Abstract

Dutch *geus* ‘Beggar, young turk’ is a loan from French, which entered the language in or around 1566 during the period of revolt against the Spanish. The French word is *gueux* ‘beggar’, which hitherto lacks a satisfactory etymology. Part of the etymological dictionaries regard *gueux* as a loan from Middle Dutch *guyte* ‘mocker; windbag’, but this is impossible for both semantic and phonetic reasons. The only other etymology derives *gueux* from French *gueuse* ‘glutton’, but this word is too recent and must have been derived from *gueux* rather than the reverse.

The original feminine to *gueux* was *gueue*, which shows that final -x is only graphic, and the Old French masculine must have been *gueu*. This can phonetically be derived from Galloromance *gotu* ‘a Goth’. A small number of place-names *Gueux* and *Montgueux* in the North of France show that a stem *gotu*, plural *gotos* must indeed have existed in the language. I assume that the Goths were marginalized as a group because they were outnumbered by the Franks, and that the meaning of their name shifted to ‘beggar’. A parallel development is attested for the word *wealh* in Old English, which shifted its meaning from ‘stranger, Celt’ to ‘slave, servant’ and even ‘shameless person’.