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## The Etymology of *Bags!* – A Simple Case of Voicing?

[O]ut of school hours [in fifteenth-century England] no language must be talked except Latin! For some centuries to come this amazing rule was sanctioned by the usual brutalities of flogging. Sometimes a ‘lupus’ or spy was paid to sneak among the boys and report if any of them used an English word in their play. (Trevelyan 1964:154)

“Has it ever happened that your last name, Paul, has been misheard as Ball?” – “Happens all the time. Particularly by school-teachers in my youth.” Answer to the author’s question given by Ronald Paul, associate professor in English literature, born and bred in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

### Background

The evolutionary history of the expression *Bags!* or *Bags I!* has been considered something of a mystery. This formula is, or at least has been, used by British and other children in the former empire (e.g. Australian) to claim something that there is competition for (including exemption from an unpopular function, for instance in a game, by means of the negated form).<sup>1</sup> The canonical description (found for instance in the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary*) assumes that the expression contains a verb that is derived from the noun *bag* and thus means “to put something in a bag, i.e. to catch or gain possession of something.” From a grammatical point of view, it says that the formula contains the third person singular present tense form of the verb. In the longer form *Bags I!* the verb is thus in non-standard concord combination with the first person subject pronoun and with full inversion (finite main verb before subject). Under that analysis a number of grammatical rules have been bent. However, the earliest attested instance (from 1866, to be quoted in full below) calls the usage “the polite practice of schoolboys”, which seems incompatible with its alleged status of ungrammaticality.<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that the formula comes in many different shapes

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<sup>1</sup> The expression still has some currency, at least in fiction. In the British National Corpus there are a few examples: *I’ll be the lion, Léonie said: **bags** I the lion* (text code GUK, a work of fiction for an adult audience); “**Bags** I be Washy!” (text code A9H, sport material in The Guardian); *Then I **bags** the portmanteau* (text code HWN, a work of fiction for an adult audience); “*I **bags** his jacket,*” said Sawney. “*And I’ll take his flowery blouse ...*” [said Angus] (text code HWN, see the previous example). Incidentally, the two practically identical instances of *bags* from HWN have different tags in the BNC. For the first example above, cf. Opie & Opie (1959:105) ‘*I wanna be Tensing.*’ ‘*All right, but I bags ’Illary.*’

<sup>2</sup> It should also be added that it is common to compare the construction to *says I*, which Partridge (1937) goes so far as to call “illiterate” in his analysis of *Bags*; the OED stops at “vulgar”.

(see list below, with examples taken from various published sources), which speaks against the view that the construction is a simple VS (or SV) one.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Bags!*
2. *Bags* + noun phrase – *Bags it!*
3. *Bags I!*
4. *Bags* + *I* + base form of a verb<sup>4</sup> – *Bags I sit in the front seat!*
5. *Bags* + *I* + noun phrase (direct object) – *Bags I the biggest cake!*
6. *Bags* + *I* + adjective phrase – *Bags I thick!*
7. *I* + *bags* + noun phrase (direct object) – *I bags his jacket!*
8. *Bags me!*
9. *Bags me* + noun phrase (direct object) – *Bags me the top corner!*
10. *Bags me* + *to* + infinitive – *Bags me to go in last!*
11. *Bags* + *it* + *me!*

It is also noteworthy that the *Bags me* constructions are attested in sources that are as early as those of *Bags I*, which provides another argument against the traditional description V + S.

### An alternative analysis

This article presents evidence that the explanation may well be much simpler than the traditional one; more precisely, the claim is that *Bags!* is the result of voicing of all three consonant phonemes, /p/, /k/ and /s/, of the Latin noun *pax* “peace.”<sup>5</sup> *Pax!* is, or has been, used in English with a similar exclamatory function since at least the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the clearest OED example is dated 1856).<sup>6</sup> Farmer (1900) glosses the interjection *Pax!* “Be quiet!” and, more to the point here, “Hands off!”. It is also relevant to note that both *Pax!* and *Bags /not!/* are

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<sup>3</sup> For simplicity, only structures containing the form *bags* have been included. Variations in form found among schoolchildren in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are exemplified in Opie & Opie (1959:135): “... the rabble do not wait to be asked or handed what they want but make an immediate claim to it, indicating the seat or slice of their choice, and exclaiming ‘Bags’, ‘Baggy’, ‘Baggy mine’, ‘Bags I this one’, ‘Bags it me’, or ‘Bags it for keeps’ ...”

<sup>4</sup> It seems impossible and irrelevant to determine what the base form stands for, the present indicative, the present subjunctive or the infinitive. The example from *George Brown's Schooldays* (see note 8 below) speaks in favour of an indicative. On the other hand, the instance *Bags I be Washy!* (footnote 1 above) is definitely not the present indicative.

<sup>5</sup> In a cross-linguistic perspective, it is easy to find cases of change or variation between voiced and voiceless. A striking example of change in the direction of voicing is Spanish *bodega* “shop” (Greek/Latin *apotheca* > *bodega*, with three cases of voicing, involving all three stops); however, this is spontaneous intervocalic voicing, which *pax* > *bags* is not claimed to be an example of.

<sup>6</sup> In Latin as spoken by the Romans (as distinct from Latin as used by English and other schoolchildren) this exclamatory usage is attested as early as around 200 BC in comedies by Plautus and by Terence. See Lewis & Short (1879) s.v. **1. pax B 4**. Given its background, it is not surprising that the same exclamatory usage is found in Italian children’s games (*Pace!*) to ask for a pause. French children cry *Pouce!*, which coincides with the word for “thumb”, but there may well be a connection with *Pax!*. However, a discussion of that is far beyond the scope of the present article.

alternatives used in parallel with *fains* and *faynites* as a request for a respite or truce in a game.<sup>7</sup>

Originally, then, under the present analysis, there would have been a sentence break between the two elements of the formula: *Pax! I want that thing > Bags! I (want) that thing > Bags I that thing*.<sup>8</sup> There is no denying that the (nominal) interjection *Bags* has been reinterpreted as a verb, but under the interpretation of its origin proposed here there is nothing unorthodox about the subject–verb concord: the final *-s* is not an inflectional ending but simply the final consonant of the stem.<sup>9</sup> It is also relevant to note that there is an infinitive *to bags*, a past tense form *bagsed* and an *ing*-form, all of which retain the allegedly inflectional *-s* as part of the stem. All of them are exemplified in the OED s.v. **Bags I**.

There is at least one phonetic parallel from the same context (children's games) that has been recognized as based on a /p/ being voiced to a /b/.<sup>10</sup> The example is the interjection *barley* “a term used in the games of children, when a truce is demanded” (Jamieson, quoted in the OED), the etymology of which is given in the OED as “perh. a corruption of F. *parlez*, Eng. *parley*” and in Collins English Dictionary as “probably changed from PARLEY”. As an interjection, *parley* is used with exactly the same meaning as the interjection *barley*, and the connection is further strengthened by an instance quoted by the OED where the author actually adds in brackets as an explanation the more established form: 1821 *Blackwood's Mag.* Aug. 35/2: “If the reader be tired ... I can ... give him a *barley*, (parley).” Wright (1898) has two separate entries, one for the verb and one for the interjection, regarding the phrase *barley me* as an instance of the verb.<sup>11</sup>

For both *Bags!* and *Barley!* one plausible background is the well-known phonetic wordplay used in children's rhymes and in school slang but regional accent and popular etymology should not be ruled out as factors.<sup>12</sup> Although they

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<sup>7</sup> For details and references, see note 20 below.

<sup>8</sup> In a string like *Bags I sit in the front seat*, it is not self-evident where *I* belongs. Is it the final element of the formula, or is it simply the subject of the following verb? The dilemma can be illustrated by means of an OED quotation from Marshall's *George Brown's Schooldays*: ‘What about you doing the gassing instead of me?’ ‘But I *bagsed-I I didn't*’.

<sup>9</sup> Bauer & Bauer (2000) claim that “... the [inflectional] *-s* has been re-analysed as part of the root of the verb” (by New Zealand children towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In my opinion, the original development (in Britain) is the other way round, the final consonant of the stem having been re-analysed, by most language users and by etymologists, as a verbal inflectional ending. It should be noted that Bauer & Bauer (2000) accept the OED derivation of *Bags!* from *to bag* and never link *Bags!* with *Pax!*.

<sup>10</sup> Note also that (erroneously, but still,) Weekley (1921) suggested a link between *bag* and *pack*: “Earlier hist. [of the noun *bag*] obscure; ? cogn. with *pack*” (question-mark in the original).

<sup>11</sup> Wright (1898) has slightly different regional distributions for the verb and the interjection, with *barley* as an interjection attested also in Scotland and Ireland in addition to a number of English counties forming a continuous band with Northumberland and Worcestershire/Warwickshire as its end-points. According to a map in Opie & Opie (1959:149), *barley* was the truce term still used in the 1950s in a continuous band in the eastern part of Scotland through the West Midlands and Wales, but not in the east and not in the south, except isolated cases of *bar*, *bars* and *barsy* in Devon.

<sup>12</sup> An interesting point made by Bauer & Bauer (2000) is that *Pax!* when shouted gets its vowel lengthened, which in turn is a signal that it is (should be) followed by a voiced consonant.

may well have interacted, the possibilities will be treated in separate sections below.

*The phonetic wordplay track*

For phonetic variation based on voiced vs. voiceless, consider the following parallels:

(1) From Opie & Opie (1969:33), emphasis added.

Ickle ockle	Iggle oggle	Iddle oddle
Black <b>bottle</b>	Black <b>bottle</b>	Black <b>poddle</b>

These are the introductory lines of three out of some twenty cited three-line “dips”, i.e., children’s rhymes used to select or eliminate participants in a game which is about to start. What is noteworthy here is the variation between stops that differ in voicing only. Highly relevant for the present discussion are the shifts between /k/ and /g/ and between /p/ and /b/, but also noteworthy is the case of *bottle* (an existing word) becoming the nonsense string *poddle* through devoicing at the beginning (possibly contact assimilation to the voiceless final consonant of *black*) and voicing in the middle, which is not unusual in a position between voiced sounds, typically between vowels.

(2) From Opie & Opie (1969:66). Monosyllabic names for the chasing game beginning with *t-*. Emphasis added.

tick	tig	tick an’	tag	tip	tit	touch
		tack				

Note especially the pairs *tack - tag* and *tick - tig*, in which the members differ only by the voice contrast.

(3) Marples (1940:180) ”*tig*, perhaps a mere corruption of *tuck* [in the sense of ’food’] (emphasis added)

(4) Marples (1940:58) **dicks** prayers ... *digs* (Shrewsbury, 1930+; Rossall, 1930+) ...

(5) Among schoolchildren’s nicknames for food served at school, Opie & Opie (1959:163) mention *peens* for *beans* (emphasis added), reported from Kirkcaldy, Scotland.

(6) Marples (1940:49): **cob** (Harrow 1906+) a corruption of *cop*: also used at Tettenhall (1930+) = reserve ...

(7) Marples (1940:112): (terms for a lavatory) “*topos ... topes ... dubs ...* probably all derived from the Greek τόπος, a place.” (emphasis added; no region for *dubs* indicated).

(8) Opie & Opie (1959:366) list, among terms used for latecomers, “...Slugabed ...**Sluck**-a-bed ...” (emphasis added)

(9) Collinson (1927:125) “... **prog** for proctor ...” (in the chapter University Life; emphasis added)

(10) According to Opie & Opie (1969:27), a Manchester variant of the game “Paper, Scissors, Stone” is “Sizz, back, or brick”. The form *back* is totally out of place here, but if we take into account the possibility of devoicing, which may have been caused by the voiceless ending of the following *brick*, we get “Sizz, **bag**, or brick”, which makes perfect sense. Some support for this may be provided by the fact that in Swedish the same game is called “sten, sax, påse”, i.e. “stone, scissors, **bag**.”<sup>13</sup>

#### *The regional accent track*

Referring to the Scottish English of the Highlands, Wells (1982:413) states that “Gaelic /b, d, g/ are typically voiceless (being distinguished from their congeners /p, t, k/ by virtue of their lenisness and non-aspiration). The use of such sound types for English /b, d, g/ may lead to their misidentification: they may be heard as /p, t, k/ ...”<sup>14</sup> This of course works the other way round too: /p, t, k/ pronounced by a non-Scottish speaker may be misheard as /b, d, g/ in Scotland. This means that *pack* can be misheard as *bag* and *pax* misheard as *bags*. As can be concluded from Wells (1982:282), the same thing may well occur when an upper-class speaker of RP (or an RP-aspiring school-teacher) uses initial /p/ with “surprisingly little aspiration” in a non-RP environment.<sup>15</sup>

Wright (1898) is chronologically more relevant than Opie & Opie (1959 and 1969) for a change that can be supposed to have taken place in (or before) the middle of the 19th century. Some general examples of the voicing/devoicing phenomenon are to be found in his monumental dictionary:

(**BAG**, see **Bog, Pag**.) **PAG** ... also in form **bag** [in the then East Riding of Yorkshire], “to carry”

**BANDY-CAT** ... Also written **bandy-cad, bandy-gad** [in Lancashire]

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. an entry in Wright (1898), **BAGHASH**, see **Back-hash**. (The meaning of this Scottish word, “ill-natured talk”, has nothing to do with my argument, which is purely phonological.)

<sup>14</sup> *Elsbeth* as a variant of *Elizabeth* is typically used in Scotland. See Hanks et al. (2006). This can be seen as an example only if the reinterpretation of /b/ as /p/ precedes the contraction and devoicing of *Eliza-*, producing *Els-*. Otherwise it is simply a case of the /b/ being assimilated to the voiceless /s/.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Opie & Opie (1959:8) “Thus we find that variations, even apparently creative ones, occur more often by accident than by design. Usually they come about through mishearing or misunderstanding ...”

**BECK** and **PECK/PICK**, all meaning “pickaxe”. In Sussex, the name for a narrow hoe: “The purpose of the **beck** is to remove weeds by **picking** or **pecking** them out of the ground ...” (emphasis added)

**BERRY-MOUCHER**, the fruit of the blackberry, is also **PERRY-MOUCHER** and **PENNY-MOUCHER** [all three forms reported from Wiltshire]

**BLIBE** sb2 Sc[otland]. Also in form **blype** ... A stroke or blow

**BOB** 1v. To **pop** in and out, or up and down. Also ... **bop** [reported from East Anglia, Norfolk and Suffolk] (emphasis in **pop** added)

**PUSH** sb3 ... also in form **bush** [in Hampshire]

For Present-day English it is also noteworthy that, according to Bauer & Bauer (2000), *bags*, *pags* and *pegs* are used in parallel by New Zealand schoolchildren.

#### *The popular etymology track*

Popular etymology is a way to make sense of an unfamiliar word by relating the whole word or one or more of its parts to familiar elements of the language. In the present case, to a person without any grounding in Latin and any contact with the socially marked use of the interjection *Pax!*, the string of sounds does not mean anything of relevance (*packs*) in the situation when it is used. When heard, it would tend to be reinterpreted as something that makes sense, at least in isolation. *Bag(s)*, with its extended sense of “capturing” would then perhaps be at least marginally more attractive than *pack(s)*.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Summarizing remarks*

Of the three factors mentioned above, the last one seems to be the weakest. As for children’s wordplay and regional accent, it is impossible to find stronger support for one than for the other. They may very well have been combined. On the interplay between school slang and regional dialects, Marples (1940:xiii) comments: “Local dialect has made a considerable contribution to school slang ... but its influence is now [shortly before 1940] much less than it was a century ago ... a century ago the boys who attended public schools as boarders must constantly have been in touch with the local dialect when they were at home ...; hence the examples of dialect words from a distance which took root in certain schools—even Scottish words have occasionally become current in this way.” It is noteworthy that the regional distribution of *Bags* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as described by Wright (1898), forms a band along or at least not far from the Welsh border: Cheshire and Warwickshire plus the then West Riding of Yorkshire (Almondbury

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bauer & Bauer (2000): “... *pax*, *pex* and *pags* would be unknown, *pegs* would be familiar. So *pegs* it has become.”

and Huddersfield) and the west of Somersetshire/the east of Devon. It is also relevant to note that the distribution is similar to that of *barley* for *parley*, except that *barley* is attested in a greater number of regions, possibly as an effect of it being older (earliest instance in the OED 1814, as against 1866 for *Bags*).

### **Chronological aspects**

As mentioned before, the earliest attested instance of *Bags* is dated 1866. It should be noted that the wording of that instance indicates that the usage was by then well established and could be recognized by the general reader: ‘Bags I first drink,’ says Bob, according to *the polite practice of schoolboys* (italics mine). In addition, Wright (1898) reports, on the basis of sources from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was used in many different regions, which means that it must have had time to spread (if the usage has a common source). It should be remembered that the boarding-school system entailed letter-writing and also long-distance mobility when children returned home for holidays and there is little doubt that the latest developments in school slang and jargon were then shared with siblings and friends. On the subject of the rapid transmission of schoolchildren’s rhymes (mainly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), Opie & Opie (1959:5–6) say that the “speed with which a newly made-up rhyme can travel the length and breadth of the country by the schoolchild grapevine seems to be little short of miraculous”, and, (1959:7), commenting on the early occurrence in Australia of a Davy Crockett paraphrase, “It seems that the schoolchild underground also employs trans-world couriers.” It is worth noting in this connection that *Bags!* is used not only in British but also in Australian English. Although communication was less intense a century before the situation commented on by Opie & Opie, there is no doubting the existence even then of a grapevine and of trans-world couriers.

### **Additional support**

The solution to the problem of the etymology of *Bags!* has actually been staring Swedes in the face for three quarters of a century but to my knowledge it has never been presented explicitly before. From 1935, English-Swedish dictionaries have translated *Bags!* as *Pax!* and from 1944 Swedish-English ones have given *Bags!* for *Pax!*<sup>17</sup> However, nobody seems to have regarded the words as linked phonetically or etymologically, at least nobody who has been aware that the origin of *Bags!* has been a problem.

### **Lexicographic consequences of the proposed analysis**

Practically all the dictionaries that have *Bags!* as an entry or a subentry link it to the verb *to bag*, which they (correctly) regard as derived from the noun *bag* and consequently as meaning “to put sth in a bag, i.e. to catch or gain possession of sth”. Under the present analysis this is an incorrect description which should be

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<sup>17</sup> For details, see the appendix below.

abolished. There is, however, a borderline area where the two derivations tend to merge, viz. the sense of “reserve (for instance a seat or a table)”. In the COBUILD 1995 example *The smart ones will have already bagged their seats by placing cards on them*, the verb seems to be derived from the claiming sense of *Bags!* rather than from the gain-possession sense of *to bag*, derived from the noun *bag*. My proposal, then, for a dictionary presentation of the relevant parts of the complex **bag/bags** looks like this in a compressed format:

**bag** n. 1. container etc., including metaphors 2. **bags** /loose-fitting/ trousers  
3. **bags** plenty  
v. 1. to place in a container; 2. to catch; 3. to manage to obtain  
**bags (I/me)** interj. I claim the right to X  
v. 1. to claim the right to X; 2. **bag** to reserve /by marking/

### Further ramifications

If *Bags!* originates in the Latin spoken by schoolchildren and other students, it is tempting to seek the same background for other terms used in games and the like. One candidate is *Fains!* (with variants such as *faynites* and *faynights*), used to request the cessation of a game. Latin *finis* means “end” and the verb *finire* “to end” has the past participle stem *finit-*. The established English pronunciation of these Latin words would contain the diphthong /aɪ/, but in those areas of the British Isles where /aɪ/ is rare in the local variants of English (Scotland, the north-east and the south-west of England), pronunciation with /eɪ/ is likely to occur, thus resulting in spellings like *fains* and *faynites*. The etymology usually given for *fains* is based on the verb *to fend*, but in my opinion the Latin alternative is worth investigating. However, it is outside the scope of the present article.<sup>18</sup>

### APPENDIX: The lexicographic history of *Bags!*

#### Specialized glossaries and dictionaries

According to the OED the earliest instance of a dictionary explanation of *Bags!* is 1886 [R. HOLLAND](#) *Gloss. County Chester*, “*Bags I*,...an expression used by boys in claiming the first place in a game; or in laying claim to any treasure trove”.<sup>19</sup> Wright (1898) places the formula under the verb, two senses of which he gives as “to assert a prior claim to anything” (which is where he puts the formula) and “to seize upon, appropriate, secure for oneself”. Not long after, Farmer (1900) has the following explanation: “**Bags** (or **Bags I**), intj. (common) – Used to assert a claim

<sup>18</sup> As for the question whether schoolchildren heard *Finis* etc used, it may be worth noting that according to for instance *Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, teachers in Italian schools use or have used *Finis* to signal the end of a lesson. Although there is no record in the OED of this use in English schools, it may well have occurred as part of the common educational heritage; if not, schoolchildren would at least have seen *FINIS* printed at the end of books or chapters in books.

<sup>19</sup> This date concerns the OED’s earliest attested *explanation* of the formula. The earliest OED example of actual use is 1866: A. DOBSON *Bob Trevor & I II*. in *Beeton’s Ann.* 215 Deep in a hole..gleamed the clear water of a shallow well. ‘Bags I first drink,’ says Bob, according to the polite practice of schoolboys.



to some article or privilege. Analogous school slang is FAINS or FAIN (*q.v.*) for demanding a truce during the progress of a game, and which is always granted by the opposing party”<sup>20</sup>

A present-day analysis is provided by Green (1998): “**bags I!/bagsy!** *excl.* [mid-19C+] (juv.) that’s mine, I want to do that!; an allied formula, mainly in preparatory schools, is *quis?* (Lat. for *who?*) to offer an object, to which the responses are *ego!* (Lat. for *I*) if one wishes to make a claim, or *baggy/bags I no par* (no part) if one wishes to be excluded ...”<sup>21</sup>

### Monolingual scholarly and general-purpose dictionaries

In non-specialized dictionaries, *Bags!* made its first appearance in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, but not until 1914. In 1911 (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), it was not mentioned, but in the 1914 Addenda to the first edition, the expression was entered under the verb **bag**: “(Also, in school slang) claim on the ground of being the first to claim (*I b.*, but usu. *bags I* or *bags, first innings!*)”. In the second edition 1929, it was integrated and basically the same wording was used in the subsequent editions through the ninth (1995). From the tenth edition it was placed under “phrases” and explained, without examples, “Brit. informal. a child’s expression used to make a claim to something.” In *The New English Dictionary* (later renamed *The Oxford English Dictionary*), *Bags!* was not an entry in 1888, when the volume comprising the letter B was published, and not even in the 1933 Supplement did it appear. In fact, users of the OED had to wait until 1972, when it was made an entry in Burchfield’s Supplement. In the meantime it had appeared as **Bags I** in the 1956 Addenda to the 1944 (third) edition of *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

The following is a brief survey of the situation in some recent general-purpose dictionaries (in alphabetical order).

Chambers 1998, s.v. **bag: bags (I)** (*slang, orig children’s*) I lay claim to

*Collins English Dictionary* 1994, 1998, 2005 s.v. **bags 4**: Also *bags I* children’s slang, Brit., an indication of the desire to do, be or have something (the 1998 and 2005 editions say Brit. and Australian) [no example]

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<sup>20</sup> By “common” Farmer seems to mean “used in several but not all of the public schools investigated”. Note also that Farmer seems to be making a distinction between public school slang and school slang. Cf. Opie & Opie (1959:152): “*Pax*. The usual term in private schools and school stories, ‘*pax*’ is group dialect not regional dialect.” The parallel use of *Bags!/Pax!* and *Fains* in different types of schools is also documented in the book *Yealm* by Sheila Lahr, who, in a description of the convent games of her childhood in London at the time of the Second World War, says that “Council-school children ... say ‘faynites’ while we say ‘pax’ for a temporary cessation of the game.” Collinson (1927:14), like Sheila Lahr a Londoner, is not quite in line with that: “... the custom of putting oneself out of the game altogether by crossing the fingers and saying *pax!* or *faynights!* ... or both together.” (italics replacing the spacing used in the original). In his experience, evidently, one and the same individual, regardless of school type, could use both expressions in parallel.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Opie & Opie (1959:134): “There are three recognized ways in which articles may be acquired by verbal dexterity, these are by ‘egoing’ by ‘bagging’, and by ‘finding-keeping’.”

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*Longman Dictionary of the English Language* 1991 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) s.v. **bags I**: *interj, chiefly Br informal* – used by children to claim the right to do or have something < ~ have the last sweet >

*Macquarie Dictionary* (Australian) 1987 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) s.v. **bags**, bagged, bagging v. Also *I bags bags I have first ride*

*The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (NODE) 1998 s.v. **bag** verb PHRASES **bags** (or **bags I**) Brit. informal – a child's expression used to make a claim to something: *bags I his jacket*

### **Learners' dictionaries**

The dictionaries are treated in chronological order, i.e. in the order of the first editions.<sup>22</sup> The following official or semi-official abbreviations are used for the titles: OALD = *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, LDOCE = *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, COBUILD = *Cobuild English Language Dictionary* and *Cobuild Dictionary for Advanced Learners*, CIDE = *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, CALD = *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, MED = *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners*.

OALD editions 1–4, i.e. 1948–1989: no mention of the formula, but the verb in various senses is treated

OALD editions 5–7, i.e. from 1995 and onwards: s.v. **bag** verb IDM **bags (I) ... (BrE) ...** used to claim sth as yours before sb else can claim it: *Bags I sit in the front seat!*

LDOCE 1978 s.v. **bags**<sup>3</sup> *interj BrE sl* **Bags I** (used by children) **a** It's mine; don't touch it **b** I'll do it, not you [no examples]

LDOCE 1987 s.v. **bags**<sup>3</sup> *interj BrE sl* **Bags I** (used by children) **a** Let me have it, not you: *Bags I the biggest one!* **b** I'll do it, not you: *Bags I sleep in the bathroom!* (sic!)

LDOCE 1995 s.v. **bags** *spoken BrE* **Bags I!** used by children to claim something that they want: *Bags I the biggest cake!*

LDOCE 2003 and 2009: No mention of the formula, but the “reserve” (or “obtain”?) sense is treated: s.v. **bag**<sup>2</sup> *2 informal* to manage to get something that a lot of people want: *Try to bag a couple of seats at the front.*

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<sup>22</sup> I treat CALD as later editions of CIDE, not as a new work.

COBUILD 1987, nothing about the formula, only s.v. **bag** 5 If you bag something that a lot of people want, you get it for yourself before anyone else can get it; used in informal English. EG *Can you bag the front seats for us?* Synonym given in the extra margin: *reserve*.

(Comment: The sense of “claiming” is missing from the definition but detectable in the synonym.)

COBUILD 1995: only the non-formulaic verb use as in 1987: s.v. **bag** 7 In British English, if you bag something that a lot of people want, you get it for yourself before anyone else can get it; an informal use. *The smart ones will have already bagged their seats by placing cards on them.*

COBUILD 2003: No verbal senses at all.

CIDE 1995 s.v. **bags, bagsy** *Br and Aus informal* (used esp. by children) to have the right to have or do (something) because you say you wanted it first • *I bagged it first!* • *Who wants to go first? – Bags me!* • *Bags I sit in the front seat!*

CALD 2003 and 2005 s.v. **bags** (*ALSO bagsy*) *UK CHILD'S WORD* to have the right to have or do something because you say you want it first: *Bags I sit in the front seat!*

MED 2002 and 2007: No mention of the formula, but the “reserve” sense may be seen as treated s.v. **bag**<sup>2</sup> *informal* to get something before other people take it: *I managed to bag us a table by the window.*

### **English-Swedish and Swedish-English dictionaries**<sup>23</sup>

Given the late appearance of *Bags!* in monolingual English dictionaries, it is not surprising that it is missing in bilingual dictionaries well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first dictionary in Sweden to include the sense in question was Kärre et al. (1935), a work which came to dominate the English-Swedish school dictionary market for nearly 50 years. It was done in the form of a subentry: **bag** (under the transitive verb) *S ofta skol knycka, lägga beslag på; I bag el. vanl. bags I...! pax (pass) för viss sak!*<sup>24</sup> Eight years later, Cronwall & Freudenthal (1943) followed suit and presented basically the same translation: *pax ell. pass (för en viss sak).*<sup>25</sup> The reverse appeared in Harlock (1944), where the Swedish entry **pax** was translated

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<sup>23</sup> For the position of the bilingual works in the English-Swedish and Swedish-English lexicographic tradition, see Olofsson (1991).

<sup>24</sup> In English and without abbreviations, the entry says “Slang, often in school, to pinch, to appropriate; *I bag* or more commonly *bags I ...!* (Swedish) *pax (pass) for a certain item*”.

<sup>25</sup> Cronwall & Freudenthal (1943) was based on an English-Danish dictionary. Since the interjection *Pax!* is not used in Danish, the inclusion and the wording seem to have been inspired by Kärre et al. (1935).

*Bags I!*<sup>26</sup> The next Swedish-English dictionary to be published, Reuter (1952), had the same translation.

### ***Pax!* in Swedish**

The Latin expression *Pax!* was used in Swedish institutions of education to ask for the cessation of something in the same way as it was used in English schools and in present-day Swedish it is still current in the sense of claiming or reserving for oneself something for which there is competition. There is also a fully current verb based on it: (*att*) *paxa*. The first mention of the interjection in a lexicographic context is to be found in Andersson (1845), followed by Ekbohrn (1868) and Dalin (1871), all of them glossing it with Swedish words meaning “Hold it!”, “Be still!”. Hellquist (1922), an etymological dictionary, places its use in the language of children’s games (“i leksp[rå]ket] o.s.v.”) and its origin in the language of schoolboys in the old Latin-dominated system of education.

In a non-lexicographic context, the first attested instance, according to SAOB (*Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*), is from the writings of Strindberg, who used the noun in a work published in 1893. The verb, although secondary, is attested earlier, used in 1885 by Mathilda Lönn.

### **Translations from English into Swedish**

It seems worth investigating whether the link between *Pax!* and *Bags!* has been further strengthened by (early) translations. However, of the sources for *Bags (I)* given in the OED, only two have been translated into Swedish. For reasons unknown, one of the two translations, that of Kipling’s *Stalky & Co*, excludes the chapter in which *Bags I* occurs (“In ambush”). The other one makes an attempt to translate *Bags*: Richmal Crompton’s *William – the Conqueror* was translated by Arne Lönnbeck in 1936 as *Bill i klämman* (roughly “Bill in a tight spot”). William’s *Bags me* (in the chapter “William the Philanthropist”) in answer to Ginger’s question *Whose turn is it to get something next?* was translated (p. 129) simply as “Jag” (= *I*). This may be factually acceptable but the translator missed the claiming mood, a miss also reflected in his unorthodox choice of translation for the simple *said William*: “upplyste Bill” (= *informed*).<sup>27</sup> The Swedish general reader thus had no early contact with this possible link.

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<sup>26</sup> The dictionary goes under Harlock’s name but the letter P was handled by Ångström and Charleston. For obvious reasons (*Bags!* not appearing in monolingual dictionaries until 1914) there is no mention of the word in the predecessor of Harlock 1944, i.e. Wenström & Harlock (1904), but it is worth noting that it was not included in the separate addenda with “new words” prepared by Ekblom and published separately in 1924 and (expanded) in 1939.

<sup>27</sup> The translation was thus published only a year after the connection *Bags–Pax* had been presented in Kärre et al. (1935). It is not very likely that the dictionary was available to the translator during the actual translation process.

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