

NEW LIFE OF THE “OLD” WORDS: ON ENGLISH HISTORICAL CORE VOCABULARY SLANG USAGE

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Summary: The article focuses on the research of English historical core vocabulary evolution in the slang register of the English lexicon. The results obtained are interpreted through the prism of language evolution as the grounds of its longevity in the language system.

Words have different ways in different languages. Every one has its own “destiny” and peculiar life-span. Some of the lexicon constituents are inherited from proto-language, others are introduced on later stages of its historical development being either derived or borrowed from other languages at different periods of language evolution. Their further life in a language can go in different directions as well. Some borrowed words can be rejected by the system after a shorter or longer time interval, native words can be substituted for loans and get the status of archaisms. But there is always certain number of words that once appeared in the earliest stages, live a long life and manage to “survive” throughout the whole history of language evolution no matter how intensive the changes were. They constitute the genetic fund of the language.

The English language has a turbulent history being subjected to dramatic changes due to numerous language contacts stipulated by conquests of the British Isles, its expansion world-wide, etc. These and other extra-linguistic events with little delay have found reflection in the English lexicon. It enlightens the well-known fact about a high degree of English lexis mobility. Thus, according to the estimates of linguists [Cannon 1987; Baugh & Cable 1978], 85% of the Old English lexicon, which comprised approximately 35000 words, came out of use after Middle English period. Mostly it resulted in substituting old words for borrowed ones. Not surprisingly among linguists English has the reputation of the most eager borrower of all languages of the world.

These facts would make the whole picture look rather discouraging if not for another side of the evolutionary process. Despite drastic changes English lexicon underwent, it preserved a set of words which have been part of English since Old English period. The volume of the part of English lexicon ascending to Old English period and functioning in the language since then is not large, it comprises 2166 lexemes¹. Chronologically they constitute the oldest layer of the English lexical system. In this article they are termed as English historical core².

¹ The selection of the corpus of historical core vocabulary was performed by V.Skybina [Skybina 1996: 105].

² Core vocabulary is studied in linguistics within numerous other paradigms, among them being communicative, structural, semantic, evolutionary, etc. [see Carter 1992; Hughes 2000: 360-393; Kretov 1987; Modiano 1999: 11; Peyawary 1999; Quirk 1982; Stein 1978; Stubbs 1986; Vinogradov 1951].

The craving for discovering the grounds of its longevity in the language system stimulated multi-aspectual investigation of the corpus of the English historical core vocabulary. Its previous research sustained the idea that historical core vocabulary is marked by an exceptional role in language structure, function – and consequently, – its evolution [Skybina & Galutskikh 2007]. The hypothesis of this study is based on the results of the preliminary observations made in the course of earlier performed investigation of the evolution of English core lexemes, the main accent being made on their semantic change in VIII-XX centuries [for details see: Galutskikh 2007].

Since all evolutionary processes in the lexicon revolve around its core vocabulary, active dynamics core lexemes participate in, mainly their semantic transformations, lead to the erasure of whatever coloring it possessed. In this study I hypothesize that due to inexhaustible semantic potential and endless capacity to undergo semantic transformations core words functioning in the language for centuries and being ostensibly marked by erased expressiveness, have the ability to sound new and fresh. In other words, to put it metaphorically, these old words can regain their freshness in the course of evolution which is one of the grounds for their long “life”.

The diffusion of core vocabulary semantics was accompanied by its penetration into all stylistic layers of the English lexicon including those distinguished by the greatest degree of expressive value. Eventually, to verify the stated hypothesis the material of the English slang was chosen as it is marked by high degree of expressiveness and is known for the highest speed of mobility among all other layers of the lexicon.

The research was performed in four stages. First, slang words derived from English core lexemes by means of semantic change were selected out of the following lexicographic sources including the dictionaries of regionalisms: The Slang Thesaurus, Dictionaries of Australian and Kiwi Slang [Green 1986; ASD; Australian slang; Kiwi slang; Kiwi words and phrases; Orsman 1994; Ramson 1988]. Second, the observations on the directions of semantic change and the amplitude of core words' semantic transformations in the course of slangisms formation were performed. Third, the semantic domains embraced by the semantics of slang words derived from core ones were singled out and thus core vocabulary semantic continuum expansion was studied. Fourth, the results obtained were interpreted through the prism of the theory of language evolution.

The results verified the hypothesis and demonstrated core vocabulary active penetration into slang register of English by means of transferred meanings. Due to core lexemes' semantic changes including the processes of metaphorization, metonymization, specialization, generalization, amelioration, pejorative change, etc., leading to the evolvment of connotative meanings their expressive potential is revived. This thesis can be illustrated by the usage of the following lexemes of Common Indo-European, Common Germanic origin in the new context of the English general slang: **angel, n** [an early Teut. adoption from L., OE. *angil*, cf. OS. *engil*, OFris. *angel, engel*, ON. *engill*, OHG. *angil, engel*, Goth. *aggilus* for *angilus*; a. L. *angel-us*, or Gr. ‘a messenger’] with new meanings ‘*a secret financier*’, ‘*cocaine*’; **apple, n** [OE. *æppel* cf. OFris. *appel*, OHG. *aphul, aphal, apfal*, mod.G. *apfel*, ON. *apli*, OSw. *æpli*; cf. Lith. *óbDlas*,

-is, Samogitian *abolis*, Lettish *ahbols*, OSl. *jabl'ko*, Russ. *jablo-ko*, Pol. *jab-ko*; also Irish *abhal*, *ubhal*, Welsh *afal*.] ‘**baseball**’, ‘**barbiturate**’; **ark**, n [OE. *arc* (*earc*), cf. OFris. *erke*, OHG. *archa*, mod.G. *arche*, ON. *örk*, Sw., Da. *ark*, Goth. and OTeut. *arka*] ‘**an old car**’; **bear**, n [OE. *bera* = OHG. *bero*, *pero*, MHG. *ber*, mod.G. *bär*, MDu. *bere*, Du. *beer*: – OTeut. **beron-*, ON. *björn*, prob. cogn. with L. *ferus* wild] ‘**ugly woman**’, ‘**highway patrol officer**’; **bee**, n [OE. *béo* = OHG. *bīa* (G. dial. *beie*), MLG. *bie*, LG. *bigge*, MDu. *bie*, Du. *bij*, all fem.; ON. *by*: – OTeut. **bîôn*] ‘**a matchbox of marijuana, a small measure of marijuana**’; **bird**, n [ME. *byrd*, *bryd*, OE. *brid*, Northumbrian *bird*, *birdas* ‘offspring, young,’] ‘**a rude gesture made with a middle finger**’; **cat**, n [OE. *cat*, *catt*, ON. *kött-r*, WGer. **katta* (MLG. *katte*, MDu. *katte*, *kat*, Du. *kat*, also Sw. *katta*), OHG. *chazzâ* (MHG., mod.G. *katze*); OIr. *cat* masc., Gael. *cat* com., Welsh and Cornish *cath* f., Breton *kaz*, Vannes *kac'h* m; OSlav. *kot'ka*, Bulg. *kotka*, Slovenish *kot*, Russ. *kot*, *kotchka*, *koshka*, Pol. *kot*, Boh. *kot*, *katka*, Sorbian *katka*; also Lith. *kate*; Finnish *katti*] ‘**a gossip woman**’; **daisy**, n [OE. *dægēs éage* day's eye] ‘**excellent thing**’; **dish**, n [OE. *disc* plate, bowl, platter, OHG. *tisc* plate (MHG. and Ger. *tisch* table), OS. *disk* table, MDu. and Du. *disch* table, ON. *diskr*; WGer. **disk(s)*, a. L. *disc-us* dish] ‘**good-looking woman**’; **spider**, n [OE. *spīpra*, f. *spinnan* spin v.] ‘**person or computer program that searches the web for new links and link them to search engines**’.

The same statement can be illustrated by the following new core words; meanings used in Australian slang and New Zealand, so-called Kiwi slang: **boot**, n [Com. Teut.: OE. *bót* fem., corresponds to OFris. *bôte*, OS. *bōta* (MDu. and Du. *boete*, LG. *bote*), OHG. *buola* (MHG. *buole*, mod.G. *busze*), ON. *bót* (Sw. *bot*, Da. *bod*), Goth. *bōta* ‘boot, advantage, good’: – OTeut. **bōt*] ‘**car trunk**’; **ice**, n [Com. Teut.: OE. *ís*, OFris., OLG., OHG. (MDu., MHG.) *ís* (Du. *ijs*, Ger. *eis*), ON. *íss* (Sw., Da. *is*): – OTeut. **Wso-*]³ with the Australian slang meaning ‘**diamonds**’; **naked**, adj [OE. *nacod*, *næcad*, = OFris. *naked*, *naket*, MDu. *naket*, *naect* (Du. *naakt*), MLG. *naket*, OHG. *nakot*, *naccot*, *nachot*, *nahhut*, ON. *nækkviðr*, *neycquiðr*, Goth. *naqap̃s*, *naqad-*, a participial derivative from the stem **naq-*: – pre-Teut. **nogw-*, which is also represented in OSl. *nagE* (Russ. *nagói*), Lith. *nDgas*, Skr. *nagnás*, L. *nGdus*, OIr. *nocht*] ‘**annoyed**’; **oil**, n [OE. *ele*, earlier *æle*:-**oli* = OHG. *oli*, Ger. *öl*, ad. L. *olium*, *oleum*] ‘**useful information, idea**’; **poppy**, n (esp. in the phrase **tall poppy**) [Early OE. *popæg*, *papoeg*, app. repr. an earlier WGer. **papQg*, **popQg*, ad. a. popular L. **papQv-um*, **papau-um*] ‘**person, successful person**’; **pot**, n [Late OE., early ME. *pott*, cognate with OFris. *pot*, MDu. *pot*, Du. *pot*, MLG. *pot*, *put*, late ON. *potte* (c1300), Sw. *potta*, Da. *potte*; also with F. *pot*, obs. It. *potto*; cf. Sp., Pg. *pote* pot, jar; late L. **pottus*] ‘**285 ml beer glass in Queensland and Victoria**’; **root**, n [Late OE. *rót*, a. ON. *rót* (Icel. and Fær. *rót*), Norw. and Sw. *rot* (MSw. *root*), Da. *rod* (†*rood*), NFr. *rôt*, *rut* (prob. from ODa.), LG. *rut*. The original stem **wrZt-* is connected on the one hand with L. *rQdWx*, and on the other with OE. *wyr̃t*] with the meaning ‘**sexual intercourse**’, and others.

The examination of the amplitude of the semantics transformations core lexemes underwent proved that core vocabulary preserves the most essential

³ All etymological data are referred to [OED 2007].

primordial semantic features and the changes taking place in the core vocabulary does not bother with its ability to secure lexicon's dynamic equilibrium.

Eventually, due to active semantic transformations the coverage of semantic domains by core lexemes' semantics is expanded. The semantic continuum is broad as it embraces 100% of semantic domains elaborated in J. Green's thesaurus [Green 1986] comprising the following ones. To illustrate this point the following examples are employed which pertain to the following semantic domains:

1) **ABSTRACT RELATIONS:** **apples**, n 'good condition', **duck**, n 'zero', **cheese**, n 'something large', **almighty**, adj 'great in degree', **blessed**, adj 'great in degree', **stream**, n 'strength', **daisy**, n 'something beautiful';

2) **SPACE:** **Apple** 'New York City', **the Smoke** 'London', **blow**, n 'departure';

3) **MATTER:** **puddle**, n 'sea', **axe**, n 'musical instrument', **box**, n 'guitar', **boat**, n 'car', **iron**, n 'car', **hog**, n 'motorcycle', **anchors**, n 'brakes', **hammer**, n 'accelerator', **kettle**, n 'motor, engine', **pot**, n 'motor, engine', **mule**, n 'motor, engine', **tails**, n 'formal dress', **dogs**, n 'shoes', **ice**, n 'jewelry', **rocks**, n 'jewelry', **berries**, n 'wine', **frog**, n 'contraceptives', **oil**, n 'liquor', **moon**, n 'illegal liquor', **smoke**, n 'cheap wine', **afloat**, adj 'drunk', **boiled**, adj 'drunk', **glad**, adj 'drunk', **high**, adj 'drunk', **ripe**, adj 'drunk', **sneeze**, v 'drink';

4) **ANIMATE EXISTENCE:** **dog**, n 'horse', **nut**, n 'head', **loaf**, n 'head', **boat**, n 'face', **horn**, n 'nose', **hooks**, n 'hands', **forks**, n 'fingers', **timbers**, n 'legs', **cheese**, n 'bodily fluids', **apples**, n 'breasts', **lungs**, n 'breasts';

5) **PERSONALITY:** **oil**, n 'personality', **smooth**, adj 'gentle', **cracked**, adj 'eccentric';

6) **INTELLECT:** **lame**, adj 'stupid', **soft**, adj 'stupid', **wind**, n 'foolish talk', **wet**, adj 'suspicious', **score**, n 'facts', **strength**, n 'facts', **gospel**, n 'truth', **cheese**, n 'real thing';

7) **COMMUNICAION:** **oil**, n 'smooth talk', **soap**, n 'smooth talk', **hook**, n 'telephone', **yarn**, n 'story', **book**, n 'newspaper', **linen**, n 'newspaper';

8) **VOLITION:** **beads**, n 'luck', **cold**, adj 'unlucky', **elbow**, n 'refusal', **boot**, n 'refusal', **kiss**, v 'reject', **ginger**, n 'spirit, energy', **keen**, adj 'fashionable', **sharp**, adj 'fashionable', **early**, adj 'fashionable', **cooked**, adj 'failed', **naked**, adj 'at a disadvantage';

9) **EMOTION:** **needle**, n 'nervousness', **ball**, n 'good time, fun', **hot**, adj 'enjoyable', **rich**, adj 'funny', **bite**, v 'annoy', **burn**, v 'annoy', **bull**, n 'flattery', **oil**, n 'flattery', **sock**, n 'sarcastic remark', **wet**, adj 'cowardly', **stones**, n 'courage', **crow**, n 'humiliation';

10) **MORALITY AND RELIGION:** **snow**, n 'lie', **balls**, n 'lie', **bull**, n 'lie', **cod**, n 'lie', **fiddle**, n 'lie', **hook**, n 'lie', **shave**, v 'lie', **trim**, v 'lie';

11) **HUMAN RELATIONS:** **load**, n 'passion, desire', **blue**, adj 'pornographic', **cheap**, adj 'mean', **duck**, n 'friendship', **neck**, n 'impudence', **lip**, n 'impudence', **bitten**, adj 'in love', **soft**, adj 'in love', **pile**, n 'wealth';

12) **PEOPLE:** **wool**, n 'woman', **leather**, n 'old woman', **kipper**, n 'Englishman', **frog**, n 'Frenchman', **harp**, n 'Irishman', **red**, adj 'Russian', **shower**, n 'group of insignificant people', **chalk**, n 'whites by blacks', **lily**, n

'whites by blacks', **silk**, n 'white females by blacks', **cheese**, n 'person of importance', **wheel**, n 'person of importance', **clam**, n 'greedy person', **queen**, n 'homosexual', **ginger**, n 'homosexual', **lobster**, n 'wealthy person', **angel**, n 'attractive woman', **dish**, n 'attractive woman', **hammer**, n 'attractive woman, girl', **talent**, n 'attractive woman, girl', **bear**, n 'unattractive woman', **crow**, n 'unattractive woman', **hog**, n 'unattractive woman', **brain**, n 'intelligent person', **tool**, n 'stupid person', **lily**, n 'homosexual';

13) SPECIALIST JARGONS: **ten**, n 'FBI's Ten Most Wanted Criminals list', **pound**, n '5 years of sentence in jail', **eye**, n 'police', **filth**, n 'police', **clothes**, n 'police', **crystal**, n 'powdered methdrine', **beans**, n 'pills', **lady**, n 'cocaine', **leaf**, n 'cocaine', **tar**, n 'opium', **bush**, n 'marijuana', **dew**, n 'marijuana', **hay**, n 'marijuana', **pot**, n 'marijuana', **root**, n 'marijuana', **kite**, n 'cheque', **whore**, n 'queen (cards)', **dough**, n 'money', **cows**, n 'small cash', **yard**, n '100\$', **fin**, n '5\$'.

Above-mentioned examples demonstrate quite vividly the usage of core lexical units in various registers of the English lexicon not only as a neutral layer deprived of expressive value but in different types of discourse. By regaining expressive coloring core words regain new life.

The results obtained attested that language system always addresses this oldest part of the lexicon which is at all times ready to respond to the needs of the system not only to feed its nominative necessity but also the necessity in production of expressive layers of vocabulary. The processes of semantic transformation of historical core vocabulary aimed at producing new slang words demonstrate the work of the inner mechanisms as a reaction to the altering milieu. Such ability for renovation witnesses a core vocabulary's constant adaptability that is one of the most significant bases of its longevity.

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