

# **Cwellan in the name of: A diachronic consideration of synonyms for *killing* in English**

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Allo (2013) examined the retention of adjectives between Old and Modern English to determine that the most frequent semantic shift was the loss of lexical items paired with the gain of new ones. The current paper takes a similar approach by conducting an analysis of the semantic change affecting the notion “to kill” between Old and Modern English and its connection to the state of the culture at a given time. It was expected that Old English would possess a plethora of synonyms for “to kill”, while the Modern English vocabulary lacks this lexical richness in denoting killing. I employ a corpus-based approach that relies upon dictionaries and thesauri, notably the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus*, to contrast the given number of synonyms within the vocabulary at each stage of the language. The analysis considered the selected vocabulary by pairing a progressive consideration of which Old English words have been retained and a regressive one by tracing Modern English lexical items to determine whether they are etymologically related to the older form of the language. Finding a significant disparity between the nineteen broadly applicable Old English words denoting killing and the singular perfect equivalent in Modern English, I argue that the lexicon of a language can encode insight into culture at a given point of time. Specifically, I suggest that the diminution of lexical items in English that denote killing as their primary definition reflects the shift from the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons to the general modern day focus on the minimization and avoidance of widespread violence.

*Keywords: killing; semantic shift; English*

## **1 Introduction**

The vocabulary of a language can code pertinent information about which concepts require lexical items to transmit meaningful statements between speakers. Conversely, an absence of words can also depict significant historical data about which concepts a culture has no need for. In this vein, there is great merit in examining the semantic domains that are abundant or scarce in a particular language. Vocabulary provides valuable insight into the current and historical states of a culture. Therein, this paper aims to juxtapose the lexicons of Old and Modern English in a systematic fashion to explore semantic change

through the vocabulary available to denote killing at two markedly different societal points.

## 2 Background Research

The term “synonym” is a problematic one as it evokes a literal meaning of the sameness, while often referring to terms that have slightly different connotations. Atkins and Levin (1995) posit that “near-synonyms” might be a more concise label in their consideration of several different words that surround the verb “to shake”. They found that even with an overlap in denotation, there was an observable difference in the syntactic environments that the words would occur. Similarly, Whatley (1887) suggested that these instances should be treated as “pseudo-synonyms” to reconcile these complications. He asserts that having words referring to the exact same denotative and connotative meanings would not benefit a language and instead hinder it. This is illustrated by how the compound “ox-flesh” has fallen out of the English language, replaced by the French loanword “beef”, while “ox” remains to refer to the animal. It is the perfect synonymy between “ox-flesh” and “beef” that seems to have caused clutter within the language, resulting in the loss of a lexical item. Therefore, Whatley argues that one very rarely sees evidence of exact overlap as the label might suggest. In order to be cognizant of the identified issues with the term “synonym”, this paper uses it in a general sense to denote terms that overlap semantically. In circumstances demanding more precision, such as determining which words to include, the qualifiers “perfect” and “imperfect” have been employed.

Expanding upon the complications that arise with the use of the term “synonym”, one must also be aware of the demarcated difference between the denotative and the connotative meaning of a word. Warren (1992) described this difference as necessary to understand the role of euphemisms as synonymous components of language. Euphemisms, by her clarification, are divergences from denotative meaning that arise in delicate situations where the employed expression is less harsh with the general intent to be more tactful. This has important implications for the study of lexical meaning and etymology as it reflects how social motivations can motivate language change.

The lexicon is a collection of the concepts that a speaker will need to communicate and live within their temporal and spatial location in history. Therefore, it is incredibly revealing to examine the linguistic wealth or paucity around certain semantic domains. The work of Ihalainen (2006) posited that language is a “constitutive element of reality” (p. 118) and therefore integral to understanding a culture. In simpler terms, a vocabulary represents a mutual agreement across a body of speakers about the connection between a surface word and the deeper concept, suggesting that the lexicon reflects the collective conscious of a given group of people at a fixed point in history.

The English language provides an opportunity to examine this as it is relatively well documented through authentic texts. These works span a variety

of purposes, from religious to literary to historical, and therefore paint a broad picture of the language at the time (McGillivray 2004). The consideration of Old to Modern English embraces over a thousand years of societal and linguistic changes. Kay and Corbett (2008) posit that one of the most influential historical moments for the English lexicon is the Norman Conquest of 1066, which introduced French vocabulary into the English language. This is important to be aware of when examining English.

There are a limited amount of lexical considerations of Old English at this time. Kłos (2013) approached this area with a largely synchronic approach to the euphemistic and non-euphemistic variations of the term “die”. Here, instead of focusing on the granular details, she selects two categories, euphemistic and non-euphemistic verbs, and separates the terms within them by contrasting the amount of items in each. The conclusion of this work suggested that a high level of variation in the possible phrases, many with a low frequency of occurrence, reflected the stylistic necessity in Anglo-Saxon poetry to fit the alliterative verse framework. This provides a solid foundation for the establishing a systematic approach to the present study as it discussed the difficulty in examining culturally bound concepts, such as euphemisms, which results in the need to clearly define criteria for classifying terms. The present research similarly approaches this challenge by outlining specific guidelines to determine the categorization of lexical items.

While work on Old English vocabulary is scarce as is, there appear to be even fewer studies that seek to contrast it with later English forms. Allo’s (2013) treated adjective retention in English by drawing upon the data available through dictionary and thesauri sources. Through this, she was able to discern that the most frequent semantic shift was the loss of certain meanings paired with the gain of others. Further, Allo mentioned that a majority of Old English vocabulary, between 60% and 85%, is estimated to have been lost over time. This diachronic perspective on the English lexicon illustrates an underrated field of study with captivating changes that demand further research and explanation.

The current exploration of the lexical choices available to speakers of Old and Modern English is conducted through a corpus-based approach. It is expected that Old English possesses a plethora of perfect synonyms for the transitive verb “to kill”, while the Modern English vocabulary no longer requires this richness of lexical variety to denote the act of taking the life of another.

### 3 Method

The examination of Old and Modern English words for killing necessitates a methodical procedure for identifying which words are acceptable candidates. The synonyms considered in this paper were harvested from a variety of different sources of a thesaurus or dictionary format. The Modern English words were taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Merriam-Webster*, *thesaurus.com*, and *Collins Dictionary*. The majority of the Old English words were taken from the two volume comprehensive thesaurus compiled by Roberts et al. (2000) and then

cross-referenced with Clark Hall's (1916) *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The resulting lexical items were individually verified across the available dictionaries to ensure that they were factually supported elsewhere and thus appropriate for consideration. Erroneous or unconfirmed data were discarded at this stage.

In exploring the synonyms for the verb "to kill" across Modern and Old English, it was necessary to set some perimeters for determining what to include. For the purposes of this paper, the chosen words were vetted through three separate criteria, shown in example (1). This process worked to protect against judgments based in a biased familiarity with Modern English as it established general guidelines and relied upon dictionary classification to determine whether a lexical item was appropriate. This protected against any bias that might arise out of making subjective decisions on lexical items based out of prior experience. However, it should be noted that there may be some undocumented connotations within the Old English set of synonyms that are too fine or culturally bound to be identified and thus cause the lexical item to be excluded.

- (1)
  - a. Synonyms must be understood to mean "to kill" as a single word  
*Excludes phrasal constructions that need multiple words*
  - b. Synonyms must not be colloquial, figurative, slang, or poetic.  
*Excludes lexical items identified in the dictionary as any of these*
  - c. Synonyms must be generally applicable and lack specific connotation  
*Excludes any item with limited use or culturally bound relevance*

The final step in preparing the data was to perform two-way comparisons between Old and Modern English. In the chronological condition, Old English words were evaluated for continuance into a Modern English form. In the reverse chronological condition, Modern English synonyms were traced back for etymological roots to determine whether they were descendants of Old English words or whether they were introduced through later language contact and borrowing.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Old English Results

The initial list of synonyms derived from *A Thesaurus of Old English*, before the application of the three selection criteria, totaled forty-three items. The following application of criteria and identification of synonyms can be seen in example (2).

Five of the initial Old English words were discarded in the application of the first criteria, as they required more than one word to express the intended definition. Syntactically, these constructions relied on a verb-noun or noun-verb construction. The application of the second criterion, regarding colloquial and

poetic language, was difficult to apply in the case of Old English. Without delving into an in-depth analysis of the specific locations where each word has occurred in the body of remaining texts, one must rely on the documentation and comments provided by the linguists and lexicographers who compile the dictionaries, corpora, and thesauri. However, one synonym, “forwegan”, was excluded as the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* identified it as solely poetic. A final four synonyms were discarded in the final step of the selection process. While there were no fundamental problems with the inclusion of words with several primary definitions, these suggested primary definitions detracted from the generalizability of the terms by implying a situational applicability where they might denote killing. An example of this is “rēodan”, which means “to redden”, which would only be used to discuss fatality if the manner of death was associated with the spilling of blood.

The final number of acceptable synonyms was thirty-three, though many of these needed to be collapsed to prevent redundancy. As Old English has a series of common prefixes before verbs, many of the synonyms contain the same root verb with varying onsets. Further, the sources suggested overlap within several verbs with similar orthographies. These were all collapsed into one root synonym. The result of this was a total of nineteen viable synonyms for the transitive verb “to kill”, shown in example (3).

(2) Exclusions	Old English Synonyms	Translation
1 <sup>st</sup> Criterion	tō dēaþ gedō oþþringan lif āgēotan blōd blōd gspillian wæl geslēan	<i>to put to death</i> <i>to deprive of life</i> <i>to pour out blood</i> <i>to spill blood</i> <i>to slaughter</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Criterion	forwegan	<i>to kill (poetic)</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Criterion	ābreca onsendan ālecgan rēodan	<i>to break</i> <i>to send</i> <i>to cast/lay down</i> <i>to redden/stain with blood</i>

- (3) Acceptable Old English Synonyms  
(ge)webban, spillan, slēan, oncwealdon, gētan, offeallan, forfaran,  
fordīlgian, geendian, gedēadian, (ge)dēþan, (ge)cwielman, (ge)cwellan,  
belīfian, āstyrfan, āmyrran, ābrēotan, ābredwian, fordōn

#### 4.2 Looking forward: Old English to Modern English

The chronological comparison between the two forms of English sought to examine whether the identified synonyms for the transitive act of killing had persisted into the modern form of the language. The result of this was overwhelmingly negative, as most of the lexical choices had fallen out of use. Of the nineteen viable synonyms, only four seem to remain in Modern English in a form that is not archaic or obsolete. This is shown in example (4).

(4)	Semantic Change	Old English	Modern English
	a. Divergent Denotation	offeallan	to fall
	b. Reduced Denotation	āmierran	to mar
		(ge)cwellan	to quell
	c. Similar Denotation	slēan	to slay

“Offeallan” (“to fall”) is no longer used to denote killing and therefore seems to have undergone a semantic shift, which renders it irrelevant to the given criteria. Two of the synonyms, “āmierran” and “(ge)cwellan”, have undergone a semantic weakening that has rendered them less extreme. While “āmierran” could be used in Old English to mean either hindering someone or outright killing them, the Modern English descendant “to mar” does not allow for the latter. Essentially, the word has lost the ability to be employed in discussing fatal actions but instead may refer to less extreme ones, such as scarring. Similarly, “(ge)cwellan” has experienced a softening in denotation. While it once was one of the primary words to describe the action of killing, it now corresponds to the modern verb “to quell.”

Only one of the nineteen synonyms, “slēan”, retains true authenticity to its original denotation. Surviving as the modern transitive verb “to slay”, this lexical item has experienced the least amount of change between Old and Modern forms of the English language.

#### 4.3 Modern English Results

A large list of potential synonyms was initially compiled for consideration from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Merriam-Webster*, *Collins English Dictionary*, and *thesaurus.com*. The resulting synonyms and exclusion process can be found in example (5).

(5)	Exclusions	Modern English Synonyms
	1 <sup>st</sup> Criterion	to put to sleep, to take out, to rub out, to use up, to lay out
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Criterion	to ace, to trash, to wax, to top, to hit, to lose, to ice, to crease, to huff, to red-light, to stretch, to stiffen, to corpse, to pop, to skittle
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Criterion	to slaughter, to massacre, to annihilate, to destroy, to murder, to liquidate, to execute, to suicide, to dispatch

The first criterion ruled out five phrasal constructions. Unlike the Old English synonyms, most of these relied on the combination of a verb and preposition. The exclusion of synonyms marked as colloquial, slang, figurative, or poetic demanded the rejection of fifteen proposed verbs. These were fairly straightforward and determined by the Oxford English Dictionary's notations. The application of the third criterion eliminated ten terms that suggested a connotative meaning that was particularly violent, applied to a larger group of individuals, had a more specific meaning of a plot or conspiracy against a certain individual, or were overly narrow in definition. This left a total of two possible synonyms, shown in example (6).

- (6) Acceptable Modern English Synonyms  
to kill, ?to slay

The application of the selection criteria eliminated most of the Modern English synonyms, leaving only “to slay” and “to kill”. “To slay” is slightly problematic as it technically passes the criteria, but is somewhat imperfect. The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that while it has the target definition and generalizability, it is used almost exclusively in rhetorical and poetic language while “to kill” is used in a more general sense. Therefore, the only perfect transitive verb in Modern English to discuss taking the life of someone is “to kill”, with “to slay” being a lacking alternative.

#### 4.4 Looking Back: Modern English to Old English

The reverse chronological condition is markedly different as the list of words to consider is shorter. While there are a series of imperfect synonyms, the only one that truly corresponds to the criteria is “to kill”. Therefore, there are fewer etymologies to consider when looking backwards from Modern to Old English.

The Modern English transitive verb “to kill” has a fascinatingly vague history. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it does not have a definitive origin. It is further suggested that there may be some connection to the Old English verb “cwellan”, which has come to mean “to quell”. If this were the case, there would have to be an undocumented form that could account for the occurrence of Middle English verb “killen”. Though this is plausible, it requires a reconstruction of an Old English verb “\*cyllan”, as per the suggestion of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. If this is not the case, one must consider other Germanic languages as possible sources for this verb. This assumption is primarily rooted in the lack of linguistic proof in Old English itself and the implausibility of a French influence, as the corresponding verb “à tuer”, originating from Latin, does not correlate to the Middle or Modern English forms. While early French and Old English are two of the most prevalent influences on the progression of English, neither can be taken as the undisputed predecessor of the Modern English verb “to kill”.

In considering the imperfect synonyms in Modern English, one can conclude that very few seem to have come from Old English. The exception, as previously discussed, is “to slay” which has roots in “slēan”. However, this verb is no longer a perfect synonym for general use when discussing killing another. Revisiting the synonyms that were ruled out with the application of the third criterion, all but three of the eleven words were descendants of Romance languages, most notably Old French. The remaining were of Old English and Romance language assimilation (“to murder”), Russian (“to liquidate”), and Old Norse (“to slaughter”) origins. It is overwhelmingly clear that Modern English does not have the same breadth of lexical richness for describing the act of killing and that this limited vocabulary is more heavily influenced by the Romance languages than Old English.

## 5. Discussion

The hypothesis that Old English will demonstrate a greater level of lexical variation in the vocabulary of killing than Modern English is ultimately supported by the findings presented in this paper. With nineteen different verbs associated with the transitive notion of “to kill”, the older iteration of the language overwhelming overshadows the current lexicon in the wealth of terms in this semantic domain. While this is compelling in itself, it lends itself aptly to a consideration of the social and historical motivations for the drastic loss in vocabulary with attention to previous work in this area.

First and foremost, the relative paucity in the vocabulary of killing in Modern English suggests an overarching cultural movement away from the need to discuss such actions in a general manner. This pertains to Ihalainen’s (2006) theory that language is constructed from a series of mutually understood concepts and that the vocabulary then reflects this. In Modern English, there is no need for an abundance of lexical items that denote the action of literal, transitive action of killing. Instead, one can either speak in a technical manner that describes the specific mode, such as electrocution or the enactment of corporal punishment, or employ a euphemistic or colloquial phrase, such as “pulling the plug” or “trashing” someone. The quandary then becomes what one should make of the loss of the general literal vocabulary paired with a rise of more specific or less direct options. Warren’s (1992) characterization of euphemisms suggested that they were the use of less severe terms in situations in order to perpetuate tactfulness around sensitive topics. This definition can be used to reverse engineer the large amount of euphemisms related to killing to find the cultural significance. If we assume the use is rooted in an awareness of tact and that the phrases used are less severe, than we must reconstruct that the topic is one of a sensitive nature. Therefore, it can be suggested that the topic of killing is a much less socially acceptable one in the current day than it was in the time of the Anglo-Saxons. If modern speakers are less keen to speak frankly on the topic of death, then there is a clutter within the language of words that convey killing. Recalling the “ox-flesh” and “beef” example in Whatley (1887), it is not



unexpected that English would have lost a good portion of the redundant lexical items. If words are not used, then they fall out of use. Further, if a language has two words with identical meanings for something less prone to discussion, then there is unresolved semantic clutter that demands reconciliation over time.

Conversely, the Anglo-Saxon world was not subject to the same stigmatized perceptions of killing and death as speakers of Modern English. In the world presented through authentic manuscripts, there is no shortage of situations where it is appropriate to employ a general description of killing. Further, the predominant literary style of the time favoured lexical variation to fit within the rigid stylistic form of Anglo-Saxon poetry (Klos, 2013). While there was an abundance of perfect synonyms for the act of killing, the topic was frequent and the poetic tradition rendered the redundancy preferable. Even if, due to the culturally based limitations of working with Old English sources, not all nineteen terms are as generalizable as they appear, there is still a considerable amount of them when compared to Modern English. Overall, the occurrence of synonyms denoting killing are ultimately reflective of the societal need for them.

The semantic weakening present between the Old English verbs “āmierran” and “(ge)cwellan” and their Modern English contemporaries, “to mar” and “to quell” were ultimately predicted by previous research. It is a similar phenomenon to what Allo (2013) noticed in the treatment of lexical change in adjectives between Old and Modern English where the most common type of semantic change occurred in situations where one meaning was lost while another was gained. Both “āmierran” and “(ge)cwellan” lost their notions of fatality for the adoption of other softened meanings. As it has been argued that Modern English does not require the same breadth of synonyms around killing, one can understand these examples as recasting existing vocabulary to meet the changing needs of the speakers. With the improvements of medicine and tightening of laws around harming others, there is a more concrete need for lexical items such as “mar” and “quell” than their Old English counterparts.

The role of societal influence on the semantic change within a language also warrants discussion in the context of the Old and Modern English synonyms for killing. While very few of the original nineteen words remained into the current language, there were several imperfect synonyms that were noted that did not find their origins in Old English. This is particularly interesting, as it has been established that there was no shortage of ways to speak of killing in Old English, yet these are not retained while other words are introduced into the language. The revealing factor in this is that these imperfect synonyms largely originate from Romance languages, which have a concrete intersection with the English language with the French influence following the Norman Conquest of 1066.

Given this historically significant event, it is likely that it would be more prestigious to adopt French loanwords than retain English ones that may evoke a sense of savagery in contrast to the organized power that overtook them. This may explain why two of the imperfect synonyms in Modern English taken from French origins, “murder” and “execute”, are intimately connected to law. This would be much like the “ox” and “beef” paradigm where the French world is

adopted over the retention of the Old English term denoting “oxflesh” in the refined condition associated with culinary pursuits. Killing that can be defined in a legal sense is expressed through loan words from the more prestigious language of the conquerors. This would then be concurrent with the retention of the Old English verb “slēan” that corresponds to a more general kind of killing that is not determined by law. Overall, the comparison of Old and Modern English lexical items denoting the transitive notion of killing provides insight into the historical background of the progression of English and how it may have been impacted by the sociocultural environment.

## 6. Conclusion

This preliminary lexical examination of Old and Modern English provided critical insight into the semantic development over time and how it reflects the sociocultural moment within history. While Old English employed a series of varying lexical items to discuss the act of killing, Modern English does not have this same amount of multiplicity. It should be noted that further examination should be given to the specific contextual environments of the Old English synonyms to discern whether they truly are in as perfect synonymy as they appear to be. Future research could also delve into the state of kill synonyms in Middle English, which would likely better demonstrate the French influence. Overall, historical semantics can play a significant in helping scholars and historians to understand the cultures of days past.

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