

ON THE SEMANTICS OF THE OLD ENGLISH WORD *METE*

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Summary: The article provides a detailed analysis of the semantics of the compound words containing an Old English word *mete* as a stem. As one of the components of the pattern $n + n \rightarrow N$, this word presented the basis for generating compound words with new semantics. On the basis of the Old English lexicon it is possible to single out several lexical groups of words belonging to the semantic field «food, meal» either in their direct or indirect meanings.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.
(Genesis 1:30)

1. Introduction

The line from King James Version [The Bible 1611, www] is a translation from Hebrew, the word *meat* (coming from OE *mete*) means here ‘food, meal’ rather than ‘meat’ proper (just like the Greek word *broma* ‘food’). This fact is reflected in the modern version: «And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air and every living thing moving on the face of the earth I have given every green plant for food: and it was so» [The Bible, www]. Such meaning of the word *mete* could be found in the sacred texts of the XIV-XVIIth cent.; it was basic in the Old English lexicon and the English literary monuments of the Early Middle Ages.

In this paper I am going to analyze the semantics of the word *mete* and that of the compound words which include it into their structure as one of the stems. Also, I am going to observe the changes which took place in its semantic structure in the course of time. As is stated in [Филин 2009: 226], «слово всегда представляет собой неповторимую единицу: за каждым словом и его историей стоит целый мир» [word always represents a unique unit: there is a whole world hidden behind it and its history].

2. The semantic structure of lexical groups of compounds with the component *mete*

Originally, in Old Germanic languages the word *mete* meant ‘food, meal’: OE *mete*, Old Sax. *meti*, Old Norse *matr*, OHG *maz*, Goth. *matjan* ‘to eat’ [Маковский 2000: 216]. This meaning is registered in «The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles»:

(1) *A.D. 891. Se bat was geworht of briddan healfre hyde þe hi on foron, hi namon mid him þæt hi hæfdun to seofon nihtum mete... ‘The boat in which they came was made of two hides and a half; and they took with them provisions for seven nights...’;*

(2) A.D. 894. *Þa besæt sio fierd hie þær utan þa hwile þe hie þær lengest mete hæfdon.* 'Then the king's forces beset them without as long as they had **food**' [The Anglo-Saxon, www].

In Ælfric's «Colloquy» which in the most reliable way represents the language of the Anglo-Saxon daily life the word *mete* is used to indicate both food and meals in general:

(3) 103. *Baker: sopllice butan cræfte minon ælc beod æmtig byþ gesewen, ond buton hlafe ælc mete to wlættan byþ gehwyrfed.* 'For without my craft the whole table would appear bare, and without bread all your **food** would become vomit'.

(4) 99. *Salter: Þearle fremað cræft min eow eallum. Nan eower blisse brycð on gereduncge oþþe mete, buton cræft min gistliþe him beo.* 'Everyone benefits a great deal from my skill. No one enjoys his **breakfast or dinner** unless my skill is present in it' [Ælfric's Colloquy, www].

In this general meaning the word *mete* was part of the semantic structure of the compound language signs denoting the processes, facts, and notions relating to the semantic field «food, meals». Implementing the structural pattern $n + n \rightarrow N$ (noun + noun \rightarrow compound), it became the basis for the appearance of compound words with new semantics. The analysis of the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary [Hall 1991] made it possible to sort out the following lexico-semantic groups of compound words with the component *mete* relating to the semantic field «food, meals».

The lexico-semantic group denoting «food proper» includes:

1) the ingredients for preparing dishes: *meteswamm* 'edible mushroom' (*swam* 'fungus, mushroom'); *metecú* 'cow for killing' (*cú* 'cow'); *flæscmete* 'flesh, animal food', which indicated 'meat' proper;

2) prepared dishes: *cócermete* 'seasoned food' (*cóc* 'cook'), in which food seasoned with spices might attest to a special skill of the cook; *wyrmete* 'dish of herbs, pottage' (*wyrt* 'herb, vegetable, spice'); *panmete* 'cooked food' (*panne* 'pan');

3) the event of satiation: *metscipe* 'feeding, meal' (*scipe* 'state'); *meteláf* 'leavings of a meal' (*láf* 'what is left, remains').

The lexico-semantic group denoting «the location of food» includes two subgroups:

1) a store or a shelter for hiding food: *metebyre* (*byre* 'stall, shed, hut'); *meteærn* (*ærn* 'place or house'); *meteclyfa* (*clyfa*, *cleofa* 'chamber, cellar'); *metefætels* (*fætels* 'vessel; bag, sack');

2) a place of selling and buying foodstuffs: *metecyþing* (*cype*, *céap* 'market, saleable commodities'); *metehus* (*hus* 'house'); *metestraet* (*stræt* 'a paved road in a town, a street').

The word indicating a special room for preparing food – *kitchen* – as well as the word *cook* were taken from Latin as the Roman heritage: *cycene* 'kitchen' [L *coquina*]; *cóc* 'cook' [L *coquus*]; they are not marked by the presence of the component *mete*.

The lexico-semantic group denoting «actions performed while treating and preparing the foodstuffs» includes:

1) the way of food treatment (using fire for frying and stewing): *panmete* ‘cooked food’ (*panne* ‘pan’); *wyrtmete* ‘pottage’ (*wyrt* ‘wort (brewing)’), which are picked out as the means of preparing dishes;

2) general operations connected with preparing: *metegearwa* ‘preparations of food’ (*gearwan*, *gierwan* ‘to prepare, cook’); *metenéad* ‘requisites in the way of food’ (*nead*, *nied* ‘what is necessary’); *meteping* ‘operation connected with cooking’ (*ping* ‘act, deed’);

3) the instruments and things for cooking and eating: *meteawel* ‘meat-hook’ (*awel* ‘hook, fork’), though forks were not part of dinner-service at that time; *metefæt* ‘dish’ (*fæt* ‘vat, vessel, jar, cup’; *fæt* ‘plate, beaten out metal (especially gold)’); *metseax* ‘meat-knife’ (*seax* ‘a knife, hip-knife, an instrument for cutting’); *metesticca* ‘spoon’ (*sticca* ‘stick, peg; spoon’).

The lexico-semantic group «people participating in the process of eating» includes the lexemes denoting people who serve those sitting at table: *metepegn* ‘seneschal, steward’ (*pegn* ‘servant, one who does service for another’); *meterædere* ‘reader at meal-times’ (*rædere* ‘reader, one who reads’); they were scopers – narrators of folk tales – or grace readers during the monastic meal. Only these persons are indicated by the compounds with the component *mete*. The lexemes denominating those who cook food and those who hunt for beasts for eating, or graze cattle, or bake bread, or bring and sell salt, etc., do not contain this component. The former were not specially indicated at all; it might be connected with the fact that both the food and the ways of its preparation were simple and did not require special skills, so the preparation was done by those who could cope with the fire: housewives or members of the family in households, and monks in monasteries. In kings’ households as well as during feasts special people were invited – cooks (*cóc* ‘cook’ [L *coquus*]), as has been mentioned above.

The lexemes denominating the latter are connected either with certain domestic animals used for eating (for example, herdsmen: *swinhyrde* ‘swine-herd’; *oxanhyrde* ‘herdsman’; *scéaphierde* ‘shepherd’), or with the kind of activity (for example, *huntere* ‘hunter’; *fugelere* ‘fowler’; *fiscere* ‘fisher’; *bæcere* ‘baker’; *sealtere* ‘salter’), i. e. these lexemes belong to the semantic field of occupation rather than to that of daily life, particularly, to the field of food and eating.

The lexico-semantic group «valuation» is related to the axiological aspect of culture, and the denominations represented by the compounds under consideration are marked with positive or negative connotation. Positively are marked the lexemes meaning delicacies, exquisite food (*sméamete* ‘delicacy (food)’; *sméah* ‘subtle, crafty; exquisite, choice’), prepared with particular skill and contrivance (*searumete* ‘dainty, delicacy’; *searu* ‘art, skill, contrivance’), tasty to the extent when it can be called divine, given by the gods (*éstmete* ‘delicate meat, dainty (food), delicacy, luxury’ (*ést* ‘luxuries (especially food)’), *usu* in pl ‘delicacies’; *ésa* ‘divinity, god’). The main food in the stern medieval time was bread, so any addition to this main course brought about particular flavor and delight (*sufłmete* ‘delicacy, relish’; *sufł* ‘anything, whether flesh, fish, or vegetable, eaten with bread, relish eaten with bread’). The value of food was

great, and a man who ate well was considered strong and healthy (*metēpiht* ‘well-nourished’; *þiht* ‘firm, strong’). The compound *swétmete* / *swótmete* meant ‘sweets’, ‘fruit in honey’ (sweetmeat, dainty; *swéte* ‘sweet, pleasant’; *swót* ‘sweet’). This word survived in modern English as *sweetmeat* having kept the component *mete* > *meat* in its general meaning ‘food’.

The same group includes the negatively marked lexeme *meteniðing* ‘food niggard’ (*niðing* ‘one who commits a vile action’; *nið* ‘action which arises from hatred, strife, war, hostility’). As is known, in the mentality of all ancient people the event of eating together or treating a guest to food symbolized hospitality, kind-heartedness, and peace on the whole. Refusing food to somebody was a signal of hostility; such action might be caused either by the negative traits of the person, or by the complicated social environment – war or other strife. In spite of the fact that this lexeme denotes a person, the connotative meaning prevails here over the denotative one, on this ground this lexeme is included in the group of valuation.

The lexico-semantic group with the meaning «the time of meal» includes compound words denoting:

1) the sequence of meals: *morgenmete* ‘morning meal’ (*morgen* ‘morn, morning, forenoon, sunrise’); *undernmete* ‘morning meal, breakfast’ (*undern* ‘morning, from 9 AM to 12 noon’); *nonmete* ‘afternoon meal’ (*nón* ‘the ninth hour (3 PM)’); *aefenmete* ‘supper, evening meal’ (*áfen* ‘even, evening, eventide’);

2) the reiteration of the process: *dægmete* ‘daily food’ (*dæg* ‘day, period of 24 hours’);

3) singling this event out of the other daily happenings: *metetid* ‘meal-time’ (*tíd* ‘time, period’).

The existence in Old English of the lexemes to denote various entities connected with the time of meal conforms to the existence of similar lexemes in the kindred German language: *Frühstück* ‘morning meal’ (*früh* ‘early’), *Mittag*, *Mittagessen* ‘noon meal’ (*mitt* ‘middle’), *Abendessen*, *Abendbrot* ‘evening meal’ (*Abend* ‘evening’), *Mahlzeit*, *Mahl* ‘meal’ (*Zeit* ‘time’). This fact indicates that the lexical denomination of meals refers to the proto-Germanic period of the history of the kindred languages, i.e. they represent a most ancient layer of the Germanic culture. (It is interesting, however, to note that supper in German is designated by the compound word with the component *brot* ‘bread’, and ‘meal’ in general – by the compound word with the component *Mahlen* ‘grinding’, as different from the Old English emphasizing the component *mete* which later acquired the meaning ‘meat’.)

The lexico-semantic group signifying «socially relevant events, processes, facts and notions» includes the compound words denoting:

1) food which was taken as supplies for a long march (a war campaign or an expedition): *formete* (*för* ‘journey, expedition’);

2) foodstuffs which served as the lord’s payment to the worker after harvesting or haymaking: *hreacmete* (*hréac* ‘rick, heap, stack’);

3) a kind of money, or payment: *metegafol* (*gafol* ‘tribute, tax, duty’);

4) means of supporting a family or a kin: *metsung* ‘feeding, provisioning’; *metecorn* ‘allowance of corn to dependants’; *wistmete* ‘sustenance’ (*wist* ‘being, existence’);

5) diseases connected with nutrition: *meteáflung* ‘atrophy’; *metecweorra* ‘surfeit, indigestion’ (*ácweorran* ‘to guzzle, gorge, eat or drink immoderately, glut’); *meteútsiht* ‘dysentery’ (*útsið* ‘going out, departure’);

6) starvation or, on the contrary, good appetite and even gluttony: *meteléas* ‘without food’ (*léas* ‘without, free from, devoid of’); *meteléast* (*-liest*) ‘lack of food, starvation’; *metesócn* ‘craving, appetite’ (*sócn* ‘seeking, search, exploring’); *ofermete* ‘gorging, gluttony’ (*ofer* ‘over, beyond, above, upon’). The compound word *meteléast* meant ‘famine’ as «a case of extreme lack of food for a very large number of people» [Longman 1992], along with which the Old English lexicon contains the word *hungor* ‘hunger’ as «the wish or need for food, lack of food, esp. for a long period» [Longman 1992] which denotes the notion of undernourishment. In the text of «The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles» these notions are mentioned side by side:

(5) *A.D. 893. <...> se cyng wæs west on Defnum wiþ þone sciphere, þa wæron hie mid metelieste gewægde, hæfdon miclne dæl þara horsa freten. þa oþre wæron hungre acwolen. <...> and the king meanwhile was in Devonshire westward with the naval force, then were the enemy weighed down with famine. They had devoured the greater part of their horses; and the rest had perished with hunger* [The Anglo-Saxon, www].

3. Changes in the semantic structure of the word *mete*

In due course the semantics of the word *mete* underwent changes. The Old English word *mete* narrowed its meaning and came to denote only ‘meat’ in its modern interpretation. The transfer of the meanings ‘food, meal’ > ‘meat’ was characteristic not only of the English language; M.M.Makovsky gives examples from other languages which are not kindred to Germanic: Hebr. *léhem* ‘food’ but Arab. *lahm* ‘meat’ [Маковский 2000: 216]. Thus we observe the narrowing of the semantics of the lexeme: ‘to supply (food)’ > ‘food’ > ‘meat’. The texts of the period under study testify to the fact that the semantics of the word *mete* was so broad that its use in the discourse required being more exact, so in order to denote meat as a kind of food a compound word *flæscmete* ‘flesh, animal food’ was used, as it is seen, for example, in Ælfric’s «Colloquy»:

(6) 105. *Pupil: Gif ge me ut adrifap fram eowrum geferscype, ge etap wyrta eowre grene, ond flæscmettas eowre hreawe. The cook replies: If you drive me away from your community you would eat your vegetables raw and your meat rare*’.

(7) 140. *Pupil: Gyt flæscmettum ic bruce, forðam cild ic eom under gyrda drohtniende. I have eaten meat, since I am a boy bending beneath the rod* [Ælfric's Colloquy, www].

In these examples the narrower meaning of the word *mete* is caused by the influence of the context: the cook justifies his value as a specialist by the fact that without him the community will suffer having few meat dishes at table; the boy stresses the fact that it is meat that gives him enough strength to work.

Some time later the meaning of the word *flæsc* became broader and came to be used of the animal's and people's flesh having left the paradigm of words denoting edibles.

In the study of word meanings, the «inner form» (W. von Humboldt) is of much importance. Modern linguists think that the inner form is an image underlying the meaning or usage of a word; it can only become clear against the background of material and spiritual culture and language system in the context of which there appeared or was transformed the word or word combination. Thus, M. M. Makovsky relates the meaning of the words *meat*, *flesh* with the meaning 'fate, destiny' because the animals or plants to be eaten, in the opinion of the ancient people, were sacrifice to gods; it was a part of an animal's body that was sacrificed – a chunk of meat or fat, or a bone (cf. Old Indian *medha* 'sacrifice') [Маковский 2000: 217]. It seems reasonable to suppose that the ancient roots of the word *mete* are connected with measuring rather than with meat as food. This idea may be confirmed by the fact that in the word family *mete* there is a meaning represented by the word *metend* which means 'measurer; God, Lord'. Its meanings might have developed from one and the same word form which meant 'to distribute, to supply with food'. Two lexemes registered in the Old English lexicon might have developed from this word form: *metan* 'to measure, mete out' (cf. Modern English verb *to mete* 'hand out, share out') and *metian* 'to provision' (hence, *mete*). That is why the word *metend* (Participle I of *metan*) denoting the person who distributes material wealth appears in the word family of *mete*. This meaning is a sign of the broadening of its semantics: 'to supply (with food)' < 'he who metes out to everybody' < 'master' < 'lord' < 'God'. Sticking to the point of view that «противопоставление между полисемией и омонимией градуально» [the contradiction between polysemy and homonymy is gradual] and that «существуют типы полисемии, более или менее удаленные от омонимии» [there are types of polysemy more or less distanced from homonymy] [Кронгауз 2005: 123], one can suppose that the original word form was polysemantic but eventually its meanings became parted and approached those of homonymy.

4. Conclusion

All the semantic changes of the lexeme *mete* discussed above have appeared to be the markers of the evolution of the material and spiritual life of the Anglo-Saxons because human language is a means of registering the results of the cognition of the objective world. Conceptualizing the world in the system of notions and objectifying them in language signs, people leave traces in the history of their language. Investigating the semantics of the ancient words can become a step to the reconstruction of the language model of the world, while the linguistic reconstruction gives an opportunity to trace the ways of the arising and developing of a society in the course of its history.

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