

DETERMINATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SEMANTIC LEXICAL
UNDERSPECIFICATION IN OLD ENGLISH HOMILIES

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ABSTRACT

One of the most challenging problems facing lexical semantics of old texts, like Old English homilies, is to explain how unspecified meanings are “controlled” allowing the proper senses to be selected and deployed to achieve successful goals. The term “underspecification” refers to “some feature value whose overt presence is required on the surface” but “is left underlyingly unspecified and must therefore be provided by a default mechanism” (Trask 1993: 291). The study of lexical underspecification not only sheds light on the semantic behaviour of polysemies by “unpacking” several senses for a single lexical item, it may enable this lexical item to be uniquely understood in the context and it may ultimately help us make suggestions about evolutionary semantic continuity of the word.

In this paper I examine a few lexical items used in Old English homilies and present a possible interpretation of the meanings of such words taking into account the context in which they are used, as well as the author’s own explanatory exposition. The Old English words which have been analysed are: *leorningcniht*, *apostol*, *ærendraca*, *leornere*, *letanie*, *ele* and *þrowend*.

To those of us who remember Margaret Schlauch’s brilliant lectures on medieval and renaissance English prose, always lucid and often witty, it seems astonishing that her trenchant observations made half a century ago are very seldom quoted nowadays. I was not her student but I remember her several books which I studied at that time and I certainly recall her lecture on Mary of Nijmegen which she delivered in 1962 at the Jagiellonian University on the occasion of my doctoral defence. In this paper I should like to pay my attention to what Margaret Schlauch said about the work of one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest, Old English homilists, Ælfric. When translating and/or adapting the Latin homiletic material he “applied much skill to the task”, says Schlauch, “taking pains to simplify, explain and adapt the exposition to his audience” (1956: 92). Taking a few lexical items as examples I shall try to show how he did it, how he coped

with alien concepts to make them understandable to his Anglo-Saxon listeners and readers.

Homilies, generally speaking, could be easily regarded as the domain of religious research: Latin in origin, cut off from laity, hidden behind the walls of medieval monasteries and cathedrals were worlds unto themselves. But they were written not only for the clergy and the clerical society among which the knowledge of Latin was poor, often practically nonexistent (cf. direct statements by homily writers, too well-known to repeat them here) but also “for the sake of the simple and unlearned listeners and readers” for whom the work was intended (Godden 1992: 521). Have a look at the example (1):

- 1) ic ðas boc of ledenum gereorde to engliscre spræce awende. na ðurh gebylde micelre lare. ac for ðan ðe ic geseah 7 gehyrde mycel gedwyld on manegum engliscum bocum. ðe ungelærde menn ðurh heora bilewitnysse to micclum wisdome tealdon. 7 me ofhreow þ hi ne cuðon ne næfdon ða godspellican lare on heora gewritum. buton ðam mannum anum ðe þ leden cuðon.

(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 174, 49-54)

‘I translated this book from the Latin language to the English speech not because of the confidence in great knowledge but because I saw and heard great heresy in many English books which unlearned men in their simplicity ascribed to great wisdom and I felt sorry that they did not know, neither had they evangelical knowledge in their writings except for those men alone who knew Latin’ [RN]¹

As seen, Ælfric's concern about the right religious background of the laity and his care to expose to them moral, ethical and philosophical views of the new Christian faith in an acceptable way to be emotionally relevant and cognitively understandable was one of his crucial aims in adapting the Latin sermons; for that very reason they are of significantly special interest for a historical linguist.

For almost all the extant Old English homilies, editors of the texts have found direct, sometimes indirect sources; they undertook extremely careful and painstaking search for a possible corresponding Latin sentence, phrase or even word (cf. a fairly recent edition of *Catholic Homilies* by Clemons and Godden). Going through this original source background one can easily notice that the Old English homilist always made a conscious effort to give his audience and readers the meaning in a clear and digestible vernacular idiom. Thus literal, word for word translations are not a rule, Ælfric's “main linguistic point is that Latin and English have different modes of expression which must be observed even in cases where a very literal translation would otherwise be

¹ Most Modern English renderings of Old English examples are my own suggestions [RN], for those that are not – reference sources are provided.

called for”, says Godden (1992: 515) referring to the preface of Ælfric's translation of *Genesis*.

Rendering the source lexical meaning requires some ingenuity on the part of the homilist so that the information loss and/or information intrusion be as small as possible. It seems that the Old English language was astonishingly adequate to render a foreign concept (Kastovsky 1992: 309; Godden 1992: 515). In addition to direct loans we often come across loan translations and additional explanatory information making explicit many aspects of meaning which are underlying and implicit in the original. Yet for some cases loan translating has not disclosed their specific meaning and their sense remains fuzzy, ambiguous and underspecified. This is not a marginal aspect of lexical semantics and becomes crucial for a right exegesis especially of a new religious doctrine. In recent years much linguistic research has been concentrated on lexical underspecification and the main representative of this orientation, Pustejovsky, says that “there is no way in which meaning can be completely divorced from the structure that carries it” and further that “the meanings of words should somehow reflect the deeper conceptual structure in the cognitive system, and the domain it operates in” (1998: 5-6). For a historical linguist, the methodology aspects of Pustejovsky's statements are as fascinating as impossible to achieve: what makes the hard problem hard is the mysterious difficulty of explaining cognitively linguistic meanings and their usage. However, I assume that some of these aspects can be disclosed even under these inexplicable circumstances. The homilist's aim is to arrive at a semantic expression that would be most informative to his audience, which often requires on his part an exceptional intuitive invention as a mere rendering, like borrowing that can be even most precise, is often still a meaningless symbol. Consider the following two words: *apostle* and *disciple*. Both are direct loans from Latin *apostolus* (going back to Greek) and *discipulus*; they are used in Old English as *apostol*, *-es* ‘one sent’, and *discipul*, *-es* ‘a youth engaged in study’.² Both loans are used in Old English homilies to denote the followers of Christ, e.g.:

- 2) an of þam cynne comon Cristes apostoli,
and manega oðre, þe æfter his æriste
heora æhte beceapodon, and eall þæt wurð ledon
æt ðæra apostola fotum, and folgodon Criste
buton gytsunge, and heora bigleofa
wæs gemæne him eallum mid þam apostolum.

(*Homilies of Ælfric, A Supplementary Collection* 297, 199-204)

² Other words given by the dictionary are *scholar* and *disciple*; Bosworth also quotes Ælfric's “Glossary” *discipulus vel mathites*. Latin *mathema* of Greek origin means ‘teaching, symbol of faith’.

'And from this tribe came Christ's apostles and many others that after his resurrection sold their possessions, and all that money laid down next to the apostles' feet and followed Christ without desire for possessions and their means of subsistence was common to all together with apostles.' [RN]

and earlier in the same homily

Hys discipuli þa sædon digellice him betwynan,
Hwæðer ænig man him brohte mete hider?

(*Homilies of Ælfric, A Supplementary Collection* 291, 73-74)

'His disciples then said secretly among themselves
Whether any man brought him food hither.' [RN]

(cf. St John 4: 33, and *The Acts of the Apostles* 4: 33-35)

But the loans themselves can hardly be associated with any native sense and thus are completely incomprehensible puzzles to Old English uneducated people. In order to make these concepts understandable, Ælfric provides loan translations: *ærendraca* 'messenger' for *apostle* and *leorningcniht* 'learner' for *disciple*, which he treats as having the same sense, or as being semantically very close. This ingeniously simple solution is often supported by explanatory exposition, as seen from the following passages:

- 3) þa siðþan geceas he him leornincnihtas; ærest twelf. þa we hatað apostolas þ̅ sint ærendracan. syðþan he geceas twa 7 hundsyfentig. þa sint genemmede discipuli. þ̅ sint leornincnihtas; þa worhte he fela wundra.

(*Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* I 187, 251)

'Then afterwards he [i.e. Christ – RN] chose disciples, first twelve that we call apostles who are messengers. Subsequently, he chose a hundred and seventy two who are named disciples, who are learners; then he performed many miracles.' [RN]

and similarly

- 4) ða þe he [i.e. Se hælend crist – RN] wæs þrittig wintra eald on þære menniscnysse. ða began he to wyrccenne wundra 7 geceas þa twelf leorningcnihtas þa we apostolas hatað þa wæron mid him æfre syððan 7 he him tæhte ealne ðone wisdom þe on halgum bocum stent. 7 þurh hi ealne cristendom astealde;

(*Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* I 325, 4-8)

'Then when he was thirty years old in his incarnation (as a man), he began to perform miracles and chose twelve disciples that we call apostles and they were with him ever since and he taught them all wisdom which is written in holy books, and through them established Christian faith.' [RN]

Though the topic of each homily is different, example (3) comes from the homily about the creation of the world, and example (4) is taken from the homily to be delivered on Tuesday in Rogationtide and is on Lord's prayer,³ the quoted passages refer to the same events, i.e. choosing disciples and performing miracles.

These two extracts show how well acquainted Ælfric was with the original meaning of words he was going to translate, and still it seems that for one reason or other he did not care to make them openly distinct and used them interchangeably as if they were synonyms. That they are not is obvious from such uses as:

- 5) Augustinus ða gehadod cyrde to his biscopstole. and asende ærendracan to rome
(*Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* II 79, 228)

'Then Augustine was appointed to his episcopal see, and sent messenger(s) to Rome' [RN]

If the word *ærendraca* were substituted by *apostol* or *leorningcniht*, the meaning would be extremely difficult to grasp. Similarly, at the beginning of the same homily we read about Gregory the Great that

- 6) He is rihtlice engliscre ðeode Apostol. (*Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* II 72, 5)

'He is rightly the apostle of the English' [RN]

Obviously, one cannot say that he was *engliscre ðeode leorningcniht* 'the disciple of the English'. Neither can the word *leorningcniht* be exchanged for *apostol* in such contexts as:

- 7) Ne bið na se leorningcniht furðor þonne his lareow;
(*Homilies of Ælfric, A Supplementary Collection* 498, 22; 503, 134)

'The disciple is not above his teacher' [RN]

(cf. Mt 10: 24 "The disciple is not above his master", AS *leorning-cniht*, Lindisfarne *ðegn*, Rushworth *leornere*, Latin *discipulus*)

An apostle or a messenger would be completely out of place here: 'the apostle, the messenger is above his master'. The lexicalization of the notion *disciple*, *learner*, *follower*, etc., appears not to be fully established in Old English as this

³ The editor says: "Ælfric's choice of the Lord's Prayer as his theme for the occasion has no parallel in any of the homiliaries which he is known to have used, and there is no evidence of its use as a pericope, but it is used as the theme for a homily *In Litaniis* in the shorter homiliary of Rabanus Maurus ... which suggests that there may have been an established link with Rogationtide" (Godden 2000: 153).

meaning can be expressed also by other items such as *leornere* or *ðegn*, for example:

- 8) Se hælend ða tobræc ða hlafas. and sealde his leornerum.
(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* II 233, 101)

'the Lord broke the loaves of bread and gave his disciples' [RN]
(cf. St Mark 8: 1-9)

- 9) 7 mið ðy gesætt geneolecedon to him ðeignas his (Lindisfarne)
7 þa he wæs gesett him eodun to his discipuli & his þægnas (Rushworth)
(in the Anglo-Saxon versions there are his *leorningcnihtas* or his *leorningcnihtes*)

et cum sedisset accesserunt ad eum discipuli (Latin, St Mt 5: 1)
'and when he was set, his disciples came unto him'

(Authorized Holy Bible)

These textual samples show that it was a hard task for a homilist to give in his own language clear-cut equivalents of foreign words with their semantic underspecification no matter how well he knew the source language. According to my observations, Ælfric tried to convey the most essential and general semantic aspects which his audience could understand. Thus, apostle and disciple are synonymous when they denote the twelve Christ's followers (see example (3): *leornincnihtas ... þa we hatað apostolas þ̅ sint ærendracan*), under other circumstances they are not synonyms.

Not all lexical elements, however, are so complex cognitively or perhaps fuzzy (?), there are also much clearer and simpler cases which allow the homily writer to explicate a new word with its qualia in an easily comprehensible way. Take as an example a Latin word *litanía* 'litaný'. In the homily called *In Letania Maiore* 'the Greater Litaný' (Rogationtide), which originally referred to "the three days of fasting, prayer and procession" (Godden 2000: 145/3), the opening sentence is:

- 10) þas dagas sind gehatene. letanie. (Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 317, 2)
'These days are called litaný' [RN]

The only semantic component of *letanie* is included in the phrase *þas dagas*, but it does not define the meaning of the word, neither does it give any entailment which the word may evoke in various sentential contexts. It is almost certainly a mistaken belief to imagine that the Old English audience know what kind of days they were, therefore Ælfric immediately adds some clarification:

þ̅ sint gebeddagas.
'that are the prayer days' [RN]

However, such a description is far from being satisfactorily informative and a good deal of underspecification remains undisclosed. Since any day can be a day of prayer, Ælfric's ingenious language intuition was telling him that further specification of the meaning was demanding; he goes on explaining that

on þisum dagum we sceolon gebiddan ure eorðlicra wæstma. genihtsumnysse: 7
us sylfum gesundfulnysse 7 sibbe. 7 þ̅ git mare is ure synna forgifenyse;
(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 317, 2-5)

'on these days we should pray for abundance of our earthly fruit (prosperity),
and for our health and peace so that yet greater be forgiveness of our sins'
[RN]

In some other homily we read that the litaný is sung:

- 11) ða hwile þe þæt folc ða letanias sungon;
(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* II 77, 161)
'while that people sang litanies' [RN]

but this characteristic is missing from the previous exposition. Instead, Ælfric focuses his attention on the functionally relevant features of the meaning of praying. Though fasting, singing and procession are supposed to be observed on the three days of Rogationtide, it is praying that Ælfric concentrated on when explaining the sense of *litanie*. The underspecification of the lexical semantics in this case is only partially made explicit.

The two examples presented so far indicate that the homilist made some choice and out of several underspecified aspects selected those that in his opinion would have been most easily understood, those that refer rather to pragmatic aspects (not metaphoric-figurative, though), those that from the point of view of religion and faith were most illuminating.

Generally speaking, it seems that this was the way Ælfric's mind worked; the same method is encountered when he explained the meaning of word referring to nonsophisticated, nor religiously conditioned natural objects, such as olive, olive oil and scorpion.

First, let us have a closer look at the word olive and olive oil which now and then appear in the homiletic material. The Latin terms were probably familiar to the majority of clergy or at least to those that visited southern Europe. They are found in the Bible and the Gospels quite often as Latin *oleum*, *oliva* and quite naturally *oleum* as most often used was borrowed into Old English as *ele*.⁴ At the very start the new word *ele* might have been simple and comprehensible to

⁴ Old English *ele* entered into the language as an early borrowing to undergo the process of i-umlaut, but it was borrowed too late for consonant gemination. (Cf. Wright and Campbell).

those that knew what it denoted but it must have been strange and meaningless to illiterate laity. As in other cases the homilist, Ælfric, described what the word signifies saying

- 12) Ele wyxt on treowum, eall swa win deð;
 ac þa elebeamas beoð maran on wæstmē,
 and þa berian grytran, and hy man gaderað and wringð,
 and man et þone ele, swa swa we etað buteran,
 on manegum estmettum, and he is metta fyrmest.
 Man deð hine to leohte eac on ðam lande
 on fægerum leohtfatum, for ðan þe he fæt is,
 and wynsumlice byrnð binnan Godes cyrcan;
 he is swiðe deorweorðe, and hine man deð to fulluhte,
 and to Godes þenungum, þonne he gehalgod bioð.

(*Homilies of Ælfric, A Supplementary Collection* 552, 132-141)

‘Oil (olives) grows on the trees, likewise the wine (vine) does
 but the olive-trees produce more fruit
 and the berries are bigger; and they are gathered
 and pressed and people eat this oil as we eat butter;
 out of many delicacies it is the best of food.
 it is used for light, also in that land
 in beautiful lamps, because it is fat
 and pleasantly burns within God’s churches,
 it is very precious, and it is used for baptism,
 and for God’s service, when it is hallowed’ [RN]

Notice that Ælfric uses *ele* both for olives (fruit) and oil (liquid fat). This is the word which easily enters into the process of compounding, compare

ele-bacen – ‘oil baked’, Latin: *oleo coctus eleatus*
ele-beamen – ‘of or belonging to the olive tree’, Latin: *oleaginus*
ele-berge – ‘an olive’ (oil berry), the fruit of an olive-tree, Latin: *oliva*
wyn-ele – pleasant oil,

and many, many others. Bosworth does not contain a loan originating from Latin *oliva*, Modern English olive is first recorded in c 1200 (from French). Going back to our extract it is important to emphasize that Ælfric’s explanation is not found in the original text on which the homily is based. He gives a fairly detailed description of the plant, tree, of the production of oil, and finally, of its application. The information about *ele* given by Ælfric was not only crucial to a proper understanding of the meaning of the word but also much wider and more

detailed than it seemed necessary for the context. The attempt on the part of the homilist to familiarize an alien concept is a clear indication of how deeply involved he was in making his text comprehensible. Beside any literal use of the sense of the word oil there are also situations when it is used in a symbolic, figurative sense, for example in a parable about ten virgins (Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* II 328: 45, cf. St. Matthew 25: 1-13) where it symbolizes true love, as it is the nature of oil that it will rise above every fluid: pour oil upon water or another fluid, the oil will flood above, pour water upon oil, and the oil will break through and swim above.

Another example which I would like to discuss, also metaphorically used in the Gospel, demands some explication of its unspecified features. It is Latin *scorpius*, *scorpio* which had not equivalent in Old English, and for which Old English *þrowend* was used. Phonetically these two words have nothing in common, neither are they semantically related: Latin *scorpio* which goes back to Greek *scorpio* is akin to Old English *scearfian* ‘to cut off, scrape’, while *þrowend* is a nominal created from the verb *þrowian* to ‘suffer’. Although easily recognizable phonetically and categorially the Old English *þrowend* hardly ever is likely to be associated with an animal. Speculating a bit one can say that there are some *qualia* in the meanings of scorpion and suffering caused by a severe sting of the worm. That the verb *þrowian* can be a causative in Old English is attested by Bosworth which cites the Lindisfarne version of the Gospel (Mt. 17: 12) where the word *þrowend* with such a meaning is found, although later altered to *geðrowed*:

- 13) 7 sunu monnes geðrowed bið from him ...
 ‘Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them’

(Authorized Holy Bible)

Latin: et filius hominis passurus est ab eis

Godden in his Commentary to Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* says: “The *OE gospels* give only a gloss for *scorpio* (“þæt is an wyrmcynn”) but Ælfric’s term *þrowend* is known to other Old English writers” (cf. Bosworth) (Godden 2000: 149). Because thought and meaning arise mainly through the association of ideas, here suffering and the venomous scorpion, the lexical underspecification was additionally given an overt manifestation. The new object which appears in the evangelical text on which Ælfric based his homily (Luke 11: 12) is first introduced by the *wyrm þe is gehaten þrowend* ‘the worm that is called þrowend’.

- 14) gif he bitt æges sylð he him þone wyrm þe is gehaten þrowend;
 (Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* I 319, 57)

‘if he asks for an egg he gives him a worm which is called scorpion (i.e. a type of a serpent, snake)’ [RN]

(cf. the Anglo-Saxon version of the Gospel)

gyf he bit æg. segst þu ræcð he him scorpionem
þæt is an wyrmcynn;
'if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?'

(Authorized Holy Bible)

Ælfric repeats this in his exegesis of the Gospel, saying

- 15) He cwæð þa oðer bigspel: hwilc fæder wile syllan his
cylde stan. gif hit him hlafes bitt? oððe nædran:
gif hit fises bitt? oððe þone wyrm þrowend gif hit
æges bit; (Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 320, 97)

'Then he says another parable: which father would give his child a stone, if he asks him for bread? or a snake (serpent?) if he asks for a fish? or that worm þrowend if he asks for an egg?' [RN]

Later, elaborating on this parable Ælfric interprets the significance of an egg and a scorpion according to a well-spread idea which equates fish, egg, and bread with faith, hope and charity. The egg is contrasted with a scorpion in the following two passages:

- 16) Þ æg getacnað hiht: for ði þe fugelas ne tumað swa
swa oðre nytenu: Ac ærest hit bið æg. 7 seo moder
syððan mid hihte bred þ æg. to bridde; swa eac ure
hiht: ne becom na gyt to ðam þe he hopað. ac is swilce he
si æg; þonne he hæfð þ him behaten is. he bið fugel;
(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 321, 1109)

'That egg signifies hope: because birds do not reproduce like other animals. But first there is an egg and the mother afterwards with hope hatches that egg to a young chick. Similarly our hope, it does not yet happened to that he hopes but he is like an egg. Then he has that is promised him. It is a bird' (Bosworth: so also our hope has not arrived at that for which it hopes) [RN]

Further, the egg, a metaphor for hope, is contrasted with a scorpion which means death:

- 17) Se wyrm þrowend: þe is geset ongean þ æig: is ætten.
7 slihð mid þam tægle to deaðe; þa ðing þe we geseoð
on þisum life: þa sind ateorgendlice; þa ðe we ne
geseoð 7 us synd behatene; hi sind ece: strece þærto
þinne hiht: 7 Andbida. oð þ ðu hi hæbbe. Ne loca þu
underbæc. ondræd þe þone þrowend. þe geætrað mid þam

tægle; Se mann locað underbæc. þe geortruað godes
mildheortnyssse: þonne bið his hiht geætroð mid þæs
þrowendes tægle; Ac we sceolon ægðer ge on earfoðnyssum.
ge on gelimpe 7 on un.gelimpe. cweðan swa swa se witega
cwæð; Ic herige minne drihten on ælcne timan ... þonne
bið ure hiht gehealden wið þæs wyrmes slege...

(Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* I 321, 124-126)

'The worm scorpion which is placed in contrast to an egg is poisonous and strikes with its tail to death. The things which we see are transient (fading, perishable?), those that we do not see and are promised are everlasting; extend to that object your hope and wait until you have it. Do not look backwards, be afraid of the scorpion which poisons with its tail. The man looks backwards who doubts in God's mercy, then his hope is poisoned by the scorpion's tail. But we should say both in hardship and in good fortune and in misfortune so as the prophet says, I praise my lord all the time ... then our hope is preserved in opposition to the worm's blow.' [RN]

These symbols seem to capture at least some of the structure of thought and concept through association, analogy, comparison and the like. One may wonder why it was just a scorpion that was selected to symbolize death, lack of hope, and not any other animal, but this is not our concern here. Perhaps a remark on this may be somewhat relevant: according to a Latin medieval bestiary of the 12th century it was believed that the scorpion which was classified with worms "is an animal which is mostly germinated without sexual intercourse, out of meat or wood or any earthly thing. People agree that, like scorpion, they (the worms [RN]) are never born from eggs" (*The Bestiary* 1960: 191). The idea of egg which is strongly significant in the religious sense is lacking from the scorpion which together with poison is bringing death.

These few examples illustrate both the power and the limitations of language. It seems that Ælfric creatively applied all explanatory resources to make lexical items at least less underspecified. Historical linguists recognize that the language processes like underspecification, word-formation, etc. have a limited utility in word semantics research and the matching cognitive conceptualizations are still undiscovered. Of the many intriguing features of the meaning spotted during historical investigations, the most notable is flexibility feature of word senses and the underlying mental processes we do not fully understand. In the quest to unlock the many mysteries of historical word semantics one should, like Margaret Schlauch, read and reread original texts all the time and investigate for oneself their conceptual background.

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