

Preliminary Corpus-based Study on the Synonyms of *slay* and *kill* in Old English

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1. Introduction

This study examines the synonyms of *kill* and *slay* in Old English by means of a diachronic corpus compiled by the author. It is well known that Old English is rich in ways of expressing one concept or another. Studies on synonyms for verbs or various expressions have been an intriguing topic for scholars. In Ogura's (1996) enquiry into the synonyms for verbs of motion in Old and Middle English she states that "one of the most influential factors in semantic change is rivalry among synonyms" and that its rivalry is "a matter of lexical preference" (ibid.: 11). As a tool to investigate synonyms, Ogura (2012) uses the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Kay et al. 2009, abbreviated *HTOED*) in order to determine how a particular concept or 'lexical system' has been expressed throughout the history of English.

When it comes to the verbs, there are plenty of synonyms, and the verbs for killing are no exception. When considered at the same time, taking into account the entries in *HTOED*, the verbs for killing seem to consist of two major groups on the basis of their etymology: *slay*-class verbs such as *slean*, *slæhtan* and *ofslean*, *kill*-class verbs such as *cwylmian*, *(ge)cwielman* and *(ge)cwellan*, and other kinds of verbs which have no etymological relation to *slay* or *kill*.

This study aims to examine the diachronic changes of these

verbs, grounded on a working hypothesis that two groups of the verbs for killing are in a kind of competition with each other. The data are taken from the corpus compiled by me based on the Old English parts of the Helsinki Corpus (Kytö 1996, hereafter HC) and the alfa version of Leuven English Old to New (Petré 2010, 2014, henceforth LEON-alfa). As a result of the data extraction, the study argues that a transition from *slay*-class verbs to *kill*-class verbs can be observed to have taken place during the Old English period.

2. Corpus

In this section, I introduce my corpus used for this study. My corpus is built so as to fill the gap in two existing corpora: HC and LEON-alfa. All of the texts in my corpus are full-text, whereas those of the Helsinki Corpus are samples. LEON-alfa delimits the choice of Old English texts in order to provide a solution to “the major problem of dialectal discrepancy that we meet when analyzing developments that involve the transition from Old to Middle English” (Petré 2014: 85). However, my corpus intends to track possible changes within the Old English period, so that it includes all of the texts in full which in HC are samples.

The make-up of my corpus is shown in Tables 1-3 (see Appendix). The tables summarize information on the texts that have been used for this study. The electronic texts are taken from DOEC, the Dictionary of Old English Corpus (Healey et al. 2009). In principle, the selection of the texts conforms to that of HC¹ and LEON-alfa (Petré 2014: 239–251). The periodization of the texts is

¹ The list of the texts in HC is on the website of ICAME Corpus Manuals: <http://clu.uni.no/icame/manuals/HC/INDEX.HTM#con11>.

also based on HC. Therefore, it follows that my corpus is comparable to these two corpora. Table 4 shows the number of words of the three corpora in each period: OE1 (texts before 950), OE2 (texts from 951 to 1050) and OE3 (texts from 1051 to 1150).

As shown in Table 4, my corpus is significantly larger than HC, since all of the included texts are full-text. The difference in size between LEON-alfa and mine stems from the fact that my corpus includes those texts in full which LEON-alfa eliminates (Petré 2014: 89). Given that it is larger than the other two corpora, my corpus is expected to provide a sufficient number of instances relevant to this study.

Table 4. Number of words of the three corpora

	OE1	OE2	OE3	Total
HC	94,240	251,630	67,380	413,250
LEON-alfa	280,541	312,290	144,101	736,932
My Corpus	327,138	496,991	200,014	1,024,143

One of the important aspects of my corpus, in general, is a balance between genres. In the case of this corpus, that would be a balanced proportion of verse and prose.

Table 5. Number of words of prose and verse in my corpus

	OE1	OE2	OE3
Verse	10,802	105,438	0
Prose	316,336	391,553	200,014
Total	327,138	496,991	200,014

Table 5 shows that most of the texts in my corpus consist of prose across the three periods. However, this should not necessarily be taken as unbalanced, since most of the texts in DOEC², from which the texts of my corpus are taken, are classified as prose. As Table 6 shows, 70% of the DOEC texts are prose, and less than 6% is made up of verse. It could be said that the percentage of prose and verse in my corpus fairly reflects that of DOEC.

Table 6. Number of words of the DOEC texts

Text Type	Number of words	Percentage
Verse	177,480	5.9%
Prose	2,128,781	70.2%
Interlinear Glosses ³	699,606	23.0%
Others ⁴	27,275	0.9%
Total	3,033,142	100.0%

3. Verbs for Killing

This section examines the synonyms of the verbs for killing listed in the entry of *HTOED* by means of my corpus described in the previous section. *HTOED* is a historical thesaurus based on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. An entry in the thesaurus is classified according to concepts.

² The electronic collection of the surviving Old English texts is composed of 3 million words in total.

³ Interlinear glosses are written in Old English in the Latin texts so that the reader can understand the Latin.

⁴ Other text types in DOEC include glossaries, runic inscriptions, and inscriptions in the Latin alphabet.

[I]ts purpose is to provide a detailed record of the English vocabulary from the earliest times to the present, with sufficient accompanying information that, for any given period in the past, **the user should be able to ascertain the exact state of the vocabulary (i.e. the ‘lexical system’) which existed at that time.** (Kay et al. 2009: xiii, bold text mine)

Following this assumption, this study intends to look into the lexical environment of the verbs for killing. The entry for *kill* in Old and Early Middle English is as follows; it summarizes verbs expressing the concept of killing.

01.02.02.04 (vt.) Kill

abrecan OE • abredwian OE • abreotan OE • acwylman OE •
 adwæscan OE • afyllan OE • alecgan OE • astryfan OE • belifian
 OE • (ge)ceorfan OE • gecwealmbæran OE • cwylmian OE •
 gedeadian OE • gedepan OE • dydan OE • geendian OE • fordilgian
 OE • forferian OE • formyprian OE • forsendan OE • forslean OE
 • forswefian OE • forwegan OE • full slean OE • getan OE • lecgan
 OE • ofaslean OE • offyllan OE • ofþecgan OE • oncwealdan OE •
 ongeslean OE • onsendan OE • oppringan feorh/lif OE • gesægan
 OE • slæhtan OE • stician OE • ut amær(i)an OE • wæl slean OE •
 sweve<(ge)swebban OE-c1205 • adeaden<adydan OE-1230 •
 quelm<(ge)cwielman OE-a1300 • [aspillan]<[aspill] OE-c1305 •
 ofslay/ofsle<ofslean OE-c1320 • aquell<acwellan OE- c1330 •
 asweve<aswebban OE; c1384 • of-fall<offeallan OE-1387 •

drepe<drepan OE- a1400/50 • forfare<forfaran OE-a1605 •
 forlese<forleosian OE-1664 • martyr<gemart(y)rian OE;c1305-1794
 • fell<(ge)fyllan OE-1681 • quell<(ge)cwellan OE-1817 • do to
 death<to deaþe gedon OE- • for(e)do<fordon OE- • slay<(ge)slean
 OE- • spill<spillan OE-a1668; 1813- (arch.)

(Kay et al. 2009: 127)

Although a variety of verbs are in use, it turns out that some verbs share an etymology. For this study, I classify the verbs for killing in *HTOED* into two major categories from an etymological point of view. This study is confined to dealing with two groups of verbs: *slay*-class verbs and *kill*-class verbs.

1. *slay*-class verbs: *forslean*, *ofaslean*, *ongeslean*, *slæhtan*,
wæl geslean, *ofslean*, *(ge)slean*
2. *kill*-class verbs: *acwylman*, *cwylmian*, *oncwealdan*,
(ge)cwielman, *acwellan*, *(ge)cwellan*
3. other verbs

Some examples of *slay* and *kill* (1–2) are given below.

(1) Beo 1333–1337

Heo þa fæhðe wræc
 þe þu gystranniht Grendel **cwealdest**
 þurh hæstne had heardum clammum,
 forþan he to lange leode mine
 wanode ond wyrde.

‘She has taken vengeance for the quarrel—that last night
you killed Grendel in a savage manner with fierce grips
because for too long he had diminished and destroyed
my people.’⁵

(2) Beo 107–108

Ðone cwealm gewræc
eƿe drihten, þæs þe he Abel **slog**;
‘The Eternal Lord avenged the murder whereby he killed
Abel.’

The *slay*-class contains 7 verbs and the *kill*-class contains 6 verbs. First, all occurrences of the conjugated forms of these verbs were extracted from my corpus. The search in the corpus yielded 869, 563 and 241 occurrences of the *slay*-class verbs for OE1, OE2 and OE3 periods respectively, as indicated in Table 7. As for the *kill*-class verbs, the search resulted in 47, 304 and 113 occurrences for the same three periods respectively, shown in Table 8.

⁵ Present-day English translations are taken from Swanton (1997).

Table 7. Frequency of *slay*-class verbs in the three periods

	OE1	OE2	OE3
<i>forslean</i>	32	5	3
<i>ofaslean</i>	10	4	0
<i>ongeslean</i>	2	0	0
<i>slæhtan</i>	2	1	3
<i>wæl geslean</i>	16	13	5
<i>ofslean</i>	478	116	79
<i>(ge)slean</i>	329	424	151
Total frequency	869	563	241

Table 8. Frequency of *kill*-class verbs in the three periods

	OE1	OE2	OE3
<i>acwylman</i>	0	0	3
<i>cwylmian</i>	1	28	22
<i>oncwealdan</i>	0	0	0
<i>(ge)cwielman</i>	5	50	24
<i>acwellan</i>	32	152	50
<i>(ge)cwellan</i>	9	74	14
Total frequency	47	304	113

Table 7 indicates the steady decline in frequency of the *slay*-class verbs over the three periods. Simultaneously, Table 8 points to the slightly upward trend in the incidence of *kill*-class verbs from the OE2 period. The change in the frequency between the two groups is shown in Figure 1, which displays the gradual increase of *kill* over *slay*.

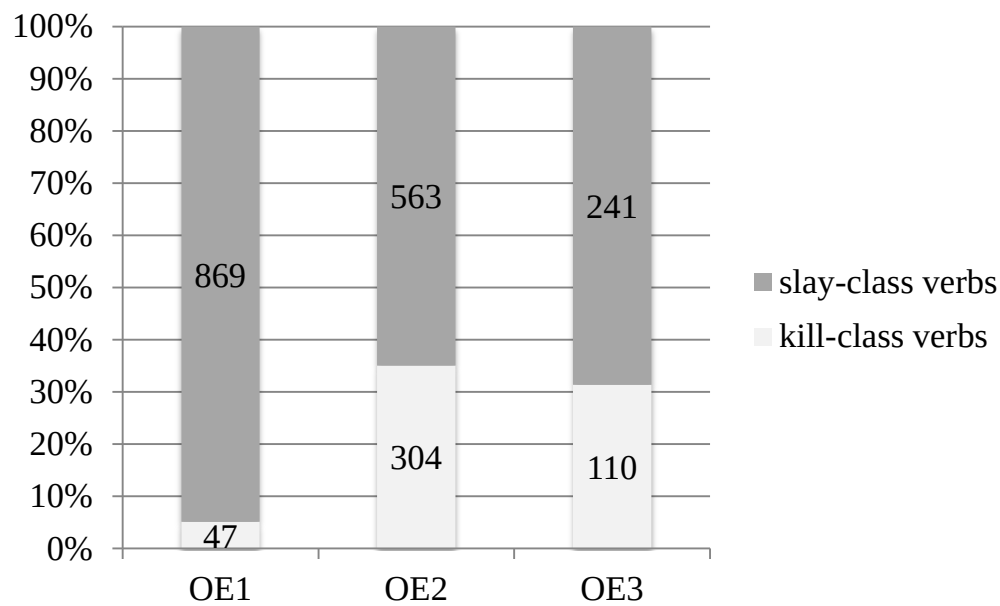


Figure 1. Frequencies of *slay*- and *kill*-class verbs in each period

4. Conclusion

In this study, I have demonstrated that the *slay*-class verbs were in a process of supersession by the *kill*-class verbs during the Old English period. The results from the corpus imply that this change began in the OE2 period and continued thereafter. In future research, the relations with other kinds of verbs should also be examined.

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Appendix

Table 1. Corpus texts for OE1 (before 950)

Text Name	Type	HC Period	OE Words	Dialect
Franks Casket	verse	o1	55	Anglian Northumbrian
Cædmon's Hymn, Northumbrian Version	verse	o1	42	Anglian Northumbrian
Bede's Death Song, Northumbrian Version	verse	o1	25	Anglian Northumbrian
Ruthwell Cross	verse	o1	78	Anglian Northumbrian
The Leiden Riddle	verse	o1	88	Anglian Northumbrian
Charters and Wills	prose	o1	1,744	Anglian Mercian, Kentish
Charters and Wills	prose	o12	279	Kentish
Laws of Ine, Alfred-Ine (Ine)	prose	ox2	2,756	West-Saxon
Alfred's Introduction to Laws, Alfred-Ine	prose	o2	1,967	West-Saxon
The Parker Chronicle (Scribes 1-3)	prose	o2	12,547	West-Saxon
The Capture of the Five Boroughs	verse	o2	57	West-Saxon
Bald's Leechbook	prose	o2	38,766	West-Saxon/Anglian
The Battle of Brunanburh	verse	o2	366	West-Saxon
Bede, History of the English Church and Nation	prose	o2	81,542	Anglian/West-Saxon
Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy	prose	o2	47,155	West-Saxon
Charters and Wills	prose	o2	1,852	Various
Cura Pastoralis	prose	o2	2,117	West-Saxon
Cura Pastoralis	prose	o2	69,114	West-Saxon
Laws of Alfred, Alfred-Ine (Alfred)	prose	o2	3,317	West-Saxon
Orosius	prose	o2	51,110	West-Saxon
Preface to Cura Pastoralis	prose	o2	874	West-Saxon
Solomon and Saturn II	prose	o2	1,196	X?/West-Saxon
The Meters of Boethius	verse	o23	10,091	West-Saxon
Total number of words			327,138	

Table 2. Corpus texts for OE2 (from 951 to 1050)

Text Name	Type	HC Period	OE Words	Dialect
Alexander's Letter to Aristotle	prose	o23	7,264	Anglian/West-Saxon
Blickling Homilies	prose	o23	42,210	Anglian/West-Saxon
Charters and Wills	prose	o23	673	Anglian Mercian/X
Lacnunga	prose	o23	6,582	Anglian
Martyrology	prose	o23	25,685	Anglian/West-Saxon
Marvels of the East	prose	o23	1,891	X/West-Saxon
Quadrupedibus	prose	o23	4,268	Anglian/West-Saxon
The Paris Psalter	verse	o23	29,396	West-Saxon/Kentish
Andreas	verse	ox3	9,287	X/West-Saxon
Beowulf	verse	ox3	17,304	Anglian/West-Saxon
Christ	verse	ox3	9,654	X/West-Saxon
Dream of the Rood	verse	ox3	1,109	X/West-Saxon
Exeter Book (Various)	verse	ox3	6,419	X/West-Saxon
Exodus	verse	ox3	2,974	X/West-Saxon
Genesis	verse	ox3	17,057	X/West-Saxon
The Kentish Hymn, Psalm 50	verse	ox3	1,078	Kentish
The Phoenix	verse	ox3	3,709	X/West-Saxon
Riddles	verse	ox3	7,451	X/West-Saxon
Ælfric's Catholic Homilies	prose	o3	204,083	West-Saxon
Charters and Wills	prose	o3	7,168	Various
Pseudo-Apuleius: Herbarium	prose	o3	21,547	Anglian/West-Saxon
Laws of Æthelred V	prose	o3	1,218	X/West-Saxon
Laws of Æthelred VI	prose	o3	2,195	X/West-Saxon
Laws of Cnut	prose	o3	7,180	X/West-Saxon
Martyrology	prose	o3	1,300	X/West-Saxon
Northumbra Preosta Lagu	prose	o3	1,310	X/West-Saxon
Saint Margaret	prose	o3	3,661	X/West-Saxon
The Gospel of Nichodemus	prose	o3	1,797	X/West-Saxon
Vercelli Homilies	prose	o3	45,203	Various
Vercelli Homilies, Homily I	prose	o3	4,391	X/West-Saxon
Arguments to Gospels	prose	o3	1,289	Anglian Northumbrian
The Lindisfarne Gospels (Marginalia)	prose	o3	638	Anglian Northumbrian
Total number of words			496,991	

Table 3. Corpus texts for OE3 (from 1051 to 1150)

Text Name	Type	HC Period	OE Words	Dialect
Charters and Wills	prose	o24	193	X/West-Saxon
Gregory's Dialogues	prose	o24	91,488	Anglian Mercian/West-Saxon
The Life of Saint Chad	prose	o24	2,649	Anglian Mercian/West-Saxon
Ælfric's Letter to Sigeweard (Z)	prose	o34	10,182	West-Saxon
Distichs of Cato	prose	o34	2,180	X/West-Saxon
Gerefa	prose	o34	813	X/West-Saxon
Saint Margaret	prose	o34	4,184	X/West-Saxon
Solomon and Saturn I	prose	ox4	2,012	X/West-Saxon
Alcuin's De Virtutibus et Vitiis	prose	o4	5,504	West-Saxon/Kentish
Augustine	prose	o4	103	West-Saxon/Kentish
Chrodegang of Metz	prose	o4	18,110	Anglian?/West-Saxon
Exodus	prose	o4	1,088	West-Saxon
Honorius of Autun, Elucidarium	prose	o4	1,511	Kentish
Honorius of Autun, Elucidarium	prose	o4	583	Kentish
James the Greater	prose	o4	1,639	Anglian/West-Saxon
Laws of William	prose	o4	219	X/West-Saxon
Martyrology	prose	o4	4,380	West-Saxon?
Preface to St Augustine's Soliloquies	prose	o4	439	West-Saxon
Saint Christopher	prose	o4	1,425	X/West-Saxon
Saint Neot	prose	o4	1,999	Anglian?/West-Saxon
St Augustine's Soliloquies	prose	o4	15,823	West-Saxon
The Gospel of Nichodemus	prose	o4	8,174	X/West-Saxon
The Gospel of Nichodemus	prose	o4	1,582	X/West-Saxon
The History of the Holy Rood-Tree	prose	o4	6,908	West-Saxon
The Martyrdom of Saint Vincent	prose	o4	2,969	X/West-Saxon
Vercelli Homilies, Homily IX	prose	o4	2,106	X/West-Saxon
Vindicta Salvatoris	prose	o4	3,666	X/West-Saxon
Vision of Leofric	prose	o4	1,012	X/West-Saxon
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle F (940–end)	prose	o4	6,772	West-Saxon/Kentish
Anglo-Saxon Chronicle H	prose	o4	301	West-Saxon
Total number of words			200,014	

