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## SEMANTIC CHANGE IN OLD ENGLISH ‘MUSIC’ NOUNS: A CORPUS STUDY

### **Abstract**

This paper presents the main Old English ‘music’ nouns used before the Norman Conquest. By “main” music nouns is meant those which bear the core sense of music as an acoustic activity produced by and for people, including basic theoretical facets pertaining to music. As a result, many terms bearing peripheral, partitive, qualitative, or otherwise specific reading(s) like ‘harmony’, ‘sound’, ‘psalm singing’, etc., are excluded from the present study (cf. Simpson – Weiner 1991: 126–127). Culturally, the paper tackles both secular and ecclesiastic types of music with regard to their artistic and/or entertaining values. The short introduction dealing with the cultural aspect of the problem will facilitate a linguistic examination of the terms in question.

### **1. Introduction**

This article<sup>1</sup> discusses the semantic content of a corpus of Old English ‘music’ nouns as obtained from four dictionaries. Once the material has been compiled it is viewed in light of the share and role the noun *dream* played in the corpus. Padelford (1976: 1) states that the Anglo-Saxons cherished music which was an essential entity in their lives.

The corpus under examination contains only those nouns which bear the core sense of ‘music’ as an acoustic activity produced by and for people. It is important to realize that due to semantic change all the nouns under study lost their original sense after the Old English period. The brief sections which follow, i.e. Section (2) on Anglo-Saxon culture, and Section (3) on semantic fields, are to facilitate the lexicographic examination of the terms in question in the subsequent sections.

## 2. Music in medieval Britain

According to Chappell (1965: 3), people from the British Isles have always delighted in all types of music: “The Scalds and Minstrels were held in great repute for many ages, and it is but fair to infer that the reverence shown to them arose from the love and esteem in which their art was held.” Fellowes (1948: 27) states that the British have always been inclined to and skilled at singing.

Lipoński (2004: 18) points out that the separation from the mainland gave Britain a greater independence, and in many cases it also accelerated the spread of civilization. It appears likely that English music had the potential to influence Continental music, e.g. a school of music in the Low Countries. Another piece of evidence for the superiority of English music comes with the round “Sumer is y comen in” (1226), which had no equal on the Continent.

A distinctly British musical style dominated until the reign of Charles II (1660–1685), who introduced a cult of foreign art, especially French music. Young (1967) quotes Lewis Morris from his *Brief account of the British, or Cambrian music* (1746):

- (1) The ancient Music of the People of Britain hath been so mixed with that of other Nations, who have from time to time made conquests, or otherwise inhabited in this Island, that, as well as in other Arts and Sciences among them, it is, at this day, a very difficult Matter to trace out the true British Music and its Revolution (...) (Young 1967: 1)

Pulver (1923: v) concedes that it was “(...) styles and manners alien to the British character and temperament (...)” that interrupted the national musical tradition.

## 3. Semantic fields in linguistics

By definition, a “semantic field” (or “semantic domain”) is a technical linguistic term describing a number of words grouped by meaning in a certain way, and thus semantic fields are sets of words which exhibit necessary and sufficient conditions for category membership. There seem to be numerous equivalents of the term: Palmer (2006: 282) refers to a semantic domain as a “(symbolic) sub-network”, Crowley (2007: 95, 98, 105) uses interchangeably the terms “semantic domain” and “semantic field”, and, in addition, introduces yet another name “semantic grouping”, while Freeman (2007: 1183) mentions also “content domain” which is analogous to “conceptual domain” or “Idealized Cognitive Model”.

Semantic field theory is very important in the study of lexis. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (2007: 143) claims that field theory can be applied to determine the polysemy of a term. Malmkjær (2006: 402) says “(...) field theory holds that the meanings represented in the lexicon are interrelated, that they cluster together to form ‘fields’ of meaning which, in turn, cluster into even larger fields until the entire language is encompassed.” Hence, in the semantic domain in question, ‘instrumental music’, ‘vocal music’, and ‘music for a dance’ cluster into the field of ‘music’ which, in turn, clusters with many other verbs into a larger field of ‘performing music’, and so on up to the field of ‘musical entertainment’ in general.

#### 4. The semantic domain of ‘music’

Due to the multitude of terms belonging to the semantic field under examination and the obvious restrictions arising from the nature of such a study, the question of inclusion and exclusion arises. In effect, the corpus consists of lexemes which have at least one of specifications like ‘(vocal/instrumental/dance) music’, ‘the art/craft/theory of music/song’, ‘musician’s art’, ‘singing’, ‘(the action of) singing/making music’, ‘playing/performing music’, ‘musical entertainment’, and ‘sound of music/musical instrument’.

The above-mentioned range of selected specifications of ‘music’ have been based on, or extracted from, the elaborate definition of music from the *Oxford English dictionary (OED)* (Simpson – Weiner 1991: 126). It should also constitute a viable cultural factor that the perception of the art of music comes from the geographical area in question. As a result, many terms bearing peripheral, partitive, qualitative, or otherwise specific reading(s) have been excluded, e.g. ‘harmony’, ‘melody’, and ‘sound’.

Theoretically, if the concept of hyponymy were to be applied here, the study would concern but superordinate terms, i.e. ‘music’ and its broad extensions, even though their intentional content might be different. By the same token, the hyponyms of ‘music’, e.g. terms denoting “‘ingredients” or “‘relatives” of the concept of ‘music’ were excluded (Bussmann 1996: 160, 213).

Also, the semantic domain of music contains “mutually exclusive” or “incompatible” terms, i.e. terms reflecting semantic categories like ‘pieces/elements of music’, ‘classes of instruments’, and so on. As a case in point, pairs like ‘harmony’ and ‘melody’ (as elements of music), or ‘round’ and ‘glee’ (as musical pieces) are mutually exclusive. In view of the corpus legibility, those very terms are excluded as they are not generic. The concepts of “mutual exclusivity” and “incompatibility of terms” are from Malmkjær (2006: 527).

## 5. Corpus of Old English ‘music’ nouns

The corpus has been gathered by means of searching four major dictionaries containing Old English lexis in order to find ‘music’ nouns which bear the generic meaning of ‘music’, i.e. its specific readings mentioned above in Section (4). In other words, Old English onomasiologies of MUSIC are looked for, although semasiologies of the ‘music’ nouns are also considered, e.g. in Section (5.3).

The dictionaries consulted include: *A thesaurus of Old English online*, *Old English dictionary*, *Dictionary of Old English*, and *Historical thesaurus of English*. The reason for choosing these particular sources is that they are the most frequently consulted, cited and referred to dictionaries of the period. Besides, the nature of such a concise and brief study does not allow for the consultation of more sources.

It needs to be clarified that the use of macrons in the terms under study is in line with the specific sources the terms come from, and thus may differ from one dictionary to another, e.g. *drēam* is found in *TOEO* (Section 5.1) while *dream* features in *HTE* (Section 5.4). At times, also the Modern English spelling equivalents are used, in this case *dream*.

### 5.1 *Thesaurus of Old English Online*

*A thesaurus of Old English online (TOEO)* allows two search options: Old English Word Search, and Modern English Word Search. When “music” is entered, the latter method provides seven categories in which the term occurs: (1) “silence (lack of music)”, (2) “joyous sound of music”, (3) “to praise God in music, celebrate, rejoice”, (4) “music and dancing”, (5) “music”, (6) “a kind of music”, and (7) “pleasure caused by music”. As shown in Table (1), the contents of some categories overlap, and there may be two subheadings (non-italicized entries in the table).

Interestingly, the subsection devoted to ‘music’ itself consists of three synonyms: *drēam*, *glīw* and *sōn*, and these nouns serve in this study as basic terms for ‘music’, but only *drēam* is viewed statistically. The semantic overlapping testifies to the fact that these terms tend to be capacious in meaning, i.e. their definitions are broad. The categories and (sub-)headings in bold reflect the semantic specifications listed in Section (4) according to which the corpus has been collected.

**Table 1.** ‘Music’ nouns in *TOEO* (Modern English Word Search)

Main category	Heading	First subheading	Second subheading	Words
Silence	Absence of noise or disturbance	<i>stil(l)nes</i>		
		Silence, quiet	<i>forsuwung, smyltnes, stil(l)nes, swīge, swīgung</i>	
			Silence (lack of music)	<i>unsang</i>
Joyous sound of music	Joyous sound, mirth	<i>drēam, gamen, gladung, wyndrēam, wyndrēamnes</i>		
	Jesting, pleasantry	Joyous sound of music	<i>glēodrēam</i>	
		<i>ceahhetung, gamen, gamenung, glīw</i>		
To praise God in music, celebrate, rejoice	Singing, church singing	<i>ciricsang, sang</i>		
	A hymn, song of praise, canticle	<i>cantic, canticsang, ciricsang, lof, lofsang, sealm, ymen, ymen-sang</i>		
		An anthem or antiphon	<i>antefn, capitol</i>	
		A benedictional canticle	<i>benedicite, bletsingsealm</i>	
		A psalm	<i>dryhtlēoþ, hearpsang, sang, sealm, sealmcwide, sealmlēoþ, sealmlof, sealmsang</i>	
		The making and reciting of psalms	<i>sealmglīg, sealmsang</i>	
		Psalm- singing, psalmody	<i>sealmsang, sealmsangmærsung</i>	
Music and dancing	Dancing	<i>hlēapung, plega, sealtung, tumbing</i>		
		Music and dancing	<i>chorglēo</i>	
Music	Music	<i>drēam, glīw, sōn</i>		
		A kind of music	<i>glīwcynn</i>	
		Musical entertainment	<i>glīwgamen</i>	
		Musician’s art	<i>drēamcræft, sangcræft, sōncræft, swēgcræft, swinsungcræft</i>	

Main category	Heading	First subheading	Second subheading	Words	
		Pleasure caused by music	<i>glīwdrēam</i>		
		Melody, sweetness of sound	<i>myrgnes, myrgþ, swēghlēoþor, swegl, swegl-rād, sweglwundor, geswin, swin, swinsung, swinswēg, wīse</i>		
		United voice, harmony	<i>efenhlēoþor, efenhlēoþrung, samodgied-dung</i>		
	<b>Singing</b> , song	<i>drēamnes, hlēoþor, sang, sangdrēam</i>			
		<b>Constant singing</b>	<i>ongalnes</i>		
		Song	<i>lēoþsang, wōþ, wōþsong</i>		
		Art of song	<i>lēoþcræft, wōþcræft</i>		
	A song, a poem to be sung	<i>galdor, giedd, hlēoþorcwide, lēoþ, lēoþgidding, organ, sang</i>			
		A harmony, hymn	<i>hlēoþrung</i>		
	A musical instrument	<i>glīwbēam, organe(-a), orgele, swēg</i>			
		<b>Sound of a musical instrument</b>	<i>organdrēam, orgeldrēam, stefn, swēg</i>		
		Art of playing an instrument	<i>glīwcræft</i>		
	<b>A kind of music</b>	This category contains items from categories “Music” and “Music and dancing”.			
Pleasure caused by music	This category contains items from categories “Music” and “Music and dancing”.				

The other search option, i.e. Old English Word Search, enables two ways of querying: *Exact* and *Wildcard*. When starting the query with *sōn*, i.e. one of the three main synonyms of *music*, apart from *drēam* and *glīw*, the query returned a list of 24 nouns from the conceptual field of ‘music’ which are listed in Table (2).

In total, *TOEO* contains 25 Old English ‘music’ nouns. Like in Table (1), the headings in bold stand for the core semantic specifications listed in Section (4). The heading “Type of music” is treated as synonymous to “Music”.

**Table 2.** ‘Music’ nouns in *TOEO* (Old English Word Search)

Heading	Term(s)
<b>Music</b>	<i>drēam, glīw, sōn</i>
<b>A kind of music</b>	<i>glīwcynn</i>
<b>Musical entertainment</b>	<i>glīwgamen</i>
<b>Musician’s art</b>	<i>drēamcræft, sangcræft, sōncræft, swēgræft, swinsungcræft</i>
Melody, sweetness of sound	<i>myrgnes, myrgP, swēghlōþor, swegl, sweglrad, sweghwundor, geswin, swin, swinsung, swinswæg, wīse</i>
United voice, harmony	<i>efenhlōþor, efenhlōþrung, samodgieddung</i>
<b>Music and dancing</b>	<i>chorglō</i>

Alphabetically, the music corpus, consisting of only relevant terms as obtained from *TOEO*, encompasses the following 21 items:

- (2) *chorglō, drēam, drēamcræft, drēamnes, glēodrēam, glīw, glīwcynn, glīwgamen, hlōþor, ongalnes, organdrēam, orgeldrēam, sang, sangcræft, sangdrēam, sōn, sōncræft, stefn, swæg, swēgræft, swinsungcræft*

The noun *dream* occurs six times in this corpus, which adds up to a 28,8% share of the total outcome of music nouns from *TOEO*. It takes both the monomorphemic form and the compounds, all of them listed below and defined:

- (3) *drēam* music  
*drēamcræft* musician’s art  
*drēamnes* singing  
*glēodrēam* joyous sound of music  
*organdrēam* sound of a musical instrument  
*orgeldrēam* sound of a musical instrument  
*sangdrēam* singing

As shown by the examples under (3), all the compound forms conform to the core semantic specifications listed in Section (3). They also confirm that compounding as a word formation process was already full-fledged in Old English, which is corroborated by other sources consulted here.

### 5.2 Old English dictionary

The *Old English dictionary (OldED)* (the on-line version, also known under the name *Old English made easy*) enables two ways of looking up words:

either starting with a Modern English term to find its Old English equivalent(s) or the other way round.

As for ‘music’ nouns, when the search begins from a Modern English form, i.e. *music*, only one Old English term, *glīwdrēam*, comes up. However, the opposite-way search, i.e. opening singly each page from the Old English section and using the “Find” command with the *music* entry, yields 20 entries (including *glīwdrēam*). The specifications of two items from the list are followed by a question mark, i.e. *gliwcynn* ‘a kind of music?’ and *swegl* ‘music?’, which symbolizes uncertainty as to the aptness of the readings. The ‘music’ nouns from the *OldED* are listed below:

- (4) *dream*, *drēamcræft*, *drēamnes*, *efenhlēoðrung*, *glēo* (*glēow*, *glīg*, *glīw*), *glīwcræft*, *glīwcynn*, *glīwdrēam*, *orgeldrēam*, *sang*, *sangeræft*, *sangdrēam*, *sōn*, *sōn cræft*, *swēgcræft*, *swegl*, *swegl drēam*, *swegl rād*, *swinsungcræft*, *wōpcræft*

The noun *dream* appears in seven items, which is a 30,55% share of the whole corpus of *OldED* ‘music’ nouns. The terms are both morphologically simple and complex, i.e. apart from the monomorphemic lemma DREAM there are five endocentric compounds using the morphemes *-cræft*, *glīw-*, *orgel-*, *sang-*, and *swegl-*, and one affixed compound in which the derivational suffix *-nes* is attached to the root *dream*. All the seven DREAM terms are shown together with their definitions in (5):

- (5) *dream* (1) joy, pleasure, gladness, mirth, rejoicing, rapture, ecstasy, frenzy; (2) what causes mirth- an instrument of music, music, rapturous music, harmony, melody, song, singing, joyous sound, jubilation; (2a) musical sound  
*drēamcræft* – art of music, music  
*drēamnes* – a singing  
*glīwdrēam* – music, mirth  
*orgeldrēam* – sound of a musical instrument  
*sangdrēam* – cantilena, song, music  
*swegl drēam* – music

From the lists (3) and (5) it appears that the noun *dream* played a vital role in the Old English corpus of ‘music’ nouns. At least partly, this can be explained by a well-established network of cognates of the term in other Germanic languages, cf. OSax. *drōm*.

### 5.3 Dictionary of Old English

Another Old English lexicon consulted for this project is the *Dictionary of Old English: A to G on CD-ROM (DOE)*. The dictionary is under continuous construction and now encompasses entries from the letter “A” to “G”, thus, of the three key Old English ‘music’ nouns *drēam*, *glīw*, and *sōn*, it was

impossible to check the last one. The semantic breakdown of the noun *dream* is presented in (6), and that of *glee* in (7):

(6) *Dream* in *DOE*:

1. joy, bliss
- 1.a. earthly joy or happiness, frequently contrasted with heavenly bliss
- 1.a.i. revelry, mirth
- 1.b. spiritual or heavenly joy, bliss
- 1.b.i. jubilation, celebration, especially in honour of God or a saint (cf. senses 1.a.i., 3.a.ii.)
- 1.c. dream (awedness) ‘joy of transfiguration’, rendering *commutation* ‘redemption’
2. frenzy, delirium, madness, demonic possession
3. **sound, music, noise; that which produces sound or music**
- 3.a. **music; song, melody, harmony;** metrical verse, measure
- 3.a.i. singing of psalms, especially as part of the liturgy
- 3.a.ii. rendering *laus* ‘(song of) praise’
- 3.a.iii. harmonious or jubilant singing of heavenly choirs (in praise of God; cf. sense 1.b.i.)
- 3.a.iv. choir, chorus (of the heavenly hosts)
- 3.a.v. glossing *organum* ‘organ of speech, musical instrument’ cf. *organdrēam*, *orgeldrēam*, *pīpdrēam*, *wyindrēam*
- 3.b. tumultuous noise, blare, blast (of trumpets)
- 3.c. clamour, noise of loud wailing, lamentation (of the damned at Doomsday)
4. also in proper names: *Dreama*, *Dreamwulf*, *Dremca*

Out of the 17 readings listed above, only two, (3) and (3.a), fulfill the semantic requirements set out for the meaning of ‘music’ in Section (4) above. *DOE* includes the following 11 forms of DREAM: *dream*, *dreames*, *dreamas*, *dreamæs*, *dremes*, *dreame*, *dræme*, *dreme*, *drime*, *dræmes*, and *dreama*.

As regards *glee*, it is represented in *DOE* as follows:

(7) *Glee* in *DOE*:

1. glee, joy, merriment, mirth; also in plural: *gliwum* ‘in joys, joyously’
2. glossing *facetia* ‘a jest, pleasantry’
3. any activity intended to amuse; an entertainment, diversion, game, etc.
- 3.a. specifically: **musical entertainment, music**
4. a source of amusement / mockery; *to gliwehabban* ‘to treat (something *acc.*) as a source of amusement (for someone *dat.*)’, to hold up to ridicule; *to gliweweorþan* ‘to become a laughing-stock’ (for someone *dat.*)
- 4.a. glossing *cavillatio* ‘mockery, scoffing, derision’ (cf. *geslitglīw*)
- 4.b. glossing *gannatura* ‘mockery, derision’

The underlined reading (3.a) is relevant for the sake of the present study. In total, *DOE* mentions 35 occurrences of the noun *glee* in Old English texts in the following 20 forms: *gliw*, *gliu*, *glio*, *glig*, *gleo*, *gliwes*, *glies*, *gliges*, *glywes*, *gliwe*, *gliuuæ*, *glige*, *gligge*, *gliowe*, *gleowe*, *gleaw*, *gluuicæ* (for *gliuuæ*), *gliwa*, *glia*, and *gliwum*.

#### 5.4 Historical thesaurus of English

In order to confirm the aforementioned search results, the *Historical thesaurus of English (HTE)* (on-line version) has been consulted. In total, *HTE* presents 8454 words in the whole category of “Music”, which is plenty when compared with other semantically adjacent groups, as there are 6040 words in the “Art” section, 1216 in “Dancing”, and 2898 in “Performing Arts”.

The dictionary enables searching within a specific semantic field, e.g. ‘music’, ‘musical sound’, ‘piece of music’, or ‘type of music’. For the sake of the present study, only Old English terms have been considered, while Middle English lexis has been excluded. All *HTE* ‘music’ nouns are listed below under (8):

- (8) Music: dreamcræft, sangcræft, soncræft, swegcræft, swinsungcræft  
 Musical sound: hleoþor, son, swegl, swegrad, sweghwundor, dream c1330, glee (gliw) 1523  
 Type of music: gliwcynn

The above shows that all three key nouns under study, i.e. *dream*, *glee*, and *sound*, are included in the *HTE* corpus, and that again, compounding was already a common word formation process in Old English as all the ‘music’ nouns here are compounded forms.

## 6. Corpus of Old English ‘music’ nouns

Having consulted the four dictionaries in Section (5) it is possible to present the whole corpus of the ‘music’ nouns used in Anglo-Saxon. The corpus, made up of 28 Old English music nouns – when counting basic forms – is listed alphabetically in (9):

- (9) chorglêo, dream (drēm) OE-c1330, drēamcræft, drēamnes, efenhlêoðrung, glee-1523 (OE glig, gliw, glêo, glêow), gliwcræft, gliwcynn, gliwdrēam (glêodrēam), glīwgamen, hleoþor, ongalnes, organdrēam, orgeldrēam, sang, sangcræft, sangdrēam, sōn, sōncræft, stefn, swēg, swēgcræft, swegl, swegldrēam, sweglrad, sweghwundor, swinsungcræft, wōþcræft

The noun *dream* adds up to a 28,56% share of the whole corpus. As previously, it occurs both independently, i.e. *drēam* (*drēm*), and in compounded forms (seven types), i.e. *drēamcræft*, *drēamnes*, *gliwdrēam*, *organdrēam*, *orgeldrēam*, *sangdrēam*, and *swegldrēam*.

It appears that the noun *glee* generated numerous spelling forms and is also prolific as regards compounding with other forms, cf. *gliwcræft* and *gliwcynn*. However, the noun *glee* is not analyzed statistically in the present study.

## 7. Conclusions

The fates of the three Old English core ‘music’ nouns, i.e. *drēam*, *glīw*, and *sōn*, reflect a significant semantic evolution as their Modern English meaning(s) departed considerably from the Old English ‘music’ sense(s) discussed in this paper. It is in line with the statement that semantic change is the most conspicuous kind of language change (Burchfield 2002: 114–115). Denning – Kessler – Leben (2007: 139) concede that “Change in meaning over time is just as frequent and natural as the sound change (...)” cf. Langacker (1968: 175) who claims that “Every language is the product of change and continues to change as long as it is spoken.”

As regards the Old English ‘music’ nouns, four conclusions can be drawn from the study:

- a) There are 28 ‘music’ nouns in Old English which denote *music* in its generic sense.
- b) The ‘music’ nouns are in most cases morphologically complex, resembling German compounded forms: they contain *dream* or *glee* as a part of the compounded term, e.g. *drēamcræft* or *glīwdrēam*.
- c) The noun *dream* constitutes a 28,56% share of the whole corpus in question.
- d) The polysemic noun *dream* in Old English signified a wide range of phenomena, including that of ‘music’.

## NOTES

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