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**SENSE AND INVENTORY CHANGES IN THE SEMANTIC  
FIELD 'SMELL' IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH**

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Since the Old English times the semantic field SMELL has been almost completely restructured. Of the words belonging to the field in Old English, only *stenc* remained within the field until the Present Day English. All the other Old English words for 'smell' either became obsolete and were replaced by a number of equivalents, mostly borrowings from French, or underwent semantic changes and no longer belong to the field SMELL.

The word *smell* was recorded for the first time in Middle English. *Smell*, of unknown etymology, took over the general meaning of the Old English *stenc* and dominated the field. In the early Modern English period, more loans of French origin were borrowed into English, further restructuring the field.

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the semantic field from the Old English period until the Present Day English.

*Key words:* smell, semantic change, restructuring, historical lexicology.

**Introduction**

The present paper concentrates on the analysis of the lexical items belonging to the semantic field SMELL. The study has been restricted to nouns. The data for the present study have been collected from the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* [5], the *Middle English Dictionary (MED)* [4], Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (ASD)* [1], *Thesaurus of Old English (TOE)* [7], *Historical Thesaurus of English (HTE)* [2], the *Helsinki corpus (HC)* [6], the *Innsbruck Corpus of Middle English Prose (ICMEP)* [3] and Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary (EDD)* [8]. The electronic corpora were searched with the help of the program AntConc 3.2.2w.

Following the *TOE* and the *HTE*, the Old English semantic field SMELL comprised only five lexical items: *bladesnung*, *bræþ*, *smæc*, *stenc* and *swæc*. Additionally, both sources enumerate (*ge*)*stencness*, derived from *stenc*, mentioned above. All the nouns denoted 'smell' (i.e. any kind of smell: positive, negative or neutral). Three of the words survived into the Middle English period, however, with some changes within their referential field. At the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c., *smell* was added to the semantic field, which highly contributed to further restructuring of the field. Finally, the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the Middle English and the early Modern English periods witnessed the borrowing of a number of nouns of French origin denoting 'smell'.

## SMELL vocabulary

### (1) OE *bladesnung*

Both the *ASD* and the *HTE* agree that OE *bladesnung* was used with reference to any kind of smell. It had been derived from the verb *bladesian* (i) ‘to flame, blaze, be hot’ and (ii) ‘to emit an odour’. Both senses gave rise to nominal derivatives: the latter to the analysed *bladesnung*, whilst the former to *bladesung* ‘flaming, blazing’ (cf. *ASD*). The Old English part of the Helsinki Corpus enumerates only two instances of *bladesung* and no occurrence of *bladesnung*. Moreover, the analysed *bladesnung* is not contained in any of the other investigated sources. Thus, we may conclude that the derivative did not become assimilated into the language and being similar in form to a noun of a different meaning (*bladesung*), it became obsolete.

### (2) OE *bræf*

*Bræf* (PDE *breath*) has been recorded from 893 (Alfred’s *Orosius*) with the meaning (i) ‘odour, smell, scent’. However, at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> c., the meaning was extended beyond the field of SMELL, and the sense (ii) ‘an exhalation or vapour given forth by heated objects; steam, smoke’ was added. Later, the referential field of the word was further extended by more senses referring to BREATHING, the most prominent of which are:

- (iii) ‘the action of breathing; respiration’ (14<sup>th</sup> c. –)
- (iv) ‘a gentle blowing, a puff (of: wind, air in motion)’ (1325 –)
- (v) ‘the air exhaled from the lungs’ (1340 –)

Following the *OED* and the *MED*, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. the original sense of *breath* had become obsolete – its final records come from 1450 (*Medical Recipes* and Lovelich’s *The history of the holy grail*; *MED*). However, Wright’s *EDD*, contains *breath*, meaning ‘an odour, a smell, esp. when unpleasant’ in the Modern English dialects of Scotland, Warwickshire, Shropshire, Berkshire, Somerset and Connaught (Ireland) (see Fig. 1). It should be noted that in Old English the sense referring to SMELL might have been used with any connotation (positive, negative or neutral). The entry in the *MED* suggests only negative or neutral connotation of *breath* (i). Whereas, the definition found in the *EDD*, indicates negative reference of the sense.

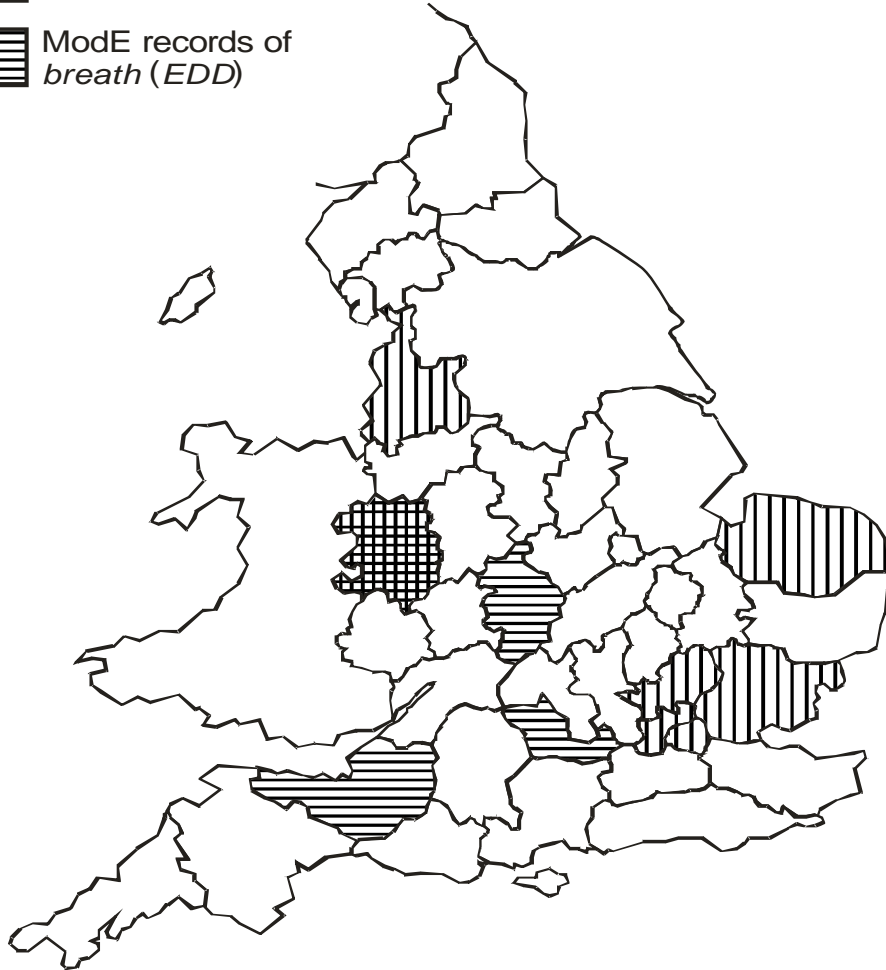
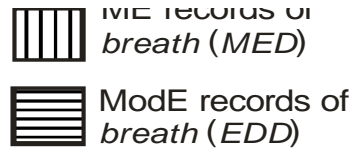
It is believed that the introduction of numerous senses referring to BREATHING and their frequent occurrence contributed to the displacement of the original sense of the analysed noun, i.e. (i) ‘odour, smell, scent’, and its limitation in distribution (to local dialects as shown on the map below) and in connotation (to the negative transfer).

### (3) OE *smæc*

*Smæc* (PDE *smack*) was first recorded in 1000 (Wülcker’s *Vocabulary*), denoting (i) ‘a taste, flavour’ and (ii) ‘scent, odour, smell’ (cf. *OED*). According to the *MED*, the last occurrence of the latter comes from 1447 (Langland’s *Piers Plowman*). However, the *OED* and the *HTE* claim that the noun with sense (ii) was used until the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. (Allen). Additionally, from the 12<sup>th</sup> c. on, the word extended its meaning to (iii) ‘the sense or faculty of taste’

Due to the fact that the OE *smæc* belonged to the semantic fields of SMELL and TASTE, it is suggested that in the later period the number of senses and the frequency of

occurrence within the field TASTE outnumbered the use of *smack* with reference to SMELL, which resulted in the obsolescence of sense (ii).



**Fig. 1 The distribution of *breath* in Middle and Modern English (based on *MED* and *EDD* respectively)**

(4) OE *stenc* / (*ge*)*stencness* and ME *stink*

First occurrences of OE *stenc* (PDE *stench*) come from Alfred and Bede, who used the word with the senses (i) 'a pleasant smell' and (ii) 'a foul, disgusting, or noisome smell, a disagreeable or offensive odour, a stink'. Following the *OED*, the noun was used with any connotation only until 1000 (*Ælfric*), later the usage became limited to offensive odours.

However, this disagrees with the results found in the Helsinki Corpus, according to which, 79% of the Old English occurrences of *stenc* were used with a positive connotation (sweet smell, aromatic, excellent, delightful, etc.), the rest being neutral. All the Old English records found in the Helsinki Corpus come from the period 950-1050, most of them were found in verse. The Middle English part of the *HC* includes only nine records of *stench*, which is too scarce a sample to draw any conclusions. However, the early quotations (12<sup>th</sup> c.) found in the *MED*, indicate both negative and positive connotation of *stench*. From the 13<sup>th</sup> c. on, the *MED* records *stench*, only with negative senses, i.e. (ii) ‘a disagreeable or offensive odour, a stink’ and (iii) ‘an evil-smelling quality’. Additionally, the analysis of the *ICMEP* records *ME stench* 48 times – all of the uses are negative (e.g., stench of: hell, corpse, body, urine, adultery, the damned, disease, etc.).

In the Middle English period, a synonym of *stench* appeared which is *stink*. According to the *OED*, at least in some of its forms, *stink* could be a dialectal variant of *stench*. An alternative explanation is the development of the noun from the verb *stincan* (a) ‘to emit a smell or vapour’ and (b) ‘to exhale’ present already in the Old English period. The verb, unlike the noun, was used with reference to both pleasant and offensive smells, as well as with an unspecified kind of smell (cf. *ASD*). Table 1 shows the development of the senses of *stench* and *stink*.

Table 1. The development of the senses of *stench* and *stink*

	<i>stench</i>	<i>stink</i>
OE	(i) ‘a smell (pleasant or not)’ (ii) ‘the sense of smell’ (iii) ‘an offensive odour, a stink’	–
ME	(i) ‘an offensive odour’ (ii) ‘evil-smelling quality’	(i) ‘an offensive odour’ (ii) ‘evil-smelling quality’
ModE	(i) ‘an offensive odour’ (ii) ‘evil-smelling quality’ (iii) ‘sth that smells offensively’	(i) ‘an offensive odour’ (ii) ‘evil-smelling quality’ (iii) ‘a stinkard’ (slang)

The noun *stink* appeared in English at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. (*Cursor Mundi*), i.e. almost two centuries after the narrowing of meaning of *stench* to pejorative. Thus, it is suggested that *stink*, derived from the Old English verb, when entering the English lexicon, was made to resemble the already existing noun, both in form and in meaning, denoting ‘a disgusting, offensive smell’ and ‘an evil-smelling quality’. The dates of occurrence of particular senses of the two nouns are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Dates of occurrence of the particular senses of the two nouns (based on the *OED*)

	‘an odour, a smell (pleasant or not)’	‘a disgusting, offensive odour, a stink’	‘evil-smelling quality’	‘sth that smells offensively’	‘a stinkard’
<i>stench</i>	900 – 1000 <sup>1</sup> (obs.)	893 – 1883	1175 – 1859	1595 – 1909	-
<i>stink</i>	-	1300 – 1897	1250 – 1882	-	1916 – 1972

<sup>1</sup> According to the *HC* and the *MED*, this sense was still in use in the Middle English period.

The Helsinki Corpus records *stink* only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the Middle English period (1350-1500), always with a negative connotation. In the *ICMEP*, the noun was found only 14 times. 12 of the occurrences were used with negative reference (the other two are difficult to categorise). *Stink* was used similarly to *stench* – with reference to hell, urine, body, corpse, but also to sin, something harmful, etc.

It should be noted that the analysis of the *ICMEP* revealed that *stench* and *stink* were used interchangeably in various editions of the same texts, e.g.,

(a)

... þreatēD ham wiD helle stēnch (Ancrone Riwle, f. Corpus Christi College Cambridge; ed. Tolkien: EETS OS 249)

... þreates ham wiD helle stīnk (Ancrone Riwle, f. Cotton MS. Titus D; ed. Zettersten: EETS OS 252)

(b)

Migge is stēnch of sunne. (Ancrone Riwle, f. Corpus Christi College Cambridge; ed. Tolkien: EETS OS 249)

(Ancrone Riwle, f. Cotton MS. Nero A; ed. Day: EETS OS 225)

Migge is stīnk of sunne. (Ancrone Riwle, f. Cotton MS. Titus D; ed. Zettersten: EETS OS 252)

(5) OE *swæc*

The last Old English noun belonging to the field SMELL was *swæc* 'odour, smell, scent'. The word was found exclusively in the *TOE* and the *HTE*. It is assumed that it was used with a relatively low frequency and became obsolete in the Old English period.

(6) ME *smell*

According to the analysed sources, the Middle English noun *smell* was derived from the OE verb *\*smiellan*, however, neither any cognates nor Old English records of the verb have been found. *Smell* was first recorded at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> c. (*Lambeth Homilies*) with the sense (i) 'the property of things which affects the olfactory organ, whether agreeably or otherwise; odour, stench, stink, aroma', and shortly afterwards it occurred with the senses (ii) 'the faculty of smelling; the sense of smell' and (iii) 'an aromatic substance'. Throughout the Middle English period, this noun occurred quite frequently. In early Modern English the sense (iv) 'an act of smelling, a sniff' was added.

In the *ICMEP* the noun was found 75 times (whilst *stench*, whose referential field it took over, had only 48 nominal occurrences). 58% of the records of *smell* had a positive reference (30% of the records were accompanied by the words 'sweet'/'sweetness'; the others were: smell of flowers, herbs; also: heavenly, marvellous, excellent smell). A surprisingly small number of instances (only 1%) had a clearly negative connotation. However, in the case of 28% of occurrences, *smell* was used with unspecified or difficult to define connotation. In 13% of the records, the noun appeared with sense (ii), i.e. 'the sense of smell'.

It is suggested that the high frequency of occurrence of *smell* as well as the lack of restrictions concerning the connotation with which the noun could be used, contributed to

the fact that *smell* dominated the semantic field and superseded the other nouns mentioned above, contributing to their limitation in use.

(7) French loanwords

In the Middle English and early Modern English periods the semantic field SMELL was enlarged by a number of French loanwords (*fragrance, odour, perfume, savour, scent*, etc.).

*Odour*, borrowed in the 14<sup>th</sup> c., was originally used with any kind of smell. Trevisa in his translation of *Bartholomaeus's De Proprietatibus Rerum*, defines the noun as follows: "ouþer [L. odor], it is smoky vapour resolved of þe substaunce of a þing ... odour is þe propre of a þing þat is perceyued and y-feled by fumosite". He states:

If þe substaunce is pure and clere, þe odour is ful good and swete, as it fareþ in mirra, in musca, and in ambra; and if þe substaunce is vnclene and medled wiþ many manere filþes, þanne þe odour is euel and horrible ... þis odour is diuided .. in tweyne, heuy and stynkyng; heuy odour comeþ of hete þat is kyndeliche in þing þat bygynneþ to apeyre ... as in fische þat is longe kepte wiþouten salt ... swete odour and stynkyng, þey ben þe tweye outemeste odours and þough a certain odour be y-founde euene þe myddel odour bitwene and eueneliche fer fro eyþer by it self by ... inwitte, it is neuere perceyued in dede by þe inwitte of smellynge.

(Trevisa)

*Odour* denoted also 'the sense of smell' and 'a substance that emits a sweet smell'. However, both these senses were infrequent in Middle English. Moreover, the former did not survive into the early Modern English period. The latter became more frequent in Modern English.

Additionally, in the 15<sup>th</sup> c. the vocabulary of offensive smells was enlarged by *fetor* 'a stench', introduced from Latin.

On the other hand, nouns referring to pleasant smells were also borrowed from French. In the 14<sup>th</sup> c. *scent* and *savour* were introduced. *Scent*, although, when borrowed, belonged to the analysed semantic field, was not synonymous with the other studied nouns<sup>2</sup>. Only at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. was it recorded with the sense (ii) 'an agreeable odour'. By the end of the Middle English period, the senses (iii) 'the faculty or sense of smell' and (iv) 'perception by the senses, feeling' were added. The last sense, however, became obsolete in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.

*Savour* was present in English from the 13<sup>th</sup> c. with the sense (i) 'a taste'. The meaning extended a century later, when the denotation (ii) 'a smell, perfume, aroma' was added. As a result, the occurrences of the word with its original sense became limited in Modern English, except when denoting (iii) 'a touch or admixture of some taste other than the proper or prevailing taste of a substance, a smack' (cf. *OED*).

More nouns with positive connotation were added later on. *Fragrance* was recorded from the 17<sup>th</sup> c. on, with the meaning 'sweet or pleasing scent'. *Perfume* entered English with the senses (i) 'the pleasant-smelling vapour or fumes given off by the burning of a

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<sup>2</sup> After its introduction into English, *scent* denoted (i) 'a track or trail as indicated by the odour of an animal or man'.

substance' and (ii) 'a substance which emits a pleasant smell when burned' at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. However, sense (i) survived only until the end of the century, when it was replaced by (iii) 'the fragrance or odour emitted by any substance (usually pleasant-smelling)' and (iv) 'an odour, savour'.

### Conclusion

The present paper was to show the fluctuations within the semantic field SMELL. The Old English stock of vocabulary denoting 'smell' has been almost entirely restructured. The only Old English term which remained within the field, i.e. *stench* changed from the general to a pejorative sense. The other two Old English nouns referring to 'smell', which survived until the Present Day English, shifted from the semantic field SMELL to some other fields, i.e. *breath* (> BREATHING) and *smack* (> TASTE). The other nouns present in Old English became obsolete.

The Middle English period brought a number of new introductions to the analysed field. The most important ones were *smell* and *stink*. The former took over the referential field of *stench* (as it was in Old English), the latter was used next to *stench*. Moreover, in Middle English a number of nouns were added and used specifically with reference to either offensive or pleasant smells.

The analysed semantic field in the early Modern English period showed a clear division between vocabulary denoting bad and good smells, with a single noun (*smell*) reflecting the general sense of 'smell'.

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## СМИСЛОВІ ТА ІНВЕНТАРНІ ЗМІНИ У СЕМАНТИЧНОМУ ПОЛІ “ЗАПАХ” В ІСТОРІЇ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

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Впродовж історії, яка ведеться від давньоанглійського періоду, семантичне поле лексем на позначення запаху зазнало майже цілковитого реструктурування. З-поміж найраніших конститuentів поля лише іменникові *stench* судилося перетривати дотепер. Решта конститuentів застаріли чи зазнали заміни з боку французьких запозичень або й перейшли до інших полів після відповідного переосмислення. З'явившись з початком середньоанглійського періоду лексема *smell* замінила давніший гіперонімний позначеннєвий відповідник *stench*. Детальніше простежено також подальші конститuentні розширення досліджуваного поля із різних етимологічних джерел.

*Ключові слова:* запах, семантичні зміни, реструктурування, історична лексикологія.

## **СМЫСЛОВЫЕ И ИНВЕНТАРНЫЕ ИЗМЕНЕНИЯ В СЕМАНТИЧЕСКОМ ПОЛЕ “ЗАПАХ” В ИСТОРИИ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА**

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На протяжении истории, начиная с древнеанглийского периода, семантическое поле лексем, обозначающих запах, подверглось практически полному реструктурированию. Среди самых ранних конститuentов поля лишь существительному *stench* суждено было просуществовать до настоящего времени. Остальные конститuentы устарели и подверглись изменениям под влиянием французских заимствований либо перешли в другие поля после соответствующего переосмысления. Появившись в начале среднеанглийского периода, лексема *smell* заменила более давний гиперонимный смысловый эквивалент *stench*. Подробнее изучены также последующие конститuentные расширения исследуемого поля из разных этимологических источников.

*Ключевые слова:* запах, семантические изменения, реструктурирование, историческая лексикология.

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