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POLAR ASYMMETRY OF EVALUATIVITY IN OLD ENGLISH

*Drawing on an author-compiled corpus of 2,953 contexts of 76 evaluative adjectives (2,489 positive and 464 negative), selected from 285 Old English texts of the prose and poetic genres of religious and secular discourse, the article investigates the structural asymmetry between the two poles of evaluativity and the role of religious discourse in the conceptualization of evil. It is established that the positive and negative poles of the evaluative space are organized according to different structural principles: the positive pole is developed on a model of multiple coordinate centres (the most frequent lexeme, *hālig*, covering only 17.7% of the positive corpus), whereas the negative pole is organized on a "nucleus-periphery" model, in which the universal designation of evil is the lexeme *yfel* (224 contexts, 48.3% of the negative corpus), while the peripheral evaluative adjectives specialize in particular aspects of the negative (notably *wamm* – impurity, *lāþ* – hatred, *frecne* – danger, *wāc* – weakness). It is shown that the nuclear lexeme *yfel* is concentrated predominantly in religious discourse (89.3% of its occurrences), and that its value profile consists almost exclusively of the negative value Tradition (TRAD), since in the Old English worldview evil appears primarily as a violation of the sacred norm rather than as a physical threat. It is conceded that Christian discourse monopolizes the lexicalization of evil, whereas heroic discourse avoids naming evil, treating the adversary as a worthy, respected opponent rather than the bearer of absolute evil. The asymmetry identified here is interpreted in terms of the psychological dominance of the negative (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), and the notion of anti-value, absent from S. Schwartz's model, is introduced (Schwartz, 2012). Directions for further research include a diachronic analysis of the pre-Christian (heroic) and Christian layers of the negative lexicon and the verification of the identified monopolization on an expanded corpus of Old English texts.*

Key words: Old English, evaluation, polar asymmetry, disvalue, religious discourse.

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ПОЛЯРНА АСИМЕТРІЯ ОЦІННОСТІ У ДАВНЬОАНГЛІЙСЬКІЙ МОВІ

*У пропонованій статті на матеріалі авторського корпусу з 2953 контекстів 76 оцінних прикметників (2489 позитивних і 464 негативних), що було вибрано із 285 давньоанглійських текстів прозового та поетичного жанрів релігійного та світського дискурсів, досліджено структурну асиметрію двох полюсів оцінності та роль релігійного дискурсу в концептуалізації зла. Установлено, що позитивний і негативний полюси оцінного простору організовані за різними структурними принципами: позитивний розгорнутий за моделлю множинних рівноправних центрів (найчастотніша лексема *hālig* охоплює лише 17,7% позитивного корпусу), тоді як негативний організований за моделлю «ядро – периферія», де універсальним позначенням зла виступає лексема *yfel* (224 контексти, 48,3% негативного корпусу), а периферійні аксіодетермінанти спеціалізуються на окремих аспектах негативу (зокрема *wamm* – нечистота, *lāþ* – ненависть, *frecne* – небезпека, *wāc* – слабкість). Показано, що ядерна лексема *yfel* концентрується переважно в релігійному дискурсі, а її ціннісний профіль складається майже виключно з негативної цінності Традиція (TRAD), оскільки зло в давньоанглійській картині світу постає передусім як порушення сакральної норми, а не як фізична загроза. Аргументовано, що християнський дискурс монополізує лексикалізацію зла, тимчасом як героїчний дискурс уникає прямої лексикалізації зла, розглядаючи супротивника як гідного ворога, а не носія абсолютного зла. Виявлена асиметрія тлумачиться в термінах психологічного домінування негативу (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) та вводиться поняття антицінності, відсутнє в моделі Ш. Шварца (Schwartz, 2012). Перспективу подальших досліджень становить діахронний аналіз дохристиянського (героїчного) й християнського шарів негативної лексики та перевірка виявленої монополізації на розширеному корпусі текстів давньоанглійської мови.*

Ключові слова: оцінність, полярна асиметрія, антицінність, релігійний дискурс, давньоанглійська мова.

Introduction. Evaluativity is ordinarily regarded as a symmetric binary structure – one in which every positive value has a corresponding negative counterpart, so that negative evaluativity simply mirrors the positive. Convenient as it is for describing linguistic structure, this model is not supported by the language data.

Psychological research has long shown that negative information is processed more intensively than positive (the negativity bias) and dominates people's perception (negativity dominance) (Rozin & Royzman, 2001; Baumeister et al., 2001). This tendency should also be reflected in the way any language organizes its lexicon.

The question we address, therefore, is not whether the two poles of evaluativity are asymmetric, but in what phenomena their asymmetry consists: in the number of lexemes at each pole, in the internal structure of each pole, in the discursive distribution of these lexemes, and in the factors that give rise to these differences.

Old English of the 7th–11th centuries offers particularly valuable data for answering this question. First, its evaluative lexicon is compact enough to be examined in full. Second, the surviving corpus of Old English texts has a clear generic structure (religious versus secular, prose versus poetry), which makes it possible to observe how different discourses conceptualize evaluation. Third, the Christianization of Anglo-Saxon England created a unique situation in which two axiological systems – a pagan-heroic and a Christian one – clashed, and the competition between them must have left its mark on the distribution of the lexicon. The aim of the article is therefore to describe, on the basis of corpus data, the structural asymmetry between the positive and negative poles of evaluativity, and to establish the respective roles of the heroic and Christian systems in the conceptualization of GOOD and EVIL in Old English.

Theoretical Background. Several theoretical strands form the background to our research.

The theory of negativity dominance provides the psychological foundation. P. Rozin and E. Royzman distinguish four manifestations of negativity bias: “(a) negative potency (negative entities are stronger than the equivalent positive entities), (b) steeper negative gradients (the negativity of negative events grows more rapidly with approach to them in space or time than does the positivity of positive events), (c) negativity dominance (combinations of negative and positive entities yield evaluations that are more negative than the algebraic sum of individual subjective valences would predict), and (d) negative differentiation (negative entities are more varied, yield more complex conceptual representations,

and engage a wider response repertoire)” (Rozin & Royzman, 2001: 297, 298–299). R. Baumeister et al. summarized these observations in the thesis that “bad is stronger than good” (Baumeister et al., 2001). The semantic dimension of the phenomenon is addressed by A. Wierzbicka, who treats GOOD and BAD as semantic primes with distinct patterns of representation in the language system (Wierzbicka, 1996).

The axiological aspect of the issue is complicated by the fact that sociological value models – such as the one developed by S. Schwartz – encompass only the positive pole, defining a value as a set of “desirable goals that motivate action” (Schwartz, 2012: 3). On this approach, a conflict of values is construed as an opposition between two positive constructs, while the negative pole is absent from the model as a construct in its own right (Kostenko et al., 2020: 39–40). This omission is what the philosophical tradition calls into question, since it affirms the parity of values and disvalues in nature, life, and society. Countering the view that the negative pole is merely the absence of a positive value, H. Rolston argues that “there are disvalues as surely as there are values, and the disvalues systemically drive the value achievements” (Rolston, 1992: 275); that is, the negative pole is an independent construct rather than the void left by the positive one. In cognitive linguistics, this principle finds support in the notion of the anti-concept – a linguistically encoded disvalue that exists independently of any corresponding concept (Prykhodko, 2008; Marina, 2017: 430).

The methodological basis is set by works in corpus linguistics (McEnery & Hardie, 2012; Biber, 1993) and by D. Glynn's behavioural profiling, which emphasizes that a corpus allows the identification of patterns of usage rather than simply the postulation of meanings (Glynn, 2009: 83, 99).

Finally, the cultural-historical context of Christianization is presented by research on the Germanization of medieval Christianity (Russell, 1994) and by studies of the semantic evolution of key theological lexemes, notably the shift of the lexeme *dryhten* from “lord of a war-band” to “God” (Douděra, 2016).

Although each of the works cited above advances a distinct hypothesis, a gap remains: the placement of EVIL within the complex, polar-asymmetric structure of evaluativity has not, to our knowledge, been described on the basis of the Old English textual corpus.

Aim and Tasks. The present paper aims to describe the asymmetry between the positive and negative poles of Old English evaluativity and to define the role of the introduction of Christianity, through religious texts, in the conceptualization of the EVIL pole. The tasks we set are as follows: (1) to compare

the principles of internal organization of the two poles of evaluativity; (2) to identify the nucleus of the negative pole and its periphery; (3) to establish the discursive distribution of GOOD and EVIL lexemes; and (4) to interpret this asymmetry in terms of negativity dominance, genre, and related factors.

Methods. The material for our research is a corpus of 285 Old English texts with 2,953 contexts of usage of 76 evaluative adjectives (42 positive (POS) and 34 negative (NEG)). The distribution of contexts across the two poles shows the predominance of the positive: positive adjectives account for 2,489 contexts and negative ones for 464. Each context is defined as the target lexeme together with its neighbours, according to the formula L10 + lemma + R10, where L10 and R10 denote the ten word-forms to the left and right of the lemma, respectively. This span reflects best practice in standard corpus research, as it captures both the immediate collocates and the meaningful frame context (McEnery & Hardie, 2012: 122; Biber, 1993: 243).

Each context is assigned certain value concepts according to the ten basic values of S. Schwartz. The positive values are Tradition (TRAD), Power (POW), Achievement (ACH), Hedonism (HED), Self-Direction (S-D), Stimulation (STIM), Security (SEC), Conformity (CONF), Benevolence (BEN), and Universalism (UNIV). The negative pole of each value is marked by “–” (TRAD[–], BEN[–], SEC[–]). Since a single usage can conceptualize several values simultaneously, we count separate value realizations rather than contexts. This yields 9,266 individual value realizations across the analysed texts. For each value concept we calculated Shannon entropy (H) as a measure of lexical variability – that is, of how evenly the value’s realizations are distributed across the lemmas that express it (H = 0 indicates that the value is realized by a single lexeme; higher values of H indicate that its realizations are spread more evenly across a larger number of lexemes). A second key measure is the asymmetry coefficient (Ratio), defined as the ratio

of the relative share of a value in the POS corpus to the relative share of the corresponding disvalue in the NEG corpus.

Discussion. As the data show, the two poles of evaluativity are organized differently. The positive pole comprises 42 lexemes, of which 12 (28.6%) together account for 80% of the contexts; yet no single lexeme dominates, the most frequent one – *hālig* – accounting for only 17.7% of the POS-corpus realizations. Positive evaluativity thus presents a model of multiple coordinate centres – parallel axiological units, each foregrounding its own aspect of positive meaning: *hālig* – holiness, *mære* – fame, *lēof* – love, *beorht* – radiance, *gōd* – goodness, *fæger* – beauty, and *milde* – mildness.

The NEG-corpus shows that negativity is organized differently, since it exhibits a nucleus-and-periphery structure. Here 80% of the contexts are covered by 8 lexemes out of 34 (23.5%), and one lexeme – *yfel* – clearly constitutes the nucleus of negative evaluativity, with 224 contexts (48.3% of the entire NEG-corpus). *Yfel* carries the most general meaning, while the other adjectives, with their more specialized meanings, cluster around it (see Table 1). No positive adjective shows a comparable dominance, and this difference is consistent with A. Wierzbicka’s account of the semantic primes GOOD and BAD (Wierzbicka, 1996), according to which GOOD is elaborated through multiple coordinate positive centres, whereas BAD requires a single universal centre with a specialized periphery.

This asymmetry also manifests itself in the structure of co-occurrence within the same pole. The positive adjective *gōd* functions as a strong axiological attractor: it was found in six of the ten most frequent co-occurrence pairs (the most frequent being *gōd* + *hālig*, *gōd* + *lēof*, *gōd* + *milde*, and *gōd* + *mære*) and, overall, in 55 co-occurrence pairs with other positive adjectives. *Yfel*, by contrast, although it has the highest number of occurrences in our corpus, is a weak attractor: we found only eight co-occurrence pairs of

Table 1

Organization of Negative Pole of Evaluativity

Adjective	Number of Contexts	Pole Position	Meaning
<i>yfel</i>	224 (48,3%)	nucleus	general evil; violation of the norm
<i>wamm</i>	44 (9.5%)	periphery	physical impurity
<i>lāp</i>	35 (7.5%)	periphery	emotional hatred, hostility
<i>frecne</i>	16 (3.4%)	periphery	danger, threat
<i>egeful</i>	14 (3.0%)	periphery	fearsomeness, awe-inspiring terror
<i>egelīc</i>	14 (3.0%)	periphery	dread, terribleness
<i>wāc</i>	13 (2.8%)	periphery	physical/moral weakness
<i>sāemra</i>	12 (2.6%)	periphery	inferiority (being worse, lesser)

Table 2

Genre Distribution of the Positive- and Negative-Pole Adjectives

Genre	POS-corpus	NEG-corpus
Religious poetry	1,553 (62.4%)	198 (42.7%)
Religious prose	562 (22.6%)	185 (39.9%)
Secular poetry	297 (11.9%)	53 (11.4%)
Secular prose	77 (3.1%)	28 (6.0%)

negative adjectives with *yfel* (e.g. *atol + yfel*, *ungōd + yfel*). This asymmetry confirms that positive concepts tend to cluster, whereas negative ones retain their semantic autonomy in discourse. The data show that negative adjectives in Old English are semantically self-sufficient and require no reinforcement through accumulation.

A co-occurrence pattern across the opposite poles reveals the unique status of the nuclear lexeme *yfel*, namely, its relationship with the most universal lexeme of the positive pole, *gōd*. The antonymic pair *gōd* ↔ *yfel* was attested in 66 contexts, predominantly in the gnomic domain, where it functions as a formula of cosmic order: in this discourse type, the opposition of good and evil constitutes the foundation of the world order. The gnomic maxim given below is a case in point:

(1) *God sceal wip yfele, geogop sceal wip ylde*

“good must (stand) against evil, youth against old age” (Maxims II)

Here good and evil are conceived as the necessary poles of the normative order of being. On this model, the polarity of evaluativity is an ontological reality, good and evil being equal constituents of the world order.

This phenomenon explains the existence of a single nucleus at the negative pole. If evil is construed as an abstract, universal antipode of good (*yfel* ↔ *gōd*), then it does not require an elaborated lexicalization, since a single counterpart suffices to define the opposite pole. Finer differentiation is carried out at the periphery, where each peripheral negative adjective finds a corresponding positive one (*wamm* ↔ *clāne*, *lāp* ↔ *lēof*). The negative pole is therefore presented as a mirror image of the positive pole, organized around a single general nucleus.

The core finding of the research lies in the discursive distribution of evil. We establish that the adjectives of the positive pole are distributed across religious and secular prose and poetry differently from those of the negative pole (see Table 2). The positive-pole adjectives are heavily concentrated in religious poetry (62.4%), whereas those of the negative pole are distributed more evenly between religious poetry (42.7%) and religious prose (39.9%). Since the sub-corpora of each type were equalized in volume, we argue that this pattern is not an artefact of our text selection. Overall, negative evaluation is concentrated in religious texts, both prose and poetry.

The nuclear negative lexeme most clearly demonstrates the monopolization of evil by religious discourse: *yfel* is attested in this discourse 200 times

(89.3%) out of a total of 224. It is Christian texts that carry the conceptualization of evil. Heroic discourse follows the opposite strategy, in which the opponent is not absolute evil but a worthy, strong adversary; Christian ethics, by contrast, requires a category of absolute evil (the devil, sin), which is assigned to the negative pole. Religious discourse thus assumes the role of an axiological regulator in the Old English period, marking the negative through mechanisms of sacral reinterpretation (Prykhodko, 2014: 35).

Monopolisation is also evident in the negative-pole trajectories. A group of sacral and demonic nouns frequently co-occurs with *yfel*. These nouns (*dēofol* “devil”, *fēond* “enemy”, *helle* “hell”, *synn* “sin”, *wīte* “punishment”) amplify the moral, hostile, and punitive dominants of the negative field. Particularly vital is the effect of negativity contagion: 40 contexts in the NEG-corpus (8.6%) contain a contrastive demonological background, compared with only 37 (1.5%) in the POS-corpus. We again observe a tendency of evil to cluster: *yfel* attracts *dēofol*, *fēond*, and *wyrm* within a single sentence. This regularity is explained by the effect of negativity contagion described by P. Rozin and E. Royzman, whereby negative stimuli spread their colouring more effectively than positive ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001: 305–306).

The mentioned monopolisation of evil by religious discourse has a direct consequence for its axiological content. The value profile of *yfel* illustrates it as the adjective conceptualises mostly the negative value of Tradition ($TRAD^- \approx 90\%$). It means that in Old English world view evil is about a violation of the sacred norm, and only after that about physical danger or social hostility:

(2) *ælc yfel cymb of dēofle*

(“all evil comes from the devil”) (Homily),

where evil is reduced directly to a breach of the theological order.

This regularity also holds for the peripheral adjectives: negative evaluation is conceptualized as a violation of Tradition irrespective of the particular bearer of the negative quality. Moreover, $TRAD^-$ accounts for 56.7% of the entire negative corpus (263 con-

texts) – that is, more than half – whereas its positive counterpart, *TRAD*, constitutes only 25.3% of the positive corpus. Violation of the sacred norm is thus described more frequently than its observance. This is direct linguistic confirmation of the principle of negativity dominance (Baumeister et al., 2001), from which we state that language registers deviation from the norm more sharply than the norm itself.

The mechanism of sacralization operates in both directions and further reinforces the asymmetry. On the one hand, Christianization adds the value *TRAD* to positive evaluative adjectives: comitatus-heroic vocabulary (*lēof / dēore + drihten*) and aesthetic-sensory epithets (*beorht, fæger, milde, swēte*) acquire a sacral component in theological contexts, since in Christian axiology tradition is a positive value (Douděra 2016: 74). On the other hand, a mirror mechanism adds the value *TRAD*⁻ to negative lexemes: purely physical or social negatives take on a sacral component through religious-moral collocates:

- (3) *wāce eorðlice drēamas*
“feeble earthly joys” (a devaluation of the worldly).

Both directions of sacralization increase asymmetry with the positive pole being enriched by sacred Tradition, the negative one – by its violation.

Another aspect of the polar asymmetry discussed in our research is how reliably the dictionary profile predicts the corpus behaviour of positive- and negative-pole adjectives. A comparison of dictionary value profiles with their corpus realizations shows that negative evaluativity is more stable and predictable than positive evaluativity. In the negative sub-corpus, full agreement between the dictionary and corpus profiles amounts to 65.9% of contexts, whereas in the positive sub-corpus it is only 13.3%. In the remaining positive contexts (86.7%), the corpus adds new values to the dictionary prediction, that is, it transforms the dictionary profile contextually. In other words, the context influences the positive lexemes more than the negative ones.

It may seem that this finding contradicts the analysis based on the Shannon entropy indices which shows that disvalues (except *TRAD*⁻ and *CONF*⁻) possess higher lexical diversity than values. The contradiction, however, can be resolved by distinguishing two levels of lexemes in the negative pole. At the level of the nucleus, the negative is stable and mono-profile: *yfel* has low entropy ($H = 0.490$). At the level of the periphery, by contrast, the negative disperses into numerous narrowly specialized lexemes, and this dispersal raises the aggregate entropy. Stability and dispersion do not contradict each other, as the former

characterizes the nucleus, the latter the periphery, and together they constitute the essence of the nucleus-and-periphery model.

The role of religious discourse lies in its capacity to transform a value profile and even to invert the polarity of an individual lexeme. The adjective *ondrysne* “terrible”, whose dictionary profile is negative (*STIM*⁻ + *SEC*⁻), realizes the positive *POW* + *STIM* as “awe-inspiring, worthy of reverence” in both of its corpus occurrences with sacral collocates. In this case we deal with the so-called numinous inversion in R. Otto’s sense: the numinous experience combines dread (*tremendum*) and fascination (*fascinans*), while the sacral collocate adds, in addition, an “overpowering majesty” (*maiestas*) (Otto, 1950: 20, 31, 37). The lexical profile thus preserves fear, but prioritises reverence in a single experience of the sacred. So, it is the religious context that triggers the change of dread in an eschatological perspective becoming majesty in a theophanic one.

The same mechanism of discursive polarity assignment is displayed by the ambivalent lexeme *egesful*. In the context of *ūres drihtnes ansyn* “the face of our Lord” the adjective realizes the positive value *POW* (“majestic, worthy of reverence”), and in the context *helle witu* “the torments of hell” it realizes a negative *STIM*⁻ + *SEC*⁻ (“terrible”). Thus, the polarity of the adjective is not always determined by the dictionary profile, but by the collocational environment and the discursive mode, where sacral theophany and eschatological threat allocate adjectives towards opposite poles. This confirms the general thesis that evaluativity is discursive rather than purely lexical in nature.

The opposing side of the same process is the crystallization of the value profile in fixed religious formulae. Hereby, the axiological meaning in the collocation *mānfulla dēofol* “wicked devil” does not vary with context but stabilizes as a phraseological unit that invariably verbalizes *TRAD*⁻ and *BEN*⁻. This process is parallel to *constructionalization* (the fixing of a form–meaning pairing as an independent constructional unit) in the sense of E. Traugott and G. Trousdale (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013: 22). Religious discourse thus acts on evaluativity in two directions: it either inverts polarity (numinous inversion) or fixes it definitively (crystallization), and in both cases it is the sacral context that acts as the decisive factor.

The revealed regularities require a theoretical instrument that the original model of values by S. Schwartz lacks. The given model describes only the positive pole of each value ignoring the negative polarity (Schwartz, 2012; Kostenko et al., 2020). As we have mentioned in the theoretical background of the paper we consider the philosophical axiological

approach to the values and disvalues (Rolston, 1992) a critical motivated procedure. Old English evaluative lexicon objectifies disvalue in two ways: as the negation of a positive concept (wamm, yfel as the “mirror” of hālig, gōd) and through independent marker-lexemes that encode a distinct negative content, which corresponds to the linguo-cognitive category of the anti-concept, capable of existing independently (Marina, 2017: 430; Prykhodko, 2008).

The explanation of monopolisation of evil by religious discourse is in the connection between value Tradition and religiousness. According to S. Schwartz, TRAD is one of the “self-protective values”, which counter the anxiety arising from the uncertainty of the world, while meta-analytic data show that religious communities gravitate towards the values of order-preservation (e.g., Tradition, Conformity) (Schwartz, 2012: 9; Saroglou et al., 2004: 722). Old English society, as a deeply religious and world-order oriented, conceptualizes evil as the violation of that order which is the object of religious discourse rather than of heroic one. Heroic ethics deals with honour, fame, and loyalty categories, in which the rival or enemy should not be just evil, but also worthy and respected. As a result, monopolisation of evil by religious discourse is the result of religious and heroic axiology of the period.

Conclusions. The poles of Old English evaluativity are organized according to different structural principles. The positive pole presents a model of multiple coordinate centres (the most frequent, hālig, accounting for only 17.7%), whereas the negative

pole exhibits a nucleus-and-periphery structure, in which the universal designation of evil is yfel (48.3% of the negative corpus), while the periphery (such as wamm, lāþ, frecne, wāc) specializes in particular aspects of the negative.

The nuclear lexeme yfel is concentrated in religious discourse (89.3% of its occurrences), and its value profile consists almost exclusively of the negative value Tradition (TRAD). In the Old English worldview, evil appears primarily as a violation of the sacred norm.

Christian discourse monopolizes the lexicalization of evil. This complementarity is systemically motivated: absolute evil belongs to Christian cosmology, while heroic ethics does not conceive of the enemy as the bearer of absolute evil.

The asymmetry of the poles is also evident in their stability: the negative pole shows far higher agreement between dictionary profile and corpus behaviour (65.9%) than the positive pole (13.3%), yet is at the same time more lexically dispersed at its periphery.

Describing the regularities revealed here requires the introduction of the construct of disvalue, absent from S. Schwartz’s model but supported by philosophical axiology and by the linguo-cognitive category of the anti-concept. The monopolization of evil by religious discourse emerges as a systemic consequence of the axiological structure of a Christianized culture.

Further research possibilities include a diachronic comparison of the pre-Christian and Christian layers of the negative lexicon and the verification of the monopolization identified here on an expanded corpus.

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