Reflection of the Mythic Worldview in the Old English Lexis Denoting the Sacred

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Abstract. The article is the study of the ways the mythic concepts of the English mythological conceptual worldview are reflected in the system of the Old English lexis. To explicate this, we combine all concepts under analysis into conceptual segments according to their dominant conceptual features. In the present article we specifically dwell on the conceptual segment of the SACRED SPHERE which integrates four sub-segments – LIFE (lif), DEATH (deaþ), FATE (wyrd), and TIME (tid).

Keywords: mythopoetic text, mythological conceptual worldview, conceptual system, conceptual segment, Old English, sacred sphere.

Introduction

One of the prospective areas of modern linguistic studies is the reconstruction of material and spiritual culture of an ethnos based on the language data. Poly-pragmatic view of modern linguistics allows for a complex approach to the study of national languages, cultures and myths as sign systems. The appeal of this subject is caused by the phenomenon of myth reviving, which prompts the research of the nature of the correlation between the type of thinking, culture and language means of reproducing universal categories in ethno-cultural aspect. Such correlations are manifested in the systems of concepts that represent a certain worldview.
The research is based on the assumption that there is a direct correlation between the vocabulary of the language and the world that surrounds its speakers. In addition, the ties between the language and the surrounding reality are not limited to material objects, but are extended to the spiritual spheres and social life, including the socio-cultural peculiarities of the worldview of native speakers. We further assume that all language categories reflect the peculiarities of the conceptual worldview of language speakers, and thus it is possible to trace the changes of conceptual dominants in different historical periods by studying the diachronic development of language categories, both semantic and grammatical.

The aim of the present study is to show how worldview is reflected in language and speech. It stipulates the following objectives of the article: to overview the approach to the study of conceptual systems through conceptual segments; to define the place of the Old English mythopoetic texts within mythological discourse typology; to analyze the semantic content of nominative units denoting the sacred in the Old English mythopoetic texts of the 7th-10th centuries.

The relevance of the proposed research is determined by the interest to historical issues of the English semantics and their consideration in the diachronic aspect from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics and linguo-cultural studies. The originality of the research lies in the attempt at modeling complex conceptual and language worldviews based on language data, and in the need for a comprehensive quantitative analysis of the relations between the mythological element of conceptual worldview and its reflection in language categories.

The object of the research is the mythic concepts of the English mythological conceptual worldview. The subject of the research is the language means which verbalize these mythic concepts in the Old English mythopoetic texts.

The data under study is represented by 20 Old English texts of 4 genres (as defined by Melnikova, 1987): heroic epic songs (Beowulf, The Battle of Finnesburh, Widsith, Waldere A and B), heroic elegies (Deor, The Seafarer, The Wanderer, The Ruin, The Husband’s Message, The Wife’s Lament, Wulf and Eadwacer), religious epic songs (Juliana, Judith, Dream of the Rood, The Fortunes of Men, The Gifts of Men, Caedmon’s Hymn, The Fates of Apostles), and historic songs (The Battle of Brunanburh, The Battle of Maldon). The literary sources were selected due to the accuracy and vividness of the language of these texts, as well as due to the fact that the world organization in the works of the abovementioned genres has a mythological basis, i.e. it is based on the national mythological tradition. The general sample is 32,997 word-usages.

The methods applied combine definitional and contextual analyses with the elements of linguo-statistical methods (\(\chi^2\)-test, cross-contingency coefficient \(K\), sample error value \(\delta\)).

\(\chi^2\)-test enables us to establish the presence or absence of meaningful correlations, to detect the presence or absence of any relations between features and to separate standard
relations from non-standard, whereas the cross-contingency coefficient $K$ determines the extent and nature of the established relations. In our case, the features under study are the frequency of word use of the specific lexis and the genre where these words occur.

The sample error value $\delta$ is used to determine the reliability of the results (whether the sample size is enough to provide reliable calculations).

**The Study of Worldviews and Conceptual Systems**

The conceptual corpus of a language is not homogeneous in terms of its organization, as it is not homogeneous in terms of compatibility laws and in the ways the concepts combine. Speaking about the consistency of concept organization we are referring to a set of typologically different concepts in their unity and variety – a conceptual system. A conceptual system does not pertain to a separate linguistic personality, but to the whole ethnos this personality belongs to (Pryhodko, 2008, 215).

The structure and content of the concepts of a conceptual system are revealed in the meaning of language units representing these concepts; this meaning manifests itself in the dictionary interpretation and speech contexts. By comparing the available direct (lexeme semantics) and indirect (combinability and grammatical characteristics of lexemes) (Wierzbicka, 1997, 92) language means which represent concepts in language and speech it is possible to determine their main content (Kubryakova, 1991, 85; Boldyrev, 2004, 26).

The structure of concepts as complex phenomena contains dominant conceptual features, regularly recurring and explicitly expressed in the dictionary definitions, and being in certain relations with each other (Sternin, 2001, 59). Conceptual features are specific characteristics of a concept that reflect objective and subjective characteristics of objects and phenomena and vary in their degree of abstraction (Palayeva, 2005, 41).

Conceptual features do not exist in isolation, they are always presented as feature clusters. Each feature cluster contains a dominant (determining) feature and subordinate features. This dominant feature underlies the reconstruction of the conceptual system. Since conceptual features are reflected in the dictionary meaning and discourse representation of the language units, dominant features are singled out on the basis of definitional and contextual analyses.

Based on a number of approaches to singling out the classes of conceptual features (Kolesnyk, 2011; Palayeva, 2005), we combine such features into 14 classes: 1) bio-vital (combine biometric and physiological); 2) status-role; 3) relational; 4) functional; 5) affective-emotional; 6) mental-functional; 7) axiological-valorative; 8) temporal; 9) locative; 10) artifact; 11) sign; 12) mythic-vital; 13) emotional-transitory; and 14) parametric.
To reconstruct any conceptual system with the help of the language data and context under analysis we use the approach suggested by Palayeva (2005) and combine all the concepts into segments according to their dominant features. A conceptual segment, which is a structural component of the conceptual system, in this case is understood as a sustainable grouping of typologically and semantically homogenous concepts which organize cognitive-semantic spaces (Palayeva, 2005, 8). Consequently, a segment is a set of mental units combined by common content and reflecting the notional, objective and functional similarity of phenomena associated with these concepts. Conceptual segments and language worldview have direct correlative relations: the latter is based on the presence of certain notional-semantic areas in the conceptual system. That is, based on the definition of a conceptual system as an ordered complex of concepts, a conceptual segment indicates how the conceptual system is ordered.

We can highlight the following peculiarities of conceptual segment organization: a) elements forming a segment are conceptually related; b) a segment can combine homogeneous and heterogeneous elements; c) sub-segments can be singled out in the structure of a segment; d) the boundaries between segments are vague, blurred, amorphous; e) the constituents of one segment can partly belong to another segment; f) different segments sometimes overlap, forming gradual transition zones.

It should be emphasized that the division of the conceptual system into conceptual segments is arbitrary, because some concepts inextricably combine several conceptual features, leading to the diffusion of boundaries between the segments of the conceptual system and to the formation of stable cognitive links between the concepts of different segments.

**Old English Mythopoetic Texts**

The present study is a part of a research that focuses on the English mythopoetic texts in diachronic perspective. We define any text as mythopoetic if in its basis it contains distinct cultural or individual mythological plot models (i.e. of the whole culture or of an individual author) represented collectively in the units of secondary nomination. These units verbalize the mythic concepts of the national mythological conceptual worldview (Old English heroic poetry) and the conceptual worldview of an imaginary world (Modern English fantasy). Since mythological outlook is associative and imaginative in its nature, it provides permanence as well as cultural and historical continuity of the mythological component in the system of conceptual worldview. Mythopoetic nominations occurring in the Old English heroic works incorporate the elements of the historically established national conceptual code.

Language units which verbalize constituent concepts of the mythological conceptual worldview function in the mythological discourse, which Kolesnyk (2011) defines as a
text structured around certain elements of the mythic space (mythic concepts and mythological scripts), included in situations directly or indirectly correlating with these scripts, and aiming at changing the state of affairs by verbal means (Kolesnyk, 2011, 141). Thus, when building the typology of mythological discourse the basic criterion will not be “institutional / personal orientation” of discourse, but the type of mythological worldview lying in its foundation. Following this logic, the Old English period is represented by the mythologically coloured type of discourse (speech representations of mythic concepts in the texts of different genres and epochs). This type of discourse is based on the real worldview in which the religious component is rather strong, but at the same time the rudiments of primitive beliefs and the fragments of the national mythological tradition are present in the latent form.

The study of the old worldviews is faced with certain difficulties. Shaposhnikova (1999) notes that such research is complicated by the fact that the material under analysis is often incomplete and fragmentary. The authenticity of the information obtained from written texts is largely varied. The texts are far from containing all language forms and structures typically used in different periods of language development (Shaposhnikova, 1999, 56).

However, the Old English literature is among the oldest vernacular languages to be written down, and is one of the best preserved among the West Germanic languages and also one of the most abundant. To back this up, we use the formula for the sample error (Perebyjnis, 2001, 23) to establish the sufficiency of the sample size under analysis. In linguistics it is accepted that the relative sample error must not exceed 33% with confidence probability of 95% and P-value of 0.05 (Levickij, 2012). For the Old English period, with 32997 word-usages total, the sample error is 2%, which means the sample for the period is sufficient for the reliability of research results.

According to Kolesnyk’s classification of the periods of existence of the language system in the context of the mythic space functioning (Kolesnyk, 2011), the Old English epic belongs to the “reverberation period”, where the mythic space is manifested as an “echo” of the previous “linguo-demiurgic” (or “configurative”) epoch with its cognitive, accumulative and nominative proper language functions, whereas in the “reverberation period” the main language function is the expressive one.

In the worldview reflected in the mythopoetic texts, the myth serves as the dominant form of outlook. Thus, the semantic re-imagining of language units in such texts happens in accordance with the nature of the mythological way of thinking, where mythopoetic nomination has linguo-creative character and the imagery functions as a cognitive tool (Campbell, 2008). Therefore, any language material in the texts under study contains the information on the mythic concepts of the mythological conceptual worldview, and nominative units combine in their inner form linguistic proper and extra-linguistic information about the central elements of the conceptual system of society.
The Conceptual Segment of the SACRED SPHERE and its Linguistic Representation

Since the present article is a part of the research which focused on the gender expression, we primarily analyzed Old English nouns and nominal word combinations. The analysis was carried out taking into consideration the lexical peculiarities of the poetic language of the Old English epic verse (the use of *heiti* and *kennings*). In particular, complex metaphorical nominations were referred to a particular conceptual segment based on the referent denoted by their figurative semantics. For example, the word combination *sumeres weard* – “guardian of summer” – belongs to the conceptual segment of NATURAL PHENOMENA verbalizing the concept BIRD, since this combination denotes a *cuckoo*. Here we present the specific results inferred from the lexis denoting the sacred.

The conceptual segment of the SACRED SPHERE is extremely complex and integrates four sub-segments – LIFE (*lif*), DEATH (*deaþ*), FATE (*wyrd*), and TIME (*tid*). The total frequency of registered word use for this segment is 771, 446 instances of word use occurred in heroic epic songs, 70 in heroic elegies, 190 in religious epic songs, and 34 in historic songs. The sum of the $\chi^2$ test for the segment is 4.45, which indicated the presence of significant relations; however, $\chi^2$ test for each of four genres either does not register (for religious epic songs and historic songs) or is less than 3.84 ($\chi^2 = 2.41$ for heroic epic songs, $\chi^2 = 2.04$ for elegies), and thus has no $K$ value. This means that the lexical units are more or less equally distributed between the genres, display no bias toward any of them in particular, and occur as theoretically expected.

Sacred sphere may be subjected to specific polar changes which can be described in the terms “sacralization” and “desacralization”, because, on the one hand, cultural space always includes some archaic ideas of the sacred that have lost “the sense of cosmic religiosity”, i.e. ideas which lose their original meaning and move into the category of mythopoetic; on the other hand, sacred ideas are occasionally activated, bringing about the rise of new sacrally marked phenomena (Skab, 2008, 73).

Based on this, we emphasize the necessity to distinguish between two conceptual segments – RELIGIOUS SPHERE and SACRED SPHERE. The former (religious) includes concepts whose nominative units denote an object/subject of worship and relate to the cult; the latter segment (sacred) includes nominations denoting everything mystic and anything that reflects mythological consciousness, but is not subjected to a cult or worship.

DEATH is one of the basic concepts in the Old English mythological conceptual worldview, in whose light axiological values inherent in the Old English culture were developed. This concept cannot be assigned to any of the connotatively coloured notional-valorative groups since the perception of DEATH by the Anglo-Saxons is not uniform and depends on a particular set of factors (Kolesnyk, 2006, 102).
The semantics of nominative units and the grammatical organization of composites which include the lexical unit death as their nuclear component indicate that DEATH in the Old English mythological conceptual worldview is an active operating force capable of taking away, subordinating, devastating and bereaving; it ensures the decree of fate and has a certain temporal and spatial localization.

The constituents in the sub-segment of DEATH are combined by their dominant bio-vital conceptual feature of the completion of all vital functions of an organism. The sub-segment has the following structure:

- the concept of NATURAL DEATH (deaþ (m), wældeaþ (m), swylt (m), wundordeaþ (m), deaþeswylm (m), deaþesnyld (n) etc.);
- the concept of DEATH IN BATTLE (guþdeaþ (m), guþscear (m), wighryre (m), garcwælæm (m), licsar (n), feorhhebæn (f), feorhwund (f), syndolh (n) etc.);
- the concept of MURDER (morþor (m/n), selfcwælæu (f), hrafyl (m), wæl (n), hondslyht (m), inwitscear (m), wælhlæm/hlæm (m), drepe (m) etc.);
- the concept of the END (endedæg (m), endestæf (m), endedogor (n) etc.);
- the concept of PARTING (aldorgedal (n), lifgedal (n), worulgedal (n) etc.);
- the concept of the FALL (deoflæhrære (m), wælfællæ (m), laodhæryre (m), forwyrd (f), spild (m), hæléþahryre (m), fyllcyningæs (m), hlæfordhæryre (m) etc.);
- the concept of LIFE PROPER (lif (n), feorh (n/m), aldor/ealdor (n/f), ferhð (m/n) etc.);
- the concept of AGONY / SUFFERING (deaþcwealm (m), deaþcwalæu (f), bealocwælæm (m), cwealmbealu (n), morþorbealu (n), feorhbealu (n) etc.);
- the concept of TIME (gescæphwil (f), endedæg (m), swyltdæg (m), deaþdæg (m) etc.);
- the concept of THE DEAD (wæl (n), wælfyld (f), wælsclæ (n), hræw (n/m), leap (m) etc.);
- the concept of the WAY / PLACE OF BURIAL (wælbed (n), legerbedd (n), hlæw (m), deaþwic (n), hrawic (n), morþorbedd (n), beorh (m), wælrest (f), deæbed (n), hoþma (m), earþweall (m), scræf (n), moldgærf (n), hrusanheolstæ (m), eorþscæf (n), eorþgærap (f), heardgripærhusæn (m), bæl (n), ad (m), brondalæf (f), adfer (n), bælstæde (m), bær (f), bælyr (n), sweæpel (m) etc.).

As we can see from the lexical units listed above, this concept can be further divided into three sub-concepts: DEATHBED (wælbed, morþorbedd, wælrest etc.), GRAVE (hlæw, beorh, deaþwic, hoþma, earþweall, moldgæraf, hrusanheolstæ, eorþscæf, heardgripærhusæn etc.) and FUNERAL PYRE (brondalæf, adfer, bælstæde, bælyr, sweæpel etc.), which reflect acultural theory about the epoch of pyres and the epoch of barrows (Petruhin, 2003, 293). Most nominations of this concept are metaphorical.

The constituents in the sub-segment of LIFE contain dominant bio-vital and temporal conceptual features of the period between birth and death; the time between birth and the current moment; and the time allotted to a man in this world. The sub-segment has the following structure:

- the concept of LIFE PROPER (lif (n), feorh (n/m), aldor/ealdor (n/f), ferhð (m/n) etc.);
• the concept of a PERIOD OF LIFE (yldu (f), geogub (f), geoguþfeorh (n/m), geongeþfeorh (n/m), gebyrd (f) etc.);
• the concept of TIME (aldordagas (mpl), lifdagas (mpl), dægrim (n), lændagas (mpl), dogorgerim (n), gearrim (n), tidðæg (m) etc.);
• the concept of WAY (lifesweg (m), eorþweg (m) etc.);
• the concept of SHARE (eorþandæl (m), wintradæl (m), þaslænanesceaft (f/n) etc.).

We can notice that the described sub-segments have two concepts in common – TIME and WAY. It should also be noted that often nominative units denoting life in contextual combination with other substantive and verbal units acquire the meaning of death. Compare: on hean galgan lif aletan (Jul : 482–83), ende lifes (Jul : 661), þis lif ofgeaf (Beo : 2252), sundur gedælan lif wið lice (Beo : 2423–24), sceolde lændaga æþeling ærgod ende gebidan (Beo : 2342–43), ure xeghuylc sceal ende gebidan worolde lifes (Beo : 1388–89), aldre beneotan (Beo : 679), hu heo þone atolan eaðost mihte ealdre benæman (Jud : 75–76), Iacob sceolde fore Herode ealdre gedælan (FA : 35–36), se ellorgast ofkt lifdagas ond þas lænen gesceaf (Beo : 1623–24). We may consider such combination to be the manifestation of the oxymoron of LIVING DEATH and DEAD LIFE, implemented in the basic mythological scripts of cosmogonic type (Kolesnyk, 2011, 184).

The idea about TIME is the result of human categorizing activity and forms an integral part of the language worldview. Within this idea we can speak of metric time that reflects the notion of quantity and is perceived as a unit of measurement (“short-term” duration, “long-term” duration) and existential time that exists at the level of feelings and associations (“eternity”, “timelessness”, “cyclicity”, “linearity”). Being associated with duration on the one hand and permanence on the other, time indication acquires special spiritual value for a specific linguo-cultural community (Belozyorova, 2005, 11).

Thus, the sub-segment of TIME contains dominant temporal conceptual features and is structured as follows:

• the concept of an INSTANT / MOMENT IN TIME (hwil (f), tid (f), þrag (f), stund (f), þrechwil (f), dæghwil (f), mæl (n), feac (n) etc.);
• the concept of a PART OF A DAY / NIGHT (morgentid (f), niht (f), æfentid (f), æring (f), sinniht (f), middelniht (f), dogor (n), dægred (n), undernmæl (n) etc.);
• the concept of a TIME SEGMENT (antid (f), non (n), gear (n), missere (n));
• the concept of ETERNITY (awa to ealdre (n), wideferh (n), to widan feore (n)).

Belief in Fate is a cornerstone of the Anglo-Saxon worldview. Fate takes various forms and colours, can be favourable or destructive, but in any case it has the nature of the absolute imperative for both the hero and the gods, reflecting the idea (Buniyatova, 2004, 20) that the mind of ancient ethnic groups is generally rooted in determinism. The nominative units of the sub-segment of FATE are characterized by high frequency of use, but not by exceptional diversity (wyrd (f), gesceaf (f), meotudgesceaf (f), forþgesceaf (f), lifgesceaf (f), mælgesceaf (f), gebyrd (f), gesceap (n), heahgesceap (n), gewife / gewefe (n),
gelimp (n)). Of note is the observation that the nouns of feminine gender predominate both in number and in frequency.

**Conclusions**

Thus, as we can see from the language data, mythopoetic mentality is not rational and logical, but imaginative and emotional in its nature. Perhaps its most striking feature is the phenomenon of “participation” (Gatch, 1991, 195), i.e. a belief in the relations between different objects which are not reduced to the cause-effect ones. Its premise is the idea of the unity of the visible and invisible reality, the latter being primary and decisive in relation to everyday life.

Sacred sphere absorbs figuratively expressed beliefs, traditions, stereotypes, prohibitions, ideas about the world order (for instance, temporal and locative representation), and “forces” functioning in the world. In this way the world acquires shape and meaning, and a personality understands their own place and purpose in it. Besides, sacred sphere contributes to the development or decline of certain abilities and skills of an individual, determines the direction and speed of their socialization. In archaic society sacred sphere of culture greatly influences the social structure and the nature of social and political relations.

It should be emphasized that the described phenomena reflect only the features of the mythological worldview, i.e. the texts different from mythopoetic may yield somewhat different results.

**References**


**Literary sources**


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Mitinio pasaulio atspindys šventumą reiškiančioje senosios anglų kalbos leksikoje

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Santrauka

Tyrimu siekiama atskleisti, kaip nominatyvinių konstrukcijų turiniu senosios anglų kalbos mitopoetiniuose VII–X a. tekstuose reiškiama pasaulėžiūra. Tuo tikslu visi konceptai sugrupuoti į konceptualiuosius segmentus – stabilius tipologiskai ir semantiškai homogeniškų konceptų grupes. Šiame straipsnyje ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas konceptualijam ŠVENTUMO SRI-
TIES segmentui, apimančiam keturis subsegmentus – GYVENIMAS (lif), MIRTIS (deaþ), LIKIMAS (wyrd), LAIKAS (tid).

Senosios angļų kalbos mitologinėje konceptualiojoje pasaulėžiūroje MIRTIS suvokiama kaip aktyvi jėga, užtikrinanti likimo neišvengiamumą ir turinti laiko ir erdvės lokalizaciją. Be to, nominatyvinės konstrukcijos, reiškiančios GYVENIMĄ, skirtinguose kontekstuose jungdamosi su daiktavardiniais ir veiksmazodiniais vienetais, įgyja MIRTIES reikšmę. Remiantis anglosaksų idėjomis apie LAIKĄ, galima kalbėti apie metrinį laiką, kuris išreiškia kiekybės sąvoką ir yra suvokiamas kaip matavimo vienetas, ir egzistencinį laiką, kuris apima jausmų ir asociacijų lygmenį. Tikėjimas LIKIMU – anglosaksiškos pasaulėžiūros pamatas; LIKIMAS turi skirtingas formas ir atspalvius ir yra absoliučiai neišvengiamas. Pastebėtina, kad nominatyvinės konstrukcijos su subsegmentu LIKIMAS vartojamos itin dažnai, tačiau jos nepasižymi didele įvairove.

Esminiai žodžiai: mitopoetinis tekstas, mitologinė konceptuali pasaulėžiūra, koncetualioji sistema, senoji angļų kalba, šventumo sritis.

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