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# Near-synonyms of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate Origin

## The Structure of Semantic Variation and its Representation in Dictionaries

### Abstract

*This article examines the semantic relations holding between pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate near-synonyms in present-day English, such as speed/velocity, sweat/perspire, shy/timid and before/prior. Meaning variation between etymologically unrelated lexical items expressing equivalent concepts has primarily been explained in terms of pragmatic principles, although the differences between them also result from constraints imposed by their denotational semantics. The analysis proposed aims to identify the nature of their semantic proximity not so much by observing meaning construal in specific contexts or the degree of collocational variation, but rather through the observation of how similarity of concepts is conventionally encoded and externalized. This approach has made it possible to provide a preliminary mapping of the areas of overlap and contrast between semantically related items. Eight main scenarios emerge from the analysis of the data: the pairs of words examined are linked by a generic-specific (or specific-generic), literal-figurative (or figurative-literal) or cause-effect relation, but also differ in terms of focus, conventional implicatures or level of iconicity. Some possible lexicographic representations of these meaning relations have been proposed for English monolingual and learners' dictionaries.*

**Keywords:** *lexical semantics, lexicography, near-synonyms, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, Latinate vocabulary*

### 1. Introduction

The meaning relations holding between synonymous words of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate origin in present-day English, such as *speed/velocity*, *sweat/perspire*, *shy/timid*, *before/prior*, etc., have so far been under-investigated in lexical semantics studies, where they tend to be explained primarily in terms of pragmatic principles (Moon 2013; Murphy 2003; Taylor 2003; Partington 1998). Latin-based words are generally viewed as more formal,

technical or as belonging to a certain specialized domain, e.g. medicine, biology, engineering, and so forth. In other words, their use would be determined by context and justified by the stylistic requirements of a specific type of discourse. The scenario, however, appears to be more complex than this, because pragmatic factors in fact only co-determine lexical choice. The reason why the member of a pair of near-synonyms is selected over the other is often to be sought at the level of its semantics, which is never perfectly equivalent to that of its counterpart.

The aim of this paper is twofold: it intends to provide, on the one hand, an initial analysis of the areas of semantic overlap and contrast between pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate ‘equivalents’ in the lexicon of English and to attempt a preliminary classification of the meaning relations holding between them; it also aims, on the other hand, at suggesting possible lexicographic representations of these meaning relations in English monolingual and learners’ dictionaries. Lexicographic resources do not always clarify the limits of substitutability and interchangeability between near-synonyms, nor do they motivate restrictions on semantic grounds. It would instead be appropriate to provide information regarding the connections and the processes of meaning differentiation between Anglo-Saxon and borrowed Latinate words—the latter make up the bulk of the lexicon of English—through codes, labels and usage notes. This metadata would be particularly useful for learners of English whose L1 is a Romance language. Italian EFL learners, for instance, often struggle with words such as *velocity*, *embrace*, *courageous*, etc., in that they are similar in form to their Italian counterparts, i.e. *velocità*, *abbracciare*, *coraggioso/a*, but which cannot be used in the same way, because they are either false friends (Chamizo-Domínguez 2008; Ferguson 1994) or partial cognates, i.e. different in their scope of reference. A lexicographic improvement with respect to the representation of what appear as recurrent patterns in near-synonymous relations is thus called for. Some examples of possible, finer-grained metadata will be provided.

Section 2 summarizes the basic facts about the development of the English lexicon, which is characterized by an etymologically diverse word-stock consisting of an Anglo-Saxon core and of Latinate borrowings (Minkova and Stockwell 2006) whose addition has produced a duplication of meanings complementing those of the pre-existing Anglo-Saxon words (Durkin 2014, 2020; Hughes 2000; Baugh and Cable 1993). Section 3 briefly reviews the major studies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on synonymy in English, in order to situate the analysis proposed here with respect to previous literature. Sections 4 and 5 are the core of the paper and discuss, respectively, the differences in the construal of meaning associated to semantically related but etymologically distant words, and how this meaning variation may be accounted for in dictionaries. Section 6 concludes the paper with final remarks and with some considerations for future research on this

topic.

## 2. The lexicon of English: borrowing and assimilation

The English language has been subject to several external influences throughout the centuries which have left a mark on its present-day status. There are many words in the lexicon of present-day English that can be traced back to the languages spoken by the settlers from Scandinavia in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. *Skull, skirt, sky, skin, knife, die*, to mention just a few very common words, are from old Norse, for instance. These lexical items, just like the ones of Anglo-Saxon origin, tend to be short, morphologically simple and refer primarily to the practical and physical world. By far the greatest influence on the lexicon of English, however, was the Norman Conquest of 1066, after which many French words became part of English through a process of assimilation. The picture was particularly complex in Middle English, because not only did French and English interact with each other, but also with Latin, which following the spread of Christianity had become the *lingua franca* of written texts and, to some extent, of speech, too. Rothwell (1994, 95) refers to this period as being characterized by some sort of trilinguism, before English ‘absorbed’ the other two languages:

Two of the constituent elements, English and French, were living vernaculars; the third, Latin, was a dead construct. Two, Latin and French, had been in widespread use as languages of record for centuries. The third, English, was used increasingly for record purposes from the later fourteenth century onwards and eventually absorbed the roles of the other two, thus becoming the sole national language.

The fact that English incorporated vocabulary from French and Latin has contributed to the ‘dissociative’ character of present-day English. The term ‘dissociative’ was first used by Leisi (1955) and then by other scholars, such as Kastovsky (1992), to indicate the presence of etymologically different, but quasi equivalent or semantically related words in the lexicon of English, as a result of borrowing, e.g. the Anglo-Saxon form *ear* and the borrowed form *aural*, which may alternate in certain expressions (*ear infection*, but also *aural infection*); similarly, *heart* may be replaced with *coronary* (*heart disease* or *coronary disease*), *mind* with *mental* (*mind health* and *mental health*),<sup>1</sup> and so forth. This is in contrast with what had happened in Old English, which had an ‘associative’ character, instead, i.e. it borrowed very little and

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the borrowed Latinate near-synonyms often belong to a different word class, i.e. *aural*, *coronary* and *mental* are adjectives, while *ear*, *heart* and *mind* are nouns, although both the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate words in the compounds above have an adjectival function.

semantically related words were mostly formed through derivation and compounding (Kay and Allan 2016, 228):

The adjectives *cildisc* and *cildlic* ‘childish,’ for example, are clearly related to the noun *cild* ‘child,’ as is *cildgeong* ‘child-young, youthful,’ where modern English might prefer *infant* or *juvenile* in some contexts, as both *childish* and *childlike* have developed more specialized meanings.

The words that in Middle English were imported from French were prevalently prestige borrowings from the language of the ruling elite and they belonged to specific semantic fields, such as the royalty (*royal, royalty, reign, monarch, monarchy*), the arts (*stage, perform, harmony, melody*), architecture (*aisle, arcade, vault*) and literature (*poet, romance, rhyme*). The introduction of these items produced an elaborate system of lexical variants that still exist in English today, where it is often possible to find not just pairs, but also triplets of partially synonymous words, e.g. *ask, question* and *interrogate, kingly, royal* and *regal*, etc.

Borrowing from Latin and French often occurred in translations into English, due to the perception that Latinate terms added a more refined character to English texts. In Caxton’s versions of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, there was an explicit propensity towards retaining a certain foreign flavour in his translations (Blake 1969, 136-141; 172-173). This is an example of how translations may have contributed to lexical development with an influx of innovations in English. Latinate loanwords, however, were considered as ‘hard words’ and progressively started to be recorded as such in English monolingual dictionaries.

In the lexicon of present-day English, Latinate words appear to be the most frequent ones compared to those of a different origin. If we consider the 10,000 most frequent items in the British National Corpus, more than half are non-Anglo-Saxon words (Minkova and Stockwell 2006, 467). The sum of the percentages of French- and Latin-based words is a rather impressive figure.

<b>Word origin</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Old English	31.8%
French	45.0%
Latin (post-OE)	16.7%
Other Germanic languages	4.2%

Other languages	2.3%
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**Tab. 1:** The origin of the 10,000 most frequent words in the English lexicon

It is not always easy, however, to clearly demarcate between Latinate and non-Latinate words. This is because there are many hybrid forms consisting of elements from more than one source, as in the case of certain compounds such as *nobleman* (*noble* is French, but *man* is Anglo-Saxon) or of nouns where the stem is Latinate, but the affixes are Anglo-Saxon, e.g. *ungracious* (French stem, but Anglo-Saxon prefix), or vice versa, e.g. *lovable* (Anglo-Saxon stem, but French suffix).

### 3. Literature review

The linguistic literature distinguishes between three main types of synonyms: absolute, partial and near-synonyms. It is widely acknowledged that absolute synonyms are extremely rare, because they need to satisfy the following three conditions (Lyons 1995, 61):

1. all their meanings [must be] identical
2. they [must be] synonymous in all contexts
3. they [must be] semantically equivalent [...] on all dimensions of meaning, descriptive and non-descriptive

Within the same language variety, it is very unlikely to come across two or more words with the exact same meaning in all contexts, but if we consider the lexicon of British and American English, for instance, there are indeed words that can be treated as absolute synonyms in the two varieties, e.g. *lift* and *elevator*, *aubergine* and *eggplant*, *holiday* and *vacation*, and so forth. Dictionaries and thesauri usually list synonyms which are not absolute, but rather partial or near-synonyms. If we look up the highly polysemous word *big* in any dictionary, for instance, we typically find the following related adjectives: *large*, *great*, *huge*, *giant*. However, while two sentences such as *Mary lives in a big house* and *Mary lives in a large house* basically express the same concept, the same cannot be said for *Mary lives in a huge/giant house*, because *huge* or *giant* have the meaning of ‘extremely big/large.’ These synonymous words are thus not always interchangeable without producing a change in meaning. When talking about an older brother or sister you refer to them as your *big brother/sister*, but not as your *great brother/sister* (unless you are praising them for something they have done), your *large brother/sister* (unless you are making reference to their weight) or, even less likely, as your *huge/giant brother/sister*. This

is because synonymous words are not semantically equivalent in all contexts or at all levels. Near-synonyms are words that differ from one another in fine and subtle ways, both at the level of their connotation and in terms of their denotation. In other words, they show variation in the manner with which they convey concepts and ideas (e.g., implied, suggested, expressed, connoted or stressed), in their frequency of occurrence, but also at the level of their deeper meaning. Table 2 exemplifies the main types of variation characterizing pairs and triplets of near-synonymous words (Edmonds and Hirst 2002, 109).

Type of variation	Example
Abstract dimension	<i>seep:drip</i>
Emphasis	<i>enemy:foe</i>
Denotational, indirect	<i>error:mistake</i>
Denotational, fuzzy	<i>wood:forest</i>
Stylistic, formality	<i>pissed:drunk:inebriated</i>
Stylistic, force	<i>ruin:annihilate</i>
Expressed attitude	<i>skinny:thin:slim:slender</i>
Emotive	<i>daddy:dad:father</i>
Collocational	<i>task:job</i>
Selectional	<i>pass away:die</i>
Subcategorization	<i>give:donate</i>

**Tab. 2:** Examples of near-synonymous relations

Denotational differences, i.e. context-independent variations, are typically due to the inherent implications of words (Dimarco, Hirst and Stede 1993): *seep* and *drip* involve, respectively, the concept of flowing continuously vs. intermittently; *enemy* stresses the concept of antagonism, while *foe* that of active warfare; an *error* is a straying from a proper course, whereas a *mistake* implies misconception, misunderstanding or inadvertence and is associated to less severe criticism than *error*; according to Room (1985, 270), the difference between *wood* and *forest* is primarily one of size, instead:

[...] a 'wood' is smaller than a 'forest,' is not so primitive, and is usually nearer to civilization. This means that a 'forest' is fairly extensive, is to some extent wild, and on the whole not near large towns or cities. In addition, a 'forest' often has game or wild animals in it, which a 'wood' does not, apart from the standard quota of regular rural denizens such as rabbits, foxes and birds of various kinds.

As for stylistic differences, there are two distinct scenarios in the table above: *pissed*, *drunk* and

*inebriated* clearly share the same semantic core, but differ in terms of register; *annihilate* entails the idea of destroying completely compared to *ruin* and is thus more emphatic. The other examples show variation in terms of connotation, with *skinny* being a rather negative word, *thin* a more neutral one, while *slim* and *slender* have a positive connotation; *daddy* and *dad* are words of endearment, while *father* is unmarked from that perspective. Finally, in addition to collocational differences (*job centre*, but not *\*task centre*), there are also variations in terms of selectional restrictions, i.e. synonyms impose different constraints on the semantic properties of their arguments. The expression *pass away*, for instance, requires a human subject (e.g., *He/\*My computer passed away during the night*), whereas *die* allows for a wider range of subjects, both human and non-human, animate and inanimate (e.g., *He/My computer died last night*).<sup>2</sup> In addition, synonymous words may vary in their subcategorization frame, i.e. in the number and type of syntactic arguments they take (e.g., *give* is ditransitive, while *donate* is monotransitive).

There are numerous works on synonymy in the linguistic literature (cf., among others, Durkin 2020, 2014; Hanks 2013, 2010; Geeraerts 2010, 2006; Croft and Cruse 2004; Cuyckens, Dirven and Taylor 2003; Murphy 2003; Cruse 2000; Edmonds 1999; Lyons 1995; Church et al. 1994; Burnley 1992; Jackson 1988; Leech 1981; Palmer 1981; Evens et al. 1980; Kempson 1977). For reasons of space, it will not be possible to embark here on a detailed analysis of the many studies on the topic, but it should be said that scholars generally follow either a semantic approach that investigates variation at the level of denotation or take a pragmatic perspective and examine synonyms not so much in terms of their truth conditions but rather by looking at how contextual use affects their meaning. Certain semantic definitions of synonymy hold that two words are synonyms if one is entailed by the other (Kempson 1977) or if they are related by symmetric hyponymy (Palmer 1981; Evens et al. 1980). For some authors, e.g. Jackson (1988), synonyms do not really exist, because all aspects of meaning must be identical in order for two words to be synonymous, while certain differences are always present. Church et al. (1994) identify sets of gradient synonyms of which one is a prototype word and the others more peripheral elements in that they entail additional meaning components. Edmonds (1999) shows that synonyms may differ in thirty-five distinct ways and that the dividing line between denotation and connotation may be fuzzy.

According to Murphy (2003, 168), who proposes a pragmatic view of synonymy, “what actually counts as synonymous is constrained by the demands of communicative language use and the

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<sup>2</sup> The non-human subject, however, produces a figurative interpretation, whereby ‘die’ is STOP WORKING.

context in which this language use occurs.” Synonym pairs thus differ in connotation (*punish* vs. *discipline*), affect (*gay* vs. *homosexual*), register (*legs* vs. *gams*), dialect (*milkshake* vs. *frappe*) and on the basis of whether they belong to general or specialized vocabulary (*word* vs. *lexeme*). Croft and Cruse (2004), within the cognitive linguistic tradition, argue that a classification of synonymy cannot cover all the possible context-sensitive properties. However, although it is true that a strong association of one concept with another can generate a synonymous relation between their lexicalizations, “construability is not infinitely flexible” (Croft and Cruse 2004, 144).

Regardless of the different traditions of linguistic research on synonymy, the identification and the nature of the relations holding between words has typically been investigated by analysing their interchangeability and substitutability. The latter aspects have been tested in two ways in the literature, either with reference to all potential contexts (Apresyan et al. 1970) or to specific ones (Murphy 2003). In both cases, there has been a general tendency to overlook the wider intra-lexical organization of a language.

#### **4. Meaning variation between Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms**

The analysis proposed in this section aims to identify the nature of semantic similarity and difference between pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms. Although synonymy is viewed here as a conceptual relation (Croft and Cruse 2004), it is not investigated by observing meaning construal in specific contexts or the degree of collocational variation between related items, but rather through the observation of how similarity of concepts is conventionally encoded and externalized. This has been possible by manually comparing and contrasting the lexical entries for the word pairs under investigation in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The examples provided, however, are both from the OED and from various published materials, which in some cases offer better or more recent illustrations of language use. The idea is that of providing a preliminary mapping of the areas of overlap and contrast between semantically related items. There are eight main scenarios emerging from an initial analysis of the data. The pairs of words examined appear to be linked by a generic-specific (or specific-generic), literal-figurative (or figurative-literal) or cause-effect relation, but they also seem to differ in terms of focus, conventional implicatures or iconicity. Each of these relations are described and exemplified in the next sections. The boundaries between the eight categories, however, are not always clear-cut and there can be some convergence between one type of relation and the other. The approach followed consists in evaluating the degree of variation produced by the assimilation of Latinate words in the lexicon of English, which, as we have seen above, has given rise to a duplication of

meanings that already existed before the borrowing process began.

#### 4.1 Generic-specific relation

The data shows that the semantics of Latinate words is often ‘narrower’ compared to that of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, which tends to be less specific. This process seems to affect all word classes. So, for instance, *dine*, *vend* and *narrate* provide additional information compared to the more basic and generic verbs *eat*, *sell* and *tell*: *dining* involves ‘eating the principle meal of the day,’ typically in a restaurant or on a formal occasion (1); *vending* is ‘selling especially as a peddler or by means of a machine’ (2); *narrating* is not just telling, but ‘story-telling’ (3):

- (1) a. 2002 O. Figs *Natasha’s Dance* (2003) iv. iv. 242 When he went to Moscow, or dined with friends, he dressed in tailored clothes.  
b. 1860 J. Tyndall *Glaciers of Alps* i. §22. 155 Up to this point I had eaten nothing.
- (2) a. Tourists and locals alike jostled each other while merchants vended their wares [...] (Kundel, T. J. *Is Wanting Enough?*, Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press, 2002, 503).  
b. 1896 H. G. Wells *Wheels of Chance* i. 7 This, madame, ...is selling very well.
- (3) a. As they narrated the course of their journeys out loud into the recorder, I made notes to facilitate the separation of images and other occurring phenomena such as events and actions (Bouse, K. J. *Neo-Shamanism and Mental Health*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2019, 33).  
b. In the course of the trial of that case, Judge Hastings, while under oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, did knowingly and contrary to that oath make a false statement [...] (*Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States* 1.3, 25 January, 1990, Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1249).

Certain nouns behave similarly, i.e. the semantics of the Latinate nouns is more restricted than that of the Anglo-Saxon nouns, e.g. *abdomen* refers only to the body part of a living organism, while *belly* has a wider application to the field of reference (4); a *feeling* is both physical and emotional, but a *sensation* also involves the idea of a reaction (5); a *pullet* is a type of *hen* (6), i.e. a young domestic one that is less than one year old:

- (4) a. 2003 *Guardian* 17 July (Life section) 3/1 The implants are fitted under the skin of the abdomen, directly above the stomach.  
b. 1699 J. Potter *Archæologiæ Græcæ* II. iii. xiv. 133 Ships of Burden., having large and capacious Bellies.
- (5) a. 2012 R.K. Haldane *Gold-Mining Boomtown* 36 She must have caused

a sensation among her Dunkard relatives, sweeping about in silks.

b. 2014 *Daily Tel.* (Nexis) 16 May 29 His thigh was cold to the touch and appeared to have lost all feeling.

- (6) a. 2004 *Independent* 14 July (Property section) 13/2 Jane bought another couple of chickens, Cream Legbars, which are still pullets and live in the rabbit hutch.  
 b. 2013 *Herald-Times* (Bloomington, Indiana) 6 Mar. d4/2 When one of his hens lays an egg, it typically likes to come out of the nesting box and sing its 'egg song' to announce its delivery.

The generic-specific type of relation can also be observed among adjectives: a *timid* person, for instance, is not just *shy*, but also lacks courage or confidence and that is reflected in his/her external life (7); *oriental* specifically refers to Asia, while *eastern* is more generic with respect to geographic location (8):

- (7) a. 2007 A. Theroux *Laura Warholic* ix. 99 She had a weak and timid handshake.  
 b. 1885 W. H. White *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance* (ed. 9) iv. 52 The women in the countryside were shy of her.
- (8) a. 2000 *Fairlady* (Cape Town) 21 June 114/2 Paan, sold by an Indian street vendor, caught our attention in Fordsburg... Look out for paan in oriental markets.  
 b. 2008 *New Yorker* 28 Apr. 58/3 In parts of the Appalachians..rich Eastern ladies taught crafts, folk songs, and country dances to poor mountain children.

These Latinate words thus stand in a hyponymous relation to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, which are 'unmarked' for specific semantic features and are, consequently, broader in their referential scope. Upon closer inspection, it can be noticed that there are distinct ways in which Latinate words express more specific meanings: they may refer to entities which have a different size compared to the one indicated by the Anglo-Saxon words (e.g., a *forest* is bigger than a *wood* and an *isle* is smaller than an *island*), they sometimes entail the idea of higher intensity, so, for instance, *rage* and *grief* refer to stronger feelings than simple *anger* and *sorrow*, respectively; in certain cases, Anglo-Saxon and Latinate near-synonyms seem to stand, rather paradoxically, in some sort of opposite relation to each other, as in the case of *body/corpse* or *smell/odour*, where the second, Latinate member of the pair refers, respectively, only to a 'dead body' and typically to an 'unpleasant smell.' As we are considering synonymous relations here, this idea of a meaning opposition may sound contradictory. It is as though there were a conjoined antonymy embedded within the broader synonymy.

Finally, the introduction of certain Latinate words has produced a meronymic extension (part

for whole), whereby *beef*, *venison*, *pork* and *mutton* now refer just to that part of the animal used for consumption and no longer to the animal itself. This is also a generic-specific meaning relation, which can be defined in terms of an entailment pattern. However, meronymy is different from hyponymy: *beef* is part of the flesh of a cow, bull or ox and not a type of cow, bull or ox.

#### 4.2 *Specific-generic relation*

The opposite trend compared to what is described above can also be observed, i.e. Latinate words may also express more generic meanings than the ones associated with their synonymous Anglo-Saxon counterparts. This scenario appears to be less common, but a larger set of data needs to be analysed before we can come to this conclusion. What is evident, however, is that certain Latinate words, such as *cattle* and *foliage*, are collective uncountable nouns: *cattle* is a superordinate word subsuming various subsets (*bull*, *cow*, *bison*, etc.) and *foliage* also generically refers to the leaves of plants and trees. Some Latinate verbs also seem to be broader in semantic scope than their Anglo-Saxon synonyms. Compare, for instance, *perceive* and *consume* with *see* and *eat*: one can ‘perceive’ through various senses, but ‘seeing’ necessarily presupposes your eyesight (unless the word is used figuratively); the concept of ‘consuming’ is also broader than that of ‘eating,’ because it does not only refer to food (9-10):

- (9) 2001 *Sci. News* 23 June 391/2 The happy partnership of these senses enables a fly to perceive complex suites of signals, including those that presage mating.
- (10) 2001 F. Popcorn & A. Hanft *Dict. Future* 254 It has almost become a ‘duty’ to consume goods.

From a semiotic perspective, we could claim that these Latinate words are less transparent than the Anglo-Saxon ones in terms of diagrammaticity, regulating the relation between ‘signans’/form and ‘signatum’/content: *perceive*, for instance, ‘points to’ a wider range of meanings than *see*, which stands in a biunique relation to its content when used literally with the sense of ‘perceiving through the eyes.’

#### 4.3 *Metaphoric and metonymic extension*

The interpretation of Latinate words is often possible due to a cognitive process whereby a certain concept is understood figuratively, either in terms of a metaphor or a metonymy. Compare the verbs *signify* and *mean*, the nouns *deity* and *god* and the adjectives *dormant* and *sleeping*. The verb *signify* basically means to ‘make a sign or signal,’ but it tends to refer to

something which is of some importance, as is perhaps clearer by considering the derived words *significant* and *significance* (e.g., with a question such as *What is the significance of the church of England?* one intends to ask about the ‘role’ or the ‘importance’ of the church of England). *Signify* can thus be understood both as INDICATING (11) and SYMBOLISING (12), as a result of a mapping operation between distinct conceptual domains:

- (11) 1999 *Independent* (Nexis) 12 Aug. 4 Still-believing Communists say the eclipse signifies at last the end of capitalist days.
- (12) 2004 *Webactive* 14 Oct. 6/2 The festival [of Diwali] signifies the triumph of light over darkness.

The relation between *deity* and *god*, on the other hand, is based on contiguity, in that the former can be viewed as a feature of the latter. Put differently, *deity* is a divine quality or character and it refers to the nature of *God*. The interesting thing is also that the concept of *deity* is gender neutral, while *god* is typically masculine. Hence, the existence of the derived feminine form *goddess*. All these three words may be used metaphorically (13-14-15) to refer not so much to someone who possesses divine power, but rather to an object of worship or an idol:

- (13) [...] a society in which money is the only deity.<sup>3</sup>
- (14) Money is the only god the Tories want us to worship on a Sunday.<sup>4</sup>
- (15) Cher is an American singer, actress and television personality. Often referred to by the media as the “Goddess of Pop,” she has been described as embodying female autonomy in a male-dominated industry.<sup>5</sup>

Both members of a synonym pair may be subject to figurative meaning extensions: *dormant* and *sleeping*, for instance, can refer to something which is INACTIVE (16). It is generally the Latinate word to be used figuratively though (17):

- (16) A sleeping/dormant volcano.
- (17) Despite massive economic shocks caused by strict anti-virus measures and long-dormant nuclear diplomacy with the United States, North Korea shows no signs of

<sup>3</sup> [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/deity](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/deity). All websites last visited on 27/09/2022.

<sup>4</sup> [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/jul/10/money-is-the-only-god-the-tories-want-us-to-worship-on-a-sunday](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/jul/10/money-is-the-only-god-the-tories-want-us-to-worship-on-a-sunday).

<sup>5</sup> [www.mbmcorporate.co.uk/tribute-acts/cher-tribute-acts/](http://www.mbmcorporate.co.uk/tribute-acts/cher-tribute-acts/).

political instability and few outside experts question Kim's grip on power.<sup>6</sup>

In this last example, the substitution of *dormant* with *sleeping* would produce an odd sentence. It is thus plausible to assume that there are different degrees of metaphoricity associated to Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms, with the latter being more likely to express figurative meanings.

#### 4.4 Demetaphorization

The opposite scenario, albeit not as common as the one outlined in Section 4.3, was also observed during the analysis of the data. In a number of cases, it is the Anglo-Saxon word which, owing to its high diagrammatic character, tends to have several senses and to produce figurative interpretations, too. Consider the words *bug* and *womb* as opposed to *insect* and *uterus*, for instance. While it is common to use *bug* and *womb* both literally (18) and figuratively (19), the likelihood for *insect* and *uterus* to produce non-literal meanings is much lower:

- (18) a. There is a bug going through town, and it's causing many calling in sick to work. (Melillo, J. & Melillo, E.M. 2005. *American Slang: Cultural Language Guide to Living in the USA*, Kiku Educational Institute, 47).  
 b. There was, however, always the possibility of a bug in the computer program (Kendig, K. *Never a Dull Moment*, Providence, Rhode Island: MAA Press, 2018, 79).
- (19) a. And when Kashi came to hear of this, the shock of it caused her foetus to slip out of her womb before the nine months (Dangle, A. *Homeless in My Land*, Bombay: Orient Longman Limited, 1994, 33).  
 b. Dew from the womb of the morning (Markwood, B. *Dew from the Womb of the Morning. Poems*. Victoria, B.C., Canada: Trafford, 2003).

The replacement of the word *bug* with *insect* in (18b), where the meaning is not to be understood literally, would result in a nonsensical sentence. Similarly, *womb* in (19b) is not substitutable with *uterus*, which cannot be exploited to produce a figurative interpretation. It looks as if the introduction of certain Latinate items into the lexicon of English might have led to a specialization of meanings that were already partly, but more generically, expressed by Anglo-Saxon words. This is similar to what is described in Section 4.1, but the process observed in the case of word pairs such as *bug/insect*, *womb/uterus*, etc. is one of demetaphorization (Van Dijk 1972; Blum-Kulka and Levenston 1983). This trend emerges also when comparing pairs of

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<sup>6</sup> [www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-kim-jong-un-marks-10th-anniversary-power-fathers-death-rcna9119](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-kim-jong-un-marks-10th-anniversary-power-fathers-death-rcna9119).

adjectives, e.g. *fatherly* vs. *paternal*. The meaning of the former can be both literal and metaphorical (20), while the latter emphasizes a specific genetic relation (21) and may not be replaced but its synonym:

- (20) a. 1963 C.J. Bleeker *Sacred Bridge* 88 Also in this rebellion against fatherly authority Gaia played her part.  
 b. 2000 R. Morris *Better Angel* iv. 154 He soon settled into a more mutually congenial role as Burroughs's fatherly confidant.
- (21) Paternal grandfather (\*fatherly); paternal estate (\*fatherly).

#### 4.5 Focus shift

Certain Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms appear to vary in terms of focus, i.e. each of them gives prominence to one aspect of meaning, while leaving the other(s) in the background. There are many instances of this phenomenon in all word classes.

The noun *pain*, for instance, tends to foreground the idea of an intense and strongly unpleasant or agonizing sensation in the body (22), while an *ache* is continuous and prolonged, but dull (23):

- (22) 1988 *Independent* 12 Aug. 1 Signs of a heart attack are pain in the centre of the chest.
- (23) 2004 J. Denby *Billie Morgan* xiii. 96 I thought maybe my period was due or something, I did feel a low, dragging ache in the pit of my belly.

There is a higher level of interchangeability between these pairs of synonyms. The substitution of one for the other does not generally produce an odd sentence, but just a shift of perspective, whereby one semantic component becomes more salient. Consider the verbs *teach* and *educate*. They both express the same basic meaning, but the former refers to the mere knowledge transfer process, while the latter emphasizes the idea of acquiring knowledge, i.e. the focus shifts from the activity of passing knowledge to the effect that it produces. The two verbs thus have different Aktionsart properties: *teach* is a durative and atelic activity, while *educate* is durative but telic, because it presupposes a certain accomplishment (Vendler 1957/1967).

When focus shifts also involve a difference in terms of reference, the interchangeability between the two members of a pair may not be possible. The adjective *happy*, for instance, may be used to refer both to people and to the condition of being effectively or successfully appropriate, e.g. *a happy choice of words*. However, *felicitous* imposes referent type restrictions, so that only a phrase or sentence may be *felicitous*, i.e. opportune, telling or graceful, but not a person (*a happy/\*felicitous person*).

#### 4.6 Different conventional implicatures

Following Grice's work on meaning (1975), a conventional implicature is one determined linguistically, rather than by language use in context. Certain words, such as *but, even, too, still, yet, already, again, stop, start, know, regret, etc.* have the power to 'trigger' invariable, i.e. conventional, meanings and functions that contribute to content. Therefore, conventional implicatures are semantic in nature.

This concept may be applied also to the analysis of some pairs of words under investigation here. Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms sometimes differ only in terms of meaning nuances that do not significantly alter the basic message expressed. Hence, the high level of interchangeability between words such as *shut* and *close*, *mistake* and *error*, *clever* and *intelligent* and so forth, which are often perceived as nearly identical. However, the verb *shut* typically implies 'not going out,' so a sentence such as *The factory has shut down*, for instance, means that there is no production; on the other hand, *close* refers to the opposite concept, i.e. the impossibility of 'going in' as in *The road has been closed*. Obviously, these two sentences would make sense also if we substituted one verb with the other (24), but the implied meanings would change:

- (24) a. A worker whose factory has closed down was earlier working in an organized sector, but now has become unemployed (Gurukul, O. *Social Science Chapterwise*, Agra, India: Oswal Printers & Publishers, 2021, 276).  
 b. Carolyn, it's Kathy. Something is going on at the ranch. Law enforcement is at the gate, and the country road has been shut down (Jessop, C. *Triumph. PART ONE: Taking on the FLDS. The raid*, London, UK, Penguin, 2011).

It is evident that in (24a) reference is made to the impossibility for the worker of 'going inside' the factory, while being 'shut down' in (24b) suggests that there is no traffic at all, also from the road.

*Mistake* and *error* are also often used interchangeably, although the latter tends to imply an ignorant, imprudent and unintentional deviation from truth, accuracy or a certain code of behaviour (25). *Mistake*, instead, indicates something wrong and inadequate, a fault, which may also be an intentional action (26):

- (25) Dr. T has just discovered a mathematical error in a paper that has been accepted for publication in a journal (Schwester, R.W. *Teaching Research Methods in Public Administration*, Hershey, PA, USA: IGI Global, 2015, 220).  
 (26) He'd made the mistake of going against his gut instincts that night in the dance club

(Ashwood, S. *Possessed by a Warrior*, Toronto, Canada: Harlequin, 2014, 148).

Two other interesting synonyms are *clever* and *intelligent*: *clever* primarily implies acting quickly in a certain situation, while *intelligent* tends to refer to someone's intellect and faculty of understanding and does not necessarily have the implication generated by *clever*:

- (27) Cats are clever, cooperative hunters (Wrede, P. C. *Across the Great Barrier*, New York, USA: Scholastic Inc., 2011, 93).
- (28) 2001 P. Bloom in R. J. Sternberg & J. C. Kaufman *Evol. of Intelligence* 363 The process of cognitive evolution is the transition from a creature without human intelligence to an intelligent human being.

The adjective *intelligent*, however, is also used to refer not just to people, but also to animals and machines. Therefore, its semantics is similar to that of *smart*, which is now frequently found in compounds such as *smart car*, *smart phone*, etc. Although *smart* appears to be more productive than *intelligent* in adjective-noun compounds (e.g. *smart TV*, *smart watch*, *smart plug*, *smart kettle*, *smart doorbell*, and so forth),<sup>7</sup> examples of compounds embedding *intelligent* can also be found:

- (29) Nowadays, energy saving and high speed have always been the pursuit direction of intelligent cars (Xhafa, F. et al. *Advances in Intelligent Systems and Interactive Applications*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019, 112).
- (30) Recently, I bought an intelligent microwave oven (Alford, W.P. et al. *An Oral History of the Special Olympics in China*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, Volume 2, 2020, 17).

This might suggest that the different implicatures associated to the two adjectives are becoming less strong.

#### 4.7 Cause-effect

The relation between certain pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate synonyms appears to be one of cause-effect. It was not possible to identify examples of verbs that instantiate this scenario and the pairs of synonymous adjectives or nouns that vary with respect to this aspect of meaning

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<sup>7</sup> If we query the NOW Corpus ([www.english-corpora.org/now/](http://www.english-corpora.org/now/)), for instance, we will find 68 occurrences of the phrase 'bought a smart' followed by various nouns, but no occurrences of 'bought an intelligent.'

are not very frequent, either. There are, however, some interesting cases. Let us first consider, for instance, *freedom* and *liberty*. The OED entries and examples seem to suggest that *liberty* is to be understood as the consequence of *freedom*. In (31) the concept of *liberty* entails that of *freedom*, but it takes this notion a step further in that it indicates a fundamental (political) value:

- (31) 2002 *Independent* 23 May 17/1 The issue is a simple one of self-determination, democracy and liberty. The people of Gibraltar show no desire whatsoever for closer links with Spain.

In other words, the two nouns share the same semantic core, but *liberty* refers to the idea of achieving independence, especially after a condition of control, imprisonment or even slavery. Therefore, ‘having liberty’ presupposes the acquisition of civil freedoms (32), which are considered as something to which all members of a community are entitled:

- (32) 2004 H. Kennedy *Just Law* (2005) ii. 31 It ran a railroad through our basic liberties and protections but it was such a boon for the powers that be that they clung to it like molluscs.

The fact that *freedom* is the cause of *liberty* is evident also in the following example (33), where *liberty* is associated with the idea of presumptuousness, resulting from the condition of having a certain right:

- (33) 1999 J. Arnott *Long Firm* i. 39 That was quite a liberty, you know, walking out like that.

This cause-effect relation between *freedom* and *liberty* is particularly strong and clear when the two synonyms appear together in binomials, which also seem to suggest a sort of crescendo of emphasis:<sup>8</sup>

- (34) As James Vernon’s analysis of the vagaries of the British constitution in the nineteenth century demonstrates, the rights, freedoms and liberties enshrined within the political system were fluid and open to construction and [...] (Moore, C. 2017. *Civil Liberties and Human Rights in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 37).

Another example of the cause-effect relation holding between synonyms can be observed in the

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<sup>8</sup> This aspect deserves further analysis in order to understand whether or not this trend holds true also for other binomials.

pair of adjectives *good* and *beneficial*, especially when they both occur in the same sentence (35):

- (35) Research shows that good nutrition has beneficial effects on human development (Squires, V. R. 2011. *The Role of Food, Agriculture, Forestries and Fisheries in Human Nutrition*, p. 196).

The substitution of one adjective for the other would produce an odd sentence (\*Research shows that beneficial nutrition has good effects on human development), exactly because the logical cause-effect relation existing between the meaning of one adjective and the other is inverted.

#### 4.8 Iconicity

Finally, certain Latinate verbs appear to iconically indicate the action they refer to. In semiotic terms, a word such as *perspire*, for instance, is more transparent than *sweat*, because its form reflects its content: *per-* means ‘through’ and *-spire* comes from *perspirare*, i.e. ‘to breathe/blow.’ Hence, *perspire*, which literally means ‘to evaporate through the pores.’ The etymology of *sweat*, on the other hand, is rather ‘blind’ and there is no evident correlation between form and meaning. In the case of Anglo-Saxon words, there often appears to be a higher degree of arbitrariness in form-meaning mappings.<sup>9</sup>

Other examples are *flood* vs. *inundate*, *swallow* vs. *ingest* and *speak* or *talk* vs. *converse*. The second members of these pairs, the Latinate words, derive their meaning from that of their constituent parts whose interaction produces a single semantic unit. These are morphologically complex words characterised by a logical relation between their form and meaning: *inundate* consists of the affix *in-* and the stem *-undate* (from Latin *undare*, i.e. ‘to flow,’ which in turn comes from *unda*, i.e. ‘wave’), whose combination gives rise to the concept of ‘overflowing,’ also expressed by *flood*, albeit much less iconically; the idea of ‘taking something in as food’ is expressed more transparently by means of *in-* ‘into’ plus *-gest* (from *gerere* ‘to carry’) than by *swallow* that does not clearly indicate the same action; *con-* ‘with/together’ in *converse* highlights the interactional character of speaking/talking (*verse* comes from *vertere* ‘to turn’), but this sense of communicating with another person is not explicitly coded in the verb forms *speak* or *talk*.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a complex topic that requires further investigation. It would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of degrees of arbitrariness, in that certain Anglo-Saxon words exhibit higher transparency due to onomatopoeia, e.g. *flood*, *clap*, *burst* (vs. *inundate*, *applaud*, *explode*).

## 5. Lexicographic representation of synonymous relations between Anglo-Saxon and Latinate pairs

The fact that Latinate words constitute the bulk of borrowed items in the lexicon of English justifies attempting to provide a lexicographic representation of the relations they hold with their pre-existing Anglo-Saxon counterparts, following the initial systematization presented in Section 4. This should ultimately prove beneficial both for native speakers of English, who often notice differences between synonyms of different origin only in terms of style and register, and for learners of English as a foreign or second language, especially when their mother tongue is a Romance language. This is because, as already pointed out above, speakers of Romance languages may confuse the meaning of certain Latinate words in English with that of words with a similar form in Italian, French, Spanish, etc., e.g. *actual* (En.) vs *attuale* (It.), *actuel* (Fr.), *actual* (Sp.), which however have developed a different meaning compared to their English counterparts.

The semantic variations outlined above may rather easily be represented in dictionaries with tags and short usage notes indicating the type of synonymous relation existing between pairs of words (Table 3), their level of interchangeability and the effect that the latter produces.

Type of relation	Tag
Generic-specific	GEN>SPE
Specific-generic	SPE>GEN
Literal-figurative (metaphor)	LIT>FIG (MTP)
Literal-figurative (metonymy)	LIT>FIG (MTN)
Figurative-literal	FIG> LIT
Focus shift	FOC
Implicature shift	IMP
Cause-effect	CAU>EFF
Iconicity	ICO

**Tab. 3:** Tags for types of synonymous relation

Now that most dictionaries are online, this metadata may be provided together with hyperlinks redirecting users to another page containing the necessary explanations, which may also be partly visible by simply hovering over the tags, in a similar way to what the OED already does through cross-reference pop-up displays (Figure 1). It could be worth always introducing the category ‘synonyms’ right at the beginning of lexical entries, alongside information concerning pronunciation, inflections, word forms, frequency of use, origin and etymology. Figure 2 is an

example of a possible improved version of the initial part of the entry for the lemma *abdomen* in the OED and Figure 3 shows the sort of information that the cross-reference pop-up window may contain.

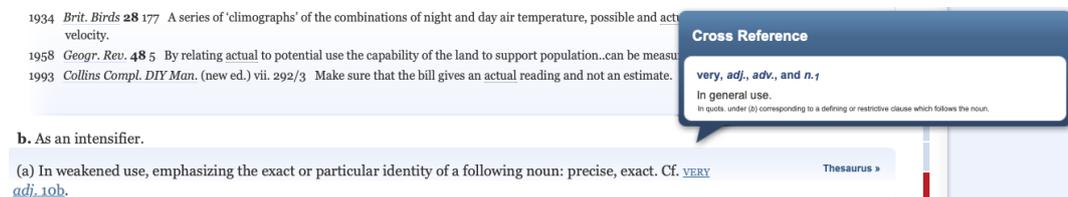


Fig. 1: Example of cross reference in the OED (2022)



Fig. 2: Addition of the category 'synonyms' in the OED

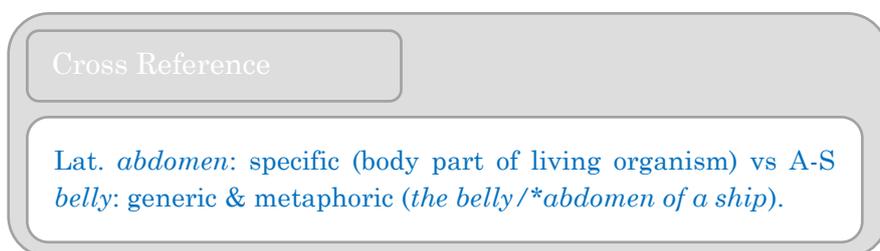


Fig. 3: Proposal of a possible pop-up window

Other monolingual dictionaries of English, e.g. the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Figure 4), the Cambridge Dictionary (Figure 5) and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Figure 6), just to mention the main ones, do not provide any synonyms for *abdomen*, either. However, the Cambridge Dictionary indicates the word as 'specialized,' thus suggesting that it is not likely to appear in everyday English.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It would also be useful to make reference to the context of use (medical, in this case).

**ab·do·men** /'æbdəmən, æb'dəʊ- \$-'dɒʊ-/ ●○○ **noun** [countable] 🔊 🔊

- 1 the part of your body between your chest and legs which contains your stomach, bowels etc
- 2 the end part of an insect's body, joined to the thorax

—**abdominal** /æb'dɒmɪnəl \$-'dɑ:-/ **adjective**

🔊 acute abdominal pains

Fig. 4: The lemma *abdomen* in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2022)

**abdomen**

**noun** [ C ] • ANATOMY • specialized

UK 🔊 /'æb.də.mən/ US 🔊 /'æb.də.mən/

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the lower part of a person's or animal's body, containing the stomach, bowels, and other organs, or the end of an insect's body

Fig. 5: The lemma *abdomen* in the Cambridge Dictionary (2022)

**abdomen** **noun**

🔖 Save Word

ab·do·men | \ 'ab-də-mən 🔊, -dō-; əb-'dō-mən, ab- 🔊 \

**plural** abdomens

**Definition of *abdomen***

- 1 : the part of the body between the thorax and the pelvis  
// ... well-defined reddish lesions that can appear anywhere on the body but most often on the thighs and **abdomen** ...  
— Susan Logan-McCracken  
**also** : the cavity of the abdomen that is lined by peritoneum, is bounded above by the diaphragm, anteriorly by a wall of muscle and tissue, and posteriorly by the spinal column, is continuous below with the pelvic cavity, and contains many of the visceral organs and especially those involved in digestion (such as the stomach, liver, pancreas, kidneys, and intestines) : ABDOMINAL CAVITY  
// Removal of the gallbladder—a pear-shaped sac in the right side of your **abdomen**—has little adverse effect on digestion.  
— *The Mayo Clinic Health Letter*
- 2 : the posterior section of the body behind the thorax in an arthropod  
// On a nearby table was a ... dish of ants that looked familiar except that they had been feeding on peach nectar and the **abdomen** of each was a large, swollen, translucent sac.  
— *The New Yorker*  
— see INSECT ILLUSTRATION

Fig. 6: The lemma *abdomen* in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2022)

Learners' dictionaries, on the other hand, tend to include a synonyms section with tags that

partially clarify the differences between related terms (Figure 7). However, distinctions are typically made only in terms of register, while reference to more subtle meaning differences is not made: *belly* is provided as a synonym for *abdomen* in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, for instance, but an explanation of the limits of interchangeability between the two words is not provided.

**abdomen**  
Collins COBUILD

Word Frequency ●●●●●

(æbdəmen ⓘ), US æbdʊ- ⓘ  
Word forms: plural abdomens ⓘ

**COUNTABLE NOUN** [oft. poss NOUN]

Your **abdomen** is the part of your body below your chest where your stomach and intestines are.

[formal]  
He was suffering from pains in his abdomen. ⓘ

**Synonyms:** stomach, corporation [informal], guts [slang], belly [More Synonyms of abdomen](#)

**Fig. 7:** The lemma *abdomen* in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary (2022)

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis above has attempted to provide an initial mapping of the relations holding between synonymous word pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Latinate origin, with the primary intent of showing that the differences between them are not to be sought only at the level of pragmatics, because they also result from constraints imposed by their denotational semantics. In addition, it has been shown how lexical variation between related items may be accounted for in dictionaries, which do not appear to systematically illustrate the limits of interchangeability between synonyms.

The taxonomy proposed is by no means intended to be exhaustive. There may be other types of relations between Latinate words and their Anglo-Saxon counterparts than the ones identified here. It would also be necessary to examine a wider data set and determine quantitatively which are the most common relations. This may be a difficult goal to achieve because the patterns of organization of words within the lexicon are complex and do not always follow linear paths. There are cases of word pairs whose relation may be described in terms of more than one of the categories outlined above. Consider, for instance, the words *work* and *labour*, which are treated as synonyms in dictionaries. There is, first of all, a difference of implicature between them, because *labour* suggests intense, difficult, painful, alienated or even exploited physical or mental exertion. Therefore, *labour* is more specific in terms of degree of intensity associated

with the basic concept of ‘working.’ The two words, however, also seem to stand in a cause-effect relation: according to the OED, *labour* is ‘work considered as [...] necessary [...] for the execution of a particular task.’ This is just an example of how meaning relations between synonymous words may be subject to different, but correlated dynamics. Hence, the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between one type of meaning relation and the other.

Finally, the analysis provided is based on word pairs, but there are often more than two semantically related words in the lexicon of English, each of which contributes different shades of meaning. One example could be that of the Anglo-Saxon verbs *forbid* and *ban* versus the Latinate word *prohibit*. In what way are *forbid* and *ban* similar? What additional meaning did the Latinate term introduce? If we accept the premise that the semantics of two or more words is never perfectly identical (otherwise there would be no need to have distinct words), there must be a logic behind the process of form-meaning mappings. It seems that this logic still awaits to be captured and that only the surface has been scratched here.

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