

DIACHRONIC ASPECTS OF ENGLISH MILITARY TERMS

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on presenting some aspects related to the use of military terminology, from the moment they were inferred as a necessity of the time up to the XXth century. The intention is to deal with military English terminology where the military phenomenon played an important role in the evolution of language and in its shaping and development. In recent years, numerous dictionaries have been compiled in the attempt to ascertain and record the often ephemeral vocabulary, associated with specific wars – not only weapons terminology and technical jargon, but also the slag that inevitably characterizes every war zone.*

Keywords: *military system, runes, borrowings, word-building, change of meaning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

To study the evolution of a language implies, first of all, a research of its evolution, its characteristics, the way in which it has enriched its vocabulary and the factors that influenced it. Although no invader succeeded in invading the British Isles since 1066, this did not immunise them. For example, the major means of defence has always been the task of the Navy. With such a rich military heritage, great captains of war abound in every period.

The physical skills and abilities of Alfred or Richard I are compared with the skilful touch of tacticians like Marlborough and Wellington. From Tudor times Britain's Admirals and captains ruled the high seas, suffering few reverses. Rank, discipline, pay, regimental structure, tactics and weaponry belong to the military system and, together with them, uniforms have fulfilled many functions in the past. They have provided protection and a means of identification in the very heat of battle. At sea the canvas bell bottoms of the ordinary seamen were simple and functional, while in the army perhaps uniforms also reflected glamour, pride and decoration.

2. THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

It represented a period starting with the year 450 when the first Germanic were attested to 700 – 1100 known as a period of with full inflections and a very complicated language found in manuscripts of the time.

Speaking about this period, the Anglo-Saxon language used the writing system of runes or the runic alphabet (written by monks within monasteries) which consisted of a secret alphabet of 24 symbols and angular letters. It served for putting down various inscriptions. The name came from *run* meaning *secret*. This alphabet was derived from the Greek alphabet and the letters were designed so that they could have been used to write on wood, that's why they are angular. The oldest records in Old English are only inscriptions and it is an inscription on a golden horn, found in Schlesning.

When they came to Britain, the Anglo-Saxons didn't bring with them any written accounts, but war-songs, war-poetry (the only one that survived being *Beowulf*) and sagas that were transmitted orally. *Beowulf* is a testimony of Old English, including terms that came from German continental pre-English. In this poem we find descriptions of social life

(of garments, customs, arms, etc.), manners of the Anglo-Saxons before they came to England. The poem also contains references to old Scandinavian boats, described with the help of common nouns as: *scip* (eng. *ship*), *bat* (eng. *boat*). The third song gives a detailed image of a military-naval expedition of those times with terms like: *afloat*, *boat*, *weapons*, *armor*.

The poem abounds in military terms, due to the war-like society that is described: *fastness* = fortress, stronghold (Ist song); *worsted* = defeated; *brand* = sword; *targe* = shield (arch.); *war-weeds* = armours (VIth song); *falchion* = broad, curved sword (XIIth song); *host* = band of warriors (XVth song). (Poruciuc, 1995:27)

Besides words found in this poem, there are also accounts of terms denoting sword equipments found on inscribed objects:

1. *Ash Gilton*, (Kent) that was a pyramidal gilt silver sword pommel, dated back to the VIth century. It can be seen in the Liverpool City Museum.

2. *Chessel Down II*, (Isle of Wight) which is a silver plate attached to a scabbard mouthpiece of a ring sword that dates back to the 6th century. It was found in a rich man's grave. It can be seen in the British Museum of London.

3. *Seaxes* meaning knife or cutting tool.

4. *Thames scramasax* meaning a single – edged knife.

5. swords and sword-sheaths Vimose chape, Vimose sheathplate, *Thorsberg chape*, that is a bronze piece belonging to a scabbard.

We also consider the Irish-Latin alphabet known as the Insular Script. It was a medieval script system originally used in Ireland, then Great Britain, that spread to continental Europe under the influence of Celtic Christianity.

The Old English dictionary had about 20,000 words with 85% of the Old English vocabulary of Germanic origin. Thus, the basic word-stock of the language has remained mostly Germanic. Implicitly, names of tools and weapons are also of Germanic origin (*bewerian* meaning *to protect from, to defend against*; *onfeohtan* meaning *to attack, to fight with*). Three main foreign influences have

been identified by researchers in the evolution of English language as follows:

2.1 The Celtic influence: the Celts were the first warlike invaders that came after the Iberians from the upper Rhineland. They were not exterminated when the Anglo-Saxons conquered England. Celtic words in Old English come from three identifiable sources – from the continent (usually words associated with conflict and battle – the Celts were often used as ‘armies for hire’), loans taken over after settlement (usually place names), and words from Ireland frequently associated with the Christianisation of Britain. Thus, we encounter place names like *Canti* (meaning Kingdom of Kent), names that designated rivers: *the Thames*, *the Avon*, *the Exe*, *the Wye*, the *Usk*, etc. and other present-day names such as: *Devonshire*, *Cornwall*, etc.

2.2 The Latin influence. The contact with the Romans was commercial, military, religious, and cultural: **agriculture** and **war** were considered the main occupations of the age. We encounter the first Latin words due to the contacts between the Roman and German tribes on the continent, like: *camp* (OE) = *battle*, *mil* = *mile*, *sepu*=*banner*, *flag*, *weall* = *wall*, *pil* = *pointed stick*, *javelin*, *pund* = *pound*, *mangian* = *to trade*, *pytt* = *pit*. The Christianization of England (before this event, the Anglo-Saxons learned words from the Celts): *caster/chester* = *castrum* (Lancaster, Manchester, Leicester [lestE], Gloucester [glAstE], Winchester, Colcester), *port*=*portus* (Devonport, Port Harbour), *munt*=*mons* (mountain), *torr* = *turis* (tower). The conversion of Britain to Roman Christianity (597-1100) was also an important historical event of the time. Throughout 500 years Latin words entered the English Language: *abbot*, *angel*, *candle*, *disciple*, *hymn*, *minster* (*cathedral*), *pope*, *shrine* (*altar*), *temple*, etc.

2.3 The Scandinavian influence, mainly Danish one (the Viking Age), was a period of Scandinavian invasions that ‘(...)constituted an important military and political event, which exerted a powerful influence on the Old English language’ (Iarovici, 1970:8). In the VIIIth century a series of events influenced the language of the time: the Scandinavians started to attack and plunder, the Swedish established

a kingdom in Russia, the Norwegians colonized part of the English Isles (the Faroes and Ireland), the Danes founded a dukedom in Normandy and conquered England; hence, the Danish influence was the most important. We encounter names denoting places: *-by* (*Rugby, Derby, Grimsby*), *-thorp* (*Althorp, Bishopthorp*), *oft* (*Brimtoft, Eastoft*). Other English words of Scandinavian origin are: *hand, bank, birth, dirt, kid, egg, leg, root, sky, sister, window, etc.* According to the same author, *'the first Scandinavian loan-words (...) relate to war and especially to the navy, e.g. orrest (battle), drenþ (warrior), hoflinþ (chief, ringleader), fylcian (to collect or marshal a force), lip (fleet), barda (typical boat used by the Vikings), cnearr (small warship), scæp (boat), siþp (warship)'* (Iarovici, 1970:43).

3. THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

It dates back to the period from 1150 to 1500, known as a period of many historical events, like:

3.1 The Norman Conquest, after the Battle of Hastings in 1066, that had a great impact on the English language, mainly on vocabulary. We can trace a line between the old Saxon England and the new Norman England. The Norman Conquest imposed French as the spoken language, and, as a result of this penetration of French in England, was a language also called Anglo-French. It was a literary language of the higher social classes, while the English language known as Middle English, was spoken only by the lower classes. More than 200 years after the Norman Conquest, French remained the language of communication among the upper classes, but the language of the masses was still English.

3.2 During the early XIIIth century, Normandy was lost to England (1204). The French and the English peoples fusion determined their bilingual nature. There were people in England who spoke French, more who spoke English, but there were also people speaking both languages. During late XIIIth century the English language started gaining importance.

3.3 The period 1337-1453, with the One Hundred Year War, turned the people's

attention to the continent, being one of the causes contributing to the disuse of French. Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (one of the oldest surviving poems in English) makes a lifelike portrait of his period, in a realistic manner. He had knowledge of military phenomenon and terminology as he joined and served the army led by The Black Prince in 1359. He was even a prisoner, caught somewhere near Reims. He was accounted again in the military system in 1369 and later on, he was sent abroad into diplomatic and even secret missions. We encounter in his writing terms like *yeoman, the squire*. At the end of the XIVth century over 10.000 French words were found in manuscripts. Of all these, 75% are still in use today.

3.4 Throughout the XVth and XVIth centuries, the importance of English increased, but the laws in England were still in French and the letters sent to ladies were written in French by gentlemen.

Thus, French influenced the Middle English vocabulary due to literary writings that were still written in French. The French-speaking aristocracy had the control of the army, and especially the navy. Thus, there are terms that refer to army and the military life that belong to that period, and are still in use today, such as: *army, armes, bataille, combat, siege, defense, regiment, lance, (coat of) mail, banner, harness, pees (peace), victorie, sergeaunt, lieutenant, aid, challenge, danger, escape, enemy, spy, stratagem, march, captain*. There were two important ages of the process of penetration of French words into Middle English: an Earlier Age up to 1250, in which borrowings are far less numerous (about 900 words) and an age from the year 1250 onwards in which borrowings are very numerous: *army and navy words: soldier, enemy, arms, battle, etc.*

4. THE MODERN ENGLISH PERIOD

4.1 Renaissance (1550-1650) when new factors come into play in the first part of the Modern English period: the apparition of the Printing Press (invented by Caxton in 1476) which led to the spread of popular education, an increase in communication, the growth of

specialized knowledge, the emergence of different forms of self-consciousness of language. Books were reproduced in thousands of copies which led to a standard language. Modern English faced 3 main problems during the XVIth century:

a) Recognition of language in the fields where Latin had been replaced for long time: translations from Latin and Greek writers: Caesar, Tacitus, Plutarch, Aristotle, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, etc.

b) Necessity to establish a more uniform orthography: spelling rules were needed: Thomas Smith (a 34-letter alphabet), John Hart *An Orthography*, William Bullokar *Booke at large for the Amendment of Orthographie for English Speech* (1580), *Bref Grammar for English* (1586) and *Pamphlet for Grammar* (1586), Richard Mulcaster *Elementarie* (1582), was considered the most important treaty on English spelling.

c) It was a period of enrichment of vocabulary with an increased activity in all fields: America was discovered, church was reformed, and Copernicus launched his theories that represented a revolution in thought. Greek and Latin literature was revived bringing new activities in modern languages. Hence, a great number of borrowings from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. Old English itself was a source of enrichment. Thomas Wilson was against borrowing words versus Dryden who was in favour.

Thus, we have examples from: Latin *exclusion, illusion, instructus-instruct, anti-aircraft*; Latin and French: *to consist* from Latin *consistere* or/and French *consister, intruire-instroy, fatigue, pilot, rendez-vous (originally a military term)*; Italian: *stanza, grotto, balcony, algebra, battalion, brigade, infantry (the last three ones being introduced through French)*; Spanish and Portuguese: *alligator, mosquito, banana, tobacco, cannibal, hurricane, etc.*

It is considered that Shakespeare had the largest vocabulary at the time, with over 20,000 word, fact that *'reflect the various means by which the vocabulary was enriched in Early Modern English: borrowings, word-building and change of meaning'* (Iarovici,

1970:182). It is a vocabulary rich in military terms, too. *'For Renaissance England, Shakespeare produced good writing; for posterity, he produced great literature. Nevertheless, without considerable changes in style, he wouldn't last long, even on a low-level staff (...). Giving genius its due, we might suppose that Shakespeare could come to terms pretty quickly with the repertoire of defense establishment forms and formats and with the techniques of producing good writing. Without stretching the point, we might even suppose he would do so intuitively'* (McIntosh, 2003:IX). If we consider Shakespeare's writing *Henry V*, we notice a great use of military terms, but much of that language has limited or no applicability to the present armed forces.

The other way round is also possible, that is, much of present-day military literature has no more applicability to our immediate situations than Shakespeare's.

4.2 The Appeal to Authority (1650-1800) also known as The Augustan Age faced other major historical events, like the English Civil War in the 1540s and the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Efforts were made in search for stability and regularity in language aiming at refining standardizing, fixing it. English needed a systematic grammar so as to codify the language, to direct its course, to fix the language permanently, to refine it by adding improvements, to ascertain the language.

The idea of the English Academy appeared at the end of the 17th century. We remark the contribution of Samuel Johnson (1755) – *A Dictionary of the English Language* (2 volumes, of great achievement due to the fixed spelling), Joseph Priestly (1761) – *The Rudiments of the English Grammar* (he focuses on the importance of usage), Robert Lowth (1762) – *Short Introduction to English Grammar*, G. Campbell (1776) – *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (aiming at ascertaining the language just like Dryden and Swift). During the second part of the XVIIth century, many military terms were borrowed from French, like: *barracks, cannonade, dragoon, espionage, fusilier, parade, parole, pontoon, sortie.*

5. THE XIXth AND XXth CENTURIES

The enrichment of the English vocabulary continued. The events that took place had also an important influence on the vocabulary. Among them, we can mention: Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar (1805) when Napoleon was defeated and England remained the undisputed leader on sea; the War in Crimea (1854-1856); the Conquest in India when the English language turned its attention to the East (influences from China, Japan, India).

Great Reform Measures were taken: the reorganization of the Parliament, the revision of the Penal Code, restrictions on child labor. All these influenced the development of language. In 1816 the first cheap newspaper appears and in 1840 – the cheap postage. More means of communication and travel improved: telegraph, the railway and steamboat were invented. There was also a great progress in science which influenced the vocabulary: *nuclear weapon, chain reaction, space craft, space shuttle, anaemia, orthodontics, AIDS, iodine, screen, camera, movie, motion, network, soundtrack*, etc. By that time all the previously mentioned words were known only by specialists, but nowadays they are all familiar to us. Some words acquired new meanings: *to park cannons – to park cars*, words that belong to the first and second World Wars: *air raid, aircraft, tank, anti aircraft gun, alert, radar, evacuate, blackout, Blitzkrieg, cold war, air raid, biological warfare, blitz, black-out, camouflage, sabotage, evacuation, evacuee, liaison officer, paratroops, phoney war, tank, war crime, WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service)*.

6. LANGUAGE AS A MIRROR OF PROGRESS

It is a period when new words enter the language: *fundamentalist, feminist, Freudian, oil field, questionnaire, heavy metal*. Beside this, a great number of borrowings penetrates the language. There are words from: French: *aileron, cadre, empennage, fuselage, nacelle, chauffeur, chef, garage*; from Italian: *ciao, confetti, graffiti*; Spanish: *fiesta, rodeo, patio*;

Mexican-Spanish: *chilli, burrito, tequila, tortilla, curry*; German: *Bildungsroman, Weltanschauung, Zeitgeist*; Russian: *perestroika, putsch, vodka*; Hungarian: *goulash*; Indian: *Karma, pyjamas*; Chinese: *Ying, Yang*; Japanese: *Shogun, samurai, sake, geisha*.

There are also terms formed by: self-explaining compounds: *e-mail, junk-food, jet leg, acid rain, green house effect, sky diving, life style*; affixation: *transoceanic, superman, transformer, post-modernism, postgraduate*; coinage: *Kodak, Xerox, Kleenex*; acronyms: *aids, radar, laser, scuba, ASAP*; blending/portmanteau words: *brunch, chunnel, transceiver, paratrooper, Franglais, Germish, Spanglish*; common words derived from proper names: *sandwich* (Earl of Sandwich), *Tabasco* (river), *Camembert* (village in France), *limousine/ limo* (province in France), *boycott* (Captain Boycott), *raglan* (Lord Raglan); narrowing of meaning: *artillery* used to designate *catapults, slings, arbalests, bows* acquire the meaning of *mounted guns*; old words acquiring new meanings: *skyline* (New York Skyline) meaning horizon, cabaret first shed (drinking place/club).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The military language is very productive and in a continuous change when it comes to particular terms used in a specific country. Thus, war and violence have both played a major part in shaping the destiny of Britain. Thus, the evolution of English language may be understood as a result of different historical factors and influences that led inevitably to the development of language, with certain quantitative and qualitative changes (from grammatical ones to changes in meaning).

English is the language most frequently used in international military operations (peacekeeping, peace enforcement, peace support). NATO represents the main organization that comprises the use of most military terms.

It has been noticed that British English military terminology is very different from the American one due to certain historical

moments that make the English terms develop differently, from region to region. Thus, American English military terminology evolved much more than the British one, mainly due to the involvement that USA has had in the military phenomenon, as superpower.

But, English language has developed not only due to the major historical events, but also according to the needs encountered by the non-native speaking countries.

'Between 1947 and 1949 a series of dramatic political events brought matters to a head. These included direct threats to the sovereignty of Norway, Greece, Turkey and other Western European countries, the June 1948 coup in Czechoslovakia, and the illegal blockade of Berlin which began in April of the same year. The signature of the Brussels Treaty of March 1948 marked the determination of five Western European countries – Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom - to develop a common defence system and to strengthen the ties between them in a manner which would enable them to resist ideological, political and military threats to their security'. It is one of the two official languages of NATO, alongside with French. It is the language used in the theatres of operations, the language of STANAG (Standard Agreement) tests those students of Romanian Academies (and not only) have to pass in order to become officers. Nowadays, having knowledge of British/American English is a must in the military system, as the penalties for failure might be vital.

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