

Cow versus Beef: Terms Denoting Animals and Their Meat in English

Tibor Órsi

Eszterházy Károly College

1. Introduction

In the opening chapter of Walter Scott's historical novel *Ivanhoe*, two Saxon serfs realise that the names of animals raised by the subjugated Saxons have English names (*swine, cow*), whereas the meat from the same animals when served up as food at Norman tables has French names (*pork, beef*). Scott's characters' observation contributed greatly to the birth of the myth according to which the social tension pulsating between the Saxons and the Norman conquerors following the Norman Conquest is palpable on the linguistic level as well: the terms in question constitute a strict "structuralistic" system.

2. Aim and method

In his novel, Scott mentions two animals and their meat. Later two further word pairs were added: *sheep – mutton* and *calf – veal*. According to Jespersen (1956:92) it is John Wallis who first drew attention to the existence of such word pairs in his *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae* in 1653. Wallis also includes the word pair *deer – venison*. We do not know whether Scott knew Wallis' work or he came to the same conclusion independently. In any case, the existence of the word pairs suggests that "socio-etymological" structures have been operating in English. The basic assumption is that the names of all the bigger domestic animals have native names, whereas their meat is systematically referred to by words of French origin.

Scott's view of history is strongly biased towards the Saxons. He presents the Normans perceptibly negatively, as it was pointed out by Lavelle (2013:2/41). It is not my duty to discuss Scott's views. What I set out to do is to examine the earliest dated occurrences as well as the semantic changes of the relevant

terms denoting animals and their flesh. I extend my research to related semantic fields. I hope to find out whether Scott's presentation of the linguistic situation of England corresponds to the data available in the major historical dictionaries (*Oxford English Dictionary*, *Middle English Dictionary*) and the most up-to-date etymological dictionary (*Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*). Briefly, I hope to test the authenticity of Scott's socio-etymological observation.

According to Baugh (1974:218), Scott's often quoted passage "is open to criticism only because the episode occurs about a century too early. *Beef* is first found at about 1300." Pyles and Algeo (1993:296) add some cooking techniques denoted by borrowings from French. Cornican (1990) devotes a very short but highly interesting article to the subject. To the best of my knowledge, Burchfield (1985:18) was the first to voice his doubts concerning the question:

"One enduring myth about French loanwords of the medieval period must be discounted. It is sometimes said that the Normans brought many culinary and gastronomic terms with them and, in particular, that they brought the terms for the flesh of animal eaten as food. This is no more than a half-truth. The culinary revolution, and the importation of French vocabulary into English society, scarcely preceded the eighteenth century, and consolidated itself in the nineteenth. The words veal, beef, venison, pork and mutton, all of French origin, entered the English language in the early Middle Ages, and they would all have been known to Chaucer. But they meant not only the flesh of a calf, of an ox, of a deer, etc. but also the animals themselves."

Burchfield probably used the corpus and the dating system of the *OED*. However, in the meantime, the full corpus and the dating system of the *MED* became accessible. The *MED* introduced a more nuanced dating system, which allows the sufficiently precise establishment of the composition date of the manuscript in which a particular word is first recorded. In what follows, I examine the word pairs referring to animals and their meat. I only make a very limited use of the quotations of the above-mentioned dictionaries. After outlining the etymologies of the word pairs, I focus my attention on the earliest occurrences of the words examined. I pay more attention to French elements of the vocabulary.

3. The methodical examination of word pairs of native and French origin

3.1 Cow – beef

Old English had separate words for bovine animals: *steor* ‘steer’, *bula* ‘bull’, *oxa* ‘ox’, *cu* ‘cow’. Old French *boef*, from Latin *bov-em* (< *bos*), denoted ‘cow’ and, by metonymy, ‘beef’. Middle English *bef*, borrowed from Old French, first occurs around 1300 in the sense ‘a bovine animal’. The sense ‘the flesh of cattle, beef’ appears somewhat later. The earliest occurrence (c1300) is quoted from the entry BEEF in the *MED*. The quotation in (1a) contains the earliest recorded forms of *pork* and *mutton* as well. The quotation in (2) shows that *veel* and *boef* continued to refer to the living animals as well, even a century later.

(1) (c1300) S. Eng. Leg. *Huy nomen with heom in heore schip ... porc, mouton, and beof.*

‘They took with them in their ship ... pork, mutton and beef.’

(2) (c1400) *Mandev* 47/23: *Pei eten but lytill or non of flessch of veel or of boef.*

‘They eat only little or no (flesh of) veal or beef.’

The plot of *Ivanhoe* is set in the reign of Richard Cœur de Lion (1189–1199). Modern scholarship dates the appearance of the sense ‘beef’ to 140 years later, consequently Scott’s use of the word occurs much too early.

According to the entry BEEF (3.) of the *OED*, the word can denote ‘an ox; any animal of the ox kind; esp. a fattened beast or its carcass’. The *OED* remarks: “usually plural, archaic or technical.” The last quotation dates from 1884. *Beef* is used in the singular as well, today mainly in the U.S. Also in the U.S., it can be used collectively, in the sense ‘cattle’. The last example of the *OED* to illustrate this sense is from 1907.

3.2 Swine, hog, pig – pork

In the case of Scott’s other example, the temporal discrepancy is more significant. Old French *porc* developed from Latin *porc-us*. The Old French word entered Middle English, where it was first recorded around 1300, in the sense ‘pork=the flesh of swine’.

English had several words to refer to ‘*Sus scrofa*’: *swine*, *hog* and *pig*. The borrowing of *pork* cannot have been motivated by the lack of corresponding terms in English. *Pork* is first recorded in the sense ‘pig, swine’ rather late, probably before 1425. The latest example to illustrate this sense dates from 1682 in the *OED*, two additional examples, from 1799 and 1887 respectively, are considered as instances of archaisms.

3.3 Calf– veal

The native word *calf* refers to ‘the young of any bovine animal, especially of the domestic cow’. *Veal* ‘the flesh of a calf used as food’ is first recorded in Middle English as *veel* before 1325. It was borrowed from Anglo-French *veel*, *veal*, earlier *vedel*, from Latin *vitellus*, diminutive of Latin *vitulus* ‘calf’. The sense ‘calf’ first occurs in English around 1400 and must have persisted for several centuries. The last quotation for the latter sense is dated 1898 in the *OED*, with a remark: “*Now rare*”. On the other hand, the *MED* supplies two quotations (one from the 14th and one from the early 15th century) in which *calf* had the meaning ‘veal’ and not the usual meaning ‘calf’.

3.3 Sheep – mutton

In Modern English, the native word *sheep* refers exclusively to the living animal. The flesh of the adult sheep is *mutton*. English *mutton* was borrowed from Old French *moton*, *mouton* ‘sheep; mutton’. The latter word was adopted from Medieval Latin *multon-em* ‘ram’, but its ultimate source is Gallo-Romance **multonem* ‘ram’, probably from the accusative of Gaulish **multo*. As an English word, *mutton* first occurs probably before 1325 with the meaning ‘the flesh of sheep, mutton’, already quoted under (1a). The earliest occurrence of the meaning ‘sheep’ is roughly contemporaneous with that quotation. The entry MUTTON (2.a.) of the *OED* supplies examples to illustrate the meaning ‘living animal’ from 1795, 1833 and 1839. The quotation from 1833 is worth mentioning:

- (3) *The word mutton is sometimes used [in America], as it once was in England, to signify a sheep.*

The opposition of the word pair *sheep – mutton* does not show marked “structuralistic” opposition.

4. Goat – goat meat/chevon

The socio-etymological opposition seems to operate to some extent even today, as the following linguistic oddity illustrates. Old English *gat* originally denoted a ‘she-goat’. Modern English *goat* refers to the species in general. Therefore, the flesh of the animal is *goat meat*. *Webster’s New Third International Dictionary* has an entry CHEVON ‘the flesh of the goat used as food’. According to the entry CHEVON of Wikipedia, “around 1960 American producers and marketeers created the term *chevon* ‘goat meat’ since market research in the United States suggests that *chevon* is more palatable to consumers than *goat meat*. To the stem *chev-* (from French

chèvre ‘goat’) was added the suffix *-on* applied on the analogy of the word *mutton*. As a matter of fact, *chevon* could also be traced back to French *cheval* ‘horse’. However, such an interpretation might not be welcomed very enthusiastically in light of the 2013 horse meat scandal. Regardless, the Anglo-French etymological socio-etymological opposition seems to linger on in the *goat – chevon* opposition.

5. Plum – prune

The question may arise whether the opposition examined can be extended to other semantic fields such as plants. I managed to find an analogous example among the names of fruits: *plum* ‘the fruit of the tree *Prunus domestica*’ and *prune* ‘a dried plum’. *Plum* is attested in Early Old English around 725. The doublets *plum* and *prune* can be retraced to the same Latin word. Vulgar Latin feminine singular **pruna* derives from Classical Latin neutral *prunum*, whose plural form *pruna* was regarded as a singular feminine form. The forms with *l* can be found only in Germanic. The French language has preserved the form *prune*. The Old French word passed into English with the meaning ‘dried plum’. It was first recorded in English in 1345 and has been used ever since. The *OED* supplies attestations in the senses ‘plum’ and ‘plum-tree’ recorded between 1530 and 1698. It is worth underlining that a semantic opposition between ‘fresh fruit’ (expressed by a native word) and ‘processed fruit’ (expressed by a borrowing from French) can be pinpointed in English, which parallels the *cow – beef* opposition.

6. Cooking techniques

Some of the terms denoting baking and cooking techniques belong to the Germanic word stock: *to cook, to bake*. Pyles and Algeo (1993:296) mention *seethe*, which is archaic now, “except when it is used metaphorically, as in *to seethe with rage* and *sodden in drink* (*sodden* being the old past participle of the strong verb *to seethe* ‘boil, stew’)”. The majority of the names of the culinary processes, however, were adopted from French.

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| (4) <i>to boil</i> | ‘to be cooked by boiling’ (c1300); ‘to cook by boiling’ (1381) |
| <i>to broil</i> | ‘to put on fire, to grill’ (c1386) |
| <i>to fry</i> | ‘to cook in hot fat’ (c1300) |
| <i>to roast</i> | ‘to cook by dry heat’ (c1280) |
| <i>to stew</i> | ‘to cook by slow boiling’ (a1399) |
| <i>to grill</i> | ‘to cook under a grill or on a gridiron’ (1668). |

7. Fowls and poultry

The Modern English word *bird* is of uncertain origin, with no corresponding form in any of the Germanic languages. The form predominating until the later 1400s was *brid* ‘young fowl’. By contrast, the native word *fowl* was used to refer to ‘any vertebrate animal’. Today *bird* is used generically in place of the older word *fowl*, which has become specialized for certain kinds of poultry. Interestingly, in the case of birds and their flesh there does not seem to be a marked socio-cultural opposition with respect to etymology. The domestic fowls all have Germanic names: *chicken*, *hen*, *cock*. Old French *coc* ‘cock’ and Old English *coc*, *cocc* ‘cock’ sound and look very much alike. Probably both are of imitative origin. The Old French word may have reinforced the native one. Cormican (1990:85) points out that “the most desirable types of chickens for eating i.e. the most tender, are identified by French names”: *pullet* ‘a young female chicken’ (c1363, from Old French *poulet*, a diminutive of *poule*) and *capon* ‘a castrated cock and its flesh as food’ (Old English *capun* (1000), probably reinforced by Old North French *capon* (a1250), both from Latin *capo*. According to Cornican, “the more abstract word *poultry* comes from Middle French *pouleterie* [‘domestic fowl’ (a1387)], and suggests that the person using it does not deal with real, live birds.”

8. Meals ‘any occasion when food is eaten’

The Germanic word *meal* itself has come down to us from Old English (a725). Old English *mete* (c1125) [> Modern English *meat*] referred to ‘food’ and ‘meal’. Among the terms for meals that have not survived into Modern English we may mention Old and Early Middle English *morwe mete* lit. ‘morning meal’, *undern-mete* ‘morning meal’ *undern-gereord* lit. ‘morning food’ *undern-gifl* lit. ‘morning meat’ *undern-geweorc*, *undern-swæsendu* all meaning ‘breakfast’ and *non-mete* ‘dinner’, lit. ‘noon meal’ obsolete Modern English *under-mæl* ‘afternoon meal’, Old English *æfen-mete* ‘evening-meal, supper’, *æfen-gifl* ‘food eaten in the evening’. All these Old English names for meals are included in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* by Bosworth and Toller. Some other names of meals of Germanic origin were formed rather late in English. *Breakfast* is first attested only in 1463 as *breffast*. The form *brekefeste* shows up in 1472. Under the entry BREKEN (24.), the *MED* supplies the Middle English verb phrase *breken faste* ‘to put an end to fasting; take the first meal of the day; start eating’. Under the entry BREAKFAST, the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* rejects the influence of French *déjeuner*: “A specific name for the first meal of the day does not appear in Old English glossaries, and some sources refer to French *déjeuner* ‘morning meal’ (1100’s), and ‘to have the morning meal’ (also

1100's) as a possible source of influence or even loan translation, especially for the verb. This does not seem likely, since, as a noun, English *breakfast* is recognized as a formation from the earlier verb phrase, of course, already existed on its own."

Lunch in the current sense is first recorded in 1829. It was shortened from *luncheon*. According to the entry LUNCHEON of the *CDE*, *luncheon* originally referred to 'a thick piece (of bread, cheese), a hunk' (1591), later 'a light meal' [in *lunching* before 1652], and 'luncheon' (1716); the morphological development may have been by alteration of dialectal NUNCHEON 'light meal' developed from Middle English *nonechenche* (1342), a compound of *none* 'noon' and *schench* 'drink', from Old English.

By contrast, the names of the two main meals are of French origin. They integrated into English massively at an early date:

- (5) *dinner* 'midday meal' (c1300); *to dine* (c1300)
 supper 'the evening meal' (c1250); *to sup* (c1300).

Further names of meals of French origin include *feast* 'feast, banquet' (a1200) and *repast* 'a meal or feast' (a1387).

9. The names for the birthing process

Cormican's examples (1990:86) show that Anglo-Saxon words were used for the birth of the various species that were domesticated and thus raised by English peasants. Raising animals must have been considered a menial occupation obviously restricted to Saxons.

- (6) *Cows calve*. 'give birth to a calf' < OE *cealfian*
 Sheep lamb. 'bring forth a lamb' (1611)
 Hogs farrow. 'bring forth a young pig' < ME *farwen* (c1200). Cp. OE *fearb* 'young pig'
 Chickens hatch. 'bring forth from an egg' (a1250) < ME *hacchen* < OE

But:

- Deer fawn*. 'bring forth a fawn' (a1338) Cp. OF *faoner* (c1171)

We come across one single birthing term of French origin, closely related to hunting, which was an aristocratic pastime *par excellence*. The English verb *fawn* 'bring forth a fawn' was borrowed from OF *faoner* 'bear young, bring forth (of animals)'. The verb was first attested in 1369, the corresponding noun *fawn* 'young fallow deer' was first recorded in English somewhat earlier, before 1338. The date of occurrence of both meanings is largely posterior to the time when *Ivanhoe* takes place. The borrowing of the French birthing term probably shows that the ruling class came into contact with young deer while hunting.

10. The names of living animals according to age and sex

According to Cormican (1990:86), the vast majority of domestic animals have names of Old English origin: *cow*, *ox*, *calf*, *bull*, *bullock* ‘a castrated bull’, *heifer* ‘a young cow that has not has a calf’, *steer* ‘a young castrated ox’, *ram* ‘a male sheep’, *ewe* ‘a female sheep’, *lamb* ‘a young sheep’. Even in this category there is a more abstract term used as a collective noun: *cattle*. The word was borrowed from Norman French *catel* ‘property’, from Medieval Latin *capitale* ‘property’, also ‘cattle’. It is first attested in English in the sense ‘property’ around 1250. The meaning ‘livestock’ is first recorded before 1325. In the 1500s, *cattle* was gradually restricted to ‘farm animals’ and *chattel*, its doublet from Central French *chatel*, was applied to ‘other articles of property’.

11. Overview of the word pairs

Table 1

	First occurrence	Latest quotation	Remark
<i>beef</i> ‘animal’	c1300	1861, 1884, (1904 US)	U Usually in pl., archaic or technical
<i>beef</i> ‘flesh’	c1330		Word of the standard language
<i>pork</i> ‘animal’	?a1425	1682 [1799, 1882]	Obsolete or historical
<i>pork</i> ‘flesh’	c1300		Word of the standard language
<i>veal</i> ‘animal’	c1400	1801, 1855, 1898	Now rare
<i>veal</i> ‘flesh’	a1325		Word of the standard language
<i>mutton</i> ‘animal’	?a1325	1795, 1833, 1839	Now only jocular
<i>mutton</i> ‘flesh’	c1300		Word of the standard language
<i>plum</i>	c700		Word of the standard language
<i>prune</i>	1345		Word of the standard language

12. Summary

My findings only partially corroborate the validity of Scott's "structuralistic" conjecture. The following observations can be made.

1. The sharp sociocultural opposition as presented by Scott probably did not exist in this form at the end of the 12th century. It developed over a long period of time, in the 14th and 15th centuries. All the four words survived to denote animals in some restricted use: archaic, dialectal or technical.
2. The sense 'living animal' is best represented by *beef*. This is the earliest borrowing. It has been fairly well preserved in American English.
3. The sense 'living animal' all but fell into disuse at the end of the 19th century.
4. The structural relation examined still functions to some extent: *goat – chevon*.
5. A similar structural relation ('fresh fruit' – 'dried fruit') can be detected in the case of *plum – prune*.
6. The observation that some of the terms of French origin are more abstract than the corresponding Germanic words: *poultry, cattle* is still valid.
7. The specific names for domestic animals and those indicating age and sex date from before the Norman Conquest. They are of Anglo-Saxon origin.
8. The French element of the specific vocabulary examined mainly refers to the preparation and consumption of food. In this respect, Scott's remark retains its validity.

Dictionaries

- Barnhart, R. K. (ed.) 2000. *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*. New York: Chambers.
- Bosworth, J. & T. N. Toller. 1898. *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. 1921. *Supplement* by T. N. Toller. 1972. *Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda* by A. Campbell. Oxford: Clarendon Press. <<http://www.bosworthtoller.com>> (BT)
- Middle English Dictionary*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press. <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec>> (MED)
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition on CD-ROM. Version 4.0. 2010. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press. (OED)
- Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. 1976. Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company.
- <<http://en.wikipedia.org>> "GOAT MEAT". 29 JULY 2015

References

- Baugh, A. 1974. *A History of the English Language*. Second Edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Burchfield, R. 1985. *The English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cormican, J. D. 1990. Middle English Class Structure and Animal Names in Modern English. In: *Language Quarterly* 28:3–4, 85–87.
- Jespersen, O. 1956. *Growth and Structure of the English language*. Ninth Edition. New York: Doubleday.
- Lavelle, R. 2013. Angolszász idill és a nyers valóság. In: *BBC History*. 3 (2): 36–43.
- Pyles, T. and Algeo, J. 1993. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. Fourth Edition. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Scott, W. 1962. *Ivanhoe*. London: The New English Library.