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Semantics of Old English *feorh*: from Pagan to Christian Tradition

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Every word was once a picture. To evoke its beauty, the picture is to be restored. The present article will focus on drawing a semantic *picture* of Old English *feorh*. Etymologically *feorh* is allied with the Indo-European stem *p^herk^{ho}u-* defining vegetation. In Anglo-Saxon tradition, *life* was inseparable from the vegetable kingdom. Old English *feorh* defined *life* as something pertaining to a living thing and was thought of as something substantial. *Life* was perceived as an isolated substance inside a human being and might define a human being himself. The introduction of Christianity affected the semantic *picture* of the word *feorh*. In Christian tradition, *feorh* acquired a new shade of meaning, i.e. *soul*, which is similar to Latin *ānīma* in its sense. Thus, the linguistic experience of the Anglo-Saxons is embedded in the semantic *picture* of *feorh*.

In the semantics of old words there dwells *status ānīmi* of the peoples in the distant centuries past. The characteristic feature of the semantics of old words was the designation of different phenomena by one form via the increase of the level of abstraction of their meaning and the weakening of its denotational limitedness (Феокистова 1984: 21). The absence of a clear borderline between the corporeal and the spiritual has determined the broad meaning of many Old English words. It is necessary to point out that the *broad meaning* should be comprehended in the sense, which is specific to the old language. According to the definition of M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij, the translation of old words does not convey the essence of their meanings [...] meanings embraced in one word were not as differentiated as they are when embraced in one word in a modern language (Феокистова 1984: 61).

The present article will focus on drawing a semantic *picture* of Old English *feorh* in the variety of its meanings and conceptions by means of semantic, etymological and comparative analysis.

An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (Bosworth et al. 1954: 278-279), defines **feorh** as **1.** life, soul, spirit; *vīta*, *ānīma*. **2.** a living being, person; *hōmo*, *persōna*.

The Medieval conceptions of *life* and *soul* prevalent among the Anglo-Saxons were rooted in the Pagan antiquity shared by all Germanic nations. It should be borne in mind that, in the Pagan antiquity, there was no discrimination between the human body and the natural phenomena. Hence the animate characteristics of a human being were personified in the inanimate substances (Гуревич 1984: 55).

Some etymologists (e.g. Grimm J., Grimm W. *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. 1845-1971, Bd. 3, S.1527) find that Old English **feorh** etymologically betrays the Indo-European stem *p^herk^{ho}u-* defining vegetation in the meaning of ‘oak, forest’ yet never ‘wood’, cf. Lat *quercus* ‘oak’, OIcel *ffjör* ‘tree’, OHG *forha* ‘pine’, OE *furh* ‘pine’.

Old English **feorh** defined *life* as something pertaining to a living thing, a human being in particular, and was thought of as something substantial. *Life* was conceived as the *fluid of life* that circulates in the principal vascular system of human beings, i.e. the vital principle, *blood*, cf. OIcel *ffjör* ‘tree’, ‘person’ and *ffjör* ‘life’ (Русяцкене 1990: 12).

Meanwhile inanimate objects were endowed with spiritual qualities. For instance, the Pagan tradition of some nations uncovers the *oak-deity* parallel which may be traced in the similarity between the etymon (stem) of the analysed word (i.e. **feorh**) and the etymon of the names defining a Thunder god. Typically, this deity was allied with oaks and cliffs. As Gamkrelidze and Ivanov claim, “[...] mountain people preserve a tradition of praying to an *oak spirit*. The oak was conceived as a great mythic tree, in essence a Cosmic Tree, with its top linked to the sky by a golden chain, by which angels ascend to heaven”, cf. Lith *Perkūnas* ‘Thunder God’, Latv *Pērķūns* ‘Thunder God’, also Lith *perkūnija* ‘thunderstorm’, OPruss *percunis* ‘thunder’; in terms of sacred trees Lith *Perkūno aužuolas*, Latv *Perkuona uōzuols* ‘Thunder god’s oak’, OIcel *Fjörgyn* ‘mother of the Thunder god Thor’ (Gamkrelidze et al. 1995: 527-528). Thus, comparative analysis of the cognates of **feorh** allows for the reconstruction of the concepts associated with them. Consider Fig. 1:

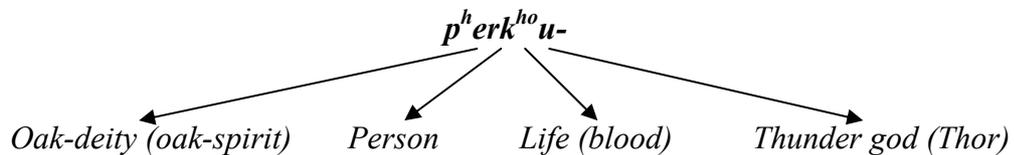


Fig. 1 Semantic reconstruction of the etymon of **feorh**.

In the Anglo-Saxon poetry, **feorh** is related to something *substantial* (corporeal, tangible), such as **feorh-gifu** *The gift of life*; *vītæ dōnum*. Consider the following (Bosworth et al. 1954: 279):

Secgas *feorh-giefe* gefêgon *men rejoiced in the gift of life*, Exon. 94 a; Th. 353, 1;
Reim. 6.

The gift of life was sent to a human being together with **feorh-hord** *Life’s treasure*, the soul, spirit; *vīta thēsaurus*, *ānimā* by **feorh-gifa** the Giver of life; *vītæ dātor* himself:

Hād wereþ *feorhhord* feóndum *armour defends the soul from foes*, Wald. 100; Vald. 2,
22; Andr. Kmb. 2363; An. 1184.

Life's treasure, the soul, spirit dwells in a human body, **feorh-hûs** Life's house, spirit's house, the body; *vītæ vel, ānimā dōmus, corpus*:

Gār oft þurhwōd fægēs *feorhhûs* the dart often pierced the body of the fated, Byrht.
Th. 140, 32; By. 297.

Life's preservation **feorh-ner** needs a refuge, sustenance, nourishment, food; *vītæ servātio, refūgium ālimentum, cībus*:

Fuglas heora feorhnereon ðæs beāmes blêdum nāme [nāman] birds took their refuge
on the tree branches, Cd. 200; Th. 248, 3; Dan. 507.

Whenever **feorh-hûs** Life's house, spirit's house, the body is destroyed, **feorh-cwalu** Life-slaughter, death; *vītæ cædes, mors* will come upon man and separate him from life, deprive him of life:

He sōhte hû he sārlicast, þurh ða wyrrestan wītu, meahte *feorhcwale* findan he
sought how he could invent a death most painfully, through the worst torments,
Jul. 573.

According to Pagan tradition, every human being has his **feorh-lege** Life-law, fate, death; *vītæ lex, fātum, mors* which is predetermined:

Ic on mǣpma hord mīnne bebohte *feorhlege* I have bought my fate for treasures'
hoard, Beo. Th. 5592; B. 2800.

For the Anglo-Saxons, **feorh** was located directly in the breast, **feorh-locu**; however, the soul, **feorh-hord**, may have been located in the body, **feorh-hûs**, itself.

The poetic phrases **feorh-gifu**, **feorh-hord**, **feorh-gifa**, **feorh-hûs**, **feorh-ner**, **feorh-cwalu**, **feorh-lege** were characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon poetry and are known as *kennings*, compound poetic phrases bearing the metaphorical background and substituted for the conception regarded as sacred, cf. *life, soul* (Феокистова 1984: 116). The word *kenning* is derived from the Old Norse phrase *kenna eitt við*, "to express a thing in terms of another", and is prevalent throughout Norse, Old English and Celtic literature (Syd Allan-Beowulf: Kennings).

In the Pagan antiquity, *soul* is regarded as "actually migrating to and fro during dreams and trances and after death haunting the neighbourhood of its body. Nearly always it is figured as something extremely volatile, a perfume or a breath" (*New Advent*). Hence in various Indo-European languages the word *soul* is etymologically connected with *breath, inhale*: PIE **anH-* : Skt *āniti* 'breathes', *ānila-h* 'breath' Gr *ánemos* 'breath, wind', Oícel *andi* 'breath, soul', Lat *anima* 'breath, soul'. The living beings (in the Indo-European tradition, these are animals, people and gods) were conceived of as possessing *breath, spirit* and *soul* (Gamkrelidze et al. 1995: 388).

In Homer, *wind* and *deified wind* are rendered by *ánemos* (Mycenaean Greek – *a-ne-mo i-je-re-ja* ('holy wind')). The etymological connection of Greek *ánemos* 'wind' with the Indo-European word which when meaning 'breathe, breath' points to the conception of the wind as 'the breath of a god' (Gamkrelidze et al. 1995: 584-585). From this it follows that *breath* is a 'deified wind', i.e. *soul*.

The dualism of early Medieval consciousness manifested the view that substances exhibit either inanimate or animate nature. Inasmuch as there are two eternal principles in the

universe, one good and the other evil, hence a human being embeds two parts, body and soul. Discrimination between the animate and the inanimate, earthly and heavenly, good and evil has in itself the antithesis of the upper and lower worlds, the *body* and *soul, spirit* (Гуревич 1984: 65).

The introduction of Christianity affected the semantic *picture* of the word **feorh**. **Feorh** in the meaning of *life, soul* pertains to Latin *vīta* ‘life’ and *ānīma* ‘soul’. Thus, *christianization* of the semantics of **feorh** is specified by Latin *ānīma* (Русяцкене 1990: 14). The tendency of Christ’s teaching was to focus on the spiritual side of man’s nature, consequently the salvation or loss of the *soul* is the great issue of existence:

Beorh đīnum *feore salva ānīmam tuam*, “save your *soul*” Gen., 19, 17.

Although in the Pagan antiquity *soul* is hardly conceived as possessing a substantial existence of its own (Стеблин-Каменский 1976: 91), yet for a Christian believer, it is *immortal* and dwells in the eternity when no longer surrounded with flesh (Bosworth et al. 1954: 279):

Syđđan to feore *in æternum*, “in the eternity” Ps. Th. 54, 22: 101, 25: 106, 8.

To wīdan feore *for ever*, Cd. 170; Th. 213,5 Exod, 54: Exon iia.

Me on sende sigerdryhten mīn, folca *feorhgiefa*, gæst hāligne *my glorious Lord, Giver of life to people, sent a Holy Spirit to me*, Exon. 50 b; Th. 176, 20; Gû. 1213.

Beoþ Godes strēāmas gōde wætere fæste gefylde, đanan *feorhnere* findaþ foldbūend *flūmen Dei replētum est āqua, pǎrasti cībum illōrium*, Ps. Th. 64, 10. “The righteous rejoice and seek *refuge* in the Lord and all the upright exult”

(*The New English Bible* 663).

The word **feorh** in the *spiritual* connotation of *life, soul* is contrasted to the corporeal, in the meaning of *a living being, person*. Consider:

Feónða feorh feóllon þicce *the bodies of the foes fell thickly*, 95; Th. 124, 19; Gen 2065.

The metonymic transfer of conceptions from the *spiritual* to the *corporeal* in the semantics of **feorh** has been determined by the similarity of the images (concepts) of both phenomena in relation to their earlier comprehension, when inanimate objects (e.g. *oak*) were endowed with spiritual qualities (e.g. *oak spirit*). **Feorh** is both the vital principle, *life* and *a living being, i.e. feorh-hūs*, the bearer of *life*, the one who yields *blood*. In fact, the concrete definition of a word’s meaning depends on the context, and, thus, one can speak of a common undivided meaning of *feorh*. Consider Fig. 2:

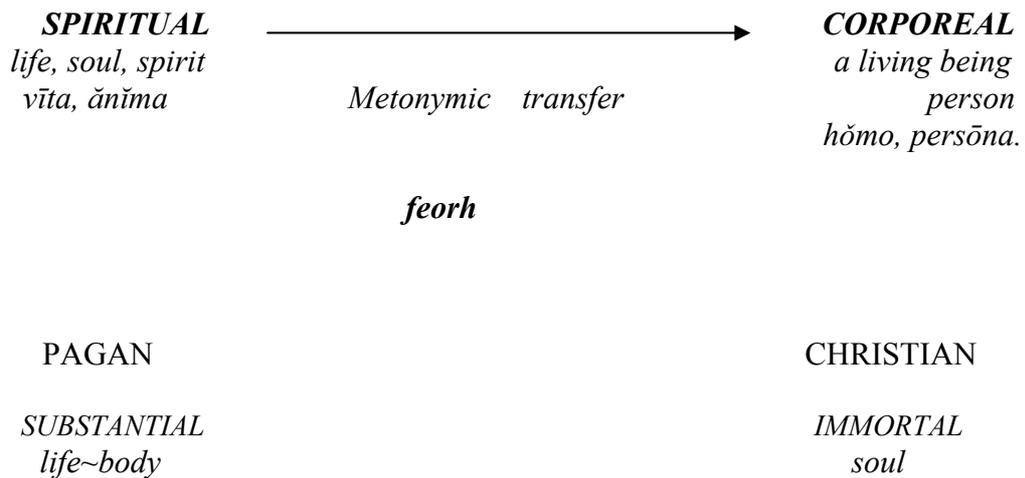


Fig. 2 The characteristic features of the semantics of **feorh**

To sum up the analysis of Anglo-Saxon **feorh**, the following conclusions may be drawn. The Ancient Anglo-Saxon conception of *life* was determined by the pastoral nature of the society. The word **feorh** in the meaning of *life, soul, spirit* designates the animate, spiritual nature of man, i.e. his inner self, which is contrasted to the corporeal, in the meaning of *a living being, person*. The semantics of **feorh** is an echo of the linguistic experience of the Anglo-Saxons before and after the introduction of Christianity.

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Abbreviations

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| B. | Beowulf. |
| Exod. | Exodus, in Thorpe's Cædmon. |
| Gen. | Genesis, in Thorpe's Cædmon. |
| Jul. | The Legend of St. Juliana, from Cod. Exon. |
| Ps. | Psalms, in Thorpe's Cædmon. |
| Seef. | Seafarer, from Cod. Exon. |
| St. Guthlac | The Legend of St. Guthlac, from Cod. Exon. |