

The Moralization of English Terms Denoting an Inferior Social Role in the Medieval Period

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Abstract

Social terms form categories created by human society, unlike natural kind terms which exist in nature independently of institutional frames [3]. They are interrelated and disposed in systems denoting ranks in a social hierarchy. A particular aspect of these terms is that they may stop denoting a social role and become evaluative terms of moral conduct. In this paper, I will show that the moralization of social terms [5] is a process of metaphorical extensions in which the attributes assigned to the terms considered are responsible for this type of semantic change. An important aspect is that these attributes refer to behaviour, not to social position.

Keywords

frame, semantic change, conceptual metaphor, amelioration of meaning, pejoration of meaning

1. The **aim** of my paper is to show that English terms denoting an inferior social rank in the medieval period develop figurative extensions in a systematic and quite predictable way. Furthermore, I intend to show that these extensions account for the *relation between status and implied moral qualities* [5].

2. My **hypothesis** is that nouns which belong to the same frame¹ develop the same type of semantic extensions [5, 9].

2. Theoretical framework

I adopt the *structuralist* view for CA (Componential Analysis) of terms and for a definition of the *connotation* [11, 17, 18, 2, 10].

The *internal structure of the frame* and the *metaphorical extensions* are discussed from a *cognitivist* perspective (Lakoff: 1987, Lakoff&Johnson: 1985, Taylor: 1989, Kövecses: 2002).

¹ A semantic frame [4] is a coherent structure of related concepts that are related in a way that without knowledge of all of them, one cannot have complete knowledge of any one.

The *consequences of semantic change* undergone by terms are discussed according to Stockwell and Minkova [14], Ullmann [16], and Hughes's [5] theories.

The *systematic character of the semantic extensions of words* is illustrated based on Lehrer's theory of a semantic field: "When one word in a lexical field has been transferred to a new field, the other words in the field are available for extension to that new field by virtue of their association with the first word. The words will retain the same relationship to one another in the new field as they did in the old fields (...)" [9, 24].

Terms will also be discussed according to Dahlgren's *criteria features for characterizing social terms*.

2.1 *Types of metaphors*

Metaphorical extensions of the terms considered are analyzed based on the *orientational metaphor* which *maps the up-down scheme* on to the other areas of experience [6, 15]. There are three types of orientational metaphors involving the *up-down* scheme: quality (*more is up, less is down*), evaluation (*good is up, bad is down*), control (*power is up, powerless is down*) [6, 8, 15].

Metaphorical extensions of negatively evaluated terms are analyzed based on the "*bad is down*", "*less is down*" and "*powerless is down*" metaphors. They involve the "co-occurrence of two domains within a specific area of experience" [15]. They have a similar experience basis. *Negatively evaluated human attributes* are associated with a *downright posture*, while the idea of an *inferior social position* is associated with the idea of *servitude* and *lack of power*.

Status in human society is conceptualized in terms of the *up-down scheme* [7, 15]. Therefore, the "*power is up*" metaphor involves the idea that *the powerful end of the hierarchy of power is associated with a high status, while the weak, powerlessness end is associated with a low status*, based on the common acceptance that *power relations are conceptualized in terms of verticality*. *Morality* (*good, bad, honesty, courage, honour etc*) is also understood in terms of the *up-down* scheme (e.g. a *lowly* thing to do). The association of the domain of *social status* (*source domain*) with the domain of *moral qualities* (*target domain*) is possible due to *the common knowledge that a person being in a low position in the social hierarchy is automatically regarded as poor and physically unpleasant*, while the reverse is true for persons in a high position.

Figurative extensions have consequences which involve semantic change which are being dealt with in the next section.

2.2 Consequences of semantic change

The two types of consequences of semantic change we discuss in this paper are *amelioration* (when a word takes on favorable connotations) and *deterioration* (when a word takes on pejorative associations) [5, 16]. According to Hughes, amelioration and deterioration of meaning “are often telling indications of social change” [5, 12] and they explain the process of *moralization*: “By the process of moralization, terms originally denoting status and class slowly acquired moral connotations favorable and otherwise, evaluative of the moral conduct commonly attributed to that class (...). There is an equation between a person’s status and material value and a strong correlation between status and implied moral quality” [5, 47].

In Stockwell & Minkova’s view, status is a *result of semantic change*. *Amelioration* and *pejoration* are *types of status change*. Amelioration involves the rising in status (from Lat. *melior* “better”) while pejoration is the opposite phenomenon (from Lat. *pejor* “worse”). Following Hughes, we expect that all inferior social terms discussed in this paper undergo the process of sense deterioration.

2.3 Dahlgren’s features for characterizing social terms

Social terms encapsulate the theory of social relations. The frame of social relations in which these words should be analyzed is highlighted by Dahlgren’s [3, 108] *critical features for characterizing social terms: physical appearance, social function, social relations, internal qualities, cultural stereotypes*.

3. The frame of English social terms denoting an inferior status

The corpus consists of 19 words which were selected from dictionaries and other encyclopedic resources: OED [13], *Words in Time* [5], *A History of the English Language* [1].

Inferior social rank terms: *blackguard, brigand, boor, churl, clown, footman, knave, lackey, lout, page, peasant, ribald, sergeant, serf, servant, slave, vassal, vavassour and villain*.

In the selection of terms I took into account the *diachronic* dimension. Terms are studied from the perspective of the medieval society when they were constituted, following their evolution until nowadays. The chosen terms² *designate inferior social ranks* in the *feudal system*³. The **annex** illustrates the meanings (both denotative and connotative) which these words acquired, as given in the OED [13].

Before presenting the figurative extensions of these terms I determined the *internal structure* of their frame. Using CA, I distinguished the main features which group social terms in a single frame. Based on these features, I determined the semantic relations established among terms (hyponymy, synonymy).

The main attributes which the analyzed terms exhibit and which group them in the same frame are / inferior social rank/ and / in relation to a superior/. These attributes do not differentiate these words in a structuralist way. The features / in relation to fields/, / in relation to household/ and / in relation to a superior/ as well as the connotative features which are presented in fig.2 help distinguish social terms.

In the frame, terms exhibit a *family resemblance structure*⁴ [7], as illustrated in figure 1.

Using CA, I identified the *connotative features* of the terms considered, which you can see in figure 2 and which reflect the process of *moralization* which the terms undergo. These features correspond to what Dahlgren refers to as *cultural stereotypes*. Each of these features is common to more terms in the same frame, illustrating the *family resemblance structure* which characterizes these terms not only at a denotative level, but also at a connotative level.

² Some of these terms are *central* in the semantic field of English social terms due to their *endurance in time*, their *importance for society*, their *polysemy* and their *capacity of forming new words* (e.g. *peasant*, *servant*).

³ The structure of the feudal system was like a pyramid, where the king was on top and the common people of the country were at the base. In between the two were the powerful nobles. Each person in the pyramid was a *vassal* of the person above. This social hierarchy which has the *king* on top as the supreme leader of people started to change at the end of the XVIIth century when capitalism replaced the old feudal organization.

⁴ Family resemblance structure refers to the idea that members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category [7, 12].

Figure 1 The frame of inferior rank terms in the medieval period

SOCIAL TERMS	Inferior social rank	In relation to a superior	In relation to fields	In relation to household	In relation to army
blackguard	+	+		+	+
brigand	+	+			+
boor	+	+	+		
churl	+	+	+		
clown	+	+	+		
footman	+	+		+	+
knave	+	+		+	
lackey	+	+		+	+
lout	+	+		+	
page	+	+		+	+
peasant	+	+	+	+	
ribald	+	+		+	
sergeant	+	+		+	+
serf	+	+	+	+	
servant	+	+		+	
slave	+	+	+	+	+
vassal	+	+		+	+
vavassour	+	+		+	+
villain	+	+	+		

Figure 2 Connotative features acquired by English social terms denoting an inferior status

SOCIAL TERMS	submission, obedience, weakness	Rudeness, lack of manners and education, stupidity	Dishonesty, wickedness, lack of principles, base character	Debauchery, depravation	Violence, thievishness, a law - breaking person
blackguard			+		+
brigand					+
boor		+			
churl		+			
clown		+			
footman					
knave			+		
lackey	+				
lout		+			
page					
peasant		+			
ribald			+	+	
sergeant	+				
serf	+				
servant	+				
slave	+		+		
vassal	+				
vavassour					
villain		+	+	+	+

4. *Figurative extensions of English terms denoting an inferior social status*

Figurative extensions of terms are analyzed based on the *bad is down*, *less is down* and *powerless is down* conceptual metaphors. Most terms were found to develop metaphorical extensions which involve the *transfer of some features* from the social field where terms are used with their denotative meaning to the *evaluative sphere of moral traits and behaviour*. This phenomenon illustrates the process of *moralization*, namely *degradation* of meaning (Hughes: 1988) by which terms acquire a *negative* meaning and become *evaluative terms of moral conduct* attributed to the respective social class. For example, the term *villain* which denotes a *vile* and *brutish peasant* in the XVth century will be metaphorically used from the XVIIth century to denote an *evil, wicked, dangerous person*. This meaning is created by means of transferring the features /vile/ and /brutish/ from the social sphere to the evaluative sphere of moral traits.

It is to be noted that the words *vassal* and *sergeant* have a different semantic evolution than the other terms in the frame. At a denotative level, they undergo *amelioration* of meaning. In the case of *vassal*, this type of semantic change is also reflected in the word *vassalage* which meant “servitude” at one time (XIth-XIIth centuries) and “splendid service in war” at another (XIVth century and later) [12, 23]. Figurative extensions of *vassal* and *sergeant* involve the addition of both *positive* and *negative* attributes to the already existing meaning (e.g. *sergeant/servant of God*, *sergeant/servant of Satan*).

The evolution of terms is *gradual*, involving *loss* or *addition* of *semantic features* which involve the disappearance or the creation of a new meaning, either *denotative* or *connotative*. In some cases (e.g. *blackguard*, *slave*, *villain*), the term loses its denotative meaning in time and it is only used with its evaluative meaning. There are also terms in which both denotative and evaluative meaning survived (e.g. *clown*, *peasant*), while in the case of *sergeant*, for instance, only the denotative meaning exists nowadays; the evaluative meaning was lost. Below I have classified the studied terms according to their evolution in time, *up to the modern period*.

- a) Terms which are used only with their *connotative* meaning: *blackguard*, *knave*, *slave*, *servant*, *villain*, *serf*, *lout*, *boor*, *ribald*, *brigand*;
- b) Terms which are used with their *denotative* meaning: *sergeant*, *page*⁵;

⁵ Page does not develop any figurative extension; the semantic changes are only at denotative level.

- c) Term which have both a *denotative* and *connotative* use: *peasant*, *clown*, *boor*, *churl*;
- d) Terms which *disappeared* from the language: *footman*, *vassal*, *vavassour*, *lackey*.

The reason why a word disappears from language has social and historical causes. A social term enters a language in order to designate a certain social rank and to perform a specific function. Once the rank disappears and the person does not fulfill the respective function anymore, the word dies out, sometimes being replaced by a new word.

In order to show how inferior social terms undergo the process of degradation in meaning, I present below the semantic evolution of two of these terms, *clown* and *knave*. Their definitions are presented as given in the OED.

Clown

This term is first registered in the English language in the late XVth with the meaning of “a countryman, a rustic, a peasant”.

(1) 1848 Macaulay Hist. Eng. I 610 The Somersetshire clowns, with their scythes... faced the royal horse like old soldiers (OED: II: 364).

The term undergoes depreciation in meaning, acquiring negative attributes. Therefore, in the XVIth century the term denotes an ignorant, a person who lacks in manners, a mere rustic, a boor. This conforms to Hughes’ idea of moralization of terms denoting status. The negative features which this word acquires are: / rude/ and /simple-minded/.

(2) 1565 Golding Ovid’s Met. (1593) To Rdr.6, The wise, the foole: the countrie cloine: the learned and the lout (OED: II: 364).

By metaphorical extension, *clown* refers to a *man without refinement or culture*.

(3) 1583 Golding Calvin on Deut. Lxxxvii.538 Euen such as haue beene counted the simplest cloynes ((OED: II: 364).

This metaphorical use is motivated by the orientational metaphors “*bad is down*” , “*less is down*” and “*powerless is down*”, according to which a *low social position automatically involves negatively evaluated human attributes*: / lack of culture/, / lack of refinement/. The metaphorical use of *clown* is possible due to the transfer of the attributes specific to the frame of *peasant* from the social sphere to the evaluative sphere of moral traits and behaviour.

The figurative meaning of *clown* has been kept until nowadays, but its first denotative meaning (that of “a countryman, a peasant”) was lost, when the breakdown of feudalism (end of XVIth century) brought major social and political changes. In the XVIIth century, the term *clown* acquires another denotative meaning: “a fool or a jester, as a stage character, or (in Shakespeare) a retainer of a court or great house” (OED:II: 364).

(4) 1822 Nares Gloss S. V., The fool was indeed the inmate of every opulent house, but the rural jester, or clown, seems to have been peculiar to the country families (OED:II:364).

From this meaning emerged the modern meaning of clown, that of “a character in a pantomime or in a circus” (OED: II: 364).

As mentioned before, *clown* emerges as a social term which undergoes semantic changes during its evolution from the XVIth century until nowadays. It undergoes the process of moralization, namely the *pejoration of meaning*, which consists of the fact that the word adds new features (negative features) to the already existing ones, denoting not only a poor and low ranked person socially speaking, but also a simple-minded, uneducated one. These features add an evaluative dimension to the social one. This validates Hughes’ theory according to which there is a strong relation between social rank and the moral traits of people belonging to that social rank. Following its semantic evolution, we notice that the term loses its first denotative meaning (that of “peasant”) and acquires another one from which the actual meaning develops. It is to be noted that this process of semantic change is *gradual* and unfolds on a long period of time, reflecting the social frame in which the term develops.

Knave

(The O.E. form is *knafa*, “boy”).

In the XIth century, it denotes a male child, a boy. It undergoes *specialization*⁶ of meaning, referring to a boy employed as a servant / a male servant of low condition.

(5) 1000 Ags. Ps. (Spelman) lxxxv.16 (Bosw.) Syle mihte cnafan þinum [L. puero tuo] (OED: VIII:483).

⁶ Specialization is a consequence of semantic change which involves narrowing of meaning [5, 14]. A word which previously had a wider use begins to be used in a strict or narrow sense (e.g.: O.E. *wife* meant *woman* in general, but later its meaning was applied only to a married woman).

Furthermore, this word undergoes deterioration of meaning, acquiring the negative attributes / dishonest/ and / unprincipled/. According to the OED, a *knave* is “an unprincipled man, given to dishonourable and deceitful practices, a base and crafty rogue (now, the main sense is often contrasted with *fool*)” (OED: VIII: 483).

(6) 1800 Wellington Let. to Lieut. Col. Close in Gurw. Desp. (1837) I 258
The common practice is to accuse a man of being either a fool or a knave (OED: VIII: 483).

The metaphorical use of *knave* involves the *up-and-down* scheme and consists of the mapping of elements from the *source domain* (social) to the *target domain* (the abstract domain of moral qualities) [6, 7]. These elements represent the knowledge we possess about the concrete domain. In terms of Dahlgren’s features (cultural stereotypes, social relations etc), we may describe *knave* as a servant of low condition and as a man without principles. The association of the domain of *social status* (*source domain*) with the domain of *moral qualities* (*target domain*) is possible due to *the common knowledge that a person being on a low position in the social hierarchy is automatically regarded as poor and morally doubtful*.

Knave is *metonymically used* to refer to one of the playing cards. It denotes the the lowest court card of each suit, bearing the representation of a soldier or servant; the jack” (OED: VIII: 483). The metonymic model involves the same *up-and-down* scheme: a *knave* is a lower card than a *queen*, for example. The “stands-for” relation is represented by the *source-path-goal* scheme: a card represents a knave.

(7) 1868 Pardon Card Player II The old German cards had neither queen nor knave ((OED: VIII: 483).

Knave is used *connotatively*, with a *change of register* (from formal to informal). Jocularly, it implies bad qualities which a person possesses: roguishness, unreliability (rare use now).

(8) 1553 Udall Royster D. III iii (Arb.) 46 Good night Roger olde knaue!” (OED: VIII: 484).

The semantic changes which this word undergoes are *gradual* and involve loss and addition of semantic features. Loss of features refers to the loss of the denotative meaning (e.g. (5)) which may have social causes: in the modern period, *knave* does not denote anymore a person who fulfills a certain social role (Hughes: 1988). The addition of connotative features like / dishonest/ and / unreliable/ to the denotation of this word illustrates the process of *pejoration of meaning* which the term *knave* undergoes. This process involves the semantic extension *to the sphere*

of moral traits and behaviour. The metaphorical use of *knave* is engendered by the mapping of negative attributes related to morality and/or social status from the source domain onto the targets domains of moral qualities and things (see e.g. (6) and (7)).

5. Conclusions

The *systematic structure* of the semantic field of English social terms denoting an inferior status is illustrated by their parallel evolution. The majority of terms develop metaphorical extensions, confirming our hypothesis that terms belonging to the same frame develop the same type of semantic extensions [9]. The words which *do not exhibit figurative extensions* are *footman*, *page* and *vavassour*. We consider them to be *peripheral terms* in the frame of social terms, because they do not have a parallel evolution with the other terms in the frame and they do not have a rich polysemy.

Figurative uses of these terms are possible due to the grounding of metaphor in reality. Specifically, certain attributes which define the term in the social sphere are mapped onto the abstract sphere of moral traits and behaviour (e.g. *villain*, *servant*).

The analysis of the metaphorical extensions of the terms considered revealed ***the relation between status and implied moral qualities***. Most of the terms underwent *pejoration of meaning*, which confirms Hughes' belief that *terms denoting a low social status tend to acquire negative attributes which refer to traits of personality and behaviour* [5, 42].

A classification of terms according to their *metaphorical extensions* revealed the following:

a) Moral traits referring to a weak character as well as to a humble and obedient person are assigned to people who used to be the *servant* of a superior in the medieval period: *lackey*, *vassal*, *serf*, *knave* etc). With regard to the deterioration of meaning which such words undergo, Schreuder [12] offers an interesting explanation:

“Words which have once come to express **servitude** are apt to pass into an ethical sphere where they are **exposed to further deterioration**. A set of unfavourable associations (...) groups itself round the word – **trickery**, **roguishness**, **petty mischiefs**, **deceitfulness**, **dishonesty** – which are gradually considered as forming the essential part of the contents of conception at the expense of the original constituent elements” [12, 77].

Other negative attributes which are common to these words are: / dishonesty/, / lack of principles/ and / debauchery/.

b) Attributes denoting an outlaw, a violent and dangerous person are assigned to people who in the medieval period fulfill the role of a mercenary *soldier* (e.g. *brigand*, *blackguard*).

c) Moral traits denoting an ill-mannered and simple-minded person are specific to the words denoting a *peasant* (e.g. *churl*, *boor*).

These observations conform to the cognitivist view according to which metaphor is grounded in reality, as well as to Dahlgren's theory of stereotypes. Figure 3 illustrates the moral attributes which inferior social terms acquire.

Figure 3 Social terms and their moral connotations

Meanness, evilness, dishonesty	Weakness, servility	Rudeness, lack of education, stupidity	Debauchery, immorality	Violence, brutality, thievishness
blackguard	lackey	boor	ribald	brigand
knave	sergeant	churl	villain	villain
ribald	serf	clown	servant	blackguard
slave	servant	lout		
villain	slave	peasant		
	vassal	villain		

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ANNEX

**Blackguard* (XVIth c.): 1) the lowest menial of a royal or noble household in charge of kitchen utensils;

2) (in the military field): A black-liveried personal guard, a servant, a camp-follower having a low position in the army;

3) (XVIIth c.): an outlaw, a criminal;

4) (XVIIIth c.): one of low, worthless character; a scoundrel.

E.g. 1786 Burns Earnest Cry Pr. Viii, A blackguard snuggler right behind her [13: II: 248]

**Brigand*: 1) (IXth c.) a light-armed foot soldier, a blackguard; 2) (XVth c.) a bandit, an outlaw;

**Boor*: 1) (XVth c.) a husbandman, a peasant, a countryman; 2) a rustic with lack of refinement, a country-clown; a rude, ill-bred fellow;

E.g. 1598 Marston Pymal. Ix 142 1. dull-sprighted fat Boetian Boore [13::II:402]

**Churl* (XIth c.): 1) a serf, a bondman; 2) (XIIth c.) a peasant, a countryman; 3) (XIVth c.) (contemptuous use) a base fellow, a villain; 4) (modern use): rude, low-bred fellow;

E.g. 1821 Byron Sard. I ii, (1868)351 since...this churl has check'd, Thy gentle spirit, go [13: III: 207]

* *Clown* 1. (XVIth c.) a countryman, a peasant; 2) (XVIth c.) a man without refinement and culture; an ignorant, rude, uncouth, ill-bred man; 3) (XVIIth c.) a fool or jester as a stage character; 4) (mod.use) a character in a pantomime, in a circus;

* *Footman* (XIVth c.): 1) A foot soldier; 2) (Late XIV): a foot servant (a runner in attendance upon a rider of rank; a servant who ran before his master's carriage. (The word is no longer in use)

* *Knave*: 1) (XIth c.) a servant of low condition; 2) (XIIIth c.) an unprincipled, dishonest man (the modern is often contrasted with *fool*);

* *Lackey* (XVth c.) 1) a footman; 2) (XVth c) a servant, a knave; 3) (XVIth c.) a servile follower, a toady; 4) (in mod.use, as a term of political abuse): a servile follower;

* *Lout* (from O.E.) A servant (it loses its denotative meaning in the medieval period; therefore, in the XVIth century this term is only used with its connotative meaning: an awkward fellow, a clown, a bumpkin).

E.g. 1821 Clare Vill. Minstr.I.19. A more uncouthly lout was hardly seen [13: IX: 50]

**Page*: 1) (XIIIth c.) a boy of the lower orders; 2) (later) a youth preparing to be a knight;

**Peasant*: 1) (XVth c.) One who lives in the country and works on the land; 2) (XVIth c.) (term of abuse): low fellow, rascal, implying ignorance, stupidity, boorishness;

E.g. 1550 Disc. Common Weal Engl.(1893) 94 The subiectes of france, in reproche of whom we call them paisantes [13: XI:403]

* *Ribald*: 1) (XIIIth c.) a servant, a lackey; 2) (XIIIth c.) rascal, offensive person, someone who pursues licentious pleasures;

* *Sergeant*: 1) (XIIIth c.) a servant; 2) (in the military field) (late XIII): a soldier, a military servant; 3) (late XIV) a sergeant-at-arms (an armed officer attending a lord or the king, arresting traitors or offenders); 4) (now) a police officer of higher rank than a simple constable; 5) (XIIIth c.) (fig. use) a servant (of God, of Satan);

* *Serf*: 1) (XVth c.) a slave; 2) (XVth c.) a person in a condition of servitude; 3) (fig.use) a submissive person;

* *Servant*: 1) (XIIIth c.) a personal or domestic attendant; one whose duty is to wait upon his master or do certain work in his household; 2) (XIVth c.) (fig.use) a professed lover, one who is devoted to the service of a lady; (in bad sense) a paramour, a gallant; 3) (fig.use) (with religious signification) : servant of God;

E.g. 1666-67 Pepys Diary 4 Jan., Peg, and her servant, Mr. Lowther [13: XV: 27]

* *Slave*: 1) (XIIIth c.) one who is the property of another person by capture, by birth or by purchase; 2) (XVIth c.) a submissive, obedient person, a servile character; 3) (XVIth c.) (in less serious use): rascal, fellow (this meaning disappeared);

E.g. 1592 R.D. Hypnerotomachia 87 Dyvers persons wondering at the force of such a little slave Cupid [OED: XV: 666]

* *Vassal*: 1) (XVth c.) a feudal tenant who vowed obedience to his lord and in return held land under him; 2) (XVIth c.) one who is totally subjected to some influence; d) (XVIth c.) one who is devoted to someone (showing humbleness); (the term is no longer in use);

E.g. 1500 Melusine xxiv 163 Damoyselle...as to my part, your vassal & seruaunt shal I euer be [13: IXI: 456];

* *Vavasour* (XVth c.): a feudal tenant ranking immediately below a baron; (the term is no longer in use);

* *Villain*: 1) (XIVth c.) a peasant occupier or cultivator, subject to a lord or attached to a manor (a tenant in villeinage); 2) (XVth c.) a peasant regarded as vile and brutish; 3) (XVIIth c.) (fig. use) a wicked or evil person, a scoundrel, a base fellow; 4) (mod.use) the main evil character in a play or story.