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# ON THE ENGLISH LAW ENFORCEMENT VOCABULARY
## – ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND ARGUMENTATION –

This paper envisages the emergence and development of the English law enforcement vocabulary from the perspective of historical sociolinguistics. A sample dictionary corpus on 19th and 20th century police terms is the starting point of several significant semantic fields reflecting the key concepts: *ranks, duties and powers, names of police officers, equipment, crimes and offences, punishments*. The names of police officers are considered both diachronically (19th century versus 20th century) and synchronically (the level of formality), defining law enforcement in its key moments as a self-governing institution.

Individual histories of words relate to a larger development in history. Historical sociolinguistics shows the relation between language and society reflected in its historical dimension, here limited to the relation between activity and vocabulary. Specialised lexis and its development are closely connected to the evolution of the users' community, as "language is the living history of the human soul."[1]

The law enforcement in the UK has developed a specialised terminology starting with the first attempts to regulate police work and duties in the 14th century. The two key timeframes - the 19th and 20th centuries - are characterized by a search for stability, order and the value of regulation, as well as innovation. These features can be clearly seen in the efforts to standardize, refine and fix the English language. Thus, we target a corpus of semantically-related words and envisage their socially-determined lexical evolution.

There is a clear sociolinguistic connection between the social status or function of a speech-community and the register or the tone of the verbal legacy left by it.[2] All developments have linguistic consequences, some more direct than others: class and gender perceptions of police, the old and the new police, reformations, the emergence of professional criminals, the Police Act of 1919, pre-war strike waves, the making of Home Office, arbitrariness and corruption in police, the invention of the motor car and telegraphic communication. Only by combining the case histories of these words with those of similar background or meaning and the social determinants of the language can we trace the complex changes within this specialized language.

Specific terminology, the relation and its overlapping with non-specialized language address a functional evaluation of the language.

The emergence of law enforcement as a self-governing social entity, connected to and influenced by other systems further on advocates for a closely cut specialized vocabulary. Unlike the field of legal sciences, texts are not its main object. However, the well built institutional framework, traditions, ideology and reforms attribute a restricted meaning to some elements within the law enforcement vocabulary, or police technolect; here we study police terminology, not police discourse, which attach specific value to the lexemes under question regardless of the field they feature. Studying these items point to the intention of partially leaving the strictly linguistic area and approaching associated social, cultural and even political phenomena.

As any specialised vocabulary, the law enforcement vocabulary is made on the one hand of frequently used common words included and specifically marked in general dictionaries



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and selected according to frequency *(police, crime, punishment);* on the other hand there is a set of words which partially overlap another specialised lexis – military, legal, social sciences – challenging each other's relevance and primacy of use *(ranks, uniforms, law*); a third part lists technical, strictly specialised units, characterised by univocity and monoreference *(E-fit, handcuffs),* the trademark of law enforcement vocabulary. The table below is but an empirical example, mostly based on one specialized material.[3]

| **Jargon** | | **Slang** | **Acronyms and abbreviations** | **Latin** | **Clippings** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Specialisation** | **Technical words** | | | | |
| mule<br>mole<br>stab vest<br>law enforcement | identity kit<br>bullet-proof<br>ballistics<br>alias | filth<br>nick<br>dirtbag<br>deuce | GSR<br>TOD<br>Vic.<br>Perp.<br>DOB | modus operandi<br>corpus delicti<br>post mortem | photo-fit<br>E-fit<br>rap sheet<br>cybercrime<br>sarge |

The advantage of grouping words in semantic fields is that they reveal a heavy load of semantic changes, which can be later on linked to the structure of society itself. The scope of the field shows the variation in size of both categories, linguistic and social, interesting variations even if not entirely predictable. Thus, the English police vocabulary development is reflected in lexical changes: invention of new terms by naming new referents (*CS spray, speedcuffs*), removal of obsolete words from the vocabulary, borrowings (*sergeant, constable*); changes of meaning (generalisation, specialisation *(constable*), amelioration, perjoration *(copper*), euphemism), compounding (*shoplifting, hit-and-run, chief inspector*), changes of register (*meter lady*).

When building lexical fields we start from the centre to the outer limits, from prototype to periphery: the same word may appear in different fields and feature under various dictionary entries. Some of the semantic features may not be the ones we selected when setting the corpus, they may have other uses, in the root vocabulary or as part of other specialised vocabularies. Thus, research can be both paradigmatic and syntagmatic, considering, along descriptive nouns, adjectives, verbs and collocations (adjective-noun, verb-noun) determined as a part of law enforcement vocabulary *(convicted criminal, illegal immigrants, inside job, mug shot, drug dealing, blood sample, seize assets, modus operandi, mount an operation, criminal record*). The core terms, determined by shared context, frequency and specialised meanings are basically the law enforcement vocabulary.

The corpus analysed comprises sets of lexical items sharing a stem, a linguistic feature, referent or hyponym. They are equipped with their definitions of various meanings from dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesaurus and corpora, which provide a useful tool to investigate semantic relations: *Oxford English Dictionary, Encyclopædia Britannica, The Oxford Dictionary of Law, Oxford Thesaurus,* (Police Officers and Forces under the heading: *Society*), *WordNet* (hierarchical relations between words), *Longman – Lexicon of Contemporary English* (Section Courts of Law and Legal Work), *British National Corpus*.

Besides linguistic sources we also use materials describing the institution of law enforcement, organised in hyponyms (manuals, police tactics, British police history, etc.) and even images (associating the mental lexicon with a picture thesaurus for terms difficult to describe). These two sets of resources are simultaneously checked against each other.



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Another source is the documentation following the making and development of law enforcement as a governmental agency and social pole. From such a document[4] for example we find that one of the first names attached to police officers in the UK at the end of the 18th century was *Bow Street Runners*, employing a metonymy which indicates the address where they camped. This information has a historical and linguistic relevance and is only a piece of the intricate puzzle of specialised meanings.

The first step of making the corpus was listing all police terms and selecting central terms according to frequency and relevance. The next step was building semantic fields (institution components) and distributing the other terms in the selected fields according to hyponymy, synonymy and meronymy. Thus, the words reflect institutional components: *ranks, means of transport, uniform and equipment, crimes, institutions*.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Law enforcement LAW ENFORCEMENT** | ranks | high-rank | inspector, superintendent, commander, commissioner |
| | | low-rank | ***constable***, sergeant |
| | duties and powers | stop, search, arrest and detain protect life and property detect and apprehend criminals prevent crime | |
| | police officers | formal | constable, officer, detective, policeman |
| | | informal | **flatfoot,** copper, old Bill, ***bobby***, meter lady |
| | equipment | weaponry | **taser**, truncheon, baton, restraints, CS spray |
| | | vehicles | panda car, **helicopter**, horse, bicycle, motorcycle, van, ***Black Maria***, *carriage* |
| | | uniform and body protection | ***helmet***, **bullet-proof vest**, whistle, *rattle*, torch, duty belt, insignia, radio |
| | structure building | constabularies | territorial and special |
| | | divisions | Metropolitan Police Service |
| | crimes and offences | against the person | homicide: murder, manslaughter |
| | | | battery, rape, ***assault***, GBH |
| | | against property | Fraud, forgery, **cyber crime**, larceny, burglary, arson, *pilferage,* shoplifting |
| | punishment | serious | *Death penalty*, life imprisonment |
| | | light | community work, conditional discharge, fine, probation |

One type of lexical change is the appearance of new words, invented, borrowed from the predecessors of police - army, administration, law - and other languages - mainly Norman French: *sergeant, constable***.** Another frequent technique of obtaining new words is compounding**:** *detective chief inspector, pickpocket, shoplifting, hit-and-run* are only a few examples. The removal of obsolete words from usage is another type of lexical change: *rattle, pilferage.* The change of the meaning in time is a process connected with the inset of new social needs, via perjoration (*constable*, which once meant *commander of an army*), metaphor (*Head of Police, branch of police, the long arm of the law*) or metonymy (*Peelers, Bobbies*).

Starting from a set of words selected from Oxford English Dictionary and WordNet by the shared seme *public official who enforces the law,* we can only categorize them according to various criteria, due to the large extent of their possible linguistic analysis.



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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| bobby | dick | knocker-up | police | shoofly |
| bluebottle | flat foot / | knickers | policewoman / | speed cop |
| bogey | splayfoot | lollipop lady | matron | sheriff |
| border warren | flattie | mug | police lieutenant | splay foot |
| Bow Street | flat-footed | mug john | Paddy | splay-foot |
| Runner | flat feet | meter maid / | Portreeve | trap |
| Body-guard | fuzz | lady | Posse comitatus | tail |
| beadle | gendarme | nark / narc | plainclothesman | thief taker |
| bull | guard | patrolman | officer | trooper |
| busy | grass / | peace officer | old Bill | the Sweeney |
| constable | grasshopper | peeler | rozzer | the force |
| cop | gumshoe | peon | runner | the rank |
| copper | hawkshaw | pig | shamus | warder |
| care-taker | jemadar | pointsman | slop | warden |
| detective | jack | police officer | sentry | watchman |
| dogberry | keeper | policeman | sowar | |

What distinguishes them is either their emergence and persistence in time, their level of formality or a combination of these.

*Bobby*, for example, is not widely used in Britain now, though it can occur with a mixture of affection and slight irony in the phrase "village bobby", nowadays referring to the local community police officer. It is derived from Robert Peel (Bobby being the usual nickname for Robert) the founder of the Metropolitan Police. *Peeler* also comes from Robert Peel; it has largely disappeared in Britain, but is sometimes used in Northern Ireland. *Cop or Copper* refers to "one who captures or snatches". *Flatfoot* refers to the large amount of walking that a police officer would do, thus causing flat feet. *Nickers* relates to an officer "nicking" suspects i.e. arresting them, and taking them to "the nick" (i.e. a cell in either a prison or police station). *Sweeney* is a Cockney rhyming slang for the Flying Squad, from Sweeney Todd, inspiring the television series The Sweeney. *Old Bill* is a term in use in London among other areas, inspiring the television series The Bill. The origin of this nickname is obscure; according to the Metropolitan Police themselves, there are at least 13 different explanations. *Bizzies* is a Common Liverpool slang term for the police, invented as the police were always too "busy" to help.[5]

Police names can be categorized according to age, frequency, etymology, register, origin, compounding, mono and poly semantism and their development. We can clearly identify and distinguish levels of formality: specialised terms, acknowledged by the institution, and units reflecting socio-cultural attitudes in the community (street and criminal slang, the language of the media, detective films and stories).[6]

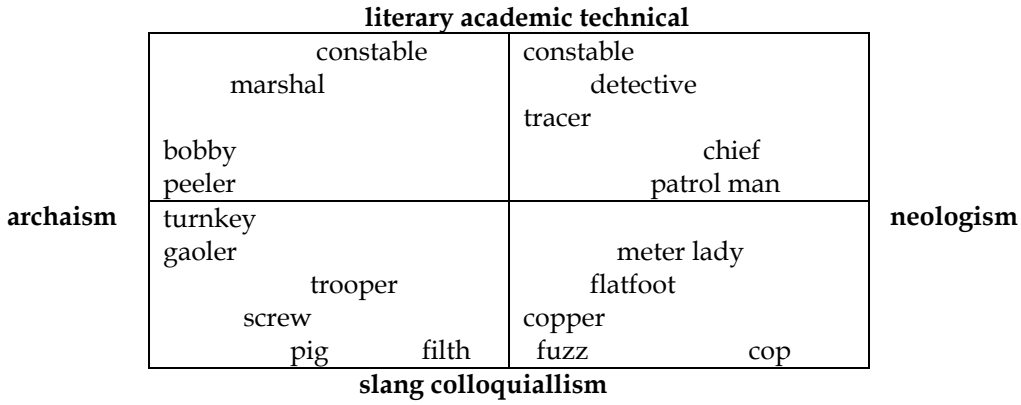
| | **bobby** | **constable** | **officer** | **gumshoe** | **grass** | **copper** | **dogberry** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| generic | + | + | + | - | - | + | - |
| Slang | + | - | - | + | + | + | + |
| archaism | +/- | - | - | - | - | - | + |
| positive | + | + | + | - | - | - | - |

Some meanings show close resemblance or even potentially identical component sets, although pluses and minuses do not necessarily mean the same thing. The synonym fields in



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this linguistic sector tend to divide into registers, which also reflects the historical development of the language. Subsequently, the semantic field of *police officer* may be represented in a diagram, displaying register on a formal/informal axis and history on an archaism/neologism axis**.**




This study is the first step which offers positive and argumented answers to questions related to the emergence and development of a specialised vocabulary. It proves the existence of an English police vocabulary and the fact it reflects the social reality of this field. The police vocabulary is organised according to the taxonomy of the police as an institution and has developed alongside the institution itself, displaying diachronic changes similar to the social mutations within the field it describes.

A future research can involve a thorough classification of the sets of words according to various criteria, a cross-linguistic reference and comparison and, hopefully, a better understanding of the relations between them and more importantly, of the changes in the relations between them. The diachronic and synchronic perspectives on the terminological fields will ultimately stand as evidence of the development of the English law enforcement vocabulary throughout centuries.

## NOTES

[1] Barfield, O., *History in English Word,.* Steiner Books, London, 1953, p.26
[2] Hughes, G., *Words in Time; A Social History of the English Vocabulary*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1988, p.5
[3] English, J., *Police Training Manual, 7th edition*., McGraw-Hill International, London, p. 235-244
[4] Emsley, C., *The English Police, A Political and Social History,* Longman, London, 1996 p.25
[5] *Oxford Reference Online* http://oed.com
[6] Nida, E., *Componential Analysis of Meaning*, Mouton, Paris, 1975

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*Oxford Reference Online* (Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford Dictionary of Law) http://oed.com
*WordNet Reference Online*, http://wordnet.princeton.edu/

**RÉSUMÉ**

LE VOCABULAIRE DE LA POLICE EN ANGLAIS : IDENTIFICATION ET ARGUMENTATION

*La constitution et l'évolution du vocabulaire de la Police dans le Royaume-Uni de la Grande Bretagne représente une direction de recherche insuffisamment exploitée. Le classement de ce type de vocabulaire avec ceux qui y sont déjà consacrés, tels le vocabulaire médical, celui juridique ou encore celui économique – suppose une approche interdisciplinaire de l'anglais, menée sous l'angle de la sémantique lexicale et de la sociolinguistique historique. Le point de départ de cette recherche se trouve dans l'établissement d'un corpus de dictionnaire de type thésaurus. Ce corpus comprend des groupements de mots apparentés sémantiquement et qui forment des champs ou des schémas unitaires mais, en même temps, versatiles et soumis à l'évolution sémantique. Le lexique spécialisé du domaine de la Police est constitué de mots qui connaissent une large circulation en langue commune, inclus et marqués du point de vue diastratique dans les dictionnaires de langue générale et mis en évidence par leur degré de fréquence ("police", "crime", "punishment"), termes qui se superposent partiellement sur un autre lexique, spécialisé, cette fois-ci, ("ranks", "uniform", "law") et sur certains élements strictement spécialisés ("E-fit", "handcuffs", "GSR"). Cette étude arrive à mettre en évidence l'existence d'un vocabulaire de police en anglais contemporain structuré selon le modèle de l'institution qu'il décrit.*

**Mots-clés** : *lexique de la Police, interdisciplinarité, évolution sémantique.*



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