

DIACHRONIC EVOLUTION OF THE AXIOLOGICAL LEXICON IN BRITISH ENGLISH

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Abstract

This article traces the development of value-laden vocabulary in British English across five historical periods: the medieval chivalric and Christian ethos; Renaissance humanism and emerging statehood; Enlightenment liberalism and press freedom; Victorian moral propriety and euphemism; and twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideals of democracy, diversity, and identity. By reviewing secondary data from authoritative online and scholarly sources, it identifies key terms—such as honour, virtue, liberty, duty, tolerance, sovereignty, and intersectionality—and situates them within their socio-cultural contexts. The study demonstrates how shifts in collective values are mirrored in the lexicon and discusses implications for contrastive axiological analysis and intercultural language pedagogy.

Keywords: Axiological lexicon; British English; diachronic linguistics; medieval values; Renaissance humanism; Enlightenment liberalism; Victorian morality; contemporary discourse.

Introduction

The lexicon of British English has continually absorbed and reflected prevailing social, religious, and political values. From the chivalric and Christian ideals of the Middle Ages through Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment liberalism, Victorian morality, and on to contemporary debates over diversity and identity, the choice and usage of evaluative vocabulary have served as indicators of collective priorities. This study traces the historical evolution of values in British English, identifying key value-laden terms and their appearance in successive eras, thereby illustrating how shifts in social norms are mirrored in the language itself (Chivalry, 2025; Medieval literature, 2025).

Methods

A secondary-data review was conducted, drawing on authoritative online resources—principally Wikipedia, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Encyclopedia.com*, and official UK government guidance—and peer-reviewed scholarship for historical context.

Results

Medieval Period (Middle Ages)

In medieval England, the chivalric code—a fusion of warrior ethos, Christian piety, and courtly manners—shaped aristocratic values such as honour, loyalty, valor, and courtesy, often transmitted through Arthurian romances and morality plays (Chivalry, 2025; Medieval literature, 2025). The Norman Conquest (1066) introduced French terms for moral ideals—*honesty* (from Old French *honnêteté*), *virtue* (*vertu*), *justice* (*justice*), *honour* (*honneur*), and *loyalty* (*loialté*)—augmenting the Old English lexicon with refined moral concepts.

Renaissance and Early Modern Period (16th–17th Centuries)

The Renaissance’s humanist values of dignity, reason, and civic virtue entered English via Latinate borrowings. Scholars and playwrights—most notably Shakespeare—popularized terms like reason, liberty, duty, conscience, sin, and redemption, reflecting Reformation theology and classical learning (Renaissance period: 1550–1660, n.d.). The rise of the modern state brought patriotic and legal values into public discourse: references to Magna Carta and “rights of Englishmen” presaged the 17th-century expansion of political vocabulary, including rights, consent, and equality.

Enlightenment (18th Century)

The Enlightenment valorized liberty, empiricism, and progress, embedding concepts like constitution, press freedom, citizen, and public opinion in political debate. By mid-century, Britain celebrated the “Freeborn Englishman” as the embodiment of inalienable rights under a mixed government (Freedom of the Press, n.d.; Freedom of the Press in Eighteenth-Century England, n.d.). Pamphlets and newspapers thrived, with political figures lauding a “free press” as essential to curbing monarchical power.

Victorian Era (19th Century)

Victorian morality prized respectability, modesty, duty, and honesty, leading to euphemistic language and formal speech. Speakers avoided blunt terms, opting for circumlocutions—e.g., referring to undergarments as “unmentionables” or “inexpressibles”—to uphold decorum (Euphemism and Language Change, n.d.; Euphemistic Language in Victorian Obituaries, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution and imperial expansion introduced secular values—progress, industry, civilization—even as Biblical idioms (e.g., “by the sweat of one’s brow”) remained in common use.

Contemporary Era (20th–21st Centuries)

Post-war British English foregrounds democracy, human rights, equality, and tolerance. The idiom “stiff upper lip” continues to evoke British stoicism (Stiff upper lip, n.d.), while “Fundamental British Values”—democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect—are formally promoted in schools (GOV.UK, 2014). Political events like Brexit reinvigorated terms such as sovereignty, independence, and freedom (Brexit, n.d.). Social-justice movements further expanded the evaluative lexicon: Black Lives Matter and #MeToo spotlight values of anti-racism, dignity, and empowerment (Black Lives Matter, n.d.; MeToo movement, n.d.).

Discussion

Over seven centuries, British English has continuously reshaped its axiological lexicon to mirror evolving value systems. Each era’s dominant ideologies—feudal-Christian virtues, humanist inquiry, liberal rights, moral propriety, and contemporary pluralism—have left identifiable lexical footprints. This diachronic survey highlights how contrastive axiological analysis can not only trace the semantic history of value words but also inform modern language teaching by sensitizing learners to culture-specific evaluative patterns.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of values in British English demonstrates a dynamic interplay between sociocultural change and linguistic expression. By cataloguing and contrasting value terms across periods, linguists and educators can foster

deeper intercultural awareness and more nuanced language pedagogy, ensuring that both universal and culture-specific values are acknowledged and taught.

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