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THE VERTICAL AXIS OF VIRTUE: AXIOLOGICAL GRADIENTS AND MORAL RECALIBRATION IN ÆLFRIC'S HOMILETIC PROSE

Summary. This article investigates the complex didactic and axiological dimensions of comparisons of inequality within Old English religious discourse, specifically focusing on the transition from heroic-pagan to Christian-moral frameworks. It argues that comparative structures in late tenth-century prose transcend their basic grammatical function, serving instead as sophisticated rhetorical instruments for moral guidance and the systemic reshaping of the target audience's societal values. By analyzing the homiletic prose of Ælfric of Eynsham, this study demonstrates how both explicit (morphologically and syntactically arranged) comparisons of inequality and implicit antithetical sequences construct a vertical axis that contrasts the ephemeral material world with the eternal spiritual realm. Through this established axiological network, Ælfric systematically uproots inherited Proto-Indo-European (PIE) symbols, steering the medieval recipient toward a novel thematic paradigm based on binary oppositions: material vs spiritual, temporal vs eternal, celestial light vs blind darkness. A significant portion of the research is dedicated to the recalibration of zoomorphic symbols (wolf, wild boar, raven, eagle) and relevant onomastics; Ælfric effectively 'topples' the high-status predatory beasts – such as the wolf and raven – which held martial prestige in the pagan Anglo-Saxon worldview. Concurrently, he elevates the virtues of the lamb and the pastor, assigning them a supreme spiritual value that was previously absent from the heroic scale of values. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Ælfric's linguistic scaling functioned as a primary mechanism for re-education of the Anglo-Saxon evaluative faculty, transforming the cultural perception of power from physical dominance to spiritual obedience and divine grace.

Key words Ælfric, axiology, comparisons of inequality, didacticism, Old English, religion discourse, zoomorphic symbols.

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Проблеми гуманітарних наук: збірник наукових праць Дрогобицького державного педагогічного університету імені Івана Франка. Серія «Філологія», 65, 55–62, doi: <https://doi.org/10.24919/2522-4565.2026.65.7>

ЕВОЛЮЦІЙНИЙ ШЛЯХ АНГЛО-САКСОНСЬКОЇ ВЕРТИКАЛІ ЧЕСНОТ: АКСІОЛОГІЧНІ ГРАДІЄНТИ ТА МОРАЛЬНЕ ПЕРЕВИХОВАННЯ В ГОМІЛЕТИЧНІЙ ПРОЗІ ЕЛЬФРІКА

Анотація. Ця наукова розвідка досліджує дидактичні й аксіологічні виміри порівнянь нерівності в релігійному дискурсі давньоанглійської мови. Основна увага зосереджена на переході від героїко-язичницьких цінностей до християнсько-моральних засад. Встановлено, що порівняльні структури в давньоанглійській релігійній прозі кінця X століття виходять поза межі своєї основної граматичної функції, слугуючи складним риторичним інструментом для моральних настанов та системного переосмислення суспільних цінностей цільової аудиторії. Аналіз гомілетичної прози Ельфріка з Ейншема дає підстави стверджувати, що як експліцитні морфологічно та синтаксично впорядковані порівняння нерівності, так і імпліцитні одиниці, вибудовані на основі антитезовості, конструюють вертикальну вісь, яка протиставляє ефемерний матеріальний світ вічній духовній сфері. За допомогою цієї усталеної аксіологічної мережі Ельфрік системно викоринює успадковані праіндоєвропейські символи, налаштовуючи середньовічного реципієнта сприймати нову тематичну парадигму, засновану на бінарних опозиціях: матеріальне :: духовне, плинне :: вічне, небесне світло :: темрява. Значна частина дослідження присвячена розгляду смислового перезавантаження зооморфних символів (вовк, дикий кабан, ворон, орел) та відповідної ономастики. Ельфрік ефективно зміщує хижих звірів і птахів (вовк, крук), престижних і шанованих у язичницькому англосаксонському світогляді. Водночас він підносить чесноти ягнати та пастора, наділяючи їх найвищими духовними рисами, не засвідченими в язичницькій аксіологічній парадигмі англосаксів. Лінгвістичне шкалювання Ельфріка функціювало як основний механізм перевстановлення системи цінностей англосаксонської мовної спільноти, змістивши акценти з шанування сили й фізичного домінування на духовну слухняність і покірність.

Ключові слова аксіологія, Ельфрік, давньоанглійський, дидактика, зооморфні символи, порівняння нерівності, релігійний дискурс.

Statement of the problem. This paper explores the axiological potential of language by examining the comparative structures utilized within Old English religious discourse. The relevance of the study stems from a notable gap in the current scholarship: the lack of the special inquiry into the linguo-philosophical nature and didactic functions of the comparisons in Old English homiletic and hagiographic texts. In this research, comparisons of inequality are treated as diachronically variable phenomena that are fundamentally shaped by discourse, cultural and contextual boundaries.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The recent trajectory of studies of English reflects an ever-growing interest in the intersection of cultural heritage and its specific representation in language. Contemporary research has moved beyond purely descriptive philology, increasingly adopting interdisciplinary frameworks – historical sociolinguistics, cultural axi-

ology, and grammar (specifically morphology and syntax). The system of values is a long lasting (spanning in time for centuries) cultural asset, and those cherished issues in Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian axiological framework can be traced back to Proto-Indo-European world-view (Mallory & Adams, 2006). This diachronic perspective is further enriched the works of Taranets (2008, p. 104, 106, 140, 144), who termed the worldview of Proto-Indo-Europeans as having binary character (= the binary of existence). This observation is crucial in understanding the PIE ancestral axiological axis in terms of polarity (evolving from horizontal to vertical).

While traditional studies often viewed homiletic texts as static resource for dogma, recent works by scholars such as Isabella Bunyatova (2025) have highlighted the multifaceted properties of homiletic tradition in reshaping the Anglo-Saxon world-modelling system. Current research often explores how «language-in-action» func-

tion as a tool for moral re-education, specifically examining the use of directives (Buniyatova & Horodilova, 2024) to influence and shape behavior of the target audience with the aim to control social order. Furthermore, the study of axiological universalism (Lang, 2020) provides a theoretical background for understanding how medieval authors (specifically Ælfric) attempted to align local values with Christian ethics, which is reflected in the semiotics of nature of the so called the «Beasts of Battle» (Britt, 2014).

The purpose of the study is to analyze the axiological transformation of the concept of dark in Old English literary discourse, identifying the linguistic and cultural mechanisms that facilitate the transition from horizontal heroic patterns to a vertical Christian moral hierarchy.

To achieve this purpose, the following research objectives were identified:

1) to examine language as a persuasive instrument capable of regulating and structuring the recipient's moral and social existence through the construction of binary oppositions of virtues and vices;

2) to delineate the diachronic variability of Anglo-Saxon values and identify the primary triggers responsible for axiological shifts and the establishment of vertical axiological poles (from PIE roots to late Old English homiletics);

3) to demonstrate the intrinsic connection between the Binary of existence and the inherent polarity of world perception, analyzing how these conceptual frameworks are manifested in comparative structures of heroic and religious texts.

Presentation of the material. The power of words in Old English was paramount. Early medieval England was characterized by a restricted landscape of communication, with limited sources of information and no means of immediate news transmission. Consequently, the prevailing types of discourse – primarily religious, heroic and legal – were not only finite in number, but also reinforcing and didactic in nature. By their essence, these discourses exerted a profound influence on target audience serving to regulate and structure various aspects of medieval life. Within this regulatory framework, language structures – specifically comparisons of inequality – emerged as a vital rhetorical device for establishing moral order. That said we outline

our primary academic interest as the study how comparative structures were utilized to perform didactic function in Old English religious discourse.

The primary intension of Old English religious discourse, particularly sermons, was multifaceted rather than unilateral. Beyond merely explaining dogmas, homiletic texts presented lives of saints as an archetypal pattern for imitation, a practical guide for living and a moral compass for distinguishing good and evil. Essentially, it functioned as a 'school of the spirit' designed to transform the recipient's inner world.

The Binary of existence and the inherent polarity in the world perception are persistent properties of human cognition, traceable from the earliest mythological and folkloric records (Taranets, 2008; Mallory & Adams, 2006). Such dualism extended profoundly into the medieval consciousness; the world was perceived through rigid oppositions: *soul vs body*, *light vs dark*, *good vs bad*, *temporary vs the eternal*. Reflecting its Proto-Indo European heritage, this discourse is characterized by a dramatic absence of «half-tones» or intermediary states, presenting a starkly polarized moral landscape (for more examples on that inherent polarity read Malory & Adams, 2006). This historically deeply rooted, polarized comprehension of world is inherently reflected in comparative structures. Fundamentally, comparisons serve as a mechanism for economizing linguistic effort; rather than requiring a lengthy description of a novel object, idea or action, they bridge the gap between the known and the unknown. Beyond this cognitive utility, comparisons of inequality possess an intrinsic evaluative capacity, acting as a powerful tool for assessment. This is precisely where comparisons of inequality – or inequative constructions – become vital. In religious discourse, these structures go far more than merely describe reality; they actively evaluate and reshape it. By doing so, they provide the scaffolding for the target audience's evaluative system, guiding the recipient through a structured hierarchy of values (axiological scaling).

The axiological system of any given community is intrinsically reflected in its language. While certain values are considered universal and timeless – cross-cultural principles such as justice, truthfulness, and responsibility (Lang, 2020) – others are culture-specific and

temporally bounded. These latter values are often dictated by the dominant ideology, religion, and behavioral discourse practices of a specific era.

A striking example of this phenomenon is found in pre-Christian Germanic culture, where bravery was conceptualized through the ferocity and resilience of the «*beasts of battle*» – the wolf, the raven and the eagle (Britt, 2014). While the precise literary and historical interpretation of these «*dark wings and grey furs*» remains a subject of active debate (Neubauer, 2021), the heroic perception of these creatures is undeniably crystalized within the vast corpus of Germanic onomastics. From a socio-linguistic perspective, the naming of a child or the decoration of an artifact is an act of positive attribution; it is highly improbable that community would bestow names or craft artifacts featuring figures viewed as purely ominous or negative. Consequently, names derived from boar (*eofor*), such as *Eve-rard* or *Eoforhild*, served to honour resilience, adaptability and courage, while those tied to the wolf (*wulf*), like *Adolph*, *Randolph*, or *Sigewulf*, celebrated an inherent nobility and strength.

The eagle, frequently depicted soaring over the battlefield (Britt, 2014), was synonymous with strength, freedom and authority, a magnificence immortalized in names like *Arnold* («*eagle-power*»), *Ahren* («*freedom-power*») and *Arvid* («*eagle-wood*»). Similarly, the raven was bestowed with attributes of intelligence, wisdom and relentless warrior spirit, preserved in *Hræfn*, *Bertram* («*bright raven*»), *Wolfram* («*wolf-raven*»). For the pagan Anglo-Saxons these creatures were not merely scavengers, but positive symbols around which a heroic axiological axis rotated – praising battle prowess, power and freedom. However, this positive reception was fundamentally destabilized by the introduction of Christianity: the new religion and cultural settings necessitated a re-categorization of these beasts, shifting them from noble, martial companions of the warrior to ominous symbols of a fallen world in need of redemption. Yet, it would be an oversimplification to assume that the advent of Christianity resulted in the immediate erasure of these time-honoured symbols. Instead, they persisted within non-clerical literary monuments as cultural residue, for instance, in «*The Battle of Maldon*», wolves, eagles and ravens continue to haunt the battlefield. This suggests a period of

axiological dualism, where the heroic «beasts of battle» coexisted with their newly emerging allegoric negative role or oblivion.

The advent of Christianity necessitated a radical axiological shift, where the virtues once attributed to these animals were either dismissed, inverted or entirely suppressed. The wolf, formerly a symbol of protection, was redefined as a predatory antagonist to the «Christian flock» under the guidance of Christ the Pastor. This degradation of the lupine archetype extended further into the realm of social morality: the term for «*wolverine*» (the she-wolf) acquired a metaphorical, derogatory meaning, becoming synonymous with the prostitute. This linguistic shift reflects a broader didactic strategy to categorize formerly heroic and eagerly accepted traits as inherently sinful or socially deviant. The *wolf* appears to be opposed to the *lamb*: (1) *and wearð awend of wulfe to sceape* [was changed from a wolf to a sheep] (Ælfric, II. Natale Sancte Eugenie Uieginis, 100). This transition from a heroic-pagan to a religious-Christian axiological framework was not merely a change of vocabulary, but a systemic re-education of the recipient's evaluative faculties. Within the Christian axiological frame, sheepish traits can be regarded as positive and are attributed to those of true faith, good will.

It is within this shift that comparative structures played a crucial role. By utilizing comparisons of inequality, religious authors could devalue formerly revered secular traits while simultaneously elevating Christian values. For instance, physical strength started to be opposed to the spiritual fortitude. The question arises: through what specific mechanism did this axiological shift occur? The answer likely lies in the process of conceptual framing. The pagan Anglo-Saxons prioritized the observable, favorable traits of these predators – such as their strategic prowess in hunting and their ferocity – viewing them as models for heroic conduct. Christian religious discourse extracted the wolf from its naturalistic setting immersing it into a profoundly symbolic and moralistic context. Within this new framework, the wolf's behavior was no longer admired for its strength, but condemned as a metaphor for the predatory nature of sin and lust, effectively rebranding a heroic archetype as a paragon of moral threat.

This study hypothesizes that comparisons of inequality in Old English religious discourse

served as a cognitive-linguistic bridge, facilitating the systematic devaluation of heroic-pagan archetypes in favour of an emerging Christian moral hierarchy. Among the diverse properties of the Old English religious discourse, axiological scaling emerges as a primary mechanism for moral re-orientation. This scaling is manifested across various language levels (Buniyatova, 2025), most notably within comparative structures of inequality.

We posit that this «axiological gradient» was perfected in these constructions to dismiss earthly pleasures as pallid and ephemeral, while simultaneously elevating the divine essence as a radiant and absolute peak of the moral scale. The primary corpus for this research is comprised of the works of Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955 – c. 1010), commonly known as Ælfric the Grammarian. As a prolific Anglo-Saxon abbot and a master of standard Old English prose, Ælfric provides a reliable and linguistically stable foundation for axiological analysis. Ælfric's religious didacticism is characterized as a deliberate, refined system of teaching (Buniyatova & Horodilova, 2024).

The central comparative pairs reflecting axiological priorities of this newly designed Christian value system revolve around favourably preferred virtues such as *purity*, *eternity*, *truth*, ranked in direct opposition to *corruption*, *transience*, and *falsehood*. These virtues and their corresponding «blemishes» are attributed to generalized positive concepts – namely – *the virgin*, *the soul*, and the *power of God* – against which their respective adversaries are measured: *the sinner*, *earthly life*, and *the power of idols*.

While the pagan Anglo-Saxons conceptualized themselves as an integral part of the natural world – a worldview vividly reflected in their zoomorphic onomastics – the emerging Christian axiological pattern fundamentally severed this link. This new paradigm prioritized the sanctity of Christian saints over the natural world that had been so central in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon devotion. As Ælfric asserts: (2) *Wundorlic is God on his halgum* [wonderful is God in His Saints] (Ælfric, Praefatio, 54), effectively redirecting the «wonder» once reserved for the natural or heroic sphere toward the divine manifestations within the holy. In this new hierarchy, the «heroic» animal was stripped off its noble status and relegated

to a lower ontological tier. This shift is manifested by opposing the higher-ranking, reasoning human to the low-ranking, irrational, beast as evidenced in the following example: (3) <...> *þurh þæt gescead ana we synd selran þonne þa ungeasceadwisan nytenu* [Through that reason alone we are better than the irrational beasts] (Ælfric, *Nativitas Domini Nostri Iesu Christi*, 148).

Direct, explicit comparative constructions are relatively sparse within Ælfric's homiletic corpus. Instead, he frequently employs extensive, antithetical rhetorical sequences that subtly guide the recipient toward a singular, predetermined comparative conclusion. In this sense, Ælfric's comparisons are largely implicit and performative, designed to steer the audience's moral judgement without relying exclusively on overt morphological markers or syntactic constructions. This indirect persuasiveness has been identified in recent scholarship as a hallmark of Ælfric's discourse. His strategy involves the use of non-canonical imperatives and a distinctive handling of personal deictics – specifically the deliberate avoidance of 'I – you' pronouns. This stylistic choice serves to soften the directive or imperative flavour of the homily, transforming what could be perceived as a rigid command into a softly fatherly guidance (Buniyatova, 2025). By neutralizing the deictic distance and refraining from abundant usage of syntactically and morphologically marked comparisons, Ælfric subtly presents his axiological scaling not as a personal imposition but as absolute, objective truths, communal wisdom to be shared by the target audience.

We observe distinct instances of axiological scaling within Ælfric's religious discourse, where comparisons are constructed vertically. This hierarchy positions the spiritual and divine at the apex (*the soul*, *heaven*, *God*), while the material, earthly and sinful are relegated to the base. Ælfric's homily *De Auguriis*, lines 47-90 (On Auguries) represents a direct polemic against lingering pagan practices, which remained deeply entrenched within the medieval community. In his effort to uproot these traditions, Ælfric employs comparative structures to frame Christian «wisdom» as superior to «heathen magic». These didactically charged comparisons align along several axiological trajectories, primarily: 1) the hierarchy of *Power and Wisdom*. Rather than mere phys-

ical strength, Ælfric scales the divine based on intellectual and creative supremacy (God vs The Devil). Ælfric's extensive and rhetorically diffuse exposition regarding the omnipotence of God versus the strictly circumscribed powers of the devil and sorcery (*Ælfric, De Auguriis*, lines 122–150) may be synthesized into a single axiological comparison: *Se Ælmohtiga God is strengra þonne se deofol / wiccan* [almighty God is stronger than the devil / witches] (Old English reconstruction by the author, L.K.). While Ælfric himself often favours a more expansive, «fatherly» delivery to bypass direct formulae, this underlying comparisons serve as the logical foundation for the recipient to draw desired conclusions.

The *Hierarchy of Substance* represents the pinnacle of Ælfric's axiological scaling, wherein the physical properties of the celestial and material worlds are used to calibrate the value of the spiritual essence. In Anglo-Saxon worldview, radiance is linked to power. Thus, by invoking the sun and stars Ælfric facilitates a reorientation of reality. The soul is compared with the brightness of the sun, stars and the moon. The divine – the ultimate «good» – is framed as luminous and celestial, diametrically opposed to the «blind darkness», death and falsehood. In this trajectory, the soul is attributed with properties that exceed physical constraints of the human body. As observed in the homily on *The Nativity of our Lord*, Ælfric avoids explicit comparative constructions in favour of descriptive performative scaling of the soul's agility: (4) *heo hæfð swa mycele swyftnyssse þæt heo on anre tide gif heo swa wyle, besceawað heofonan and ofer sæ flyhð ... and swa hrade swa heo gehyrð þære burge naman ... swa hrade heo mæg þa burh on hire geþohte gescyppan ...* [It (the soul) has such great swiftness that in one moment, if it so wills, it surveys the heavens and flies over the sea... and as soon as it hears the city's name... just as quickly it can create that city in its thought] (*The Nativity of our Lord*, 124). Here the «substance» is defined by its transcendence of time and space. By contrasting the soul's instantaneous swiftness (*swyftnyssse*) with the static nature of the physical world, Ælfric leads the recipient to conclude that the spiritual essence is inherently greater than the material vessel. This indirect comparison functions as a persuasive tool, guiding the target audience toward the desired direction.

The hierarchy of *Divine vs Human's Agency* is illustrated in a passage from *De Oratione Moysi*, where Ælfric recounts King David's selection between three divine punishments (famine, war or pestilence). The King's decision is framed through an explicit comparison of inequality: (5) *Un-eaðe me in þis, ac me is swaðeah leofre þæt ic on Godes handa befealle þonne ic on mannes handa befealle, forðan þe his mildheortnyssa syndon manigfealde* [This is difficult for me, but it nevertheless dearer to me that I should fall into God's hands rather than that I should fall into man's hands; because His mercies are manifold] (*Ælfric, XIII. De Oratione Moysi*, 248).

This narrative serves a sophisticated persuasive function: by presenting the comparative *leofre ... þonne* as the resolution to a state of unease (*un-eaðe*), Ælfric creates a cognitive template for the recipient. The passage does not merely report a choice, it establishes an axiological priority where divine mercy – characterized as «manifold» (*manigfealde*) – renders human intervention naturally second-rate. *Forðan* serves as a cause connector that anchors axiological scale of supremacy of the divine agency.

Conclusions. The investigation into didactic and rhetorical strategies of Ælfric of Eynsham reveals that comparisons of inequality serve as much more than mere grammatical markers; they are the primary linguistic architects of a new Christian social and spiritual reality. Through the systemic application of axiological gradients, Ælfric facilitated a profound recalibration of the Anglo-Saxon system of values, moving largely from horizontal (equal in status), martial prestige to a vertical, divine hierarchy. The findings of this study lead to the following key conclusions:

1. **Linguistic scaling as a didactic tool:** Ælfric utilizes both explicit morphologically and syntactically marked comparatives (e.g. *selra, beorthre*) and implicit «fatherly» rhetoric to establish a hierarchy of values. These structures function as a guidance for the recipient in prioritizing the eternal over the ephemeral.

2. **The toppling of Heroic Onomastics:** the transition from a heroic-pagan framework to a Christian one necessitated a semiotic demotion of formerly lauded symbols. The once prestigious «beasts of battle» – the wolf, the raven, the eagle, the wild boar – underwent a systemic recate-

gorization. This dramatic shift is evidenced by the deliberate dismissal of the wolf's traditional associations with nobility and bravery in favor of pejorative, metaphorical alignment with the devil. By prioritizing lambs and pastors Ælfric facilitates a radical axiological turn: it topples the entire secular prestige system, replacing the martial beast with the humble flock as a new moral standard (*of wulfe to sceape*).

3. **The Primacy of intangible:** by scaling the swiftness and radiance of the soul above the physical constraints of the sun, moon, and human body, Ælfric successfully internalizes the concept of power, associating it with wisdom and divine mercy (*mildheotnyssa*).

4. **Axiological dualism:** Ælfric represents values vertically – good, plausible is on the top, bad, undesirable is in the bottom, ensuring that the vertical axis of Christian virtue became the new standard for social and spiritual conduct.

Directions for further research. This investigation opens several avenues for further scholarly development. First, a comparative analysis of the axiological comparative structures in the religious discourse of Wulfstan and Ælfric would highlight the stylistic diversity of late OE homiletics. Second, a broader diachronic study into the evolution of «the beasts of battle» across diverse Indo-European cultures could offer profound insights into ancestral mythopoetic symbols.

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