The Historical Development of Shell Nouns.
PhD-Project by Annette Mantlik


1. Research background
Schmid defines shell nouns as "[…] an open-ended functionally-defined class of abstract nouns that have […] the potential for being used as conceptual shells for complex, proposition-like pieces of information" (Schmid 2000: 4). Typical shell nouns like idea, problem, chance, claimed to be relatively unspecific in content, are used in certain syntactical surroundings which specify the shell nouns' content: "[…] the shell contents, i.e. the complementing clauses, fill the semantically unspecific shell nouns with concrete conceptual content" (Schmid 2007: 317). Noun and pattern taken together make up a so called shell-content construction. The shell-content constructions taken into consideration in the present study are the following: N that, N-be-that, N to, N-be-to, N-wh, N-be-wh.

The term 'shell noun' finds acceptance among a growing group of scholars in an increasing number of disciplines (cf. Caldwell 2009; Flowerdew 2008; Aktas & Cortes 2008). This justifies research into the etymological origins of shell nouns as well as into their historical development up to the present day in order to establish more accurately when and how these abstract nouns became part of the English language and since when they have been used as shell nouns. This is what the present paper aims to do. Inherently, of course, we hope to contribute to the viability of the terminology proposed by Schmid (2000), and, in addition, to extend the theoretical framework drawing on both cognitive and psycholinguistic findings (cf. Langacker 1987 and Kauschke 2007).

2. Aims and hypotheses
The hypothesis underlying the present paper in regard with the lexico-semantic development of shell nouns is that the vast majority of shell nouns can be traced back to verbal roots in ancient Greek. It is argued that these verbs were transformed
into nouns in ancient Greek before being borrowed into Latin, French and English successively. Furthermore, it is claimed that (a) a small number of nouns, after having been borrowed into English, came to be used as verbs by means of conversion, (b) an even smaller number of nouns was used both as a noun and as a verb at the time of borrowing and (c) most nouns have merely been used as nouns ever since their appearance in English. This is accomplished by establishing dates of usage for a selection of the 670 shell nouns via detailed corpus-based analyses.

In addition, the process which brought the noun into the English language is examined. The existence of three categories of shell nouns is postulated: (a) shell nouns having been present in Old English ever since, indicating Celtic / Germanic origin; (b) the majority of shell nouns having been loanwords of different periods of language contact; (c) very few shell nouns being the result of word formation. It is by corpus-based analyses that exploring which abstract noun is part of which group is achieved.

The hypothesis in regard with the lexico-grammatical development, i.e. the shell-content constructions, is that some patterns are older than others which implies a diversification of patterns, i.e. an increase in the number of shell-content constructions. The diachrony of the lexico-grammatical patterns in which the shell nouns occur is arrived at by applying corpus linguistic methods (in line with Schmid 1996).

3. Theories
The most fundamental theory underlying the present paper is shell noun theory as proposed in Schmid (2000). Other explorations of shell-nounhood (cf. Schmid 1996, 1998, 1999, 2007) are drawn on, too. The theoretical framework on abstract nouns is extended by both cognitive and psycholinguistic findings on, amongst other aspects, the distinction between the word classes of noun and verb (cf. Langacker 1987; Kauschke 2007).

4. Methods and material
The method applied in the present paper is both qualitative and quantitative. The quantitative part of the study is corpus-based, i.e. corpora, differing in text type, supply both the linguistic material and the dates of usage of the linguistic material.
The table gives an overview of the two types of corpora used for different kinds of queries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electronic version of Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Entries for a selection of shell nouns: 'senses' + according quotations</th>
<th>Electronic version of Old English texts Middle English texts (such as Beowulf and Canterbury Tales)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aim: Establish first written proof of usage in the OED for the selection of shell nouns</td>
<td>Aim: Establish early written proof of usage for the shell-content constructions of the selected shell nouns</td>
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</table>

One corpus is the electronic version of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the most prominent monolingual dictionary of the English language, not only containing entries including different 'senses' (i.e. semantic variants) but also a large selection of quotations providing ample illustration of the 'senses'. The second corpus used in the present study is a selection of Old and Middle English texts in electronic version.

In accordance with the two types of corpora two types of queries are launched: In the OED, both 'senses' and according quotations are searched for first attested proof of usage for a selection of shell nouns with the aim of establishing first written proof of usage for each shell noun in the OED. While this task is about establishing the 'age' of the abstract nouns it must be pointed out that it is, of course, methodologically impossible to determine the first use ever of any given lexeme since there is no access to language use of periods gone by. What can be established though, and, what is established in the present paper, is dates of early written proof of usage. So ‘first usage’ in the OED and in the other texts is first written proof in one corpus, not first written proof of overall use in the English language as such.

The Old and Middle English texts are searched for the lexico-grammatical patterns the shell nouns occur in, i.e. for the shell-content constructions evolving around the shell nouns. Here, the aim is to establish early written proof of usage for each of the selected shell nouns in the relevant patterns, i.e. for all the relevant shell-content constructions.
5. Working programme

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<tr>
<td>SoSe 09</td>
<td>Gathering the data from the various corpora</td>
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<tr>
<td>WS 09/10</td>
<td>Analysing and interpreting the data</td>
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<td>SoSe 10</td>
<td>Extending the theoretical framework on abstract nouns / shell nouns drawing on cognitive and psycholinguistic findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selected references

- Schmid, Hans-Jörg (im Druck), „Does frequency in text instantiate entrenchment in the cognitive system?“.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg (1996), „The historical development and present-day use of the noun *idea* as documented in the OED and other corpora“, in: *Poetica* 47, 87-128.