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A SHORT HISTORY OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN ENGLISH WORDS: FROM *POSSE COMITATUS* TO *FLYING SQUAD*

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Abstract: English survived, was enriched and expanded to become the most spoken language in the world. As such, it contains a lexical map of the concepts and culture it represents, stored and activated to the present days. Law enforcement has been but a relevant example, featuring fundamental hierarchies of usage for almost a thousand years, in terms of dialect and register. From the 12th century *posse comitatus* and *sherrifs* to the 19th century *Bow Street Runners*, and to the 21st century technical language, English law enforcement vocabulary reflects both etymologically and socially the specialized field it describes.

Keywords: *English for Law Enforcement, sociolinguistics, historical background*

1. Introduction

This paper presents Law Enforcement English as a specialized language [1], evolving in close connection with social and historical developments. As a newly-acknowledged linguistic field, Law Enforcement English stems from various sources, from institutional written documents to criminal slang.

The police vocabulary is a linguistic reflection of the institution it describes; this view is supported by a travel in time, to the circumstances of its emergence and change and to their relevance for linguistics. Obsolete terms that have left the language, newly coined terms mirroring technological developments, and the relevant terms that have witnessed semantic shifts are presented against a socio-historical background.

2. The language of police

Until recently, the institution of police has not been recognized as a source of specialized vocabulary – and language in general - and as

such has been little represented linguistically in dictionaries and other resources. It is with the international recognition of dictionaries [2], language course-books [3], discourse investigation [4], and special interest group events that Law Enforcement English has finally made its way among other specialized language fields: Medical English, Legal English, Military English, etc. Although it shares some common ground with the last two above, due to their socially-bound roots, LEE manages to bear all the hallmarks of a fully-fledged language in itself.

Although the discourse level is admittedly more often found representative for police talk than lexemes, the latter bear more evidence of the emergence and development in time of the specialized vocabulary in question. It is acknowledged that specific police language can be found in various types of discourses: written documents of the institution, police communication techniques, witness-victim statements, media accounts, and criminal slang. In terms of specificity, some border general English (witness talk, media accounts), others reach a high degree of technicality and inaccessibility (police jargon,

criminal slang).

The emergence of police as a free standing institution, as a social phenomenon, partly assimilated to and influenced by other systems, calls for a proper display of a more or less clear-cut specialized vocabulary. The well-established institutional framework, traditions, concepts, reforms assign a precise meaning to certain terms in the police vocabulary, or the police sociolect, gathered in specialized lexicons according to professional, social and cultural criteria. [5].

This study will look in particular at the challenges that dealing with such words can pose for a historical dictionary, where complex conceptual changes must be accommodated within a diachronic account of individual word histories. Examples will be taken mainly from entries which have been revised for the third edition of the Oxford English Dictionary [6], cross-referenced with entries from specialized dictionaries, such as the Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement, the Oxford Wordfinder, the Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English, Roget's Thesaurus.

3. The history of British Police in words

Police or law enforcement (despite the differences, the terms *law enforcement* and *police* are used interchangeably in this study) in Great Britain refers mostly to the police of England and Wales, as 'the bureaucratic and hierarchical bodies employed by the state to maintain order and to prevent and detect crime'[7]. The police have been portrayed as the rational solution to the problems of rising crime and increasing disorder, which means that they were created and steadily developed and improved to protect the law-abiding citizen from the criminal and disorderly element which prays upon society.

The legislation draws attention to the wide variety of tasks undertaken by the police in England and Wales, and how their role has gradually converged with the original meaning of the word 'police'. The Greek *politeia* meant all matters affecting the survival and well-being of the state (*polis*). The word and the idea were developed by the Romans (the Latin *politia* can be translated as 'the state'). By the

early eighteenth century in continental Europe a police and *Die Polizey* were being used in the sense of the internal administration, welfare, protection, and surveillance of a territory. The word *police* gained popularity in England towards the end of the eighteenth century. While the main duty of the new police when they were first established in London in 1829 was declared to be the prevention of crime, as the nineteenth century wore on, English policemen found themselves carrying out a variety of tasks fitted with the older definitions: they *regulated traffic, ensured that pavements were unimpeded, kept a watchful eye for unsafe buildings and burning chimneys, administered first aid at accidents, drove ambulances, looked for missing persons*. Some of these tasks have been yielded to specialist agencies, but the fact remains that police not only deals with law and order, but also with the smooth running of different aspects of society.

A broad chronological sweep of the history of the police to the present, with focus on the 19th and 20th centuries, will explore its linguistic dimension, covering the social contexts for coining or borrowing new words, and the rationale behind the shift of meanings.

3.1. The beginnings of policing

Until the mid-1800s, law enforcement in England was a local responsibility of citizens. From 1066 (invasion and conquering of England by William Duke of Normandy) to the 1300s, police services were provided through the *frankpledge* system, the local *watch* and the *hue and cry*. Under this system, citizens were appointed with the responsibility of *maintaining order* and *controlling crime*. Men were formed into groups of ten, called a *tything*. Ten tythings were grouped into a hundred and were supervised by a *constable*. Groups of ten hundreds created a *shire*, controlled by *reeves*. *Sheriffs* were appointed in counties as the first law officers to *arrest suspects*; they could also call out *posse comitatus*, consisting of all adult males, against *vagabonds and malefactors*.

During the 1500s, England increased its participation in world trade and through the



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1700s more citizens moved into the cities and crime began to rise. Although England had one of the harshest criminal justice systems of its time, including *death sentences* for *minor crimes*, crime and *disorder* continued to rise. Many began to hire their own private police, and the king began a system of *night watch* for the large cities.

The police in the UK have always been associated with *constables*. A Norman term, *constable* stood for a variety of functionaries of whom the most significant were the high constables of the hundreds and the *petty constables of the manors, tythings or vills*. The petty, later commonly known as the *parish constable*, acquired royal authority and was responsible for maintaining the *King's peace* in his district. The constable registered a decline in Elizabethan times from a man of authority to a figure of fun, illustrated by Shakespeare's *Dogberry*, the headborough in 'Much Ado About Nothing', and *Elbow*, the simple constable from 'Measure and Measure'. However, constables demonstrated courage in *making arrests*; their duties also consisted in *maintaining the king's peace*, overseeing the poor and the vagrants, surveying the highway, or *warding churches, enforcing the law* on taxation and military recruitment.

Watchmen were local agents of law enforcement recruited from urban dwellers to patrol the cities in a 'marching watch' arresting night-walkers who behaved suspiciously. *Justices of the peace* were royal officials, often lords of the manor, the social superiors of the constable. If nothing worked to pacify crowds, trained bands, or *county militias* were called in to keep order.

The problems of *administering justice* and *pursuing offenders* in the growing cities led to the appearance of the *trading justice* and the *thief-taker*, as professionals who eased the burden on the constables. Although some of

them were corrupt, the *Bow Street Runners* were considered dependable and far-sighted. The 1770s city police organized effectively against criminal gangs, were given a *uniform* and a regular pay, had to comply with minimum standards, and were divided into day and night *patrols*. *Mounted* and *foot constables* could still claim statutory rewards for bringing certain offenders to justice, which allowed a certain degree of independence.

3.2. Policing in the nineteenth century

Sir Robert Peel is credited for establishing the first modern police force in England under the *Metropolitan Police Act*, a bill passed in Parliament in 1829. This act created a single authority responsible for *policing* within the city limits of London. The force began with one thousand officers divided into six divisions, headquartered at *Scotland Yard*. These officers (known as *Bobbies* for their founder) started *patrolling* their *beats* in *uniforms*, and introduced new elements into policing that became the basis for modern police, such as the *prevention of crime* as the their first duty.

The new professional high constables, organized in a military-like hierarchy and based in *constabularies*, were assisted by part-time constables in the rural areas and *serjeants-at-mace* and *beadles* in industrial areas, and their efficiency was considered superior to the old-style 'country dogberry'. The old town police was now supervised, put into a uniform, and called by the new name of *policemen*. Their duties included now *imposing fines* and *executing warrants*.

It was with the County and Borough Police Act of 1853 that the formation of police forces became obligatory on local government; they were certified by Inspectors of Constabulary and were directed by the *Home Office* in the performance of their duties; the *Home*

Secretary would require annual reports from *chief constables* on the state of crime in their *jurisdiction*. This led to an increase in arrests for *petty offences* and *misdemeanours*: *loitering*, *street gambling*, *prostitution*, *vagrancy*, *public drunkenness*, *rioting*. *Carrying weapons* however led to certain situations of ‘undue exercise of power’ and police brutality.

Disorder and *rioting* however increased. Moral panics, such as that generated by the fear of *garroting* in the 1850s and 1860s, and by Jack the Ripper in 1888 was supported by the crime statistics, sometimes caused by a new way of categorizing offences or unsolved cases magnified out of proportion by the press, which led to criticism of the police. As a response, a higher control over the force was imposed to diminish *assaults*, *watch-snatching*, *highway robberies*, *burglaries* and *pilfering from shops*. Detective policemen began to appear in popular literature, notably with *Inspector Bucket* in Dickens’ *Bleach House*, and the courageous master of disguise *Jack Hawkshaw* in Tom Taylor’s *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*. The police constable became the ‘domestic missionary’, charged with bringing civilization and decorum, by *seizing goods* exposed illegally, *apprehending disturbers* of the peace, *quelling domestic disputes*, *patrolling* at night, armed with *cutlasses*, or checking on traveling hawkers, gypsies and tramps.

3.3 Policing in the twentieth century

The strains of the First World War affected police development in several ways. Ten new wartime duties added to the police: *mobilization*, *billeting*, *requisitioning horses and vehicles*, *protection of vulnerable points*, *espionage*, *control of aliens*, *detention of enemies’ merchant ships*, *watching wireless stations*, *protection of defence works*, *intelligence*.

Active feminists and increasing pressure for some kind of women policing led to the organization of the first *women police patrols* in 1915. Some of them were incorporated into police forces as women police in 1918. At both force and national level there were

branch boards elected separately from and for the ranks of *inspector*, *sergeant* and *constable*.

Peacetime emergencies listed serious *industrial disorder*, *hunger marches* and *strikes*, which were kept under control with daily *intelligence reports* to the Home Office, Scotland Yard and the Metropolitan Police *Special Branch MI5*. *Police brutality*, *corruption* and *arbitrary use of powers* were a legacy of wartime, but the Metropolitan Police took great care to avoid leaks to the press and maintain the image of the English *Bobby* as unique, loyal, impartial and non-political.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, technological developments marked policing as well as society. The railway and the motor car raised concerns that criminals became mobile. The police began to use *motor vehicles* themselves from the first decade of the century, along with patrols on *bicycle*. *Telegraphic communication* had been used by the Metropolitan Police since 1850s, but at the turn of the new century it was replaced with the telephone and *telephone boxes* in the street, which enabled constables on the beat to *receive information* and *summon assistance*.

The potential for scientific aid in criminal detection was explored by a few enthusiastic chief constables, and most notable before the First World War by Sir Edward Henry who developed a system for the classification of *fingerprints*. Also *computers* and data-processing equipment, the *radar* and the pocket transistor radios, called the bat-phones were introduced into the force.

‘The steady march of centralisation’ [7] had asked for uniformity, bypassing local police committees, amalgamation of smaller forces, national criminal investigation departments and police *training* and *promotion* systems, represented by the *Police College*. Centralizing *police records* in a *national computer system* provided quick and easy access to information.

The 1960s were the years of change: the growth of consumer society, the increase in private motor vehicles, the extension of roads and the emerging self-consciousness of Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants led to significant developments in police organization. The Police Act of 1964



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incorporated these changes, including new duties, such as: *mace-bearers, court ushers, market inspectors, mortuary attendants, licencing and inspecting hackney carriages*, etc.

A trade argot developed, often varying from force to force, which became a part of the work culture and helped to cement the police community. Thus, to a member of the Metropolitan Police an ordinary member of the public became a *chummy*, a prostitute was a *tom*, and her trade *tomming*, a pickpocket was a *dip*, a summons a *blister*, an arrest a *knock*, the truncheon was *Charley Wood*, the police station *the nick*, a cadet a *gadget*, the motorcycle officers were *black rats*, the area covered by the station or an individual constable the *manor*, the elite Special Patrol Group (SPG) became *Snatch, Punch and Grab*, and the CID were also known as *Creeping Insect Department*, termed coined by the uniformed branch due to their long-standing rivalry with the CID.

Gradually, the police began to surround themselves with a professional mystique, seeing themselves as the experts in identifying criminals and keeping an eye on old offenders. Expected to *appear in court* and *give evidence*, the officer was equipped with pompous, stereotypical language: "He never walks or runs, he always *proceeds*; he never asks, he always *requests*; he never finds people quarrelling, they are always 'having an altercation'; for a stable to be behind a house near a church is too simple; it has to be 'situated at the rear of a house in the vicinity of a church'; he never watches, he 'always 'keeps observation', or 'keeps observation in conjunction with another officer'." [7]

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built on openness to the public and schemes such as *neighbourhood watch* met the 21st century, one police service in England and Wales based on the Metropolitan Police model, controlled both locally and governmentally.

Specialized preventive and detective groups exist within many law enforcement organizations either for dealing with particular types of crime, such as *traffic law enforcement* and *crash investigation, homicide, or fraud*; or for situations requiring specialized skills, such as *underwater search, aviation, explosive device disposal* ("bomb squad"), and *computer crime*. Such specialist squads - *Flying Squad, Diplomatic Protection Group, Royalty Protection Branch*, are routinely *armed*. In *The Sweeney*, a 1970s British television police drama, the Flying Squad is portrayed tackling armed robbery and violent crime in London. The programme's title derives from *Sweeney Todd*, which is Cockney rhyming slang for 'Flying Squad'.

4. Findings

English policing in its present form has existed for about 150 years. Throughout the past two centuries, police duties have covered a variety of increasingly complex and specialized tasks, the statute of the police officer has been alternatively controversial, standardized, or professional; police work and ideology has been portrayed in laws and reforms as well as detective stories and slang. These developing facets of law enforcement in England are reflected by its complex specialized vocabulary, comprising obsolete words, new technical entries and shifts in meaning, as summarized in the table below.

	1200	1500	1700	1800	1900 →
policing	frankpledge thying constable sheriff posse comitatus	petty constable parish constable mounted constable county militia thief-taker Bow Street Runner justice of the peace		Metropolitan Police Scotland Yard Bobbies serjeants-at-mace beadles policemen Home Office	women police inspector sergeant market inspectors Flying Squad
duties	arrest suspects hue and cry maintain order control crime	night watch make arrests ward churches taxation pursue offenders patrol maintain king's peace		uniform patrol prevent crime impose fines execute warrants seize goods quell disputes	mobilization billeting espionage intelligence fingerprinting appear in court give evidence regulate traffic
crimes and criminals	vagabonds malefactors	disorder suspicious night walkers		loitering prostitution vagrancy rioting assault highway robbery pilfering	industrial disorder corruption computer crime homicide fraud

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