

# Mincing Words: A Diachronic View on English Cutting Verbs

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The culinary arts involve much more than merely cooking. The preparation of foodstuffs for cooking or serving often involves their being shaped by knives or other sharp implements. Like many other crafts, cookery has developed a highly specialised vocabulary for describing its various operations. This paper examines the diachronic development of the category of culinary verbs associated with the action of cutting and carving food — such as *cut*, *slice*, *mince*, *chop*, *trench*, *leach* and *dice* — from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century.

### 1.1. *The aims of this study*

The principal aim of this study is to present a general diachronic overview of the verbs used for describing cutting in historical culinary recipes by looking at a small corpus of selected recipe collections from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Since historical culinary verbs have previously received little attention, especially from a corpus-linguistic point of view,<sup>2</sup> this article serves as a pilot study on the topic and locates potentially diachronically interesting lexical items for further study. There are two specific research questions that initially prompted this study and will be discussed here, namely

- 1) what happened to the wide variety of specialised carving terms used in Medieval and Early Modern culinary texts, and
- 2) how did the terms used for culinary cutting change in time from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century?

The initial working hypothesis used by this paper is based on my own general impression in reading medieval recipes that they use a large variety of specific verbs to describe different types of cutting, whereas present-day or 19th century ones seem to prefer a smaller variety of more general verbs specifying the type or manner of cutting using adverbial or nominal constructions. This observation led to the hypothesis that somewhere between the Late Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, technical verbs with very specific meanings — including, but not limited to, specialised carving terms — get replaced by more complex structures consisting of semantically generic verbs combined with adverbial and nominal phrases.

### 1.2. *The contents of the article*

I will first briefly introduce the material used for this study, and then define what is meant by cutting verbs and present a classification scheme based on the type of cutting operation and the specificity of the verb. I will then present my observations, beginning with a quick overview of the various cutting verbs attested and their diachronic occurrence patterns, and look more closely into the fate of the medieval carving terms and pick out some other interesting cases. I will then look at some

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<sup>1</sup> The research presented here was funded by the Research Unit for Variation, Contacts and Change in English (VARIENG).

<sup>2</sup> Although Carroll (1997) has examined the patterns of behaviour of Middle English cooking verbs based on a corpus of fourteenth-century instructional material, her approach was mainly synchronic.

more general trends that can be seen in the material, and, finally, present my conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Materials used

The data presented in this study is drawn from a small corpus of historical recipe collections, which comprises 13 texts dating from the late fourteenth to the nineteenth century and has a total word count of around half a million words. While many of the texts also contain material other than recipes, such as general instructions on various aspects of household management and a variety of prefatory materials, only the recipes have been included in the corpus. Since the selection of texts has to a large degree been dictated by availability, the corpus is not entirely balanced. Because of limited time and resources, only texts already available in electronic form were used to compile the corpus. Most of these electronic versions (especially in the case of the oldest texts) are based on old out-of-copyright print editions, which are not suitable for many types of linguistic study. Fortunately, most of the issues (e.g., normalised or carelessly recorded spelling, omission of the original layout and the use of several sources to create a composite text) are not critical for the kind of lexical analysis attempted here. Another potential concern is that, as the number of individual texts making up the corpus is relatively small, the authors' individual idiosyncrasies may significantly skew the results.<sup>3</sup> Further study would require a more systematically compiled and broader-based corpus of culinary texts.<sup>4</sup> The following section will describe the texts included in the corpus.

### 2.1. Fourteenth century

- 1) Anon.: *The Forme of Cury* (late fourteenth century, 17,735 words)

The “most famous and extensive collection of the fourteenth century”, associated with the royal court of Richard II, is known to survive in its entirety in six manuscript copies (Hieatt & Butler 1985: 16–21). Text taken from Pegge (1780), based on British Library Additional MS 5016, digitised by Project Gutenberg.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.2. Fifteenth century

- 2) Anon.: *Liber Cure Cocorum* (15<sup>th</sup> century, 11,081 words)

This recipe collection in verse form occurs as an appendix to a longer verse text entitled *The booke of Curtassye*, found in British Library Sloane MS 1986 (Morris 1862: iii). Text taken from Morris (1862), digitised by Gloning.<sup>6</sup>

- 3) Anon.: *MS Cosin V.iii.11 A* (early 15<sup>th</sup> century, 14,556 words)

This recipe collection belongs to a family of recipe collections known as *Potage Dyvers* and is found in a miscellany manuscript together with medical and other utilitarian texts. The text is a transcript of the original manuscript, edited and digitised by myself.<sup>7</sup>

- 4) Anon.: *MS Harley 279* (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, 23,878 words)

This collection is another member of the *Potage Dyvers* family, divided into three separate parts and quite different from the text of the Cosin MS. Text taken from Austin (1888), digitised by

<sup>3</sup> This problem is especially acute in the case of *The Book Of Household Management* (1861) by Isabella Beeton, not only because it is the only text from the nineteenth century, but also because of its size — in terms of number of words, it contains almost as much recipe material as all the other texts combined.

<sup>4</sup> I am currently planning a diachronic corpus of culinary recipes based on original sources in the context of the *Digital Editions for Corpus Linguistics* framework (Honkapohja, Kaislaniemi & Marttila, *forthcoming*).

<sup>5</sup> There is also a newer, more accurate critical edition of the *Forme of Cury* by Hieatt & Butler (1985).

<sup>6</sup> This text, along with other medieval culinary recipe collections digitised by Gloning, is available online at <<http://www.uni-giessen.de/gloning/kobu.htm>>. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Gloning for his generosity in publicly sharing his work.

<sup>7</sup> I would like to acknowledge the generous cooperation of the Durham University Library and its staff in allowing me access to the manuscript.

the University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative and available in the *Corpus of Middle English Verse and Prose*.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.3. Sixteenth century

- 5) Anon.: *A Proper newe Booke Of Cokerye* (1557, 3,981 words)  
The earliest printed text included in the corpus is this short anonymous recipe collection which was included in a bound volume of sixteenth-century tracts. Text taken from Frere (1913), digitised by Gloning.
- 6) A.W.: *A Book Of Cookrye* (1591, 13,745 words)  
This cookbook, attributed to an unknown “A.W.”, was originally published in 1584 as *A Booke of Cookrye*. Text taken from a digital facsimile of the second edition of 1591, provided by Early English Books Online and digitised by myself.
- 7) Anon.: *The good Huswifes Handmaide for the Kitchin* (1594, 25,672 words)  
This printed cookbook is described on the title page as “Verie meete to be adioined to the good Huswifes Closet of prouision for her Houshold”, reflecting the emerging tendency to market cookery books to the middle classes. Text taken from the 1594 edition digitised by Wallace, with illegible parts clarified using the 1597 edition.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.4. Seventeenth century

- 8) John Murrell: *A New Booke Of Cookerie* (1615, 11,928 words)  
Murrell’s cookbook from 1615 claims to promote a new, more worldly fashion of cookery over the old and ‘provincial’ one. Text taken from a 1972 reprint of the first edition, digitised by Gloning.
- 9) Hannah Wolley: *The Gentlewoman’s Companion* (1675, 10,272 words)  
This guide, targeted at married women, contains recipes and instruction in various household matters. The work is actually an unauthorised compilation based on Wolley’s earlier works, and was originally printed in 1673. Text taken from the 1675 edition, digitized by the Emory Women Writers Resource Project.<sup>10</sup>
- 10) Gervase Markham: *Counrey Contentments or The English Huswife* (1683, 20,711 words)  
Markham’s work, originally printed in 1615, was a bestseller which ran through many editions and provided instruction in womanly virtues, including cookery. According to the author, the recipes were originally provided to him by “an Honourable Countesse”. Text taken from the ninth edition, digitised by Robert.

### 2.5. Eighteenth century

- 11) Richard Bradley: *Country Housewife and Ladies Directory* (1762, 60,120 words)  
Bradley’s work, originally published in 1727, is a guide for managing a country household with appropriate recipes for each month of the year, supplemented by recipes sent in by readers. Text taken from the 1762 edition, digitised by Project Gutenberg.
- 12) Elizabeth Moxon: *English Housewifry* (1764, 61,051 words)  
This collection of almost 500 recipes, originally published in 1748, is organised by category of dish, and, like Bradley’s collection, is supplemented by an appendix of recipes obtained from “several Gentlewomen from the Neighbourhood”. Text taken from the ninth edition of 1764, digitised by the University of Adelaide Library.

<sup>8</sup> I am currently in the process of re-editing the MS Harley 279 collection — along with the five other members of the *Potage Dyvers* family — from the original manuscript for my PhD thesis.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace’s online edition has been made publicly available for scholarly and private purposes on Prof. Gloning’s website at <<http://www.uni-giessen.de/gloning/ghhk/index.htm>>, for which I would like to express my gratitude for both parties involved.

<sup>10</sup> More information about the project is available online at <<http://chaucer.library.emory.edu/wwrp/index.html>>.

## 2.6. Nineteenth century

### 13) Isabella Beeton: *The Book Of Household Management* (1861, 231,347 words)

One of the most influential British cookbooks ever, Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* is a guide to all aspects of running a household in Victorian Britain, and includes a large number of culinary recipes, borrowed and adapted from a variety of sources and intended to provide culinary advice for the urban middle classes. It was originally published as a monthly supplement in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* during the period 1859-1861 and in 1861 was printed as a single volume for the first time. Text taken from the first edition, digitised by Project Gutenberg.

## 2.7. Overview of the material

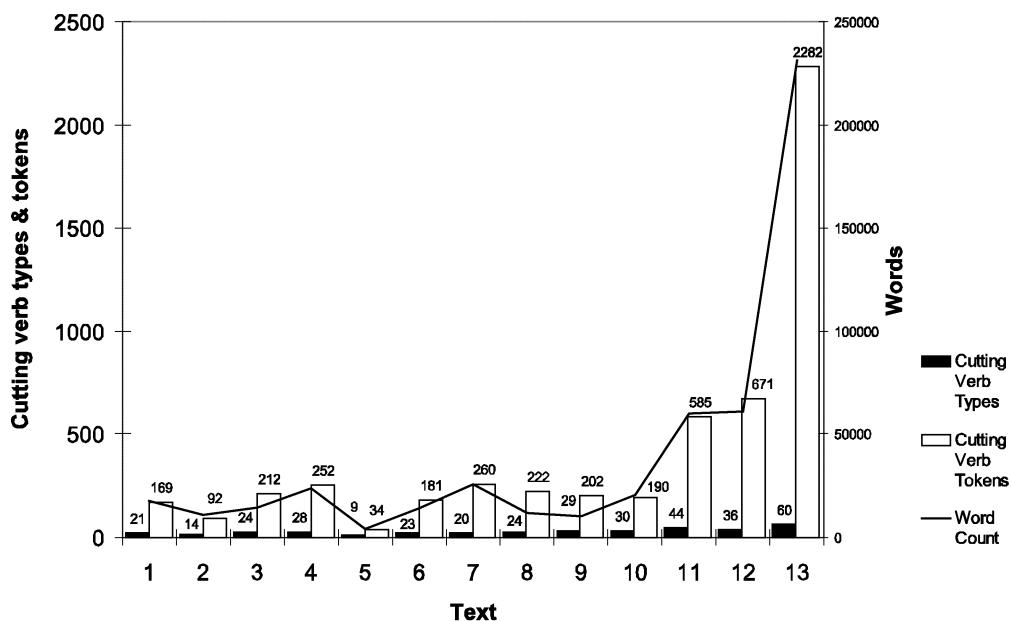


Figure 1. Relationship between cutting verbs and text length.

The total size of the corpus used for this study is slightly over half a million words (506,077), and consists of 13 different texts. As can be seen from the descriptions above, the texts are not only few, but also of varying size. Although the differences in size are indicative of textual reality, in that recipe collections tended to get longer with time, they mean that the quantitative results of this study must be used cautiously.

These half a million words of recipes provide us with slightly over 5,000 tokens of cutting terms. As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of cutting verbs seems to be roughly proportional to the size of the text, the average frequency being around 10 cutting verbs per 1,000 words, with slight variation above and below this. The number of types of cutting verbs varies between 14 and 60 and correlates with the length of the text to only a limited degree, as is to be expected in the case of relatively long texts and a very small set of types. However, these absolute frequencies of cutting verbs are not very interesting in themselves. In order to examine the qualitative aspect of cutting expressions, it is necessary to somehow qualify and categorise different types of cutting verb.

### 3. Defining and classifying cutting verbs

Before attempting any kind of categorisation, it is necessary to define what exactly is meant by the term “cutting verb”. Levin (1993: 156-158), in her semantically based categorisation of English verbs, defines the category of cutting verbs as verbs which involve a “separation in material integrity” and include “some specification concerning the instrument or means used to bring this result about” (Levin 1993: 157). The categorisation used in this study is similar but more inclusive, in that it operates not so much on the lexical semantic level as on the level of contextual meaning.

Thus, any verb that is used in the corpus to describe a cutting operation, regardless of its core lexical meaning or dictionary definition, is here considered a “cutting verb”.<sup>11</sup> In many cases, the use of a bladed implement is not indicated by the lexical content of the verb, but only implied by the context. This means that some instances of a given verb might describe a cutting operation while others do not. To separate the cutting uses of these verbs from the non-cutting ones, all occurrences of potential cutting verbs in the corpus have been individually examined and their inclusion or exclusion judged on a case-by-case basis.

#### 3.1. *Semantic categorisation of cutting verbs based on the type of operation*

Since the definition of cutting verbs is based not on the lexical properties of the verb but rather on the type of operation it is used to describe, it is also natural to base the subdivision of these verbs on the type of operation described. For the purposes of this study, a threefold division has been used.

##### 1. Dividing cuts

This category includes verbs that describe the division of a foodstuff into roughly homogenous pieces of varying sizes using a bladed implement, either for processing or for serving. Examples include slicing, chopping and mincing.

##### 2. Removing cuts

This category includes verbs that describe the removal of unwanted parts from a foodstuff using a bladed implement. Examples include peeling, coring and boning.

##### 3. Penetrating cuts

This category includes verbs that describe the cutting of a foodstuff with a bladed implement for either aesthetic or functional purposes, without dividing it or removing anything from it. Examples include scoring, incising and opening.

Since all of these operations can in some circumstances also be performed without using bladed implements, care has been taken to include only instances where a bladed implement is either explicitly mentioned or implied by the physical properties of the specific foodstuffs and operations involved.

#### 3.2. *Categorisation of cutting verbs based on lexical specificity*

In addition to the threefold semantic division described above, the verbs found in the corpus have also been divided into three categories according to the amount of information about the operation encoded into the verb itself, i.e., the lexical specificity of the verb used to describe the cutting operation.

##### A. Specific verbs

This category consists of verbs whose lexical meaning indicates the specific target, procedure, or resultant shape of the cutting operation. The use of a bladed implement can either be included in the meaning or implied by the context.

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<sup>11</sup> Many of these verbs fall into the categories “Verbs of Removing”, “Verbs of Contact by Impact”, “Verbs of Separating and Disassembling” and “Verbs of Change of State” in Levin’s 1993 categorisation.

### B. General cutting verbs

This category consists of verbs whose lexical meaning does not indicate the specific target, procedure or resultant shape, but does explicitly indicate the use of a bladed instrument. The target, procedure or resultant shape of the cutting operation is often indicated by an adverbial or nominal complement structure.

### C. Generic verbs

This category consists of generic verbs whose lexical meaning indicates neither the specific target, procedure or resultant shape nor the use of a bladed implement. The parameters of the cutting operation are either indicated using an adverbial or nominal complement or implied by the context.

Since these two subdivisions are independent of each other, they can be seen as perpendicular to each other and combined into a two-dimensional matrix consisting of nine subtypes of cutting verbs. This matrix, complete with selected and normalised examples of each subtype, is presented in Figure 2. Since the categorisation is a semantic one, some of the verbs — especially the more generic ones — may appear in different categories depending on their contextual meaning.

	Specific verbs	General cutting verbs	Generic verbs
Dividing cuts	dice, fillet, halve, leach, mince, shred, slice	carve, chop, cleave, clip, cut, hack, hew	break, divide, part, reduce, separate, split
Removing cuts	beard, bone, core, draw, flay, cut, scale, stone	chop off, cut out, pare away, scrape off	clean, clear off, detach from, remove, take out
Penetrating cuts	crimp, lace, notch, score, scotch, splat	cut, incise, pierce, scrape, stab	break, open, split, thrust

Figure 2. Subdivisions of cutting verbs.

## 4. Overview of cutting verb frequencies

Before looking at individual cases, I will first present an overview of the various cutting verbs that belong to each of the above-mentioned categories and of their relative popularity in different periods. For the purposes of this study, all variant spellings have been normalised and aggregated together under the OED base form. In addition, some variants that are given as separate words by the OED but used identically in the corpus texts (and often interchangeably in the same text), such as *pill* (treated as a variant of ‘peel’), *myce* (treated as a variant of ‘mince’) and *cleanse* (treated as a variant of ‘clean’), have been combined into one type.<sup>12</sup> Different grammatical forms of the same verb have also been considered together, with the nominal forms excluded. This means that, for example, the forms *peel*, *pele*, *pylle*, *ypylled*, *pill’d* and *peeling* have all been classified as the type *peel*.

### 4.1. Dividing cuts

There are a total of 3,223 verbal descriptions of *dividing cuts* in the corpus, representing a total of 30 different verbs and accounting for more than half of the total cutting verbs. As can be seen in Figure 3, below, there is significant diachronic variation in the occurrence of some verbs, and only a few, most notably *chop*, *cut*, *mince* and *shred* occur consistently throughout the period. The figure also shows that dividing operations seem to be expressed mostly by general cutting verbs, which account for 54% of the total occurrences over the whole period. In this category of verbs, *mince*, *shred*, and *slice* would seem to be especially persistent and frequent. Generic verbs, on the other hand, seem to be rarely used for dividing operations, especially before the seventeenth century.

<sup>12</sup> The extensive spelling variation present in the corpus serves to further blur the distinction between such closely related forms to a point where they become practically impossible to distinguish from each other.

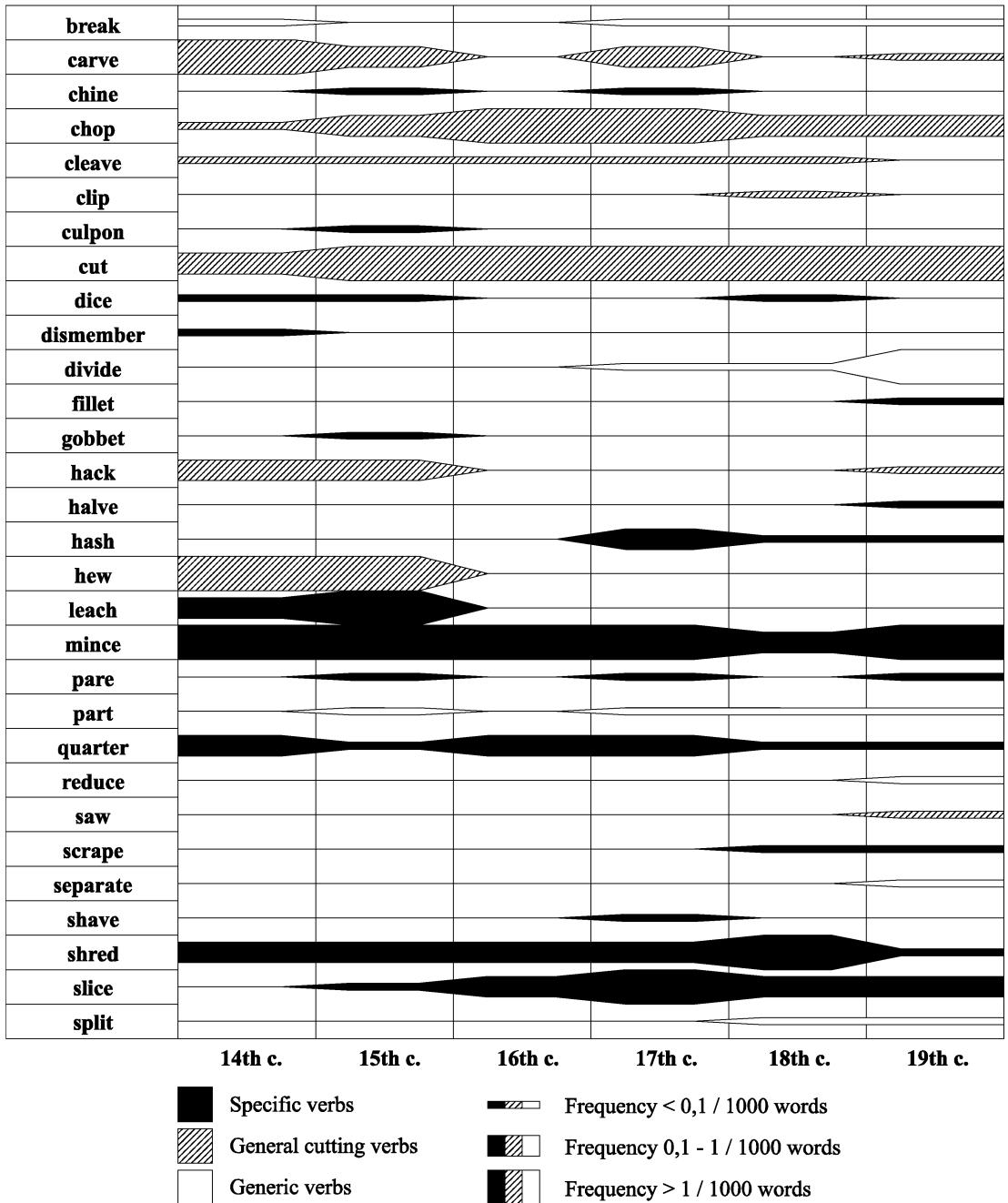


Figure 3. Changes in the relative frequencies of verbs describing dividing cuts over the centuries.

#### 4.2. Removing cuts

Cutting verbs in the removing category make up slightly less than a third of the total, with 1,689 occurrences. Although occurring in the corpus in smaller numbers than dividing verbs, these verbs show greater variety, with a total of 40 different types. Many of the general cutting or generic verbs in this category are complemented by various adverbs or adjectives to specify the operation referred to. As can be seen in Figure 4, this subcategory also exhibits diachronic variation, with only a handful of verbs occurring consistently (*pare*, *peel*, *scrape* + adverbial and *take* + adverbial). In terms of specificity, removing operations are expressed predominantly by specific verbs which account for 51% of the total over the whole period, while general cutting verbs and generic verbs are roughly equal in frequency, accounting for 23 and 26% of the total respectively.

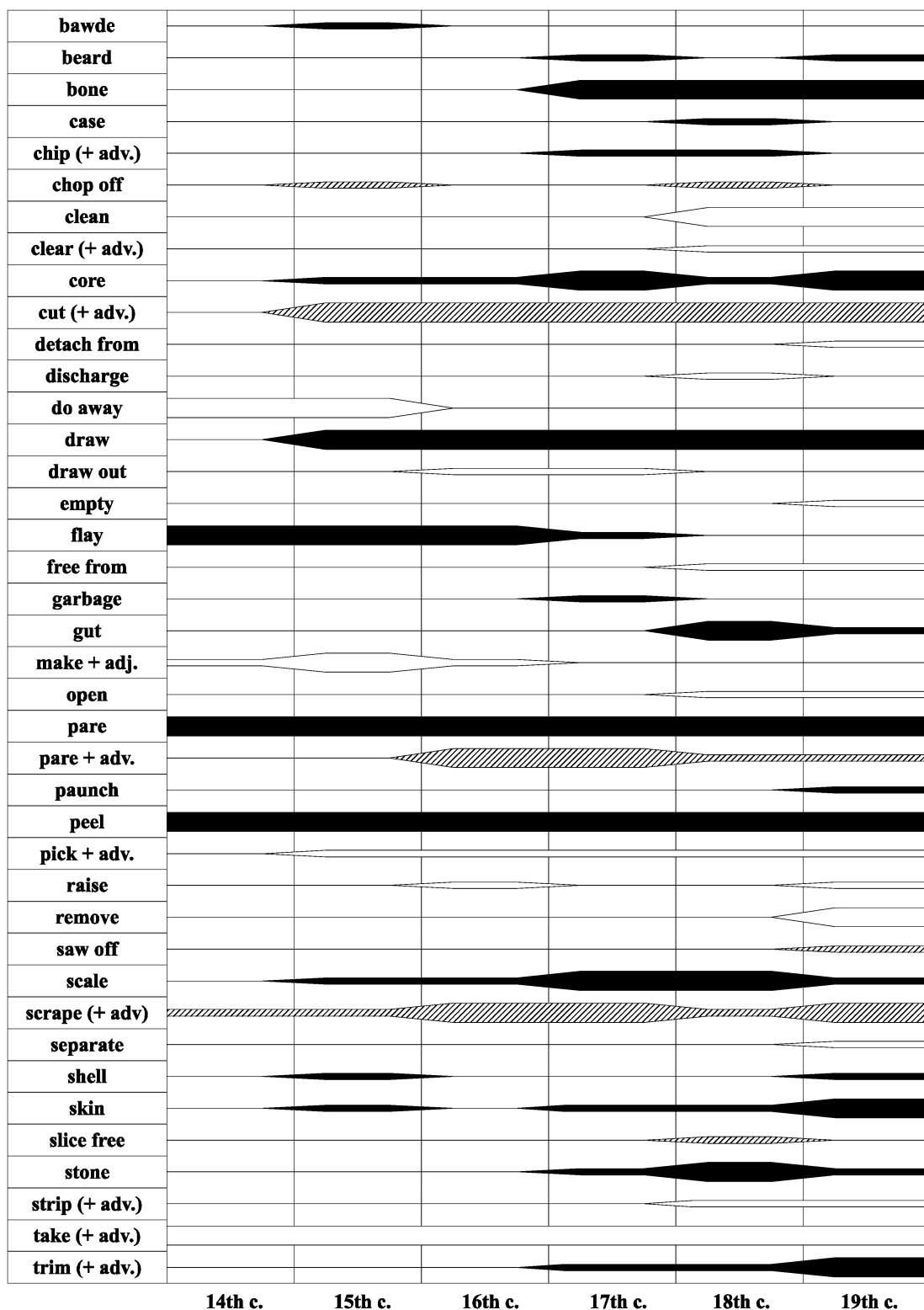


Figure 4. Changes in the relative frequencies of verbs describing removing cuts over the centuries.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Complex verbs with a variable complement have been grouped together with the type of the variable complement indicated. If the complement is optional, it is given in parentheses.

### 4.3. Penetrating cuts

Verbs describing penetrating types of cut are clearly marginal in comparison to the other two categories, with only 130 occurrences representing 20 different verbs. The low frequency and the associated high type token ratio means that for most individual verbs in this category there are too few occurrences for conclusions to be drawn. However, it is notable that there does seem to be a preference for generic verbs, which account for 45% of the verbs describing penetrating cuts over the whole period.

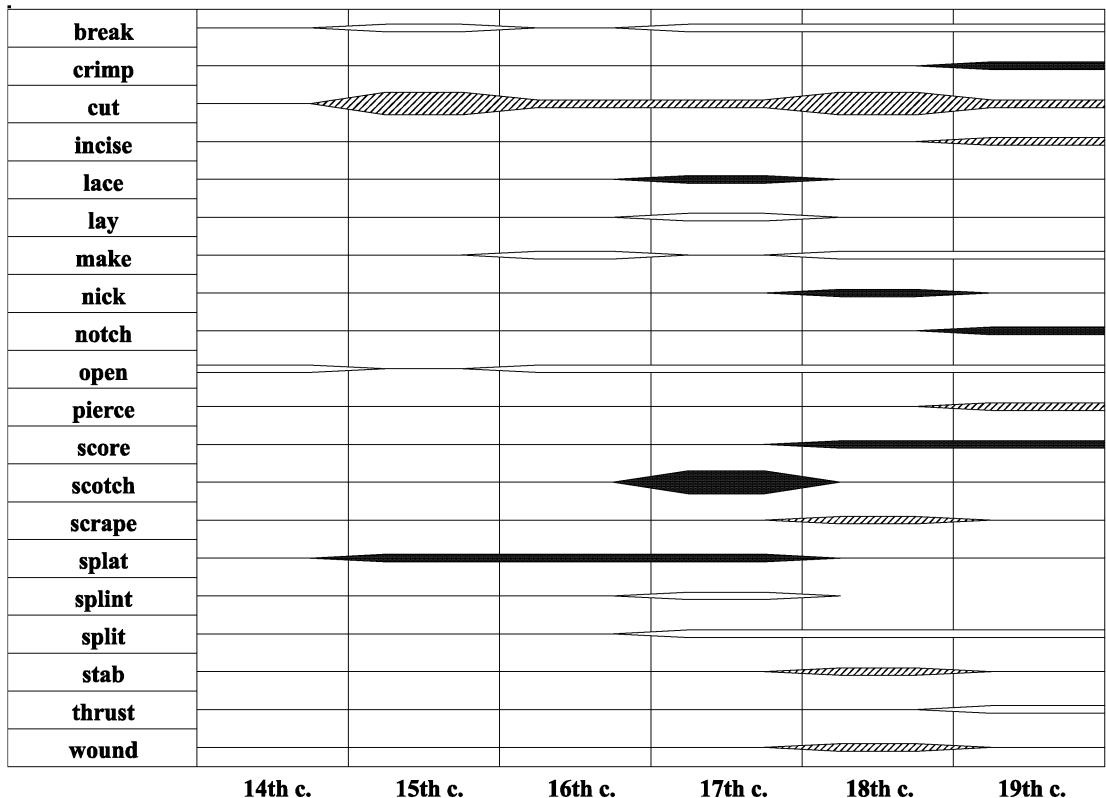


Figure 5. Changes in the relative frequencies of verbs describing penetrating cuts over the centuries.

## 5. Medieval carving terms: what really happened to them?

Termes of a kerver. Breke that dere, lesche the brawne, rere that goose, lyfte that swanne, sauce that capon, spoyle that henne, fruche that chekyn, unbrace that malarde, unlace that conye, dysmembre that heron, dysplaye that crane, dysfygure that pecocke, unioynt that bytture, untache that curlewe, alaye that fesande, wynges that partryche, wynges that quayle, mynce that plover, thye that pygyon, border that pasty, thye that woodcocke, thye all maner small byrdes, tymbre that fyre, tyere that egge, chynne that samon, strynges that lampraye, splatte that pyke, sauce that place, sauce that tenche, splaye that breme, syde that haddocke, tuske that berbell, culpon that troute, fyne that cheuen, traffene that ele, traunche that sturgyon, undertraunche that purpos, tayme that crabbe, barbe that lopster

(*The Boke of Kervynge* 1508)

The above list, taken from *The Boke of Kervynge*, first printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1508, is an example of the traditional lists of carving terms that for several centuries were an essential part of a guide for gentlemanly behaviour. In addition to being presented as a list like the one above, these terms often served as headings for the cutting instructions, which themselves used the more ordinary cutting terms which were also employed in other types of recipe. The use of these technical carving terms in manuals of carving seems to have waned as time went on and they seem to have been relegated to the status of curiosities. While the seventeenth-century *Gentlewoman's Companion*, by Hannah Wolley still lists the terms, it refers to them as “those proper terms in Carving, which are used abroad and at home, by the curious students in the art of Carving” (Wolley 1675: 113). Nineteenth-century manuals of carving no longer seem to use these special terms, but merely use the names of the appropriate animals as the headings for the various carving instructions, which are much longer and more detailed than earlier ones and are often accompanied by illustrations.

I will now address my first research question by taking a brief look at the occurrence of the medieval carving terms in the corpus of culinary recipes. The terms are almost disappointingly scarce even in the earlier material. Only seven of the verbs occur in the corpus and, while the total number of hits is quite respectable (716), about 90% of these are accounted by a single verb, *mince*. The others, in order of decreasing frequency, are *leach*, *break*, *splat*, *chine*, *dismember* and *culpon*. But even this is not the whole truth, as can easily be seen upon closer examination.

### 5.1. *culpon* (trout)

“pan take gode fat Ele & **culpe** hym” (*MS Harley 279*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

In the whole corpus, there is only a single occurrence of this verb, which in the carving guides is associated with cutting a trout. Although it is here used for a fish and could theoretically refer to cutting the eel in the manner of a trout, the context makes it far more likely that it is used in the more generic sense, “to cut into pieces, cut up, slice” (OED Online, *culpon*).<sup>14</sup> The related noun, referring to a portion, bit, slice or shred of something, is slightly more common, occurring twice in the fifteenth-century texts and three times in the sixteenth-century ones.

### 5.2. *dismember* (heron)

“and **dimembre** it and do yt in a clene water” (*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)

This verb also appears only once in the whole corpus, and even then it is not used in the specialised carving sense of cutting apart a heron, but rather in the more generic sense of removing the limbs from a deer carcass.

### 5.3. *chine* (salmon)

“take a porpays & **chyne** him as a samonde” (*MS Cosin V.iii.II A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“**CHine** your Pigge in two parts” (Murrell, 1615)

“the Pig you shall **chine** and diuide in two parts” (Markham, 1683)

Here we have the first clear example of a medieval carving term in the fifteenth-century occurrence which instructs the reader to carve a porpoise in the manner customary for a salmon. The seventeenth-century occurrences, on the other hand, have a more general sense of cutting along or across the backbone, and it would seem that by the seventeenth century even this verb was no longer used as a technical carving term.

<sup>14</sup> The verb occurs in a recipe for a fish pie, where the only operation prescribed for the eel before putting it into the pie is to culpe it.

#### 5.4. *splat* (*pike*)

“**splat** hym & kepe þe lyuere” (*MS Cosin V.iii.11 A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“take a tenche & **splat** him up on a grydyryn” (*MS Cosin V.iii.11 A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“TAke and **splat** an Eele by the back, and keepe the belly whole”

(*A Book Of Cookrye*, 1591)

“To roast a Jigget of Mutton, which is the legg **splatted** and half part of the loyn together” (Markham, 1683)

The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century occurrences of this verb can plausibly be considered genuine examples of the specific carving sense, in that they involve fish and may refer to the cutting of these fish in the manner customary for pike. The seventeenth-century example, on the other hand, has the more general sense of cutting or splitting something open. Judging by this small corpus, therefore, *splat* seems to have been associated exclusively with fish up to the sixteenth century, but acquired a more generic sense in the seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup>

#### 5.5. *break* (*deer*)

“serue the Chykenns hole oper **ybroke**” (*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)

“take up your fowl, and **break** it according to the fashion of Carving” (Markham, 1683)

“poured upon the Phesant or Partridge, being **broken** up” (Markham, 1683)

“take the livers, **break** them small” (Moxon, 1764)

“**Break** the apricots in half” (Beeton, 1861)

“**Break** the butter into small pieces” (Beeton, 1861)

This verb occurs twelve times in the corpus across the whole period from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, but unfortunately none of the occurrences have anything to do with the technical carving term. In the fourteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, this word is used for cutting apart various types of fowl, while the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts use it for chopping or halving operations, some of which could conceivably be accomplished either with a bladed or blunt implement.

#### 5.6. *leach* (*brawn*)<sup>16</sup>

“And whan it is al colde **lesh** it thynne put it in a panne and fry it wel”

(*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)

“take it up fro þe fire & **lese** it into feire peces” (*MS Cosin V.iii.11 A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“& þen **leche** it fayre with a knyff, but not to þinne” (*MS Harley 279*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

This verb is the second most common of the carving terms, occurring 61 times in the corpus. All of the occurrences have the more generic sense of cutting something into slices (although two of them do actually involve brawn) and can hardly be considered technical carving usages. What is interesting, however, is that the verb is found only in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts, disappearing entirely by the sixteenth century.

The rather sudden disappearance of *leach* is especially interesting, because, as is clear from Figure 3, it coincides with the appearance of *slice*, which seems to have replaced it entirely and permanently at the boundary of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These two verbs are quite similar, not only in their meaning and usage, which are identical, but also in the sense that both are derived from Old French and also have a corresponding noun which is also frequently attested in the corpus. Unfortunately the current corpus contains too few texts from the boundary of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for a

<sup>15</sup> The OED quotes the word in this carving sense up to the nineteenth century, but notes that it occurs “in later use only as a traditional entry from lists of ‘proper’ terms” (OED Online: *splat*).

<sup>16</sup> *Brawn* here refers to the meat of the wild boar.

closer analysis of the interrelations of this synonym pair, but it is certainly one that merits further study using a higher-resolution corpus of culinary texts.

### 5.7. *mince (the plover)*<sup>17</sup>

- “take Oynouns and **mynce** hem smale” (*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 “& then **myse** feire dates smale” (*MS Cosin V.iii.11 A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 “Take buttys of Vele & **mynce** hem smal” (*MS Harley 279*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 “mutton or beif must be fyne **mynced** and seasoned wyth pepper and salte”  
 (*A Proper Newe Booke Of Cokerye*, 16<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 “take good cheese clene scraped and small **minced**” (A.W., 1591)  
 “TAke Apples, and **mince** them small” (*The good Huswifes Handmaide for the Kitchin*, 1594)  
 “take the flesh from the bone, and **mince** it small” (Murrell, 1615)  
 “Boil your Eggs hard, then **mince** and mix them with [...]” (Wolley, 1675)  
 “then **mince** the yelk of a hard Egg, and strew it on the Trout” (Markham, 1683)  
 “Take a Hare and bone it, then **mince** the Flesh very small” (Bradley, 1762)  
 “take the flesh from the bones, and **mince** it very well” (Moxon, 1764)  
 “**mince** the lemon-peel very finely” (Beeton, 1861)  
 “Beard and **mince** the oysters” (Beeton, 1861)

*Mince* is one of the most frequent cutting verbs in the corpus, accounting for over 12% of the total. It has an average frequency of 1.25 occurrences per 1,000 words across the whole corpus and occurs at least once in every single text in the corpus. Unfortunately, none of the occurrences have any association with carving a plover or any other bird, but instead refer more generally to cutting something into small pieces. Although it does not function as a technical carving term in the corpus, a detailed investigation of this term reveals an interesting diachronic development, namely a drastic fall in its popularity during the eighteenth century. While its average frequency over the other centuries varies from 1.23 to 2.66 per 1,000 words, its average frequency in the three eighteenth-century texts is merely 0.26 per 1,000 words. This dip may well be linked to developments in culinary fashions, but ascertaining the reality and elucidating the reasons behind it would require a larger collection of texts from the period and an approach oriented more towards cultural history. This offers an interesting prospect for further study.

### 5.8. *Conclusions on the medieval carving terms*

After a closer look at the occurrence of the medieval carving terms in recipes, it seems clear that the initial hypothesis is not really supported by the evidence. It seems, in fact, that the technical carving terms were not really used in recipe texts to begin with. This is not necessarily surprising, since carving was considered a gentlemanly activity associated more with the dining hall than with the kitchen (Scully 1995: 172). It should be noted, however, that what few occurrences there are do occur in the earlier texts, those from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This supports the picture painted by their usage in the carving manuals, namely that most if not all of these specialised cutting verbs became obsolete during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

## 6. Other casualties

### 6.1. *The violent end of hack and hew*

- “Nym Veel and seth it wel and **hak** it smal” (*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)  
 “Take Harys & Fle hem & make hem clene an **hacke** hem in gobettys” (*MS Harley 279*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

<sup>17</sup> The form *myce*, which the OED treats as a separate lexeme, has here been included under *mince*, since they are both variants of the same Anglo-Norman and Old French root (*mincer/mincier*) and seem to be used identically. The main distinction seems to be dialectal or down to personal preference; the form *myce* is used in the *Forme of Cury* and MS Cosin V.iii.11 A.

“parboile Oynouns presse out þe water & **hewe** hem smale” (*Forme of Cury*, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)

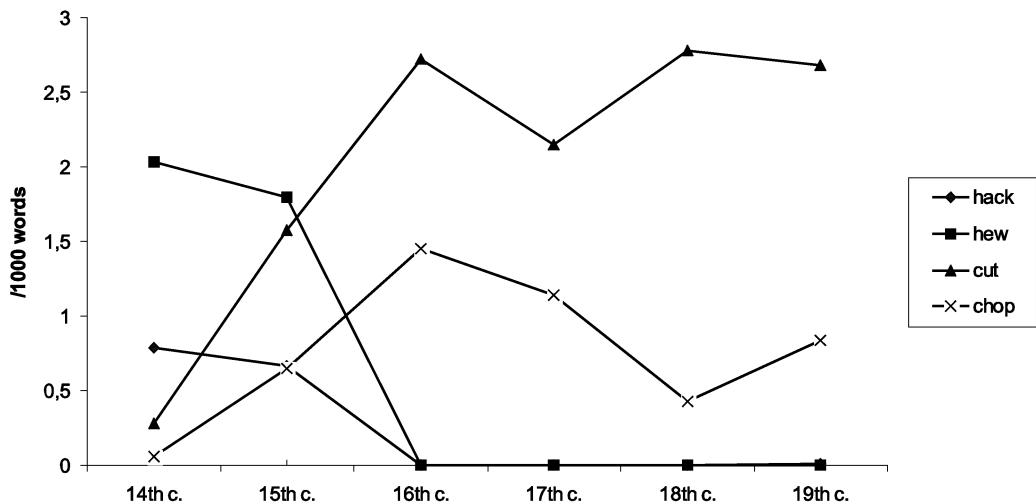
“Take peions and **hew** hom in morselle smalle” (*Liber Cure Cocorum*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“peke out alle þe bones & **hewe** hit smale” (*MS Cosin V.III.11 A*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

“take ysoppe Sawge Percely a gode quantite & **hew** it smal” (*MS Harley 279*, 15<sup>th</sup> c.)

These two almost synonymous verbs, which in the modern mind are not immediately associated with the culinary arts, were in fact very frequent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, being used for a variety of purposes, as can be seen from the examples above. With an average frequency of 1.86 occurrences per thousand words over the two centuries, *hew* is in fact the single most frequent cutting verb in the whole corpus, while *hack* occurs a respectable 0.7 times per thousand words over the same period.

What makes these verbs interesting is the fact that apart from a single occurrence of *hack* in Mrs. Beeton’s nineteenth-century text, neither of them appear in the corpus after the end of the fifteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that after the Late Middle Ages, these verbs seem to have been relegated almost exclusively to more violent contexts of inflicting bodily harm. While the present corpus offers very few clues as to the reasons for their disappearance, it does provide strong evidence concerning their likely replacements. As can be seen in Figure 6, the decline of *hack* and *hew* is paralleled by a corresponding rise in the frequencies of the related but more neutral verbs *chop* and *cut*, most likely indicating that these verbs took over at least some of the functions that had been covered by *hack* and *hew*.



**Figure 6.** The frequencies of *hack* and *hew* contrasted with those of *cut* and *chop*.

## 6.2. The loss of the generic *make + adj.* & *do away*

“Take rapus and **make** hem **clene** and waiss hem clene” (*Forme of Cury*, 14th c.)

“Take Conyngys & **make** hem **clene** & hakke hem in gobettys”

(*MS Harley 279*, 15th c.)

“scrape it faire and **make** it **hollow** as you doo a Carret roote”

(*A Book Of Cookrye*, 16th c.)

“Tak Figys and Reysons and **do away** the Kernelis and a god party of Applys and **do away** the parying of the Applis and the Kernelis” (*Forme of Cury*, 14th c.)

“And **do away** þo rybbys I undurstonde” (*Liber Cure Cocorum*, 15th c.)

“Take a sole & **do away** þe hede” (*MS Cosin V.iii.11 A*, 15th c.)

“take Perys seþe hem & pare hem & **do a-way** þe core” (*MS Harley 279*, 15th c.)

These constructions involving a semantically generic verb and an adjectival or adverbial complement, have been described by Broccias (2008: 38) as “schematic resultative constructions”.<sup>18</sup> While adjectival resultative constructions<sup>19</sup> are not at all uncommon in Present Day English, schematic forms employing verbs like *do* or *make* are rarely used. It is especially interesting that, with the exception of the generic verbs of making and verbs of creation, adjectival resultative constructions even in Old English texts usually involve verbs of cutting and washing, i.e., verbs especially typical of the culinary realm (Broccias 2008: 43).

Moving on to Middle English,<sup>20</sup> Broccias notes that, as in Old English, “the majority of dynamic examples (i.e., both ‘manner’ resultatives and schematic resultatives) contain the schematic verb *make*” or verbs of cutting or washing, but new, more diverse constructions also appear, involving verbs of removal, filling, destruction, hitting, change of shape or food preparation (Broccias 2008: 48). The fact that this list coincides to a striking degree with the types of verbs used in culinary recipes suggests that these constructions might be especially typical of this text type. The present corpus does seem to support this. In the context of cutting verbs, the phrases *make X clean* and *do away X*, are both used to refer to the removal of unwanted parts from the object, where Present Day English would use the simple verbs *clean* and *remove*. As can be seen in Figure 4, these simple verbs do not appear in this context until the eighteenth (*clean*) and nineteenth (*remove*) centuries.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the present corpus does seem to support Broccias’ observation that “by Shakespeare’s time the types of possible RCs seem to be similar to the Present-day ones” (Broccias 2008: 51). The two above-mentioned constructions occur quite frequently in recipes of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but appear in only one example from the sixteenth century and disappear entirely by the seventeenth.<sup>22</sup> Judging by the results obtained in this pilot study, a more comprehensive corpus of historical recipes would offer interesting material for further research on the diachronic development of the different types of adjectival resultative construction.

## 7. New arrivals and rising stars: The cutting edge of cutting verbs

The sixteenth century seems, at least to some degree, to act as a watershed with regard to cutting verbs. Most of the “old” cutting verbs and expressions described above die out before or during this century, and most of the new ones appear during or after it. Disregarding single occurrences, the new verbs that appear in the corpus only after the sixteenth century include: *divide*, *hash*, *beard*, *bone*<sup>\*</sup>, *chip*<sup>\*</sup>, *trim*, *scotch*<sup>\*</sup>, *split*, *stone* (seventeenth century); *clip*, *case*, *clean*, *clear*, *discharge*, *free from*, *gut*<sup>\*</sup>, *open*, *skin*, *strip*<sup>\*</sup>, *nick*<sup>\*</sup>, *score* (eighteenth century); *fillet*, *halve*, *saw*, *separate*, *detach from*, *empty*, *paunch*<sup>\*</sup>, *remove*, *separate*, *shell*, *crimp*<sup>\*</sup>, *incise*, *pierce*, and *thrust* (nineteenth century).<sup>23</sup> As the relatively small size of the corpus and the number of earlier attestations found in the OED demonstrate, the present corpus is not comprehensive enough to allow us to draw conclusions about individual verbs, and it is therefore necessary to look at larger trends.

<sup>18</sup> Broccias distinguishes these “schematic resultatives” from “manner resultatives” or resultatives proper on the basis that unlike the latter, the former employ a generic (or schematic) verb that “does not specify, for example, the manner in which the change of state took place” (Broccias 2008: 38).

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that in Middle English ARCs can be adverbial as well as adjectival (Broccias 2008: 50).

<sup>20</sup> His corpus material consisted of the second edition of the *Penn–Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English* (Broccias 2008: 44).

<sup>21</sup> It is notable that the verb *clean* does not occur in the corpus even in the sense of washing. Although the OED has a quote for *clean* from 1450, it is from a context involving the removal of weeds from arable land; it does not occur in a culinary context before the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> Outside the sphere of cutting, idiomatic combinations of a semantically generic verb (mostly *make*) with an adjectival or adverbial complement do also occur in later texts to a degree. Examples of this type of construction from the later texts include “make it into balls”, “make it brown”, “make it tender”, “make it in little Pasteyes”, “make it thinner” and “make it into a Paste”. The diachronic changes in the frequency of this construction over the centuries is an interesting topic, but unfortunately falls outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>23</sup> The earliest culinary occurrence of these verbs in the OED was also checked, and verbs that have a sixteenth-century or earlier attestation in a culinary context were marked with an asterisk (\*).

### 7.1. Specific removing verbs indicating the part removed

One of these larger trends would seem to be the rather dramatic and steady increase in the number of specific removing verbs that explicitly indicate the removed part: *beard*, *bone*, *case*, *core*, *garbage*, *gut*, *paunch*, *peel*, *scale*, *shell*, *skin* and *stone*. As can be seen in Figures 4 and 7, these verbs increase in both number and variety across the entire period, with an especially steep increase after the sixteenth century.

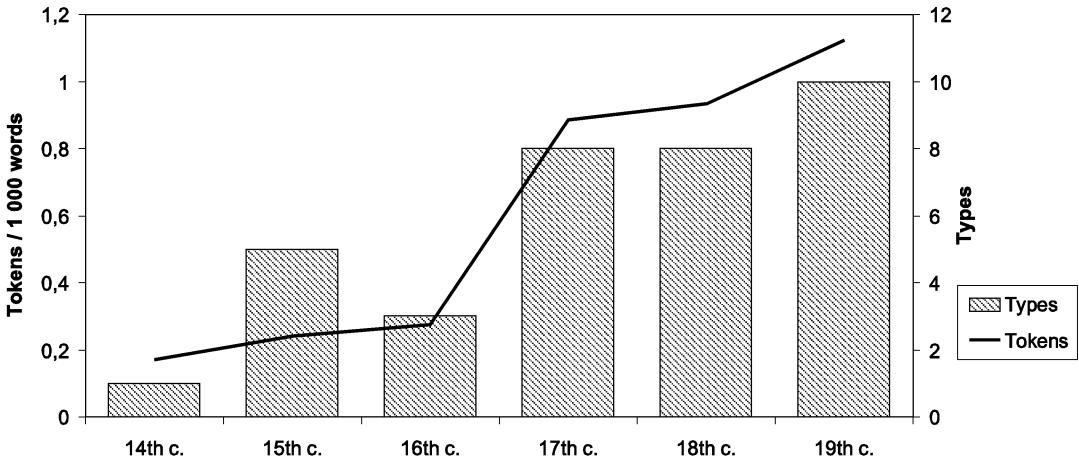


Figure 7. Type and token counts for specific removing verbs indicating the part removed.

In terms of the individual verbs, *peel* (including the variant form *pill*) seems to be the earliest removing verb of this type, as well as the most persistent throughout the period. Based on the preliminary evidence provided by this corpus, this category may well have expanded through the processes of analogy and generalisation, where new nouns referring to parts of plants and animals came to be used as verbs signifying the removal of this part. In light of this hypothesis, it is interesting that according to the *OED*, the noun form of *peel* is probably derived from the verb, whereas in the case of the other members of the group, the verb seems to be derived from the noun. If this etymological information is correct, it can be taken to suggest that the later verbs are analogous zero-derivations inspired by *peel* and possibly other early verbs of this type.

### 7.2. Generic dividing verbs

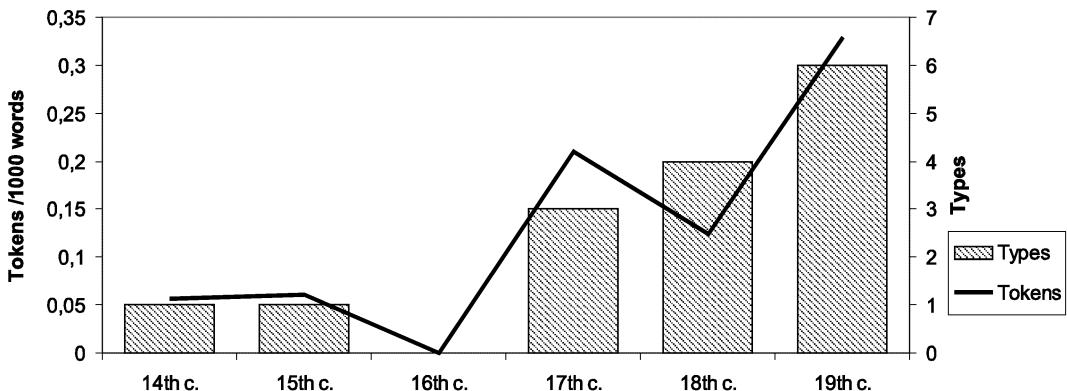


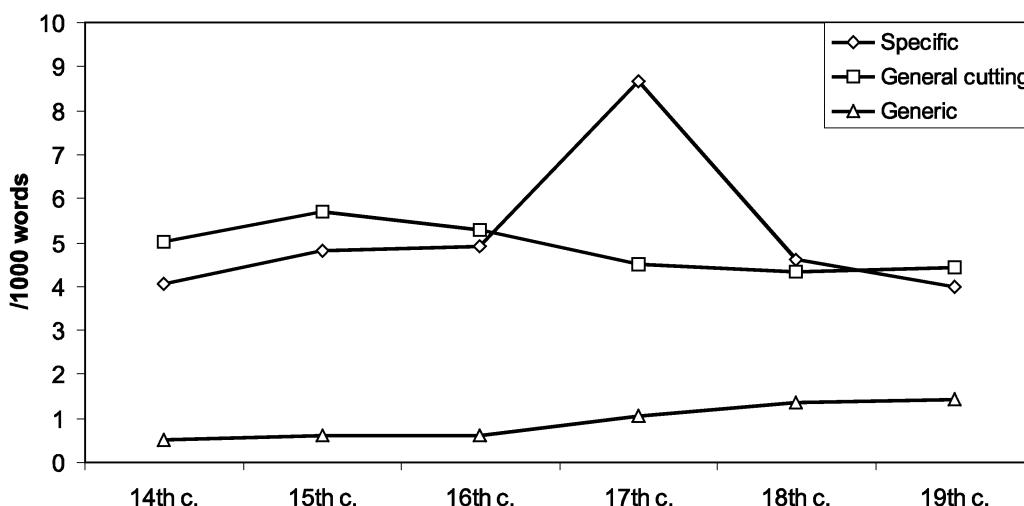
Figure 8. Type and token counts for generic dividing verbs.

Another more general trend can be observed in the field of dividing operations, where generic verbs seem to increase, especially in variety. While some generic dividing verbs, namely *break* and *part*, do occur as early as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a number of new ones are introduced along the way during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increasing the total frequency.

This would seem to support the initial hypothesis that generic verbs progressively gained ground over more specific ones. Unfortunately, while the relative increase in frequency is considerable — from 0.06 occurrences per thousand words in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to 0.33 per thousand words in the nineteenth century — the absolute frequencies are too low to allow us to draw far-reaching conclusions.

## 8. General trends

Having examined individual cases, I will now take a look at more general trends in the diachronic development of cutting verbs in light of my initial hypotheses. As can be seen from Figure 9, the use of generic verbs does indeed increase over the period, as predicted by the hypothesis. Although the frequency of generic verbs increases by 100% over the whole period from around 0.6 to 1.2 per thousand words, they remain quite marginal with respect to the other categories, increasing their proportion of all cutting verb occurrences from 5% in the fourteenth century to 15% in the nineteenth century.



**Figure 9.** Relative development of specific, general cutting and generic verbs describing cutting operations.

This increase, however, is not accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the number of specific verbs, which maintain a fairly steady frequency of between four and five occurrences per thousand words, with the exception of a spike to nine per thousand words in the seventeenth century. Due to the small size of the present corpus, it is impossible to say whether this is an anomaly or a genuine feature of seventeenth-century recipes. However, it is clear that this category would benefit from a larger corpus and a finer categorisation scheme to tease out changes in its internal composition.

It seems to be the category of general cutting verbs rather than specific verbs that gives way to the more generic verbs. Since general cutting verbs are much more common than generic verbs, their proportional decrease is not very significant (c. 20%), but in absolute terms it corresponds roughly to the increase in generic verbs, being from around 5.5 to 4.5 occurrences per thousand words. Figure 10 shows the frequencies of these two categories of cutting verb by century and by type of cutting operation. Here we can see that general cutting verbs are mostly used for dividing operations, while most generic verbs indicate a removing operation.

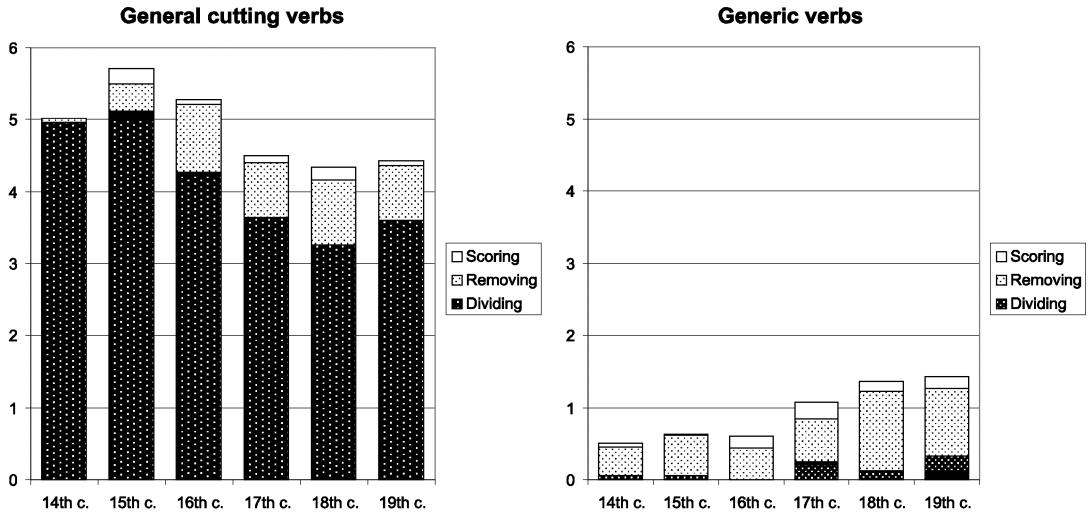


Figure 10. The use of general cutting verbs and generic verbs to describe different cutting operations.

If we look at the frequencies of these types of operation in Figure 11, below, we can see that there is a corresponding decrease in the frequency of dividing operations and an increase in the frequency of removing operations. While the correspondence is not exact, the trend is similar, at least partly explaining the changes in the relative frequencies of the two verb types. It should be noted, however, that the proportion of generic verbs does show an increasing trend for both types of operation, indicating that it is independent of the type described.

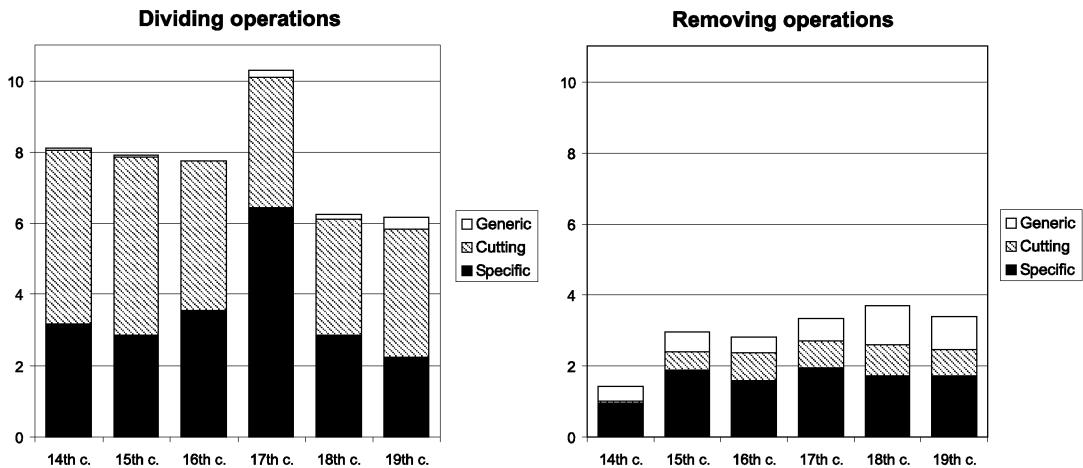


Figure 11. The types of verb used for dividing and removing operations.

This increase in generic verbs seems to be accounted for mostly by a considerable increase in the use of *take*, complemented in most cases by prepositions such as *out*, *off*, *from*, *down* and *away*. Although this construction remains marginal throughout the whole period, its frequency increases steadily from 0.11 per thousand words in the fourteenth century to 0.75 in the eighteenth century. For the nineteenth century, the frequency falls back to 0.22, a fact which highlights one of the problems of the present corpus: the nineteenth century is represented by a single large text, Beeton's *The Book Of Household Management*, and the results for this century may be affected by its idiosyncrasies.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> However, it should be noted that Beeton lifted a large proportion of her recipes directly from a variety of earlier cookbooks (Hughes 2005: 197-220), which means that the language of his work is actually an amalgamation of her own style with that of various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cookery writers.

## 8. Conclusions

Given the above observations, the first conclusion must be that the initial hypothesis — that technical verbs with very specific meanings are replaced by more complex structures consisting of semantically generic verbs complemented with adverbial and nominal phrases somewhere between the Late Middle Ages and the nineteenth century — was grossly over-simplistic. At least according to this experimental corpus, the reality is much more complex and the changes that occurred in the linguistic means of expressing cutting operations are more subtle than expected. As for the specialised medieval carving terms, it has to be concluded that, even in the Late Middle Ages, they were used in recipes very rarely, if at all. It is true that some of the specific cutting verbs used in the Middle Ages did indeed become extinct by the seventeenth or eighteenth century. However, they were not necessarily replaced by more generic verbs, but by new ones that were just as specific as the old ones. The frequency of adjectivally or adverbially complemented generic verbs does increase from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century; however, this occurs not at the expense of specific cutting verbs but rather of the general cutting verbs, whose frequency seems to decline over the period.

The principal outcome of this pilot study lies not in its elucidation of the quantitative development of English cutting verbs over time *per se*, but rather in the fact that these quantitative observations make it obvious that the lexis of culinary recipes is diachronically interesting. It is clear from the observations made above that several lexical changes that have occurred within this genre merit further study using both corpus linguistic and cultural-historical approaches.

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