

THE FORMS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH GENERATED BY THE INTERPLAY OF ENGLISH, FRENCH AND LATIN

Toward the close of the Old English period an event occurred that had a greater effect on the English language than any other in the course of its history. This event was the Norman Conquest in 1066. What the language would have been like if William the Conqueror had not succeeded in making good his claim to the English throne can only be a matter of conjecture. It would probably have pursued much the same course as the other Germanic languages, retaining perhaps more of its inflections and preserving a predominantly Germanic vocabulary, adding to its word-stock by the characteristic methods of word formation already explained, and incorporating words from other languages much less freely. In particular it would have lacked the greater part of that enormous number of French words that today make English seem, on the side of vocabulary, almost as much a Romance as a Germanic language. The Norman Conquest changed the whole course of the English language. An event of such far reaching consequences must be considered in some detail [1, p. 14].

For a long time after the Norman Conquest, Medieval England was a trilingual culture. Latin had become the language of the church, education, and philosophy. French was the language of administration, culture, and courtier ship. English was the language of popular expression, regional dialect, and personal reflection. The Harley Lyrics, a collection of literature written probably in the 1330s in Hertfordshire, gives us clear evidence of writers and readers who were, in a broad sense, trilingual [2, p. 9].

French influence became increasingly evident in English manuscripts of the 13th century. It has been estimated that some 10,000 French words came into English at that time – many previously borrowed from more distant sources. These words were largely to do with the mechanisms of law and administration, but they also included words from such fields as medicine, art, and fashion. Many of the new words were quite ordinary, everyday terms. Over 70 per cent were nouns. A large number were abstract terms, constructed using such new French affixes as *con-*, *trans-*, *pre-*, *-ance*; *-tion*, and *-ment*. About three-quarters of all these French loans are still in the language today. As new words arrived, there were many cases where they duplicated words that had already existed in English from Anglo-Saxon times. In such cases, there were two outcomes. Either one word would supplant the other; or both would co-exist, but develop slightly different meanings [5, p. 124].

Some French loans in Middle English which are represent the following semantic areas:

1. Administration: *baron, chamberlain, chancellor, constable, coroner, council, court, crown, duke, empire, liberty, majesty, manor, mayor, messenger, minister, noble, palace, parliament. peasant, prince, realm, reign, revenue,*

royal, servant, sir, sovereign, squire, statute, tax, traitor, treason, treasurer, treaty, tyrant, vassal, warden.

2. Law: *accuse, adultery, advocate, arrest, arson, assault, assize, attorney, bail, bar, blame, chattels, convict, crime, decree, executor, felon, fine, fraud, heir, indictment. inquest, jail, judge, jury, justice, larceny, legacy, libel, pardon, perjury, plaintiff.*

3. Religion: *abbey, anoint, baptism, cardinal, cathedral, chant, chaplain, charity, clergy.*

4. Leisure and theatres: *beauty, carol, chess, colour, conversation, courser, lance, dance, falcon, fool, image, jollity, joust, juggler, kennel, lay, leisure, literature, lute, melody, minstrel, music, noun, painting, palfrey, paper, parchment.*

French was the dominant influence on the growth of Middle English vocabulary but it was by no means the only one. Latin was not the language of a conquered people. It was the language of a highly regarded civilization, one from which the Anglo-Saxons wanted to learn. Contact with that civilization, at first commercial and military, later religious and intellectual, extended over many centuries and was constantly renewed. It began long before the Anglo-Saxons came to England and continued throughout the Old English period [3, p. 70].

The influence of Latin on Old English is usually divided into several periods: the influence on Germanic on the continent and in Britain, the influence on Old English before the Middle English period, and the influence during the Renaissance [4, p. 93].

During the 14th and 15th centuries several thousand words came into the language directly from Latin (though it is often difficult to exclude an arrival route via French). Most of these words were professional or technical terms, belonging to such fields as religion, medicine, law, and literature. They also included many words which were borrowed by a writer in a deliberate attempt to produce a 'high' style. Only a very small number of these 'aureate terms' entered the language [5, p. 124].

Some Latin loans in Middle English are in the following areas:

1. Administration and law: *alias, arbitrator, memorandum, pauper, prosecute, proviso, summary.*

2. Religion: *collect, diocese, immortal, incarnate.*

3. Science and learning: *abacus, allegory, etcetera, comet, contradiction, desk, diaphragm, discuss, dislocate, equator, essence, formal, genius, history, index, innumerable, intellect, item, library, ligament, magnify, major, mechanical.*

Thousands of loanwords that poured into English after the Norman Conquest had an effect beyond that of merely adding new terms and synonyms to the language. They also provided the raw material for an intricate system of levels of vocabulary ranging from the colloquial through the formal, from the everyday to the highly technical, from the general to the highly specialized. Through the thousands of Latin-based roots, they also mark the beginning of the highly cosmopolitan nature of English today.

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