

The Linguistic Influence of the Norman Conquest (11th Century) on the English Language

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Abstract

In this paper I present some historical facts that took place regarding the Norman Conquest in England, then, I discuss the different Linguistic influences on English which appears to lend support to the fact that the French Normans had a major effect on the English Language. Evidence of some changes that took place on English as a result of the Norman invasion is presented, and finally I shall conclude with the fact that some views may not be as convincing as they were once believed to be. The claim that the Normans did not have any influence on the structure of English is falsified by Lars R.'s. (1975) analysis that proves the opposite, and which is discussed later in this paper.

Keywords: Norman conquest, Linguistic influence, History of English language, 11th century English, English language, Variation of English

1. Introduction

Before the arrival of the Germanic tribes, Celtic and Roman influences were already found in Britain. The English language had been spoken by a few in a particular area, and spread to being spoken by a larger numbers of people in different geographic locations, according to Gelderen (2006:02). Despite the Germanic origins of the English language, French, Scandinavian and Latin influences are considerable and they make up nearly half of the English words. According to Barber (1993:134), the influence of French in Britain was already obvious in the higher positions of society even before the Norman Conquest happened.

The Norman French became the language of government in England as a result of the Conquest, when Anglo-Normans replaced the native English nobility, according to Algeo and Pyles (2004:123). As a result of the Conquest, the influence of French on the English language was clear with many French words replacing English vocabulary. It was not only that the word stock was influenced, but in Middle English the areas of idiom and grammar were also affected.

2. The Historical Backgrounds

The connection between our everyday life and how we form our vocabulary has been emphasized by linguists time and again. According to Kastovsky (2006), ‘Lexemes are the means by which we make direct reference to extralinguistic reality, converting our basic perception of the world around us into language. Their basic function thus is to serve as labels for segments of extralinguistic reality which a speech community finds nameworthy’ (Kastovsky, 2006: 248).

Since vocabulary reflects changes in society, vocabulary must change necessarily to reflect the needs and perceptions of any given group of people. According to Meillet (2009:104), when we describe the impact brought by the Norman French, it should be taken into consideration that this dialect was initially based on Germanic dialects that went through the process of Romance influence and, therefore, became Romance its self. This means that there were lexemes in the Norman vocabulary that were from German origins, alongside those that came from the Romance invasion. Latin had already influenced Old English (OE) dialects. Therefore, when English and French came in contact with each other, both systems had some things in common.

There are historical studies that have proven that there were two stages of French loans in the English Language. This means that the invasion belonged mainly to two different varieties of French (Norman and Central French). According to Freeman (1987:64–72), the dividing line between the two was around the year 1250. In the first period, there was less borrowings and these borrowings included phonological patterns and features that were initially from the Norman, and later from the Anglo-Norman.

According to Kastovsky (2006:166), the number of borrowings in this period is thought to be not more than 900 words, and they reflect the ‘superiority’ of the French culture. And that happened through contact with the French-speaking nobility (e.g. *noble*, *dame*, *servant*,

messenger, minstrel). According to Kastovsky (2006:249) and Tout (1922:86–71), after the year 1250, the process of borrowing changed as the speaking community of French and Anglo-French used English as their everyday spoken language.

Despite the fact that the Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Jutish and Scandinavian tribes all shared a great amount of cultural, linguistic, social features and were going through the same stages of social development, the Normans had a dialect with noticeable traces of Romance origin and lived under an old different kind of system. (Brown, 1985).

According to Freeman (1987:322), the murdering of Anglo-Saxon nobility was the result of the first change, The second change was in the social life. The feudal system introduced new classes and social groups. The distinction between the people who spoke French and others who spoke English in this period was not only ethnical, but was also social. English remained the language of the common people.

According to HEL (2005:106), there are no justified evidence that the Normans tried to extinguish the native linguistic system.

3. Linguistic Influence

After 1066, the French-speaking Normans had gained authority in the government, owned much of the lands, and were running the church, according to Freeborn and Langford (1986:27). Less and less OE was being written, replaced by West-Saxon in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Many changes took place in terms of spelling, vocabulary, word-forms and grammar and this, however, became the standard written language.

3.1 Direct Borrowings

According to Leith (1996:123) attributing Burnley (1992:432), soon after the Norman Conquest, it has been estimated that approximately nine percent of the English vocabulary had been derived from French but has increased to about 21 percent. Most of the vocabulary was considered ‘exotic’, as it was used in exclusive circles when dealing with matters of law, the church, and the running of country estates.

Powell (2004:346) believes that the changes that happened in the social life effected the words that are related to the government and administration, fashion, food, ways of social life, art, learning and medicine, and other areas of everyday life.

According to HEL (2006:249–250), Some of these examples include:

1. Government and administration:

counseil, estat, government.

2. Feudal system:

duke, madam, maner, sir.

3. Ecclesiastical words (i.e. words related to religion):

clergie, frere, religioun, preyere.

4. Law:
court/cort, crime, juge, justice.
5. Army and arms:
army, maille, regiment, sege.
6. Military ranks:
general, sergeaunt.
7. Architecture:
paleis, piler, temple.
8. Occupations:
bocher, peintre, tailloler.
9. Arts:
art, colour, ornament.
10. Education:
lessoun, pupille.
11. Fashion, meals, social life:
chaire, joye, feste, leyser(e); plate.
12. Trade:
feire, market, moneye.

As the two systems came together, it led to the formation of synonymic pairs. This is particularly clear in the case of words denoting animals. As the Anglo-Saxon were mainly breeding domestic animals. The name of the animals were from Germanic origin (e.g. *calf, cow, ox, sheep, swine, etc.*). The upper class of society introduced additional words of vocabulary that denote animal products that they enjoyed feasting such as *bacon, beef, mutton, pork, veal, etc.*

Many German words and earlier borrowings were replaced by Norman synonyms, and later on they were either replaced by French borrowings, or were subjected to semantic changes.

3.2 Indirect Borrowing and Grammatical Merges

According to Strang (1970:227), the English alphabet had twenty-five symbols at the beginning of the period 1170-1370. By the end of this period, twenty-seven symbols existed. Those symbols which had ceased to exist had been a part of the OE alphabet, while the symbols appearing later followed the Norman-French custom.

According to Skeat (1883:52;WED), because Norman French consisted of a combination of

Proto-Germanic, Germanic and Romance origins, words with these origins naturally proceeded into the Anglo-Norman language. So the noun *baron*, for example, originally belonged to Old High German (OHG). The form was *bar* and the meaning was ‘man’ or ‘husband’, originally, ‘a bearer’ or a ‘porter’. It had a correspondent *baro* in Low Latin in the sense of ‘vassal’, ‘servant’. It then changed into *barun*, that was borrowed into Old English (OE), and then changed into *baron*.

3.3 Etymological Doublets

According to Bergs and Brinton (2012:1247), although the Norman Conquest was not the cause of the structural changes between Old English and Middle English, the rule of the Norman French certainly influenced the lexicon and English rhythm and phonology

In the following table, words that are derived from the same roots are shown with their different meanings, resulting from the variations in sound and graphic forms (Jackson 2000).

Table 1. Illustrates some of the merging of the Romance units in the English Language.

latin	Central french	Norman French	Modern English
caballus (horse)	chevalerie chevalier	cavallerie cavalier	chivalry, cavalry, chevalier, cavalier
campania (a plain)	champaigne Champagne	campaigne	champaign (an open country) Champagne, campaign
canalis	chanel	canal	channel, canal

According to Kastovsky (1994:17–31), the semantic shifts, combined with phonetic changes have led to such pairs of words in Modern English. Some of these pairs are: *catch vs chase*, *wile vs guile*, *warrant vs guarantee*, *warden vs guardian*, *convey vs convoy*. The phonetic difference is explained by the variations of sounds in different dialects. The first represents the Norman or Anglo-Norman form and the second represents the Central French one: /k/ vs /tʃ/, /w/ vs /g/, /e, ei/ vs /oi/ (HEL, 2005).

3.4 Structural Changes

According to Lass (1975:174), the Normans introduced the new symbols [g] to represent the OE consonants symbol [ɣ]. The new symbol represented OE stops where the old symbol was retained only for the fricatives. According to Algeo and Pyles (2004:128), the Anglo-Normans in the M.E introduced the development of the letter *f* that changed to *v* for voiced sounds, as in *driven* as opposed to *drifen*, whereas *O.E* used *f* to represent both. Furthermore, *z* was introduced along with *s* though it was not used frequently. According to Barber (1993: 151), the digraphs [ð] and [þ] were gradually replaced by [th], but [ð] remained present up to the year 1300, and the use of [þ] was still common up to the year 1400.

The English grammar in the twelfth century started to reflect striking changes, according to Bradley (1904:32). Words in Southern dialects that used to end with *-an* changed in writing to end with *-en*, and ‘all inflexional endings consisting in vowels were reduced to a uniform

–e’ (Bradley, 1904:33).

3.5 Word Formation

According to Kastovsky (2000:110–125), in the OE period, affixation and compounding were the most productive ways to form new words. Affixes were mostly Germanic, more than lexemes being from the result of borrowing. In early Norman period, the OE prefixes such as *be-*, *fore-*, *mis-* and *un-* continued to be productive yet most of the other verbal prefixes lost their productivity. This paved the way for the borrowing from French and Latin and filled the semantic gaps in the English derivational system: *arch-*, *co-*, *counter-*, *dis-*, *in-* with allomorphs *il-/ir-*. While prefixes lost their productivity, suffixes saw new foreign patterns emerging, when some others had died out. The new ones included *-able*, *-acy* and *-ate*.

According to Kastovsky (1994:17–31), this produced a system with two derivational levels; one that is native and another that is foreign. These two levels, to some degree, overlap. Initially, the lexical items would have been borrowed from the source language where they would already be related. They would be introduced into English, and developed into other formations that might or might not reflect the usage of these words in the source language. This would result in ‘hybrid formations’, a combination of roots and affixes from different sources that result in the morphemic structure of a word.

A number of scholars still have doubts about the existence and the wide spread of ‘hybrids’ in the first period. It has been assumed that the non-native, especially the French patterns had become productive early on (see Kastovsky, 1986).

However, Dalton-Puffer (1996:221) tried to prove that the Romance suffixes had not really become productive in this period. ‘Hybrid’ formations containing a Germanic base and a Romance affix come as a result of a direct relationship. Some of these examples are: *spekable*, *knowable*, *bondage*, *aldermanrie*, *worshippour* and a few others that indicate a beginning of productivity; only with *-able*. Burnley (1992:447) also names late Middle English as the ‘starting point’, especially for prefixation.

There were also a number of new patterns which emerged as a native development and were the result of foreign influence (HEL, 2005).

According to Crystal (2003:128–132), this period also brought a completely new nature to the process. This is a transformation where new words were formed by simply changing their morphological class and paradigm. However, according to Crystal, attributing HEL (2006), this transformation was not productive then.

3.6 The Simplification of Stems

According to Kastovsky (2006:203), another change happened in the morphological structure. Because the morphological structure of the new borrowings was not very clear, some elements failed to be considered as separate morphemes. This resulted in the simplification of stems. Affixes and roots no longer formed a breakable systematic unit. The word *baron* and *lieutenant* can illustrate this process. For example, the first word was formed according to the root (*bar*) and ‘derivational’ suffix *-on*. The word *Lieutenant* is a combination of two

roots. The first root is *lieu* which mean ‘place’ and is from the Latin word *locum* and the second root is the suffix *tenant*. It is a noun derived from the verb *tenir*; ‘to hold’. It is also derived from the Latin word *tenere*; ‘hold or keep’. Another reason for the simplification of stems was that the native roots that used to form compound words were dying out. A couple examples are:

1. BARN: is ME *berne*. It is a contracted form *ofber-ern*. It occurred in the Old Northumbrian dialect. It used to be a compound word from Anglo-Saxon (AS) *bere* – ‘barley’, and *ern*, which is ‘a house, or place for storing (Skeat, 1883:52;WED).
2. NIGHTINGALE: is a compound AS word *nihtegale*, ‘singer of the night’. It consists of AS *nikte*, gen. case of *niht*, *neah*, ‘night’ and *gale*, ‘singer’ from *galan*, ‘to sing’. Compounds that were related also existed in Old Danish (OD) *Nattergal*, Swedish *n'dktergal*, Gothic *nachtigall* and many more. The verb *galan* became *galen* in ME. It is the same as OD *gale* and Swedish *gala*, ‘to crow as a cock’, and is closely related to English *yell* (Skeat, 1883:398;WED).

3.7 Semantic Shifts

According to Crystal (2003:138), these include transferred meanings (e.g. metaphor and metonymy), generalized or extended meanings and narrowed or specialized meanings. The words develop new positive or negative meanings that underwent the process. In other cases, the original meaning of a word is extended by applying it to new referents. So the word becomes ‘polysemantic’ (i.e. has multiple meanings). According to Crystal, attributing Skeat (1883), when researchers work with lingual sources, it allows them to reach conclusions that concern the process and the nature of the semantic changes that take place. For example:

The word ‘KNAVE’ in ME is *knaue* (with u for v). ‘Male’ is a form of AS *cnafa*, which means ‘a boy’. It is a later form of *cnapa*. It has related words in OD such as *knap*; ‘a lad, servant’, and German *knabe*; ‘a boy’.

According to Skeat (1883:316–317;WED), the origin of this word is Celtic. It appears to be preserved in Gael, *cnapach*; ‘a youngster’. This word is grammatically connected with the adjective *cnapach*, which means ‘knobby, bossy, stout’. Originally, this word did not mean ‘rascal’, but gradually changed its meaning because of the connotation associated with the characteristics of the boys and how their masters perceived them..

The word KNIGHT, on the other hand, underwent a more advanced process. This word was originally an AS *cniht*; ‘a boy, servant’. It had related words in OD such as *knegt*; ‘a man-servant’, ‘knave (at cards)’, Old Swedish *knekt*; ‘a soldier’. It also underwent the stem simplification as in AS *-iht*, which is the adjectival suffix. It probably was *cn-iht*; ‘belonging to the kin or tribe’ (Skeat, 1883:317;WED). Its modern meaning which is ‘a man raised by a sovereign to honourable military rank after service as a page and squire’ or ‘a title’ did not exist, neither did the connotations such as ‘noble’ and ‘courageous’. The new meanings emerged over time.

‘Split polysemy’ is another result of this period. New words emerged and mixed with the

original meanings of OE words and created polysemantic words and formed homonyms. One of the original meanings of the sets was lost. This made other meanings (that were already transferred from the direct meaning) form new clusters and sometimes they made paradigms. An example for this is the noun *board*. It was used to name planks, tables and desks. Therefore, it was a means for food to be served on and for business matters to be discussed at. According to Skeat (1883:620;WED), the words *tablette* and *table* were borrowed from NF. The word *board* failed to mean ‘a piece of furniture’. The semantic bond between the direct meaning ‘plank’ and the transferred use of word was lost. As a result of this, there are homonyms in the English Language.

3.8 The Spelling System

According to Culpeper and Archer (2009:250), the Norman French had a great impact on the English spelling system, as it had a different sound and spelling system than the English did. The change of the spelling of some place names such as *turville*, which was originally spelt with initial *th*, is a result of French influence. However, because the French system did not have the sound *th*, they changed the spelling to fit their own system. Another feature that did not fit the French system was the ‘initial consonants clusters consisting of ‘s’ followed by a consonant’ (Culpeper and Archer, 2009:252). Therefore, English place names with this feature such as *Tutbury* and *Nottingham* ended up losing their initial ‘s’ that they once had.

The diphthongs *th*, *uu* (or *vv*) and *sh* were also developed in the ME period by the Normans. They also caused the ‘distinctive’ letters such as *thorn*, *eth* and *wynn* to vanish. The Normans brought Old French spelling into the English Language, and some examples of such are:

O.E *cw*, as in *cwen*, ‘queen’, was changed to *qu*, Mod French *quatre*.

O.E *c*, as in *cild*, ‘child’, became *ch*. ‘*tf*’ was reduced to ‘*f*’ in Mod. French words as in *chef*.

O.E *s*, as in ‘ice’, changed to Mod. French *c*; ‘Sitroen’.

O.E *u*, as in *hus*, ‘house’, changed to Mod. French *ou*; *vous*.

According to Algeo and Pyles (2004:129), when the letters *e* and *i*, ‘y’ occur after *c* in French loanwords such as in *cite*, ‘city’, it is pronounced *s*. In O.E writing, the letter *c* never represented *s*, but it did with *k* and *č*.

4. ‘Onomastics’; The Study of History, Origin and The Use of Proper Names

According to HEL (2006:301), some changes occurred in the system of personal names and place names. The system of person names included French-mediated names from Celtic and West Germanic origin and also French-mediated names of saints. Some Germanic names include *William*, *Robert*, *Richard*, *Gilbert*, *Rose/Rohais*, *Maud*, and *Alan*. Christian names were biblical names. Some of these names are *Adam*, *Matthew*, *Nicholas*, *Peter/Piers*, *John* and its feminine *Joan*, *Anne*, *Margaret* and *Mary*. According to Coates (2006:302), some of the Germanic stocks disappeared, or the names were changed entirely. This was due to the French workers being unfamiliar with the names.

According to Coates (2006:335), many English place names were changed after the Norman Conquest. This was due to the scribes not being able to render them accurately. The scribes were trained in Old French, and were unfamiliar with the English place names.

5. Conclusion

The Norman Conquest has brought some drastic changes to the structure of the English vocabulary with regard to the etymology, semantics, word-forming patterns and spelling. Despite the fact that some authors, Bergs and Brinton (2012) believe that the Norman Conquest was not the cause for the structural changes between OE and ME, clear evidence presented by Lass (1975) shows that the Norman French did cause the structure of the English Language to change. With regard to when the influence took place, some believe that these changes took place immediately after the conquest where as others believe that the changes took place hundreds of years later.

ABBREVIATIONS

AS – Anglo-Saxon

HEL – A History of the English Language

ME – Middle English

NF – Norman French

OD – Old Danish

OE – Old English

OHG – Old High German

PIE – proto-Indo-European

WED – Webster's Online Encyclopedic Dictionary

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