The penetration of French into four occupational domains in medieval England

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This paper presents interim findings of the Leverhulme-funded Bilingual Thesaurus of Medieval England project, in which the extent of language contact influence in non-elite occupational domains in medieval England is identified. We investigate how far they were subject to contact-induced linguistic change, and whether acceptance of or resistance to French lexical influence varied significantly by occupational domain. Conclusions can be drawn as to the extent to which items were borrowed from French to fill pre-existing lexical gaps in English, or English words existed but were displaced by French terms.

Methodological questions are raised, including the identification of the lexis for the semantic domains in both languages, and the use of a conceptual categorization devised for a diachronic view of English - the Historical Thesaurus of the OED - that requires slight modification to encompass the practices of the medieval period.

Lexis is analysed along the following dimensions: single-word lexemes versus compound words, so as to control for the proliferation of lexical items formed by compounding; single language versus multiple language origin, to control for the difficulty in many cases of isolating a single language of origin for medieval English borrowings. Results are presented separately to allow the penetration of French to be assessed accordingly.

The semantic domains so far investigated are building, manufacture, shipping, and farming, where we report on and discuss results obtained at this stage. Preliminary results suggest that the levels of French lexis in the first three of these are similar, at around 25%. Farming offers a nuanced picture of the interaction between the two languages: terms for agricultural processes show a level of French origin lexis comparable to other occupational domains, whereas under 10% of those for agricultural instruments are of French origin.

Elite occupations (military, ecclesiastical, governmental etc.) were clearly not the only ones to experience intense contact influence from mediaeval French (Kastovsky 2006). Findings are compared with those of earlier lexical contact influence studies (Dekeyser 1986, Rothwell 1998, 2010); the social and acquisitional frameworks (Trotter 2003, Ingham 2012) within which such developments took place is further discussed.

References


