

On the Anglo-Norman Origins of Supralocalisation in English

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Philip Durkin has shown that of the thousand most frequent words in the present-day British National Corpus, just under 50% are borrowings from French or Latin or both (4% are from other languages and the rest Old English), with the French and Latin words borrowed into English in the fourteenth century. “The high-frequency vocabulary of contemporary written English thus appears to show a much more marked impact from late Middle English borrowing from French and Latin than is shown by the lexicon as a whole” (Durkin 2020: 348).

In this paper I suggest that ‘Standard English’ is really a codeswitched English matrix containing Anglo-Norman vocabulary of non-high register, which evolved from the mixed-language practice of trade and business (accounts-keeping, journal-keeping, inventories of goods and testimonies in wills). If fifteenth-century monolingual English is regarded as ‘English matrix plus AN/ML wordstock’ (the inverse of preceding generations’ ‘ML+AN matrix plus English wordstock’), then it can be seen that when monolingual Anglo-Norman was abandoned (starting c.1370, completed by c.1430), the matrix language shifted to an English which also took over the written conventions of Anglo-Norman. Those written conventions (derived from earlier Medieval Latin ones, of which it is a descendant) included a force towards relative invariancy. Based on the Middle English Local Documents project of the University of Stavanger, I consider the supralocal spread of:

- Anglo-Norman spellings -ioun, -aun-, -lx
- the cliticisation of atte ‘at + the’, on the model of Anglo-Norman del ‘de + le’ and as ‘a + les’
- the cliticisation of th’, as in thestate ‘the + estate’, on the Anglo-Norman model of the definite article l’ followed by a noun beginning with a vowel, as in lestatut ‘le + estatut’

These features fanned out over a large region and although they did not standardise, they were part of the force for invariancy.

References

Durkin, Philip. 2020. The relationship of borrowing from French and Latin in the Middle English period with the development of the lexicon of standard English: some observations and a lot of questions. In Laura Wright (ed.). *The Multilingual Origins of Standard English*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 343-364.

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