

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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