



## Compare and Contrast influence on English of the Scandinavian Languages and French.

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French and the Scandinavian languages - often referred to collectively as Norse - are amongst several prolific languages that have dramatically influenced the development of English. Within Old English, only 3% of words had been borrowed from other languages, yet this figure is approximately 70% in Modern English;<sup>1</sup> one drastic change partly due to Scandinavian and French influence. In order to fully understand the contrasting and similar ways in which these languages have contributed to English, several aspects about them must be considered: the classes, functions and quantity of words loaned; the depth and breadth of their influences across England; and how these languages initially came to infiltrate English.

This work will use Chaucer's *The Parlement of Foulys*<sup>2</sup> to aid illustration of these aspects. Written in the late fourteenth century, this poem presents a dreamer and his dream vision, within which he envisions a parliament of birds assembled on Valentine's Day to choose mates. Robert French determines the poem 'an allegory; based upon a contemplated marriage in the royal family;<sup>3</sup> presumably with the 'ryal eagle' (l.330) and the 'formele eagle' (l.373) representing the couple involved. Such royal connotations may be relevant later, when the language within Chaucer's text will be used in order to fully ascertain and highlight the differences and similarities between these two languages' influences on English.

Firstly however, the historical context of each language's associations with English must be considered. Scandinavian raids in England first occurred between 787 and 850, after which time Scandinavian natives began to settle in the north-east. Thus in 878, the English and Danish leaders, King Æthelred and Guthrum, signed the Treaty of Wedmore, establishing Danelaw; a north-eastern area ruled by Danish hierarchy and law. Although the divide was not consistently accepted by all, place-names and legal terms became influenced by Norse in this region.

When King Æthelred died in 1016, the ruler of Denmark and Norway, Canute, was declared King of England and placed Scandinavian friends and followers in positions of authority. Perhaps more significantly for English, this sparked further Scandinavian settlement in England (mostly in the north-east) that continued for centuries; providing settlers with opportunities to influence language. This seems extremely important as 'Edward the Confessor,' half-English, half-Norman, became King after Canute in 1042 and placed Norman friends in prestigious Church and State roles, thus limiting Scandinavian opportunities to influence English from powerful positions. However, residual Scandinavian

<sup>1</sup> Manfred Scheler, *Der Englische Wortschatz: Grundlagen der Anglistik und Americanistik* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1977), p.74.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parlement of Foulys*, ed. by D.S. Brewer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970). Hereafter referred to as *Parliament*. Further references [to this edition, etc.] are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Robert French, *A Chaucer Handbook*, 2nd edn. (New York: F.S. Crofts, 1947), p.93.

nobles ensured that ‘two factions at the court were striving for supremacy:’<sup>4</sup> Scandinavian and French; both temporarily able to influence the English language from above.

When Edward died childless, Harold, his advisor’s son, became King, but William of Normandy (who claimed that Edward had promised him the throne) soon became monarch after victory over Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Baugh and Cable have claimed that this Norman Conquest ‘had a greater effect on the English Language than any other (event) in the course of its history.’<sup>5</sup> Not only did William bring over friends who spoke his native tongue to fill authoritative positions as Edward and Canute had done, but French became the language of government, law and education, associated with rule and aristocracy.

Therefore, Scandinavian languages and French infiltrated English at different social strata: Scandinavian more consistently gained access to ordinary people via settlers (given that Canute’s rule of England was short lived), whereas French became a language associated with the highest tiers of society.

Even though only 2% to 10% of the British population were French-born at any point,<sup>6</sup> French had a much wider influence on vocabulary than Scandinavian (the speakers of which probably represented a higher population proportion, particularly in north-eastern areas). Finkenstaed and Wolff have indicated that Norse-derived terms constitute less than 13% of the Modern English lexicon, whereas terms from French comprise roughly 28%,<sup>7</sup> with over 10,000 of the latter adopted during the Middle English period.<sup>8</sup> This may seem surprising given the historical context (as Scandinavian probably came into contact with more English people), yet Chaucer’s *Parliament* indicates a link between French aristocratic power and the semantic fields of loans, which seems explanatory.

For instance, the debate within the text concerning the formel’s choice of lover is ‘peppered with scholastic and legal terminology... for real parliamentary flavour,’<sup>9</sup> many of which are French-derived, such as ‘counseyl’ (council) (l.631) and ‘argumentis’ (argument) (l.538).<sup>10</sup> (Furthermore, ‘parliament’ itself is also taken from French.)<sup>11</sup> This indicates the route via which French terms infiltrated English; through royalty, courtiers and the upper class, who had the authority to adopt such French lexical items in the English setting.

Moreover, if we consider the poem’s suspected aforementioned royal wedding allegory, it seems significant that ‘ryal’, ‘tersel’ (l.393), ‘formele’ and ‘eagle’ are all French derived,<sup>12</sup> as this suggests that (even as monarchs of England) the period’s royalty may have been influenced by French and its naming strategies. Additionally, the royal eagle is the first of three eagles given the opportunity to verbalise his desire to mate with the ‘formel’ eagle, potentially reinforcing the unrivalled noble French-born status (if we follow the royal wedding allegory theory.)

<sup>4</sup> Dieter Kastovsky, ‘Semantics and Vocabulary’ in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Richard M. Hogg, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-99), i (1992), 290-408 (p.326).

<sup>5</sup> Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), p.108.

<sup>6</sup> Rolf Berndt, ‘The Linguistic Situation in England from the Norman Conquest to the loss of Normandy’ in *Philologica Pragensia*, 8 (1965), pp.145-163.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Finkenstaedt and Dieter Wolff, eds. *Ordered Profusion: Studies in Dictionaries and the English Lexicon* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1973), cited in ‘Lexis and Semantics,’ by John David Burnley, in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, ed. by Richard M. Hogg, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992-99), ii (1992), 409-499 (p.415).

<sup>8</sup> Baugh and Cable, p.178.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A study in style and meaning* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), p.119.

<sup>10</sup> See OED ii. s.vv. *council*, *argument*.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd edn. (Oxford University Press, 2000-2008), s.v. *parliament*. Hereafter referred to as OED iii.

<sup>12</sup> See *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd edn. (Oxford University Press, 1989), s.vv. *eagle*, *formel*, *tercel*, *royal*. Hereafter referred to as OED ii.

The royal eagle's speech has also been deemed superior, possessing 'the power – and the simplicity – of the best troubadour lyrics,'<sup>13</sup> and this view may occur in part due to the wealth of French-derived vocabulary used. For example, within the first two stanzas of his speech, at least ten French-derived (or heavily influenced) terms appear, including one verb, 'serve' (1.419), and several nouns, such as 'sovereign' (1.416), 'certys' (certain) (1.424), 'reward' (1.426)<sup>14</sup> and 'place' (1.423). The latter was originally introduced into Old English through Latin, but reinforced considerably via Anglo-Norman, Old-French and Middle-French variants,<sup>15</sup> indicating that French both loaned and influenced already present terms.

However, this male eagle's perceived higher eloquence does not simply stem from using French terminology (although this may elevate him somewhat); it is instead more likely that he demonstrates graciousness as the loaned terms often depict noble actions and concepts. This is surely because French borrowings occurred within a limited but powerful sphere of influence: that of government, administration, law and learning.

While French influenced English in this manner, as a language of upper class and aristocracy, Scandinavian languages affected English through common people over several generations. The latter therefore resulted in Norse everyday items, across several word classes, being borrowed into English; something evident in *Parliament*. Norse-derived terms in the text include the verbs 'take' (1.670), 'deye' (die) (1.423) and 'wante' (want) (1.287), the adjective 'low' (1.601), the pluralised noun 'skillis' (skills) (1.537), which demonstrates the 'sk' consonant cluster common in Norse borrowings, and the noun 'lawe' (law) (1.78).<sup>16</sup> Although Norse seems to have infiltrated at a more regular, everyday level than French, the latter term 'lawe' suggests that the Scandinavian power structure in place over Danelaw (and briefly over England) caused some politically or legally significant Norse words to become adopted through and by those with authority, in a similar process to most French borrowings.

Thus the semantic fields of French and Scandinavian loans clearly link with the historical background of each language's status and function in England, but the manners in which their influences on English actually arose - for instance, when and where they were felt as affective – are also significant. As previously stated, the influences began at different times: Scandinavian natives first settled in the ninth century, whereas the Norman Conquest largely sparked French influence in 1066. Yet it has been estimated that only 150 Scandinavian terms were borrowed into Old English,<sup>17</sup> with the language filtered slowly into written English 'only after the Conquest, when training in the West Saxon standard was terminated.'<sup>18</sup> This indicates that the previous southerly standard prevented Norse influencing written texts in the Old English period.

However, Scandinavian languages were largely spoken rather than written in England, and thus they were always likely to more heavily impact spoken language (and potentially influence written language following this oral contact.) This notion seems supported by Burnley's comment that 'even today, the proportion of Norse words is much higher in dialect speech than in the standard written language,'<sup>19</sup> and it is important to note that in the Middle English period, localised north-east dialects would have been most affected. Given its spoken nature, Scandinavian influence depleted once its speakers reverted to English in the late Middle English period.

Alternatively, French found its way almost immediately into English texts after the Norman Conquest, particularly official records, due to its affinity with government, religion

<sup>13</sup> Ian Robinson, *Chaucer and the English Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p.63.

<sup>14</sup> See OED ii. s.vv. *serve, sovereign, certain, reward*.

<sup>15</sup> See OED iii. s.v. *place*.

<sup>16</sup> See OED ii. s.vv. *take, die, want, low, skill, law*.

<sup>17</sup> Kastovsky, pp.331-2.

<sup>18</sup> John David Burnley, 'Lexis and Semantics' (see Finkenstaedt and Wolff, above), p.419.

<sup>19</sup> John David Burnley, *A Guide to Chaucer's Language* (Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1983), p.146.

and law. (Therefore, it began to lose its influence when the English regained power in the fourteenth century, although limited borrowings continued from French literature.) However, although French was so widely instrumental in texts, it did not become embedded into the general public's spoken language; an idea supported by the fact that Church Ministers, primarily French speakers, often preached in English.<sup>20</sup> Common people evidently did not all know or learn French, and thus, as Burnley suggests, it seems that the adoption of French words into English was mostly 'socially-motivated', and only occasionally a 'communicative necessity.'<sup>21</sup>

The implications of this for Chaucer seem clear: his use of French-derived words was probably not necessary to portray his sentiments to everyday readers, but 'living on the fringes of the court, and involved in legal and administrative work, the pressures encouraging him to exploit the resource of that language would have been considerable.'<sup>22</sup> Thus his use of French borrowings was likely to affect the social acceptability of his verse to the upper classes, and hence the appearance of several such borrowings in *Parliament* may provide evidence of Chaucer's attempt to gain the approval of elite society. However, it has been claimed that there would have been a distinction felt between early French borrowings, 'thoroughly assimilated into English' by Chaucer's time and those still 'synchronically recognisable as foreign.'<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps the latter which would have been used for social elevation purposes, while use of the former may have become naturalised.

The geographical natures of Scandinavian and French influence also seem relevant here, in terms of embedded and new vocabulary. As stated, Scandinavian natives settled largely in the north-easterly area temporarily titled Danelaw, which is claimed to have been 'much more progressive linguistically than the rest of the country, [...] the changes that started there were gradually radiating into the rest of the country.'<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, French radiated influence from England's capital, and so when Norse terms arrived in London, (having spread from the north-east), they may have lacked 'the automatic acceptability that social and cultural prestige afforded to new French borrowings,'<sup>25</sup> given that this area had not felt such extensive Scandinavian rule or influence as Danelaw.

As Chaucer was a London writer, this may partly explain the lack of Scandinavian vocabulary in *Parliament*, compared to the array of French-derived items. Scandinavian influence on his works would have been limited; he would have been aware of terms that had become integrated into Standard English but not any north-eastern localised lexical items. This is obviously corroborated by the idea that Scandinavian languages were largely spoken vernaculars. Chaucer probably only accessed other dialects through written texts (of which there were few from the Danelaw area) or visitations, and so he would rarely have been exposed to north-eastern, Scandinavian-influenced dialects. Thus it seems understandable that Norse has much less influence on Chaucer's written English than French, the written and spoken forms of which he encountered every day through his courtly associations.

These geographical specifics may also provide rationale for the partial use of modern Scandinavian-influenced third person pronouns in *Parliament*. During the Middle English period, Norse pronouns such as 'they', 'them' and 'their' replaced former pronouns: 'hie', 'him' or 'hem' and 'hire'. These 'h' form pronouns seem to have become perceived as

<sup>20</sup> 'Lexis and Semantics', p.425.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.134.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> John David Burnley, 'French and Frenches in Fourteenth-Century London' in *Language Contact in the History of English*, ed by. Dieter Kastovsky and Arthur Mettinger, 2nd.rev.edn (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), pp.17-34 (p.26).

<sup>24</sup> Kastovsky, p.327.

<sup>25</sup> *A Guide to Chaucer's Language*, p.147.

deficient,<sup>26</sup> and thus those in contact with Scandinavian speakers adopted their apparently more useful pronoun systems. Some evidence of this surfaces in *Parliament*; for instance ‘they’ (l.55, 79 etc.) and ‘þey’ (l.83) occur intermittently. However ‘hem’ occurs rather than ‘them’ (for instance, l.40 and l.234) and ‘hire’ appears in line 82 (rather than modern ‘their’). This certainly demonstrates the incomplete nature of Scandinavian influence felt by Chaucer in late fourteenth century London, as these features may have been fully adopted into north-eastern spoken dialects by *Parliament’s* conception.

Such consideration of pronouns highlights a further discrepancy between French and Scandinavian influence. Although French mostly targeted ‘open-class elements such as nouns’<sup>27</sup> (and sometimes verbs,) as seen by the French-derived terms highlighted in *Parliament*, Scandinavian infiltrated other aspects of English, most significantly grammar, presumably due to the necessity of communication between Scandinavian settlers and native Englishmen and women. Along with pronouns, Norse apparently also influenced the ‘s’ plural suffix on third person singular verbs, the substitution of the northern ‘are’ for than southern ‘sindon’ and the prepositions ‘till’, ‘though,’ and ‘fro,’ the latter of which developed into the Norse-influenced formulaic phrase ‘to and fro.’<sup>28</sup>

In *Parliament*, ‘fro’ occurs in the aforementioned ‘to and fro’ sense in line 150; ‘Ne hath no myzt to meue too ne fro’, and ‘though’ occurs shortly afterward (l.156.). Yet ‘comyth’ (l.61), ‘metyth’ (l.37) and ‘anoyeth’ (l.518) all provide examples of the previously used ‘eth’ verb suffix, confirming the gradual, partial nature of Scandinavian influence on Chaucerian and hence London English by the fourteenth century.

However, these Scandinavian influenced grammatical features seem relatively minor compared to another grammatical development partly attributed to Scandinavian–English interaction: the loss of grammatical gender. As Norse and English are Germanic languages, it has been claimed that there was some (limited) mutual intelligibility between their speakers,<sup>29</sup> as many words had similar stems but used different suffixes to indicate gender, case, tense or number. Therefore, it can be surmised that, for increased mutual understanding, many endings became eradicated in the north-easterly regions and then these simplifications spread across England. Alternatively, rather than viewing the loss of grammatical gender as a consequence of Scandinavian–English contact, some have claimed that more general phonological changes in the Middle English period were instead responsible. For instance, various vowel endings became obscured to a similar indeterminable sound across England and thus came to be written –e.<sup>30</sup> We may however speculate that contact between Scandinavian settlers and English natives furthered or quickened this process.

Thus although Scandinavian languages were largely spoken and not written in England (unlike French), they seem to have found ways to influence grammatical functions. The vast Norse grammatical influence has even provoked Poussa to claim that creolisation occurred when the Scandinavian settlers and English natives interacted.<sup>31</sup> Although this notion is generally disputed, it emphasises the rarity of such huge foreign influence on English grammatical structures. French certainly did not achieve this to any notable degree, a notion that provides basis for criticism of Burnley’s claim that:

<sup>26</sup> Nikolaus Ritt, ‘The Spread of Scandinavian third person plural pronouns in English: Optimisation, adaption and evolutionary stability’ in *Language Contact in the History of English* (see ‘French and Frenches’ above), pp.279-304, (p.283).

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.280.

<sup>28</sup> Kastovsky, p.320.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.327-8.

<sup>30</sup> Baugh and Cable, p.159.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Poussa, ‘The Evolution of Early Standard English: The Creolization Hypothesis’ in *Studie Anglica Posnaniensia*, 14 (1982), 69-85.

‘the influence of French upon English is more complete than that of the Scandinavian languages, since in addition to the early oral contact between the two languages, there is a prolonged history in which French influenced English as a technical written language.’<sup>32</sup>

Burnley here seems to assign superiority to the immediate influence of ‘oral contact’ on written language, disregarding the fact that ‘oral contact’ between Scandinavian settlers and English natives was so incredibly influential in terms of grammar and borrowings. Although French probably influenced written forms of Middle English, particularly its power-associated vocabulary, to a greater degree, the effects of Scandinavian on spoken English and the grammatical changes and vocabulary additions to English that derived from this should not be ignored or undervalued.

This has become particularly clear through consideration of *Parliament*. While Chaucer heavily uses French-derived vocabulary (presumably because of his status in London, in contact with, and attempting to gain acceptance from, courtiers and gentry), Scandinavian influences on grammar (and some other borrowings) infiltrate the text too, perhaps indicating that they were embedded into English, even though they derived from a different geographical time region.

Therefore Burnley’s assertion of the more ‘complete’ nature of French influence might be deemed acceptable if he were only considering the English lexicon, rather than language itself: French did have a much wider, enormous influence on vocabulary, particularly within semantic fields associated with power or royalty, or law or religion. Yet Scandinavian proved more influential for grammatical forms, but influenced the lexicon to a lesser extent, although Norse-derived terms were borrowed encapsulating every day or technical notions.

Hence, both French and Scandinavian languages seem to have crucially influenced the English that we speak in the modern day, but their influences derived from different geographical centres, occurred across different time periods, and initially affected people of different status.

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Lexis and Semantics,’ p.426.

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