

# The impact of French loan words on English grammar: The rise of the progressive construction

Marlieke Shaw (KU Leuven)

**Keywords:** historical linguistics, language contact, French/Middle English and Early Modern English, syntactic influence, progressive construction

In previous work on French influx in Late Middle English (1350–1420), we showed that French loan verbs, as opposed to English native verbs, were more frequent in non-finite forms than in finite forms (De Smet 2014; Shaw & De Smet 2022). Although this *non-finite bias* primarily affected French loan verbs, an increased reliance on non-finite forms was in fact more generally characteristic of Late ME grammar. An example is the rise of newly developing periphrastic constructions and non-finite clauses (e.g. modal and light verbs, gerunds, *do*-support, progressives), all relegating lexical verbs to non-finite slots. It follows that this overall grammatical change in English may have been fuelled by (among other things) the influx of French loan verbs.

In recent corpus research we investigated one such periphrastic construction: *do*-support, as in *I do not know* (De Smet & Shaw in prep.). The findings showed that French loan verbs entering Early Modern English (1500–1570), as compared to their English equivalents, were substantially more frequent with *do*-support than without. Although the use of *do*-support would most likely have increased even without contact with French, we argued that the great influx of French loan verbs, and their non-finite bias, was a factor accelerating the development.

In the present paper we focus on a second construction emerging in Late ME, namely the progressive (1), which consists of inflected copula *be* (*was*) combined with the participle form of a lexical verb (*encresing*, inf. *encresen* ‘increase’).

- (1) *Euery day his Compenye was Encresing.*  
‘Every day his company grew.’ (c1420, MED)

Although progressive-like constructions were already attested in OE (Smith 2007; Kranich 2010), their usage frequency only started rising as of Late ME. Analogous with *do*-support, we hypothesise that the rise of progressives has been boosted by French lexical influx. This complements more system-internal explanations (e.g. Los 2012; van de Pol & Petré 2015) as to why the progressive “has been so much more successful than semantically similar constructions in other Germanic languages” (Fischer, De Smet & van der Wurff 2017: 126).

To verify the language-contact hypothesis, we extracted data from the *Penn-Parsed Corpus of Middle English, second edition* (Kroch & Taylor 2000) and the *Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English, first edition* (Kroch, Santorini & Delfs 2004). We created a paired sample including attestations with and without the progressive, which were manually annotated for form (progressive vs. simple), source language of the lexical verb (French vs. English), lemma frequency, person, number, and clause structure (e.g. interrogative, inversion). The sample was analysed by means of a mixed-effects logistic regression model.

Providing evidence that language contact was a facilitating factor in the rise of the progressive construction, this study supports the claim that French influence in English was not restricted to the lexicon, but extended to syntax (cf. Ingham 2012, 2020; Rothwell 1976, 1980; Stein & Trips 2012). In the case at hand, however, the influence is indirect. As French loans were favoured in non-finite forms, they more generally promoted reliance on non-finites in the language.

## References

- De Smet, Hendrik. 2014. De integratie van Engelse leenwerkwoorden in het Nederlands. In Freek Van de Velde, Hans Smessaert, Frank Van Eynde & Sara Verbrugge (eds.), *Patroon en argument: Een dubbelfeestbundel bij het emeritaat van William Van Belle en Joop van der Horst*, 75–87. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- De Smet, Hendrik & Marlieke Shaw. *Do-support in Early Modern English: Did French accelerate the use of this construction?* [Manuscript in preparation].
- Fischer, Olga, Hendrik De Smet & Wim van der Wurff. 2017. *A brief history of English syntax*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ingham, Richard. 2012. *The Transmission of Anglo-Norman. Language history and language acquisition*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Ingham, Richard. 2020. How Contact with French Drove Patient-Lability in English. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 118(3). 447–467. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-968X.12199>.
- Kranich, Svenja. 2010. *The Progressive in Modern English: A Corpus-Based Study of Grammaticalization and Related Changes*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
- Kroch, Anthony, Beatrice Santorini & Lauren Delfs. 2004. The Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Early Modern English. CD-ROM, first edition, release 3. <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/ppche/ppche-release-2016/PPCEME-RELEASE-3>.
- Kroch, Anthony & Ann Taylor. 2000. Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English, second edition. <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/hist-corpora/PPCME2-RELEASE-4/index.html>.
- Lewis, Robert E. 1952–2001. Middle English Dictionary. In Frances McSparran (ed.), *Online edition in Middle English Compendium*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>.
- Los, Bettelou. 2012. The Loss of Verb-Second and the Switch from Bounded to Unbounded Systems. In Anneli Meurman-Solin, Maria Jose Lopez-Couso & Bettelou Los (eds.), *Information Structure And Syntactic Change In the History of English* (Oxford Studies in the History of English), 21–46. Oxford University Press. <http://global.oup.com/academic/product/information-structure-and-syntactic-change-in-the-history-of-english-9780199860210?cc=gb&lang=en&>.
- Pol, Nikki van de & Peter Petré. 2015. Why is there a Present-Day English absolute? *Studies in Language* 39(1). 199–229. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.39.1.07pol>.
- Rothwell, William. 1976. The role of French in thirteenth-century England. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 58(2). 445–466. <https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.58.2.8>.
- Rothwell, William. 1980. Lexical borrowing in a medieval context. *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 63. 118–43.
- Shaw, Marlieke & Hendrik De Smet. 2022. Loan Word Accommodation Biases: Markedness and Finiteness. *Transactions of the Philological Society*. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-968X.12233>.
- Smith, K. Aaron. 2007. The Development of the English Progressive. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics* 19(03). 205–241. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1470542707000098>.
- Stein, Achim & Carola Trips. 2012. Diachronic aspects of borrowing aspect: the role of Old French in the development of the *be going to* + INF construction. *SHS Web of Conferences* 1. 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20120100254>.