

## **The semantics of word borrowing in late medieval English**

**Louise Sylvester, Megan Tiddeman, Richard Ingham (University of Westminster),  
Kathryn Allan (University College London).**

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The effects of French loans on Middle English is often seen as having been a matter of lexical replacement. Common conceptualisations of borrowing in this period describe them in terms of a ‘partial relexification of English from French and Latin sources’ (Schendl 2000: 78) or a ‘lexical transfer’ (Trotter 2012: 1789). Timofeeva (2018) found considerable replacement by loanwords of Old English lexemes in the religious sphere (cf. also Käsmann 1961) and framed this in terms of competition between native and borrowed terms, but questions remain as to the representativeness of this domain. While a long tradition of research has discussed the outcomes of borrowing from French, far less attention has been paid to the process of loan assimilation during the Middle English period. Studies are lacking that examine in detail, and across a broad range of lexical domains, the relative variation in replacement rates between native and non-native terms, and whether the presence of loanword and Old English words sharing the same sense(s) affects these words’ long-term outcomes. The research reported here sought to remedy this deficiency.

First, an extensive dataset was analysed, tracking patterns in lexical retention, replacement and semantic change, and comparing long-term outcomes for both native and non-native words. Use was made of the Historical Thesaurus to identify pairs, trios and quadruples of native lexemes and loanwords sharing a sense. The retention or loss of those lexemes was analysed to see if the sense was relexified with a loan item, or if the loan and the native word(s) co-existed as synonyms. Results clearly challenge the commonly held view of competition between existing terms and foreign incomers. They show that there were far fewer instances of relexification, and far more of synonymy, during the Middle English period than might have been expected. Replacement of a native by a loan word was found only about a quarter of the time. When retention rates for words first attested between 1100 and 1500 are compared, it was loanwords, not native terms, which were more likely to become obsolete at any point up to the nineteenth century. (Sylvester, Tiddeman & Ingham 2021). Furthermore, proportions of outcomes involving narrowing and broadening (often considered common outcomes following the arrival of a co-hyponym in a semantic space) were low in the Middle English period (Sylvester, Tiddeman & Ingham forthcoming).

Specific attention was then paid to polysemy in a configuration of autohyponymy, i.e. where one word denotes both the restricted and the more general meaning, e.g. cat ‘domestic cat’ > ‘any felid’.” (Koskela 2011:129). A sample of autohyponymic borrowings obtained using the Bilingual Thesaurus of Everyday Life in Medieval England (Ingham & Sylvester 2017) showed that words that narrow or extend their senses include a higher proportion of French loanwords when compared to the distribution of languages within that domain. A third of autohyponyms in the content domain of Farming, were borrowed from French (e.g. *agisten*, *braun*, *catel*, *ferroure*, *generacioun*, *wardein*, *wareine*, *venesoun*) as opposed to only 16% across the domain. In the domain of Trade, 46% of the words that narrow or broaden were of French origin (e.g. *bargainen*, *brokage*, *coin*, *grocer*,

*marchaundise, mercer, regrater, pris*) as opposed to 31% across the domain. Conversely, the rate of native lexis (i.e. of Old English origin) is more or less the same as that of the domain as a whole: 59% compared to 58% in Farming and 32% compared to 35% in Trade. These results appear to suggest that Continental and Anglo-French loanwords in Middle English were more likely to shift through restriction or generalisation of meaning than native lexis.

Finally, it was observed that over half of the French loans studied showed a sense development unique to Middle English and Anglo-French, but which is not attested in Continental French e.g. *catel* is extended from ‘personal goods and property’ to ‘livestock’, whereas *mercerie* narrows ‘merchandise’ to ‘fine textiles’). In numerous other cases, however, polysemy in insular French, Continental French and Middle English did not differ (Ingham 2021). This prompted questions as to how far semantic developments in English as the target language of loans mirrored those in the source language, who were independent of them. We report the findings of an investigation into this issue in a new project begun this year.

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