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Analysis of language change from the Middle English of Wycliffe’s Bible to the Early Modern English of Tyndale’s Bible

The Bible is one of the few texts that is translated as the language changes, so it’s a great way to see language change. We begin by overviewing the Bible translations. Wycliffe’s Bible (also known as the Wycliffite Bible or the Lollard Bible) was written from approximately 1382 to 1395. John Wycliffe worked with several other people to translate the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English. Evidence can be seen both of adherence to Latin word order and syntax and of Wycliffe’s northern dialect, particularly in the early version. There are two distinct versions of Wycliffe’s Bible - the early version translated during the life of Wycliffe and published in 1382, and the later version a revision by John Purvey, published in 1394. Tyndale’s New Testament was published later - a partial copy in 1525 and a full copy in 1526. Tyndale used several sources for his translation: the 1522 edition of Erasmus’s Greek New Testament, Erasmus’ Latin New Testament, Luther’s German version, and the Vulgate. He did not, however, use Wycliffe’s Bible because he didn’t want his English to reflect Middle English. He published revised versions in 1534 and 1536.

Research sources: The Gothic and Anglo-Saxon gospels in parallel columns with the versions of Wycliffe and Tyndale, published in London in 1874 by John Russell Smith. It was “arranged, with preface and notes, by The Rev. Joseph Bosworth, D.D. F.R.S. F.S.A. Professor of Anglo Saxon, Oxford; Corresponding Member of the Royal Institute of the Netherlands; Honorary F.R.S. of Sciences, Norway; F.S.A. Copenhagen; F. of Lit. S. Leyden, Utrecht, Rotterdam, etc.” and assisted by “George Waring, Esq., M.A. of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Magdalen Hall, Oxford” (Bosworth & Waring). The introduction details where the sources came from. Wycliffe comes from the early version of Wycliffe’s Bible as published by Oxford University Press in 1850. The 1850 version was “Formerly edited by the Rev. Josiah Forshall, F.R.S., Etc. Late Fellow of Exeter College Oxford” and “Sir Frederic Madden, F.R.S., Etc. Keeper of the MSS. in the British Museum” (Bosworth & Waring). “The editors have examined and described 170 MSS., and selected and most carefully printed two of the best in parallel columns, the first written before 1390, and the second before 1420” (Bosworth & Waring xxii). For Purvey’s revision, I looked at The New Testament in English According to the Version by John Wycliffe About A.D. 1380 And Revised By John Purvey About A.D. 1388 which was a reprint of Purvey’s revision from the 1850 Oxford publication. This publication includes the introduction from the 1850 publication, which has a “remarks on the language” section describing the language at the time the translation was being written and including examples from the text of the translation. That introduction is henceforth referred to as Oxford or Oxford notes. As for Tyndale’s Bible, I looked first at the source in Smith’s publication. Smith’s publication said “It appears that our present English Version was based upon the Bishop's Bible of 1568, and that upon Cranmer's of 1539, which was a new edition of Matthew's Bible of 1537, partly from Coverdale of 1535, but chiefly from Tyndale; in other words, that our present authorized translation is mainly that of Tyndale, mainly from the original Hebrew and Greek” (Bosworth & Waring xxviii-xxix). So, I found an earlier manuscript. I used Tyndale New Testament (1525) from studylight.org for quick searches, then looked in a source from Early English Books Online to confirm there were no discrepancies. I found the three sources of Tyndale to be quite similar; the only differences I noticed were spelling (but not such that seemed to indicate inflections).

As I report results, a pattern noted in Wycliffe is also seen in Purvey unless otherwise specified. (I will not note minor spelling changes.) If a pattern is seen in multiple verses, a + is added after the verse number to indicate this pattern is seen multiple times. I read Matthew 4, 5:1-45, and 6:1-13. I discovered that Wycliffe’s Middle English has several inflections that are lost in Tyndale’s Modern English, that Tyndale has more consistent (and less varied) pronoun usage, and that many of the words chosen by Tyndale that differ from the words chosen by Wycliffe are French in origin.

There were several patterns of plural inflections of nouns. *-ys*, as in *days* (W 4:2), *rewmys* (W 4:8), and *sonys* (W 4:8 +). In contrast, Purvey has *daies* (P 4:2), *rewmes* (P 4:8), and *sones* (P 5:45). Thus, *-ys* plural may have been an instance of Wycliffe’s northern dialect that Purvey corrected to *-es* in his revision. More examples of *-es* plural in Purvey: *langouores* (P 4:24), *almes* (P 6:4). Another plural: “*-is*”, as in “*Nyʒtis* (W 4:2), *hoondis* (W 4:6), *eendis* (W 4:13), *coostis* (P 4:13), *derknessis* (W 4:16), *nettis* (P 4:18 +), *fisheris* (W 4:18), *synagogis* (W 4:23), *sorowis* (W 4:24), *tourmentis* (W 4:24), *deuelis* (W 4:24), *feendis* (P 4:24), *prophetis* (W 5:12), *werkis* (W 5:16), *thingis* (W 5:16), *mundementis* (W 5:19), *scribis* (W 5:20), *oethis* (W 5:33), *pacis* (W 5:41), *ypocritis* (W 6:2), *streetis* (W 6:2), and *corneris* (W 6:5). Oxford did not explain this pattern. There were a few *-en* plurals, as in *bretheren* (W 4:18 +) and *children* (P 5:9 +). Oxford notes state that “the usual plural-ending is -es or -is”.

In Tyndale, there was less variations on noun plurals. *-is* plurals survived in *synagogis and in the stretis* (T 6:2). However, *-es* is more common for plurals. Examples are *dayes* (T 4:2), *nightes* (T 4:2), *stones* (T 4:3), *rewmes* (T 4:8), *kyndomes* (T 4:8), *coostes* (T 4:13), *nettes* (T 4:21), *sinagoges* (T 4:23), *dyseases* (T 4:23), *gripinges* (T 4:24), *cyties* (T 4:25), *saynges* (T 5:11), *prophets* (T 5:12), *workes* (T 5:16), *commaundmentes* (T 5:19), *scribes* (T 5:20), *pharises* (T 5:20), *ypocries* (T 6:2), *almes* (T 6:1), and *treaspases* (T 6:12). Consonant before *-s* was seen in *angels* (T 4:11), *fisshers* (T 4:18), *devils* (T 4:24), *regions* (T 4:25), *peacemakers* (T 5:9), and *corners* (T 6:5).

I saw the plural verb inflection *-en* in *shulden* (W 4:6), *camen* (W 4:11 +), *serueden* (W 4:11), *satten* (P 4:16), *sueden* (W 4:20 +), *leften* (P 4:20), *offriden* (P 4:24), *brouʒten* (P 4:24), *weren* (P 4:24), *hadden* (W 4:24), *mournen* (W 5:4), *hungren* (W 5:6), *thristen* (W 5:6), *suffren* (W 5:10), *putten* (W 5:15), *haten* (W 5:44), *hatiden* (P 5:44), *scalundren* (P 5:44), *preyen* (P 6:5), *gessen* (W 6:7), *axen* (W 6:8), and *forʒyuen* (P 6:12). Oxford notes state that the past tense plural of strong verbs commonly has *-en*. A few of the verbs I gave as example are still strong verbs today: *shulden*, *camen*, *satten*, *brouʒten*, *weren*, and *hadden*. Not all of the other verbs in this paragraph are past tense, but they are all plurals.

There were no *-en* plural verbs in Tyndale. Verbs from the previous paragraph: *came* (T 4:11), *ministred* (T 4:11) *sat* and *sate* (T 4:16), *folowed* (T 4:20 +), *lefte* (T 4:20), *brought* (T 4:24), *were* (T 4:24), *had* (T 4:24), *morne* (T 5:4), *honger* (T 5:6), *thurst* (T 5:6), *suffre* (T 5:10), *put* (T 5:15), *hate* (T 5:44), *thincke* (T 6:7), *axe* (T 6:8), and *forgeve* (T 4:12).

Oxford indicates *-id* as one of the endings for past participle of a weak verb. I saw this in *temptid* (W 4:1), *fastid* (W 4:2), *said* (W 4:4 +), *comfortid* (W 5:4), *clepid* (W 4:18 +), *defoulid* (W 5:13), *recounseilid* (W 5:24), *worschipid* (W 6:2), and *halwid* (W 6:9).

Past participle in Tyndale: *tempted* (T 4:1), *fasted* (T 4:2), *sayde* (T 4:4 +), *troade* (T 5:13), *reconcyled* (T 5:24), *preysed* (T 6:2), and *halowed* (T 6:9). Ends in *-ed*.

Oxford notes state weak verbs have several possible endings for past tense singular. *-ide* in *hungride* (W 4:2), *answeride* (P 4:4), *settide* (P 4:5), *saide* (P 4:7 +), *shewide* (W 4:8), *walkide* (P 4:18), and *helide* (W 4:24). *-de* in *hadde* (W 4:2 +), and *openyde* (P 5:2). *-te* in *sette* (W 4:5). *-e* in *toke* (W 4:8), *lafte* (W 4:11), *wente* (W 4:12), *lefte* (P 4:13), *dwelte* (P 4:13), *saye* (P 4:18), and *tauʒte* (W 5:2).

Past tense singular in Tyndale: *shewed* (T 4:8), *answered* (T 4:4), *set* (T 4:5), *sayde* (T 4:7 +), *shewed* (T 4:8), *walked* (T 4:18), *healed* (T 4:24), *had* (T 4:2 +), *opened* (T 5:2), *set* (T 4:5), *toke* (T 4:8), *left* (T 4:11), *departed* (T 4:12), *left* (T 4:13), *dwelte* (T 4:13), *sawe* (T 4:18), *taught* (T 5:2). Ends in *-ed*, nothing, or occasionally *-e*.

I’m not sure why this loss of inflections is happening. For the verbs, it could be that with the loss of strong verbs (which disappear entirely or change to weak) we lose a category of words that had different inflections. It may be that these inflections reflect changes in pronunciation, either due to local variation or the influence of foreigners. It’s also possible that what I observed as inflectional differences are simply variant spellings (e.g., *-is* vs *-es*) that become more standardized with the advent of the printing press.

Wycliffe uses different third person plural pronouns from Tyndale. Wycliffe uses *thei* for *they* and *hem* for *them*. The possessive has many forms: *herun* (W 5:10), *heren* (W 5:3), *her* (W 4:20, 6:2, 6:5), *the* (P 4:20 +), and *herne* (P 5:10). This suggests that pronouns are still shifting and being figured out at the time the translation was written. In Tyndale, the third person plural pronouns are fixed: *they*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs*.

Next is analysis of vocabulary differences between Tyndale and Wycliffe (compared to Purvey when Purvey differs from Wycliffe). Only the Tyndale word is given if there is not a clear correspondent in Wycliffe. The vocabulary changes can be found in the tables in the appendix. Tyndale uses several words that entered English before Wycliffe’s Bible where the Wycliffe word is not used in contemporary English (as indicated by the *Obsolete* or *Rare* label in the OED). 11/15, or about 73% of words that entered English around the time of Wycliffe’s Bible are French in origin. 7 out of 9 (about 78%) words that entered English after Purvey are French in origin. So it seems French borrowing is still alive and well.

In writing this paper, I got firsthand experience with HEL research. Comparative analysis like this is a great way to see changes in grammar and vocabulary, because you can pick out individual words and say “this word in this translation corresponds to that word in that translation”. I also learned that it’s important to consider the source of the manuscript you are looking at to make sure you have an accurate copy. I rejected many potential sources because they had “updated” spelling and/or grammar and were thus cutting out the very things I wanted to study. Thus the experience of writing this paper was informative and interesting.

Appendix: Vocabulary changes from Wycliffe to Tyndale

Words in Tyndale that entered English before Wycliffe’s Bible, where the word in Wycliffe is rare or obsolete in contemporary English (as indicated by the OED).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tyndale | Wycliffe | Verse number | Origin T | Origin W |
| called | clepid | 4:18 | Scandinavian | Old English |
| folowed | sueden | 4:20 + | Germanic | not in OED |
| dyseases | languour | 4:21 + | French | French and Latin |
| rewarde | meede | 5:12 + | French | Germanic |
| Treade it vnder fete | defoulid | 5:13 | Old English | French |
| better | spedith | 5:29 + | Germanic | Old English |
| canst | maist | 5:36 | Germanic | Germanic |
| rewarde the openly | quyte thee | 6:4 | French | Not in OED |
| knoweth | woot | 6:8 | Germanic | Germanic |

Table of words that entered English around the time of Wycliffe’s Bible

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tyndale | Wycliffe | Verse | Origin T | Origin W | Date of origin |
| proceadeth | cometh | 4:4 | French and Latin | Germanic | 1380 |
| charge | comaundide | 4:6 | French and Latin | French | 1389 (1225) |
| avoyd | goo | 4:10 | French | Germanic | 1400 (1375) |
| Spreed abroode | Wente in to | 4:24 | Germanic | Germanic | 1393 (OE) |
| gripinges | turmentis | 4:24 | Germanic | French | 1559 (900 1300) |
| Greate nombre off people | Myche puple | 4:25 | French | Germanic | 1350 (1300) |
| Mayteyners of peace | Pesible men | 5:9 | French | French | 1395 (1325) |
| revyle | curse | 5:11 | French | unknown | 1393 |
| excede | Be more plenteouse than | 5:20 | French | French | 1425 (1374) |
| Daunger of | gilti to | 5:21 + | French | prehistoric | 1377 (1225) |
| Angre with | Wrooth to | 5:22 | Norse | Old Frisian? | 1450 (1360) |
| agre | consentynge | 5:25 | French | French | 1413 |
| lustynge | coueite | 5:28 | Germanic | French | 1526 (1230) |
| devorcement | forsakyng | 5:31 | French | Old Saxon | 1526 (1387) |
| secret | hidlis | 6:4 + | French | Old English | 1378 |

Table that entered language after Purvey

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tyndale | Wycliffe | Verse | Origin | Date of origin |
| obteyne | gete | 5:7 | French | 1422 |
| persecute | pursue | 5:11 | French | 1475 |
| committ | do | 5:27 + | French and Latin | 1445 (1402) |
| testymonyall | libel | 5:31 | French | 1425 |
| blowe | smyte | 5:39 | Scots? | 1488 |
| sue | styue | 5:40 | French | 1438 (1200) |
| persecute | sclaundren | 5:44 | French | 1475 |
| bablynges | myche speeche | 6:7 | English (derivation) | 1430 (1250) |
| them which treaspas vs | oure dettouris | 6:12 | French | 1425 (1290) |

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