Middle English

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Contents

Chapter 1

Corpus and Various documents distributed in class

The primary course book will be "an introduction to middle English".

Middle English (defined as the period between the Norman conquest and the introduction of the printing press) is handed down to us entirely in handwritten manuscript of which several copies tend to exist.

Hunter.uma.es

The Hengwrt is the oldest preserved manuscript of the Canterbury tales[1]. The manuscript is written in *Gothic Cursiva Anglicana Formata.* This script is part of the Gothic family (the exclusive family after the Norman conquest). Of this family there are two types, one of which is *Anglicana.* The script is written cursively though adapted for literature (though separation of the letters) (indicated by the *Formata* in the script name).

Common in old manuscripts is the concept of biting, which is where the two letters share a side, such as in æ.

Modern elements of English absent from Middle English include the term "who" as a relative pronoun, being substituted instead by "that". Similarly, do-support for verbs has not yet come into being.

1.1 Lecture

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

English arrives in Britain from the continent (Friesland, Germany, and Saxony) after the departure of the Romans. At this time, most people speak a Germanic language close to Welsh, pushing away the indigenous Celts who feel to the Scottish Ilses, Cornwall and Ireland.

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[1]Known in old manuscripts as "The book of the tales of Canterbury"

As the viking raids start in Northumbria (793), there is more and more contact between the English west-Germanic language, and Scandinavian north-Germanic language. The vikings, other than raiding, likely settled peacefully coexisting with the Anglo Saxons. Given this extended coexistence, there is a great share of vocabulary which arises only in manuscripts of Middle English. Old English manuscripts survive primarily out of areas such as Wessex, which had little Scandinavian (Danish) influence. Towards the end of this period – right before the Norman conquest – a Norwegian sits on the throne, leaning – after his death – to a dispute between the Norwegians, English, and French.

After the Norman conquest, the official language of England became French with all government officials, aristocrats, and bishops being French nationals. This conquest affects English in many ways besides language, such as format, handwriting and poetry. After this period, when English returns as a written language, no one knows how to spell it, having written only French and Latin for 300 years, leading to great variation in spelling.

Chapter 2

Codicology and Paleography

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

Middle English (and in fact, all medieval manuscripts) contain inherent ambiguity due to the difficulty of recognizing handwriting, with manuscripts containing otiose marks[1], having no normalized spacing or capitalisation, and frequent use of abbreviation.

A letter can defined by its nomen, figura, and potestas, which together from the littera.

Term	Meaning
Littera	Letter
Nomen	Name
Figura	Shape
Potestas	Sound (literally "power")

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[1]Serving no linguistic purpose

Chapter 3

Manuscript characteristics

Lecture slides supplied on-paper in class and available online

In comparison to Old English, Middle English is lends itself much better to sociolinguistic analysis.

A major advantage for Middle English is the amount of texts that were preserved. In particular this allows us to separate Middle English characteristics from the idiosyncrasies from a particular scribe. This is aided particularly by the fact that we have the same manuscript copied by different scribes (such as 80 copies of the Canterbury tales), and different manuscripts by the same scribe (4 manuscripts in the case of Chaucer for instance).

A secondary element of Middle English which is entirely absent from Old English is the presence of plays and court transcripts, which allow for the reconstruction of actual spoken language, as opposed to mere poetic representation. A similar reconstruction can be formed from other works such as the Canterbury tales due to the presence of dialogues.

Neither the Old-, nor Middle- English, corpus has many authorial copies. This is likely because authors wrote on wax tablets, passing these on to scribes for copying, and subsequently meting down the wax for reusing.

Middle English also contains the first explicit statement of differences in dialect in comments, as well as attempts at recreating the forms of speech of different dialects. Of course, there is also dialectical difference among manuscripts themselves, which was present in writing likely as much as it was in speech.

Chapter 4

Important Middle English Manuscripts

Old English is mostly written in alliterative verse, as is common in Germanic languages, whereas middle English – influenced by French – has end-rime verse. In later Middle English however, there is a revival of alliterative rime. This revival is occasionally accompanied with intentionally archaic hand and spelling.

End-rime verse is popularized by secular scribes in London around 1400. Chaucer particularly popularizes verses with ten syllables and five stresses per line. Scribes with less French influence – such as those located in the Southwest Midlands, East Anglia and Yorkshire – stick more to the Old English traditions. Thus, many of the English texts written in these areas are in Alliterative meter, though there were also many written in French and Latin, occasionally within the same manuscript.

Interestingly, there are scribes from these areas, who write rather modern Latin, though they use many old English idiosyncrasies such as split ascenders, as well as the ðand .

In Anglo-Saxon times, the layout of a manuscript is not particularly important, though this becomes more important as the middle ages progress. Of course, for proper *ordinatio* – or page management – takes much more work and effort compared to the simpler-, business-inspired- manuscripts of Old English.

One example of *ordinatio* is Harley 2253 70^v. In this two-column text, the religious texts start higher on the page than the secular texts. A further popular layout in Middle English is bob-and-wheel style printing. Where two

lines rime, with a third (located vertically between, horizontally on the next column) comments on both previous lines.

Chapter 5

Standardisation

Standardisation, or the reduction of the variations in spelling, grammar, and pronunciation, already happened in late west Anglo-Saxon before the Norman Conquest. After the Norman conquest, French took over administration, thereby robbing English of some of its functions and thereby setting back the project of standardisation. As English becomes more common in parliament, schools, and administration, English continues to standardise.

Throughout the history of Middle English, there are four streams converging towards standardisation.

Central Midlands	Religious, associated with Wycliffe and the Lollards
Earth 14th century London	Edinbrugh and the national library of Scotland
Later 14th centry London	Chaucer and national parliament (10%)
Post 1430	Westminster and national parliament

Standardisation generally goes through four stages: Acceptance, Selection, Codification, and Elaboration. The above, "standards" did not go through all stages, particularly codification and elaboration are missing. English does not go through all of these stages until the use of the printing press becomes widespread.

Another problem for the "standards" listed above, is that there is a limited number of scribes, genres, and texts for each standard. Among these standard there are some which are only written by one or two scribes, and only in end-rime verse poetry. Furthermore, there are manuscripts by multiple scribes, some of whom write in one of the standards above, whereas others do not, irrespective of communication between said scribes.

Chapter 6

The Trinity Gower is a manuscript of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* copied by five scribes.

Scribe	Manuscripts
A	Not known for other manuscripts
B	Also copied Hengwrt and Ellesmere
C	Not known for other manuscripts
D	Also copied Corpus and Harley
E	Thomas Hoccleve

Scribe B may have been Chaucer's own scribe, while Thomas Hoccleve may have been Gower's own scribe. All of the scribes were present in London-Westminster around the same time and appear to have worked rather separately. Their copying is not particularly organized, leading to much of the variation we see.

While the area in which the scribes worked can rightly be called "London", the term "Westminster" might be more accurate and specific. Historically, London was seen as the center of literary texts, while Westminster was the center of documents. We now know that there is a lot of overlap between these groups. Such as is the case with Hoccleve, whose Westminster training is evident, though he neither worked nor lived at Westminster. Furthermore, he also copied literary (London-style) texts.

Chapter 7

Dialectology

The Principal work in middle English Dialectology is the Linguistic Atlas of (Late/Early) Middle English (respectively LALME and LAEME). LALME is based on scribal translations (localisations) of original manuscripts. These translations are dialectically consistent and can therefore be used for dialectical analysis.

Chapter 8

Provincial book production

8.1 Auchinleck

The Auchinleck manuscript is a rather peculiar one, containing 44 texts – exclusively in English, mostly romances, many of which did not appear in earlier manuscripts (17 to be precise). Furthermore, these stories are tied together by characters and entire passages making appearances between texts in the same manuscript.

The manuscript was commercially produced in London by 5-6 professional scribes. We know of its London origins because of the novelty of the texts, as it would not be possible elsewhere to have aces to such texts and aces to translators. It is furthermore theorised, due to the crossovers, that the scribes worked under one roof. Though these echoes are likely merely a characteristic of the genre, as professional scriptoria did not exist.

The manuscript emerged really too-early for English to become the aristocratic-, and legal- language. As such, the manuscript was likely produced for a merchant, banker, or other wealthy artisan. This is furthermore supported by the somewhat sparse decorations, though the product was likely still very expensive. Sue to the expenses, it is also theorised that the manuscript was produced by merchants or bank notaries themselves. The key text in the manuscript speaks about the Guy of Warwick, which leads some to theorise the Earls of Warwick to be the patrons, though they would not be speaking English. Though the text may be written for the children of Warwick to educate them in morals and English simultaneously.

8.2   Thornron

Thornton was a rural gentleman in Yorkshire who spent 40-50 year assembling 2 manuscripts. Thornton was not a professional scribe, as is recognizable by his handwriting and quire management. The manuscripts were likely intended to a family library as it is of highly varied content created by a single scribe. It furthermore contains gemological records on the blanks of the quires. The family has also recorded such gemological records after Thornton's death in the same book.

How Thornton got a hold of the exemplars remains a question open to scholarship. The most prolific theory being a local network of book-sharing, both religious and secular.

Thornton furthermore stands out because he signed all of his texts. This is likely part to credit his accomplishment, though it may have also involved indication of ownership in the aforementioned sharing networks.

8.3   Findern

The Findern manuscript originates from Derbyshire Findern, though is possible unconnected to the Findern family. This manuscript is copied by several scribes (up to 50 individuals), even on the same page. This leads some to conclude that this manuscript may have been part of a project of family entertainment. The hands furthermore range between amateur and professional. Many of the scribes signed their sections, whose signatures included women's names. These women's hands were furthermore more inclined towards the professional side of the spectrum. For this manuscript too, local sharing networks are proposed as a source of the exemplars.

Chapter 9

The lexicon of Middle English

The middle English lexicon is largely inherited from Old English, and to a lesser extent French and Old Norse. From the loan languages, words are both inherited and anglicised. Particularly relevant for middle English are compounding words and affixasion. A small minority of loan words are from Greek or Latin, primarily religious, scholarly, and medical- terms. Interestingly there is very little Celtic influence into Middle English.

    The way in which various languages influence English depends largely on the relationship between speakers of the language. Celtic, for instance, was the language of the conquered people, with adversarial relationships between the Celts and Saxons. French, being the language of diplomacy and governance, influences many bureaucratic words, as well as the lexicon of the aristocracy. Latin comes in mostly though the catholic faith and old scholarly texts, influencing relevant words.

Chapter 10

Syntactic changes in the History of English

10.1   Pronunciation

Many changes have occurred surrounding the letter "r". This letter is pronounced in various ways depending on dialect. While these pronunciations can be phonetically very different, they sound roughly equivalent. In Old English, the r was strongly pronounced, throughout the development of English this r was gradually dropped or turned into a schwa.

Inflectional endings were also dropped, with the most sonorous sounds disappearing first. Most consonantal like sounds, such as "s" remained for a long time, and are still present in contemporary English. Being left with only the "s" however, it becomes difficult to determine both case and gender. The loss of these sounds lead Middle English to rely on word-order instead.

10.2   Word Order

Old English is a V2 language, meaning that the verb is always in the second position. In early middle English, this is occasionally still the case, though subject-verb order also becomes increasingly common, with subject-object-verb being used for sub-clauses. In late middle English, subject-verb is the most common, with verb-subject being used for interrogative sentences. One main reason for these changes are the increasing reliance on word order as the inflectional endings of Old English disappeared.

In Early Middle English, the subject slot needn't always be occupied. For example "went to shop" being a valid sentence. In Old English, these sentences would use the locative case. In late Middle English the word order is too great, thus requiring the subject slot to be filled, leading to the existential use of "there" such as in "there once was a man" instead of "once was a man".

10.3   Gender and Case

Old English had three grammatical genders. This has been lost through the phonological changes in English, as endings were replaced with word-order. Similarly, Old English has the nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and (rarely) instrumental cases. These cases gradually merged together, leading us to the Modern-English genitive-, and common- cases. Furthermore, English went from three numbers – singular, dual, and plural – to two as the dual and plural collapsed.

Gender and Case survives only in contemporary English only in the pronoun system, such as "who", "whom", "whose". Examples of old pluralisation rules survive in words such as "children". This is a conflation of the Old English "childr" and "childen".

10.4   Pronouns

The pronouns in Middle English already sounded quite similar. "he, she, it" being "he, heo, hie". These become difficult to distinguish with the pronunciation changes explained above. This would have been particularly difficult for speakers of Old Norse, who could otherwise communicate with Old English speakers. Instead of conflating these, as with the cases and numbers, they are differentiated instead. The female form gains an "s", and the third person personal pronouns are borrowed from Old Norse and become: they, them, their, and theirs.

Chapter 11

Syntactic changes in the History of English II

Old English had a freer word order compared to present day English, though its word order was more restricted than ancient Indo-European, which had eight cases and nearly entirely free word order. The strictness of word order in Middle English allows for the emphasising of certain words without changing their spelling. This feature lends itself well to poetic writing.

For example, coherence is increased when old information is stated before new information, and heavy information last. The writer can however distribute information differently to increase ambiguity to focus a particular element. For example the sentence "It is great to ski in winder" contains a very long subject "to ski in winter" which is very heavy, and is therefore put at the end. In it's place, we place "it" in the subject slot. Old English would allow for something along the lines of "great is to ski in winter" with the relevant case expressed through inflection.

There is a discussion of the order in which the cases were lost in Old English. The question being whether the syntax was lost first, or if the phonological changes forced the syntax out. There are some Old English texts which suggest the phonology-first theory, where wrong endings are added by the scribe, suggesting that the scribe could not distinguish the sounds he was attempting to transcribe.

11.1   French influence

While French was largely introduced after the Norman conquest, it would be wrong to say that English was influenced only by Norman-French, as many of the French immigrants came from all over France. Furthermore, there is also learned contact, mediated through texts, other than mere speaker contact.

Initially, French influenced phrases, native elements, word formation, and personal names. These are relatively minor results of language contact. Deeper influenced appear latter as function words, phonology, and morphology are adopted. These deeper influences remain in contemporary English, as is common with such profound influences.

Looking at phonology, it is very difficult to distinguish between Norman, French, and Latin. There are however a few common cases which indicate where a particular influence originated from. *See French Influence: phonology II on handout.*

French introduced periphrastic comparison as a more common method. Old English did not use this much, always using the endings -er and -est. In contemporary English, we see this influence still, as Germanic words receive the Old English Endings (Old, Older, Oldest) whereas Romance words get periphrastic additions (Obese, more Obese, most Obese).

The most intensive period of French influence is during the fourteenth century. This is also the height of French cultural influence. At this point, there was widespread bilingualism, and influences can also be seen in handwriting.