

Lexical loss and continuation in the transition from Old to Middle English

After the Norman Conquest, a large amount of lexical material from the Old English (OE) period falls out of use. For example, Dekeyser and Pauwels (1990: 4) report that by 1225, only about a quarter of the English lexicon was material that had originated in OE, the other three-quarters consisting of Middle English (ME) new formations or loanwords, mostly from French and Latin. This process has often been characterised as a “competition” or “rivalry” between the native lexis and the new French and Latin loanwords, a view that has recently been criticised by Sylvester et al. (2021: 1–2).

The aim of this paper is to shift the focus away from the supposed competition, the loanwords that seem to push out OE words, or those terms that seem to have survived due to sheer frequency (cf. Timofeeva 2018) and instead direct it towards the material that is disappearing. This paper will take a closer look at the last attestations of OE vocabulary in the early ME period, with an eye on different factors such as geographical or dialectal distribution, genre or subject matter, prose or verse, rhyming position, and older (i.e., copies of pre-Conquest exemplars) versus newer texts.

The focus will be on nouns whose last dates of attestation are recorded after 1066 and up to around 1225, as identified by the *Historical Thesaurus of English* (HTE). I will use a random sample of nouns that appear in the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (LAEME), which contains a variety of texts from the early ME period and is tagged extensively, and thus enables me to collect information on the different environments mentioned above. An initial survey of the material has already shown that some words classified by the HTE as appearing only in OE actually survive well past the Conquest, and not only in copies of pre-Conquest material.

References

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