

# IMPACT OF OLD NORSE HERITAGE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

Most of the Norse legal and administrative terms attested in Old English were replaced by equivalents from the French superstrate soon after the Norman Conquest, whereas a remarkable number of more basic terms are known to have become part of the very basic vocabulary of modern Standard English. This paper focuses on Norse lexical loans that survived during and beyond the period of French rule and became part of this basic vocabulary. It explores the regional and textual conditions for the survival of such loans and their expansion into late medieval London English and into the emerging standard language. Based on selective textual evidence it is argued that they were not quite as basic originally, that they typically survived and developed in regional centres far away from the French-dominated court, and eventually infiltrated the area in and around late medieval London owing to its growing attraction as an economic and intellectual centre. Both the survival of Norse loans and their later usage expansion are shown to be in harmony with the principles of comparative contact linguistics.

**KEYWORDS:** Old Norse, English Literature, basic vocabulary, regional conditions, medieval English.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of our evidence for Norse influence on Old English is attested in the late West-Saxon standard language that had become a written standard also for the Midland and northern regions including the Danelaw. This applies particularly to the legal and religious texts attributed to Archbishop Wulfstan of York that reflect his role as lawmaker and political and spiritual leader under two kings, Ethelred and Cnut. It is Norse terms particularly from the legal and administrative sphere that we find in such texts which otherwise use this Old English standard.

Truly northern texts such as the interlinear gloss to the Lindisfarne Gospels form only a fraction of the Old English evidence.

The textual evidence for Norse influence on Old English mostly reflects the special situation in the Danelaw from the 9th until the 11th century but some of it also betrays the expansion of Danish rule under Cnut (1016–1035), e.g. the usage extension of OE *lagu* and *eorl* (< ON *jarl*) beyond the Danelaw.<sup>1</sup> It is known that the distinction between words inherited from West Germanic and words borrowed from closely related Old Norse is occasionally difficult and sometimes impossible (for detailed discussions, see Peters 1981; Townend 2002: chs. 2, 3; and Durkin 2014: ch. 10). Nevertheless, most of the late Old English lexical evidence for Norse influence can be shown to reflect an asymmetrical contact between a Norse superstrate and an Anglo-Saxon substrate. This linguistic assessment is in harmony with the historical evidence for the period before the Norman Conquest, in particular with regard to the Danelaw and to Cnut's reign (see Mack 1984; Keynes 1994, 1997; Brink 2008; and Treharne 2012).

Cross-linguistically, language contact between a conquering power and a subjected population is known to be asymmetrical: Lexical borrowing occurs mostly from the superstrate into the substrate, typically from lexical fields having to do with the execution of power, e.g. in warfare, in legal and administrative acts, and in all sorts of daily affairs; see Vennemann (1984, 2003), where numerous parallel examples for such superstratal influences are presented, among them for Old French influence on English, Visigothic and Arabic influences on Spanish, and Turkish influences on several Balkan languages. In Lutz (2012: sections 1–3, 2013: sections 3–4), I have argued that the lexical influence of Old Norse on English is likewise superstratal, not adstratal,<sup>2</sup> and as such similar to the influence of Old French. It reflects foreign rule in the period before the Norman Conquest in England, particularly in the Danelaw. As the most obvious lexical evidence for superstratal influence from Old Norse on Old English, I adduce legal and administrative terms that are attested in Old English texts as detailed word families, e.g. those of OE *lagu* 'law, right, legal privilege' and OE *māl* 'suit, cause, agreement', but also the etymologically unrelated terms denoting ranks of society in the Danelaw hierarchy from OE *eorl* 'ruler and administrator of a region' down to *þrǣl* 'serf' and *þīr* 'female servant' (Lutz 2012: 21–24). Thus, lexical borrowing from Old Norse into Old English reflects organized and extended foreign rule. The large number of such words listed by Pons-Sanz (2013: 128) under "B. Legal world" and "G. Social status" likewise demonstrates the importance of this type of influence on Old English.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NORSE INFLUENCE ON OLD ENGLISH

Obviously superstratal lexical evidence for the Norse conquest of England is less likely to have survived into Modern English than such evidence for the Norman Conquest, since the evidence for the latter conquest tends to supplant the evidence for the foregoing conquest. Thus, many Old English legal and administrative terms borrowed from Old Norse can be shown to have been replaced by synonymous superstratal terms borrowed from Norman French later on, as their Middle English and Modern equivalents (typically Norman French loans)

betray, or to have gone out of use due to changing political conditions; both types of development are attested, e.g. for most of the lagu-family and the entire mālfamily (Lutz 2012: 18–24). Consequently, the legal terminology of Modern English is largely Frenchified but nevertheless preserves some Old Norse loans and also some inherited Old English (West Germanic) terms.

### **OLD NORSE VS. NORMAN FRENCH LOANS:**

Most loans from Old Norse that have survived into Middle English and Modern English do not belong to the legal and administrative language but have more basic, non-technical meanings, as is well known (see e.g. Jespersen 1938: §§ 75–78; Barber et al. 2009: 140–144; and Durkin 2014: chs. 2, 9). Scholars have tended to believe that they reflect contact on equal terms between speakers of Old Norse and Old English.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in the case of Old French influence, scholars have focused their attention on loans that reflect Norman rule and French courtly culture, and they have largely overlooked the fact that English also contains many loans from Old French with very basic meanings and forms, as is shown in Lutz (2013: section 4). Very early on, Leonard Bloomfield had pointed out that the lexical influence resulting from a conquest “very often extends to speech-forms that are not connected with cultural novelties” (Bloomfield 1933: 461). And indeed, many loans from both Old Norse and Old French can be adduced to illustrate the fact that the two languages have contributed many culturally “unnecessary” loans to English – very basic words for which Old English can be shown to have had adequate inherited equivalents. Structurally parallel lists of examples for such words from both contact languages, drawn from Baugh and Cable (2013: §§ 75, 130), can be found in Lutz (2012: 25); other examples for French loans of a very basic character could be adduced from Hughes’ (2000: 121) list of French loans that “displaced basic native terms for ordinary things”. However, until very recently, only Manfred Scheler’s (1977) study of the English lexicon could be adduced to support Bloomfield’s (1933: 461) assumption with comparative lexico-statistic material and not only with such selective lists of examples. His book provides a differentiated assessment of the foreign influences on English based on three very different types of dictionaries of modern Standard English: the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED), with ca. 80,000 words representing the entire lexicon, the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (ALD), with less than 30,000 words representing the average active and passive lexicon of an educated speaker, excluding professional and technical terms, and the General Service List (GSL), which contains ca. 4,000 high-frequency words.<sup>5</sup> That way, his percentages enable us to distinguish in particular between the widely differing contributions of a donor language to the entire lexicon of modern Standard English and to its basic vocabulary: The percentages for basic vocabulary resulting from post-Conquest contacts of a donor language are much higher than the percentages for the contributions of the same donor language to the lexicon as a whole. In the case of French influence, Scheler notes 38.00 % for the basic vocabulary but only 28.37 % for the entire lexicon.

This contrast with the percentages for the influence of Latin, which typically led to cultural borrowing: Latin contributes only 9.57 % of a basic character but 28.29 % to the English lexicon as a whole. Scheler's percentages for Scandinavian<sup>6</sup> influence (3.11 % of a basic character but 2.16 % altogether) are much lower than those for the respective French and Latin influences, yet the relations between the percentages for the basic portion and the entire lexicon are very similar for Scandinavian (ca. 3:2) and French (ca. 4:3) and differ strongly from those for Latin (ca. 1:3). Thus, taken together, the relations for both French and Scandinavian influences support Bloomfield's (1933: 461) assumption that the lexical influence resulting from 'intimate borrowing' after a conquest differs from that of 'cultural borrowing' resulting from an interest of the speakers of a language in the culture represented by the donor language.

## **NORSE LOANS UNDER FRENCH RULE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH**

### **Problems with their Stratal Assessment**

So far, I have concentrated on two types of Old Norse lexical influence: (a) legal and administrative terms attested in Old English, many of which did not survive beyond Old English; and (b) more basic terms, which constitute a considerable portion of the Norse loans that have survived into modern English. Now that both types of Old Norse loans have been shown to be similar in kind to important influences of Old French, the survival of Norse loans during an extended period of French rule requires some attention. How did these Norse loans survive and develop during this period? Simply as part of a mixed Germanic, i.e. inherited Old English and borrowed Old Norse substrate below the more recent French superstrate? Or was the stratal role of Norse loans in Middle English more complex, namely (1) with regard to their use in particular dialects and text types and (2) with regard to the usage expansion of a remarkable number of them into late medieval London English and into the emerging standard language?

The following six examples are meant to provide a rough idea of (a) when and where such Norse loans are first attested and in which meanings, (b) where they survived and how they developed in Middle English, and (c) when and how they reached late medieval London English and thus eventually became part of the emerging standard language. The first two loans to be discussed are first attested in very late Old English, shortly after the Norman Conquest; the loans of the second group are first attested in early Middle English. Both groups of loans reached London before Chaucer's time, whereas the loans of the third group replaced their inherited equivalents in London only after Chaucer's death. The words of all three groups belong to the loans that have developed very basic meanings in modern English. Their use and usage expansion in Middle English should therefore help to explain why Norse loans could become part of late medieval London English and, that way, of the emerging standard language.

## Words that are First Attested in Very Late Old English

The first attestations of the following Norse loans are only slightly later than those of the borrowed legal terms, most of which did not survive the Norman Conquest, as shown in section 1 above. The first example is a noun with concrete meaning:

### Example 1: skin

The noun *skin* (< ON *skinn*) is one of numerous Norse loans with /sk-/, some of which have very basic meanings and belong to the most frequently used words of modern English (Durkin 2014: 199–200, 213–214). The loanword *skin* supplants OE *hyd* in much of its original meaning-range,<sup>9</sup> to a lesser degree also OE *fell*.<sup>10</sup> Old Norse distinguished between *skinn* ‘skin; skin of small animals’ and *húð* ‘hide of cattle’ but originally also ‘skin’ more generally.<sup>11</sup> The narrowing of the Old English meaning-range of the inherited word as a result of borrowing of the Norse loan is characterized as semantically highly remarkable by Grant (2009: sections 5, 7) for *hide* and *skin*. The MED, s.v. *skin* 2. (a) ‘The external covering of an animal’s body’ lists *Orrmulum*, l. 3210 *Hiss girrdell was off shepess skinn* ‘His girdle was made of sheep’s skin’ as the first Middle English attestation, and this was also given by OED2, s.v. *skin*, n. I. 1. ‘The integument of an animal stripped from the body, and usually dressed or tanned’ as the first attestation of the Norse loan. The *Orrmulum* is a homiletic poem written by an Augustinian monk in Lincolnshire c. 1175 (see Parkes 1983).

But meanwhile, OED3, s.v. *skin*, n. I. 1.a. ‘The natural external covering or integument of an animal removed from the body, esp. one which is dressed or tanned (with or without the fur) and used as a material for clothing or other items’, based on Peters (1981: 96–98), provides a much earlier attestation, from the annal s.a. 1075 D of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. This manuscript version was written by several 11th-century scribes and ends with the annal for 1079. It contains many textual features that exhibit links both with York and Worcester.<sup>12</sup> In the late 10th and early 11th centuries the D-text is closely connected with archbishop Wulfstan of York, who held the archbishopric in plurality with Worcester, like several other archbishops of York.<sup>13</sup>

This earlier attestation of *skin* brings us close to the time of direct language contact between Old Norse and Old English and, even more importantly, provides an interesting glimpse into the world of the leading circles of the late Danelaw, shortly after the Norman Conquest. The annal reports in detail on the lavish gifts of King Malcolm of Scotland to the king of Francia: *myccla geofa manega gærsama [...] on scynnann mid pælle betogen, on merðerne pyleceon, on graschynnene, hearmaschynnene, on pællon, on gyldenann faton, on sylfrenan* ‘great gifts and many treasures [...] of skins covered with purple cloth, and robes of marten’s skin and of grey fur and ermine, and costly robes and golden vessels and silver’ (Cubbin 1996: 86; Douglas and Greenaway 1981: 161).

## Words that are First Attested in Early Middle English

The first example for this second group of Norse loans is taken from the *Ormmulum*, which was written near Lincoln in the late 12th century. This text is of great value as an example of early Middle English from the former Danelaw not only on account of its early date but also because, as a religious text, it represents several genres that stand for much of vernacular verse and prose in the high and late Middle Ages.<sup>30</sup> As such, it is more suitable for linguistic comparisons with texts of such types from other dialect areas and periods than the ‘Peterborough Continuations’ of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Skaffari’s (2009) quantitative study of all foreign influences on early Middle English, which is based on the early Middle English section of the Helsinki Corpus, demonstrates the importance of the text for this period. His “Table 4. Norse-derived words in the HCM1, in order of frequency” (2009: 150) provides figures for several types of words that are most frequently attested in the *Ormmulum*, and their modern English equivalents illustrate the fact that such loans entered the standard language only in part – among the closedclass items or function words þeʒʒ ‘they’ but not fra ‘from’, among legal terms laze ‘law’ but not grið ‘peace’, and among verbs taken ‘take’ but not aunen ‘disclose, appear’. In section 3.2 above, Orm is shown to use the noun skin and the verb taken with very basic meanings.

The following abstract noun has become part of the basic vocabulary of modern Standard English:

### Example 2: skill

The noun skill belongs to the most frequently used words of modern English (cf. Durkin 2014: 199–200, 213–214). According to OED, s.v. skill, n.1 † 1., this noun is first attested in the *Ormmulum* with the meaning ‘Reason as a faculty of the mind; the power of discrimination’: ziff þu follzhest skill & shæd & witt i gode þæwess ‘If you follow reason and discrimination and understanding in good habits’ (cf. Holt 1878: 1. 1210). In this and several related meanings the Norse loan is well attested in Middle English texts but meanwhile long out of use.<sup>31</sup> In late Middle English texts, examples are found in the works of Chaucer, Gower, Wycliffe, and Caxton. An argumentative passage from Chaucer’s prose Tale of Melibee, which is cited in the MED, s.v. skil 4. ‘A reason for an observed fact [...] a cause (of sth.)’, provides an interesting glimpse into the competition of synonyms borrowed from Old Norse and Old French in his London English. In this passage, Chaucer links two synonyms borrowed from Norse and French: skile and resoun and injuries and wronges: Ye causelees and withouten skile and resoun, / han doon grete injuries and wronges to me ‘Without any cause or reason, you have injured and hurt me greatly’ (cf. Riverside Chaucer 238, Tale of Melibee, l. 2999–3000). The lexical equivalents in modern English that refer to these intellectual and moral qualities are French and Latin loans.

## DIALECT AWARENESS IN POST-CONQUEST OF NORSE LOANS

It is known that as a result of the Norman Conquest, England experienced a gradual redistribution of the roles of Latin and the vernaculars. Latin regained much of its importance as a supra-regional language for church and state, which it had lost to some degree to Late West Saxon in late Anglo-Saxon England; this vernacular standard

had also been used by the Anglo-Norse elites during Cnut's reign and beyond (see Keynes 1994: esp. 43–44, 47–48 and Treharne 2012: 61–68). The strengthening of the role of Latin made post-Conquest England similar to large parts of continental Europe, not only of those areas where Romance languages served as the oral equivalents of Latin but also of regions where varieties of West Germanic were spoken. Norman French, as the language of the new rulers of England, acquired a role as written language for literary and legal purposes and in various administrative fields only gradually, long after 1066.

The resulting functional trilingualism in post-Conquest England relegated the written use of English to the status of a language for which no nationwide linguistic orientation comparable to that of Ælfric's time was available,<sup>37</sup> with the effect that Middle English was written – if at all – in the form of regional dialects. This remained so for a long time, as pointed out by Benskin (1992: 71):

At the close of the fourteenth century, the written language was local or regional dialect as a matter of course; typically, the area in which a man acquired his written language can be deduced from the form of the language itself.

### **NORSIFICATION OF MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LEXIS STANDARDIZATION PROCESS**

The late fourteenth century was not only a time of particular dialect awareness but also a period in which London English, as the future standard language, developed features that were characteristic of more northerly varieties, as first shown in Lorenz Morsbach's study of 1888. The authors of LALME were well aware of the difficulties of separating the long dialectal period from the following period of gradual standardization, particularly with reference to the London region, when they had to decide on the temporal limits for their corpus of manuscripts (see LALME I: ch. 1). Among the features that characterize the emerging standard language are Norse loan words that became part of London English during the 14th and 15th centuries (see esp. Rynell 1948). For the purposes of my limited lexical study, it suffices to highlight some parallels between the lexical evidence for Norse loans and other types of evidence for the development of the standard language:

Eilert Ekwall (1956) aims to make sociolinguistic sense of the long-known variational fact that the emerging standard language is more northerly in character than the old-established London dialect (see Morsbach 1888 and numerous later studies discussed in Ekwall 1956: xiv–xxiv). Ekwall's comprehensive study is based on the evidence from surnames attested in the Lay Subsidy Rolls of the late 13th and 14th centuries for London. On this onomastic basis, Ekwall argues that the change of the London dialect is due “to considerable immigration into London from Midland districts” (1956: xi) and that immigration from more northerly regions increases during the 14th century (1956: lxi). Although his evidence is not suitable for hard-and-fast statistical assessments, he is able to show for numerous individuals who immigrated from Midland and northern counties such as Yorkshire that they prospered in various trades, e.g. as drapers, mercers, skippers, and woolmongers, held civic offices, e.g. as sheriffs or aldermen, or were noted as clerks or lawyers (1956: lvi–lvii). Ekwall comes to the conclusion that

“the London language as we find it towards the end of the fourteenth century was a class dialect, the language spoken by the upper stratum of the London population” (1956: lxiii), and he attributes the evidence for “so many prominent Londoners” who came from the Midlands and North to the growth of supraregional trade, in particular to various aspects of cloth-making (1956: lxiv–lxv).

### **INFILTRATION OF LONDON ENGLISH WITH NORSE LOANS**

This section deals with the increase of Norse loans in late medieval London with a focus on Chaucer’s Reeve’s Tale, where his London dialect contrasts with a Yorkshire dialect used for the passages of direct speech of two Cambridge undergraduates. The examples of skin, take, skill, and trust have shown how lexical loans from Old Norse became part of late medieval London English before and during Chaucer’s lifetime, and the examples of egg and give have demonstrated how other loans infiltrated London English only afterwards (see section 3 above). It would be difficult to show for these and other lexical loans to what degree old established Londoners were actually aware of the northern origin of the loans, let alone their borrowing from Old Norse. But the fact that Chaucer employed a Yorkshire dialect for the two students suggests that he himself had acquired an awareness of that dialect and assumed a similar dialect awareness for the audiences and readers of his late works. Chaucer’s decision to situate this fabliau<sup>57</sup> in and near Cambridge and make the two undergraduates speak a Yorkshire dialect “from Strother”, which was not limited to lexical features but also considered phonological and morphological characteristics,<sup>58</sup> was obviously meant to add an element of comic realism to the story, since in his days English students from the Midlands and North preferably went to Cambridge. Scholars are agreed that this use of the Yorkshire dialect contributed to making the two students appear naive and backward, together with their seemingly clumsy behaviour towards the miller in the first part of the tale. Both features contradict the genre cliché of the clever student out tricking the less educated craftsman.

Yet Chaucer’s dialect trick for this tale could not have worked effectively on his audience if the sociolectal constellation in London had not provided a plausible basis for that aspect of the setting of his tale in real life.<sup>59</sup> Thus, we need to assume that Chaucer and his audience were familiar with living examples of newcomers to the established circles of London society from far-up north and were not only able to identify these newcomers dialectally but also to associate them with certain social positions. The latter task was in fact easier in a medieval society with its socially differentiating rules for clothing than it is today. For Chaucer himself, as a social riser within London society, the numerous official positions of his later life, e.g. as controller of the wool tax, must have offered ample opportunities for observing such risers coming from outside and various reactions to them from old-established London citizens.



## CONCLUSION

This paper has concentrated on the questions (a) how the surviving lexical loans from Old Norse developed during the long period of French rule following the Norman Conquest and (b) why a considerable number of them managed to infiltrate late medieval London English and, that way, became part of the very basic lexis of modern Standard English. Since both the Old Norse and the Norman French influences were mainly the results of superstratal influence on Old English following a conquest, it was necessary to address these questions also with regard to the stratal role of the Norse loans during and beyond the time of Norman French rule. During the long Middle English period in which the vernacular existed only as dialects, the use of Norse loans developed mainly in regional centres of the former Danelaw but from there eventually also spread to London where they supplanted a considerable number of well-established inherited terms. That is, we have to do with an initial period of Anglo-Norse language contact and with long subsequent phases of dialect contact. Does the assumption of superstratal influence make sense also for dialect borrowing of Norse loans from northern varieties into late medieval London English, 300 to 400 years after the Norse conquest? It may be argued that this dialect borrowing did not result from a conquest and therefore does not meet the sociolinguistic conditions for superstratal influence. However, superstratal influence is not necessarily the result of a conquest, as shown by the intense Middle Low German lexical influence of the Hanse traders on the closely-related Scandinavian languages. This influence was concentrated in the same lexical fields as the Old French influence on English.

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