

Middle English Phraseology: Native Developments and Foreign Influences

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Diachronic lexicology is a field that has been extensively studied and which is often considered to be the most interesting linguistic aspect of the ME period. Many of these studies have provided evidence for high frequencies of Old French (henceforth OF) influences. The question however is whether the OF influence has extended beyond the lexical level.

Given that the ME lexicon consists of up to 15.7 % of OF lexical borrowings (Scheler 1977: 52) I should like to suggest that OE has developed not only through French input at the word level but also through its entire contextual phraseological units; after all: “You shall know a word by the company it keeps!” (Firth 1962: 11). I therefore propose a correlation between the frequencies of the lexical and the phraseological French influence and thereby regard the phraseological input as an extension to the lexical one. Furthermore, this implies that – in addition to the overall influence – the main effect of OF should be evident during the so-called second period of French influence (i.e. ca 1300-1476).

The line of argumentation that this paper pursues and the resulting working hypothesis may therefore be formulated as follows: If there is substantial evidence of OF influence on the ME lexicon – regardless of the loan strategy – there must be enough data to prove that this influence also had effects on the phraseological wealth of ME. Subsequently, the different strategies of borrowing which have so far been theoretically formulated on the morphological level have to be expanded to account for the phraseological loans as well.

In order to prove this hypothesis, the present paper will compare keywords from three corpora, accounting respectively for the ME, OE or OF language usage; the latter two will provide the data for comparison. These results will also exemplify the difficulties determining the putative phraseological source language.

In summary, this paper will seek to prove the two following points: Firstly, OF, via the influence on ME vocabulary, had an enormous impact on the phraseological level of ME and secondly, the amount of phraseological borrowings did affect the different loan strategies alike.

References

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