

Studies in Early Middle English Loanwords: Norse and French Influences

Lectio praecursoria

The author defended his doctoral dissertation *Studies in Early Middle English Loanwords: Norse and French Influences* (*Anglicana Turkuensia* 26. Turku 2009) at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Turku, on 2nd October, 2009. The official opponent at the public defence was Professor Juliette Dor (University of Liège), and the defence was chaired by Professor Risto Hiltunen (University of Turku). The following is an English-language summary of the introductory talk given in Finnish at the beginning of the viva.

There is a celebration in the city of Turku today, on the 2nd of October: as the Finnish government turns two hundred, the Cabinet convenes here to mark the occasion. Exactly two hundred years ago the new Governing Council held its first meeting in Turku. Throughout the year Finland has celebrated the bicentenary of 1809, the year when Finland after centuries of Swedish rule became an autonomous Grand Duchy within Russia.

As Finland got its own central administration in 1809, the leaders of Finland began to interact with St. Petersburg instead of Stockholm. The political situation changed, but did the linguistic situation change as well? Finland had been bilingual for a long time, with a Swedish-speaking minority going back to at least the thirteenth century. A third language was introduced in the early nineteenth century, but tempting as it is to think that Finland became trilingual at the beginning of the hundred-year Russian era, this did not actually happen: the Russian

language did not establish itself in the country. The linguistic situation two hundred years ago is illustrated by the fact that the official regulations of the Governing Council were first drafted in Swedish, then sent to St. Petersburg for approval – in a French translation, not in Russian – and then finalised and translated into Swedish. The first Council also decided to translate the regulations into Finnish.

The question of language thus seems complicated in and after 1809. Such complexity is typical in matters of language – contact, choice, proficiency, and so forth. For example, not everyone is multilingual in a multilingual society; not all languages with important roles in society are necessarily spoken languages; and the language of the upper classes and administration is not always the language of the majority of the population. The different roles of languages in the past may be difficult to grasp for modern people, who are used to thinking in terms of national languages. A good example of the complexity of language issues is the first Grand Duke of autonomous Finland, Alexander I. He was Czar of Russia but probably never learnt Russian perfectly; he was educated in several languages, mostly in French; and as a child his first language is likely to have been English, which he learnt from his nurse.

As a researcher interested in language contacts, I have often thought about the similarities and differences between Finland in the nineteenth century and England in the twelfth. Finland, despite the circumstances, never actually become trilingual, while medieval England was clearly a trilingual country: its languages were English, French and Latin. This situation emerged with the Norman Conquest: 1066 was the dramatic beginning of something new in England, in a manner somewhat similar to 1809 in Finland.

Changes in the international or multinational political situation often lead to new types of language contact. In England, the beginning of

Norman rule under William the Conqueror, or Guillaume, not only brought the Norman variety of French to the country but also reinforced the position of Latin as the language of written record. To modify a much-quoted Finnish adage from the early nineteenth century: “English we do not know; French we are not used to writing; let us therefore write in Latin.”¹ This, however, would be too much to claim, as the choice of Latin was probably not a choice at all: as the one language regarded as stable and prestigious, Latin was naturally the language of documentation.

In these circumstances the role of vernacular English writing – so remarkable in the preceding Anglo-Saxon era – weakened in the two centuries after the Conquest, at the beginning of what we call the Middle English period. Overall, there are not great numbers of texts containing early Middle English, and what is extant does not cover a very broad or balanced range of dialects and genres: the majority of what we can access is in the Midland dialects and deals with religious topics. Due to this relative scantiness of material, many scholars have treated the earliest Middle English either as an extension of Old English or a minor component of Middle English, and the whole period has been called shadowy, ever dark. Reluctant to accept such approaches, I have focused squarely on early Middle English in my research.

The three languages of post-Conquest England are not the three languages named in the title of my dissertation. Instead of Latin, (Old) Norse, the Scandinavian language of the Vikings, is mentioned as a source language influencing early Middle English, alongside French. The Viking influence began in the ninth century, but its linguistic consequences do not show much in Old English texts. Norse influence does mark Middle English texts, however, as does the influence of

¹ The maxim “Swedes we no longer are; Russians we will not become; let us therefore be Finns” exemplifies the emerging discourse of Finnishness.

French. Although both languages contributed to English lexis, they have typically not been treated together in scholarship, which has been a further motivation for me to consider the influences of two source languages – and not just in a single text or a small group of related texts, but in a broader range of writing from the early Middle English period.

My main source of data has been the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts, probably the most important achievement within English studies in Finland. I have focused on the 1150-1250 sub-corpus of this diachronic text database, which gives access to seventeen of the most noteworthy texts from the period, including homilies, saints' lives, religious instruction and histories; some of the texts were originally written after 1150, while others are copies of older texts. The size of the sub-corpus is some 113,000 running words. To complement this bird's-eye view on early Middle English lexis and its use in written texts, I have also studied an individual twelfth-century text in full: *Vices and Virtues* is a religious dialogue which has received less attention from scholars than some of its contemporaries. In the following I will briefly introduce the vocabulary I have studied and present some of the findings of the corpus study.

The lexical material gathered from the corpus contains approximately three hundred French loanwords (e.g. the nouns *delit*, *peis*, *spuse*; the verbs *cacchen* and *passen*; and the adjective *poure*) and some two hundred Norse loans (e.g. *feolah*, *rote*, *skil*; *semen*, *taken*; *meok*), attested altogether almost 2000 times.² The term 'loanword' here covers both words borrowed from and influenced by French or Norse.³

² PDE *delight*, *peace*, *spouse*; *catch*, *pass*; *poor* and *fellow*, *root*, *skill*; *seem*, *take*; *meek*.

³ Not all of the etymologies of Middle English words of non-native origin are definite. Although unclear cases exist, it has not been the objective of this study to settle etymological disputes.

The two groups of loans differ from each other in a number of ways. Almost seventy per cent of the French-derived words are nouns (the most easily borrowed word class), while the share of nouns within the Norse element is much lower, some forty per cent. Among the Norse-derived words, closed word classes are well represented: there are some prepositions, conjunctions, numerals and pronouns. The most important of these must be the pronoun *they*, a member of the very small system of personal pronouns, which first appears in writing around 1200. Semantically, words from the lexical field of social interaction are important in both groups, but there are also differences: for example, religious words stand out among the French loans, whereas the relative share of words related to war and peace is larger among the Norse loans.

It is not the case that all loans spread far and wide, or ever establish themselves in the recipient language. In the early Middle English corpus, most of the loans appear in only one text, but there are also items which are both widely used across the corpus and have taken part in English word formation, and thus seem to have a relatively established status in early Middle English. A case in point is the Norse-derived noun which speakers of Present-Day English know as *law*. This is the same word as Finnish *laki*, borrowed into Finnish from Old Swedish. There are relatively speaking more Norse than French loans which have already become established in early Middle English. This reflects the relatedness of Norse and English as languages, the length of the period of language contact, and the apparently greater integration of the Viking and English populations.

In addition to the loanwords themselves, the types of early Middle English texts in which they appear have also been explored in my study. The texts can be grouped according to dialect/area, genre/topic and age/origin. Borrowed words are very rare in Southern texts, which are

typically older than the Midland material. Interestingly, the East- and West-Midland texts do not seem statistically different in terms of the use of Norse-derived words, although the original Viking settlement was primarily in the East. Moreover, there do not seem to be significant differences between the different genres with respect to French and Norse influences, which probably reflects the broad semantic range of loans from either language. An interesting dissimilarity emerges when the age of the texts in the corpus is considered: there is a clear difference between twelfth-century and thirteenth-century texts as far as French loans are concerned, but the difference is not significant if loanwords of Norse origin are considered.

The study as a whole suggests that Norse-derived words already had quite a strong foothold in early Middle English. At the same time, a steady and rapid growth in the use of French-derived words is visible in the texts, from the oldest to the newest. A new age was beginning in the history of English: the age of considerable lexical borrowing. This has been a remarkable feature of English ever since: it has been estimated that up to three quarters of English vocabulary today is made up of words of foreign origin. English has borrowed from a very large number of languages all around the world – including Russian, Swedish and Finnish.