

Linguistic analysis of a passage from both the "miller's tale" essay



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Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* were written in Middle English during the 14th Century, the period after the loss of Old English inflexions and before the standardisation of spelling due to the introduction of the Caxton printing press. Chaucer wrote during the years in which foreign loan words were fully integrated into the English vernacular as a result of invasions such as the Norman Conquest of 1066, the developing trade routes, and the expansion of learning associated with the Renaissance.

It can be argued that his influence allowed for foreign words to be embedded and accepted into the language. It was relatively easy for loans to be adopted by Middle English because it had lost the inflections system, thus new words could 'cohere with the syntactic structures of the borrowing language'. Middle English morphology consisted mostly of a manipulation of the existing vocabulary; therefore affixation and compounding were common. Methodology: *The Canterbury Tales* passages:

The first 60 lines of 'The Miller's Tale' and 'The Man of the Law's Tale' supply two contrasting characters. I accessed the passages from the Electronic Literature Foundation (ELF) website. I was able to compare the use of lexis and word formation, and able to comment on whether any differences were deliberate to suit a purpose. Categorising the words: Each word was systematically looked up in a combination of three locations: The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), Henry Stratmann's Middle English Dictionary (MED) and Norman Davis' *A Chaucer Glossary*.

The OED was useful in providing the etymology of words and indicating the morphology. The MED filled gaps when the OED in some cases did not

provide a comprehensive account of certain words, or it faltered due to irregular spelling between sources. In most cases I used both sources together in order to strengthen the given etymologies. Davis' Glossary was particularly useful since it allowed me to investigate root words, and words written in Chaucer's spelling which were yet to be standardised as in either of the other two dictionaries.

However, referring to three sources resulted in inconsistencies. There were discrepancies on etymology, in which case I gave preference for the OED, because it was thorough, and supplied connections to other words through hyperlinks. The preface of the MED acknowledges that although it was an achievement of learning, it however had 'certain serious practical defects' but without 'limitations of scope' it wouldn't have been completed in time.

The total 120 lines identified words of the following origins: Old English, Old French, French, Latin, Frisian, Old Norse, Anglo Norman, Middle English and Middle Dutch. I counted and categorised the words, but in order to avoid a skew overly favouring Chaucer's employment of Old English words, I did not count the grammatical function words - the finite class of words including pronouns, articles, demonstratives, auxiliaries, prepositions and conjunctions, since they are all decedent from Old English. However, I included function words that presented interesting cases of word-formation.

To identify the use of Old English function words, I counted the total words and can compare this number with the other recorded data counts of content words. Lexical content words - nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs add substance and meaning, thus will allow me to fully assess the basis for

Middle English lexicon. I counted each content word once and disregarded repetition, to avoid any element of bias favouring a particular word. The graphs included portray the origins of content words based on the initial use of the word. Analysis: Loan words: Figure 1

Figure 2 Figures 1 and 2 emphasise the prominence of French loan words, Old French after Old English is the next largest source of lexis. The Miller's Tale (Fig. 2) only makes use of 34% of foreign loans as opposed to the Lawyer's Tale who uses 45%. Thus, resembles the character of the Lawyer who has access to specialist terminology involved in justice and court. The Lawyer uses 9% more vocabulary from French origins than the Miller (including 2% 'French'); perhaps this is Chaucer attempting to place vocabulary so that it portrays the character using it.

However, a conventional Miller may not be prone to using as many foreign loan words as Chaucer establishes, the concentration of foreign words seems high. An explanation for this is that Chaucer himself was an influential player when it came to the utilisation of foreign loans, and it is considered that he allowed such language and words from other origins to become accepted and part of the natural vernacular having had direct contact with the French language 'living on the fringes of court and involved in legal and administrative work'.

Through this it channelled into the vernacular of the elite, due to them having access to the language; and this explains the Lawyer's ability.

Furthermore, French was regarded as the more prestigious languages and therefore the residents of English emulated this French as aspiring social

climbers, thus it infiltrated the language in more prestigious areas where the high class congregated, e. g. in the areas of government, food and fashion.

The influx of French loans is credited to the Norman Conquest which cemented the use. The invasion explains the infiltration of Anglo Norman words, and again the Lawyer uses more. The Miller may then be considered an 'aspiring social climber'. For the full tables providing the total word counts please see the appendix. Below, Table 1 and 2 represent each Tale's use of Old English and Old French words:

Table 1: Miller| All words including used more than once| Repeated words| All words but only used once| Just content words that have only been used once| Old English| 368| 205| 163| 119|

Old French| 42| 5| 37| 37| Table 2: Lawyer| All words including used more than once| Repeated words| All words but only used once| Just content words that have only been used once| Old English| 347| 203| 144| 94|

Old French| 59| 5| 54| 55|

Of the total 368 Old English words used by the Miller, 205 are repeated and only 119 are content words, this is a contrast to his use of 42 French words where 37 are content words. In addition, all Old French words are used as content words, this highlights that the use of French words are more for semantic meaning, rather than being facilitators in grammar as function words, in which repetition is unavoidable. A similar pattern follows the Lawyer's Tale.

Of the words used initially, 94 out of 114 words are content words and thus the rest are grammatical facilitators. Old English is used in Middle English for basic words and concepts such as body parts e. g. ' herte', ' hand' and simple adjectives such as ' yong', ' grete', ' smale' and ' good'. Conversely, foreign loans demonstrate specialisms such as the Latin offering of ' astrologye'. Both passages illustrate French loans used for the vocabulary denoting fashion e. ' ceynt' (girdle) and ' coler' (collar), as well as words for government as in ' ministre'. Word-formation processes: Tables 3 and 4 present the words of the passages that can be grouped into the word-formation categories. The Miller's Tale uses compounding- the combining of free morphemes, more than any other word-formation process, and many of the examples are prepositional words such as ' bifall', ' thereto' and ' therewithal'.

As opposed to the two nouns used, ' barmcloth' literally a ' lap-cloth' and the colour ' col-blak'. As a contrast, The Lawyer's Tale encompasses compound words entailing more content such as ' chapmen'- an endocentric compound since one element determines another (dealing-men), whereas ' chaffare' (cheap-fare) is an exocentric compound as the words are independent of each other. This illustrates the Lawyer's ability to use complex words as opposed to the Miller.

Affixation- bound morphemes added to roots in order to produce inflections or derivatives is very common in both passages but particularly for the Lawyer, thus indicating that he is more versatile and flexible with language, contrasting to the Miller. Furthermore, the Lawyer uses the suffixes '-esse'

which is borrowed from Old French, whereas the Miller uses Old English
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suffixes, this supports the notion that the character of the Lawyer utilises the French language more.

In both cases a realistic character is portrayed through their choice and use of lexis thus indicating the designed persona of the Tale. Conclusion: Chaucer's lexicon and word formation was representative of its period in the prestigious use of the French language, since it was only accessible to the highest areas of society. Chaucer emulates this in the Lawyer by allowing him to use more vocabulary borrowed from French in the case of lexis and word-formation.

Therefore, Chaucer uses lexis as another means of portraying character and adding further depth to his writing. However, his own experience with foreign loan words has infiltrated his work. Middle English inherited Old English for basic concepts and to serve grammatical functions, whereas loan words were important to provide specialist content vocabulary. The project supports the notion that 'the influence [Chaucer] had on language seems to have been more a matter of style than substance'.

Since the supply of vocabulary was inherited from other sources, he was able to play with words to form innovations in language such as in compound words. Had time allowed I would have looked at other 'Tales' in detail. The way people used language was dependent on their backgrounds, the types of vocabulary and word-formation used reflected them. Therefore, the register of lexicon must not be ignored and can be argued as being more significant than the etymology. = 1 500 words