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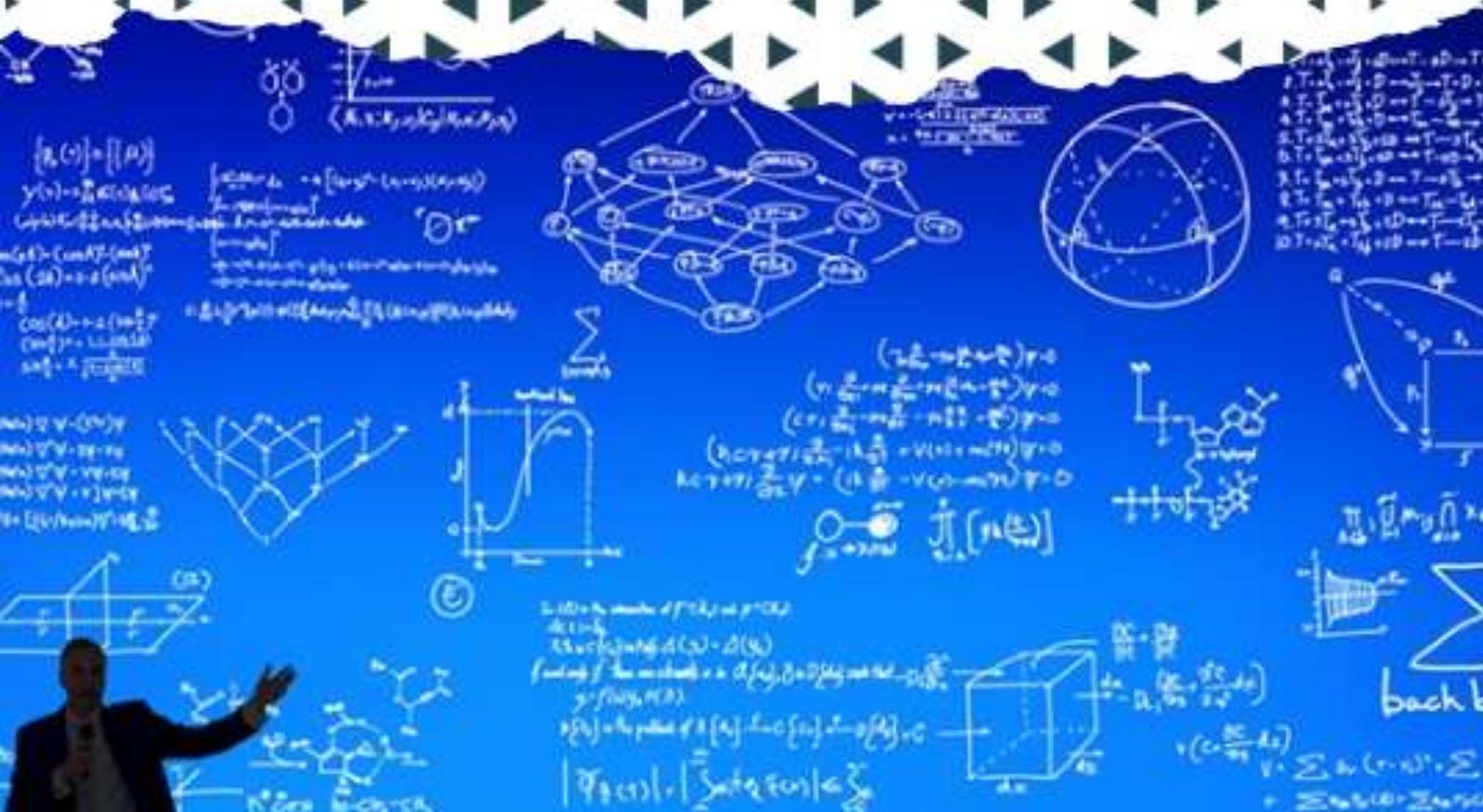
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The Evolution of Vocabulary during the Middle English Period

Jo'raboyeva Feruza Qobiljon qizi
Fergana State University, Department of Practical English
Instructor: Gulyora Ismoilova
4th-year student of the Faculty of English Language and Literature

ABSTRACT: In this article, the development of English vocabulary during the Middle English period is examined from a historical–linguistic perspective. The study focuses on the extensive lexical expansion resulting from language contact, particularly with Norman French and Latin, following the Norman Conquest of 1066. It analyzes semantic shifts, borrowing patterns, and lexical stratification across social and functional domains. Furthermore, the article evaluates how these changes contributed to the emergence of a more heterogeneous and stylistically differentiated lexicon, laying the foundation for Modern English vocabulary.

Keywords: Middle English, vocabulary development, lexical borrowing, Norman French, semantic change, historical linguistics.

Introduction. The Middle English period (circa 1150–1500) represents one of the most transformative stages in the history of the English language, particularly with regard to vocabulary. Unlike Old English, whose lexicon was overwhelmingly Germanic in origin, Middle English is characterized by large-scale lexical borrowing and semantic restructuring. This profound change was primarily triggered by the Norman Conquest, which introduced French as the language of administration, law, and elite culture, while Latin continued to dominate religious, scholarly, and scientific discourse.

As a result, English developed a stratified vocabulary system in which words of different origins coexisted and were distributed according to register, domain, and social context. Native English terms remained dominant in everyday life and domestic spheres, while French and Latin borrowings increasingly filled lexical gaps in areas such as governance, law, art, fashion, and abstract thought. For example, native words like kingly coexisted with French-derived royal, reflecting subtle semantic and stylistic distinctions.

The Middle English period also witnessed significant semantic change, including narrowing, broadening, amelioration, and pejoration of word meanings. Many borrowed terms underwent adaptation to English phonological and morphological patterns, while native words were sometimes displaced or specialized in meaning. The erosion of inflectional morphology further facilitated borrowing, as words could be integrated into the language with minimal grammatical adjustment.

Understanding the evolution of Middle English vocabulary is essential for explaining the richness and stylistic flexibility of Modern English. The period marks a transition from a relatively homogeneous lexicon to a linguistically layered system that reflects social hierarchy, cultural contact, and functional specialization.

Methods: The present investigation adopts a qualitative historical–philological approach to the study of Middle English vocabulary. Primary data are drawn from a representative selection of Middle English texts spanning different genres and

periods, including literary works (such as The Canterbury Tales), religious prose, legal documents, and instructional texts. This range allows for the observation of lexical variation across registers and communicative contexts.

Lexical items are analyzed according to their etymological origin (Germanic, French, Latin, or other), semantic domain, and functional distribution. Particular attention is paid to synonym sets consisting of native and borrowed terms, as these illuminate processes of semantic differentiation and stylistic layering. The analysis is supplemented by reference to major historical dictionaries and etymological resources, including the Middle English Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary.

Comparative evidence from Old English and Early Modern English is incorporated to trace diachronic developments and to identify long-term trends in lexical replacement and retention. The methodology emphasizes interpretive analysis over quantitative frequency counts, with the aim of uncovering structural patterns and sociolinguistic motivations behind lexical change.

Results: The analysis reveals that Middle English vocabulary expanded dramatically through borrowing, with Norman French contributing the largest number of loanwords. These borrowings are especially concentrated in domains associated with power, law, administration, and culture, such as court, judge, parliament, beauty, and fashion. Latin borrowings, by contrast, are most prominent in religious, scholarly, and scientific registers.

Native English vocabulary persisted most strongly in core semantic fields related to the body, nature, basic actions, and kinship. However, many native words underwent semantic specialization, while borrowed terms often acquired more abstract or formal meanings. This resulted in the emergence of lexical doublets and triplets, such as ask (Old English), question (French), and interrogate (Latin), each associated with different stylistic levels.

The data also demonstrate that borrowing was not a passive process. Loanwords were phonologically nativized and morphologically adapted, taking English plural markers and derivational affixes. Over time, borrowed vocabulary became fully integrated into the language and productive in word formation.

Genre-based variation is clearly observable. Literary and courtly texts exhibit a higher density of French-derived vocabulary, while religious and didactic prose displays stronger Latin influence. Everyday instructional and narrative texts, however, retain a higher proportion of native vocabulary, indicating that lexical change was socially and functionally conditioned rather than uniform.

Discussion: Taken together, the findings confirm that the Middle English period constitutes a decisive turning point in the lexical history of English. The massive influx of borrowed vocabulary did not merely increase the size of the lexicon but fundamentally altered its internal organization. English developed a multi-layered vocabulary system in which etymology correlates with register, abstraction, and stylistic nuance.

Language contact emerges as the primary driver of this transformation. French and Latin influence did not eliminate native vocabulary but restructured it, introducing

competition, specialization, and semantic differentiation. This coexistence of lexical layers demonstrates that vocabulary change operates through accumulation and redistribution rather than simple replacement.

The sociolinguistic dimension of lexical evolution is particularly significant. Vocabulary choices reflected social hierarchy, education, and institutional power, reinforcing the association between borrowed terms and prestige. At the same time, the survival of native words ensured continuity and accessibility in everyday communication.

Ultimately, the evolution of Middle English vocabulary laid the groundwork for the expressive flexibility of Modern English. The period illustrates how external contact, internal restructuring, and functional differentiation interact to reshape a language's lexical system over time.

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