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V. Slipetska

MIDDLE ENGLISH NORMAN-FRENCH BORROWINGS: THEMATIC GROUPS

The article focuses on the analysis of the thematic organization of the Norman-French borrowings in Middle English and determines their role in the formation of the English lexical system. In the study there has been analyzed the historical background of the Anglo-Norman language contact, the functional role of French, and English in medieval society. Lexical units have been systematized into thematic groups, including (a) public administration and governance, (b) law and the judicial system, (c) military affairs, (d) feudal relations, (e) religion, (f) education, (g) culture and literature, (h) daily life and trade, and (i) abstract vocabulary.

Keywords: *Middle English, Norman-French borrowings, thematic classification, language contact, lexical system, semantic differentiation, synonymy.*

Сліпецька В. Д. Середньоанглійські нормандські запозичення: тематичні групи. *Статтю присвячено дослідженню тематичної організації нормандсько-французьких запозичень у середньоанглійській мові та визначенню їхньої ролі у формуванні лексичної системи англійської мови. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена необхідністю комплексного вивчення історичних, соціокультурних і мовних чинників, що сприяли інтенсивному поповненню англійського словника французькими елементами після нормандського завоювання Англії 1066 року. Метою статті є виокремлення та характеристика основних тематичних груп нормандсько-французьких запозичень, а також з’ясування механізмів їхнього проникнення й адаптації в англійській мові. Об’єкт дослідження – нормандсько-французькі запозичення середньоанглійського періоду. Предмет – тематична класифікація та семантичні особливості нормандсько-французьких запозичень середньоанглійського періоду. Джерельну базу становить лексичний матеріал, дібраний із Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003).*

У роботі розглянуто історичні передумови англо-нормандського мовного контакту, особливості функціонування латини, французької та англійської мов у середньовічному суспільстві, а також вплив соціальної ієрархії на процеси лексичного запозичення. Систематизовано лексичні одиниці за такими тематичними групами: (а) державне управління й адміністрація, (б) право та судочинство, (в) військова справа, (г) феодальні відносини, (ґ) релігія, (д) освіта, (е) культура та література, (є) побут і торгівля, (ж) абстрактна лексика. Особливу увагу приділено явищам синонімії, семантичної диференціації та розмежування функціонально-стилістичних регістрів, що виявляються у співіснуванні питомо англійських і французьких слів. Проаналізовано основні

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механізми мовного запозичення, зокрема пряме запозичення, калькування, утворення гібридних лексем і семантичні зміни. Нормандсько-французькі запозичення суттєво збагатили словниковий склад англійської мови, відобразили суспільні трансформації середньовічної Англії та сприяли розвитку її синонімічного ресурсу й стилістичної гнучкості. Результати дослідження поглиблюють розуміння взаємозв'язку мовних змін із соціально-історичними процесами.

Ключові слова: *середньоанглійська мова, нормандсько-французькі запозичення, тематична класифікація, мовні контакти, лексична система, семантична диференціація, синонімія.*

Introduction

The Norman Conquest of 1066 initiated an era of a sustained and unprecedented linguistic contact between English and French. While contact between Old English and Old Norse had already reshaped English grammar, the Anglo-Norman presence introduced something quite different: a prestige superstratum whose influence flowed primarily through the lexicon, the legal and administrative systems, and the cultural tastes of the ruling elite. Over the subsequent three centuries – spanning the late Old English and Middle English periods – French became the dominant language of government, law, literary culture, and high society.

Foreign scholars A. Baugh and Cable analyzed Middle English Norman-French borrowings. Estimates vary, but scholars generally agree that over 10,000 French words entered English between the 11th and 15th centuries, of which approximately 7,000 remain in use today (Baugh & Cable, 2013). These borrowings were not evenly distributed across domains: they tend to cluster in thematic fields associated with the activities and authority of the ruling class.

V. Slipetska analyzed Latin borrowings, in particular Latin religious terms in English (Slipetska, 2024).

O. Dobrovolska did the research on the French borrowings in Middle English attested at the anthroponymic level – specifically, the French occupational terms reflected in the English surnames (Dobrovolska, 2008).

H. Polishchuk studied the lexicographical representation of the French borrowings in the English language, their lexico-semantic groups, morphological features, and distribution by parts of speech (Polishchuk, 2021).

The goal of the article is to elucidate the thematic groups of Middle English Norman-French borrowings.

The object of the research is Middle English Norman-French borrowings. The subject – the thematic groups of Middle English Norman-French borrowings. The source material of the research is Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LD, 2003). The goal of the research implies the following **objectives**: (a) to elucidate the historical context of the Anglo-Norman contact; (b) to compile a sample of Middle English Norman-French borrowins; (c) to single out thematic groups of Norman-French borrowins; (d) to highlight mechanisms of borrowings.

Research Methods

According to the purpose and objectives of the research we have used the following methods: the metods of analysis and synthesis, descriptive method, etymological method, method of thematic classification, method of sampling. The methods of critical analysis of philological publications and definition analysis have been applied to gain some information about the research focus. The method of sampling has been used to provide the examples to illustrate Norman-French borrowings. Etymological method has been used to compile a sample of Norman-French borrowings. The method of thematic classification has been used to group Norman-French borrowings.

The Main Material

In the article there have been systematically surveyed the Norman-French borrowings across major semantic fields – government, law, military life, religion, culture, domestic life, and abstract vocabulary – and it has been demonstrated how these loans reveal the complex dynamics of class, power, and cultural interaction in medieval England. In this research we focus on the historical context of Anglo-Norman contact. Post-Conquest England operated under a triple linguistic hierarchy:

a) Latin dominated scholarship, liturgy, and record-keeping;

b) French was the language of court, aristocracy, legal practice, and high culture;

c) English remained the vernacular of the rural and urban populace.

This trilingualism produced a layered lexicon in which the three languages co-existed, interacted, and competed across centuries. French borrowings often displaced native English terms in prestige contexts while native words persisted in everyday speech. This double vocabulary

– *freedom / liberty*, *to ask / to demand*, *kingly / royal* (LD, 2003) – became a feature of English stylistic diversity.

The earliest loans were largely Norman in origin (e.g., *castle*, *warden*, *gard* > *yard*). By the 13th century, Central French (Parisian) influence rose sharply, partly due to renewed cultural ties with continental Europe. The coexistence of these two French varieties contributed to **doublets**, pairs of related words with distinct meanings or registers, e.g.: *warranty* (Norman) vs. *guarantee* (Parisian French), *warden* vs. *Guardian* (LD, 2003), and etc. This complexity further enriched English semantic fields.

In our research we've singled out the following thematic groups of Norman-French borrowings:

Thematic Group 1. Government and Administration.

Governance was one of the first domains transformed by French, since the Normans replaced the English aristocracy and introduced new legal and administrative structures. French terms for political institutions and administrative procedures became deeply entrenched, e.g.:

a) *government, parliament, state, council, authority, tax, subsidy;*

b) *office, chancellor, treasurer, mayor, constable, lieutenant* (LD, 2003).

The above mentioned borrowings not only describe new offices and procedures but also mark the centralization and bureaucratization of the English governance under the Normans.

Thematic Group 2. Lexical Replacement and Register.

Several native English terms survived but underwent semantic shift or register differentiation. For instance, native *folkright* faded in favour of *justice*; *folcrēd* (people's counsel) gave way to *council*. What emerged was a mixture of native administrative expressions (e.g., *kingdom*) (LD, 2003) alongside an expanding French terminology, producing a governance lexicon with pronounced stratification.

Thematic Group 3. Law and Legal System.

The legal system provides the most extensive and stable body of the Norman-French borrowings, because Anglo-Norman was the official language of the courts until the mid-14th century. Vocabulary relating to legal proceedings includes such words as:

a) *court, judge, jury, attorney, counsel, plea, evidence, verdict;*

b) *felony, trespass, homicide, damage, prison* (LD, 2003).

These borrowings reflect the importation of the Norman legal institutions and practices. Notably, both procedure (*to appeal, to claim, to accuse*)

and documentation (*to record, to register, to document*) are dominated by French-origin terms. The process of borrowing caused dual vocabulary. English frequently developed pairs of near-synonyms with distinct registers, e.g.:

a) *doom* (native) vs. *judgment* (French);

b) *offspring* (English) vs. *heir* (French) *offspring* (English);

c) *truth* (English) vs. *verity* (French) (LD, 2003).

These pairs illustrate the linguistic stratification between everyday speech and formal legal discourse.

Even after English re-emerged as the primary administrative language (Statute of Pleading, 1362), the French legal terminology remained entrenched, explaining the enduring French character of legal English today.

Thematic Group 4. Military, Feudal, and Aristocratic Vocabulary.

French influence was equally strong in the domains of warfare and feudal society. Terms for officers, tactics, and equipment overwhelmingly come from French, e.g.:

a) *soldier, army, battle, captain, lieutenant, sergeant;*

b) *enemy, peace, siege, garrison, banner* (LD, 2003).

Military terminology reflects both the Normans' military dominance and their revolutionary influence on English feudal structure.

Thematic Group 5. Feudal Society.

The feudal system introduced new social roles and obligations, encoded in French vocabulary, e.g.:

a) *vassal, liege, fief, homage, manor, tenant, peasant;*

b) *noble, servant, servant, master, chamberlain* (LD, 2003).

These terms helped articulate a hierarchical worldview distinct from older Anglo-Saxon social structures. The vocabulary of class distinction – *sir, lady, noble, honour, courtesy* – further reflects aristocratic culture.

Thematic Group 6. Religion, Learning, and Intellectual Life.

Although Latin remained the dominant ecclesiastical language, many French terms entered English through religious administration, monastic life, and theological literature.

Religious borrowings include the following words:

a) *religion, faith, charity, mercy, grace, prayer, sermon;*

b) *saint, miracle, chapel, abbey, clergy* (LD, 2003).

These terms appear in sermons, devotional texts, and monastic writings from the 12th century onward.

As the university system matured, the French terms connected with academic culture entered English, e.g.: *study, science, logic, theory, question, problem, memory, reason,* and etc. (LD, 2003). Some words derived directly from Latin but entered English via French phonological form. These helped expand the abstract and academic vocabulary necessary for later Middle English literature and early Renaissance scholarship.

Thematic Group 7. Culture, Literature, and Courtly Refinement.

French was the language of courtly romance, aristocratic etiquette, and refined taste. Its borrowings reflect the cultural aspirations of the English nobility. Terms such as *court, courtesy, chivalry, honour, romance, dance, music, pleasure, beauty* capture the values of aristocratic culture (LD, 2003). French contributed heavily to literary terminology, e.g.: *poem, prose, chapter, story, image, art, painting, colour,* and etc. (LD, 2003). Many of these became central to the flourishing of Middle English literature, including the works of G. Chaucer, whose lexicon draws deeply from French models.

French introduced numerous words for clothing, social refinement, and culinary culture, e.g.:

a) *fashion, garment, jewellry, luxury;*

b) *beef, pork, mutton, veal, poultry, sauce* (LD, 2003).

The classic dichotomy – the English names for live animals, French names for meats – reflects social roles: English-speaking peasants tended animals, while French-speaking nobles ate the finished dishes.

Thematic Group 8. Domestic, Everyday, and Urban Life.

Not all French borrowings are elevated in register. Many relate to the emerging urban and mercantile economy. French significantly shaped commercial vocabulary, e.g.:

a) *merchant, money, bargain, price, cost, profit, market;*

b) *labour, service, servant, partner, contract* (LD, 2003).

These borrowings reflect the growing importance of towns, guilds, and commercial networks in medieval England. Some French borrowings refer to ordinary objects and activities, e.g.: *table, chair, dinner, river, garden, flower, story, people,* and etc. (LD, 2003).

These examples show how deeply French merged with everyday English life during the later Middle English period.

Thematic Group 9. Abstract Vocabulary and Semantic Enrichment.

The most far-reaching impact of French borrowing lies in the expansion of English abstract and conceptual vocabulary. French contributed

many words for mental and emotional states, e.g.: *desire, passion, courage, honor, virtue, conscience, memory* and etc. (LD, 2003).

These terms allowed English to express more nuanced psychological and ethical concepts. Borrowings such as *nature, motion, matter, form, quality, quantity, reason, cause* played a major role in the intellectual development of Middle and Early Modern English.

The emergence of a double vocabulary – native terms for concrete concepts and French / Latin terms for abstract or elevated concepts – became a cornerstone of English stylistic versatility.

Many words were adopted wholesale from French, often reflecting the bilingualism of the elite. Some English words emerged as calques or partial translations, e.g., *lawful* (native) vs. *legal* (French). Hybrids, combining English and French elements (e.g., *gentleman*), exemplify English's creativity in blending linguistic resources. Native English words sometimes shifted in meaning under French influence (e.g., *dear* shifting towards "expensive" under influence from French *cher*).

The Norman impact reshaped English into a language with:

a) rich synonymy (*ask / demand, help / aid, holy / sacred*);

b) register differentiation (*high / low, formal / informal pairs*);

c) expanded morphological productivity (using French affixes such as *-ment, -able, -ity*);

d) enhanced stylistic flexibility.

These developments underpin the expressive range of modern English and remain one of its most distinctive features.

Conclusions

A thematic approach to the Norman-French borrowings classification reveals not merely a list of borrowed words but a social map of medieval England. Norman-French dominated the semantic fields most associated with power – law, government, aristocratic culture – and introduced a vast abstract vocabulary that expanded English's communicative capabilities. Meanwhile, native English terms persisted in domains related to everyday life, emotional immediacy, and concrete experience. Thus, lexical units have been systematized into thematic groups, including (a) public administration and governance, (b) law and the judicial system, (c) military affairs, (d) feudal relations, (e) religion, (f) education, (g) culture and literature, (h) daily life and trade, and (i) abstract vocabulary.

The post-Conquest centuries thus forged the hybrid character of English: structurally Germanic, lexically layered, stylistically diverse – capable of both poetic intimacy and bureaucratic precision. This linguistic synthesis laid the foundation for the later rise of English as a global language.

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Сліпецька Віра Дмитрівна – кандидат філологічних наук, доцент, завідувач кафедри практики англійської мови і методики її навчання, Дрогобицький державний педагогічний університет імені Івана Франка, вул. І. Франка, 24, м. Дрогобич, Львівська область, Україна.

E-mail: vslipetska@ukr.net

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2569-0197

Slipetska, Vira – Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of English Language Practice and Methods of Teaching English, Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, 24 Ivan Franko Street, Drohobych, Lviv Region, Ukraine.

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