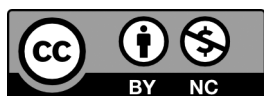# Simplification of English Morphology after the Norman Conquest

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Abstract: Historical transformations have resulted in fluctuations in the evolution of the English language. Following the Norman Conquest, the evolution of English was tumultuous; with the transition of monarchy, English was relegated from its status as the official language and underwent simplification due to external influences. The incursion of French and Latin expanded and complicated the English lexicon. To preserve its viability, English underwent an organic transformation, gradually diminishing its intricate grammatical structure. Middle English exhibited greater simplification in structure compared to Old English, creating advantageous conditions for subsequent continuous evolution.

Keywords: Middle English; External change; Internal change

1 Introduction

In the Middle English period (1100-1500 AD), English morphology underwent incremental simplification due to the effect of the Norman Conquest. From a theoretical perspective, early French and Latin were morphologically complex languages, and their integration into Old English would have enhanced the morphological evolution of English. Nonetheless, regarding the current state, the majority of English morphological indicators have vanished and become simplified over their evolution. This research aims to examine the simplification process of Old and Middle English, focusing on the underlying reasons and the complex historical context. Both Old English and Latin are recognized as typical synthesizers, while Modern French is classified as an analytic language, and Modern English functions as a synthesizer-analyzer.

2 External Changes in Middle English

2.1 The Influence of the Norman Conquest on Middle English

In 1066 AD, upon the death of King Edward of England, who left no male heir, the country's nobility picked his

uncle, Harold, as his successor. William, the Duke of Normandy, asserted his claim to the throne based on a promise made by Edward and initiated a military campaign, ultimately defeating Harold in the Battle of Hastings. The Norman Conquest initiated centuries of Norman governance and introduced the French language, significantly influencing the development of the English language.

Following William's ascension to the throne, the English aristocracy and clergy underwent a significant transformation: the Anglo-Saxons were mostly supplanted by French-speaking Normans. The vernacular of the court, the clergy, and other elite classes transitioned to French. Individuals from the poor and middle classes continued to communicate in English. During that era, education was predominantly accessible primarily to the aristocracy and higher classes, with the Church assuming the role of imparting knowledge. Following the entire replacement of this class by the Normans, it may be inferred that all written and educational materials in England at that period transitioned to French. Consequently, written English was virtually eradicated for approximately 150 years, existing solely through oral transmission among the lower classes (Zhang, 2020).

Throughout the 200 years of England's invasion, the Norman aristocracy showed little inclination to acquire the English language, while French persisted as the primary mode of communication among the ruling elite. The underlying cause of this phenomenon was that the Norman ruling elite in England sustained strong connections with the European continent, prioritizing strategic interests and political reasons that favored continental issues over local English matters. The motive of the Norman elite to adopt English might be characterized as a "lack of concern" for the alteration of the official language in medieval England (Crystal, 2018).

2.2 Passive Simplicity for English Survival

In England, the middle and lower Normans utilized Norman French as a means of communication while also acquiring proficiency in English. The management of noble manor stewards, warriors defending the region, economic activities of traders, and operations of small workshops by craftsmen necessitate communication with local citizens of England for daily trades and interactions. At present, the form of English, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc., nearly fully depends on the individual use, and the use of diverse forms is very intricate. To disseminate more effectively, English needed to simplify and enhance its memorability. Both the linguistic background and the Norman aristocracy exhibit structural restrictions. The principal distinction lies in the fact that the Norman aristocracy functioned inside a French-speaking milieu, while the lower-middle-class Normans predominantly utilized English. The prolonged intermingling and coexistence of the Anglo-Norman peoples substantially fostered the advancement of bilingualism on both sides. The prevalence of Latin and French was significantly affected by the onset of the Black Death. Due to the demise of numerous Latin-or French-speaking pastors, the Church was compelled to establish a new cohort of English-speaking clergymen. The interplay of these elements enabled the English language, which had been predominantly disseminated orally, not only to endure but also to thrive more robustly despite comparatively adverse conditions.

3 Internal Changes in Middle English

English is examined through its internal linguistic alterations, leading to the conclusion that the simplification of its morphology is both mutated and occurs independently. The preceding discussion pertains to the exterior modifications

of English due to external factors; the subsequent section presents a study of the internal alterations.

Since the Norman Conquest, English society has exhibited a trilingual linguistic pattern, comprising French, Latin, and Old English, which subsequently evolved into Middle English. The royal family and numerous administrative bodies employed French and Latin for official documentation, the clergy predominantly utilized Latin, while the ordinary populace primarily spoke English for everyday interactions. In this context, the Norman Conquest significantly influenced the simplicity of the English language in various ways, as seen in the subsequent sections (Li, Xiao, & Xu, 2011).

3.1 Expansion and Complexity of the English Lexical System

The richness of the English lexicon, particularly with the plethora of synonyms and near-synonyms, can be attributed to a nuanced amalgamation of Latin, French, and English. This amalgamation enables the integration of many linguistic parts to convey the same concepts; yet, the associated terms frequently vary in emotional nuance and contextual suitability. Consider the lexicon associated with "time", including terms such as "time", "age", and "epoch". The term "time", derived from the native language, is the most commonly utilized; "age", originating from French, is used slightly less frequently than "time"; and "epoch", also of French origin, follows suit. "Age" derives from French and is utilized less frequently than "time", although "epoch" has Latin origins and is comparatively little employed. Significantly, the majority of French lexicon introduced during the Middle English period pertained to literary language, resulting in a pronounced written quality and a more consistent semantic interpretation, thereby rendering them more suitable for formal written contexts, while their application in colloquial speech remains comparatively restricted. The origins of English vocabulary extend beyond French and Latin to include Old Brittonic, Germanic, Nordic (Danish, Norwegian, etc.), among others (Li, 2014). The language of the conqueror consistently had significant advantages and was employed by the judiciary, the aristocracy, and civil servants. Each conquest introduced new lexicon into the English language. Each new synonym that emerges diminishes the utilization of the old vocabulary.

Furthermore, it discards the original vocabulary, rendering it unusable. In Old English, the term apple referred to "fruit", but with the introduction of the French word fruit into English, apple became restricted to denote solely one type of fruit, "apple". For instance, Old English employed "sick" to denote "sick", but with the introduction of the Norwegian "ill" into the English lexicon, "sick" became restricted (Xu, 2004).

3.2 Changes in English Grammar

The most noteworthy shift in the Middle English period is the progressive elimination of grammatical gender, word-final inflected forms, and infinitive ends. For instance, das Mädchen (the young girl) in German is neuter, a grammatical gender that has almost vanished in Middle English. The significant loss of inflectional modifications directly resulted in the evolution of English from a fully synthetic language to a predominantly analytic one.

All foreign languages incorporated into Old English possessed separate rules for noun-verb inflection and conjugation, characterized by unique lexical regulations and internal structures. The English lexicon was progressively diminished due to linguistic encroachment. English nouns, adjectives, and articles exhibit no gender distinction, but French and Spanish possess both feminine and masculine forms. For instance, English nouns exhibit no inflection and possess distinct singular and plural varieties. Cat and cats; verbs exhibit inflection: I am, you are, etc., conveying distinct meanings through variations in word forms. In the second example, the identical meaning of "go home" is conveyed;

however, the English language employs different terms. The initial example conveys the same information on apples, yet uses distinct wording due to the quantity of apples involved.

In contrast to many comprehensive languages, such as Latin, English verb conjugation is considerably more straightforward, with the exception of the third person singular (he/she). The present tense remains largely unaltered, as there is no conjugation for the six pronouns I, you, he/she, we, you, they/them across tenses. The past tense and past participle have been streamlined, except for certain words derived from Old English (e.g., take-took-taken; swim-swam-swum).

Pronouns possess a straightforward subject, object, and possessive case. Latin and Russian possess six variations, German has four, and Old English contains five. The rapid expansion of vocabulary necessitates that English simplify its grammatical structure and system, discard most conjugation and inflection systems, and rely on word order and prepositions to achieve equivalent functions, thereby evolving into an analytical language. Nevertheless, the linguistic nature of contemporary English is not exclusively analytic, but rather synthesized-analytic. In the Middle English period, the grammatical structures of other languages, particularly French, were assimilated into the foundational grammar of Old English. In Modern English, the grammatical structure exhibits a distinctive pattern of inflection and alteration. At the same time, the rigidity of word order and the utilization of numerous function words have become essential methods for conveying grammatical relationships.

In contrast to earlier stages, Modern English increasingly depends on the rearrangement of word order and the function of grammatical words. At the same time, the significance of morphological alterations and affixation has diminished. Contemporary English increasingly depends on word order and function words, diminishing the significance of inflectional alterations and affixation.

Languages can be broadly classified into three categories: isolates, agglutinative, and blended. Languages undergo continuous evolution, typically following a cyclical pattern of transformation: from isolating to agglutinative, to fusional, and reverting to isolating, repeatedly. If language types were represented on a dial, with isolates at 4 o'clock, agglutinatives at 8 o'clock, and fusions at 12 o'clock, one could delineate the transformations now occurring within various language families (Cao, 2017). However, the reality is that most languages cannot be strictly classified into the categories of integrative, analytic, or isolating; it is more suitable to regard analytic as a characteristic. English is more analytical than Russian. A pure isolating language is inherently analytic as it lacks morphologically variable morphemes; however, the reverse is not necessarily applicable.

3.3 Changes in English Spelling

In Old English, y transformed into u, ý into yi, u becoming ou (and ow when positioned at the end of a word), among other changes. Approximately 10,000 French terms were incorporated into English, with the Normans' utilization of the language, resulting in the gradual introduction of their distinctive Norman French lexicon to England. Consequently, at least three vocabulary systems emerged in the English language utilized within English society: the native English lexicon, the Latin terms introduced by Roman missionaries, and the Nordic words brought into English by the Norse settlers in the Danelaw region of northeastern England, among others. The initial period, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century A.D., yielded numerous works delineating reform plans. The more traditional the proposition, the greater its success in the higher levels of writing. James Howell's Grammar of 1662 proposed modest orthographic modifications, including logique to logic, warre to war, sinne to sin, toune to town, and tru to true.

Beginning in the 16th century, English authors, along with Greek and Latin scholars, endeavored to revert English terms to their original forms. Latin scholars endeavored to associate English lexicon with its Greek and Latin equivalents. They elucidated the actual or perceived connection by using a silent letter. Consequently, det evolved into det (derived from the Latin debitum), dout transformed into doubtful (originating from the Latin dubitare), sissors became scissors, and site changed to scythe (mistakenly believed to derive from the Latin scindere). Commencing in the 16th century, English authors and scholars of Greek and Latin literature endeavored to associate English vocabulary with its Greek and Latin equivalents. They enhanced the apparent connection, whether factual or fictitious, by using a silent letter. Consequently, det evolved into det (derived from the Latin debitum), dout transformed into doubtful (originating from the Latin dubitare), sissors became scissors, and site was misattributed to scythe (incorrectly believed to stem from the Latin scindere).

In contrast to numerous other languages, English spelling has not undergone systematic revisions and presently adheres only partially to the notion of alphabetical order (Liu & Zhang, 2015). In several instances, English exhibits a more conservative approach to the utilization of Old French vocabulary compared to French, particularly in spelling, if not in pronunciation— Apostle (Old French: apostle; Middle French: apôtre). Several Old French terms have vanished from contemporary French, such as "dandelion".

3.4 Changes in English Spelling

Middle English lacked a standardized spelling system; spelling was a creative endeavor, with individuals employing their interpretations of phonetics to produce spellings. Consider the term "might", which was represented in several forms in Middle English: maht, mahte, mohte, mihte, mihhte, miht, micht, miȝt, tmiȝte, michte, myht, myhte, myhtte, myhtt, mȝht, tmiȝte myhtt, mȝht, mȝhtte, mighte, and may are all instances of its spelling. In oral communication, consonant clusters have diminished, as the k in knee and knight is no longer articulated, and the h in hring and half is also unvoiced. The pronunciation of Y has evolved from the rounded-lipped ü ([y]) in Chinese to the non-rounded-lipped i ([i]), despite the presence of the [y] sound in French. The Old English principle that emphasis predominantly occurs at the beginning has likewise vanished, etc (Bryson, 1990).

Dixon (2010), in The Rise and Fall of Languages, elucidates that several alterations in languages occur abruptly rather than gradually, typically transpiring within one or two generations. The alterations resemble steps rather than gradual inclines. For instance, alterations in grammatical categories or structural types occur by incremental mutations rather than progressive modifications. Similar to English, the Great Vowel Shift commenced with the splitting of high vowels and the progressive elevation of the tongue position of low vowels to occupy the voids left by high vowels, a process that spanned several centuries. Secondly, certain alterations in the linguistic framework are spontaneous, resulting from the internal dynamics of the language. The majority of alterations result from the expansion of grammatical categories in an adjacent language or a cluster of languages. Speakers of Old English encountered French and Latin, both of which possessed noun attribute classes, or genders (Zhang, 2014). Consequently, speakers of Old English progressively established a comparable yet novel system, independent of borrowing grammatical forms from external sources. Instead, this system emerged from Old English itself, deriving suffixes for noun attribute classes through internal mutation, thereby giving rise to Middle English.

4 Conclusion

In summary, the progressive simplification of Middle English morphology might be rephrased as the inquiry: why is English evolving towards a more analytic structure? Rather than simplifying and dissecting the English language, it is more pertinent to assert that the English language is being popularized and casualized over time. To address the requirements of a contemporary, swiftly evolving society, English should not be an intricate system, but rather a straightforward one. Currently, there is a trend of "casual usage"; for instance, "cat tail" may be expressed as "cat tail" or "tail of a cat", rather than "cat's tail". The grammatical system of contemporary English nouns appears to be diminishing. As a member of the same Germanic group, German had a slower process of analyticization compared to English, particularly evident in its nouns, which nevertheless preserve a trinitarian tetragrammaton.

Throughout a century, the most evident characteristic of the transition from Old English to Middle English is the progression from complexity to simplicity in the language. The intricacy of vocabulary and brevity contribute to a streamlined grammatical structure, indicating that language, as a medium of human communication, will invariably adhere to principles of usability and evolve in a manner that fosters societal advancement.

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