

Language Contact and Language Change: The Danes in England

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ABSTRACT

The influence of the Scandinavian dialects on English has been often studied though no significant progress seems to have been achieved. The major aim of this paper is to offer a methodological approach which can provide a description of the Scandinavian lexical element in Middle English but considering it in its different aspects. Thus, we will undertake a corpus-based analysis where different variables such as semantic field, type of text and dialect among others are taken into consideration. The resulting description will reveal that the linguistic intercourse must have been different from what traditional scholars have always believed.

0. Introduction

The presence of the Scandinavian element in English has been often mentioned but not thoroughly studied since no real quantification of it has been issued. The present paper aims at providing an interpretation of one aspect of the linguistic system of Scandinavian England, namely, that concerning loan words. A detailed account of all the linguistic system of Anglo-Scandinavian would certainly need a complete volume and we will not make such an attempt here. Instead, we will concentrate on the composition of the lexical level of English during the so-called Middle English period.

Therefore, my main interest here will be to fix the proportion of this element as well as its distribution according to a series of variables. As a source of data I have resorted to the *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*) first edited by Hans Kurath and Sherman Khun in 1956. Since my intention is to ascertain to what a degree did the Scandinavian lexical system penetrate into the Anglo-Saxon one, I will focus on the number of uses of loan words of Scandinavian origin rather than in the number of words themselves.

The information from the *MED* has been organised into a database. Such information will be analyzed according to the different fields considered. In addition, an interpretation

of the results of the analysis of each separate field will be given so as to provide a distributional pattern of Scandinavisms in English. To this end, some examples have been selected by way of illustration.

1. The corpus

In order to achieve a detailed analysis of the behaviour of Scandinavian loans in Middle English, a corpus is needed that can be considered as representative of a great range of linguistic possibilities. At the same time, the selection has to be random so that the presence of this type of vocabulary can be studied the way in which it occurred in common linguistic intercourse as it was recorded, corresponding to different dialects, types of text and periods. Thus, a corpus has been made based upon the *Middle English Dictionary*, compiling all entries corresponding to words of Scandinavian origin. The selection of the entries has been carried out so that we only take into account those lexical items the authors of the *MED* themselves considered had been originated in any of the Scandinavian dialects.

Only the entries for words whose first grapheme was <a>, or <c> have been considered (totalling 100,000 words), but many different variables have been taken into consideration for the making of the corpus. Each record contains fourteen fields or variables. The ones I have examined here are as follows:

Word: it contains the loan word with its possible spelling variants as it is in the *MED*.

Meaning: the different meanings of the loans are recorded in each case. The way in which these meanings are considered is the one adopted by Kurath in his introduction to the *MED* (3). For the identification of the different meanings the following types of quotations have been preferred:

- (a) Those containing an explicit definition by a medieval writer, without considering its validity or acceptance on the part of his contemporaries.
- (b) Those containing synonyms and antonyms.
- (c) Those containing words used to refer to coordinate, subordinate or unities of a superior entity in a system of classification, as in phylosophy, for instance.
- (d) Those exhibiting the expression in a linguistic context or in a specific setting that restricts its meaning.
- (e) Those giving a Latin or French equivalent of the ME expression, or for which the foreign equivalent is available.

Semantic field: each use of a loan word is classified according to the semantic field to which it belongs. A complete account of how these fields were established is given in section 4 below.

Period: two possible dates have been registered for each use of a loan. Namely, the first date of composition and the date of the manuscript when necessary. Of course these dates are almost never exact, but a variation of around 25 years can be considered for almost all the cases.

Dialect: The ME dialect to which the text belongs is considered only in those cases in which any particular features indicate so. This means that texts showing no dialectal

feature are considered as “standard.” A full account of the classification of texts according to their dialectal peculiarities is provided in section 3.

Type of text: since our corpus comprises works of various kinds, it has been necessary to make a further classification according to the type of text where the use of the loan has been recorded. The types of text here considered are slightly different from the ones considered by the Helsinki Corpus. This is due to two reasons: on the one hand, the fact that this corpus was already being compiled before we could make use of the Helsinki one. And on the other, the nature of the texts and of this study itself exacted a more detailed explanation of the different pieces where words of Scandinavian origin were found to occur. The different types will be considered in section number 5.

After compiling the information mentioned above, the analysis of these different variables and the conclusions on how the Scandinavian lexical influence affected ME follow.

2. The dates

Since it is my purpose to study both the rate at which Scandinavian loans were introduced in English and the periods during which this influence was more intensely felt, I established subperiods of twenty years each all along the lapse of time covered in the *MED*. The first time that a Scandinavian loan is recorded in my material is 1107. This is why I have established 1100 as my starting point and finished in 1540 (date in which the latest loan is recorded by the *MED*).

The first occurrence corresponds to the affix *bergh* from Old Icelandic *berg* “hill” in the word *Wardeberg*. Only twenty years after this first use, can we find it again in the place name *Akeberga*.¹

Even from 1120 onwards, the rate at which the Scandinavian loans are incorporated into English vocabulary is certainly slow, since only five new uses of such loans have been detected before 1140. In fact, the following table will reveal that the four first subperiods (eighty years) show a very scarce presence of the Scandinavian element in the English lexicon.

YEARS	LOAN WORDS
1100-1120	2
1121-1140	5
1141-1160	23
1161-1180	18
1181-1200	213
1201-1220	15
1221-1240	46

1241-1260	103
1261-1280	34
1281-1300	264
1301-1320	56
1321-1340	455
1341-1360	138
1361-1380	427
1381-1400	1444
1401-1420	235
1421-1440	684
1441-1460	658
1461-1480	325
1481-1500	145
1501-1520	1
1521-1540	4

Table 1

Table 1 shows an increase in the number of Scandinavisms used in English from 1180 onwards. When Duke William of Normandy arrives in England, the population is basically of Anglosaxon and Scandinavian descent since the Celts had been expelled to the West of Watling Street. These communities, both sharing a common Germanic origin, have been already coexisting for a century when the Norman troops come to England, though their degree of intimacy is not homogeneous at all. If we take the Danelaw communities as a point of reference, we can suppose they are not very big centres of population. It is highly probable that they constitute high density multiplex social networks (Milroy).²

In addition, two other factors must be taken into consideration besides the type of speech community involved. In the first place, the fact that most members of these communities are illiterate, which means that the relation between the spoken and the written language is not very fluid and changes in the oral level are only very slowly reflected in the written so that from the moment when a linguistic use begins spreading to the moment it is finally recorded in a text, a long time may have elapsed.³ Secondly, though some kind of segregation may have existed between the two communities, it would not be surprising that they would unite against the common enemy represented by the Normans. The most evident linguistic consequence of this third element is a bigger linguistic interaction due to a bigger social cohesion.

The reasons above mentioned may constitute a good explanation for the increasing number of Scandinavian lexical items used in English from 1180. As a matter of fact, from this year onwards we find many uses of Scandinavianisms, this time referring to people rather than to place names. Some instances are given below:

- (1) *Pipe Roll Society* 29, n. 103: Normanus le Bonde
 (2) *Feet of Fines...* 24, n.34: Wulwardus Butekarl

Example (1) is especially interesting since both names denote Scandinavian origin: *Normannus* is equivalent to “man from the North” and *Bonde* (from Old Norse *bonda*) is referring to someone by his social condition (*bonde* is originally opposed to “free”). In a similar way, *Butekarl* in example (2) contains a reference to a person by his professional activity (*butekarl* meaning “boatman”). Table 1 shows that the number of uses increases very irregularly until the period stretching from 1381-1400, in which the highest rate is registered. In fact, during these twenty years 1444 uses of different terms of Scandinavian origin have been found in our corpus, which represents a 27.3% of the total. At this time, English has already assimilated the neologisms introduced from the North of Europe as well as many from Norman French. This assimilation is obvious when such terms are used not only in an oral level, but also in writing (see above). This is what happens in many texts by Chaucer:

- (3) *The Knight's tale* A. 996: The grete clamour that the ladyes made at the brennyng
 of the bodies

Chaucer uses the verb *brennen* probably without being conscious that it is a word of Scandinavian origin, the same as *callen* in example (4) below:

- (4) *Troilus and Cryseyde* 2.71: He gan awake, and gan to calle

From the beginning of the 15th century onwards, the uses of Scandinavian loans decrease in our corpus. Nevertheless, we do not consider that this is caused by a cessation in its social use but by the fact that the most productive writers of the period, including Chaucer himself, have stopped writing. Of course, the more written material exists, the bigger number of loans can be detected. This is, we think, the main reason why certain words do not appear in our corpus from the date above mentioned though their presence in the English language nowadays proves they had to be used then as well.⁴

3. The dialects

Two criteria have been followed for the assignment of texts to particular dialectal areas. In the first place, the classification adopted here is not that by Kurath but the one by Robert Lewis. The edition of the *MED* carried out by Lewis and his team revised much of the information previously given by the former editors, including that concerning the

dialectal distribution of the texts. This revision gave place to a more detailed classification, since some areas that had been considered as containing one single variety are divided in two by Lewis. This way, texts such as *Amis and Amiloun* and *The Lay of Havelok the Dane* belonged to the East Midland group according to the 1956 edition but are ascribed to different dialects (South East Midland and North East Midland, respectively) by the 1984 edition. Texts showing no special northern or southern features are left as belonging to the East Midland (this is the case of the *Romance of Emaré*). In the second place, in those cases in which no information was provided, texts were ascribed to the dialect proposed in the edition of those same texts by the *Early English Text Society*. However, many of the records of our database have not been classified on the grounds of to which dialect they belong. This is mainly because the term does not appear in a medieval text but in periodical publications or later studies such as the ones by Thuresson, Ekwall or the English Place Name Society itself. These terms have been grouped together with the ones showing no special dialectal features.

Despite the tendency to believe that the dialects of the Danelaw area have been subject to a bigger influence from Norse dialects so that a corresponding higher number of loans should be found in them, the data from my corpus show that this assumption is not necessarily true. When analyzing the information available, I established thirteen different groups: twelve corresponded to the dialects of ME according to the criteria proposed by Robert E. Lewis, and the last one included all forms showing no especial dialectal feature under the label “common core.” Table 2 below displays the total number of occurrences of each loan according to the dialect in which it appears.

DIALECT	USES OF LOANS
South	9
South East	4
South West	149
Southeast Midland	1027
Southwest Midland	125
Midland	7
East Midland	213
West Midland	264
North	809
North East Midland	313
North West Midland	281
Kent	46
Common core	2048

Table 2

Without resorting to a minute analysis, and contrary to the general assumption, it can be easily seen that it is not in the dialectal area of the Danelaw where a larger number of Scandinavian loans can be found. As can be seen in the numbers exhibited in table 2, it is the so-called “common core” that contains most loans (38.67%).

If we now turn to those dialects showing less loans, it is also obvious that they are the ones covering the South and South East, with only four and nine uses respectively. Certainly, three of the four terms belonging to the Southeastern area are common and widely-used even nowadays. Thus, we come across *anger* (“suffering, problem”), *bond* (“a mutual obligation met with marriage”), and *brennen* (“burn or torture by means of fire”). The three instances recorded are given below:

(5) *The Abbey of the Holy* 53/18: Owte ofe worldly noyse and of wordly angyrse and besynes.

(6) *The Abbey of the Holy* 51/13: Many walde be in religyon, bot thay⁵ may noghte . . . for band of Maryage.

(7) *Old English Homilies* 243: Ye seneyden also lange also ye lefede and ye scule birne also longe as ic lefie.

The fact that I have not checked more than thirteen instances of uses of Scandinavian loans for the South and South East of England should not be regarded as a sign of the lack of penetration of the Scandinavian linguistic habits, but rather the opposite. Historical evidence demonstrates that, since 793, a heavy demographic pressure was exerted by the Danes from the northern and eastern coasts of England as they were looking for new settlements. This implies, subsequently, that the area where the continental population was less numerous was the Southern one. But this includes London, Cambridge and Oxford as well. The triangle formed by these three cities is not only the one producing a larger number of all types of works but also a source of cultural influence, and to such an extent that the English used in this area will be generally spoken and written in a few years. From the 13th century onwards most speakers of English tend to use this particular variety which finally becomes the standard. This is to say, it constitutes the “common core.”

According to the data obtained from the corpus, and though it seems that scholars traditionally tended to avoid this evidence, I believe that the paucity of Scandinavisms in those dialects of a bigger social and cultural importance is a consequence of their being only registered when they are very peculiar (Kurath 10). This suggests that many other Scandinavian loans were being used in this part of England too, but they were not considered as dialectally marked or stigmatised since its use was widely spread.⁶ This same reason explains that the Danelaw area shows less Scandinavian loan words than what we have called the “common core” or “standard.”

4. The semantic fields

The semantic fields that I have included as one variable for the present study have been established taking as a starting point the ones proposed by Mary S. Serjeantson. However,

I found her list was not sufficient to classify all the terms in my material. Thus, I came to consider 35 different semantic fields, each of which was given a numeric key in order to be more easily recorded in the database. The semantic fields thus established are the following:

- 1 references to people or social rank
- 2 references to groups or assemblies
- 3 trade and money
- 4 buildings, decoration and architecture
- 5 law and social relations
- 6 religion and myths
- 7 the military world and war
- 8 nature, geographical features
- 9 wild life, animals
- 10 clothes, textile
- 11 household
- 12 physical action
- 13 food, drink and cooking
- 14 state of mind
- 15 mental action or action directed to the mind
- 16 abstractions
- 17 writing, painting, knowledge and the arts
- 18 agriculture and plants, farming
- 19 medicine, anatomy, human body
- 20 hunting, fishing, hawking and other sports and games
- 21 navigation and the sea
- 22 time
- 23 the weather
- 24 measures
- 25 professions
- 26 sex
- 27 history and traditions
- 28 miscellaneous
- 29 manner, mood
- 30 place, position
- 31 suffixes in place names or personal names
- 32 physical appearance
- 33 abilities
- 34 movement
- 35 quality

It seems unnecessary to explain the contents of each of the preceding fields, except, perhaps, the one labelled "miscellaneous." It contains all those items which had no easy classification or were difficult to appoint to any of the thirty-four left. This is the case of verbs such as *do* or certain suffixes which, though not included in key number 31, did not fit under "abstractions" either.

When establishing all these different semantic fields, my intention was to find if the statement that Scandinavian loans belonged to everyday life vocabulary was true or if, on the contrary, some degree of specialisation could be observed. The total number of loans included in each field of course depends on the context in which they are used so that the same word may mean two things belonging to two different fields. Thus, table 3 shows the number of uses of loans belonging to each field and the percentage of the total they represent.

FIELD	LOANS	%	FIELD	LOANS	%
1	208	3.92%	19	230	4.34%
2	25	0.47%	20	94	1.77%
3	42	0.79%	21	110	2.07%
4	89	0.01%	22	105	1.98%
5	333	6.28%	23	12	0.22%
6	73	0.01%	24	40	0.75%
7	80	1.51%	25	59	1.11%
8	160	3.02%	26	8	0.15%
9	111	2.09%	27	7	0.13%
10	121	2.28%	28	121	2.28%
11	189	3.56%	29	213	4.02%
12	859	16.2%	30	100	1.88%
13	62	1.17%	31	194	3.66%
14	422	7.96%	32	166	3.13%
15	360	6.79%	33	5	0.09%
16	296	5.59%	34	156	2.94%
17	64	1.20%	35	64	1.20%
18	117	2.20%			

Table 3

Generally speaking, the difference in the number of terms included in each field is not big, except for field number 12 (referred to physical action) containing 16.2% of the total. Some of those terms are part of idioms and they are widely used since they belong to what we call the “common core” or standard in section 3. This is the case of the ME adverb

aloft(e) that appears in several idioms or phrases such as *holden alofte* (“to go on with something”):

(8) Gollancz, *Sir Gawain* 1125: The olde lorde of that leude Couthe wel halde layk alofte

Other terms denoting physical action are verbs of Scandinavian origin. In fact, verbs constitute the more numerous grammatical category (see section 6 below). Of the 859 loans related to physical action, 721 (83.9%) are verbs, such as *atlen*, *aunen*, *belen*, and more often, *brennen*.

(9) Skeat, *Wars of Alexander* 1157: Than etils him sir Alexander

(10) Furnivall, *English Conquest* 35/3: Landys to wynne, and nat wyth slaght and wyth brennynge

In fact, this last term is so deeply rooted in the language that authors whose linguistic variety is traditionally considered to be far from the Scandinavian influence, as Chaucer, cannot help including it in their texts. A similar behaviour can be observed for the verb *casten* inside this field.

The second semantic field according to the uses of lexical terms it includes is the one under key 14 designing “state of mind.” Though I could affirm that it refers to an everyday life activity (since states of mind are a part of the most elementary human nature) the number of terms found seems to contradict the idea that the Scandinavian tribes were basically materialistic supported by certain scholars when suggesting that the Scandinavian terms in English denoted mere survival. Some such terms are ME *adlen* “to deserve spiritual peace,” *alod* “in bad condition” in the examples below:

(11) Ker, *Unpublished Ormulum* 13075: Niss nan otherr kinness lif that addlethth eche blisse

(12) *The Towneley Plays* 24/56: Therfor I drede lest god on vs will take veniance, ffor syn is now alod without any repentance

That the new settlers of England had a spiritual wealth to offer the Anglosaxons is again reflected in the language. The third semantic field according to the items it includes is the one under key 15 referred to mental actions. Loans represent here 6.79% and they are found again as part of idioms as *amis* in *saien amis* (“to tell lies, to make a mistake”):

(13) Zupitza, *Guy of Warwick* 664: Yf y amys seye, amende me

Members of the field referred to “law and social relations” (key number 5) are also abundant (6.3%) providing an idea of the people using such terms that reinforces my argument. The number of such terms suggests two possible explanations. On the one hand, that Old English lacked them so that they had to be borrowed or, on the other, that they denoted such an important aspect for the speakers that they replaced the native ones. But it is probably a mixture of both factors what gives place to such a distribution. However,

due to the nature of my material the legal term of Scandinavian origin par excellence, *law* from ON *logu*, is not recorded as such in our corpus, but as part of compounds (see note 4).

In addition to all the evidence provided, it is worth noting that the fields referred to “abstractions” (key 16, 5.59%) and “medicine” (key 19, 4.34%) are also more representative than the one denoting “person or rank” (key 1, 3.92%) and much more than number 2, “assemblies.” Contrary to the general assumption this seems to prove that the Scandinavian social model was not so democratic as it was considered to be, but not so primitive either. In sight of the evidence, the idea that most words borrowed from the Scandinavian languages are part of everyday life terms can be thus disregarded.

5. The types of text

My classification of the texts here considered includes the following types each of which has been represented by a three-letter key in the data base:

- Poe: includes all non-religious poetry except pieces that though written in verse, contain legends or romances.
- Fic: tales and legends.
- Cos: manners and social games.
- Pol: texts referred to the organization of society and political life.
- Reg: different versions of *Domesday Book* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as well as records, court rolls, historiographical works, etc.
- Tec: any kind of technical text (directions for the use of certain utensils, textbooks dealing with sports, hunting, fishing, sailing, astronomy, etc.). Only medical texts and cook books have been excluded from this group since their frequency makes them deserve a separate consideration.
- Med: medical texts.
- Rom: romances.
- Lis: lists of words, glossaries and dictionaries.
- Coc: cook books.
- Dra: drama in general.
- Did: works with a didactic content. Religious texts such as the Bible, and hagiographies are included here due to the difficulty of separating religion from any other didactic purpose in the Middle Ages.
- Mxt: texts offering a special difficulty for their classification because in many cases only a few lines are kept in volumes containing different types of written material.

TYPE OF TEXT	NUMBER OF USES	%
Did	1607	30.34
Rom	880	16.61
Reg	751	14.18

Poe	402	7.59
Fic	398	7.51
Tec	249	4.70
Mxt	214	4.04
Med	206	3.89
Lis	192	3.62
Dra	168	3.17
Cos	34	0.64
Coc	11	0.20

Table 4

As shown in table 4 above, didactic texts are the ones in which a larger number of loans are recorded. This may be accounted for by the fact that it is difficult to draw a line between didactic texts strictly speaking and texts containing some other kind of teaching, such as hagiographies, dialogues, etc. Thus, this category includes pieces so different as the *Ormulum*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the *Cursor Mundi* and different versions of the *Bible*.

The first and more abundant examples are found in the *Ormulum* from 1200 onwards. The terms there recorded, the same as occurs in most texts, are characterised by their non-restriction to one or other semantic field. On the contrary, I have found numerous examples similar to the one below.

(14) Ker, *Unpublished Ormulum* 151: I shall hafenn adledde me The Laferrd Cristess are

The meaning of *adlen* involved in (14) is only one of the possible senses it may have in Middle English. In addition to its more usual reference to trade and finances, when used in everyday intercourse it shows here a figurative meaning.

The two factors mentioned so far, namely, that terms belonging to any semantic field are included, and that the label "didactic" includes religious texts as well, can be argued as the causes of my detecting so many uses of Scandinavian loans in this type of text. Further support to this notion comes from the fact that lexical change is at an advanced point so that most loans are integrated in the vocabulary and general linguistic behaviour of most speakers.

Table 4 shows that romances and acts are respectively the second and third text type according to their use of Scandinavian loans. Among the first, *The Wars of Alexander*, the *Romaunt of the Rose* and *King Horn* deserve mentioning; under the label "acts" *Domesday Book* or the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in its different versions. While checking the material

I had the impression that not many texts in which Scandinavian terms were found could be described as related to everyday life.

Contrary to the general idea, again, my data show that, in fact, most fragments containing lexical items of Scandinavian origin are not found in texts one could define as everyday. Surprisingly enough, only 11 instances of Scandinavian loans were found in Cook Books, for instance. In contrast, there are 249 uses registered for what we could call technical texts of so different nature as *Treatise on the Astrolabe* by Chaucer, *Equatorie of the Planets*, *Medulla Grammaticae* or *An Older Form of the Treatise of Fysshynge with an Angle*. The same can be applied to medical texts, containing 206 items.

In general, it seems to me that the study of the types of text containing Scandinavisms contradicts the existing theory about their non-specialisation. However, that texts of a didactic character are the ones using more loans appears to indicate that such lexical items have been sufficiently assumed by the speech community or to an extent as to be sure they will offer no problem of comprehension. Otherwise, the goals of such texts would not be achieved.

8. Conclusions

The above discussion offers some evidence of the distributional pattern of Scandinavian loans in Middle English. My attempt was twofold: on the one hand, I wanted to offer a new perspective for the study of the Scandinavian element in English, not only quantitative but qualitative as well so that such pattern could be drawn. On the other, it was my intention to provide the reader with a new concept of the Danes in England from what their traces in the language may suggest.

The conclusion that can be drawn from what has been said so far is that the presence of Scandinavian lexical items in English is, by no means, limited to one single kind of linguistic behaviour. On the contrary, after checking the material it seems to me that Scandinavian loans in Middle English are distributed in such a way as to suggest that their use can be better observed in what we have termed the “common core” of the vocabulary. The fact that this is so could be justified by a deeper penetration of the loans in English caused, from my point of view, by a close relation between the Scandinavian newcomers and the native speakers of English. Many arguments have been given to support this idea, but the one involving a social determining factor should be borne in mind above all the rest. Thus, a socio-historical explanation of the phenomenon is preferred and the challenge now is to verify whether a method of socio-historical linguistics can be applied to other aspects of the English language and with what results.

Notes

1. Both uses are recorded by the Early Place Name Society in volumes 3 (Bedfordshire and Huntingdon) and 14 (Yorkshire's East Riding), respectively.

2. For a better understanding of Scandinavian speech communities in medieval England, see Iglesias Rábade and Moskowich, and Moskowich.

3. The preponderance of the oral language over the written one is such that we will never get to know the number of Scandinavian loans that were really used in Middle English, since many could have been originated as a passing fashion and could have disappeared before ever being written.

4. A very common Scandinavian loan is *cake* still present in English nowadays. However, not many instances of its use are recorded in our corpus.

5. "Thorn" has been substituted for by the digraph <th> in this pronoun. The same has been done for letter "eth" in all the examples. Letter <y> stands for "Yogh."

6. As explained by López Morales (55) the difference between a change in progress and one already completed can be perceived in its social distribution. The change normally begins when one social group starts using a form (Scandinavian in our case) stigmatised by the rest of the speakers. When it reaches other groups, a pyramid pattern can be still observed, with the higher levels of use among the young speakers of the original group. Once the change becomes general, the loser form (in our case the non-Scandinavian one) is stigmatised.

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