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# **PROTOTYPE EFFECTS BEHIND FRENCH LOANS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH: A COGNITIVE ACCOUNT OF LEXICAL BORROWING**

**ABSTRACT**

It is a well-established fact that the Norman Conquest profoundly transformed the English society and had a significant impact on the course of evolution of its language. As a result of the peculiar situation of English, French and Latin trilingualism in medieval England, Middle English displayed a reorientation of its strategies for word creation, by increasingly relying on lexical borrowing. The presence of Romance-derived loanwords thus introduced some degree of onomasiological variation into the language, so that the coexistence of native and foreign lexical resources would eventually become a recurring feature of Middle English. Within this well-researched area, the aim of this paper is to explore the contribution of Cognitive Semantics, and more specifically of prototype theory, to French lexical borrowing, and to investigate the many ways in which prototypicality may help account for the integration of loanwords into the English lexicon – or conversely, for the retention of native vocabulary. First of all, the substitution of cultural models made for rather swift changes into the lexicon, as loanwords were introduced to better reflect the new cultural prototypes. Prototypicality can also work both within lexical categories at the intensional level, as a differentiating factor between near-synonyms, and across categories at the extensional level, in the restructuring of category members around an onomasiologically salient concept. The objective of this paper is thus to show how prototypicality comes into play at various levels in processes of semantic change, and how prototype theory can therefore be deemed a relevant framework for the analysis of loanwords.

**Keywords:**

prototype semantics, lexical change, lexical borrowing, onomasiology, Middle English, prototypicality

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The French influence on Middle English has drawn considerable attention among scholars, from a variety of perspectives. It is a well-established fact that the Norman Conquest profoundly transformed the English society and had a significant impact on the course of evolution of its language. Its linguistic consequences gradually unfolded in the course of the Middle English period (ca. 1100–1500), primarily under the form of lexical borrowing. The massive influx of French-origin lexis in Middle English not only led to a large-scale restructuring and layering of the English lexicon, but also deeply affected its morphology and patterns of derivation, as well as its syntax to some extent. Within this productive research area, this paper focuses on the contribution of Cognitive Semantics, and more specifically of prototype theory, to the study of French lexical borrowing in Middle English. Following Geeraerts (1997), who demonstrated in a pioneer study the relevance of prototype theory for the study of diachronic lexical change (which includes lexical borrowing), I propose here to explore how prototype semantics can help account for the success of French-derived lexis on the one hand, and for the retention or demise of native vocabulary on the other, against the backdrop of medieval England's multilingual culture, where Latin and French coexisted with the native English language in an intricate situation of tri-glossia.

This paper is organised as follows: the next section introduces the texts under analysis as well as the methodology used to annotate the data. Section 3 is concerned with the societal changes of the time which had a more or less direct impact on the English lexicon, most importantly in the political and religious domain. Section 4 takes a closer look at the way in which the introduction of French loanwords triggered some degree of onomasiological variation, which would become a typical feature of Middle English, and shows by means of two concrete examples how prototypicality helped solve lexical competition. Section 5 moves on to explore the semasiological side of the coin, by showing how new meanings that are not found in the donor language (i.e., French) could develop in loanwords. Finally, Section 6 concludes with an attempt to pinpoint the reasons for the success (or not) of French loans and by highlighting the role of prototypicality in lexical variation and change.

## 2. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The corpus used for this study consists of Part Three of the *Ancrene Wisse* (composed ca. 1215), the 20<sup>th</sup> homily from the *Northern Homily Cycle* dated from ca. 1300, and the first 15 chapters of the mystical treatise entitled the

*Cloud of Unknowing* written ca. 1375.<sup>1</sup> All three texts can be said to be part of a literary tradition of religious writing in the vernacular which finds its roots in the Old English period (Chambers 1957: lxxvi; Zettersten 1965: 295), and are therefore likely to bear witness to the continuity of English prose. While the *Cloud of Unknowing* stands in rather sharp contrast with regard to the two earlier texts, by displaying a higher number of French loans as well as other innovative tendencies, Chambers (1957: ci) argued that the influence of the *Ancrene Wisse* (henceforth *AW*) upon the *Cloud of Unknowing* is discernible in the same plain and authentic style. The selection of religious texts was not a random decision. It was assumed that this text genre was likely to favour a more natural recourse to language, and hence to its vocabulary. In addition, because these texts are intended for a lay, and more importantly, a monolingual audience, its authors would avoid “elevating” the English language according to French or Latin models – such as literary movements in the 15th and 16th centuries would consciously do (Nielsen 2005: 164). The selected excerpts span a period of nearly two centuries (from the early 13th to the late 14th century) and come from three distinct geographical areas – respectively the West Midlands, North and East Midlands. As such, they show that French loanwords were not restricted geographically and can be assumed to provide an overview of the diversity and evolution of French lexical borrowing over time.

Altogether, 1,575 lines of text were sampled from these three religious works, consisting of around 20,000 running words, from which we manually extracted lexical items of French origin. Lexemes were identified as French on the basis of their etymology as given in the *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*). Only lexical types were listed, but tokens were counted and spelling variants recorded. Derivational forms were entered in the database alongside their root form (e.g., *parfite*, *parfitely*, *parfiter* and *inparfite* formed a single entry). Lexical types were then labelled according to their semantic category. Importantly, native (near-)synonyms found in the same excerpt were also recorded. The first result obtained was the observation of a gradual and steady increase in the number of French loanwords across the texts (3.26%, 6.07% and 9.33% respectively). As for the semantic analysis, the loanwords related to the lexical field of “religion” (considering the text genre under analysis) and the field of “Secular government and the public domain” (considering the political and administrative changes brought about by the Norman Conquest) were first extracted. Unsurprisingly, the category “Secular government and the public domain” makes up

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1 The dates given are approximate and are far from achieving unanimous support among scholars.

the largest contribution to this corpus, with such words as *servise*, *juggi*, *preove*, *rancun*, *deattes*, *reimin*, *acounte*, *amounte*, *chalangid*, *ordinaunce*, *statute*, *heritage*, *profite*, etc. The category “Religion” follows closely, with words such as *chearite*, *grace*, *creoiz*, *contemplatiun*, *temptatiuns*, *seint*, *sermoune*, *prechoure*, *parihssen*, *penaunce*, *preier*, *mercy*, etc., all of which ultimately survived into Modern English. Yet, these two semantic categories brought together, although subsuming a substantial part of the total number of loanwords, account for 46.2%, 61.6% and 27.6% of the French loans for each of the texts respectively. This observation matches the results obtained by Ingham in his 2018 study of the French-derived lexis in *Cursor Mundi*, a religious text composed ca. 1300. He observed that “the great majority of its French-origin lexical types fall outside the content domains” that are traditionally identified when it comes to French lexical borrowing (Ingham 2018: 216). Ingham further added that “to find [such semantically diverse French loans] in homiletic material composed around 1300 suggests that they were by this time already known to ordinary English monolingual audiences”.

### 3. NEW CULTURAL MODELS, NEW PROTOTYPES AND THEIR LEXICAL EXPRESSION

As was suggested in the previous section, the religious and political domain both underwent profound transformations, which is mirrored in the excerpts under analysis at the lexical level, since a significant number of French loans were found to belong to these semantic categories. By the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Anglo-Saxon warrior society had been replaced by a feudal society relying on a complex system of obligations and services between the sovereign and its vassals, while religious reforms had fostered initiatives for making theological knowledge more accessible to the laity. These changes in political and religious models gave rise to new concepts that needed appropriate expression. Among these new concepts we can mention a new social order as well as a new financial and legal framework on the side of politics; and an emphasis on pastoral care, confession and contemplation on the side of religion. French loanwords soon appeared as the most suitable means for their lexicalization. French enjoyed a privileged status within England, as it came in to replace English as the official language at court and in schools in the wake of the Conquest, but also internationally: by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, French had strengthened its position as the language of culture and international politics in Western Europe, which prevented a dialectally-fragmented English to compete with a rather uniform (Anglo-)French at a supra-regional level (Nielsen 2005: 25). Some French-origin lexemes thus

came in to replace Old English terms which lacked semantic connections with the newly established cultural model, as their prototypical meaning was associated with other, now outdated, Anglo-Saxon cultural models. This observation, in turn, highlights the dynamic relationship that exists between the lexicon of a language and the socio-historical context, and shows that both elements are communicating vessels that can hardly be analysed separately from one another.

### 3.1. FEUDAL SOCIETY AS A NEW PROTOTYPE

Quite strikingly, in all three excerpts, some passages are conspicuously more densely loaded with French words than others. These French loans typically belong to the semantic field of secular government, e.g., (from the *AW*) *ser-vise, preove, juggi, stable, prisun, crune, tresor, spuse, richesces, largesce, rente, paien*. Such borrowed lexemes are furthermore among the earliest loans, some of them being even attested as early as in the *Peterborough Chronicle* written between 1087 and 1154 (Lerer 2007: 46). William the Conqueror introduced a feudal model in the wake of his invasion of England that ousted the Anglo-Saxon warrior society relying on the mutual obligation between the lord and his tenants, as well as a new legal and financial system that would leave its mark on the English vocabulary. Interestingly, these changes would not only affect the English lexicon, but also its literary style: the authors' choice of exempla and illustrations increasingly draw upon themes and motives inspired by the new post-Conquest social order, which is equally representative of the cultural shift. In the texts under analysis, for instance, the setting of Judgement Day evokes the Norman court of justice. The examples (1) and (2) put forward a representation of God as a secular feudal lord who distributes favours, which take the form of either knowledge in the *Northern Homily Cycle* (1), or time in the *Cloud of Unknowing* (2). In both illustrations, the sinner is required to give an account, i.e., to report on how he has spent the lord's gift: in front of the Supreme Judge, men have to *yelde acounte* or *geve acompte* of how they have *spendid* or *dispendid* their lives. The words in italics are of French origin and quite likely inherited from the Norman legal system.

- (1) 'Thaim burd think, if thai ware wise,  
 How thai sall stand at Goddes *assyse*,  
 To yelde *acounte* of all thai rewitte,  
 How thai in the werld have *spendid* it.  
 To God what sall this persounes saie,  
 When thai er *chalangid* on Domesdaie,  
 To yelde of all thaire live *acounte*?'  
 [They ought to think, if they were wise,

How they shall stand at God's court/judgement  
 To yield account of all their knowledge  
 And how in the world they have dispensed it.  
 What shall these parsons say to God  
 When they are required on Domesday  
 To give account of their whole life?]

- (2) 'Alle tyme that is goven to thee, it schal be askid of thee how thou haste *dispendid* it. And skilful thing it is that thou *geve acompte* of it [...] And He [Jesus], bi His Godheed and His Manheed togeders, is the *trewist domesman* and the *asker of acompte of dispendyng of tyme*. [...] And therfore take good keep into tyme, how that thou *dispendist* it. For nothing is more *precious* than tyme. [...] **Man schal have none *excusacion* agens God in the Dome and at the gevyng of *acompte of dispendyng of tyme*.**' [my emphasis]

In addition to a new administrative system, the Normans also introduced a new social order. The Anglo-Saxon nobility was swiftly replaced by the Norman aristocracy, hence the substitution of *noble* for *æthel* in the AW (3), and of *prince* for *earl* in the *Northern Homily Cycle*. New words related to social status made their way into the English lexicon: *dignete* appears alongside native *worth*, while the adjective *gentile* 'of noble birth' and the noun *genterise* 'nobility' still find an echo in present-day English in the expressions *gentlemen* and *gentry*, emphasising the long-lasting influence of that social change. The word *burgeise* in (3) reflects another kind of development, that of the growth of towns and cities throughout Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A new, wealthy bourgeois class arose in the growing towns, and the economy gradually became dependent as much on trade as on agriculture (Gunn 2008: 20-21). Example (3) below is a good illustration of the restructuring that took place at the level of rank and secular hierarchy – the words in italics are French loans; the underlined words are related to social status. It is also interesting to note that no native synonym is used alongside French terms related to nobility in this passage.

- (3) The feorthe *reisun* is *preove of noblesce* ant of *largesce*. *Noble* men ant *gentile* ne beoreth nane packes, ne ne feareth *i-trusset* with *trussews*, ne with *purses*. Hit is beggilde riht to beore bagge on bac, *burgeise* to beore *purse* – nawt Godes *spuse*, the is leafdi of heovene. *Trussen* ant *purses*, baggen ant packes beoth wortliche thinges: alle eorthliche weolen ant wortliche *rentes*.

[The fourth reason is proof of nobility and of generosity. Noble and well-bred people do not carry packs or go around loaded with bundles or purses; it is proper for a beggar-woman to carry a bag on her back, for a townswoman to carry a purse, not for God's spouse, who is the lady of heaven. Bundles and purses, bags and packs are worldly things – all earthly riches and worldly income.]

The most densely French passages of the corpus under analysis thus allowed us to catch a glimpse of what English society had become by the early Middle English period, and of the changes – social as well as lexical – that could not be resisted. The parts in which French loanwords feature prominently bear witness to the fact that the lexicon of Old English could not appropriately reflect the new social and cultural models based on Norman customs. Arnovick (2012: 558) furthermore observed that the heroic lexis typical of Old English is not present anymore in the early Middle English literary style. Timofeeva (2018: 231) relates the eventual demise of some native words with their lack of semantic connection to the secular feudal world and its hierarchy, and the hierarchy of the English society underwent profound changes in the aftermath of the Conquest.

### 3.2. RELIGIOUS REFORMS

The same holds true for the domain of religion. Timofeeva (2019: 55) states that “the religious life of western Europe around 1200 saw a remarkable re-orientation towards greater emphasis on moral instruction of the laity, especially following the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and the spread of the mendicant orders from the 1220s onwards”. One of the first main concerns of these religious reforms was pastoral care, i.e., the moral and religious instruction of lay people. Pastoral care was carried out in several ways: it was required of the clergy to preach in the vernacular, and of the laity to confess their sins. Both activities nevertheless required that an appropriate terminology in the vernacular be made available. Innovative French-based denominations such as *preachur* and *chearite* are found as early as in the *AW*, yet these French-derived terms closely coexist with Old English ones such as *tholemodnesse* ‘patience’, *eadmodnesse* ‘humility’, *theawes ant untheawes* ‘vices and virtues’, *schrift* ‘confession’ and *bireowsunge* ‘contrition’. In the *Northern Homily Cycle*, the French-derived verb *preach* (*prechinge*, *prechis*, *prechid*) appears eight times without any native counterpart, reflecting the concern on the part of the poet of the *Cycle* that priests should teach the laymen. Finally, in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, *confession*, *contricion* and *conscience* are found next to *patience*, *vertewe* and *charité*. *Humility*, however, is not yet

a common word in the *Cloud*, which features the Scandinavian loanword *meeknes* instead.

Timofeeva (2019) and Ingham (2018) attribute the innovation and subsequent spread of new French-based religious lexis to the new preaching practices developing in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council and to the emergence of mendicant orders. These religious reforms brought about substantial cultural changes too, so that pastoral care grew into a sort of new cultural model. To ensure that pastoral care be carried out successfully, (new) theological concepts needed accurate expression in the vernacular, and once again, French, supported by Latin, appeared as a suitable, unifying medium of expression. In the next section, we will have a closer look at the way in which the focus on pastoral care acted as a “major driving force behind the introduction of new Romance-based religious terms in Middle English” (Timofeeva 2018: 242), and thus introduced some degree of onomasiological variation (i.e., the coexistence of various forms to refer to a similar concept). We will further examine how the presence of competing lexical items influence the evolution of each (loan)word and how prototypicality helps solve lexical competition.

#### 4. LEXICAL BORROWING AND ONOMASIOLOGICAL VARIATION

Lexical borrowing is one of the mechanisms of lexical change (Geeraerts 1997) and typically introduce some degree of onomasiological variation into the receptor language, that is, “the presence of multiple terms expressing the same concept” (Sylvester 2020: 366). In England, this variation was made possible and further reinforced by its peculiar situation of multilingualism where English, French and Latin coexisted in close proximity, eventually shaping “one culture in three voices” (Lerer 2007: 55). Middle English thus displayed a reorientation of its strategies for word creation, by increasingly relying on lexical borrowing rather than compounding, which was so typical of Old English (Nielsen 1998: 137). As a result, the coexistence of native and foreign lexical resources became a recurring feature of Middle English. This lexical competition between synonyms of native and foreign origin is a conspicuous and recurrent property of the texts under analysis, particularly in the *AW*, in which a native corresponding word was found for virtually every French loan. In the *Cloud of Unknowing*, the number of synonymous pairs decrease significantly, but doublets continue to function as a matter of style: God, for instance, is described as ‘the *soverein desirable* and the *highest wilnable* thing’. The use of doublets had thus in the meantime grown into a stylistic device which was used well into the Late Middle English and Early Modern periods (Nielsen 2005: 110; Chambers 1957: cxxii). Modern English has retained a number of such pairs, which are generally differentiated by register.



While the study of French-derived lexemes in English has often focused on the loanwords themselves, we will try here to expand the focus, following Kristiansen & Zenner (2014: 6), from taking the loanword as the main unit of analysis to adopting a concept-based approach to borrowing, “where not only the loanword itself but also possible receptor language equivalents are taken into consideration”. In doing so, we will attempt to analyse the way in which existing native words adjust semantically in relation to new lexical items, and how speakers ultimately choose between different linguistic forms to express similar concepts (Glynn 2014: 8).

#### 4.1. THE LEXICAL FIELD OF SIN IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

As described in Section 3 above, preaching to the masses and hearing confession became the core concerns of the Church in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The need for confessing one’s sins triggered a need for a means of expressing them accurately. This, in turn, led to lexical innovation and to a profusion of new terms, where French loans competed with native alternatives. New theological concepts and religious practices stemming from the continent thus needed an appropriate, technically accurate and as uniform as possible designation. In England, French was considered a suitable medium, alongside Latin, to fulfil these needs owing both to its supradialectal and international status. Although the (capital) sins had been important *topos* in moral theology since the early days of Christianity, they saw their importance renewed in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Franciscan and Dominican theologians were increasingly trying to establish the order and kinship of the sins and their opposites (Timofeeva 2018b: 59-60).

The concept SIN can be best described as a basic and onomasiologically salient level of categorization. It exhibits characteristics that are acknowledged by Geeraerts (2010: 180) as typical of basic level categories: it is conceptualised as a perceptual and functional “whole” (or *gestalt*) and it is named by a short, morphologically simple item. It is furthermore a rather vague, underdetermined item, in the sense that the schematic content of SIN is more salient than its instances. Because its specific instances are less salient, the category allows for some degree of lexical instability, which may lead to a proneness for lexical innovation and result in onomasiological variation, as can be shown in Table 1 below, which takes up all the terms referring to specific sins present in the excerpts under scrutiny.

As a basic, and thus cognitively salient category, the native word *sin* (*sunne* or *synne* in Middle English) was less likely to be ousted or replaced by a French loan – and indeed *sin* proved to be a recurrent and well-established word in our corpus. The raw frequency of the lexeme is higher in all three texts than the words denoting more specific sins (it appears 25 times

in the *AW*; 8 times in the *NHC*; 15 times in the *Cloud*). Furthermore, it was not threatened by any competing French loan and survived well into Modern English. As a result, not only was *sin* a well-entrenched word in the lexical memory of Middle English speakers and one that could be easily retrieved (in active competence); it was also a well-entrenched concept that has a strong cultural significance. The notion of ‘sin’ has indeed been a culturally salient concept of Western culture since the advent of Christianity, already in the Anglo-Saxon period. Following Zenner’s approach (Zenner et al. 2014: 77), we observe that the category SIN displays both a communicative entrenchment (linked to frequency of use: “the more one talks about a given concept, the more entrenched it becomes in one’s cognitive apparatus”, hence become part of the speakers’ active competence) and experiential entrenchment (linked to the age of the concept: “the more one comes in contact with a concept in one’s daily activities, the more entrenched it becomes”). In view of all this, it is possible to conclude that it was cognitively efficient to retain the native lexeme *sin*, whereas the breadth of the concept made it possible to elaborate a wholly new terminology for its category members around this very stable prototypical core.

Table 1:  
Words denoting SIN in our corpus and their diversity (words of French origin are indicated in bold)

Modern English	AncreneWisse	Northern Homily Cycle	Cloud of Unknowing
Lust	Flesches lustes, <b>leccherie, galnesse</b>	Lust offlehsse	<b>Lecherye</b>
Greed	Yisceunge	<b>Covetise</b>	<b>Covetyse</b>
Sloth	Slawthe	Slewthe	Slewth
Wrath	Wreaththe, wrath	-	Wrath
Envy	Onde	Nythe, <b>envye</b>	<b>Envye</b>
Gluttony	Yivernesse	<b>Glotonye</b>	<b>Glotonie</b>
Pride	<b>Prude, orhel</b>	<b>Pride</b>	<b>Pride</b>

It follows as a natural consequence of prototype-based categories that they display prototype effects in varying degrees. Four types of prototypicality effects are traditionally identified (from Geeraerts 2010: 304):

- (a) Differences in typicality and membership salience (e.g., within the category FRUIT, apples are often considered more typical than avocados)
- (b) Clustering into partially overlapping family resemblances (i.e., each item has at least one, and probably several, elements in common

- with one or more items (in the case of FRUIT: seed-bearing, juicy, sweet, etc.), but no, or few, elements are common to all items)
- c) Fuzziness at the edges; membership uncertainty (e.g., are tomatoes considered as fruit?)
  - d) Absence of necessary-and-sufficient definitions (which may lead to demarcation problems and overlap of categories, e.g., between the categories of FRUIT, VEGETABLE and NUT)

In the case of the category SIN, however, a very powerful counterforce to prototypicality effects could be identified, namely the continuous theological endeavour in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to classify sins and order them (Timofeeva 2018b: 59-60), as is reflected in the excerpts (4) and (5) extracted from the corpus under analysis. As a result, prototype effects were so to speak “blocked”:

- (a) No difference in typicality: there is not (or should not) be a sin more salient than another as they should all equally be avoided.<sup>2</sup>
- (b) Instead of clustering into family resemblances, each sin occupies a very well-defined place in the taxonomy of sin.
- (c) There should be no doubt as to which sin pertains to the category: there are seven capital sins, neither more nor less.
- (d) Sins should be distinguished from other types of immoral behaviour.

Due to their inherent semantic flexibility, prototype-based categories may lead to conflicts about the interpretation of words. Geeraerts (2008: 24) puts forward norms that could come into play to settle semantic disputes, which he calls the “socially normative aspects of meaning”. He identifies three fundamental sociosemantic forces, each of which may play a role in this process, i.e., collaboration, power and competition. These sociosemantic forces can push the evolution of a category in different directions. In this particular case, the definition of the lexical category of SIN is a rather straightforward example of *semantics of authority*, which “comes into play when discussions and debated issues are settled by deference to recognised experts” (2008: 36). These need not be scientists but figures of authority in their own domain. Indeed, it appears that medieval theologians did work on necessary-and-sufficient definitions according to the classical model of categorization in their attempt at classifying the sins, ending up with a homogeneous classification that resembles a scientific taxonomy (4-5).

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2 The picture is in fact more complex, and further distinctions could be made such as venial and mortal sins. For the sake of this study, though, we will restrict our scope to the category of the capital sins.

- (4) [In the *Ancrene Wisse*:] Gath, thah, ful warliche, for i this wilder-nesse beoth uvele beastes monie: liun of **prude**, neddre of attri **onde**, unicorne of **wreaththe**, beore of dead **slawthe**, vox of **yisceunge**, suhe of **yivernesse**, scoriun with the teil of stinginde **leccherie**– that is, galnesse. Her beoth nu o rawe i-tald the **seoven heaved sunnen**.
- (5) [In the *Cloud of Unknowing*:] Than it is **deedly synne**. And this be-falleth when thow, or any of hem that I speke of, wilfully drawn upon yow the mynde of any man or womman levying in this liif, or of any bodily or wordely thing outhere; insomoch that yif it be a thing the whiche greveth or hath grevid thee before, ther riseth in thee a teenful passion and an appetite of vengauce, the whiche is clepid **Wrath**; or elles a fel dedein and a maner of wlatsonnes of their persone with dispitous and reprovyng thoughtes, the whiche is clepid **Envy**; or elles a werines and an unlistines of any good ocupacion, bodily or goostly, the whiche is clepid **Slewth**. And yif it be a thing that plesith thee, or hath plesid thee before, ther riseth in thee a passaunt delite for to think on that thing whatso it be, insomochel that thou restest thee in that thought, and finally fastnist thin herte and thi wille therto, and fedest thi fleschely herte therwith, so that thee think for the tyme that thou coveitest none other welthe, bot to live ever in soche a pees and rest with that thing that thou thinkest upon. Yif this thought that thou thus drawest upon thee, or elles resceyvest when it is put unto thee, and that thou restest thee thus in with delite, be worthines of kynde or of knowyng, of grace or of degree, of favour or of faireheed, than it is **Pride**. And yif it be any maner of worldly good, riches or catel, or what that man may have or be lorde of, then it is **Covetyse**. Yif it be deintuous metes and drinkes, or any maner of delites that man may taast, then it is **Glotionie**. And yif it be love or plesaunce, or any maner of fleschly daliaunce, glosing or flaterieng of any man or womman levying in this liif, or of thiself outhere, than it is **Lecherye**.

#### 4.2. COMPETITION AND DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN NEAR-SYNONYMS

The restructuration of category members around the salient concept of SIN in the Middle English period provides evidence for the fact that older native lexical resources that were firmly established and widely used – that is, prototypical, frequent, and as such firmly entrenched in the speakers'

mind and culture – were maintained, which is in line with the notion of experiential entrenchment (Zenner et al. 2014: 77). This is the case of *sin*, but also of native words such as *heaven*, *father*, *lord*, *holy*, etc. in the religious domain. Conversely, the most specialised terms, or terms denoting new concepts or reflecting new cultural models were often replaced (Timofeeva 2018a: 8-12). In other cases, sets of near-synonyms could remain in the language, “often differentiated by semantics, pragmatics or register” (Sylvester 2020: 366), such as *spirit/ghost*, *saint/holy*, *desire/will* or *frail/weak*, which are all found in the corpus under analysis. While we showed in the previous section how neologisms could flourish under a category organised around a strong, well-entrenched prototypical centre, we will now illustrate, by means of a synonymous pair found in the *AW* excerpt, how individual words may also display some degree of restructuration around their own prototypical core at the semasiological level, as a reaction to the tension introduced by competing lexicalizations, eventually leading to semantic differentiation.

*Bitacnen* and *spealen* (*spellen* as found in the *MED*, from Old French *espeler*), respectively of native and French origin, represent such a pair of synonyms. They are found in similar contexts in the *AW* excerpt, sometimes even alongside each other such as in (6), and can both be roughly translated as ‘to mean’. However, when we look at their distribution within the text, a differentiation in meaning – although subtle – is discernible. Even though they show a similar meaning, *spealen* seems to be ultimately semantically distinct from *bitacnen*: while the latter is used mainly in cases of analogy, the former, French-derived word is exclusively used to explain the meaning of proper nouns. The two verbs thus appear to be organised around similar, yet different prototypical centres. The core reading of *bitacnen* would therefore be ‘to represent, to symbolise’ (literally: ‘be a token of’, hence Modern English ‘betoken’) whereas the core meaning of *spealen* appears to be much more linked to the linguistic, textual level. Its prototypical centre would be ‘to mean, to signify’, more specifically when it comes to translate some foreign expression. This observation fits well with the Cognitive Linguistic perspective, which assumes that “any variation in form is motivated by some variation in use and that ‘true’ synonymy is rare, if it exists at all” (Glynn 2014: 8). Most of the time, either changes in the non-referential meaning of the words (such as a social, stylistic, or evaluative distribution), or subtle conceptual differences can be observed (Soares da Silva 2015: 2016). It is this latter case that we find here. This subtle differentiation in meaning reflects the complex ways in which native and French words already interacted with each other in Middle English.

- (6) ‘This word “Jerusalem” *spealeth* “sihthe of peis” ant *bitacneth* ancre-hus.’

[This word ‘Jerusalem’ signifies ‘sight of peace’ and symbolises the house of the anchoress.]

- (7) Jerusalem *bitacnēð* “griþes sihþe”.  
 [Jerusalem means “sight of peace”.]

The *MED*, however, records a few instances where *bitacnen* and *spealen* were used interchangeably. In the Lambeth Homilies (ca. 1225), for instance, sentence (7) makes use of the native verb *bitacnen* to convey the very same meaning as *spealen* in (6). The ensuing semantic evolution of both lexical items into Modern English, however, supports the near-synonymy hypothesis. In fact, we observe a gradual strengthening of their respective prototypical centres. *Betoken* has kept its core reading as ‘be a sign of’ at a more concrete level, while *spell* has developed a more textual, linguistic meaning since it now means ‘spell out letters, pronounce’. This semantic evolution is also reflected in the word *spelling* ‘correct way to write a word’ in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, *spell out* ‘to explain step-by-step’ is a further modern evolution that was first recorded in 1940 in American English. In the line of Geeraerts’ (1997: 42–60) analysis of the Dutch pair of synonyms *vernielen* and *vernietigen* and of Soares da Silva’s (2015: 204–208) analysis of Portuguese *deixar*, *abandonar* and *permitir*, we can formulate the hypothesis that the introduction of the French loan *espeler* first triggered a competition between two very similar lexical items, then led to a specialization of both items around their respective prototypical centre, so that a marginal use of *bitacneth* as reflected in (7) would gradually no longer be possible. Prototypicality thus clearly acted as a differentiating factor of the synonymous pair.

## 5. ENGLISH OR FRENCH? SEMASIOLOGICAL CHANGE TRIGGERED BY ONOMASIOLOGICAL VARIATION

The example above demonstrated that once a loanword has entered the receptor language, it does not remain ‘frozen’ into its lexicon. Not only does it exhibit a certain degree of morphophonological assimilation, but it also starts showing semantic developments of its own, some of which do not even exist in the donor language. The presence of such independent semasiological developments in the corpus under analysis might help address the rather debated question of whether French loans might already be considered ‘English’ in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the most productive mechanisms of semasiological change, Geeraerts (1997: 93) mentions metaphor and metonymy, generalization and specialization, melioration and pejoration and analogical processes. Other more complex and long-term mechanisms are processes of grammaticalization and subjectification. All these changes develop within

a lexical category organised as a radial network around a prototypical core meaning. Any part of the network can be the starting point for a new meaning to develop, and one particular reading of a word can have multiple origins, so that “instead of rigidly defined senses developing individually, one finds various distinct meanings being blurred in the process of semantic change” (Geeraerts 1997: 60). The polysemization of the lexeme *quaint* in the Middle English period is a good illustration of the prototypical organization of lexical categories and of processes of semantic change. *Quaint* is a word of French origin which ultimately disappeared from Modern French but survived into Modern English. It appears twice in the corpus under analysis, in the *AW* and in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, under the form *cointe* (8) and *queynte* (9) respectively [the words in italics are of French origin].

- (8) Thet flesch is her ed hame, as eorthe the is in eorthe, ant is for-thi  
*cointeant cover.*  
[The flesh is here at home, as earth is on earth, and is therefore  
vain and treacherous.]
- (9) And here mowe men schortly *conceyve* the *maner* of this worching,  
and *cleerly* knowe that it is fer fro any *fantasie*, or any *fals ymagina-*  
*cion*, or *queynte opinion.*  
[This then, in brief, is how it (= contemplation) works. It is obviously  
not make-believe, nor wrong thinking, nor fanciful opinion.]

English *quaint* came from Old French *cointe*, which itself evolved from Latin *cognoscere* (‘to know’), so that the idea of ‘knowledge’ lay at the core of the concept of *quaint*. From the original prototypical meaning of ‘knowledgeable’, ‘who is well-acquainted with something’, two distinct paths of semantic change – both metonymic in nature – yielded two distinct meanings which gradually ousted the original meaning from which they arose. On the one hand, there is a metonymic shift from knowing one specific thing (10) to knowing a great deal about something (11); *cointe* hence came to mean ‘intelligent’ and further, ‘wise’ (also metonymically). On the other hand, the contextually salient subset of the category ‘who knows about courtly manners’ from the wider category ‘who knows about something’ has yielded the sense ‘elegant, gracious’ (12), also found in Old French.<sup>3</sup> Two major clusters thus seem to have emerged in the structure of *cointe*, one with the central reading ‘clever’ and the other with the central meaning ‘pretty’. The *MED* also provides substantial evidence for this gradual reorganization of the lexical

3 In the French dictionary *Cnrtl*, the following definition was found: *cointe* «gracieux, aimable» bien attesté dans la poésie des troubadours (XII<sup>e</sup>s), et lui-même dérivé du sens «qui sait [les bonnes manières de cour]» (<https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/cointe>).

category and for the development of two new schematic prototypical centres roughly corresponding to ‘clever’ and ‘pretty’ (10-12).

- (10) He was *quointe of conseil & speke*, & of bodi strong. [He knew how to speak and give sensible advice and had a strong body. (c1325)]
- (11) Lancelot was a *queynt* man. [Lancelot was an intelligent man (c1330)].
- (12) Hehad a wif was *queint* and fair. [His wife was gracious and fair. (c1330)]
- (13) This Cardinal...with his wordes slyhe and *quointe*. [The Cardinal, with his sly and cunning words. (1393)]
- (14) Þe false world...Bad þe be ful *quoynte* and proud. [The false world, which is utterly vain and proud. (c1300)]

The semantic evolution along these two paths had already occurred or was occurring in French at the time that word was borrowed into English. Interestingly, however, the pejorative changes undergone by the lexical item, such as in examples (13) and (14), are not found in French and as such appear to be typically English. This observation is sustained by the occurrences found in the corpus under analysis, which likewise display a negative meaning. In the *AW* (8), the loanword refers to the flesh trying to master the soul. *Cointe* thus shifted from ‘elegant’ to ‘proud, vain’, as in (14). In the *Cloud of Unknowing* (9), one is warned against *queynte*, i.e., ‘fanciful’ opinions, and the lexeme thus shifts from ‘clever’ to ‘cunning’ (using one’s intelligence in a deceitful way), as in (13). It seems possible to relate the loanword in the *AW* to the schematic meaning of ‘pretty’, whereas the loanword in the *Cloud* seems to derive from the other prototypical reading ‘clever’. However, it is not always easy to determine the precise origin of a new meaning, which may arise through the joint influence of several existing meanings. This is the case of *quaint*, whose semantic evolution in the course of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in a cluster of interrelated and sometimes even overlapping readings at the intensional or definitional level (Geeraerts 1997: 20).

The inherent flexibility of prototype-based categories enables the development of new, more peripheral meanings. These semantic developments lie in the meaning potential of the lexical category, which is activated in context (Allwood 2003). Some of these peripheral meanings might in time eventually replace the prototypical one, whereas others remain marginal nuances that do not subsist in time. From the evidence provided by the *MED*, the two occurrences found in the excerpts under analysis could best be characterised as peripheral and short-lived instances of the word *cointe* that have emerged



at some point in the history of the word. Furthermore, it seems that the pejoration mechanism which gave rise to these particular readings appears to be specifically English, since *cointe* was usually a positively connoted Old French word. This in turn provides evidence for the productivity and relative independence of loanwords in English by an early point in time (i.e., the early 13th century): the fact that they could develop readings that were not found in the French source are evidence for the 'Englishness' of loanwords.

## 6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: FACTORS OF SUCCESS OF FRENCH LOANS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

How can we ultimately account for the success and eventual establishment of French loanwords in the English lexicon? The response to this question is bound to be a multifactorial one, as it involves structural, conceptual and sociocultural factors, is shaped by usage and influenced by processing issues. Prototype theory nevertheless appears to provide some relevant insights to address this question. Although diachronic semantic change is largely unpredictable and can only be explained in retrospect, it is motivated by general cognitive principles such as prototype-based categorization, which can be expected to work the same way across centuries. Even though we cannot assess factors of usage and processing for the vocabulary of the Middle English period, prototype theory provides some clues as to why some loanwords fared better than others, and why native vocabulary was retained in some cases and lost in others. Timofeeva (2018) and Zenner et al. (2014) point out similar conditions for the survival of native vocabulary and/or the borrowability of a foreign item: on the one hand, the frequency of the native item, which Zenner et al. refer to as *communicative entrenchment*, and on the other, its semantic connection to the external world, or *experiential entrenchment*. Zenner et al. introduced the latter concept with the following line of reasoning: "the longer a concept has existed in the receptor language, the harder it is for the loanword to become entrenched in the receptor language" (2014: 78). These conditions account for the retention of the native lexeme *sin* in English: as a communicatively and experientially entrenched category, it was a solid reference point and allowed for some degree of restructuring of its category members. By contrast, a lack of referential power would encourage recourse to lexical borrowing: in medieval, feudal England, some words such as *æthel* could no longer appropriately reflect the social hierarchy of the time and thus gradually fell into oblivion, whereas French *noble* established itself firmly as it better suited the existing cultural model. In all these processes of semantic change, prototypicality comes into play, as an efficient tool to deal with a changing world. Loanwords that would best account for societal changes were kept (particularly in the political and religious domain

where new cultural models emerged). Prototypicality could also act as a differentiating factor between competing lexicalizations, as differentiation between near-synonyms occurs through the semasiological reorganization of prototypes (Soares da Silva 2015: 207). Finally, the flexibility of prototype categories would allow for new, initially peripheral word senses to emerge, that were not found in the donor language. Prototype theory was thus shown to lie at the basis of the restructuring of the lexical categories analysed in this paper, both at the extensional level (category *SIN*) and at the intensional level (in the case of the *bitacnen/spealen* pair and of *quaint*).

It becomes clear from all this that lexical borrowing does not operate in a vacuum. It was shown that both sociocultural and conceptual salience factors interact in accounting for the success of French loans and their eventual interaction into the lexicon (Soares da Silva 2015: 216). The individual path of change of each borrowed item, although it remains largely unpredictable and can only be explained in a post hoc fashion, is influenced by elements either from the linguistic system, i.e., competing forms for the same concept, or from the wider sociocultural context, which can bring about new cultural models, and is motivated by general cognitive principles of semantic change such as prototype theory. Loanwords can therefore hardly be considered in isolation. However, once a loanword has entered the lexicon of the receptor language, it starts developing new readings independently of its counterpart in the donor language. The study of the semantic changes undergone by a single borrowed item – the semasiological approach – is therefore still a relevant and fruitful area of study, but it should nevertheless be integrated in a wider onomasiological framework taking into account competing lexemes against which changes can actually occur. Both approaches are ultimately two sides of the same coin, yielding different yet complementary results.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### EFEKTY PROTOTYPOWE W ZAPOŻYCZENIACH LEKSYKALNYCH Z JĘZYKA FRANCUSKIEGO W JĘZYKU ŚREDNIOANGIELSKIM. STUDIUM KOGNITYWNE

Wpływ języka francuskiego na średnioangielski analizowano z wielu perspektyw badawczych. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje się omówienia tego wpływu z perspektywy semantyki kognitywnej, w szczególności teorii prototypów, skupiając się na zapożyczeniach leksykalnych z języka francuskiego w okresie średnioangielskim. Wzorem Geeraerts (1997), którego analiza wykazała istotność teorii prototypów w badaniu diachronicznych zmian leksykalnych, artykuł niniejszy pokazuje, w jaki sposób semantyka prototypów może przyczynić się do wyjaśnienia popularności leksyki o pochodzeniu francuskim oraz przetrwania bądź zaniku słownictwa rodzimego w kontekście wielojęzycznej kultury średniowiecznej Anglii, w której angielszczyzna współistniała z językiem francuskim i łacińskim. Cel realizowany jest trój-etapowo, na początku wyjaśniono, w jaki sposób istotne zmiany społeczne doprowadziły do zaistnienia nowych modeli kulturowych w domenie religii i polityki, które z kolei przyczyniły się do szybkiego zastąpienia słownictwa rodzimego zapożyczeniami francuskimi. Krok drugi to zbadanie, jak efekt prototypu działa jako czynnik różnicujący konkurujące ze sobą leksemy rodzime i zapożyczone z francuskiego. Na końcu pokazano, w jaki sposób tenże efekt przyczynia się do rozwoju znaczeń wyrazów zapożyczonych, nieobecnych w języku-dawcy.

Korpus, na którym przeprowadzono badanie, składa się z części trzeciej *Ancrene Wisse* (powstałego ok. 1215), dwudziestego kazania z cyklu *Northern Homily Cycle*, datowanego na ok. 1300, oraz pierwszych piętnastu rozdziałów traktatu mistycznego *Cloud of Unknowing*, powstałego ok. 1375. Przyjęto założenie, że teksty religijne charakteryzują się bardziej naturalnym użyciem języka, co z kolei oznacza takie użycie zapożyczeń, które odzwierciedla rzeczywiste praktyki językowe. Z tych trzech dzieł religijnych pobrano w sumie 1575 linii tekstu złożonych z około 20 000 słów, z których z kolei manualnie wyodrębniono jednostki leksykalne pochodzące z języka francuskiego. Podstawą do takiej kwalifikacji leksemu była jego

etymologia opisana w *Middle English Dictionary*. W kolejnym etapie podzielono typy jednostek leksykalnych na kategorie semantyczne. Co istotne, zanotowano również bliskie synonimy pochodzenia rodzimego występujące w tych samych fragmentach. W analizowanych tekstach zaobserwowano nasilające się występowanie zapożyczeń, odpowiednio 3,26%, 6,07% i 9,33%. Analiza semantyczna wykazała, że najliczniej reprezentowaną kategorią w korpusie jest „świecka administracja”, do której należą słowa takie, jak *servise, juggi, preove, rancun, deattes, acounte, amounte, chalangid, ordinaunce, statute, heritage, profite* itp. Następną co do liczebności kategorią jest „religia”, która odpowiada za słowa takie, jak *chearite, grace, creoiz, contemplatiun, temptatiuns, seint, sermoune, prechoure, parihssen, penaunce, preier, mercy* itp. Wszystkie te słowa zachowały się do dziś w angielszczyźnie.

Te dwie kategorie semantyczne są najliczniej obecne w korpusie, ponieważ powiązane są z istotnymi zmianami społecznymi, które zaszły w XII i XIII wieku. Podbój Anglii przez Wilhelma Zdobywcę skutkowało wprowadzeniem systemu feudalnego, który zastąpił wczesnośredniowieczny system Anglosasów, powstały z kultury wojowników. Model feudalny opierał się na systemie wzajemnych zobowiązań między seniorem a wasalami; wprowadzono również nowy system prawny i fiskalny, który odcisnął ślad na angielskim słownictwie. Oprócz nowego systemu administracyjnego, Normanowie wprowadzili również nowy porządek społeczny. Anglosaskie elity zastąpiono normandzką arystokracją, co wyjaśnia ustąpienie *æthel* na rzecz *noble* w *Ancrene Wisse* oraz *earl* na rzecz *prince* w *Northern Homily Cycle*. Podobnie jest w przypadku słownictwa z domeny religii. Timofeeva (2019) i Ingham (2018) przypisują popularyzację nowej, zapożyczonej z francuskiego leksyki w tej domenie nowym praktykom kaznodziejskim, które rozpowszechniły się po Soborze Laterańskim IV, oraz powstaniu zakonów żebraczych. Reformy religijne spowodowały istotne zmiany kulturowe, które miały odzwierciedlenie również na poziomie leksykalnym. Nowe koncepcje teologiczne potrzebowały adekwatnych środków wyrazu w językach miejscowych, a język francuski, z pewnym wsparciem ze strony łaciny, zapewniał takie środki.

Zapożyczenia, jako jeden z mechanizmów zmian leksykalnych, zwykle wprowadzają pewien stopień zróżnicowania onomazjologicznego do języka-biorcy. Ze względu na wzrastającą liczbę zapożyczeń z francuskiego, konkurencja między leksemami rodzimymi a zapożyczonymi stała się istotną cechą języka średnioangielskiego. Efekt prototypu stał się więc istotnym czynnikiem, który decydował o wyborach leksykalnych w sytuacji napięcia generowanego przez współistnienie słownictwa rodzimego i zapożyczonego. Proces ten dobrze pokazuje przebudowa pola leksykalnego SIN [grzech] w okresie średnioangielskim. Słowo o pochodzeniu anglosaskim *sin* denotuje kategorię podstawową i wyrazistą pojęciowo, istniało

więc małe prawdopodobieństwo, że zostanie ono zastąpione zapożyczeniem z francuskiego. Jest to jednak pojęcie szerokie, co umożliwiło powstanie nowej terminologii w ramach tej kategorii (gdzie znalazły się następujące zapożyczenia z francuskiego: *Lecherye, Covetyse, Envye, Glotenie, Pride*).

Poszczególne słowa wykazują niekiedy pewien stopień restrukturyzacji na poziomie semazjologicznym wokół własnego ośrodka prototypowego. Procesy takie zachodziły w reakcji na napięcie wprowadzone przez konkurujące ze sobą leksykalizacje, co skutkowało zróżnicowaniem semantycznym. Tak stało się w przypadku pary bliskich synonimów: *bitacnen* (ze staroangielskiego; nowoang. *betoken*) i *spealen* (ze starofrancuskiego; nowoang. *spell*), które można w przybliżeniu przetłumaczyć jako 'znaczyć'. Uważne prześledzenie dystrybucji tych synonimów w tekście pozwoli jednak zauważyć pewne zróżnicowanie znaczenia: pierwszy z nich zwykle towarzyszy analogiom ('przedstawiać, symbolizować'), podczas gdy drugi, zapożyczony z francuskiego, jest używany wyłącznie przy wyjaśnieniach nazw własnych ('oznaczać'). Prototypowość jest więc czynnikiem różnicującym, jako że czasowniki te wydają się wykazywać cechy organizacji wokół podobnych, choć różniących się, ośrodków prototypowych. Elastyczność kategorii opartych na prototypach może ponadto umożliwiać rozwój nowych, bardziej peryferyjnych znaczeń, które nie istnieją w języku-dawcy, a które mogą z czasem zastąpić znaczenie prototypowe. Dobrym przykładem prototypowej organizacji kategorii leksykalnych i niezależnych procesów zmiany semazjologicznej, jakim podlegają zapożyczenia, jest proces polisemizacji, który zaszedł w przypadku nowoangielskiego leksemu *quaint*, z francuskiego *coïnte*. W języku francuskim słowo *coïnte* miało zwykle konotacje pozytywne, ale w średnioangielskim zaczęło nabierać znaczenia pejoratywnego. Ten proces pejoratywizacji wydaje się ograniczony do języka angielskiego i jest dowodem na relatywnie wczesną (początki XIII wieku) produktywność i względną niezależność zapożyczeń w angielszczyźnie.

Mimo że diachroniczne zmiany semantyczne są w dużym stopniu nieprzewidywalne i można je wyjaśniać jedynie retrospektywnie, są one motywowane ogólnymi zasadami kognitywnymi takimi, jak kategoryzacja oparta na prototypach. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę wykazania, iż teoria prototypów może być pomocna w zrozumieniu przyczyn, dla których jedne zapożyczenia poradziły sobie lepiej od innych, a także tego, że w niektórych przypadkach słownictwo rodzime zostało zachowane, a w innych zanikło. Zapożyczenia, które najlepiej odzwierciedlały zmiany społeczne, przyjęły się (szczególnie w dziedzinie polityki i religii, gdzie wykształciły się nowe modele kulturowe). Prototypowość może również stanowić czynnik różnicujący konkurujące ze sobą leksykalizacje, ponieważ różnicowanie między bliskimi synonimami zachodzi poprzez semazjologiczną reorganizację prototypów (Soares da

Silva 2015: 207). Elastyczność kategorii opartych na prototypach umożliwia wyłonienie się nowych, początkowo peryferyjnych, znaczeń, które nie istnieją w języku-dawcy.

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