

The French Influence On The English Language*

Taraneh. A.Tabari**

E-mail: t_tabari@yahoo.com

Abstract

English, like all languages in the world, has changed through its history. Some of its changes are due to the natural process of change which all languages pass through, and some others have come about as a result of language contact. Foreign influences on English are so great that they have changed English from an almost pure language to a completely mixed one. The language which has had the most penetrating influence on English is French. The Normans' invasion put the native inhabitants of the country in direct contact with the language of the invaders, Norman French. In this article, first, the socio-historical situation of England under Norman Kings, which gave rise to this language change, is investigated, and then the French influence on different components of the English language is presented.

Key words: *Allophones, Borrowings, Dialect, Diphthong, Doublets, Hybrid word, Interjections, Lexical, Phoneme.*

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** - Lecturer of Tarbeyat moallem University

Socio- historical situation

It shouldn't be supposed that the French influence on the English language started with the Norman conquest. The society of the late Anglo-Saxon times had fairly close relations with France. In 1042, Aethelred, king of England, married a Norman princess and sent his son, Edward, to school in France. When in 1042 Edward came to throne, he gave his Norman friends the chief positions in both church and government. Their speaking French affected the English spoken in the court. During his reign a few French words entered the English language. Examples are *proud, tower, market*, etc.

Edward died childless. The day after his death, Harold was elected king. But, almost immediately his power as the king of England was challenged by William, Duke of Normandy. He invaded the country, and on Christmas 1066, he was crowned as the king of England.

After the conquest, the ruling classes, their servants and the bishops were Normans. Moreover, a large number of Norman French lower orders came to England. Therefore, since the actual number of the Normans who settled in England was sufficiently great, they continued to use their own language, Norman French. However, they continued this habit for about 200 years after the conquest. The reason for this continuity can be sought in the fact that from the time of the conquest, the kings of England were likewise dukes of Normandy. Therefore, it was natural for the kings to keep close contact with their territories in France. Moreover, until about 1200 most of the English kings, as well as, the nobility in general, great English landowners who had possessions in the continent, military forces who accompanied the kings, the clergymen and merchants spent as much time in France as in England. Therefore, their continuous use of French was not only natural but inevitable. We may be certain that if this close contact and constant intercourse with the French had not taken place the linguistic influence of French would have been much less.

Thus, for some years the two languages Anglo- Saxon and Norman-French were used side by side without mingling. However, since the two sections of the society couldn't live separately, and had some relations with each other, they gradually came to learn or understand the other language.

The Englishman who associated with the governing class soon acquired a command of French. Knowing French and speaking it was a mark of social distinction. On the other hand, since English was the language of the greater part of the population, it was likely that many of the Frenchmen would

acquire some familiarity with it. At the end of the twelfth century, a knowledge of English was not uncommon among those who habitually used French.

However, in 1204, the constant connection of England with France, which reinforced the use of French, was broken. The English kings lost Normandy. The loss of Normandy was advantageous to the English language, for it caused the upper classes to become bilingual. As we know, when a conquering race begins to be bilingual, their own language is likely to be replaced with the language of the conquered race, and it is what happened in England. However, the decay of French as the predominant language of the ruling classes was hastened by another factor which was a new French invasion. The invasion began in the time of king John, whose wife was from France. In the time of his son, Henry III, great floods of Frenchmen poured into England. He dismissed all the native officers of his court and appointed foreigners in their places. What he did was not completely disadvantageous to the English language since it caused the reaction of people, the barons and the middle class, against the foreigners. Consequently, national feelings arose among the people, even among those who were of foreign origin and who had lived in England for generations and now considered themselves Englishmen.

At the end of the thirteenth century and especially in the course of the fourteenth century, French language gradually lost its influence on English. Different factors besides the loss of Normandy helped in the decline of French and re-establishment of English. At this time Parisian French was the standard dialect in France. Therefore, the Anglo-French spoken in England was considered a provincial dialect and not good French. Another factor was the hundred years' war, beginning in 1337, which made England and France bitter enemies. It further aroused the national feelings against the use of French. The next factor was the fact that the upper classes, who had been instrumental in retaining French, were gradually and continuously losing their relative importance. The condition of the peasant class had gradually improved during the thirteenth century, and the Black Death, which started in 1348 and caused the death of about 40 percent of the population, increased the importance of this class by reducing the number of laborers and thereby increasing the value of services of those left. In addition, the merchant and craftsman class was becoming increasingly important in the towns, and they soon became a rich and powerful class ranking between the nobility and peasants. Such an increase in the importance of the peasants and this new middle class

undoubtedly led to an increase in the importance of the language they spoke. As it is known, a language gains its importance by the importance of the people who speak it. It is important to mention that in 1362 the use of English was prescribed for the law courts, and in the same year Parliament was opened in English.

The French influence on the English language

Although Normans' invasion of the country was intentional and predetermined, their influence on the English language was indirect and the result of the circumstances. This influence was so great that the English language after the Norman Conquest was very different from the language of the Anglo-Saxons. French influence can be seen in different components of the language.

Vocabulary

The most important influence the French language had on the English language was the introduction of too many French words into English. It should be mentioned that one of the characteristics of Old English was to enlarge its vocabulary chiefly by using prefixes and suffixes and combining native elements into self-interpreting compounds. But this habit was somewhat weakened in Middle English. In many cases where a new word could have easily been formed on a native model, a French word was borrowed instead. Moreover, English people borrowed words whose native equivalents existed in their language. McMahon (1994) states,

; The unifying factor underlying all borrowing is probably that of projected gain; the borrower must stand to benefit in some way from the transfer of linguistic material. This gain may be social, since speakers often borrow material from a prestigious group or it may be more centrally linguistic, in that a speaker may find a replacement in her second language for a word which has become obsolete or lost its expressive force. However, the most common and obvious motive for borrowing is sheer necessity; speakers may have to refer to some unfamiliar object or concept for which they have no word in their own language. (p.201)

As we have seen one of the factors in borrowing words is prestige. In cases of close contact, the two languages may not have the same status within the speech community in which they are spoken. The language with more powerful speakers will be regarded as more prestigious. Generally, the less prestigious language borrows from the most prestigious one and the

borrowing will be concentrated in the semantic fields where the most prestigious speakers have the greatest influence. That is why after the Norman Conquest we find a huge influx of the French vocabulary into English mainly connected with religion, army, art, government and administration. These lexical items reflected the interests of the French-speaking ruling group, and had prestigious connotations.

However, it should be noted that not all French loan words are related to these classes. The lower and specially the middle class of Englishmen liked to be able to communicate with their superiors, and also thought it fine or refined to be able to talk French, and to interlard their English talk with French words and expressions. In this way many non-technical words, too, found their ways into the English language.

As mentioned before, the French influence on the English language didn't occur immediately after the Conquest. There were very few loan words before 1100, and probably not more than 900 words before 1250. The influx was the greatest between 1250-1400. Since after 1250 the upper classes who had been accustomed to speak French were returning to the use of English. As they didn't know English perfectly, they often needed to help out with French words in expressing themselves. In this way the upper classes carried over into English an astonishing number of common French words relating to government, administration, law, religion, army, fashion, food, social life, art, learning and medicine. During this 150 years half of the French words in English language came in.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that after the Norman Conquest the West Saxon dialect which had been the standard system of spelling and pronunciation throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries was soon abandoned. From 1100-1300 scarcely anything had been written in English, and it had remained a spoken language only.

During this long period of time, in addition to the influence of the French ruling classes, the influence of the French literature had been at work. French literary influence was not restricted to the rich literature of the Continent. From the beginning of the twelfth century much literature written in French was produced in England. We know that the words used in ordinary conversation are a small part of any language. Therefore, when books began to be written once more in English, those English words which didn't occur in ordinary talk were forgotten. Most of the terms at hand to express the ideas above those of daily life were to be found in the language of the upper classes,

who for the past two centuries had the chief control of art, science and law. Hence, a large number of the French words were adopted to take the place of the forgotten English ones. In the intermingling of the two languages Chaucer had a profound influence. It has been computed that he used just over 8000 words in his writings, of which a little over 4000 were of Romance origin, and over a thousand French words were first recorded in his work.

In the meantime, the Central or Parisian dialect, having become the language of French court and French literature, began to be fashionable in England and since 1250, many words were adopted from it into English. Interestingly, sometimes a word was taken from both central French and Norman French, for example, the Norman French *catel* and the Central French *chatel*. In the same way a number of doublets such as *catch, chase; warranty, guarantee; reward, regard; goal, jail* entered English. The first one in each pair is from Norman French and the second one from Central French.

Moreover, it is necessary to mention that although the introduction of the French words into English resulted in the extinction of too many Anglo-Saxon words, many of the English words continued to be used in the language side by side with their French equivalents. But, in the course of time some differences developed between the synonyms. The native words are always nearer to the nation's heart than the French words; they are more popular and fundamental, while the French words are often more formal, more polite, more refined and less emotional. For example, *amity* means formal friendly relationship especially between nations or states and thus lacks the warmth of *friendship*. *Help* expresses greater dependence and deeper need than *aid*. (A list of some of the synonyms is provided in Appendix I)

The French loans are of different parts of speech. The first French words the English lower classes borrowed were interjections and exclamations like *alas, sure, a dieu* and perhaps *verrai* (later *very*). The English language has also borrowed nouns, verbs and adjectives. However, all of the English function words, except one, are of the Old English origin. The only sign of the French influence is the complex preposition *because of*, which is the English version of *par cause de*.

It is also necessary to mention that among the words which the English language has borrowed some have become obsolete in their native country, some consonants have been dropped and the sounds of some others have

been changed. For instance, English retains the <s> that the French lost in many words like *beast* and *feast* which are *bête* and *fête* in Modern French.

The breadth of the French influence on the English language was so great that it has altered the English vocabulary to the extent that half of its vocabulary is French. Baugh (1963) states "The total number of French words adopted during Middle English was slightly over 10000 of these about 75 percent are still in common use" (p.215). The greatness of the French influence made some scholars doubt whether the English vocabulary can properly be regarded as typical of a Germanic language. However, it should be mentioned that in spite of the great number of French loan words, the common core of the English vocabulary and most of the words which belong to everyday language are still English. (A list of some of the French loan words is provided in Appendix II)

Pronunciation

The introduction of too many French words into English brought about some changes in the sound system of the language. In Old English, there were the phonemes /f/ and /s/ which had respectively the allophones [f] and [s] which were used initially and finally, and [v] and [z] which were used medially between voiced sounds. However, the introduction of a number of Norman French loans such as *veal*, *victory*, *zeal* and *zodiac* with initial [v] and [z] introduced [v] and [z] into the contexts where they had not previously appeared. Therefore, [v] and [z] became separate phonemes. Moreover, the English adopted the French diphthongs /i/ and /ui/ which were used in the French loan words.

Spelling

In the middle of the thirteenth century, once more English emerged as a written language. And the churchly writers started to copy texts in English. These writers, who had studied in France and were familiar with French, gradually changed the Anglo Saxon forms of Latin letters and replaced them with French ones. The change was not great, as most of the French letters were nearly the same as those previously in use in Old English.

The useful Old English letter <æ> was first dropped from the English alphabet. *æfter*, *æsc*, *græs* are examples of the Old English words. In Old English, the letters <þ> and <ð> were used to denote the sounds [θ] and [ð] indiscriminately. The letter <ð> had almost disappeared before 1300; and

<þ> denoting either sounds, was used much longer. Towards the end of the Middle English period, around 1400 <th> was gradually introduced.

The Anglo- Saxon <c> (originally sounded as [k] in all positions) was often replaced with <k> by the scribes before the front vowels <e>, <i> and <y>, but was kept as it was before the back vowels <a>, <o> and <u>. On the other hand, the French <c> had the sound of [s] before a front vowel and was used with the words of the Anglo-French origin such as *certain*, *city*. The introduction of these words into English, brought about some confusion in pronunciation; therefore, in order to have a regular and uniform system, the French method was followed. <C> was pronounced [k] before a back vowel and [s] before a front vowel, and in the case of those native words whose letter <c> were pronounced [k] before a front vowel, <k> was used in place of <c>. Therefore, the Anglo-Saxon *cyning* became *king* and *cene* became *keen*.

In Old English, <ç> was used for /tʃ/, but after the Norman Conquest the French Spelling <ch> took its place; thus, the original Old English *cild* became *child* in Middle English. Moreover, the Old English <sc> for /ʃ/ gradually became <sh> or <sch> as in *shield* and *sheep* which were written *schild* and *sceap* in Old English. Anglo-Saxon <cw> was turned into <qu>; hence, Old English *cween* changed to *queen*. <HW> which gave the sound of the first letters in *which* was changed to <wh>. In Old English <ƿ> was used to represent /g/. This letter was replaced with French <g>. With the introduction of the French words into English, this new symbol was used also with the value which it had in Old French before <e> and <i>, that is /dʒ/.

In French language <g> and <j> were pronounced /dʒ/ initially (*gentil*, *geste*, *juge*) which caused ambiguity since in a few words <g> had the value /g/ before front vowels. To solve this problem <gu> was devised; thus, Old English *gild* and *gest* changed to *guild* and *guest*. The digraph <gg> replaced Old English <cg> which represented /dʒ/ in medial and final positions, later it was written as <dg(e)> as in modern *edge*. This sound didn't occur initially in Old English until French loans introduced it.

The marks denoting vowel length were also discarded in Middle English. In Old English <u> was used for back vowels [u:] (long) and [u] (short). However, French scribes changed <ū> to <ou>; thus, *hūs* was written *hous* and *mūs* was spelt *mous*. They also changed the long <ō> to <oo> as in *hoom*

(home).

The vowels <u> and <y> in Old English were vowels only; in Middle

English, they came to be used as consonants also, the former with the sound of [v] and the latter with the sound of [j]. Moreover, the sound [j] was spelt as <ȝ> in Old English and under French influence changed to <y> (eg ȝieldan, yield). Both /j/ and /g/ were spelt <ȝ> in Old English.

The French people didn't pronounce the letter <h> at the beginning of a word. Under the influence of spelling, some of the French loan words with initial <h> were pronounced with or without /h/ in Middle English. However, <h> gradually came to be pronounced in all but a few words, such as *honour*, *honest*, *hour* and *heir*. In England *hotel* is pronounced with and without /h/.

Grammar

OE was an inflected language. During Middle English period, it lost most of its inflections and simplified. Simplification is the process of development in all languages, but this process was accelerated in the English language after the Norman Conquest. It is a common knowledge that grammatical purity and accuracy is preserved chiefly in written language. As we have mentioned before, until about 1200, English had remained practically a spoken language. During this period, English also lost its gender system. The most important factor which helped the loss of gender was the fact that French had a different gender system. The same object which was masculine in English might have been feminine in French or vice versa. So, the easiest way was to use the natural gender.

Moreover, French syntactic patterns such as phrases consisting of nouns followed by adjectives were introduced into English. Examples are *attorney general*, *court martial*, *fee simple*, *heir male*, *letters patent*, *proof positive*.

In Old English *thou* was used for the second person singular, and *ye* and *you* for the second person plural. The distinction between *thou* and *you* was the distinction of number. Gradually under the French influence the plural forms were extended to singular use, while still remaining the plural forms. The tendency was to use *thou* forms as marked forms indicating either intimacy or contempt, whereas *you* forms were neutral and polite.

During early Middle English *þe* (the) and *þæt* (that) were used to introduce relative clauses until *þæt* gradually supplanted *þe*. At the same time interrogative pronouns, the old forms of Modern English *who*, *which*, *etc*,

were introduced to be used as relative pronouns. French might have had some influence here, too. It is probable that the Latin influence prompted the adoption of the *wh*-relatives and the French influence strengthened its use. In

the French language the interrogative pronouns *qui* and *que* are also used as relative pronouns.

Affixes

With the borrowing of a large number of French words, French affixes found their ways into English. Moreover, the English suffixes were also added to French loan words. Hybrid words of this kind are found in comparatively great numbers in most languages. However, the hybrid of the other kind which is composed of a native stem and a foreign ending such as *bearable*, *breakage*, *hindrance*, *murderous* and *bakery* are in most languages rarer than in English. Some of the French affixes which entered English are as follows. (French has borrowed some of its affixes from other languages.)

Prefixes: *con-*, *de-*, *dis-*, *ex-*, *pre-*, *en-*, *pro-*, *trans-*.

Suffixes: *-ee* , *-ance*, *-ant*, *-ation* , *-ment*, *-ism*, *-ity*, *-able*, *-al* , *-ous*, *-fy*, *-ize*.

Later Borrowings

French influence on the English language is not restricted to the two or three centuries after the Norman Conquest. English has always borrowed from French but the number of the loan words has not been so great as in the Middle English period.

About the year 1500, the intellectual awakening of Europe (Renaissance), reached England. At this time, the French influence, although still strong was not predominant. The words, *portmanteau*, *genteel*, *fricassée*, *cache*, *moustache*, *machine* are examples of the words borrowed at this time.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, during the commonwealth period there was a civil war in England, and the court resided in France. Therefore, with the Restoration, a large number of French words and phrases came into English. Examples are *parole*, *rendezvous*, *envelope*, *critique*, *memoir*, *tableau*, *routine*, and many others.

The French Revolution which occurred in the closing years of the eighteenth century also resulted in the importation of many French words relating to revolution into England. Examples are *regime*, *guillotine*, *aristocrat*, *democrat*, *revolutionize*, *royalism*, *terrorism*, *liberal*, *conservative*, *despotism*, *etc.*

After the Middle English period, the greatest influx of the French loan was during the nineteenth century. At this time, it was the period of English liberalism; therefore, it was quite natural that a new interest in a country

which was the home of the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity arouse in English people. There was also increased travel facilities which led to more and more people going to France both for business and pleasure. In this way numerous words related to art, food and drink, fashion, adornment of home, social graces and social pastimes entered the English language. Examples are *ballet, souvenir, cuisine, moquette, liqueur, route, canteen, bureau, baroque, rococo, cliché, resumé, blouse, acrobat, restaurant, chef, fiancée, prestige*, and the phrases like *coup d'état, savoir fair, hors d'œuvre, etc.*

More than a century ago, French was still widely considered a prestigious language; it was the diplomatic language of the world and it had considerable popularity in literary and scientific circles. During the late nineteenth century its prestige, though still great, gradually declined. Therefore, the number of the loans in the twentieth century had been fewer. Examples are as follows: *revue, garage, limousine, camouflage, enfant terrible, etc.*

Idioms

The English language has also borrowed some French idioms. Some of these idioms are used in their French forms such as *au contraire, force majeure, à la mode, vis à vis, repondez s'il vous plait*. However, the other borrowed idioms are translated into English. *How do you do* is used for *comment fait vous*; *It's me* for *c'est moi*; *that goes without saying* for *cela va sans dire, etc.*

Doublets

It should be mentioned that there are some French words which have been borrowed twice in different periods in the history of English such as *salon, saloon; chief and chef*. One reason for the difference in the pronunciation and the position of the accent of these words lies in the fact that the French language has undergone changes from the medieval times. For example, in Old French <ch> was pronounced as [tʃ] as in *chief*, but in Modern French the sound of <ch> shifted to [ʃ] as in *chef*. The other reason for this phenomenon, which is not less important, is the fact that the French loan words up to 1650 were thoroughly naturalized and conformed to the rules of the English pronunciation and accent, while in the later borrowings (unless

they have become very popular) an attempt is made to pronounce them in the French fashion.

Spelling and Pronunciation (recent influence)

The result of the English tendency to pronounce the words in French fashion is that the pronunciation of the late borrowings is not fixed. Some like *garage* is pronounced in different ways, as ['gæ ra:dʒ], ['gæra:ʒ], [gə'ra:dʒ] and [gə'ra:ʒ] which retain the aspects of French pronunciation with variant syllable stress, and ['gæridʒ] the anglicized form, which has followed the pattern of *village*['vilidʒ]. This tendency had also a queer effect in changing the pronunciation and spelling of a number of old-established and naturalized words. Thus, *biscuit* which in the form *bisket* is found as an old English word, has recently changed to accord with French spellings, although its pronunciation has not yet been changed. For the same reason, the accent of some old words have been changed. *Police* and *marine* are old English words whose pronunciation changed owing to French influence.

Conclusion

As we have seen French had a great influence on the English language. Thousands of French words entered English. The spelling system of Old English changed. Some new French phonemes came into English sound system. A large number of French affixes replaced most of the Old English ones. Moreover, French accelerated the grammatical simplification of English. One wonders whether all of these changes were inevitable and the result of the circumstances which the English people were involved in, or the English people's tendency to use this prestigious language has brought about most of these changes. However, it is not the unique characteristic of the English people to borrow foreign words and expressions. We can find instances of it all through the history of languages. What makes a nation borrow words from another language has been clearly stated by Dr. J.A. Sheared (1962), "The acquisition of loan words from another language shows that the borrower feels that there is something superior in the foreign language, or in the people who use it, for we may suppose that no reasonable being would deliberately make use of foreign words if he felt that his own language possessed words which did the job better." (p. 26-27)

Appendix I
The List of Some of the Synonyms

<i>English words</i>	<i>French Loans</i>	<i>English Words</i>	<i>French Loans</i>
darling	favorite	folk	People
deep	profound	go on	Continue
lonely	solitary	happiness	Felicity
rise	mount	holy	saint(ly)
ask	question	wish	Desire
goodness	virtue	friendly	Amicable
fast	firm	heartily	Cordial
fire	flame	fight	Battle
fear	terror	kingdom	Realm
holy	sacred	thief	Robber
time	age	weapons	Arms
begin	commence	might	Power
hide	conceal	feed	Nourish
look for	search	ask	Demand
kingly	royal	shun	Avoid
child	infant	seethe	Boil
meal	repast	freedom	Liberty
beg	pray	speech	Language
sound	safe	do	Perform

heal	cure	storm	Tempest
theft	larceny	sheep	Mutton
cow	beef	calf	Veal

Appendix II

The List of Some of the French Loan Words

Religion: ceremony, baptism, Bible, prayer, lesson, sermon, relic, miracle, disciple, abbot, clergy, sacrament, etc.

Law: attorney, felony, larceny, judge, jury, justice, estate, sue, fee, plea, defendant, prison, suit, advocate, complaint, summon, court, accuse, bill, act, tax, lease, assets, embezzle, disclaim, etc.

Government: people, parliament, crown, reign, treaty, council, cabinet, city, minister, nation, village, domicile, etc.

Military: army, navy, enemy, battle, defense, retreat, soldier, guard, spy, sergeant, manor, chattel, captain, corporeal, etc.

Titles and offices: duke, marquis, baron, constable, count, lieutenant, mayor, prince, viscount, vicar, dean, chancellor, countess, etc.

Art and Science: art, painting, sculpture, music, beauty, figure, image, tone, literature, poet, romance, story, chronicle, tragedy, prologue, preface, title, volume, chapter, paper, treatise, study, logic, geometry, grammar, noun, clause, gender, medicine, physician, surgeon, malady, pain, plague, anatomy, stomach, pulse, remedy, ointment, poison, alkali, sulphur, etc.

Architecture: cathedral, palace, mansion, chamber, ceiling, cellar, chimney, lattice, tower, porch, column, pillar, base, brick, storey, attic, tile, lintel, etc.

Abstract terms: sense, honour, glory, fame, colour, dignity, chivalry, piety, science, nature, etc.

Social life and domestic economy: curtain, couch, chain, cushion, screen, lamp, lantern, blanket, towel, basin, parlor, wardrobe, closet, chess, recreation, leisure, fool, minstrel.

Fashion: fashion, dress, habit, gown, robe, garment, cape, cloak, coat, frock, collar, veil, train, chemise, trousers, lace, embroidery, buckle, button, plume, kerchief, boots, galoshes, etc.

Natural Scenery: valley, mountain, river, torrent, fountain, gravel.

Colour: blue, brown, vermilion, scarlet, violet, crimson, mauve.

Jewelry: Jewel, ivory, enamel, brooch, turquoise, amethyst, topaz, garnet, ruby, emerald, pearl, diamond, crystal, coral, beryl.

Relationship: aunt, cousin, spouse, parent, uncle, nephew, niece.
Division of time: hour, minute, second.



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