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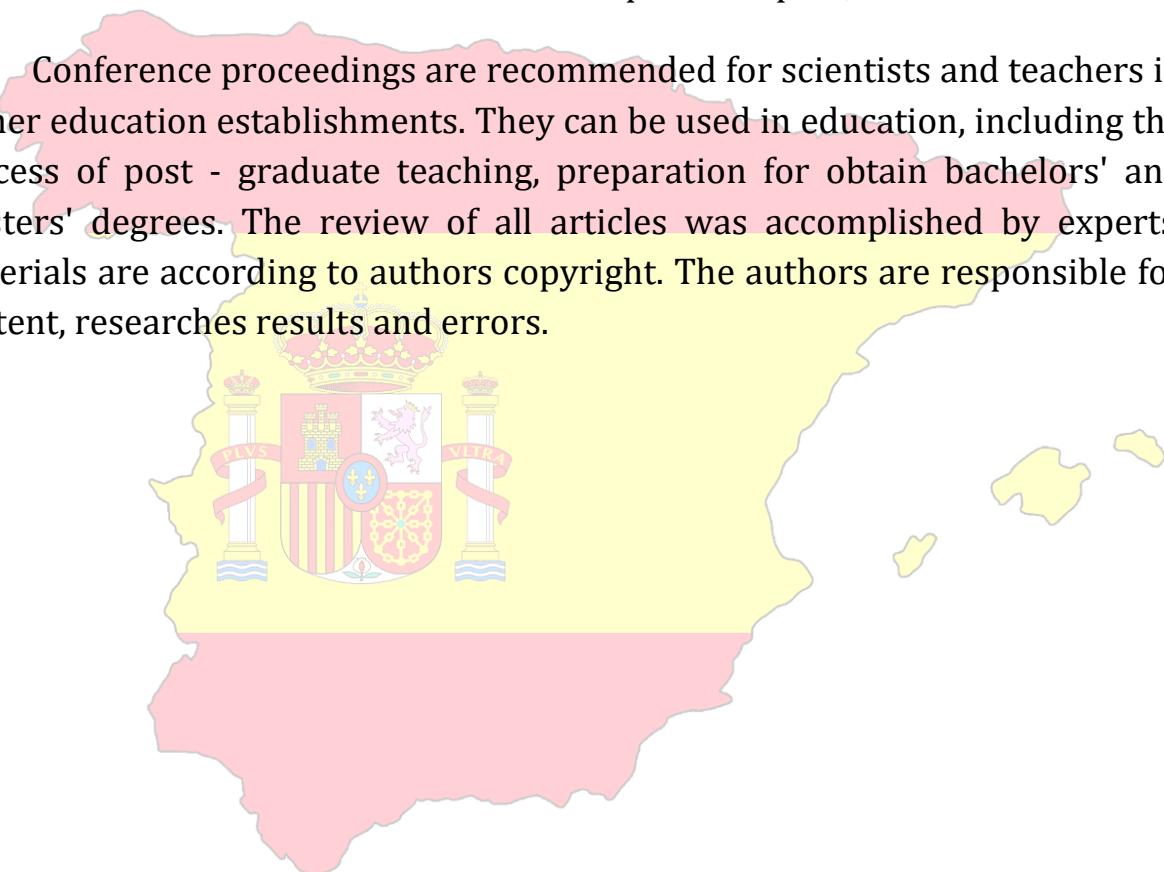


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## The evolution of vocabulary during the Middle English period

**Kimsanboyeva Gulsevar**  
Farg'ona davlat universiteti  
Ingliz tili va adabiyoti yo'nalishi  
4-kurs talabasi

**Abstract:** In this article, the evolution of English vocabulary during the Middle English period is analyzed from historical and linguistic perspectives. The study highlights how extensive contact with Old Norse and Norman French profoundly influenced the lexicon, leading to the emergence of a richer and more diverse vocabulary. It examines major lexical changes such as word borrowing, semantic shift, and the gradual decline of inflectional morphology that characterized this transitional stage between Old and Modern English. Furthermore, attention is given to the role of social, cultural, and political factors—particularly the Norman Conquest—in shaping the linguistic landscape of the time.

**Keywords:** Middle English, vocabulary development, borrowing, semantic change, Norman influence, linguistic evolution.

**Introduction.** The Middle English period (roughly 1100–1500) marks one of the most dynamic and transformative phases in the history of the English language. It was during this time that the English lexicon, phonology, and grammar underwent profound restructuring, leading to the emergence of a linguistic system distinctly different from its Old English ancestor. Among these changes, the evolution of vocabulary stands out as one of the most visible and consequential developments. This transformation was not an isolated linguistic process but the result of complex historical, social, and cultural interactions that shaped medieval England.

Following the Norman Conquest in 1066, English ceased to be the language of administration and high culture for several centuries. Norman French became the language of the court, law, and governance, while Latin retained its dominance in religion, scholarship, and education. English, though relegated to the speech of the common people, continued to evolve in the background, gradually absorbing thousands of lexical items from French and Latin. As a result, Middle English became a language of remarkable hybridity — a linguistic melting pot that combined native Germanic roots with a growing influx of Romance vocabulary. This borrowing was not merely superficial; it reshaped entire domains of expression, from government and law to literature and daily life.

At the same time, the loss of many inflectional endings in nouns, adjectives, and verbs — a process that had already begun in late Old English — created a more analytic grammatical structure. This morphological

simplification allowed greater flexibility in adopting and integrating foreign words. Native derivational processes, such as prefixation and compounding, continued to function, but they now coexisted with new affixal patterns derived from French and Latin sources. Thus, Middle English witnessed the coexistence and interaction of two lexical traditions: one native and conservative, the other foreign and innovative.

The evolution of vocabulary in this period also reflects the shifting cultural identity of England. The gradual reassertion of English as a language of literature and record, particularly from the 14th century onward, corresponded with a growing sense of national consciousness. Writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, and John Gower deliberately employed and expanded the English lexicon to express sophisticated ideas, blending native idioms with newly acquired words. The result was not a chaotic mixture but a creative synthesis that gave English its extraordinary lexical richness and stylistic depth.

Moreover, the Middle English vocabulary illustrates how linguistic change is both a reflection of and a response to historical experience. Contact with Norse-speaking settlers in earlier centuries had already introduced many everyday words into English, and the continuing influence of French and Latin during the Middle English era transformed English into a language capable of expressing both the concrete and the abstract, the familiar and the intellectual. The expansion of trade, the growth of urban centers, and the development of new social classes further stimulated the need for a broader and more flexible vocabulary.

In essence, the study of Middle English vocabulary provides crucial insight into the mechanisms of linguistic change and cultural adaptation. It demonstrates how English evolved not through isolation but through continuous interaction and exchange. By examining the etymological sources, semantic shifts, and morphological adaptations of this period, one can trace how English transformed from a largely Germanic vernacular into a global language with unparalleled expressive capacity. The Middle English period, therefore, represents both a bridge and a turning point — a stage in which the foundations of Modern English were firmly laid.

**Methods:** The present investigation employs a qualitative, philological, and historical-comparative approach to analyze the evolution of English vocabulary during the Middle English period. The research relies on lexical, semantic, and etymological evidence drawn from a broad corpus of Middle English texts, including *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Ancrene Wisse*, *Ormulum*, and various documents preserved in the Early English Text Society collections. These texts represent different registers—literary, religious, and administrative—allowing for a balanced and comprehensive view of vocabulary development.



The study integrates methods from historical linguistics and lexicography to identify sources of borrowing, semantic shifts, and morphological simplification. Comparative analysis with Old English and early Modern English dictionaries, such as the *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, enables the tracing of lexical origins and transformations. Furthermore, etymological comparison with Old Norse, Norman French, and Latin sources helps determine the direction and nature of contact-induced changes.

The methodological framework is structured along three analytical dimensions: (i) the external influence of language contact and social bilingualism; (ii) the internal development of native word-formation patterns through affixation and compounding; and (iii) semantic evolution and functional redistribution within the lexicon. The research design is interpretive rather than quantitative, emphasizing historical motivation, contextual analysis, and the interaction between linguistic and sociocultural factors that shaped the Middle English vocabulary.

**Results:** The analysis reveals that the Middle English vocabulary underwent a period of unprecedented expansion and restructuring between the 11th and 15th centuries. Following the Norman Conquest (1066), English became subject to extensive lexical borrowing from Norman French, particularly in areas of governance, law, religion, art, and culture. Thousands of French-derived words entered English, such as *court*, *judge*, *beauty*, and *virtue*, enriching the lexicon and creating a new layer of prestige vocabulary. At the same time, Old Norse influence—primarily from earlier Viking settlements—continued to contribute core lexical items such as *sky*, *take*, *they*, and *window*, which replaced or coexisted with native Anglo-Saxon equivalents.

Morphologically, the inflectional system of Old English weakened, reducing the number of derivational endings and leveling many word forms. This simplification facilitated borrowing and made the language more receptive to new lexical structures. Native word-formation processes such as prefixation (*become*, *forgive*) and compounding (*blackbird*, *fireplace*) remained productive but increasingly coexisted with Romance-based derivations using suffixes like *-tion*, *-ment*, and *-ity*.

Semantically, the period saw frequent shifts in meaning as borrowed words overlapped with native ones. Some Old English terms became specialized (*deor* > *deer* meaning a specific animal), while others were replaced or displaced by synonyms of French origin (*freedom* vs. *liberty*, *help* vs. *aid*). This lexical duality—native versus foreign—became a defining feature of English, establishing stylistic and register distinctions that persist into Modern English.

Sociolinguistically, the bilingual environment of post-Conquest England played a central role. The ruling elite spoke Norman French, while the

majority used English. Over time, as English regained its official and literary functions in the 14th century, particularly through writers like Chaucer, its vocabulary reflected the synthesis of both linguistic traditions. The resulting lexicon was broader, more nuanced, and more flexible in expressing abstract and technical ideas than its Old English predecessor.

**Discussion:** Taken together, the findings indicate that the Middle English period represents a critical stage in the lexical and structural transformation of English. The convergence of internal linguistic evolution and external contact led to a profound reorganization of the English vocabulary. Borrowing from French and Latin introduced a vast number of new lexical fields and stylistic registers, while Old Norse influence strengthened the syntactic and morphological simplification already underway.

This hybridization produced a multilayered lexicon where native Anglo-Saxon words continued to dominate the core vocabulary (everyday speech, basic verbs, and pronouns), whereas Romance and Norse elements enriched specialized and abstract domains. Such stratification shaped the expressive potential of English, enabling distinctions between high and low style (ask vs. inquire, holy vs. sacred) and fostering flexibility in literary and rhetorical composition.

Moreover, the transition from a predominantly synthetic (inflectional) to a more analytic (positional) language structure had direct implications for vocabulary growth. As grammatical relationships were increasingly expressed through word order and prepositions rather than endings, lexical clarity and precision became essential. Consequently, new derivational patterns and semantic extensions emerged to compensate for lost morphological transparency.

The interplay of contact, social hierarchy, and linguistic innovation exemplifies how vocabulary change reflects broader cultural transformations. The Middle English lexicon, thus, is not merely a collection of words but a record of England's historical encounters—military, political, and intellectual. Its evolution demonstrates that language change is cumulative, adaptive, and intimately connected to the lived experiences of its speakers.

Ultimately, the Middle English period laid the foundation for Modern English as a global language characterized by lexical diversity, semantic flexibility, and stylistic richness. The fusion of Germanic and Romance elements during this era remains one of the most remarkable examples of linguistic evolution in recorded history.

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