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Did French words replace perfectly good native ones (i.e. driving them out of the language), or were they merely adding to the riches of the language in the Middle English period?

In this position paper the French influence on the English language will be discussed. The influence of French has been seen as a complication by authors like Orwell. Contrastingly, one could also argue that French has added to the richness of the English language. Firstly, this paper will give a short overview of the historical period in which French loans and morphology were introduced in to the English language. Secondly, an argument against the use of French loans will be examined. Finally, this paper will argue that French has added to the richness of the English language by providing examples of how new words have been formed as an effect of this influence.

Van Gelderen (2014) distinguishes two periods in which borrowing from Old French into Old en Middle English took place. The first phase took place between 1066-1250, taking the Battle of Hastings as a starting point. This is when the Normans entered England. In the first phase fewer than 1000 words are borrowed. In the second phase, French speakers adopt English. Most of these words were used for purposes in government, law, learning, art and fashion, food, and religion.

In academic texts the number of loans is estimated around 45% (Gelderen, 2014, p. 109), and this makes our writing sound more formal. However, some have also argued that it makes writing more confusing. Francis Bacon and George Orwell protested against language full of loans and argued for a more simple lexicon.

“Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.”
(George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” 1947)

However, the influence of French loans, especially the prefixes and suffixes, arguably also allow for more words to arise in the English language. It adds to the expressive range of the language. The –our ending has allowed for the creation of words like honour and labour. Both words that are used extensively in English. The influence from French has also allowed for new word distinctions. For example shirt and skirt are cognates (i.e. they derive from the same word) but have different meanings now. Similarly chattel and cattle have different meanings but derive from the same source. A word like “chant” has a new form as “enchantment”, using French affixes “-en” and “-ment”. This is just one example, is an abundance of examples of words which are specific and constructed with affixes from French. Therefore, one could also argue that French has added to the richness of the English language, allowing for new words to be formed.

References

Gelderen, E. v. (2014). *History of the English Language: Revised Edition*. Benjamins Publishing Company, John.

Orwell, G. (1947). *Politics and the English Language*.