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# The Effects of the Norman Conquest on the English Language

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# THE EFFECTS OF THE NORMAN CONQUEST ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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By Curt Baker

In 2016, English is one of the most widespread languages in the entire world. It is the national language of thirty countries, and more than twenty others claim English as a second language.<sup>1</sup> As one of the most-spoken languages in the world, English is a crossroad of several dialects, demographic groups, and cultural influences. The time of Roman rule in England is where historians begin to understand English language formation; from there forward a picture begins to form as researchers piece together the development of English. Different influences on the development of English include indigenous populations in England, Anglo-Saxon influence, and finally the Norman Conquest, which scholars consider a “defining moment in the development of the English language...”<sup>2</sup> Although it is one of many factors in the evolution of English, the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 and the resulting effects were crucial in the formation of the English language.

An understanding of the complex nature of the English language requires a detailed study of the history of English in the time preceding the Norman Conquest. This consideration of the linguistic landscape begins during the time of Roman authority in England. Romans, invading from Italy, brought their own culture, traditions, and language when they conquered England. For reasons that will not be addressed in this paper, however, the Romans did not attempt to change the existing culture, traditions, and language like the Normans. Nonetheless, the period of Roman rule is significant to the study of the English language — historians find ample evidence during this time period for the existence of indigenous people groups and their own unique dialects in the time of Roman rule. Their presence, however, raises questions. Scholars have speculated that these seemingly indigenous peoples are actually of mainland-European descent.

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<sup>1</sup> “Facts and Figures,” U.S. English, INC., accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.usenglish.org/userdata/file/FactsandFigures.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Robert P. Creed, “The Norman Conquest and the English Language,” *Science New Series* 34, no. 5675 (May 28, 2004): 1243, accessed September 14, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3837114>.

This is evidenced in the Welsh, who likely descended from Spain. Similarly, the Britons living in the lowlands appear to have connections to Gaul.<sup>3</sup> These native peoples spoke dialects reflective of their differing backgrounds, rendering it unlikely that a national, unifying language existed before the late tenth and early eleventh century AD.

Evidence for a central language is first apparent during the reign of King Aethelred around 1000 AD. During this time period there was an explosion of writing in Latin and Old English. This included the first English law code — most likely in Old English — commissioned in 985 by Aethelred. Additionally, Aethelred charged scholars to record works of contemporary and classic poetry such as *Beowulf* in Old English. King Wulfstan, a later ruler, also ordered a written law code in 1008 A.D.<sup>4</sup> This flurry of law codes and writings reflects a centralization and unification of language, arguably the first recorded in the history of English.

French entered this linguistic environment in 1066 as a result of the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. The duke of Normandy, William had a legitimate claim to the English throne as the distant cousin of Edward the Confessor, king of England. With the death of Edward in January 1066, Duke William immediately declared himself the heir to the English throne, asserting that Edward had chosen him as the successor.<sup>5</sup> Duke William's claim included evidence of Edward calling together his nobles in 1051 and forcing them to support William. Also, William claimed that Edward had specifically sent Harold, Earl of Wessex, to Normandy to personally swear fealty to Duke William. Upon the death of Edward, Harold denied the entirety of William's claim and seized the throne.<sup>6</sup> William promptly responded by invading England in September 1066, crushing Harold's defenses and establishing himself as King of England on Christmas Day 1066.

Following his coronation, King William began a widespread campaign to legitimize his kingship and establish allies in prominent

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<sup>3</sup> Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Yale University Press, 2013), 70.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 342, 352, 357.

<sup>5</sup> George Garnett, *The Norman Conquest: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

<sup>6</sup> James Henry Ingram, trans., "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," (Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2008), 87-89.

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positions of society. As a part of this effort, he commissioned a country-wide census in 1086 known as the Domesday Book. Written by William of Calais, a French lawyer, this extensive account of the English population served not only its statistical purpose but was also designed to influence the political and legal environment.<sup>7</sup> Calais used language and vocabulary to solidify William's ownership of the land and his resulting ability to give it to his nobles.

This manipulation of vernacular in Domesday Book included a dispute of land ownership. When Harold took the crown, he awarded land and towns to nobles supporting his cause. William, after dethroning Harold, retracted Harold's gifts and in turn bestowed them upon his own supporters.<sup>8</sup> Naturally, the original landowners opposed this reversal. Calais anticipated such resistance and wrote Domesday Book in Norman Latin, meaning that some words contained different meanings than their traditional connotation in the legal jargon of Old English.

An example of this exploitation in Domesday Book is the term *antecessor*, a common word in Old English ecclesiastical law. Before Domesday Book, the term was used to indicate someone who had held ecclesiastical office before the current clergy. It was widely accepted this way and used in various law codes. William of Calais, however, used the term to denote land ownership. He defined an *antecessor* as one who held land at the moment of Edward the Confessor's death. According to Duke William's claim as the rightful heir to the English throne, he was the *antecessor*.<sup>9</sup> Under the interpretation of *antecessor* in Domesday Book, William, as King of England, owned all the land in England at the moment of Edward's death, thereby legitimizing his ability to take and give land at his own inclination.

Finally, an Old English translation of Domesday Book was never written. Thus, an explanation of the nuances and changed meanings of rights and laws — such as *antecessor* — under Domesday Book was almost entirely unavailable to Old English speakers. Furthermore, the glossary of terms developed for Domesday Book — most likely written by a Frenchman, possibly William of Calais himself — included words alien to England before

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<sup>7</sup> Garnett, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ingram, 90-91.

<sup>9</sup> Garnett, 59.

1066.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, not only were Englishmen unable to understand the terms themselves, but even the explanations of these terms contained foreign words, significantly increasing the obstacles for disapproving Englishmen in their protestations against the new king.

King William's efforts reached beyond land ownership, however. He also rewrote law codes utilizing French vocabulary and loanwords that slightly altered legal procedure.<sup>11</sup> With his coronation in 1066, King William officially established Anglo-French "...alongside the traditional Latin as the language of public state business and of the court."<sup>12</sup> The limited available records, solidifying that early law codes were written nearly entirely in French, confirm this.<sup>13</sup> Many of these codes contained French loanwords, one example being *portirefan*, meaning mayor.<sup>14</sup> The English did not have a word for mayor; indeed, the existence of the concept itself is questionable before the conquest. Thus, King William not only introduced a new word but also a new legal position.

Similarly, these law codes were primarily written in Old English but occasionally the author added a French phrase, altering the meaning of the law. For example, *him lahlicne spalan*, a new Norman phrase to describe a substitute in trial-by-combat, was inserted into law codes, introducing a new method of resolving disputes. Again, King William used language to benefit himself and the other Norman invaders; the French phrase *mid unforedan aoe* was placed at the end of a law about oaths, releasing Normans from repeating English oaths.<sup>15</sup> Literate Englishmen, even ones who could read French, would not have understood the implications of the new laws because the concepts themselves were foreign. These literary works — Domesday Book

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<sup>10</sup> Garnett, 59.

<sup>11</sup> George Garnett, *The Norman Conquest: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ishla Singh, *The History of English: A Student's Guide* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Brand, "The Language of the English Legal Profession: The Emergence of a Distinctive Legal Lexicon in Insular French" in *The Anglo-Norman Language and Its Contexts*, ed. Richard Ingham (Rochester, NY: York University Press, 2010), 96.

<sup>14</sup> A.J. Robertson, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I: Part Two: William I to Henry I* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 230.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, 361.

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and law codes — helped cement French into English legal practice and, eventually, general speech.

Although significant, the influence of legal vocabulary on the English language pales in comparison to the impacts of social pressure from the upper French class and its effect on common speech. King William, largely through the giving of land, brought French nobles to England, forming an aristocracy of French-speakers. Initially, this upper-class failed to influence colloquial speech but rather made its impact on vocabulary through the elite caste as a result of the limited literacy rates in England at the time.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as the official language of the state and the one spoken by society's most prominent figures, it is not surprising that French loanwords began to make their way into the English lexicon in the period immediately following the Conquest. For instance, the French word *trône* appears for the first time, from which the English word throne is derived. Similarly, the word *saint* makes its debut, a Latin word brought to English by French.<sup>17</sup> A relatively confined influence seems to be the limit of French on English immediately following the conquest; by 1250, however, the effect increased significantly.

Nearly 200 years after the conquest, French was sufficiently established in England and rapidly gaining popularity among the general public. As the primary language of the aristocratic portion of society and the law, French had a trickle-down effect on common speech, gradually becoming more attractive to commoners. This consistent presence of French sounds and words in routine conversation eventually led to general acceptance of formerly unnatural morphemes and expressions. As French became more prevalent and desirable among Englishmen, the amount of French words and units of language that came to be included in English speech and lexicon naturally increased. Additionally, entirely new words formed from combinations of existing French and English words.<sup>18</sup> This

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<sup>16</sup> Douglas A. Kibbee, *For to speke Frenche trewely: The French Language in England, 1000-1600: Its Status, Description and Instruction* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1991), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Isabel Roth, "Explore the Influence of French on English," *Innervate: Leading Undergraduate in English Studies* 3 (2010-2011), 255.

<sup>18</sup> Ishltla Singh, *The History of English: A Student's Guide* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 127.

development, known as derivational morphology, ushered in changes to English in sentence formation and vocabulary.

The beginning of this process was not by direct and immediate combination of affixes and words but rather through loanwords, some of which have already been discussed. Before 1250, the number of loanwords from French seems to be limited; after 1250, the number expanded to include words like coronation, princess, royal, inspiration, and university, representatives of others that still endure today.<sup>19</sup> Another example of this word-borrowing is the Middle English word *blihand*. This is a derivation of the French *bliaut*, a word describing a long garment.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is clear that a great number of French words were consistently used and accepted by society, ushering in even greater changes of English through French.

Although French syntax shaped English sentence structure, it was almost entirely limited to official titles. These often follow the Old French pattern of placing a noun before its describing adjective; e.g. Prince Royal, a deviation from the standard English placement of adjectives before nouns.<sup>21</sup> Change in this area can be attributed to the multi-lingual influence on the scribes and literature of the time period.<sup>22</sup> Although minimal, there is contemporary evidence for French influence on English word order.

The checked effect on syntax is not representative of French impact on vocabulary, especially through word structure (derivational morphology). With increased French influence on common speech, formation of new words with French roots or affixes became common. For example, the word *hindrance* resulted from a combination of the Old English verb *hinder* and the French suffix *-ance*, used in the construction of nouns. Thus, the merging of an English verb and a French suffix formed a new word entirely. In addition, English words are occasionally formed entirely from French, as in

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<sup>19</sup> Anita Singh, “Royal wedding: Huw Edwards to lead BBC's coverage”, Daily Telegraph, 13 December 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Chambers and Louise Sylvester, “From Apareil to Warderobe: Some Observations on Anglo-French in the Middle English Lexis of Cloth and Clothing,” in *The Anglo-Norman Language and Its Contexts*, ed. Richard Ingham (Rochester, NY: York University Publishing, 2010), 68.

<sup>21</sup> Singh.

<sup>22</sup> Eric Haerberli, “Investigating Anglo-Norman Influence on Late Middle English Syntax,” in *The Anglo-Norman Language and Its Contexts*, ed. Richard Ingham (Rochester, NY: York University Press, 2010), 149.

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the word *coverage*, a combination of the French word *cover* and the French suffix *-age*.<sup>23</sup>

Although there are many examples of word formation according to this pattern, the derivational morphology of English is not limited to French plus English or vice versa. Latin also plays a role, evidenced in the word *involvement*, a Latin verb *involve* with the French suffix *-ment*, used in the construction of nouns. Another example of mixing languages is *coveted*, a Latin word brought to English as a French loanword. The addition of a native — originally Germanic — suffix *-ed* forms the adjective describing something highly desirable. Each of these morpheme combinations indicates a distinct French presence in the formation of English words following the Norman Conquest, evidencing the profound French impact on English.

Many people groups and native dialects have influenced English, including seemingly indigenous peoples with connections to various European demographics and foreign influences like the Romans, Angles, Saxons, and finally Normans. Nevertheless, the linguistic effects of Duke William of Normandy's takeover of Britain mark that event as a crucial element in the formation of the English language. This is evidenced in legal vocabulary following the Conquest, as the English lexicon swelled to include French words as well. The Domesday Book is also noteworthy, as the usage of formerly-unknown French terms in the book led to new definitions and understandings of standard English nomenclature. Finally, French slowly influenced common speech in England, to the degree that the general population consistently used French vocabulary and even formed new words using French affixes and roots. These three influences form a critical stage in the formation of English lexicon and phraseology. Indeed, a study of the evolution of English directs researchers to an undeniable conclusion: the Norman Conquest and its accompanying French linguistic impact was foundational to the English language.

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<sup>23</sup> Roth, 257-258.