French-English Linguistic and Cultural Contact in Medieval England

The Evidence of Letters

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The proportion of the English vocabulary derived from French is surprisingly high, a fact which has inspired scholarly investigation and speculation for more than a century. This paper takes a fresh look at the role French played in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. It takes collections of medieval letters as its database and studies the role of French, from a language of letter writing to a source for borrowing words and phrases, as well as the methods of and motivation for learning French in this period. It concludes that French words and phrases made their way into the English language not by French speakers shifting to English, but by English speakers borrowing them in the course of extensive language and cultural contact with French. It shows that the process of nativisation was extremely fast and assumes that this was the result of two characteristics of medieval society: (1.) an oral culture where texts were read aloud and letters were dictated, and (2.) the structure of medieval households, where speakers with and without a knowledge of French lived closely together.

1. Introduction

English is a language rich in words borrowed from Latin and French, which make up more than 50% of the vocabulary of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary (Finkenstaedt and Wolff 1973: 119). Even if dictionaries in-

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1 Both languages contribute c. 28% to the 80,096 words of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. According to Scheler (1977: 2), the percentages for vocabulary of Latin origin is somewhat lower in the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (c. 22%) and considerably lower in the General Service List, a list of the 4,000 most frequent English
clude some rare words, this attests to a very high proportion of French words. Scholars have tried to account for this with three main arguments: (1.) the numerical strength of French speakers, (2.) the political dominance of French speakers, and (3.) the cultural dominance of the French language. Estimates of the numerical strength of the French in post-Conquest Britain have varied considerably, and high estimates tend at least partially to be based on linguistic influence, which makes this a circular argument. Moreover, if the numerical strength of the population were a decisive factor, the number of Scandinavian loanwords in English should be much higher than that of French ones.

The striking discrepancy between words borrowed from French and words borrowed from medieval Scandinavian languages (also referred to as Old Norse) is a topic discussed in most histories of the English language in chapters on medieval language contact. There is not only a difference in the frequency of borrowing, but also in the type of words that were borrowed. The following extract from Barber (1993: 146) is a typical account of this difference:

The French words were on the whole not such homely ones as the Scandinavian words: the Vikings had mixed in with the English on more or less equal terms, but the Normans formed a separate caste that imposed much of their culture on their subordinates. Many of the French loanwords reflect this cultural and political dominance: they are often words to do with war, ecclesiastical matters, the law, hunting, heraldry, the arts, and fashion.

Relating French loanwords to different domains has a long tradition. The most elaborate allocation to different domains is presented in Serjeantsen (1935: 12-156). A more differentiated description of the language contact situation is given by Smith (1999: 120-121), whose discussion of French and Scandinavian loanwords includes a chronological dimension:

Most [Scandinavian words] express very common concepts, cf. PDE BAG, BULL, EGG, ROOT, UGLY, WING, and it is noticeable that Scandinavian has supplied English with such basic features as the third person plural pronoun, THEY/THEM/THEIR. [...]

By far the largest number of words borrowed into English during the ME period are taken from varieties of French. Up to the thirteenth century these borrowings were rather few and reflected the role of French as the language of the ruling class (c. PDE JUSTICE, OBEDIENCE, MASTERY, PRISON, SERVICE, all of which are first found in English during the early ME period). [...] However after that date, French words from Central French dialects enter the language at a great rate, reflecting the cultural status of Central France; it seems to have become customary for the higher social words (c. 10%), while those for vocabulary of French origin are higher with c. 36% and 38% respectively (see also Lutz 2008: 348).
classes in England to signal their class-membership by studding their English with French-derived vocabulary.

Smith takes into account the research carried out by Prins (1952), who investigated phrasal borrowing from French, including both phrases consisting of lexical material of French origin and phrases which are English calques on French ones. His textual database differs from that used as sources for quotations in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*). Nevertheless there is a surprising correspondence between the chronology of phrasal borrowing in Prins’s data and Jespersen’s chronology of words borrowed from French, which is based on the *OED* (or the *New English Dictionary*, as it was called at the time). The following diagram taken from Prins (1952: 33) shows the highest peaks for both first occurrences of words (top dotted line) and phrases (bottom dotted line) in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.

![Diagram](image)

Fig. 1: Date of first occurrence of French loanwords and loan phrases in English (from Prins 1952: 33)

The date of the highest peak of first occurrences of French words and phrases (including calques on French phrases) is not compatible with the typical pattern of language shift in immigrants, which usually takes place
in the second and third generations, with the second generation being bilingual and the third generation having the language of the country of immigration as their mother tongue. This means that if the French vocabulary were introduced by the families of those who came with William the Conqueror, the peak should have appeared at least two centuries earlier. This is not to say that French speakers shifting to English did not introduce any French words or phrases to English at all, but only that they did not introduce the bulk of words and phrases of French origin. If native speakers of English introduced French words and phrases into English, this raises a number of questions: (1.) How were the words introduced? (2.) Who introduced them? (3.) Why were they introduced? and (4.) To what extent were they adopted by different strata of medieval society, i.e. did they become general usage or was their use socially restricted?

Present-day studies of language contact focus on oral contact. This is not surprising, as the type of contact that was most prominent in the twentieth century was that between immigrant workers and the people of their host countries. The contact that took place between these people was predominantly one of everyday oral communication at the workplace, or with shop assistants, landlords and neighbours. If written language contact is mentioned in books on language contact, it is usually in connection with dead languages used in religious contexts, such as Latin, classical Arabic or Sanskrit (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 78-79).2

There is general agreement in histories of the English language that Latin words were introduced into English via the written language, since spoken interaction in Latin was limited even within the clergy. Latin makes up a quarter of the vocabulary of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, according to Finkenstaedt and Wolff (1973: 119). This means that there is evidence of large-scale borrowing as a result of written contact in medieval England. It seems therefore possible that written language contact may also account for loanwords borrowed from languages other than Latin.

2. The Data

The data used for the present study consists of three Middle English family correspondences, those of the Stonors, covering the years 1290-1483, edited by Kingsford and provided with a new introduction by Carpenter in 1996 (henceforth SL), those of the Pastons, covering the years 1425-1495, edited by Davis in 1971 and 1976 (henceforth PL), and those of the Celys, covering the years 1472-1488, edited by Hanham in 1975 (henceforth CL).

2 Thomason (2001: 2-3) accepts the existence of written bilingualism, but does not include it in her discussion in later chapters of the book.
The members of the three families did not belong to the highest levels of society; the Stonors and Pastons were landed gentry, with estates in Stonor near Henley on the Oxfordshire-Buckinghamshire border and in Norfolk respectively, while the Celys were a family of London wool merchants. It is important to note that there is no indication that any of the three families had any French background. Their names all indicate native origin. In the case of the Celys the family name is derived from Old English sælig (‘blessed’) (see Hanham’s “Introduction” to the Cely Letters, 1975: 6), while the etymology of the family name Stonor is given as a spelling variant of the profession of stoner, i.e. ‘stone cutter’ or ‘stone mason’ or derived from “stanora ‘stony or rocky bank’ [O.E. stán + óra]” (Harrison 1969, entry “Stonor”). The family name Paston is not listed in Harrison, but it is clearly related to the corresponding placename in northern Norfolk, which is where the Pastons had their estate. The online database of the Institute of Name Studies at the University of Nottingham has the following entry for the place name: “Uncertain. Possibly ‘*Paecci’s farm/settlement’ or perhaps ‘puddle farm/settlement’ ?OE paesc(e) ?OE pers. n. OE tun” (http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/~aezins//kepn/detailpop.php?placeno=9679).

Both the Paston and the Cely correspondences contain a high number of family letters and letters to and from employees. The Paston Letters are also a rich source for women’s correspondence, with several female authors, of whom Margaret Paston was the most productive with over one hundred letters. All three correspondences involve more than one generation of writers. They are therefore particularly well suited for detecting changes in language use as well as social practices and cultural change.

3. French as the Medium of Writing

It is a well-known fact that letters by members of the nobility were written in French long after the Conquest. Ellis (1824: xx) states in his Original Letters, Illustrative of English History that letter writing in English only began in the reign of Henry V (1413-1422): “Letters previous to that time [the reign of Henry V], were usually written in French and Latin; and were the productions chiefly of the great and learned”. The content of Ellis’s edition suggests that by “the great and learned” he means the nobility and bishops. The Stonor correspondence provides clear evidence that the practice of writing letters in French also extended to the gentry. The early letters are exclusively in French and Latin. Latin was used for communications by and with members of the clergy, while all other letters up to the year 1380 are in French. Between 1380 and 1424 there is a gap in the correspondence. This 44-year gap may be the result of the early death of Ralph Stonor (1370-1394), as Thomas Stonor, the letter writer of 1424, was the grandson of the Edmond Stonor writing in 1380. From 1424 all letters are in English and Latin. This means that while the
practice of corresponding in Latin with members of the clergy continued, for all other letters the medium of letter writing changed from French to English between 1380 and 1424.

The Paston correspondence begins in 1425, i.e. at the time when the shift to English is documented in the Stonor correspondence. The first letter writer of the Paston correspondence is William Paston I, who was born in 1378. William Paston’s writings contain an endorsement in French “À mez treshonnurés meistres William Worstede, John Longham, et Meistre Piers Shelton soit donné” (PL: no. 4, dated 1426) and notes in French on a recycled draft letter that had been turned by 180 degrees so that the original writing was upside down (PL: no. 6, dated 1430). As William Paston I used French for notes, writing in French must have come naturally to him. This is surprising, as it is not in line with the date given in histories of the English language for the shift from French to English as the medium for teaching Latin. This is usually dated between the middle of the fourteenth century and 1385, a date which is based on a comment by John Trevisa which he inserted in his translation of Higden’s Polychronicon. Here he states that all grammar schools shifted to teaching Latin via English after the Black Death:

This custom was much in use before the first plague [that is, the Black Death of 1349], and since then has somewhat changed. For John of Cornwall, a licensed teacher of grammar, changed the teaching in grammar school and the construing from French into English; and Richard Pencrich learnt that method of teaching from him, and other men from Pencrich, so that now, in the year of Our Lord 1385, in the ninth year of King Richard II, in all the grammar schools of England children are abandoning French, and are construing and learning in English. [Translation Barber’s]
shift from French to English as the language of letter writing in the gentry
did not predate that in the nobility, which Ellis (1824: xx) dates to 1413-
1422. The Cely Letters are considerably later, and it is therefore not sur-
prising that none of the members of that family wrote in French. The only
French letters in the collection are by a woman by the name of Clare (CL:
no. 54), who appears to have been George Cely’s mistress in Bruges, and
by a Dutch merchant (CL: no. 62).

4. The Acquisition of French in the Fifteenth Century

The Paston Letters document the fact that French continued to be taught to
members of the gentry in the fifteenth century, as the collection contains
notes of a French lesson in William Paston II’s hand (PL: no. 82). The notes
are dated by Davis to 1452, when William Paston II, the grandson of Wil-
liam Paston I, was a student at Cambridge.4 The notes clearly show that
French was taught as a second language and that the teacher did not as-
sume that his students had any prior knowledge of French pronunciation.

Memoorandum þat ho hath affeccion to lerne þis langage must first con-
sidre viij thinggis qweche byn full nessessarij to knowe to come to þe tru
profescion of þis language – Frist, because it is not sownid as it [is] wret-
tyn 3e must considre þat this lettre s sondit neuer but qwan it stondit be-
fore j of þis v letteris qweche ben callid wowellys, þat is to say, a, e, i, o,
v, and neuer þis letter sownit but in cas.5

The notes show that the teacher pointed out that French s is mute before
consonants. This mute s was later dropped in French spelling, and in pre-
sent-day French the vowel that originally was followed by s is marked by
an accent circonflexe, as in être. The rule given in William Paston II’s notes
simplifies matters somewhat, as s was not mute in initial consonant clus-
ters nor in all other preconsonantal positions, but it is unclear whether
the rule was overgeneralised for didactic reasons or whether the teacher’s
knowledge of French pronunciation was shaky.6 The text also shows that
no prior knowledge of French grammar is assumed. The following extract
from the notes (PL: no 82) introduces French grammatical gender, gender
concord, and the paradigm of personal pronouns.

4 For a detailed description of this manuscript see Davis and Ivy (1962).
5 ‘It must be remembered that who wants to learn this language must first consider
8 things which are quite necessary to know in order to come to the true perfection
in this language – First, because it is not pronounced as it is written, you must con-
sider that this letter s is never pronounced except when it stands before one of the
5 letters which are called vowels, that is to say a, e, i, o, u, and never is the letter
pronounced except in this case.’ [My translation, MH]
6 A contemporary teaching manual, the Femina shows, according to its editor Roth-
well (2005: iii-v), inconsistent pronunciation guidelines, which indicates that the
scribe who inserted them was uncertain of the pronunciation of French words.
Item, as in Latyn distjnccion is be-twix þe femynyn gender and þe mascu-lyne gender, so is in this langgage; were-fore rith nessesary it is to knowe þe pronons and þe declinacionis of þe verbis in þe maner hereafter folowyng

Je or moy    tu    il    nous    vous    ilz
I    thou    he    we    þe    thei

mg    Ces choses sount nostres
The thinggis byn owres

Et lez autres choses sount vostres
And þe oder thinggis byn 3owment

mg    Ce cheval est moun et la cell est tenne    fg
þis horse is myn and þe sadil is thyn

fg    Ce jument est mon et la veel tien    mg
This mare is myn and þe calfe thyn

The extract shows that the French gender distinction is unfamiliar to William Paston II, as he writes “mg”, which stands for masculine gender, before an example sentence which contains a feminine plural subject (choses), and in the case of ce jument and la veel the gender label is “fg” and “mg” respectively, that is, the reverse of the French gender. This mistake reflects the difficulty of understanding the concept of grammatical gender for someone whose native tongue has only natural gender. Jument is probably labelled “fg” because a mare is a female animal, and the gender allocation of veel might be a consequence of the allocation of feminine gender to jument, if the learner grasped the contrastive nature of the examples.

The beginning of the extract (PL: 82) states that French gender is like Latin gender. This suggests that Latin was taught either before French or at the same time, which is quite different from the situation a century earlier, when French was the medium for teaching Latin. This is also supported by the use of a Latin comment, which follows a somewhat garbled explanation of French vowel elision:

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7 Also, as in Latin there is a distinction between feminine and masculine gender, so is it in this language; therefore it is quite [literally “right”] necessary to know the pronouns and declinations of the verbs in the manner which follows

I you-sg he we you-pl they
m[asculine] g[ender] The things are ours. And the other things are yours.
m[asculine] g[ender] This horse is mine and the saddle is thine [yours-sg]
f[eminine] g[ender]’
f[eminine] g[ender] This mare is mine and the calf is thine [yours-sg]’
[My translation, MH]
Item, were two ar iij vowellis come to-geder þe vowell jn þe myddis is set a-side and is nep[er] wretyn neithere sownyd, example as jayme; þat is as muche as je ayme, quantum breuyus tantum melyus.8

The extract states that it is the middle vowel that is elided, whereas it is actually the word-final vowel that is elided in hiatus position, as in je ayme > j’ayme, the example given, where the vowel of je is omitted in spelling and pronunciation. This explanation is followed by the Latin comment quantum breuyus tantum melyus, which could only be understood by the students if they had a basic knowledge of Latin.

The remainder of the notes show the teaching of the present, past, future, and subjunctive forms of verbs. The grammar notes thus show a contrastive approach to the teaching of French focusing on the differences between French and English pronunciation and grammar.

The correspondence does not tell us why William Paston II learned French at a time when French had ceased to be an official language. In 1362 Parliament was opened in English rather than French, and in the same year the Statute of Pleading was decreed, which required that English should be used in the law courts. With Henry IV, in 1399 a king ascended the throne whose first language was English (Baugh and Cable 2000: 144-146). Suggett (1946) documents a sharp decrease in the use of French in legal documents from around 1398, with the last French deed endorsed on Close Rolls in 1434 and only two French petitions in the 1440s, the latter of which dates from 1447. This raises the question why French was still learned at a time when the need for learning French for professional reasons such as a legal career had disappeared.

The ownership of books documented in the Paston letters sheds some light on this question. Sir John Fastolf, a neighbour and distant relative of John Paston I, possessed 19 French books, according to an inventory of 1448 (Beadle 2008), Richard Call, a bailiff of the Pastons, owned one French book, according to an inventory of stolen goods (PL: no. 195), and John Paston II’s “Inventory off Enylyshe Bokys” (PL: no. 316) contains a number of French texts in miscellaneous volumes. Two books stand out in this inventory by being introduced by memorandum (‘note’) rather than item (‘also’) and being referred to as “my olde boke off ...” and “my grete boke off ...”, whereas the others are listed as “a boke off ...”. The latter of the two books was copied for John Paston II by his scribe, William Ebesham (cf. PL: nos. 751 and 755), who may also have copied the former. John Paston II’s “Great book” contains, according to his inventory, the making of knights, jousts, tournaments, fighting in lists, paces and challenges, statutes of war and the De Regimine Principum.

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8 ‘Also, where two or three vowels come together, the vowel in the middle is left out and is neither written nor pronounced, (for) example as (in) j’aime; that is as much as je aime, quantum brevius, tantum melius ['the shorter the better'].

[My translation, MH]
II’s inventory of books and in particular the texts in his “Great book” show a major interest in chivalry. The concept of chivalry, as is evident from the etymology of the word (OED entry “chivalry, n” gives the etymology as “Old French chevalerie (11th cent)”), developed in France, as did the literary genre which celebrated this form of life by depicting chivalrous deeds, the romance. It is defined as follows in the OED (entry “romance” A. n. I. 1):

A medieval narrative (originally in verse, later also in prose) relating the legendary or extraordinary adventures of some hero of chivalry. Also in extended use, with reference to narratives about important religious figures. Originally denoting a composition in the vernacular (French, etc.), as contrasted with works in Latin.

For members of the gentry an incentive for learning French may well have been to gain access to French literature and culture. The steep increase of French vocabulary coincides with the rise of manuscripts of romances. French romances were not only copied in England, but also translated into English, and romances were written in England both in French, or Anglo-Norman, and in English (see Cooper 1999, Cooper 2004: 22-40, Meale 1992).

No French books are mentioned in the Cely Letters. The education of the Celys did not include the learning of French. This is evident from notes by George Cely which are found on the back of a letter written to him by John Dalton, a fellow merchant (CL: 49). They consist of four lines of French text followed by French words and phrases with their English translations. The first four lines appear to be the text of a drinking song:

Je boy Avous mademoy selle / je vous plage movnsenyuevr/
Poirsse ke vous I estes se belle / Je boy, etc.

Je sens lamor rensson estyn selle ke me persse par me
le kowre / Je boy a […] Je voue plege movnsenywr / ⁹

The list of words and phrases are separated by single or double slashes at irregular intervals. The line breaks in the extract follow that of Hanham’s diplomatic edition.

de davns wyth in / de horsse wyth hov[te] Bosonye besy //
shavnte // syng / // vn shavnssovne / an song
lere / Rede vn shen an doge
ffrett covld
Je le vous hay de kavnt je Raye / I have sayd yow whan

⁹ ‘I drink to you mademoiselle / I pledge [i.e. “toast”] you,monsieur
Because you are so beautiful / I drink, etc.
I feel love in its spark that pierces me through
the heart / I drink to […] I pledge [i.e. “toast”] you, monsieur’
[My translation, MH]
The spelling of the French words is phonetic, as can be seen from the omission of mute *t* in *de* (modern French *dit*) and mute *s* in *swy* (modern French *suis*). The word division reflects the English stress system, where stress is predominantly on the first syllable, and therefore stressed syllables are preceded by spaces, as for example *de horse* (modern French *dehors, je raye*) (modern French *j’irais*). This suggests that George Cely had no knowledge of French and wrote the words down as he heard them (see also Hanham 2005: 712-713). The feminine ending in *je swy hovntesse* has been seen as an indication that his teacher was female and possibly the Clare who wrote a love letter to him (*CL*: no 54). The random choice of words of this document suggests that this was not part of a systematic attempt at learning the language, but rather that the notes were occasioned by the situational context. George Cely’s primary motive for this lesson may have been to learn the words of the song. His interest in song and dance is documented in a booklet in which he recorded expenses, which included three pages for musical and dancing lessons (Hanham 1957). This indicates that his lack of any knowledge of French was predominantly a question of interests and priorities rather than opportunity, in other words George Cely preferred to learn dancing to learning French. As he appears to have been a person who enjoyed socialising, this probably means that learning French was of little importance in the merchant community in Flanders.

A further indication that the merchant correspondents in the *Cely Letters* did not know any French are curious phrases beginning with *so it* or *so hit* on the endorsement of letters, as illustrated by the following two examples (my emphasis, MH; italics are used for expanded abbreviations):

To my inteirly beluffyd brother Jorg Cely, merchant at the Staple of Calles, **so it don**.
(John Dalton, 22 September 1481; *CL*: no. 125)

To George Cely merchaunte off the Stappell off Callys, **soo hit dd**.
(William Cely, October 1481; *CL*: no. 128,)

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10 ‘dedans within / dehors without [‘outside’], *bosonye* “busy”/ [*bosony* is derived from *besogne* “work, business” sub verbo in Brachet (1873)].
chanter sing / une chanson a song /
lire read / un chien a dog /
frais cold /
je le vous ai dit quant *j’irais* / I told you when
I would go / je suis honteuse I am ashamed/ je suis honteuse
I am ashamed’      [My translation, MH]
The highlighted phrases clearly correspond to the English ‘be delivered’, which is used by Richard Cely II:

A my whelbelouyd brother George Cely mercha<nt> off the Estapell off Calleys or at the martte, be thys dd\textsuperscript{11}.
(Richard Cely II, 24 October 1481; CL: no. 127)

The origin of the curious so it don(e) can be seen in the endorsement of a French letter written by a Dutch merchant to George Cely:

\textbf{Soyt donne} a Maistre Jorge Silait, demeurrant auptres de Monseigneur Maistre Portier
(Waterin Tabary, before 12 October 1479; CL: no. 62)

Anyone whose education had included formal French teaching would have learned the paradigm of the verb être ‘be’ and would have known the form of the present subjunctive soit, as did William Paston I, who spelled the phrase correctly in his French endorsement. (\textit{PL}: no. 4). The English merchants using the French phrase divided it up into two English words, even though the combination of these words did not make any sense in the context. They must have read endorsements such as that used by Waterin Tabary without knowing what the individual words meant. As the words appeared in combination with the addressee’s name, they were able to deduce that it was how you told the bearer of a letter to deliver it.

Being able to speak French would have been useful for merchants, as it might have allowed them to communicate with French traders. A French-English phrasebook entitled \textit{Dialogues in French and English} aimed at merchants was published by Caxton in 1488. Its French-English table of contents contains inter alia “des diuerses villes et festes Of diuere tounes and fayres”, “Les marchandises des laines The marchandyse of wulle” and “Les noms des cuyres & des peaulx The names of hydes and of skynnes” (quotations from Bradley’s 1900 edition). The dialogues were translated from a fourteenth-century book of dialogues in French and Flemish, which would suggest that French may have been used on the wool markets in Flanders. But if this was the case, the English wool merchants’ exposure to spoken French had no impact on their English. There is no difference in the vocabulary of George Cely, who was based in Calais for several years, from that of his brother Richard Cely II, who was based in London. Non-English technical terms relating to the wool trade are Flemish rather than French in the \textit{Cely Letters}. This does not mean that the Celys did not use words of French origin, but these words appear to have been in general usage. As the Celys managed to run their business successfully for decades, we must conclude that they conducted their business negotiations in Flanders in English. English and Dutch must

\textsuperscript{11} Dd. is a common abbreviation for \textit{delivered}. 
therefore have been close enough for English sellers to understand Dutch buyers and vice versa. For negotiations with French buyers English merchants would probably have used intermediaries. That such multilingual people were available at Calais is documented in a letter by John Paston III to Lord Hastings, dating from 1476 (PL: no. 370): “He is well spokyn jn Inglyshe, metly well in Frenshe, and very parfit in Flemyshe. He can wryght and reed. Hys name is Rychard Stratton. Hys moder is Mastress Grame of Caleys.”

5. Evidence for the Nativisation of French Vocabulary

The problem of differentiating between the use of a word of foreign origin as a foreign word, which implies code switching, and using it as a nativised loanword is notoriously difficult. The documentation of French words in medieval literary works or legal documents does not show whether the respective word was perceived as native. It is therefore of special interest to see to what extent French words were used by people who had no knowledge of French and who were not exposed to French. For this reason the letters of women are of special interest, as female members of the gentry received an education that was geared towards skills other than literacy, embroidery being one of them. Their use of words of French origin can therefore be taken as an indication for nativisation and thus reflect the spread of French vocabulary in contemporary society.

Texts authored by the following four women were selected for a closer analysis: Agnes Paston (AP): married 1420, died 1479; Margaret Paston (MP): married about 1440, died 1484; Margery Brews, later Paston (MB): married 1477, died 1495; Margery Cely (MC): married 1484, date of death unknown. The texts, which are given in full below, are a memorandum of errands from 1458 by Agnes Paston, the wife of William Paston I, and a letter each by three women to their spouses or, in the case of Margery Brews, a future spouse: Margaret Paston to John Paston I, son of William Paston I, dated c.1441, Margery Brews to John Paston III, dated 1477, and Margery Cely to George Cely, dated 1484. Words or parts of words of certain or probable French origin are put in bold in the texts. Italics are used for expanded abbreviations, while inserted interlinear text is put in curly brackets and emendations of lacunae by the editor in square brackets. The line breaks of the editions are retained.

Agnes Paston: Memorandum of errands (28 January 1458), PL: no. 28

1 To prey Grenefeld to sent me feyth fully word by wrytyn who Clement
2 Paston hath do his devere in lernyng.
3 And if he hathe nought do well, nor wyll nought amend, prey hym that
4 he wyll trewly belassch hym tyl he wyll amend;
5 And so ded the last mайster, and þe best that euer he had, att Caumberge.
6 And say Grenefeld that if he wyll take up-on hym to brynge hym in-to
good rewyll and lernyng, that I may verily know he doth hys devere, I
7 wyll geue hym x marc. for hys labore; for I had leuer he were fayr beryed
8 than lost fore defaute.12

Margaret Paston: Letter to John Paston I (c. 1441), PL: no. 124

1 Ryth reuerent and worsypful husbon, I recomawnde me to 30w wyth alle
2 myn symyl herte, and prey {yow to wete} þat there come up xj hundyr
3 Flemyns at Waxham, qwere-of were takyn and kylte and d(r)onchy vij
4 hundyrte. And þa[t] had nowte a be 3e xul a be atte home þis Qwesontyde,
5 and I suppose þat 3e xul be atte home er owte longke.
6 I thanke 30w hertely for my lettyr, for I hadde non of 30w syn I spake
7 wyth yow last for þe matyr of Jon Mariot. þe qwest pasyd nowte of þat
8 day, for my lorde of Norfolke was in towne for Wedyrbyys matyr; qwere-
9 fore he wolde nowt latyd pase. As for-furþe os I k[n]owe Fynche ne
10 Kylbys makeþe no purwyauys for hys gode.
11 No more I wryte to 30w atte þis tyme, but þe Holy Trenyté hawe 30w in kepyng.
12 Wryte at Norweche on Trenyté Sunne-day.
13 3ow[r] MARKARYTE PASTON13

12 ‘To prey Grenefeld to send me a faithful report in writing how Clement Paston has
done his duty in learning. And if he has not done well nor will amend, pray him
that he will really belt him until he will amend; and so did his last master, and the
best that he ever had, at Cambridge. And tell Grenefeld that if he will take (it)
on him to bring him into good rule and learning (so) that I truly know that he
does his duty, I will give him 10 marks for his labour, because I would prefer if he
were buried well rather than lost because of faults [in his character].’ [My transla-
tion, MH]
13 Right reverend and worshipful husband, I recommend myself to you with all my
simple heart and pray {you to know} that there came up eleven hundred Flemings
at Waxham, of whom eight hundred were taken and killed and drowned.
And if that had not been [the case], you would have been at home this Whitsonside,
and I suppose that you will be home some time [literally ‘ought’] not before too long.
I thank you heartily for my letter, for I had none from you since I last spoke with
you about the matter of John Mariot. The quest was not passed on that day, for my
lord of Norfolk was in town about Wedyrby’s matter; wherefore he would not let it
pass. As far as I know, (neither) Fynche nor Kylbys makes purveyance for his
good[s].
I don’t write to you any more at this time, but the Holy Trinity guard you.
Written at Norwich at Trinity Sunday.

Your Margaret Paston.      [Translation mine, MH]
Ryght reverent and wurschypfull and my ryght welebeloued Voluntyne, I recomend me vn-to yowe full hertely, desyring to here of yowr welefare, whiche I beseche Almyghty God long for to preserve vn-to hyss plesure and 30wr hertys desyre. And yf it please 30we to here of my welefare, I am not in good heele of body ner of herte, nor schall be tyll I here from yowe; For þer wottys no creature what peyn þat I endure,
And for to be deede I dare it not dyscure.
And my lady my moder hath labored þe mater to my fadur full delygently, but sche can no more get þen þe knowe of, for þe whech God knowyth I am full sory. But yf that þe loffe me, as I tryste verely that þe do, 3e will not leffe me þe for; for if þat 3e hade not halfe þe lyvelode þat 3e hafe, for to do þe grettyst labure þat any woman on lyve myght, I wold not forsake 30we. And yf þe command me to kepe me true where-euer I go Iwyse I will do all my myght owwe to love and never no mo. And yf my freendys say þat I do amys, þei schal not me let so for to do,
Myn herte me byddys euer more to love owwe
Truly ouer all ethely thing. //
And yf þei be neuer so wroth, I tryst it schall be bettur in tyme comyng.
No more to yowe at this tyme, but the Holy Trinité hafe 30we in kepyng.
And I besech 30we þat this bill be not seyn of non ethely creature safe only 3our-selfe, &c. And thys lettur was indyte at Topcroft wyth full heuy herte, &c.

Be 3our own M.B.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Right reverend and worshipful and my beloved valentine [sweetheart], I recommend myself to you very heartily, desiring to hear of your welfare, which I beseech Almighty God to preserve long to his pleasure and your heart’s desire. And if it should please you to hear of my welfare, I am not in good health of either body or heart, nor shall (I) be till I hear from you; For no creature knows what pain I endure, And for my life I do not dare to discover it (to anyone). And my lady my mother has advocated the matter to my father very diligently, but she can achieve [literally ‘get’] no more than you know of, for which God knows I am very sad. But if you love me, as I really trust you do, you will not leave me because of this; for if you had not half the livelihood that you have, (and) if I had to do the hardest work [literally ‘greatest labour’] that any woman might (have to do) in her life, I would not forsake you. And if you command me to keep myself true wherever I go Certainly I will do all (in) my might to love you and never any more.
Margery Cely: Letter to George Cely in Calais (c. Sept. 1484), CL: no 222

1  Ryght [re]uerent and worchupfull Ser, [I r]ecommand me vnto
2  [you wyth] reuerence, as a s[p]ows how to dow to [h]yr spow[s],
3  as [h]artely as [I can], euermore dessyr <y>ng to her of your wellfar,
4  þe wyche Jhesu presaru[e] to his ple[sure and] your hart desser.
5  And [if] it lyke you Ser to send me a letter o[f you]r w[ellfar], that
6  I dessyr alder[mo]st to her. And yf it lyke you ser to h[er] [o]f my
7  [h]art[he], at the) makynge of thys symple letter I was in good
8  helthe of bode, blessyd be J[hesu as I troste þat ye be, or I wold
9  be ryght sorye.
10  And I pray y[ou] s[e]r that ye well [be of] good cher, for all your
11  goodys ar in safte at home, blessyd be God; and [as sone] as ye may
12  make a nend of your besenes I pray you to sped you ho[me], for
13  I thyng it a long se <s>en [MS senen] se depart from me, and I wott well I
14  sch[all] bery to I see you agayn. And I pray you to send me
15  word in h[aste what] tyme þat ye well be at home yf ye may. Ser,
16  lattyng you w[ette] I sent you a hart of gold to a tokyn be
17  Nycklas Kerkebe, and ye [schold receyue15] in thys lett[er] a feterloke
18  of gold wyth a rebe þerin, and I pray you ser to [t]ake [it] in worthe
19  at thys tyme, for I knew not wo schold care þe let[er]. No mor vnto you at thys
20  tyme, b[ut] Jhesu haue you in hys keppyng.
21      Be your wyf, Margere Celye.
22  Address: To my ryght worchupfull ho{w}ss band Gorge Cely,
23  merchand of þe Stapell at Calys þys be del[y]uered.16

And if my friends say that I do (something) wrong, they shall not stop me from doing so.
My heart bids me to love you forever [literally ‘ever more’]
Truly above all earthly things.
No matter how angry they are, I trust I shall be better in future times.
No more to you at this time, but the Holy Trinity guard you.
And I beseech you that this bill be not seen by any earthly creature except only
yourself, etc. And this letter was composed/dictated at Topcroft with a very heavy
heart, etc.

By your own M.B.’  [My translation, MH]

Davis’s emendation of the lacuna is “schall receive”, but this is not really compatible with “take it in worthe at thys tyme”. My reading of the text is that Margery intended to enclose the fetterlock, but did not do so, as she did not consider it safe.

‘Right reverend and worshipful Sir, I recommend myself to you with reverence, as a spouse ought to do to her spouse, as heartily as I can, evermore desiring to hear of your welfare, which Jesus preserve to his pleasure and your heart’s desire. And
An overview of the words printed in bold is provided in Table 1, which also gives the respective dates of first occurrence, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* for comparison. Cases where French origin is probable, but not absolutely certain are marked by a preceding question mark.

Table 1: French loanwords in the letters/list of errands of four illiterate 15th-century women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/OED date</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>Word/OED date</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>MC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>amend</td>
<td>1330</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pass</td>
<td>1473</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>? belash</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>please</td>
<td>1382</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carry</td>
<td>1340-70</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pleasure</td>
<td>c. 1425</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cheer</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pray</td>
<td>1325</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>command</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>preserve</td>
<td>1432</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>creaturec.</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>purveyance</td>
<td>c. 1325</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>quest</td>
<td>1393</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1297</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>receive</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depart</td>
<td>1340</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>recommend</td>
<td>c. 1386</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desire n</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>reverence</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

if it should please you, Sir, to send me a letter about your welfare, I would most desire to hear (about) that. And if it should please you to hear about my health, at the making of this simple letter I was in good health of body, blessed be Jesus, as I trust that you are, or (else) I would be very sad.

And I pray you, Sir, that you will be of good cheer [i.e. happy], for all your goods are in safety at home, blessed be God, and as soon as you can finish your business, I pray you to speed yourself home, for I think it [is] a long time since you departed from me, and I know well I shall never be merry till I see you again. And I pray you to send me word in haste when you will be at home, if you can. Sir, I let you know that I sent you a heart of gold as a token by Nicklas Kerkebe, and you shall receive [Davis's emendation; I would suggest *schold receyue* in the sense of 'should have received' MH] in this letter a fetterlock of gold with a ruby therein, and I pray you, Sir, to take it in worth [its value], at this time, for I did not know who should carry the letter to you. No more to you at this time, but Jesus guard you.

By your wife, Margery Cely.

To my right worshipful husband George Cely, merchant of the Staple at Calais be this delivered.’ [My translation, MH]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/OED date</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>Word/OED date</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>MC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>desire vb 1340-70</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>reverent 1380</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>devoir 1300</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>rule 1305</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diligently 1340</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>save 1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td>season 1465</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>faithfully 1400</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>indite c. 1374</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>simple 1220</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?haste n. 1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>sir 1320</td>
<td>x (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>labour n 1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Spouse c. 1200</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>labour vba 1449</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>staple 1423</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?letter a 1220</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td>suppose 1340</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>master 1387</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>trinity a 1225</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>matter c. 1230</td>
<td>x (2)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>valentyne a 1450</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>merchant c. 1225</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>verily 1300</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pain 1375</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

The proportion of French loanwords in the three letters ranges between 7% and 9%, ignoring multiple usage of *sir* by which Margery Cely addresses her husband, while it is c. 12.5% in Agnes Paston’s memorandum of errands. As two of the texts are definitely not autographs, the possibility needs to be considered that the vocabulary used is that of the scribe rather than that of the female author. There are several reasons that argue against this. (1.) Changing the wording when writing to dictation is difficult and would therefore only be done for a good reason. Such a change is, for example, documented in terms of address in drafts of petitions to the nobility where the author needed to obtain the addressee’s favour (John Paston I; *PL*: nos 42-44). In terms of their general importance, the texts clearly do not fall into the same category. (2.) Agnes Pas-
ton’s memorandum shows the structure of oral composition, which has not been interfered with. (3.) Margaret Paston’s vocabulary and syntax is consistent across letters written by twenty-nine different scribes (Davis 1971: xxvii). (4.) The verse in Margery Brew’s letter is so poor, with lines of diverging length, that the text is clearly her own attempt at poetry rather than being produced for her by her father’s clerk. This is also confirmed by her choice of “thys lettur was indyte”, which means ‘composed’ and ‘dictated’. In this case, as also in that of Agnes Paston’s memorandum, it is certain that the text is not autograph. The hand of Margery’s Valentine letter has been identified by Davis as that of Thomas Kela, her father’s clerk. In the case of Margaret Paston’s letter and Margery Cely’s letter it has been claimed that they are autograph (Tarvers 1992 and Tarvers 1996). This claim is based on the fact that the hand of Margaret’s letter was described as “crude and unpractised” by Davis, while the hand of Margery Cely’s letter is also found in additions to household accounts (CL: no. 201). While this claim cannot be confirmed or refuted with certainty, it seems safe to assume that the vocabulary is indeed that of the women and not that of their amanuenses.

Further supporting evidence for nativisation are the spellings used. These show consonant elision in the case of dyscure (from Old French descovrir, descouvrir ‘discover’, OED entry “discover, v.”), and vowel reduction in the case of devere (from Old French deveir ‘devoir’, OED entry “devoir, n.”). The texts also include the word belash, which is listed under “be-, prefix” in OED Online, and for which the only documented source is Agnes Paston’s memorandum, where it occurs in “prey hym that he wyll trewly belassch hym tyl he wyll amend”. The OED etymology entry for this word is “? <lash, v1”, which means that it might be derived from the verb, for which the etymology entry reads as follows:

Of difficult etymology. The quotes. seem to show that in branch I. the vb. is the source, not the derivative, of lash n.1 An onomatopoeic origin is possible, and is favoured by the early appearance of the parallel and nearly synonymous lush v.1; compare dash, dush, flash, flush, mash, mush, smash, smush, etc. Some uses resemble those of French lâcher (Old French lascher) to loose, let go (lâcher un coup to ‘let fly’). The senses in branch II. are < lash n.1, and in mod. use have coloured the other senses.

Agnes Paston’s belassch, which refers to corporal punishment, is clearly related to Old French lascher un coup and to OED entry “lash n. 1”, which is defined as “a sudden or violent blow; a dashing or sweeping stroke (obs.)”. The addition of the native English prefix be- to a French root shows a high degree of nativisation. Thus both the nativised forms that occur in the four texts by women, and the fact that so many words borrowed from French are used by illiterate women or women of limited literacy, if one accepts Tarvers’s claim, show that the words were in common use.
6. The Use of English Letter Formulae Based on French Models

Letter writing is governed by conventions. In medieval times these conventions were more pronounced than in modern times. The three letters by Margaret Paston, Margery Brews and Margery Cely contain conventional formulae which recur in all of them. These can be described under the headings of ‘recommendation formula’, ‘welfare formula’ and ‘closing formula’. Tables 2, 3, and 4 illustrate that the formulae are not only used by all three women, but also that they are closely related to French models. The recurrent phrasal units are printed in bold in the tables. Italics indicate expanded abbreviations.

Table 2: English and French recommendation formulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation formula (English)</th>
<th>Recommendation formula (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MP: Ryth reuerent <em>and</em> worsepful husbon, I <em>recomawnde</em> me to 30w wyth alle myn sympyl herte</td>
<td>Model letter from son to mother: Ma chiere et treshoneuree mere, je <em>me recomande a vous en tant comme je puis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB: Ryght reuereent and wurchyp-full and my ryght welebeloued Voluntyne, I <em>recommande me vn-to yowe full hertely</em></td>
<td>Nicholas Cowley to Edmund de Stonor (c. 1365): A mon treshonore et tresreverent syr, <em>je moy recomanke a vous de tout mon cuer</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC: Ryght reuereent <em>and</em> worship-full Ser, I <em>recommend me vnto you wyth reuereence</em>, as a spows how to [ought to] dow to hyr spows, as hartely as I can</td>
<td>Waterin Tabary, Calais (c. 1479): Mon treschier et bien ame Maistre Jorge Silait [sic], <em>je me recommande a votre bonne grasse</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clare to George Cely, Calais (1479): Tréschier et especial, <em>je me recomannde à vous, Jorge Sely</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The English formula “I recommend me (un)to you with all my heart” is modeled on the French *je me recomande a vous de tout mon cœur*, which was in use in England, as the letter by Nicholas Cowley to Edmund Stonor shows. Margery Cely’s more deferent “I recommend me unto you with reverence, as a spouse ought to do to her spouse” is an extended English translation of the French *je me recomande a vous en tant comme je puis*. There is some variation both in the English and the French phrases, which may reflect different relationships between writer and addressee as well as personal choice.
Table 3: English and French welfareformulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Welfare formula (English)</th>
<th>Welfare formula (French)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MB:</strong> desiring to here of your welefare, whec I besche Almyghty God long for to preserve vn-to hys plesure and 3owr her- tys desyre.</td>
<td>Model letter from husband to wife: desirant tout dis d’oier bons nouvelles de vous et de vostre estat et santee que Dieux vueille maintenir et accroistre a sa louange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MC:</strong> euermore dessyr &lt;y&gt; ng to her of your wellfar, þe wyche Jhesu presarue to his plesure and your hart desser</td>
<td>Nicholas Cowley to Edmund de Stonor, (c. 1365): tresentierment endesirant doier bones novelles de vous, come je sui grauntement tenuz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare to George Cely, Calais (1479): Sachies qe je suy en très bonpoint et je prye à Dieu que ainsy soiet il de vous.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The welfare formulae used by Margery Brews and Margery Cely are almost identical. They are abbreviated English versions of the one that is used in the French model letter from husband to wife. Both have the additional “and to your heart’s desire”, which does not occur in the French model, perhaps because it was considered inappropriate to combine “God’s pleasure” and the “addressee’s desire” in one and the same phrase. Margaret Paston’s letter does not contain a welfare formula, while the French female letter writer Clare in her letter uses a formula that combines a statement about her own welfare with good wishes for the addressee’s.

Table 4: English and French closing formulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closing formula (English)</th>
<th>Closing formula (French )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MP:</strong> No more I wryte to 3ow atte bis tyme, but þe Holy Trenyté hawe 3ow in kepyng</td>
<td>Model letter from sister to sister: Aultre respons ne vous fay man- der quant a present. A Dieu qui vous eit en sa garde.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MB:</strong> No more to yowe at this tyme, but the Holy Trinite hafe 3owe in kepyng</td>
<td>Nicholas Cowley to Edmund de Stonor (c. 1365): Autre chose quant a present, monsyr, ne sai escrive, mais je pri a la Trinite qe vous doigne bone vie et sauntee de corps a long durre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MC:</strong> No mor vnto you at thys tyme, b[ut] Jhesu haue you in hys keppyng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The welfare formulae used by Margery Brews and Margery Cely are almost identical. They are abbreviated English versions of the one that is used in the French model letter from husband to wife. Both have the additional “and to your heart’s desire”, which does not occur in the French model, perhaps because it was considered inappropriate to combine “God’s pleasure” and the “addressee’s desire” in one and the same phrase. Margaret Paston’s letter does not contain a welfare formula, while the French female letter writer Clare in her letter uses a formula that combines a statement about her own welfare with good wishes for the addressee’s.
The closing formulae used by the three English women are almost identical. They consist of two parts, one stating that there is no more to say at the time of writing, and another which asks the Trinity or, in the case of Margery Cely’s letter, Jesus to guard the addressee. In all three letters the French phrase *en sa garde* is translated by “in (his) keeping”. The elaborate French *vous fay mander* (‘have you sent’) of the model letter is not translated into English. Instead two of the women use the elliptical verbless construction “no more (un)to you at this time”, which corresponds to Waterin Tabary’s *non plus pour le present*, while Margaret Paston’s version, which includes “write to you” appears to be a reduced English equivalent of the formula used by Nicholas Cowley, which contains *sai escrire* ‘know to write’. Clare’s *say* may likewise be a reduced form of Cowley’s formula.

The three women’s use of letter formulae raises the question of how they acquired them. This question relates to two more general ones: (1.) How were English letter formulae acquired and transmitted in the Middle Ages? and (2.) Why are English letter formulae so similar to French ones? To answer these questions, it is necessary to take a brief look at medieval epistolary culture.

Medieval letter writing is very different from the classical tradition of Latin letter writing that is documented in Cicero’s letters. English medieval letters are also very different from Old English letters (cf. the writs in Harmer 1952). The only phrase that seems to go back to the Old English tradition is *I greet thee/you well*, which is used by the older generation in the correspondences (John Paston I, Agnes Paston, Richard Cely I). According to Constable (1976: 2-24), the reason for the change in style is a shift from the personal letter of antiquity to political and ecclesiastical letters, which gave them a public and authoritative character (cf. Lanham 1992). Murphy (2005: 199) states that already in the Merovingian period prototype letters existed that served as templates for various occasions,
and Lanham (1992) claims that letters had been used as teaching material for teaching Latin from the eighth century. The first known treatise on the *ars dictaminis*, the *Breviarium de dictamine* was written by Alberic of Monte Cassino (born ca. 1030 and died 1094/1099), while the first treatise compiled in England dates from c. 1207 (Robertson 1942: 9). The treatises detailed the general structure of letters consisting of salutatio ‘salutation’, exordium ‘introduction’, narratio ‘report’, petitio ‘request’ and conclusio ‘conclusion’, but they also gave more specific advice on stylistic matters, e.g. the appropriate address terms for different members of the clergy, the nobility and gentry, and relatives, and often contained model letters. More practical manuals which restricted themselves to model letters are documented in the fourteenth century, such as those by Thomas Sampson, who taught letter writing in Oxford in the middle of the fourteenth century (Richardson 1942: 329-450). His manuals, from which some of the French examples in tables 2-4 are taken, contain French and Latin model letters for different occasions. The following extract from a manuscript dating from 1383 illustrates the elaborate recommendation, health and closing formulae proposed by Sampson. The example is a model letter from a son to his father (Richardson 1942: no. 59):

Treshonure sire et piere. Je me recomanc a vostre tresreverente paternite en tant come je suy digne en totes reverences et honurs, desirant soveraignement vostre benison et qe vous soiez en saintee, qe pry a Dieu, par sa mercy, q’il la vous voille longement granter. Et touchant mon estat, treshonure piere, savoir vous pleise q’a l’escrire du cest lettre feu en saintee de corps, la mercy Dieu, […]

Autre chose, treshonure piere, ne vous sai escrire a present, mais qe me voillez recomandre a ma treshonure dame et miere et saluer de par moy mez freres, soers et touz autres amys. Et luy soverain piere Dieu mesmes vous octroie plusours jours et benurez. Escript.17

There is no contemporary English letter writing manual. The first manual in English is William Fullwood’s *The Enimie of Idlenesse*, published in 1586,18 which is a translation of a French manual entitled *Le stile et
manière de composer, dicter, et escrire toute sorte d’epistres, ou lettres mis-siues, tant par réponse que autrement, avec epitome de la poinctuation française, published in 1566, which in turn is indebted to Erasmus of Rotterdam’s influential Libellus de conscribendis epistolis, a Latin manual which was written for his pupil Robert Fisher and first printed in Cambridge in 1521 (Robertson 1942: 10, 13-14). While Fullwood’s manual remained comparatively unknown, Angel Day’s *The English Secretary* (1586), likewise based on a French model, went through a second edition in 1592 and became the source for later manuals. Earlier English manuals have either not survived or did not exist. If none have survived, this indicates that they must have been rare. If they did not exist, the most likely scenario is that English letter writing was taught with the help of French manuals and ad hoc translations by teachers who also taught, or were familiar with, French letter writing. As the first English manual was published almost two centuries after the medium of letter writing shifted from French to English, it seems highly probable that French manuals were used for teaching English letter writing.

Formal teaching was only accessible to men. Yet, women had evidently acquired the formulae. How was this possible? With the exception of Margery Cely, of whose background we know very little except that she was the widow of the London merchant Edmund Rygon (Hanham 1985: 310-311), the women in question came from families who had clerks that were employed as scribes. Unlike in the late modern period, in the medieval period there was no spatial and temporal division between work and private life. Business letters as well as private letters were predominantly dictated to scribes in people’s homes. This means that the women grew up in an environment where letters were regularly dictated. I would argue that the women learned the phrases by regularly hearing them, just as children learn the idiomatic phrases of everyday language from the oral input they receive.19 As medieval letter writing was highly formulaic, the same formulae were repeated in almost every letter with little variation. The formulaic nature of medieval letter writing therefore provided ample opportunity for hearing the formulae and facilitated the process of oral acquisition.

7. Conclusion

The evidence of the three family correspondences of the Stonors, the Pastons and the Celys sheds new light on the date of the shift from French to English in the schoolroom, suggesting that teaching via French may have

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19 The same also holds for the acquisition of professional terminology. Spedding (2008) argues that Margaret Paston acquired her vast legal vocabulary of some 200 terms through exposure.
extended to 1400 in parts of the country and letter writing in French to the beginning of the fifteenth century among members of the gentry. The correspondences document for the second half of the fifteenth century a major difference regarding the acquisition of French between the gentry and the merchants including those who traded extensively on the Continent. The *Cely Letters* show that wool merchants such as the Daltons and Celys had no or next to no knowledge of French. In contrast, the evidence of book ownership in the *Paston Letters* suggests a reading competence in French for members of the gentry as well as for some of their employees. It also shows that the interest in French is closely related to the gentry’s interest in chivalry. This indicates that it was the cultural interest that motivated the continued acquisition of French after French had ceased to be used in courts of law and the royal court. The potential advantage in business interactions on the Continent, which is emphasised in Caxton’s dialogues and is mentioned by Kibbee (1991: 78) as a reason for learning French, was not enough to lead to the acquisition of French among the Celys and their fellow merchants. It is perhaps not just a coincidence of transmission that the earliest French manual aimed at merchants (Caxton’s *Dialogues in French and English*) dates from the late fifteenth century, while Walter de Bibbesworth’s *Tretiz*, which was written for Dionys de Mountechensie, a member of the nobility, dates from the thirteenth. The evidence of the *Cely Letters* suggests that the interest in the French language and culture that existed among members of the gentry did not extend to the merchant classes.

The correspondences also provide information on the nativisation of French words and phrases. A high degree of nativisation of French words in the fifteenth century is documented by the high proportion of words of French origin in texts authored by women who had no knowledge of French. The use of letter formulae calqued on French ones, which is identical in males and females, shows that these likewise had become general usage.

The data challenges the view that language transfer takes predominantly place in spoken interaction, and it shows the importance of the link between cultural transfer and language transfer. In the later Middle Ages French chivalric culture served as a model for the English gentry. French literature provided access to French culture and was the vehicle for linguistic import. In a similar way French letter conventions were taken over, when French letter formulae were transliterated by those who were used to writing in French. The large-scale borrowing from French did not originate in bilingual speakers, but in bilingual writers, i.e. the translators and adaptors of French texts and letter formulae. The quick spread of borrowed words and phrases through English society was facilitated by an oral culture, in which reading aloud was the norm and letters were dictated at home.
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