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The Medieval English Glossary as Vehicle of Cultural Adaptation: The Case of *Ælfric's Vocabulary*

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Abstract

When historical linguists examine medieval glossaries, they commonly do so with a view to studying phoneme changes, morpheme changes, or sememe changes. Along the lines of the last type here, this study analyzes *Ælfric's Vocabulary* (Wright 1884), a Latin-Old English glossary compiled by Abbot *Ælfric* of Eynsham for pedagogical purposes in 11th century England. The discussion focuses on selected items in the glossary that were used to render semantic loans (e.g. E. *gerefa* 'reeve' for L. *consul* 'Roman magistrate', E. *scrud* 'shroud' for L. *tunica* 'tunic'), with special attention to native lexemes (e.g. E. *wesend* 'bison' for L. *urus* 'aurochs') which, due to contact with Latin, acquired new senses but ultimately went obsolete in favor of the Latin terms. Adducing such borrowings, the paper maintains that because *Ælfric's* glossary

was used as a teaching tool for Anglo-Saxon scholars, and contained to a great extent everyday words for people, animals, plants, clothes, weapons, and so on, it fostered polysemy, expansions of basic semantic fields, and the adoption of numerous loanwards from Latin, and as a result, the glossary served distinctly as 'a vehicle of cultural adaptation' (cf. Ashrafova 2024; Şahin 2009).

Keywords: *glossary, polysemy, semantic loan, lexical loan, sememe*

Introduction

The cultural context of language

If our main objective is to analyze instances of semantic borrowing and lexical loss as well as loan-

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word adoption in an attempt to establish that Ælfric's pedagogical glossary was explicitly 'a vehicle of cultural adaptation', perhaps it is best to begin with an orienting definition of culture. The most relevant definition of culture in the OED is under sense III.7.a. It reads thus:

"The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period." (Oxford English Dictionary <https://www.oed.com/>)

Obviously, this is common ground. However, before proceeding further, we may highlight a few terms for clarity in the context of language and borrowing processes. We will be considering the 'ideas' as the concepts signified by loan words and loan senses, the 'social behaviour' as what we might call lettered interlocution, the 'products' as, in our case, Latin loan nouns as well as native Old English equivalents, and 'people' as the speech communities of medieval Latin and English, particularly Ælfric and his fellow scholars in England.

A current reanalysis of cultural phenomena is Barth (2020:35): "[Cultural] ideas are made manifest to other persons [...] only in a necessary conjunction with other aspects or dimensions of existence which together compose social action: aspects such as social relationships, will and purpose, and material context." Here we find an emphasis on sharing culture and social interaction with purpose. Evidence of such will be found in Ælfric's compilation and dissemination of his glossary, which was designed with didactic aspirations.

Methods

Linguistic borrowing as cultural adaptation

In a discussion of German loanwords in English, Ashrafova (2024: 44, 49) generalizes on the matters of linguistic adaptation and cultural influence: "The assimilation of loanwords reflects English's historical openness to linguistic influences, showcasing a linguistic flexibility driven

by social and communicative needs [...] This process of adaptation highlights how loanwords serve as conduits for cultural exchange [...]"

Of course, that openness, that conceptual accommodation, dates back to medieval times, when King Alfred was translating the *Historiarum* of Paulus Orosius and our Abbot Ælfric was compiling his *Vocabulary*, both men addressing what they deemed social and communicative needs among their people in their day (i.e. the 9th century for Alfred and the 10th for Ælfric).

As regards borrowing and consequent developments in the English lexicon, Kizi and Zafarovna (2025: 389) assert: "loanword absorption drives English vocabulary development by creating new patterns through [...] semantic change processes [..., and] adjustments stem from social and cultural contexts".

In Old English, loans from Latin, Old Norse, and so on, often augmented the existing inventory of lexemes, but sense borrowing and consequent polysemy were also commonplace.

Functions and types of loans

With respect to the reasons for lexical and semantic borrowing, we may begin with Jespersen's statement about the borrowing impulse. On this matter, he notes: "When a nation produces something that its neighbors think worthy of imitation, these will take over not only the thing but also the name. This will be the general rule, though exceptions may occur, especially when a language possesses a native word that will lend itself without any special effort to the new thing" (1955: 30).

In a more detailed manner, Görlach (1997: 149-151) outlines several reasons for adopting loans. The most pertinent among them are: gaps in the native lexicon; failed loan translations (*calques*); and association with previous loans of the same semantic field.

This discussion will highlight semantic borrowing along with lexical obsolescence and loss, and we will find that one or more of those reasons was causal. Görlach (1997: 145-147) gives the main types of loans as: loanwords, *calques*, semantic loans, syntactical loans. Below, we will be

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considering Latin semantic loans (which initially caused polysemy in native words), calques (which failed to survive), and Latin loanwords (which displaced native words in Old English times or later).

Background

Aspects of Medieval English glossaries

Wright and Wülcker (1884) is the largest collection of medieval English glossaries. It contains 19, largely anonymous, glossaries, dated from the 8th to 15th centuries, mostly representing the southern dialects of Old and Middle English, and it includes Ælfric's Vocabulary (glossary). Most of the early glossaries are non-alphabetical, and a few glossaries include illustrations of items. In the main, they were intended to serve didactic purposes. (e.g. the oldest one, of the 8th century, was compiled for the school of Canterbury, which was under Archbishop Parker)

Examples of native English words used to translate multiple Latin words: *æcer* 'field', *bed* 'bed', *boc* 'book', *cræft* 'craft', *flod* 'flood'. Such instances reflect semantic borrowing which resulted in polysemy by the addition of new senses. Later, as certain of the Latin equivalents were adopted into the English lexicon as loanwords, some of the new senses were naturally vulnerable to loss, and narrowing made possible in these lexemes. At the same time, the lexicon itself expanded.

Ælfric as teacher and facilitator of linguistic and cultural adaptation

As regards Ælfric the man, the monk, and the teacher, Newman (2010: 166) notes that:

"Ælfric was born in the English kingdom of Wessex around the year 955. He entered the monastery at Winchester as a teen and lived there, as a postulant and eventually as a monk and mass priest, until 987. In that year, Bishop Alphege sent him to the recently founded Abbey of Cernel. Ælfric remained at Cernel until 1005, when he was invited by Æthelmær to be the first abbot of Eynsham Abbey [...] Ælfric would also be known

as a figure significant to the monastic temperament of the late 10th and early 11th centuries, not only for his roles as monk and abbot, but for his dedication to religious and linguistic learning, and, perhaps most of all, for his liturgical homilies, which he composed in the vernacular tongue of English, and cast in an easy, rhythmical, alliterating, and semi-poetical style [...] Ælfric's vigor as a teacher further resulted in the composition of the Grammar and Glossary. Translated from Priscian Major and Minor c. 995, the Grammar outlines the sounds, inflections, and syntax of Latin for Anglo-Saxon pupils. This work is accompanied by the Latin-English Glossary, which contains not only technical terms but also many common words for occupations, plants, and animals. The Glossary is arranged in categories, the first of which relates to the occupation of agriculture, whose subservient but earnest activities were esteemed by the Anglo-Saxon clergy."

On the purposes of Ælfric's glossary, Wright (1884: 105) observes that: "The object of these vocabularies [this glossary] was chiefly twofold; first to interpret Latin words to the Anglo-Saxon scholar, and secondly, to furnish him with the Latin words for the common objects of life. The vocabulary of Alfric would seem to have been originally arranged with a view to the latter object".

Thus, in compiling his glossary, Ælfric wished to introduce his fellows not only to some Latin terms requisite for Christian monks, but also very much to expose them to Latinate culture via basic everyday vocabulary.

Results

Ælfric's Vocabulary (Glossary)

Ælfric's Vocabulary contains approximately 3000 items on 86 pages. This non-alphabetical glossary is divided into 15 sections, and it includes a few unmarked subsections. It is followed by a supplement (the last 21 pages).

It is the longest, early, originally compiled Latin-English glossary. One in the Wright and Wülcker collection is longer (at 136 pages in length), but

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it differs in being derived from the glosses annotated onto a number of texts written in Latin, and perhaps also from previously compiled glosses, like that of Ælfric, which is dated earlier. Similar renderings of native 'lichama' for corpus, 'gerefa' for consul, and so on may indicate as much. By more or less modern categorization (disregarding the inclusion of particular reptiles (e.g. lizards) under 'Insects'), the sections may be given thus: .

Members of society

Insects

Social roles

Nautical terms

Religion

Colors

Body parts

Clothing

Animals

Birds

Plants

Trees

Crops

Agricultural tools

Miscellaneous objects

Ælfric's Glossary: Sample lexical borrowings in the wake of lexical losses

reticulum	[borrowed 17c.]	'fishing net, hairnet'	cicada	[borrowed 15c.]	'homopterous insect, cicada'
feaxnet	[feax obsolete 17c.]	'hairnet'	hilhama	[obsolete OE]	'cricket'
elephants	[borrowed 14c.]	'elephant'	lancea	[borrowed 13c.]	'light spear, lance'
ylp	[obsolete 13c.]	'elephant'	wigar	[obsolete OE]	'war-spear'
camelus	[borrowed 10c.]	'dromedary'	sulphur	[borrowed 14c.]	'brimstone, sulphur'
olfend	[obsolete 13c.]	'dromedary'	swefel	[obsolete OE]	'brimstone, sulphur'
flasco	[borrowed 7c.]	'wooden vessel for wine, flask'	color	[borrowed 14c.]	'color, pigment, complexion'
buteruc	[obsolete OE]	'leather bag for butter, vessel'	bleoh	[archaic 19c.]	'color, hue, complexion'
altar	[borrowed 9c.]	'altar for burnt offerings'	corpus	[borrowed 15c.]	'body, abode of the soul'
weofod	[obsolete 15c.]	'idol, holy nourishment (table)'	lichama	[obsolete 18c.]	'living, non-spiritual body'

The dates and definitions listed above are given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, or the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

Ælfric's Glossary: Sample calques

gnomon	[borrowed 16c.]	'pointer of a sundial, gnomon'
dægmaelspilu	[calque (hapax?)]	'day divider declarer' ('teller of the divisions of day')
armonia	[borrowed 14c.]	'conjunction melody, harmony'
geþwære sang	[calque]	'agreeing song'
libatio	[borrowed in 14c.]	'a sacrificial offering, libation'
wintifer	[calque (hapax?)]	'windy carrier'
fungus	[borrowed 16c.]	'mushroom, fungus'
metteswam	[calque (hapax?)]	'meat-mushroom ('food-fungus')

Similarly, the dates and definitions listed here are given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, or the *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

Additional medieval English calques are listed in Mac Gillivray (1902) and Newman (2006).

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Discussion and conclusions

This discussion has examined the contents and purposes of Ælfric's Vocabulary, and it has contended that the glossary functioned as a 'vehicle of cultural adaptation'.

Borrowings for social roles, animal species, weapons, and items of clothing and furniture have been analyzed. Semantic loans such as 'consul' (signified by gerefa 'reeve'), 'tunic' (signified by scrud 'shroud'), 'cicada' (signified by hilmama 'cricket'), 'corpus as abode of the soul' (signified by lichama 'living physical body'), 'gnomon' (signified by dægmaelspilu a calque meaning 'teller of the divisions of day'), and others have been adduced. These loans, causing polysemy, evidently filled perceived lexical gaps in Old English times, and later as such native words were supplanted by their Latin equivalents, those loanwords functioned to represent sememes which would otherwise have been lost as their host calques (e.g. metteswam 'meat-mushroom') went obsolete.

Within its socio-cultural context (cf. Kizi and Zafarovna 2025: 389) and to satisfy "communicative needs" (Ashrafova 2024: 44), the design of the glossary served the purpose of edification via the social actions (cf. Barth 2020:35) of the teacher and the learner as well as the purpose of cultural accommodation. The transfer of these ideas by means of such words required linguistico-cultural adaptation; it required accommodations to Latinize cultural concepts which were "worthy of imitation" (cf. Jespersen 1955: 30) as the English lexemes underwent polysemy, expanding semantic fields by adding sememes to the mental lexicons of Anglo-Saxon scholars and later to those of other speakers of English.

Ultimately, English has adapted linguistico-culturally in a variety of ways over the centuries. Neologisms from native material have been formed and have spread only to go obsolete some generations afterward. Loanwords from dozens of languages have gained currency and later fallen out of use. Senses have been borrowed and then lost. No doubt the net result of those thousands upon

thousands of adaptations, that is, the lexis of Present-Day English, would, were they alive today, captivate the teachers of old, like Ælfric.

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