French Influence on the English Legal Language of the Chancery in the First Half of the Fifteenth Century

Research topic

The documents from the late medieval Chancery (the governmental secretariat) have been scrutinised by linguists mainly in relation to the standardisation of English, as the influence of their linguistic features on this process and their interaction with urban vernaculars of major regional centres is still unclear. However, these documents remain to be explored with regard to the interface between French and English linguistic practices, an approach that has borne much fruit in literary texts (e.g. Jefferson & Putter 2013).

The government was at the core of medieval England's multilingual culture. While administrative processes had been dominated by French and Latin for most of the post-Conquest period, English started to assert itself as a language of government administration in the late fourteenth century (principally after the Statute of Pleadings in 1362, which mandated pleading in English in legal cases, and the development of the equity jurisdiction of Chancery, whose records survive in English). As scribes switched to English, they imported into their mother tongue many of the same legal phrases and words that they had used when writing these same kinds of documents in French. Durkin (2014) has shown that most French loanwords entered the English language between 1350 and 1500, but no work has been done on the contribution to this process by the switch from French to English in government administration. This project aims to explore the lexical debts (loan-words, semantic loans and phraseology, including collocations, binomials, etc.) to French legal practices in early fifteenth-century Chancery documents. Thus, the project will bring together historical linguistics, historical sociolinguistics and the understanding of the mechanics of government; and will further complement and advance current work on the interaction between the two languages in specific lexico-semantic domains (cp. the *Bilingual Thesaurus of Everyday Life in Medieval England*; https://thesaurus.ac.uk/bth/).

Research questions

The main research question of the project is: What is the French lexical basis of fifteenth-century governmental English?

This question is, in turn, related to a number of further questions:

To what extent can we still see the contribution of Anglo-Saxon legal terminology in these fifteenth-century texts?

Are there specific areas of government that are particularly prone to borrowing or retention of traditional terminology? If so, what can this tell us about the mechanics of government?

How can fifteenth-century Chancery documents help us understand the multilingualism of late-medieval England and vice-versa?

Research context

In order to answer these questions, the student will be supported by three leading scholars in the fields of medieval multilingualism and governmental administration:

Dr Sara M. Pons-Sanz (Cardiff University) and Prof. Ad Putter (University of Bristol) are experts on the impact that medieval multilingualism had on the development of the English lexicon and its manifestations in literary and non-literary texts, including sociolinguistic and stylistic choices. Pons-Sanz's work on the medieval English legal technolect fully complements Putter's expertise in Anglo-French linguistic and textual interactions.

Dr Paul Dryburgh (The National Archives, TNA) is a historian who specialises in medieval government in the British Isles. Besides providing invaluable advice on the context of administrative history, he will facilitate the student's access to the documents held in TNA, which form the corpus of this study; and to the linguistic, palaeographic and archival training that TNA can offer. This training and Dr Dryburgh's time constitutes TNA's in-kind contribution to the collaboration.

This project speaks directly to the TNA's research priorities, particularly their interest in gaining better understanding of state transformations and social reform over time, in its People, Place and Rule strand (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-research-and-academic-collaboration/our-research-and-people/our-research-priorities/people-place-and-rule/).

The three supervisors already have a proven track record of collaboration, through the supervision of another DTP-funded student (Pons-Sanz and Putter) and through the AHRC-funded 'Medieval English (*ca*650-1500) in a Multilingual Context' network, led by Pons-Sanz.

Methodological approach and existing literature

The student will analyse the lexis of the fifteenth-century Chancery documents held at TNA (almost all of which remain unedited) with the help of key lexicographical resources: the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (*OED*; https://www.oed.com), the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*) and associated corpus (https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary) and the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (*AND*; http://www.anglo-norman.net). In his study on the relationship between Chancery and Standard English, Fischer (1977) included a preliminary list of English terms found in Chancery records. However, this list is not complete nor does it include etymological analysis.

This project will have a scholarly impact broader than the historical analysis of English lexis, not only in relation to the research questions stated above, but also in two very concrete ways:
1. Lexicographical advances: the *OED* and the *AND* are currently undergoing significant revisions, and senior editors from both dictionaries (Drs Philip Durkin and Heather Pagan, respectively) have expressed their interest in incorporating findings from the project (Fischer 1977 already noted that not all the English terms Chancery

documents are included in the *OED*). Moreover, Pagan has offered to give the student access to their unpublished lexicographic and documentary materials.
2. Accessibility of historical records: as part of the project, the student will edit some of the texts that s/he will work on, thus facilitating further work on TNA's vast historical records.

Suitability for doctoral work

The project will make a significant contribution to current scholarly knowledge regarding the impact of medieval multilingualism on English lexical practices and the development of legal vocabulary, as well as the workings of the late-medieval Chancery. Moreover, as noted above, its impact will extend beyond its immediate remit. In spite of its breadth and ambition, the project can be completed in three years: it is based on a well-defined corpus (its exact size will be established after initial archival work) which can be analysed through advanced lexicographical resources.

References

Durkin, P. *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English* (Oxford, 2014)

Fischer, John H. 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century', *Speculum* 52 (1977): 870-99

Jefferson, J., and A. Putter (eds). *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066-1520): Sources and Analysis* (Turnhout, 2013)