

On The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project

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A proposal for discussing the goals, limits, benefits and problems of creating a multi-lingual dictionary, using the web-based Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project as a basis for consideration. Using PowerPoint slides and examples from ongoing work, the presentation will demonstrate both the methods in use for the dictionary and will raise questions regarding lexical practice when developing dictionaries for describing the lexis of multilingual communities.

In medieval Britain, cloth production and the international trade of textiles and clothing constituted a major sector of the economy. Dress was not only a source of pride or shame but signified occupation, status and even virtue across the many cultural groups found through Western Europe. Far reaching trade routes brought precious linens and silks from the South and East in return for materials manufactured on the island, linking the speakers of numerous Indo-European languages through an ever-increasing multilingual vocabulary. Despite the historic, economic and cultural importance of evidence provided through studies of cloth and clothing, both as artifacts and as signifiers for heroic or saintly attributes in the contemporary literature, the study of medieval textiles, as with most daily “things”, currently must be mined from sources produced by diverse academic disciplines: archaeology, art history, literature and linguistics.¹

Adding to the difficulties for the researcher of British textiles is the disparate treatment of vocabulary found in the literature of the British Isles, a vocabulary documented in specialist dictionaries, segregated by syntactic or morphological criteria rather than by geographic or communal-economic evidence. In reality, particular articles of clothing or materials were rarely restricted to single linguistic communities as they traveled along trade routes, bringing new cultural terminology and core variants into the native languages of Britain. Moreover, the language of certain types of clothing, such as that of the ecclesiastic community, became so specialized as to exist in jargon, understandable more in the liturgical or monastic context than one bound by geography or nationality. In recent years, a push to examine the multilingual connections formed during the Norman Conquest has been made, but not only did words bounce back and forth across the morphological boundaries of Anglo-Norman, Latin, English (and to a lesser extent Welsh), but between Irish, Norse, Scots and Scots-Gaelic. For the lexicographer, the problems inherent in creating a lexicon to deal with these linguistic communities were summed up by David Trotter in the introduction to *Multilingualism in Later medieval Britain*:

[lexicographers] compiling dictionaries of the languages of medieval Britain, have to contend with the same problem of deciding at what point words are a part of “their” language, and when what some would call “loanwords” become a naturalised part of the target language...the monolingual approach is neither appropriate nor adequate for the investigation of language use in a society where multilingualism was endemic and where, for the educated at least, monolingualism was the exception and not the norm. (2000: 3)

This move toward the study of multilingualism in medieval texts follows a similar move made by scholars of modern multilingualism. In 1992, Carol Eastman published a collection of articles regarding code switching and word borrowing. In it she explains, “[t]he twelve papers in

¹ Quotation marks have been used around the loaded term *thing*. In this paper the term will be used to represent both referenced physical objects or ideas found in a culture, similar to the terms *die Sache* and *la chose*.

this volume share certain common themes. One is that the effort to distinguish codeswitching, codemixing, and borrowing are doomed. In addition the study of loanwords *per se* out of context is a relic of the past”(1). While the presence of multilingualism among the masses of medieval Britain should not be overstated, lexicographers are faced with the fact that, as far as the Middle Ages in Britain are concerned, the extant evidence speaks only of the educated, often bilingual, authors and translators who were schooled in Latin.

Given current views of code switching and multilingualism, geographical proximity and interaction through labor and trade would argue that this textual linguistic evidence should be categorized and analyzed together, rather than be treated as distinct codes limited to monolingual groups. Therefore, the Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project was started to address the issues of creating a tool for this purpose, a tool which weaves together dictionary, encyclopedia and bibliography. Funded for five years, the project is in its second year of operation with the primary goal of offering an on-line multilingual dictionary addressing the vocabulary of cloth and clothing in Medieval Britain. This dictionary will also offer non-lexical evidence for the subject by attempting to create a method for cataloguing non-textual evidence in the same manner as lexis. Moreover, there exist secondary goals for the project. As it works toward creating such a dictionary, the project is examining methods for creating a corpus of evidence from text, artifact and art, a corpus which could be expanded to include other areas of study, such as agriculture and weaponry. Finally, the project attempts to create a method in which evidence from other linguistic groups in medieval Europe could be included. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to explaining the methods used in assembling such a database and, while expressing the boundaries of our search, to offering current ideas for allowing those boundaries to be crossed in the future.

At the centre of The Lexis Project is the assembly and examination of the lexis of textiles, clothing and related tools and economic interests found in the early languages of Britain (Old and Middle English, Old Scots and Norn; Welsh, Irish and other insular Celtic languages; Anglo-Norman French and Medieval Latin). Moreover, because commercial and intellectual trade was not restricted to the insular communities, some related linguistic material from Norse and other economically-related linguistic communities will be noted when possible.²

It is worthwhile to discuss the limits on the scope of such an investigation, as questions regarding that scope lie at the heart of creating such a dictionary. Instead of being bound by purely linguistic and morphological considerations, The Lexis Project is instead bound by three other factors: temporality, geographical area, and subject area. First, practical data regarding the lexis of the British Isles is obtainable from around the year 700CE; therefore, that year is the starting point of the study. As with *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, the evidence of Classical Latin before the 700s will have to be left to other projects. However, the use of Classical Latin terms in medieval Britain will be investigated, particularly in the manner in which they are glossed in the vulgar languages and, just as importantly, the manners in which they are used in texts that employ code-switching. Many Latin clothing terms, particularly those relating to ecclesiastical vestment, were borrowed with little phonological change into all tongues of medieval Britain: *paillium* appears in *The Dictionary of the Irish Language*; *pallium* appears in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*; *palleon* appears in *The Middle English Dictionary*; *pyll* in *Geriadur Prifysgol Cymru*; and many variants appear in *The Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. Similar examples are numerous, and the manner in which each “word” is treated by each dictionary is different, leaving the researcher unable to compare them.

² The phrase “Linguistic Community” has been chosen to describe a community (NOT geographically bound) that shares a morphological and syntactic code. In practical terms, The Lexis Project relies on the current dictionaries to define the Linguistic Communities employing a term. This term should not be confused with “Linguistic Area” or “Sprachbund”, two terms which imply geographical limits and often refer to a community of speakers wherein three or more differing codes are found; see, for example Thomason (2001: 99).

To address the widespread use of terms, The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project will offer searchable lemmata that are not predetermined by linguistic morphology; rather, they will be a collection of orthographical variants of terms. For example, a searchable lemma for the term mentioned above will include *paillium*, *pallium*, *palleon*, *pyll*, etc. Orthographical forms will be determined by the forms found in the most modern scholarly dictionaries such as *The Dictionary of Old English*, *The Middle English Dictionary*, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary* and the *electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*. Reliance on lemma forms found in these dictionaries will allow the end user of our product to make use of language-specific dictionaries for particular morphological information whilst browsing our product for a multilingual word study. When we have added an otherwise non-lemmatized term, we provide our spelling as part of the searchable lemma.

Such a methodology does not necessitate creating a completely etymological dictionary. Many etymological cognates found in the languages ceased to be readily recognizable as such by the eighth century; therefore, although Middle Welsh *gwe* and Old English *web* may ultimately share an Indo-European root, the two are not covered as a single term in our lexicon. Instead, the etymological relationship is noted for cross reference and comparison. This type of evidence, and related etymological evidence including scholarship, is treated separately from the textual evidence. Nevertheless, when addressing the textual evidence, a comparable set of semantic components can be applied when defining both terms, thus allowing comparison.

The final point of investigation is 1450CE, a date often chosen by English lexicographers for historical reasons. It is also chosen for reasons of practicality, as it is at this time that the English language, the greatest linguistic supplier of lexemes for the database, undergoes a shift into Early Modern English. Given the time limits of the funding, it would be impractical to account for the new vocabulary.

The second limitation to our study is geography. Professor Frankwalt Möhren (2000: 157), editor for *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*, once critiqued a British tendency toward scholarly isolationism. Restricting the project investigation to the British Isles is a most arbitrary boundary given the shifting political alliances and vast trade and intellectual networks in Europe—the variety in the lexicon is its own proof. Nevertheless, we cannot but fall back upon a defence for limited projects that the author offered in the same article (Möhren 2000: 158): “I [Möhren] am not sure that these times are fit for that challenge, times where serious labour is much less honoured than ‘science-management’ and ‘showy events’”. After its five-year life span, we hope that The Lexis Project can produce a showy product. Nevertheless, by creating a format to which similar studies could be amended—thus allowing for future work on continental material—perhaps ongoing labor could be undertaken as a series of showy events. As etymological cognates from non-insular linguistic evidence are added, care is taken to rely on lemma orthography present in the relevant lexical works. As lexes from new linguistic communities can be accommodated, whether in whole or in part, terms can be included in the searchable lemmata forms as textual evidence is incorporated into the analysis.

The third boundary is the subject, *i.e.* the “thing,” cloth and clothing, and related areas in the culture. A large amount of archeological work has been completed in England already, and as more information comes to light, the importance and position of the medieval British Isles in a European economy appears to grow. The Lexis concerns itself not only with the names of clothing but names of headgear, tools, trades, places, persons and industries related to clothing and with the specialized clothing found in other trades, subjects that are the first restrictive level of typology in the database. The extent to which we will be able to fully explore the lexis of all of these areas is yet to be seen. In any case, the scope of such a study is still quite broad, and in the future, even more mercantile and manufacturing terminology could be added as new types of materials are added to the database.

The biggest remove from traditional lexical practice is the application of the project’s typology. In order to handle such a large database of items, it was necessary to create an expandable but restrictive typology that was not applied to terms but to denotations found for terms. Terms often resist a strict typology; Old English *bænd*, for example, may refer to a distinct article of

clothing worn about the head, but may also refer to a decorative strip of material encircling a larger garment among other “things”. If one were to apply a strict typology to categorizing this referent as either *headpiece* or *jewelry* or *decoration*, the term would not be fully searchable. However, it is possible to apply such a typology to each denotation found for a term. Therefore, the level at which searching in the database takes place is primarily at the denotative level. Instead of directing cross-referential searches to terms, each particular denotation is marked individually as a type: e.g. “accessory”, “dye”, “garment”, “personal name.”

Relying on the textual evidence, each denotation is then tagged with semantic components such as “gender use”, “status” and “rank” of the user, “ceremonial nature of usage”, relevant body parts, etc., when the evidence presents itself. Rather than looking for synonyms on the term level, synonymous meaning will be searched between denotations. In addition to tagging each denotation, when obvious semantic cognates for denotations are found in other terms, such as frequent glosses, those cognates are noted for cross-comparison.

This type of categorization is also applied to the non-linguistic data. If “things” are represented in art or found as artifacts, they, too, are marked with tags composed of the same semantic components. Using cross-referential searches, *most-likely* matches between denotations for terms and non-literary evidence can be provided. It is accepted that *exact* matches between denotations, representations or “things” are not possible given the nature of contextual situation. A similar method has been tested by Alan Frantzen.³ Frantzen’s textual database is much smaller, however, and his goal is to match artifacts with particular textual attestations. Using criteria of five determiners, matches between “thing” and “word” are evaluated. The characteristics used as determiners by Frantzen are based on literary and contextual issues such as description in a text and the location of found objects and provenance of manuscript for each attestation. While the method is certainly intriguing, until we are able to reliably date and geographically place all manuscripts and texts, a less-exact but broader-ranging analysis such as that found in The Lexis Project seems preferable.⁴

Methods used by The Lexis Project attempt to mediate the difficulties found in all socio-historic studies. On the one hand, studies can become fetishist in nature. Just as the manuscript context for each textual attestation can become an object of singular research, focus on a particular artifact dug from the ground can become the same, but studies of that type generally do not lead to comparative views regarding the social nature of history.⁵ On the other hand, when dealing with linguistic evidence from the past through texts, scholars are always obliged to admit that they are “making the best use of bad data” (Labov 1994: 11), just as structuralists such as Barthes are denounced as performing “armchair analysis” by relying on idealized or incomplete generalizations of society for evidence (Entwistle 2000: 69).⁶

³ Frantzen’s work, examining only texts in Old English, can be found on the internet at www.anglo-saxon.net. He provides a small sample of textual attestations and artifacts for comparison and invites suggestions from users.

⁴ While we agree that geographically placing each manuscript attestation would be helpful for linguistic study of a term, that step alone would not address the sociolinguistic factors in play, nor does it take into account the historical reality of textual transmission and multilingualism in the Middle Ages. The presence of a certain “English” term in a manuscript found in Ireland would not necessarily offer proof of the existence of the referential object in Ireland, as the text may have been transmitted without the related cultural artefact. Therefore, placing the “text” in geographical relation to a referential object would be more methodologically sound, though not necessarily probable.

⁵ Indeed, both modern textual critics and fashion critics have complained about fetishism. An apology for fetishism in manuscript studies was offered by Andrew Taylor (2002: 97), while Joanne Entwistle complained about the lack of social consideration in clothing study, which focused too much on the object without regard to its relation to a body and society (2000: 10).

⁶ Barthes’s incomplete “corpus” included a study of the 1958-59, June – June issues of two fashion journals: *Elle* and *Jardin des Modes* (1967: 21). A defence for the use of texts as sample data for sociolinguistic study of Middle English was provided by Tim William Machan, which amounts to

The project's goal is to provide *most-likely* matches by comparing shared semantic components. "Things" will be identified with Modern English names for lemma, preferably the Modern English name found in the appropriate scholarship, but those Modern English terms will never be assumed to relate directly to medieval terminology presented in the lexis. For example, although the Bayeux Tapestry has been referred to as such for hundreds of years, the work, in fact, does not fulfill the technical characteristics of "tapestry," *i.e.* a decorated cloth created using a woven pattern. The Bayeux Tapestry is, in truth, embroidery, that is a woven cloth onto which a pattern is stitched. Therefore, a cross-referential search between description of object and description of name would not produce a match despite the commonly-used name. Moreover, the three types of evidence for "things" will be presented separately, recognizing that each type of evidence has a differing value: artifacts that can be reliably dated to the time period will be described and tagged under the heading of Archaeology; depictions of objects will be presented under the heading of Art and Illustration; textual evidence will be treated in the lexis as evidence from Literature.⁷

The use of this type of cross-referencing is useful as the project can uncover synonymous terms or calques and help to identify word shifting as loanwords for ideas or objects have invaded native linguistic communities. One of the greatest difficulties for modern scholars of Middle English is to reveal the winding path along which much of the vocabulary of phrasing travels before it enters the language from Latin or Anglo-Norman French. Similarly, Irish scholars are often at odds to determine the immediate source of Germanic terms, coming from Norse or English. While The Lexis Project does not suggest that such an approach will always shine a light upon these murky paths, by offering strong comparative semantic evidence, at the very least, a greater understanding of how these shared terms were used or how native terms were affected can be provided.

Clothing is more than an object of economy and a defense against cold and shame. Like many other objects carried or inscribed upon the person, clothing signifies greater issues such as wealth, status, occupation, chastity and affiliation. Even before the Black Knight and a cowboy's black hat, colored clothing identified characters and signified status in literature. That signification was also translated into the works of the British literati: Christ's purple robe is represented in many ways in medieval British media, but the cloth remains a regal purple, even when it is not entirely certain that the society had the means to reproduce the dye necessary to recreate the garment. Therefore, literary representation of clothing will be studied not only in relation to other evidence, such as artistic or archeological, but also in terms of an awareness of symbolic imagery presented in the materials. As with the method for dealing with denotation above, readily identifiable connotations can also be explored and tagged with semantic components, though the application of the markers is far more subjective.

By restricting our subject of study, more attention can be placed on contextual and social issues regarding the lexicon. For example, terms primarily found in hagiographic literature can be identified as such. Similarly, terms for objects found in depictions of Biblical stories or romance can be compared across previously restrictive morphological boundaries. That is, a single story may exist in more than one language. It is possible to create specific denotational entries for unique references, such as the garment worn by Christ at the crucifixion. These particular denotations can then be cross-referenced with other denotations found under other lexical terms, and, thereafter, be compared according to such contextual markers as linguistic community, literary genre, *etc.*

recognizing that while all types of linguistic study have issues of selection in corpus construction, at least corpora obtained from medieval manuscripts are not affected by scholarly bias (2003: 15-17).

⁷ This tri-fold division is similar to that presented by Barthes, *les trois vêtements*, ("the vestment", "the vestment image", "the written vestment") though the media from each type of evidence will be a bit more varied (1967: 13). Unlike Barthes's study, however, we do not expect to find instances of written and iconic evidence in simultaneous presentation, unless in rare cases such as manuscript illumination of texts wherein the garment is a significant actor in the text, such as Joseph's "coat of many colours."

This paper has presented some but not all of the methods being used to create a multilingual research dictionary for researchers of a particular section of culture: that of cloth and clothing. The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project is entering its third year of existence, and soon we will be creating the end-user interface for the internet, but further changes to the organization of the database can be incorporated given useful feedback from conferences such as this one. Already, it is clear that a five-year period is simply not enough to address every aspect that one wishes for a project such as this, so as the project hurries to complete its showy piece of work, it is hoped that future projects, similar to ours, can build upon and improve our work.

Further information regarding *The Lexis of Cloth and Clothing Project*, including the author's contact information, can be found at <http://lexisproject.arts.manchester.ac.uk/>.

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