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Linguistic diversity in medieval England: continuity and discontinuity

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Abstract

Before the Norman Conquest in 1066, written English had enjoyed equal status with Latin. Post-Conquest, while spoken English continued to be the first language of the vast majority, it was not the vernacular of the conquering elite. Written English was therefore relegated to a much more lowly status than it had enjoyed hitherto. Latin and then (increasingly from mid-12th cent) French were used for all serious literature and documents. Old English texts continued to be copied (and to a certain extent updated) post-Conquest, especially in certain religious centres where they were objects of study. But there survive very few texts *newly composed* in the English that actually dates from the late 11th and early 12th century. When newly written English began gradually to emerge again from the mid-12th century onwards, it was apparent that: (a) it had changed quite radically from the period when it was last in extensive use; (b) its written forms reflected the spoken usage not only of the time but also of the place where it was written.

This dialectal variation is already evident in the earliest post-Conquest new works in English. It is therefore possible, even at this period, to map some of the regional linguistic variation. But it takes some time for the amount of English writing to build up, and survival of manuscripts is in any case not predictable. However, by 1365 – the focus date of this conference – English was being used for all kinds of writing: religious and secular, prose and verse, and even for some classes of official legal and government documents which had previously been produced in Latin. There is therefore a vast amount of locally written English available to inform the very complex dialectal continuum of the later Middle English period.

A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English, 1150–1325 (LAEME) was published as a free-access website in 2008. Although much of the work involved in its making was thus available, it was not complete at the time of first publication. In 2013 a much-revised version was brought out. Even more recently (2014/15), a vastly increased number (over 1800) of online dialectal feature maps have been added. Moreover, also in 2013, a revised on-line edition of *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (e-LALME) was published. The period covered by (e)LALME is ca 1350–1450. The provision of more than 1700 on-line feature maps (as opposed to the 1200 in the original printed *Atlas*) formed part of the enhancement project for this electronic version.

Far less source material survives from 1150–1325 than from 1350–1450 and the regional coverage provided by LAEME is less dense and very patchy compared to that of eLALME. Nevertheless, it is now possible to compare regional distributions of different forms for the same linguistic item from two periods of the history of English

on either side of our focus date of 1365. In this presentation, I will illustrate three types of distributions:

- (a) those where the regional pattern of selected features in the attested forms for a particular item is largely continued from early Middle English into late Middle English;
- (b) those showing how some features may be recessive and some emergent between early Middle English and late Middle English;
- (c) those that illustrate a comparatively mixed picture for early Middle English, while the late Middle English picture shows a clearer regional ‘consensus’.

References

eLALME = M. Benskin and M. Laing 2013–. An Electronic Version of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English with webscripts by V. Karaiskos and K. Williamson. [<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>] Edinburgh: © The Authors and The University of Edinburgh.

LAEME = Laing, Margaret 2013–. A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English, 1150–1325, Version 3.2 (With R. Lass (Introduction) and webscripts by Keith Williamson, Vasilis Karaiskos and Sherrylyn Branchaw.) [<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/laeme2/laeme2.html>]. Edinburgh: © The University of Edinburgh.

LALME = Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels & Michael Benskin (with the assistance of Margaret Laing and Keith Williamson) 1986. *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediæval English*. 4 vols. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press/Edinburgh: Mercat Press.