

## LOANWORDS AND STYLISTICS: ON THE GALLICISMS IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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**Abstract.** This article explores the way in which loanwords become incorporated into a recipient language. It concentrates on the interim period, the time between the borrowing of a new word from a donor language and its incorporation into a recipient language. During this period the new word still retains some of its “foreignness”, its associations with another language and culture, therefore its stylistic potential is enhanced. The material is taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an English poem written in the latter half of the 14th century, at the time of the greatest influx of French words into English. This article shows that the *Gawain*-poet uses gallicisms as an expressive part of his poetic technique due to their stylistic potential as what were at the time recent borrowings.

**Keywords:** Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, gallicism, bilingualism in Late Medieval England, interim period, stylistics, historical linguistics, Middle English

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### 1. Introduction

Loanword research is an integral part of historical linguistics and the study of language contact. However, for a long time its primary concern has been classifying different types of words according to their phonological or morphological adaptation, semantic domains, or diachronically (cf. Treffers-Daller 2010: 17–19). In this article I would like to focus on another aspect of the process of borrowing, which is the stylistic importance of foreign elements that they can acquire during the initial period of their existence in a language. I turn to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an English text that witnessed a period of enormous introduction of French words and phrases (Baugh and Cable 2002: 177–178), and examine the nature and the author’s contextual use of borrowings. The quotations, word forms and lines are given according to SGGK (1967); the translation into modern English, unless otherwise stated, is by J.R.R. Tolkien from SGGK (2006). The etymologies and the dates for the first recorded occurrences are taken from the MED and the OED.

## 2. Background

In my approach to the text written when a huge number of foreign words were being absorbed into the native stock, I follow the same methods as Hope (1973) used to study the language of Dante's *Divina Commedia*. In his analysis Hope shows that those gallicisms that were borrowed nearer to Dante's lifetime acquire new expressive power in his work: they appear in contexts that have to do with strong feelings, such as fear, horror, hatred, indignation, or wrath. They belong to the interim period, the time between the entering of a new word from a lending language and its acceptance as a conventional one in the receiving lexicon. Therefore, as a starting point, I use Hope's definition of this period that was based on his earlier work (1971: 609–611).

According to Hope, “the [interim] period is one of experimentation and of tentative confrontation with the semantic pattern that already exists; it is also one in which the stylistic or expressive potential of the word is enhanced because it may be used to form novel collocations. The new term may participate in imagery with greater impact because it is at liberty to inspire and retain new aesthetic or emotive connotations; in brief, it has not yet found its feet in terms of either form or meaning and therefore is imbued with a greater suggestive force...” (1973: 157).

The coexistence of French and English in Late Medieval England and the use of both of them in the same registers on a daily basis by the learned are today well-known facts (e. g., Rothwell 1985, 1994, and 2001). Various documents of the 14th and 15th centuries ranging from macaronic poetry to medical and scientific writing provide us with many examples of code-switching. However, by the latter half of the 14th century the use of French was gradually declining, thus leading to large-scale lexical borrowing into English, which was replacing French (Burnley 1992: 431). This also gave rise to a number of outstanding literary works – the period from 1350 to 1400 is often called the Period of Great Individual Writers. To this period belong Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland, John Wycliffe, and the anonymous *Gawain*-poet.

Though much has been said on bilingualism in Late Medieval England in general, it seems that still, as Machan puts it, “much remains to be discovered about the complexities and nuances of late-medieval sociolinguistic practice” (2005: 112). The outcomes of prolonged language contact in the realm of lexical stylistics, the use of French loanwords in their “interim period” by sophisticated poets have started to attract researchers' attention. For example, it has been observed that the density of borrowings in Chaucer's *Canterbury*

*Tales* is associated with the differences in character descriptions and their status (Miller 2012: 164–165, Pons-Sanz forthcoming, and see the references in these two works), or that in *Boece* Chaucer alternated between condensing French loanwords and avoiding them in different passages depending on their topic (Žoludeva 2010: 109–117). However, little has been said about the use of gallicisms by Chaucer’s contemporary, the *Gawain*-poet. Both of these authors are equally renowned for their rich and linguistically varied vocabulary, yet the *Gawain*-poet belonged to a different stylistic community (Burnley 1992: 454). Some of the peculiarities of his use of French loanwords have been examined by Clough 1985, and Putter 2011, the former looking into the poet’s description of Bertilak’s castle, and the latter concentrating on the few instances of code-switching. I hope that the current article will continue this line of studies.

### 3. French element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – an overview

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written in the north-west midlands in the latter half of the 14th century (the manuscript is dated c. 1400), but its language is far more complex than a local dialect and consists of several elements. Its author, and here I echo many critics, is adept at lexical subtlety: he “is distinguished from fellow alliterative poets as much as from writers of other forms of Middle English verse, by his richness of vocabulary and the precision with which... he makes use of it” (Davenport 1991: 219; cf. Clough 1985: 195–196). On the one hand, the *Gawain*-poet uses some native words that were characteristic of Old and Middle English alliterative poetry. On the other hand, more than one third of his vocabulary is not derived from Old English. At a rough estimate, of a total of 2650 words about 250 have Scandinavian etymologies (although at the time they were no longer considered borrowings, but rather northern dialect words (Burnley 1992: 460)) and about 750 are of French origin (figures from SGGK 1967: 138). Thus, the French element in this poem is significant and comprises almost 28% of the vocabulary.

Certainly, a number of the French borrowings the poet used were long assimilated and formed part of the common fund of words in literary and spoken usage at that time, e. g. *co(u)rt* ‘court’ or *laumpe* ‘lamp’ (MED, s. vv. *cōurt* (n. (1)), *laump(e)*). But some of them were borrowed more recently, nearer to the times the poem in question was composed, e. g. *kauelacion* ‘objection’, *oritore* ‘chapel’, *tyxt* ‘text; story’ (MED, s. vv. *cavillāciōun*, *ōrātōrī(e)*, *text(e)*). What is more

interesting, according to the dictionary data, not all of those recent borrowings were common words: some were used only by the poets of the north-west midlands (*blasoun* ‘shield’, *fylter* ‘to contend’, *moun-ture* ‘horse’ – MED, s. vv. *blāsōun*, *filteren*, *mōuntūre*) and some were innovations by the poet himself, appearing in English for the only time in this poem (*a-belef* ‘obliquely’, *fynishment* ‘end’ – MED, s. vv. *abelef*, *finishment*). It seems that the author would simply switch to French lexicon *ad hoc* when he needed to make his diction more diverse and ornamented. Lines in which all content words are of French origin, and only the function words belong to the native stock are not uncommon, e. g. l. 1247: To þe *plesaunce* of your *prys* – hit were a *pure ioye* (“To the pleasure of your excellence – it would be pure delight”). Furthermore, the poet inserts French set phrases in his characters’ dialogues and monologues: *beau sir* ‘fair sir’ (l. 1222), *bone hostel* ‘a good lodging’ (l. 776), *graunt mercy* ‘thank you’ (ll. 838, 1037, 1392, 2126). This usage is called *Frenkysch fare* ‘French observances’ (l. 1116) and reflects the refined manners of aristocratic society and chivalric behaviour as depicted in romances (cf. Machan 2005: 140–141, and Putter 2011: 295–296). Such expressions, though obviously easily lexicalized, give the speech of the socially elevated characters a distinct Romance colouring, reflecting their status and values.

The gallicisms of the *Gawain*-poet that belong to the “interim period” display the same qualities, as described by Hope (see above): they are stylistically charged and participate in the poem’s imagery. The author plays upon his vocabulary, uses the stylistic contrasts between borrowed and native words, carefully loads some of his lines with French loanwords while others are devoid of them. In the following sections, I will illustrate these statements.

#### 4. French loanwords in descriptions

In some of the descriptive passages in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* French loanwords tend to oust all other elements of the poet’s diction. However, as the tone of the poem varies greatly, the author then may avoid such words depending on the context. Clough (1985) illustrates this tendency analyzing the stanza describing Bertilak’s castle (ll. 785–810). Another remarkable example of this descriptive technique is the scene depicting the Green Knight’s arrival at Camelot.

When the Green Knight first enters Camelot, the author gives his detailed portrait. It is very ambiguous, for the challenger is a

mysterious character – “an amalgam of nature and culture” (Chism 2002: 76), and the description alternates between the beautiful and the grotesque. From a literary standpoint, this conflicting description of the Green Knight was studied, to name a few major works, by Benson (1965: 58–95), Burrow (1977: 12–23), and Besserman (1986). We see the Green Knight both as a handsome courtier, dressed in line with the latest fashion, and a monster, a bearded churl, and the language of the description alternates accordingly. In the following passage, as well as elsewhere in this article, the words in italics are of French origin:

- (1) Ande al grayped in grene þis gome and his wedes: (ll. 151–156)  
*A strayt cote* ful stre3t, þat stek on his sides,  
 A mere *mantile* abof, mensked withinne  
 With *pelure pured apert*, þe *pane* ful clene  
 With blyþe *blaunner* ful bry3t, and his hod boþe,  
 Pat watz la3t fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes...

“All of green were they made, both garments and man: / a coat tight and close that clung to his sides; / a rich robe above it all arrayed within / with fur finely trimmed, shewing fair fringes / of handsome ermine gay, as his hood was also, / that was lifted from his locks and laid on his shoulders.”

These lines describe the Green Knight’s garments that are all in step with the latest fashion. As attested by the MED (s. v. *mantel*), the word *mantile* ‘mantle, robe’ is the only French word in this passage that entered English in the 13th century. All other gallicisms are examples of that great infusion of French words into the English vocabulary in the second half of the 14th century. *Blaunner* ‘a kind of fur’ is also a rare word: the MED (s. v. *blaunnēr*) gives only one example of its use prior to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (in another romance, *Sir Degare*). Furthermore, the author phonetically emphasizes the “foreignness” of these lines by bringing together four words with *p*- in the beginning of the stressed syllable (*pelure*, *pured*, *apert*, and *pane*), for there were almost no native words with initial *p*-, as well as initial *v*- (OED, s. vv. *P*, *V*; see our next example).

- (2) And alle his *vesture uerayly* watz clene *verdure*... (l. 161)  
 “And verily all this vesture was of verdure clear.”

According to the MED all the three gallicisms in this line were first attested at the very end of the 14th century, the *Gawain*-poet being one of the first to use them in his literary works. Throughout the poem

the author repeatedly brings together French loanwords that retained their “foreignness” for an English ear.

- (3) Pat were to tor for to telle of *tryfles* þe halue (ll. 165–169)  
 Pat were *enbrauded* abof, wyth bryddes and fly3es,  
 With *gay gaudi* of grene, þe golde ay inmyddes.  
 Þe *pendautes* of his *payttrure*, þe *proude cropure*,  
 His *molaynes* and alle þe *metail anamayld* was þenne...

“It would be too hard to rehearse one half of the trifles / that were embroidered upon them, what with birds and with flies / in a gay glory of green, and ever gold in the midst. / The pendants of his poitreil, his proud crupper, / his molains, and all the metal to say more, were enamelled.”

The description of the Green Knight’s stallion also abounds in gallicisms. In this passage only three French loanwords – *tryfle* ‘detail (of ornament)’, *proude* ‘superb, splendid’, *metail* ‘metal’ – were in frequent use before the 14th century. However, as words in a text are not isolated from one another, those loanwords that were long assimilated still evoke association with their surroundings that may arise from awareness of the donor language. They are linked by a common context which points to their functional similarity. In short, recent borrowings reactualize the “foreignness” of the older ones. The rest of the gallicisms in this passage are words borrowed into English in the 1380s, whereas *payttrure* ‘breast-trappings of a horse’ and *molaynes* ‘ornamented stud on the bit of a horse’s bridle’ are the poet’s innovations (MED, s. vv. *paîtreure*, *molaine*).

Thus goes the description of the beautiful side of the Green Knight – a man in an exquisite costume decorated with fur, jewels, and gold. But then it changes, and we see the grotesque, wild side of the knight: he has a great bushy beard and hair that covers his upper body like a cape. French loanwords almost completely disappear from this description; instead, the author turns to the native stock of words generously sprinkled with dialect words of Scandinavian origin that were rarely used in the literature of the time (they are underlined here and elsewhere):

- (4) Wel *gay watz* þis gome gered in grene, (ll. 179–184)  
 And þe here of his hed of his hors *swete*.  
 Fayre fannand fax ymbefoldes his schulderes;  
 A much berd as as a busk ouer his brest henges,  
 Þat wyth his hi3lich here þat of his hed reches  
 Watz euesed al ymbetorne abof his elbowes...

“Very gay was this great man guised all in green, / and the hair of his head with his horse's accorded: / fair napping locks enfolding his shoulders, / a big beard like a bush over his breast hanging / that with the handsome hair from his head falling / was sharp shorn to an edge just short of his elbows.”

On the whole, the Green Knight is composed of contrasts and contradictions, he is both an elvish giant and, judging by his attire, a fashionista of the time, and these points are further brought out by the author's careful use of his vocabulary. The same can be said about the Green Knight's first words with which he addresses the knights of the Round Table:

- (5) ‘Wher is’, he said, / ‘*Ʒe gouvernour of Ʒis gyng?*’ ... (ll. 224–225)  
 “‘Now where is’, he said, / ‘the governor of this gathering?’”

The phrase is ambiguous, and perhaps even rude, for the poet brings together a refined word of French origin that was first attested to in the 1380s – *gouvernour* ‘ruler, lord’, and a northern dialect word of Scandinavian origin *gyng* ‘company’ that, according to the OED (s. v. *ging*), could be used “in depreciatory sense: a crew, rabble”. As a side note I would like to point out that language change has made this particular context, along with many others, impossible to translate accurately into Modern English. J.R.R. Tolkien, whose translation I follow elsewhere, simply uses a stylistically neutral word – *gathering*. S. Armitage (SGGK 2008), on the contrary, retains the original ambiguity using an onomatopoeic word – *gaggle* (usually denotes ‘a flock (of geese)’, ‘a company (of women)’): “‘And who,’ he bellows, without breaking breath, ‘is governor of this gaggle?’” But the original ambiguity of two words of different origin clashing in one line is, nevertheless, lost. The speech of the Green Knight as depicted by the poet is also courteous and ruthless at the same time, and that brings me to my second group of examples.

## 5. French loanwords in characters' speech

The particular stylistic qualities that gallicisms acquire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* become even more striking if we examine the speech of the main characters. On the one hand we have the courtly speech of Gawain and the Lady, a late-medieval variety clearly marking their elevated social status:

- (6) ‘Wolde 3e, worƷilych lorde,’ quop Wawan to Ʒe kyng, (ll. 343–347)  
 ‘Bid me bo3e fro Ʒis benche, and stonde by yow Ʒere,

þat I wythoute *vylanye* my3t *voyde* þis *table*,  
 And þat my *legge* lady lyked not ille,  
 I wolde com to your *counseyl* bifore your *cort ryche*...

“‘Would you, my worthy lord,’ said Wawain to the king, / ‘bid me abandon this bench and stand by you there, / so that I without discourtesy might be excused from the table, / and my liege lady were not loth to permit me, / I would come to your counsel before your courtiers fair.’”

Although most of the words in this passage were already in use in the 14th century, the verb *voyde* ‘vacate, leave’ was a recent import (MED, s. vv. *voiden*). This sort of speech, rich with French borrowings, reflects the former language of the aristocracy and chivalric culture as it appeared in numerous romances of the time.

- (7) Hit is þe *tytelet* token and *tyxt* of her werkkez, (ll. 151–1519)  
 How ledes for her *lele* luf hor lyuez han *auntered*,  
*Endured* for her *drury* *dulful* stoundez,  
 And after *wenged* with her *walour* and *voyded* her care,  
 And bro3t blysse into boure with *bountees* hor awen...

“It is the title and contents and text of their works: / how lovers for their true love their lives have imperilled, / have endured for their dear one dolorous trials, / until avenged by their valour, their adversity passed, / they have brought bliss into her bower by their own brave virtues.”

Even more courtly are the lexicon and idioms of the Lady. The mere density of French loans in her speech on the heroes of romance is higher, and half of them came into usage in the end of the 14th century: *tytelet* ‘inscribed’, *tyxt* ‘story, romance’, *endured* ‘endured’, *drury(e)* ‘love’ (according to the MED (s. v. *drūerīe*), we find it occasionally from the end of the 13th century, but it became popular (and perhaps reentered) in the 1390s), *walour* ‘valour’.

This cultivated, eloquent and elegant language with a strong French element is associated with social status, and is typical of courtly life. It is absolutely different from the language the Green Knight uses – brusque, simple and a bit churlish, with almost no French loanwords at all:

- (8) 3if I þe telle trwly, quen I þe *tape* haue (ll. 406–412)  
 And þou me smopely hatz smyten, smartly I þe teche  
 Of my hous and my home and myn owen nome,  
 þen may þou frayst my fare and forwardez holde;

And if I spende no speche, þenne spedez þou þe better,  
For þou may leng in þy londe and layt no fyrre – / bot slokes!

“If I tell thee the truth of it, when I have taken the knock, / and thou handily hast hit me, if in haste I announce then / my house and my home and mine own title, / then thou canst call and enquire and keep the agreement; / and if I waste not a word, thou'lt win better fortune, / for thou mayst linger in thy land and look no further – / but stay!”

As noted by Machan, “the brusqueness of the Green Knight’s language compounds the boorishness of his entrance to Camelot, and the contrast between the wildness associated with him and the civility of Arthur’s court again manifests itself in the elegance of Gawain’s request [see above ll. 343–347] – replete with subjunctives, honorifics, and semantic indirection – to assume the test for the king” (2005: 142).

The coarse manner of the Green Knight’s speech provides a stark contrast to the way he speaks at the end of the poem, after he reveals himself to be the lord of the castle, a perfect example of a courteous gentleman:

- (9) Þou art *confessed* so clene, beknowen of þy mysses, (ll. 2391–2394)  
And hatz þe *penaunce apert* of þe *poynt* of myn egge,  
I halde þe *polysed* of þat ply3t, and *pured* as clene  
As þou hadez neuer *forfeted* syþen þou watz fyrst borne...

“Thou hast confessed thee so clean and acknowledged thine errors, / and hast the penance plain to see from the point of my blade, / that I hold thee purged of that debt, made as pure and as clean / as hadst thou done no ill deed since the day thou wert born.”

The Green Knight’s/Lord’s speech strategy has completely changed; moreover, the French borrowings he uses belong to their “interim period”, having entered the English language in the 14th century. These shifts in his speech reflect the stylistic value of French loanwords – they indicate a change in the Green Knight, the fact that he has stopped being a ruthless churl representing the forces of nature and turned instead to courtly speech and behaviour, accepting for a while the conventions of chivalric society.

## 6. Conclusion

Thus, in the language of the poem, gallicisms in their “interim period” become an expressive part of the author’s poetic technique and figure in rhetorical strategies. They are not distributed evenly in the text. In fact, there are two patterns of the distribution of lexical material in the text: one which exhibits heavy foreign influence, and another which rather relies on native words (which include dialect words). This difference indicates a deliberate stylistic choice, and it is further supported by the very plot of this literary work. The main opposition in the poem, as expressed through language, is court and culture with French loanwords as their marker versus wilderness, nature, and the Green Knight. This individuality of expression is possible due to the fact that the words borrowed were not yet fully entrenched in English. Gallicisms in their “interim period” had inherent stylistic potential that a skilled writer, such as the *Gawain*-poet, might well manipulate. This potential exists and can be made use of when the words enter a language, but still retain some associations with a foreign culture.

To sum up, the language of medieval literary works itself can still show much on the way people in multilingual communities felt about the process of lexical borrowing and variation.

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**Kokkuvõte. Maria Volkonskaya: Laensõnad ja stilistika: gallitsismid poemis “Sir Gawain ja Roheline Rüütel”.** See artikkel käsitleb laensõnade vastuvõtmist sihtkeeles, keskendudes vahepealsele perioodile, mis jääb uue sõna laenamise ja selle sihtkeeles kodunemise vahele. Selle perioodi vältel säilitab uus sõna osa oma võõrapärasusest ja assotsiatsioonidest teise keele ja kultuuriga, mistõttu tema stilistiline potentsiaal on sel ajal suurem. Analüüsi all on inglise poem “Sir Gawain ja Roheline Rüütel” 14. sajandist, mil toimus suur prantsuse laenude sissevool inglise keelde. Artikkel näitab, kuidas selle poemi autor kasutab gallitsisme oma luuletehnikas nende kõrgema stilistilise potentsiaali tõttu.

**Märksõnad:** Sir Gawain ja Roheline Rüütel, gallitsism, kakskeelsus hilis-keskaegsel Inglismaal, stilistika, ajalooline keeleteadus, keskinglise keel