

Chaucer's Impact on the English Language: a detailed study of the vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

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1. Introduction: Chaucer's impact on the English language

Geoffrey Chaucer is a famous English writer from the fourteenth century, who has been popular throughout the ages. Because of his public favour, one would expect that he influenced the English language, and many studies have been devoted to this subject. As Cannon (1998) also indicates in his work, the most elementary and surveyable method of considering the impact of Chaucer on English is the study of words. Vocabulary can easily be compared to that in other literary works and its origin is generally not hard to determine. Studies of words have led to the development of several dictionaries, including the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* and the *Middle English Dictionary (MED)*. My study of Chaucer's vocabulary is based on the data available in the *OED*, since the *MED* is not completed yet.

To define the impact of Chaucer on the English language, I referred to the *OED* for words used by Chaucer, endeavouring to find information on the characteristics of his vocabulary in general and on words he newly introduced to English. Since it is beyond the scope of this study to cover all of Chaucer's words, it was inevitable to discuss merely main verbs and nouns, and to restrict myself to one tale, for which I selected *The Tale of Sir Thopas* on account of its conciseness and humour.

This paper consists of a discussion of already existing literature on the impact of Chaucer's vocabulary on English, and of three new studies by myself. Some general information is provided concerning previous literature on the influence of Chaucer on English, followed by a description of types of new words. Moreover, *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are amplified.

In the first study I looked up the origin, etymology and meaning of each main verb and noun in this tale, emphasising on the language of *origin*, how long the word had been in *existence* in English when Chaucer wrote his tale – both in *general* and in the *specific* meaning it has in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* –, the time between the use of a word in this particular meaning by an author before Chaucer and by an author after Chaucer (from now

on labelled *bridging period*), and whether it is *still common* in contemporary English. The latter is examined by referring to the *Cobuild Dictionary*, which includes only those words that are common in present-day English. The outcome of these searches indicate the role of the words before, around and after Chaucer's time, which naturally is significant for discovering the impact of Chaucer on the English language.

The words that were introduced into the language by Chaucer himself are considered even more closely in the second study by discussing the *manner of introduction*, for instance *borrowing*, and the *occurrence* of the words in other works by Chaucer. The manner of introduction demonstrates the type of creativity that Chaucer possessed, while the occurrence in other works by Chaucer gives information about the role of the word within Chaucer's language. Obviously a word that is frequently used by Chaucer influences the language more than a word he uses only once, so this search also relates to the impact of Chaucer on English. Cannon (1998) already recorded in which tale the word was used first by Chaucer according to the generally accepted chronology to be found in the appendix, and the number of occurrences of the words throughout his oeuvre; the figures he recorded are also applied in this paper.

To investigate the effect of Chaucer on writers after him, I studied two modernisations of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* by different authors from different periods. The aims of both writers were entirely different; the eighteenth century writer Williams Lipscomb wanted to give a personal 'modern' version of the tale, whereas Nevill Coghill wrote a very close translation in modern English in the twentieth century. As this third study proves, both aims entail a very different approach to Chaucer's vocabulary. While the first two studies say more about the impact of Chaucer on the English language in general, this last study reveals the influence Chaucer had at a more personal level.

In brief, this paper is an attempt to describe the impact of Chaucer on the English language on a large and on a small scale by discussing previous literature on the topic and examining the main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the new words introduced in this tale, and two modernisations of it from different ages with different aims.

2. Previous literature on the impact of Chaucer on English

A great deal has been said about the language of Chaucer throughout the ages; most comments are extremely favourable, making him out to be a key figure in the history of the English language. Christopher Cannon (1998), however, has written the book *The Making of Chaucer's English*, which is very critical of Chaucer's influence on English. Cannon (1998)

focuses on the fact that at a certain moment in history scholars simply selected Chaucer as the originator of English poetry, so that later scholars were greatly affected by this assumption rather than motivated to look at the language themselves. To show this statement he examined Chaucer's vocabulary, a research method he defends by giving various motives. A study of words, he claims, is not subject to significant disagreement because of the fact that words are rather simple elements of a language. Moreover, a lexical study is able to show the whole history with regard to other texts and to disclose the influence it had on later language thanks to the records in dictionaries such as the *OED* and the *MED* (Cannon 1998). In his book he criticises his predecessor Joseph Mersand (1937), the author of *Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary*, for his dependence on the *OED*. The *OED*, as Cannon asserts, is also a result of the importance that had already been ascribed to Chaucer, and therefore is written with the premise that Chaucer introduced new words, motivating editors to search extra hard to detect one. Whether this claim is true, I cannot ascertain, but nevertheless I was dependent on the *OED* due to the incompleteness of the *MED*. There are some disadvantages of a lexical study as well, however. Many works have been lost throughout the ages. Moreover, a lot of words probably were present in the spoken language, but not in literature. The number of those words must have been larger than it is now, because the number of works written in English at that time was very low due to the important role of French and Latin. These disadvantages apply to all manners of investigating the impact of Chaucer on the English language, so they did not prevent me from doing a study of words similar to that by Cannon (1998).

Cannon (1998) found out that Chaucer's language was very *innovative* on the one hand, but not *expanding* on the other hand, which means that despite the fact that Chaucer constantly added new words to his language, the number of different words he actually used did not increase. Cannon (1998) calculated the *density* of all of Chaucer's works, meaning that he divided the number of different *headwords* by the total number of words. Cannon's (1998) definition of *head words* is "the number of entries in Benson's *Glossarial Concordance* that account for the words in the text – *excluding* repetitions and declined forms" (p.107) If the density for instance is five, every fifth word is a word that did not appear in this particular work yet. Thus the lower the number, the higher the density. Interestingly enough, throughout Chaucer's works, the density does not really increase but remains rather stable, which indicates that although Chaucer invented or introduced new words, he did not employ more different words in his texts as he aged. While Mersand (1937) speaks of the enlargement of Chaucer's vocabulary, Cannon (1998) shows that Chaucer's

innovation is constant and his vocabulary not expanding (*stability*). Evidently Chaucer discarded certain words, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

3. The categories of new words

When you consider categories of new words, you should distinguish between *externally* and *internally new words*. *Externally new words* are words that are brought in the English language by Chaucer; they are new in English literature in general. *Internally new words*, conversely, are words that were new to Chaucer's works themselves but that were already existent in the English language. Words that were first used by Chaucer in English literature naturally are both *externally* and internally new because they are new to himself *and* new to English literature in general. From this point onwards I will label them *externally* new, since that is the largest category in which they can be placed.

There are a number of categories of *externally new words*, each representing a different *manner of introduction*. Firstly, the category of *borrowings*, especially those from *Romance* languages such as Latin, French, Italian and Spanish, is mentioned by both Mersand (1937) and Cannon (1998). In Chaucer's time, literature was mostly written in Latin and French, but a number of writers started writing English literature. The problem was evidently that English was not the language of law and high culture, and besides, those people that were not familiar with the Romance languages were not able to read English either. Geoffrey Chaucer solved this by adding Romance words to enrich the language and give it eloquence, thereby making his work interesting for readers of French and Latin literature, but also for the lower classes to whom the works could be read aloud. As both Mersand (1937) and Cannon (1998) conclude from their vocabulary research, the number of Romance words that Chaucer used in his works – either borrowed by himself or already borrowed before – is enormous. In every text written by Chaucer new Romance words occur, which would seem to indicate that Chaucer's English became saturated with them. This is not the case, as Cannon (1998) establishes, so Chaucer must have discarded certain words after using them, which will be discussed further on in this paragraph.

Another category of *externally new words* (mentioned by Cannon 1998) is that of *compounds*. *Compounds* are words formed by combining two existing words to form one new word, so consequently one that is first used by Chaucer. In the definition of *compounds* that I use in this study affixes are excluded since they are not genuine words; they rather belong to the next category.

The last category of *externally new words* considered here is that of *derivational words*, which means for example a noun first used as a verb by Chaucer, or a noun changed into an adjective by adding a suffix. Derivation is also a very common way of adding new words to English used by Shakespeare as I have discovered in a previous research. Since the scope of this study forced me to limit my study to nouns and verbs only, and word class is essential for this category of new words, I will not discuss derivational words in this paper.

Cannon (1998) defines one category of *internally new words*, which he calls *reserved words*. This definition denotes words that were already present in the English language when Chaucer wrote his works, which he figuratively stored in the cupboard until he took them out at a certain moment to utilise them. The term, however, is not very felicitous, since *reserved* suggests *distant*, which is not a desirable association. *Internally new words*, therefore, will be referred to as *retained words*.

There is one category of new words that does not belong to either *externally* or *internally new words*, but necessarily needs to be mentioned if you consider the contrast between *innovation* and *stability*, as Cannon (1998) does as opposed to Mersand (1937). Despite the fact that Chaucer used new words in every work he wrote, the number of different words in those texts did not really grow, which means that he discarded words, as I have discussed before. Cannon (1998) calls these words *nonce words*: words that are only used in one particular work by Chaucer. The category *nonce word* does not only refer to words that Chaucer introduced to the English language, but to every word that occurs in only one tale. *Nonce words* therefore are always internally new, but can also be *externally* new, which makes them hard to classify.

It may be clear that if you add the number of words in each category together, the number will be higher than the actual number of new words present, because a new Romance word, for instance, can also be classified as a *nonce word* and as a *retained word*, and thus be classified in three different categories.

4. *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

As I have argued before, I enabled myself to study Chaucer's vocabulary extensively within the scope of this study by limiting it to main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, which is a humorous romance tale in Chaucer's tremendously popular book *The Canterbury Tales*. This work gave Chaucer the possibility to write in different styles and genres without the risk of being reproached personally for shocking story lines or awfully bad poetry. According to Cannon (1998), Chaucer stressed the different types of English used in the

Canterbury Tales by letting the host and the pilgrims distinguish them themselves. The reader is forced to think that Chaucer's English is innovative, precisely because Chaucer emphasised the different types of poetry used by the pilgrims. He shows both high and low style, but also an intermediate style (Cannon 1998), which must have inspired poets after his time. Cannon (1998) even states that the myth that Chaucer himself created made him such a famous poet, that scholars saw his quality because they were forced to see it by Chaucer and by other scholars who discussed his language before. Moreover, Chaucer has been praised by other writers from his time until today because they tried to follow his example and praising him therefore meant praising themselves (Cannon 1998). Apparently, Chaucer's vocabulary has not only fascinated readers for ages, his tactics of applying and naming the different styles to ensure no one would miss his linguistic skill have been praised as well. In the Early Modern English period the so-called *Archaisers* even gave a rebirth to words that Chaucer discarded after using them in only one work (*nonce words*), which again increased the indirect influence of Chaucer on the English language.

The Tale of Sir Thopas, which is told by the pilgrim Chaucer, is a hilarious tale because of its clichés and pleasantries. Standard phrases (Chaucer 1386) such as "His lippes rede as rose" (p. 213) are very common, and traditional elements in the romance genre are twisted so that they obviously make Sir Thopas look ridiculous, and eventually Chaucer satirises the romance genre in general. To give an example, the knight Sir Thopas meets a violent giant but cannot fight him because he has left his armour at home (Cooper 1989). The tale is full of ludicrous scenes like this and there is no convincing or exciting story line. It is based on a whole range of works that Chaucer knew, and, as Helen Cooper (1989) finds, often words and even lines Chaucer used are the same as in his sources, although some works might only have been spoken, not written yet, in Chaucer's time. The poetry of this particular tale is predictable and rather poor, which, combined with the twists to the traditional romance, makes the tale too awful to hear out as the host also concludes.

Evidently, the language Chaucer used in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is different from the rest of the tales; it is apparently the worst, and therefore it is intriguing that Chaucer assigned himself this tale. Both Cooper (1989) and Cannon (1998) discuss the language used in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*:

"Chaucer always writes with semantic and stylistic daring: it shows in his readiness to innovate in vocabulary and syntax, his pushing of the English language beyond any previous expressive limits, his fine control of rhetoric, his sensitivity to different lexical

registers and stylistic effects. *Sir Thopas* turns backwards to the cramping mental universe of formula, cliché, and filler lines.” (Cooper 1989, p.305)

“In the simplest terms, as *Sir Thopas* recalls native romance traditions it is Chaucer's embrace of the 'English,' and as the *Melibee* is 'a close translation' [...] it is Chaucer's embrace of the 'European'.” (Cannon 1998, p.137)

As I have mentioned before, English was not as important in Chaucer's time as it is nowadays; literature was dominated by French and Latin, which Cannon (1998) named *European*. The *English* that Cannon (1998) refers to is the Germanic language stemming from Old English, so Cannon also discriminates words with an Old English origin and words with a Romance origin. The incredibly large number of Romance words still present in Modern English is a direct result of the contact the English language had with French when French kings ruled England.

To come back to the myth that has been created by Chaucer himself and the scholars who studied him, Cannon (1998) seems to be tricked by it as well as Cooper (1989). Both conclude that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is written in the not so elegant language English of that time, so one would expect that the number of new *Romance borrowings* would be lower than in other works. This, however, appears not to be the case. While the average percentage of new Romance words in comparison with the total of different words in all of Chaucer's works is 0,7%, it is 0,9% in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* (Cannon 1998, I've changed the figures to percentages), which means that the percentage of new *Romance borrowings* is about the average of all Chaucer's works, not lower. The figures of the *retained words* are as expected: While only 3,1% of all different words are *retained words* throughout Chaucer's works, more than the double (6,3%) are *retained words* in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Obviously Chaucer used words present in the language at that time that he did not use normally, probably to underline the difference with the other *Canterbury tales*. It is therefore not surprising that 7,7% of all different words are *nonce words*, as opposed to an average of 2,5% in Chaucer's oeuvre (figures for *retained* and *nonce words* again from Cannon 1998). Despite the fact that the language in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is predictable and not very impressive, the density is higher than average: every third word in this tale is a new word against the average of every fourth. This probably has to do with the length – or better, the shortness – of the tale, but it remains a significant difference. Thus although Cooper (1989) and Cannon (1998) conclude that Chaucer's language in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is *cramping* and *English* the percentage of new *Romance borrowings* and the density are higher than they lead one to expect.

5. Study 1: Vocabulary in general

The impact of Chaucer on the English language is not only determined by the new words he introduced to the language, but also by his language in general, so it is important to inspect his vocabulary in general. Because *The Tale of Sir Thopas* is, according to Cannon (1998), “Chaucer’s embrace of the ‘English’” (p.137), you would expect to find a large number of words stemming from Old English. The verb forms derived from verbs such as *to be*, *to do*, *to have*, *shall/will* and *can* are excluded from this discussion even if they are in head position, because the entries in the *OED* for these words are so extensive that it is impracticable to trace the precise meaning the word has in this particular tale. The meaning is so diffuse because they are grammatical words.

In my study, the origin is categorised in four groups: *Old English*, *Romance*, *both Old English and Romance*, and *other*. The first two groups are clear, but the last two require some explanation. Chaucer often used *compounds* in his works, which are, as I have mentioned above, combinations of two words. When one of those two words is derived from Old English and the other from a Romance language, I categorised the *compound* in *both Old English and Romance*, rather than putting the word in both the categories *Old English* and *Romance*. These words, of course, are very interesting since they prove Chaucer’s inclination to mix English and the Romance languages in his works, which is probably caused by the already present mixture of English and Romance in the language that Chaucer heard around him. The category *other* comprises words from Arabic, Dutch, Norse and words from which the origin is unknown or obscure. This last group is left out of consideration in this study since it is a compilation of too many different origins to relate anything solid about it. Moreover, the number of words in this category is minimal. The figures do appear in the diagrams for completeness’ sake, however.

How long a word had been in *existence* in English when Chaucer wrote *The Tale of Sir Thopas* possibly gives engaging information about Chaucer’s vocabulary. Here I would like to focus on the occurrence of the word in the particular meaning it has in this tale throughout the history of English. The *OED* provided me with the following data:

1. The first appearance in the *OED* in any meaning (of the same class, but of any origin)
2. The first appearance in *OED* in this particular meaning (and word class)
3. The appearance in the *OED* in this particular meaning just before 1386 or any other work by Chaucer in which the word is used
4. The appearance in the *OED* in this particular meaning just after 1386 or any other work by Chaucer in which the word is used

It may be clear that certain choices must be made in gathering data. From points 3 and 4 can be concluded that I took no account of the phenomenon *retained word* yet; when a word had been used by Chaucer before or after *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, I singled out the date of the occurrence before or after that date. Although the emphasis of this paper is on *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the distinction between Chaucer and other writers is of more importance here, because this first study concerns Chaucer's vocabulary in general, disregarding the development of Chaucer as a writer himself. The words that were first used by Chaucer are given the date 1386, which is an accepted date for *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. From points 3 and 4 I derived the *bridging period*: the number of years between the work before and after Chaucer in which the word appears. Point 1 leads to the *general existence* (how long the word in whatever meaning had been in the language) of the word, point 1 minus 1386, while point 2 leads to the *specific existence* (how long the word in this specific meaning had been in the language) in the same way. Considering the amount of literature that is lost and the fact that the *OED* makes no claim to be exhaustive, it would be too far-fetched to draw any definite conclusion about these dates, but nonetheless they provide us with some perception of the use of 'Chaucer's words' throughout history, making a good starting point for further research.

To give an idea of how timeless Chaucer's vocabulary is – at least that in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* – I looked up all main verbs and nouns in the *Cobuild Dictionary*, which is a dictionary with words that are used in daily life rather than words that are old-fashioned and hardly ever used. When a word is present in this dictionary, it means that it was still in use approximately ten years ago, which is only yesterday compared to the time in which Chaucer lived. The entries in the *Cobuild* should obviously have the same meaning as the word occurring in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, or should at least have a modern meaning derived from that.

6. Results

The results of the first study are presented here, mentioning only figures that differ clearly from the others; the discussion of them follows in the next paragraph.

The numbers and percentages of words in the four origin categories are displayed in figure 1.1. The difference between Old English and Romance is very obvious; of all main verbs and nouns almost thirty percent had been borrowed from Romance languages. Still two thirds of the words were derived from Old English, which is the main part. Even more fascinating is the difference between the number of words derived from Romance languages

in main verbs and nouns: 6,4% for main verbs as opposed to 38,6% for nouns. All *compounds* stemming from both Old English and Romance languages are nouns, not verbs: *staf-slynge*, *lilye/lilie flour* (two times), *rewel boon* and *love-drury*.

origin	main verbs and nouns		main verbs		nouns	
Old English	249	67,7%	97	89,0%	152	58,7%
Romance	107	29,1%	7	6,4%	100	38,6%
both	5	1,4%	0	0,0%	5	1,9%
other	7	1,9%	5	4,6%	2	0,8%

Figure 1.1: origin of Chaucer's vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

The *existence* and *bridging period* of the words Chaucer used in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are represented in figure 1.2 and 1.3. The average *general existence* of the words is 355 years, compared to an average *specific existence* of 265 years; the average *bridging period* is 93 years. The Romance verb *comanded*, for example, has a very short *bridging period* of 11 years; it was used in 1382 and in 1393 in the same meaning. The noun *wonger* that stems from Old English, however, has a much longer *bridging period* of 220 years, although it was still used in 1380. The long *bridging period* of this word is caused by the fact that it was only adopted by another author in 1590 according to the *OED*.

word class	<i>general existence</i>	<i>specific existence</i>	<i>bridging period</i>
main verbs and nouns	355	265	93
main verbs	439	292	93
nouns	319	253	92

Figure 1.2: existence and bridging period (in years) of Chaucer's vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to word class

Figure 1.2 focuses on word class, and it appears that on average verbs are older than nouns, both in any meaning and in the specific meaning. The *bridging period* for both word classes is about the same.

origin	<i>general existence</i>	<i>specific existence</i>	<i>bridging period</i>
all origins	355	265	93
Old English	470	350	91
Romance	110	85	100
both	86	86	79
other	186	82	62

Figure 1.3: existence and bridging period (in years) of Chaucer's main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to origin

Figure 1.3 compares the age and *bridging period* to the origin of the words, and as expected Romance words had been present in English for a shorter period than words derived from Old English. The *bridging period* of Romance words, however, is larger than that of words derived from Old English, and is shortest for the *compounds* from both origins (disregarding *other* as announced before).

Not less than 75% of the main verbs and nouns that Chaucer used in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* were still present in daily English ten years ago! Words that still exist are for example *dremed* (*dream*), *corage* (*courage*) and *londe* (*land*), while words as *priketh* (*to prick*, meaning *riding one's horse*) and *destrer* (*destrier*, meaning *a horse*) did not survive into present-day English. Figure 1.4 shows that a higher percentage of verbs than nouns survived, and the same goes for Old English in comparison with Romance words as figure 1.5 makes clear. Only 40% of the *compound* nouns derived from both made it into the *Cobuild*.

word class	total	Cobuild	
main verbs and nouns	368	278	75,5%
main verbs	109	91	83,5%
nouns	259	187	72,2%

Figure 1.4: Chaucer's vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* present in *Cobuild* with regard to word class

origin	total	Cobuild	
all origins	368	278	75,5%
Old English	249	199	79,9%
Romance	107	72	67,3%
both	5	2	40,0%
other	7	5	71,4%

Figure 1.5: Chaucer's main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* present in *Cobuild* with regard to origin

7. Discussion

The large percentage of Romance main verbs and nouns in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas* (almost 30%) is remarkable considering Cannon's (1998) and Cooper's (1989) discussion of the *Englishness* of this particular tale. The fact remains, however, that certain Romance words had already been in the language for a long time, and had therefore already gained the status of *English*. It is not surprising that a higher percentage of main verbs than of nouns stem from Old English and not from the Romance languages, as the almost 90% of verbs

derived from Old English as opposed to almost 60% of nouns of that origin confirm. The explanation for this significant disparity is that verbs form the basis of a language because they are interwoven in the grammar; they fix the argument structure and organisation of a sentence. Enriching the language by Romance words is easier for nouns (38,6%) since they are more loosely embedded in the syntactic structure and therefore readily replaceable, but sometimes it also happens that main verbs are derived from a Romance language (6,4%). The *compounds* derived from both Old English and the Romance languages are all nouns, which corresponds to Modern English, in which *compound* nouns still seem to be more common than *compound* verbs (excluding affixes as stipulated before).

Naturally, the time that a Romance word existed in English in any meaning and in the specific meaning is shorter than that for words derived from Old English, since Old English is the root of Chaucer's English, whereas the Romance influence started much later. The fact that average verbs are older than nouns is a result of the high number of verbs stemming from Old English in comparison with nouns, and the logically longer *existence* of words derived from Old English opposed to Romance words. The *bridging period* is the same for verbs and nouns, which could mean that Chaucer picked up nouns and verbs from other writers at the same rate, just as other writers copied words from both word classes equally fast from Chaucer. The figures concerning origin provide some deviation. Romance words have the longest *bridging period*, namely 100 years, which could demonstrate that these words were not as common in literature around Chaucer's time as words stemming from Old English. The *compounds* derived from both languages have the shortest *bridging period*, seemingly showing an important role of Anglo-Romance words (words derived from both Old English and Romance) in medieval literature. The low number of occurrences of these words (only 5), however, makes it too unreliable to be certain about the matter. Further research on Anglo-Romance *compounds* in all of Chaucer's works is therefore desirable, but beyond the scope of this paper.

More than three quarters of the main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are present in the *Cobuild Dictionary*, which means that an enormous part of Chaucer's vocabulary has survived into Modern English. The tale is easy to read for modern English speakers because of this, which perhaps has also contributed to the ongoing popularity of Chaucer. His popularity presumably caused an increase in his influence on the English language, again making his popularity grow, which brings us in a vicious circle of cause and result. The highest percentages of surviving words regarding word class are those of the main verbs (83,5%) and concerning origin those of Old English (79,9%). The word class

main verb and the origin *Old English* are interrelated, as pointed out before. A likely cause for the survival of Old English main verbs is again the fact that verbs are the basis of a language, meaning a stable role of this class from the beginning of the language until now. Therefore it is not a surprise that many Old English verbs are still present in our language.

8. Study 2: New words

As I have pointed out earlier, there are several categories of new words, from which I will discuss two types of *externally new words*, namely new *Romance borrowings* and new *compounds*, one category of *internally new words* (*retained words*) and additionally the separate category of *nonce words*. For the sake of clarity: *externally new words* are words that have not been used by other authors before (at least as far as we know), while *internally new words* are words that are new to Chaucer in this particular tale, so they are not necessarily new in literature.

Whether a new word is a *Romance borrowing* is very easy to find, since you only have to consider words that are used first by Chaucer and consequently select those that have a Romance origin, omitting the words that are derived from already existing Romance words in the English language (new derivational words are not considered in this study). In my study, words that had already been used by Chaucer, but not by anyone before him, are counted as new words as well, because this category is about words that Chaucer used for the first time opposed to other writers.

Compounds are also discoverable without effort, since it means counting only those new words that consist of two other (mostly already existing) words.

There are difficulties in assigning the label *nonce word*, however. The problem lies in how you define *different words*: a particular word can differ from another word because it has a different word class, or because it has a different word class *and a different meaning* than another word. To examine the specific history of a word in the English language, every distinct meaning and structure should be discussed. Hopefully we can investigate words with different meanings more thoroughly in the future when the *MED* is finished and all occurrences are mentioned by meaning. At his moment, however, it is necessary to employ the first definition of *different words*, and therefore I copied the number of occurrences of a particular word in Chaucer's oeuvre directly from Cannon (1998), who used Volume I of Benson's *Glossarial Concordance* (1993). In this concordance spelling difference and inflection do not signify a new entry. The numbers in Cannon's (1998) book gave me the

possibility to calculate the average number of times a word in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* occurs in all of Chaucer's works, and also to count the number of *nonce words* in that text.

The problem with *retained words* is exactly the same as with *nonce words*; similar words with different meanings are regarded as the same word. Again I copied Cannon's (1998) figures, which enabled me to total the number of *retained words* in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

9. Results

In study 1, I discovered that *The Tale of Sir Thopas* contains seventeen different *externally* new main verbs and nouns: *coste* (v), *stiked* (v), *baiteth* (v), *paydemayn* (n), *jane* (n), *ram* (n), *paramour* (n), *launcegay* 2x (n), *sparhawk* (n), *wodedowve* (n), *corage* (n), *elf-queene* 4x (n), *love-likynge* (n), *leere* (n), *lake* (n), *charbocke* (n) and *ambil* (n). This paragraph contains the results of this study, mentioning remarkable figures separately; the discussion of the results can be found in the next paragraph.

The *externally new words* occur as figure 2.1 shows. More than 38% of all *externally* new main verbs and nouns are derived from Romance languages, and one third are *compounds*, being all nouns. Affixes still do not belong to the category of *compounds*. The percentage of new *Romance borrowings* is lower for main verbs than for nouns. The verbs *coste* and *stiked* are still present in Modern English, while *baiteth* is not. Only about 11% of the new nouns have survived, namely *corage* and *ambil*.

word class of new word	total	Romance		compounds		Cobuild	
main verbs and nouns	21	8	38,1%	7	33,3%	4	19,0%
main verbs	3	1	33,3%	0	0,0%	2	66,7%
nouns	18	7	38,9%	7	38,9%	2	11,1%

Figure 2.1 New Romance borrowings and new compounds in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to word class

type of new word	total	occurrences	nonce		Cobuild	
all	21	9,7	5	23,8%	4	19,0%
Romance	8	17,3	1	12,5%	2	25,0%
compound	7	3,0	2	28,6%	0	0,0%

Figure 2.2 Occurrence and nonce words in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to the type of the externally new word

Figure 2.2 above shows how many *externally new words* in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are *nonce words*, and how many are present in the *Cobuild Dictionary*. The *externally new nonce words* are *payndemayn* (n, new *Romance borrowing*), *wodedowve* (n, new *compound*), *love-likynge* (n, new *compound*), *lake* (n) and *ambil* (n). The new words *coste* (v, new *Romance borrowing*), *stiked* (v), *corage* (n, new *Romance borrowing*) and *ambil* (n, *nonce word*) were still present in daily English ten years ago. As expected, only one word of the four 'survivors' is a *nonce word*. Moreover, the figure shows the average number of occurrences of the new words throughout Chaucer's oeuvre. Chaucer evidently used his new *Romance borrowings* more often in other works than his new *compounds*. The new *Romance borrowing* that he used most is the noun *corage*: 94 times in all his works. Therefore it was only to be expected that it appears in the *Cobuild*.

The figures for all *nonce words* and *retained words* (regardless whether they are new or not) are presented in figure 2.3. About 8% of all main verbs and nouns are *nonce words*, and the same goes for *retained words*. It is clear that the percentages of both *nonce* and *retained words* are a lot higher for nouns than for main verbs. *Payndemayn* (n) is an example of a *nonce word*: Chaucer only used it in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, while he used *archeer* (n) in works from later in his career, but for the first time in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, making it a *retained word*. *Payndemayn* (n) is not present in the *Cobuild Dictionary*, but *archeer* (n) is.

word class	total	<i>nonce</i>		<i>retained</i>	
main verbs and nouns	368	32	8,7%	28	7,6%
main verbs	109	3	2,8%	3	2,8%
nouns	259	29	11,2%	25	9,7%

Figure 2.3 *Nonce words and retained words in The Tale of Sir Thopas with regard to word class*

origin	total	<i>nonce</i>		<i>retained</i>	
all origins	368	32	8,7%	28	7,6%
Old English	249	12	4,8%	10	4,0%
Romance	107	17	15,9%	14	13,1%
both	5	3	60,0%	3	60,0%
other	7	2	28,6%	1	14,3%

Figure 2.4 *Nonce words and retained words in The Tale of Sir Thopas with regard to origin*

From figure 2.4, it can be concluded that the rather low percentage of both *nonce* and *retained words* in this tale are due to the low percentage of these words stemming from Old

English. The percentages for words derived from both Old English and Romance are extremely high, but we must take the small number of words fitting this category into consideration.

It is also possible to find the average of times that Chaucer used the main verbs and nouns present in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in his complete oeuvre, as can be seen in figures 2.5 and 2.6:

word class	occurrences
main verbs and nouns	190,9
main verbs	321,5
nouns	135,9

Figure 2.5 Number of occurrences of words from *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in Chaucer's complete oeuvre with regard to word class

origin	occurrences
all origins	190,9
Old English	254,0
Romance	60,7
both	6,6
other	66,3

Figure 2.6 Number of occurrences of words from *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in Chaucer's complete oeuvre with regard to origin

The average number of occurrences of the words is circa 190. Obviously Chaucer used his main verbs from this tale more often throughout his work than the nouns in this tale, which also depends on the large number of occurrences of words derived from Old English. Words completely or partly derived from the Romance languages appear much less frequently in his other works. The results concerning occurrence are interesting because one would expect that other writers sooner copy words that are often used by a popular author such as Chaucer than words that are scarcely applied.

10. Discussion

Seventeen different main verbs and nouns have been introduced to the English language by Chaucer in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, which is about 4,6% of the total number of main verbs and nouns in the tale. Although this seems to be a small percentage, it means in fact that every twenty-second main verb or noun is a new word! This result makes it easier to understand that Chaucer was called *innovative*, because a text in which every twenty-second

main verb or noun is new must have sounded as queer and inordinate in the fourteenth century as it would today.

More than 35% of these new words are derived from Romance languages, which is not surprising regarding the reputation of introducing Romance words that Chaucer had, but is rather remarkable if you remember the statement both Cannon (1998) and Cooper (1989) made about the *Englishness* of this particular tale. There is not much difference between main verbs and nouns. Almost one third of the new words are *compounds*, which shows another often used strategy to expand the English language.

To give an idea of the impact of the words that Chaucer actually brought first in the English language, it is useful to calculate how many of these words are only used in this particular work. It appears that one of the eight newly borrowed main verbs and nouns from the Romance languages in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are *nonce words*, and as expected, the word in question (*payndemayn*) is not present in the *Cobuild Dictionary*. Two of the seven *compounds* in this tale are *nonce words* (*wodedowve* and *love-likynge*); and they are not in the *Cobuild*. Of the five new words that are *nonce words*, only one word (*ambil*) still exists in daily English, which is a logical effect of the fact that people borrow words more easily when they are used frequently. Chaucer employed his *Romance borrowings* more often in the rest of his career than his new *compounds*, which perhaps can be explained by the fact that the *compounds* in this tale (*staf-slynge*, *lilie/lilye flour*, *rewel boon* and *love-drury*) are not likely to appear in many texts just because of their meaning.

This last observation also explains the incredibly high percentage of *retained words* derived from both Old English and the Romance languages (60%). *Retained words* are words that were already present in the English language of the fourteenth century, but not used by Chaucer before this particular tale (see appendix for the chronology used). One would expect that the *retained words* are mostly derived from Old English, because of the *Englishness* Cooper (1989) and Cannon (1998) refer to. The opposite, however, is the case; only 4% of all main verbs and nouns derived from Old English are *retained words*, compared to 13% derived from Romance languages. There is a possible explanation, however: since verbs are the basis of a language because they are interwoven in the grammar as discussed in study 1, and almost all verbs were taken from Old English, it is not a surprise that only a small portion of words derived from Old English (mostly verbs) is *retained*. Chaucer obviously needed most words derived from Old English in his other works already. This explanation also accounts for the difference in percentages of *retained words* for main verbs and for nouns (respectively 2,8% and 9,7%).

The most interesting category of new words is that of the *nonce words*. *Nonce words* can either be words that are introduced by Chaucer or *retained words*, but the prerequisite is that Chaucer used them in only one tale. Looking at all main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, the figures are very similar to those of the *retained words*. Again nouns have the convincingly higher percentage of *nonce words*, just as those words that come from the Romance languages; these figures are interrelated, as has been observed before. The average of the number of times a head word or noun occurs in other works of Chaucer is about 190, which means that the words discussed in this study appear 190 times in Chaucer's complete oeuvre. Chaucer's verbs in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are more frequently used than his nouns, which is again explicable by the important role of verbs in the language. It is very interesting to see that despite the fact that Chaucer's language was seen as filled with *Romance borrowings*, he used the Romance words in this tale only 60 times average in all his works, which confirms Cannon's (1998) theory that Chaucer introduced a lot of new words, and used many words derived from the Romance languages, but often used them only in one or just a few tales (*local novelty*).

11. Study 3: Two modernisations of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*

Chaucer has always been, and still is, a very popular writer. Therefore it will not surprise anyone that his works have been translated and edited by other writers throughout the ages. In this study I attempt to show how two different writers, from two different periods, with completely different aims, treated *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

First of all, there is an eighteenth-century modernisation by William Lipscomb (1795). His version is a very free translation of the tale, with shorter stanzas and therefore fewer lines and words, and he endeavours to bring Chaucer back to life by providing his audience with the original tale plus modern twists in both structure and vocabulary. The second version I will discuss is a twentieth-century translation by Neville Coghill (1951), who clearly wanted to stay as close to Chaucer's language and poetry as possible. Naturally, both writers treated Chaucer's language completely differently; not only because they lived in different ages, but also because they are two different persons with their own opinions and style.

In this short study, I will look at the vocabulary of the two writers compared to that of Chaucer by classifying each word in the original *Tale of Sir Thopas* as *same*, *omitted* or *changed*. The *same* means that the modern writers used the same word as Chaucer did, possibly in the modern spelling. *Omitted* contains those words that are left out in the

alternative versions, whereas *changed* is the most interesting group, namely that of words that have been changed by the two writers. The main question here is: Why did the writers change the word? Two obvious reasons for changing the word are that the word did not exist anymore or was too old-fashioned (*occurrence*), and that it had to *rhyme* with another word. Changed words of which I am not convinced that they are changed because of occurrence or rhyme are classified in a separate category *unknown reason*, which will not be considered in this study because of its too wide range, although the results are given in the figures.

12. Results and discussion

William Lipscomb (1795) and Neville Coghill (1951) have a completely different method of approaching Chaucer's vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, as can be concluded from figures 3.1:

word class	total	same				omitted				changed			
		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill	
main verbs/nouns	368	91	24,7%	224	60,9%	186	50,5%	29	7,9%	91	24,7%	115	31,3%
main verbs	109	16	14,7%	53	48,6%	49	45,0%	10	9,2%	44	40,4%	46	42,2%
nouns	259	75	29,0%	171	66,0%	137	52,9%	19	7,3%	47	18,1%	69	26,6%

Figure 3.1 Same, omitted and changed words in Lipscomb and Coghill's version of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to word class

Lipscomb (1795) has omitted half of the main verbs and nouns used by Chaucer; a quarter of the words he has left the same, and another quarter he has changed. In Coghill's (1951) version, on the other hand, more than 60% of the words in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* are the same as those Chaucer uses, and only 8% is omitted. The remaining more than 30% are changed words. Both the eighteenth-century and the twentieth-century writer tend to change verbs mainly, while nouns were more likely to remain the same, which is remarkable considering the assumption that Old English verbs had and have an important role in the English language.

Figure 3.2 on the next page emphasise the origin of Chaucer's vocabulary that Lipscomb and Coghill either omit, change or leave the same. Lipscomb (1795) omitted words derived from Old English and from the Romance languages equally often, which could indicate that words derived from the Romance languages still had a significant role in eighteenth century literature. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that Lipscomb regularly left Romance words the same, while words derived from Old English were

changed. Coghill (1951), conversely, changed relatively more Romance words and left more words derived from Old English the same. But he omitted more words derived from Old English than in the Romantic languages, which could demonstrate that Coghill's language is oriented towards a balance between Old English and the Romance languages.

origin	total	same				omitted				changed			
		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill	
all origins	368	91	24,7%	224	60,9%	186	50,5%	29	7,9%	91	24,7%	115	31,3%
Old English	249	58	23,3%	157	63,1%	125	50,2%	22	8,8%	66	26,5%	70	28,1%
Romance	107	32	29,9%	62	57,9%	53	49,5%	7	6,5%	22	20,6%	38	35,5%
both	5	1	20,0%	2	40,0%	4	80,0%	0	0,0%	0	0,0%	3	60,0%
other	7	0	0,0%	3	42,9%	4	57,1%	0	0,0%	3	42,9%	4	57,1%

Figure 3.2 Same, omitted and changed words in Lipscomb and Coghill's version of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* with regard to origin

That both Lipscomb and Coghill changed words used in Chaucer's tale can also be shown by how they alter the following lines:

“Sire Thopas drow abak ful faste;

This geant at hym stones caste” (Chaucer 1387, p. 215)

Lipscomb (1795) provides the following lines:

“A stone he seiz'd, with fury fir'd (...)

but quick the watchful Knight retir'd” (p. 199)

Coghill's translation is the following:

“Sir Thopas quickly then retired;

The Giant took a sling and fired” (p. 180)

Why both authors changed the words is not evident; both *faste* and *caste* are in use nowadays, and they still rhyme. Possible reasons could be personal taste and the poetic rhythm of the tale. The reason why certain words have been changed by both writers, can be found in figures 3.3 and 3.4. The last main columns of both figures immediately draw attention because of their high percentages, but unfortunately this is in the category *reason unknown*, to which also the words *faste* and *caste* belong as considered above. Because the broad scope of this category makes drawing trustworthy conclusions impossible, I ignored the figures in this column.

word class	total		occurrence				rhyme				reason unknown			
	Lips.	Cogh.	Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill	
main verbs/nouns	91	115	6	6,6%	47	40,9%	19	20,9%	21	18,3%	66	72,5%	47	40,9%
main verbs	44	46	1	2,3%	13	28,3%	13	29,5%	10	21,7%	30	68,2%	23	50,0%
nouns	47	69	5	10,6%	34	49,3%	6	12,8%	11	15,9%	36	76,6%	24	34,8%

Figure 3.3 Changed words in Lipscomb and Coghill's version of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* due to occurrence, rhyme or unknown reason with regard to word class

origin	total		occurrence				rhyme				reason unknown			
	Lips.	Cogh.	Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill		Lipscomb		Coghill	
all origins	91	115	6	6,6%	47	40,9%	19	20,9%	21	18,3%	66	72,5%	47	40,9%
Old English	66	70	3	4,5%	26	37,1%	15	22,7%	11	15,7%	48	72,7%	33	47,1%
Romance	22	38	3	13,6%	17	44,7%	1	4,5%	9	23,7%	18	81,8%	12	31,6%
both	0	3	-	-	2	66,7%	-	-	0	0,0%	-	-	1	33,3%
other	3	4	0	0,0%	2	50,0%	3	100,0%	1	25,0%	0	0,0%	1	25,0%

Figure 3.4 Changed words in Lipscomb and Coghill's version of *The Tale of Sir Thopas* due to occurrence, rhyme or unknown reason with regard to origin

Lipscomb (1795), mostly changes his words for rhyme's sake, probably because his totally different structure constrained him to change many words and consequently many rhyme words. He especially changed words derived from Old English to make them rhyme, while he had to change mostly Romance words because the word used by Chaucer was either old-fashioned or extinct. Coghill's (1951) main reason for change is occurrence, which is not strange since the gap between Chaucer and Coghill is very large (more than five and a half centuries). Romance words were changed most by Coghill due to both occurrence and rhyme. Both writers change more nouns than main verbs because of occurrence, and more main verbs to maintain the rhyme.

All the results presented in the diagrams show the difference between the styles of both writers. Lipscomb gives his own version of the tale by leaving out half of the words and changing another 25%, chiefly using a Romance language while Coghill merely translates the work and leaves more than 60% of the words the same.

13. Conclusion

Geoffrey Chaucer has been assigned *the founder of English poetry* by writers and critics from his time until now, which has made us blind to the actual figures about his language.

Fortunately, Cannon (1998) has solved the mystery of the renewing but not expanding language of Chaucer by describing the categories *retained words* and *nonce words*. These together with the *externally new word* categories *Romance borrowings* and *compounds* gave a promising basis for my studies of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*.

My first study on the Chaucer's language in this particular tale showed that almost 30% of all main verbs and nouns in the tale have a Romance origin, confirming Chaucer's reputation but weakening Cannon's (1998) and Cooper's (1989) statements about the *Englishness* of this work. Logically, the time the main verbs and nouns had been present in fourteenth century English both in general and in the specific meaning is related to the origin of the word; words stemming from Old English are of course older than those from the Romance languages. The so-called *bridging period* surrounding Chaucer established that Romance words were used less frequently than words derived from Old English in the literary language of the Middle Ages. Despite the critique on the assumed important role of Chaucer in the English language that Cannon (1998) has, more than 75% of Chaucer's words in this tale are still in use in present-day English.

About 4,6% of the main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* were newly introduced by Chaucer into the language (*externally new*), which was the point of interest in my second study. About one third of Chaucer's new words in this tale are *Romance borrowings*, and another one third are *compounds*. New *Romance borrowings* and new *compounds* that are *nonce words* (respectively 12,5% and 29%) are not present in our Modern English, while the newly introduced *nonce word* *ambil* surprisingly is. *Internally new words* are also present in this tale: about 9% consists of *retained words*, from which most have a Romance origin, and are nouns. *Nonce words* comprise almost 8% of all main verbs and nouns, being mainly nouns and words stemming from the Romance languages. The average number of occurrences of the main verbs and nouns in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* in all of Chaucer's works is 190, but only 60 for Romance words, which means that Cannon (1998) was right in discussing Chaucer's *local novelty*.

My third and last study demonstrates that both William Lipscomb (1795) and Neville Coghill (1951) made very different versions of Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*. The former made a personal interpretation of the tale by omitting half of the words and changing a quarter. He mostly changed words derived from Old English for rhyme's sake, which means that Lipscomb's language has more Romance tendencies. Coghill (1951) obviously tried to stick close to the original by Chaucer, as the enormous amount of words that he left the same prove (60%). Because of the large time-span between Chaucer and himself, he had to

change words mostly because they were not present in his (and our) daily language anymore.

The figures in the three studies do not give a complete or sufficient analysis of Chaucer's vocabulary in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, but they give an interesting insight in it nonetheless. Cannon (1998) has set the tone for a critical but thorough approach towards the vocabulary of Chaucer in general, which can hopefully be continued more satisfactorily when the *MED* is finished.

14. References

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Appendix

Chronology of Chaucer's works (Cannon 1998, pp. 224-226)

The Romaunt of the Rose (Fragment A)

An ABC

The Book of the Duchess

The Complaint Unto Pity

A Complaint Unto His Lady

Prologue to the Second Nun's Tale

The Second Nun's Tale

The Monk's Tale (lines 1991-2374 and 2643-2766)

The House of Fame

Anelida and Arcite

The Parliament of Fowls

Boece

Troilus and Criseyde

Adam Sciveyn

The Complaint of Mars

The Complaint of Venus

The Knight's Tale

The Former Age

Fortune

Truth

Gentilesse

Lak of Stedfastnesse

The Legend of Good Women (Prologue, text F)

The General Prologue

A Treatise on the Astrolabe

The Legend of Good Women (Prologue, text G)

The Miller's Prologue

The Miller's Tale

The Reeve's Prologue

The Reeve's Tale

The Cook's Prologue

The Cook's Tale

Introduction to (and Prologue of) The Man of Law's Tale

The Man of Law's Tale

Epilogue to The Man of Law's Tale

The Wife of Bath's Prologue

The Wife of Bath's Tale

The Friar's Prologue

The Friar's Tale

The Summoner's Prologue

The Summoner's Tale

The Clerk's Prologue

The Clerk's Tale

The Merchant's Prologue

The Merchant's Tale

Epilogue tot The Merchant's Tale

Introduction to The Squire's Tale

The Squire's Tale

The Franklin's Prologue

The Franklin's Tale

The Physician's Tale

Introduction to The Pardoner's Tale

The Pardoner's Prologue

The Pardoner's Tale

The Shipman's Tale

The Prologue of The Prioress's Tale

The Prioress's Tale

The Prologue to The Tale of Sir Thopas

The Tale of Sir Thopas

The Tale of Melibee

The Prologue of The Monk's Tale

The Monk's Tale "Modern Instances" (lines 2375-2462)

The Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale

The Nun's Priest's Tale

Epilogue to the Nun's Priest's Tale

The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue

The Canon's Yeoman's Tale

The Manciple's Prologue

The Manciple's Tale

The Parson's Prologue

The Parson's Tale

Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan

Lenvoy de Chaucer a Bukton

The Complaints of Chaucer to His Purse

Proverbs

To Rosemounde

Against Women Unconstant

Womanly Noblesse

Merciles Beaute