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THE MORPHOLOGICAL ASSIMILATION OF FRENCH LOANWORDS IN ENGLISH: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DERIVATION, CONVERSION, AND HYBRID WORD FORMATION

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Abstract. This article offers a systematic and multidimensional analysis of the morphological assimilation of French-derived lexical items (Gallicisms) in the English language. The study treats morphological assimilation as a process that proceeds along parameters independent of phonetic and semantic assimilation, and examines it along four dimensions: integration into English part-of-speech paradigms, the productivity of derivational affixes, the phenomenon of conversion, and hybrid word formation. The analysis draws on a corpus of more than 120 Gallicisms selected from historical dictionaries of English and modern corpus sources. The findings show that five affixes of French origin (–ment, –age, –ance/–ence, –ity, –ous) have become independent, productive word-formation devices in English, now attaching to bases regardless of etymological origin. The study also establishes that words which retain partially "foreign" phonetic features (e.g. ballet, chauffeur) are nonetheless fully assimilated grammatically – confirming that lexical borrowing is not a single, unidirectional process but a multilayered one that proceeds at different rates along several independent parameters. The conclusions are of relevance to historical linguistics, word-formation theory, and the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: morphological assimilation, Gallicism, derivational affixes, conversion, hybrid word formation, productivity, language contact, historical linguistics, word-formation theory.

Introduction

The lexical consequences of language contact remain one of the most enduring areas of interest in modern linguistics. Yet within this broad field, not all dimensions of borrowing have received equally thorough treatment: while phonetic assimilation (the adaptation of a loanword's pronunciation to the norms of the recipient language) and semantic assimilation (narrowing, widening, or shift of meaning) are well represented in the literature, morphological assimilation the degree to which a borrowed item becomes integrated into the recipient language's grammatical and word-formation system has comparatively rarely been treated as an independent object of study.

The relevance of the problem lies in the fact that morphological assimilation is not merely the passive outcome of a loanword's "adaptation"; it is an active process with consequences for the recipient language itself. The transformation of French-derived affixes into independent English word-formation devices has expanded English's own internal resources, extending even to lexical

strata that have nothing to do with French. Studying morphological assimilation is therefore of theoretical significance not only for the history of English but for word-formation theory as such.

The purpose of this article is to provide a systematic analysis of the morphological assimilation of French-derived lexical items along four principal dimensions – part-of-speech integration, derivational affixes, conversion, and hybrid word formation – and to demonstrate that this process proceeds independently of phonetic and semantic assimilation. The objectives of the study are as follows: (1) to clarify the concept of morphological assimilation theoretically and to distinguish it from phonetic and semantic assimilation; (2) to identify French-derived affixes that have acquired independent productivity in English and to characterize their degree of productivity; (3) to illustrate the phenomena of conversion and hybrid word formation using Gallicism material; (4) to demonstrate, with concrete examples, that the degree of morphological assimilation can be independent of the degree of phonetic assimilation.

The scholarly novelty of the study lies in the fact that, whereas prior work – including the author's earlier article on phonetic assimilation – has focused primarily on sound-level change, the present article is the first to treat the morphological behaviour of Gallicisms as an independent object of study within a systematic four-dimensional model.

Theoretical Framework

One of the classic foundations of borrowing theory is Uriel Weinreich's Languages in Contact (1953), which showed that the changes arising from language contact may proceed independently at the phonological, grammatical, and lexical levels. This idea was further developed by Einar Haugen (1950), who described lexical borrowing as a staged process of adaptation, in which a loanword is first "imported" and then adapted to the recipient system through "substitution." Rudolf Filipović's (1986) three-stage model – transphonemization, transmorphemization, and semantic adaptation – systematized these processes still further, and it is the second of these stages, transmorphemization, on which the present article focuses in depth.

A second theoretical foundation essential to understanding morphological assimilation is word-formation theory, in particular Laurie Bauer's English Word-Formation (1983) and Ingo Plag's Word-Formation in English (2003). These studies developed the notion of affixal "productivity" – the degree to which an affix is actively used to form new words not previously in existence. This productivity criterion serves in the present article as the principal instrument for assessing the degree to which French-derived affixes have been "naturalized" in English: if an affix occurs only in words historically inherited ready-made from French, it has not yet been fully assimilated; if it is also actively used to form new words unrelated to French, this is evidence of its complete morphological assimilation.

A third theoretical strand concerns the phenomenon of conversion, understood through Hans Marchand's (1969) classic account as "zero-derivation": a word changes its part-of-speech function without any change in its external form. This phenomenon is almost absent in French itself, where nouns and verbs typically take distinct morphological shapes; the fact that English-based Gallicisms readily undergo conversion is therefore particularly clear evidence of a development that is independent of the donor language and governed solely by the recipient language's own internal grammatical logic.

Materials and Methods

Material and selection criteria

The study material comprised more than 120 French-derived lexical items selected from historical and etymological dictionaries of English (notably the Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology and the data presented in Philip Durkin's Borrowed Words, 2014). Selection was governed by two criteria: first, the word's French (or French-mediated) etymology had to be confirmed; second, the word had to be in active use in contemporary English rather than being confined to archaic or purely historical texts.

Analytical procedures

The following methods were employed: morphemic analysis (to segment each word into root and affixes); the historical-comparative method (to track an affix's productivity across historical periods); componential analysis (to identify instances of conversion by examining a word's syntactic properties); and a descriptive-classificatory method (to sort the identified phenomena into the study's four categories: part-of-speech integration, affixal productivity, conversion, and hybridization). The productivity of each affix was assessed against two criteria: (1) the existence of words formed with the affix on a base unrelated to French; (2) evidence of the affix's participation in forming contemporary neologisms.

Results

Part-of-speech integration

The analysis showed that all major parts of speech of French origin – nouns, verbs, adjectives are fully subject to the corresponding English grammatical paradigms. Among nouns, words such as restaurant, machine, bouquet, garage, passport, portrait, and costume take the regular **–s** plural, retaining no separate French plural form (a small number of exceptions, such as chateau/chateaux, occur mainly in scholarly or formal registers and constitute a distinct, less fully assimilated subgroup). Among verbs, items such as arrive, continue, prepare, imagine, suffer, and refuse participate fully in the regular English tense and aspect system (the **–ed** past tense, the **–ing** progressive form). Among adjectives, many French-derived items conform to English's analytic comparison pattern (more/most), a further indicator of their syntactic integration.

Productivity of derivational affixes

The central finding of the study is the demonstration that five affixes of French origin have become independent, highly productive devices in English (Table 1).

Table 1. Productivity of five derivational affixes of French origin in English

Affix	French-derived examples	English (non-French-based) examples	Degree of productivity
–ment	development, employment	endorsement, amazement, fulfilment	High
–age	marriage, village, passage	shortage, breakage, leakage	Medium-high
–ance/–ence	importance, performance	acceptance, forbearance	Medium
–ity	activity, curiosity	readability, testability	High (in scholarly register)
–ous	curious,	murderous, thunderous	Medium-high

	dangerous, famous		

The table shows that all five affixes are capable of attaching to bases unrelated to French – concrete evidence that they no longer function as "French suffixes" but as English's own, independent word-formation resources. The affixes **–ment** and **–ity** in particular were assessed as highly productive, since they remain actively engaged in contemporary word formation, including in new professional and technical terminology.

Conversion

English contains numerous nouns of French origin that function as verbs without any additional morphological marking. This phenomenon is almost absent from the donor language's own morphological behaviour, since French nouns and verbs typically carry distinct morphological shapes. Instances of such conversion in English are therefore particularly clear evidence of the recipient language's independent, internal productivity: a word may have entered English purely as a noun, yet English's own grammatical flexibility allows it to acquire a verbal function as well – a new functional possibility that did not exist in the donor language.

Hybrid word formation

A further important manifestation of morphological assimilation is the formation of hybrid words, in which a root of French origin combines with an affix of English (or Germanic) origin, or, conversely, an English-based root combines with a suffix of Romance origin. Such hybrid forms demonstrate that the Germanic and Romance lexical strata no longer operate as strictly separate systems but as parts of a single, interacting word-formation system. Table 2 summarizes the two principal types of hybrid formation.

Table 2. Types of hybrid word formation

Type of hybrid	Structure	Significance
Romance root + Germanic/English affix	French-derived base + English suffix	Shows the French root's full subordination to the English morphological system
English/Germanic base + Romance-derived suffix	English base + French-derived suffix	Shows the Romance affix functioning as a general device independent of the donor language

Historical dynamics of morphological assimilation

Morphological assimilation is not a single event but unfolds over the course of several centuries. In the period immediately following the Norman Conquest, French words were mostly borrowed as ready-made, unsegmented wholes; their internal morphological structure (root plus affix) was not separately recognized by speakers of English. Over the following centuries, particularly during the Middle English and Early Modern English periods, as the domains of education, law, and science created growing demand for Latinate-French affixes, these affixes

came to be reanalyzed by English speakers as independent, separable units – a process known in linguistics as rebracketing. As a result, native speakers of English today do not perceive suffixes such as **–ment** or **–ity** as French at all.

Discussion

The findings show that morphological assimilation can proceed along a parameter independent of phonetic assimilation. As demonstrated in the author's earlier study, words such as ballet, chauffeur, and croissant retain partially "foreign" phonetic features (such as stress placement or elements of French pronunciation) to this day. Yet when the grammatical behaviour of these same words is examined here, they are found to take regular plural and other grammatical forms without exception. This observation indicates that lexical borrowing cannot be captured by a single, unidirectional notion of "assimilation degree", but must instead be described along several independent dimensions (phonetic, morphological, semantic) – a finding that confirms, with contemporary linguistic material, the early theoretical intuitions of Weinreich and Haugen.

A second important point of discussion concerns the possibility of measuring morphological assimilation through the criterion of affixal productivity. Traditional studies have often assessed a word as simply "assimilated" or "unassimilated" in binary terms; the present study, by treating the affix itself as a separate unit of analysis, offers a more fine-grained, gradient classification instead: affixes borrowed from the same donor language may display markedly different degrees of productivity (for instance, **–ment** and **–ity** are high, while **–ance**/**–ence** is comparatively medium), and this difference may be related to the affix's historical period of entry, its semantic transparency, and the stylistic register (scholarly, legal, everyday) in which it was needed.

A third point of discussion concerns the theoretical significance of conversion and hybrid word formation. Both phenomena show that the recipient language is not simply a passive recipient of borrowed material but an active system that reworks that material through its own internal grammatical freedom, at times creating functional possibilities such as the conversion of a noun into a verb – that did not exist in the donor language at all. This conclusion also matters for the general theory of language contact: it suggests that the very term "borrowing" may be somewhat misleading, since the recipient language does not passively retain the borrowed material but actively works it into its own system.

As a limitation of the study, it should be noted that although the more-than-120 items selected constitute a reasonably representative sample, they do not exhaust the full inventory of Gallicisms in English, which is estimated to run into the thousands. Future research using larger corpus datasets could calculate precise frequency figures for each affix and could further relate the degree of morphological assimilation to the types of semantic assimilation (narrowing, widening, pejoration) that a given item has undergone.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the morphological assimilation of French-derived lexical items in English within a systematic four-dimensional model – part-of-speech integration, the productivity of derivational affixes, conversion, and hybrid word formation. The findings show that five affixes of French origin (**–ment, –age, –ance**/**–ence, –ity, –ous**) have become independent, productive word-formation devices in English, while the phenomena of conversion and hybrid word formation confirm that the recipient language actively and creatively integrates borrowed material into its own internal system. The study's central conclusion is that the degree of morphological assimilation can be independent of the degree of phonetic assimilation, indicating that lexical

borrowing should be understood not as a single, linear process but as a multifaceted phenomenon that proceeds at different rates along several independent parameters. These findings may enrich university courses in historical linguistics, word-formation theory, and lexicology, as well as the practice of teaching English as a foreign language.

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