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I Why study Chaucer's language?

All living languages are subject to change. Linguistic change may happen in various different ways for a variety of different reasons, affecting the pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary of a language. We are often made aware of such changes by the media who lament the corruption and decay of the English language as reflected in such changes as the spread of estuary English, the spelling of text and email messages, and the inclusion of slang terms in dictionaries. Yet all these changes are simply reflections of the fact that languages are in a continual process of flux, adapting to reflect changes taking place in the society within which they are used. So, for instance, the revolution in information technology has led to the coining of new words such as *download* and *email* which have become adopted into English and are thus included in new editions of dictionaries. If we take a broader historical perspective, then we can see that over the past 500 years the English language has undergone numerous changes that have radically altered its structure, making it increasingly difficult for us to read texts written in English of earlier periods. Chaucer was aware of the inevitability of language change and its effects, and he considers these in the proem to Book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*:

Ye knowe <u>ek</u> that in forme of speche is chaunge	also
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes <u>tho</u>	then
That hadden pris, now wonder <u>nyce</u> and straunge	absurd
Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake <u>hem</u> so,	them

(2.22–5)

Linguistic change means that to read Chaucer today we need a good understanding of his language and how it differs from our own. This is most evident in the case of vocabulary, as many of the words

used by Chaucer have since fallen out of use and become obsolete. An example of this is the word *ek* found in the above quotation, where it means 'also'. This is a common word in Chaucer and therefore its meaning needs to be learned, just as today we learn common French words to help us to read texts written in that language. In fact the number of such words is comparatively small and many of the words used by Chaucer are still recognizable to us. So, for instance, in the above extract, the majority of the words are familiar enough that someone with no knowledge of Chaucer's language could probably make some sense of what is being said.

However, while the familiarity of Chaucer's words can be helpful, it can also cause problems. The availability of Chaucer's work in translations into modern English, or modernized versions, encourages the view that Chaucer's work is more similar to present-day English (PDE) than is really the case. The similarity of Chaucer's language to our own is also frequently emphasized by writers on the history of English, often as support for the view that Chaucer was responsible for creating the English literary language that we use today. For instance, in his recent book *The Adventure of English*, Melvyn Bragg describes how, in Chaucer's work, 'English speakers talk directly to us, through skilful stories told by a group of pilgrims' (2003, 69). The suggestion is that Chaucer's characters speak in a language that can be easily understood by a modern reader, thereby ignoring the linguistic divide that separates us from Chaucer's language. This view of Chaucer as a modern writer is further encouraged by current trends in Chaucer criticism that tend to emphasize the similarity between Chaucer's works and modern literature, rather than its difference. This has the effect of de-emphasizing the linguistic differences between Chaucer's language and our own, which may cause problems when it comes to reading his works. While Chaucer's works are indeed relevant to a modern audience, their language differs from that of PDE in a number of ways, and it is important that we are aware of such differences when reading Chaucer to prevent us misunderstanding his meaning.

The most obvious way in which Chaucer's language may appear similar to our own is in the survival of many of his words into PDE. But here we must be careful as a word may have kept the same appearance but have changed its meaning. This becomes apparent if we consider the phrase 'nyce and straunge' in the above passage. On the surface this phrase does not appear to cause many problems as it

is easily recognized as the equivalent of 'nice and strange'. But what does that mean? Can words be described as being 'nice and strange'? So while the apparent familiarity of these words might trick us into thinking that there is no difficulty, we must remember that words that look like PDE words may have had different meanings in Middle English (ME). So, even though the word *nyce* looks familiar, we must check in a dictionary to see how it was used in ME. The *Riverside Chaucer* gives two main senses for this word as follows: (1) foolish; (2) scrupulous. The first thing to notice about this definition is that neither of these meanings is the same as the main meaning in PDE of 'agreeable, pleasant, satisfactory'. So whenever we encounter the word *nyce* in Chaucer's works we must be careful not to give it our PDE meaning.

Armed with the *Riverside Chaucer*'s definition, we can now return to our passage and see which of these two senses is the more appropriate in this context. Clearly the intended sense here is 'foolish', although we might prefer to gloss this particular example as 'ridiculous' or 'absurd'. So by looking the word up in the glossary, we are able to determine the correct meaning of this word in this particular context. However, there are other examples of the word *nyce* that may cause us further problems. For instance, later in Book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus makes the following appeal to his niece Criseyde:

'Wel,' quod Pandare, 'as I have told yow <u>thrie</u> ,	thrice
Lat be youre nyce shame and youre <u>folie</u> ,	folly
And spek with hym in esyng of his herte;	
Lat nycete nat do yow bothe smerte.'	

(2.1285–8)

In this example neither of the definitions given by the *Riverside Chaucer* seems particularly appropriate. 'Foolish shame' might seem the most fitting translation, although this would make the following noun *folie* 'folly' seem redundant. In this case we need a more comprehensive definition, as provided by the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*). Instead of the two senses offered by the *Riverside Chaucer*, there are four major senses listed for this word in the *MED*; these can be summarized as follows: (1) foolish, frivolous, absurd; (2) sluggish, weak, timid; (3) fastidious, fussy, dainty; (4) extravagant, self-indulgent. Given this greater range of meanings, it

becomes apparent that sense 2, not given in the *Riverside* glossary, is the most appropriate meaning for the example given above. Pandarus is instructing Criseyde to put aside her timid shame rather than her foolish shame, which would imply a much more judgmental and dismissive attitude.

This example has shown us that we need to be wary of words that may seem familiar to us because their meanings have often changed. We also found that we should not rely entirely on the single-word glosses provided by editors, but turn to a more comprehensive dictionary, such as the *MED*, for a detailed definition of a word. The greater range of definitions provided by the *MED* means that we have to work harder to determine the correct meaning for a particular use of a word, forcing us to analyse the context more closely. This might seem like an unnecessary amount of extra effort, but it is extremely important if we are to appreciate fully Chaucer's writing.

There are many other words like *nyce* which have survived into PDE with similar spellings but with different meanings. Another good example is the word *buxom*, as in the following rhetorical question in the Merchant's Tale: 'For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?' (E 1287). It would be easy to view this as a reference to a woman's physical appearance, reading *buxom* according to its present-day meaning 'plump' or 'busty', but this meaning is not recorded before the sixteenth century; the ME meaning of the word is concerned with moral behaviour and means 'obedient' or 'submissive'. Such distinctions are clearly important as they radically alter our perception of attitudes to women in the Middle Ages. While physical appearance, and especially youth, is clearly important to the lecherous old bachelor in the Merchant's Tale, he is primarily looking for obedience and subservience in his future bride.

Another word that survives into PDE with a different meaning is *sely*, which is PDE *silly*, meaning 'foolish'. However, in ME the word can mean 'holy', as in the description of the saintly heroine in the Man of Law's Tale as 'this sely innocent, Custance' (B1 682). It can also have the meaning 'simple' or 'innocent', as in the Host's reference to 'sely men' who are at the mercy of the deceit and trickery of women. There is clearly a link between the meaning 'simple' or 'innocent' and the PDE meaning 'foolish' and it is easy to see how the modern meaning has developed from the ME one. In fact, there are instances in Chaucer where the word seems to be used in a similar way to that of PDE *silly*. For example, in the Reeve's

Tale the two students who are tricked by the miller are described as being 'sely clerkes'. We could read this sympathetically as 'innocent' but the tone seems more critical, while the ridiculous image of the students charging round the fens trying to catch their runaway horse makes the sense 'foolish' seem more appropriate.

In the case of *silly*, it is apparent that in some instances the PDE meaning is appropriate, while in others, senses found only in ME are correct. This situation forces us to be particularly alert to the subtle shifts in meaning and connotation that can only be gauged from a close reading of the immediate context. Another good example of this is the ME word *corage*, which can be used with the PDE sense 'courage' as well as 'spirit' or 'temperament'. But in ME it can also refer to 'sexual desire', as in the reference to Walter fulfilling his *corage* in the Clerk's Tale (E 907). It is important to be aware of this range of meanings so as not to attribute the wrong meaning to a particular instance, such as the 'ful devout corage' with which Chaucer and his fellow travellers set out on the Canterbury pilgrimage (A 22). In most cases the correct meaning can be determined by a careful analysis of the context, although in some instances it is not so simple. For example, in the Merchant's Tale we are told that, in his old age, January had 'a greet corage' to get married. The intended meaning here is probably 'inclination', although the fact that he wants a young and beautiful wife makes the sense 'sexual desire' seem equally appropriate. This example shows how a good knowledge of Chaucer's vocabulary helps us to appreciate the range of meanings available to Chaucer, and the ambiguities and subtle distinctions in connotation that he was able to exploit. If we are unaware of such distinctions, we are likely to miss many of the nuances and ironies that are central to a true appreciation of Chaucer's work.

A sound understanding of the full range of meanings associated with Chaucer's vocabulary is particularly important when dealing with certain key terms. For instance, the adjective *gentil* and the related noun *gentillesse* occur frequently throughout Chaucer's works, representing a complex network of moral and social qualities. It is therefore important that we have a good understanding of the range of applications of these terms, especially as the word *gentle* has changed its meaning significantly since the Middle Ages. In PDE, the word signifies 'soft', 'mild' or 'tender', but these meanings are not found in Chaucer's usage. For Chaucer the word signified

rank or status, indicating that someone belonged to a noble family. By association with this meaning, it is also used to describe qualities generally associated with the well-born, such as 'courteous', 'noble' and 'generous'. A good example of this usage is found in Chaucer's description of the knight in the General Prologue, whom he calls a 'verray, parfit gentil knyght' (A 72). Given the long list of military battles and conquests Chaucer has just described, it would be odd to label the knight 'soft' or 'tender'; here the word signifies both his rank and the noble qualities associated with it. The use of this word to signify degree and rank has not survived into PDE, except in the term *gentleman*, although the original meaning of this term is no longer recognized. We might contrast this development with that of the adjective *lowely*, which is used to describe the knight's son, the Squire (A 99). In PDE this word tends to signify low status, whereas here it signifies humility and modesty.

Another key term in Chaucer's writing is the adjective *fre*, as in the Franklin's concluding question to the issues raised by his tale: 'Which was the mooste fre?' (F 1622). To begin to answer this question we need a detailed definition of the word *fre*. The *MED* gives the following main senses for this word: (1) free in rank or condition, having the social status of a noble or a freeman, not a slave or serf; (2) noble in character; gracious, well-mannered; (3) generous. Despite the obvious differences between these three senses, they overlap in complex and subtle ways. For instance, someone who is of noble birth is likely to act in a noble way, and generosity may well be part of this behaviour. People of noble birth may do ignoble acts, while it is also possible that someone who is of a low social status may act nobly in spite of their rank. This distinction is also complicated by those who belong to neither the noble nor the peasant classes, as well as those who are born peasants but who achieve noble status through the acquisition of wealth and social status. All these interlocking issues are raised by the Franklin's Tale, so that it is apparent that the Franklin is invoking each of these senses of the word when posing his final question.

Another aspect of a word's meaning and use that we need to be aware of when reading Chaucer is its connotation. Connotation is much harder to define, and it is an aspect of a word which cannot be determined simply by looking in a glossary or a dictionary. As speakers of English, we are aware of a complex network of associations for individual words that cannot be gleaned from a dictionary

entry, but require an understanding of the cultural setting within which a word is used. For instance, the words *truth* and *veracity* have similar meanings, although their connotations are quite different, with *veracity* appearing only in formal contexts. Similarly *lie* and *fib* have similar meanings, but *fib* is limited exclusively to colloquial usage. Such distinctions existed in ME as well, although it is much harder for us to reconstruct the connotations words had for native speakers of ME.

One way of determining the connotations associated with a particular word is to examine all instances of its use, taking note of a range of contextual factors, such as whether it appears in a piece of high style description in the Knight's Tale, or in direct speech uttered by a person of low social standing in one of the fabliaux. This type of analysis helps us to understand why Chaucer should use a particular word instead of another with a similar meaning. For instance, there are many words in ME with the core meaning of 'noble', raising the question of why Chaucer should select a particular one in a certain context. If we examine the distribution of some of the words meaning 'noble' used by Chaucer, we find a number of restrictions which help to isolate factors conditioning their use. For instance, the words *hende*, *joly* and *gent* are only ever used to describe characters whose nobility is decidedly dubious, suggesting that, for Chaucer, these words belonged to a lower register than others such as *digne*, *free*, *gentil*, *noble*, *riche*, *worthy*, which are frequently used to describe genuinely noble characters.

A related problem concerns words which are borrowed from French. Students tend to make the assumption that all words of French origin were of high status, and that any passage making use of French vocabulary was intended to be high style. While it is broadly true that French words were stylistically marked, it is certainly not the case that all French words belonged to a higher register. To determine which French words were elevated and which were less marked is a complex process and requires more than a simple check of a word's etymology in a dictionary. As well as knowing its etymology, we also need to be aware of its history in ME and its use, both in Chaucer and in other ME works. This is because a French word that was borrowed early on in the ME period, sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, is likely to have been assimilated into the English language by the time Chaucer used it in the late fourteenth century. A similar situation is

found in PDE, where we are more aware of the French origins of words like *milieu*, *apropos*, *chaise-longue*, which still retain their French pronunciations, than of words like *problem*, *place*, *uncle*, which have become fully assimilated so that we think of them as English words.

So a true understanding of the status of Chaucer's vocabulary demands a sensitivity to the connotations of the individual words that goes beyond the simple fact of their etymologies. This is particularly important when reading Chaucer, as one of Chaucer's achievements as a poet was to exploit the connotations of words by using them in original and unusual contexts.

So far I have focused entirely on vocabulary, as this is the level of language that is likely to cause most problems of interpretation for students with no knowledge of ME. But there are also differences between the grammar of ME and PDE that it is important to be aware of when reading Chaucer. For example, students are often confused by the frequent switching between the present and past tenses in Chaucer's work, as in the following extract:

The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon,	
And Absolon his <u>gyterne</u> hath ytake;	cittern
<u>For paramours</u> he thoghte for to wake.	because of love
And forth he gooth, jolif and amorous,	
Til he cam to the carpenteres hous	
A litel after cokkes hadde <u>ycrowe</u> ,	crowed
	(A 3352-7)

This is a piece of narration in the past, although the verb *gooth* is in the present tense. Many students fail to recognize such switches into the present tense and so translate the passage as if it was consistently in the past. But, having identified this switching between tenses, they remain uncertain as to why Chaucer should do this. In PDE, switching between the past and present tense is not generally found in written English, although it is common in speech, as in an example like, 'A chap went into a bar and says to the barman ...'. It is easy to assume that the same rules apply in ME, and that switching between tenses in writing is evidence of colloquial usage. This seems a logical explanation of the above example, especially given the frequent use of colloquial language in the Miller's Tale. However, this explanation does not account for the switching

between present and past tenses in passages written in high style, such as the following example taken from the Knight's Tale:

The sesoun priketh every gentil herte, incites
 And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,
 And seith 'Arys, and do thyn observaunce.' duty
 This maked Emelye have remembraunce
 To doon honour to May, and for to ryse.

(A 1043–47)

So how do we explain these frequent shifts between the present and past tenses? One reason for the shift from the present to the past tense is to indicate a move from continuous to completed action, as in the above example from the Knight's Tale. The switch from the past tense to the present, as in the example from the Miller's Tale, serves to quicken the pace of the narrative, giving it greater immediacy as well as highlighting the beginning of a new stage in the story's development. The present tense may also be used within a piece of past narration to mark a statement that has a significance which goes beyond the limits of the story. So the comments on the joys of marriage in the introduction to the Merchant's Tale are in the present tense, and read like a set of pronouncements made by a character within the tale, although they are not in fact in direct speech:

And certainly, as sooth as God is kyng, true
 To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng,
 And namely whan a man is oold and hoor; particularly; grey
 Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.

(E 1267–70)

Another possible explanation for the switching of tenses concerns metre. For example, the choice between *maketh* and *made* affects the metre, so that Chaucer may decide to employ the present tense when he needs a form with two syllables, or the past tense when one syllable is required. Whatever the reason for such switching, it is clear that we cannot judge such passages by modern standards, but need a good understanding of Chaucer's own practices in order to be able to appreciate all the stylistic implications of such details.

Applying modern notions of correct grammar to Chaucer's text can cause us many other problems, prompting us to misjudge

constructions that are deemed incorrect according to the rules of standard English. A good example of this is the double negative which we meet frequently in Chaucer, but which is frowned upon in standard English. In PDE the double negative is considered a non-standard feature, found in certain dialects such as Cockney, spoken in the East End of London, and is therefore socially stigmatized. As a result, when we encounter such constructions in Chaucer, it is tempting to regard them as incorrect, or to assume that they are intended to reflect badly on a particular narrator or character. However, such notions of correct and incorrect usage, and the stigmatization of the double negative, are eighteenth-century developments, and it would be anachronistic to apply them to Chaucer's work. In ME double, or even triple and quadruple negatives were used to add emphasis to the negation, so that Chaucer's famous description of the knight was intended to stress the purity of his speech rather than call it into question:

He nevere yet no <u>vileynye</u> ne sayde	rudeness
In al his lyf unto no <u>maner wight</u> .	sort of person
	(A 70-1)

Not only can we not apply the grammatical rules of standard English when reading Chaucer, but we must also put aside the preconceptions that we have concerning the importance of correctness and consistency when using language. This is because Chaucer wrote before the English language had become standardized, so that there was much greater variation in the use of language, which in turn allowed Chaucer considerable flexibility. Because we are taught that there are correct and incorrect ways to use language, we are often intolerant of variation. As a result, students are often confused and frustrated by the range of variant spelling forms that they frequently encounter in Chaucer, and there is a tendency to see this as poetic licence, especially where variant spellings appear in rhyme. However, such variation was commonplace and perfectly acceptable in ME, and we must not impose our modern preference for consistency upon a period when the language permitted much greater variation.

This book also includes a chapter which provides guidelines as to how Chaucer's language was pronounced. I often encourage students to spend time learning how to pronounce Chaucer correctly,

as this can be a useful guide to recognizing particular words and their meanings. As well as helping with understanding the text, being able to pronounce Chaucer's works is an important way of appreciating his work. This is because it is likely that Chaucer's works were composed for oral performance, and his first audience was probably composed of listeners rather than readers. By reading the text aloud, we gain important insights into how this method of presentation affected the way the text was composed and circulated, as well as coming closer to the way medieval readers first experienced Chaucer's poetry.

One way of coping with the difficulties presented by Chaucer's language is to turn to a translation into PDE, although by doing this you will miss out on many of the subtleties and nuances of Chaucer's work that cannot be conveyed in a PDE representation. The difficulties involved in providing a faithful translation of Chaucer's work are further compounded by an attempt to preserve the metre and rhyme of the original, so that many of the choices of specific words may be governed by practical concerns as much as semantic ones. For example, in the opening line of the Miller's Tale, John the carpenter is described by Chaucer as a *gnof*, a word which means 'churl' and thus has connotations of low social status (A 3188). In the verse translation by Nevill Coghill, this word is rendered as 'old codger', no doubt in order to facilitate a rhyme with 'lodger' in the following line. The clerk Nicholas is then introduced as 'Nicholas the Gallant', an epithet which does not do justice to the ironic and satiric connotations that are implied in Chaucer's use of the adjective *hende* to describe Nicholas.

We noted above the complex range of interlocking associations represented by the word *fre*, and their significance for our understanding of the Franklin's final question: 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?' (F 1622). In the Coghill translation, the complexity of this question is considerably reduced, by the rendering of the Franklin's question as 'Which seemed the finest gentleman to you?' Similarly, we might consider the translation of another complex term such as *trouthe*. This word has a range of meanings in ME, encompassing concepts such as 'fidelity', 'loyalty', 'honour', 'honesty', 'moral soundness', 'faith' as well as the PDE meanings 'correspondence to reality' and 'speaking without deceit'. We need to be aware of this wide range of potential meanings when encountering Chaucer's use of the word, as in the

description of the knight in the General Prologue who loved 'Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie'. In the Coghill translation, the word *trouthe* is rendered as 'truth', a translation which considerably narrows the range of available meanings. A similar range of concepts is encompassed by the term *curteisie*, which is defined by the *MED* as 'the complex of courtly ideals', and includes 'chivalry, kindness, nobleness, generosity and refinement of manners'. Only the last of these is associated with the PDE equivalent term *courtesy*, which is the word selected by Coghill in his translation of this line.

So, by relying on a translation, a reader of Chaucer is likely to miss much of the density of Chaucer's vocabulary and the subtle shifts of nuances and connotations, as well as the many ironies that are evident when reading the original. To read Chaucer exclusively in translation is like going to see a Shakespeare play in translation – much of what makes it Shakespeare would be missing. In fact, the production of Shakespeare's plays has recently moved in the opposite direction, with the reconstructed Globe Theatre now staging plays with the original Shakespearean pronunciation. If we want to read Chaucer, and be alive to the nuances and subtleties of his work, then we also need to read Chaucer in the original, equipped with a good understanding of his language.

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