

THE FRENCH ELEMENT IN ENGLISH

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THIS paper presents a report of a study¹ of the French element in English based upon an examination of the derivation of the English words in Thorndike's *The Teacher's Word Book*.² This study was made to secure information as to the potential value of French for increased control over the English vocabulary, with the ultimate purpose of paving the way for the utilization of this value by English-speaking students of French.

The potential value for the enrichment of English vocabulary inherent in French depends upon the etymological relation between the words of the two languages. The extent of this relationship may be expressed objectively in terms of the number and percentage of English words derived from French. The Thorndike Word Book was chosen as a basis for the etymological study for the two following reasons. First, a list of the English words that are most useful in reading seemed the most appropriate, inasmuch as the development of the ability to read French is generally admitted to be one of the primary objectives for the study of French by American students. Secondly, this list embodies the results of the most extensive word count of reading vocabulary in English that had been made when this study was begun.³

This study differs from other derivative studies that have been made of the same word-list in that it is concerned primarily with the direct rather than with the ultimate sources of the English

¹ This study was made under the direction of Dr. Charles E. Young, Associate Professor of Romance Languages, State University of Iowa.

² Thorndike, Edward L., *The Teacher's Word Book*, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1921.

³ The Thorndike word-list has been enlarged by a more extensive word count since the work of this study was well under way. The extended list has not yet been made available by publication, however, though some of the results of the count have been published.

The Classical Investigation. Part I, General Report, page 134, Princeton, 1924.
Grinstead, Wren Jones, "On the Sources of the English Vocabulary. A Report on the Latin-English Word Count of the American Classical League." *Teachers College Record* XXVI (1924), 32-46.

words in the list.⁴ Since French is not a primitive language, it is obvious that any investigation of the influence of French upon English must be based upon the direct sources of the English words.

The Thorndike Word Book consists of an alphabetical list of the 10,000 English words of most frequent occurrence in the reading material examined. The list was compiled from a count of four and a half million running words from forty-one different sources distributed as follows:

Source	Number of words (approximately)
Literature for children	625,000
Bible and English Classics	3,000,000
Elementary School text-books	300,000
Books about cooking, sewing, farming, the trades, etc.	50,000
Daily newspapers	90,000
Correspondence	500,000

In regard to the adequacy of the counts Dr. Thorndike says: "The present counts are adequate to determine the first one thousand words with a small probable error, and the next four thousand enough for many educational purposes, and the last five thousand to an extent that is useful, though far from accurate. . . . The present list may be criticized as too weak in credit to children's literature and newspapers, and much too weak in words relating to common life and trades. It will, however, serve reasonably well until more extensive and specialized counts are made."⁵

Many words in the Word Book were found to be etymologically not one word, but two or more words. One or more of these homonyms were in many cases obviously of very infrequent occurrence in English reading material as compared with the other words of

⁴ Orleans, J. S., "Possible Transfer Value of the Study of Latin to English Vocabulary." *School and Society* XVI (1922) 559-560.

Franklin, E. Earle, "Derivation of the Second 5000 words of the Thorndike Teachers Word Book." *School and Society* XV (1922) 622-623, and *Classical Weekly* XVI (1923) 114.

Ullman, B. L., "Our Latin-English Language," *Classical Journal* XVIII (1922) 82-90. (See page 86.)

⁵ Thorndike, Edward L., "Word Knowledge in the Elementary School," *Teachers College Record* XXII (1921) 348, 354-5.

the same group. It did not seem fair, therefore, to give each word equal value in determining the percentages based upon the derivation of these words. For this reason it was decided to make a choice among the homonyms of each group on the basis of expert opinion. This plan seemed justifiable inasmuch as judgments based upon expert opinion were utilized by Dr. Thorndike in making a choice among the words of frequency "3" included in the Word Book.⁶ The total list consisting of 373 homonyms with the meaning of the words in each group was submitted to five expert judges. With the list of words were included a list of the reading material used in making the word counts and the credit number of each word. The judges were instructed to select the word or words in each group that seemed to them likely to be of most frequent occurrence in the reading material from which the words were selected.

The direct, intermediate, and ultimate sources of each of the English words in the Word Book were determined and tabulated. The derivation of the root alone was considered. In case of hybrids, equal credit was given to each contributing language. All proper names in the Word Book were omitted. All words were disregarded that were designated in the New English Dictionary as obsolete, rare, dialectical, slang, or peculiar to a particular community. The New English Dictionary was first consulted for the etymology of the English words. As the available volumes of the New English Dictionary cover the English alphabet only through "th," the Century Dictionary was used to supplement it. In case of twenty-six words, the derivation given by Derocquigny⁷ was followed instead of that of the New English Dictionary. The Middle English Dictionary known as Bradley's Stratmann was used to supplement the New English Dictionary when it was a question of the ultimate origin of a Middle English word. If a Middle English word was traced by Bradley's Stratmann to Old English, the word was tabulated as Teutonic, even though the ultimate origin of the word was uncertain or unknown. Latin lexicons were used to supplement the New English Dictionary in determining the

⁶ Thorndike, Edward L., "Word Knowledge in the Elementary School," *Teachers College Record* XXII (1921) 348.

⁷ Derocquigny, Jules, *A Contribution to the Study of the French Element in English*, Lille, 1904.

ultimate sources of Latin words. Saalfeld's "Tensaurus Italo-graecus"⁸ was used for Greek loan-words in Latin and Walde's Latin Etymological Dictionary⁹ for ultimate sources of Latin words. Derivatives of Greek loan-words in Latin were regarded as ultimately of Greek origin.

The results obtained from the comparative study of the sources of the English words of the Word Book are presented in the following tables and graphs.¹⁰ In these computations only the direct sources of the English words were considered. The data on each half and on the entire Word Book are given separately.

A careful count of the Word Book gave a total of 10,009 words;¹¹ 5,139 in the first half and 4,870 in the second half. Of these, 660 are proper names,¹² 214 in the first half and 446 in the second half. This leaves a total of 9,349 words in the Word Book, exclusive of proper names; 4,925 in the first half, and 4,424 in the second half. The percentages are based upon these totals.

Under the term Teutonic are included Old English or Anglo-Saxon, Dutch, German, Gothic, and Scandinavian. Under the designation "Miscellaneous" are included Spanish, Italian, late Latin, (including medieval, or ecclesiastical Latin), late Greek, Celtic, Oriental, onomatopoeia, obscure, uncertain, and unknown. The fractions appearing in the counts of the number of words are due to the presence in the Word Book of hybrids and of other English words whose direct sources are more than one language. In many instances, for example, the direct sources of a noun and verb designated by the same word in the Word Book are different languages. In such cases a proportionate fraction of credit is given to each contributing language.

⁸ Saalfeld, G. A., *Tensaurus Italograecus*, Vienna, 1884.

⁹ Walde, A., *Lateinisches Etymologisches Woerterbuch* 2nd edition, Heidelberg 1910.

¹⁰ The writer is indebted to her colleague, Miss Ruth Lane, and her student Mr. Carl Sylvester, for the calculation of the percentages and the preparation of the graphs.

¹¹ Ten words without frequency numbers and the word "conjecture" on page 23 were not counted.

¹² Under proper names were not included abbreviations of common nouns such as Ave., Dr., etc.

RESULTS OF THE ETYMOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE WORD BOOK

A. First 5000

Total number of words 4,925 (exclusive of proper names)

	Origin	Number of different words	Per Cent
1	Directly from French	2,035.58	41.33
2	" " Latin	508.33	10.32
3	" " Greek	8.50	.17
4	" " Teutonic	2,112.25	42.89
5	" " Miscellaneous	260.33	5.29
	Total	4,924.99	100.00

B. Second 5000

Total number of words 4,424 (exclusive of proper names)

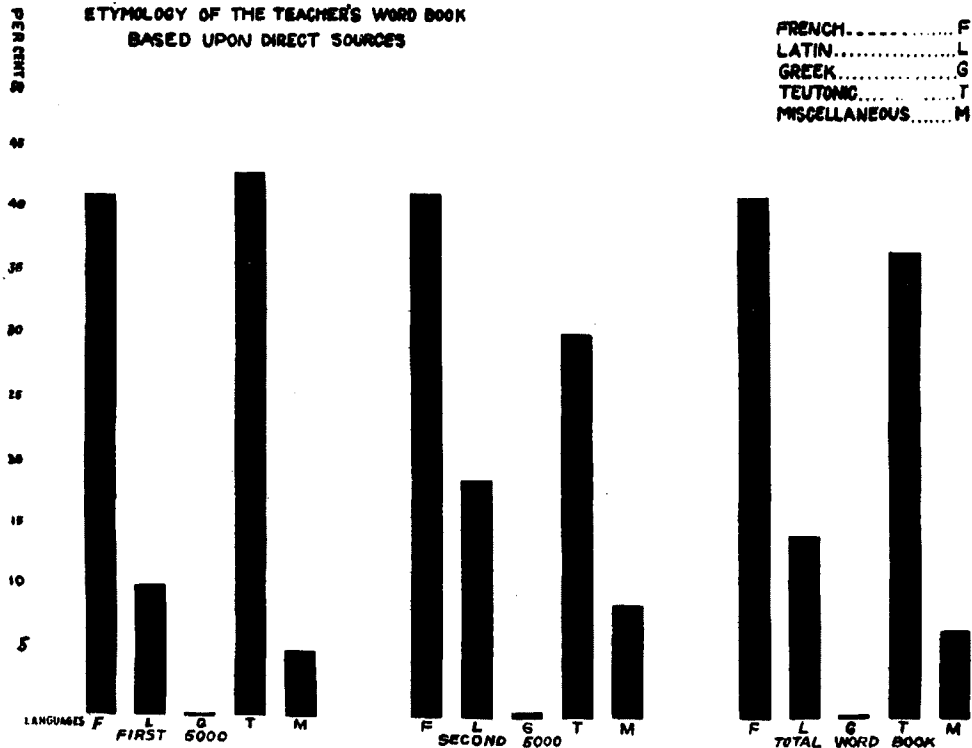
1	Directly from French	1,833.17	41.44
2	" " Latin	828.67	18.73
3	" " Greek	22.75	.51
4	" " Teutonic	1,342.75	30.35
5	" " Miscellaneous	396.67	8.97
	Total	4,424.01	100.00

C. Total of A and B 9,349 (exclusive of proper names)

1	Directly from French	3,868.75	41.38
2	" " Latin	1,337.00	14.30
3	" " Greek	31.25	.33
4	" " Teutonic	3,455.00	36.96
5	" " Miscellaneous	657.00	7.03
	Total	9,349.00	100.00

It will be seen from these tables that on the basis of the direct sources of these 9,349 English words, the French element is the most important, 41.38 per cent of the words having come into English directly from French. The Teutonic element ranks next in importance with 36.96 per cent, the difference between the percentages of the French and Teutonic elements being only 4.42. Latin ranks next with 14.3 per cent, then the elements designated by Miscellaneous with 7.03 per cent, and lastly Greek with 0.33 per cent. In the first half of the Word Book where we would expect the Teutonic element to predominate, its percentage is only 1.56 higher than the percentage of the French element. It will be noted that the French element is greater than the Teutonic element in the second half of the Word Book.

These results show that French is a factor of the highest importance to be taken into consideration in a derivative study of these basic English words. The potential value of the study of elementary French for English vocabulary is clearly demonstrated.



Other recent studies corroborate the results presented above as to the importance of the French element in English.

The late Professor Alexander Inglis submitted the following results from a derivative study based upon a list of 10,161 different words compiled by G. Dewey from 100,000 word occurrences in representative modern usage of English.¹³

Origin	Number of different words	Per cent
Anglo-Saxon	3,069	30.2
Latin (direct)	2,054	20.2
Latin-French	3,318	32.7
Greek	507	5.0
Scandinavian	332	3.3
All others	881	8.6
Total	10,161	100.00

¹³ Inglis, Alexander, "Classical and Native Elements in the English Language," *Classical Journal* XX (1925) 515-525.

It will be noted that the difference between the percentages of the Latin-French element and the Latin (direct) element is 12.5, in favor of the Latin-French element.

Dr. Archibald W. Smalley in a study entitled "The Coördination of Latin with First Year Algebra"¹⁴ states these conclusions:

"(1) Practically the whole nomenclature of algebra is Latin or Greek in origin, 96.2 per cent of the 156 words, 97 per cent of the 193 words. (2) French is the most useful of the modern languages. Of the 156 words, 96 come through the French."

Professor Evan T. Sage and others in a report on the "Result of a Word-Analysis Test"¹⁵ draw these significant conclusions: "Latin is undoubtedly one factor in the superior success of these students, but only one. All but 2 of the 25 under consideration have studied other foreign languages. . . . A large number of students derived "diabolical" from the French or Spanish, while many more said that "incomprehensible" came from French or Spanish rather than Latin. *This suggests that linguistic connections may be made by modern language teachers more successfully than by us [teachers of the classics].*"¹⁶

Teachers of the modern languages and especially of French may well profit by the suggestion of Professor Sage. Attention to such linguistic connections will strengthen the position of French in the secondary schools, for it is evident from the findings of the derivative studies reported above that all arguments for the justification for the study of Latin based upon its influence upon the English vocabulary are much more valid for the study of French. The first conclusion given by Dr. Grinstead in summarizing his report upon the extension of the Thorndike word count,¹⁷ is the following: "By any system other than unweighted frequency Latin comprises fully half of the English vocabulary." Though in his study the Latin element has not been separated into Latin (direct) and Latin-French, it is clear that the statement rests upon the large direct borrowing of the English from the French.

¹⁴ *Classical Journal* XVII (1922) 201-209.

¹⁵ *Classical Journal* XVII (1922) 218-224.

¹⁶ Italics and words in brackets mine.

¹⁷ Grinstead, Wren Jones, *loc. cit.*

To secure data by which to discover the actual transfer value of the study of French for English vocabulary, a fuller etymological study was made of the 5,000 words of the Word Book that are the most important from the standpoint of frequency of occurrence in the reading material examined. One of the reasons for selecting the first 5000 words for study was the fact that the first 5000 are more accurately placed than the second 5000.¹⁸ From these 5000 words were selected all those that have come into English from French. For each of these English words has been found as far as possible the modern French word that is most closely related to it etymologically. In addition, the nearest modern French etymological equivalent has been found for the English words in the first 5000 that are of Latin or Greek origin, but have not come into English through French. These additional words were included because these English and French descendants from a common source are likely to be very similar in form. Therefore, if the words exist both in modern French and modern English, there is a possibility of transfer between French and English, even though French is not the direct source of the English word. To a student who has not had Latin or Greek, the transfer value of the French word will be all the more important, but in any case it should be taken into account. Moreover, the direct source of many of these English words is still an open question. Professor O. F. Emerson has recently called attention to this fact. He says: "Professor Derocquigny of the University of Lille proved some years ago that many English words assumed to be of Latin origin by Skeat and the New English Dictionary are really of Old French provenance. Besides, since many Old French texts are still unprinted and the study of Derocquigny not exhaustive, the French element in English will be still further increased in the future and the so-called Latin element correspondingly diminished."¹⁹ Romance dictionaries were used to supplement the information in the New English Dictionary and to determine the modern French words etymologically related to the English words. The dictionaries consulted were those of Meyer-Luebke, Hatzfeld-Darmesteter-

¹⁸ Thorndike, Edward L., "Word Knowledge in the Elementary School." *Teachers College Record* XXII (1921) 348-350.

¹⁹ Emerson, O. F., "The Battle of the Books," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* XXXIX (1924) LXVIII-LXIX.

Thomas, Littré, Koerting, and Diez. Any French words designated in the dictionaries of Hatzfeld-Darmesteter-Thomas or Littré as obsolete or rare were not used in making up the list of modern French words. For use in derivative studies and in the construction of tests, the classical Latin source word for each English word has been found wherever possible and tabulated beside the corresponding English and French words. These Latin words were checked against the list of Latin words in Lodge, G. "Vocabulary of High School Latin" New York, 1922.

There were found to be 2913 modern French words closely related etymologically to the 2580 English words in the first half of the Word Book that are directly or ultimately of French, Latin, or Greek origin. Of these English words, 1956 are directly from French. Of these 2913 modern French words, 1615 are found in Henmon's list²⁰ of the 3900 words most frequently used in the French reading material examined. These 1615 words form 41.4 per cent of the Henmon list. Of the modern French words, 1221 are either exactly like the corresponding English word in form or differ by only one letter or by the interchange of two letters. These 1221 words constitute 41.8 per cent of the total number of modern French words in the list.

On the basis of similarity in form, therefore, there should be a high transfer value from these French words to the corresponding words in English or *vice versa*. The actual amount of transfer can be determined only by scientific experimentation.

The study of Thorndike and Symonds²¹ throws some light on the problem of transfer. They have shown that any word in the first 3000 of the Thorndike Word Book is likely to be known to three-fourths of the pupils in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades of the elementary school, that any word in the first 5000 is likely to be known to two-thirds of such pupils, and that any word in the last 5000 is likely to be known to at least one-half of such pupils. The transfer seems likely therefore to be in most cases from

²⁰ Henmon, V. A. C., "A French Word Book Based on a Count of 400,000 Running Words." University of Wisconsin Bureau of Educational Research Bulletin Number 3. September, 1924.

²¹ Thorndike, Edward L. and Symonds, Percival M., "Difficulty, Reliability and Grade Achievements in a Test of English Vocabulary." Teachers College Record XXIV (1923) 438-445.

English to French for these particular words. However, for each pupil the problem is an individual one and should be investigated by the teacher of French by means of suitable tests.

Mr. V. G. Edgcumbe²² in his study of 510 French words of Latin origin in the Word List printed by *Le Petit Journal*, April, 1921, shows that there is greater likelihood of a student of beginning French making a transfer from English to French than from Latin to French. He concludes: "When supporters of Latin state that 85 per cent of French words are derived from Latin, and that 47 per cent of English words come from Latin, they should go a step further and explain that many of these Latin-derived English words came to us through the French."

The data submitted in this study concerning the question of actual transfer are valuable only as a preliminary to further investigation of the problem. The study should be extended to include the completed Thorndike list when this is available. To the list of modern French words selected by this study should be added those secured by a similar study of the extended Thorndike list. They should be checked against the Henmon list, until it is exhausted, or against any other similar list of French words made available by further word-counts. Sufficient data should then be at hand for selecting the most useful French roots and for arranging the French words into groups according to their derivation. Definite plans and methods for derivative study could then be devised. A further study of the modern French words should include a comparison as to meaning with the English words that are etymologically most closely related to them, an important phase of the problem of transfer, whether from French to English or *vice versa*, which has not been touched in this study. With such data available the question of actual transfer could be investigated by means of objective tests, and through controlled experiments could be determined the best methods to be employed in derivative work in order to attain the maximum degree of transfer.

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²² Edgcumbe, V. G., "How Valuable to the Student of French is his Latin Vocabulary." *Educational Review* LXVIII (1924) 9-14.