

Disturbing News from the Thirteenth Century: Variation in a Borrowed Lexeme in Middle English

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1. Introduction

It is sometimes assumed that the process of reanalysis of a borrowed prefix as productive is a simple process of detachment from the borrowed base and subsequent re-attachment to a native one. If this is reanalysis, however, it is so in a limited sense. It is not, for example, an instance of ambiguity resolution (see Lewis 1998: 2489), since the result of the process is to add to the stock of morphemes, not to alter the form or function of existing ones, thus modifying the system internally. Reanalysis itself is variously and confusingly defined. Indeed it is often simply taken as a given. Langacker's account is 'change in the structure of an expression or class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation' (see Hopper and Traugott 1993: §3.4; cited in Nevanlinna 2000: 346), but this will not suffice in the present case, since extreme surface variation, of which the present lexeme is an excellent example, characterizes Middle English.

This paper sets out to examine the early history of *distourben*, a single lexeme, or rather lexeme complex in early Middle English. The expression 'lexeme complex' is being used here to cover lexemes and their variants, given that in this case the range of forms covered is large, extending across what would appear to be lexeme boundaries both in PresE and ME, and in the Middle English Dictionary (*MED*). To illustrate this, the variants of the verb range from *distourben* to *distourblen*, *distrublen*, and *stourblen*, and include nouns, deverbals and adjectives.² Forms like *troublen* also need to be taken into account. Since the assumption made at the outset in this research that this prefix could be dealt with as a homogenous, unitary morpheme proved illusory once the database had been constructed, a paper on *discomforten* was read at the ICOME 5 conference in Naples in August 2005 (McConchie 2005), and another paper covering lexemes such as *disseisin*, *distincioun*, and *disafforeten* is to appear (McConchie forthcoming).

This research forms part of a larger project on the early history of the prefix *dis-* in English, work which to this stage has suggested that it is essential to consider each of the early lexemes containing this prefix as separate phenomena before attempting to draw conclusions about precisely how this prefix was introduced and vernacularised. In the case of *distourben*, the prefix has its non-privative sense, described by the *MED* in these terms:

taken from L or OF the force of **dis-** is vague from the ME point of view, since the simplex is either not current or has different meanings, as in **discret**, **discussen**, **disport**, **disposen**, **disputacioun**, **dissencioun**. It has, or may have, completive or intensive force in **dismaten**, **disseveren**, **dissolut**, etc. (*MED* 2001 s.v. *dis-*)

The *OED* is rather more firm in its account of the intensifying sense, which is probably the one applicable to the lexeme complex considered here.³

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² Probably the only other lexemes which exhibit such a range of variation in form among the *dis-* group are *discomforten* and *disparplen*.

³ Note however that the aphetic forms mentioned later in this paper appear to have much the same meaning as the fully prefixed forms, which suggests that the prefix added little, even as an intensifier.

With verbs having already a sense of division, solution, separation, or undoing, the addition of *dis-* was naturally intensive, ‘away, out and out, utterly, exceedingly’, as in *disperire* to perish utterly, *dispuđere* to be utterly ashamed, *distaedere* to be utterly wearied or disgusted; hence it became an intensive in some other verbs, as *dilaudare* to praise exceedingly, *discupere* to desire vehemently, *disuaviri* to kiss ardently. In the same way, English has several verbs in which *dis-* adds intensity to words having already a sense of undoing, as in *disalter*, *disaltern*, *disannul*.

Since *distourben* is apparently a borrowing from French, something must be said briefly about the status of English, French and Latin in England in the twelfth century. Latin was the prestige language, and the language of learning, religion, and administration. French was very much a minority language, confined to the upper classes largely in the south-east of the country, but with prestige deriving from social position. English, the majority language had little obvious social prestige, though some members of the upper class spoke it, and it was both remembered and to some extent used as a language of administration and the law (Clanchy 1993: 148).

A brief survey of early research on the extent and rate of introduction of French words into English appears in Pennanen (1971: 7–11). Jespersen’s diagnostic table of words introduced into English from French (1935: 87), as recorded in the *OED*, though sketchy in the extreme, has been influential. He rightly points out the probability that the chronology of such introductions may well considerably predate the chronology suggested by the *OED* citations themselves. Having made this important proviso, he then proceeds to cite chronology as if it were not skewed in this way. In general, however, scholars have considered these borrowings quantitatively, as a mass, rather than looking more closely at whether the trajectory of introduction for particular words reveals a common pattern or a series of disparate courses. I take the latter course in this paper by making the assumption that they should be considered separately in the first place.

2. The Database

The process I have used in constructing the data set for this paper is to take the quotations from all and every *dis-* entry from the *MED*, supplemented where possible by the *OED*. Since citations under *dis-* head-words only contain part of the data, citations including such words but cited under other head-words have also been searched. This data has then been ‘unpacked’, that is, stripped of elements of the dictionary lemmatization to create a single list sortable by head-word and date, so that many of the lexicographical assumptions about each head-word have been expunged. Putting *distrouble* and *disturb* together in this way allows us to consider a range of variation precluded by lemmatization decisions. The editing processes involved are too tedious to recount here; suffice it to say that these dictionaries are neither internally consistent nor compatible in many respects.

3. The Variants

Sorting the various *distourben* forms by first cited date produces the following list:

Table 1. *Distourben* and related forms cited by first composition date (*MED* head-word form).

distourben (v.)	1200
distourbaunce (n.)	1280
distourbinge (ger.)	1300
distourbour (n.)	1300
distourblen (v.)	1303
distrublen (v.)	1303
distourblaunce (n.)	1338
distourbaunce (n.)	1387
distourbler (n.)	1389
distorbiloun (n.)	1410
distrublen (v.)	1410
distrublinge (ger.)	1425

There are four variant phonological features:

1. *dis-/des-*
2. the vowel, which may be *o/ou/u*;
3. metathesis affecting the vowel and the *r*
4. the *-bl-* consonant combination

The dictionary data suggests that all three of these variations had appeared after the lapse of about a century, but allowance must be made for the processes involved to take place.

The earliest recorded instance shows this form:⁴

- (1) c1230(?a1200) *Ancr.(Corp-C 402) 44a: Na mirð ne þrung of folc ne mahte letten him of his beoden ne *desturbin* his god.

which is characteristic of a French borrowing. The variation in the vowel may well reflect dialectal differences rather than free variation, but work remains to be done with LALME to localise the various manuscripts. Since the French and Latin models for these lexemes show little or no metathesis, one must assume that this is an English phenomenon, and that it may reflect uncertainty in the minds of both authors and copyists. Finally, since it also appears without the *l* of the OF *troubler*, datable to the previous century, the appropriate derivation is that from OF *destorber/destourber* and Lat. *disturbāre* as supplied by the *MED*. The intrusive *l* does however suggest the influence of the other French lexeme, which probably also influences the metathesis of the vowel and *r*.

It is also interesting to note that the phonological element *trob-/trub-* was very rare in Middle English prior to the introduction of the *distourben* lexeme complex, practically the only other word which turned up in searching for *trub-* being forms of the place-name Trowbridge. Variants produced by metathesis may thus simply indicate this degree of unfamiliarity in phonological conditions where it was inclined to occur more generally in any case (vowel + /r/).

4. Related Borrowings: Unprefixed Forms

We cannot assume that *distourben* was an isolated borrowing or that it was unaffected by other borrowings. In this regard, it is instructive to consider what happens with the unprefixed equivalent *troublen* and to see the diachronic process of each complex side-by-side. First of all, this complex is far more lexically productive than *distourben*. The *MED* lists 41 lexemes which appear to be related, including gerundial forms, etc., of *sto(u)rb(l)/stro(u)b(l) / to(u)rb(l)/tro(u)b(l)/* words, providing many illustrative examples. The majority of these appear by about 1440, after which its productivity seems to taper off.

Table 2. The chronological order of apparent introduction (*MED*).⁵

(S)TOURBEN	first date	DISTOURBEN	first date
stourben (v.)	1200	distourben v	1200
sturbing(e) (ger.)	1200		
trouble (n.)	1200		
troublen (v.)	1200		
stourblen (v.)	1280	distourbaunce	1280
trouble (adj.)	1300	distourbinge	1300
troble (n.) ⁶	1325	distourbour	1300
sturbling (ger.)	1330	distourblen	1303

⁴ Italics have been added here, as in all other examples.

⁵ Since this list is intended to be exhaustive, some items about which there will be dispute appear. An example is *storbilon* ('whirlwind'), listed as from OF *estorbeillon*, but presumably ultimately related to *turbare* 'to agitate, disturb'. Words like this are probably independent borrowings, not local coinages. Their adoption may have been assisted by the familiarity of the group as a whole, but they are not pertinent to notions of productive derivation in Middle English.

⁶ Just what a *troble* was, evidently a shoemaker's tool, is unclear. The *OED* does not list it, and the *MED* has no very clear notion of what it might have been. Perhaps a tool used with a twisting motion.

storbilon(e) (n.)	1333	distrublen	1303
troubling(e) (ger.)	1350	distourblance	1338
troubli (adj.)	1380		
tostourben (v.)	1382		
troubler (n.)	1382		
stroublen (v.)	1384	distourbaunce	1387
tourbaciun (n.)	1388	distourbler	1389
turbli (adj.)	1398		
stroubling(e) (ger.)	1400		
troubleness (n.)	1400		
turble (adj.)	1400		
turblen (v.)	1400		
turbling(e) (ger.)	1400		
turbulaunce (n.)	1400		
sturbler (n.)	1410	distorbiloun	1410
stourbaunce (n.)	1415	distrublen	1410
troubliness (n.)	1425	distrublinge	1425
troublois (adj.)	1425		
turble (n.)	1425		
turbles (n.)	1425		
turbulence (n.)	1425		
turbulent (adj.)	1425		
sturblaunce (n.)	1435		
turbloise (adj.)	1438		
stroublere (n.)	1440		
turblere (n.)	1440		
trobellion (n.)	1450		
turben (v.)	1450		
turbaunce (n.)	1460		
turbulacioun (n.)	1460		
troublaunce (n.)	1464		
turbilen (n.)	1475		
sturbel (n.)	1480		

Several points emerge from this. Firstly, the introduction of the prefixed and unprefixed forms seems pretty much simultaneous (*trouble(n)/distourben*), and the *(s)t(r)ob(l)* base is far more productive of new lexemes, as one might expect, assuming that the presence of a prefix is semantically restricting.⁷ The vowel and the *l* vary fairly freely on the non-*dis-* side, suggesting simultaneous borrowing from L and OF, rather than simply from OF, as suggested by the *OED*.

5. Aphetic Forms

A number of forms with initial *st-* occur, the first instances also being roughly contemporaneous with the *dis-* forms. I take this to be a form exhibiting aphesis of the initial *di-*; that is, a form derived from *distourben*, and not in itself a borrowing at all. The process of aphesis turns out to be quite frequent among this group of words, aphetic pairs including *discoveror/scourer*, *dispitous/spitous*, *dispenden/spenden*, *disparplen/sparplen* and *distroien/stroien*.⁸ There seems to be little or no research

⁷ The *st-* forms, apart from *storbilon(e)* and *sturbel*, simply reflect what occurs on the *dis-* side, so that *sturbler* = *distourbler*, and so on. One would expect this to be significant if the prefix was semantically privative, thus creating antonymic pairs, but this is not the case here. The situation is otherwise with *discomforten*.

⁸ Likewise *disputen/sputen*, which is as early as *distroublen*, appearing in *Seinte Katerine*. A curious though possibly doubtful re-formation is *disfortles* (adj.) [Read: comförtles.] a1500 (a1450) Gener.(2) (Trin-C O.5.2) 6645: All disfortles he was and full of thought. *MED*. This may only be a case of scribal eye-skip.

on this phenomenon in Middle English to which one might appeal for confirmation of its significance, however.

The other possible aphetic verb, *stourblen*, also appears in the thirteenth century. This may suggest the extent to which the forms with and without *-l-* become confused during that period. It is possible that the sense of their original declined relatively rapidly and that the forms became free variants. Using LALME and LAEME to ascribe the various texts to a geographical location would probably assist greatly in clarifying this.

6. Other Prefixes

A further significant point is the appearance of other prefixes attaching themselves to the base, since this suggests that the base is felt to be free for recombination. These prefixes do appear, although rarely. The form *tostourben* appears in the late fourteenth century, an instance of native prefixation on a borrowed base at a relatively early stage, especially so since the prefix *to-* itself was probably in decline by this period:

- (2) *tostourben* v (a1382) WBible(1) (Bod 959) Ps.42.5: Whi dreri art þou, my soule, & whi al *to-sturbist* þou me.

The form *outstourben*, again an instance of a native prefix being attached, appears in the following:

- (3) *outstourben* v a1382 WBible(1) (Bod 959) Josh.7.25: Seide Iosue, `for þou hast disturbid vs, *outsturbe* þe þe lord in þis day.'

The *MED* records only this instance of the word.

7. Within-Text Variation

Variation within a text, which occurs quite often, may be taken to indicate either scribal error, variation in dialect or idiolect, or conscious emendation. Although a complete list has not been compiled, since some of the data lies beyond the scope of the database, several instances of this can be cited in the case of *distourben*. Reuter points out an instance of variation between *trouble* and *sturble* in the A (BM Additional 17376) and T (Trinity College, Dublin A 4. 4.) MSS of the Earliest Complete English Prose Psalter (1938: 16). The next instance is somewhat complicated by variation with the relatively infrequent word *tribulen* derived by the *MED* from the Latin etymon *tribulare*, varying with *trublen* and *troublen* as in (4) and (5), and varying with *sturblen* as in (6), an example which seems to represent conscious scribal choice:

- (4) c1350 MPPsalter (Add 17376) 105.11: Þe water couerd þe *trybuland* [vr. *trublyng*] hem.
- (5) c1415 Chaucer CT.SN.(Lnsd 851) G.72: Triblide [Heng: Of thy light my soule in prison lighte That *troubled* is by the contagioun Of my body].
- (6) c1350 MPPsalter (Add 17376) 38.9: Man for-soþe in likenes [passeþ]; ac in vayn he hys *tribled* [vr. *sturbyld*].

7.1 *Within-Text Variation*: Ancrene Wisse

I now return to the first occurrences, since these are crucial to any account of the introduction of this lexeme. The earliest all occur in *Ancrene Wisse*, a text known in English, French and Latin, although English seems to be the original language. The *MED* does not of course record all and every occurrence of a word. *Ancrene Wisse* produced two further examples at M 154 and M 162 (7) and (8), the MS read right through being Cotton Cleopatra C vi (Dobson 1972):

- (7) (M 154) heo ham seolf as ofte as ha walden þenchen sikerliche of god z makien clene bonen. z beon inheorte gastliche ihech3et towart heouene. § oa me fint þ haflu3en monnes *sturbinge* z wenden bi ham ane. Pp. 121–2 f64 z
- (8) (M 162) as hali writ seið þ nan nurð ne þrung of folc ne machte letten him of his bonen. ne his good *to sturben*. P. 126 f67^v 17–19

Thus this text attests the existence of the gerund as well as the verb. The CCC 402 manuscript (ed. Tolkien 1962), a version of *Ancrene Wisse* written in the dialect of North Worcestershire (Laing 2000: 114), has

- (9) as hali writ seið þ na nurð ne þrung of folc. ne mahte letten him of his beoden. ne *desturbin* his goddhe

at the same place in the text. MS CCC 402 is later than Cot Cleo C vi, being ‘plainly a direct fair copy’ which Dobson suggests dates from approximately 1228–30 (Dobson 1972: ix–x). Despite this, the copyist has seen fit to make alterations in the text at this point.

Fortunately, the Latin and French versions of *Ancrene Wisse* are later translations of the originally English version, so that we do not have to consider the influence of the translation process in assessing the forms found in the English versions. The evidence is still difficult to interpret, however. The reading of Cot Cleo C vi may be either taken as a verb plus infinitive sign or as *tosturben*, which is apparently what we have at p. 314 f197^v 19–20:

- (10) ne don nan þing ne seggen hwar þurch hire silence mu3e beon *to sturbed*.

This appears to be *tosturben*, a form of the greatest interest, since it represents an instance of an OE prefix used with a borrowed base. This example (10) is rather more secure than (8), but even there taking *to* as a prefix seems at least possible. Mustanoja, however, points out that in general constructions involving an auxiliary and infinitive without *to* paralleled by an infinitive with *to* were quite normal. Unfortunately, he offers no chronological account of this phenomenon (1960: 522). At the corresponding point, MS CCC 402 reads

- (11) ne don na þing ne seggen. hwer þurh hire silence mahe beon *isturbet*

so that the scribe of this MS has not interpreted his exemplar as an infinitive. In both instances, the change in this word is substantive. The scribe of CCC 402 is apparently thus comfortable with *(i)sturben* and *desturben*, but not with *tosturben*. We might conjecture that this scribe felt uneasy with this combination of prefix and base, changing it to a borrowing he knew in one case and to the aphetic form of this borrowing in the other, presumably because it was equally familiar.

The passages recorded in the *MED* were compared with editions of 4 other MSS: MS CCC 402, Cot Nero A xiv, Cot Titus D xviii, and the ‘Vernon’ text, Bodl. MS Eng poet. a 1.⁹ This process yielded the following table:

Table 3. Parallel passages from six MSS of *Ancrene Wisse*. [Titus MS (South Cheshire, Laing 2000: 114) not searched]

MS	M 162	M 154	Approx date
MS CCC 402	desturbin	sturbunge	1225
Cot Nero A xiv	desturben	sturbinge	a1225–30?
Cot Cleo C vi	sturben	sturbin-ge [sic]	1228–30
Cot Titus D xviii	desturben	sturbinge	
The ‘Vernon’ text, Bodl. MS Eng poet. a 1	distorben	storbynge	
MS Royal 8 c. 1	distribil	–	a1400

⁹ Gonville and Caius MS 234/120 was also checked, but does not contain this passage.

Similar within-text variation, indeed, within-sentence variation, is attested by the quotation from the Wycliffite Bible; see (3) above.

8. Some Conclusions

Various conclusions suggest themselves. Since the combination *tro/ou/ub* was actually quite rare in English, perhaps we could hypothesize that there may be a direct relation between phonological unfamiliarity in borrowed elements and variation in recorded instances, which appears here in the vowel variation and the metathesized forms. The earliest text, *Ancrene Wisse*, already shows an array of forms of *distourben* which apparently obviate any possibility of its being a text showing the earliest forms of this borrowing. The lexeme complex must have already been well-established, at least in the dialect of the earliest scribes of this text. On the other hand, we may also argue that the formation of the participle and the appearance of aphetic forms were relatively early changes in the history of this lexeme. The prefix itself had little or no semantic weight, and the reflexes *stourben* and *trouben* were also established early, but only the latter by borrowing. Although far from conclusive, there is really no evidence here to suggest that the borrowing of this lexeme complex was a simple process, indeed, rather the contrary. We can also see that, instead of there being a later, straightforward ‘point of reanalysis’ at which the prefix becomes detachable from the base, a process leading eventually to reanalysis, was under way relatively early. This process might indeed be interpreted as one detaching the quite strongly variable base from the semantically and prosodically negligible prefix.

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