

ABOUT a Corpus of Narrative Etymologies (CoNE)

CoNE's purpose

The purpose of CoNE is to explain a specific data set: the forms attested in the corpus of early Middle English texts collected for a *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (LAEME). This corpus is the largest available collection of texts written or copied in English during the period 1150-1325. It has two very valuable characteristics.

(1) The source manuscripts' text forms have been transcribed to conserve as much information as possible. The corpus texts record the *litterae* as found in the texts, notice the abbreviations, suspensions and mark the manuscripts' punctuation. Texts are not emended: all scribal forms, even if apparent errors, are left in place; verse-texts originally written as prose are left as prose; manuscript line-ends are marked; there is no modernization of *litterae*, capitalisation or punctuation. Also, the corpus texts provide extensive descriptions and annotations concerning the orthographies and scripts.

(2) Each text form (word or morpheme) has been lexico-grammatically tagged in considerable detail. The texts are therefore heavily enriched with both linguistic and palaeographical information.

The scribal languages of the texts in the LAEME corpus of tagged texts (LAEME CTT) are the product, in part, of developments from Old English. It is these developments that CoNE aims initially to explicate in detail, to account for each variant spelling type attested in the LAEME CTT. The variant forms of a word or morpheme are gathered under a 'tag' which taxonomises the form lexically and / or grammatically with respect to each of its occurrences in one or more texts. This tag – as the label for a set of forms – is related to a form deemed to be original for Old English (the presumed form at the time of the original settlement of speakers of a West Germanic tongue in England). Each CoNE etymology in effect tells the story of how that original form changed (often taking divers paths) to give the various forms found subsumed under the LAEME tag. The LAEME CTT provides a specific *terminus ad quem* for the linguistic narratives.

Of course, in the languages of the texts in the LAEME CTT are to be found lexis from Old French and Medieval and Classical Latin. The Romance lexis in the LAEME CTT has not been dealt with in this initial phase of CoNE. This, we have deemed, will require a separate project to be carried out by Romance specialists as well as Anglicists.

What is inside CoNE?

The two fundamental parts of CoNE are the set of narrative etymologies (the Corpus of Narrative Etymologies itself) and the set of linguistic changes (the Corpus of Changes, the CC).

Taking an individual tag from a menu, a user can access the etymological narrative for the forms subsumed under that tag in the LAEME CTT. An etymological narrative falls into two main parts. The first is a narrative which deals with the item's evolution from its Proto-Old English origin to its attested Old English forms. These Old English forms are presumed to be input into the Middle English narrative, which accounts for the orthographic types found in LAEME. The entries in CoNE can also be searched.

The Corpus of Changes can be consulted in its own right, by browsing or searching for terms.

In addition to the Corpus of Changes, there is a set of ‘Special Codes’ to explain forms that are not the result of linguistic (formal internal) change. The codes may either flag a form as unchanged, or explain it in terms of other contextual factors to do with scribal behaviour – scripts and orthographies and the making of the texts in general.

CoNE provides a set of documents to aid the user in explaining its concepts, perspectives and structures, as well as those of LAEME. The principal document relating to CoNE is the Introduction, which provides a detailed account of the thinking that underpins CoNE and the *modus operandi* that has been adopted in creating the narrative etymologies. There are also documents describing

- the general conventions, symbols and abbreviations used in CoNE
- a template for the shape of a CoNE entry
- the various ‘descriptors’ used commonly in the CC entries.

The LAEME CTT itself is a complex data set and documents are provided to explain the system of tagging, with keys to

- the grammatical elements in the tags, (‘grammels’) texts
- the semantic and functional specifiers in the lexical elements (‘lexels’) of tags
- filename references to texts in the LAEME CTT.

CoNE and the ‘handbooks’

In the etymologies and in the changes, frequent reference is made to the ‘handbooks’. This is shorthand for the standard works on Old English and Middle English, on which researchers and teachers have come to rely. Notable are Luick (1914/1940), Wright & Wright (1925), Jordan (1958), Campbell (1959), Holthausen (1963), Hogg (1992a), Hogg & Fulk (2011). CoNE perforce draws on these works and others (see References), but in many cases the CoNE editors have made critiques of the handbooks’ descriptions and explanations and offer an alternative view. One of the aims of CoNE with its attendant Corpus of Changes is to offer more specific detail and to clarify issues in the historical account. The problem of dating of changes has been examined carefully, but very often the editors have been compelled to assert, contra the handbooks, that in many cases dating of a change is not determinable or even its duration or relative ordering.

CoNE and the Corpus of Changes are intended both to supplement the handbooks and to serve as a resource for their interpretation. We hope also that they might prove a stimulus for new thinking in future, more general, accounts of the early history of English.

CoNE and the user

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Whatever your motivation for using CoNE (research, teaching or just curiosity), we hope that you will find CoNE a rewarding resource to explore, and that you will enjoy making discoveries about a fascinating period in the history of the English Language.