Technical terms in British Medieval Latin 
and some European links

Although the question of the extent of European links among the technical terms documented in our sources from the Middle Ages can only obtain a full answer once all the national Dictionaries of Medieval Latin have been completed and once accurate comparisons can be made, I would like to suggest a few ideas regarding common sources and usage of technical terms across the different countries of Europe, according to the evidence of our Dictionaries as they exist at present.

What qualifies as a technical term is not always clear: even if we accept the definition of «the specialized use or meaning of language in a particular field» we may find a certain blurring between technical terms and neologisms or other words that a reader might find unfamiliar, for whatever reason. Nevertheless, since it appears that the sources for technical terms are very similar to the sources for neologisms more generally in Medieval Latin, we may posit that technical terms, whether or not sensu strictiore, are most commonly derived from the following sources or by the following means:

1) From Classical Latin used with new specialized meanings, for example in legal or ecclesiastical contexts
2) By analogy with Classical Latin words or by using Classical elements to form a new word
3) From Greek
4) From Arabic
5) From Greek through Arabic
6) From a local lingua materna
7) From the lingua materna of another country
8) From a word in the lingua materna of another country that itself derives from Classical or Late Latin.


A large number of Classical Latin words experienced a semantic shift, developing meanings that were specific to a certain field of knowledge, expertise or to a new development of a particular social context, as for example a legal or ecclesiastical context. Examples of such words are the specialised meanings of *beneficium* or *advocatio*.

Words that appear to be neologisms i.e. that have no documented existence in extant Classical Latin, are very frequent, continuing the word-forming habits evident in Late Latin. Such words were those which Isidore would probably have approved of as he watched the development of the Latin language, for in his *Etymologiae* he observes that it is easier for people to understand a new word if they recognized its source, while if a word is taken from a foreign language it is hard to know what its source or meaning is:

> etymologia est origo vocabulorum, cum vis verbi vel nominis per interpretationem colligitur. (...) cuius cognitio saepe usum necessarium habet in interpretatione sua. nam dum videris unde ortum est nomen, citius vim eius intelligis. (...) alia (nomina) (...) ex nominibus locorum, urbium vel fluminum traxerunt vocabula. multa etiam ex diversarum gentium sermone vocantur. Unde et origo eorum vix cernitur.\(^3\)

Isidore would presumably have been less comfortable with the influx of words, mainly technical terms, from Greek and Arabic, in the fields of medicine, astronomy and alchemy. Examples of such words are *elixir* and *algorithmus*.

If technical terms could be derived from written languages or the languages of the past, they could also be taken from spoken, current languages. This is the case with words from the vernacular, to which Latin morphological endings were added. Among such words we should differentiate between those having a solely local usage, drawing on a local vernacular word and those which spread beyond the national borders and came to be used in other countries, often in a slightly altered meaning or with a particularly local sense. The question of why this happened to certain words is an interesting one which, as mentioned, will require further research once the detailed evidence is available. One example of this is the term *gastaldus* which seems to have spread beyond Lombardy and taken root in several countries as far away as Britain, taking on a range of locally various meaning as it went.

Other Medieval Latin terms are adopted from a vernacular word that originally derived from Latin, as with the word *baillivus* that appears in documents from a number of European countries: this word took on a Latin form from the French word *bailiff* which itself derived from the adjective *baiulivus* from the Classical Latin noun *baiulus*.

And even a limited survey of words from such sources reveals that many terms spread easily across Europe mainly as the result of trade, a common education system, ecclesiastical and monastic administration and culture. More

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\(^3\) Isid. *orig.* 1,29.
surprising, perhaps, is the common use of terms of secular administration and power, such as *baro*, *burgus*, and *feudum* which are attested in several of the European Medieval Latin Dictionaries.

But if it is necessary to wait a while before we can gain a more complete and accurate understanding of the sources of Medieval Latin words and of which words were used across the whole Latin *Sprachraum*, in the meantime it may be instructive to step back and consider briefly a few observations made by medieval writers on the subject of technical terms and the formation of words to designate specific, new, unfamiliar concepts, as needs to happen with every living, developing language in every vibrant society. Such observations on the part of medieval writers often occur in the context of discussions about the transmission of technical terms from one language to another. This was a necessary consequence of the fact that most technical terms in Medieval Latin occur in such subjects as medicine, astronomy, alchemy and philosophy, and the knowledge of these subjects was largely derived from writings translated from Greek or Arabic. As a result of such translations, the number of technical terms in Latin increased from the eleventh century onwards. However, we will see that similar observations also occur in other areas of expertise and in the context of the transmission of technical terms to non-experts.

With regard to much of the technical literature that needed to be translated into Latin during the Middle Ages, it was primarily a case of filling the gaps in the material needed for teaching the traditional subjects of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*\(^4\). While the works of Donatus, Priscian, Cicero, Quintilian and Boethius had provided material for the teaching of grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, often introducing technical terms into Latin from Greek sources, there was little material in Latin for the subjects of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, apart from what could be found, in summary form, on a vast range of subjects, in Isidore’s *Etymologiae*. Hence the need for the translations from Arabic – as these became available as the result of the period of translation under Abbasid rule, by such as Adelard of Bath, Gerald of Cremona and Dominicus Gundissalinus.\(^5\) Other specialist fields that developed rapidly during this period were those of medicine and the natural sciences, in which much material was taken over from Greek and Arabic texts and transmitted to a Latin readership.

It is against this background that I wish to consider the attitude to technical terms and unfamiliar words, to foreign languages and translation, and to the problem of communicating and explaining unfamiliar terms, as expressed by a few British writers in Latin of the 12th and 13th centuries. This was of

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course the period when on the one hand all sorts of new features were being introduced to British society and government following the Norman conquest in 1066 and as the result of the development of medieval society, at the same time as throughout Europe people were attempting to absorb the huge amounts of scientific and philosophical writings entering by way of translations from Greek and Arabic.

The earliest British translator of technical material of whom we know was the early 12th century writer Adelard of Bath, who both accepts transliterated Arabic terms into his works (even adding verse jingles full of Arabic terms to help readers to memorise them) and also offers Latin interpretations of Arabic terms, as for example in his version of the astronomical tables of Al-Khwarizmi\(^6\).

At the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th centuries we find a group of translators and scholars who offer comments about the challenges of transmitting technical terms. Alfred of Shareshill at the end of the 12th century, in the preface to one of the translations he made from Arabic, namely of what he believed to be Aristotle’s *De Plantis* (or as Alfred refers to it, the *De vegetabilibus*) speaks of the *angustiae*, - the limitations - of Latin and feels the need to expand his Latin translation in places by means of some small additions in order to express adequately the terms and ideas he is transmitting from the Arabic version which was itself a translation (via Syriac) from the Greek original of Nicholas of Damascus, which included passages from a work of Aristotle, now lost. He writes,

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\text{parvulam – essentialem tamen – philosophiae particulam, librum scilicet Aristotelis} \\
\text{*De Vegetabilibus*, ex arabo in latinum transferens, nostri idiomatis angustias quantumcumque adiectione ampliavi}^7.
\]

Moving on into the 13th century we find Roger Bacon writing on the subject of technical terms in several of his works. He is mainly concerned with the problem of preserving the meaning intended by the original user of a word. In his *Compendium studii philosophiae* Bacon says that all works of theology and philosophy demand knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and Arabic because, so he claims, no original works in these subjects were written in Latin. Only in canon law and civil law are there writings originally composed in Latin, but he dismisses these by saying rather scornfully that canon law consists only of a

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series of passages taken from Scripture and the Church fathers, while civil law contains nothing that is not found more usefully in Aristotle. In fact Bacon concludes that all available texts for the study of theology, philosophy, medicine, quaeestiones naturales, mathematics, astronomy and alchemy are full of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic words because those who translated the originals into Latin could not find words already existent in Latin to express what they were trying to translate nor could they invent (adinvenire) new Latin words. He laments the fact that so many of his contemporaries are so badly educated that they do not know Greek, Hebrew and Arabic (Bacon had high standards!), even to the point that they cannot tell which words are from which language, and cannot give correct definitions or derivations or even correct spellings of the technical terms they use. Bacon does not think that translation is the answer, because he can see that in vernacular languages there are different dialects – for example.

in Francia apud Picardos et Normannos et puros Gallicos et Burgundos et alias non solum est consonum ut Latini sciant linguas propter textum translatum, sed impossibile est quod veritatem intelligenti, nisi linguis instructi fuerint alienis. (... ) videmus quod cum eadem lingua sunt diversa idiomata, id est modi et proprietates loquendi, ut in Anglico apud boreales, et australes et orientales et occidentales; in Francia apud Picardos, et Normannos et puros Gallicos et Burgundos et alias, tamen quod bene sonat et proprie apud homines unius idiomaticus, male sonat et improprie apud alios.

which means that people often fail to understand each other even when speaking the same language. If, as he says, it is hard to find a single word to express an Arabic or Greek or Hebrew term, neither does he advocate the use of Latin multi-word paraphrases to express a foreign word, in the way that the Vatican

9 « Certe majora sunt hic in paucis capitulis (of Aristotle’s De Legibus) quam in toto corpore juris Italici »: Bacon, Compendium, p. 422.
10 « Videmus in omnibus scientiiis translati quod vocabula priorum linguarum remanserunt infinita ut in textu Dei. Et sic in medicina et in naturalibus et in omni mathematicis et in omnibus. Nec potuit aliter esse, quia translatores non invenerunt in lingua Latina vocabula sufficientia linguis extraneis, nec potuerunt nova vocabula Latina adinvenire; et ideo necesse est quod scientiae translatae in Latinum ignorantur ab eis qui linguas alias non noverunt »: Bacon, Compendium, p. 467.
11 « Vulgus Latinorum (...) multipliciter oberrat, primo quia estimat esse Latina vel Graeca vel Hebraea, et e converse, quae non sunt; secundo, quia derivationes falsas et interpretationes facit et etymologias in his; tertio quia falsa pronuntiat et scribit »: Bacon, Compendium, p. 446-447.
12 Bacon, Compendium, p. 467.
glossary of so-called modern Latin, *Lexicon recentis latinitatis*, often uses 3 or 4 word paraphrases to render an English or Italian word.\(^{13}\)

Perhaps surprisingly, Bacon’s solution is not to advocate the use of reliable linguistic experts to provide a commonly agreed Latin technical term which everyone can use regardless of whether they know foreign languages and regardless of which vernacular they speak alongside Latin. His solution is rather for those who deal with scientific texts of any kind to have to become experts themselves in a number of languages; indeed, not only in Greek, Arabic and Hebrew, but also, it would appear, in vernacular languages. This certainly seems to be the point of the anecdote he tells about the occasion when he was lecturing on the text *De Plantis* by Alfred of Shareshill referred to above, and came across the word *belenum*, which he admitted he did not understand, until one of his students pointed out that this was a Spanish word for the plant henbane, but which, according to Bacon, many ignorant people had thought was from Greek or Arabic:

> pro mille millibus exemplis unum ponatur de libro Vegetabilium Aristotelis, ubi dicit «belenum in Perside perniciosissimum» \(^{14}\) (...) hoc vocabulum non est scientiale sed laicorum Hispanorum. nam jusquiamus, vel semen cassilaginis est eius nomen in Latino; quod sicut multa alia prius ab Hispanis scholaribus meis derisus cum non intelligebam quae legebam, ipsis vocabula linguae maternae scientibus, tandem didici ab eisdem.\(^{15}\)

Indeed it is still the name for henbane in Spanish, namely *beleño*. But despite Bacon’s explanation of this term, the word has proved problematic even to this day, for a look at two of the Medieval Latin dictionaries that record this word, namely the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* and the *Mittellateinisches Wörterbuch*, gives it variously as deriving from Greek or Arabic and defines it as three very different plants, namely *persea*, henbane, or desert date (Zachunbaum). However the Spanish and Castilian etymological dictionary says the word *beleño* has a Celtic origin but it also refers to the Alfred of Shareshill passage and says that it probably has a Spanish Arabic origin which indicates that the text is likely to have been translated from Arabic into the Spanish vernacular and thence into Latin, which was the rather elaborate process which many texts had to undergo.

Of course this all gets very complicated. If the reason for maintaining technical terms from other languages in a Latin translation is that the translator was

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\(^{13}\) One example of this is the definition of «typing» (s. v. *dattilografia*) given by the Vatican as «*ars manuali prelo scribendi*», Carolus Egger, *Lexicon recentis Latinitatis*, editum cura operis fundati cui nomen Latinitas*, Vatican City, 1992, I, p. 204.


not good enough at Latin and the original language, it puts all the pressure for understanding the original on the reader attaining sufficient linguistic and technical skill. But of course if the translator had had these skills then he might have produced an accurate Latin text without having to retain foreign technical terms.

Bacon does notice this when he writes rather amusingly in his work *Linguarum cognitio*, that the translator needs to be highly expert in two languages and in the scientific subject of the text he is aiming to translate. In his view only Boethius had had a sufficient knowledge of languages, and only Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln (Bacon’s older contemporary) had the necessary scientific knowledge. This rather bleak conclusion does not bode well for Bacon’s ambitious plans to improve educational standards and transmit important knowledge.

However, if it’s any consolation, the lack of such skills was not limited to Latin writers and translators: it is clear that linguistic and scientific ignorance either of language or of the subject matter, as well as the deficiencies of the language into which one was translating, had often hampered those who had earlier translated from Greek or Syriac into Arabic. In addition, of course, anyone who translated into or from Arabic would have had to deal with the problem of the ambiguities of the Arabic script and the different sounds present in Arabic. Bacon may have believed it to be best if the Arabic terms were retained in the Latin translations but even the Arabic terms were often imperfect translations from the Syriac or Greek, for Arabic itself was struggling during this period to develop technical terms.

Nor was the lack of such skills limited to members of the scholastic community. Bacon admits his shame that linguistic skills are so rare in contemporary Europe, in both ecclesiastical and secular society, that there is apparently no one who can translate Greek or Arabic: indeed, when a letter for the King of France arrived from a Sultan in the Middle East, no one could be found who could translate it so as to give a reply to the envoy.

The problem may have been serious in the 13th century, even allowing for exaggeration on Bacon’s part, but ignorance was nothing new. Bacon also criticized earlier translators such as Gerard of Cremona, Alfred of Shareshill and Michael Scot for insufficient technical and linguistic knowledge. And Bacon was not the first to criticize. Daniel of Morley, around 1200, had already mentioned

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16 « oporteat interpretem optime scire scientiam quam vult transferre et duas linguas a qua et in quam transferat, solus Boethius primus interpres novit plenarie linguarum potestatem ; et solus dominus Robertus dictus Grossum Caput, nuper episcopus Lincolniensis, novit scientias » : Bacon, *Linguarum Cognitio*, p. 82.

17 « valde verecundum est quando inter omnes sapientes Latinorum praelati et principes non inventi unum hominem qui unam literam Arabicam vel Graecam sciat interpretari, nec un ununti respondere (…) ; ut intellexi quod Soldanus Babyloniae scripsit domino regi Franciae qui nunc est et non fuit inventus in toto studio Parisiensi nec in toto regno Franciae qui sciret literam sufficienter exponere nec nuntio ut oportuit respondere » : Bacon, *Linguarum Cognitio*, p. 120.
the *ignorantia* of earlier philosophers who tried to hide their ignorance of the Arabic meaning by using obscure and invented Latin terms. The ignorance of earlier philosophers who tried to hide their ignorance of the Arabic meaning by using obscure and invented Latin terms. Moving from science to the world of government finances and legal matters, we find a similar, if less scathing, observation made by Richard Fitznigel, the late 12th century writer, who was encouraged to write a work to explain to a wider audience the technicalities of the Royal Exchequer – or to use the Latin technical term from which the English word Exchequer derives – namely the *Scaccarium*. His reaction to this request is to complain that such a book would surely need to contain all sorts of complicated terminology, like the books of the *scriptores artium* who wrap up their subject in obscure language to conceal their ignorance and to make the arts more difficult. But Richard’s interlocutor says, «Although it is generally permissible to invent new terms, please do not be ashamed to use common and conventional words for the objects described, so that no additional difficulty may be created by the unusual language». In this way Fitznigel goes on to explain terms such as scutage, murder-fine and danegeld, which his pupil gives as examples of barbarous terms that he does not understand.

From about the same period, we have the *De Legibus et consuetudinibus regni Anglie*, known as Glanville. In the prologue to this work the writer states his intention of committing to writing some of the laws and rules commonly used in England. He has decided to write in *stilo vulgari* to help people understand such new legal terms as *purprestura*, *essonia* or *saisina*, all words derived from French. In other words, the readers learn the meaning of such unfamiliar legal terms from the clear context in which the terms are used through the course of the book.

If Fitznigel and Glanville helped to spread understanding of financial, administrative and legal technical terms, the specific terms used in other walks of life were served by three other British writers of the 12th and 13th centuries, in Adam of Petit-Pont’s work *De utensilibus*, Alexander Neckam’s *De nominibus utensilium* and *Sacerdos ad altare* and John of Garland’s *Dictionarius* and *Commentarius*. Their focus was on everyday life in a secular, ecclesiastical or court environment and they drew both on classical terms, often using such of their predecessors as Varro and Isidore, and also new medieval terms. Their purpose was educational, driven as they were by a feeling of duty to be intellec-

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tually generous towards the interested non-specialist and a desire to help others to become fluent in the handling of words that were largely unfamiliar. What is common to all these writers on non-specialist terms is the fact that their works were primarily aimed at a British readership, drawing as they do on vernacular words that were more or less peculiar to Britain (though clearly in the case of words derived from Anglo-Norman, these would usually be comprehensible also to speakers of Old French). But if it seems that terms appearing in works and translations on the subjects of the quadrivium were more likely to find a Europe-wide readership, usually through the university curricula, other terms might be familiar across Europe as the result of being derived from a shared treasury of Classical texts or as the result of trade and travel links.

This paper has sought to indicate some of the attitudes to various kinds of technical terms expressed in British Medieval Latin and to prepare the ground for further investigation relating to such questions as the level of learning and expertise needed to understand technical terms, questions regarding communication and accuracy of definition or explanation or translation, and the problem of creating a precise and stable terminology within a language, as well as the question, only touched on here, as to why some terms or classes of words seem to have spread and become widely used, but not others. These are all questions regarding the transmission and transformation of Medieval Latin which provide evidence that Medieval Latin, at its best, was a living, international language, despite its limitations.

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ABSTRACT. — This paper looks at the range of sources for Latin technical terms and poses the question of whether some Latin technical terms were more likely to cross national boundaries during the Middle Ages, observing that these questions can only be properly answered when all the national dictionaries are complete. The paper then focuses on British Medieval Latin writers, their attempts to transmit technical terms and neologisms to specialists or non-specialists, and the difficulties they faced.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. — Dieser Artikel untersucht, aus welchen verschiedenen Quellen lateinische Fachausdrücke hergeleitet wurden und stellt die Frage, ob es für einige dieser Fachausdrücke wahrscheinlicher war, nationale Grenzen zu überschreiten, als für andere. Diese Frage kann erst dann abschließend beantwortet werden, wenn alle nationalen Wörterbücher vollständig vorliegen. Im Anschluß daran wird untersucht, wie die lateinischen Autoren auf den Britischen Inseln versuchten, Fachausdrücke und Neologismen an Fachleute und Laien zu vermitteln und welchen Schwierigkeiten sie dabei begegneten.