

**MENTAL FURNITURE  
FROM THE  
PHILOSOPHERS**

JAMES FRANKLIN\*

**T**HE VOCABULARY OF a language encapsulates a large part of the conceptual apparatus common to its speakers. As Diderot writes in the *Encyclopédie*, "The language of a people gives its vocabulary, and its vocabulary is a sufficiently faithful record of the whole knowledge of the people; simply by comparing the vocabulary of a nation at different times, one can form an idea of its progress." (1) There have been many suggestive, but isolated, remarks made about the relation between the vocabulary of a speech community and its thought. A modern East German study, (2) for example, compared the vocabularies of German as spoken in the Federal Republic and in the Democratic Republic. It found that there was little difference between the two, except in the choice of ideological terms — a difference the authors attributed to the "imperialist attempt to conceal reality and influence the masses." In a similar vein, Theophylact of Ohrid, a Greek theologian at the time of the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, advocated a lenient attitude towards the errors of the Latin church on the grounds that it was using a language without the requisite theological distinctions. (3) The vocabulary chosen by the Watergate criminals exemplified another way in which words could be related to thought; namely, they could conceal it and preserve the "deniability" of anything that might appear to have been said. (4) Newspaper columnists and comic novelists have long realized that vocabulary is extremely sensitive to social changes, and examples abound in these genres of exposés of the linguistic foibles of sub-classes of societies. (5)

\* James Franklin teaches Mathematics at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

Two languages may differ in the vocabulary they use in similar circumstances and so reveal differing conceptualizations of the subject matter in question. But it may also happen that two languages differ in the sheer amount of vocabulary of some type. The possibility arises that the community using the poorer language is simply unable to think about the phenomena described by this type of vocabulary in the richer language. Although individuals can perhaps deal in ideas for which there is no word, such ideas can hardly become part of the mental furniture of the community at large. In Diderot's words, if an idea can acquire a name, then, "if this idiom be supposed admitted and fixed, the notions immediately become permanent, the distance of time vanishes." (6) An increase in the vocabulary of a language will then correspond to an enlargement of the pool of concepts at the disposal of its speech community. Modern English, in particular, has a very much larger vocabulary than Old English had. A study of the sources of the new vocabulary can be expected to reveal some deep, and perhaps unexpected, influences on the way we think.

The etymology of English is, of course, in general very well understood. It is well known, for example, that many of the words added to Middle and Modern English are technical terms derived from Latin and Greek. The researches summarized in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Middle English Dictionary* permit an accurate picture to emerge of the first occurrences in English of words of any given type. This study will consider a class of words which has not been satisfactorily isolated for separate treatment, even though the history of any one of them can be described as familiar. The class is that consisting of the English words which express very general concepts (for example, 'general' and 'concept'). These words are characterized by the variety of the situations to which they apply, and the generality of the features of the world which they express. Other examples are 'absolute,' 'act,' 'infinite,' 'necessary,' 'movement,' 'divide,' 'exist,' 'probable,' and 'common.' Such words are so much a part of our linguistic dealings with the world that the poverty of a language which had no such words is almost unimaginable. Yet Old English did not have them — they are all Latin derivatives.

The importance of these words for our thinking is perhaps too obvious to need laboring. Nevertheless, it need not rest purely on subjective evaluations. The "Brown Corpus" (7) lists the frequency of words in a sample of a million words of modern American written English. Of the 500 most frequently occurring words, 124 are of Romance origin. If those which have obviously Old French modifications to their stems are omitted, there remain, in descending order of

frequency: 'just,' 'state,' 'states,' 'part,' 'general,' 'united,' 'fact,' 'public,' 'president,' 'social,' 'present,' 'national,' 'possible,' 'form,' 'important,' 'case,' 'family,' 'interest,' 'area,' 'different,' 'sense,' 'human,' 'example,' 'action,' 'company,' 'local,' 'history,' 'act,' 'experience,' 'really,' 'information,' 'college,' 'probably,' 'real,' 'question,' 'special,' 'major,' 'federal,' 'moment,' 'study,' 'result,' 'position,' 'individual,' 'society,' 'areas,' 'community,' 'future,' 'department,' 'center,' 'necessary,' 'front,' 'able,' 'provide,' 'education,' 'university,' 'effect,' 'students,' 'military,' 'total,' 'figure,' 'rate,' 'art,' 'century,' 'class,' 'usually,' 'evidence,' 'various,' 'modern,' 'tax,' 'minutes,' 'personal,' 'process,' and 'situation.' Of these, only 'president,' 'company,' 'university,' 'students,' 'military,' and 'tax' could be described as in any way "technical terms," and the reasons for the prominence of these words in the American context are not hard to find. All the others, except perhaps 'national,' 'family,' and 'century,' fall into the class of general terms described above.

But these words, though Latin derivatives, do not come from classical Latin. The thesis of this article is that these words were technical terms of scholastic philosophy, and mostly entered English directly from that source in the fourteenth century.

Before the evidence for this conclusion is presented in the next section, it should be emphasized how the line of argument being advanced here differs from what has been written on the subject heretofore. Barfield briefly mentions the fashioning of abstract terms in medieval philosophy in his *History in English Words*, but he is apparently unique in doing so. (8) In general, historians of language, faced with the massive borrowings of English (and French) from Latin in the later middle ages, have been content to observe that many technical terms of law, science, and ecclesiastical life were adopted from Latin, and to provide lists of these. (9) But their lists in fact contain a high proportion of general words which have no apparent connection with any of these subjects, and which we would unhesitatingly deny were technical terms at all. That the vulgar tongues adopted technical legal, ecclesiastical, and astrological terms because they had none of their own is not a matter to occasion any surprise. What does call for remark is the fact that the technical Latin vocabulary of philosophy, the most abstract of disciplines, provided the modern languages with a vocabulary which is in no way technical but rather permeates the language used in all areas of discourse.

## II

In determining when a word first became current in English, there is an obvious measure to use — the first occurrence of the word in documents as recorded in the standard dictionaries. Some obvious cautions apply to this measure. First, words can be current in a spoken language for an indefinite time before appearing in documents; the words being considered here, however, are ones that would naturally appear first in writing, and in the later fourteenth century at least there is a wealth of documentary evidence of the state of written English. Second, the first occurrence of a word may be an isolated instance which does not represent any genuine currency of the word and may have been unknown to later authors. This was particularly the case before the invention of printing. But it appears that in practice this was rarely so. For almost all of the words to be discussed, the dictionaries record many instances soon after the first.

In the following, "X introduced the word Y into English" should be read as an abbreviation for, "The combined evidence of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Middle English Dictionary* suggests that the word Y first occurs in extant documents in the works of X." A few quotations will be given where they reveal a specifically philosophical context for the first occurrence of a word.

In the references provided by the dictionaries for the words under discussion, two books appear again and again — Chaucer's translation (of about 1380) of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and John of Trevisa's translation (c. 1398) of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum*.

Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, written about 523, was by far the most popular work of medieval philosophy. Most of it was a eulogy of philosophy rather than genuine philosophizing, but its later sections do contain a number of passages which deal with free will, God, and the operations of nature, drawing on many different traditions of ancient philosophy. One of Chaucer's first works was a careful translation of the *Consolation*, (10) using as an aid a French commentary. (11) For many of the more difficult concepts, which strained the resources of English, he retained the original Latin word, or its French derivative. The following words first appear in English in Chaucer's translation: 'absence,' 'absolute,' 'act,' 'action' in other than the legal sense, 'centre,' 'circle' (verb), 'circular,' 'compound,' 'compress,' 'conceit' (meaning "concept"), 'conject-', 'conjoin,' 'consequence,' 'conservation' ("In conservacion of hyr beyng and enduryng," III pr. xi), 'continuation,' 'convenient,' 'create,' 'credible' (earlier than 'believable'), 'define,' 'demonstration,' 'differ,' 'disposition,' 'efficient,' 'egal' (an earlier form of

'equal'), 'equality,' 'eternity,' 'exceed,' 'fortuit-,' 'future,' 'imaginable,' 'imply,' 'impress,' 'inestimable,' 'infect,' 'infinite' (possibly), 'infirm,' 'interminable,' 'manifest,' 'moment,' 'movable' (except of feasts) and 'movability,' 'movement,' 'necessary' in the sense of "inevitably determined," 'necessity,' 'object,' 'opportunity,' 'particip-,' 'position,' 'premise,' 'proportion-,' 'reason' in the sense of "a cause independent of humans," 'reduce,' 'resist,' 'subject' (except in the sense of "vassal"; it translates Boethius' "de materiali subjecto"), 'submit,' 'superfice' (earlier than 'surface'), 'universal' ("Reason surmounteth ymaginacioun and comprehendeth by an uniuersal lokynge th commune spece that is in the singuler pces," V pr. iv) and 'variant.' (12) In addition, the frequency of the suffixes of abstraction '-ion,' '-ty' and '-ance' in the translation (13) marks a new ease of expressing abstract concepts in English.

Boethius was by no means the only philosopher who contributed to the development of Chaucer's thought. In later medieval England the language of learning was Latin (rather than French), (14) and the apex of learning was philosophy and theology. Anyone engaged in serious thought in the fourteenth century can be presumed to have examined the ideas of the scholastics, simply on the grounds that there was no other systematic conception of the world available. Detailed studies of Chaucer's opinions on such topics as free will and predestination, Church and State, and generality and individuality, have found that they did indeed stem from the thought of the scholastics. (15) Chaucer's later works introduced into English many more Latin derivatives expressing general ideas. From *Troilus and Criseyde*, which is in part a dramatization of Boethian philosophy: 'alter,' 'casual' (possibly), 'complete,' 'direct,' 'influence,' 'motion,' 'possibility,' 'sentiment,' 'substance' in the sense of "what underlies appearances," and 'transitory.' From the *Canterbury Tales*: 'accidental' (possibly: "cause accidental," *Melibeus* 2585-90, in a passage explicitly about scholastic terminology), 'aspect,' 'consequent,' 'constant,' 'effectual,' 'expel,' 'formal' ("cause material . . . cause formal," *Melibeus* 2585-90), 'habit' (except in the sense of "clothing"), 'inclination,' 'inequal' (earlier than 'unequal'), 'intellect,' 'introduction,' 'modify,' 'operation,' 'oppose,' 'opposite' and 'opposition,' 'particular' ("particular sciences," *Franklin's Tale* 1122), 'practic,' 'reverse' (noun), 'total' and 'variation.' From other works of Chaucer: 'absent,' 'accident,' 'appearance,' 'authentic,' 'conserve' and 'conservative,' 'effect' (possibly), 'equal,' 'exception,' 'existence,' 'natural,' 'observe' in the sense "look at," 'precedent,' 'retrograde,' 'signal,' and 'site' (originally a technical term of astrology).

Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Proprietatibus Rerum* was the most

popular encyclopedia of the late middle ages. Written about 1230, it included much of the then newly-rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy and science. It was translated into French, Spanish, Dutch, Provençal, Italian, and English, and there are some forty-five extant printed editions. (16) The English translation was that of John Trevisa, made no later than 1398, and printed in 1495 and again in 1535. (17) In it are the first occurrences in English of 'accidentally' ("Druye essentialliche and moiste accidentallich, as Aristotil seith," XVII.i), (18) 'alteration,' 'apprehend,' 'apprehension' and 'apprehensivd,' 'associate,' 'atom' (originally a unit of time), 'communicable' and 'communicative,' 'complement,' 'convenience,' 'cooperate,' 'dimension' ("Eueriche body hath his owne dymensioun and mesure," XI.cxxviii; "As Rabanus seith, tyme is dymensioun of chaungeabil thingis touchinge meovinge and abidinge," IX.ii; cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 221b7 and 223a29-33), 'discontinual' and 'discontinuance,' 'discrete' (possibly), 'effective,' 'essence' (*OED*: "The coinage ['essentia'] is ascribed by Seneca to Cicero, but by Quintilian (who disliked it) to the philosopher Plautus or the rhetorician Verginius Flavus." Trevisa writes, referring to Pseudo-Dionysius, "the essencia of hem [angels] is simple and vnmatural, pure, distingt, and discrete," II.ii), 'fiction,' 'immaterial,' 'instant,' 'instrumental' ("The cause material and instrumental," III.xx), 'intellectual' ("Damascenus seith that an aungel is substancia intellectual," II.ii) and 'intellectually,' 'magnitude,' 'moderate' (possibly), 'potential,' 'resumptive' (earlier than 'resume'), 'simple' in the sense "not compound" ("As Constantyn seith, an element is symple and lest particle of a bodie that is compowned," X.iii; "the duringe, contrariness, simplenesse, quantite and qualite of the pacient," VII.lxix), 'substantially,' 'symptom,' and 'virtual.' In introducing a Latin word, Trevisa sometimes adds an English word with a similar meaning (thus "associate and coupled," "gretnesse or magnytude," "actiue and passiue, worchinge and suffryng"). This was to some extent merely an intellectual fashion which he shared with other translators of the age, (19) but it was a fashion adopted with good reason. Trevisa seems to have been conscious that the Latin terms would be unfamiliar to his English readers and would require some explanation, and at the same time that there were no English words with meanings precise enough to translate the Latin.

Two other writers played an important part in introducing general words into English, though a smaller one than Chaucer and Trevisa. Richard Rolle of Hampole, a student of philosophy and theology at Oxford early in the fourteenth century, wrote various devotional works in which first appear: 'active' (possibly), 'cause' (verb: "A fantasye caused of trubblinge of the brayne," *Prose Treatises*, (20)

p. 18), 'constrain' ("Fre wil, nocht constraynd," *Psalter* xxvi.10), 'continue,' 'illusion,' 'imagine' and 'imagination' (possibly), 'material,' 'moral,' 'necessary,' perhaps 'possible,' 'presence,' 'reform,' 'reserve,' 'singular,' 'transcend,' 'transform,' and 'vary.' Wyclif, himself an author of Latin treatises in the scholastic manner, (21) introduced: 'communication,' 'composition,' 'definition,' 'deform,' 'different,' 'distinct' (adjective), 'essentially,' 'interpretation,' 'negative,' 'occasion,' 'principle,' and 'relative.'

Usk, (22) Gower, Lydgate, and a few other authors could be mentioned, but their contributions were small. A listing of them would be tedious, and would add nothing of substance to the argument.

There are certain Latin derivatives even more fundamental to the language than those so far mentioned — words like 'art,' 'cause,' 'change,' 'common,' 'figure,' 'form,' 'general,' 'image,' 'matter,' 'measure,' 'nature,' 'perfect,' 'person,' 'proper,' 'quality,' 'question,' 'space,' 'special,' 'state,' and 'substance.' These all entered the language in the thirteenth century, at a time when documentary evidence for the history of English is too sparse to draw many definite conclusions. Philosophical influence is sometimes evident in the early uses of the words, but it is not always easily distinguished from the influences of French, legal Latin, and the Vulgate Bible. But the words cited appeared only rarely in classical Latin, or only rarely with a meaning similar to the modern one. Rather, their modern meanings generally reflect those they assumed in medieval philosophy.

The history of abstract words from the time of their introduction into English to the present day is characterized chiefly by its uneventfulness. From the earliest occurrences, they gradually spread to all areas of discourse, to assume the dominant position in contemporary English revealed by the previously-mentioned frequency tables. One incident only is perhaps worthy of some comment. Poets have sometimes felt that these words were too general and colorless for most poetry, but Shakespeare displays no such qualms. As part of his preference for Romance words in intellectual and formal passages (as opposed to Germanic words for strong emotions), (23) he makes remarkably free use of abstract words:

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,  
senses, affections, passions?

*Merchant of Venice* III.i.

A foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects,  
ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions.

*Love's Labour's Lost* IV.ii.

Sometimes he gives these words more concrete senses, which have become more familiar in modern English. For example, he is the first

to use 'formal' in the sense of 'excessively regular' (*Lover's Complaint* 29); 'affect' in the sense of "make display of" (*Lear* II.ii); 'the present' in the temporal sense (*Macbeth* III.iv); and 'object' in the sense of "purpose" (*2 Henry IV* IV.v). These meanings have not, however, replaced the original abstract ones. Shakespeare's wholehearted acceptance of abstraction contrasts somewhat with the practice of the authors of the other major contemporary influence on later English, the Authorized Version of the Bible. The simpler words mentioned above as entering English in the thirteenth century are used frequently by the translators — some indeed owed their currency in English to their use in the Vulgate Bible. But the later words of the kind introduced by Chaucer and Trevisa appear rarely in the Authorized Version: 'absolute,' 'active,' 'centre,' 'dimension,' 'exist,' 'formal,' 'idea,' 'movement,' 'opposite,' 'position,' and 'probable' do not occur at all; 'motion' and 'object' only once.

### III

Listings of the first occurrences of words in English are effective as a record of the development of that language, but they cannot give any information about the linguistic environment of the words before their importation into English. To partially remedy this defect, it will be useful to examine in detail the histories of two representative words: 'exist' and 'probable.'

The verb 'existere' was used in classical Latin with the meaning "to be manifest," "to emerge," but the sense of the modern English word 'exist' seems to appear in the Church Fathers. Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* (c. 180 AD) writes, "The Son of God did not then begin to be, but was always existing (existens) with the Father." (24) Chalcidius (early fourth century) states that Atlantis vanished, leaving no trace of its prior existence. (25) In the same century, the Arian Candidus and the orthodox Marius Victorinus made extensive use of 'existens,' 'existentia,' 'existentialiter,' and 'existentialitas' in their debates on the Trinity. (26) Of more significance for later developments were Boethius' opinions on similar subjects, e.g. "Nor did He form it [the world] after any model, lest it should be thought that anything had already come into being (exstitisse) which helped His Will by the existence (existentia) of an independent thing." (27) The word is used very frequently in this way by the classical medieval philosophers Thomas Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and others. (28) From about 1300 there are occasional similar usages in Italian and French. (29) The first occurrence of the word in English, however, corresponds to a more specialized sense, in which (real) existence is contrasted with (mere) appearance. The appearance/reality distinction, a philosophical problem long before its life as a literary commonplace, was a source of



sceptical arguments that troubled many ancient and medieval philosophers. The scholastic Siger of Brabant (c. 1250) presents arguments for and against the proposition "that all the things that appear to us are simulacra and as dreams, so that we cannot be certain of the existence (existentia) of any thing." (30) Appearance and existence are similarly contrasted in thirteenth century discussions of sophistical reasoning (31) and in Petrus Aureolus' treatment of optical illusions (c. 1317). (32) It is in this sense that 'appearance' and 'existence' appear in the *Roman de la Rose* of Jean de Meung (another translator of Boethius' *Consolation*):

Mais ja ne verreiz d'aparence  
 Conclure bone consequence  
 En nul argument que l'en face  
 Se defauz existence efface. (33)

A slightly later French writer, imitating or translating one of the encyclopedic works of Bartholomaeus Anglicus and others, says of the Pole Star:

Ele est de petite apparence  
 Mes elle est de grant existence. (34)

There are examples from Italian authors of the same period, including Boccaccio. (35)

The first occurrence in English is very like these. It is from Chaucer's *Hous of Fame* (c. 1380), I.266:

Allas what harme do the Apparence  
 Whan hit is fals in existence.

The *Romaunt of the Rose* (c. 1400) and Lydgate use the word in an almost identical context. (36) Lydgate is also the first to use 'existence' in its slightly wider and now more usual sense:

Thyng countirfetyd hath non existence. (37)

Strangely, the verb 'exist' does not appear in English until 1602. (38) It occurs three times in Shakespeare.

In modern written English, 'existence' is among the 1000 most frequently used words. The parts of the verb 'exist,' taken together, have a frequency about twice that of 'existence.' (39) In French, 'existence' ranks a remarkably high 500th in order of frequency. (40)

The history of 'probable' follows very much the same lines. Except for some isolated remarks in Aristotle and Cicero, the concept of a likely or probable event or opinion seems to have been absent from ancient thought. (41) 'Probabilis' is used in classical Latin of opinions, but means "provable" or "approvable."











