



## RELIGIOUS CHANNELS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE: CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines religious channels of linguistic change that have shaped the development of English, focusing on Christianity and Islam as historically significant vectors of lexical, semantic, orthographic, and discursive innovation. Christianity provided early and sustained inputs via Latin- and Greek-mediated church vocabulary, biblical translation traditions, and sermonizing genres that standardized formulaic expressions and idioms. Islam, by way of Arabic and Persian and via mediating languages (e.g., French, Italian, Spanish), contributed technical, cultural, and religious lexicon across medieval trade, early modern scholarship, and contemporary media and migration, with growing visibility in late modern English. Synthesizing historical linguistics, contact linguistics, and translation studies, the paper proposes a comparative, corpus-informed framework to track diffusion pathways (missionary education, scripture translation, scholarly exchange, media circulation) and linguistic outcomes (borrowings, calques, semantic shifts, register formation). Pilot, illustrative corpus trends and typologies are presented to show how religious institutions and practices have served as durable sociocultural infrastructures for linguistic change. The article argues that religious channels remain productive in World Englishes through transliteration conventions, policy debates, and interfaith discourse, and concludes with implications for diachronic corpora design, lexicography, and pedagogy.*

### Introduction.

Religious traditions have long functioned as powerful sociocultural infrastructures for linguistic innovation.

In the history of English, Christianity and Islam have been particularly consequential channels through which words, meanings, orthographic practices,



and discourse styles have circulated. From the Latin- and Greek-derived ecclesiastical lexicon early in the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons to the idiomatic influence of successive English Bible translations, Christian institutions routinized formulaic patterns and propagated vocabulary across education, law, and governance. In parallel, Islamic civilization became a conduit for scholarly and commercial terms—often via Arabic and Persian and transmitted through Romance languages—while modern migration, media, and interfaith dialogue increased the salience of specifically Islamic vocabulary (e.g., halal, hijab, imam, Ramadan, sharia) and recontextualized earlier Arabic-origin terms (e.g., algebra, alcohol, tariff).

This paper conceptualizes “religious channels of linguistic change” as structured pathways—missionary schooling, scriptural translation, scholarly exchange, ritual and homiletic genres, and mass media—through which linguistic material moves and stabilizes. We pose two questions: Which mechanisms (borrowing, calquing, semantic shift, register formation) are predominant in Christian- and Islamic-linked transmissions into English? And how have these mechanisms evolved from Old English to contemporary World Englishes? Using a comparative, corpus-informed approach grounded in historical and contact linguistics, we outline typologies of form and function and present illustrative, small-sample results to motivate future large-scale studies (Durkin 2014; Nevalainen & Traugott 2012; Downes 2011; Crystal 2018).

### Literature Review.

Historical accounts emphasize the foundational role of Christianity in Anglophone literacy, schooling, and textuality, which accelerated contact with Latin and Greek and seeded durable ecclesiastical registers (Nevalainen & Traugott 2012). Conventional treatments trace early borrowings (e.g., abbot, altar, mass, psalm) and calques (e.g., Godspell → gospel) alongside orthographic and stylistic norms derived from scriptoria and sermonizing genres that diffused formulaic constructions into legal and administrative prose (Crystal 2018). Beyond lexicon, scholarly attention has shown how English Bible translations, culminating in the King James Version and continuing through modern versions, canonized idioms and parallelism patterns that entered general discourse, journalism, and literature (Crystal 2018; Downes 2011).

Contact-linguistic work broadens this to Islam-related channels, noting multi-hop pathways from Arabic and Persian into English via Mediterranean trade, the Crusades, and later colonial and scholarly circuits (Durkin 2014; Hickey 2013). While many Arabic-origin items in English are not strictly religious (e.g., algebra, admiral, tariff), a cluster of Islamic concepts—imam, sharia, jihad, halal, haram, zakat—shows distinct transliteration conventions, semantic accommodation, and register-bound usage in news and policy debates, especially since the late twentieth century (Lawrence 2017; Schreier et al. 2020). Recent studies of World Englishes argue that religious vocabulary travels with diasporic communities, acquiring localized phonology, morphology



(pluralization of imam(s)/a'immah), and discourse functions (Schreier et al. 2020).

Translation studies contributes tools to track how theological terms shift across versions and contexts, including choices between domestication and foreignization that shape calques, neologisms, and reader uptake (Malmkjaer & Windle 2011). In the English Qur'an translation tradition, Lawrence (2017) documents the contestation of key Arabic terms (e.g., shahada, salat) and the balance between transliteration and explanatory gloss, outcomes that later anchor usage in broader English discourse. Durkin (2014) situates these developments within English's long-standing receptivity to loanwords, noting institutional domains (education, religion, science) as high-intake zones.

In sum, the literature converges on three claims: (1) religious institutions create durable channels that amplify contact-induced change; (2) Christianity's influence in English is early, layered, and register-forming, while Islam-linked influence intensifies in distinct historical waves; and (3) contemporary globalization multiplies circulation loops through media and diasporas, embedding religious lexis within World Englishes (Nevalainen & Traugott 2012; Crystal 2018; Hickey 2013; Lawrence 2017; Schreier et al. 2020).

#### **Materials and Methodology.**

We propose a comparative, corpus-informed design combining historical and contemporary sources to operationalize religious channels of change. Four corpora anchor the

approach: (a) historical English (e.g., a representative Old and Middle English subcorpus), (b) Early Modern English (sermons, Bible translations, homiletic prose), (c) modern general corpora (e.g., COHA/COCA-like sources), and (d) news and social media snapshots for the 1990–2020 period. While this paper presents illustrative pilot counts rather than definitive measurements, the workflow is reproducible and extensible (Durkin 2014; Nevalainen & Traugott 2012; Crystal 2018).

The pipeline: (1) construct seed lexicons for Christian-linked and Islam-linked term families, including canonical spellings and common variants/transliterations; (2) tokenize and lemmatize texts; (3) compute normalized frequencies by century/decade; (4) extract collocates within  $\pm 4$  words to profile semantic prosody and register; (5) annotate pathways (translation, liturgy, scholastic, media) at the text level; and (6) model diffusion curves and register concentration. Translation choices and transliteration norms are documented qualitatively using reference works (Malmkjaer & Windle 2011; Lawrence 2017).

#### **Results.**

The pilot illustration indicates distinct timelines and mechanisms for Christian- and Islam-linked items. Christian ecclesiastical terms appear early and stabilize across genres, with peaks around translation milestones; Islam-linked terms show later rise and stronger clustering in news and policy registers. Collocate profiles differentiate frames: sharia co-occurs with law, court, policy, while gospel aligns with truth,



witness, sermon, suggesting register-bound semantics (Durkin 2014; Crystal 2018).

Collocate snapshots show that gospel's top co-occurrences include preach, truth, choir in Early Modern texts, whereas sharia co-occurs with court, ban, code in late-modern news, reflecting media frames that shape semantic prosody (Lawrence 2017; Schreier et al. 2020).

### **Discussion.**

The findings align with the literature's three claims and clarify mechanisms by channel. First, Christianization constituted a "high-intake" domain for Latin- and Greek-mediated borrowings in Old/Middle English, but crucially it also fostered intra-English calquing and idiomatic stabilization through translation and liturgy (Nevalainen & Traugott 2012; Crystal 2018). The long arc of Bible translation seeded memorable parallelisms and proverbiality that diffused beyond religious domains, resulting in enduring idioms and rhetorical patterns in public discourse.

Second, Islam-linked influence is more episodic yet accelerates in late modernity. Arabic-origin items historically entered English through science, navigation, and trade; the recent uptick of explicitly Islamic terms tracks migration and media salience, with transliteration variability (sharia/shari'a/shariah) indexing competing norms and communities of practice (Lawrence 2017). Register stratification is prominent: policy and news discourse concentrate sharia and jihad, while culinary and lifestyle

domains normalize halal alongside certification jargon.

Third, a contact-linguistic lens highlights that religious channel do not act in isolation but interact with education, law, and markets, creating feedback loops that stabilize usage. For researchers, this implies that diachronic corpora should annotate channel metadata (genre, translation tradition, register) to disentangle mechanisms. For pedagogy and lexicography, documenting transliteration variants and register notes is essential in World Englishes where community norms vary (Schreier et al. 2020; Crystal 2018).

### **Conclusion.**

Religious channels—material institutions, textual traditions, and communicative practices—have repeatedly mediated linguistic change in English. Christianity provided early, sustained scaffolding: it introduced ecclesiastical lexicon through Latin and Greek, standardized orthographic and stylistic conventions via scribal and homiletic practices, and diffused idioms through translation traditions. Islam contributed through multi-hop pathways that initially privileged scholarly and commercial vocabulary and, in late modernity, added salient religious terms whose transliteration and semantic accommodation reflect contemporary media and migration.

A comparative, corpus-informed framework clarifies how pathways (missionary schooling, scripture translation, scholarly exchange, media circulation) map onto mechanisms (borrowing, calquing, idiomatic stabilization, transliteration) and outcomes (register formation, semantic



prosody). While the tables presented here are illustrative, they demonstrate how to structure empirical analysis across periods and registers. Future work should operationalize larger, genre-balanced datasets, incorporate

prosodic and discourse-level metrics, and triangulate with translation-historical evidence to quantify the enduring impact of religious channels on English in its global varieties.

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