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Borrowing and semantic change in early Modern English

The influence of other languages on the lexis of English has been widely discussed. For example, several studies consider which languages are major sources of new words in different periods; other research explores the formal characteristics of loanwords and the ways in which they have affected the phonology, morphology and spelling of English. However, there is still relatively little research that examines the meanings of loanwords, and how meanings change in the process of borrowing. This paper looks specifically at what happens to the multiple senses of borrowed lexemes when they are first used in English and subsequently. It focuses on the early Modern English period, since this period is often acknowledged to show 'unprecedented lexical growth... achieved [partly] by extensive lexical borrowing' (Nevalainen 1999: 332).

French and Latin are particularly important donor languages during the period, but often the most usual senses of loanwords in French or Latin show more restricted use in English, and more minor senses in the donor language become more established. For example, the French loanword *ardent* is rarely used with the sense 'physically burning', and is much more common in English in the sense 'passionate'; similarly, *astonish*, borrowed from French *étonner*, is rare and restricted in the sense 'physically hit or stun', though this appears to be attested early in English. This paper considers the relationship between borrowing and polysemy in the early Modern English period, and asks whether it is possible to make generalisations about the meanings that tend to survive or die out when a lexeme is borrowed into English.