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Electronic Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English
(review)

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Electronic Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English

The University of Edinburgh, 2013- .

<<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>>

► Since its publication in 1986, the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English* has served as a critical resource for scholars attempting to understand the shifting morphology and syntax of the English language in the medieval period. Its careful tracing of the patterns of morphological variation, and the attachment of those variants to manuscripts held in libraries and archives, has allowed scholars to localize manuscripts whose provenance were unknown—most notably in the localization of the *Pearl* manuscript to Cheshire. In revising the printed text produced by Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, Benskin and Margaret Laing's electronic version of *LALME* (http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme_frames.html, hereafter *eLALME*) is a monumental task of scholarship in its own right—one which shows a promising start considering the time frame the editors were provided with for the project, but falls short in terms of the presentation of that scholarship in what is an entirely new medium.

Scholars who are used to dealing with the *LALME* in its print form will find much that is familiar in *eLALME*. Linguistic Profiles, based on a questionnaire, and dot maps of particular linguistic forms are still at the core of the information presented on the site. However, in revising *LALME* the editors have not only provided all of the material from the printed edition of the text, but have also searched a number of archives that were not part of the original scope of the printed edition. Furthermore, they also found and included additional material from archives that were searched during the initial production of *LALME*. Additionally, those LPs that were really too early a form of Middle English for *LALME* have been removed and transferred to *eLALME*'s sister project, the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Medieval English*. The core content thus has been revised based on the best current understanding of the state of the late-medieval English language.

More importantly, the editors have provided some useful search capabilities to help engage with *eLALME*'s data. Users of *eLALME* can search the LPs by county, by a string in a record field, or by the LP number of a particular item. This uses the capabilities of the website's

underlying database to avoid the juggling between multiple volumes that has always plagued the use of the *LALME* in the past. Likewise, *LALME*'s Item Maps are present in the electronic edition, but the intuitive connection between a particular grammatical form as defined by the questionnaire, the data collected on that form, and the dot map has been lost. Instead, the editors have divided up the dot maps by the particular forms used with no way for users to know intuitively when multiple forms are being used in a particular location.

This shortcoming is alleviated somewhat by two mapping features that are unique to *eLALME*. The first is the "fitting" map script, which attempts to automate the process of attempting to localize a text that is not in either *LALME* or *eLALME*. By selecting LP items found in the text, and then specific forms of those items, a custom dot map is generated over a map of the United Kingdom. The dots on this map are various shades of red, with the darker shades indicating a more likely match in terms of area. The second mapping feature is a user-defined dot map, where users first select one or more Linguistic Profile items from a drop-down list, then select the particular form of the LP item chosen. The map is then generated with blue dots indicating all the LPs where the chosen items appear. Users can also interact with the map by hovering the mouse over unselected forms to see where they appear. Furthermore, in both cases individual dots can be selected, which will show the relevant LP items and forms for that location. However, these dot maps do not differentiate between items chosen, so users cannot, for example, lay a series of dot maps over each other and intuitively see where they overlap.

Since this interactive functionality exists and expands on the utility of the existing print maps, it is hard to understand why the static dot maps are necessary at all. The custom map, pre-selected with the appropriate item, could serve the same purpose and provide the extra functionality seen in the two interactive options. The choice to have both makes the site feel cluttered, detracts from the quality of the material presented, and underscores the major issue with the site currently: it is unfinished and marked with design decisions that hinder usage, which I hope the editors will revisit.

Although the print medium's underlying data for the web may not need to be redesigned, at times the site feels too beholden to the design decisions of its predecessor, such as a front page (<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>) that basically serves as an electronic frontispiece based on the layout of the print version. This decision takes up far too much valuable space on the user's screen, especially when

that layout pushes the information for new users towards the bottom of the screen and requires that they scroll down to see it. The material on this page could easily be combined with the introduction to the electronic edition, and the new user information incorporated into the menu material for the site. That menu should also be available on all the pages, as it is the primary way to navigate to the content and tools that make this edition so useful. Currently, users viewing the site from `elalme.html` rather than `elalme_frames.html` must click on a title link in order to access the site content. This is not intuitive and can be missed, leading to confusion. My assumption, which seems to be borne out by those sections where the menu does appear, is that the eventual intent is for the site to be driven by a series of framesets under `elalme_frames.html`. Using framesets (the HTML `iframe` tag) rather than `divs` makes it more difficult to control the look and feel of the page across browsers, as each browser renders iframes slightly differently and frames will generate their own scrollbar if they are larger than the window size of the browser.

All of the pages should also follow the same styling practices—many of the pages revert to white text on a black background and are far too wide to be in keeping with current best practices for web design. I suspect these are eventually intended to reside in a frame that will be styled by the parent site, but right now it makes the navigation of the site entirely unusable. Pages that should or could be interactive, such as the Questionnaire, are currently static pages that add nothing to the overall functionality of the site. The information contained in them would be of more immediate use to users incorporated into the interactive elements. This is also true of the introductory material from the print edition. A help guide on every page, which appears in a popup box and gives appropriate information from the introduction to each volume of the print edition (modified, obviously, for web usage) would be beneficial for those users who are not familiar with the print edition and who might find the different terms, questionnaire elements, and LP items off-putting. Additionally, users should not be expected to download or install the Junicode or Cardo fonts in order to view the site content, as the use of `@font-face` in the `.css` would load the needed fonts from the web server.

Besides the organizational and styling issues on the site, the interactive elements could also use some cleanup and improvement to better fit the online medium. I attempted to use the site to see what information I could find out about the localization of “our” and “goo” as part of a project I am currently undertaking with Lydgate verses in East Anglia.

Unsurprisingly, while it was easier to search for the terms on the site than shuffling between the four print volumes, the differing selection mechanisms the various interactive elements present made it difficult to figure out what method would be best for me. Some of the checkboxes in the index and user-defined maps could be better presented as a form of faceted search, rather than presenting all the information to the user at the same time. However, some of the confusion may be because the editors have not completed the styling of a site to a uniform standard.

Encouragingly, the editors seem to know the need to improve the utility of the site for users. In their introductory material, they note that they are more “aware of what still needs doing than of what has so far been done.” This cannot be stressed enough. All too often features that make the site incredibly useful, such as the user-generated dot maps noted above, are not foregrounded. This makes their discovery a pleasant surprise for the user of the site, but hides the fact that this is really far more than simply an online version of the print *LALME*. It also obscures the quality work the editors have done in revising and updating the content of the *LALME* for this new online edition. The site, while undoubtedly more convenient and useful than its print predecessor, is currently just too difficult to interact with for any but the most dedicated user. Hopefully, future revisions will include the work of someone with an eye for design and user experience issues as well as the continued and important work of expanding upon the print edition in order to make it clear just how useful this expansion of an already critical resource can be.

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