Traces of Stress Change in Medieval French

The "group stress" system of modern French sets it apart from the lexical stress of Latin and the other Romance languages. The emergence of this group stress system can be dated to the medieval period, although since stress is never directly represented in the writing system, it may only be studied through its effects on other aspects of language and linguistic practice. Two such effects are studied in the present paper. Firstly, I examine changes in the versification of French, focusing in particular on the octosyllable. I argue that texts written before 1150 favour regular distribution of lexically stressed syllables, while those written from the latter half of the 13th century onwards show no such preference. This indicates a loss in the saliency of the lexical stress. Moreover, in Anglo-Norman, where speakers of French were in regular contact with a lexically-stressed language, versification follows a radically different, stress-oriented development. Secondly, I present an hypothesis as to the effect of a loss of lexical stress on monosyllables occurring regularly in group-unstressed (i.e. phrase-initial or phrase-medial) positions, suggesting that it was accompanied by context-specific syntactic specialization. Moreover, I suggest that such specialization of monosyllables triggers far-reaching changes within grammatical subsystems.