

History of the English Language

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Abstract

Language is the tool of communication among people of the world and English is the most common language that is spoken by over 1 billion people in the world as either the official language of a nation, a second language, or in a mixture with other languages. Talking about the birth date of a language is a complex issue while the birth of English language is not too complex. The history of English language starts when a group of Anglo Saxon tribes (who they were belong to West Germanic branch of Indo-European family language) invasion to the current Britannia and push the residents away - mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from "Englaland" and their language was called "Englisc" - from which the words "England" and "English" are derived.

The history of the English language has traditionally been divided into three main periods: Old English (450-1100 AD), Middle English (1100- 1500 AD) and Modern English (since 1500).

Key Words: **Language, English language periods: old English, Middle English, Early-Modern English, Late-Modern English.**

Introduction

English is a milting pot language that has influenced by whole languages around the world which is originally English is a West Germanic language that originated from the Anglo-Saxon dialects, brought to Britain by Germanic invaders and/or settlers from the places which are now called North West Germany and the Netherlands. It uses a different vocabulary to other European languages of the same era. A large part of the modern English vocabulary came from the Anglo-Norman languages. English is considered as a "borrowing" language.



Figure 1: The invasion of Germanic Tribes to Britain

Middle English differed from Old English because of two invasions which occurred during the Middle Ages. The 1st invasion was by peoples who spoke North Germanic languages. They conquered and colonized parts of Britain during the 8th and 9th centuries A.D. The 2nd invasion was by the Normans of the 11th century, who spoke Old Norman and eventually developed an English form therefore called Anglo-Norman. New vocabulary used beginning in the time of Middle English heavily influenced many organizations including the church, the court system and the government. European languages including German, Dutch, Latin and Ancient Greek influenced the English vocabulary during the Renaissance. (1)

Old English (450-1100 AD)

It is nearly impossible to identify the birth of a language, but in the case of English, it is safe to say that it did not exist before the West Germanic tribes settled Britain. During the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., West Germanic tribes from Jutland and southern Denmark (Norseland) invaded the British Islands. These tribes--which included the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes--spoke a Germanic language now termed Old English, a language which is similar to modern Frisian. Out of these tribes, four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Merican in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.(2)

Before the Germanic tribes arrived, the Celts were the original inhabitants of Britain. When the Germanic tribes invaded England, they pushed the Celt-speaking inhabitants out of England into what are now Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland. The Celtic language survives today in the Gaelic languages, and some scholars speculate that the Celtic tongue might have influenced the grammatical development of Eng-

lish, though the influence would have been minimal. (3)

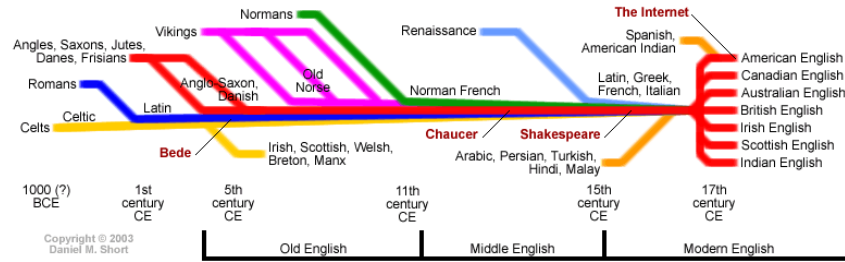


Figure 2: The influence of other languages on English language

Old English varied widely from modern Standard English. Native English speakers today would find Old English meaningless without studying it as a separate language. But, English remains a Germanic language, and approximately half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words *be*, *strong* and *water*, for example, derive from Old English. Many non-standard dialects such as Scots and Northumbrian English have taken features of Old English in vocabulary and pronunciation. (4)

In the 10th and 11th centuries, Old English was strongly influenced by the North Germanic language Old Norse, spoken by the Norsemen who invaded and settled mainly in the North East of England. The Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians spoke related languages from different branches of the Germanic family; many of their lexical roots were the same or similar, although their grammars were more divergent.

The introduction of Christianity late in the 6th century encouraged the addition of over 400 Latin loan words, such as *priest*, *paper*, and *school*, and fewer Greek loan words. (5) The Old English period formally ended sometime after the Norman Conquest (starting in 1066 AD), when the language was influenced to an even greater degree by the Normans, who spoke a

French dialect called Old Norman.

The most famous surviving work from the Old English period is the epic poem Beowulf composed by an unknown poet.

Middle English (1100- 1500 AD)

In 1066, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded and captured England and the Anglo-Saxons. After the invasion, the Norman kings and the nobility spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman, while English continued to be the language of the common people. This class difference can still be seen in the English language today in words such as “beef” vs. “cow” and “pork” vs. “pig.” The rich and high ranking people which most of them were Anglo-Norman commonly ate beef and pork, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who were Germanic ate cow and pig. Many legal terms, such as “indict,” “jury,” and “verdict” also have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ruled the courts. It was not uncommon for French words to replace Old English words; for example, “uncle” replaced “eam” and “crime” replaced “fren.” French and English also combined to form new words, such as the French “gentle” and the Germanic “man” forming “gentleman”. To this day, French-based words hold a more official connotation than do Germanic-based ones. (6)

The more idiomatic, concrete and descriptive English is, the more it is from Anglo-Saxon origins. The more intellectual and abstract English is, the more it contains Latin and French influences (e.g. pig is the animal bred by the occupied Anglo-Saxons and pork is the animal eaten by the occupying Normans).

In this period, the French language was regarded like an official language in England, but this tendency would disappear in the 14th century.(1) English literature appeared after 1200

AD, when a changing political climate and the decline in Anglo-Norman made it more respectable. The Provisions of Oxford, released in 1258, was the first English government document to be published in the English language after the Norman Invasion. In 1362, Edward III became the first king to address Parliament in English. By the end of the century, even the royal court had switched to English. Anglo-Norman remained in use in limited circles somewhat longer, but it had ceased to be a living language.

The English language changed enormously during the Middle English period, both in grammar and in vocabulary. While Old English is a heavily inflected language (synthetic), an overall diminishing of grammatical endings occurred in Middle English (analytic). English spelling was also influenced by Norman in this period, with the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds being spelled th rather than with the Old English letters þ (thorn) and ð (eth), which did not exist in Norman. On that time Geoffrey Chaucer is the most famous writer from the Middle English period, and The Canterbury Tales is his best-known work. Although the spelling of Chaucer's English varies from that of Modern English, his works can be read with minimal assistance. (1)

Modern English (since 1500)

Modern English is often dated from the Great Vowel Shift, which took place mainly during the 15th century. (1) English was further transformed by the spread of a standardized London-based dialect in government and administration and by the standardizing effect of printing. Following to the push toward standardization, the language acquired self-conscious terms such as "accent" and "dialect". (7)

During the medieval and early modern periods the influence

of English spread throughout the British Islands, and from the early seventeenth century onwards its influence began to be felt throughout the world. The complex processes of exploration, colonization and overseas trade that characterized Britain's external relations for several centuries led to significant change in English. Words were absorbed from all over the world, often via the languages of other trading and imperial nations such as Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. At the same time, new varieties of English emerged, each with their own nuances of vocabulary and grammar and their own distinct pronunciations. More recently still, English has become a *lingua franca*, a global language, regularly used and understood by many nations for whom English is not their first language. By the time of William Shakespeare (mid-16th - early 17th century), the language had become clearly recognizable as Modern English. In 1604, the first English dictionary was published, the Table Alphabetical. (1) The eventual effects on the English language of both of these developments can only be guessed at today, but there can be little doubt that they will be as important as anything that has happened to English in the past sixteen hundred years. (8)

Conclusion

The history of English is a complex and dynamic history. The history of the English language really started with the arrival of three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. And recently, English became a global language that is regularly used and understood by many countries where English is not the first/native language. In fact, nowadays when leaders, scientist, or politician want to address or criticize a worldwide topic they didn't speak Arabic, Pashto, Italian, Hebrew, or their native languages; instead, they speak

in English. In fact, English is used in over 90 countries, and it is the working language of the world trade and of 98 percent of international research, physicists and chemists. It is also the language of computing, international communication, diplomacy, and navigation. Over one billion people worldwide are currently learning English, making it unarguably a global language. And the effects of this international language are being obvious in the thirds-worlds country like Afghanistan too; where people pay for learning English rather than buying enough clothes and food.

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