

THE MAKING OF ENGLISH: WHERE IT HAD BEEN AND WHERE IT IS HEADED¹

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Abstract

Linguists concerned with diachronic research of English have established several main periods of development of the English language: Old-English (450-1100); Middle English (1100-1500) and Modern English which is further subdivided into Early Modern English (1500-1700) and Late Modern English (1700 -).

The aim of the paper is to explore the most important social, political and cultural factors that marked all these three major periods, as they undoubtedly exerted heavy influence on the making of today's English. In fact, the paper attempts to follow closely the intricate and extraordinary story of the development and evolution of the English language since its inception to date. It traces some of the major ups and downs of the language and their correlation with particular historic events primarily (but not exclusively) from Britain's great and turbulent historic past and present. The paper tries to demonstrate how all of that has been manifestly reflected in the language at various levels – pronunciation, morpho-syntax, lexis, and spelling.

Keywords: English language, development, evolution, major historic events

INTRODUCTION

Each language, being a 'living' organism, has its own path of evolution or development. This hard-and-fast rule has been confirmed on numerous occasions in the past and it surely applies to English as one of the most remarkable, influential and wide-spread languages in the world nowadays.

The story of the English language is a most peculiar one, to say the least. From its inception to date, tracing its path of development, its movement and growth, its ups and downs, can be an extremely complex, challenging and laborious task. Firstly, the process of 'brewing' the language is a centuries-long process. Establishing a neat progression of all its changes can be painstakingly difficult. With the advent of information technology and the progress made by humanity in general, nowadays, it is perhaps relatively easy to note, analyze and mark current changes in language. But the same task becomes progressively more complex as we go back in time and try to do the same in the Medieval Ages and the Old Ages, for obvious reasons – lack of real, tangible and sufficient pieces of evidence that will support our claims in a clear-cut and unambiguous manner.

¹ Revisional scientific paper

Despite these real setbacks, serious efforts have been made to figure out an approximate timeline of the evolution of English and to put the developmental stages of the language in a solid and well-defined framework (Crystal, 2003; Barber, 2000; Baugh and Cable, 2001; Singh, 2005; Hogg & Denison, 2006; Chiluva, 2008; McIntyre, 2009; Chamonikolasova, 2014, etc.). Thanks to these efforts, today we can discuss the features of Old English or Anglo-Saxon English, Middle English and Modern English, which further branches into Early Modern and Late Modern English.

In all these three periods the development of the language has undeniably been very dynamic, and all linguistic levels (phonological, morpho-syntactic, semantic and lexical) have been affected. Thus, if we compare Old English with, say, Modern English, one would be amazed by the fact that Old English is almost completely unrecognizable for contemporary English language speakers.

What instigates these persistent linguistic changes throughout time is decidedly something that can be attributed to various extra-linguistic factors such as social, political, economic and cultural circumstances arising in the country of origin of the language in question.

In the sections that follow this brief introductory part, we will take a closer look at this wide range of accompanying circumstances and major historic events that were instigated by those circumstances, as well as how they all have had their bearing on the creation and the present-day shape of the English language.

Needless to say, investigating the past of a language can be extremely helpful in making valid and plausible projections about its future course.

OLD ENGLISH (ANGLO-SAXON ENGLISH) (450 -1100)

The beginning of the story of the English language is a most striking one. English in its oldest form, i.e. Old English, did not originate in England. It was ‘transported’ to England from northern Europe, i.e. from what we nowadays know as Northern Germany and Denmark. That is why, within the tree of the Indo-European family of languages, Old English has been recognized as one of languages that belong to the West Germanic branch alongside with German, Frisian, and Dutch.

The Old English language in its most primitive form reached England in the 6th century, when the three Anglo-Saxon tribes (Angles, Saxons and Jutes) arrived from northern Europe and brought their language with them to the British Isles. At that point, the language was not unified; it consisted of at least four different but, more or less, mutually intelligible dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon.

It is worth noting that these Old English dialects were not the first linguistic means of communication ever used among the inhabitants of the British Isles. The primacy in that respect belonged to the Celtic language which was also of Indo-European descent. Celtic was brought to the British Isles much earlier by another wave of European settlers who are believed originally to have come from the far ends of Russia, gradually moving and spreading throughout the entire European continent.

The illiterate Celts in England had almost no written records of their language. That was a great drawback which prevented them from preserving their language, first, during the Roman occupation (from BC55 to AD450), and then during the surge of the newly arrived conquerors – the Anglo-Saxons who brought with them their Old English language. Thus, the

Celtic language gradually and almost completely lost its ground in the British Isles, withdrawing to some distant parts of Wales, Cornwall and the Scottish highlands along with those Celts who refused to give in to the newcomers.

With that being said, it is evident that the Celtic language in England was not in a position to exert any significant influence on the making of English at this initial stage of its development. It did leave some traces on it, but that is only as far as place names are concerned (e.g. *Birmingham, Southampton, Stamford, Oxford*, etc.).

The language that did have a serious impact on the creation of English in this period, in fact, was Latin – the language of the Roman conquerors. Although the Roman left England in AD450 to defend their homeland from the relentless attacks of some pagan European tribes, their language was quick to return to England but via another route – the spread of Christianity. The undertaking of the Roman Catholic Church to spread the Christian faith throughout the British Isles, which was initiated in AD597, soon turned into a great success and it entailed a renewed and intensified input of the Latin language in the making of the English. This was especially evident in the domain of religion and church affairs as many Latin words almost effortlessly entered the English language at that time (e.g. *litany, epistle, canon, nun, cap, sock, mat, sack*, etc.). The Latin language served as a role model for Old English in terms of grammar as well. Namely, just like Latin, Old English was also a synthetic language, i.e. a heavily inflected language (with plenty of declensions and conjugations) which made its usage particularly cumbersome.

In the 8th century, another pivotal event took place in the British Isles which provided a major impetus for changes in the Old English language. That was the arrival of the famous warring tribes from Scandinavia, the Vikings (also known as the Danes or the Norsemen). Their initial interest in England was directed merely towards looting and plundering English churches and monasteries. Nevertheless, shortly after their first encounters with the magnificent and abundant natural resources of the British Isles, their ambition changed and their goal was to settle there. The Anglo-Saxons' resistance was gradually weakening, and, eventually, they were defeated by the relentless, troublesome and extremely military adept Vikings. Thus, a large proportion of the island fell under the Vikings' control, and they referred to it as the Danelaw due to their great infatuation with laws and regulations.

Once conquerors, now conquered, the Anglo-Saxons had no choice but to accept to live side by side with the newcomers – the Danes. Over time their interactions gradually intensified primarily via commerce and intermarriages, which, in turn, paved the way for introducing the last strong wave of changes in the system of the Old English language. Namely, the language of the Anglo-Saxons, being exposed now to the language of the Norsemen, had to accommodate a new linguistic intake which principally consisted of words such as place names, but also words related to everyday, domestic affairs (e.g. *Thornby, Withby, Scunthorpes husband, knife, window, sky, skin*, etc.).

Evidently, in this initial period of its development, the English language was still in a rather fluid state. Its shaping and structure were greatly impacted by the crucial historical events which took place in this period and which were characterized mainly by warring adventures and conquests, exploring and occupying new pieces of lands, mixing with other tribes, etc.

MIDDLE ENGLISH (1100 -1500)

The historic event that had grave consequences on the development of the English language and which ushered the Old English language into a new era of its development was the Norman Conquest in 1066, when England was conquered by William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy.

Being under French authority, England was forced to accept the French language, i.e. Norman French (a dialect of French) as its official language. In fact, the Norman French became the language of government, administration, courts, literature, etc. To put it succinctly, Norman French was synonymous with high class and prestige. Nevertheless, in this abrupt and drastic shift of the linguistic setting, the vernacular English language was not completely forgotten or exterminated. English remained in use as the language of the ordinary people, especially, those living in the rural areas. Its prospects were far from favorable, but at least it was safe from complete extinction.

Apart from Norman French and vernacular English, the presence of Latin was still very strongly felt in England in this period, especially in the domain of literature and religion. Thus, amazingly, the linguistic situation in this period (1100-1500) was such that there were three completely distinct languages coexisting in England – French, English, and Latin – each having its own sphere of influence and operation.

The Middle English Period, just like the Old English period, was marked by numerous salient historical happenings and they all had a direct and very strong impact on the language itself. Namely, in the 13th and 14th century, a series of significant historical events, such as King John's losing all possessions in France (1204); the deadly plague – Black Death –which slaughtered almost a third of the entire population in England in a time span of only three days (1348); the Peasants' revolt (1381) which announced the rise of the middle class, and last but not least, the ever growing animosity between England and France, which resulted in the Hundred Years' War between these two countries (1337-1453).

All of these events, each in its own peculiar way, contributed to the unexpected shift in the position of the English language in the Medieval Ages. The French language suddenly lost its prestige almost entirely in England, and English triumphantly and rather unexpectedly rose to prominence once again. In fact, English won its final victory in 1363, when for the first time it was used in Parliament as the official language in which the Parliament sessions were to be conducted.

Another contributing factor that led to the ascent of the Middle English language was of an entirely different nature – it had to do with culture. Namely, a host of magnificent literary works (e.g. *The Canterbury Tales*, *Piers the Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, etc.) by extremely talented English authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland sprang to life, and helped immensely in consolidating the Middle English language after the long, turbulent period in which the very survival of English was seriously questioned.

From the linguistic point of view, the Middle English Period is extremely important as some major changes were introduced to the linguistic system of the English language. Thus, on a morpho-syntactic level, the inflections were becoming an increasingly heavier burden for the language users to carry, and they initiated a common practice of dropping the inflections extensively. Having discarded most of the declinations and conjugations, considerably simplified the language structure of the English language. The role that inflections played previously in determining the meaning of sentences, now was substituted by much heavier reliance on prepositions and fixed word order (Subject - Verb - Object).

Moreover, the Middle English period is marked by huge changes in pronunciation. The process known as The Great Vowel Shift affected mostly the system of vowels, and, as a result, many long vowels changed their quality drastically – they were raised and turned either into short vowels or diphthongs (e.g. \bar{i} [fi:f] - five - [faɪv]).

Evidently, huge linguistic transformations happened to the English language in the Middle English Period, and they were all, undoubtedly, to a great extent, propelled by the tremendous societal changes that occurred at that time.

MODERN ENGLISH (1500-)

This period of the development of the English language was also marked by a multitude of relevant historic events and unprecedented breakthroughs which literally opened the door to a new influx of linguistic changes which adorned the English language with a completely new outlook. The English language in this period is normally referred to as Modern English, which, in turn, for convenience purposes, is normally divided into: Early Modern Period and Late Modern Period.

Early Modern English (1500-1650)

The Early Modern English Period neatly overlaps with the Renaissance Period (1500-1650) in England. The Renaissance rekindled the interest in the human being and focused intently on all its complexities. The science was making a huge progress in exploring both human body and mind. Medicine made some invaluable breakthroughs in finding cure for numerous diseases that were troubling the human kind in the past.

Astronomy provided insights into the universe, and numerous novel technological advances presented themselves, making the subsequent large-scale explorations of the new continents, such as America, possible.

The admiration for the classical Greek and Roman literary and artistic achievements had also their say in the making of Modern English as the fashion of borrowing words from Greek and Latin became a common practice, especially, in the process of translating classical works into English (e.g. *anachronism*, *atmosphere*, *autograph*, *antipathy*, *chaos*, *chronology*, *climax*, *crisis*, *critic*, *dogma*, *emphasis*, *enthusiasm*, etc.).

Nevertheless, the ancient Greek and Latin language were not the only linguistic influence on the Early Modern English. Due to the extensive exploration feats of the English in the Renaissance period, which were strongly supported by the British Crown at the time, English came in contact with many other languages worldwide, for instance, the languages of the Indians, the indigenous people, of the newly discovered American continent at that time; languages spoken in Africa and South-East Asia, etc., and consequently, was in a position to enrich itself with numerous other borrowings which came directly from these languages (e.g. *tepee*, *moccasin*, *coyote*, etc.).

A lot of English people were critical of this excessive borrowing of foreign words, as they believed that it posed a serious threat to the very existence of their mother tongue. This process was popularly known as the Inkhorn Controversy.

The discussion of Early Modern English will not be complete without mentioning the contribution of the greatest English bard of all times, William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616). His truly impressive opus, which consists of 154 sonnets, 2 long narrative poems and 37 plays, presents an invaluable literary corpus which displays an immense and truly authentic

linguistic treasure. What is truly remarkable about Shakespeare is that he was incessantly experimenting with the language by inventing new coinages and by exploiting all word-formation processes (e.g. compounding, affixation, conversion, etc.) (e.g. *agile, allurement, antipathy, catastrophe, critical, demonstrate, dire, prodigious, renegade, widow-comfort, ill-turned, barefaced, courtship, dislocate*, etc.).

Another similarly strong influence on the language came from King James Bible (1611) which contributed greatly to the enrichment of vocabulary by resorting to an extensive use of old English idiomatic expressions (e.g. *en eye for an eye, the pupil of his eye*, etc.).

In the Early Modern Period, linguistic changes at the other levels were also noticeable. The great changes in pronunciation (The Great Vowel Shift) that started in the Middle English period were finally complete. This left pronunciation, to a great extent, in a grave discrepancy with orthography, which stabilized with the advent of the printing press in England in 1476. Efforts to sort the discrepancy ensued but to no avail, as they all failed to receive a wide public acclaim. This explains why orthography remains to be one of the most lingering and unsolvable problems of the English language to date.

The late Modern English (1700-)

This period was also very turbulent and filled with many significant historic events which were manifestly reflected in the language itself – mainly in the domain of vocabulary, as orthography, pronunciation and grammar in this period have stabilized to a great degree.

In fact, the Renaissance period was followed by the Age of Reason or the Age of the Enlightenment. Now the accent was increasingly put on science and scientific achievements. This was especially after the famous English mathematician, physicist and astronomer, Sir Isaak Newton (1642-1727) promoted the scientific method which advocated for systematic observation, measurement and testing of all investigated phenomena.

Secondly, what marked this period was the great Industrial Revolution (late 18th and early 19th century), the focal point of which, for the most part, was exactly England (e.g. the invention of the steam engine, steamships, railways, the development of new materials, numerous pieces of equipment in a range of manufacturing industries, etc.).

All these scientific and industrial advancements inevitably created an evident need for creating neologisms to designate the new inventions. Once again, Latin and Greek were used as the right source to provide the needed lexis (e.g. *oxygen, protein, vaccine, lens*, etc.). In some cases, though, completely new words were coined (e.g. *train, engine, combustion*, etc.), or old English words were given new meaning (e.g. *locomotive, factory, pump*, etc.).

The rise of the British Empire was yet another decisive factor that played a key role in the making of the English in this Late Modern English Period. With the process of colonization, which started as early as the 16th century and which was greatly intensified as a result of the scientific and industrial revolution between the 18th and 20th century, the English language was spreading with the speed of light throughout the entire globe from Canada to Australia, India, the Caribbean, South Africa and Singapore. This extending of the English language to the newly colonized territories was believed to help in consolidating the British authority over these territories. Although that was true, only few people realized then that the entire affair could also go in the opposite direction as well. Namely, by exposing the English language to the indigenous languages of the colonized people, the English language itself was being greatly influenced and modified. Thus, a new, unstoppable surge of borrowing foreign

words presented itself (e.g. *boomerang*, *kangaroo*, etc. from the languages of the Australian Aborigines; *pyjamas*, *bungalow*, *jungle*, etc. – borrowed from Hindu spoken in India, etc.).

Interestingly, the fall of the British Empire in the 20th century, when most of the former British colonies gained their independence, did not put an end to the use of the English language on these territories. Quite on the contrary, many of them have adopted, or in fact, preserved the English as their official language. Such is the case with Hong Kong, Singapore, South Africa, Malaysia, etc.

At present, the English language continues to change and grow. Its growth now is mainly boosted by the new digital era and once again its vocabulary is most evidently affected by it. According to some estimates 8500 new words on average are added to the English lexicon per year. These are terms related to the new technologies, foods, gadgets etc. (e.g. *meme*, *selfie*, *nerd*, *unplugged*, etc.).

Apart from these newly coined words, the vocabulary is expanded by adding words that have been created by ‘verbification’ of nouns (e.g. *to google*, *to email*, *to text*, *to parrot*, etc.), or conversely, by ‘nounification’ of verbs (e.g. *an ask*, *a build*, *a solve*, *a fail*, etc.); compounding (e.g. *frenemy*, *stagflation*, *Disneyfication*, etc.); words change meaning (e.g. *momentarily* has come to mean *very soon*). A lot of short-lived words appear abruptly and disappear the next day as well (e.g. *fanute*, *YOLO* (you only live once), etc.).

ENGLISH TODAY

Given all this, now that we are confidently tramping throughout the first decades of the 21st century, the unfolding of story of the English language seems still far from over.

With its estimated approximately 2 billion users worldwide, out of whom interestingly only 350-400 million are native English speakers, English remains one of the most widely spoken languages today, along with Chinese, which has about 800 million native speakers.

The UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are the countries where English is spoken as a mother tongue. In another set of countries, namely in the former British colonies, English is spoken as a second language. Finally, in almost all of the remaining countries in the world English is taught at school as a foreign language. In fact, the greatest number of English speakers today lives in these countries exactly.

Being so widely spread, nowadays, English has the unquestionable status of lingua franca in the world. English is the language used for international communication; almost all important international political meetings and gatherings, scientific and business conferences and forums are conducted in English. English is also the language of the international aviation and maritime navigation, broadcasting, popular modes of entertainments, i.e. music and films, etc.

What enables and sustains this highly prominent status of English nowadays is undoubtedly the current and strongly felt cultural, political, economic and military influence of the USA worldwide. It seems like the USA, the former British colony which gained its independence in 1776, has taken up in terms of promoting and spreading the language, where the UK has left off, when its Colonial empire started to disintegrate.

Due to its strong presence in all spheres of life and in all corners of the world, it is fair to acknowledge that at least as far as vocabulary goes, interestingly, the trend has been reversed and English these days lends far more from its extremely extensive and affluent vocabulary to

other languages than it borrows. This is especially the case with terms related to the latest ICT developments and breakthroughs (e.g. *iPhone*, *iPad*, *tablet*, *laptop*, etc.).

CONCLUSION

Although Noah Webster predicted in 1789 that English will change drastically in the coming decades and centuries by saying that “the language of North America will become as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German or from one another”, still, that does not seem to have happened just yet (<http://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/>).

It would be absurd to deny that there are actual differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and spelling among the different variants of English (British English, American English, Australian English, etc.), and furthermore among the different regional and social dialects of these same variants, nevertheless, none of them currently seems to be able to make these varieties mutually unintelligible and completely distinct.

The age of instantaneous global communication is perhaps one of the factors which prevent that from happening. This same factor, which for the time being shows no signs of abating, is very likely to keep up this safeguarding of the stronghold of English in the future as well.

The other factor which preserves the English language dominance is decidedly the USA as its main advocate in modern times. Namely, as long as the USA manages to maintain its current economic, military and political supremacy in the world, the chances are that the English language will also retain its imperial status on the global stage.

Any far reaching predictions would be far-fetched as no one can actually predict with a relatively high degree of certainty what will happen in this extremely dynamic environment we live in. What is absolutely certain is that, just as it was the case in the past, the future development of English will be greatly determined by the future political, social, and cultural trends and occurrences in the world at large.

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