The History of the English Language

Middle English (1066-1500)

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Simplification of Language

In the **four** centuries that followed the **Norman** Conquest, the English language changed more than at any other time in its history. Thousands of words from **French** came into the language, and many Old English ones left it. At the same time, the language changed **grammatically**, mainly by becoming **simpler**. The English used at this time is called **Middle English**.

One way the grammar grew **simpler** was by **losing** some of the different **endings** for **nouns**, **adjectives**, and **pronouns**. For example, by the 15th century the **plural** noun ending -**(e)s** was accepted everywhere in England, although some plurals with - en survived (children is one of them). Other noun endings which have survived are the **'s** (the boy's book) and the **s'** (the boys' books). Adjectives and nouns also lost their grammatical gender, and the became the only form of the definite article.

Simplification of Tense

The main change to verbs was to the **past** tense. Some of the Old English verbs began to end in **-ed**. For example, the past tense of **climb** was **clomb**, but the word **climbed** also began to appear in the 13th century. In the 14th century, most of the thousands of verbs that had entered the language **from French** also formed the past tense with **- ed**. Sometimes the change went the other way, so **knowed** became **knew**. There are still about **250** 'irregular' past tense verbs in English, but this is only about half the number that there were in Old English.

In **Old** English, there were two main **tenses**: **past** and **present**. In **Middle** English other tenses developed. **Shall** and **will** began to be used to express the **future**. **Have** was used for **perfect** tenses (as in **they have gone**), and **be** was used for the **passive** (as in **it was done**). **Be** was also used for the **continuous** tenses (as **in he is coming**).

Grammatical Changes

When the different noun endings disappeared, people had to put words in a particular order to express meaning. The most common order they used was:

subject - verb - object

They also used **prepositions**, for example **in**, **with**, and **by**, instead of noun endings, so the expression **daeges** and **nihtes** became **by day** and **by night** in Middle English.

All these grammatical changes were possible because from 1066 until the end of the 12th century very **little** was written in English. The official papers of the government and the Church were written in Latin or French. This meant that people were free to make changes to their **spoken** language very easily.

Richness of Vocabulary

If English **grammar** was much **simpler** by the end of the 15th century, its **vocabulary** was much **richer**. Between 1100 and 1500, about ten thousand French words were taken into English, three-quarters of which are still in use. French words came into every part of life.

For example, the words **blanket**, **ceiling**, **chair**, **dinner**, **fruit**, **lamp**, and **table** describe things in the <u>home</u>. New words arrived to describe the <u>law</u>, like: **crime**, **judge**, **prison**, and **punish**. And some things in <u>nature</u> received new names: **flower**, **forest**, **mountain**, **river**, and **ocean**.

Richness of Vocabulary

French (F) words very often replaced Old English (OE) words: for example, **people** (from the French **peuple**) replaced **leode** (OE). But sometimes both the French and the Old English words survived, with small differences in meanings: for example, **ask** (OE) and **demand** (F), **wedding** (OE) and **marriage** (F), **king** (OE) and **sovereign** (F).

Sometimes **French** words were used for life in the **upper** classes and **Old** English ones for life in the **lower** classes. For example, the words for the animals in the fields were **Old** English (**cows**, **sheep**, and **pigs**) but the words for the **meat** on the table were **French** (**beef**, **mutton**, and **pork**).

New English words were made from some of the new French words by adding certain English suffixes. For example, the English **-ly** and **-ful** endings were added to **French** words to make **gently**, **beautiful**, and **peaceful**.

Vocabulary from Latin

At the same time, several thousand words also entered English from **Latin**. They came from books about law, medicine, science, literature, or Christianity these books often used words, which could not be translated into English.

Translators often took the **Latin** word and made it into an English one. Some words that came into Middle English from Latin at this time were: **admit**, **history**, **impossible**, **necessary**, and **picture**. One important source of Latin words was **the first translation of the Bible from Latin to English**, which was made by John Wycliffe and his followers between 1380 and 1384. They followed the Latin very closely, using many Latin words. More than a thousand Latin words appear for the first time in English in their translation of the Bible.

Spelling Changes

The main dialects in Middle English were similar to those of Old English, but they used different words, word endings, and pronunciations. When people wrote, they used the words and pronunciations of their dialects. For example, the sound /**x**/ in the middle of words was spelt **gh** in the south and **ch** in the north, so **night** (pronounced /nixt/ at that time) could be spelt as **night** or **nicht**. One word could have some different spellings. There were more than twenty ways of spelling **people** (for example, **pepylle**, **puple**, **people**), and many more variations.

During this time there were changes to the ways sounds were spelt. The old English letter **3** was replaced by **g**, and **æ** by **a**. **Th** began to be used instead of **þ** and **ð**. The Normans introduced **j** and **z**, used **k** more often, and used **u** and **v** for /**u**/ and /**v**/. They replaced **cw** with **qu** (**queen**), **sc** with **sh** (**ship**), **ch** with **c** (**church**) and **ou** instead of **u** (**house**). In many words, they replaced **u** with **o** (**love**, **son**).

Geoffrey Chaucer

The greatest writer in Middle English was **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1343-1400). Chaucer, who lived in London, was both a poet and an important government official. He wrote in the East Midlands dialect (spoken by people living in the Oxford-London-Cambridge triangle) and used many words from French.

He also used rhyme, which was used in French and Italian poetry. His best-known work, **The Canterbury Tales**, written in the1390s

The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales, written in the1390s, begins with these famous words:

Whan that <u>Aprill</u>, with his <u>shoures soote</u>,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licuor,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour...
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...

When <u>April</u> with its <u>sweet showers</u>
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every vein in such liquid
From which strength the flower is engendered...
Then people long to go on pilgrimages...

The Canterbury Tales

The **poem** is about a group of ordinary people who had a journey to the large church at Canterbury together, telling each other **stories** on the way. They are a varied group of characters, and Chaucer describes them colorfully. There is the Wife (woman) of Bath, the Cook, the Clerk (a student at Oxford), the Man of Law, the Shipman, the Monk, and many others. In their stories and conversations, Chaucer gives us plenty of details about their lives.

Chaucer was very good at describing people and also at writing conversations that sounded very real. He had a great effect on writers in the 15th century, and many of them copied him.

Other Developments

A different kind of development in the 4th century was the growing use of family names. People began to need these as they moved away from their village. Sometimes the family name had the **father's** name (Johnson), as in Anglo-Saxon times. Other names showed where a person **lived** (Rivers, Hill), or his **town** (Burton, Milton), his **country** (French, Holland), or his **work** (Cook, Fisher). A person's family name could change **five** or **six** times during his lifetime.

In the 15th century, a machine was brought to England, which had a great effect on English. This was the printing machine, which William Caxton brought to London in 1476. Suddenly it was possible to produce thousands of copies of books.

Other Changes

Caxton and other printers decided to use **the East Midlands dialect**, mainly because it was spoken in London and used by government officials. The printers did not make their decisions in a particularly organized way, but slowly standard spellings developed.

However, after this time, the sounds in many words changed or disappeared. As a result, there are now thousands of words that are spelt in the way that they were pronounced in Caxton's time. For example, the letter **k** in **knee**, the letter **w** in **wrong**, and the letter **l** in **would** were pronounced at this time.

By the end of the 15th century, English was starting to be read by thousands of people. In the next century it was read by many more, and used by the great star of English literature - **William Shakespeare**.

Modern English (1500 - present day)

Early Modern English

Early Modern English

At the beginning of the 16th century, Latin was the language of learning in all of Europe, and it was seen as richer than English and the other spoken European languages.

However, with the growth of education, the introduction of printing, and the new interest in learning, this began to change. More and more people wanted to read books by Roman and Greek writers, and in England, they wanted to read them in English. So these books were translated, and other books about learning were written in English.

Early Modern English

However, the acceptance of English as a language of learning was not complete until the end of the 17th century. For example, in 1687 Isaac **Newton** chose **Latin** when he wrote his **Principia**, but 15 years later, he wrote **Opticks** in **English**.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, writers in English borrowed about **30,000** words from about 50 languages, mainly to describe new things and ideas. About half of these words are still used today. This very large growth of vocabulary was the main change in English at this time. The new words came mainly from **Latin**; for example, **desperate**, **expensive**, **explain**, **fact**. Other important sources for new words were **French**, **Italian**, **Greek**, **Spanish**, and **Portuguese**. And as the Europeans traveled to more and more places, so words came into **English** from **America**, **Africa**, and **Asia**. For example **chocolate** and **tomato** came from **Mexico**; **banana** from **Africa**, **coffee** from **Turkey**, and **caravan** from **Persia**.

The borrowing continued….

Not everyone liked this borrowing of words. Some thought that the strange words were unnecessary and hard to understand. English could express everything quite well without them and the writers were only showing how much Latin they knew.

But **the borrowing continued**, and the new words that survived slowly lost their strangeness. New words were also added to English in other ways. People were adventurous with language: they used **verbs** as **nouns** (**laugh** and **invite**), or **nouns** as **verbs**, or made **adjectives** from **nouns** (**shady** from **shade**). Or they put two words **together** (**chairman**), or they added new parts to words; **un-** to **comfortable**, for example.

William Shakespeare

The age of Queen **Elizabeth** the First (Queen of England 1558-1603) was one of a great flowering of literature. For example, **Shakespeare** (1564-1616) is considered the **greatest writer** of **plays**. He expressed his understanding of human nature in extraordinarily rich language in his plays and poems. He had the **largest vocabulary** of any English writer and made about two thousand new words, and a large number of expressions, which are now part of **Modern English**.

Shakespeare wrote: **it's early days** (it's too soon to know what will happen)-, **tongue-tied** (unable to speak because you are shy); **the long and the short of it** (all that needs to be said about something); **love is blind**. His success and fame during his lifetime meant that his plays had a very great effect on English.

Translation of Bible

When Elizabeth the First died in 1603 she left no children, so her cousin, King James the Sixth of Scotland, became King James the First of England. In 1604, the new king ordered **a translation of the Bible** into English. There were many different English translations of the Bible and he wanted to have one main translation. It was made by fifty-four translators who worked together in small groups, using older translations as their guide.

The translators did not follow Shakespeare's example and make new words; instead, they used old ones, even ones that were out of date or were becoming unusual. For example, they used **ye** instead of **you** as a subject pronoun, and the **-eth** ending for verbs instead of **-s**. They did not use as many different words as Shakespeare either: he had used twenty thousand and they only used eight thousand. They aimed to make the language sound like poetry when it was read out and usually, they succeeded.

Changes in Language

The **Bible** had an important effect on the English language. Many expressions from it became part of the language; for example, **the apple of somebody's eye** (a person who is loved very much by somebody); **by the skin of your teeth** (you only just manage to do something); **the salt of the earth** (a very honest person. Its poetry had a great effect on many English writers in the centuries that followed.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, there were some grammatical changes to English, although not as many as those that had happened to Middle English. People began to use **do** with a **main verb**. For example, you could say I know not or **I do not know**. You could say **I know** or **I do know**. And you could say **know you?** Or **do you know?** In the 17th century, people began to use **I know**, **I do not know**, and **do you know?** more often. Another verb change was the ending of **the 3rd person singular** in the present tense. By 1700 the -**th** was no longer used and all verbs took -s; for example, **loveth** was now **loves**.

Changes in Pronouns and Pronunciation

Pronouns also changed a little. In 1500 the words **ye** and **you** were used in the same way as **he** and **him**, but by 1700 **ye** had disappeared. **Thou** and **thee** were also used instead of **you** to **children** or **people** who were less important than yourself, but these also disappeared in many dialects in the 17th century. Also during this time, the word **its** replaced **his** to talk about things without gender. The leg of a chair was now **its** leg not **his** leg.

Changes in pronunciation were continually taking place. From the middle of the 15th century, the seven long vowels began to change. For example, in Chaucer's time the word for **life** was pronounced **/li:f/** and this became **/leif/** and then **/laif/** by the 18th century.

Changes in Pronunciation

Similar changes happened to the **house**, which was /**hu:s**/ in Chaucer's time. After two changes, it finally arrived at its modern pronunciation /**haus**/. Sounds in some other words disappeared; for example, the /**k**/ and the /**w**/ at the beginning of **knee** and **write** were lost. The pronunciation of /**t**/ in **castle** and the /**1**/ in **would** also disappeared.

The big growth in vocabulary and the flowering of literature happened when England was quite peaceful. However, in the middle of the 17th century, this peace was destroyed, and the changes that followed had some interesting effects on the language.