



# Making of the national language

- The formation of the national literary English language Covers the Early NE period (c. 1475—1660). Henceforth we can speak of the evolution of a single literary language instead of the similar or different development of the dialects.
- There were at least two *major* external factors which favoured the rise of the national language and the literary standards: the unification of the country *and* the progress of culture. Other historical events, such as increased foreign contacts, affected the language in a less general way: they influenced the growth of the vocabulary;

- As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> c., within the feudal system, new economic relations began to take shape. The villain was gradually superseded by the copyholder, and ultimately, by the *rent-paying tenant*. **With** the growing interest in commercial profits, feudal oppression grew **and** the conditions of the peasants deteriorated. Social discontent showed itself **in** the famous peasants' rebellions of the 14th and 15th c.
- The village artisans and craftsmen travelled about the country looking for a greater market for their produce. They settled in the old towns and founded new ones near big monasteries, on the rivers and at the cross roads. The crafts became separated from agriculture, and new social groups came into being: poor town artisans, the town middle class, rich
- merchants, owners of workshops and money-lenders.

- The 15th and 16th c. saw other striking changes in the life of the country: while feudal relations were decaying, bourgeois relations and the capitalist mode of production were developing rapidly. Trade had extended beyond the local boundaries and in addition to farming and cattle-breeding, an important wool industry was carried on in the countryside. Britain began to export woollen cloth produced by the first big enterprises, the “manufactures”

- Economic and social changes were accompanied by political unification. In the last quarter of the 15th c. England became a centralised state.
- At the end of the Hundred Years' War, when the feudal lords and their hired armies came home from France, life in Britain became more turbulent than ever. The warlike nobles, disappointed with their defeat in France, fought for power at the King's Court; continued anarchy and violence broke out into a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses (1455—1485). The thirty-year contest for the possession of the crown ended in the establishment of a strong royal power under Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty.



- The absolute monarchy of the Tudors was based on a new relation of class forces: the crown had the support of the middle class. Henry VII reduced the power of the old nobles and created a new aristocracy out of the rural and town bourgeoisie. The next step in the creation of an absolute monarchy was to break the monopoly of the medieval Papacy. This was achieved by his successor, Henry VIII (1509—1547), who quarrelled with the Pope, declared himself head of the English Church and dissolved the monasteries (the English Reformation, 1529—1536); now the victory of the Crown was 'complete.'
- The economic and political unification played a decisive role in the development of the English language.

- All over the world the victory of capitalism over feudalism was linked up with the consolidation of people into nations, the formation of national languages and the growth of superdialect forms of language to be used as a national Standard. The rise of capitalism helped to knit together the people and to unify their language.

- The 15th and 16th c. in Western Europe are marked by a renewed interest in classical art and literature and by a general efflorescence of culture. The rise of a new vigorous social class — the bourgeoisie proved an enormous stimulus to the progress of learning, science, literature and art.
- The universities at Oxford and Cambridge (founded in the 12th c.) became the centres of *new* humanistic learning. Henry VIII assembled at his court a group of brilliant scholars and artists. Education had ceased to be the privilege of the clergy; it spread to laymen and people of lower social ranks. After the Reformation teachers and tutors could be laymen as well as clergymen.



- As before, the main subject in schools was Latin; the English language was labelled as “a rude and barren tongue”, fit only to serve as an instrument in teaching Latin. Scientific and philosophical treatises were written in Latin, which was not only the language of the church but also the language of philosophy and science. The influence of classical languages on English grew and was reflected in the enrichment of the vocabulary.

- Of all the outstanding achievements of this great age, the invention of printing had the most immediate effect on the development of the language, its written form in particular. “Artificial writing” as printing was then called, was invented in Germany in 1438 (by Johann Gutenberg); the first printer of English books was William Caxton.

- William Caxton(1422—1491) was born in Kent. In 1441 he moved to Flanders, where he spent over three decades of his life. During a visit to Cologne he learned the method of printing and in 1473 opened up his own printing press in Bruges. The first English book, printed in Bruges in 1475, was Caxton's translation of the story of Troy **RECUYELL OP THE HISTORYES OF TROYE**. A few years later he brought his press over to England and set it up in Westminster, not far outside the city of London. All in all about one hundred books were issued by his press and about a score of them were either translated or edited by Caxton himself.

- Among the earliest publications were the poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, still the most *popular* poet in England, the *poems* of John Gower, the compositions of John Lydgate, the most voluminous poet of the age, Trevisa's translation of the POLYCHRONICONI and others. Both Caxton and his associates took a greater interest in the works of medieval literature than in the works of ancient authors or theological and scientific treatises published by the printers on the continent.

- In preparing the manuscripts for publication *William* Caxton and his successors edited them so as to bring them into conformity with the London form of English used by their contemporaries. In doing this they sometimes distorted the manuscripts considerably. Their corrections enable us to see some of the linguistic changes that had occurred since the time when the texts were First written.

- It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the first printers in fixing and spreading the written form of English. The language they used was the London literary English established since the age of Chaucer and slightly modified in accordance with the linguistic changes that had taken place during the intervening hundred years. With cheap printed books becoming available to a greater number of readers, the London form of speech was carried to other regions and was imitated in the written works produced all over England.