

***New English:
Development of the
National English
Language
(1475 – 1660)***

The basis of the English national language

One of the major characteristic features of a nation is the national language. It rises above all territorial and social dialects and unites the whole nation.

As a rule the national language develops **on the basis of a territorial dialect** which under certain historical (economic, political and cultural) conditions becomes generally recognized as a means of communication.

The English national language has developed on the basis of **the dialect of London**. After the Norman conquest London became the political and cultural centre of England.

As London was situated on both banks of the Thames, its dialect had both Southern and East Midland elements. But gradually **the East Midland** dialect took the upper hand.

The prestige of the dialect was great because East Midland was the most populated and the most developed district. It was the seat of the two universities: Oxford and Cambridge.

The influence of the first *printers* in fixing and spreading the written form of English was outstanding. The language they used was the *London literary English* established since the age of Chaucer and slightly modified.

With relatively cheap printed books available to a greater number of readers, the London dialect **was spread** to other regions and was imitated in the written works produced all over England.

Caxton's spelling was more normalized than the spelling of the manuscripts. **Caxton's spelling** was accepted as standard and often remained unchanged to the present day in spite of the drastic changes in pronunciation.

The effect of printing on the development of the language was so great that the date of publication of the 1-st English book (Caxton's translation of **the story of Troy**, printed in Bruges) 1475 is a turning point in the English linguistic history and denotes the start of a new period – New English.

The Written Standard

The growth of the national literary language and fixation of its Written Standard is connected with the flourishing of literature (English *Literary Renaissance*).

The beginning of the literary efflorescence goes back to the 16-th century. This age of literary flourishing is called “***the age of Shakespeare***” (also Elizabethan age).

The most notable figures were ***Thomas More*** (1478 – 1535) and ***William Tyndale***, the translator of the Bible.

- The main work by **Thomas More** is “***Utopia***” (1516). It was written in Latin and was first translated in to English in 1551.

- **William Tyndale** completed his new English translation of ***the Bible*** in 1526. He made a great influence not only on the language of the church but also on literary prose and on the spoken language.

- **William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)** was the chief of the Elizabethan dramatists who influenced every age and every country. The first collected edition of his plays was the ***Folio*** (1623). His works give an ideal representation of the literary language of his day.

His vast vocabulary (over 20 thousand words), freedom in creating new words and new meanings, diverse grammatical construction reflect the fundamental properties of the language of the period.

Early NE Written Accounts

The number of the written matter of the Early NE period is far **greater** than that of the OE or ME periods. In addition to the writings of a literary, philosophical, theological or official character there are many *private papers*.

Family archives contain papers written both by educated and by uncultivated people. The earliest collections of letters are the *Paston letters* (1430 – 1470) and the *Cely Papers*. Both are in the East Midland dialect of the late Middle English.

Numerous private letters of the 16-th century give a fair picture of colloquial speech.

The renewed interest in living languages in the 16-th and the 17-th centuries led to the appearance of one more kind of printed matter: ***books of instructions*** for pupils and ***didactic works***.

The first dictionaries

The development of international trade created a demand for dictionaries. *Bilingual dictionaries* appeared in the 16-th century. The first *English-English explanatory dictionary* was compiled in 1604 by *Robert Cawdrey* (small, 3 thousand words).

Towards the end of the Early NE (mid. 17-th) one of the forms of the national language, its **Written Standard** was established. In the 15-th and the 16-th centuries the speech of London became more mixed due to the intermixture of the population.

The Written Standard of the early 17-th century was less stabilized and normalized than the literary standards of later ages.

The writings of the Renaissance show **a wide range of variation** (in spelling, grammar forms and word-building devices, syntactic patterns).

The existence of a prestige form of English in Early NE (a sort of standard) is confirmed by the statements of contemporary scholars.

Grammars of English

This period was followed by the period of “**fixing the language**”. Correctness and simplicity was of great importance at that age.

In 1664 the Royal Society
appointed a special committee
for “improving the English
tongue”.

Many new grammars of English were compiled in this age. For example: ***J. Wallis's Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*** (1653) won European fame.

The Spoken Standard

The written standard was probably fixed and recognized by the beginning of the 17-th century. The next stage in the growth of the national literary language was the development of the Spoken Standard.

Obviously in the 18-th century the speech of educated people differed from common people – in pronunciation, the choice of words, in the use of grammar construction.

Different works on language gave recommendations how to **improve oral speech**. So they testified to the existence of recognized norms of educated spoken English.

The emergence of the Spoken Standard goes back to the late 17-th century. Some scholars refer it only to the end of the 18-th century.

The concept of Spoken Standard doesn't mean the absolute uniformity of speech. Such uniformity can never be achieved.

It means a more or less **uniform type of speech used by educated people** and taught as “correct English” at schools and universities.

By the end of the 18-th century
the formation of national literary
English language may be
regarded as completed as it
possessed both a written and a
spoken standard.