

A Brief History of the English Language

Old English to Modern English

Before English

The various dialects spoken by the Germanic tribes are known as **Pre-Old English**. The term *England* developed later from the tribal name *Angles*, possibly because this kingdom was dominant. The term *Anglo-Saxon* referred to the West Germanic tribes generally. Old English was not entirely uniform and four main dialects were predominant: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. Nearly all of Old English literature is preserved in the West Saxon dialect.

An Overview

Periods in History of English

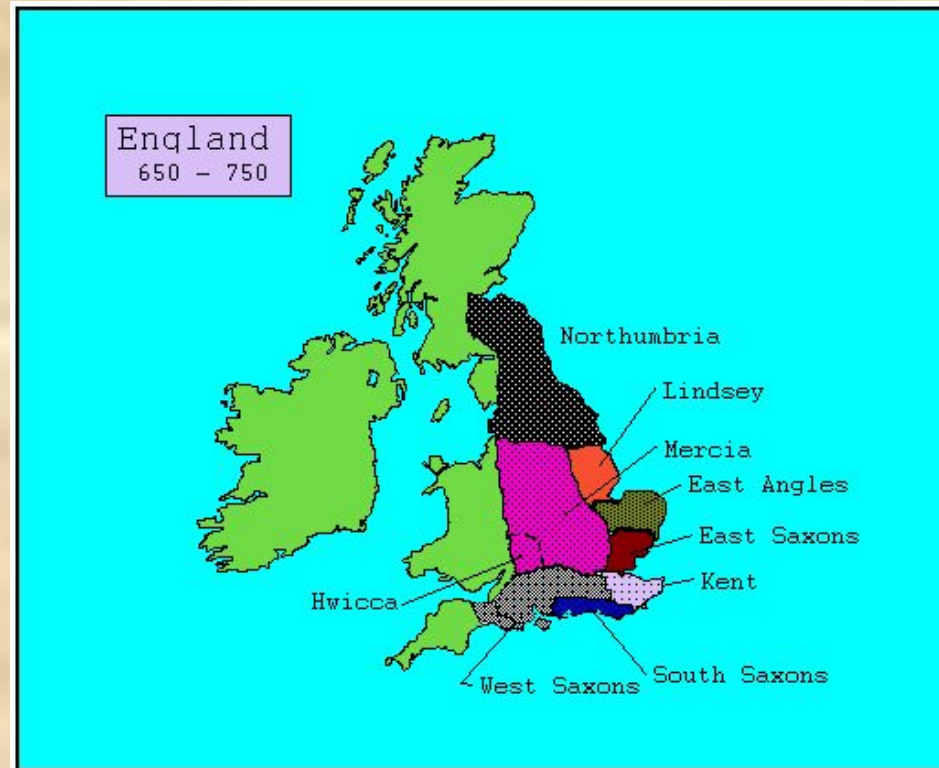
Old English: 449-1066

Middle English: 1100-1500

Modern English: 1500 on

Old English (500-1066 AD)

West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—began to settle in the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. They spoke a mutually intelligible language that is called Old English. Four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.

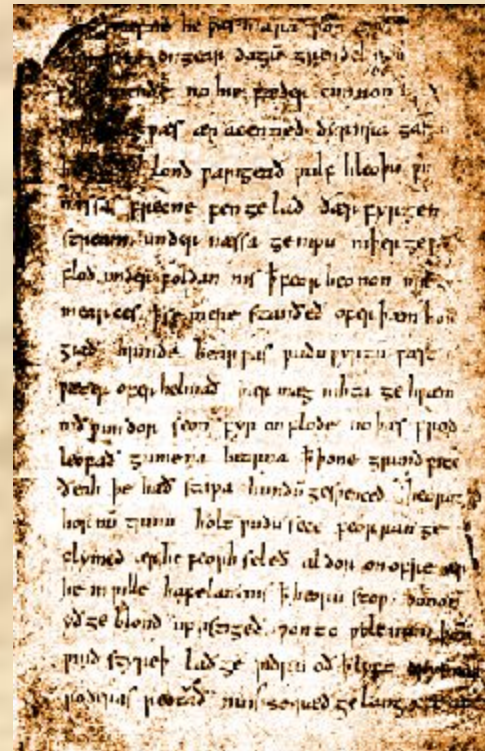


Influence of Old English

The majority of words in modern English come from foreign, not Old English roots. Only about one sixth of the known Old English words have descendants surviving today. But this is deceptive; Old English is much more important than these statistics would indicate. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have Old English roots. Words like *be*, *water*, and *strong*, for example, derive from Old English roots.

Beowulf

Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem *Beowulf*, lasted until about 1100, just after the most important event in the development and history of the English language—the Norman Conquest in 1066.



The Lord's Prayer in Old English (c. 1000AD)

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice
gewurpe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on
heofonum
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we
forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys
us of yfele soþlice.



The Norman Conquest and the Development of Middle English (1100-1500)

William the Conqueror invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD.

Norman Influences: Latin

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as *priest*, *vicar*, and *mass* came into the language this way). Now there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.

The Merging of Two Languages

The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, beef and cow. *Beef*, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic *cow*.

Many legal terms, such as *indict*, *jury*, and *verdict* have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts. This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

Middle English: 1100-1500

It was not until the 14th century—300 years later—that English became dominant in Britain again. In 1399, King Henry IV became the first king of England since the Norman Conquest whose mother tongue was English. By the end of the 14th Century, the dialect of London had emerged as the standard dialect of what we now call **Middle English**.

Middle English: 1100-1500



The most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

The Canterbury Tales

**Here bygynneth the Book
of the tales of Caunterbury**

Whan that aprill with his
shoures soote
The droghte of march hath
perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in
swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is
the flour;

**Here begins the Book of the
Tales of Canterbury**

When April with his showers
sweet
The drought of March has
pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with
liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire
the flower;

The Canterbury Tales

Whan zephirus eek with his
 sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt
and heeth
Tendre croppes, and the
yonge sonne
Hath in the ram his halve
cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken
melodye,
That slepen al the nyght
with open ye
(so priketh hem nature in hir
corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon
on pilgrimages,

When Zephyr also has, with
 his sweet breath,
Quickened again, in every
holt and heath,
The tender shoots and
buds, and the young sun
Into the Ram one half his
course has run,
And many little birds make
 melody
That sleep through all the
night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on
to ramp and rage)-
Then do folk long to go on
pilgrimage,

The Canterbury Tales

And palmeres for to seken
straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in
 sondry londes;
And specially from every
shires ende
Of engelond to caunterbury
 they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to
 seke,
That hem hath holpen whan
 tha they were seeke.

And palmers to go seeking
 out strange strands,
To distant shrines well
known in sundry lands.
And specially from every
shire's end
Of England they to
Canterbury wend,
The holy blessed martyr
there to seek
Who helped them when they
 lay so ill.

The Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift was a change in pronunciation that began around 1400 and separates Middle English from Modern English.

In linguistic terms, the shift was rather sudden, the major changes occurring within a century. The shift is still not over, however, vowel sounds are still shortening although the change has become considerably more gradual.

Our Changing Language

Chaucer wrote about his
“gentle knight”:

*In all his life he hasn't
never yet said nothing
discourteous to no sort
of person.*

What's right to say
today, may be wrong
tomorrow!



Early Modern English

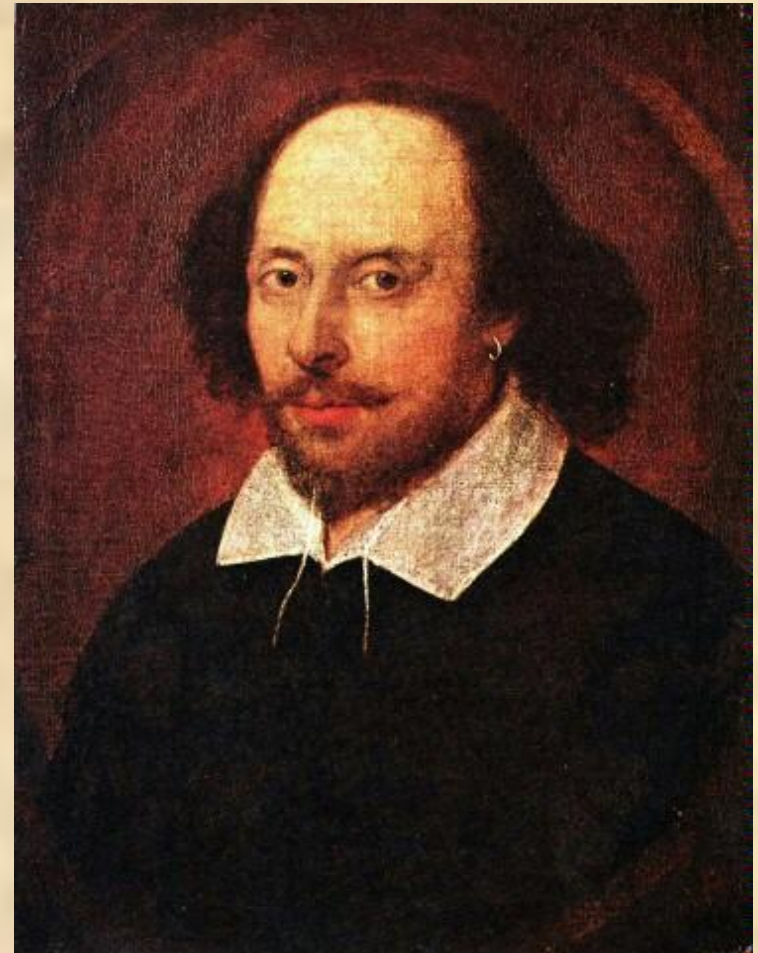
The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

The Renaissance brought the revival of classical scholarship and brought many classical Latin and Greek words into the Language. These borrowings were deliberate and many bemoaned the adoption of these "inkhorn" terms. Many survive to this day.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote in modern English. Elizabethan English has much more in common with our language today than it does with the language of Chaucer. Many familiar words and phrases were coined or first recorded by Shakespeare. Some 2,000 words and countless idioms are his.



Shakespeare



Newcomers to Shakespeare are often shocked at the number of clichés contained in his plays, until they realize that he coined them and they became clichés afterwards. "One fell swoop," "vanish into thin air," and "flesh and blood" are all Shakespeare's. Words he bequeathed to the language include "critical," "leapfrog," "majestic," "dwindle," and "pedant."

The Influence of the Printing Press

The last major factor in the development of Modern English was the advent of the printing press.

William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1476. Books became cheaper and literacy more common. Publishing for the masses in English became profitable.



Standardization

The printing press brought standardization to English. The dialect of London, where most publishing houses were located, became the standard.

Spelling and grammar became fixed.

The first English dictionary was published in 1604 (Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall*).

“Standard English”

Many find the term *standard English* to be inaccurate and misleading because it creates a false impression that there exists a single variety of English that all educated Americans speak and write.

Edited written English

Late Modern English (1800-Present)

The principal distinction between early- and late-modern English is vocabulary.

Pronunciation, grammar, and spelling are largely the same.

New words are the result of two historical factors:

- the Industrial Revolution
- the British Empire.

English Vocabulary

There are 600,000 words in the English language.

The average college student may have a vocabulary of 80,000.

Nearly 60% of all he or she says is said with just 100 different words.

Social Economic Status and Vocabulary

“By the time a low-income kid is 4, they’ve heard 13 million fewer words than upper middle class suburban kids.... Not only do they hear fewer words, it’s the types of words....We call it the ‘word gap.’ You cannot make up for that 13 million fewer words.”

--Beth Bye, Director of Early Childhood Education
Capitol Region Education Council, Hartford