

The History of Middle English: Impact on the Language

The event that began the transition from Old English to Middle English was the Norman Conquest of 1066, when William the Conqueror (Duke of Normandy and, later, William I of England) invaded the island of Britain from his home base in northern France, and settled in his new acquisition along with his nobles and court. William crushed the opposition with a brutal hand and deprived the Anglo-Saxon earls of their property, distributing it to Normans (and some English) who supported him.

The conquering Normans were themselves descended from Vikings who had settled in northern France about 200 years before (the very word *Norman* comes originally from *Norseman*). However, they had completely abandoned their Old Norse language and wholeheartedly adopted French (which is a so-called Romance language, derived originally from the Latin, not Germanic, branch of Indo-European), to the extent that not a single Norse word survived in Normandy.

However, the Normans spoke a rural dialect of French with considerable Germanic influences, usually called Anglo-Norman or Norman French, which was quite different from the standard French of Paris of the period, which is known as Francien. The differences between these dialects became even more marked after the Norman invasion of Britain, particularly after King John and England lost the French part of Normandy to the King of France in 1204 and England became even more isolated from continental Europe.

Anglo-Norman French became the language of the kings and nobility of England for more than 300 years (Henry IV, who came to the English throne in 1399, was the first monarch since before the Conquest to have English as his mother tongue). While Anglo-Norman was the verbal language of the court, administration and culture, though, Latin was mostly used for written language, especially by the Church and in official records. For example, the “*Domesday Book*”, in which William the Conqueror took stock of his new kingdom, was written in Latin to emphasize its legal authority.

However, the peasantry and lower classes (the vast majority of the population, an estimated 95%) continued to speak English - considered by the Normans a low-class, vulgar tongue - and the two languages developed in parallel, only gradually merging as Normans and Anglo-Saxons began to intermarry. It is this mixture of Old English and Anglo-Norman that is usually referred to as Middle English.

During these Norman-ruled centuries in which English as a language had no official status and no regulation, English had become the third language in its own country. It was largely a spoken rather than written language, and effectively sank to the level of a patois or creole. The main dialect regions during this time are usually referred to as Northern, Midlands, Southern and Kentish, although they were really just natural developments from the Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish dialects of Old English. Within these, though, a myriad distinct regional usages and dialects grew up, and indeed the proliferation of regional dialects during this time was so extreme that people in one part of England could not even understand people from another part just 50 miles away.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were founded in 1167 and 1209 respectively, and general literacy continued to increase over the succeeding centuries, although books were still copied by hand and therefore very expensive. Over time, the commercial and political influence of the East Midlands and London ensured that these dialects prevailed (London had been the largest city for some time, and became the Norman capital at the beginning of the 12th Century), and the other regional varieties came to be stigmatized as lacking social prestige and indicating a lack of education. The 14th Century London dialect of Chaucer, although admittedly difficult, is at least recognizable to us moderns as a form of English, whereas text in the Kentish dialect from the same period looks like a completely foreign language.

It was also during this period when English was the language mainly of the uneducated peasantry that many of the grammatical complexities and inflections of Old English gradually disappeared. By the 14th Century, noun genders had almost completely died out, and adjectives, which once had up to 11 different inflections, were reduced to just two (for singular and plural) and often in practice just one, as in modern English. The pronounced stress, which in Old English was usually on the lexical root of a word, generally shifted towards the beginning of words, which further encouraged the gradual loss of suffixes that had begun after the Viking invasions, and many vowels developed into the common English unstressed “schwa” (like the “e” in *taken*, or the “i” in *pencil*). As inflections disappeared, word order became more important and, by the time of Chaucer, the modern English subject-verb-object word order had gradually become the norm, and as had the use of prepositions instead of verb inflections.

The “*Ormulum*”, a 19,000 line biblical text written by a monk called Orm from northern Lincolnshire in the late 12th Century, is an important resource in this regard. Concerned at the way people were starting to mispronounce English, Orm spelled his words exactly as they were pronounced. For instance, he used double consonants to indicate a short preceding vowel (much as modern English

does in words like diner and dinner, later and latter, etc); he used three separate symbols to differentiate the different sounds of the Old English letter yogh; and he used the more modern “wh” for the old-style “hw” and “sh” for “sc”. This unusual phonetic spelling system has given philologists an invaluable snap-shot of the way Middle English was pronounced in the Midlands in the second half of the 12th Century.