

THE OUTLINE HISTORY OF ENGLISH VOCABULARY

A language as rich in its vocabulary as English is full of surprises, and however wonderful it may be that this richness is always increasing, it places a potentially painful burden on us when we first learn words and their meanings.

The history of English vocabulary studies engaged John Algeo, Keith Denning, Philip Durkin, Carl B. Smith, and other scholars [1; 4; 5; 8].

English has changed its vocabulary so dramatically that in terms of word-stock it can no longer be considered a Germanic language.

The history of the English language is traditionally divided into the following periods:

Old English (c. 450–1066)

Middle English (1066–1476)

Early Modern English (1476–1776)

Modern English (1776–present)

The historical period during which Old English was spoken is known as Anglo-Saxon. We talk of Anglo-Saxon literature, the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, Anglo-Saxon religion, law, and culture. The end of Old English / the beginning of Middle English is dated at 1066 to coincide with the Norman Conquest. Clearly, a single historical event cannot cause the language to change overnight; the cut-off date is a convenience. In some of its features Old English was still Old English until the end of the eleventh century and beyond, and characteristic traits of Middle English had started to develop before 1066. The same principle holds for the time-span of the other periods.

Old English Vocabulary. Most of the Old English lexicon was native in origin and of two types, Indo-European or Germanic. The Indo-European portion comprises those words found not only in Germanic languages but also in other Indo-European languages. It includes the most essential vocabulary, such as the names of the numbers from 1 to 10, kinship terms for the nuclear family, and basic terms essential to any language, like the words meaning sun, water, to eat, head, tree, high, cold, flat, red, to stand, to have, to run, to laugh. The Germanic element consists of items either common to all branches of Germanic or to West Germanic alone, but not found in other Indo-European languages. Some of the Common Germanic words in Old English are *bæc* ‘back,’ *bān* ‘bone,’ *folc* ‘folk,’ *grund* ‘ground,’ *rotian* ‘to rot,’ *sēoc* ‘sick,’ *swellan* ‘to swell,’ *wērig* ‘weary,’ and *wīf* ‘woman’. Common only to West Germanic are Old English *brōc* ‘brook,’ *craflan* ‘to crave,’ *īdel* ‘idle,’ *cniht* ‘boy, knight,’ *sōna* ‘immediately,’ and *wēod* ‘weed.’

Particular care must be taken with words which look familiar, but whose meaning is different in Modern English. An Anglo-Saxon *wīf* was any woman, married or not. A *fugol* ‘fowl’ was any bird, not just a farmyard one. *Sōna*

(*soon*) meant ‘immediately’, not ‘in a little while’; *won* (*wan*) meant ‘dark», not ‘pale’; and *fast* (*fast*) meant ‘firm, fixed’, not ‘rapidly’. These are ‘false friends’, when translating out of Old English [3, p. 24].

Middle English Vocabulary. Middle English (1100–1300) has a largely Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. During the Middle English period, Latin continued to exert an important influence on the English vocabulary. Scandinavian loanwords that must have started making their way into the language during the Old English period became readily apparent in Middle English, and Dutch and Flemish were also significant sources.

Early post-Conquest borrowings. For reasons which perhaps have much to do with the keeping and survival of records, the overall number of documented borrowings before 1250 is relatively modest: about 900 [2, p. 164]. Among the words which entered English at that early stage are such common words as *air*, *beast*, *beauty*, *color*, *dangerous*, *diet*, *feast*, *flower*, *jealous*, *journey*, *judge*, *liquor*, *oil*, *part*, *peace*, *soil*, *story*.

Central French influence. More and more members of the upper classes adapted to the linguistic environment by learning English. This paves the way for yet another strand of linguistic influence, namely from Central Old French, creating rivalry between the Anglo-Norman and the French forms of the same word. Some surviving pairs are: *catch* (Anglo-Norman) – *chase* (Central Old French); *Karl* (Anglo-Norman) – *Charles* (Central Old French); *cattle* (Anglo-Norman) – *chattel* (Central Old French).

Thus, in effect, and according to legal histories, Anglo-Norman survived as a true vernacular language only for a couple of generations after the Conquest. Thereafter, any form of French was a learned tongue, like Latin [7, p. 43].

The role of Latin and Greek. French is the most dominant influence on the growth of Middle English vocabulary, but it is by no means the only one. During the 14th and 15th centuries several thousand words came into the language directly from Latin. Most of these words were professional or technical terms, belonging to such fields as religion, medicine, law, and literature.

The transition from Middle English to Modern English began in the sixteenth century when several factors came together to produce a period of extraordinary vitality and progress in the development of the language. During this period – the Renaissance – a great revival of interest in learning swept over England and much of Europe, leading people to become more aware of the importance of language as they studied the writings of the past. Furthermore, many words from other languages (especially Latin and Greek) were introduced into English as a result of this growing interest in the writings of antiquity. The growing availability of printed books made more and more people aware of the need for clarity and consistency in spelling and usage [8, p. 49].

The scholarly disciplines owe much of their vocabulary to classical Latin and Greek. Among the first contributions to Modern English from Latin were *exterior*, *appendix*, *delirium*, *contradict*, *exterminate*, and *temperature*. At about

the same time, Greek provided *tonic*, *catastrophe*, *anonymous*, *lexicon*, and *skeleton* [4, p. 32].

Modern English Vocabulary. Modern Standard English is strongly influenced by the dialect spoken in London and the surrounding counties in the years 1350-1450. This was only one of several competing literary standards in its own day. It is the language of Geoffrey Chaucer, but Chaucer had no sense that he was writing the «true» or «pure» English of his time – he recognized that there were other English standards in other parts of the country, standards that produced literary works like ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ or Langland’s ‘Piers Plowman’. In retrospect, we come to see Chaucer as the great model for ‘standard’ Middle English because his dialect was the one chosen as the standard in the century after his death.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the steady coalescence of a notional Standard English. The desire of the Enlightenment for the imposition of rational order was apparent in attempts to formalize the language on a rational and scientific basis. The first major attempts at comprehensive dictionaries were made by Nathaniel Bailey (in 1721 and 1730) and, most famously, by Samuel Johnson (in 1755). These established the word-stock more authoritatively, giving rise to the influential notion that for a word properly to exist, it should be ‘in the dictionary’.

The latter part of the nineteenth century was a period of intense lexicographical activity. This was evidenced principally by the compilation of the great Oxford English Dictionary, or OED, (1884–1928) with a first Supplement (1933). Other remarkable lexicographical achievements focusing on less central areas of the lexis were Joseph Wright’s ‘English Dialect Dictionary’ (six volumes, 1898–1905), Bosworth and Toller’s ‘Anglo-Saxon Dictionary’ (1894), and J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley’s ‘Slang and its Analogues: Past and Present’ (seven volumes, 1890–1904) [7, p. 18].

Throughout the history of English, like that of all other languages, developments in the vocabulary have a social and intellectual dimension, as borrowing reflects foreign contacts, standardization reflects the rise to power of a ruling class, concern with correctness reflects a desire to maintain or change social status, terms of address reflect social hierarchy. In addition, the words that are central to our discourse at any time are tokens of the way we view and respond to the world. Vocabulary, more than any other aspect of language, is inextricably connected with our total culture and history.

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