

THEME 1.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MIDDLE ENGLISH (1066—1475)

AIMS:

- to familiarize with the term “Middle English”;
- to account for major external and internal influences on its development;
- to perceive the linguistic consequences of the Norman Conquest;
- to define the return of English as a standard.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1 Language contact in the Middle Ages
2. The Norman Conquest of 1066
3. The origin of the Normans and their influence on English culture and life
4. Middle English writing
5. Middle English dialects
6. The decline of French
7. Towards a new written standard for English

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE:

Obligatory:

David Crystal. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. –Holyheard. —1994.—P. 30—39.

Elly van Gelderen. *A History of the English Language* –Amsterdam/Philadelphia.—2006. P. 111—117.

Seth Lerer. *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition.—2008. — Part II. P.2 —5.

Valery V. Mykhailenko. *Paradigmatics in the Evolution of English*.—Chernivtsi.—1999.—P. 16—21.

T.A. Rastorguyeva. *A History of English*.—Moscow.— 1983.— P. 149—163.

Additional:

L.Verba. *History of the English Language*.— Nova KNYHA.— 2004.— P. 102—110.

As the name of this period indicates, Middle English (ME), constitutes a kind of *middle* stage within the evolution of English when one looks at it from a contemporary perspective. Lasting from about 1150 to about 1500, ME is the period that lies between Old English (650-1100) and (Early) Modern English (1500-today).

But rather than regarding the period as a purely temporal middle stage, ME should be seen as a transition point. The transformation of English in the Middle Ages marks its turn from the early Anglo-Saxon to the modern period. By the end of the ME stage, all the basic linguistic parameters that lead to its modern structure and anatomy are established.

1 Language contact in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, English was marked by important landmarks that drove its development into a direction that was markedly different from the development of other West Germanic languages such as German. The evolution of English from the second half of the Old English to the end of the Middle English period was deeply influenced by language contact situations that disturbed its smooth development as a Germanic language.

In early Anglo-Saxon times, Old English dialects co-existed with Latin, the language of church. However, while Latin was only spoken by a small educated elite, the status of English was strong; this is reflected by the impressive literature written in the West-Saxon standard.

The linguistic anatomy of Old English was first affected by its contact with Old Norse in the North, North East and mid-East of England – the result of Viking invasions and settlement.

2. The Norman Conquest of 1066

The landmark that triggered many of the most striking changes in the Middle English period was the Norman Conquest of England. In 1066, William the Conqueror invaded England from Normandy and killed king Harold in the Battle of Hastings.

The events at Hastings were woven into the famous Bayeux tapestry a unique and extraordinary document to reflect this episode of English history.

The historical and political context that led to the Norman invasion frames a complex story about collaboration, intrigue, and treachery. Both Harold and William the Conqueror had claims to the throne, which they both regarded as their rightful inheritance. When William invaded England he came to gain what he regarded his own possession and right.

3. The origin of the Normans and their influence on English culture and life

The origin of the Normans is hidden in their very name: Nor(se)man. The Normans came to France in the 9th century. They were Norwegian Vikings who raided the French territory when sailing up the Seine. In 911 their king, Rollo, forced the French king to cede French territory.

As a consequence, Rollo became the independent ruler of Normandy. By 1000 Normandy became one of the most powerful and successful regions in Western Europe. In the process, the Normans adopted the language, religion, and customs of the surrounding French population.

What consequences did the Norman invasion have for the English population? It is uncontroversial that the Normans did not civilize the Anglo-Saxon population. The Anglo-Saxons had a highly developed culture: they had an extraordinary literature and crafted beautiful jewellery, they were christianized, and profited from a well-developed and well-functioning economy. The same is true for the Vikings who mixed with them in the North and East of England. Therefore, the Norman Conquest was not a mission of civilization.

Very simply, the Normans brought power with them: the Normans were more powerful politically and ecclesiastically.

At the time of the Conquest, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were politically weak due to internal quarrels. Since many of the Anglo-Saxon nobility were wiped out at Hastings, the English ruling class was replaced by Norman noblemen. The Normans imported the feudal system and lordship by taking the key positions in the state and church. These positions correspond to the high ranks of power in the medieval social order, which was defined by the three-estates of nobility, clergy, and peasants. Since the grammar schools also lay in the hands of the church in the Middle Ages, the Normans also controlled education. In a nutshell, they established the new upper-class.

Material tokens of Norman power are still conspicuously present in today's England. The Normans built around 1000 castles, among them the White Tower of London.

Evidence of Norman ecclesiastical power is visible in the many impressive cathedrals usually constructed in Romanesque style.

In addition, the Normans also imported their national symbols. The three golden lions in the coat of arms of England are derived from the symbol of the kingdom of Normandy.

But, the Normans also brought their language – **Norman French**.

The Norman Conquest influenced the linguistic landscape of England decisively. The following statement in the Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester from around 1300 illustrates this nicely:

Thus came, lo, England into Normandy's hand: and the Normans then knew how to speak only their own language, and spoke French as they did at home, and also had their children taught it, so that noblemen of this land, that come of their stock, all keep to the same speech that they received from them; for unless a man knows French, people make little account of him. But low men keep to English, and to their

own language still. I think that in the whole world there are no countries that do not keep their own language, except England alone. But people know well that it is good to master both, because the more a man knows the more honoured he is.

So the chronicle indicates that the Norman upper-classes, first and foremost, spoke French – Norman French to be precise - and they taught this language to their children. French was the prestigious H-language. English, however, was the language of the lower classes – the vernacular. But, English was spoken by the majority of the population of England.

The chronicler bemoans this situation as being unique in the world: any nation should stick to its own language – in this case English. However, he nevertheless regards it as a virtue to speak both languages. Clearly, to learn French was the only way possible to climb up the social ladder. But what did the English vernacular look like?

4. Middle English writing

Obviously, the advent of Norman French did not determine the use of Old English dialects. Conservative forms of English were still in use until about 1150. For instance, the archbishopric of Canterbury was fairly resistant to linguistic changes.

The move from Old to Middle English was not a drastic but a gradual development. Nevertheless, there is a recognizable gap in the transition from the Old English to the Middle English text corpus. This is the consequence of the political changes after the Norman Conquest. Written English was basically non-existent for about 100-150 years.

Writing, being an upper-class and church issue, was dominated by the Norman French ruling class. As we have seen, this class used French or Latin and not English. As a consequence, the West Saxon written standard was replaced by French and Latin texts. Literature in English only started to be written again from about 1150 onwards.

Due to the absence of a written standard for English, this literature is highly **dialectal**. Middle English writers used a dialectal pronunciation-based spelling.

The development of the national language was greatly promoted by the work of **Geoffrey Chaucer** (1340-1400), an outstanding poet, “*father of English Poetry*” as many historians style him. Chaucer's best-known work *The Canterbury Tales* is the variety of the written language which has been carefully crafted. It contains many variations in word order and frequent literary allusions. Chaucer has managed to capture so vividly the intriguing characters, and to reflect so naturally the colloquial features of their speech. And it is acknowledged by many scholars that no other author, except Chaucer, who would have better supported for the view that there is an underlying correspondence between the natural rhythm of English poetry and that of

English everyday conversation (David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* p.38).

The famous opening 18-line sentence of the General Prologue to “*The Canterbury Tales*” shows us how Chaucer makes meaning out of the linguistic resources of his time and place.

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;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(Spriketh hem nature in hir corages),
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
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 that they were seeke.

When it happens that April, with his sweet showers, has pierced the drought of March to the root, and bathed every vein in that fluid from whose power the flower is given birth; when Zephyr also, with his sweet breath, has inspired the tender crops in every wood and heather, and the young sun has run half of this course through the sign of the Ram, and little birds make melody who sleep all night with their eyes open (so Nature stimulates them in their hearts), then people desire to go on pilgrimages, and professional pilgrims desire to seek strange shores; and they wend their way, especially, from the end of every country in England to Canterbury, in order to seek the holy, blissful martyr who had helped them when they were sick.

These lines juxtapose new words of French and Latin origin with roots and forms of Old English or Anglo-Saxon origin. We see French, for example, in *perced*, *veyne*, *licour*, and *flour*. The word *vertu* comes from Latin *vir*, meaning *man*; here, we interpret it as *power*. Combined with *engendred*, we get a sense of the power of regeneration in the spring (S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part I, p.49-50). Summing up we may conclude that French words mostly reflected culture, whilst English ones mainly depicted nature and landscape.



Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400, the "*Father of English Poetry*") was the greatest narrative poet of Middle Ages. He made a distinct advance in literature, in most of his poems Chaucer used the heroic couplet, a verse having five accents with the lines rhyming in pairs. Chaucer's greatest work is **The Canterbury Tales**, becoming a herald of the Renaissance. Geoffrey Chaucer's realistic approach and humanitarian atmosphere, his whole-hearted optimism and folk spirit make his *The Canterbury Tales* immortal. It is a splendid picture of the 14th c. England. It is a marvelous trilingual picture of the history of the English language of his time, its trilingualism being presented together in a profound synthesis of nature (English), culture (French), and religion (Latin).

Middle English literature includes a variety of genres constituting an impressive corpus of Middle English literature, the most celebrated text being **Geoffrey Chaucer's** masterpiece, the **Canterbury Tales** (1387, East Midland dialect)

5. Middle English dialects

During the Middle English period (roughly 1100–1500) the English language is characterized by a complete lack of a standard variety. By contrast, during much of the Old English period, the West Saxon dialect had enjoyed a position as a written standard, and the transition to Early Modern English is marked by the emergence of the middle class dialect of London as the new standard variety of the language.

The lack of a written standard in Middle English is a natural consequence of the low status of English during this period. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the ruling classes spoke (Norman) French, while English lived on as the spoken language of the lower classes. In the absence of a high-prestige variety of English which might serve as a target for writers of English, each writer simply used his own variety of the language.

The Old English dialects evolved and became ME dialects: Kentish, Southern, Northern, East-Midland and West-Midland.

The Middle English dialects can be divided into five major groups:

- South-Western (SW) (or simply Southern), a continuation of OE West Saxon;
- South-Eastern (SE) (or Kentish, though it extended into neighbouring counties as well), a continuation of OE Kentish;
- East Midland (EM), in the eastern part of the OE Mercian area;
- West Midland (WM), in the western part of the OE Mercian area;
- Northern (N), north of the Humber.

The traditionally recognized **Middle English dialects** are as follows: *Kentish* remains the same as in Old English, West Saxon transformed into *Southern*, and Northumbrian into *Northern*. The Mercian dialect constituted two parts: *East Midland* and *West Midland*.

The **London dialect**, comprising predominantly features of East Midland, became the written form of official and literary papers in the late 14th century. The London dialect had extended to the first two universities of Cambridge and Oxford, thus constituting the famous literary and cultural London—Oxford—Cambridge triangle.

Thus the year 1066 is the date of the Norman Conquest in England. The conquest symbolizes the beginning of a new social, cultural, and linguistic era in Great Britain, i.e. the conventional transition from Old English to Middle English, the language spoken and written in England from the end of the 11th c. to the end of the 15th c. Undoubtedly French as the language of conquerors influenced English greatly. French, or Norman French was immediately established as the dominant language of the ruling class. Strikingly but Anglo-Saxon dialects were not suppressed. During the following 300 years communication in England went on in three languages: 1) at the monasteries learning was conducted in Latin; 2) **Norman-French** was spoken at court and in official institutions; 3) the common people held firmly to their mother tongue.

During the the **Middle Ages** in **Britain** educated people would have been trilingual. English would have been their mother tongue. They would have learned Latin as the required language of the Church, the Roman Classics, most scholarship and some politico-legal matters. And they would have found French – essential both for routine administrative communication within Britain and in order to be considered fashionable throughout Western European society (D. Crystal's *The Stories of English* p.139).

Norman-French or **Anglo-French**, the language of the ruling class in medieval history of English, was the variety of the Northern dialect of French, spoken predominantly by Norman French-speaking noblemen and their descendants in Britain.

Some scholars (David Crystal, Seth Lerer) admit that the Norman Conquest had major effects on the English language but at the same time they claim that English was changing long before the conquest and continued to change throughout the British Isles despite the influence of the French-speaking Normans (S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part I, p.37).

Traditionally linguists look for written evidence showing a level of literacy high enough to record sounds and forms that they can find many signs of ongoing changes. Both David Crystal and Seth Lerer assert that the Middle English period has a much richer documentation than Old English. (D. Crystal's *The Stories of English* p.117, S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part I, p.39).

An illustrative example of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* proved this. The *Chronicle* did not stop in 1066. In one manuscript scholars find entries continuing for nearly a century after the Norman Conquest. This is the *Peterborough Chronicle*, so called because it was first copied in the Benedictine monastery at Peterborough, Cambridgeshire. It was copied in 1121, and updated to that year, and various scribes kept it going until 1131. No further additions were then made for twenty-three years. The *Peterborough Chronicle* entries up to and including 1131 were written in Old English, in the West Saxon literary standard; but the later entries are sufficiently different in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary that they have to be considered an early example of Middle English. Also, the final continuation of the *Peterborough Chronicle* is of special interest because of the way its style can be directly compared with an analogous sample of Late West Saxon of only twenty-five years before. Nowhere else is the transition between Old and Middle English so visible. And one of the most notable features—the *Peterborough Chronicle* as a whole has very few new French loanwords (about 30) (D. Crystal's *The Stories of English* p.117-120).

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is not a single text, but a compilation from several sources which differ in date and place of origin. It takes the form of a year-by-year diary, with some years warranting extensive comment, some a bare line or two, and many nothing at all. Most ancient European chronicles were kept in Latin. There are seven surviving chronicle manuscripts, six of which are completely in Old English, the seventh partly in Latin. The scholars have given each text a distinguishing letter name, but they are commonly known by the name of their source location or that of an early owner (David Crystal. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. – p.15).

The *Peterborough Chronicle* –also called the *Laud Chronicle*, after Archbishop William Laud (1573-1645). This version, copied at Peterborough in a single hand until 1121, extends as far as 1154. In 1116, most of the monastery at Peterborough was destroyed by fire, along with many manuscripts. The monks

immediately began to replace the writings which had been lost. The language became quite different. Despite points of similarity with the previous work, the overall impression is that the writer is starting again, using vocabulary and grammatical patterns which reflect the language of his time and locality, and inventing fresh spelling conventions to cope with new sounds (David Crystal. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. – p.33).

Doubtless it is worth mentioning S. Lerer's commentary concerning the language change in the *Peterborough Chronicle*. Each *Chronicle* entry is the set of events of a given year, and each one begins with a phrase meaning *in this year*. Let's consider the following examples:

Year	Phrase	Notes
1083	<i>on þǫsum geare</i>	The endings “-um” and “-e” signal a dative masculine singular. This is classic Old English.
1117	<i>on þǫson geare</i>	The “-um” ending has been replaced with “-on”. The adjectival ending seems to have been replaced with an indiscriminate vowel plus an indiscriminate nasal (“-m” or “-n”). This may be the scribe's attempt to preserve a grammatical ending or to preserve the sound of speech.
1135	<i>on þǫs geare</i>	The adjectival ending of <i>this</i> has been lost, but the “-e” at the end of <i>geare</i> still signals a dative. Concord in grammatical gender is obviously gone by this time.
1154	<i>on þǫs gear</i>	The endings have completely disappeared. We are no longer in the world of inflected Old English.

As we see, in such a way blocks of text highlight the manners in which the English language was changing during the transitional period right after the Norman Conquest (S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part I, p.39-40).

Indisputably a detailed explanatory comment of David Crystal and Seth Lerer on the changing nature of text in the *Peterborough Chronicle* will serve as a model for the linguistic analysis in subsequent lectures and seminars.

S. Lerer's idea that “*Medieval England was a trilingual culture*” can be supported by *The Harley Lyrics*, a collection of literature written probably in the 1330s in Hertfordshire, which gives us clear evidence of writers and readers being, in a broad sense, trilingual. One poem in the manuscript (#2253) ends with this quatrain:

Scripsi hec carmina in tabulis;
Mon ostel es en mi la ville de Paris;
May y sugge namore, so wel me is;
ʒef hi deʒe for loue of hire, duel hit ys.
I have written these verses on my tablets;
My dwelling is in the middle of the city of Paris;
Let me say no more, so things are fine;
But if I die for love of her, it would be a pity.

The first line here is in Latin, the second is in French, and the third and the fourth are both in Middle English. This poem shows us the brilliance of medieval trilingual culture, to be found in the stratifications of languages (S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part I, p.45).

So we may conclude that the English, or rather the **Anglo-Norman** literature of the 11th-13th cc. reflected the complicated linguistic situation quite faithfully: church literature was in Latin, chivalric poetry was for the most part in French while folklore continued to develop in Anglo-Saxon. Thus without losing its native basis, with the help of few writers of genius, and profiting by the situation, the English language of the 14th c. was transforming from the language of common people into a general, unifying language for all the strata of English society).

Among the authors who contributed much in the progress of literary tradition in Medieval England are worth mentioning John Wyclif (1320-1384), William

Langland (1332-1400 appr.), John Gower (1325-1408), an anonymous poet created an elegy for a daughter lost "*The Pearl*", and another created a chivalric romance in verse "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" of the King Arthur cycle. English literature was flourishing gradually in the 14th c., reflecting the culmination of the medieval genres and promoting the way to the **Renaissance**.

Apart from changes in pronunciation, the most striking characteristic of this process is the influence of Scandinavian in the Danelaw, which led to the division of the **Midland dialects** (the former Mercian dialects) into the East and West Midlands dialect areas.

Among many other features, the **Scandinavian influence** can be seen in the use of the plural 3rd person personal pronoun *they*, which was first used in the North and East Midlands and then spread to the other dialects from there.

6. The decline of French

Looking at the upper-classes again, one can also find interesting shifts in the status of French. These shifts in sociolinguistics status possibly helped English to gain the status that it has today.

First, around 1250, Norman French came out of fashion at court and was replaced by Central French (Parisian French). This already indicates that the bonds of the Anglo-Norman nobility with Normandy became weaker and weaker.

From Around 1300 onwards, the status of French declined quite drastically, but why? Quite simply, the change in attitude towards French was caused by political developments. Living both in Normandy and in England the Anglo-Norman kings had one foot on the island and the other on the continent.

In 1204, King John got into conflict with king Philip of France and lost Normandy to the French kingdom, which ruled over England for one year. King John regained England, but due to the conflict, the majority of the Norman nobility fled to England. As a consequence, the bonds of England with Normandy were weakened and developing a spirit of English nationalism the Anglo-Norman nobility gradually became English.

In 1348 English became the language of grammar-schools (excluding Oxford and Cambridge where Latin was used) and in 1362 the Language Act declared English the official language of the law courts. In 1399, Henry IV, was the first man on the

throne with English as his mother tongue. From 1423 onwards all parliament records were written in English.

At the end of the 14th c. and at the beginning of the 15th c., English was practically established as the official language of records. The following historical events certify this process. King Henry V (1413-1422) proclaimed English as the official language. By 1423, all the Parliament's records were kept in English. The London Brewer's Guild adopted English as its official language of record in 1422. In 1438, the Countess of Stafford made her will in English. The wills of kings Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI were all in English. Shakespeare went so far as to present Henry V as not even conversant in French, an example, in S. Lerer's opinion, of the rewriting of history. Some critics argue that Chaucer's revival in the 15th c. was itself the product of a nationalistic movement (S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part II, p.3).

7. Towards a new written standard for English

With the decline of French, English regained its social status as the language of the ruling class. As a consequence, a new written standard was necessary. Although the modern English standard, as we know it, was only established in the centuries to follow, a minimum standard had already developed towards the end of the Middle English period. The standard was based on the **East Midland dialect**.

The most important reason for this dialect to become the basis for the novel standard was the strong economic and cultural influence of the East Midlands triangle: London-Oxford-Cambridge. This centre attracted a great number of people from all over England all of them contributing to the development of the new standard.

In summary, we may conclude that with the emergence of English as a standard language, French became decaying rapidly. By the end of the 15th c. new inspiring ideas appeared in English culture. The Oxford University (1168) was becoming a centre for scholars, students, and connoisseurs of art, discovering the Greek and Latin authors of antiquity. The clear thought of the ancient Greeks, unburdened by scholasticism, was opening the medieval eyes of the English to perception of something unknown to them.

The foremost scholar Seth Lerer admits that a standard form of English accompanied the rise of the institution known as "Chancery". Chancery comes from the word *chancel*, or chapel of the king, where the chaplains of the court originally spent their time between services, writing the king's letters. **Chancery English** contributed to the development of a form of writing that was a standard, irrespective of the speech or dialect of the writer. Spelling was standardized without regard for pronunciation.

Writing became truly conventional and arbitrary. Thus, by using Chancery English, **William Caxton** established a national literary standard in printing based on the written standard of official documentation. This was a radical change in the notion of a standard and in a standard's relationship to regional dialect and official forms ((S. Lerer's *The History of the English Language*, 2nd Edition, Part II, p.3-5).

The term **Chancery** first appears in English in the late fourteenth century, referring to an additional court, presided over by the Lord Chancellor of England. **Chancery English** established special forms of spelling and handwriting that were taught to scribes for the production of official documents. Among the features which have been suggested as typical of Chancery style are:

- past-tense verb endings typically *-ed* (*assembled, dwelled, ordeyned*);
- present-participle ending in *-yng* (*dwellyng*);
- third-person singular forms in *-th* rather than *-s* (*hath*);
- 'said' as *saide* rather than *seide*;
- 'should' as *shulde* rather than *schulde*;
- 'which' as *whiche* rather than *wiche*;
- 'any' as *any* rather than *ony*;
- the double *o* spelling in 'one' (*oon*);
- *-ly* ending on adverbs (*only*) rather than *-li, -lich*, etc.
- prefix 'in-' as *en-* rather than *in-* (*enquestes*);
- 'tion' suffix is *-cion* (*discrecions*)

(D. Crystal's *The Stories of English* p.233-236)

Conclusion

Middle English is the name given to the English language spoken in Great Britain from the 11th century to the 15th century (1066-1475). The English, or rather, Anglo-Norman literary monuments of Medieval England reflected the complicated linguistic situation quite faithfully: religious works were written in Latin; chivalric poetry was predominantly French, while folk-lore continued to develop in English. Thus, without losing its native basis, the English language was becoming in the 14th century more flexible and profiting by the trilingual situation to have been finally turned into a general language for all layers of society