

Lecture 15 Modern English : 1500 to the Present

Modern English begins in the middle of the 15th century, when Franco-Norman and Anglo-Saxon coalesced to form today's English. Modern English can be divided into three periods:

1. **Early Modern English** : 1500 to 1750
2. **Late Modern English** : 1750–1800 to the 20th Century
3. **Contemporary English** : the 20th Century

Early Modern English

The period known as Early Modern English began just prior to the Renaissance, a time of unprecedented, intense excitement that included a fascination with Italy, new inventions, the discovery of America, etc. While it was a prosperous era for the aristocracy and the middle class, the peasants generally lived in squalor and knew nothing of Renaissance splendours. The English language attained its definitive structure in the 16th century, when spelling began to be standardized and grammar acquired the characteristics known today. At the end of the first period, which corresponds to the Renaissance movement, pronunciation transformed itself: for example, *to meet*, once pronounced [met], evolved into [mi:t].

The Contribution of Latin and Scientific Words

Vocabulary once again borrowed heavily from Greek and Latin, often through French. For example, with *real* and *royal* came the Latinism *regal*. The great authors wrote in English (this was the Shakespearean era), but scientific writings were always in Latin. This is why English drew from **Latin** and **Greek**: *maternity*, *esteem*, *education*, *atmosphere*, *skeleton*, *catastrophe*, *drama*, *scheme*, *genius*, *vacuum*, *anonymous*, *celebrate*, and *confiscate* are but a few examples. Others include *absurdity*, *adapt*, *agile*, *alienate*, *anachronism*, *appropriate*, *assassinate*, *atmosphere*, *autograph*, *benefit*, *capsule*, *catastrophe*, *chaos*, *climax*, *conspicuous*, *contradictory*, *crisis*, *criterion*, *critic*, *disability*, *disrespect*, *emphasis*, *encyclopaedia*, *enthusiasm*, *epilepsy*, *eradicate*, *exact*, *excavate*, *excursion*, *exist*, *expectation*, *expensive*, *explain*, *external*, *extinguish*, *fact*, *glottis*, *habitual*, *halo*, *harass*, *idiosyncrasy*, *immaturity*, *impersonal*, *inclemency*, *jocular*, *larynx*, *lexicon*, *lunar*, *monopoly*, *monosyllable*, *necessitate*, *obstruction*, *pancreas*, *parenthesis*, *pathetic*, *pneumonia*, *relaxation*, *relevant*, *scheme*, *soda*, *species*, *system*, *temperature*, *tendon*, *thermometer*, *tibia*, *transcribe*, *ulna*, *utopian*, *vacuum*, and *virus*.

Many words borrowed from Latin first went through French, but as usual it is not always easy to tell which ones. Meanwhile, new complications arose in spelling, leading to some disharmony between pronunciations and written forms, a characteristic as striking in French as in English.

Some English scholars very attached to Latin etymology managed to impose Latinate forms. For example, *debt* (F *dette*) and *doubt* (F *doute*) acquired a written [b] as a reminder of the Latin *debitum* and *dubitum*. A -g was added to *reign* because of the Latin *regnum*, and an -s to *island* because of *insula*. But in the latter case, *island* did

not come from the Latin *insula* but from the Old English *iegland*. There was also the addition of numerous **Latin prefixes and suffixes**:

- Prefixes: a- (amoral), ab-, ac-, ad-, ante-, anti-, co-, com-, con-, de-, di-, dis-, e- (eject), em-, en-, ex-, it-, im-, in-, ir-, ob-, op-, per-, pre-, pro-, re-, sub-, super-.
- Suffixes: -age, -al, -ance, -ant, -ar, -ate, -ence, -ent, -ible, -ic, -id, -ile, -ion, -ite, -ity, -ive, -or, -ous, -tion and nouns like -a (data), -is (crisis), -ude (decrepitude), -um (datum), and -y (contingency).

It is noteworthy that Latinate words had a higher status than Anglo-Saxon or Germanic words, especially during the Renaissance, when professional vocabulary (medicine, botany, law, etc.) entered English in full force directly from Latin or through French. Thus, Latinate words became indicators of a good English education and, consequently, of the speaker's social status. For example, it can be shown how words of Latin (or French) origin have acquired a higher social cachet than Germanic ones. Today's English has many such doublets: *amiable/ friendly*, *lachrymose/ weeping*, *library / book store*, *city/ town*, *journey/ trip*, *couch/ bed*, *cuisine/ kitchen*, *pork/ pig*, *mutton/ sheep*, etc.

The English humanists also borrowed from **Greek**, either directly or through Latin. Many scholars knew Greek and promoted its study. They directly introduced words such as *criterion*, *acoustic*, *idiosyncrasy*, *pathos*, *topic*, *acoustic*, *anonymous*, *chorus*, *crisis*, *critic*, *cylinder*, *dogma*, *drama*, *enigma*, *isthmus*, *larynx*, *nectar*, *site*, and *theory*. Moreover, Renaissance English fostered the use of compound words taken from Greek, such as *anthropology*, *archaeology*, *biography*, *cacophony*, *geography*, *hydrography*, and *physiology*. This way of enriching the lexicon would become very much in vogue in the 18th and 19th centuries—not to mention the 20th.

On the other hand, during the Renaissance many Latin or Greek words were considered pompous. Called *inkhorn terms*, they seem to have been most popular in university circles. With this fashion, however, came a growing resistance to borrowings often considered pointless. Some writers who used inkhorn terms were criticized for being boring and unintelligible, and even pedantic. Terms that the local populations would find hard to understand or use were called **hard words**. Some scholars, such as George Pettie (1548–1589), spoke of "the barbarousness of our tongue," while Sir Thomas Wilson denounced "these scholars who Latinize to the point that the man in the street wonders what they are saying." Later on, English protestants would refer to Latin as a *Popish language* in the belief that it had been created to keep the common people in ignorance and uphold the power of the clergy. Moreover, changes were underway as the 17th century drew to a close: in 1687 Newton wrote his *Principia Mathematica* in Latin, but in 1704 published his *Opticks* in English.

The Contribution of Modern Languages

Throughout the 17th century, English continued to borrow **French words**, notably through the English aristocracy and middle class. Examples include *aide-de-camp*, *belles-lettres*, *burlesque*, *cabaret*, *canaille*, *champagne*, *chef-d'oeuvre*, *commandant*, *compote*, *cortège*, *contretemps*, *crayon*, *démarche*, *dishabille*, *double*

entente, *envoy* (from *envoyer*), *façade*, *faux pas*, *group*, *liaison*, *muslin* (from *mousseline*), *penchant*, *pis-aller*, *repartee*, *reverie*, *suite*, and *tableau*.

As elsewhere in Europe, the Renaissance also brought a contingent of **Italian words**. Thanks to its economic riches, military strength, technological and scientific advances, and cultural supremacy, Italy dominated almost every field of endeavour. So it is no surprise that many in England were fascinated by this country and gave in to a vogue of Italomania that is still evident in the English language today. Between 1500 and 1650, English borrowed heavily from Italian: *artisan*, *bandit*, *battalion*, *bankrupt*, *belvedere*, *cav a lier*, *cornice*, *madon n a*, *opera*, *partisan*, *pedant*, *populace*, *balloon*, *carnival*, *caprice*, *gazette*, *disgrace*, *mustachio*, *tarot*, etc.

Although Queen Elizabeth I and her advisors took great pains to foster anti-Hispanic sentiment, many English people also spoke Spanish, especially since the marriage of Mary Tudor, daughter of Catherine of Aragon, with Philip II of Spain. But it was not until the mid-17th century that **Spanish terms** entered the English vocabulary through French: *sherry*, *cargo*, *infant*, *renegade*, *creole*, *toreador*, *armada*, *escalade*, *grenade*, etc. Some words were borrowed from the Spanish Americas: *ananas*, *banana*, *cannibal*, *mosquito*, *potato*, etc.

English continued to borrow from **Dutch** (*brandy*, *yacht*, *smack* [fishing boat], *filibuster*, *wagon*, *frolic*, *snip*, *sputter*, etc.), **Arabic** (*alchemy*, *admiral*, *alembic*, *azimuth*, *cotton*, *elixir*, *alcohol*, *algebra*, *apricot*, *hashish*, *arsenal*, etc.), the **languages of India** (*curry*, *pariah*, *nabob*, *arsenic*, *check*, *chess*, *lilac*, etc.), **Persian** (*bazaar*, *dervish*, *shah*, etc.), and **Turkish** (*caviar*, *coffee*, *dolman*, *horde*, *janissary*).

During the 16th and 17th centuries, English took *canoe*, *lama*, *manioc*, *tobacco*, *chocolate*, *condor*, *tomato*, *moccasin*, *sachem*, *squaw*, and others. from **aboriginal languages**.

These contributions show without a doubt that the English lexicon was undergoing quite a transformation with the introduction of foreign terms. English was even forsaking its Germanic heritage of short words in favour of long words passed down by Latin and Greek, and even French (or Franco-Norman). Moreover, this was a fashion followed by most English writers—Chaucer in the 14th century, Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Bacon in the 16th, and Ben Jonson and Milton in the 17th. If some in England reacted "badly" to the intrusion of foreign words—especially Latin and Greek ones—others believed the English language had also grown richer with thousands of new words, and that it had acquired a remarkable lexical flexibility. It is easy to understand the reaction of someone like Edmund Spenser (1552–1599) at the influx of these foreign terms into English. Writing to the poet Gabriel Harvey (1550–1631), he lamented that they had made the English language a gibberish and a mishmash of all other languages. This flood of new words from approximately fifty different languages must have made a similar impression on many in England. Still, the majority of loan words came from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Spanish, giving the language of this "northern country" a curious and unique "Mediterranean flavour."

It is also around this time that concerns were raised about spelling. The introduction in 1476 of the printing press by William Caxton's played a role in standardizing spelling. There were two opposing camps—"revolutionaries" and "reformers." The former wanted to completely overhaul the writing system, while the latter merely wanted to tidy up the spelling. The reformers won, which left English spelling in a rather complex state. In the mid-17th century, a major campaign was waged aimed at founding an English Academy modelled after the French *Académie française* (1635) and the Italian Accademia della Crusca (1582). The proponents of the idea wanted to set out and impose a series of norms that would stabilize the English language. But despite the support of such famous writers as Dryden, Defoe, and Swift, nothing came of the idea. A certain standardization did occur during the next period, but attempts at reform would remain half-hearted until the arrival of lexicographer Noah Webster (1758–1843). In 1828, Webster published his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, which included distinctive new American spellings. Webster's fame does not rest solely on his impressive body of work—he was the first to see the necessity of distinguishing American usage from its British model. As for grammar, despite numerous attempts since the 16th century, English has never been truly codified.

Questions for Lecture 15

1. What is the Contribution of Latin and Scientific Words?
2. How Renaissance also brought a contingent of **Italian words**?
3. What was William Caxton's contribution?
4. Speak of French *Académie française* (1635) and the Italian Accademia della Crusca (1582).
5. What was standardization did occur during the next period?