

Lecture 4

Middle English : 1100 to 1500

The 11th century saw the beginning of the "second period" of English, called Middle English, with the conquest of the country by William I of Normandy. At the death of Edward of England in 1066, his cousin, the Duke of Normandy—then called "William the Bastard," the illegitimate son of the Duke of Normandy, Robert I (Robert le Diable) and Arlette, a tanner's daughter—landed in England with the Pope's blessing in order to lay claim to the English throne. With an army of 6,000 to 7,000 men and some 1,400 ships, William landed in Sussex on September 29th and headed for Hastings, where he confronted King Harold II.

At the Battle of Hastings (October 14, 1066), which lasted only one day, William vanquished and killed Harold II. Thus "William the Bastard" became **William the Conqueror** and, on Christmas day, was crowned king in Westminster Abbey and became **William I of England**.

A Norman King for England (and Vassal of the King of France)

The new king ousted the Anglo-Saxon nobles, who had not supported him, and promoted his Norman barons. He began by appropriating the lands of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy: over 1,000 "thegns" (aristocratic landowners or rich merchants) lost their lands to some 600 barons (mostly Normans but also Lorraines, Flemish, and Bretons). William I also did away with Anglo-Saxon prelates and ecclesiastical dignitaries by handing over the archdioceses to Norman dignitaries. It is thought that roughly 20,000 Normans settled in England following the Conquest. Thereafter, William I of England (1066–1087) ruled over his feudal lords with authority and became the richest and most powerful king in the West. As the kingdom's principal landowner, three-fifths of the land fell under his direct control. After twenty years of rule, the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy had vanished completely and a Norman elite had replaced it. There was not a single Englishman at the head of a bishopric or an abbey. The English language had begun to decline while Franco-Norman thrived.

However, as the Duke of Normandy, the King of England remained a vassal of the King of France (until 1204), which only succeeded in provoking antagonism. After the death of William I in 1087, his heirs fought over the English throne, and rivalries with Normandy intensified. William II ("William the Red") assumed the English throne to the displeasure of his brother, Robert Courteuse, the eldest son of William I and heir to the Duchy of Normandy. Tensions and conflicts between the two brothers lasted twenty years, as each tried to seize the other's lands, which served only to further the claims of the King of France.

The Franco-Norman Language

During the reign of William I of England, members of the court spoke a *kind of French* known today as *Franco-Norman* (or **Anglo-Norman**), a French tinged with northern words brought by the Vikings who had conquered northern France a century

earlier. By that time, the word *Norman* had lost its etymology of "man of the North" in favour of "inhabitant of the Duchy of Normandy." As conqueror, William declared Franco-Norman the official language of England. While inhabitants of the countryside and most common townspeople spoke Anglo-Saxon, the local nobility, the conquering aristocracy, and those connected with the church and the courts spoke **Franco-Norman**. Clergy, clerks, scientists, and scholars wrote in **Latin**. Thus, three languages shared the same language arena without any real competition: Franco-Norman, Anglo-Saxon, and Latin.

French, the language of the King of France, had not yet become established in high society, but this changed by the close of the 13th century. More prestigious than Franco-Norman, French was finally adopted by aristocrats and high dignitaries of the Church of England. The French language became widespread in cultural and artistic life. The Norman nobility had always forced its children to learn French, either in France itself or in specialized schools. Robert of Gloucester, one of the kingdom's leading figures, wrote in his *Chronicle* in 1298:

In short, commoners and country dwellers were barely influenced by French. They continued to use their Anglo-Saxon dialects while also borrowing (without knowing it) words from Franco-Norman or French.

Until the 14th century, four languages were spoken in the country, but did not seriously compete with one another. **Franco-Norman** (also called "Anglo-Norman") was the language of local administration and was taught in schools from the elementary level. The Church even preached to its congregations in Franco-Norman, although it used **Latin** for its own internal administration. **French** was the language of the aristocracy, legislation, and the courts; many rich and/or noble families sent their children to study in French cities. Meanwhile, the Anglo-Saxon people continued to speak an **Anglo-Saxon** (fragmented into five linguistic varieties) infused with Latin, Franco-Norman, and French words. Certain Anglo-Saxon words were created: town, home, house, and hall. This is how English acquired numerous lexical doublets, one of Germanic origin, the other of Romance origin: *house/ home, bookstore/ library, kitchen/ cuisine, sheep/ mutton, stream/ river, coming/ arrival, tank/ reservoir, tongue/ language, town/ city, mansion/ manor*, etc.

Other words came into English through Franco-Norman: *accustom* (acostumer > accoutumer), *afraid* (afrayé > effrayé), *butler* (buteler > bouteiller), *candle* (candeile), *crown* (coronne > couronne), *eagle* (egle > aigle), *garden* (gardin > jardin), *jacket* (jacquet), *mayor* (maire), *money* (moneie), *oil* (oile > huile), *school* (escole > école), *soldier* (soudier > soldat), *tailor* (taillour > tailleur), *war* (werre > guerre), etc. **Old Norse** (of Scandinavian origin) gave Middle English the very important word *law*.

The English nobility had borrowed its titles from **French** (*prince, duke, peer, marquis, viscount, and baron*), but had created others in Middle English: *king, queen, lord, lady, and earl*. There was also an administrative vocabulary with French origins, such

as *county, city, village, justice, palace, mansion, residence, government, and parliament*. There were words in the areas of religion (*sermon, prayer, clergy, abbey, piety, etc.*), law (*justice, jury, verdict, prison, pardon, etc.*), fashion (*fashion, collar, button, satin, ornament, etc.*), cooking (*dinner, supper, sole, salmon, beef, veal, mutton, pork, sausage, pigeon, biscuit, orange, oil, vinegar, mustard, etc.*), and art (*art, music, image, cathedral, column, etc.*).

By his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152, Henry II, first king of the Plantagenet dynasty, controlled over half of eastern France, aside from Ireland and Scotland. His kingdom now stretched from Scotland to the Pyrenees, the greatest potential power in Europe. Eventually, Philippe Auguste took back from Henry II's sons (Richard the Lionhearted and John Lackland) the lion's share of the Plantagenets' French possessions (Normandy, Maine, Anjou, Touraine, Poitou, Aquitaine, Limousin et Brittany).

At this time, the entire English monarchy spoke French, not to mention that the English kings married only French princesses (every princess between 1152 and 1445 came from France). Some English kings actually spent more time on the continent than in England; Henry II spent 21 of his 34 year reign there.

In 1259, Henry III of England officially renounced Normandy, which nonetheless retained a kind of autonomy within the French kingdom. The loss of Normandy forced the English nobility to choose between England and the continent. This contributed to marginalizing Franco-Norman while benefiting both Parisian French and English. In 1328, the last of the French Capetians (Charles IV) died heirless. The King of England claimed his succession rights to the French realm, but the French princes chose Philippe VI of Valois (1337). Henceforth, the two French-speaking kings fought over the French kingdom (until 1453) during the **Hundred Years War**.

After winning the Battle of Crécy (1346), English king Edward III was completely unable to address his troops in an English they could understand. Two years later (1348), he founded The Most Noble Order of the Garter, with its French motto *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense*, meaning "Evil to him who evil thinks." But this long war had given birth to strong nationalist feelings in both France and England, and there were to be consequences for the French language of the English monarchy.

The English middle class protested the increasing use of French and demanded the use of English in their legislation. Edward III was forced to concede. In 1362, the Statute of Pleading officially recognized **English** as the sole language of the courts, although in practice French remained in use until 1731, despite the act of Parliament of 1362 that made English the sole legal language of the country. Gradually, French even lost its privileged place in education. Beginning in 1349, English became the language of instruction at the University of Oxford, whereas previously university teaching had been done in French. English began to be taught in some "grammar schools," and eventually in all schools.

The first king of England to speak English as a mother tongue was in fact Henry IV (1399–1413). One might say that in "kicking the English [allied with the] Burgundians

] out of France," Joan of Arc (1412–1431) also contributed to the decline of French across the Channel. One wonders what would have happened to French and English if she had not intervened: the King of England, Henry V—already Count of Maine, Duke of Normandy and of Guyana—would have been crowned at Rheims, thus becoming both King of France and England. French would surely have become the language of both countries thus united in a single kingdom. In short, if Joan of Arc saved France from the English, unbeknownst to her she also did a disservice to the French language, as her intervention ensured the enduring presence of English across the Channel.

The State of Middle English

When compared to Old English, the linguistic developments of Middle English were in the considerable simplification of the language during that period. In fact, beginning in the 13th century, the three or four cases (declensions) of nouns in the singular were reduced to two, and the *-es* ending marking the plural of nouns was adopted. "Arbitrary" distinctions of grammatical gender were replaced by "natural" ones, contrary to French practice, which arbitrarily assigned the gender of nouns. The dual number (to indicate "two," as in Greek) fell into disuse, while the dative and accusative of pronouns were merged into a single form. Verb conjugation was also simplified by omitting endings and using a common form for the singular and plural of the past tenses of "strong verbs." As for writing, it had evolved from the Runic to the Latin alphabet when England as a whole became Christian. The Middle English writing system retained a number of characteristics inherited from Old English, but adapted them according to the writing system inherited from the Normans.

French Loan Words

Middle English vocabulary underwent a radical transformation due in large part to its borrowings from **Franco-Norman** and especially **Parisian French**. The English nobility and clergy, most of whom were fluent in French and English, littered their English with French words relating to government, the Church, the army, life at court, the arts, education, and medicine. A century after the arrival of William the Conqueror, more than 1,000 **Norman words** had entered Middle English. Eventually, so did roughly 10,000 **French words**. In reality, English and Franco-Norman melded so well that the lexical result was very supple and contained numerous terms. However, it is not always easy to distinguish Franco-Norman derivations from French ones in today's English. For example: *bargain* (bargaignier > barguigner), *bastard* (bastard, bâtard), *choice* (chois > choix), *crust* (cruste > croûte), *custom* (c Costume > coutume), *merchant* (marchand), *money* (monnaie), *mutton* (mouton), *pork* (porc), *to toast* (toster > rôtir), etc.

These Middle English verses contain at least eight words of French origin: **cause** (*cause*), **maladye** (*maladie*), **moyste** (*moite*), **engendred** (*engendrer*), **humour** (*humeur*), **verray** (*vrai*), **parfit** (*parfait*), and **praktisour** (old form of *médecin*, doctor). Even this small sample illustrates the importance of the French contribution to the English vocabulary of the period.

Latin Loan Words

English at this time underwent another massive Latinization, borrowing heavily from Medieval Latin, sometimes prompted by French: *attencioun* (attention), *diffusioun* (diffusion), *pastour* (pastor), *rectour* (rector), *actualyte* (actuality), *captivite* (captivity). Among the many terms of Latin origin to have survived are *allegory*, *conspiracy*, *contempt*, *homicide*, *incarnate*, *infinite*, *intellect*, *lapidary*, *lunatic*, *moderate*, *nervous*, *promote*, *quiet* (*quietus*), *rational*, *solidary*, *submit*, *suppress*, *temporal*, *tributary*, and *zenith*. In addition, English was enriched by **Latin suffixes and prefixes**, some of them borrowed through French. For example, the prefixes *de-* (deduce), *dis-* (distract), *ex-* (except), *inter-* (interval), *per-* (pervert), *pre-* (predestine), *pro-* (prosecute), and *sub-* (subscribe); and the suffixes *-able* (admirable), *-ible* (credible), *-al* (capital), *-ant/-ent* (important, different), *-ment* (argument, segment), etc. English would later draw from Latin in order to adjust its verbal and adjectival systems to its substantive one. Moreover, English "imported" terms from ancient regional languages spoken in medieval France, especially Angevin and Provençal.

Latin (or French) was also the medium for a number of words of **Greek** origin. Some 14th century examples include *agony*, *artery*, *basis*, *centre*, *character*, *climate*, *comedy*, *cycle*, *echo*, *fantasy*, *harmony*, *horizon*, *idiot*, *logic*, *magic*, *mystery*, *pomp*, *prune*, *schism*, *spasm*, *theatre*, and *tragedy*.

Dutch Loan Words

Finally, the Netherlands brought their share of lexical loan words, thanks to flourishing economic relations between England and Flanders at the time. There are words such as *poll* (meaning "man's head"), *clock*, *pickle*, *firkin*, *hop* (the plant), *skipper*, *deck*, *hose* (tube), *groat*, *wainscot*, *bulwark*, *luck*, *groove*, and *snap*. Meanwhile, the **people of the English countryside** spoke only a Middle English dialect. The language map at left illustrates the locations of the varieties of Middle English dialects.

There were dialects in the north (equivalent to **Northumbrian**), southwest (**West Saxon**), southeast (**Kentish**), West Midlands (**West Anglian**), and East Midlands (**East Anglian**). Compared to the preceding Old English period, Celtic speech areas shrunk while Middle English ones grew, in Scotland as much as in Wales and Cornwall. By the end of the 14th century, standard English was fully formed. It had developed in the area around London for various political, economic, and demographic reasons. Due to massive borrowing from Latin and French, the English of this period had become far removed from other Germanic languages such as German, Dutch, and Danish. And compared to Old English, it was completely transformed. This English was used by the people insofar as it corresponded to the speech around London, one that would become the language of public life, trade, and learning.

It is worth noting that English evolved unchecked, never having been "governed" by the rules generally imposed on official languages. Until now, Latin and French had been the languages used in official functions. In centuries to come, Latin would

continue to exercise a profound influence on English, a Germanic language: no small feat!

Questions for discussion

1. How did the Great Vowel Shift influence the pronunciation and spelling of Modern English?
2. What major historical and cultural events contributed to the spread of English after 1500?
3. How did the invention of the printing press affect the standardization of English grammar and vocabulary?
4. In what ways has contact with other languages influenced the development of Modern English vocabulary?
5. How has the rise of global communication and digital media changed the nature and usage of Modern English in the 21st century?