

Department of Humanities
Mid Sweden University



Mittuniversitetet
MID SWEDEN UNIVERSITY

A (very) Brief History of English



Mats Deutschmann

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1. Introduction

Study the following text:

**Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum;
Si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurþe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg
And forgyf us ure gyltas
Swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
And ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soþlice**

You might be surprised to discover that this is actually English! Not present day English of course, but Old English, which was spoken between 700 and 1100 AD. Now take a look at the following text of the same passage but in a different modern-day language:

**Faðir vor, þú sem er á himnum.
Helgist þitt nafn,
til komi þitt ríki,
verði þinn vilji,
svo á jörðu sem á himni.
Gef oss í dag vort daglegt brauð.
Fyrirgef oss vorar skuldir,
svo sem vér og fyrirgefum vorum skuldunautum.
Og eigi leið þú oss í freistni,
heldur frelsa oss frá illu.**

Do you recognise any similarities? What language is it? Do you have any explanations as to why these two passages display so many similarities?

The purpose of this compendium is to give you a brief outline of the history of English. A knowledge of the history of English will give you a better insight into the grammar and phonetics of Modern English and explain the strange makeup of its vocabulary. In addition, a study of how historical events have affected the English language will highlight many of the sociolinguistic principles that we discuss on this course.

2. Pre-History

2.1. Proto-Indo-European

English is a Germanic language which belongs to the Indo-European languages. The question of the original home of the Indo-Europeans has been much debated, but nowadays most

scholars agree that the original group of people that spoke Proto-Indo-European, the language which would later spilt into a number of branches, including the Germanic branch, lived somewhere between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea some 6000 years ago. Most scholars believe that this population then expanded/migrated eastward, westward and northward and thereby came to inhabit most of Europe and parts of Western Asia.

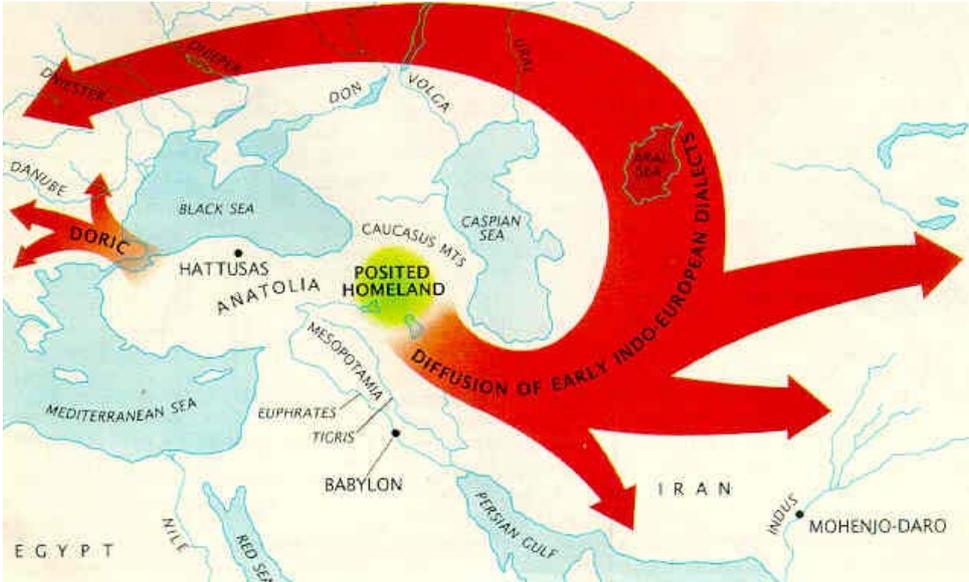


Figure 1. Proposed geographic location of original home of the Proto-Indo-European tribes

We can learn about the earliest Indo-Europeans from aspects of their reconstructed vocabulary. Some words, for example, describe an agricultural technology whose existence dates back to 5000 B.C. The Indo-European words for *barley*, *wheat*, *flax*, *apples*, *cherries*, *grapes*, *vines*, *mead* and *beer* and words for the various implements with which to cultivate, harvest and produce these products describe a way of life unknown in northern Europe until the third or second millennium B.C.

Reconstructed vocabulary also tells us much about the climate and geography of the region where the Proto-Indo-Europeans lived. Such words include words meaning *winter*, *snow*, *birch*, *beech*, *pine*, *wolf*, *salmon*, *bear*, and *otter*, and seem to suggest a northerly, temperate climate.

2.2. A Little Note on Language Reconstruction: Cognates

How then can we say anything about a language which existed more than 6000 years ago, before the time of written language? The answer comes from the study of so-called *cognates*,

words of common origin in different languages. These words often resemble each other, and differences that exist between languages tend to be systematic (more about this later).

Table 1. *Indo-European Cognates (adpated from Dr. Dan Mosser's HEL site):*

Sanskrit	Avestan	Greek	Latin	Gothic	English
pita		Pater	pater	fadar	father
padam		Poda	pedem	fotu	foot
bhratar		Phrater	frater	brothar	brother
bharami	barami	Phero	fero	baira	bear
virah	viro		vir	wair	wer (cf. were-wolf)
		Tris	tres	thri	three
		Deka	decem	taihun	ten
	satem	he-katon	centrum	hund(rath)	hundred

By studying cognates, linguists are able to make qualified guesses about what words may have looked like in a proto-language. Cognates also reveal systematic sound changes that have occurred as new languages have emerged. One such famous sound shift is **Grimm's Law**. By comparing Germanic languages with Latin languages, Jakob Grimm (and yes, he was one of the Grimm brothers) was able to show that the following systematic changes of the plosive consonants had taken place at some point in history (Latin/English words in brackets):

p → f (ped/foot, pisc/fish, pater/father, pyro/fire)

t → θ (th-sound) (tres/three, tu/thou, frater/bother).

k → h (centum/hundred, cord/heart, cannabis/hemp, canard/hana, cornu/horn)

d → t (dent/tooth, duo/two, decem/ten)

g → k (genu/knee, genus/kin, gelidus/cold).

An additional systematic sound change was short /o/ → /a/ (noctem/nacht) , and long /ā/ → long /ō/ (mater/moder).

Why did such systematic sound changes take place? The most likely explanation is that the Indo-European languages were influenced by the sound patterns of other, older European languages as the tribes moved into new parts of Europe and mixed with the native populations. Such effects are known as **substratum effects**, where one language is systematically influenced by the languages of a subjugated group. Similar language

phenomena exist today and one example is how Swedish pronunciation is being influenced by immigrant groups in suburbs such as Rinkeby.

2.3. Germanic

English belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages.

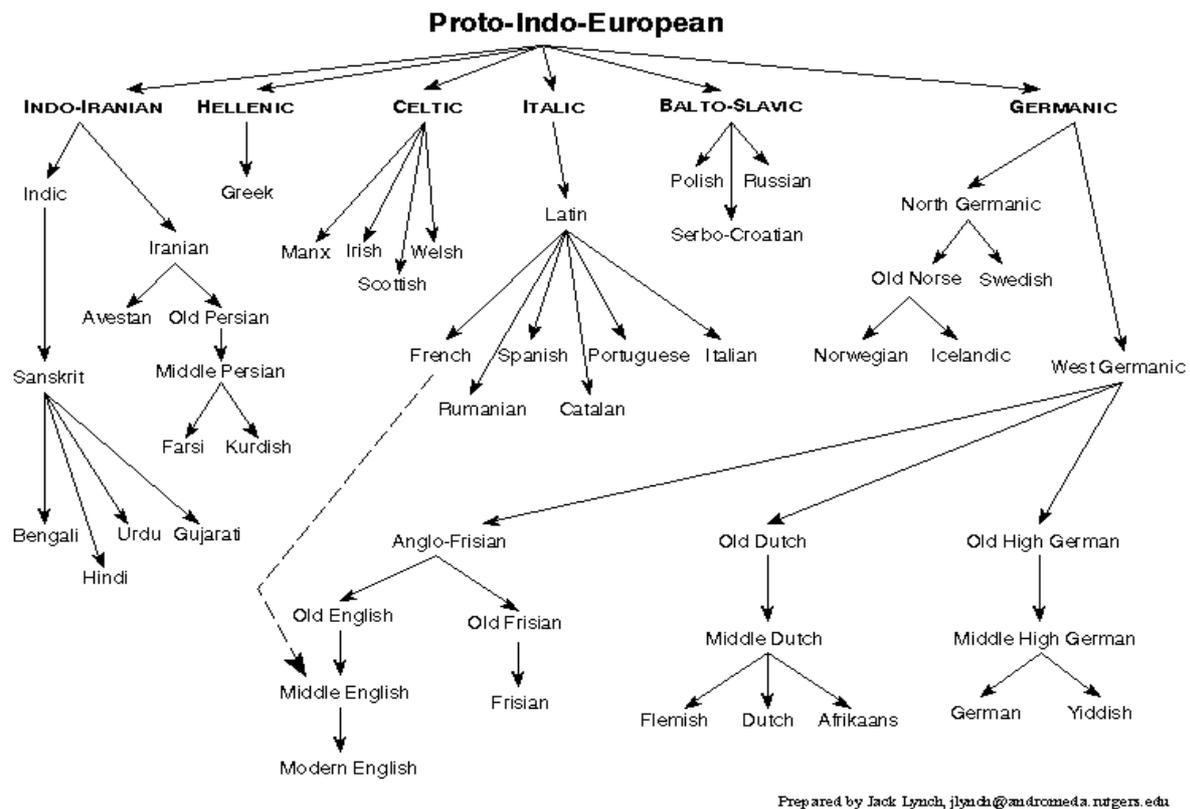


Fig 2. Indo-European tree (from Jack Lynch: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/language.html>)

This group began as a common language in the Elbe river region about 3,000 years ago. Around the second century BC, this Common Germanic language split into three distinct sub-groups:

- East Germanic was spoken by peoples who migrated back to southeastern Europe. No East Germanic language is spoken today, and the only written East Germanic language that survives is Gothic.
- North Germanic evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic (but not Finnish, which is related to Estonian and is not an Indo-European language).

- West Germanic is the ancestor of modern German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English.

3. The Primitive Old English Period (450-700A.D.)

About 500 B.C., Britain was invaded by Celtic tribes, who ruled the islands undisputed for about 500 years. In 43 A.D., however, the islands were invaded by Emperor Claudius and Britain became part of the Roman Empire. Britain was totally conquered except for Scotland where the Celtic Scots and non-Indo-European Picts reigned sovereign.

When the Roman empire collapsed and the Roman legionaries went home, they left a power vacuum in Britain. The Scots and Picts advanced southwards and the weak Celts could not keep them back. The distressed Celts decided to seek help from three Germanic tribes living in present-day southern Denmark and north-western Germany. This proved to be a fatal mistake: the three Germanic tribes called the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes did not only conquer the Scots, but seeing that the islands were fertile they pushed the weakened Celts to the peripheries of the island (Wales, Cornwall and Ireland) and took the land for themselves. By 600A.D. the victory was complete and *England* and English was born.

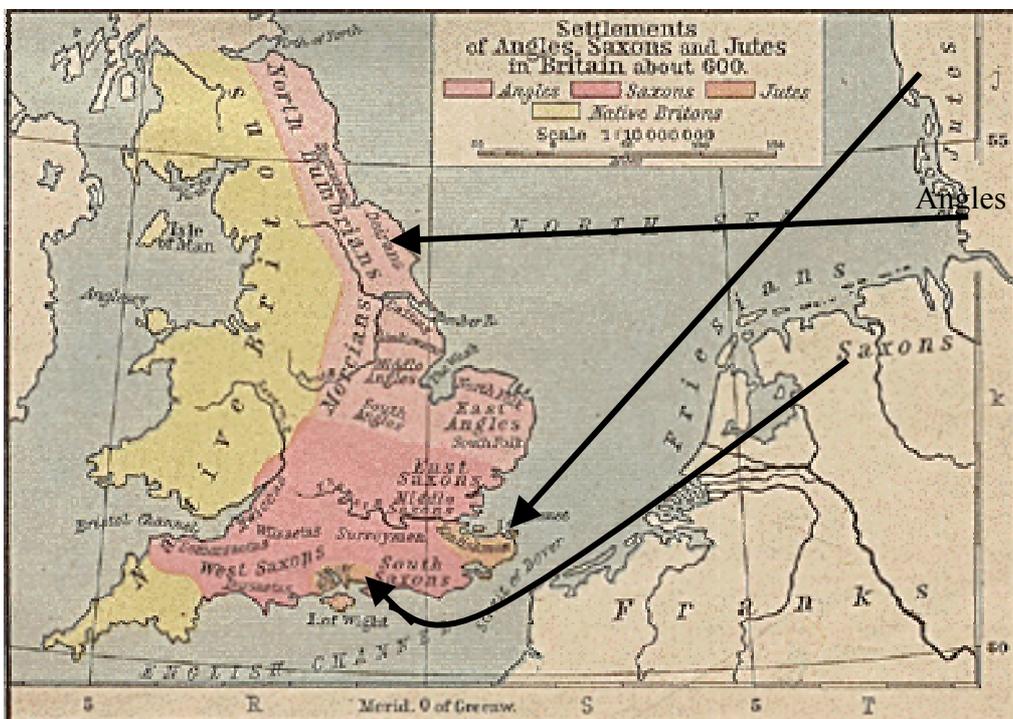


Figure 3: The Settlement of the Jutes, Angles and Saxons 450-600 A.D.

We know very little about the exact nature of Primitive Old English since only a few runic inscriptions have been found dating from this period. We do, however, know some

sound changes that took place during the Primitive Old English period. This is because certain sound patterns had changed in Old English by the time extensive written texts are recorded (around 700 A.D.), sounds patterns that remained in the original Western Germanic languages.

3.1. I-Umlaut

One such sound change that occurred during this period was the so-called *i-umlaut* or *front mutation*. I-umlaut can be seen as a kind of assimilation, whereby a front vowel towards the end of a word affects a the vowel of a preceding syllable, raising it. In many cases, the final front vowels were later lost. Because many Germanic inflectional endings, including some noun plural endings and non-finite verb forms, contained front vowels (/i/ and /e/), i-umlaut changes are relatively frequent and explain many rather strange forms in English. Let us take a look at some examples:

The POE word *Blod* (blood) gave rise to the verb *blodjan*. > The i-umlaut led to a raising of the vowel in the preceding syllable so that the word changed to *bledjan*.> The final vowel sound was lost producing *bledan*. > Later the inflectional ending was lost altogether producing the modern form *bleed*. This explains the, what at first seems rather strange, sound relationship between the noun *blood* and the verb *bleed*.

Another such example is the noun *man/men*. Why should the plural form have a different vowel sound than the singular form? Again i-umlaut can be used to explain this. The original POE word for *man* was *mann* and the plural form was *manniz*. I-umlaut resulted in a raising of the vowel of the first syllable, and finally a loss of the last syllable: *Manniz* > *menniz* > *menn*. Can you think of any more examples of this phenomenon?

3.2. Consonant Changes in Primitive Old English

/k/ → /tʃ/ before front vowel (cild/child)

/g/ → /j/ before front vowel (gielðan/ jielðan (yield))

/sk/ → /ʃ/ in all positions (skall/shall)

/f/ → /v/ between voiced sounds. (this explains modern English patterns such as *half/halves*)

4. The Old English Period (700-1100 A.D.)

The oldest manuscripts written with Roman letters found in Britain date from 700 A.D. This thus marks the beginning of the Old English period. Prior to this date the Jutes, Angles and Saxons had been Christianised, which meant that they adopted the Roman alphabet and started to produce a comprehensive primarily Christian literature in English. A number of

manuscripts found from this time have given us a fairly good idea of what Old English looked like, or rather what some old English dialects, primarily the dialect of West Saxon spoken in Wessex, looked like.

4.1. The Heptarchy

The England of the Old English period was not one kingdom. The original tribes that had invaded Britain had organised themselves into seven smaller kingdoms: Kent, Essex (East Saxons), Sussex (South Saxons), Wessex (West Saxons), Mercia (Angles), Northumbria (Angles) and East Anglia. These kingdoms competed for supremacy, but from the ninth century Wessex, with Winchester as the capital dominated explaining the relative abundance of records written in West Saxon dialect found from that time.



Figure 4: *The Heptarchy*

The main point to note here is that these kingdoms actually spoke different languages based on the grammars, vocabularies and pronunciations of the original Germanic languages of the different tribes. This partly explains the very great dialectal differences that exist in the relatively small geographic area represented by modern-day England.

4.2. A Brief Linguistic Description of Old English

Old English can be described as a highly *synthetic* language. By this we mean that inflectional endings were used to signal the grammatical function of words, and word order was thus of less importance. Old English nouns, for example, had two numbers, four cases, three grammatical genders and roughly ten different patterns of declensions.

Table 2. *Some inflectional patterns in Old English nouns*

Masculine strong noun			Feminine noun		
stán	Singular	Plural	Cwen (queen)	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(se) stán	(þá) stánas	Nominative	(seo) cwen	(þá) cwena
Accusative	(þone) stán	(þá) stánas	Accusative	(þa) cwene	(þá) cwena
Genitive	(þæs) stánes	(þára) stána	Genitive	(þære) cwene	(þára) cwena
Dative	(þæm) stáne	(þæm) stánum	Dative	(þære) cwene	(þæm) cwenum

Neuter strong noun		
scip	Singular	Plural
Nominative	(þæt) scip	(þá) scipu
Accusative	(þæt) scip	(þá) scipu
Genitive	(þæs) scipes	(þára) scipa
Dative	(þæm) scipe	(þæm) scipum

Adjectives also had inflectional endings that reflected the noun they described as did pronouns and articles.

The verb system too, was highly inflectional. The verb took different endings depending on the grammatical subject. In addition, there were ten different classes of verbs, all with different systems of declension:

Table 3. *Verb endings weak verb Class I.*

person	Present tense	Past tense
Ic	hiere	Hierde
þu	hierest	Hierdest
He/heo/hit	hiereþ	Hierde
We/ge/hie	hierap	hierdon

4.3. Old English Vocabulary

Old English was a purely Germanic language. There were, however, some influences from other languages on the vocabulary and these are listed below:

CELTIC:

The influence from Celtic was minimal. This is to be expected from a sociolinguistic point of view: conquerors do not usually borrow words from the subdued. Outside of place names the influence of Celtic on Old English is negligible (compare with of influence of Native American languages on American English).

- Place Names: Thames (the dark river), Kent, London (the town of the wild one), York, Avon (the water), Dover, Cumberland, Wight.

Note that the word *Welsh* is actually an Old English word meaning “foreigner; slave”.

LATIN:

There were several terms borrowed from Latin. These can be grouped into different semantic fields (fields of meaning):

a) **Early loans:** From the first to fifth centuries A.D. around fifty words came into Germanic through Germanic contact with Rome before the invasion and settlement of Britain. Semantic fields include:

War: *camp* meaning *battle* from Latin *campus*; *pil* meaning *javelin* from Latin *pilum*.
straet (road) from Latin *strata*; *mil* (mile) from Latin *milia*.

Trade: *ceap* (L. *caupo*) 'bargain,'; *pund* (L. *pondo*) 'pound,'; *win* (L. *vinum*) 'wine,'; *mynet* (L. *moneta*) 'mint, coin,'

Domestic Life: *cuppe* (L. *cuppa*) 'cup' *disc* (L. *discus*) 'dish' *pyle* (L. *pulvinus*) 'pillow' *cycene* (L. *coquina*) 'kitchen' *linen* (L. *linum*) 'linen' *gimm* (L. *gemma*) 'gem,'

Foods: *ciese* (L. *caseus*) 'cheese, ' *butere* (L. *butyrum*) 'butter'; *pipor* (L. *piper*) 'pepper'; *senep* (L. *sinapi*) 'mustard'; *cires* (L. *cerasus*) 'cherry'; *pise* (L. *pisum*) 'pea'; *minte* (L. *mentha*) 'mint.'

b) **The Period of the Christianizing of Britain (7th –10th centuries):** Most of these loans are related to the fields of religion and learning:

Religion: abbot, alms, altar, angel, anthem, candle, collect, creed, deacon, demon, disciple, hymn, martyr, mass, nun, offer, organ, palm, pope, priest, prime, prophet, psalm, relic, rule, sabbath, temple, tunic.

Learning: school, master, Latin, verse, meter, circe, history, paper, title, grammatical, accent, brief (vb).

Other: fever, cancer, paralysis, plaster, place, sponge, elephant, scorpion, camel, tiger, giant, talent.

SCANDINAVIAN:

Surprisingly there are a number of Scandinavian loans that entered English towards the end of the Old English period. What these loans were and how they came to be part of English is the subject of the next section.

5. Vikings and their Influence on English

The first Viking attacks on England started around 800 AD and were at first merely plundering raids, but some fifty years later these attacks had become more serious and groups had even started settling in Britain.

The resistance from the English was badly organised and often ineffective. The lack of unity in England made it a great deal easier for the Vikings to roam and raid the countryside. The Vikings, usually referred to as ‘Danes’, successfully took control of large parts of England, and towards the end of the ninth century their eyes turned to Wessex, the strongest of the Saxon kingdoms not yet under Danish control. Here, their conquering of England came to an end when King Alfred and his followers put up resistance, eventually forcing the Viking troops to surrender in 878. Alfred and the Viking leader Guthrum reached an agreement, called the Treaty of Wedmore, where the Vikings promised to leave Wessex alone and to accept Christianity. The northern and eastern counties already belonged to the Danes, and now a southern boundary was drawn. This area was what would be called the *Danelaw*.



Figure 5. *Distribution of place names with Scandinavian origins and the Danelaw*

Naturally, the massive migration and settlement that the Scandinavians undertook led to extensive use of the Norse (Scandinavian) tongue in the area of the Danelaw, and we can see evidence of it even today through its influences on the English language. The Anglo Saxons and the Vikings were culturally quite similar. They spoke similar languages and had similar traditions and it appears that the Vikings soon started integrating with the Anglo Saxons. Scandinavian vocabulary penetrated nearly every area of the English language, but most words of Scandinavian origin in English are concrete everyday words. A few examples follow here:

- **Nouns** *bank, birth, booth, egg, husband, law, leg, root, score, sister, skin, trust, wing and window*
- **Adjectives** *awkward, flat, happy, ill, loose, low, odd, sly, ugly, weak, and wrong*
- **Verbs** *to cast, clip, crawl, cut, die, drown, gasp, give, lift, nag, scare, sprint, take, and want.* And of course the present plural of ‘to be’, *are*.
- **Pronouns** *both, same, they, them and their*

The fact that even the Norse pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ were accepted into English is remarkable; it is very unusual that grammatical items are borrowed. This suggests

that there was extensive contact between the Anglo Saxons and the Vikings and a gradual integration of the two groups.

It can be difficult to recognise the Scandinavian words since the languages are so closely related; many words that look Scandinavian are actually native English words. Here are some hints on how to decide whether a word is a Scandinavian loan or not:

1. Germanic /sk/ became /ʃ/ (sh) in all positions. This change occurred later in Scandinavia, and therefore words like *shall*, *shoulder* and *shirt* are native English words whereas *skin*, *sky* and *skirt* are Scandinavian words.
2. In early Old English the Germanic /g/ before front vowels became /j/, and /k/ became /ʃ/. In Old Norse /g/ and /k/ remained. Thus, *child*, *choose* and *yield* are all native words, while *give*, *gift*, *kid* and *kindle* are Scandinavian.
3. Date of first appearance. For instance, the Old English word for 'take' was *niman*, but in late Old English *tacan* is found. The Old Norse word was *taka*, which shows that it must have been borrowed from the Scandinavians. In the same way, the word for 'law' was originally *æ* but a later recording is *lagu*, which comes from Old Norse.

In fact, judging by the large number of Scandinavian words in the legal area, The Vikings had a considerable impact upon the law and order of the Anglo-Saxons. Some examples are *fellow* ('partner'), *law*, and *outlaw*. Even more Scandinavian words related to the legal area existed in Old English but were later replaced. Not only did the Scandinavian peoples bring their laws and customs to the Danelaw, but their view on law and legal custom was to a great extent acknowledged by all of England.

6. Middle English Period (1100-1500)

The Middle English period begins with the Norman conquest at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, when the duke of Normandy, William the Conqueror, defeated King Harold and became king of England. The Norman invasion England in 1066, brought French (F) into England. The Normans (North-men, descendants of Danes), spoke a French influenced by Germanic dialect. This dialect was Norman French. This led to the unusual situation, in which the common people spoke one language (English), and the aristocrats another (Norman French). Naturally, the two languages gradually began to mix into what we now call Middle English.

6.1. Norman French Influences on English Vocabulary

By the 13th century approximately 10,000 French words had come into English. About three-quarters of these French loans are still in the language today. These new words duplicated words that existed in Old English from Anglo-Saxon times. Sometimes one word would supplant the other or both would co-exist, but develop slightly different meanings. For example, *doom* (OE) and *judgment* (F), *hearty* (OE) and *cordial* (F), and *house* (OE) and *mansion* (F).

A study of the types of words that were borrowed from Norman French says much about the socio-cultural situation of the time. The vast majority of the borrowed words belong to the spheres of court, administration, law, the army, the Church, art, literature, medicine and the sciences. Some examples include *prince, duke, count, baron, crown, majesty, mayor, minister, parliament, state, accuse, crime, defend, judge, justice, prison, punish, army, battle, lieutenant, navy, soldier, dean, divine, prayer, preach, saint, vicar, image, paint, literature, poem, medicine, physician, surgeon, science, theory, invent* etc.

It is significant that the names of the domestic animals (which were tended by the Englishmen of the lower classes) remained native, while the corresponding dishes (which were eaten by the Norman lords) are often French: *ox-beef, calf-veal, pig-pork, sheep-mutton, hen-poultry*.

Not only did Norman French bring great changes to Old English vocabulary, spelling changes also occurred. The Norman scribes listened to the English they heard around them, and began to spell it according to the conventions they had previously used for French, such as *qu* for *cw* (*queen* for *cwen*). The scribes also introduced *gh* (instead of *h*) in such words as *night* and *enough*, and *ch* (instead of *c*) in such words as *church*. Another change introduced was *ou* for *u* (as in *house*). Yet one more change was the use of *c* before *e* (instead of *s*) in such words as *cercle* ('circle') and *cell*.

6.2. Grammatical Changes in Middle English

Perhaps as a result of the influence of French pronunciation patterns, unstressed vowels were gradually lost in English. This phonological change had extreme consequences on the grammar of English. As we have seen Old English was a highly inflected language. These inflections appeared at the end of words and were unstressed. Because the inflectional endings showed the relationships between words in a sentence, the word order of Old English was fairly free. As a consequence of the loss of inflectional endings, grammatical relationships

began to be marked through word order and the use of preposition. English thus changed from being a *synthetic* language to become an *analytic* language.

- the loss of inflections
- loss of grammatical gender
- loss of case system
- less freedom in word order
- greater use of prepositions

6.3. The Emergence of a Standard

The Normans gradually became isolated from their French roots. In 1204 King John, a descendant of William the Conqueror, lost the province of Normandy to the king of France. At the end of the 14th century the Anglo-Normans no longer had any land left in France. The Normans decided to adopt English as their official language and in 1362, Parliament was opened in English. This parliament was situated in Westminster, London and this resulted in the eventual dominance of the London dialect as the standard spoken and written language due to London's importance as a commercial centre and seaport, as well as its proximity to the court in Westminster. A process of standardisation of English had begun.

7. Modern English (1500-)

Two major factors that influenced the language and served to separate Middle and Modern English were the *Great Vowel Shift* and the *advent of the printing press*.

7.1. The Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift was a change in pronunciation that began around 1400. During the next two centuries there was a great influx of people into the London region and the different dialects began to affect the pronunciation patterns of the standard. While modern English speakers can read Chaucer with some difficulty, Chaucer's pronunciation would have been completely unintelligible to the modern ear. Shakespeare, on the other hand, would be accented, but understandable.

In short we can summarise the vowel shift as a process which led to long vowel sounds being raised and diphthongised. Chaucer's *Lyf* (pronounced /lif/), for example became the modern *life*.

The principal changes were roughly the following — though exceptions occur; the transitions were not always complete.

/a:/ -> /e:/ (in e.g. make)

/e:/ -> /i:/ (in e.g. feet)

/i:/ -> /ai/ (in e.g. mice)

/o:/ -> /u:/ (in e.g. boot)

/u:/ -> /au/ (in e.g. mouse)

7.2. The Printing Press

The last major factor in the development of Modern English was the advent of the printing press. William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1476. Books became cheaper and as a result, literacy became more common. Publishing for the masses became a profitable enterprise, and works in English, as opposed to Latin, became more common. Finally, the printing press brought standardization to English. The dialect of London, where most publishing houses were located, became the standard. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the first English dictionary was published in 1604. Note that much of this standardisation in spelling took place before the Great Vowel shift was completed, and old pronunciation patterns are often reflected in English spelling.

7.3. Early Modern English Vocabulary

The Early Modern English period coincided with the Renaissance. This was a great time of learning and discovery. Many new words had to be found for all the new concepts that needed naming. At the time, there was a heated debate going on in England whether these terms should be coined from Anglo Saxon words or whether they should be borrowed from Latin and Greek, which were considered to be the languages of learning. To cut a long story short, the Latin/Greek promoters won the dispute (later called the Inkhorn Controversy), and a great number of Latin and Greek terms were borrowed into English.

A final factor which affected the vocabulary of English was the expansion of the British Empire. People came in contact with languages all over the world and borrowed freely

from them, especially words denoting objects and phenomena that they themselves lacked words for. Examples include *taboo* (Polynesian), *bungalow*, *jungle* and *yoga* (Indian languages), *tea* and *ketchup* (Chinese), *boomerang* (Aboriginal languages), *moccasin* and *squaw* (Native American languages).