

# Middle English Language

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## Middle English Language

"Middle English" defines that period of the language between Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, and Modern English. The time boundaries at either end are necessarily arbitrary. The Norman Conquest of 1066 led to important changes in English, but not immediately. Chaucer's death in 1400 is rather more significant for literary than for linguistic history; the Great Vowel Shift of about 1450 affected only a part of a part of the language--the pronunciation of the long vowels; and Caxton's introduction of printing into England in 1476 was only the beginning of the influence of spelling on pronunciation. This article will deal with the English language between about 1100 and 1500, allowing for the great events of 1066 and 1476 to have had some effect.

After the Conquest the upper classes spoke French; the rest, English. More and more French words were borrowed into English, including some important grammatical ones such as "except." Even more people might have come to speak French but for the loss of Normandy in 1204; landowners had to choose between their English and their French possessions. Those who chose to stay in England necessarily had less contact with the Continent than before. English began to gain lost ground, replacing French in both the law courts and the schools during the fourteenth century.

The introduction of printing froze spelling. We spell essentially the way Caxton did and almost exactly like certain Elizabethan printers. Before printing, spelling followed a little behind phonological developments, trying to mirror them. Also, people speaking different dialects spelled accordingly. Since printing came to be common, the fact that words have continued to be spelled the same way has probably slowed changes in pronunciation--it certainly has led to the reintroduction of some old pronunciations, such as sounding the "t" in "often." In addition, people everywhere soon learned to spell the same way, following the system they saw in print: that of London English.

Old English resembles present-day German and differs from present-day English in at least two obvious ways: discrete elements are commonly strung together to make words, and there are many inflections. Take the opening of Beowulf:

Hwat, we Gardena in geardagum

Peodcyninga Þrym gefrunon.

Literal: Lo, we Spear-Danes in yore-days people-kings' might heard of.

Free: Lo, we Spear-Danes heard of the might of the kings of the people in days of yore.

The Old English has three inflections for case (genitive plurals Gardena, and Peodcyninga, and dative plural geardagum); the literal modern English equivalent, one (people-kings'); the free

modern English equivalent, none. Aside from the special name for the Danes, the Old English has two compounds; the free modern English, none. The work done by compounding or inflecting in the Old English is now sometimes done by prepositions (for instance, "of the kings of the people" for *Ʒeodcýninga*), sometimes allowed to lapse (the dativeness of the dative plural inflection -um of *geardagum* is not included in the simply plural inflection -s of "days").

But though Modern English does not have nearly as many inflections as Old English did, it may still be as capable of forming compounds as its ancestor, even if the capability is not exercised to the same degree; the literal translation above of the opening lines of *Beowulf* is at least possible, and understandable, albeit forced. Also, Modern English has many disguised compounds (for instance, "college student") written as two words. In Old English, any separable modifier preceding a noun would be inflected, and any uninflected modifier is printed by modern editors of Old English texts as the first element of a compound, either run in without division or hyphenated.

The *Beowulf* passage quoted above and the free Modern English equivalent also differ in the order of the fundamental sentence elements. *Beowulf* has SOV (subject-object-verb); the Modern English, SVO. But Old English also commonly used SVO, as well as VSO and other orders. Its greater number of inflections allowed Old English (like Latin) to be relatively free in word order. Modern English, with fewer inflections, depends more on the fixed position of a word to indicate meaning. (In the *Beowulf* passage, the direct object *Ʒrym* is uninflected and is unaccompanied by any demonstrative pronouns or adjectives, which would have been inflected; but it is already clear that we must be the subject of the sentence.)

The first stages of Middle English can be seen in two types of text: late copies of Old English works and new compositions. Old English texts continued to be copied as late as the thirteenth century, often with great fidelity to the original, though in general with increasing change (often termed "corruption" or "deterioration").

An anonymous Old English homily on the phoenix survives in two copies: one from the second half of the eleventh century in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 198, the other from the middle of the twelfth century in British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian D, xiv. Brief extracts follow for comparison:

*Ponne se monaƷ in cymed ... Ʒar is se fazere wuduhold Ʒe is on bocum zehaten Radiansaltus. Ʒar is alc treow swa riht*

*swa bolt and swa heah ... (MS 198)*

*Ponne se mond ... Ʒar is se*

*fagere wudehold Ʒe is zenemmed*

*Radiansaltus. Ʒar is alc treow swa riht*

*swa bolt and swa heh ... (Vespasian D.xiv)*

When the month comes in ... there is the

fair forest which is (in books) named

Radiansaltus. There each tree is as straight

as a bolt and so high ...

The differences between the two texts are minimal but not without significance. In respect to orthography, Old English and Middle English scribes used both Þ (called "thorn") and also d ("edh" or "eth") for the "th" sound, voiced or unvoiced. (No writer ever used one for the voiced sound, as in "then," the other for the unvoiced, as in "thin," as is often stated.) The letter d fell out of use in the fourteenth century, but Þ continued into the sixteenth, and later, having merged in shape with y (and giving rise to such misconceptions as "ye olde tea shoppe"). On the other hand, Old English scribes used only one letter, ȝ (yogh), where Middle English scribes at first used two, ȝ and g, representing different guttural sounds, and later y, gh, hg, and other combinations. (The Old English ȝ is usually printed g by editors--as in the Beowulf passage above--since there is no contrast to be made between the two. Similarly, the p-shaped letter "wynn" or "wen"--like Þ a survival from the runic alphabet--is usually printed w.)

As for pronunciation--as indicated by spelling, at least--in the Vespasian manuscript unaccented vowels have merged in a single pronunciation rendered by e, and then some of them have been syncopated (monaþ/mond, cymed/cumd, wudu-/wude-); and an accented diphthong has become one sound (heah/ heh). There is evidence, however, that all three of these developments took place in at least some dialects of Old English before the Conquest. But Old English, too, developed a rigid spelling system used all over the country in the later tenth and eleventh centuries, called late West Saxon, which hid many phonological changes.

The only change in vocabulary in the Vespasian version of the homily, genemmed replacing gehaten (named), is in the direction of Modern English. Old English had both words, but nothing close to hatan, the past participle of which is gehaten, has survived. The verb "name" comes from the Old English noun nama, which is related to the verb nemnan, or nemman, the past participle of which is genemmed.

An early composition in Middle English is from the entries made in the Peterborough Chronicle between 1132 and 1155, showing more sweeping changes than Vespasian D.xiv:

On Þis gar [1154] ward Þe king Stephne ded

and bebyried Þer his wif and his sune waron

bebyried. ... Þa Þe se king was ded, Þa

was Þe eorl beionde sa, and ne durste nan

man don oþer bute god for Þe micel eie of him.

In this year became the king Stephen dead  
and buried where his wife and his son were  
buried. ... When the king was dead, then  
was the earl beyond the sea, and no one dared  
do other than good for the great fear of him.

Here almost all Old English diphthongs have become monophthongized (\*gear > gar, weard > ward, dead > ded), but new diphthongs have arisen, with the g of the Old English \*ege becoming vocalized as eie.

More striking is the relative absence of inflection in the Peterborough Chronicle: only the nouns *sune* and *eie*, the verb *durste*, and the prepositions *beionde* and *bute* have inflections--all final *-e*--that subsequently were lost. Even Chaucer might have inflected the nouns and verb this way, though not the prepositions. The final *-e* was not lost everywhere in English until just after Chaucer's death, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and there have not been any further losses of inflection from the language since.

In line with the great reduction of inflection is the merging of the many declined forms of the two Old English demonstrative pronouns into one invariable form for the singular and one for the plural. Whereas Old English declined the singular *se* (the, that) according to three genders (masculine, feminine, neuter) and as many as five cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental), Middle English used only *the*; similarly, the Old English plural forms--nominative and accusative *þa*, genitive *þara*, and dative *þam* or *þam*--all merged into *tha* (later *tho*). The same thing happened with the Old English demonstrative pronoun *þes* (this), the neuter nominative singular *þis* became extended to all singular functions, and the nominative and accusative plural *þas* superseded the genitive and dative forms *þdssa* and *þissum*. The neuter nominative singular form of *se* was *þat*, which developed into an emphatic pronoun, *that*, as it came to assume the functions of a definite article. By Chaucer's time, *tho* had become the plural only of *that*, and *the* was the invariable definite article, singular or plural. After Chaucer's time a final *-s* was added to *tho*, on the analogy of nouns, giving *thos* (modern English: "those"). Meanwhile, the older *thos*, from the Old English *þas*, had been superseded by the new formation *thise*, or *these*, as the plural of *this*.

The vocabulary of the Peterborough passage quoted is wholly native, or at least pre-Conquest. *Eorl* was introduced by the Vikings and took over some of the functions of the Anglo-Saxon word *ealdorman*; all the rest of the words in the passage go directly back to Germanic through the Anglo-Saxons. The absence of French words may, at least in part, reflect the subject matter--a simple narration of simple facts. After all, even today, all of the 100 commonest words in English go back to Old English.

Middle English is often thought of as the period par excellence for diversity of dialects. Chaucer's Parson in the *Canterbury Tales* says he "kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre,"

referring as much to the (to London ears) crudeness of the Northern and Western dialects as to the alliterative, versus rhymed, style. The first explicit statement about, or admission of the existence of, English dialects is from William of Malmesbury, who, writing in the earlier twelfth century, claimed he could not understand the language spoken north of the Humber, particularly in York ("sane tota lingua Nordanim-brorum et maxime in Eboraco, ita inconditum stridet, ut nichil nos australes intelligere possimus").

No Anglo-Saxon writer, in Latin or English, refers to fellow countrymen speaking any differently from himself, but we know that they did. Certainly before the onset of late West Saxon, any Old English text of sufficient length can be assigned on the basis of its spelling to one of four major dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish, or West Saxon. Within each of these areas it is also clear from the surviving evidence that there were subdialects, though the paucity of texts does not allow us to begin to say how many or to locate them very well.

There are hundreds of times as many texts in Middle English as in Old English; accordingly, some experts believe that they can locate a Middle English text to within an area having a radius of five miles or even less. Equally, linguists carefully mapping the country have discovered significant differences of pronunciation, as well as of vocabulary and even of syntax, from one English village to another; the same is true, though to a lesser degree, in the United States and Canada.

It is highly plausible that after the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded England and were settled, the speech of each village became ever more particularized and the number of distinguishable dialects or subdialects increased. On the other hand, the different invading Germanic tribes may have spoken dialects whose differences, at least at first, broke down in England, yielding the national language, English, with characteristics as a whole that set it off from its continental sister languages and their dialects.

If English, throughout Anglo-Saxon and into Middle English times, increased in geographical dialectal diversity, when did the trend stop and begin to recede? In the twentieth century it has become clear that dialects are becoming less distinct and that English is becoming more homogeneous, both worldwide and within each country. The trend toward diversity may have stopped as early as the fourteenth century, when English once again became the language of government and the ruling class; or not until the introduction of printing; or perhaps not until the advent of radio and television.

Whenever London English made its way to other parts of the land, at first speakers must have learned it like any other foreign language and continued speaking their own dialect without modification. But sooner or later the London dialect would affect the local one, at first through the occasional visitor and book, finally through six hours or more a day of television.

In the fourteenth century there is explicit testimony that books had to be, in effect, translated from one dialect into another. A scribe of the *Cursor mundi* wrote of that work:

In sotherin Englis was it draun,

And turned it have I till our aun  
Langage o northrin lede,  
That can nan other English rede.  
In southern English was it written,  
And I have turned it into our own  
Language of Northern people,  
Who cannot read any other English.

A modern reader can sympathize with this view after reading the openings of two of the greatest English literary works of the fourteenth century, the anonymous alliterative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, thought to have been written in northwestern England, near Chester, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in London:

Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye,  
The borg brittened and brent to brondes and askez,  
The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wrought  
Watz tried for his tricherie, the trewest on erthe . ...  
Since the seige and the assault were ceased at Troy,  
The town broken up and burned to brands and ashes,  
The man who there wrought the tricks of treason  
Was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth . ...  
Whan that Aprille 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 . ...

Though both works date from the last quarter of the fourteenth century, Chaucer's is very much easier for any modern reader--in spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax--because his or

her dialect, descended from or through the centuries, has been greatly influenced by London English.

Traditionally, Middle English has been divided into three great dialects: Northern, Midland, and Southern, with dividing lines at the Humber and the Thames. Southern was further divided into Southwestern (Old English's West Saxon dialect) and Southeastern (Old English Kentish), and Midland into East Midland and West Midland. A more recent approach has been to draw as many isoglosses as possible, the number of dialects, and their characteristics and affinities, being indicated accordingly.

An isogloss marks the boundary between a linguistic feature, a, on one side of the line and not-a on the other side. For example, one of the most important isoglosses for Middle English, affecting many words, indicates the realization of the Old English *y* (pronounced *ü*) in stressed syllables. In the Southwest and West Midlands, words with the Old English *y*, such as *kyng* (earlier *cyning*), are often spelled with *u*; in the Southeast, with *e*; and elsewhere, including London, with *i*--hence the modern standard English "king."

Isoglosses can also be drawn for differences of inflection, vocabulary, and syntax, as well as for spelling and pronunciation. The third-person-singular verb inflection *-(e)s*, for instance, began in the North in Old English times and became established in London speech, ousting *-(e)th*, only after the Middle English period. Chaucer uses the *-s* inflection twice in rhyme, so it was recognizable, but must have been perceived as a dialectism. Middle English (and modern) dialects also differ widely in vocabulary, even with such common words as prepositions, for instance, the southern *to* versus the northern *til(l)*. As for syntax, the northern dialect of Middle English preserved an older habit, never common in the South, of using both a demonstrative and a possessive pronoun with a noun.

Another well-known phonological isogloss of Middle English forms the outline of a thumb sticking up into England from the south, centered on the Isle of Wight (but not including that island) and extending almost as far as the Humber. Within the thumb the Old English *eag* became *i3*. London lies just outside the thumb, Chaucer usually writing *eigh* and *eye*, but occasionally *ye*. London English of the fourteenth century partook of features found all over the country, but had closest affinities with the dialects of the East Midlands, to the north and east and not cut off from the city by any important natural barriers such as the Chilterns or the Thames.

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