A Brief History of the English Language – Old, Middle and Modern English Periods

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I. Introduction

In the beginning there was an island off the coast of Europe, roughly half the size of the Indian state of Maharashtra. It had no known name, for its natives had no proper language. This little island was constantly subjected to successive foreign conquerors, beginning with the Romans, who came to it in AD 43, called it Brittania and made Latin its official language. However, it was a later invasion by three different tribes, commonly known as the Barbarians, that was to have a profound influence on the languages spoken in Britain. Out of this would emerge a language which much later would dominate the world.

The history of the English language commenced with the arrival of three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. These tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and northern Germany. At that time the inhabitants of Britain spoke a Celtic language. But most of the Celtic speakers were pushed west and north by the invaders - mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from "Englaland" and their language was called "Englisc" - from which the words "England" and "English" are derived.

Some sixteen hundred years later, it is estimated that there are 300 million native speakers and 300 million who use English as a second language and a further 100 million use it as a foreign language. It is the language of science, aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. It is listed as the official or co-official language of over 45 countries and is spoken extensively in other countries where it has no official status. Half of all business deals are conducted in English, and two thirds of all scientific papers are written in English. This assignment seeks to examine the conventional division of the history of English into three main periods: Old, Middle and Modern English.

II. Old English Period – 450-1100 AD

The Old English period can be regarded as starting around AD 450, though the Venerable Bede, writes that the with first shipload of West Germanic warrior-adventurers arrived in southern Britain in 449.[i] These settlers were Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and a few other minor tribes as well, who crossed the North Sea from what is the present day Denmark and northern Germany. It was at this time that the 'Britain' of the Romans came to be known as England – the land of the Angles. Another term, Anglo-Saxon, also refers to the people and language mixture that was used at this time. They were violent in subjugating the Picts, the Scots and the Britons, all three of whom were natives of the British Isles.

The inhabitants of Britain previously spoke a Celtic language, which was quickly displaced by the invaders. Most of the Celtic speakers were pushed into Wales, Cornwall and Scotland. These ancient Celtic languages survive today in Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, however, is now a dead language with no living speaker. One group of Celts escaped Germanic persecution by migrating to the Brittany Coast of France where their descendants still speak the Celtic Language of Breton today.

The invading Germanic tribes spoke similar languages and brought with them dialects closely related to the continental language varieties which would produce modern German, Dutch and Frisian. These various inter-related languages of the invaders developed into what we now call Old English (OE). While it is true to say that about half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots, today's native English speakers now would have great difficulty understanding Old English. This Germanic basis for English can be seen in much of our everyday vocabulary:

Old English	**Germanic**	**Modern English**
heorte	Herz	heart
cuman	kommen	come
eald	alt	old

Many grammatical features also date back to this time: irregular verbs such as drink ~ drank ~ drunk (OE drincan ~ dranc ~ (ge)druncen) parallel German trinken ~ trank ~ getrunken. Similarly, many OE pronunciations are preserved in modern spellings e.g. knight (OE cniht, German Knecht), in which k would have been pronounced and gh sounded like ch in Scots loch.

OE, also called Anglo-Saxon, was not heavily influenced by the Celtic languages spoken by the native inhabitants of the British Isles, borrowing only a few words (e.g. brock, tor) associated with local wildlife and geography (but many place and river names e.g. Dover, Avon). During the next few centuries four dialects of English developed:

- Northumbrian in Northumbria, north of the Humber
- Mercian in the Kingdom of Mercia – modern Midlands
- West Saxon in the south and west Kingdom of Wessex
- Kentish in southeast England, known as Kent

A defining moment in Anglo-Saxon culture took place in 597, when Saint Augustine arrived on British soil, with the papal mandate of converting the heathen. In four years, Augustine became the first Archbishop to hold the seat at Canterbury. Through Augustine's efforts, Latin, previously introduced to Britain by the Romans, was reinforced in its influence by the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity during the 7th century. Its impact was such that it provided both vocabulary (e.g. master, mass, school) and the basis for the writing system. OE was mostly written using the Latin alphabet, supplemented by a few Germanic runic letters to represent sounds not found in Latin e.g. þ, which represented the th sounds in thin or this.

Viking invasion – 800s

The descendants of previous German invader-settlers were themselves subjected to harassment from other north European marauders called the Vikings. Norse invasions, beginning around 850, brought many North Germanic words into the language, particularly in the north of England. Some examples are dream, which had meant joy until the Vikings imparted its current meaning on it from the Scandinavian cognate draumr, and skirt, which continues to live alongside its native English cognate shirt.

During the 7th and 8th Centuries, Northumbria's culture and language dominated Britain. The Viking invasions of the 9th Century brought this domination to an end (along with the destruction of Mercia). Only Wessex remained as an independent kingdom. By the 10th Century, the West Saxon dialect became the official language of Britain. Written Old English is mainly known from this period. It was written in an alphabet called Runic, derived from the Scandinavian languages.

At this time, the vocabulary of Old English consisted of an Anglo Saxon base with borrowed words from the Scandinavian languages (Danish and Norse) and Latin. Latin gave English words like street, kitchen, kettle, cup, cheese, wine, angel, bishop, martyr, candle. The Vikings added many Norse words: sky, egg, cake, skin, leg, window (wind eye), husband, fellow, skill, anger, flat, odd, ugly, get, give, take, raise, call, die, they, their, them. Celtic words also survived mainly in place and river names (Devon, Dover, Kent, Trent, Severn, Avon, Thames).

Many pairs of English and Norse words coexisted giving us two words with the same or slightly differing meanings:

Norse	**English**
anger	wrath
nay	no
fro	from
raise	rear
ill	sick
bask	bathe
skill	craft
skin	hide
dike	ditch
skirt	shirt
scatter	shatter
skip	shift

The later Viking settlements in many parts of the British Isles also resulted in substantial borrowing of basic vocabulary. This conflation resulted in making Old English a language that was complex rather than crude, and capable of use in great scholarship. Intellectuals such as Augustine and Bede ensured that the great cathedrals were seats of learning as well as religion. Caedmon spearheaded a new genre of pastoral poetry with religious themes, and the epic poem Beowulf embodied traditions that go back to the Anglo-Saxons' origins on the Continent. King Alfred 'the Great' was himself a scholar, translating historical, philosophical and literary works into Old English.

Examining Old English

Vowels

Old English had six simple vowels, spelled a, æ, i, o, u and y, and probably a seventh, spelled ie. It also had two diphthongs (two-part vowels), ea and eo. Each of these sounds came in short and long versions. Long vowels are always marked with macrons (e.g. ā) in modern editions for students, and also in some scholarly editions. However, vowels are never so marked in Old English manuscripts.

Vowel length (that is, duration) is significant in Old English because it does make a difference in the meanings of words. For example, Old English is means 'is' while īs means 'ice', ac means 'but' while āc means 'oak', and ġe means 'and' while ġē means 'you' (plural). The significance of length means that the macrons that appear in the texts you will be reading are not there only as guides to pronunciation, but also to help you decide what words mean. If you absent-mindedly read mæġ 'kinsman' as mæġ 'may', you will never figure out the meaning of the sentence you are reading.

Further, vowel sounds changed or 'mutated' based on sound change in the following syllable. I-mutation is front mutation, where the stressed syllable is followed by unstressed syllable containing [i] or [y]. For example, the Modern English word 'doom' is the Old English 'dom'.

Stress

Old English words of more than one syllable, like those in all Germanic languages, were regularly stressed on their first syllables. This heavy stressing of the first syllable of practically all words has had a far-reaching effect on the development of English. Old English stress system of was simple as compared to that of Modern English, given that the latter has numerous loanwords with complex stress requirement.

As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of Old English words were of Germanic origin. Of these numerous words have remained the same in form and meaning to the corresponding Modern English words – *hand, land, word* being a few. In other cases, the form has remained but the meaning has seen major change, as in *dream* which meant 'joy'. Some Old English words are seen in Modern English, but in set forms, such as in the word *bridegroom,* where 'groom' comes from the Old English *guma,* meaning 'man'. Old English also made extensive use of German-style compounds, though these have now been replaced by loan words.

As against Modern English, which owns a system of natural gender, Old English follows the Indo-European system by which every noun was either masculine, feminine, or neuter. This assignment of gender to a noun is arbitrary, and has nothing to do with the sex of the noun. Grammatical gender remained a character of English well into the Middle English period. Latin and German continue to use noun genders till today. Old English had an elaborate system of inflection for nouns, adjectives, and verbs; and words that went closely together had to agree in certain respects, as signaled by their inflectional endings. Thus, adjectives that modified singular nouns had to be singular too. Similarly, adjectives modifying masculine nouns had to be masculine too. Old English used more grammatical endings on words and was thus far more inflective.

Verbs

Old English verb infinitive forms usually ended with the –an suffix, *faran* ('to travel') being an example. Verbs are inflected for tense, person, number, and mood. Old English verbs were either weak, adding a -d or -t to form their preterits and past participles (as in modern talk-talked), or strong, changing their stressed vowel for the same purpose (as in modern singsang-sung). Old English had several kinds of weak verbs and seven groups of strong verbs distinguished by their patterns of vowel change; and it had a considerably larger number of strong verbs than does Modern English. These strong verbs are divided into seven classes and are generally identified by their four principal parts.

For example, the verb singan ("to sing"):

infinitive: singan ("to sing")
past singular: sang ("[she] sang")
past plural: sungon ("[they] sang")
past participle: gesungen ("sung")

Weak verbs in Old English were essentially a Germanic innovation, also called "dental preterite" verbs and were formed their past tense by means of a dental suffix [d]. These led to regular verbs in Modern English, with seglan ("to sail"), for example, becoming seglode ("sailed").

Old English also had a fair number of irregular verbs in both the weak and strong categories, such as beon/wesan ("be"), don ("do"), willan ("will"), gan ("go").

The majority of words in modern English come from foreign, not Old English roots. In fact, only about one sixth of the known Old English words have descendants surviving today. But this statistic is deceptive; Old English is much more important than this number would indicate. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have Old English roots. Words like be, water, and strong, for example, derive from Old English roots. Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem Beowulf, lasted until about 1100. This last date is rather arbitrary, but most scholars choose it because it is shortly after the most important event in the development of the English language - the Norman Conquest. This single historical event serves as the transition point between Old English and Middle English.

III. Middle English Period – 1100AD -1500AD

In 1066, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy (part of modern France), invaded and conquered England. The Normans, as new conquerors, brought with them the French language, which became the language of the Royal Court, and the ruling and business classes. For a period there was a kind of linguistic class division, where the lower classes spoke English and the upper classes spoke French. It has been claimed that the English underclass cooked for the Norman upper class, and this is why the words for most domestic animals are English (ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine, deer) while the words for the meats derived from them are French (beef, veal, mutton, pork, bacon, venison).

French dominance and prestige in such contexts as the royal court, law, the church and education encouraged extensive borrowing of vocabulary into English. Many legal terms, such as indict, jury, and verdict have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts. This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances. During Norman-ruled centuries in which English as a language had no official status and no regulation, English became the third language in its own country, existing largely as a spoken rather than written language.

Sometimes French words replaced Old English words; crime replaced firen and uncle replaced eam. Other times, French and Old English components combined to form a new word, as the French gentle and the Germanic man formed gentleman. At other times, two different words with roughly the same meaning survive into modern English. Thus we have the Germanic doom and the French judgment, or wish and desire.

Norman scribes also influenced the way English was written, respelling words using conventions from French; thus OE îs became ice, cwçn became queen. They also changed the common Old English letter pattern "hw" to "wh", largely out of a desire for consistency with "ch" and "th", and despite the actual aspirated pronunciation, so that hwaer became where, hwaenne became when and hwil became while. A "w" was even added, for no apparent reason, to some words that only began with "h" (e.g. hal became whole). Another oddity occurred when hwo became who, but the pronunciation changed so that the "w" sound was omitted completely. These are just some of the kinds of inconsistencies that became ingrained in the English language during this period. However, by the 14th and 15th centuries, French influence in Britain had begun to wane, being replaced for many purposes by English. In the 14th century, English became dominant in Britain again, but with many French words added, resulting in a language called Middle English. The introduction of French in Britain added more vocabulary to English, with further pairs of similar words arising as under:

French	English
close	shut
reply	answer
odour	smell
annual	yearly
demand	ask
chamber	room
desire	wish
power	might
ire	wrath / anger

The Germanic form of plurals (house, housen; shoe, shoen) was eventually displaced by the French method of making plurals: adding an s (house, houses; shoe, shoes). Only a few words have retained their Germanic plurals: men, oxen, feet, teeth, children. French also affected spelling so that the cw sound came to be written as qu (eg. cween became queen).

London English – end 1300s

In 1204 AD, King John lost the province of Normandy to the King of France. This began a process where the Norman nobles of England became increasingly estranged from their French cousins. England became the chief concern of the nobility, rather than their estates in France, and consequently the nobility adopted a modified English as their native tongue. About 150 years later, the Black Death (1349-50) killed about one third of the English population. The laboring and merchant classes grew in economic and social importance, and along with them English increased in importance compared to Anglo-Norman. This version of the language came to be known as Middle English. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

It wasn't until the 14th Century that English became dominant in Britain again. By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. In that year, the Statute of Pleading was adopted, which made English the language of the courts and it began to be used in Parliament. In 1399, King Henry IV became the first king of England since the Norman Conquest whose mother tongue was English. By the end of the 14th Century, the dialect of London had emerged as the standard dialect of what we now call Middle English. The famous poet Chaucer (1340-1400) wrote his classic Canterbury Tales in this version of the language.

A portion of the Bible called the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ can be compared as below and the differences between Old and Middle English are clearly observable:

Old English (c.1000):

Fæder ure þuþe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Middle English (Wyclif, 1384):

Oure fadir þat art in heuenes halwid be þi name;
þi reume or kyngdom come to be. Be þi wille don in herþe as it is dounin heuene.
yeue to us today oure eche dayes bred.
And foryeue to us oure dettis þat is oure synnys as we foryeuen to oure dettouris þat is to men þat han synned in us.
And lede us not into temptacion but delyuere us from euyl.

The Middle English version of the same text seems more recognizable to the modern reader. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by today's English-speaking people.

In Middle English, changes in the pronunciation of unstressed syllables, mainly occurring at the ends of words, caused most inflections to merge indistinguishably, or be dropped altogether. This inflectional breakdown could have created ambiguity (e.g. wanted man find), but speakers compensated by using more rigid word order (subject – verb – object, usually), among other strategies.

The Great Vowel Shift

Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation started, with vowels being pronounced shorter and shorter. It is usually seen as one of the key developments that propelled Middle English towards its metamorphosis into Modern English. Called the Great Vowel Shift, it comprised an important series of linked pronunciation changes which mainly took place after the 15th century. In ME, the sound system had contained broadly corresponding series of long and short vowels, represented in writing by the same letters. Due to the Great Vowel Shift, the sounds of the long stressed vowels in English changed their places of articulation (i.e., how the sounds are made).

Old and Middle English were written in the Latin alphabet and the vowels were represented by the letters assigned to the sounds in Latin. For example, Middle English "long e" in Chaucer's "sheep" had the value of Latin "e" (and sounded like Modern

English "shape" [/e/]). It had much the same value as written long e has in most modern European languages. Because of the Great Vowel Shift, the "e" in "sheep" sounded like that in Modern English "sheep" or "meet". The Great Vowel shift involved a regular movement of the places of articulation: The front vowels each moved up a notch, except for /i:/, which formed a dipthong. Likewise the back vowels moved up, except for /u:/, which formed another dipthong. For instance, the vowel in caas ‘case’ was simply a longer version of the vowel in blak ‘black’; similarly mete ‘meat’ (long vowel) and hell (short vowel), or fine (long) and pit (short). In early ModE, people began to pronounce the long vowels differently from the corresponding short vowels: long e ended up sounding like long i, leaving a gap in the sound system; this was filled by shifting the pronunciation of long a to sound like long e, and so on.

These changes did not actually affect spelling, the latter being largely fixed and standardized by the time of Chaucer. However, the Great Vowel Shift did contribute to the disparity between English pronunciation and writing, a phenomenon that quite differentiates English today from most other European languages. The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

IV. Early Modern English Period – 1500AD – 1800AD

The English language entered the so-called 'Modern' phase around the 16th Century and, like all languages, is still changing. Some scholars would identify Modern English as starting with the introduction of printing. Caxton's selection of an East Midlands/London variety of English for the first printed books at the end of the 15th century contributed to the development of a standardised variety of the language, with fixed spelling and punctuation conventions and accepted vocabulary and grammatical forms.

The perception of this standard variety as correct, 'good' English was also supported by attempts at codification, notably Johnson's dictionary and many prescriptive grammars of the 18th century. The vocabulary of English was consciously elaborated as it came to be used for an increasing variety of purposes, including translations of classical works rediscovered in the Renaissance, a burgeoning creative literature, and the description of new scientific activities. Thousands of words were borrowed from Latin and Greek in this period, such as education, metamorphosis, critic, conscious.

The next wave of innovation in English came with the Renaissance. The revival of classical scholarship brought many classical Latin and Greek words into the Language. These borrowings were deliberate and many bemoaned the adoption of these inkhorn terms, but many survive to this day. Examples of characteristic inkhorn words include: ingent, devulgate, attemptate, obtestate, fatigate, deruncinate and subsecive. Shakespeare's character Holofernes in Loves Labor Lost is a satire of an overenthusiastic schoolmaster who is too fond of Latinisms. Since the 16th Century, because of the contact that the British had with many peoples from around the world, and the Renaissance of Classical learning, many words have entered the language either directly or indirectly. New words were created at an increasing rate. This process has grown exponentially in the modern era.

The early Modern English period could also be called the golden age of English Writing. Two particularly influential milestones in English literature were published in the 16th and early 17th Century. In 1549, the "Book of Common Prayer" (a translation of the Church liturgy in English, substantially revised in 1662) was introduced into English churches, followed in 1611 by the Authorized, or King James, Version of "The Bible", the culmination of more than two centuries of efforts to produce a Bible in the native language of the people of England. Up until the 17th Century, English was rarely used for scholarly or scientific works, as it was not considered to possess the precision or the gravitas of Latin or French. Thomas More, Isaac Newton, William Harvey and many other English scholars all wrote their works in Latin and, even in the 18th Century, Edward Gibbon wrote his major works in French, and only then translated them into English. Over time, the rise of nationalism led to the increased use of the native spoken language rather than Latin, even as the medium of intellectual communication.

The English scholar and classicist Sir Thomas Elyot went out of his way to find new words, and gave the English language words like animate, describe, dedicate, esteem, maturity, exhaust and modesty in the early 16th Century. Sir Thomas More contributed absurdity, active, communicate, education, utopia, acceptance, exact, explain, exaggerate and others, largely from Latin roots. Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Shakespeare, is also credited with the introduction of many common words, including damp, defunct, strenuous, clumsy and others, and to Sir Philip Sydney are attributed bugbear, miniature, eye-pleasing, dumb-stricken, far-fetched and conversation in its modern meaning.

Poetry became the proving ground for several generations of English writers during a golden age of English literature, and Edmund Spenser, John Donne, John Milton, John Dryden, Andrew Marvell, Alexander Pope and many other rose to the challenge. Important English playwrights of the Elizabethan era include Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, John Webster and of course Shakespeare. It is clear that one man, William Shakespeare, single-handedly changed the English language to a significant extent in the late 16th and early 17th Century. Taking advantage of the relative freedom and flexibility of English at the time, he played with liberal prevalent grammatical rules, even using nouns as verbs and adjectives in phrases such as “he pageants us” and “dog them at the heels”. He had a vast vocabulary (34,000 words by some counts) and he personally coined an estimated 2,000 new words in his many works, including bare-faced, critical, leapfrog, monumental, castigate, majestic and obscene. However, not all of his ‘new words’ were personally invented by Shakespeare himself: they merely appear for the first time in his published works, and were variously sourced including from local dialects. He also introduced countless phrases in common use today, such as one fell swoop, vanish into thin air, brave new world, in my mind’s eye, laughing stock, love is blind, a foregone conclusion, beggars all description, it's Greek to me, a tower of strength and brevity is the soul of wit among many others.

Another major factor that influenced the language and served to separate Middle and Modern English was the continual effect of the Great Vowel Shift, even though its roots are seen as far back as 1400. 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. Long vowel sounds began to be made higher in the mouth and the letter e at the end of words became silent. Chaucer’s Lyf (pronounced /leef/) became the modern word life. In Middle English name was pronounced /nam-a/, five was pronounced /feef/, and down was pronounced /doon/. In linguistic terms, the shift was rather sudden, the major changes occurring within a century. It is interesting that the ‘shift’ is still not over, however, vowel sounds are still shortening, although the change has become considerably more gradual.

The advent of the printing press played a defining role in the development of Modern English, when 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. Caxton and printers who succeeded him played a major role in the orthography of early Modern English. The invention of printing also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read. For example, with regard to the and thee, early printed books sometimes used y to represent the sounds usually spelled th. This substitution was made because the letter þ was still much used in English manuscripts, but the early printers got their type fonts from the Continent, where the letter þ was not normal. So they substituted for þ the closest thing they found in the foreign fonts, namely y.[ii] Yet printing ensured that standardization was applied to English, and spelling and grammar became fixed. The first English dictionary was published in 1604, and the dialect of London, where most publishing houses were, became the standard.

The so-called 'orthoepists' were largely self-appointed guardians of the language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They took it upon themselves to direct and guide orthographical changes in the spelling ad pronunciation of early modern English, though the grounds for their directives were often flimsy and sometimes whimsical. Thomas Sheridan, in his General Dictionary of the English Language (1780) decides in favor of the l-less pronunciation of fault. Robert Nares wrote Elements of Orthoëpy (1784) and John Walker produced his Critical Pronouncing Dictionary (1791). The underlying motivation of these experts was often a desire to ensure that modern English words remained true to their latin origins. So, for example, debt and doubt are fancy etymological respellings of Old English det and dout, the b having been inserted because it was perceived that these words were ultimately derivatives of Latin debitum and dubitare, respectively. However, such modifications of orthography have caused discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation in Modern English.

Syntax and usage

The establishment of the standard written language of Modern English was necessitated by central government for regular procedures including record keeping and communication with the citizens of the land. The Chancery of Westminster made some efforts from the 1430s onwards to set standard spellings for official documents, specifying I instead of ich and various other common variants of the first person pronoun, land instead of lond, and modern spellings of such, right, not, but, these, any, many, can, cannot, but, shall, should, could, ought, thorough, etc, all of which previously appeared in many variants. Chancery Standard contributed significantly to the development of a Standard English, and the political, commercial and cultural dominance of the London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle was well established long before the 15th Century. With the advent of mass printing, the dialect and spelling of the East Midlands (and, more specifically, that of the national capital, London, where most publishing houses were

located) became the de facto standard and, over time, spelling and grammar gradually became more and more fixed.

The first English dictionary, “A Table Alphabeticall”, was published by English schoolteacher Robert Cawdrey in 1604, eight years before the first Italian dictionary but possibly some thousand years after the first Sanskrit dictionary). Cawdrey’s little book contained 2,543 of what he called “hard words”, especially those borrowed from Hebrew, Greek, Latin and French. Several other dictionaries, as well as grammar, pronunciation and spelling guides, followed during the 17th and 18th Century. The first attempt to list all the words in the English language was “An Universall Etymological English Dictionary”, compiled by Nathaniel Bailey in 1721, with its 1736 edition contained about 60,000 entries. However, the earliest reliable dictionary Samuel Johnson’s “Dictionary of the English Language”, published in 1755, over 150 years after Cawdrey’s. An impressive academic achievement in its own right, Johnson’s 43,000 word dictionary remained the pre-eminent English dictionary until the much more comprehensive “Oxford English Dictionary” 150 more years later. In the wake of Johnson’s “Dictionary”, many more dictionaries and glossaries appeared, including Thomas Sheridan’s book “British Education”, an attempt to regulate English pronunciation as well as its vocabulary and spelling.

In addition to dictionaries, many English grammars started to appear in the 18th Century, the best-known and most influential of which were Robert Lowth's “A Short Introduction to English Grammar” (1762) and Lindley Murray's “English Grammar” (1794). In fact, some 200 works on grammar and rhetoric were published between 1750 and 1800, and no less than 800 during the 19th Century. Most of these works, Lowth’s in particular, were extremely prescriptive, stating in no uncertain terms the “correct” way of using English. Lowth was the main source of such "correct" grammar rules as a double negative always yields a positive, never end a sentence with a preposition and never split an infinitive. A product of the scientific age, Lowth believed that English was “easily reducible to a system of rules.” A refreshing exception to such prescriptivism was the “Rudiments of English Grammar” by the scientist and polymath Joseph Priestley, which was unusual in expressing the view that grammar is defined by common usage and not prescribed by self-styled grammarians.

While all these important developments were underway, British naval superiority was also growing. In the 16th and 17th Century, international trade expanded immensely, and loanwords were absorbed from the languages of many other countries throughout the world, including those of other trading and imperial nations such as Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands. Among these were:

French (e.g. bizarre, ballet, sachet, crew, progress, chocolate, salon, brigade, passport, explorer, ticket, machine, cuisine, prestige, vogue);

Italian (e.g. carnival, fiasco, arsenal, casino, miniature, design, bankrupt, grotto, studio, umbrella,balcony, macaroni, piano, opera, violin);
Spanish (e.g. armada, bravado, cork, barricade, cannibal);
Portuguese (e.g. breeze, tank, marmalade, molasses);
German (e.g. kindergarten, noodle, bum, dumb, dollar, muffin, wanderlust, gimmick, waltz, seminar);
Dutch/Flemish (e.g. spool, skipper, dam, curl, scum, sketch, landscape, smuggle, yacht, cruise, dock, freight, leak, snoop, spook, brick, pump, boss,);
Norwegian (e.g. maelstrom, iceberg, ski, troll);
Icelandic (e.g. mumps, saga, geyser);
Finnish (e.g. sauna);
Persian (e.g. shawl, lemon, caravan, bazaar, tambourine);
Arabic (e.g. harem, jar, magazine, algebra, algorithm, almanac, alchemy, zenith, admiral, sherbet, saffron, coffee, alcohol, mattress, syrup, hazard, lute);
Turkish (e.g. coffee, yoghurt, caviar, horde, chess, kiosk, tulip, turban);
Russian (e.g. sable);
Japanese (e.g. tycoon, geisha, karate, samurai);
Malay (e.g. bamboo, amok, caddy, gong, ketchup);
Chinese (e.g. tea, typhoon, kowtow).
Polynesian (e.g. taboo).

Even with all these borrowings the heart of the language remains the Anglo-Saxon of Old English. Only about 5000 or so words from this period have remained unchanged but they include the basic building blocks of the language: household words, parts of the body, common animals, natural elements, most pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. Grafted onto this basic stock was a wealth of contributions to produce, what many people believe, is the richest of the world's languages.

By the end of the 16th Century, English had finally become widely accepted as a language of learning, equal if not superior to the classical languages. Vernacular language, once scorned as suitable for popular literature and little else - and still criticized throughout much of Europe as crude, limited and immature - had become the ‘standard of Shakespeare’, with rich inherent qualities.

V. Late Modern English - 1800-Present

One clear distinction that becomes immediately obvious as one compares early-modern English and late-modern English is the huge increase in vocabulary as one moves from the former to the latter. While basic pronunciation and grammar are recognizably similar, late-modern English has a humongous vocabulary, easily the largest of any world language. Two historical factors are known to have contributed to this. The first is the Industrial Revolution and the consequent rise of the technological society. This necessitated new words for things and ideas that had not previously existed. The second was the British Empire. At its height, Britain ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, and English traveled to many nations, adopting many foreign words and making them her own.

The industrial and scientific revolutions created a need for neologisms to describe new discoveries and creations. For this, English relied heavily on Latin and Greek. Words like oxygen, protein, nuclear, and vaccine did not exist in the classical languages, but they were created from Latin and Greek roots. Some neologisms were created from English roots too, producing such terms as horsepower, airplane, and typewriter. This steady stream of neologisms continues today, perhaps most visible in the field of electronics and computers. Android, megabytes, hard-drive, and microchip are examples of technological words that have made their way into common parlance.

'The sun never sets on the British Empire', it was claimed and quite rightly so as the home nation of English controlled large swathes of the world map. The governance of these lands and the ensuing global trade that came out of it introduced English to the world. Simultaneously, words from across the world made their way into the English language. Virtually every language on Earth has contributed to the development of English, from the Finnish sauna and the Japanese tycoon, to the Indian jungle and Arabian sherbet.

From around 1600, the English colonization of North America resulted in the creation of a distinct American variety of English. British English has been considered the prestigious national variety as compared to its younger counterpart across the Atlantic ocean, American English. The former assumed greatness due to the weight of its literary heritage, Shakespeare et al and also its status as the language of the Empire. British English also seems to demand importance because of its so called purity, a notion that Algeo dismisses as 'baseless'[iii]. American English, the only other national variety of the language is far more popular, given its influence as exerted in spheres as diverse as popular music and scientific journals. Indeed, it is possible to identify a linguistic conservatism in American English that is greater than that of British English. Some English pronunciations and words "froze" when they reached America. In some ways, American English is more like the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is.

Whether in pronunciation or grammar, the version of English now spoken in America has retained numerous characteristics of earlier English that have not survived in contemporary British English. For example, British English only uses the word 'gotten' in the phrase "ill-gotten gains", but American English continues to use gotten in normal parlance as the past participial form of the verb ("I've gotten a tummy upset each time I eat at McDonalds"). Similarly, earlier British English used the word 'fall' but now uses 'autumn'; American English has retained the use of 'fall'.

American English had to cope with the new conditions facing the descendents of the colonists who first crossed the Atlantic from Britain. British vocabulary had topographical terms that were not needed in America (heath and moor, for example). On the other hand, new words had to be coined to name new geographical features such as 'canyon', taken from the Spanish canon, meaning tube. Similar challenges were faced when they came across flora and fauna that were unfamiliar. At such times, a popular method used was to enquire and use the name given to it by the local Indians. The American raccoon is so named after its Indian name, since such a creature does not exist in Britain. Thus, the American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like Mississippi and Iowa. Spanish has also been a great influence on American English. Mustang, canyon, ranch, stampede, and vigilante are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West.

Differences and variations between British and American national varieties of English can be observed in word choice, pronunciation, intonation and spelling. American and British Englishes use different words for the same thing; one of the best examples of this is the terminology used for automobiles. American English calls hood what British English calls the car bonnet. The British car boot is the trunk in American English. The British lorry is called a truck in American English. One of the basic differences between the British and the American pronunciation is the treatment of /r/. British English is non-rhotic, whereas the American accent is rhotic (r is pronounced when found in spelling). British speakers of English use the /a:/ sound (i.e. clahs, grahs, pahth) for class, grass, path. Americans, on the other hand, use the "short a" /ae/ sound. Another characteristic very common in American English, and not commonly seen in British English, is nasalisation, a nasal quality given to vowel sounds preceding a nasal consonant (mainly m, n or ŋ), producing a 'nasal twang'. Thus, the word can't / ka:nt / becomes / k?(n)t / in American English pronunciation.

The difference in word stress between the two Englishes can generally be seen in relatively long words. For example, the word cigarette would be stressed thusly in British English: ciga'rette, whereas the American equivalent would have so such stress at all. Finally, some general differences between British and American spellings are obvious: Words ending in -or in American English are seen ending with -our in British spellings.

So: color / colour, humor / humour, flavor / flavour. Another group of words that change are words ending in -ize (American) -ise (British): recognize / recognise, patronize / patronize.

While the erstwhile British Empire is history today, English is spoken by two of the world's seven billion people. Braj Kachru, Professor Emeritius at University of Illinois, explains the spread of English around the world in terms of three concentric circles. The Inner Circle (at the centre), represents the countries where English is the primary language and it includes the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. These countries are said to represent what is called native speakers of English. He also refers to them as 'norm- providing' countries since the norms of English use are derived from them. The second circle, which is called the Outer Circle, represents countries where English is one of two or more official languages and used in a variety of functions. Examples of such countries are mainly former colonies of Britain such as India, Malaysia, Pakistan, South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana. Kachru calls such countries 'norm-developing' countries since they are developing their own varieties. Some examples for such category are Singaporean English and Indian English. The third circle, which is called the Expanding Circle, includes countries where English is used as an international language like, China, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and Zimbabwe. These countries, according to Kachru, are 'norm-dependent' as they are not developing their own varieties of English.

Over the last four hundred years the English language has spread all over the globe and has developed a wide range of regional, social, and stylistic varieties. In the Postcolonial era it has become rooted and acquired new forms and functions, in contact with indigenous languages and cultures, in America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Australasia. This has resulted in the creation of other varieties of English around the world, including for example Canadian English, South African English and Indian English. Yet, given its key function as an international medium of communication, all dialects of English share a common core, usually called an international standard of English.

Indian English

English has been with India since the early 1600's, when the East India Company started trading and English missionaries first began their efforts. A large number of Christian schools imparting an English education were set up by the early 1800's. The process of producing English-knowing bilinguals in India began with the Minute of 1835, which officially endorsed T.B. Macaulay's goal of forming "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect". English became the official and academic language of India by the early twentieth century.

Only about three percent of India's population speaks English, but they are the individuals who lead India's economic, industrial, professional, political, and social life. Even though English is primarily a second language for these persons, it is the medium in which a great number of the interactions in the above domains are carried out. Despite being a three percent minority, the English speaking population in India is quite large. With India's massive population, that three percent puts India among the top four countries in the world with the highest number of English speakers. English confers many advantages to the influential people who speak it -- which has allowed it to retain its prominence despite the strong opposition to English which rises periodically from supposedly nationalistic philosophies.

VI. Conclusion

In the present day, English is used in many parts of the world, as a first, second or foreign language, having been carried from its country of origin by former colonial and imperial activity, the slave trade, and recently, economic, cultural and educational prestige.

It continues to change at all linguistic levels, in both standard and non-standard varieties, in response to external influences (e.g. modern communications technologies; contact with other world languages) and pressures internal to the language system (e.g. the continuing impulse towards an efficient, symmetrical sound-system; the avoidance of grammatical ambiguity).

We need not fear or resist such change, though many people do, since the processes operating now are comparable to those which have operated throughout the observable and reconstructable history of English, and indeed of all other languages.

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[i] Venerable Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, written in Latin & completed in AD730

[ii] Algeo, John, Origins & Development of the English Language, pg 142

[iii] Algeo, John, Origins & Development of the English Language, pg 198