

INVESTIGATING THE PROMINENT LINGUISTIC CHANGES THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE UNDERWENT DURING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

D. N. Aloysius

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka
Mihintale, Sri Lanka
aloysiusrjt@gmail.com

Key words: Old English, Middle English, Modern English, Norman Conquest, French influence

Introduction

It is considered that Middle English (ME) period existed from 1150-1500⁷. Before 1150, Old English (OE) or Anglo-Saxon period was in existence and after 1500, Early Modern English (EME) period succeeded it. ME was framed by the after-effects of the Norman Conquest, which took place in 1066. With the advent of printing introduced to England by William Caxton in the late 1470s, some important social and cultural impacts of the English Reformation occurred in Middle English. With this new trend, ME period came to an end and it was followed by Early Modern English (EME) period, which prevailed from 1470 to 1650. ME existed for approximately three centuries between the late 12th and the late 15th century. It gradually developed out of Anglo-Saxon English in Norman England during the period between 1066 and 1154. It was spoken all over

the Plantagenet era⁸ (1154–1485). This particular period ended around 1470s. Most important linguistic developments occurred in the English language in the ME period. They were in grammar and vocabulary.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the present study is to find out the prominent changes, which the English Language underwent during the ME period. Numerous changes have already been detected, but it is assumed that the researchers might have investigated and ascertained some more novel facts regarding the changes, which occurred in the English Language during the ME period. It is intended to explore more information and new knowledge related to the relevant field comprehensively through the present study.

Methodology

⁸ Relating to the English royal dynasty, which held the throne from the accession of Henry II in 1154 until the death of Richard III in 1485

⁷ Middle English—an overview- By Philip Durkin

Almost all the data relevant to the present study were collected from the secondary data. Articles published in journals, magazines, web sites and relevant books related to the subject were studied for conducting the research. Literary works done during the ME period were also read and collected information accordingly for the benefit of the study.

Results and Findings

As far as grammar is concerned, English depended less on inflectional endings and more on word order to convey grammatical information during the ME period. Grammar of ME was absolutely different from that of Old English. Grammatical gender was highly used in Anglo Saxon English whereas it was lost in Middle English. The range of inflections, particularly in the noun, was reduced drastically during this period. In general, the plural nouns end in *-s* or *-es*. But, some nouns end in *-n* or *-en* (ox, oxen), especially in earlier texts.⁹ This morphological difference can be seen in Shakespeare's writing.

As far as the verbs are concerned, the infinitive form 'to go', 'to sleep', 'to sing' ends in *-n* or *-en* as goon, slepen or singen, but in later texts, it seems to have disappeared.

In ME, *-n* or *-en* ending indicated a plural form of the verb: e.g. They goon. They slepen. They singen. *-n* or *-en* can also be a past participle as in Modern English eaten, beaten, taken etc.

In ME, verbs are made negative by the use of the words *ne* and *nat*. This is another feature that can be observed in ME. 'thou' form is used to refer to one person, whereas the 'ye/you' form refers to more than one person. This can be mostly observed in William Shakespeare's writing.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

English vocabulary was predominately expanded due to the influence of the Norman Conquest, which took place in 1066. English language was much more heterogeneous as it had borrowed more words from French, Latin, Scandinavian and Celtic. Nevertheless, when compared to Latin, Scandinavian and Celtic languages, the highest bulk of loans words were borrowed from French language.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the ruling elite both in church and state became French speakers. After the Conquest, English was gradually pushed out from churches and state and the people began to use more French words in their day to activities and their functions. Thus, Anglo-Saxon English gradually became Anglo-Norman. It was also used in the title of *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary*.

During this period, the great poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer and, John Gower composed major poems in French and Latin.

During the ME period, religious writings in English became more common. The first complete English

⁹ 2009 Scott Kleinman, Department of English, California State University, Northridge-28.08.2014

translation of the Bible, the *Wycliffite Bible* was written during this period. It was also found that many scientific and medical texts were written in English during the same period.

The vocabulary of the fields of law, government, business and religion were expanded with the words of French origin after the Norman Conquest.

According to the evidence of dictionaries, the vocabulary of Middle English suggests that the number of words borrowed from French exceeds the number of words surviving from Anglo-Saxon.

It was found that by 1500, over 40 per cent of French words had been added to the English Language, which plays a central part in the vocabulary of modern English. By contrast, the number of Latin words added to the English language was about 20 per cent.

Conclusion

It is now obvious that during the ME period, the English language seems to have undergone numerous changes. The prominent change that occurred during that particular period was its expansion of vocabulary. As discussed earlier, after the Norman Conquest, English vocabulary was enriched in the fields of law, religion, education, culture, literature and so on. In addition

to that, the English language also underwent many linguistic changes in grammar, spelling and pronunciation. All these changes made immense contribution to the English language during the ME period.

References

- Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (1986)
- Middle English—an overview- By Philip Durkin
- Philip Durkin “Mixed” etymologies of Middle English items in *OED3*: some questions of methodology and policy’, in *Dictionaries* 23 (2002), 142–55.
- Philip Durkin, *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (2009)
- Roger Lass and Margaret Laing, *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English, 1150–1325: Introduction*.
- Roger Lass, ‘Phonology and morphology’, in Norman Blake, ed. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. ii: 1066–1476 (1992), 23–155.
- Simon Horobin and Jeremy Smith, *An Introduction to Middle English* (2002)
- www.csun.edu/~sk36711/WWW/Common%20Files/megrammar.pdf
PDF file-28.08.2014