

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Language Change Overtime

Thorne asserts that “Social, historical, cultural, or geographical influences can alter the words and structures that we use them”. It is these influences that have resulted in the distinctive periods of the English language. English has undergone many alterations under all subsystems. However, distinctive changes in lexicological, phonological and morphological aspects produce periods currently recognized as Old, Middle and Early Modern English.

A most pronounced difference in Old to Middle English is within the morphological realm. Although now greatly deteriorated, Old English was comprised of a vast inflectional system. Largely a synthetic language, Old English used a variety of inflections to signify the different functions of a lexeme within a particular syntax. For instance, the noun “hund” denoting “dog” took up a nominative as a subject, genitive as a possessor, dative as a direct object and accusative form as the indirect object. [Hund] was used when functioning as either a subject or direct object, whereas [hundes] was genitive and [hunde] was dative. An influence in the slow decline of inflection system was greatly due to the change in the stress of syllables. Now emphasizing on the first syllable, the endings became less audible, thus leading to its inevitable disappearance. Moreover, grammatical gender, similar to the system of modern German was also apparent. Every noun had a masculine, feminine or neuter form. For example, the lexemes [wif] and [wifeman] both denote “woman”, yet [wif] was neuter whereas [wifman] was masculine. Although it began before the French invasion, it is believed that the Norse influence catalyzed the disappearance of grammatical gender. However, to accommodate for the loss of inflections, a change in syntax and use of function words were employed to indicate relationships between lexemes to ensure fluent discourse. Such transformations to the morphological and syntactical structures, lead to the transition of Old to Middle English.

The borrowings of foreign lexemes lead to an expansion and great change in the English lexicon. Borrowing from the French vernacular lead to the rise of Middle English from Old English. For example [inquire] was adapted from French and is still widely used today. The French borrowings were due to the Norman Conquest in 1066, where William the Conqueror invaded and conquered England. Under the French rule, English was outlawed but eventually became the language of the lower class. Ultimately, French lexemes were incorporated into the English vernacular. Furthermore, the transition between Middle to Early Modern English shows that Latin was a major influence in the English Language. The increase in cognitive and culture awareness of the Renaissance period is reflected in the expansion of the English lexicon. The renaissance period witnessed radical changes in religion, literature, arts and science. The limited lexicon of the English language could not accommodate such growth hence Latin and some Greek lexemes were adopted as neologisms in the English language. Etymology behind the lexeme [pancreas] shows that it originates from Latinized version of the Greek lexeme [pankreas]. Historical factors leading to foreign borrowings lead to an evidently altered English language.

The distinct phonological developments in Old and Middle English gave rise to Modern English. The consonant inventory of the English language was modified as phonemes were added and deleted throughout the three periods. For example, the voiceless velar fricative /x/ disappeared after Old English. In old English, the lexeme [night], currently pronounced /nīt/, was pronounced /nixt/. The addition and deletion of sounds move towards a more symmetrical language. Phonological symmetry within language refers to the even spread of phonemes in a languages. In relation to consonant symmetry, this is achieved by matching nasal stops with oral stops, and voiceless sounds with voiced sounds. Moreover, the phenomena of the Great Vowel Shift around 1450 to 1750 brought about differences in pronunciations. In Middle English, there were four front (/ɑ:/, /e:/, /i:/ and /ɛ:/) and three back vowels. (/o:/, /u:/ and /ɔ:/)

These vowels each moved up by moving the tongue to a higher point of articulation in the mouth. Vowels /i:/ and /u:/ already pronounced at the top become diphthongs /ai/ and /aʊ/ respectively. The cause of the Great Vowel Shift is unknown, however due to the vowel systems are symmetrical, and such changes must preserve or enhance this symmetry. Changes in the phonetics of English generated different pronunciations of phonemes throughout the eras.

Within the morphological, lexicological and phonetically realms of English language, significant changes have accumulated. As observed by Thorne, cultural, geographical and historical influences have indeed morphed the language into the periods we recognize today. Old, Middle and Early Modern English are due the metaphysical manifestations of culture, and expression of the rich history of the English language.

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