

## **A Diachronic Analysis of the English Language: From Old English Origins to Contemporary Structures**

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### **Abstract:**

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the longitudinal transformation of English, charting its trajectory from the Old English era to its current state. By investigating the mechanisms of linguistic shift—specifically those triggered by migratory patterns, cross-cultural contact, and the expansion of communicative networks—this paper identifies how diverse dialects and variations emerged. Central to this analysis is an examination of morphological and syntactical changes during the medieval period, evidenced through comparative examples between archaic and modern forms. Ultimately, the research illustrates the profound impact of external socio-cultural catalysts on the internal structural evolution of the language.

### **Keywords:**

Linguistic Evolution; Diachronic Linguistics; Language Contact; Medieval English; Sociolinguistics.

### **1. Introduction**

Linguistic evolution serves as a significant catalyst for the concurrent expansion of literacy and scholarly advancement (Baugh & Cable, 2012). Throughout history, these shifts have mirrored the stratified nature of society, highlighting the distinct sociolinguistic boundaries between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry, as well as the divergence between urban centers and rural peripheries (Crystal, 2005). As the English social fabric became increasingly complex, it fostered a period of intellectual openness. This receptivity allowed for the integration of external perspectives and cross-cultural knowledge, including influential exchanges with Islamic scholarship—particularly

in the realms of science and philosophy—which enriched the English linguistic and cultural worldview (Menocal, 2002).

The transition into what we now recognize as Modern English was not an abrupt departure but rather a continuous development from its Old English roots, albeit one involving profound structural transformations (Barber, 2000). A critical period for this standardization occurred during the Tudor dynasty. As noted by Nevalainen (2006), this era sought to reconcile the phonetic and grammatical inconsistencies inherited from centuries of varied linguistic input, effectively "amending" the language for a new age of administration, the printing press, and literature.

This article provides a detailed exploration of the progression from archaic Germanic structures to a modernized linguistic form. By focusing on the Elizabethan era as a pivotal milestone, the study investigates the etymological shifts triggered by human migration and inter-communal communication (Pyles & Algeo, 2010). Through a comparative analysis of medieval linguistic markers and their contemporary counterparts, this research demonstrates how external pressures and internal adaptations shaped the modern English tongue.

### **a) The Cultural Renaissance and the Dawn of Early Modern English**

The fifteenth century marked a period of intellectual "efflorescence," serving as a bridge

between medieval traditions and a new era of global discovery and renovation. This means that the efflorescence of the fifteenth century came as a brightness on the British culture to be the inauguration of a new era full of discovery, movements, renovation, and re-establishment. With the start of the European extension all over world, people started to have different ideas and thoughts in a dissimilar manner towards supplementary property that allowed the rising of the Renaissance era. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, education developed highly because of Queen Elisabeth's support and the growth in printing press permitted to enrich people's minds by giving them the country daily news. The print culture was the key reason in the increase of literacy and enabled even middling sort to have a book and to read it. The Elizabethan time was a floured time; the old Elizabethan English reached its peak because many intellectuals cooperated to improve and infiltrate some adjustments to the English language from the time of the Tudors in anticipation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century modern English language as a fresh recent idiom.

### **b) The Significance of English History 'the Virgin Queen'**

The significance of English history between 1485 when the Tudors came to the throne. This early-modern period was critical in the improvement of England even for transatlantic civilization generally. Throughout this time, the country transformed itself from a feudal and minor European state into a constitutional monarchy, the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth as called by historians "the first modern society".

During this epoch, England experienced a series of civil wars; revolutions resulted constitutional monarchy; also series of reformations in religion that would lead to religious toleration. The culture of Early-modern England is the root culture of many institutions, laws, customs, and traditions traced back to that time and place. The most powerful and lasting cultural achievement of Elizabethan was the perfection of the English language. English became eloquent, expressive, and coherent in an extensive diversity of sorts. As a demonstration, these types could be found in

philosophical, theological, and historical works such as by Francis Bacon '*Essays, The New Atlantis*', Richard Hooker '*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*', and Walter Raleigh '*History of the World*'. In literature as an example, William Camden '*Britannia*'; in Poetry the famous Shakespeare '*sonnets*', and Edmund Spenser '*The Faerie Queen*'. The achievement likewise best summed up in the authorized "King James" version of the Bible of 1611. Though translated by a committee of bishops, it presented Scripture in prose that still resonates through language.

Even in the areas of language, art, and culture, English men and women in 1603 worried about disorder. Such an eloquent and powerful language could inspire and increase. Hence, the Crown and ruling elite tried to manipulate it for their own ends.

Through the Elizabethan era, the printing press development played a vital role in mounting the number of intellectual people .i.e. the efflorescence of education and literacy. The influence of the cultural progress on the evolution of the English language appeared during the 16<sup>th</sup> century mainly under the reign of Queen Elisabeth when the English language passed its high difficult time to appear as an individual language. Old English started to be an official language challenged both French and Latin, in addition the English society or the English people started to converse fluent English. As a result, people started to differentiate between the right manner to talk towards the other and the correct way of living that filed with the Elizabethan time.

### **c) The Influence of the Print Culture during Elisabeth Reign**

The rapid development of the print culture, one of the major cultural advancements of that period, was a precious change. The impact of printing was an extra and even an outer limit in medieval Europe. It permitted the dissemination of religious attitudes and the widening of new different modern ideas that helped to produce a changeable society that would not have been a missing position in the middle times. This made the assortment of books printed more varied and the printing press made book ownership easier. "In fewer than 200 years after the

introduction of the printing press, 20,000 titles were printed in English” (Baugh & Cable, 2000, pp. 201-202).

The rising print culture reflected the supremacy of religion in the early modern world with the growing availability of devotional and religious books. At one level, this increase in the religious side made it possible for a cultivated middling sort to read for themselves about matters of beliefs in many fields such as philosophy, history, linguistics and literature of varying levels of complexity. At another level, the development of the print culture also made available more books that the poor class could afford to buy. The printing uprising allowed the propagation of ideas using descriptions that went along with the written text and converted by individuals whose reading competence was limited. Devout themes were essential in the ballads and chapbooks printed in large numbers like ‘*A Perfect Description of the Frailty of Man’s Life*’, a ballad that describes the state of men during the middle ages, a time when the state was controlled by the clergy and the church.

The Christian group under church authority sustained new subjects and new ballads and chapbooks called ‘*The Rich Farmer’s Ruine*’ and ‘*The Poor Man Pays for All*’ caused the emergence of chap Print culture. *William Caxton* introduced printing to England in 1475 and in 1485; Sir *Thomas Mallory* with the story of ‘*la Mort d’Arthur*’. Events written and published in the print press were not simply reported, they were also

seriously analysed and tended to clarify more the situations lived and relations made and happened.

#### d) The Uprising of Modern English

##### Language

Modern English was affected by the changes happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century towards people who had inflexible response. The English language altered over time from the worst to the best to be an influential and significant world language. A new epoch for the improvement of English used by the nobles arose; superior resources initiated its right way to make its progress. The scientific uprising and restoration interests in both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have opened the gate for other technical terms for newly found concepts and discoveries, which derived from different cultures through time. The diverse treasures of English vocabulary such as Norman Conquest and Anglo Saxon cultures, allowed its users to apply collation of alternative words to utter small difference in meaning.. English became a dominant foreign language in the whole world and saw a large extension through centuries; it was time of creative changes occurred in all areas of the European society. The alterations influenced attitudes and principles of the increasing culture, also conveyed as change in all aspects of each person’s daily life.

Table 1: Vocabulary Expansion Across Eras

Source / Era	Estimated Vocabulary Size
Old English (ca. 1000 AD)	Approximately 50,000–60,000 words
Modern English (Oxford Dictionary)	Around 500,000 core words, plus an estimated 500,000 technical terms
20th-Century Unabridged Dictionaries	Approximately 650,000–750,000 words

Bibliographic entry	Surrounding text	Standardized results
Cran, William. (1992). <i>The Story of English</i> . New York: Penguin.	“Among all the world's languages, English is may be the richest in vocabulary. The <i>Oxford Dictionary</i> lists about 500,000 words; and a further half-million technical and scientific terms remain uncatalogued”	500,000 words 1,000,000 words (including scientific words)
Encyclopedia Americana. (1999). Volume 10.	"The vocabulary has grown from the 50,000 to 60,000 words in Old English to a great number of entries 650,000 to 750,000 in an unabridged dictionary of today"	From 650 to 750, 000 words

Weinreich, (1996, pp. 76- 77).

Since the influence of different languages such as Latin, French, Arabic and Spanish, the English shift took place. The vocabulary growth became known as the Modern English language. New words extended by the use of mass media. Another cause of lexical change is the rapidity of development in diverse parts of life such as social concepts ; new concepts were launched into the language to deal with innovative procedures like computer terminology. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, were periods of loanword appearance and new technical perceptions in English.

The transition into modern language phase contributed to the rise of English as a prevailing language. With the development of education, schooling became available to the masses or common people who also benefited from access to libraries in English. The advantage permitted people to enrich their vocabulary and lexis and improve their English language competence. The English language increased to be largely spoken; it

has frequently been referred as a world language of the modern time. English is not an official language in some countries, but it is taught and used in education and considered as a foreign language. For example, the number of education increased gradually in the foreign countries, “...The perception of utility as a foreign language amid Europeans is 68% among the English, 25% among the French, and 22% among the Germans” (Crystal, 1996, pp. 15-16).

The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a vocabulary enlargement by the widespread use of modern English and increased borrowing from other languages. The English language saw a restoration of interest in changing the way of talking by conveying new counting words coming by English travellers and traders after turning from their journey throughout the continents. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was an opening of new inventive English language that looked only for prosper and advance. Their spoken language in a society could be classified as

a language of educated persons. Each person all over the world consider the 20<sup>th</sup> century as continuity of the English language improvement because of the large spread of the English language witness. In the two last centuries, 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup>, English became the prestigious local language and more tolerable in the social surrounding. People looked to English as the new fashion language that each one should know or at least understand.

The modern English language did not focus on meaning as in old English but on sentence structure ‘*Ran he and ouertok þam þare*’ spelt in Modern English as *He ran and overtook them there*’. In this sentence, there is a reverse of the noun and verb. Another example, ‘*That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke*’, in Modern English ‘*he has to help them when they are ill*’. In this sentence, there is also another overturn in noun instead of the verb. The other change concerned the Old English alphabets, there were 24 letters as the ‘*u*’ and ‘*v*’, the ‘*J*’ and ‘*y*’ were taken as the same

letters, but modern English counts 26 letters and each letter has its sound independently.

There was a change in word orthography such as *th’at comyn englyshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another*, in Modern English becomes *that common English is spoken from one shyre variety to another*. Another example, *playse euery man by cause of dyuersitie & chaunge of langage*, that turns into *every man plays by cause of diversities and change of language*. Another change in orthography is, *Se guma sloh tone wrym*, in Modern English becomes, *the man slew the dragon*. Another example in Old English, *Sege finum leodum micc le latre spell*, it changed to Modern English, *Tell people more horrible tale*, “...English language adopted foreign words from many countries. Modern English has many more words, the Industrial Revolution and technology created a need for new words” (Thomason, 2004, pp. 23- 24).

Table 2: Morphological Evolution from Medieval to Modern English

Old English Words	Modern English Words
blód	Blood
God	God
biscop	Bishop
Longe	Long
Be	By
Fréo	Free
Ofer	Over
Fisc	Fish
Betst	Best
Hlaford	Lord
Æfen	Evening
þurh	Through

(Tuvung, 2011, pp. 54- 55).

Another example, the word *good* in Modern English is written with double ‘*oo*’; however, in Old English

was written *gode* with one ‘*o*’ in the middle and with ‘*e*’ at the end, also, *taak* in old English, it

becomes *take* in Modern English. The new English vocabulary could be classified in different categories. First, there is a native vocabulary, is a set of words that are authentic or have an English derivation such as, *behaviour, chicken, frosting and authentic*. Native speakers' vocabularies contrasted broadly within a language and are especially reliant on the level of the speaker's instruction. A native word belongs to the original English accumulation; English native words are subdivided into Indo European and common Germanic origin.

The number of native words of Germanic root is superior to those of Indo European origin, for example, *summer, winter, rain, house, shirt, need, life, to buy, to make* and other words. Native words constitute about 80 percentages of the 500 frequent words in English language (Yule, 2006, pp. 78- 79).

### **Conclusion**

The trajectory of the English language from the 16th to the 20th century is a testament to its adaptability and the influence of socio-cultural catalysts. English had a middle-aged vocabulary and increasingly made-up a modern one by creating new words and trying to include others in its language. English individuals believed in that change as they were persuaded that it would be unlocked and released access for a new beginning. The 15<sup>th</sup> century represented a starting point of language transformation and the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the fruit of that language change. English turns out to be the language style of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where people wish to read, write and mainly speak. The English language traversed all continents to raise more and enlarge its verbal and written communication with its modern suitable vocabulary or lexicon. English was a succession correlation of different languages mainly produced the intellectual class of the European students who went out of Europe. What began as a Germanic dialect constrained by feudal boundaries has transformed into a prestigious global *lingua franca*.

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