



PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

Samarkand region

English teacher

Shukurova Rano Kakhorovna

Annotation: This article devoted to the topic periods in the history of English and covers significant, historical datas. Moreover, in the article linguistic changes which occurred century by century in the English language were noted.

Key words: *diachronic variability, Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, leves of confessioun, phonological system.*

All languages are in a constant process of change along the dimension of time. This phenomenon is called language change or the diachronic variability of language. English has undergone considerable changes in the three main periods of its history. These periods are Old English (OE), roughly from 450 to 1100, Middle English (ME), from about 1100 to about 1500, and Modern English (ModE), from roughly 1500 to the present. The Old English period started when three Germanic tribes coming from the Continent, viz. the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, settled down in what is known today as England, in the 5th century. They spoke Germanic dialects, from which the various OE dialects developed directly. Today OE texts are largely unintelligible even to the English[1]. Consider the example in (1), which is taken from a 10th century document (Aelfric's homily on St. Gregory):

(1) *þā sæ#de him man þæt hī of Engla-lande wæ#ron and þæt*

then said him someone that they of England were and that

(2) *Dæ#re Dēode mennisc swā wlitig wæ#re*





that country's people so comely were 'And then someone told him that they were from England and that the people of that country were so comely.'

The OE example differs from its ModE counterpart in many respects. For instance, it contains a short [a] and a long [ā], as well as diphthongs that later disappeared, e.g. [ēo]. Words like *Dēod* ('country') and *wlitig* ('comely, handsome, beautiful') have disappeared from use. The word *hī* means 'they'. There are considerable syntactic differences, too: for example in the first clause the verb precedes the indirect object and the indirect object precedes the subject. Morphology is also quite different. The suffix -on in *wæron* indicates that the verb is in the past tense and plural. In OE there was an elaborate inflection system for both verbs and nominal phrases. In 1066, with the Norman Conquest, a new era began, which is referred to as Middle English. In this period the English language changed more radically than in any other period of its history. Vast numbers of French words entered English and by the end of the period English had lost most of its inflections, and the quality of many of its original sounds had changed considerably. From the main dialects of ME3 eventually a Mid-South-Eastern dialect (around London) emerged as the dominant one and this provided the basis for what later became Standard English. The following extract, (2), is not too difficult to understand for present-day readers. It is from Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale* (end of the 14th c.). Chaucer wrote in the London dialect. (2) Of the roote of contricion spryngeth a stalke that bereth braunches and of the root of contricion springs a stalk that bears branches and leues of confessioun, and fruyt of satisfaccioun. leaves of confession and fruit of satisfaction

By about 1500, English had essentially become a language which, though looking archaic to us, can be recognised as English and understood without much difficulty even today[2]. This is the beginning of the Modern English period. The following illustration is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene I (early 17th c.) (3) – ... why was he sent into England? – Why, because he was mad: he shall

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recover his wits there; or, if he do not, 'tis no great matter there. – Why? – 'Twill not be seen in him there; there the men are as mad as he. – How came he mad? – Very strangely, they say. An examination of the changes that have occurred in English during the past 1500 years shows that they have affected all parts of the language. We will illustrate this claim with a few examples.

Let us start with some phonological changes. These are sound changes that directly affect a language's phonological system. For instance, the sound [N] was originally an allophone of /n/, which appeared before /k, g/ in English, just as it does in Hungarian words like *munka* and *inga* today. During Middle English, /g/ was lost in word-final position after a nasal consonant, leaving [N] as the final consonant in words like *sing*. The loss of the final /g/ in words created minimal pairs such as *sin* and *sing*, i.e. the phoneme /n/ split into two phonemes: /n/ and /N/. Sound change was also a common type of phonological change. By the end of the 14th century the old /Ã/ sound was replaced by /ç̃/, and words such as e.g. *stān*, *bān* and *gāst* became *stōne* ('stone'), *bōne* ('bone') and *gōst* ('ghost'), respectively. A major phonological change in the history of English took place approximately between 1400 and 1600. It is known as the Great Vowel Shift. The seven long vowels of Middle English underwent the following change. The highest vowels, /ĩ/ and /ũ/, became the diphthongs /aI/ and /aU/, respectively. In addition to this, each of these vowels was replaced by the next higher vowel[3].

There have been considerable morphological changes, too. In Old English, there was a rich conjugation system for verbs: the verbs had different endings depending on person, number and tense. Nouns were divided into three gender classes: masculine, feminine and neuter, and each gender class was associated with a different set of case endings in both singular and plural, and there was concord between nouns and their adjectives, too. This is shown in (6), illustrating the declension of *sē gōda wind* ('the good wind'). (6) Singular Plural Nom. *sē gōda wind þā gōdan windas* Acc. *þone gōdan wind þā gōdan windas* Gen. *þæs gōdan*

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windes þāra gōdra winda Dat. þæ#m gōdan winde þæ#m gōdum windum This elaborate system of declension had disappeared by the end of the Middle English period and with the overwhelming majority of nouns it was only the non-genitive singular form and the form with the suffix -s (standing for nongenitive plural, genitive singular and genitive plural) that remained distinguished[4]. As for syntactic changes, there are statistics which show that in 1200 the direct object (O) was put before the verb (V) in 53 % of all cases and after the verb in 47 %. By about 1500 this had changed completely: the direct object was put before the verb in only 2 % of the cases and after the verb in 98 %. The verb-object word order had become dominant.

In conclusion it should be highlighted that Today, if you examine the 5000 most frequent words in English, you will find that 40 % of them are of English (Germanic) origin, 39 % of French origin, 12 % of Latin origin and 9 % of other. But if you concentrate on the first 1000 most frequent words, you will find that the ratio of words of English origin is considerably higher.

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