

A CULTURAL HISTORY

of the ENGLISH
LANGUAGE

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Preface

The growth of computer-based technology has already fundamentally changed the role of the textbook. In view of the amount of information now available, particularly the kind of detail appearing in the more specialist literature, it is impossible for one short textbook to provide an exhaustive account of the history of English. The analysis of historical corpora is making us reconsider issues which were previously thought to be long since established. Much historical information does not properly belong in a book at all. Sound changes, for example, belong in a relational database, and they are better presented in hypertext with linked sound files than in a conventional book. The aim of this book is therefore to provide a general framework which will be of assistance in the interpretation of historical data.

It is intended as an outline history of the English language for linguists and for students of linguistics and modern English language. In the past, the history of English has typically been studied in the context of English language and literature, and consequently there are large numbers of textbooks which chronicle the changing literary language. There are also many textbooks which are devoted to changes in linguistic form and which trace the history of English phonology, grammar and lexis. However, the scope of linguistics has increasingly extended over recent years to include the social role of language, and this raises such issues as languages in contact, the development of literacy and new text types, and the relationship between standard language and dialects. These things need to be reflected in the historical study of the language. I have sought to take a wider view of the language, and to show how it came to be the way it is. This wider view means that I have not concentrated on the minutiae of linguistic form, and so I have made relatively little use of technical terminology. As a result I hope this book will be more accessible to the general reader.

A consequence of taking a wider view is that one has to reinterpret much of the history of English. Inexplicable gaps must be filled. The peasants' revolt of 1381 and the English revolution of the 1640s both had profound consequences for the language, but they are scarcely mentioned

in conventional histories. Secondly, one has to confront the popular myths – many of them of considerable interest and antiquity in their own right – which lie behind the received interpretations. I have attempted to find a deeper explanation than is conventionally given for beliefs about English. Why should English people believe their own language to be inadequate? Why was the English translation of the Bible politically contentious? Why were prescriptive attitudes to English prevalent in the eighteenth century? Why should ideas of ‘language deficit’ be taken seriously in the twentieth century? In dealing with myths, I have tried to identify the different interests that people have sought to represent and defend. The attitude of the medieval church towards English, for example, may come across as utterly bizarre until one takes into account the economic, intellectual and political power which churchmen of the time were defending. It is more difficult to deal with myths when the political issues are still alive. I find it difficult, for instance, to say anything positive about the intolerant attitudes to language which developed after 1660, and which have profoundly influenced the form which the language takes today.

In preparing this book I have been deeply indebted to many friends, students and colleagues who have provided encouragement and commented on earlier drafts. In particular I would like to thank friends and colleagues at the universities of Lancaster and Helsinki, and a number of individuals including Josef Schmied and Chris Jeffery.

Lancaster, April 1997

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1

Introduction

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to raise some of the main issues that are involved in the study of the history of the English language. The first section provides a brief outline history for the reader with no previous historical background, and presents some of the basic historical material which (allowing for some necessary simplification) would be generally accepted by language historians. The remaining sections deal with some general points which are developed further in later chapters. I have used cross-references to make explicit the connections between this chapter and more particular instances in the later chapters.

1.1 *An outline history*

A language related to Modern English has been spoken in Britain since the early fifth century. Before the Roman legions left Britain, the east coast of England was already being subjected to raids from Saxon invaders from beyond the North Sea. In the course of the next century, the newcomers began to settle permanently. According to Bede, a monk from Jarrow writing in the late eighth century, they belonged to three tribes, Angles, Saxons and Jutes. The people are now generally referred to as *Anglo-Saxons*, but their language has always been called *English*. Eventually they conquered the whole of what is now England, and English replaced the Celtic language, which was until then spoken by the mass of the population.

The English speakers were themselves subjected to further raids from across the North Sea, this time from Danes. The first raids date from 797, and eventually the Danes conquered a large part of England north and east of a line stretching from Chester to the Thames. At the time of King Alfred, only the land south and west of this line remained in Anglo-Saxon hands. The Danish invasion and subsequent settlement had a considerable

influence on the English language, and many words were borrowed into English, especially into the dialects of the north.

After the Norman conquest in 1066, French became the spoken language of the aristocracy in England, while Latin was adopted as the main written language. English was still spoken by the lower orders of society, but the old written tradition eventually collapsed, and few English written records survive for 200 years after about 1150. French remained in use for some 300 years, until it was gradually replaced by English after the middle of the fourteenth century. The kind of English that emerged, however, was strongly influenced by French, and contained a large number of French words and expressions. The French influence can be seen in the language of Chaucer, who died in 1400.

Caxton introduced printing into England in the 1470s, and written texts became much more widely available than before. Printing was the catalyst for the major upheavals of the sixteenth century which were linked in various ways to the Renaissance and the Reformation. It is from about this time that scholars began to write in English instead of Latin, and as a result many Latin words were borrowed into English. English literature flourished at the end of the sixteenth century, the time of Shakespeare (1564–1616). The Authorized Version of the English Bible was published in 1611.

Modern Standard English can be traced to about the time of Chaucer, but was for a long time variable in spelling, in the use of words, and in the details of English grammar. After the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, there was considerable interest in fixing the language, and in 1712 Jonathan Swift proposed the setting up of an Academy to do this. By default, however, it was left to scholars to decide on what should be included in Standard English. Johnson's dictionary of 1755 did much to standardize spellings and fix the meanings of words. Several grammars were produced, among the more influential being Lowth's grammar of 1762. From the 1760s there was increasing interest in fixing a standard of English pronunciation, which resulted in a tradition of pronouncing dictionaries, of which the most influential was Walker's dictionary of 1791. It was not until the present century that a standard pronunciation was described in detail. This is Daniel Jones's *Received pronunciation*, which was adopted by the BBC in the 1920s as a standard for broadcasting.

1.2 Language and social change

Even from this broadly sketched outline it is immediately clear that the history of the language has been determined in various ways by social change. For most of the 1500 years of its history English has been subjected to a pattern of continuous small-scale change interrupted by major

events which have brought about dramatic and sudden change. It is these major discontinuities that enable us to divide the history of the language into convenient 'periods'. The first of these continued until shortly after the Norman conquest and is known as *Old English*. The period of French domination is the *Middle English* period, and finally, from about the time of the introduction of printing, when the language becomes recognizably similar to the modern language, it is possible to talk of *Modern English*. In order to understand the details of language change, it is important to investigate the kind of social changes that are involved and how they can bring about changes in the language.

Language contact

The English language has not existed in isolation and has always been in close contact with other European languages. The effect of contact may be to determine which of several languages is used in particular social situations. Conquest by foreign invaders is inevitably followed by the introduction of the languages of the invaders, and this can take several forms. The new language may take hold permanently, as in the case of Anglo-Saxon (see section 2.3), or the invaders may eventually give up their language, as in the case of the Danes (see section 3.4) and the Normans (see section 4.3). Where several languages are in use simultaneously, they may have different functions: for example, after the Norman conquest English and French were used as vernaculars, and Latin was used as the language of record (see section 4.2).

When a language is given up, its users may transfer some of its patterns into the new language. In this way foreign influence has peaked when Danes adopted Anglo-Saxon (see section 3.4), when bureaucrats began to use English rather than French (see section 4.4), and when scholars began to write in English rather than Latin (see section 5.3). The process of adopting features of another language is known as *borrowing*, and the most readily borrowed items are words. English has thousands of words borrowed from Danish, French and Latin. In more recent centuries words have been borrowed from all over the globe as a result of mercantile contact and imperial expansion. 商人的。

Contact must be taken into account when we consider the origin of the English language. It is self-evident that it is not a single object with a single origin. English vocabulary, expressions and idioms come from a wide range of sources, mainly Latin, French and Germanic, but also Hindi, Hungarian and native American and Australian languages. English pronunciation is largely Anglo-Saxon, but also in part Danish and French. English grammar is basically Germanic, but it has been modified by French and Latin.

Language and power

Language is an important factor in the maintenance of power, and an understanding of power relations is important in tracing the history of a language. In the medieval period, the relevant power was possessed by the church. The important language was Latin, and written English was moulded according to the language practices of the church. Most of our modern literacy practices were closely modelled on those originally developed for Latin. When the power of the church was challenged by the growing power of the state, the prestige of Latin was recreated in English, and the new language of power was a Latinate form of English.

For much of the modern period, English was the language of the English national state, as it grew from a small kingdom to a major empire. The growth of the nation state, the cult of nationalism at the court of Elizabeth, the seventeenth-century revolutions, and worldwide expansion are all reflected in the history of the language. When English was an unimportant vernacular, it was associated with the common people, but after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 it was the language of the 'politest part of the nation'. Soon there was a widespread belief that the common people did not speak proper English at all. Since the middle of the present century power has shifted away from Britain to the United States, and new technologies are creating new relationships which will affect the language in the next millennium in ways we cannot even guess.

A shift of power does not of itself bring about language change, and is mediated by intellectual change, in that shifts of power can affect the basic assumptions people make about their language. Some of the major changes in English in the sixteenth century resulted from the belief of scholars that it was desirable to use English in place of Latin, and from their deliberate efforts to bring change about. The shift of power from the aristocracy to the middle class is reflected in the eighteenth-century concept of politeness (chapter 9), which in turn led to the 'fixing' of standard written English (see section 9.5). The increasing economic power of the working class led to the concept of the Queen's English (see section 10.5) and a narrowed definition of acceptable pronunciation (see section 10.4). In the late twentieth century the assertion and recognition of the rights of women have led to a marked change in the use of the pronouns *he*, *she* and *they*, and of nouns referring to human beings, such as *poetess* and *chairman*.

Language and fashion

In addition to changes which have an identifiable social origin, there is a large mass of changes which have been the result of prestige and fashion. Although we can never find out how or why some particular innovations occur in the first place, we can nevertheless trace their spread over several

generations. For example, much of the current variation in English pronunciation follows the loss of the [r]¹ sound after a vowel in words such as *sure*, *square* or *cart*. This can be traced back in some detail to the fourteenth century (Wyld, 1920). The nature of the evidence is such that we can infer that a new form has emerged, but we are given no idea who started the new fashion or why. For example, when the captain in Thackeray's *Vanity fair* says *I'm shaw*, we can infer that he uses the new form of *sure* rhyming with *law* rather than the old form rhyming with *bluer*, but we do not know how this new form arose in the first place.

Innovations spread along lines of prestige. The capital imitates the fashions of the court, and the provincial towns imitate the capital. The farmer going to market comes into contact with the more prestigious speech of the town. Of course not all innovations begin at court, and the farmer will come across more local and regional changes. But these are unlikely to spread against the tide of prestige, and will remain local dialect forms (see section 9.2 under *Provincial English*). Innovations eventually spread to the limits of the sphere of influence of the place in which they arise, and bring about within that area a greater degree of linguistic conformity.

In addition to these geographical changes, we have to take into account age differences and the effects of education. Young people adopt new styles of speech for the same reasons as they adopt new styles of dress and other social habits. Traditionally young people adopted the new forms as they came into fashion in their locality, but this pattern began to change with the introduction of mass education. Teachers have sought to teach children what they regarded as the 'correct' forms of English, with the result that most people are aware of a clash between the English that comes naturally and the English they have been taught formally. The pattern is now changing again as the 'younger generation' is constructed by the mass media as an identifiable group. The long-term effects of this are still impossible to predict, but already there has emerged a kind of speech which is neither localized nor based on school norms, and called *Estuary English* (see section 11.2 under *Estuary English*). The domain within which patterns of prestige occur has become global.

Because language plays an important role in English society, there have always been significant differences between the language habits of people with power and prestige and the mass of the population. Habits of language – such as dress, diet and gesture – have themselves been categorized as prestigious or non-prestigious, and the prestigious habits of one generation have become the arbitrary conventions of the next.

1. The square brackets are used to enclose pronunciations.

Language and technology

Language change is facilitated by the development of new technology, in particular technology that leads to improved communications. The effect of technology on language and society depends on who has the power to control the direction of change. In this respect it is two-edged: in the short term it reinforces existing authority, but in the longer term it can alter the distribution of power.

The introduction of printing made possible the development of a written language which became the national standard for England, and later the basis for the modern worldwide Standard English. At first publishers worked for their ecclesiastical and aristocratic masters (see section 4.5), but within 50 years it was clear that the press had generated a new international form of power beyond the control of church and state. Censorship in England at the time of Henry VIII offered a business opportunity to foreign publishers (see section 5.4 under *Bible translations*).

Spoken language was deeply affected by the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The turnpikes, canals and railways constructed for the transport of freight also brought people into contact, and brought them to the industrial towns. The speech of most people in England is now related to the dialect of one of the major conurbations rather than the local village in which they live (see section 10.3 under *Urban dialects*) and the urban dialects of England are much more homogeneous than the older rural dialects.

Broadcasting and other forms of mass communications developed in the early twentieth century had an initial effect analogous to that of printing, particularly in the spread of Received Pronunciation in Britain (see section 11.2). This has brought about increasing uniformity in speech in England during the present century (see section 10.4), but already the power to control pronunciation has passed from Britain to the United States (see section 11.1). It is too early to predict the longer-term effects of computer-based speech technology and the use of English on the Internet (see section 11.4).

1.3 *Language, evolution and progress*

The major upheavals that punctuate the history of the language were brought about by social events which were not themselves intrinsically involved with language. Social unrest associated with the poll tax in the late fourteenth century eventually brought about the prohibition of the use of English in the area of religion (see section 5.1). Caxton set up his printing press to make money (see section 4.5), not to contribute to the English language. The growth of urban dialects (see section 10.3 under

Urban dialects) was a by-product of the industrial revolution. It would be naïve to imagine these events as the unfolding of a master plan with the English society of the 1990s, or perhaps the 1890s, as its ultimate goal. It would be naïve *a fortiori* to imagine a long-term plan guiding change in the language.

Nevertheless, the notion that sets of changes are connected is widespread, and underlies many beliefs about change in language. It is often claimed, for instance, that the language has in some way improved or deteriorated. This idea can be traced to the sixteenth century (see section 6.5), the fourteenth century (see section 4.3) and indeed to the ancient world. Linguists today still talk about the ‘development’ of the phonological system or the verbal system, as though sounds and verbs had a sense of historical direction. This has a very real effect on the way they interpret language change, such as sound changes (Milroy, 1994: 25).

Improvement and decay

It is important to realize that, before the middle of the nineteenth century, assumptions about language change followed logically from conventional religious and intellectual beliefs. As it was then understood, a major event in the history of the world was the confusion of languages which followed the building of the tower of Babel by the sons of Noah, calculated to have been in about 2218 BC (Genesis 11: 1–9). This gave a scale of roughly 4000 years for the whole history of human language. The ancient world of Greece and Rome, and for that matter the Old Testament, stretched at least half of the way back. It is thus possible to understand why scholars had such respect for the classical languages, and interpreted change as decay and corruption. There was also a belief that Noah’s third son, Japheth, was not involved in Babel, and so his language, and the languages of his descendants, remained pure and uncorrupted. Some linguists went on the trail of Japhetic, as it was called. Van Gorp claimed in 1555 that German was spoken in the Garden of Eden before the fall (see section 6.1 under *Saxon and classical*). Parson’s *Remains of Japhet* appeared as late as 1767. The default view that change is inherently bad (see, for example, sections 8.2–8.3) is sometimes given an apparently rational explanation, for example that people borrow too many French or Latin words (see section 7.1).

The Babel story does not of course explain the opposite belief, namely that the language has improved, which typically coincides with social events considered to be evidence of progress, such as the introduction of printing, the Protestant Reformation, or the Restoration of the monarchy. Commentators tend to look back, not to the immediately preceding years, but to the last generation but one. Caxton, in his late middle age, comments on the problems caused by change and looks back to the English ‘whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne’, and claims that the English he

adopts for his publication is ‘lyghter to be vnderstonde than the olde and aucyent englysshe’. Dryden looks back with satisfaction on the improvement in the language since the time of Shakespeare. Swift, by contrast, is dismayed by the deterioration in the language since the ‘Great Rebellion of forty-two’. In the 1990s it is sometimes alleged that the language has decayed with respect to some time early in the century, as though language decline had somehow followed the decline of the British empire.

The golden age

A variant of the view of improvement or corruption of languages is that languages rise to a peak and then decay. The classical example is set by Latin, the Golden Latin of Cicero and the Augustan Age being followed by Silver Latin, and eventually the Romance vernaculars. There is still a widespread feeling that English peaked at the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign (see section 6.5), the outstanding linguistic monuments of this golden age being of course the Bible and Shakespeare. Writers in the reign of Queen Anne believed that they themselves were using English at its peak, and sometimes this claim has rather uncritically been taken at face value. Even language historians have used in all seriousness terms such as ‘the Augustan Age’ (McKnight, 1928: chapter XIII) and ‘the century of prose 1660–1760’ (Gordon, 1966: chapter 13).

Closely associated with the concept of the golden age is the notion that the language must be defended against the barbarian. It is always worth asking who are the barbarians, and what is the nature of their barbarism. For Sprat (see section 8.1 under *The language of science*) and Dryden (see section 8.2) the barbarians were Puritans. For Defoe (see section 8.3) barbarism was swearing, while for Addison it was the omission of relative pronouns. Swift (1712) warns against the barbarians, but is not clear who exactly they were. Judging by Oldmixon’s reply (1712) they were probably Whigs. Present-day complaints that standards of English have declined adduce evidence which makes it clear that the barbarians are the working class (see section 10.3), and by implication look back to the golden age before mass education. King Alfred, in the preface to his translation of *Cura pastoralis*, looks back to a golden age of English literacy, before it was destroyed by barbarians from across the North Sea.

Language evolution

The theory of evolution has exerted a profound influence on the thinking of language scholars. If evolution is linked to a belief in human progress, it is easy to interpret change as progress towards a goal. Natural evolution can be seen as a progress towards *homo sapiens*. In much the same way, language evolution can be seen as a progress towards Standard English.