

The Story of English 6: Middle English

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The period we generally refer to as Middle English is roughly between two major battles, in which two English kings were killed in action – King Harold at Hastings in 1066 and Richard III at Bosworth in 1485. After the first battle, William I ascended the throne of England, and the second set the scene for King Henry VII to establish the Tudor line of kingship. For convenience, we say that Middle English is from around 1150, when the impact of the Norman Conquest became well visible, till 1500, which adumbrated the dawn of English Renaissance.

This was a period of great changes in the English language, both as a result of the Conquest, and as a continuation of tendencies that had begun in Old English prior to 1066. These changes considerably affected the Middle English sound system, grammar and vocabulary. A considerable number of Old English words were lost forever as they were replaced by words adapted or borrowed from French. At the beginning of the Middle English period, the language was very different from the English spoken today, and even Chaucer's English of a few centuries

Whan that Apryll with his houres rote
The droghte of March hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swith licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours y-ronne,
And smale fowels maken melodye,

later (see image), reads like a distinct language which needs to be learned. By the close of the age, however, English had become very much like that of today.

For over a century after the Norman Conquest, English was pushed to a status inferior to that of French and Latin. Things changed eventually, and by the fourteenth century, English had found its way back into universal use, and in another century French had almost totally disappeared. The contribution of writers like John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer played a major role in this reestablishment of English. John Wycliffe's translation of the Bible, copies of which were widely in circulation in the late fourteenth century, contributed immensely to popularize English. The language slowly returned to the palace, to the courts of law, and eventually to the schools.

The most significant change in English language during this period was the great reduction of inflections. The endings of nouns, adjectives and verbs changed considerably. In nouns, much of the word endings disappeared and only –s for showing plural remained. The decay of inflections in nouns and adjectives made it necessary to depend less on gender-related suffixes, and more on word order and the use of prepositions. There was a corresponding loss of inflections in pronouns, where several forms indicative of different gender, number and case disappeared in most dialects of Middle English.

Nearly a third of the strong verbs in Old English died out during this period. Strong verbs (usually called irregular verbs) show tense difference by changing the vowel of the base form; for example, *give/gave* and *stick/stuck*. This was most common during Old English and early Middle English. Many of these were systematically replaced by ‘weak’ verbs. Weak verbs (more commonly called regular verbs) show tense change by adding **-ed**, **-d**, or **-t** to the base form of the verb (for example, *call/called* and *walk/walked*).

The Norman rulers and their kith and kin who settled in English towns after the Conquest spoke a variety of French known as “Anglo-Norman”. This variety died out about two hundred years later, after exerting a long and profound influence upon English. In the 13th and 14th centuries, English was exposed to a new wave of French influence; this time it came from Parisian French, a variety of a more cultivated, literary kind.

The effect of these successive and overlapping waves was seen in a large number of French words in Middle English. Nearly all the words relating to the government and administration of England are French by origin: *assembly, authority, chancellor, council, counsel, country, court, crown, exchequer, govern*. Close to this group are words related to the feudal system and

words indicating titles and ranks of the nobility: *baron, count, countess, duchess, duke*. A good number of words belong to the domain of law and governance, which were controlled by the Normans: *acquit, accuse, attorney, case, cause, condemn, court, crime, damage, defendant, false*. Several other French words in English are related to the Church and religion: *abbey, altar, archangel, Bible, baptism, chapel*.

The setting up of Caxton’s printing press in 1476 led to the partial standardising of all the new grammatical conventions, the vast changes in vocabulary and the features of spelling. Of the major Middle English dialects, East Midland emerged as the prestigious variety of the period, replacing West Saxon of the Old English period. East Midland became predominant in London, which was fast developing as the capital of the country, and this London dialect which was precisely a northern variant of East Midland, assumed further significance in the coming centuries, and it is from this variety that the ‘standard’ Modern English evolved.

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[Editor’s Note: *This is part of a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.*]

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