

The Story of English 8: Chaucer and Caxton

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In Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The White Company* (1891), we see King Edward III speaking French to the members of his retinue. Chaucer was born around 1340, during the reign of this king, who was still speaking French some three centuries after the Norman Conquest. Chaucer died in 1400 during the reign of Henry IV, and we find the next king, Henry V, presented as being more comfortable with English than French, in the Shakespearean play. Those were times when England was strongly trilingual, with French, Latin, and English playing major roles in the country's socio-political life.

Chaucer's writings offer a very sound linguistic profile of a well-educated man of the Middle Ages, who was proficient in all three languages and wrote in all three. His books written in English were well received during and after his times, and have come down to us with a fund of samples, not only of the English of the times, but also its varieties. The different characters of *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, speak slightly variant forms of Middle English, in terms of both register and dialects, thus offering major insights into the linguistic features of ME. Moreover, Chaucer's English works gave a major thrust to the language, with their wide popularity among the people which had a major impact on the sustenance and revival of the English language, and its reestablishment as the official language of the land.

Of course, English would never be the same

as King Alfred's. It had got considerably altered with the French loan words, French grammatical conventions, and French impact on the spelling system. It had lost much of its inflexions, and it was fast becoming highly non-phonetic. It had become a strange mix of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Roman linguistic features, a heterogeneity so strange that it perhaps makes English unique among world languages.

Equally important is the role played by William Caxton (c. 1422 – c. 1491) in this return of prestige to English. Johannes Gutenberg had set up a printing press using 'moveable type' technology in 1450 in Germany, and Caxton got interested in this during his visits to the continent. In 1473 he set up a press in Belgium and the first ever book to be printed in the English language, *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, was produced here. Caxton himself had translated this book, and it became the first of several English books and English translations to be printed and circulated widely by him. Coming back to England, he set up a press at Westminster in 1476, and it is believed that *The Canterbury Tales* was the very first book to be printed there. Printing made it possible to produce books in large numbers in remarkable speed compared to the painstaking and laborious process of writing out manuscript copies. It also made books more affordable.

Caxton devotedly translated a good number of books into English. But despite his

devotion to the language, he was not particularly good at it and all his weaknesses passed into the works he printed, including several misunderstandings and large scale transmission of French words into the translations. He also had problems with choosing standard expressions, as he himself noted in his translation of the *Aeneid* in 1490, on how a lady in Kent did not understand the English of a man from northern England. Here is a modern English version of Caxton's lines about this anecdote:

And he (the merchant from north) asked specifically for 'eggys', and the good woman said that she spoke no French, and the merchant got angry for he could not speak French either, but he wanted eggs and she could not understand him. And then at last another person said that he wanted 'eyren'. Then the good woman said that she understood him well. (William Caxton, Eneydos, 1490, www.bl.uk)

To Caxton, however, goes the credit for

standardising the English language through printing, homogenising regional dialects, and largely adopting the London dialect. This also led to further regularisation of inflection and syntax, and a greater gap between spelling and pronunciation.

Thus, the 15th century fraught with the protracted war with France, and bitter internal battles between the families of York and Lancaster, also saw the closure of Middle English, and the standardisation of English to a great extent. This standardisation can be seen by comparing the measure of difference between Chaucer's English and that of Shakespeare's with that between Elizabethan English and the current English used in the UK. The former is much greater than the latter.

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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.]

Checklist for Manuscript Review

1. Does this article present and/or discuss **issues that are important and relevant** to the teaching and learning of English in an ESL/EFL context?
2. Is the **title** clear, short and appropriate for the content of the article?
3. Is the **abstract** brief, clear, inclusive and consistent with the content of the article?
4. Is the **introduction** relevant, meaningful and purposeful?
5. Is the **literature review** relevant to the article and focussed?
6. Does the article establish a clear **rationale** for the study and state the **problem** clearly?
7. Are the **techniques and tools** used appropriate for the study?
8. Are the **results** clearly presented and discussed?
9. Are the **findings** based on a robust analysis of the data and clearly presented?
10. Are the **conclusions** appropriate and reasonable, and linked to other studies on the topic?
11. Are **implications** of the findings discussed in the article?
12. Are the **references** appropriate, current, sufficient and consistent with in-text citations?