

The Story of English 5: The Normans Land

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Until the end of the eleventh century, the word *apple* could refer to any fruit, not just the lovely, red, aromatic one we fondly call *apple* today. In other words, *apple* meant *fruit* in Old English, as the French word *fruit* was not there in English at that point in its history. *Fruit* and a host of other new words flooded the English linguistic scene following the defeat of the last Anglo Saxon king, Harold Godwinson, in the battle that took place in 1066 at Hastings, some eighty kilometres south-west of Dover. And the impact of this on the English language went much beyond the addition of thousands of new words and the replacement of several thousand others.

William, the Duke of Normandy, believed he had a claim to the throne of England and he was mortified when he heard Harold had become king on the death of Edward the Confessor. He swiftly planned an invasion of England, but had to wait for a few months before the ships could have the right wind that would take his army to the English shores. The legendary arrow that passed through an eye and touched the brain of Harold marked the beginning of the Norman takeover of the British islands, and it was a tremendous event as far as English language is concerned.

The Bayeux Tapestry, which is a 70- metre long embroidered cloth, depicts the events

leading up to the Battle of Hastings. Believed to be created some years after the battle, this historical relic is still on display in a museum in Normandy.



Normandy was the North-western part of France, where a dialect of French was spoken, which was different from that in Paris and other parts of France. Soon after his conquest of England, William systematically replaced the Anglo Saxon aristocracy with his own Norman kith and kin, and their language inevitably supplanted English as the language of administration and law. English continued to be the language of the masses, but it drastically lost its prestige, as Latin and French were used by the king, the nobility and the clergy, and in those days, those were the only people who mattered!

It was in the few centuries following 1066 that the language of the Anglo Saxons

completely lost its relatively homogenous character. Norman-French words began to flow into the language in hundreds, Norman scribes brought in French practices into English spelling, and this paved the way for the perpetual spelling-pronunciation confusion that we complain of about English. Much of the terminology related to governance, law, military and aristocratic life were either borrowed from the conquerors or systematically replaced by French equivalents. There is the oft-cited example of how the names of animals, like *cow*, *sheep*, *calves*, *pig* and *deer* are all Anglo Saxon, as these were encountered alive only by the peasants, while the meat of the same animals bears French names, like *beef*, *mutton*, *veal*, *pork* and *venison*, as only the French aristocrats had the privilege to savour them.

Even as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, written in Old English, continued to be updated into the twelfth century, the *Domesday Book*, created under the stringent orders of William, and completed in 1086, was written in Medieval Latin. Since the accession of William as the King of England on Christmas Day in 1066, the English king also came to be the ruler of several French domains. There happened a continuous influx of French-speaking nobles and clergy into England, and the relegation of English language to a tertiary status was a natural result.

The fate of English emerged to be totally different from that of the other Germanic languages today, and it almost assumed the appearance of a Romance language, due to the Norman takeover of the land. Though English still shows evident traces of Celtic and Scandinavian, the impact of French is huge. For a century and a half, it looked as if English would be wiped out of the land. But, over decades, the Norman kings of England began to lose their French holdings and by early 13th century King John finally lost all his French dominions, though he is remembered in history as John Lackland for another reason.

It gradually became the need of the king, the nobility and the clergy to learn and support the native language. Many of the French aristocrats began to seek English wives, and there was an amalgamation and resettlement of the Anglo Saxons and the Normans. Though in early eleventh century it appeared as if English was on the verge of effacement, by the dawn of the following century, the signs of reestablishment were quite evident, and English prevailed eventually, going on to be the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare and the Authorised Version of the Bible.

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