

Development of the national literary English language in the XVI-XVIII centuries

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The formation of the national English language, or Standard English, is considered to date from the period between the 15th and 17th centuries. After that time the language continued to change, yet, henceforth one can speak of the evolution of Standard English instead of tracing the similar or different trends in the history of its dialects.

We must mention at least two of the external factors that led to this development: the unification of the country and the progress of culture. Other historical events, such as the increased foreign contacts, produced a more specific kind of influence on the language: they affected the word stock.

The 15th and 16th centuries saw striking changes in the life of the country. Trade had extended beyond the local boundaries and apart from farming and cattle-breeding an important wool trade and industry was carried on in the country-side. As the demand for wool and cloth rose, Britain began to export woollen cloth produced by the first big enterprises, the «manufactures».

The changes in the economic and social conditions were accompanied by the intermixture of people coming from different regions, the growth of towns with a mixed population, and the strengthening of social ties between the various regions. All these processes played an important role in the unification of the English language.

Towards the end of the 16th century the period of feudal disunity in Britain came to an end, and Britain became a centralized state.

The rise of a new vigorous social class — the bourgeoisie — proved an enormous stimulus to the progress of learning, science, literature and art. Of all the outstanding achievements of this great age the invention of printing had the most immediate effect on the development of the language, its written form in particular. The first book in the English language was printed in the year 1476 by the first En-

English printer William Caxton (his own translation of the Story of Troy), *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*.

The sixteenth century was full of changes in Europe. The Protestant churches developed, Europeans began to explore America, Asia and Africa, and creativity and learning in all areas flowered. In England, the English language grew enormously in order to express a huge number of new ideas.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century Latin was the language of learning in all Europe, and it was seen as richer than English and the other spoken European languages. However, with the growth of education, the invention of printing and the new interest in learning, this began to change. More and more people wanted to read books by Roman and Greek writers, and in England they wanted to read them in English. So these books were translated, and other books about learning were written in English. Using English meant that a writer could reach a larger audience, as one sixteenth-century printer explained to a writer who preferred Latin:

Though, sir, your book be wise and full of learning, yet... it will not be so saleable.

However, the acceptance of English as a language of learning was not complete until the end of the seventeenth century. For example, in 1687, Sir Isaac Newton wrote his *Principia* in Latin, but fifteen years later he wrote *Opticks* in English.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, writers in English borrowed about 30,000 words from about fifty languages, mainly to describe new things and ideas, and many of them are still used today. This huge growth of vocabulary was the main change in English at this time. The new words came mainly from Latin; for example, *desperate*, *expensive*, *explain*, *fact*. Other important sources for new words were French, Italian, Greek, Spanish and Portuguese. And as the European exploration of the world widened, so words came into English from America, Africa and Asia. For example, *chocolate* and *tomato* came from Mexico, *banana* from Africa, *coffee* from Turkey, and *caravan* from Persia.

Not everyone agreed with the practice of borrowing, particularly of Latin words. Some thought that all the strange words were hard to understand and unnecessary. English could express everything quite well without all the new words. The writers were only showing how much Latin they knew. One man, Sir John Cheke, wrote in 1557:

I am of this opinion that our tung shold be written cleane ... unmixt... with borowing of other tungs. (*I think we should write English without using words from other languages.*)

But the borrowing continued, and the new words that survived slowly lost their strangeness.

New words were also added to English in other ways. People were adventurous with language: they used verbs as nouns (*laugh* and *scratch*), or nouns as verbs, or made adjectives from nouns (*shady* from *shade*). They put two words together (*chairman*), or they added parts of words: un- to *comfortable*, for example.

The age of Queen Elizabeth I (Queen of England 1558-1603) was one of a great flowering of literature.

There were the poets Spenser and Sidney, and the writers of plays Marlowe, Jonson, and, of course, William Shakespeare. [1]

Shakespeare is considered the greatest writer of plays. In them - and in his poems - he explored the complications of human nature and expressed his understanding of them in extraordinarily rich language. He had the largest vocabulary of any English writer and was a great inventor of words and expressions. He created about two thousand words, and a huge number of expressions which are now part of everyday English. For example he invented: *it's early days* (*it is too soon to know what will happen*); *in my mind's eye* [*in my imagination*]; *tongue-tied* (*unable to speak because you are shy*); *the long and the short of it* (*all that needs to be said about something*). His success and fame during his lifetime meant that his plays had an enormous effect on English. [1]

As well as taking in a huge number of new words, English developed in other ways too. People began to use *do* with a main verb. For example, you could say I

know not or *I do not know*. You could say *I know* or *I do know*. And you could say *know you?* or *do you know?* In the seventeenth century, it became more common to use *do* with a main verb in questions and negative sentences, and to leave it out of the positive sentences. Another verb change was the ending of the third person singular in the present tense. By 1700 the *-th* ending was no longer used and all verbs took *-s*; for example *loveth* was now *loves*.

The big growth in vocabulary and the flowering of literature happened when England was politically quite peaceful. However, in the middle of the seventeenth century this peace was destroyed, and the changes that followed had some interesting effects on the language.

The earliest date suggested as the time of the formation of the spoken standard is the end of the 17th century; the type of speech used in London and in the Universities was unanimously proclaimed the best type of English. The phoneticians and grammarians recommend it as a model of correct English. Naturally we possess no direct evidence of the existence of a spoken standard, since all the evidence comes from written sources.

From the 11th to the 16th century the English language spread to the whole of the British Isles. At the end of the 16th century England founded her first colonies abroad; Newfoundland was captured in 1583. The conquest of the West Indies begun about the same time extended over a hundred years. The 17th century saw the English colonization of the New World (North America). It began with the famous voyage of the *Mayflower* in 1620, which carried the first settlers to Massachusetts. Many colonists arrived from Ireland and Scotland. The English dialects of all these areas formed the basis of American English, which has now become a second standard form of English.

Charles I, James I's son, was not a popular king, and in 1642 civil war broke out between those who supported him and those who did not. Charles I was killed in 1649, and England, Wales and Scotland remained without a king until 1660, when Charles II (Charles I's son) returned to England. Charles II died in 1685 and his brother, James II, became king. But James II was so unpopular that in 1688 he left

England and he was replaced by his daughter and her husband, Mary and William of Orange.

All these political events made people dislike change and wish for order and regularity in their lives, and some people also wanted more regularity in their language. The great growth in new words between 1530 and 1660 (the fastest in the history of the language) had left people uncertain. What was happening to the language? If so many foreign and newly-formed words kept on being added to it, would it remain English?

In 1635 the Academie Francaise was created to control changes in the French language. Some people in England also wanted to create an official organization to control the English language. One of these people was the author Jonathan Swift, who wanted to 'fix' the language by making grammar rules, forbidding some words, making others correct, and deciding on spelling.

The idea never succeeded, partly because other people realized that changes in a language were unavoidable. But it did make people think about the need for everyone to use the same spelling and grammar. As a result, different spelling guides, dictionaries and grammar books began to appear.

Although printing had introduced some regularity in spelling, in the sixteenth century spelling remained very varied, even for personal names. For example, there are six known examples of Shakespeare's name that he wrote himself, and in each one he spelt his name differently. People invented their own spellings, which usually showed their own pronunciation. Other variations were introduced to show that words came from Latin. For example, the c was added in *scissors* to follow the Latin spelling, *cisorium*. In the end, this freedom to change spellings led to confusion.

In the seventeenth century, the appearance of the first English dictionaries slowly brought about more regularity in spelling. During the eighteenth century, ways of spelling that differed from these dictionaries were seen to be incorrect and a sign of stupidity or bad education. Even today, many people do not like making spelling mistakes, and often use the spell-check tool on their computers.

Dictionaries were not unknown in the seventeenth century, but they were Latin-English ones. The first English-English dictionary, which appeared in 1604, was a collection of about three thousand 'hard English words'. Similar collections followed, and in the eighteenth century dictionary writers began trying to include more everyday words, not just difficult ones.

In 1755 Samuel Johnson produced *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and it was an immediate success. Johnson's choice of words was wide, and he showed how each word was used by giving examples from literature. The dictionary was not perfect: sometimes Johnson's explanations were harder to understand than the words themselves, some expressed his personal opinions, and some words were not included because he didn't like them. Also he could not fit in all his examples, so there were not as many examples for the words at the end of the dictionary as there were for those at the beginning. However, it remained the most important English dictionary in Britain for more than a century.

Guidance with vocabulary and spelling came from dictionaries; guidance with grammar came from various 'grammars'. These grammar books first appeared in the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century a huge number of them were produced. Many of them told the reader how to write and speak 'correctly', which really meant how to use language in the same way as in serious pieces of literature. They were widely used because people wanted to be seen as educated, and so be socially acceptable.

The grammarians writing these books considered the grammar of much ordinary spoken language and of regional dialects (especially Scots) to be wrong and believed that the grammar of English should be the same as that of Latin. For example, they thought that a sentence should not end with a preposition because in Latin it did not. For example, it would be correct to say *I like the town in which I live*, but not *I like the town which I live in*.

Although some people continue to believe that there is only one 'correct' grammar of English, many others believe that all varieties of English are 'correct'. Some grammarians write grammar books very differently today, too; they write

descriptions of how English is actually used, instead of telling us how we should speak or write. [1]

So, one could trace a very long period in the evolution of the English language, with lots of alterations. Thus, by the end of the 18th century the formation of the national literary English language may be regarded as completed, for now it possessed both a Written and a Spoken Standard.

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