A Brief History of the English Language

Old English to Modern English

Before English

The various dialects spoken by the Germanic tribes are known as **Pre-Old English.** The term *England* developed later from the tribal name *Angles,* possibly because this kingdom was dominant. The term *Anglo-Saxon* referred to the West Germanic tribes generally. Old English was not entirely uniform and four main dialects were predominant: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. Nearly all of Old English literature is preserved in the West Saxon dialect.

An Overview

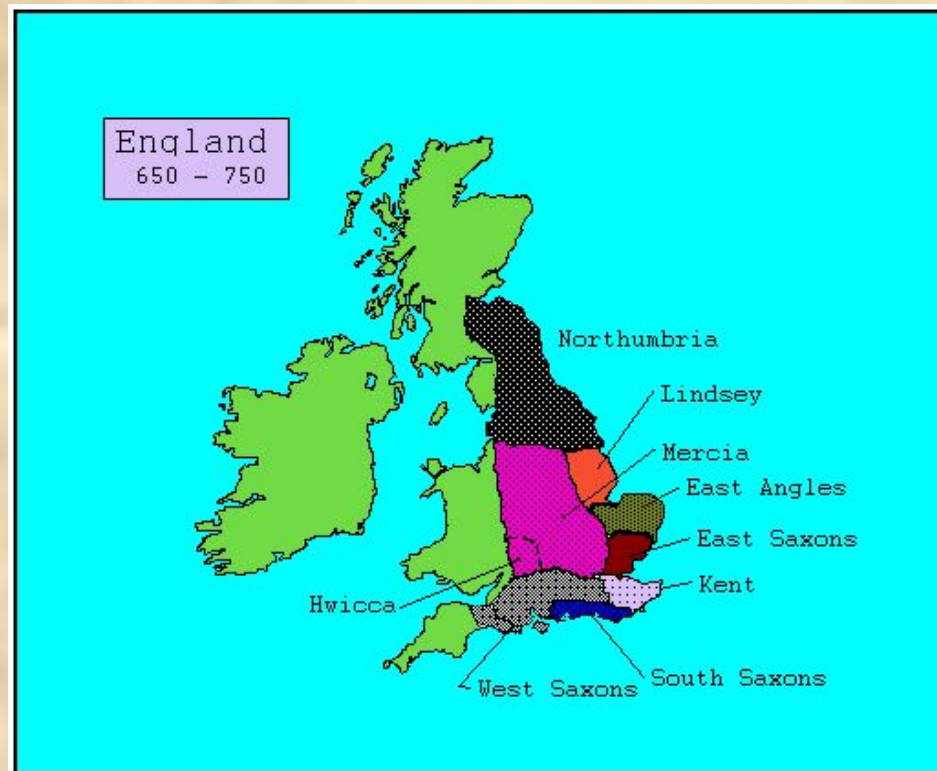**Periods in History of English**

Old English: 449-1066
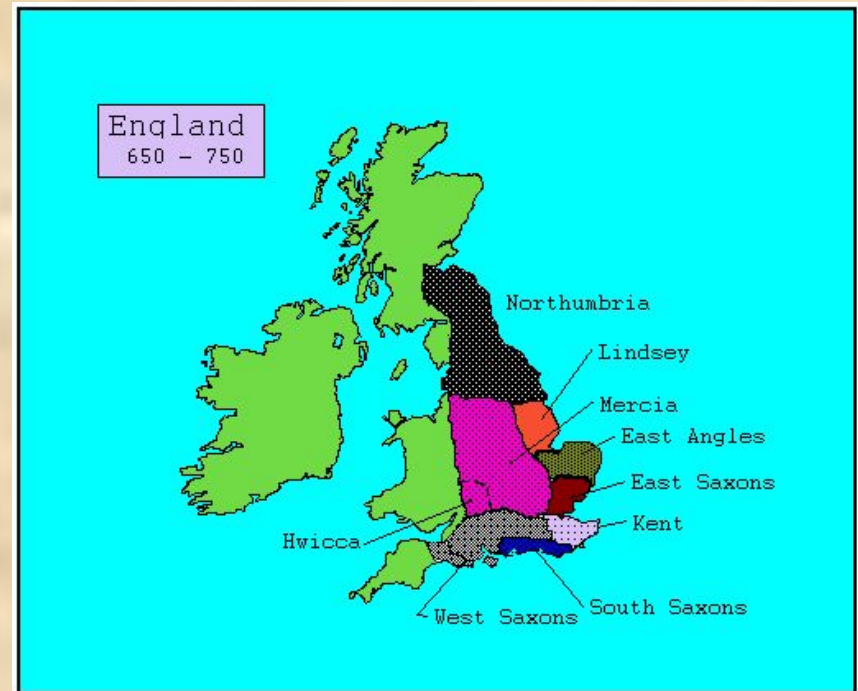Middle English: 1100-1500
Modern English: 1500 on

Old English (500-1066 AD)

West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes— began to settle in the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. They spoke a mutually intelligible language that is called Old English. Four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.

England
650 – 750

Northumbria

Lindsey

Mercia

East Angles

East Saxons

Kent

Hwicca

West Saxons

South Saxons

Old English (500-1066 AD)

These invaders pushed the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants out of what is now England into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, leaving behind a few Celtic words. These Celtic languages survive today in the Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, unfortunately, is, in linguistic terms, now a dead language.

England
650 - 750

Northumbria
Lindsey
Mercia
East Angles
East Saxons
Kent
Hwicca
West Saxons
South Saxons

Influence of Old English

The majority of words in modern English come from foreign, not Old English roots. Only about one sixth of the known Old English words have descendants surviving today. But this is deceptive; Old English is much more important than these statistics would indicate. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have Old English roots. Words like *be*, *water,* and *strong,* for example, derive from Old English roots.

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Beowulf

Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem *Beowulf*, lasted until about 1100, just after the most important event in the development and history of the English language—the Norman Conquest in 1066.
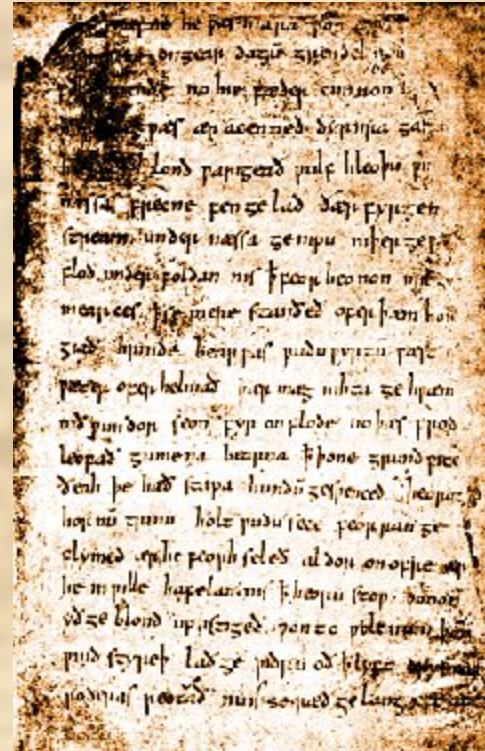
The Lord's Prayer in Old English (c. 1000AD)

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice
gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað   urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

The Norman Conquest and the Development of Middle English (1100-1500)

William the Conqueror invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD.

Norman Influences: Latin

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as *priest*, *vicar*, and *mass* came into the language this way). Now there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.

The Merging of Two Languages

The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, beef and cow. *Beef*, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic *cow*.

Many legal terms, such as *indict*, *jury*, and *verdict* have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts. This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

Middle English: 1100-1500

It was not until the14th century—300 years later—that English became dominant in Britain again. In 1399, King Henry IV became the first king of England since the Norman Conquest whose mother tongue was English. By the end of the 14th Century, the dialect of London had emerged as the standard dialect of what we now call **Middle English**.

Middle English: 1100-1500

The most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.*

Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

The Canterbury Tales

Here bygynneth the Book of the tales of Caunterbury

Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath   perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in   swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is   the flour;

Here begins the Book of the Tales of Canterbury

When April with his showers sweet
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with   liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire   the flower;

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The Canterbury Tales

Whan zephirus eek with his
   sweete breeth
   Inspired hath in every holt
   and heeth
   Tendre croppes, and the
   yonge   sonne
   Hath in the ram his halve
   cours yronne,
   And smale foweles
   maken melodye,
   That slepen al the nyght
   with   open ye
   (so priketh hem nature in
   hir   corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon
   on pilgrimages,

When Zephyr also has, with
   his sweet breath,
   Quickened again, in every
   holt and heath,
   The tender shoots and
   buds,   and the young
   sun
   Into the Ram one half his
   course has run,
   And many little birds
   make   melody
   That sleep through all the
   night with open eye
   (So Nature pricks them
   on to   ramp and rage)-
   Then do folk long to go
   on   pilgrimage,

The Canterbury Tales

And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in   sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of engelond to caunterbury   they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to   seke,
That hem hath holpen whan   tha they were seeke.

And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.
And specially from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,
The holy blessed martyr there   to seek
Who helped them when they   lay so ill.

The Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift was a change in pronunciation that began around 1400 and separates Middle English from Modern English.

In linguistic terms, the shift was rather sudden, the major changes occurring within a century. The shift is still not over, however, vowel sounds are still shortening although the change has become considerably more gradual.

Our Changing Language

Chaucer wrote about his "gentle knight":

In all his life he hasn't never yet said nothing discourteous to no sort of person.

What's right to say today, may be wrong tomorrow!

Early Modern English

The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

The Renaissance brought the revival of classical scholarship and brought many classical Latin and Greek words into the Language. These borrowings were deliberate and many bemoaned the adoption of these "inkhorn" terms. Many survive to this day.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote in modern English. Elizabethan English has much more in common with our language today than it does with the language of Chaucer. Many familiar words and phrases were coined or first recorded by Shakespeare. Some 2,000 words and countless idioms are his.
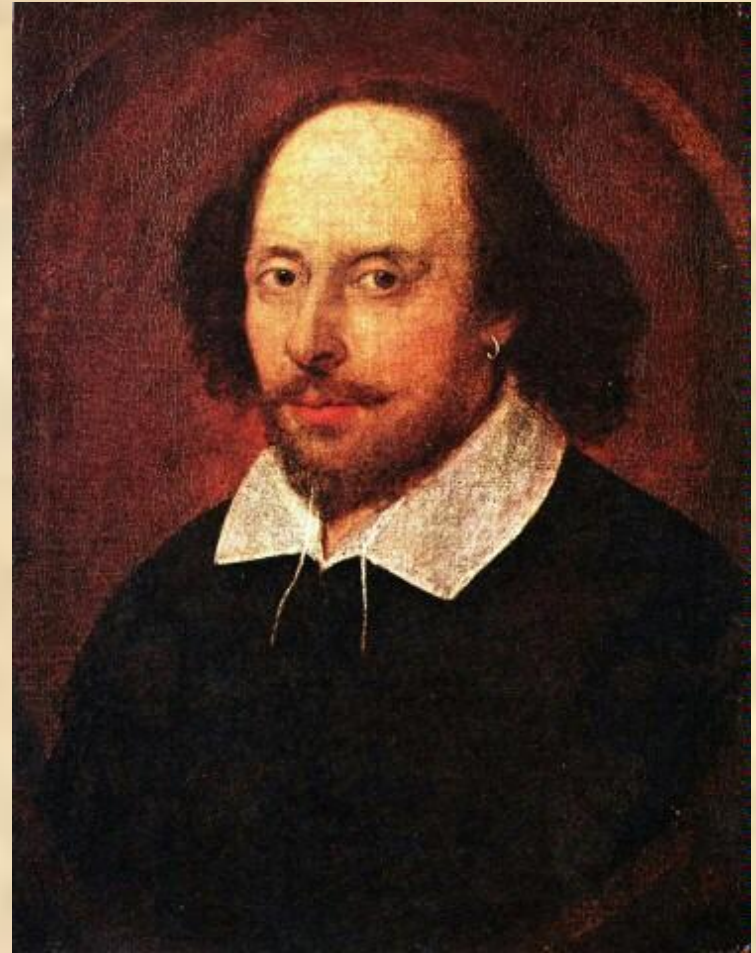
Shakespeare

Newcomers to Shakespeare are often shocked at the number of clichés contained in his plays, until they realize that he coined them and they became clichés afterwards. "One fell swoop," "vanish into thin air," and "flesh and blood" are all Shakespeare's. Words he bequeathed to the language include "critical," "leapfrog," "majestic," "dwindle," and "pedant."

The Influence of the Printing Press

The last major factor in the development of Modern English was the advent of the printing press.

William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1476. Books became cheaper and literacy more common. Publishing for the masses in English became profitable.

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Standardization

The printing press brought standardization to English. The dialect of London, where most publishing houses were located, became the standard.

Spelling and grammar became fixed.

The first English dictionary was published in 1604 (Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall*).

"Standard English"

Many find the term *standard English* to be inaccurate and misleading because it creates a false impression that there exists a single variety of English that all educated Americans speak and write.

Edited written English

Late Modern English (1800-Present)

The principal distinction between early- and late-modern English is vocabulary.

Pronunciation, grammar, and spelling are largely the same.

New words are the result of two historical factors:

- the Industrial Revolution
- the British Empire.

English Vocabulary

There are 600,000 words in the English language.

The average college student may have a vocabulary of 80,000.

Nearly 60% of all he or she says is said with just 100 different words.

Social Economic Status and Vocabulary

"By the time a low-income kid is 4, they've heard 13 million fewer words than upper middle class suburban kids…. Not only do they hear fewer words, it's the types of words….We call it the 'word gap.' You cannot make up for that 13 million fewer words."

--Beth Bye, Director of Early Childhood Education
Capitol Region Education Council, Hartford

Why Should a Teacher Know These Things?