

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL LITERARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Preliminary Remarks

The formation of the national literary English language covers the Early NE period (c. 1475 – 1660). Henceforth we can speak of the evolution of a single literary language instead of the similar or different development of the dialects.

There were at least two major external factors which favoured the rise of the national language and the literary standards: the unification of the country and the progress of culture. Other historical events, such as increased foreign contacts, affected the language in a less general way: they influenced the growth of the vocabulary.

Economic and Political Unification. Conditions for Linguistic Unity

As early as the 13th c., within the feudal system, new economic relations began to take shape. The villain was gradually superseded by the copy-holder, and ultimately, by the rent-paying tenant. With the growing interest in commercial profits, feudal oppression grew and the conditions of the peasants deteriorated. Social discontent showed itself in the famous peasants' rebellions of the 14th and 15th c.

The village artisans and craftsmen travelled about the country looking for a greater market for their produce. They settled in the old towns and founded new ones near big monasteries, on the rivers and at the crossroads. The crafts became separated from agriculture, and new social groups came into being: poor town artisans, the town middle class, rich merchants, owners of workshops and money-lenders.

The 15th and 16th c. saw other striking changes in the life of the country: while feudal relations were decaying, bourgeois relations and the capitalist mode of production were developing rapidly. Trade had extended beyond the local boundaries and in addition to farming and cattle-breeding, an important wool industry was carried on in the countryside. Britain began to export woollen cloth produced by the first big enterprises, the "manufactures". The landowners evicted the peasants and enclosed their land with ditches and fences, turning it into vast pastures.

The new nobility, who traded in wool, fused with the rich townspeople to form a new class, the bourgeoisie, while the evicted farmers, the poor artisans and monastic servants turned into farm labourers, wage workers and paupers.

The changes in the economic and social conditions led to the intermixture of people coming from different regions and to the strengthening of social ties

between the various parts of the country.

Economic and social changes were accompanied by political unification. In the last quarter of the 15th c. England became a centralised state.

At the end of the Hundred Years' War, when the feudal lords and their hired armies came home from France, life in Britain became more turbulent than ever. The warlike nobles, disappointed with their defeat in France, fought for power at the King's Court; continued anarchy and violence broke out into a civil war known as the Wars of the Roses (1455 – 1485). The thirty-year contest for the possession of the crown ended in the establishment of a strong royal power under Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty.

The absolute monarchy of the Tudors was based on a new relation of class forces; the crown had the support of the middle class. Henry VII reduced the power of the old nobles and created a new aristocracy out of the rural and town bourgeoisie. The next step in the creation of an absolute monarchy was to break the monopoly of the medieval Papacy. This was achieved by his successor, Henry VIII (1509 – 1547), who quarrelled with the Pope, declared himself head of the English Church and dissolved the monasteries (the English Reformation, 1529—1536); now the victory of the Crown was complete.

The economic and political unification played a decisive role in the development of the English language.

All over the world the victory of capitalism over feudalism was linked up with the consolidation of people into nations, the formation of national languages and the growth of superdialect forms of language to be used as a national Standard. The rise of capitalism helped to knit together the people and to unify their language.

Progress of Culture. Introduction of Printing

The 15th and 16th c. in Western Europe are marked by a renewed interest in classical art and literature and by a general efflorescence of culture. The rise of a new vigorous social class – the bourgeoisie – proved an enormous stimulus to the progress of learning, science, literature and art.

The universities at Oxford and Cambridge (founded in the 12th c.) became the centres of new humanistic learning. Henry VIII assembled at his court a group of brilliant scholars and artists. Education had ceased to be the privilege of the clergy; it spread to laymen and people of lower social ranks. After the Reformation teachers and tutors could be laymen as well as clergymen.

As before, the main subject in schools was Latin; the English language was labelled as “a rude and barren tongue”, fit only to serve as an instrument in teaching Latin. Scientific and philosophical treatises were written in Latin, which was not only the language of the church but also the language of philosophy and science. The influence of classical languages on English grew and was reflected in the enrichment of the vocabulary.

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. “Artificial writing”, as printing was then called, was invented in Germany in 1438 (by Johann Gutenberg); the first printer of English books was William Caxton.

William Caxton (1422 – 1491) was born in Kent. In 1441 he moved to Flanders, where he spent over three decades of his life. During a visit to Cologne

he learned the method of printing and in 1473 opened up his own printing press in Bruges. The first English book, printed in Bruges in 1475, was Caxton's translation of the story of Troy **RECUYELL OF THE HISTORYES OF TROYE**. A few years later he brought his press over to England and set it up in Westminster, not far outside the city of London. All in all about one hundred books were issued by his press and about a score of them were either translated or edited by Caxton himself.

Among the earliest publications were the poems of Geoffrey Chaucer, still the most popular poet in England, the poems of John Gower, the compositions of John Lydgate, the most voluminous poet of the age, Trevisa's translation of the **POLYCHRONICON**, and others. Both Caxton and his associates took a greater interest in the works of medieval literature than in the works of ancient authors or theological and scientific treatises published by the printers on the continent. About one quarter of his publications were translations from French, e. g.: **RECUYELL OF THE HISTORYES OF TROYE** mentioned above, **GAME AND PLAYE OF THE CHESSE**, the famous romance of knightly adventure **MORTE D'ARTHUR** ("Death of Arthur") by Thomas Malory, one of the last works in this genre.

In preparing the manuscripts for publication William Caxton and his successors edited them so as to bring them into conformity with the London form of English used by their contemporaries. In doing this they sometimes distorted the manuscripts considerably. Their corrections enable us to see some of the linguistic changes that had occurred since the time when the texts were first written.

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of the first printers in fixing and spreading the written form of English. The language they used was the London literary English established since the age of Chaucer and slightly modified in accordance with the linguistic changes that had taken place during the intervening hundred years. With cheap printed books becoming available to a greater number of readers, the London form of speech was carried to other regions and was imitated in the written works produced all over England.

The greatest influence exerted by the printers was that on the written form of the word. Caxton's spelling, for all its irregularities and inconsistencies, was more normalised than the chaotic spelling of the manuscripts. The written forms of many words perpetuated by Caxton were accepted as standard and have often remained unchanged to the present day in spite of the drastic changes in pronunciation. It should be noted that Caxton's spelling faithfully reproduced the spelling of the preceding century and was conservative even in his day.

In conclusion we may recall that so great was the effect of printing on the development of the language that the year 1475 – the date of the publication of the first English book – is regarded as a turning point in English linguistic history and the start of a new period – NE.

Foreign Contacts in the Early New English Period

The Tudors encouraged the development of trade inside and outside the country. The great geographical discoveries (beginning with the discovery of the New World in 1492) gave a new impetus to the progress of foreign trade: English traders set forth on daring journeys in search of gold and treasures. Under the later

Tudors England became one of the biggest trade and sea powers.

The main events of the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) were connected with the rise of merchant capital. Ousting her rivals from many markets England became involved in the political struggle of the European countries for supremacy. Most complicated were her relations with France, Spain and Portugal: in 1588 England defeated the Spanish fleet, the Invincible Armada, thus dealing a final blow to Spain, her main rival in overseas trade and in colonial expansion. In the late 16th c. England founded her first colonies abroad.

The contacts of England with foreign nations, although not necessarily friendly, became closer, which had an inevitable influence on the growth of the vocabulary.

Expansion of English over the British Isles

As Britain consolidated into a single powerful state, it extended its borders to include Wales, Scotland and part of Ireland.

As mentioned before, the partial subjugation of Wales was the last stage of the Norman Conquest. It was not until the 16th c., however, that the annexation was completed. Both during the wars and after the final occupation, the English language penetrated into Wales and partly replaced the native Celtic language; a large proportion of the aboriginal population, however, did not give up their mother tongue and continued to speak Welsh.

The repeated claims of the English kings to be overlords of Scotland were met with protest and revolt. In the early 14th c. Scotland's independence was secured by the victories of Robert Bruce. Feudal Scotland remained a sovereign kingdom until the later Tudors, but the influence of the English language was greater than elsewhere.

Scotland began to fall under English linguistic influence from the 11th c., when England made her first attempts to conquer the territory. The mixed population of Scotland – the native Scots and Picts, the Britons (who had fled from the Germanic invasion), the Scandinavians (who had stayed on after the Scandinavian settlement), and the English (who had gradually moved to the north from the neighbouring regions) – was not homogeneous in language. The Scotch-Gaelic dialect of the Scots was driven to the Highlands, while in Lowland Scotland the Northern English dialect gave rise to a new language, Scottish, which had a chance to develop into an independent language, an offshoot of English. The Scottish tongue flourished as a literary language and produced a distinct literature as long as Scotland retained its sovereignty. After the unification with England under the Stuarts (1603), and the loss of what remained of Scotland's self-government, Scottish was once again reduced to dialectal status. In the subsequent centuries English became both the official and the literary language in Scotland.

Thus by the end of the Early NE period, the area of English had expanded, to embrace the whole of the British Isles with the exception of some mountainous parts of Wales and Scotland, the Isle of Man, Cornwall, and some parts of Ireland, – though even in most of these regions the people were becoming bilingual.

Flourishing of Literature in Early New English (Literary Renaissance)

The growth of the national literary language and especially the fixation of its Written Standard is inseparable from the flourishing of literature known as the English Literary Renaissance.

The beginnings of the literary efflorescence go back to the 16th c. After a fallow period of dependence on Chaucer, literary activity gained momentum in the course of the 16th c. and by the end of it attained such an importance as it had never known before. This age of literary flourishing is known as the “age of Shakespeare” or the age of Literary Renaissance (also the “Elizabethan age” for it coincided roughly with the reign of Elizabeth). The most notable forerunners of the literary Renaissance in the first half of the 16th c. were the great English humanist Thomas More (1476-1535) and William Tyndale, the translator of the Bible. The chief work of Thomas More, UTOPIA was finished in 1516; it was written in Latin and was first translated into English in 1551. In UTOPIA Th. More expressed his opposition to the way of life in contemporary England, which he defined as “a conspiracy of the rich against the poor” and drew a picture of an ideal imaginary society in which equality, freedom and well-being were enjoyed by all. More’s other works were written in English; most interesting are his pamphlets issued during a controversy with W. Tyndale over the translation of the Bible.

William Tyndale was a student at Oxford and Cambridge and a priest in the church. In 1526 he completed a new English translation of the Bible. Both in his translations and original works Tyndale showed himself one of the first masters of English prose. He exerted a great influence not only on the language of the Church but also on literary prose and on the spoken language. The later versions of the Bible, and first of all the Authorised Version — KING JAMES’ BIBLE (produced by a body of translators and officially approved in 1611) was in no small measure based on Tyndale’s translation.

As elsewhere, the Renaissance in England was a period of rapid progress of culture and a time of great men. The literature of Shakespeare’s generation proved exceptionally wealthy in writers of the first order.

William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was the chief of the Elizabethan dramatists as well as a genius whose writings have influenced every age and every country. Shakespeare’s plays were greatly admired in the theatres but less than half of them were printed in his lifetime. The first collected edition of his plays was the Folio of 1623.

It is universally recognised that Shakespeare outclassed all his contemporaries in all genres of drama and poetry (comedies, historical plays, tragedies and sonnets) and surpassed them all in his mastery of the English tongue. His works give an ideal representation of the literary language of his day. His vast vocabulary (amounting to over 20,000 words), freedom in creating new words and new meanings, versatility of grammatical construction reflect the fundamental properties of the language of the period.