

CHRONOLOGICAL DIVISIONS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH. SHORT SURVEY OF PERIODS

The historical development of a language is a continuous uninterrupted process without sudden breaks or rapid transformations. Therefore any periodization imposed on language history by linguists, with precise dates, might appear artificial, if not arbitrary. Yet in all language histories divisions into periods and cross-sections of a certain length, are used for teaching and research purposes. The commonly accepted, traditional periodization divides English history into three periods: Old English (OE), Middle English (ME) and New English (NE). OE begins with the Germanic settlement of Britain (5th c.) and ends with the Norman Conquest (1066); ME begins with the Norman Conquest and ends on the introduction of printing (1475), which is the start of the New English period (NE) which lasts to the present day.

A famous English scholar Henry Sweet divides the three main periods into early, classical, and late. Division into chronological periods is based on two aspects: external and internal (extra-linguistic and intra-linguistic). The following periodization of English history is based on the above-mentioned three periods; it subdivides the history of the English language into seven periods differing in linguistic situation and the nature of linguistic changes.

1. The *first* – pre-written or pre-historical – period, which may be termed *Early Old English*, lasts from the West Germanic invasion of Britain till the beginning of writing, i.e. from the 5th to the end of the 7th c. It is the stage of tribal dialects of the West Germanic invaders (Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians).

The tribal dialects were used for oral communication; there was no written form of English. The English of this period has been reconstructed from the written evidence of other Old Germanic languages, especially Gothic, and from later OE written records.

2. The second historical period extends from the 8th c. till the end of the 11th century. The English language of that time is referred to as *Old English* or *Anglo-Saxon*; it can also be called *Written OE* as compared with the pre-written Early OE period. The tribal dialects gradually changed into local or regional dialects: West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian and Northumbrian. With the rise of the Kingdom of Wessex, the West Saxon dialect prevailed and most written records of this period have survived in this dialect. OE was a typical Old Germanic language, with a purely Germanic vocabulary, and few foreign borrowings. OE was an inflected or “synthetic” language with a well-developed system of morphological categories, especially in the noun and adjective. Therefore, Henry Sweet called OE the “period of full endings”.

3. The *third* period, known as *Early Middle English*, starts after 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, and covers the 12th, 13th and half of the 14th c. It was the stage of the greatest dialectal divergence caused by the feudal system and by foreign influences – Scandinavian and French. Under Norman rule the official language in England was French, or rather its variety called *Anglo-French* or *Anglo-Norman*; it was also the dominant language of literature. The local dialects were mainly used for oral communication and were little employed in writing. Towards the end of the period their literary prestige grew, as English began to displace French in the sphere of writing, as well as in many other spheres.

Early ME was a time of great changes at all the levels of the language, especially in lexis and grammar. English absorbed two layers of lexical borrowings: the Scandinavian element in the North-Eastern area (due to the Scandinavian invasions since the 8th c.) and the French element in the speech of townspeople in the South-East, especially in the upper social classes (due to the Norman Conquest). Numerous phonetic and grammatical changes took place in this period. Grammatical alterations were so drastic that by the end of the period they had transformed English from a highly inflected language into a mainly analytical one. Therefore, H. Sweet called Middle English the period of “leveled endings”.

4. The *fourth* period – from the later 14th c. till the end of the 15th century – embraces the age of Chaucer, the greatest English medieval writer and forerunner of the English Renaissance. We may call it *Late* or *Classical Middle English*. It was the time of the restoration of English to the position of the state and literary language and the time of literary flourishing. The main dialect used in writing and literature was the mixed dialect of London. The literary authority of other dialects was gradually overshadowed by the prestige of the London written language.

In periods of literary efflorescence, like the age of Chaucer, the pattern set by great authors becomes a more or less fixed form of language. Chaucer’s language was a recognized literary form, imitated throughout the 15th c. Literary flourishing had a stabilizing effect on language, so that the rate of linguistic changes was slowed down.

The written records of the late 14th and 15th c. testify to the growth of the English vocabulary and to the increasing proportion of French loan-words in English. The phonetic and grammatical structure had undergone fundamental changes. Most of the inflections in the nominal system – in nouns, adjectives, pronouns – had fallen together. H. Sweet called Middle English the period of “levelled endings”.

5. The *fifth* period – *Early New English* – lasted from the introduction of printing and embraced age of Shakespeare. This period started in 1475 and ended in 1660. The first printed book in English was published by William Caxton in 1475. This period is a sort of transition between two literary epochs - the age of Chaucer and the age of Shakespeare (also known as *the Literary Renaissance*). Caxton's English of the printed books was a sort of bridge between the London literary English of the ME period and the language of the Literary Renaissance. The London dialect had risen to prominence as a compromise between the various types of speech prevailing in the country and formed the basis of the growing national literary language.

In this period the country became economically and politically unified; the changes in the political and social structure, the progress of culture, education, and literature led to linguistic unity. Thus, the national English language was developed.

Early New English was a period of great changes at all levels, especially lexical and phonetic. The progress of culture and economy led to the growth of the vocabulary. New words appeared from internal and external sources. As for the phonetic changes, the vowel system was greatly transformed, which resulted in the growing gap between the written and the spoken forms of the word (that is, between pronunciation and spelling). The loss of most inflectional endings in the 15th c. justifies the definition “period of lost endings” given by H. Sweet to the NE period.

6. The *sixth* period lasts from the mid-17th c. to the end of the 18th c. It is called “the age of normalization and correctness”. The norms of literary language were fixed as rules. Numerous dictionaries and grammar-books were published and spread through education and writing.

During this period the English language extended its area far beyond the borders of the British Isles, first of all to North America.

The 18th c. is called the period of “fixing the pronunciation”. The **great vowel shift** was over and pronunciation was stabilized. Word usage and grammatical constructions were also stabilized. The formation of new verbal grammatical categories was completed. Syntactical structures were perfected and standardized.

7. The English language of the 19th and 20th c. represents the *seventh* period in the history of English – *Late New English* or *Modern English*. By the 19th c. English had acquired all the properties of a national language. The classical language of literature was strictly distinguished from the local dialects. The dialects were used only in oral communication. The “best” form of English, the *Received Standard*, was spread through new channels: the press, radio, cinema and television.

The expansion of English overseas was due to the growth of the British Empire in the 19th c. and with the increased weight of the United States. English has spread to all the inhabited continents. Some geographical varieties of English are now recognized as independent variants of the language.

In the 19th and 20th c. the English vocabulary has grown due to the rapid progress of technology, science, trade and culture. There have been certain linguistic changes in phonetics and grammar: some pronunciations and forms have become old-fashioned, while other forms have been accepted as common usage.

It is apparent that an English speaker of the 21st century uses a form of language different from that used by the characters of Dickens or Thackeray one hundred and eighty years ago. Therefore we may be fully justified in treating the 19th and 20th c. as one historical period in a general survey of the history of English. But in order to describe the kind of English used today and to determine the tendencies at work now, the span of the last forty or fifty years can be singled out as the final stage of development, or as a cross-section representing Present-day English.

The following table gives a summary of the periods described above:

Table

Periodization of the history of English

<i>I</i>	<i>Early (pre-written) Old English</i>	<i>450-700</i>	<i>OLD ENGLISH</i>
<i>II</i>	<i>Written Old English</i>	<i>700-1066</i>	<i>OLD ENGLISH</i>
<i>III</i>	<i>Early Middle English</i>	<i>1066-1350</i>	<i>MIDDLE ENGLISH</i>
<i>IV</i>	<i>Classical Middle English</i>	<i>1350-1475</i>	<i>MIDDLE ENGLISH</i>
<i>V</i>	<i>Early New English</i>	<i>1475-1660</i>	<i>NEW ENGLISH</i>
<i>VI</i>	<i>Period of normalization and correctness</i>	<i>1660-1800</i>	<i>NEW ENGLISH</i>
<i>VII</i>	<i>Late New English or Modern English</i>	<i>1800-till today</i>	<i>NEW ENGLISH</i>