

MIDDLE ENGLISH

Characteristic features of Middle English.

The approximate chronological boundary that has been assigned to the Middle English period is the years between 1150 and 1450. The Norman conquest of England in 1066 resulted in bringing into the island a ruling class speaking foreign language, French and driving out the English speaking natives from all social ranks and privileges. Although the Anglo-Saxons were not driven out of their hearth and home like the Celts, yet they lay like a submerged race at the bottom of the society. English language did survive but unrecognised at the upper levels of the society. In about a hundred years, Old English, mainly under the influence of the large number of French words that spilled on it from the top, had undergone a great change, both in vocabulary and grammar. This phase of English language has been appropriately called Middle English, because it is distant from Old English as well as from Modern English.

However, it would not be accurate and appropriate to attribute the vast changes which took place in English pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary to the Norman conquest. NO doubt, a vast percentage of French words were poured into English, but all the other features for the development of the language during the Middle English period would have been on the same lines even if the Norman conquest had not taken over the island. Long before the setting foot by Normans in England, a considerable number of Old Norse (Scandinavian) words had already entered into the speech of the English people and had made their appearance in the writings of the period in Old English. Similarly the weakening and loss of the inflexional endings of Old English words, which is an outstanding feature of Middle English, was not the consequence of Norman conquest, but was the natural and inevitable consequence of the fixing of the Teutonic accent on the root syllable of word which had gradually caused the syllables to become blurred and consequently lost in pronunciation. It would be proper to say that the process of the loss of inflexions which had started earlier was accelerated by the Norman conquest.

One of the most characteristic features of Middle English was the introduction of a vast number of French words as a result of the Norman conquest. While Old English vocabulary was almost pure and unmixed with only a sprinkling of Latin and Old Norse (Scandinavian) words, Middle English vocabulary was definitely a heterogeneous one. Sweeping changes came over the English vocabulary during the Middle English period on account of the large number of French words in almost all departments of English life. The early words that were poured into English were those that related to the ways, customs and ideas of life peculiar to the Normans. Then came the terms connected with government, law and the Church. There also came words concerning warfare, hunting, falconry, fashion, learning, medicine and social life. In the words of Mario Pei (in *The Story of English*), "As for vocabulary the Norman conquest acted like a bomb that smashes a dike and lets loose a flood." Along with French words, a good number of Latin words were also introduced into the language during the Norman period. These Latin words were mostly technical, legal and ecclesiastical terms some of which have passed into popular use and have become permanent part of English. Such words are **pauper, proviso, equivalent, legitimate, index, scribe, simile, momento, requiem** and many more.

A very important phenomenon that occurred in Middle English due to Norman conquest was the introduction of a big number of French scribes. These scribes were entrusted with the work of writing English, but they did not have the knowledge of traditional English spellings to guide them. So they resorted to the French rules of spelling in the writing of English words. They tried to represent English words phonetically according to the rules of traditional French Orthography, thus resulting in the loss of the roughly phonetic character of the English spelling in the Old English period. In many cases, the spelling did not correspond to the actual sounds of the English words and because of this the spellings became ideographic in place of being phonetic.

The most outstanding change that came over Middle English is the one that operated from the core of the language, that is, its grammar. The grammar of a language can **change** internally, by internal laws, or by external influence, or by both. Both internal laws and external influence operated jointly on Old English to bring about a great change in its structure. From a synthetic language, English journeyed to its career of an analytic language, but in Middle English this journey came to an even poise between the two points. Thus the changes in grammar reduced English from a highly inflected language to an extremely analytic one. The changes in grammar may be described as a general reduction of inflections.

The transition from Old English to Middle English is one of considerable reductions in inflections. It would be more accurate to use the word **levelling** than **reduction** since Middle English did contain forms that had fallen together or become vestigial, a very large amount of the Old English inflections. This is why the Middle English period is often referred to as the period of '**levelled inflexions**.' There was gradual decay and ultimate loss of most of the Old English inflectional endings. The inflectional decay was the natural outcome of the fixing of the Germanic accent on the first syllables of words which led to the obscuring of the vowel in the unstressed inflectional endings of words. Old English would have to get rid of the inflectional endings even when there had not been the Norman conquest, but it hastened the process. In the words of A. C. Baugh – "As a result, a number of originally distinct endings such as **-a, -u, -e, -an, -um** were reduced generally to a uniform **-e**, and such grammatical distinctions as they formerly expressed were no longer conveyed. Traces of these changes have been found in Old English manuscripts as early as the tenth century. By the end of the twelfth century they seem to have been generally carried out." The effect of these changes on the inflection of the noun, the adjective, the pronoun, the verb, etc. is to be clearly seen in Middle English. Another feature was that a single form of the definite article and the adjective began to be used in all cases, genders, and numbers in Middle English. Then, the grammatical gender was replaced by natural gender. One of the consequences of the decay of inflections was the elimination of grammatical gender and the adoption of the natural gender corresponding to sex or the absence of sex in noun. All English nouns came to be divided into masculine, feminine or neuter according to natural gender by the end of the fourteenth century.

As a result of the Norman conquest, English came into the contact of French which became responsible for the introduction of certain French usages into English. Thus came the use of the preposition 'of' as an indicator of the genitive meaning. Old English had very rare examples of the use of this preposition (of) to express possession. But it (of) came to be used as a regular indicator of the genitive case under the influence of French in Middle English. This kind of use of preposition 'of' has been a very useful addition not only to Middle English, but also to Modern English. Another useful addition of the French-English contact was in the field of forming degrees of comparison of adjectives. In Old English, the comparative and superlative degrees were formed by means of inflectional endings while in French grammar the use of adverbs was also made for this purpose. Middle English borrowed this new device from French of forming the comparative and the superlative degrees of adjectives. While monosyllabic adjectives mostly continued to form the comparatives and superlatives through inflectional endings, the polysyllabic words, mostly of French origin, resorted to the analytical way. For example, we can see this by making comparison of the forms **long, longer, longest** with the forms, **beautiful, more beautiful and most beautiful**. The levelling of the inflectional endings caused a lot of confusion and ambiguity in Middle English. This confusion was removed to a large extent by replacing the native English pronouns with the Scandinavian pronouns which are represented in the modern **she, they, them, their** which became generally accepted by the 14th century. The Old English pronoun for the first person singular, **ic**, also changed to modern form, 'I', by the beginning of the 13th century.

Middle English was very different from Old English in respect of pronunciation and spelling. Old English spelling was more or less phonetic and the difference in pronunciation, for example, between the 'a' in 'father' and the 'a' in 'sat' was expressed by using two different letters (a for the former and ae for the latter) to indicate the two different sounds. In the same way, the difference between the 'th' of 'thing' and the 'th' of 'them' was represented by the letter 'p' for the first and the letter 'θ' was discarded and the letter 'p' was retained while in other positions the 'th' spelling was substituted in its place. This change may be accounted for in the following manner. After the coming of the Normans to England, French became the language of the court, the nobility, and the upper classes in general, and the English children were taught to read and write French in place of English. Under these conditions, when people wanted to write English, they resorted to French pattern of spelling because they had no orthographical traditions to guide them. Another factor were the French scribes entrusted with the task of writing English who were accustomed to French spelling traditions and introduced these traditions into English. Due to these and other factors, Old English words changed their spelling. For example, 'cirice' became 'church', 'hus' became 'hous'. Because of writing 'o' in place of 'u' in the neighbourhood of m, v, n and w, the spellings of old words were changed to come, love, son, fowl, etc. Old English 'a' into rounded vowel 'o' as in 'stone' in place of Old English word 'stān'. The double vowel in words like food, root, boot, green, sheen all point to Middle English spelling. These are only a few examples. The fact is that Middle English spelling and pronunciation changed a great deal.