Influences on the Development of Early Modern English

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This article covers the basic social, historical, and linguistic influences that have transformed the English language. Research first describes components of Early Modern English, then discusses how certain factors have altered the lexicon, phonology, and other components. Though there are many factors that have shaped English to what it is today, this article only discusses major factors in simple and straightforward terms.

Introduction

The history of the English language is long and complicated. Our language has shifted, expanded, and has eventually transformed into the lingua franca of the modern world. During the Early Modern English period, from 1500 to 1700, countless factors influenced the development of English, transforming it into the language we recognize today. While the history of this language is complex, the purpose of this article is to determine and map out the major historical, social, and linguistic influences. Also, this article helps to explain the reasons for their influence through some examples and evidence of writings from the Early Modern period.

Historical Factors

One preliminary historical event that majorly influenced the development of the language was the establishment of the printing press. Created in 1476 by William Caxton at Westminster, London, the printing press revolutionized the current language form by creating a means for language maintenance, which helped English gravitate toward a general standard. Manuscripts could be reproduced quicker than ever before, and would be identical copies. Because of the printing press spelling variation would eventually decrease (it was fixed by 1650), especially in religious and literary texts. The printing press would also regulate the lexicon, as well as perpetuating literacy. The literacy rate and the printing press will be discussed in the next section.

Another historical event that dramatically influenced the English language was the Protestant Reformation. Protestant churches were more likely to hold services in English to distinguish themselves from the Romans who conducted services in Latin. This switch to English meant that the religious texts needed to be translated from Latin, with the intent to give the gospel to the common people through the common language. Also, translations of the Bible were made from Greek and Hebrew

into English for a more English-authentic translation. One man named John Cheke even attempted to translate the Bible using only English words and removing all Latinate ones: *moonde* for lunatic, *crossed* for crucified, *hundreder* for centurion, etc. His translation did not take off, but his idea of English's possibilities, did. The Reformation allowed English to gain prestige. With English now in the religious sphere, the language could now spread from church to court and from court to school. This flexibility also led to an increased number of borrowed words from Latinate languages to compensate for a lack of vocabulary in religious and educational realms.

A third historical factor that proved to be most influential was the work of the grammarians in the later part of the 1600s (around and after the Reformation). Grammarians looked at their language through the rules and regulations of Latin, so they classified English with Latin terms. This Latin lens helped to add legitimacy to English. The grammarians began to publish grammars, rhetorics, hard-word dictionaries, spelling and pronunciation guides, and other materials. All of this work laid the foundation for prescriptive norms in the later centuries. There was talk of an English Academy (similar to the present-day French Academy) that could regulate the language and stop it from being corrupted. Though the academy never got the support that it needed, many ideas were perpetuated into prescriptive usage through the grammarians.

Social Factors

One long-lasting social factor that influenced English also came from the printing press. The ease of publishing brought about an increase in literacy, although more men could read and write than women could. This gender skew had to do with the education opportunity; women had less opportunity for formal learning in this time. However, close analysis of corpora data indicates that women were more influential on the general standard dialect than men were. An example of this comes from letters exchanged

between John and Sabine Johnson in 1545. John follows the more traditional use of *ye*, while Sabine uses *you* in all the same circumstances: John writes "that *ye* may knowe the trewthe, and then ye maie kepe . . ." and Sabine responds with ". . . if *you* spake with hym, *you* shall knowe all" (Nevalainen 2006). However, cases where education influenced language change (such as the waning of multiple negatives), men perpetuated those patterns.

Another social factor that influenced English was associated with the social classes of Britain. During this period, there was a lot of social upheaval. Merchants began to grow in numbers and in wealth, and soon no one knew how to tell a real duke from a wealthy artisan at a party. The established social hierarchy had maintained specific titles for each member of the gentry (*lord* and *lady*, *sir* and *dame*, *master* and *mistress*); however, with so many people climbing in status, the criteria for the terms began to generalize and lose rank. Politeness in conversation caused the generalization of words like *lady, sir, Mr.,* and *Mrs.* into the lower classes (Nevalainen 2006). Today, toilets in England are labeled 'Gentlemen' and 'Ladies,' even though no one actually has to own property or be knighted to use them.

A third social factor that influenced the development of English was mass migration. The population of London grew tenfold during the Early Modern period. People came in from all over the country, making London a linguistic melting pot. With greater language contact between dialects, change was bound to happen rapidly—and it did. Accents merged, new words were formed and adopted, and semantic meaning shifted. The language of the common folk changed quicker than the royal court, as the court was not as affected by the migration as the working class. However, the dialect that emerged in London soon became the general standard and incorporated a few traits from the North of England: (1) the *-s* over the *-eth* ending for third person singular, (2) the use of *are* as a form of the BE verb, and (3) *my* and *thy* replacing *mine* and *thine* for determiners.

Linguistic Factors

Throughout this section, factors from several branches of linguistics will be highlighted briefly to show just how significantly the language was affected during the Early Modern period.

Phonological Features

The greatest factor that influenced the language phonologically was the Great Vowel Shift (GVS). All of the long vowels in English shifted up (except the high vowels, which shifted into central diphthongs). The GVS did not happen instantaneously; it was more like a chain reaction that took hundreds of years. In addition, not all regions of England were affected equally; the northern dialects and parts of Wales and Ireland did not shift back vowels. This drastic change in the sound system made for changes in the spelling system during this period. Some examples are as follows: /li:f/ (*life*) and /ti:m/ (*time*) were pronounced as /leif/ and /teim/, and /hu:s/ (*house*) and /u:t/ (*out*) as /hous/ and /out/ (Nevalainen 2006).

Morphological Features

Many of the morphological factors that influenced the language were because of the differences between the North and the South of England. The North used -*s* for third person singular, while the South used -*eth*; eventually the North's influence won out. Another major factor came from all the new loan words that entered the language from Latin and French. With these borrowings came more affixes than ever before; the famous playwright William Shakespeare alone had over 120 affixes available. The Early Modern period allowed greater variation on which prefixes could attach to which roots. For example, *disthrone, unthrone,* and *dethrone* could all be used to mean the same thing.

Syntactical Features

The two features that most influenced the language was the change in relative pronoun usage from *which* to *who* for animate/human referents, and the development of do support. At the beginning of the period, one would say "Speakest thou English?" and "The messenger which had my last letters was reternyd back" (Nevalainen 2006). By the end, "Do you speak English?" and "The messenger who had my last letters . . ." would be the norm. *Do* support also became more common toward the end of the Early Modern period. First, it was used in negative questions, second in affirmative questions, and then in negative statements (I do not like tea); finally, it could be used in affirmative statements (I do want to dance). Modern speakers would understand that use of *do* to be emphatic, but to people in that period it was not.

Orthographic Features

Two things that affected the orthography of this period were the use of the printing press and the influence of Latin. When the printing press took over, printers had to figure out what to do with þ and ð, which were Old English letters used only periodically for the few hundred years previous to Caxton. For a while they replaced these letters with a *y* and would hang an *e* or a *t* over it to indicate *the* or *that*. Examples of this are found abundantly in published works from the time. In Antwerp's Bible of 1537, one can read, "And God sawe yt it was good." Eventually that practice died out, and *th* took over for those sounds. Because of Latin influence, there was another pair of letters that changed during this period—*v* and *u*. The two letters would represent both sounds; *v* at the beginning of a word (as in *vsed* for *used*), and *u* in the middle (*saue* for *save*). It was not until the mid-1600s that these letters settled into present-day usage.

Lexical Features

The feature chosen to highlight lexical factors ties into historical and social factors as well. The Inkhorn terms entered the lexicon

during this period, due to a desperate need for more academic vocabulary in English instead of Latin. This need was brought about by the increased use of the language after the printing press and Reformation. These Inkhorn terms were big-sounding, sophisticated words made up to impress. They had a snobby look and created some rather stuffy writing. Many of these terms never stuck, because they were unnaturally penned before they were naturally spoken (thus the derogatory title). Those that did stick include *exaggerate*, *expect*, and *industrial.*

Conclusion

Only three historical and three social factors each were covered in this paper. Entire textbooks have been written on such subjects. In addition, just a smidgen of information regarding linguistic factors was discussed. There are more interesting and complicated features that were not analyzed because of the limited scope of this paper.

The changes to the English language were drastic, but the results were phenomenal. English transformed from a language spoken only as the vernacular in some regions in the world, to a lingua franca in areas of business, academics, and tourism.

References

Nevalainen, Terttu. *Introduction to Early Modern English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.