LANGUAGE CHANGE AND SOCIAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF OLD AND MIDDLE ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

By studying the relationship between language and society, sociolinguistics provides valuable insight as to why languages change. Consequently, events such as the spread of Christianity, the extensive settlement over great areas of Britain by Scandinavians, and the Norman Conquest during the Old and Middle English periods, led to huge social changes which were to considerably affect the structure and use of the English language.

RESUMEN

Al estudiar los aspectos sociales del lenguaje, la sociolingüística se revela como un medio indispensable para entender por qué cambia una lengua. Por tanto, fenómenos como la difusión del cristianismo, el asentamiento de invasores escandinavos en Gran Bretaña, y la Conquista normanda durante los períodos del inglés antiguo y medieval, provocaron importantes cambios sociales que afectarían de manera significativa la estructura y el uso de la lengua inglesa.

Two sets of factors need to be taken into consideration when analysing language change. Firstly we find those factors that are intrinsic to language, such as analogy or minimization of effort which largely account for the loss of inflectional endings on nouns, adjectives and verbs in the Old English and Middle English periods. However, a second set of factors which, at first glance, do not seem directly related to language also need to be borne in mind, as they are of utmost importance in creating the conditions for language change to occur. Therefore different extrinsic circumstances will result in different changes in language, as there is a direct correlation between language change and the social context in which that change occurs. In this respect, sociolinguistics can provide us with many clues concerning the historical development of language; for social phenomena such as demographic movement, contact with other peoples and cultures, political decision-making, attitudes and fashion, all have linguistic consequences. This essay covers some of the basic developments that took place in the English language in the Old English (OE) and Middle English (ME) periods, setting them against a historical background. Interestingly, these developments largely reflect the social, political and cultural instability that existed at the time, for the differences between Old English and Middle English are so great that it is unlikely whether a fifteenth century English citizen would have been able to understand one of his Anglo-Saxon ancestors.

Coinciding with the Dark Ages in European history, the Old English period was a time marked by the establishment of the Church, as well as by political fragmentation, a hiatus in city life, a lack of major learned centres and the Viking invasions. Naturally, all of these circumstances were to have a profound effect on the development of Old English, but amongst them, two events are of special significance. Firstly, the spread of Christian culture all over Britain reinforced the importance of Latin. Apart from its direct effect on Old English liturgical lexis, Latin initiated a written tradition which would in turn set the conditions for the emergence of texts to start

appearing in Old English. Secondly, large-scale Scandinavian settlement in Great Britain paved the way for major linguistic changes to take place in the host country. Springing from the same Germanic roots, Norse and Old English were mutually intelligible; exposing the latter to the invaders' linguistic influence. It is also important to point out that there was no uniform vernacular in England at this time and various regional dialects or dialect groups existed, which could loosely be categorized under the terms Kentish, West Saxon (embracing the part of the country known historically as Wessex which lies south of the river Thames) and Anglian which itself was divided into Mercian and Northumbrian, (the linguistic border corresponding to a line from the Mersey to the Humber). However, as from the tenth century the linguistic divergence between the various Old English dialects was somewhat moderated by the unification of England under the Wessex kings, and the West Saxon dialect now emerges as the literary standard.

Any efforts to create some kind of sense out of the hotchpotch of Old English dialects by imposing the West Saxon standard were foiled during the transition from Old English to Middle English. This period is marked by the Norman invasion of 1066 whose effects on the development of the language were far-reaching, as it set the conditions for important linguistic change to occur. The native aristocracy in England was replaced by the Normans, and French became the language of the ruling class. French was the language used in public schools, at the universities and by the church (along with Latin), yet English in its different dialectical forms was still spoken by the vast majority of the country's population. However, this meant that for three centuries no single form of English was recognised as a standard; under these circumstances linguistic change went largely unchecked, and changes that were already occurring in the OE dialects were now accelerated. Thus the language spoken at the end of the ME period was very different from the one spoken at the beginning.

In the Middle English period, which started at around 1150 and finished three centuries later at approximately 1450, we see the appearance of new dialects loosely based on the geographical areas covered by the Old English dialects. We find the Northern dialect based on Northumbrian Old English, the Southern dialect based on West Saxon OE, the Kentish or South Eastern dialect based on Kentish OE, and two Midland dialects which are based on the Mercian variety of Anglian Old English that part of Mercia east of a line from London to Chester (corresponding to Watling Street) which was subjected to the Danelaw developed an East Midland dialect which was heavily influenced by the Old Norse spoken by the Viking invaders. The area west of this line was not subjected to such great an influence and thus the Mercian variety of Anglian OE diverged into the two ME dialects of East Midland and West Midland. In short, the ME period is marked by very rich dialectical diversity, with the East Midland dialect emerging as the new standard replacing the West Saxon dialect which held this distinction before the Norman invasion. Many contemporary English scholars and writers were aware of the large differences that existed between one dialect form and another and of the rapid changes that were occurring in the English language:

> Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye ...
>
> And for ther is so gret diversite
> In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
> So prey I God that non myswrite the,
> Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge[1].
>
> Our language is also dyverse in yt selfe,
> that the commen maner of spekyng in
> Englysshe of some contre can skante be
> understonded in some other contre of the
> same londe[2].

These two examples of Middle English are based on the East Midland dialect. The second example draws our attention to how the dialectical diversity of the period often led to misunderstanding between Englishmen from different parts of the country. The following extract, written at around the same time as the first example, illustrates this difference quite clearly. It is written in a southwestern dialect of English in 1385-87 by John of Trevisa who translated it from a Latin text written by a monk called John Higden:

> þis apeyring of þe burþtonge ys bycause of twey þinges. On ys for chyldern in scole, aȝenes þe vsage and manere of al oþer nacions, buþ compelled for to leue here oune longage, and for to construe here lessons and here þinges a Freynsh, and habbeþ suþthe þe Normans come furst into Engelond. Also gentil men buþ ytauȝt for to speke Freynsh fram tyme þat a buþ yrokked in here cradel, and conneþ speke and playe wiþ a child hys brouch; and oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylf to gentil men, and fondeþ wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more ytold of[3].

If we are to take this text as representative of Medieval English attitudes, then from a sociolinguistic point of view it is very revealing. Firstly, it talks of an «apeyring» or deterioration of the «burptonge» or mother tongue which reflects the fact that the English language was changing, but more significantly, it talks of the social significance of French and how this language had overt prestige for many Englishmen. Due to its social, political and cultural importance, many Englishmen learnt French in order «to do well», resulting in the emergence of a bilingual social stratum.

As from the thirteenth century, the bilingual sector of the population saw its ranks increased by French speakers who began to adopt English as their new language. In 1204 the English crown lost Normandy to the French, consequently a large part of the nobility in England turned its back on France, and England began to re-emerge as a nation state and concomitantly the English language began to regain prestige status, which would conclude in the total displacement of French by the end of the ME period. This newly found

national pride and recovery of English coincides, paradoxically, with a huge influx of French vocabulary items into the language. However, it has been suggested that when bilingual speakers who have been accustomed to speaking one language change over to another, they invariably carry with them a large proportion of words that they perhaps feel more comfortable with, whether these new words are accepted by the native population in general depends on factors such as the social class the bilingual group belongs to and its consequent influence on society at large[4]. It is estimated that during the ME period over ten thousand French words were assimilated into English, the influence on vocabulary is especially noticeable among those words concerning administration, the Church, art, learning, medicine, food and entertainment.

Amongst French loan words concerning administration we can find titles of rank, such as: *prince, sovereign* and *duke*—as well as more obvious ones such as: *government, crown, state, parliament, people, country* and a host of others. Many legal terms are also taken from French—*justice, court, judge, prison, sentence, attorney, punish and crime.* Words related to the church include: *religion, saviour, virgin, saint, abbey, prayer.* Some of the terms linked to art, learning and medicine that were borrowed are: *art, beauty, colour, poem, romance; study, logic, grammar, copy; surgeon, pain, leper, plague, stomach, balm,* and *poison.* Culinary terms include: *veal, pork, beef, mutton, dinner, taste, toast, biscuit, roast, boil, stew, fry, saucer* and *plate.* Finally many words reflect French dominance in entertainment: *leisure, recreation, dance, carol, melody, music,* and *chess.*

As a result of the influx of French vocabulary into English, many former terms with Germanic roots became obsolete, this is one of the reasons why so much of OE vocabulary seems unfamiliar. Other words continued to exist but their meaning or usage was slightly altered, thus in Modern English we have English *stench, seethe, ask, folk* and *doom* alongside French *perfume, boil, demand, people* and *judgement.* Furthermore, many French words taken into

English were combined with native elements to form additional words. The earliest types of French-English hybrids to appear have French stems and Germanic prefixes or suffixes —*beautiful, nobleman, ungracious, preaching, faithless, gentleness.* Finally, it is important to mention that the ease in which French words were assimilated into English opened the language up to subsequent influences from Latin and other Romance languages, particularly Italian and Spanish as well as from modern French itself.

The direct influence of the Norman invasion on the English language in the late OE and ME periods was largely confined to vocabulary, for as far as grammar and pronunciation are concerned the influence of French was practically negligible. This can be seen by the fact that those words that were assimilated into English from French were soon adapted to the English phonological system. For example, a word like *nature* was first stressed on the second syllable (as in French), but after a time the stress moved to the first syllable thus conforming to English speech patterns. However, indirectly, the Norman invasion acted very much as a catalyst which acted in accelerating change in the different English dialects, for during the centuries of Norman domination there was no longer a standard form of English to conform to.

Perhaps the two most single important factors concerning the nature of language structure that influence linguistic change is minimization of effort or ease of articulation on the one hand, and analogy on the other. Sounds can disappear completely from a language, or they may be elided in certain positions such as in consonant clusters or at the end of words, or sounds may change through assimilation in various contexts. Changes in the phonological system of a language can also have a direct influence on its grammatical make up, and changes in grammar are very often due to analogy. As we shall now see, both minimization of effort and analogy played a fundamental role in the changes that took place between OE and ME.

Various differences can be seen between the phonological systems of OE and ME, during the course of these two periods variants of the phoneme /h/ - [ç] and [x] disappear from English, as we can see in differences in the pronunciation of words such as «light» or «daughter» which were pronounced [lIçt] and ['dɔxtɔr] in OE. The allophone [ɣ] also disappears in words such as *fugol* (bird) and *lagu* (law), and develops into the semivowel [w] in ME, the words becoming *fowel* and *lawe*. We also see how sounds such as [g][k] become elided when they precede [n] in words such as «knight» and «gnaw».

When such combinative changes occur uniformly in a language, we can obviously see analogy working - once one or two changes occur, a domino-effect seems to take place and sweeps over a multitude of examples sharing similar phonetic characteristics, leading to widespread change. Another important change regarding pronunciation which begun around the end of the OE period was the lengthening of vowels before certain groups of consonants, especially before *ld, mb* (although final «b» in Modern English is not pronounced, this is not the case with Old and Middle English), and *nd*. Thus the short vowel [a] in Old English (Anglian) *ald, fald, sald* changed firstly to the long vowel [a:] and then to [ɔ:] south of the Humber and which would change in the Modern English period to [əu] giving us present-day *old, fold*, and *sold*. Lengthening also accounts for OE *feld, cild, camb, climban, and blind* (pronounced with the vowel [I]) becoming *field, child, comb, climb* and *blind*. However, vowel lengthening did not take place before clusters of more than two consonants, hence the difference in pronunciation between the vowel of *child* and that of *children*. We also see other important dependent changes affecting vowel length in other phonetic circumstance during the ME period, notably affecting the short vowels *a, e* and *o* in open syllables in two-syllabled words. Thus the verb *bacan* (with [a] in the first syllable) became *baken* (with [a:]) which would become *bake* in Modern English (elision of the ME inflectional ending -*en* is dealt with later), in the same way OE *cradol* («a cradle») became ME *cradel*.

One of the most striking distinguishing features of ME in comparison to OE, is its reduced inflectional system. This is partly due to the fact that under the Danelaw, English existed alongside Old Norse and mixing of the two very similar languages undoubtedly occurred; a great deal of English words were similar to those of Old Norse, yet their inflections were quite different, this must have led to confusion and those speakers who found themselves in a bilingual situation no doubt used different grammatical devices to allay any misunderstanding. The increase in the use of such devices must have contributed to the deterioration of the inflectional system. However, as far as factors intrinsic to language are concerned, sound reduction, which involved the weakening and loss of unstressed syllables at the end of words, was of paramount importance.

Evidence suggests that sound reduction of inflectional endings was occurring as early as the tenth century, this meant that the vowel sounds in distinct endings such as *-an*, *-on*, *-un*, and *-um* all were all gradually replaced by schwa [ə], and by the ME period these endings were orthographically represented solely by the letter «e» which indicates that the final nasal consonant was elided, thus the grammatical function expressed by the former endings was lost and many of the inflections now became identical, resulting in the simplification of the entire inflectional system. What is more, the final -e, which was all that was left of many of these endings, disappeared during the ME period; firstly in the North, which was the area where changes tended to take place earliest, and then in the South.

The simplification of the inflectional system was largely the result of analogy - irregular patterns were changed in accordance with regular patterns which already existed in the language; during the OE and ME periods a large number of strong (irregular) verbs became weak (regular), for example *helpan* («help») had *healp* as a past tense and *holpen* as a past participle, but by the 14th century, the verb had become regular, so that the past tense and past participle had the same form: *helped*, the same occurred with over forty other verbs during

the same period. A parallel development is seen with nouns; if we take the OE forms *stan, stanes, stane, stan, stanas, stana, stanum, stanas*, the first four corresponding to the singular and the second four to the plural, the dative singular ending was extended to the nominative and accusative singular cases, and in the plural, the ending for the most frequently used cases —the nominative and accusative— was extended to the dative and accusative, so in a nutshell the six forms corresponding to the eight different cases were reduced to just two corresponding to three cases; *stones* corresponding to the plural and the genitive singular, and *stone* corresponding to the singular. All the adjectival cases in OE were reduced to just one by the end of the ME period, again this is largely the result of analogy. The decay in the inflectional system meant that grammatical gender disappeared and was replaced by natural gender, this occurred firstly in the North where inflections decayed earliest and was followed by the South where, generally speaking, changes were assimilated less rapidly, we therefore see how the definite article which showed three genders in OE (*se* masculine, *seo* feminine, *paet* neuter) and was declined through all four cases singular and plural, in the course of the ME period was reduced to just one - *the*. The decay of the inflectional system in English, which was largely brought about by weakening, i.e. minimization of effort together with analogy, resulted in huge changes in the language which is clearly reflected in the simplified grammar system. This simplification led to a greater reliance on word order, and the more frequent use of prepositions to show the meanings previously marked by inflections.

In conclusion, important changes at a phonological, syntactic and lexical level took place within the English language during the Old and Middle English periods. The phonological and syntactic changes are principally due to analogy and minimization of effort - two factors which are intrinsic to language. However, these factors in turn need to be set against a background of factors which are essentially extrinsic to language in order to achieve a fuller picture of the

development of the English language during these periods. In exploring the relationship between language and society, sociolinguistics can provide us with an illuminating interpretation as to *why* languages change. As far as English is concerned, the Norman Conquest of 1066 represents a watershed between Old and Middle English, and supplies us with significant sociolinguistic information. By relegating the English dialects to inferior status for nearly three centuries and therefore automatically suppressing a standard English vernacular to conform to, Norman England not only provided the ideal setting for accelerating linguistic changes which were already beginning to take place in the OE period, but also established the conditions in which a huge amount of French vocabulary items were absorbed into the English language and supplemented its lexis considerably. Therefore, by the end of the ME period, when French had lost its political importance in England, a new form of English, which combined a rich and sophisticated lexis together with a simplified grammar system, arose as a standard, the East Midland dialect. It is of no coincidence that the re-emergence of England as a nation-state should coincide with the appearance of a new standard vernacular, for linguistic change cannot be understood without considering the historical context in which the change has occurred.

NOTES

1 CHAUCER, *Troilus and Criseyde*, (circa 1835). In FREEBORN, Dennis: *From Old to Standard English: A Course Book in Language Variation Across Time.* 1992; p. 60.

2 *The Myroure of Our Ladye* (first half of the fifteenth century). in BAUGH, Albert C. and CABLE, Thomas: *A History of the English Language.* 1978; p. 188.

3 In BARBER, C. L.: *The Story of Language.* 1972; p. 158.

4 BARBER, C. L.: *The Story of Language.* 1972; p. 57.

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