

The Origin and Development of English Language: A Study

Dr.P.Anandan,

Assistant Professor, PG Department of English
GTN Arts College, Dindigul-624005

Abstract

The emergence of words and their meanings in any a language can be considered the signal of the linguistic development of the particular language. In that respect, English has gone through many stages of development in its syntax and semantics. It can be rightfully said that English is a mongrel of breeds because of the derivation of words from various languages such as Greek, Latin, French, Hebrew, Tamil etc. This paper titled *The Origin and Development of English language- A study* solely aims at celebrating the sophistication of English accelerated by incorporating the syntax and semantics of many languages in different eras.

Keywords: Anglo Saxon, Wessex dialect, syntax and semantics.etc

Language is a centre for exchanging ideas and feelings to another. The progress of language may be arbitrary and recasting its structure and usage for its welfare while certain limitations is used continuously among the clique. In the beginning, people were living with a limited vocabulary because their needs also were limited. At present scenario we have brought globe into the room through technology entitled virtual meets how do we adapt with its limitations. Though many confines are in education system, the association within it is mandatory for literates. Regular progress of English language is an essential and inevitable one in the technological society. Through this study, the importance of eloquence is clarified among the literary scholars.

Old English

The word 'English' is derived from 'ænglisc', the language of the Angles and 'England' comes ængla lond, meaning the land of Angles. Old English is also known as Anglo-Saxon. It had four dialects, namely Kentish, West Saxon, Mercian and Northumbrian. During the early Old English period, the dominant dialect was the Northumbrian one. When Alfred the Great established his kingdom in the ninth century in Wessex, West Saxon

became the dominant Old English dialect. The greatest work in Anglo Saxon was *Beowulf*, an epic of three thousand lines.

In old English the spelling represented the sounds more or less in a one to one correspondence. The important vowel changes that took place during the Old English period were umlaut and ablaut. Old English syntax and morphology differed much from those of Modern English. The primitive Germanic system of inflections of the noun, adjective, and verb was preserved in Old English. Old English had grammatical gender that is gender was not related to the sex of the referent (e.g 'girl' was neuter gender)

Middle English

After the Norman conquest of England in 1066 Norman French became the dominant language in England. Gradually it merged with Anglo Saxon, the language of the subject race, to produce Middle English. During the Middle English period many French words entered English, particularly words related to government, law, church, fashion, meals, social life, art and medicine, since these fields were dominated by the aristocratic Norman rulers. During the Middle English period the English language was constantly undergoing a process of simplification, dropping its complicated inflections and reforming its various spellings. The levelling of the inflection was mostly due to phonetic changes. Adjectives lost all their case systems and nouns and nouns lost two of their four case systems. Verbs also underwent a similar change. For instance the standard plural was reduced to 's'. During the Middle English Period Gender in English become more or less dependent on sex that is gender became 'natural'.

An important change that occurred in the English language during the Middle English period is known as the Great Vowel Shift. Principally this change had the effect of raising the entire long vowels one step, e. g., /ɑ:/ → /æ/; /e/ → /i:/; /i:/ → /ai/; /u:/ → /au/.

In spelling the Anglo Saxon 'c' become 'k' before the vowels 'e', 'i' and 'y'
 e.g. cying → king; cepan → keep; cene → keen. The Anglo Saxon 'g' can to be written as y,
 eg. gearu → Year. The Anglo Saxon 'ð' disappear and was replaced by 'th'.

Standard English

The term 'Standard English' is a controversial term because there is no universally accepted criterion of what constitutes Standard English. Any Criterion prescribed can only be arbitrary. Standard English is not only be a tentative desirable ideal, Standard English does exist and can recognize when it is used one can also detect deviations from Standard English. But no one can define Standard English or legislate what constitutes Standard English.

What is accepted as Standard English cannot be rigid or inflexible. There must be room for variations. The concept of Standard English should be marked by a spirit of

tolerance and compromise. For example one should not be too finicky about long and short varieties of the same sound or about different points of stress or accent. Standard English can also tolerate minor differences in grammar. However, there are some variations that are quite unacceptable. The ultimate arbiter is linguistic currency. The ultimate question to be answered is whether what is spoken is Queen's English.

Standard English is not the more arbitrary invention of any particular class or clique, but the natural product of certain historical, cultural and social factors. During the Anglo-Saxon period the Wessex dialect used by King Alfred the Great was predominant. During the Middle English period the East Midland dialect used by Chaucer and Caxton was predominant. The invention of printing was one of the most influential factors in the evolution of Standard English. It did not alter the pronunciation but it certainly influenced spelling, grammar syntax and vocabulary. The several dialects of England continued to be used in conversation and correspondence, but were considered inferior English.

Under the Tudor monarchs the spirit of national unity was assiduously cultivated, in the process the East Midland dialect spoken at court spread widely. The appearance of the Authorised Version of Bible in 1611 further accelerated the movement towards a standard variety of English.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century writers felt the need for an academy of Letters so that some standard of language and vocabulary could be fixed by an authoritative body. Samuel Johnson wished to define what was 'good' or 'polite' but abandoned the idea and even opposed the idea of an Academy. However dictionaries of the eighteenth century attempted to lay down a standard. They not only indicated 'correct' usage, but prescribed accent and vowel quantities for pronunciation also. But all these rules and attempts at standardization were based on the misconception that the ancient languages had been static and fixed.

The nineteenth century was an age of individualism, *Laissaz faire* and evolution. So there was little sympathy for the idea of an Academy. Matthew Arnold flirted with it but gave it up. However he favoured 'influential centres of correct information'—a concept subsequently realized to some extent. The geographical, imperial and commercial expansion of the nineteenth century had a two-fold effect on language, at once broadening and restrictive. Foreign contacts enlarged English vocabulary and so did the development of science and social theories, which necessitated recourse to classical tongues to form words of academic and technical nature. But the nineteenth century was also an age of issues. The development of nationalism led to a movement for the purification of the English Language by excluding words of foreign origin. People like Ruskin favoured 'Bible English'. Tennyson, the representative poet of his age, accelerated this movement towards purer English and about 88% of his diction consisted of words of native origin. William Morris, with his cult of

dislikes of innovations, was another purist. However, few of the revivals become permanent. The development of the language took its own course of the four aspects of a language, namely, vocabulary spelling, grammar and pronunciation it was in the first three that English become uniform. Pronunciation became uniform only recently. The tussle between conservative and progressive tendencies will go on forever in any language. In the case of grammar and usage the present age has adopted the common sense attitude that grammar is determined by usage and not vice versa (precept by practice). However, no whims and fancies or arbitrary departure from what has been long accepted as 'correct' will be allowed. At the same time what has come to stay will be accepted, Hence the prevailing variants in spelling and pronunciation.

Recently there was a reaction against Standard English. In 1954 Alan Ross and Nancy Mitford engaged in a controversy over 'universal' English and 'non-universal' English but now it is almost unheard of. Therefore studying English Language is essential for a scholar in English Literature and adopt with its progress obligatory one at present scenario.

Reference

Wood, Frederick, T. *An Outline History of the English Language*. Macmillan Publishers: Delhi. 1967. Print.