

influence from another Germanic tongue: Old Norse, which survives now in a minimally changed form on Iceland.

The last great external linguistic influence on English came two centuries later: In 1066 the Viking age was almost spent. The Scandinavian expansion had seen Viking settlements founded from Kiev in Russia to Dublin in Ireland, from Iceland to America. Normandy was a Viking kingdom in France. England was ruled by King Harold Godwinson, who stood atop a rather shaky claim to the throne. He faced an army led by a giant Viking warrior of fearful renown, Harald Hardrada ("hard-rede," or "hard-counsel," usually translated as "the Ruthless"). In a pitched battle at Stamford Bridge, the invader, Harald Hardrada, was killed by an arrow, and his attack failed. But just three days later Harold Godwinson's exhausted army faced another: this was led by a Norman Frankish duke, called William the Bastard (and himself a descendant of Vikings). The initial attack failed, and William's forces were repelled. An ill-advised decision to pursue the attackers led the defending forces headlong into a fatal trap. They were wiped out, and William shed his unflattering epithet to become William the Conqueror.

Over the next few centuries, as the conquering Normans assimilated into the local culture, the two languages, French and Anglo-Saxon, fused into the mixed Latin-Germanic mishmash we call Middle English, best known as the language of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

It's significant that the natures of these two conquering armies were very different. The Norsemen who settled the Danelaw were from an egalitarian society, in which kings were elected and women could own land and conduct business. In addition, they brought a Germanic language -- Old Norse -- to join a closely related Germanic language, Anglo-Saxon. So both their culture and their tongue led them to assimilate very quickly among the natives of the Danelaw, both accepting and being accepted as equals.

The Norman conquerors of two centuries later were very different. Though descended from the same Vikings, they had adopted the Latin Frankish language, Old French. The cultural differences had prevented the Norsemen from similar assimilation in Latin France, so instead they had become a separate hereditary aristocracy. When William of Normandy conquered England and installed his people as overlords, assimilation was a slow and painful process. In fact, French was spoken at the King's courts for almost two centuries, until 1362.

The effect of these differences, as well as the centuries separating them, is subtle but important. By the time of Elizabeth, Middle English was late in its transition to Modern English. But where the Scandinavian influences had become deeply rooted in the common man's speech, the Latin influences were still seen more in the speech of the ruling class. In Shakespeare's time (and well into the twentieth century) an education in Latin was a mark of wealth and high class. Before the Norman Conquest the kings and commoners spoke the same tongue, therefore this French invasion marks the origin of the class differences in speech that pervade England even today.

The next major change was more subtle: around 1450 a linguistic event began which language historians call the Great Vowel Shift. Until this time the English vowels had been all monophthongs (single vowel sounds in a syllable). Now diphthongs (two vowel sounds joined in a syllable) began to replace them in many parts of speech. In addition, the sounds moved higher in the throat, or further forward in the mouth. This

marked the beginning of the change from Middle English to Modern English. It's also largely responsible for the chaotic spelling which confounds schoolchildren and foreigners learning English.

Note that I said "the beginning." While Early Modern English was well on its way to supplanting Middle English by Shakespeare's time, none of these changes happened overnight. Linguistic evolution has always been a gradual process, much more so in previous centuries than in today's age of mass communication. In addition, a change in the vernacular in London might take years or even decades to radiate to the smaller, more distant towns or villages. A nobleman, returning to his estates from the Queen's court at Greenwich (say "Gren-itch"), might bring with him some new examples of "courtly" speech, but most of his tenants used a different class accent anyway, and would probably hesitate to use the new words. Between the displacement in time and that in distance, it was not uncommon for Englishmen from different regions to find that they couldn't understand each other.

One more important event occurred in the history of English, beginning before Shakespeare's time and continuing after. Up to the middle 1500s, English was widely considered a rather vulgar tongue, suitable for farmers and blacksmiths. The great literature was considered to be limited to Greek, Latin, and other "respectable" languages, such as French and Italian.

Then came 1476, and William Caxton set up the first English-language printing press in Westminster. By the mid-1500s Englishmen began to see their own language as respectable. A surge of English patriotism, combined with the spread of the printing process, led to English translations of the classics (pioneered by Caxton). The spread of classical literature, now available in English, had a twofold effect: First, there were suddenly many more people borrowing Greek and Latin words and phrases into their everyday English speech. And second, with the translation of the classical texts on rhetoric -- the artful use of literary devices, an art almost lost today -- it became a standard part of the educated Englishman's verbal arsenal. Not just the few relics we use today, such as hyperbole, assonance, and alliteration. No, an English schoolboy of the time was expected to name and master well over a hundred rhetorical devices, including such things as anastrophe, stichomythia, anaphora, and polyptoton. These trends were bolstered by such works as Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) and Richard Carew's *The Excellencie of the English Tongue* (1614). Poetry and literature in English began to appear, and the highly literate populace snapped it up.

By Shakespeare's time, Late Middle English, with its "thees and thous," had largely given way to Early Modern English -- at least, around London, the center of English civilization. On the cusp of both these dialects, the language enjoyed a tremendous vocabulary and power of expression, unparalleled until the emergence of English as the world language of the 20th century.

Spelling of words, for instance, was not a fixed, by-the-book affair. Instead, spelling was considered a dynamic art, varied and changeable. Shakespeare's name is known to be spelled at least three different ways *in his own hand!*

A few examples can make it quite clear that there was, in general, no "right" or "wrong" spelling, but simply spelling that reflected the dialect and the whim of the writer. Records from the period refer to such things as, "the quenes Magestye," "her heyghnes,"