

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTICLES

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Language teacher sees Latin as helpful boost to students. Rob Rogers

Nancy Erickson teaches Latin at University Preparatory School in Redding, where all students are required to take at least one year of the language. The following is an excerpt from a recent conversation.

Q. It's been awhile since Latin was taught in public schools. Why is it now making a comeback?

I think one of the reasons maybe the competitiveness of getting into college. And there is approximately a 100- to 200-point boost in SAT scores if people have a Latin background. So students who are very motivated or maybe have planned to be in a profession, such as law or medicine, are looking ahead down the line. Parents are more aware of this; they're looking down the line knowing this is a subject that can help them achieve their goals.

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Rob Rogers, Record Searchlight

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Q. We shouldn't call it a dead language?

This language is much more alive than (people) realize. Sixty percent of all the English words that we have are based upon Latin. There's no other language that can boast that. There's no other culture, no other language that has as profound an influence on worldwide culture as Latin and the ancient Romans.

Q. What is it you hope your student learn from taking Latin?

If you think about in everyday life where you encounter things that might have some connection: obviously, your vocabulary. The whole structure of the English language, the way sentences are constructed, it's all based upon how Latin is constructed. So the help and the insight that you get into the study of English, I don't even think it can be measured. People who take Latin seem to be better writers and it also seems to instill in them more of a desire to become readers.

Q. UPrep also has Russian and Chinese classes. Is there competition to get students to take Latin?

In a way, you could say, 'yes, there is.' But that is one of (UPrep's) basic requirements; everyone takes Latin 1. And then from there, you have this amazing choice as to what you would like to do for your foreign language. So when I have students who are interested in language, I have quite a few of them who are taking two (different foreign language classes) and actually I've got a couple of them who are taking three.

Q. Latin mottos and maxims are everywhere. If you had to come up with one for Redding, what would it be?

A couple of our seniors came to me and said they were developing a senior motto and they wanted to put it into Latin. I think it was "We made history; we will change the future." I think that's a wonderful motto. In Latin, it's "Historiam Fecimus; Futuram Mutabimus."

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This is part 1 of 6 in a brief series describing the history of English and its grammar.

What is Grammar?

A grammar is a set of rules for the communal use of a language. A language can never become a truly national language unless all users of that language share common rules for how words are invented, used and strung together in sentences. When by some means the users of a language no longer share these rules, the language fragments into dialects and eventually, new languages. It is useful to think of dialects as not being quite so large an obstacle as different languages are to trade, commerce and exchange of ideas between regions.



A grammar is an art when it is used as a set of rules or guidelines for people to follow. The advantage of a communal guide to speaking and writing is that all users of a language, by using the same rules, can understand each other without effort.

Grammar is a science when it examines how language is used by ordinary people in their daily lives. In this case, scientists are trying to find out how language works. The findings of science gradually trickle through to the formal teaching of language, so that there is some overlap between grammar as an art and grammar as a science.

Apart from the grammar of Sanskrit, for many centuries the most widely studied grammar has been the grammar of English. This scientific study has its foundations in the grammar-as-art of the Greeks and the Romans. For many centuries there was no study of the grammar of English, hence there were no rules to teach in the schools. The early grammar schools were schools of Latin grammar. Before a grammar can be used to stabilise a language, the language must be stable and universal enough to warrant study by grammarians. That initial stability comes, not from formal teaching but from the popularity of storytellers and their styles. This mechanism is clearly shown in the history of the English language.

### A Brief History of the English Language

It was about the fifth century CE that the Angles and the Saxons settled in Britain. It is their language that was the foundation of all variants of modern English. Their language thrived and developed, it became the language of common people and scholars, kings and shepherds. English was the English of Wessex, of King Alfred and his court. That one dialect was the language of people of culture. Until 1066.

Following the death of Edward the Confessor, a challenge arose between Harold Godwinson and William of Normandy. Each claimed a right to the throne of England. While Harold was away north fighting Harold Hardrada's invading army, William landed his forces on the south coast, near Hastings. Harold's men, after defeating the Norsemen, made a forced march south and confronted the Normans. In the ensuing battle, Harold's men were getting the best of it until they broke ranks to pursue a group of fleeing Normans. William took advantage of that brief indiscipline and broke defender's ranks. The rest, as they say, is history.

### Norman England

The Normans imposed their language on the whole country. Before long there was no opportunity for advancement for anyone who didn't speak Norman French. French was taught in the schools, not as a foreign language, but as a national language. English became mostly the language of the uneducated classes, with few exceptions. Robert of Gloucester, writing in 1298, suggested that children should be taught French from the time that they are rocked in the cradle.

It is often found that rural people and the poor look down on the snobbery of those who insist on speaking with what the 'lower classes' consider a false accent. So it was with the competition between French and English. In 1263, Mathew of Westminster wrote that whoever was unable to speak English was considered 'vile and contemptible' by the common people. In a brief span of years there was a pressure from the bottom ranks upwards to restore English to its place as the national language.

### The Rise of English

In 1272, Edward 1st became the first English king since Harold to have a Saxon English name. Within a comparatively short time, it became a matter worthy of note that an educated man might travel widely and not meet anybody who could speak French. The

greatest leap forwards for English as a national language started about 1350 onwards.

In 1362, Parliament was opened with the customary Chancellor's address. But in English, not French. In the same year a statute decreed that English was to be the official language of the courts. In the same brief period, English replaced French in the schools.

In his Polychronicon written in Latin, circa 1350, Ralph Higden observed that French was the language of instruction in English schools. John Trevisa, translating that book in 1385 observed in a translator's note "in all the grammar schools of England, children have abandoned French and construe and learn English ... Children in grammar schools know no more French than does their left heel."

When a language is the official language of a nation there are forces both natural and official continually at work tending to a common standard. When a national language is supplanted by another the forces tend towards a fractioning of the language. Thus it was with an English language supplanted by French. Writings from a period from about 1066 to about 1360 appear in various dialects, some seeming entirely foreign to the modern reader. Here are the first lines of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

SIPEN þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,  
þe bor3 brittened and brent to bronde3 and askez,  
þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wro3t  
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erþe:

The siege and the assault was ceased at Troy  
the burg destroyed and burnt to ashes,  
he who had planned and wrought that treason  
was tried for his treachery, the truest on Earth:

#### The First Fyndere of Our Faire Langage

Before a language can truly be said to be a national language it must to a large degree employ standards of choice of words, spelling and word order. Such standards in the English language can be attributed in large part to Geoffrey Chaucer. He has been well described as the first founder of our fair language, and father of modern English. Here we have a storyteller writing in the new national language: English. Not the 'official' English of the court and the academic, but rather, the English of the common people. It is strange that an author's caricature of the English of ordinary people should be adopted as a standard and a model by academics. Strange, but true.

#### A Brief History of the English Language Part 2

Part 1 of this Brief History of English describes the suppression of the English language under the Normans who imposed Norman French as a national language. As French declined and English revived there were briefly two languages in the one nation.

"Before Chaucer wrote, there were two tongues in England, keeping alive the feuds and resentments of cruel centuries; when he laid down his pen, there was practically but one speech -- there was, and ever since has been, but one people."

#### D. Laing Purves

Many scholars are agreed that Geoffrey Chaucer is the father of literary English. I propose to take that idea further. I suggest that, of his century, Chaucer was the most important unifying influence on the English language, with John Wycliffe running him a close second. The influence of these two men can still be clearly found in modern English.



## The Life and Times of Geoffrey Chaucer.

In the century of Chaucer's birth, the English way of life changed dramatically and permanently. The climate changed, turning cooler in Europe. There were famines in much of Europe during the whole century, with a peak, the Great Famine, about 1315 to 1317. Overpopulation and underproduction of food led to wild economic cycles with starvation and death for many. Undernourishment, and a lack of scientific knowledge of disease control made many people vulnerable to typhoid and other infectious diseases. England and France joined battle in the start of what would come to be called the hundred years war. And then came the Black Death.

Into all of this economic and social chaos was injected a popular disaffection with the established order of things. A population used to the idea that each person had a pre-ordained station in life began to rebel against that notion. John Wycliffe enjoyed popular support for his attacks on a wealthy and corrupt established church, and the power of a distant pope over English kings. Wat Tyler ensured his place in history by fomenting rebellion against harsh taxes and corrupt churchmen. It was the age of change.

In 1382, Wycliffe completed his translation of the Bible from the Vulgate Latin into English. It was a plain, unadorned English, intended to convey accuracy of translation rather than a sense of prose or poetry.

1 In the bigynnyng God made of nouyt heuene and erthe.  
2 Forsothe the erthe was idel and voide, and derknessis weren on the face of depthe; and the Spyrte of the Lord was borun on the watris.  
3 And God seide, Liyt be maad, and liyt was maad.  
4 And God seiȝ the liyt, that it was good, and he departide the liyt fro derknessis; and he clepide the liyt,  
5 dai, and the derknessis, nyȝt. And the euentid and morwetid was maad, o daie.

## The Canterbury Tales

In an England where French and Latin were still the languages of the scholar, Geoffrey Chaucer chose to write in English. He wrote to such a high standard that his style was accepted and adopted for at least two hundred years afterwards. Although Chaucer wrote much more than just the Canterbury Tales, it is for these tales that he is most widely known. They are, of his writings, the lightest, most readable, most enjoyable, most earthy. The reported speech may have been emphasised for purposes of satire. In these tales he appears to have interwoven snippets from Greek and Latin stories, personal recollections of his travels and perhaps some English folk tales.

Chaucer's English had no history of bookish style, no formal grammar, no dictionary. Chaucer had a free hand. He had knowledge of the English of the royal court, the courts of law and of parliament. He knew logic and rhetoric, French, Italian, Latin and most probably Greek. He was a courtier, a poet, a gentleman, a knight of the shire of Kent and a keen observer of human nature. He also had a keen ear for the common use of language.

Taking what might well be called the Germanic English of the common people and the Norman English of the ruling classes, Chaucer created a new meld of words and phrases. Medieval treatises on (Latin) writing distinguish only three styles: grave, middle and simple. John of Garland wrote of the manner of speech of the shepherd, the agriculturalist and the person of rank. Chaucer achieved at least six styles of speech to give a vitality and a realism to the characters in his Canterbury Tales.

This newly blended English was middle English, that is to say, English in its middle state between early and modern. The pronunciation of the final e and the e in -ed endings was only just beginning to die out. The poetry of Chaucer retains this to the full: telle is

pronounced 'tell-uh', speak, spelled as speke, is pronounced 'speak-uh'.

Who so shall telle a tale after a man,  
He moste rehearse, as neighe as ever he can,  
Everich word, if it be in his charge,  
All speke he never so rudely and so large;  
Or elles he moste tellen his tale untrewe,  
Or feinen thinges, or finden wordes newe.

In a land where schooling was mostly in the hands of the church, Wycliffe's bible helped to spread the written form of English. In a land where the storytelling poet was held in high esteem, Chaucer's writings helped to spread English as the new language of literature. For the first time, a fairly uniform English was the true national language of England.

References:

Geoffrey Chaucer  
the Wycliffe Bible

### A Brief History of the English Language Part 3

The historical development of English is an excellent model of how a grammar naturally develops. I am trying to capture some of that history in this short series. Part of the problem of understanding how language works evaporates completely if one can see the beauty in a flow of words, the magic in a few blots of ink.

Part 1 briefly covered the period from the 5th century CE to the 14th century.

Part 2 describes Chaucer's influence on the development of English.

Part 3 now covers the period from Chaucer to the Elizabethan age.

Chaucer achieved his fame as a writer in English in age when 'men of letters' wrote books mainly in Latin and French. His success led many another writer who would otherwise have written in French or Latin to 'endite', that is create, in English 'a bok for Engelondis sake'.

And for that few men endite  
In oure english, I thenke make  
A bok for Engelondis sake.

John Gower (ca.1330-1408)

The above quote, from John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* shows the author's intention to write a book in English. However, the title is in Latin, the prologue is named 'prologo' - a Latin word and the whole six-line prologue is in Latin. John Gower, a close friend of Chaucer, wrote mainly in French and Latin for most of his life. It was only about 1386 that he began to write in English.

Chaucer invented his own ways with what may truly be called an experimental form of English. After him, writers experimented with other styles, or else tried to impose the rigours of a Latin-based traditional rhetoric on the English language. From the 14th century onwards, commentators have almost consistently preferred the style of Chaucer over the styles of his contemporaries and followers.

Ye flower of Poet in our English tung, and the first that  
euer elumined our language with flowers of rethorick and  
eloquence; I mean famous and worthy Chaucer.

The Serpent of Division, John Lydgate (c.1370-c.1451)



John Lydgate, whilst full of praise for Chaucer, failed to observe Chaucer's own avoidance of many of the traditions of rhetoric, and thus Lydgate made his own style too heavy and cumbersome. John Skelton in comparing Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower seemed to favour Chaucer above the others. Whilst Skelton had a keen eye for the traditions, he tended to use a style of poetry that his detractors later found to be over-simple. John Skelton was Henry VII's poet laureate, and his son Henry VIII's tutor, and later King's Orator.

My name ys Parott, a byrde of Paradyse,  
By Nature devysed of a wonderowus kynde,  
Deyntely dyeted with dyvers delycate spyce,  
Tyll Eufrates, that flodde, dryveth me into Ynde,  
Where men of that contre by fortune me fynde,  
And send me to greate ladyes of estate;  
Then Parot moste have an almon or a date.

A cage curyowsly carven, with sylver pynne,  
Properly paynted to be my coverture;  
A myrroure of glasse, that I may tote therin;  
These maydens full meryly with many a dyvers flowur  
Fresshely the dresse and make swete my bowur,  
With, 'Speke, Parott, I pray yow,' full curteslye they sey,  
'Parott ys a goodlye byrde and a pratye popagay.'

Speke Parrot, John Skelton (ca.1460-1529)

Whilst John Skelton was a popular author in his own times, his style was not much imitated. In later times he came to be seen as a 'mere' satirist and comedic writer. However, his writings show a great diversity of styles, a rich vocabulary and an influence, perhaps too heavy an influence, of the traditions of rhetoric. It is certain that he helped to popularise the idea that English could be employed to good effect in writing, in an age dominated by Latin scholarship.

"Skelton a sharpe satirist, but with more rayling and scoffery then became a Poet Lawreat, such among the Greekes were called Pantomimi, with vs Buffons, altogether applying their wits to Scurrillities&other ridiculous matters."

The Arte of English Poesie, attr. George Puttenham (1529 - 1590)

In this, the age of Medieval Latin, Latin was the language of scholarship. It was the international language. When the word 'grammar' meant 'a body of writings', and 'rhetoric' meant 'the art of ornamental language', the grammar schools taught 'a body of writings' as supreme examples of 'the art of ornamental language'. All was taught in Latin, to boys who were required to converse privately in Latin by teachers who were experts in Latin. Skelton's great achievement was his adaptation of these tools of Latin to the task of enriching the English vocabulary by Anglicising Latin and French words, by adapting their meanings to new purposes and by making them fit into the naturally evolving grammar of English.

In this age of a blossoming English language, paper-making was industrialised at exactly the right moment to feed the new printing presses. The printers had an economic incentive to simplify the orthography of English - simplicity lends itself to speed of production of new plates for printing. This was the first step towards a standardised spelling using standardised letters, a process continued with the invention and development of movable type.

William Caxton learned of printing in his travels abroad. His first books were printed in Bruges. The first book printed in English was Caxton's own translation of Recueil des

Histoires de Troye by Raoul le Fevre: Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye, circa 1475-6. The first book printed by Caxton in England, at Westminster, was Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The British Library states that about 70% of surviving 15th century editions of books were in Latin. Of Caxton's editions, about 68% were in English, 28% were in Latin, 4% were in French - by a crude estimation.

Caxton was an author, translator and editor. He chose to edit what he printed based on a sound observation: language is changed by its users. He was trying to achieve for English what had already been achieved throughout Europe for Latin - a standard to be followed by writers and printers. He was followed in this editorship by Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson. Pynson, as a printer of legal writings had a greater incentive to regularise his productions. The law is an area with stated objectives of clarity and lack of ambiguity in language for a nation of users. A consistency of word choice, spelling and grammar assists in these objectives. The tradition of editorship is continued to this day by publishers.

The English language changed and the old and homely terms of past times were now incomprehensible. Caxton had seen old texts written in an English which he could not himself understand. He had even noticed a change in the English language from his youth to his old age: 'And certainly our language now used varyeth from that which was used and spoken when I was borne' [and certainly the language now used is very different from that which was used and spoken when I was born].

William Caxton (c. 1415/1422 c. March 1492) British Library

The booming trade in printing, the industrialisation of paper-making, the spread of education through the (Latin) grammar schools, the popularity of the new writings in English; all these came together at just the right time to influence the right man. The right time was the Elizabethan age. The right man was England's most famous grammar-school boy of all time: William Shakespeare.

Continued in Part 4

A Brief History of the English Language Part 4 - The People's English

Part 1 briefly covered the period from the 5th century CE to the 14th century.

Part 2 describes Chaucer's influence on the development of English.

Part 3 covers the period from Chaucer to the Elizabethan age.

The People's English

When people adopt rules for a language, most especially when they do it without conscious thought, the mere fact of a large number of language users thinking the same way leads to a convergence, a uniformity. The grammar of a language cannot be imposed by schools - it must evolve naturally or the language will die out. But a grammar, having once evolved naturally can assist the budding author or orator in creating a unique personal style based on a mixture of established uses and personal artistic flourishes.

The English language, especially in the matter of literary language, took about one hundred years after Chaucer to develop into a form that writers could recognise as a standard, and conform to. There were no schools giving formal instruction in English. There were no books of English grammar, no English dictionaries, nor even any spelling books. There was no uniform foundation on which to erect literary monuments. It is all the more astounding, then, that so many achieved so much with the newly rising English language.

There are invisible forces at work in any human language tending to modify it. Two of the most powerful forces are the rule of analogy and the rule of euphony. When people are unsure how to make a variant of a word, they mostly use as a model any word which seems



to them to be somewhat similar. With the dropping of the sound of final 'e' in many English words, people were at a loss to know how to form the correct inflection to suit the purpose.

In the absence of a clear rule of grammar, in every language people will tend to use the most regular form available. In English that led eventually to the classes of regular verbs and nouns, the regular possessive with s and the loss of grammatical genders. The rule of euphony causes people faced with a choice of pronunciations to choose the one that either 'sounds right' or is easiest to say. It might well be called a rule of fluency. The rule causes words to conform with a high frequency of occurrence to an overall 'shape' or orthography.

The medieval grammar schools.

In the age which gave us Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare, schooling was Latin based. In that age there were many scholars who could speak Latin fluently. Latin was still the universal language of much of Europe. It was a subject for study in its own right. English pedagogs soon followed the lead of Petrus Ramus. It was thought desirable to teach, not the naturally evolved vernacular Latin grammar of the medieval age, but a 'pure' form. But where to find that purity? The mythical 'everybody' agreed that only the Latin of Cicero was worth teaching, and it soon became the only Latin taught in England.

A generation of schoolboys being punished for using 'vulgarisms' was enough to establish Cicero as the source of all things Latin. If anybody wanted to study grammar, they studied Cicero. Rhetoric? Cicero. Examples of quality literary prose? Cicero. And so more and more Latin grammars came to contain only words from Cicero, phrases from Cicero, patterns from Cicero. A language confined into too small a space suffocated and dies. In England, a land where Latin once flourished, it died out, coming to be found only in dead books written by long dead hands.

" ... all barbary, all corruption, all Latin adulterate, which ignorant blind fools brought into this world, and with the same hath distained and poisoned the old Latin speech, and the veray Roman tongue which in the time of Sallust and Virgil was used — I say that filthiness and all such abuson, which the later blind world brought in, which more rather may be called Bloterature than Literature, I utterly banish and exclude out of this school."

John Colet (January 1467 – 10 September 1519) - text modernised.

In a climate of 'Ciceronian' studies, much of great worth in antiquity was ignored for many years. Just at the time when this old knowledge was being rediscovered there was a boom in the arts and the sciences. At a time of the discovery of new lands, academia was rediscovering old fields. Casting aside the rigid frames imposed on writings by pedagogs, great works of magic were done with the English language by pen and by press.

"From jiggging veins of riming mother wits  
And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay  
We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,  
Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine  
Threatening the world with high astounding terms  
And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword."

Christopher Marlowe (1564 - 1593)

In the course of a few decades English began anew to adopt new coinages. By their very newness these words were considered 'hard words', hard for ordinary people to say and to write. For a brief period, many alternative spellings could be found, but the rise of literacy helped to stabilise the language once more.

The humbler writings of tradesmen are often overlooked in studies of English. The value of these writings is that they show a remarkable conformity of spelling and vocabulary with the literary writings of the age. This tends to prove that the language was evolving in its day-to-day use by ordinary people. Most people have heard of Samuel Pepys diary. Few will have heard of the diary of Henry Machyn. He lived about 1480 to 1560, exact dates unknown.

The same day be twyne a xj&xij a fore noon the lady  
Elizabeth wa? proclamyd quen elsabeth quen of England  
France&yrland deffender of the ffeyth by dyverse  
harold of arme?&trumpetor?&duke? lord&knyghts  
the wyche wa? ther present ye duke of norfoke my  
Lord tresorer ye yerle of shrovsbere ye yerele of bedford & the  
Lord mayre & ye althermen & dyuer odur lord & knyghts

The same day between eleven and twelve before noon the Lady Elizabeth was proclaimed Queen of England, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, by divers heralds of arms and trumpeters and dukes, lords, and knights. The which was there present the Duke of Norfolk, my lord treasurer, the Earl of Shrewsbury, the Earl of Bedford, and the lord mayor and the aldermen and divers other lords and knights.  
Henry Machyn Diary, 17th November 1558

The entire group of people who use a language, which I call the commune of that language, cause the language to evolve into a communal form, the collective, a language having the collective properties injected into it by each and every user. The collective is formed by the commune through the democracy of a free choice exercised by each user. Once in a while a language user will so freely exercise a choice of style as to influence a majority of the commune into copying that style of language. Such a man was William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare had the good fortune to have been educated in a grammar school of the English Renaissance. Whilst still very much Latin based, the schools were now teaching a broader base of classical studies. Little is know about Shakespeare's early life. However, from the contents of his plays it may be seen that he had a very broad knowledge, a breadth of knowledge in fact greater than that of most academics of his time. Language, law, history, geography, all these and more were Shakespeare's to command.

In a new era the English language blossomed anew. It was the Elizabethan age. It was the age of adventure, age of exploration, age of discovery. Into that age came a man whose turn of phrase so delighted the people that they took his words and phrases into the language. Modern English owes much of its power and flexibility to Shakespeare. The new English could produce laughter or tears, gasps of amazement or shudders of horror. When at last a dictionary of the English language was compiled, by Samuel Johnson, Shakespeare was cited more than any other author.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It droppeth as the gentle raine from heauen  
Vpon the place beneath. It is twice blest,  
It blesseth him that giues, and him that takes,  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest, it becomes  
The throned Monarch better then his Crowne.  
His Scepter shewes the force of temporall power,  
The attribute to awe and Maiestie,  
Wherein doth sit the dread and feare of Kings:  
But mercy is about this sceptred sway,  
It is enthroned in the hearts of Kings,

The Merchant of Venice



The Elizabethan era gave a new vigour to the English language. William Bullokar produced pamphlets in an attempt to standardise English grammar and orthography, but it was Shakespeare's contemporary Ben Jonson who gave English its first true book of rules, English Grammar in 1640. However, it was not adopted in the schools. Queen Elizabeth herself gave much to the language.

I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

Elizabeth I speech at Tilbury.

Thus far the English language was the people's English, shaped by the people, nurtured and grown by the people, used freely and artistically by the people. But it came to be called the King's English. What belongs to the King must be governed and safeguarded. No academy was created to safe guard English. Its guardians have always been self-appointed. In every age since Chaucer there have always been champions ready to fight against the 'terrible wrongs' done against the 'purity' of the language. None of them seems to have troubled themselves to study how language works and to discover that the tide of change in English has grown to be unstoppable.

Continued in Part 5

A Brief History of the English Language Part 5 - Early Modern English

Part 1 briefly covered the period from the 5th century CE to the 14th century.

Part 2 describes Chaucer's influence on the development of English.

Part 3 covers the period from Chaucer to the Elizabethan age.

Part 4 describes processes in the natural evolution of English.

Grammar as an Evolutionary Process

A major purpose of this short series is to show that the grammar, the set of rules for using a language, is a product of evolution, a continually evolving product of natural selection. A natural grammar is not a set of rules by which generations of speakers and writers should be forced to clone their language. For any living language it is the users in the mass who control its direction and growth. To ignore that reality is to ignore human psychology. A living language is the only truly democratic institution on the face of the Earth. What the people want is what they get. For every would-be 'expert' who votes with the pen there are tens of thousands who vote with the tongue.

Fortunately, the people who instruct us to never at all split an infinitive, to never start a sentence with an adverb and to never - horror of horrors - end a sentence with a preposition are not long by ordinary people put up with.

Of course, the foregoing sentence is not a good example of clarity in writing. But there is nothing whatsoever in any way, shape or form wrong with it according to the naturally evolved rules of the grammar of the English language. Human language is the very model of evolution in action. Languages merge, languages split; they diverge and converge; they parallel biology greatly in the origins of their species. A language may, like Latin, be bred 'true to type' by experts, so that it eventually dies, breathless. Or it can be given full freedom by the parliament of its people, so that it may spread its joyful song throughout the world.

The Influence of Shakespeare

It is impossible in a series of short articles to give credit to the many hundreds of people who contributed to the re-establishment of English as England's national language, to its growth, embellishment, standardisation and stability. The period of development of the English language known as the Early Modern English period covers approximately the three centuries from the Tudor period onwards. The Tudor period's greatest son is Shakespeare. No student of the English language should miss the chance to discover the sources of Shakespeare's inspiration.

Raphael Holinshed, (c.1525-1580?), was commissioned by the printer Reginald Wolfe to write a history of the world. This was finished after Wolfe's death, the joint production of a number of authors. Published in two volumes in 1577 it is now known as Holinshed's Chronicles. The Chronicles have been shown by modern scholars to have been the source of much of Shakespeare's historical knowledge. The section on Macbeth is very enlightening.

C.E.M.S. Oxford University

Holinshed's Chronicles are still not fully studied. New material has just (April 2009) come to light quoting from the Vita Ædwardi Regis - the life of Edward the Confessor. The surviving original Anglo-Saxon text is incomplete, so this is an exciting discovery for historians.

C.E.M.S. News

To do justice to the development of the English language from the time of Shakespeare to the founding of the United States of America would require at least a whole book. How does one sum up in a few paragraphs the history of so many years? Explorers and adventurers brought to English new words for new cultures, new languages, new plants, new animals and new products. The many wars contributed military terms. Scholars began to translate academic and literary books into English. Authors of popular works wrote mainly, or even entirely, in English.

The Roman Catholic Church, so long a major influence in England, lost its power. Henry VIII declared himself head of the English Church, denying the right of a distant Pope to dictate to an English king. Latin continued to be the official language of the church, and it was some time before an English translation of the Bible was officially accepted. But the Latin of the church was classical Latin. The official church would not give house room to the medieval vernacular Latin.

### The Influence of The Bible

No history of the English language, however short, should fail to mention the 'authorised' bible. The influence of English translations of the Bible on the language itself is immense. If one views the Bible, not from a religious, but from a politico-economic perspective, there are insights to be found. The ruling classes already had an official French version of the Bible. There was a demand for an English Bible for the benefit of the common people. Not as readers, but from ordinary people as an audience. In an age of widespread illiteracy, people wanted to hear, not an unintelligible 'mumbo-jumbo' of Latin words that they could not comprehend, but biblical stories in their own language.

Wycliffe's Bible was the earliest translation with a wide distribution. It is a too-literal translation from Latin, with English words forced into a Latin mould. It contributed to the spread of English literacy, and added to the vocabulary, but its impact on the language comes mostly from its having shown that there was a great demand for an English Bible. William Tyndale's Bible was translated into a more vernacular English from older Hebrew and Greek texts. Tyndale was arrested on the orders of Henry VIII and ultimately burned at the stake for his pains.

Henry VIII, a king never known for his piety, ordered the production of an English bible to



be read aloud in church. The Great Bible, named for its physical size, incorporated elements from Tyndale's Bible, but 'corrected' to conform to the prevailing theological ideas and the king's wishes. The Great Bible incorporated elements from the Latin Vulgate Bible, itself a multiply translated and 'corrected' version of older texts.

The Byble in Englyshe : that is to saye the content of all the holy scrypture, both of ye Olde and Newe Testament, truly translated after the veryte of the Hebrue and Greke textes, by ye dylygent studye of dyuerse excellent learned men, expert in the forsayde tonges.

### The King James Bible

The influence of the King James, or Authorised version of the Bible lies not in its accuracy, but in its self-consistency and poetry. Great care was taken to ensure consistency of spelling and phraseology throughout. The quality of the writing was excellent, becoming a model for generations of English speakers and writers even into the 20th century. For all its beauty, the King James Bible was a deliberately inaccurate translation. Parts which might give rise to a disaffection of the working classes were modified. Biblical advice against misrule was toned down. References to the rights of the congregation - the people - were subverted into the rights of the Established English Church. Politics aside, it was a work of linguistic art.

William Anders:

"For all the people on Earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send you".

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.  
And the earth was without form, and void;  
and darkness was upon the face of the deep.  
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.  
And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.  
And God saw the light, that it was good:  
and God divided the light from the darkness."

Jim Lovell:

"And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.  
And the evening and the morning were the first day.  
And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,  
and let it divide the waters from the waters.  
And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament  
from the waters which were above the firmament:  
and it was so.  
And God called the firmament Heaven.  
And the evening and the morning were the second day."

Frank Borman:

"And God said, Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place,  
and let the dry land appear: and it was so.  
And God called the dry land Earth;  
and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas:  
and God saw that it was good."

Apollo 8 Christmas 1968

Published in 1611, the King James Bible is an astounding achievement for its day. It can still be read by any averagely literate English speaker. Only a few words have lost or changed their meanings over the centuries. Anyone who learned their English only from this Bible could be readily understood in any country where English is spoken, although

they would probably sound very old-fashioned.

For all its hidden political messages, through its linguistic powers the King James Bible was so much a part of the belief systems of English speakers that a more accurate translation of 1970 was rejected by many Christians at that time, both practising and nominal. Such is the strange power of language when it is a cultural norm. It resists enforced change as though it were a living, breathing, beautiful creature of nature.

Continued in Part 6

## A Brief History of the English Language Part 6 - Global English

Part 1 briefly covered the period from the 5th century CE to the 14th century.

Part 2 describes Chaucer's influence on the development of English.

Part 3 covers the period from Chaucer to the Elizabethan age.

Part 4 describes processes in the natural evolution of English.

Part 5 presents a brief overview of Early Modern English

## Global English

Modern English is a global language shared by many nations. It has its national variants: British, American, Canadian, Australian, Indian, Jamaican etc. Every human language evolves as its users come to favour some specific feature over another. The instabilities of speech over time are greatly damped by standards in writing. Spellings derived from attempts at capturing sounds on paper act on new generations as an influence in pronunciation. Rules of grammar, whilst never slavishly adopted by all speakers of a language, nevertheless serve to moderate the rate and amount of change over the generations. Although English is spoken with a very wide variety of accents, yet it is written formally with few variations other than style.

The influence of the King James Bible on the stability and globalisation of the English language is remarkable. In a more religious age, the Bible was carried to the colonies where it was used in the churches. In poor regions it was the main or even the only book available from which children could learn to read. It was the primary source for many people learning English as a foreign language. Perhaps it is the very beauty of the style that causes some people to believe that this specific version of a much-translated, edited and redacted canonical selection of documents from a larger set of source documents is literal truth. For all of its faults, it must be said that the King James translation was a huge improvement in accuracy over previous translations.

Laws penned with the utmost care and exactness, and in the vulgar language, are often perverted to wrong meanings; then why should we wonder that the Bible is so?

Johnathan Swift.

## The Evolution of English Grammar

The natural grammar of English has not evolved much since the King James Bible's publication, in 1611, although the vocabulary has swelled greatly. A hundred years later, many of the words which had been called 'hard words' and 'inkhorn terms' when first introduced were now so well adopted and taken into the core of English that they served as a model for new coinages. Words which did not conform to the new model began to drop out of use. English had become more systematic. The system, the evolved grammar, was both a product of the users and a tool of the users of the English language. A language clouded by dead words was subjected to the filter of its living users and made to sparkle.

Most changes in the way the English language is written have been in the areas of spelling



and punctuation. Most of these changes in the written form of the language came, initially, not from academics, but from printers. Standardisation is of great economic benefit to printers, most especially when using moveable type. It is economically beneficial if a compositor can work 'on autopilot', rather than keep checking spellings against a list. It is also beneficial if printers can agree amongst themselves on a set of standard spellings: if two or three adopt a standard and another does not, then who is to say which of them is using the 'right' spellings?

Even though the King James Bible employed a greater standardisation of spellings than any previous work, it was not sufficient as a reference work for spelling. None of the new discoveries in the world and in the sciences feature in the Bible. The English language needed a standard word list. Various lists were produced, and various attempts made to record the grammar of English. These were not generally adopted, mainly because changes in grammar and orthography were overtaking the language even as the books were being written, partly because the books were not accurate. Also, there was too much desire on the part of some authors to impose their own view on others of how the language ought to be. These would-be experts were keen to find fault with the writings of even such luminaries as Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Ten censure wrong for one who writes amiss;

...

Those rules of old, discovered, not devis'd,  
Are Nature still, but Nature methodiz'd;  
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd  
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd.

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, 1711.

Samuel Johnson

Alexander Pope obviously knew a thing or two about the evolution of language. So too did Samuel Johnson. The most famous early spelling list was Samuel Johnson's dictionary. In fact, it was more than a dictionary. It was a fairly good introductory grammar of the English language. In order to understand how that one book exerted such an influence on the literary evolution of English, a little economic background knowledge is needed. In a boom time for printed materials: books, pamphlets, maps, newspapers and even early advertisement leaflets, standards were desired. Without powered machinery, the only way to meet a publishing deadline would be to spread the workload over a number of printing shops. It would be intolerable if that led to two or three different versions of a single publication.

Samuel Johnson was already widely known as a writer when he was approached by a consortium of printers to write a dictionary and a grammar of English. A description of that monumental task would easily fill a book. Originally contracted for 1500 guineas, BP1575, Johnson had to continually raise money to finance his dictionary, even whilst creating it. The work took nine years. The result was a masterpiece.

GRAMMAR, which is the art of using words properly, comprises four parts:  
Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, and Prosody.

In this division and order of the parts of grammar I follow the common grammarians, without inquiring whether a fitter distribution might not be found. Experience has long shown this method to be so distinct as to obviate confusion, and so comprehensive as to prevent any inconvenient omissions. I likewise use the terms already received, and already understood, though perhaps others more proper might sometimes be invented. Sylburgius, and other innovators, whose new terms have sunk their learning into neglect, have left sufficient warning against the trifling ambition of teaching arts in a new language.

ORTHOGRAPHY is the art of combining letters into syllables, and syllables into words. It therefore teaches previously the form and sound of letters.

There have been many schemes offered for the emendation and settlement of our orthography, which, like that of other nations, being formed by chance, or according to the fancy of the earliest writers in rude ages, was at first very various and uncertain, and is yet sufficiently irregular. Of these reformers some have endeavoured to accommodate orthography better to the pronunciation, without considering that this is to measure by a shadow, to take that for a model or standard which is changing while they apply it.

#### SYNTAX.

The established practice of grammarians requires that I should here treat of the Syntax; but our language has so little inflection, or variety of terminations, that its construction neither requires nor admits many rules. Wallis, therefore, has totally neglected it; and Jonson, whose desire of following the writers upon the learned languages made him think a syntax indispensably necessary, has published such petty observations as were better omitted.

#### Samuel Johnson A Grammar of the English Tongue

The modesty of Johnson in trying to capture a little of the natural grammar of English without trying to impose an unreasoned prescriptive grammar on others contrasts greatly with the works of other grammarians. Horace, 65 - 8 BCE and Quintilian, 35 - 10 CE, knew that the purpose of a grammar was to describe the product of a natural process of evolution. For about 2,000 years, grammarians have vacillated between positions of describing or prescribing forms of language. Unfortunately, until about the 1950s, most grammarians studied literature in order to determine facts about the language, and the spoken form was studied for the most part only by phoneticians.

Between the publication of Johnson's grammar and the rise of modern descriptive linguistics, grammar was treated as though it had the truth of a science, whereas it was but a series of personal views of language as a form of art. Right through until the 1960s, grammar was used as a hammer in an attempt to beat English into submission. In earlier times, children would leave school with an acquired 'bookish' use of English. With the general rise of literacy, children left school with a command of their language derived from authors such as Tennyson, Wordsworth, R.L. Stevenson, Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Mark Twain, Longfellow, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Edward Lear and many, many more. These days it is a brave person who will stick their head above the parapet and tell others just how wrong their use of English is, and offer to correct the errors from motives of the purest altruism.

"Now, in reality, the world have paid too great a compliment to critics, and have imagined them men of much greater profundity than they really are. From this complacency, the critics have been emboldened to assume a dictatorial power, and have so far succeeded, that they are now become the masters, and have the assurance to give laws to those authors from whose predecessors they originally received them.

The critic, rightly considered, is no more than the clerk, whose office it is to transcribe the rules and laws laid down by those great judges whose vast strength of genius hath placed them in the light of legislators, in the several sciences over which they presided. This office was all which the critics of old aspired to; nor did they ever dare to advance a sentence, without supporting it by the authority of the judge from whence it was borrowed.

But in process of time, and in ages of ignorance, the clerk began to invade the power and assume the dignity of his master. The laws of writing were no longer founded on the practice of the author, but on the dictates of the critic. The clerk became the legislator, and those very peremptorily gave laws whose business it was, at first, only to transcribe them."



## History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, 1749, Henry Fielding

Oppressed by the Norman conquerors, then by kings, the church and the grammarians, English refuses to kneel in surrender. Chaucer made English the language of England. Since his times, English has spread over the world and other countries have made English their own. Today, in England, I still hear people who decry the 'Americanisation' of English. I have read Americanised English. Americanized even. Chaucer would have loved it.

Up from the South come the birds that were banished,  
Frightened away by the presence of frost.  
Back to the vale comes the verdure that vanished,  
Back to the forest the leaves that were lost.  
Over the hillside the carpet of splendour,  
Folded through Winter, Spring spreads down again;  
Along the horizon, the tints that were tender,  
Lost hues of Summer-time, burn bright as then.

### Comments

Robert: From your writings and comments you most certainly do know a lot about the English language. So I'm very pleased to be able to write about some things you didn't know. :)

Even before Caxton, the language was changing greatly. My own theory about the loss of grammatical genders is that the common people, in adopting Norman French or Latin words, used the default neutral gender, as German does for adopted words. As older Saxon words dropped out of fashion so did the genders that went with them. By the time that English was becoming the dominant language again, the use of neutral 'the' would have been intuitive for most speakers of English.

I expect that Caxton certainly had doubts about his choices of what should be kept and what should be changed. He would have observed the trends away from complexity of grammar and gone along with the majority. After all, that is what language does if left to its own devices. Latin became a dead language because it wasn't left to its own devices - it was stifled by 'experts'. I shall write a little about these 'grammar police' in part 4.

Latin never died out! It continues to be spoken by millions of people in Europe, the Americas and other places around the globe. It is now known by such varied names as French, Italian, Romansch and Spanish.

Languages such as French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese etc., all evolved from their roots as did English by absorbing Latin words and making them a part of a new language. Although having much in common with Latin, none of them is Latin. Latin is a dead language.

Latin, the language of ancient Rome, which in medieval times was still evolving and thriving, was killed off by the bookish grammarians who wanted to fit it into the straightjacket of Ciceronian grammar and vocabulary.

Latin went right on being spoken after Rome was sacked in the various regions where Rome had brought it as well as in its home region. There are continua of phonological, semantic and syntactic changes that clearly demonstrate that Latin merely changed into the various forms spoken today. One very strong piece of evidence is the still-present dialect continuum, where you can walk from Rome to France, with each village understanding the neighboring village's speech even though Roman speech is not intelligible to Parisians. Latin bears the same relationship to Spanish, French and the rest as Old English does to Modern English. Neither one died out.

This is understood to be common knowledge in linguistics and to refute it, you need extremely strong evidence. Even Wikipedia agrees with me: The expansion of the Roman Empire spread Latin throughout Europe, and, eventually, Vulgar Latin began to diverge into various dialects. Vulgar Latin gradually evolved into a number of distinct Romance languages by the 9th century. These were, for many centuries, only oral languages, Latin still being used for writing. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin#Legacy>)

What we call Latin today refers to general speech patterns extant during a certain time period, but you cannot draw a line and say, "Latin ended on this day" because it never happened. Latin changed in ancient Rome just as Old English (Anglo-Saxon) did. That is, Latin and the Romance languages are chronolects of the same language.

The matter of Latin as used by the Roman Catholic Church is something different all together. Scribes copied Latin texts and the educated used it as a lingua franca, but it wasn't a form of Latin that people were learning natively, and like the other branches, it continued to evolve.

Your series is very interesting, but putting forth the idea that a group of grammarians somehow killed a language is just silly and unfortunate as it brings doubt to the rest of what you have written. Please note: Language changes, all languages change. That includes Latin.

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