

A 'Diachronic' Study of English Language Within the Frame: 5th Century - 21st Century

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English today is the most spoken language in the world after Mandarin Chinese. It comprises of the elements of so many other tongues like, Latin, German, French, Greek, Sanskrit and so on. Still today other languages are influencing this language. This is because it is such a flexible and language that it is used across the globe for communication between people of different races and cultures. 'Chron' means 'Time,' and 'Dia' means 'through.' Thus *Diachronic* is how Language changed over time. In short, Diachronic Linguistics¹ views the historical development of the language through the ages. Thus on the diachronic axis, one could go back and forth in time watching the language with all its features changed. In my paper, an exhaustive study of the socio-historical development and change in the English Language from the Old English period or the 5th century till the present 21st century that we are living in, has been done.

To begin with, Old English is the name given to the earliest recorded stage of the English Language. It refers to the language as it was used in the early 5th century from the coming of the Germanic invaders and settlers to Britain up to the Norman Conquest in 1066. Old English a.k.a Anglo Saxon was spoken in England from the mid-5th century to the mid-12th century, its usage covering a period of about 700 years. Speakers of Old English called their language *Anglisc* or *Englisc*. Old English developed out of North Sea Germanic or Ingvaenic² dialects from the 5th century. It eventually incorporated a number of dialects but only one of

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them, King Alfred's *West Saxon*, had left literary monumental works. By 10th century, West Saxon was considered to be the most significant language. Previously, the method used was for inscribing very short inscriptions on wood, bone or stone in *runic* characters. The oldest surviving text is Caedmon's *Hymn* (658-680 A.D). Nearly all surviving documents were mediated through the church and there was a deep influence of Latin Christianity. Old English was first written in the form of runic alphabets known as Anglo Saxon Runes or *Futhorc*³. This alphabet (26-32 letters), started to be replaced by Latin alphabets in the 7th century and after the 9th, runes were used mainly in manuscripts and interested mainly antiquarians. Old English words were spelled as they were pronounced unlike present English. Often the Latin alphabet fell short of being able to adequately represent Anglo Saxon Phonetics. Therefore, the spellings can be thought of as best attempt approximations of how the language actually sounded and written language was not taken as literal approximations. The silent lettered words in many Modern English were actually pronounced in Old English. For example, the letters 'C' & 'H' in 'CNIGT', the Old English ancestor of the 'KNIGHT', the letters 'K' & 'GH' are silent, but in Old English, 'C' & 'H' their Old English equivalent letters were actually pronounced. Again, spelling was extremely variable and words represented phonetics of authors' regional dialect and were symbolic of writers' idiosyncratic spelling choices some of whom varied spellings between words. For instance, 'AND' could be spelt 'AND' or 'OND.' Old English Period changed with the Norman Conquest.

The Middle Ages was a time of tremendous linguistic change. During the Old English Period, there wasn't any dictionary available. The only people who could read or write was the aristocracy or the clergy. Consequently, in the 350 years of the Middle Ages, the English

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Language changed rapidly. The most important changes came from the peasantry. Living at the end of the Middle Ages, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in a language that is now known as Middle English. It is the immediate precursor of Modern English that we speak today. The following bears testimony to this.

THE LORD'S PRAYER IN MODERN ENGLISH –

*“Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, Amen”*

AND THIS IS WHAT IT SOUNDED IN THE ANGLO SAXON PERIOD

*‘Fæderureþuþeeart on heofonum;
Si þinnamagehalgod
tobecumeþin rice
gewurþeðinwilla
oneorðanswaswa on heofonum.
urnegedæghwamlīcanhlafsyde us todæg
andforgyf us uregyltas
swaswa we forgyfaðurumgyltendum
and ne gelædþu us on costnunge
acalys us of yfelesoþlice’*

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The Middle English period (extension from 1066 to 1500) marks a clear break from the Old English Period. From 1500, the dialect known as '*Chancery Standard*'^{3A} began to be widespread in England. After the Norman Conquest,⁵ French ruled over England and French influence was deeply felt. William, the Duke of Normandy won in the Battle of Hastings in 1066 in a dynastic war for the throne of England. And Norman French was spoken in English court from 1042 onwards. Norman countrymen became feudal lords in England. Norman French and English were commonly spoken in England. Marriage between Anglo Saxon women and Norman men transpired and communication was a mix of the two languages and their offspring learnt it too. However, Norman French enjoyed the patronage of the court, nobility and law-courts. The Normans represented a higher culture than the Anglo Saxons. It was known as the prestige language. English was relegated to the common class. French literature was more popular within the upper class. Thus the two languages, *Anglo Saxon* and *Norman French* married to form *Middle English*. This is the mixed Anglo-French tongue from which Middle English has descended. This continued till around 1300. Huge number of dialects were born during the Middle English period like *West Saxon* and *East Midland*. When William Caxton established his first printing press towards the end of this. period in 1462 he printed his earliest books in *East Midland dialect*. It became the standard dialect of England. Hence, from Old English to Middle English period, books that document the changes were *THE ORMULUM*, *AYENBYTE OF INWYT*, (in respect of grammar, spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary). For example, 'the long 'u' changed to 'ou.' and 'Hus' changed to 'House.' However, Latin was the official language.

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In 1453, The Fall of Constantinople, is regarded as the beginning of the Renaissance when Greek scholars fled to Italy along with their manuscripts. The Renaissance first began in Italy and then spread to various parts of Europe. During this time, an unprecedented number of Latin words entered England at this time. This occurred due to a renewed interest and admiration of the classical languages and scores of new ideas came into being, and for expressing these concepts the comparatively rich storehouse of words possessed by *Latin* and *Greek* was exploited. While the influence of Latin and Greek may have retarded the growth of English to a certain extent, it also made the language more polished and elegant.

Following was the Elizabethan period which was seen as the flowering of the Renaissance. It spanned from the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558 till the death of James I, in 1625. During the Elizabethan period, the English language consisted only of **24** letters as against **26** used in the modern English language. Another aspect of different usage of the language was that, some letters like 'j' and 'i', 'u' and 'v' were used to mean the same thing. One more point of difference between the usage of English language then and now is that during the Elizabethan times, a common man was aware of very few letters that were used to speak or write as compared to the present age. Also, with the Shakespearian plays, new words were added to the vocabulary. Thus, Shakespeare can be given the credit for inventing new words that were later on adopted into the mundane language whether spoken or written. Some of the words introduced by Shakespeare through his plays are - *Accused, Courtship, Countless, Exposure, Luggage*, etc. It can thus be seen that despite the Elizabethan language being simple, much confusion was created about its understanding because of the different manner in which it was used and also

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because there was a difference in the number of letters used then and the number of letters used now.

Next came the Puritan Age (a.k.a the second greatest Renaissance) which was divided into two periods – *Jacobean (Reign of King James I)* and *Caroline (Reign of King Charles I)* and there was less spontaneous emotion and profundity and more of cerebral experiments. It was an age of brisk pamphleteering and also of social unrest due to political disturbances between the King and the Parliament which culminated into the execution of the King Charles I, in 1649. This was followed by the establishment of the commonwealth led by Oliver Cromwell. These days were marked by Puritan orthodoxy that had a significant influence upon the English Language of that time. Drama and fiction went into a decline. What flourished, was the poetry of the great poet Edmund Spenser, Metaphysical poetry and Cavalier poetry. They believed in the purity of Bible and wanted to cleanse the Church of England from elements of Roman Catholicism. John Milton was the best representative of the Puritan spirit. He showed in his writing, the significance of showing obedience to God.

What followed was the Restoration period, when Latin works of classical antiquity presented both the best models and the ultimate standards of linguistic taste. The study of the classics promoted familiarity with the works of Persius, Horace and Juvenal. Hence this age was known as the Neo-Classical Age where a great impulse was given to the principle of regularity and order and a highly artificial type of poetry. Correctness and '*decorum*' were of much greater importance than the spontaneity of the creative mind. During the reign of Charles II, the domestic politics of England became divided into two groups – 'Whigs' and 'Tories, and this sharp cleavage had a great impact on literature. While the Whigs were in favour of the

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Hanoverian succession, the more conservative Tories were Jacobites. When Queen Anne died in 1714, the Hanoverian succession took place. The succession as well as the War of Spanish succession – both influenced contemporary English Language. At this time, there also grew in London, a definite literary class. Both the political parties recruited the services of men of letters so that most of the authors and poets came to support one party or the other. Jonathan Swift was a violent Tory and Joseph Addison, a moderate Whig and Richard Steele, a Whig and Tory in turn. During this time, the intelligentsia (lawyers, politicians, writers, scientists et al.) began to revolve round the coffee-houses and clubs, where they discussed topical issues. From the coffee-houses, branched other literary associations such as the famous *Scriblerus* and *Kit-Cat clubs* which became the haunt of fashionable authors. However, coffee-houses became extinct before the close of the century.

During (1740-1800), the Whig-Tory conflict lost its intensity, since the Tories lost both strength and popularity. Certain trends which reached culmination in the last years of the century, were already being seen. These included a sympathetic observation of Nature and with it of common and rustic people who are close to Nature, and a growing interest in themes concerning the weird and the supernatural. There was also a rebellion against traditional literary forms like the heroic couplet. This was most evident in poetry where poets wished to express themselves more simply and spontaneously, and rejecting the more rigid and artificial forms.

The Transitional period gave birth to the Romantic Revival. Then emphasis was laid on the glories of the natural world instead of new concepts. A strong influence of Germany was seen at this time. The English Romantics such as Walter Scott, Lord Byron and S.T. Coleridge were deeply influenced by Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Von Schiller.

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German Romanticism however unlike English Romanticism, had very little impact on life and was almost a creed involving society as a whole and was much more critical and philosophic. Kant's⁶ foundation of Individualism was also felt at that time.

The Victorian Age saw an increasing recognition of democratic ideals. Writings reflected a deep sympathy for the masses and spoke out for their uplift. Human rights were given greater recognition and there was a desire to demolish man-made social distinctions. During the Victorian period, the English language was greatly modified due to the social changes Britain underwent at that time (most of them caused by the Industrial Revolution). The Industrial Revolution, which began early in the eighteenth century when British society began to move away from a cottage industry towards an industrial society had a major impact on language displaying a new vocabulary. For example, in 1851 at the Great Exhibition the English language showed the world what it made of the machine age and how trade terms denigrated in the past, now powered the language. These are some of the words that appeared at the Great Exhibition, some plain English and others coinages from other languages: *self-acting mill*, *power looms*, *steampress* and *cylindrical steampress* to name a few. The standardization of spelling was just one aspect of a more general attempt to regulate the language, an attempt especially prominent in the second half of the eighteenth century when there was a growing feeling that English needed to be '*ruled*' or '*regulated*', as classical Greek and Latin were believed to have been. In the Victorian era, the Industrial Revolution had a great impact on the English language. Standard English, the language used today, derives from the language standardized during the Industrial Revolution, and it can be organized around six word fields, each of which representing social changes created by the Industrial Revolution: *fashion*, *food*, *leisure*, *medicine*, *psychology*. Each

of these word fields contains words that the Industrial Revolution adapted, changed, customized and invented and that became common currency in Victorian England - (1880-1950).

Again, in its genesis, the Modernist Period in English literature was first and foremost a visceral reaction against the Victorian culture and aesthetics. The Modernist Period in English Literature occupied the years from shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century through roughly 1965. In broad terms, the period was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. In the Modern Age, Language started to be used paradoxically to express the uselessness of language, for where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meaning. The writings showed the influence of the exotic imagination of the surrealists⁷ with the compulsiveness and significance of Kafka or Camus' *Existentialism*⁸ was formally introduced in the works of philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger and can be traced to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century by writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Franz Kafka. But Existentialism as a movement became popular in the mid-twentieth century through the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The most important characteristics of the *Theatre of the Absurd* was that, it responded to the destruction and anxieties of the 20th century by questioning the nature of reality and illusion. The word '*absurdism*' is often used more specifically, to refer to European drama written in the 1950s and 1960s by writers including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, who are often grouped together as the '*Theatre of the absurd*' (a phrase coined by the critic Martin Esslin) playwrights. Characterized by a fascination with absurdity in all its forms – philosophical, dramaturgical, existential, emotional – this is a drama form that pushes theatre to extremes, and which asks

probing questions about what reality (and unreality) really looks like. Often interpreted as a response to the challenges of living in a 20th-century world that seems devoid of meaning, it is frequently far more nightmarish than funny. It is, in its attitude to language that the *Theatre of the Absurd* is most revolutionary. It deliberately attempts to renew the language of drama and to expose the barrenness of conventional stage dialogue. Language also becomes an instrument of mockery and meaninglessness when it is targeted in an offensive manner. The language we come across in the *Theatre of the Absurd* is loaded with such meaningless conversations that the characters do not really want to communicate with each other meaningfully. It is aimed rather at exposing the absurd condition of their relations. Instead of indulging in any valid or meaningful conversation, characters in absurd drama undermine the dignity of one another in the process, aiming rather to hurt and abuse. The World War II was largely responsible for the shattering of belief in religion. In the play *Waiting for Godot*, written by Samuel Beckett (1906-1909), the absurd condition of human beings is better described through the endless waiting of two tramps Vladimir and Estragon for *Godot* who actually never turns up! *Godot*, they imagine, would somehow resolve their unstated problem in a mysterious way but their hope remains unrealized. The language employed by the dramatist shows his deliberate attempt to convey the meaningless situation of the two tramps:

“Vladimir: We will hang ourselves tomorrow. (Pause.) Unless Godot comes.

Estragon: And if he comes?

Vladimir: We will be saved.

Vladimir takes off his hat (Lucky’s), peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, knocks on the

crown, puts it on again.

Estragon: Well? Shall we go?

Vladimir: Pull on your trousers.

Estragon: What?

Vladimir: Put on your trousers.

Estragon: You want me to pull off my trousers?

Vladimir: Put ON your trousers.

Estragon: (realizing his trousers are down). True.

He pulls up his trousers.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move”.

There is often no real story line. Instead there is a series of 'free floating images' which help the audience to interpret a particular play of this genre. The main focus of an Absurdist play is on the incomprehensibility of the world, or the futility of an attempt to rationalize an irrational, disorderly world. The *Theatre of the Absurd* is to a very considerable extent, concerned with a critique of language (which has become devoid of meaning) as an unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. For instance, in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett parodies the language of philosophy and science in Lucky's speech. Even the silences that

punctuate the conversation between Estragon and Vladimir represent the emptiness that pervades peoples' lives. They talk to each other but they fail to comprehend what is being said. They often interrupt and repeat each other's dialogues. In other words, the Absurdist drama creates an environment where people are isolated, clown-like characters blundering their way through life because they don't know what else to do. Though the Absurdist plays seem to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, one can trace an underlying structure and meaning amidst chaos. Another important feature of the *Theatre of the Absurd* is that, it does not situate Man in a historical, social, or cultural context. It is not merely a commentary on the general condition of human life. Instead, it delineates the human condition. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps have a very blurred sense of time and history. This lack of knowledge of one's own culture and past symbolizes the breakdown of culture and tradition in the twentieth century. Most of the dramatists whose plays are grouped under the label *Theatre of the Absurd*, resisted and disliked any such classification and categorization of their plays.

However, within the next fifty years or so, substantial language shifts could occur as economic development affects more countries. Owing to these shifts in allegiance, more languages may disappear. Those remaining will rapidly get more native speakers. This includes English. internal migration and urbanization, that might restructure areas, thereby creating communities where English becomes the language of inter-ethnic communication a neutral language. Universities using English as the medium of instruction will expand and rapidly create a generation of middle-class professionals. Economic development will only increase the middle class, a group that is more likely to learn and use English in jobs. While languages such as English, German, and French have been international languages because of their government's

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political powers, this is less likely to be the case in the 21st century where economics and demographics will have more influence on languages. One could conclude that; English has been an international language for only fifty years. If the pattern follows the previous language trends, we still have about hundred years before a new language dominates the world. However, this does not mean that English is replacing or will replace other languages as many fear. Instead, it may supplement or co-exist with languages by allowing strangers to communicate across linguistic boundaries. It may become one tool that opens windows to the world, unlocks doors to opportunities, and expands our minds to new ideas.



Notes

1. Diachronic linguistics is one of the two main temporal dimensions of language study identified by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). The other is Synchronic linguistics. Diachronic linguistics is the historical study of language, whereas synchronic linguistics is the geographic study of language
2. Ingvaenic /,ɪŋvi:'bɪk/, also known as North Sea Germanic, is a postulated grouping of the northern West Germanic languages, comprising Old Frisian, Old English, and Old Saxon, and their descendants. Ingvaenic is named after the Ingaevones, a West Germanic cultural group or prototribe along the North Sea coast.
3. The futhorc was a development from the 24-character Elder Futhark. Since the futhorc runes are thought to have first been used in Frisia before the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain, they have also been called Anglo-Frisian runes. They were likely used from the 5th century onward, recording Old English and Old Frisian.

LINK - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_runes

4. Chancery Standard, also known as Chancery English, are present-day terms for the 15c written usage of the clerks of Chancery in London, who prepared the king's documents. Before the 1430s, official records were mainly in Latin and French, but after that date mainly in an English based on the Central Midland dialect, with such usages as gaf (gave) not Chaucer's East Midland yaf, such not swich, and theyre (their) not hir. Until the end of the 15c, Chancery and the Exchequer built a foundation of written English that was developed by Caxton when he set up his press in Westminster in 1476. Over the years,

printers replaced some features of Chancery usage with London equivalents, such as third person -s instead of -th (hopes, not hopeth), and are instead of be.

5. The Norman Conquest of England (in Britain, often called the Norman Conquest or the Conquest) was the 11th-century invasion and occupation of England by an army of Norman, Breton, Flemish, and French soldiers led by the Duke of Normandy, later styled William the Conqueror.
6. Immanuel Kant was an influential German philosopher in the Age of Enlightenment. In his doctrine of transcendental idealism, he argued that space, time, and causation are mere sensibilities; "things-in-themselves" exist, but their nature is unknowable.

LINK - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Immanuel_Kant

7. An artist or writer who is an exponent of the avant-garde movement in art and literature which sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind. Surrealism is a cultural movement that began in the early 1920s, and is best known for its visual artworks and writings.
8. The philosophical study that begins with the human subject—not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual. It is associated mainly with certain 19th and 20th-century European philosophers who, despite profound doctrinal differences, shared the belief in that beginning of philosophical thinking.

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