Interrelationships between Language and Literature from Old English to the Modern Period

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Abstract

Literature is the aesthetic manifestation of language. It is 'as old as human language and as new as tomorrow's sunrise.' This paper explores the interrelationships between language and literature from 600 AD to the present day. The grammar of present-day English is closely related to that of Old English with the same tense formation and word orders. The verse unit is a single line and its organizing device is 'alliteration'. The range of Chaucer's English did much to establish English as a national language. The writers of the Elizabethan period reshaped the literary language by borrowing foreign words and by coining new expressions and figures of speech. Shakespeare's language and modern English have enough in common so that historians consider that they both belong to the same stage in the history of English. Milton attempted to reinvent the English language through his *Paradise Lost.* The writers of the seventeenth century developed a prose style that could bear the weight of the most serious and complex ideas. Then, the writers of the eighteenth century devoted themselves to developing out a formal, polished, and "correct" style of expression. Wordsworth and Coleridge intended to purify and renew the literary language and make it closer to the everyday speech of the ordinary people. Modernism tried to articulate a representation of the world and the way of seeing it through complexities of mind using the spoken rather than the formal language.

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1. Introduction

English, or any other language, cannot be traced to its ultimate origin, because this origin is buried far back in the prehistoric past of the human race. Language existed long before written literature. Its history, however, could be traced as far back as a language that scholars call "Indo-European," which was spoken five or six thousand years ago by a group of tribesmen who lived somewhere in Europe or in the western part of Asia. The initial expansion of the Indo-Europeans is believed to be the pushing out of the frontiers of agricultural people, who over centuries introduced agriculture into the more thinly populated countries; a process which would require a long time-scale. This expansion is believed to have begun in about 7000 B.C. (there is also a traditional view dating it to 4000 B.C. or later). The geneticists have shown that "a large proportion of the genetic make-up of the population of the British Isles derives from Neolithic movement of people", a fact which supports the idea of the expansion of the Indo-European languages over a long time-scale of gradual expansion of agriculture (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p.77).

Well before 2000 B.C., the Indo-European speaking groups of people began to break up. One branch managed to settle far away in India; others migrated to other remote lands like Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and northern and western Europe. Being geographically separated, the languages spoken in these parts of the world underwent gradual changes (Crystal, 2003). The earliest records of Indo-European speaking groups in Europe belong to the Greeks back in 1400 B.C. The records of Italic are later, dating from around the sixth century BC onwards, and the Celtic-speaking people first became visible in the region of the Alps, with inscriptions from around the fifth century BC onwards. The Germanic-speaking peoples are first heard about from Greek and Roman authors during the first century BC; however, the earliest records

of Germanic languages in the form of inscriptions in the runic alphabet date to the fourth century AD onwards. By the beginning of the first century, the original Indo-European Language had already given birth to the 'daughter' languages Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Germanic, etc. Latin later developed into distinct regional varieties that eventually formed the separate French and Italian languages. Germanic evolved into the group of languages that includes German, Dutch, Swedish, and English (Crystal, 2008, p.185).

2. The Old English Period

The history of English as a separate language begins in the middle of the fifth century, when the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded Britain. The invaders brought with them their own language, a dialect of Germanic. This dialect, which soon came to be designated as "Angleish," or English, was the ancestor of the present-day English. The invaders also brought with them their own alphabet, which consisted of a set of characters called "runes" (Alexander, 2000). The runic alphabet was used for carving inscription on materials like wood and stone. Except for these carvings, however, not much use was made of writing. Written records were not kept; stories, legends, and poems were passed along orally from generation to generation. Most of the knowledge we have of Old English, therefore, is based on manuscripts that were written fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period by monks who used the Latin alphabet for writing English.

Three other languages, during the Anglo-Saxon period, made important contributions to the English language. One was the language spoken by the Celtic population of Britain. Celtic is divided into three groups: Gaulish, Britannic and Gaelic (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p. 65). Gaulish was spoken in France and northern Italy in the time of the Roman Republic. It died out

during the early centuries of the Christian era. Britannic was the branch of Celtic spoken in most of Britain before the Anglo-Saxon invasions. Gaelic was the Celtic language of Ireland. It spread to the Isle of Man in the fourth century and to Scotland in the fifth. Its earliest records are inscriptions from the fourth or fifth century AD (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009). Celtic speaking people were skilled in metallurgy, and the Germanic words for iron and lead (seen for example in Old English *īren*, *lēad)* were probably borrowed from them. The Celts retreated before the Anglo-Saxon invaders; the Germanic language of the incomers became the dominant one, and there are few traces of Celtic influence on Old English (OE); indeed, the number of Celtic words taken into English in the whole of its history has been very small and limited to a number of Celtic place names and geographical terms, including *Kent, York, Thames, Dover,* and *Avon.*

A second language that influenced Old English was Latin. Due to the large number of translations from the Latin, it influenced the lexis and structure of Old English, at least in some of its written forms. After the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, Old English borrowed a number of words from Latin, especially for the concepts and institutions of Christianity; they include OE *apostol* 'apostle', *biscop* 'bishop' (Latin *episcopus*), *munuc* 'monk' (Latin *monachus*), *mynster* 'monastery, church' (Latin *monastērium*), etc. A number of words related to education and learning, such as *school, verse, paper,* and *title,* were also taken over from Latin during this period. During the later part of the Old English period, the Danish invaders, Scandinavian in origin, settled in the northern part of England. Their language, Old Norse (ON) is the third language which had a considerable influence on English. Most of the words that the Danes contributed to English are every day terms like *anger*, *to cast*, *to die* and *ill*, from Old Norse *angr*, *kasta*, *deyja* and *illr*; Old English used instead

the words *wratt, weorpan*, *steorfan* and *yfel*, which have become *wrath*, *warp*, *starve* and *evil* (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009)

Languages are morphologically divided into four types: *isolating*, *agglutinative*, *flectional* (or *inflectional)* and *polysynthetic* (or *incorporating*). In the extreme cases of isolating languages every word would consist of a single morpheme, i.e., the language uses no bound forms. In agglutinative languages, there are many bound forms stuck together to form words, but the shapes of the bound morphemes do not alter during the word formation process, i.e., the boundaries between morphemes are clear-cut. By contrast in an inflectional language the bound morphemes may be realized in several different forms. In a polysynthetic language, several different morphemes, both grammatical and lexical, can be combined into a single word (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009).

Proto-Indo-European and Proto-Germanic were highly *inflected* languages, i.e., in their grammar they make great use of variations in the *endings* of words. Old English, was generally less inflectional than Proto-Germanic, but still did make great use of its inflectional system, and to a great extent it still preserved grammatical gender; Old English inherited a two-tense system ('present' and 'past') from Proto-Germanic. Old English retained the person distinctions in the indicative singular in the present tense, as in *ic helpe* 'I help' *tū hilpst* 'you (sg) help', and *hē*/*hēo*/*hit hilpt* 'he/she/it helps'. But in the plural it made no person distinctions: *wē*/*gē*/*hīe helpat* 'we/you/they help'. In the past-tense subjunctive there was one form for the singular (*hulpe*) and one for the plural (*hulpen*). As the examples show, although the inflectional system of Old English was simplified compared with Proto-Germanic, it still had a more complicated inflectional morphology than Modern English (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009).

2.1. The Earliest Figurative Language

Like Greek and even Persian literature, English literature begins with an *epic*, a poem of historic scope telling of heroes and the world, of the deeds of a legendry or historical hero. Compared with the epics of Homer, *Beowulf*, the first survived English poem, is short, yet it is the longest as well as the richest of Old English poems. The poem is not set in Britain; it opens with the mysterious figure of Scyld, founder of the Scylding dynasty of Denmark, who would have lived c. 400, before England existed (Alexander, 2000). *Beowulf* is an ancient poem that was transmitted orally by Anglo-Saxon bards for centuries before it was written down some time in the eighth century. It tells the story of Beowulf, a warrior prince from Geatland in Sweden, who goes to Denmark and kills the monster Grendel that has been attacking the great hall of Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the Danish king. Grendel's mother, a water monster, takes revenge by carrying off one of the king's noblemen, but Beowulf dives into the underwater lair in which she lives and kills her too. Returning home, in due course Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. The poem then moves forward about fifty years. Beowulf's kingdom is ravaged by a fire-breathing dragon that burns the royal hall. Beowulf, aided by a young warrior, Wiglaf, manages to kill the dragon, but is finally wounded. He pronounces Wiglaf his successor. The poem ends with Beowulf's burial.

Old English poetry is characterized by a number of poetic tropes which enable a writer to describe things indirectly and which require a reader imaginatively to construct their meaning. The most widespread of these are what are known as *kennings.* Kennings often occur in compound: for example, *hronrad* (whale-road) or *swanrad* (swan-road) meaning 'the sea'; *banhus* (bone-house) meaning the 'human body' (Carter & McRae, 2001). The word

'to ken' is still used in many Scottish and Northern English dialects, meaning 'to know'

According to the first volume of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2006), all the poetry of the Old English is in the same verse. The verse unit is the single line, since rhyme was not used to link one line to another except very occasionally in late Old English. The organizing device of the line is *alliteration*, the beginning of several words with the same sound. The Old English alliteration line contains four principal stresses and is divided into two half-lines of two stresses each by a strong medial caesura or pause as in the first line of *Piers Plowman*:

In a *s*ummer *s*eason when *s*oft was the *s*un

or

A *f*air *f*ield *f*ull of *f*olk *f*ound I therebetween

Beowulf stands out as a poem which makes extensive use of figurative language. There are over one thousand compounds in the poem, totaling one-third of all the words in the text. Many of these compounds are kennings. The poem is organized largely by alliteration rather than rhyme, and that it is driven primarily by stressed syllables rather than regular alterations between stressed and unstressed (Peck & Coyle, 2002).

As for the structure, the grammar of present-day English is closely related to that of Old English. For instance, verbs still have many of the same tense formations that they had in Old English: *was* and *were* are still past tense forms of the verb *be*. And word order in modern English tends to follow the same patterns used in Old English: a *preposition* precedes its *object*, a *subject* usually precedes its *verb*, and an *appositive* usually follows the word with which it is in apposition. In fact, the contributions that other languages have made to English have usually not affected the basic structure of the language very much,

but have merely supplied new words that can be fitted into English sentence patterns.

3. Chaucer and Middle English

Departing from the Old English we move to the medieval ages, starting from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, when the official language of the court in London was French. Medieval literature was done by hand. The period began and ended with the unwelcomed arrival of two conquerors: Normans in 1066, and the printing press in 1476. English literature survived the first conquest with difficulty. When the first printed English book appeared, the phase of Middle English was virtually over: the language had assumed its modern form except in spelling. A distinctive stylistic feature of the period was a rapid expansion in the number of words which often entered the language from Latin and mostly from French. Middle English vocabulary thus often has sets of words each with a different origin and each conveying more or less the same meaning but with different patterns of use (Carter & McRae, 2001). For example, some modern equivalents are:

Old English	*French*	*Latin*
ask	question	interrogate
kingly	royal	regal
holy	sacred	consecrated
fire	flame	conflagration
clothes	attire	-----
house	mansion	domicile
sheep	mutton	-----
calf	veal	-----

The Old English-derived lexical items are generally more frequent in English and more colloquial, more central and core to the language; while the words of Latin origin are more formal, learned and bookish in their use. The French words are considered to be more literary in function. It can also be noted that the French words confer a more elevated style on words used in domestic and culinary domains.

French words also entered into the law and administration, the arts, fashion and areas of cultural and political dominance. They tended to spread from London and the court as well as locally from the lord's castle. Many of these words came down from a higher social and cultural level and had no equivalent in English. By contrast, English and Scandinavian-derived words are more homely and much more part of a daily life.

After the Norman Conquest, the language of the Norman ruling class was Northern French. The language of the English court in the century was Parisian French, which carried more prestige than Anglo-Norman or other varieties. French culture was the culture of English aristocracy, while English was the workaday language of commoners. Chaucer, the father of English literature, is the only medieval English poet who has been read continuously from his time down to ours. There are good reasons for this. The best reason is his greatness: he is the great poet of his age and one of the 'big four' of English literature; the other three are Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens (Stephen, 2000). Another reason is the accidental fact that Chaucer happened to write in the dialectical medieval English from which standard modern English is derived. It would not be surprising if Chaucer had written all his works in French. His poetry was intended for an audience undoubtedly fluent in French. Use of English for a poet to proclaim himself an 'English poet' was still a bold and uprising move (Allen, 2004).

Chaucer in his great poem, the *Canterbury Tales,* brings together for the first time a diversity of characters, social levels, attitudes, and ways of life. Literature with Chaucer takes a new role: as well as affirming a developing language, it is a mirror of its times – but a mirror which teases as it reveals, which questions while it narrates, and which opens up a range of issues and questions, instead of providing simple and easy answers (Carter & McRae, 2001). Chaucer made extensive use of every day colloquial speech which contains more Old English-derived words. The range and variety of Chaucer's English did much to establish English as a national language throughout the country, although the process was not to be completed for several centuries.

4. The Renaissance

New worlds, both geographical and spiritual, are the key to the Renaissance, the 'rebirth' of learning and culture, which reached its peak in Italy in the early sixteenth century and in Britain during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603. During this period the English language changed very swiftly in keeping with rapid social, economic and political changes. However, writers in particular soon came to realize that the vocabulary of the English language did not always allow them to talk and write accurately about the new concepts, techniques and inventions which were emerging in Europe. At the same time a period of increasing exploration and trade across the whole world introduced new words, many of which had their origin in other languages. Historians of the language have suggested that between 1500 and 1650 around 12,000 new words were introduced into English (Carter & McRae, 2001). Words came into English from over fifty different languages, although by far the majority was derived from Latin. Here are some examples of words which entered the English language during the Renaissance: *banana*, *embargo*, *tobacco* (Spanish

and Portuguese); *balcony*, *design*, *stanza* (Italian); *detail*, *vogue*, *volunteer* (French); *yacht* (Dutch); *caravan* (Persian); *coffee* (Turkish); *appropriate*, *contradictory*, *utopia*, *vacuum* (Latin and Greek). Many of the Latin and Greek words provided a more formal alternative to existing native English words: for example, *cheap*: inexpensive; *mean*: parsimonious; *dig*: excavate. In many cases, however, no suitable English word existed.

4.1. The Language of the Bible

The Bible has been one of the major shaping influences in the development of the English language. However, the history of the relationship between *the Bible* and the English languages has been a long and at times controversial one. For example, in 1328 John Wycliffe translated the *Vulgate* edition of the *Bible*, published in Latin, into Middle English but caused controversy because many people believed that English was not a language worthy of conveying the profound moral sentiments of the Bible. Over one hundred and fifty years later, William Tyndale translated the New Testament into English from the original Greek, seeking in the process to produce a version of the Bible which could be accessible to anyone who could read. He was a strong proponent of the view that people should be able to read the Bible in their own language and, accordingly, contributed much to the development of plain, colloquial English style (Nicolson, 2011). Yet Tyndale had to work abroad and was eventually put to death by burning as a result of his translation.

In terms of grammar, the *Authorised Version of the Bible*, which was the product of fifty-four scholars, maintains an older word order. For example, *they knew him not* (for 'they did not know him') and *things eternal* (for 'eternal things'); the *-eth/th* third-person singular form of present tense verbs is common: for example: *God doth know* (for 'God does know') and *your cup*

runneth over (for 'your cup runs over'); several irregular verbs appear in older forms: for example, *spake* (for 'spoke'), wist (for 'knew'), and *gat* (for 'got'); and several prepositions have a marked usage: for example, the preposition 'of' in *tempted of* ('by') *Satan*; and the use of 'his' as a possessive form. If *the salt has lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted* for 'if the salt has lost *its* savour'.

The language of the Bible was primarily heard by churchgoers and its rhythms and music exerted a major influence on the development of spoken and written English. It contributed immensely to English cultural identity through the innumerable writers, who for almost four centuries have echoed its phrasing (Carter & McRae, 2001).

4.2 . Shakespeare's Language

It may come as a surprise to learn that Shakespeare wrote in Modern English since the Elizabethan Age often seems antiquated and quite "unmodern" to twentieth-century readers. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's language and modern English have enough in common so that language historians consider that they both belong to the same stage in the history of English. The changes between Chaucer's and Shakespeare's days were so extensive that Middle English and Modern English sound like two different languages. The most important changes involved the pronunciation of vowel sounds. In Middle English – as in Latin and in most modern foreign languages – the letter *a* represented the sounded *ah*, while a long *e* sounded like our long *a*, and long *i* and *y* like our long *e*. A long *o* was always pronounced *oh*, and a long *u* (often spelled *ou*) was *oo*. Thus the Middle English pronunciation of *care* might sound to us like *car*; *sheep* would sound to us like *shape*; *my* would sound like *me*; *to* would sound like *toe*; and *south* would sound like *sooth*. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, the pronunciation of all the long vowel sounds gradually

shifted. By Shakespeare's time most of the long vowels had acquired the values that they still have today (Greenblatt et al., 2006).

Another considerable change was the disappearance of the final *e* sound at the end of words. In Chaucer's verse the final *e* was often pronounced in words like *space*, *straunge* (strange), and *ende* (end). The tendency in spoken English to slur over unaccented syllables, a tendency which seems always to have been present in the language, probably accounted for the dropping of these final *e*'s in pronunciation. The same tendency probably also accounted for the fact that many other unaccented vowel sounds came to be reduced to the indistinct *uh* sound represented in dictionaries by the symbol "ə".

English spelling was not much affected by these great changes in pronunciation. A standard written form of English came into use during the fifteenth century. Before that time, every writer's spelling had represented his own pronunciation, and spelling therefore had varied widely not only from one historical period to the next but also from one local dialect to the next. Once fairly standardized forms came into use, though, scribes and clerks – who did most of the actual writing of Middle English documents – tended to adhere to the familiar spelling instead of respelling words according to their own pronunciation. The introduction of the printing press into England reinforced this tendency. The early printers often relied on manuscripts that had been written by Middle English scribes and a printer would simply set words into type the way he found them written in the manuscript.

It thus happened that a great many Middle English spelling became permanently fixed in the language. This is why long *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* usually stand for different sounds in Modern English than they do in all other languages that use the Latin alphabet. English spelling was already largely fixed before the shift in English vowel sounds took place. The same reason accounts for the

present of so many 'silent letters' in English words. The *gh* in words like *night*, *slaughter*, and *freight* had been pronounced in Middle English; as had the final *e* that ends so many words, and the initial *g* and *k* in words like *gnat* and *knob*.

Englishmen of the Elizabethan period continued to borrow words from other languages. Educated men, during the middle ages, had usually preferred to use Latin for their serious writing, but now Englishmen began to take a new pride in their native tongue. They deliberately set out to use English in writing about all matters. Shakespeare satirized the over-use of formal Latinate diction in the character of Holofernes in *Love's Labours Lost* (Carter & McRae, 2001). The language of continental Europe also continued to supply new words. Englishmen who traveled abroad brought back news of continental customs and fashions, introducing words like the French *vogue* and *mustache*. From Italy they brought back many words relating to architecture and music, like *piazza*, *sonata*, and *violin*. From Spaniards they acquired words relating to the exploration of the new world, such as *alligator*, *armadillo*, and *cocoa*. Spanish sailors and traders passed on some terms from American Indian language, too, including *canoe*, *cannibal*, *hurricane*, and *tobacco*.

5. The Seventeenth Century

One of the remarkable things that happened to the English language in the course of the seventeenth century was that it reached a fairly stable form. Writers of the previous century had often felt that they were completely reshaping their native tongue. They had borrowed words from foreign languages: they had developed elaborate prose styles (frequently in imitation of Latin prose); and they had delighted in rhetorical outpourings that overwhelmed readers with strange terms and fantastic figures of speech.

In the seventeenth century, however, this Elizabethan attitude gradually gave way to a concern for polishing and refining the language. John Milton (1608-74) was one of the last writers to make a deliberate practice of borrowing words from Latin. He was also one of the last to deliberately pattern his style after classical models, using long, weighty sentences and Latinate constructions. In Milton there is nothing ornamental; every word earns its keep. Among his triumphs of language is Milton's ability to employ unsophisticated words to convey a sense of incomprehensible mystery (Stephen, 2000). His talent for making language sing in its simplicity and yet still contain the immensity of his thought is among Milton's greatest achievements. The poet and critic Matthew Arnold called this form of expression Milton's 'grand style' (*Essays in Criticism*, London, 1908). Milton inverts word order by putting the adjective after the noun, as in 'horror chill' or 'serpent wise', whereas conventional English usage would read 'chill horror' and 'wise serpent'. He can also sandwich a noun between two adjectives, as in 'grateful evening mild' and 'mortal sin original' (Stephen, 2000). Single-handedly, Milton attempted to reinvent the English language when he wrote his massive poem *Paradise Lost*. The poem's Old Testament theme is the Fall of Man. In twelve books of 10,500 blank verse lines, Milton describes the rebellion against God of Satan and other angels, their ejection from heaven, and Satan's revenge in successfully tempting Adam and Eve to disobey their creator (Carrington, 2003).

The rapid rise of interest in scientific subjects gave a new attitude toward language. The modern "Age of Science" was beginning, and the educated public was fascinated by the experiments and discoveries that were taking place in different fields like medicine, astronomy, physics, and other related areas. Writers on these subjects realized, of course, that clarity and accuracy were

essential for their purposes. But they sometimes complained that English was not suited for expressing exact ideas, though it had proved to be an excellent means for poetry and drama. For this reason, a few of the leading thinkers of the time continued the old practice of writing in Latin, feeling that it was easier to present ideas accurately in that language. Isaac Newton, for instance, used Latin to write his famous work on mathematics. However, English was the usual language for scientific discussions in England (Carter & McRae, 2001).

6. The Eighteenth Century

David Hume identified the 'spirit of the age' of the eighteenth century as one of sociability. Men and women met in polite and easy company and together created a revolution in manners and thinking. In fact, they needed one another: men could educate and elevate female understanding, women could refine and make more polite behavior of men (Haslett, 2003). Clubs, societies, coteries, conversational circles, literary groups, salons, coffee houses are of those ideas we associate with the eighteenth century. This was the age of 'conversation' and rise of the 'novel'. The age is also called 'age of sensibility'. The literature of sensibility developed largely in reaction to seventeenth-century stoicism and in opposition to Thomas Hobbes's theory that humanity is inherently selfish (Murfin & Ray, 2003).

During most of the eighteenth century, Englishmen were strongly concerned with rules, form, and "correctness" in the use of language. The love of order is a prominent feature of the literature of the period. This love of order can perhaps be illustrated by the fondness in the poetry of the period for the heroic couplet form with its sense of poise and balance. (The heroic couplet is a pair of rhyming iambic pentameter lines that encapsulate a general idea of

truth.) This interest in general truth is a basic principal of the literature of the period.

Alexander Pope (1688-1744), the leading poet of the eighteenth century, has made together with John Dryden (1631-1700) the century, the Neoclassical Period. Pope who never grew beyond four feet six inches was ravaged in youth by tuberculosis of the spine. He was troubled all his life by an aching, twisted body and chronic headaches. He had to undergo much cruel scoffing at this physical disability and he could hardly marry. He could neither attend the university nor hold public office because he had been born to a catholic family. Yet, his father was modestly well off and encouraged his son to pursue his studies and to write. Happily he found himself the admired junior of a literary circle who asked him to revise some of their works. The *Essay on Criticism* (1711) and the first version of *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) brought him fame. Pope based his poem on an actual event. Lord Petre had cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair which precipitated a family quarrel. Pope dedicated his poem to Arabella. He tells the tale of the 'rape' of Belinda's 'lock', her anger, and lock's final resting place as a star adoring the heavens through the whimsical influence of gnomes and sylphs (Carrington, 2003). The poem perfectly embodies qualities that are peculiarly associated with the cultural achievements of the period. Its elegance, harmony, polish and refinement evoke the values of the eighteenth century. The poem is a gentle satire upon a genteel society.

The century also began with a revival of interest in the idea of establishing an English Academy to set up official standards for the language, as the French Academy was attempting to do for the French language (Crystal, 2003). Several leading writers of the time – including Defoe and Swift (author of *Gulliver's Travel)* – were interested in seeing such an Academy founded, and they wrote

articles giving urgent reasons why it was needed. Swift's ideas on the subject were especially influential. He wanted to see the language improved – but he wanted even more to see it protected from further change.

The members of the Royal Society had taken it for granted that language changed, but they had not wanted to halt this process; on the contrary, they wanted to encourage further development. Englishmen no longer felt that their own language was inferior to other languages (particularly to Latin) for purposes of serious writing. But there was an even more important reason why Swift and his contemporaries feared further changes in the language. They were keenly aware that a great national literature had been produced in English during the past century and a half, and they were afraid that if the language kept on changing, soon all of this literature would be dead and lost. Of course, we know that Pope's gloomy prediction about the future of the language has not come true. Approximately three centuries have now passed since the time of Dryden and Pope, yet – except for an occasional word or two – their writing is still as clear to twentieth-century readers as it was to readers of Dryden's own day.

But why is it that Pope and Swift and other thinkers of the Age of Reason turned out to be wrong about the path of development that the language was following? One answer is that these men had no way of estimating the powerful influence that the written form of the language was coming to exert. Until the end of the Middle Ages, the written language had never had much effect on the kind of English that was used by the population because most people had not been able to read or write. The introduction of the printing press in 1485 changed this situation by making inexpensive reading matter widely available. By Shakespeare's time, a century after the introduction of printing, probably about half the population of London could read and write. By the time of Pope

and Swift, the literacy rate for the middle and upper classes in England was close to 100 percent (Haslett, 2003).

The schools began to exert an important influence on the language. Prior to 1700, most schools had concentrated on the teaching of Latin and had paid little attention to English. During the course of the eighteenth century, however, the teaching of English gradually became the basis of most elementary schooling. Many of the rules of spelling, grammar, and usage that were first set forth in eighteenth-century schoolbooks became a traditional part of the school curriculum and have continued to be taught to the present day. In fact, the schools have probably done a far more effective job of preserving the language from change than any official Academy could have hoped to do.

The fact that the basic grammatical system and the basic vocabulary of English have not changed essentially since 1700 does not mean, however, that no changes at all have taken place. While the influence of the written language tends to keep old words and expressions from dropping out of the language, it also speeds the acceptance of new words and expressions. A new term appearing in a few newspaper and magazine articles can become part of the vocabulary of millions of people within a matter of days. Thus today's English vocabulary is indeed different from the vocabulary of Swift's time, but the difference is due almost entirely to the addition of new words and new meanings – not, as Swift had feared, to decay and loss of the old words.

7. The Romantic Age

Romanticism was a reaction against the eighteenth-century perspectives and at the same time it was influenced and inspired by the French Revolution, marked by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and storming the Bastille to release imprisoned political offenders. In the history of English literature, the

Romantic Period is said to have commenced with the 1798 publication of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, a volume that included such well-known poems as Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Line Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey". Some scholars, however, maintain that the Romantic Period began before 1798 arguing that certain works, such as Robert Burns's *Poems* (1786) and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) published before that date (Stevens, 2004).

In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) made the first theoretical argument in the history of English poetry for a radical review by a language of poetry. His argument was that conventional poetry should be replaced by a language closer to the everyday speech of ordinary people. It was an essentially democratic statement, arguing that ordinary words should be admitted into the society of the poem. Wordsworth and Coleridge wanted to purify and renew the language of poetry (Stevens, 2004).

With the start of the Romantic period, the attitude of English writers toward their language underwent a remarkable change. It seemed to them that eighteenth-century literary English, careful and elegant though it might be, had often proved limited and artificial. Deliberately rejecting the literary style of the immediate past, they looked for inspiration to sources that eighteenth-century purists had scorned – the literature of the Elizabethan period, the speech of folk ballads and the speech of everyday life. Coleridge employed the techniques and some of the archaic language of the old ballads in "the Rime of the Ancient Marine". Wordsworth tried to capture the simplicity and directionless of rural speech in his poetry, a "selection of language really spoken by men". Sir Walter Scott put archaic English into the mouth of his hero in *Ivanhoe* (1819) and Scottish dialect into the mouth of his heroin in *the*

Heart of Midlothian. Byron, in *Don Juan*, annoyed the conservative crisis of his day by writing in a racy conversational style and introducing fashionable slang into his lines (Carter & McRae, 2001).

The appearance of "nonliterary" English in so many literary works marked a turning point in the history of the written language. The earlier ideal of creating lofty literary English, different in style from spoken English, was overthrown. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, written English has become progressively less formal and closer to the spoken language. This change has effected not just the work of professional writers, but all the written that everyone does even letter writing.

Meanwhile, other events were taking place in the early nineteenth century which made it quite clear that the language was still changing and growing. English-speaking colonists had by now settled in many parts of the world, and the language spoken in some of these places, particularly in North America, was beginning to show clear differences from language of the British Isles. Before 1750, American speech had probably sounded much the same as British speech. By 1800, however, differences in pronunciation and even in the written language had begun to appear. For instance, during the last half of the eighteenth century, speakers in England had come to use an "ah" sound in words like *path*, *ask*, *glass*, and *chance.* Thus arose one of the first and most noticeable differences between the British accent and the American accent, a difference that persists to the present day.

Differences between British and American spelling also arose during this period. Most of these differences can be traced to the influence of one man, Noah Webster (1758-1843), the author of the first American dictionary of England. Webster had long been interested in spelling reform, and he had come to the conclusion that it would be both convenient and practical to use

simplified spelling for certain words ـ for instance, *honor* instead of *honour*, *wagon* instead of *waggon*, *medieval* instead of *mediaeval*. He therefore incorporated these spelling in his dictionary, and the widespread popular acceptance of this dictionary eventually established the new forms as the regular American spellings (Crystal, 2003).

8. The Victorian Age

When Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, her country was already in the midst of a period of great social and economic upheaval. Great British, which only two centuries earlier had been a tiny island country on the fringes of European civilization, had now become the most powerful nation in the world and the governing centre of a vast colonial empire. Many Englishmen who might formerly have spent their lives quietly in the towns where they had been born now found themselves assigned to the far corners of the earth as government officials or as soldiers. Even for those who did stay at home, life was no longer the same. The Industrial Revolution had begun; factories were springing up everywhere, cities were growing rapidly, railways were extending over the country-side. The English way of life was changing rapidly, and these changes were reflected in the language and literature (Zare-Behtash, 1994).

Englishmen who saw service in outlying parts of the British Empire returned home with a new vocabulary of exotic terms, some of which quickly made their way into the standard vocabulary of the language. Meanwhile, in England itself, the vocabulary of modern science and technology was taking shape. An "engine," to an eighteenth-century Englishman, had been any kind of tool or device; to nineteenth century Englishman it began to assume its present-day meaning of a machine that converts energy into mechanical force. The arrival of the steam engine was marked by the appearance of new terms

such as *piston valve*, *drive shaft*, *steamship*, and *steamroller*. During the last half of the century, many words associated with electrical power put in their first appearance: *dynamo*, *ampere*, *ohm*, *volt* and *watt* (Zare-Behtash, 2011).

At the same time that the scientific and technological vocabulary was expanding rapidly, other specialized vocabularies were beginning to fall into disuse. When the stagecoach gave way to the railroad, for instance, terms like *postillion*, *splinter bar*, and *swingle* began to disappear from common speech. A little later, with the coming of the automobile, almost all horse-drawn vehicles vanished from the scene; and with them went an enormous group of specialized terms. Everyone today knows the difference between a *sports car*, a *taxi,* a *trailer truck*, and a *bus*.

The writers of the Victorian period, or Post-Romantic writers, were keenly aware that they were living in a time of change. On the whole, they found the changes disturbing and unsettling. They had good reason for looking on modern developments with a gloomy eye: among the most visible signs of "progress" were ugly factory districts, growing urban slums, and an ever-increasing stream of cheap, shoddy manufacture items. Some writers, such as Carlyle, spoke out directly against the ugliness and the suffering they saw in contemporary life (Zare-Behtash, 1994). But many others, especially the poets, reacted by turning away from modern civilization and concentrating on pleasant rural scenes or on a romantically idealized past. It was left for twentieth century writers to adopt urban life as their theme; few nineteenth century English writers felt quite at home in the city streets. To some extent, therefore, the language of a Victorian literature is the language of a vanishing country life or of a vanished past.

Perhaps the greatest single product of nineteenth century language scholarship was the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a dictionary that traces the

origin of hundreds of thousands of English words, giving the date when each was first found in English writing and showing the development of new meanings by giving definitions and carefully dated quotations. The preparation of this dictionary was an immense task. Work on it was begun in 1857, and by the time the first volume appeared in 1884, approximately a thousand readers and editors had given their time to the project. The complete twelve volume dictionary took more than seventy years to finish (Crystal, 2003).

8.1. The Developing Uses of Dialects in Literature

Before modern English developed in the sixteenth century, most writing had been in local varieties of English. As Standard English developed, some writers took pains to maintain the importance of local or regional varieties and dialects in their writings. In the seventeenth century, Robert Fergusson' poetry brought the spoken language of Edinburgh to a wide readership. Robert Burns, clearly influenced by Fergusson's work, was equally at home in using his local southern Scottish dialect as in using English in his writing.

In the nineteenth century, Tennyson used his local Lincolnshire dialect in many of his poem – although these have tended to be forgotten. Thomas Hardy acknowledged the considerate influence of William Barnes, the Dorset poet, in many of his uses of language in the Wessex novels and in his own poetry. George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) contains sensitive representation of dialect speech as a key element in character and relationship (Carter & McRae, 2001).

Dickens's use of cockney dialect in creating lower-class London characters is perhaps the best-known example of dialect used to delineate social class. It is widely found in the Victorian novel, both for comic effect and as part of the

social milieu. Sir Walter Scott used Scots for similar reasons of his Waverley novels.

9. Modernism

Modernism is variously argued to be a period, style, genre, or combination of these; but what is certain is that it is a 'word'. According to the *OED*, its stem means 'now existing' and so has a far wider currency and range of meanings than 'modernism'. In the late fifth century, for example, the Latin *modernus* referred to the Christian present in opposition to the Roman past; modern English is distinguished from Middle English; the modern period in literature is considered to be from the sixteenth century on. More generally, 'modern' has been frequently used to refer to the avant-garde, though since World War II this sense has been embraced by the term 'contemporary' while 'modern' has shifted from meaning 'now' to 'just now'. It is this sense of the avant-garde, radical, progressive or even revolutionary side to the modern which was the catalyst for the coinage of 'Modernism' (Childs, 2000).

As for the morphological structure of the language, Modern English prefers other grammatical devices than inflectional endings of the words to signal the grammatical concepts; consequently, not much of the Indo-European system of inflections is left in the contemporary Modern English (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009). That is why, it is said that English has been moving from a synthetic type of language (i.e., a language using lots of bound morphemes combined in single words,) in the Old English period, towards an analytic type of language (i.e., one that uses very few bound morphemes.) in the Modern English period.

Modernism was the dominant aesthetic movement of the earlier twentieth century which is often considered to be a thorough critique and repudiation of

Romanticism in general and Victorianism in particular. Now that Modernism is no longer modern, however, we are able to evaluate the ideas and artistic expression of the Modernists from distance (Spurr, 2006). One of the aims of Modernist poets was to articulate a representation of the world and of a way of seeing which expressed a profound sense of a spiritual and psychological condition which was not readily definable. For these purposes the limits of expression in rhythm, the use of images and symbols, allusion and reference and word choice were extended: at the same time the limits of syntax as a resource for the expression of meaning were explored (Carter & McRae, 2001). Here is an example from the opening of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", first published in 1915:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half- deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one- night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question …
Oh, do not ask, what is it?
Let us go and make our visit.

The 'I' here is a *persona* created in the poem but character of the 'you' is not at all clear. It could refer to us, the readers, or it might be someone who is invited within the speech situation to accompany the 'I', or may possibly be another part of the personality of the 'I' with the result that the speaker in the poem is

addressing another self, an alter ego. Neither the identity of the 'I' nor the 'you' is entirely clear. As a result of such indefinite pronoun use a psychological unease and division is suggested against a landscape compared to an impersonal surgical operation.

The syntactic structure of the poem also does not wholly cohere. Is it the streets or the argument that leads to the 'overwhelming question' and how can streets follow and lead at the same time? And why is the question not asked? Attempts to try to answer these questions by examining the details of the next only led to further problems as the reader begins to perceive that the journey is more metaphorical than literal. It is a seemingly passive progress through fragments of thoughts, memories, and dialogues out of which no arrival seems feasible; and the syntax postpones a climax and completion which parallels a meeting perpetually deferred.

One of the most interesting developments in the English language during the twentieth century has been the swift rise in the importance of the spoken language. The titles of the earliest novels written in English are designed to suggest certain solidity. The names of people predominate; for example, *Tom Jones*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Moll Flanders* all indicate the writers attempt to blur a distinction between fiction and real-life biography at a time when there were suspicions that a novel was merely something invented. Similarly, the names of 'real' places served as titles; for example, *Mansfield Park*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Cranford*, and *Middlemarch.*

Modernist writers generally prefer titles which are more oblique and symbolic and which require an act of interpretation from the reader. They do not always provide the reader with any definite anchor in recognizably realistic people and places; for example, *Ulysses*, *The Rainbow*, and *Heart of Darkness*.

In the titles of a number of post-war British novels another trend is discernible. Some titles carry a clearly marked imprint of the speaking voice. The voice may or may not be that of the author, suggesting in turn that the authors' voice may only be one among several voices in the novel and may not necessarily be the most authoritative or the one which offers a secure and stable vantage point. It may not be the singular voice of the moral center from which the world of the novel can be interpreted. Here are some representative titles, listed by Carter and McRae (2001), from this period:

An awfully Big Adventure (1990) Beryl Bainbridge
How Late It Was, How Late (1994) James Kelman
Now That You're Back (1994) A.L. Kennedy
Take A Girl Like You (1960) Kingsley Amis
You Can't Do Both (1994) Kingsley Amis
Ginger, You're Barmy (1962) David Lodge
How Far Can You Go? (1980) David Lodge
Burning Your Boats (1995) Angela Carter
A Far Cry from Kensington (1988) Muriel Spark

In William Golding's *The Inheritors* (1957), language itself is a major theme in the novel and is shown to be enslaving. One group of people, who belong to one phase of the human evolutionary process, is defeated and superseded by another group whose greater command of language allows them more powerful categories of thought and enables them to classify their experience in a more 'advanced' way. Above all, it is the inadequacy and arbitrariness of language which is most often addressed in twentieth- century literature. At best, language allows us to make only indeterminate, surrealistic sense of our world (Carter & McRae, 2001).

What is characteristic about many twentieth-century innovations and experiments is the extent to which features of the spoken rather than the standard written language are foregrounded. Twentieth-century writers have taken full advantage of the great range of possibilities offered by the spoken language. Although nineteenth-century writers had also been interested in this aspect of language, the feeling had lingered until the end of the century that informal spoken English was not entirely respectable. While Wordsworth admired the simplicity and directness of rural speech, he believed that for literary purposes it must be "purified" – by which he meant that all dialect expressions and any grammatical departures from Standard English must be avoided. Dickens also delicately refrained from assigning dialect-speech to his humblest heroes and heroines. Today the prejudice against nonstandard English in literature has practically disappeared partly due to concern for realism and accurate detail that marks much of the present writings.

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