The history of English

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Origins

Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the British Isles have always been multilingual. The society which the Anglo-Saxons joined, in the fifth century, was linguistically highly varied. Our main source of information is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, written around 730, which opens with a statement recognizing the existence of a multi-ethnic and multilingual Britain.

> This island at present … contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth.

So, in addition to English (as it would later be called) there was Latin, the Celtic languages (Welsh, Cornish, Cumbrian, Manx, Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic), and the intriguing Pictish, known only from a few names and inscriptions, which probably represents a European language from the days before the Indo-European invasions.

The British Isles were multidialectal too. All these languages would have been spoken in different dialects. Latin existed in both classical and colloquial forms. And when the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes arrived in England in 449, they brought with them a range of spoken varieties reflecting their origins in different parts of northern Europe.

Old English, as we have come to call the earliest stage of our language, evolved in a land which was full of migrants, raiders, mercenaries, temporary settlers, long-established families, people of mixed ethnic origins, and rapidly changing power bases. The society was not numerically very extensive, but it was highly scattered, with people living in small communities, and groups continually on the move. These are ideal conditions for a proliferation of dialects.

Once in the country, mobility did not cease. Population growth within the Anglo-Saxon groups, plus the continual pressure from new arrivals in the east, forced people to move inland. Although frequently halted through conflict with the British, the Anglo-Saxons rapidly spread throughout central, southern, and north-eastern England. By 600 they had reached the area of present-day Dorset, and occupied land north to the River Severn, across central England into Yorkshire, and north along the coast towards the River Tyne.

The paths taken by the Anglians followed the major rivers. Some entered the country via the Wash, eventually moving north-west to form the kingdom of Lindsey. A major group moved south to form the kingdom of East Anglia. Some entered via the River Humber, taking the Trent tributary southwards towards central England: these came to be called Mercians (a name which meant 'marchmen' or 'borderers'). Some moved north from the Humber, along the Yorkshire River Ouse, forming the kingdom of Deira. Further north still, the kingdom of Bernicia was established.

Four of these Anglo-Saxon kingdoms gave us the names of the main Old English dialects: *West Saxon*, *Kentish*, *Mercian*, and *Northumbrian*. They were the origins of the hundreds of accents and dialects known today.

The Middle Ages

A new era of multilingualism and multidialectism dawned in the Middle Ages. As a result of the Norman invasion, England became a nation in which Latin, French, and English coexisted. Educated people were trilingual as a matter of course. English would have been their mother-tongue. They would have learned Latin as the required language of the Church, the Roman Classics, most scholarship, and some politico-legal matters. And they would have found French essential both for routine administrative communication within Britain and in order to be considered fashionable throughout Western European society.

As the Middle Ages progressed, we find English gradually making inroads into domains of discourse which had previously been the prerogative of Latin or French. By the sixteenth century, trilingualism was restricted to a specialized, chiefly legal elite. But even in Shakespeare's time and beyond, it was routine to speak Latin in school. And London was already a multilingual city, containing many speakers of Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian, Hebrew, and other languages.

The Middle Ages was also a period of significant population growth. Dialects and accents exist to express identity, and as a population grows and spreads, so regional variations proliferate. Thanks to the preservation of written materials, we can see a noticeable increase in the range of dialects during the period, but the names scholars have given to the dialects are not exactly the same as those recognized in Anglo-Saxon times.

- *Northumbrian* is called *Northern*, and distinguished from the very different developments taking place in Scotland, where *Scottish* English was becoming one of the language's most distinctive forms
- *West Saxon* is called *South-Western*, or *Southern*.
- *Kentish* is usually referred to as *South-Eastern*.
- The old *Mercian* dialect area splits into two distinct regions, called *East Midlands* and *West Midlands*, the dividing line broadly following the path of the southern Pennines and the Cotswold Hills. An *East Anglian* area is sometimes separately distinguished.

The East Midlands - taking this to include the London area - proves to be of special significance for the later history of English, as it is the region which had greatest influence on the evolution of the standard language.

The most noticeable dialect differences in Middle English, as we would expect, are those between the parts of Britain furthest away from each other - the north and the south. And it is this difference which is represented in the very first 'dialect story', in which characters are represented as coming from different parts of the country. This is in one of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* The various characters in the Tales come from all walks of life and regional backgrounds, but in only one story do they talk as if they do - in *The Reeve's Tale*, where two students from the north of England, speaking a northern dialect, defeat the trickery of a miller from Cambridgeshire, who speaks southern.

The period in which Chaucer wrote (Middle English) illustrates an age when all accents and dialects were equal. The written language permitted the use of a wide range of variant forms, each of which was acceptable. One person may not have liked the way other people spoke or wrote - that is a character-note for the human race - but there was no suggestion that they were somehow 'incorrect' as a result of doing so. Middle English is the only period in the history of English when we can see regional variation reflected in the written language so widely and so unselfconsciously.

Standard English

During the Middle Ages, the south-east of England - in particular the triangular area with focal points in London, Oxford, and Cambridge - became a region of special social and economic influence. Social change always has a linguistic sequel. It was inevitable that the speech of those south-easterners in routine contact with the worlds of courtly culture, commerce, and learning would increase in prestige, and begin to be evaluated as a more polished, elegant, and altogether more desirable medium of communication than the varieties available elsewhere. The stage was set for the emergence of a standard language.

The linguistic climate of a community changes as a standard language grows. When one dialect achieves a special social position, associated with power and prestige, and begins to be described using such terms as 'correct', 'proper', and 'educated', the nonstandard varieties - the regional varieties, in particular - begin to be ridiculed and condemned. But it takes time for this situation to become established, and in Britain the opposition between 'standard' and 'nonstandard' or 'substandard' did not fully manifest itself until the end of the eighteenth century.

There was no inferiority complex attached to dialect variation in Shakespeare's time. Indeed, there are some famous cases of people achieving the highest positions in society while retaining their regional speech. A contemporary of Walter Raleigh's, the judge Sir Thomas Malet, observed that Raleigh 'spoke broad Devonshire to his dying day'. And when James I of England (and VI of Scotland) and his entourage arrived in London, they brought their Scottish way of talking with them. Nobody dared criticise that - at least, not in public!

The eighteenth century changed everything. That century was a century of manners, class, and politeness, and one of the ways in which class distinction was expressed was through language, and especially through the way one spoke. There was a new concern to 'find the rules' governing polite usage, and a climate grew in which writers attempted to formulate them. The second half of the century saw the first big dictionaries (Dr Johnson), grammars (Bishop Lowth), and pronunciation manuals (John Walker), and soon there was a prescriptive era in which the recommendations of such writers were seen as authoritative. Only by following their rules would speakers be perceived to be educated.

At this point, the standing of regional dialects and accents went into serious decline. And as the Industrial Revolution increased the class divisions in British society, so further contrasts evolved between the speech of different social groups, with urban and rural dialects becoming increasingly polarized. This was the period which fostered the antagonism towards city accents that is still found today, with urban accents (such as Birmingham, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Glasgow) still widely abused by people who should know better.

But nobody - and certainly not a few lexicographers, grammarians, and elocutionists - can keep under control the powerful human drive for the expression of social identity. And within a few decades of its arrival, the notion of a 'standard' English, conceived as a uniform mode of linguistic behaviour uniting English speakers everywhere, began to fragment. While Johnson, Lowth, Walker, and the other prescriptivists were busy inserting the remaining bars into a cage which they thought would keep English under proper control in Britain, on the other side of the Atlantic the cage-door was about to be opened by Noah Webster, who was proposing a different set of linguistic norms for American English.

As the eighteenth century reached its close, English had either been established, or was about to be established, in as many as seven regions outside the British Isles and the United States: in the Caribbean, Canada, Australia, South Africa, South Asia, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. In each of these places, English was adopted and then immediately adapted to express the new circumstances and identities of the people. And it would not be long until the birds came home to roost, with fresh patterns of immigration introducing these new accents and dialects back into the mother country.

RP and its successors

In speech, the legacy of the eighteenth century concern about class and correctness led to the emergence of one accent which attracted more prestige than others - the speech of polite London society. By the 1830s, writers were advising provincials to speak like Londoners, and by the end of the nineteenth century this accent received a name. It was called 'received pronunciation' (now usually referred to by its initials, RP) - that is, the kind of pronunciation passed down from one educated generation to the next.

RP quickly came to be associated with a public-school education followed by higher education at Oxford or Cambridge. And the accent then rapidly spread through the career-structure which such an education opened up - in the civil and diplomatic service (especially abroad, as the Empire expanded) and the Anglican Church. When the BBC was established, in the 1920s, it was the accent used by its presenters. And it remained the accent of educated choice for most of the twentieth century, going by such varied labels as the 'Oxford accent', 'BBC accent', the 'King's/Queen's accent', and a 'public-school accent'.

But almost as soon as RP arrived, it began to diversify. It already contained a great deal of personal variation, and it was subject to change, as any other accent. By the beginning of the twentieth century it was displaying a range of chiefly age-related differences which would later be described as ‘conservative’ (used by the older generation), ‘general’ (or 'mainstream'), and ‘advanced’ (used by young upper-class and professional people), the latter

often being judged as 'affected' by other RP speakers. It retained its upper and upper-middle social-class connotation, as a supra-regional standard, but from the 1960s it slowly came to be affected by the growth of regional identities, resulting in the re-emergence of regional colouring - a phenomenon now described as ‘modified RP’.

There was also a reduction in the extent of the country which recognized RP as a desirable standard. It had never had great presence in the Celtic-speaking parts of the UK, and these days, especially after devolution in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, RP survives in most educated voices only with a noticeable regional modification. But even in England, the range of the accent as spoken by the educated class has dramatically altered, incorporating a number of features previously associated with local London speech to produce the accent that the media have happily designated ‘Estuary English’, or simply 'Estuary'.

Although Estuary was first noticed in the 1990s with reference to the accent emerging around the mouth of the River Thames, it soon became apparent that this name would not do as a means of characterizing an accent several of whose features were spreading around the country. Moreover, the trend had been around for quite a while. As early as 1949, the phonetician Daniel Jones had commented that 'it seems quite likely that in the future our present English will develop in the direction of Cockney unless special influences come in to counteract this tendency'.

No such influences arrived. By the 1970s, accents showing a mixture of RP and Cockney were becoming noticeable, motivated by an upmarket movement of originally Cockney speakers and a downmarket trend towards 'ordinary' (as opposed to 'posh') speech by the middle class. By the 1990s, attitudes had begun to change, with conservative RP attracting negative attitudes, such as 'posh' and 'distant', and modified varieties (such as Estuary) eliciting such positive evaluations as 'warm', 'customer-friendly', and 'down to earth'.

For many people, no further evidence of the rehabilitation of regional accents is required than the voices heard during the 1990s in call-centres throughout the UK (before the move to India took place), where Edinburgh Scots, Yorkshire, and other regional forms were routinely encountered, but traditional RP hardly ever. The number of people using a classical RP accent has fallen greatly, as a consequence. Estimates of usage in the 1980s were that between three and five percent of the British population still used it - around two million. This must be now less than two percent and falling.

The situation today

The eighteenth-century prescriptivists had two impossible aims: they wanted to stop the language changing, and they wanted to eliminate usage variation. In neither case were they successful. They could not have been, for it is in the nature of language to change and to vary. And the evidence of their failure is all around us today, in the remarkable diversity which exists. It is moreover a diversity which is increasing, and in some unpredictable ways.

We must always remember to talk in terms of trends, never of uniformity. Linguistic change does not take place all at once: it gradually diffuses - both geographically, throughout a region, and socially, throughout the various classes out of which the society is comprised, with the rate at which the change is taken up very much affected by the gender and age of the speakers. As a result, at any one point in time, there is inevitably a great deal of variation, as old forms compete with new. Not only is there variation among speakers, there is variation within individuals, with people taking time to get used to new forms. Everyone is pulled in multiple directions, when it comes to language, because we interact within a multifaceted society.

We need to respect and preserve social diversity, especially in the face of cultural steamrollers which threaten to crush it, and of the crude racial anatagonisms which daily assail it. But we cannot respect something if we do not recognize it. We all therefore need to increase our awareness of the role of languages and of language (in the form of accent and dialect) as a primary expression of this diversity. That is why a project such as the UK Speaks is so important.

The UK has never been as multilingual and mulidialectal as it is today. The critis affecting our global linguistic heritage, with half the languages of the world threatened with

extinction, has generated a lively and welcome concern for language maintenance and revitalization, and this can clearly be seen in the UK.

- In relation to the indigenous languages of the British Isles, Welsh is the success story of the twentieth century, with two Language Acts in place to foster its growth, and the 2001 census figures showing a significant increase in users. Concern over other Celtic languages has also grown, with renewed interest in the position of the Gaelic languages in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and growing revitalization movements in support of Cornish and Manx.
- There is a corresponding vitality evident in relation to the 350 or more non-indigenous languages of the UK. This could hardly have been otherwise, given the size of the immigrant communities which have grown up in several city suburbs, and the numbers of their children attending schools. The languages of countries from the former British Empire, such as India, the Caribbean, and West Africa, have been supplemented by the languages associated with the European political issues of the twentieth century, as refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers arrived in the UK, bringing with them Polish, Italian, Russian, Yiddish, and many other languages. The rights of passage of members of the European Union add a further dimension to this linguistic 'salad-bowl' - a term used in relation to the American experience (in contrast to 'melting-pot') to suggest a society which respects cultural diversity while striving for a new unity.
- All of this adds to the UK's multidialectism. There is a widespread myth that dialects are dying out. All that has happened is that, as society becomes more urbanized and mobile, traditional rural dialects have evolved into new varieties, and a large number of new urban dialects have emerged. Where there was once just 'Scouse' (Liverpool English), there is now Caribbean Scouse and many other ethnically influenced varieties. As a result of social mobility, many speakers now have mixed accents, representing the parts of the country in which they have lived.

The linguistic complexity of the country is growing, as its social constituency evolves. The UK speaks today in more regional and ethnic voices than at any other time in its history.