

and in his hatpynge...
his eyes thynklyd in his hed a ryght
as doon the sterres in the frosty nyght
his worthy freere was callyd but berde



Canterbury Tales (most) by Geoffrey Chaucer
Credit: British Library Board

Exhibiting English

Previewing the British Library Exhibition

David Crystal looks forward to an exciting new exhibition at the British Library.

The British Library is doing something rather exciting this year. It's holding its

first ever exhibition totally devoted to the English language. It'll be called *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices* and will run from mid-November until early April. If you're anywhere near London during that time, make a visit. You'll never have seen anything like it.

Bits of it you might have seen before. Some of the really famous books and manuscripts are always on display at the Library – such

as the Anglo-Saxon saga *Beowulf*, the first edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's First Folio, or the King James Bible. But they are there as wonderful works of literature in their own right. They're not there to tell a story – the story of the English language.

It's a story that has often been told in textbook form, but textbooks typically don't have many pictures – and when you

do see them they're usually quite small and not in colour, and it's often difficult to read the words in the manuscripts. TV documentaries are visual enough, but they never give us enough detail, nor do we get a good sense of the physicality of the objects. Once you see how big a First Folio or a King James Bible actually is, you don't forget it. (And how heavy these books are. You have to be pretty strong to lift one of those bibles!)

It's not just the famous books of the past that tell the story of English. The British Library has amazing collections of ephemera – texts that aren't intended to have a long life, such as tickets, programmes, posters, and advertisements. These are also an important part of linguistic history, so they are in the exhibition too. And the Library has great collections of literature from all over the world. English is a global language now, and any exhibition has to show the way it has evolved in other places. This isn't just an exhibition of British English.

Nor is the exhibition only about books. People sometimes forget that the British Library has a large number of audio-recordings of spoken English, some dating back to the 1800s. You can hear a recording

of Florence Nightingale, for instance. The Library has an excellent collection of modern regional accents and dialects too. And it's building up its collection of reconstructed accents. You can hear how English may have sounded in Chaucer's time, or Shakespeare's.

There isn't just one story of English – there are hundreds. Each dialect of the language, whether national or global, has its own story. This was one of the big problems the organizers of the exhibition had to face. How to tell as many stories as possible, in a limited exhibition space? They solved

the problem by dividing the space, and the accompanying book, into seven themes, each of which explores a different strand of the story.

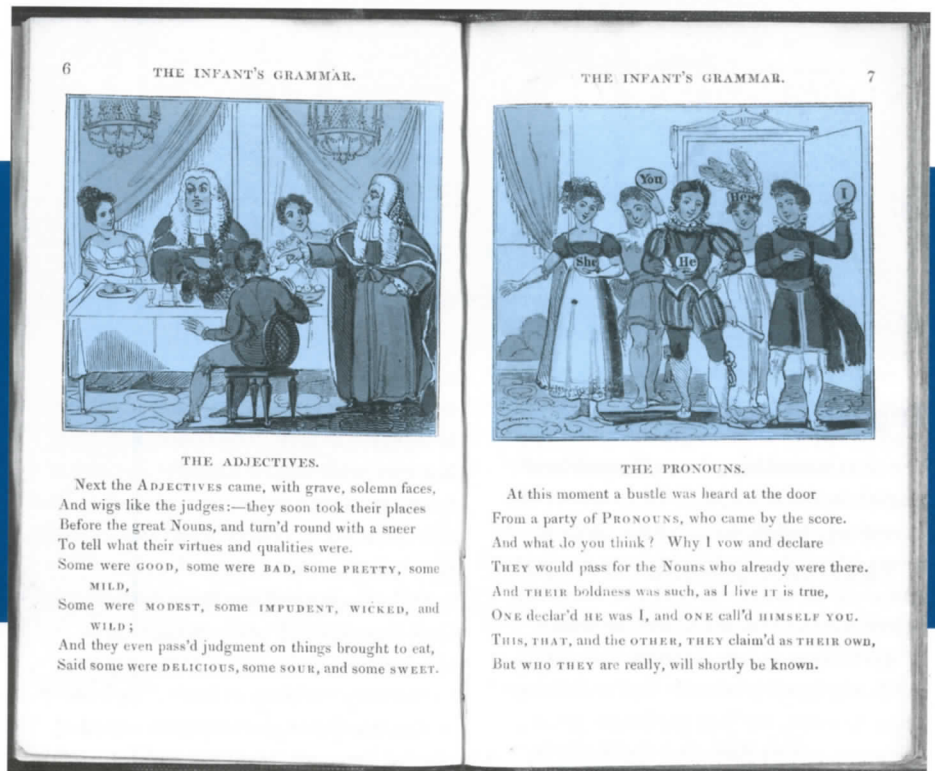
English comes of age

This strand presents the first thousand years of English, beginning with the earliest appearance of the language in Britain, in the fifth century, in simple inscriptions. We follow its growth as a written medium, first using runes, and then the Roman alphabet introduced by missionaries, along with a few extra letters to cope with the Old English sound system. We see the language developing in poems, riddles, charters, wills, chronicles, songs, and stories. As we move into the Middle English period, from around the 12th century, the old letters are gradually replaced, so that the language becomes much more recognizable to modern eyes. The period ends with a letter, written in English in about 1419 by King Henry V, probably in his own handwriting. When kings start using English, rather

develop a 'standard English' – a variety in which educated people all came to use the same rules of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The exhibition identifies the main influences. We see the very first printed book in English, from William Caxton's printing house, as well as works by Chaucer and Shakespeare, some early translations of the Bible, the first accounts of English spelling and grammar, and the first English dictionary, compiled by Robert Cawdrey in 1604. We then move into the 18th century, with its hugely influential grammars and dictionaries, such as Dr Johnson's, and into the present day, with the Pronunciation Unit at the BBC.

Everyday English

Standard English has both formal and informal varieties, though it is the formal variety that we encounter most often in literature and the press, and in such areas as science, education, religion, and the law. But this kind of language is only one side of the coin. On the other side we



than French or Latin, we can say that the language has really come of age.

Setting the standard

This strand takes up the story as the Middle Ages draw to a close. A nation state needs a standard language, if it is to function effectively, but this isn't something that happens overnight. It took 400 years to

find thousands of examples of ordinary everyday English, in the form of letters, recipes, diaries, and all kinds of daily chat. In the exhibition we see some fine surviving specimens from the Middle Ages, such as the letters written by the Paston family, as well as informal writing from later periods by such people as Jonathan Swift, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, and Harold Pinter.

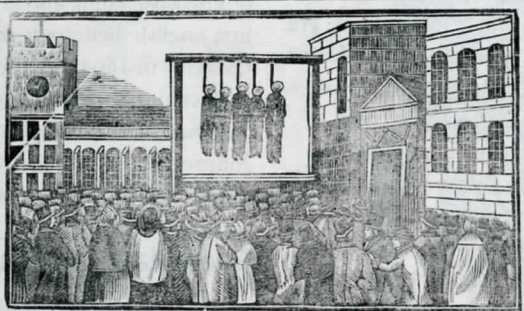
**FULL DETAILS OF THE
TRIAL AND EXECUTION
OF
THE FIVE PIRATES,
AT NEWGATE, TO-DAY.**

A Copy of Verses

Thou that art the King's true friend,
When they come to be tried,
The first shall be the King's friend,
The second shall be the King's friend,
The third shall be the King's friend,
The fourth shall be the King's friend,
The fifth shall be the King's friend,
The sixth shall be the King's friend,
The seventh shall be the King's friend,
The eighth shall be the King's friend,
The ninth shall be the King's friend,
The tenth shall be the King's friend,

THE EXECUTION.

Such a multitude were assembled for the purpose of watching the execution of the five pirates, that the King's Bench was almost surrounded, and the streets were filled with people. The execution was performed with the greatest solemnity and order, and the people were much gratified with the sight. The execution was performed with the greatest solemnity and order, and the people were much gratified with the sight. The execution was performed with the greatest solemnity and order, and the people were much gratified with the sight. The execution was performed with the greatest solemnity and order, and the people were much gratified with the sight.



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PORTRAITS OF THE EIGHT PIRATES.

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THE TRIAL.

The trial was held in the Court of King's Bench, and was attended by a large number of people. The trial was held in the Court of King's Bench, and was attended by a large number of people. The trial was held in the Court of King's Bench, and was attended by a large number of people. The trial was held in the Court of King's Bench, and was attended by a large number of people.



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dialect words and the way authors started to bring dialects into their writing, as with the poems of Robbie Burns or the characters of Charles Dickens. The large surveys of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries stimulated fresh interest in the study of regional speech, and there are examples in the exhibition showing how dialectologists operate.

Global English

This last strand looks at the emergence of English outside the British Isles, on a global scale. The evolution of international dialects follows the course of world history – largely a consequence of the spread of the British Empire. An American English emerged in the seventeenth century, and was soon followed by other Englishes in the Caribbean, India, the East Indies, Africa, and Australasia. In some cases, contact with local languages resulted in the development of pidgin varieties of English, some of which evolved into separate languages. The diversification has continued in a postcolonial era, with many countries adopting English as a *lingua franca* and then immediately adapting it to express their cultural identity. Several of these 'new Englishes' are on display in the exhibition.

English at work

The next strand introduces the notion of English in the workplace. Here we see the enormous stylistic range of the language as it was adapted to cope with new intellectual and social demands. It does not take long before we can talk about the 'language of' such areas as law, religion, economics, medicine, history, science, and technology. More recently, we find the language of the press, advertising, and the media in general. In the exhibition we see the first ever English newspaper, and some of the dramatic news reports and advertisements from the nineteenth century. Special forms of English appear, such as shorthand and the use of simplified systems for teaching purposes. All of this captures the notion of 'English at work'.

English at play

By contrast, this next strand illustrates the

equally wide range of varieties involved in 'English at play'. The concept of 'play' is a very wide one. It includes any use of language where someone manipulates the rules to make an effect, as in jokes, riddles, word puzzles, and creative literature. We see joke books and language parlour games from hundreds of years ago, and how schoolbooks made use of language play to motivate children to learn. The history of English shows a continuous strand of playful language, from the earliest Anglo-Saxon riddles to the latest text-messaging poems.

Accents and dialects

This strand deals with the development of accents and dialects. They can be seen at the very beginning of the Old English period, and they become more in evidence as the language spread around Britain and came to be written down in widely separated places. We see the very first collections of

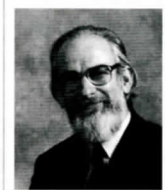
So: if you can get to London, go. If not, get the book. Either way, you'll experience the language as never before.

The exhibition

Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices is a free exhibition at the British Library from 12 November 2010 to 3 April 2011. Accompanying the exhibition are events, conferences and workshops for student groups. For more information visit www.bl.uk/evolvingenglish

The book

David Crystal's book, *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices. An Illustrated History* accompanies the exhibition and will be available from the British Library shop (priced £16.95) www.bl.uk/shop



David Crystal writes, broadcasts and lectures on all aspects of language and linguistics. He is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor.