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The Influence of Norman French on the English Language

One could say that the English language has never been its own. Beginning as an Indo-European language, the English language has long been known for stealing words, grammar, and spellings from other languages and cultures throughout the years. English of course, has a mainly Latin and Germanic background that stems from the original Indo-European language, and the language doesn't unify across the nation for many centuries as there are several dialectic regions in Britain, especially during the Old English and Middle English time periods. However, after the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Invasion of 1066, Norman French has a substantial impact on the English language in spelling, grammar, and vocabulary. The Norman Invasion and the dichotomy in language between the upper-class noble Normans and the lower-class English peasants influence the evolution of the English language.

In his book, *The History of England, Volume I: From the Earliest Times to the Reformation*, author and historian George Macaulay Trevelyan writes that for one hundred years, beginning at King Edward the Confessor's reign and onward, the Scandinavian influences in England primarily come from the Norman French culture (Trevelyan 141). King Edward reigns in England from 1042 until he passes away in January of 1066. Harold Godwinson succeeds to the throne, as King Edward had no children, and the king's nephew, the actual heir to the throne, is too young to take over the duties of a king. Duke William of Normandy claims that his genealogy should put him as the next rightful heir to the throne, not Harold. Furthermore, he

claims that Harold has sworn to defer his succession to William, should Harold be chosen to succeed to the throne (Trevelyan 157).

Consequently, when William is passed over as heir, he is obviously upset, and he begins to prepare his men to invade and attack England. He even goes so far as to petition the Pope for support. Pope Alexander II supports William, and sends knights from all over France to help with William's crusade. They plan to leave in the summer, but the winds were not right, and the trip was postponed. William and his crew finally set sail from Normandy in September, and once they land, they begin to set up camp near the town of Hastings. In October of 1066 after a long day of fighting, Harold is defeated and killed at the Battle of Hastings. Duke William of Normandy is crowned King William of England on December 25, 1066, almost one full year after the death of King Edward the Confessor (Trevelyan 162).

With the crowning of King William comes many changes, one of which is the shift of nobility from Anglo-Saxons to Anglo-Normans. The king commences the removal of Englishmen who have not favored him during their reign as nobility, and he replaces these men with worthy Normans who have supported him (Trevelyan 166). King William also implements a restricted feudal court system which is a combination of the traditional laws of England and the courtly manner of Normandy. In this system, it becomes "the privilege and the duty of a feudal King to consult his tenants-in-chief" (Trevelyan 170). Accordingly, the nobility become his council and court. The governmental council and court started by King William eventually evolves into England's present day administrative, judicial, and legislative systems. This is where the dichotomy in language between the Anglo-Norman nobility and Anglo-Saxon peasants begins.

Because the vast majority of the nobility in the King's court primarily speak Norman French, it becomes the official language of the court, and the English Language begins to take words from the French courtly traditions. In his article entitled "The Effects of the Norman Conquest", author and historian Frank Barlow writes, "There was a change in nomenclature [in the royal court]. The thegns, stallers, Housecarls, and clerks at court were replaced...by men performing similar functions, but...bearing the titles of the Capetian court: stewards, butlers, chamberlains, marshals, constables and, chaplains" (Barlow 144). After appointing Norman men to assist in running the kingdom, the king exchanges the English titles of the court with the Norman French titles. As a result, words such as *abbey*, *battle*, *castle*, *council*, *duke*, *empress*, *gentle*, *honour*, *journey*, and *treasure*, all coming from the language of the Norman French courts, gradually becomes a part of the normal language of the English courts.

In the article entitled, "Contacts and Conflicts: Latin, Norse, and French", linguist Matthew Townend maintains that most of the language that is taken from French into English comes in the form of nouns and adjectives, while verbs and adverbs are found less commonly, and borrowed pronouns and conjunctions are very rarely found (Townend 92). This makes sense, considering that the lower-class English peasants wouldn't necessarily need to know the Norman French translation for what the court does or how they do it, but they would need to know the titles of the nobility that are make up the court. In fact, it is situations such as this that reveal the language dichotomy between the Norman French nobility and the English peasantry, and in what manner it caused the English language to evolve.

An additional example of this language dichotomy is the animal and meat language pattern. Once the Normans have taken over the vast majority of the noble positions in the kingdom, the majority of the English live as peasants who undertake the numerous agricultural

and servitude jobs. Consequently, this leaves the English to raise and work with the cattle, pigs, chicken, and sheep, among other things. However, when the court dines at banquet, the servants distribute the food using the Norman French terms in order for the nobility to be able to understand what food is being provided. For example, although the farmers would raise cattle, the servants would announce the meat as beef. Likewise, when the servants serve venison, the English hunters would recognize the animal hunted as deer. Other examples include the English word *sheep* and the Norman French word *mutton*, and the English word *calf* and the Norman French word *veal*. Therefore, the English language begins to shift when it comes to the names of some foods.

The English language also adopts changes in spellings from Norman French. Spellings with the letters *qu* or *ch* are introduced (Algeo, 117). Consider this example: in Old English, the word *queen* would have been spelled *cwen*, but after the Norman Conquest, the spellings of the *cw* shift into the Norman French *qu*. In addition, the letter pair *ch* is introduced to the English language in words like *champagne*, *archive*, and *choice*. The letters *c*, *gh*, and *h* also have some shifts in pronunciation after the Norman Conquest. For example, *C* is given the [s] sound in some words, such as *cinder*, whereas the Old English spelling would have been *sinder*, but it retains the [k] sound in words such as *crust* or *cat*. Likewise, *ou* and *gh* derive in pronunciation in some words such as *loud* and *soup*, and *night* and *cough*.

The shift in spelling possibly comes about because the English language almost becomes extinct as a written language. Those who would know how to read and write would now write almost exclusively in Latin or French. It would make the writers look unintelligent or simple if they continued to write in English. Trevelyan writes, “Now when a language is seldom written and it is not an object of interest to scholars, it quickly adapts itself in the mouths of plain people

to the needs and uses of life... And so it fell out of England” (179). English becomes the language of the poor, and it adapts to the needs and lifestyle of its speakers. It is a national language for the peasantry, but as for the nobility and clerical people of England, Norman French and Latin are the official languages, respectively.

One could view this as a regrettable fact in history, but Trevelyan observes the decline of the written English language as an advantage. He writes, “During the three centuries when our native language was a peasants’ dialect, it lost its clumsy inflections and elaborate genders, and acquired the grace, suppleness and adaptability which are among its chief merits. At the same time it was enriched by many French words and ideas” (Trevelyan 179). He maintains that if English did not decline as a written language, the language would not have absorbed as much of the romantic and courtly Norman French language or the religious Latin language. English would have been an uglier language, so to speak.

In an article by the Oxford English Dictionary, Linguist Philip Durkin states that after English is exiled as a written language, Latin takes over as the official written language for a short period of time until French also has “flowering of vernacular writing” (Durkin). It is not until 1205 that we see the first book written in English since the Norman Conquest, and until the middle of the fourteenth century, all documents written in English are written in the localized dialects of English, because any language standard or unification in vocabulary or spelling that English may have had before the Conquest has been lost with the dominance of the Norman French language (Durkin). Additionally, all governmental actions are carried out mostly in Norman French, and rarely in Latin, so all royal proclamations are given in Norman French, while Mass is said in Latin. English, as mentioned before, becomes a language of the poor and uneducated.

Townend suggests that for the first hundred years after the Norman Conquest, almost all of the nobility would have spoken Norman French, and would have very little knowledge of the English language, while most of the lower-classes would have spoken mostly English with little knowledge of Norman French (82). However Townend also notes that “from the middle of the twelfth century at the latest, most members of the aristocracy were bilingual” (82). Although there is a large language gap between the upper and lower classes at first, after about one hundred years, the people from both classes begin to merge linguistically.

Initially, individuals from both social classes only become bilingual. This is surprising because the aristocracy primarily understood English as a dirty language. Nevertheless, after working with English speaking people for so long, one would eventually come to understand the language, even if a member of the aristocracy merely used it to communicate with his serfs. Conversely, many of the English speaking people would have viewed French as a beautiful language of the educated and successful.

Townend also notes that “in the thirteenth century, one begins to find educational treatises which provide instruction in French, and it seems from the target audiences of such treatises that not only was French having to be learned by the aristocracy, it was also coming to be learned by members of the middle classes” (82). It gives the impression as though French is beginning to develop into a dominant language that would take over the English language as a whole. Seeing as though it had already demolished English as a written language, the Norman French language would have been on the right track to evolve into the singular national language.

After the thirteenth century, Norman French indeed succeeds into becoming a generalized language of the culture, although it still holds almost an equal status with English. It is certainly

moving in the right direction in order to take over total control as the singular dominant language. However, this does not happen. Instead, English appropriates more of the “functions developed by French...and by the mid- to late-fourteenth century, the ‘triumph of English’ was assured” (Townend 83).

The English language does indeed triumph in the end, but it is not an instantaneous victory. Although Norman French has a short moment of dominance, English is usually the first language while Norman French is the second language of the bilingual society. As the culture becomes bilingual, the two languages begin to mix, and because English is usually the first language, it is more common for the people to speak mostly English with Norman French vocabulary and grammar mixed in. Slowly but surely, parts of the Norman French language either get added to the English language, or they become discarded.

In 1258, the king issues the first royal proclamation given in English since the Norman Conquest, and about one hundred years later in 1362, English once again becomes the official language of the law courts (Algeo 112). After the mid-fourteenth century, more written documents are also found in English, including the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, the well-known author of *The Canterbury Tales*, and John Wycliffe, who is the first person to translate the bible into English (Algeo 113). Additionally, William Caxton brings the first printing press to England in 1476, which promotes literacy and unification in language, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary (Algeo 113). The arrival of the printing press additionally brings about the early Modern English period.

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