

Epilogue

The end of Old English?

David Crystal

According to Toronto University's *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* the entire body of Old English material from 600 to 1150 consists of only 3037 texts (excluding manuscripts with minor variants), amounting to a mere three million words. A single prolific modern author easily exceeds this total: Charles Dickens' fiction, for example, amounts to over four million. Three million words is not a great deal of data for a period in linguistic history extending over five centuries. But we should be grateful for small mercies. Given that the Vikings destroyed so many monasteries and the libraries they contained, we are lucky to have even three million words to explore. And it is enough to illustrate a literature which, as we have seen, is vivid, vibrant, and varied.

Old English dialects

Most of the texts illustrated in this book were written in the dialect of a single part of the country – Wessex. The prestige of a dialect always reflects the power of its speakers; and in Anglo-Saxon times the emergence of Wessex as the dominant and eventually unifying force in English politics inevitably resulted in an increase in the status of its dialect. But standards do not develop overnight; and in the case of Old English, the process took over a century.

Early West Saxon is the name given to the dialect that characterises the literature of the first part of the period. It is a literature almost entirely due to the motivation and influence of King Alfred, who introduced a revival of religion and learning – a programme designed to win God's support for victory over the pagan Danes and to consolidate loyalty to himself as a Christian king. The results of Alfred's assiduous language planning were remarkable. Almost all prose texts during the late ninth century and throughout the tenth display a dialect that is very largely West Saxon and it

is this which has been used as the primary input for introductory grammars and manuals of Old English today.

Late West Saxon is the name given to the development of this dialect towards the end of the tenth century, when we find the writings of Ælfric, Wulfstan, Athelwold, Byrhtferth and others, as well as the continuation of the *Chronicle*, all of which were widely and officially distributed through the political and church networks. But there is an important difference between the Early and Late periods. In the Early period, the texts contain a great deal of variation, displaying dialect mixture, personal variation and scribal inconsistency. There is no sign of any real attempt to produce a consistent, universally standardised form of expression.

During the second half of the tenth century, just such an effort began to be made. A noticeable consistency appears in the work of scribes from monasteries all over the country. Writers as far apart as modern Wiltshire (Æthelwold), Dorset and Oxfordshire (Ælfric) and Worcestershire (Wulfstan) show remarkable similarity in spellings, words and constructions. Many scholars think that the influence of the Winchester school was especially strong. We can even see signs of revision taking place, with authorial corrections suggesting a concern to use 'correct' language.

Alongside West Saxon, three other dialects are known from the Old English period, deriving from the names of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Kentish, Mercian and Northumbrian, with the last two sometimes grouped together as a northern variety, Anglian. In reality, there must have been many more. East Anglia is an example of a major gap. There would have been many dialects in this area, from what we know of early patterns of settlement, but there are no Old English texts to represent them. Thousands of dialect manuscripts must have been destroyed in the Viking invasions.

The evidence for a Kentish dialect is thin, with just a few documents, glosses and poetic texts, chiefly ninth/tenth century, displaying features that seem to be south-eastern in character. Although not numerous, these features are nonetheless among the most interesting in the early history of English. Several, indeed, exercise a permanent influence on the language, being taken up by some Middle English writers (notably, Chaucer) and eventually entering standard English.

The early appearance of Northumbrian texts is not surprising when we recall that by 700 several major centres of learning had emerged in the north, notably at Jarrow, Durham and Lindisfarne, with Bede and later Alcuin producing influential works. The amount of language in these texts is not large, but there are enough variant forms used in a consistent way to indicate that a distinctive Northumbrian dialect existed by the beginning of the eighth

century. Interlinear glosses from the late tenth century confirm the character of this dialect, notably those added to the Lindisfarne and Rushworth Gospels. The absence of Northumbrian texts between the eighth and tenth centuries is a further result of the Viking burnings.

The growth of Mercia as a political power and a centre of culture and learning, during the eighth century, is reflected in the survival of several texts from that period. The most important are glossaries in which many of the forms display a distinctive West Midlands character, notably the *Corpus* and *Vespasian Psalter* texts. A surprising number of charters, land records and other official documents have also survived, reflecting the growth of political and legal frameworks during the period, especially under Offa, and they show many Mercian features.

Many texts display a mixture of dialect features. Mixing takes place when people from different dialect backgrounds come into contact and let themselves be influenced by each other. We have only hints about the social background of individual Anglo-Saxon scribes, but we do know there was considerable mobility. Travel records of the time suggest that the monks moved around the country a great deal, often bringing copies of books with them and staying for long periods in their host monasteries. There they would continue their scribal activities, working in association with others who might display different dialect backgrounds, and influencing – and being influenced by – different scribal practices and conventions.

Because the entire corpus is the product of a scribal elite, it gives no information about the dialect variations that ordinary people would have used. Most of the material belongs to specialised stylistic varieties, such as religious and legal language, or is consciously innovative and poetic. A record of everyday conversational speech is hardly ever found. There is one recorded example of a fairly extensive Old English conversation – the pupil/teacher dialogue forming the *Colloquy of Ælfric*. But we can hardly take this as representative, for the Old English text is actually made up of lines glossing a Latin original designed to teach Latin to boys in monastic schools. However, it is probably the closest we will ever get to Old English conversational style.

The four major dialect areas are the ones which have received all the attention; but undoubtedly there were further divisions within them. Over and above the question of their social diversity, three of the areas they covered were huge. Mercian and Northumbrian, in particular, covered a territory which in later centuries would each be home to several distinct dialects. These later dialects did not suddenly appear. They slowly evolved; and it is likely that some of their linguistic features were present in Anglo-Saxon times. Certainly there are enough variations within both Mercian and

Northumbrian for scholars to postulate northern forms of the former and southern forms of the latter. There is also evidence in Mercian of a division between the West and East Midlands.

What is particularly unclear – but highly intriguing – is whether we should be thinking exclusively in geographical terms in attempting to explain these variations. Some scholars think that, in the final analysis, what we have is a dialect picture not of regions of the country but of diocesan preferences, given that most scribes came from just a few monasteries, such as Jarrow, Winchester, Lichfield and Canterbury. The study of different handwriting preferences, illustration styles and page layout conventions – part of the subject of palaeography – is especially important in this connection.

Vocabulary change

No language has ever been found that displays lexical purity: there is always a mixture, arising from the contact of its speakers with other communities at different periods in its history. In the case of English there is a special irony, for its vocabulary has never been purely Anglo-Saxon – not even in the Anglo-Saxon period. By the time the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, there had already been four centuries of linguistic interchange between Germanic and Roman people on the European mainland. The Roman soldiers and traders borrowed Germanic words and the Germanic people borrowed Latin ones. The integration was at times quite marked: many Roman cohorts consisted of men from Germanic tribes. Language mixing was there from the very beginning.

Latin

A Latin word might have arrived in English through any of several possible routes. To begin with, Latin words must have entered the Celtic speech of the Britons during the Roman occupation and some might have remained in daily use after the Romans finally left in the early fifth century, so that they were picked up by the Anglo-Saxons in due course. Or perhaps Latin continued to exercise its influence following the Roman departure: it is possible that aristocratic Britons would have continued to use the language as a medium of upper-class communication. If so, then we might expect a significant number of Latin words to be in daily use, some of which would eventually be assimilated by the Anglo-Saxons. Some Latin words would also have been brought in by the Anglo-Saxons invaders. And, following the arrival of St Augustine in 597, the influence of the monks must have grown, with Latinisms being dropped into speech much as they still are today.

The Latin words express a considerable semantic range. They include words for plants and animals, food and drink, household objects, coins, metals, items of clothing, settlements, houses and building materials, as well as several notions to do with military, legal, medical and commercial matters. Most are nouns, such as *camp*, *street* and *monk*, with a sprinkling of verbs and adjectives. As we move into the period of early Anglo-Saxon settlement in England, we find these semantic areas continuing to expand, with the growing influence of missionary activity reflected in an increase in words to do with religion and learning.

Nearly half of all Latin borrowings during this early period died out. In some cases, they were replaced during the Old English period: *fossere*, for example, was in early competition with *spade* and *spade* won. More often, the word that formed the replacement arrived in medieval times, as with *pocket*, which entered English from Norman French in the thirteenth century, taking over the function earlier performed by Old English *bisæcc* 'pocket' (from *bisaccium*).

Borrowing from Latin continued throughout the Old English period, but it changed its character as church influence grew. Whereas most of the earlier words entered the language through the medium of speech, later words came in through the medium of writing and were more learned and religious in character, such as *deacon* and *grammar*. This trend is not surprising: the teaching of the church had to be communicated to the Anglo-Saxon people and new vocabulary was needed to express the new concepts, personnel and organisational procedures.

Borrowing Latin words was not the only way in which the missionaries engaged with this task. Rather more important, in fact, were other linguistic techniques. One method was to take a Germanic word and adapt its meaning so that it expressed the sense of a Latin word: examples include *rod*, originally meaning 'rod, pole', which came to mean 'cross', and *gast*, originally 'demon, evil spirit', which came to mean 'soul' or 'Holy Ghost'. Another technique, relying on a type of word creation that permeates Old English poetry, was to create new compound words – in this case, by translating the elements of a Latin word into Germanic equivalents: so, *liber evangelii* became *godspellboc* 'gospel book' and *trinitas* became *þrinnes* 'threeness' = 'trinity'.

Scandinavian

The Vikings made their presence felt in Britain in the 780s, but it was a further century before Old Norse words began to arrive in Old English. In c. 880 Alfred made a treaty with Guthrum which left Alfred in control of London and Guthrum in control over an area of eastern England which, because it

was subject to Danish laws, came to be known as the Danelaw. This area ran from the northern shore of the Thames as far west as the River Lea (the boundary of Essex), then north along the Lea into Bedfordshire and from there along the Ouse to the line of Watling Street. The boundaries further north are unclear, but it is evident from the place names that eventually appeared that Danes were present in the whole of the northern and northern third of the country, roughly between Cheshire and Essex.

Over 2000 Scandinavian place names are found throughout the Danelaw, chiefly in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and the East Midlands. The distribution of Scandinavian family names – such as those that end in *-son* (*Johnson*, *Henderson*, *Jackson* and so on) – also shows a concentration throughout the area. In Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire, 60% of the names recorded in early Middle English sources are of Scandinavian origins.

The Scandinavian place names are one of the most important linguistic developments of the period. Many are easily recognised. Over 600 end in *-by*, the Old Norse word for 'farmstead' or 'town', as in *Rugby* and *Grimby*, the other element often referring to a person's name (Hroca's and Grim's farm, in these two cases), but sometimes to general features, as in *Burnby* ('farm by a stream') and *Westerby* ('western farm'). Many end in *-thorpe* ('village, outlying farm'), *-thwite* ('clearing') or *-toft* ('homestead'), such as *Althorp*, *Millthorpe*, *Braithwaite*, *Applethwaite*, *Lowestoft* and *Sandtoft*.

We might expect Scandinavian place names to be recorded relatively quickly after the period of Norse settlement began; but what about general words in speech and writing? The treaty between Alfred and Guthrum contains the first Scandinavian loans known in Old English texts: *healfþanc* 'half a mark' and *hiesengum*, a variant of *hiesing* 'freedmen'. But only about 30 Norse words came into Old English during this period. Most are terms reflecting the imposition of Danish law and administration throughout the region, social structure, or cultural objects or practices, such as seafaring and fighting. Very few had enough broad applicability to survive into later periods of English, once Scandinavian culture and power declined.

Despite the extensive period of settlement and Danish becoming the language of power for a generation, the overall impact of Scandinavian words on Old English vocabulary continued to be slight during the eleventh century – just a few dozen more items being identifiable in English texts. Indeed, when we count up all the Scandinavian words that entered Old English between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, we arrive at a surprisingly small total – about 150. Why?

One important factor would have been the rise of the West Saxon dialect as the literary language following King Alfred's extensive use of it. By the

year 1000 it had achieved the status of a scribal standard, used throughout the country as a result. It would have been difficult for regionally restricted Danish forms to achieve public prominence. The political centres were in the south, at Winchester and later London, outside the Danelaw. Then, in the later period, the rise of Norman influence made Danish words less prestigious. But perhaps most important is the very short period of time overall that received Danish rule – little more than 50 years in the age of the Danelaw and only 26 years in the age of Cnut. No creative literature with a Danish theme, which might have shown a typical Scandinavian vocabulary, has survived from this period.

If that was the end of the linguistic dimension to the Scandinavian story, it would be no more than a ripple in English linguistic history. But something remarkable was taking place in the period between Old and Middle English. Although there are no written records to show it, a considerable Scandinavian vocabulary was gradually being established in the language. We know that this must have been so, because the earliest Middle English literature, from around 1200, shows thousands of Old Norse words being used, especially in texts coming from the northern and eastern parts of the country, such as the *Ornnulm* and *Havelok the Dane*. They could not suddenly have arrived in the twelfth century, for historically there was no significant connection with Scandinavia at that time; England was under Norman French rule. And as it takes time for loanwords to become established, what we must be seeing is a written manifestation of an underlying current of Old Norse words that had been developing a widespread vernacular use over the course of two centuries or more.

There is no doubt that many of these words were well established, because they began to replace some common Anglo-Saxon words. The word for 'take', for example, was *niman* in Old English. Old Norse *taka* is first recorded in an English form, *tac* (= *took*) during the late eleventh century, but by the end of the Middle English period *take* had completely taken over the function of *niman* in general English. The everyday flavour of the Scandinavian loans can be seen, for example, in these two dozen words, all of which survived into modern Standard English:

anger, awkward, bond, cake, crooked, dirt, dregs, egg, fog, freckle, get, kid, leg, lurk, meek, muggy, neck, seem, sister, skill, skirt, smile, Thursday, window

We mustn't overrate the impact Scandinavian words on English: they are only a fraction of the thousands of French words that entered the language during the Middle Ages. Moreover, the majority fell out of use. Yet some of the ones that did survive exercised a disproportionate influence, because

(like *take* and *get*) they were very frequently used. And they were supplemented by another set of changes that were even more influential, because they made a permanent impact on the grammar of the language.

Grammatical change

The most important of these changes was the introduction of a new set of third-person plural pronouns, *they*, *them* and *their*. These replaced the earlier Old English inflected forms: *hi* or *hie* (in the nominative and accusative cases, 'they/them'), *hira* or *heora* (in the genitive case, 'their, of them') and *him* or *heom* (in the dative case, 'to them, for them'). Pronouns do not change very often, in the history of a language and to see one set of forms replaced by another is truly noteworthy.

Another grammatical influence was the use of *are* as the third-person plural of the verb *to be*. This form had already been used sporadically in northern texts during the late Old English period – for example, in the Lindisfarne Gospels – but in Middle English it steadily moves south, eventually replacing the competing plural forms *sindon* and *be. Sindon* disappeared completely by the mid-1200s, but *be* remained in use for several centuries, entering generations of intuitions through the style of the Book of Common Prayer and the King James' Bible (e.g. *They be blind leaders of the blind*, Matthew 15: 14). It continues to be a major feature of the language in regional dialects, both in Britain and abroad.

Among other Scandinavian grammatical features that survived are the pronouns *both* and *same* and the prepositions *till* 'till', *to'* and *fro'* 'from'. The negative response word, *nay*, is also Norse in origin (*nei*). And the *-s* ending for the third-person singular present tense form of the verb (as in *she runs*) was almost certainly a Scandinavian feature. In Old English, this ending was usually *-ð*, as in *hebbað* 'raises' and *gæð* 'goes'; but in late Northumbrian texts we find an *-s* ending and this too spread south to become the standard form.

The transition from Old English to Middle English is primarily defined by the linguistic changes that were taking place in grammar. Old English, as we have seen (Chapter 11), was a language that contained a great deal of inflectional variation; modern English has hardly any. And it is during Middle English that we see the eventual disappearance of most of the earlier inflections and the increasing reliance on alternative means of expression, using word order and prepositional constructions rather than word endings to express meaning relationships.

We must be careful not to overstate the nature of the change. The phrase 'increasing reliance' is meant to suggest that there is a great deal of

continuity between the grammatical systems of Old and Middle English. Word order was by no means random in Old English, neither was it totally fixed in Middle English. We can hear echoes of Old English word order even today. When we meet Yoda, in the *Star Wars* films, we find him regularly inverting his word order, placing the object initially: *If a Jedi knight you will become* . . . This was a common Old English pattern – and we have no difficulty understanding it 1000 years later.

However, a major grammatical change of this kind – from inflection to word order – is of real significance in the history of a language. Grammar is, after all, the basis of the way in which we organise our utterances so that they make sense, through the processes of sentence construction, and it is not an aspect of language that changes very easily – unlike vocabulary and pronunciation. New words come into English on a daily basis, but new habits of grammatical construction do not. Indeed, only a handful of minor grammatical changes have taken place during the past four centuries, although that period saw huge numbers of new words and many changes in accent. So when we see English altering its balance of grammatical constructions so radically, as happened chiefly during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the kind of language which emerges as a consequence, Middle English, is rightly dignified by a different name. At that stage, from a standpoint of linguistic structure, the Old English language was history.

End of an era

And from the standpoint of language use? Here we see a more gentle process operating. People often talk about a 'break' between Old and Middle English, but there was never any break. From a linguistic point of view, there could not have been. A spoken language does not evolve in sudden jumps: it consists of many thousands of working parts – in the case of English, over three dozen vowels and consonants, some three or four thousand features of sentence structure and tens of thousands of domestic words – and they do not all shift at once. If they did, different generations would not be able to understand each other. So, although the pace of linguistic change between Anglo-Saxon and early medieval times does seem to have been quite rapid, it was still gradual, and we encounter texts that are amalgams of Old and Middle English and texts that fall 'midway' between Old and Middle English.

The continuity is mainly to be seen in texts of a religious, political or administrative character, thousands of which have survived. Most of the surviving material in English is religious in character – about one-third are collections of homilies, especially by Ælfric and Wulfstan. The writings of

Ælfric, in particular, continued to be copied throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries and these overlap with sermons from the twelfth century that are very clearly in an early form of Middle English.

The overlap is not difficult to identify. A copy of the Old English Gospels (Bodleian MS Hattou 38), made in Christ Church, Canterbury, probably in the 1190s, has been called 'the last Old English text'. That is very much later than a manuscript which has been called 'the earliest Middle English text': the *Sermo in festis Sancti Marie virginis* ('Homily for Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary'), a translation of a Latin sermon by Ralph d'Escures, who was Archbishop of Canterbury between 1114 and 1122. It forms one of the *Kentish Homilies*, compiled c. 1150 or somewhat earlier, most of which are copied straight from Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*.

The copying practices of twelfth-century scribes are especially important, because they provide evidence of an ongoing oral tradition between Old and Middle English. In several texts it is possible to identify examples of formulaic phrases, aphoristic expressions and other rhetorical features, dealing with a particular theme, which cannot be related to any known written source. When such locutions are found in several texts of different times and places, the conclusion is unavoidable: we are seeing here examples of oral transmission. The only way such material could have been incorporated into a piece of 'copying' is for the scribe to have been remembering such expressions and judging them to be appropriate for the text he was working on.

The religious material is of great sociolinguistic significance. If Ælfric's work was still being copied or quoted as late as around the year 1200, this gives us the strongest of hints that the language had not moved so far from Old English as to be totally unintelligible. It is inconceivable that the huge labour involved in copying would have been undertaken if nobody had been able to understand them. Contrariwise, we can sometimes sense a growing linguistic difficulty from some of the contemporary decision making, as when the monks of Worcester requested William of Malmesbury to have the Old English life of Wulfstan translated into Latin – presumably because they found it easier.

Eventually, there is a frank admission of failure. Around 1300, we find someone adding the following note in the margin of an Old English text: *non apreciatum propter ydionia incognita* ('not appreciated because an unknown language'). At that point, the Old English period was very definitely over. But its influence lives on, as this book has shown you.