1 The Beginnings

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1 Introduction

How did the English language begin, this supple, economic, subtle instrument of communication, commerce, and belles lettres that has become de facto and in many institutions and contexts de jure the lingua franca of the world? Where and when was it born? What were the linguistic, historical, and cultural factors that joined to make this language of so small an island so formidable a force in world history?

It is impossible to point to a specific date, a specific place, or a specific person, and say: that is when the English language began. The birth of a language is never an event like the birth of a baby, one moment silent and passive residing in a comfortable womb, the next moment crying, flailing, thrashing about – a noisy newcomer to a strange and brave new world. In their origins and spread, languages are not unlike trees growing in a dense jungle: the foliage – the varieties of English we can see and hear today: Indian English, Australian English, Singapore English, British English, American English, Irish English – is there plain to see; the roots – the origins – are no longer in sight, long since concealed by generations of accumulations of earth and overgrowth of thick underbrush.

But the growth patterns – to continue, for a moment, the tree metaphor – of languages throughout the world and at all times are so similar as to be virtually universal, and it is the job of the historical linguist to distinguish these patterns in languages and to put together a coherent reconstruction of how a language was born and how it came of age. There is much in the early history of English and its antecedent languages that we do not know and will probably never know for certain, but two centuries of linguistic scholarship have given us a sound basis from which to hazard educated guesses about what happened before we have the written records that are the eyewitness testimony of the early years.
2 Germanic Legacy

English belongs to the Germanic family of languages, whose other members include High German, Low German, Dutch, Faroese, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic, as well as the oldest attested but now extinct Germanic language, Gothic. Their common ancestral language we call Proto-Germanic, which, unlike the Latin from which the Romance family of languages descend, was never a written language. Both Romance and Germanic belong to the large and important Indo-European family of languages some of whose other members are the languages of northern India (their ancestral tongue Sanskrit, the venerable language of the Hindu scriptures), Persian (usually called Farsi today), the Slavic languages, Greek, Armenian, the Celtic languages (once spoken throughout western and central Europe, now reduced to toeholds in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and the Brittany peninsula of France).

If the early origins of English are concealed by mists of early history, then doubly so the origins of the Indo-European ancestral tongue. Where the primeval home of the original Indo-European tribe was located and when the language its members spoke was still a single and uniform thing are two vexed questions in historical linguistics, much debated, and both the where and the when are still active topics of research. We probably do not involve ourselves in serious error if we place the age of the Indo-European languages at some 3000 BCE and the primeval home in eastern Europe, just north of the Black Sea in what today is Ukraine. At some point the resources of the region became insufficient to support its population, and groups from the original Indo-European tribe broke off and emigrated east (into Persia and India), north (to Russia and the Baltic regions), and west (to Greece, Italy, western Europe, and the British Isles).

The Germanic tribes had departed the Indo-European primeval home probably by the beginning of the Common Era at the latest. They drifted into western Europe and settled in what today is northern Germany, the Low Countries, and southern Scandinavia. The Baltic Sea, the relatively shallow inland sea that separates Germany and Denmark from Norway and Sweden, was more of a boggy marsh than a sea when the Germanic peoples made this their home, thus easing ingress and movement throughout the area.

The Germanic tribes – Saxons, Angles, Jutes, Frisians – were a roving, restless, aggressive lot like their Indo-European forebears before them, always seeing the other side of rivers, of valleys, of bodies of water as greener, more fertile, more suited to their idea of a proper home than where they were living. This hereditary trait, this restlessness, this urge to sail away and find new lands to conquer, the English later were to display in quantity.

3 The Germanic Presence in England

England at the period in question (roughly 0 BCE/CE plus or minus a hundred years) was anything but a Germanic-language area. The earliest inhabitants of
whom we have certain knowledge were the Celts, whose languages survive today in the forms of Irish (the preferred designation today for what still is often called Gaelic), Welsh, and Scots Gaelic. The Romans led by Julius Caesar invaded the island in 55 BCE, but it was almost a century later during the reign of Claudius before they could claim to control even the southern part of the country. The Romans never were able to impose their Latin language on the Celtic substratum to any great degree. People who wanted to get ahead, to become important in Roman Britain, would have learned Latin, as people who have wanted to get ahead anywhere in the world at all times have always had to learn the language of whoever is in charge – it is after all in this way that English gained ascendancy in the countries comprising the British empire. But knowledge of Latin would have been a town and garrison thing. Beyond the walls of the forts, beyond the baths and arenas, the common people continued speaking the Celtic languages that captured, as languages always do, their Celtic identity.

In or around 449 the restless continental Germanic tribes began what we may call the Germanic Conquest of England. The English Channel in good weather is not much of a barrier to even small sailing craft from countries such as Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the northern coast of Germany. Already in Roman times bands of Germanic invaders (for whom the conventional name is “Vikings”) had been an irritant for the Romans, always grabbing things that did not belong to them, plundering, causing mischief. It was only after Roman rule had become ineffectual against the warriors sailing from the north that Germanic invasion on a large scale could succeed. The Celts, those who did not assimilate to Germanic ways, moved west and south into Cornwall and Wales; Scotland with its hills, wild terrain, and rain remained untamed by both Roman and Saxon.

4 Anglo-Saxon England

Thus came into being an Anglo-Saxon civilization. Its language was Old English (also known as Anglo-Saxon), which we nominally date 450–1150, a fusion language to which various of the Germanic invaders had contributed, most particularly the Saxons from northern Germany. The language of the Saxons who remained behind in northern Germany, Old Saxon, is a good deal more conservative than its wandering cousin Old English, “conservative” in historical linguistic usage meaning “closer to the ancestral language,” here Proto-Germanic.

What resemblance did Old English, this rough beast of a language that slouched about in southern England as the legacy of the fusion of Germanic invader-languages, bear to the English of modern times? The answer is: very little. Old English, like the Old Saxon to which it owes most, was a “heavy” language: heavily inflected and richly conjugated, with three genders and four cases, and numerous subclasses of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Exemplary noun declensions are (dialect variations, of which there were many, are ignored here):
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<th>Modern English</th>
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Compare these declensions with their modern English counterparts, and the greater linguistic complexity of the earlier period is immediately clear: *day/days, word/words, gift/gifts*. The Old English verb conjugations are no less complex in comparison with modern English: where English today has in the present indicative only one marked ending *(e)s*, in the third-person singular *(goes, tries, kills)*, Old English had four. Even the simple, anodyne definite article *the* of modern English required 18 different forms to decline it: three genders in the singular, four cases for the singular and the plural, plus an instrumental case for masculine and neuter singular.

So much for the language. What about the literature it produced? Linguists qua linguists are not often disposed to ask about the quality of the literature of these early Germanic languages. That we tend to leave to literary scholars. Our interest focuses more narrowly on forms and phonemes, on scribal errors, on the technical aspects of phonology, morphology, and syntax.

It is just as well that linguists are not always lovers of literature, for the literatures of most of the early Germanic languages are poor things, consisting mostly of bible translations, gospel harmonies (a unified story of Christ’s life woven out of the four gospels, used by missionaries), travelers’ phrase books (as it were, *How to Say It in Old Saxon*), the odd gloss in a Latin document. Old High German literature (600–1150), for example, which is contemporaneous with Old English, is an inferior thing in comparison with the literature of even its close relative, Old Saxon (*Heliand*), not to mention the further afield Old English. It is vastly inferior to the rich medieval literature of Middle High German (1150–1350) with its courtly epics, its *Nibelungenlied*, its poetry. Old High German literature is not nearly the equal of the slightly later literature of Old Icelandic.

But how different was Old English literature! Its greatest single work was *Beowulf*, a story of heroes and dragons and great deeds still studied today as a classic of world literature. Besides *Beowulf* there is the great war poem *The Battle of Maldon* and numerous religious poems. Under the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great (born 849, reigned 871–899) and due directly to him we have outstanding translations from the Latin of such works as Bede’s *Ecclesiastical*
History of the English People and Boethius’ The Consolation of Philosophy. That a king at that time should have so lofty a mind is remarkable. Even more remarkable, we have every reason to believe that Alfred himself translated these works or at least lent a hand in their translations, this besides making his mark as a gifted military leader and statesman. He initiated the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was not completed until two centuries later. A plentiful trove indeed, this body of Old English literature, rich in detail and rich in genius. Because of its existence we are well informed about the social and cultural history of the English peoples at a time when we can see the life of other Germanic peoples only as through a misted glass with many cracks in it, darkness everywhere.

Old English already was disposed toward linguistic hospitality, an openness to the influence of other languages which endures to the present day, welcoming new words from the languages with which it shared territory (Latin, Celtic) and from the languages of influential figures such as warriors and priests who came speaking no English. Many place-names point back to the Celtic linguistic substratum (Kent, Cornwall, York) as do words such as crag and bin. Of far greater importance and extent were borrowings from Latin, earlier from the Latin of Roman conquest, later from the Latin of Christian conquest. From the earlier period we have camp, mile, pit, cheap, wine, and many other domestic words so well integrated into English that only an enthusiast would know them not to be originally Germanic. Christianity came to Britain in 597, though it was not to drive out the autochthonous religious traditions until centuries had passed. Its impact on English vocabulary is great: church words such as bishop, angel, disciple, human, relic, and rule; school words like school, verse, meter, and grammar; and words not easily categorized such as elephant, radish, oyster, talent, and crisp.

Scandinavian was the last of the great lexical and grammatical influences on English prior to the Norman Conquest. Vikings had always been sailing to the island. It was not far away, often no more than a few days’ sailing, it was attractive and promised wealth and interesting things to steal, and its defenders were usually no match for a boatload of Vikings in battle regalia. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle the first major raid occurred in 787. Thereafter incursions from the north occurred without relief until 850. These were raiding parties more interested in plunder and English women than in conquest of territory, but Northmen with more than jewels, girls, and booty on their mind were not far behind. By 1014 the English king had been driven into exile, and England was ruled – though that is surely too strong a word for what must have been a parlous, ephemeral suzerainty – by the Danish king Svein. Most of the invaders settled in the Danelaw, the districts on the northern and eastern coasts of English where the Danish influence was strongest.

The influence of Danish – and other north Germanic languages to a lesser extent, notably Norwegian (Norse) – is vast. Because of their genetic similarities as Germanic languages Old English and Old Danish were not as far apart as English was from Latin or Celtic. The two Germanic languages had similar
grammatical structures, declensions, and conjugations, and both may have been mutually intelligible at least in saying the simple things that the buyer and seller of a sheepskin would have to say to conclude a successful transaction. Both had the uniquely Germanic division between strong verbs and weak verbs, the former signaling tense changes by vowel (sing/sang, ride/rode, eat/ate), the latter by the addition of a suffix -ed (work/worked, look/looked, sweep/swept). Though the Romance and Celtic languages have an often daunting array of irregular verbs, only Germanic has the strong/weak division; indeed, no other Indo-European language does. The numerous English place-names in -by are Danish in origin: Rugby, Derby, Whitby (the Danish word by meant ‘farm’ or ‘town’). Even the word law is Scandinavian, and band, odd, rotten, rugged, die, crawl, and scowl are a small sample of a much larger number of simple-life words borrowed into English from Danish.

5 The French Legacy

In depth and mass of linguistic imprint on the English language, however, all else pales into insignificance in comparison with the French influence that followed upon the Norman Conquest. The Normans were Frenchmen descended from Nordic invaders who had snatched control of pieces of the French coast during the Viking era, much as their cousins had done in England. In 912 the Northmen gained by right of treaty with the king of France the part of France known still today as Normandy. Normans threw themselves into absorbing French culture, military know-how, cuisine, law, and – most importantly for the future history of English – the French language. By the eve of the Norman Conquest Normans were French through and through.

In 1066 the king of England died without an heir. The usual wrangling began, and a second cousin to the deceased king soon announced that he was the rightful successor and was prepared to prove the point by military means if it came to that. This cousin was William, duke of Normandy. William had had a hard childhood, having to overcome the stigma of illegitimacy among much else, and he rose to his dukedom through physical toughness mixed with shrewdness. William made careful preparations for invasion, taking care to cultivate supporters on the English side of the channel (a ‘Fifth Column’), and in 1066 he sailed with his soldiers across the English Channel, the Channel being very narrow and easy to traverse at this point. It is no accident that the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944 going the other direction chose the beaches of Normandy to land on.

William and his men landed at Hastings, then as now a town on the Channel not far south of London. The battle did not last long. On Christmas Day, 1066, William was crowned king of England. One of the first effects of the Norman Conquest was the creation of a new French-speaking Norman aristocracy. While William did not complete his conquest for several years to come, a Norman royal court in southeast England came into being almost overnight.
It was not the way in those days to “impose” a language on a conquered people, as the Soviet Union for example imposed Russian on most of its member states. The Normans did not “impose” French, but William’s court was French-speaking, and the Normans he had brought with him and who followed spoke French. If, as a speaker of English, you wanted to have dealings with the court, then you had to learn French. If you wanted to sell a pig to the king’s kitchen, you had to learn French. If as an aristocrat you decided it would be advantageous to switch your allegiance from Saxon to Norman – this is the stuff of Robin Hood and Sir Walter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe – then you had to learn French. If a Norman fancied a Saxon girl and married her, she would learn French, and so would their children if they wanted to get ahead. The close proximity of France made for a steady stream of fortune-seekers testing the possibilities in this England, which they doubtless regarded as cold, crude, and with not much of interest to eat – not French, in a word. As fortune-seekers are not always respectable members of the aristocracy, French would have been much heard outside the court in the century and a half after 1066.

Two centuries after the Conquest English kings regained power, and the French court was a memory. By the beginning of the fourteenth century English was again the language of the country, but this was a very different kind of English from the English that had preceded the Norman Conquest. It had been profoundly transformed by the course of linguistic evolution and by its fateful encounter with French. It was a far different English from that of Beowulf. Alfred would have needed an interpreter. Many of the words with which French had permanently enriched English are from the legal and governing (legal and govern themselves are French) lexical domains: crime, criminal, criminality, regal, regental, judge, plea, royal, sue, defend, defendant – it would be quite impossible to try a case in an English-speaking court anywhere in the world even today without using a French loanword every half minute or so. But not all of what we got from French is abstract and polysyllabic: consider joy, face, cap, force, war, chase, paint, pay.

But we got more from the French than individual loanwords. Because those loanwords often came in pairs, for example criminal/criminality, legal/legality, régent/regéntal, difficult/difficúlty (with the acute accent ´ marking the location of main stress in the word), we inherited from French a more complex set of rules for marking word-stress than what we had had before when English vocabulary was more monolithically Germanic. Words from our Germanic heritage, most of them, are monosyllabic, and therefore have a very simple rule for marking stress – stress the only vowel in the word: gô, côme, it, rûn, bê, bést, so, stône, wôrd.

It was not only French that had changed the language so much since Alfred’s day. The inexorable force of linguistic change had done its work. By the end of the Middle English period (1150–1500) the language had come to be something not that different from modern English. In nouns for example -s had become the only suffix, signifying as it does today either the genitive day’s or the plural days. The multiplicity of unstressed vowels in Old English
(the vowels a, e, u, o in the final syllables of for example giefa, giefe, giefum, curon) had been reduced to a single unstressed -e. Of the numerous different forms of the definite article only the and that have remained. Some strong verbs became weak, some weak verbs strong. The language had become grammatically simpler, especially in its morphology, leaner somehow – and it is this streamlining of the language that later would make it so easy a language to export.

6 Early Modern English

The creation of Early Modern English (or Late Middle English) coincided with the onset of the Age of Discovery. Ships were bigger and better, navigational aids were more reliable, and something in the European Zeitgeist demanded exploration. What was the English like that was sent out in search of countries to claim as Britain embarked on its quest to “rule the seas”? It was to begin with a “light” language when compared with Old English, which I earlier described as “heavy.” Gone the Indo-Germanic/Germanic complex morphology, gone the Germanic fashions in word compounding and word derivation, gone many of the sounds of Old English (such as the velar fricative [x], spelled gh in words such as light and knight). What remained is what we have today: an English with a preponderance of monosyllabic words, with sounds that are on the whole easy to pronounce or to approximate (though th is a stumbling-block for speakers of many languages), a simple morphology, a language mostly free of elite academy-driven notions of correctness. (The Académie française regularly issues stern injunctions against using words like weekend and OK; no ordinary speaker of French pays them the slightest mind. English has never been disposed to put up with such silliness.)

Let us take the English of 1600 as a starting-point. This is a useful date because it was on December 31 of that year that Queen Elizabeth granted a royal charter to a group of merchants for the purpose of exploitation of trade with East and Southeast Asia and India. Although the English East India Company as it was called soon fell into financial difficulty and was never far out of it, it was for a century and a half a major facilitator of the English language. What was the English like that John Company, as the English East India Company was sometimes ironically called in India, exported to these far-off lands?

It would have been richly diverse for one thing. On the lower decks Cockney English would have been well represented along with every conceivable kind of regional English: Yorkshire accents, Devon accents, Welsh accents, Irish accents, Scots accents – even the odd Yankee (American) twang of some poor lout who had been pressed into service. There would have been “r-less” dialects of English alongside “r-ful” dialects. There would be very along with “very” and vind beside “wind.” “It was ‘is to ‘ave” would have cheerfully coexisted with “E hain’t ‘appy.” There would be lots of [f] for th, muffin for
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‘nothing’ and wif for ‘with’. There would be speakers for whom lace and lice rhymed. Words now archaic like gart ‘caused or made’, sollicker ‘force’, and to fossick ‘to search’ would have abounded. Received Pronunciation (“the King’s English,” “Oxford English,” “BBC English”) was not a concept at this time, so even the captains and upper-class loungers who fanned out across the world would have had by today’s standards huge differences in pronunciation and usage.

And so the stage was set for the triumphant march of the English language to the ends of the earth. The Age of Discovery transformed the world’s view of horizon and limitation, as the frigates and brigs and men o’war set out under full sail from this tiny island of England and the Union Jack was planted on alien terrain such as India, Australia, Hong Kong, and America. It is inconceivable that in the minds of these captains and men or those who had sent them lurked even an inkling of what their ultimate and most enduring achievement would be.

They thought they were exploring, trying to find the Northwest Passage, trying to find faster ways to sail to Japan and China. They thought they were going to get rich by locating sources of spices or profiting from the appeal of a new drink like tea. They thought they were claiming some God-forsaken barren island or peninsula for Crown and country forever. Or they were transporting some kind of plant, breadfruit for example, out to a new location to see whether it could be made to grow there as an inexpensive food for slaves to the profit of slave-owners and John Company.

And so they were. They were doing all these things. But little did these empire-warriors know that their one enduring accomplishment would be to make English first among the world’s languages – first not in intrinsic worth or beauty or goodness but first in practicality and first as a means of expression for word-gifted people whose first language might be something other than English.

7 Post-Empire English

The British Empire is now gone. The money it made – if indeed it made money for England; Karl Marx thought it did not – is long since gone. The islands and peninsulas where once the Union Jack was proudly planted are now ruled by their own people (if they are inhabited at all). The breadfruit never seemed to find the right kind of soil to prosper in, it never became a profitable crop; besides most of the plants died on the way out. Slave plantations are gone, and so is John Company.

What remains however is infinitely more enduring, chaster and nobler, more of a great thing, than land or plants or possessions. What remains is the English language, a gift to the globe, a “way of speaking, a mouth” to millions of people on this globe, often to people who would not be able to express themselves if not for English. One of the greatest and most underacknowledged
gifts of the British Raj to India was English prose style. Not simply narrative prose – after all the Laws of Manu were written in Sanskrit prose – but the prose style of the polished English essay, of a Macaulay, of Samuel Johnson’s Idler, of Edmund Burke or John Stuart Mill. This kind of graceful, spare, ironic prose was something altogether different from the forms of prose in indigenous literature. It was initially foreign to the “cut” of any Indian language, from Sanskrit down to the meanest vernacular. But something about it kindled fire in the Indian mind. By the end it would produce masters of the English language – Rabindranath Tagore, Aurabindo Ghose, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and his historian son, Sarvepalli Gopal, Raja Rao, Nirad Chaudhuri, Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru. The English language remains to India after virtually all other traces of the British Raj have decayed and receded from view.

8 Conclusion

What was true of India is true of all the other countries where English once was the language of rule: former British colonies in Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangladesh, the West Indies, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and of course America. English is one of the natural means by which gifted writers express themselves in countries once under British rule. And when they write their graceful prose and eloquent poetry, they doubtless do not often stop to reflect on how it came about that it is English that is their instrument of choice. And when a Frenchman has dealings with a German or a Swede, when they perforce move into English to do their negotiating, none of them surely thinks back to that day in 449 when Saxons from the north of Germany sailed their ships to southern England and decided to stay there.

“Our beginnings never know our ends,” wrote T. S. Eliot. How far we have come from those early days when German and Scandinavian warriors descended on the south of England, unloading their languages along with their weapons of conquest. But as Eliot also wrote, “In my beginning is my end.” The dots are not always easy to connect, even for linguists, but connected they are, these dots that take us from Old to Middle to modern English, whose end lies in its beginning.

See also Chapters 15, World Englishes Today; 23, Literary Creativity in World Englishes; 25, World Englishes and Culture Wars.
FURTHER READING


