AN OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY INFLUENCES ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEXICON

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Abstract: When thinking of culture and civilization, one thinks of history, literature, philosophy, art and various other domains, but seldom does one think of the importance and influence that a nation's language has on it. This paper emphasises the early stages of the becoming of the English language. This will be put in connection with the waves of invaders that pillaged and settled on the Isles. A more detailed analysis will be provided for the Norman Conquest and its linguistic and cultural influences that took part in the making of nowadays England.

Keywords: English, borrowings, lexicon, the Norman Conquest, history

The Beginnings of the English Language

The history of the English language begins somewhere in the year 449, when, according to Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, three tribes from the North-West of Europe invaded the Isles: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes[1].

Arriving from the nowadays territories of Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, the Germanic tribes overpowered the Celtic peoples living in the previously Roman-conquered Albion.

The name by which they will be referred to comes, strangely enough, not from the dialect originally spoken by the West-Saxons – the one to become the source of Modern English, but from the OE *engla-cynn*[2], 'the kind of the Angles'.

Influences in the *Englisc* Lexicon

Old English developed from the dialects spoken by the mainland tribes, out of which the later West-Saxon will have prevailed. The Celtic influence in the Old English vocabulary consists mainly of toponyms, such as *Kent, Devonshire, Cornwall* etc. The preserved Saxon elements are part of the basic word stock (f*æder, mōdor, god, dæg, gōs, ic, gōd* etc.). Latin played a role in the contouring of English even before the second half of the 5th century, since the mainland tribes had been in contact with it and consequently began using words that will become in Modern English *camp, mile, cup, copper, mule, dragon* etc. [3].

[1] Crystal, *The English Language* p. 146
[2] Tătaru, p. 117
[3] Id., p. 117-121

Although impossible to obtain precise data on the matter, scientists speculate over the extent of the *Englisc* vocabulary and, as L. Frăţilă points out, it might have only had around 24,000 words[4]. This might be the main reason for English's 'eagerness' to accept so many words from a wide array of languages.

Latin – During and After the Christianisation of *Englaland*

Apart from the French waves of lexical enrichment, Latin presented as one of the most interesting influences on *Englisc*. This is because Latin had influenced Old English even before the Anglo-Saxon tribes reached the Isles. One and a half century after the first wave of borrowings on the mainland and with a small number of indirect borrowings through the Celtic tongues of the natives in their cultural background, the *engla-cynnes* underwent an extensive transformation which began at a cultural and spiritual level: the Christianisation of the end of the 6th century.

From a polytheistic society, worshiping a plethora of gods and spirits of nature, the peoples of the Isles began to align themselves to a new, fresh, European religion. This meant that the scattered tribes had yet one more thing in common; they had taken one more step towards becoming a nation and they were now more similar to the rest of the mainland.

Christianity was brought, as in all the West-European regions, via Latin, be it literary or the Vulgata. The relatively small number of words – cca 450 – that entered the language in this period had an enormous influence over *Englisc*, entering the basic word stock and surviving up to the present. (cf. Tătaru, 121-123)

The most important part of the church-related vocabulary was formed then, at the end of the 6th century, consisting of words such as: *nun, monk, abbot, pope, candle, shrine* etc. and words from various other domains: *lentil, cap, pine, lily, school, master, verse, metre* etc. (ibid.).

The lexicon will have increased about eight centuries later, when the first great wave of Latin borrowings put its toll on the language. Over 1000 words came into various degrees of usage. Unlike the Latin element of the 6th century, many of these words remain as part of specialised vocabularies, not having made their way into the basic word stock[5].

The Scandinavian part of the *Englisc* lexicon

Alongside the extensive role played by Latin, and during the period in which it did not influence *Englisc* extensively, Scandinavian dialects represented the major element of change in the lexicon.

Beginning in 787 with the first Viking raids, Scandinavian words began to be assimilated in the every-day use of the native Anglo-Saxons. They consist either of proper names – *Derby, Rugby, Davidson* etc. – or very common words which easily replaced their Old English counterparts, since the languages were mutually intelligible: *they, them, get, give, egg, silver, sister* etc.[6]

The Norman Conquest and Its Influence on *English and Englishness*

[4] Frăţilă, p. 18
[5] Tătaru, p. 122
[6] Id, p. 29-30

The Norman French invasion of 1066 is undoubtedly one of the most significant events of the history of the English people. This event brought social and political changes to the Anglo-Saxons and it ensured the beginning of the age of Middle English.

The Invaders' Threat on the Natives' Englishness

A sense of belonging, of ethnicity to put it in modern terms, existed among the people of the Isles long before the Normans invaded their territories. Thus, after the invasion of 1066, cultural clashes between the two peoples began to emerge. On the one hand, the native English were keen on keeping their heritage alive but on the other, peace among the two nations was necessary for them to be able to ensure prosperity.

At first glance, the main means through which this could have been obtained was religion – shared Christian values should have meant peace. In reality things were quite different. After William had ensured the people of the Isles that they would not be mistreated if they remain loyal to him, religion was the only thing that stood in the course of assimilating the Normans. The fact that the Norman clergy felt that the Christianity of the isles was going backwards, as opposed to that of the mainland and their attempt to make the English more progressive in terms of rites and rituals led to numerous riots and delayed the unification of the two peoples[7].

After the arrival of William I and of the new aristocracy, the Anglo-Saxon nobility risked being captured and either be exiled to Normandy, taken as a war-prize, or be imprisoned in monastic communities. This was a general practice for the clergy, thus Æthelric, bishop of Durham was confound in Westminster Abbey, but some of the laymen were fortunate enough to have the same fate as the clergy. Another option was to flee their lands. This meant that the Scottish lands and noblemen would soon be a haven for the Engla-cynnes, and so were Denmark and Norway. The largest documented escape from the occupied Anglo-Saxon territories comprised 235 ships going towards the Byzantine Empire. The only other option was to fight the invaders, which, for a Viking people was very appealing, thus making way for numerous battles between the natives and the Norman French.[8]

Predictably enough, the aristocrats began playing a game of genes that will become one of the great travesties of history. Since the throne was held by the Normans and since the lower-class Normans did not cross the Channel in great numbers, all the places in the upper-class were held by the conquerors. This led to a large number of claims from English aristocrats that they were of Norman descent, in order to ensure their social status and stability.[9]

The Norman Conquest meant the arrival of a new monarchy, a French-speaking one. This gave way to the use of French in official circumstances; not only did the aristocracy have to learn the new language, but also the commoners. Thus, the printing of manuals to learn French made the usage of Norman borrowings frequent among the people of the Isles.

The French Spelling Convention and the Great Vowel Shift

In roughly 100 years after William, Duke of Normandy, had conquered the Isles, changes

[7] Thomas, p. 107-8
[8] Daniell, p. 13-14
[9] Thomas, p. 109

in the language became quite obvious. The Norman French having taken over the land, were in the optimum position to impose changes in the spelling of *Englisc*, event known as 'The French Spelling Convention'. This did not mean that they could force the *engla-cynn* to utter the words in a French manner. The changes in spelling were made according to the standards of Norman French, which brought about the replacing of 'cw' with 'qu' (*cwēn* vs. queen), 'þ', 'ð' and 'θ' with the cluster 'th' (*mūþ* vs. mouth), long vowels were replaced by double lettering (*gōd* vs. good).[10]

The other major linguistic event of the age began around the 15th century and became finalised roughly in the 18th century and is known as 'The Great Vowel Shift'. Its importance is perhaps greater than the one of the 'French Spelling Convention', since it affected the language at a phonetic level.

The push-me and pull-you chains generated changes in pronunciation that marked According to the image below, the long, high vowels became diphthongs (*mūþ* vs. [mauθ]).[11]

The Great Vowel Shift is the landmark for the development of Middle English into Early Modern. The end of the shift completes the transformation of the language.

Borrowings from Norman French

Two centuries after the Norman Invasion, researchers found that the manuscripts written in Middle English contain a large number of words borrowed from French, around 10,000 out of which roughly 75% are still in use today. David Crystal comprised a list of about 250 of them, pertaining to various domains: administration (*baron, chancellor, council, court, duke, government, majesty, mayor, parliament, peasant, prince, royal, tax, treaty*), religion (*abbey, baptism, cathedral, confess, convent, creator, crucifix, immortality, mercy, miracle, ordain, prayer, religion, solemn, trinity, virgin, virtue*), law (*accuse, adultery, arrest, attorney, bail, convict, crime, decree, evidence, gaol, judge, prison, sue, verdict*), military (*army, battle, captain, combat, defend, enemy, guard, lance, lieutenant, peace, sergeant, soldier*), fashion (*brooch, button, diamond, embroidery, emerald, ornament, pearl, robe*), food and drink (*appetite, bacon, beef, biscuit, date, dinner, feast, fry, mustard, mutton, plate, pork, salad, saucer, tart, toast, veal, venison, vinegar*), learning and art (*art, beauty, geometry, grammar, image, medicine, music, noun, paper, poet, romance, sculpture, story*), general (*action, adventure, age, blue, certain, chair, chess, city, conversation, dance, flower, forest, gay, hour, joy, lamp, leisure, mountain, ocean, pain, people, piece, real, reason, river, special*,)[12].

French has influenced the vocabulary on English to a greater extent than any other language. Since the language gained such a large number of terms, the people were facing a difficult choice: what term to use if the same object or concept could be named in two ways, even three if we consider the almost simultaneous borrowings from Latin. The key to the nowadays highly developed vocabulary of English is that the language chose, on very many occasions, to use all the existing terms. Over time, the various origins ended in a slight difference of meaning or of usage: the Old English word is of a more common use, the French one more literary, while the Latin word is viewed as the learned, bookish variant, even specialised. Thus, the English can use *kingly*, *royal* and *regal* or *rise*, *mount*, and *ascend* to relate to the same basic

[10] Crystal, *The English Language*, ch. 10
[11] Tutschka, p. 5
[12] Crystal, *The English Language*, p. 174-175

idea, but with a great difference in style. Some French words did not preserve their pure, original meaning, but were adapted by the English to refer to a concept related to their existent word, but slightly different. This is the case with *pig* and *pork*, *cow* and *beef*, *calf* and *veal*, *deer* and *venison*, pairs of words in which the latter, of French origins, refers to the meat obtained from the animal of the Old English origin[13].

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[13] Id, 176-177