

The early modern period

The early modern period of English is that which is taken to have begun at the end of the middle period, conventionally set at the year 1476 when printing was introduced by William Caxton. It is also common to regard it as having lasted to about 1800, after which one talks of modern English, although there is no single event, internal or external, which would justify this cut-off point.

The early modern era is characterised by a large influx of words from classical languages, i.e. from Latin and Greek. The flood of Latin loans into English peaked in the period from approximately 1580 to 1660. There is a familiar pattern to the establishment of English in fields of study which were originally the domain of Latin. Firstly one has translations of Latin originals, the works which follow Latin models slavishly and finally those in which English is used as an independent medium. There were many purists in this sphere such as Ralph Lever who in a book on logic published in 1573 suggested such contrived native formations as *endsay* 'conclusion', *witcraft* 'logic', *saywhat* 'definition'. This kind of attempted purist influence on the vocabulary was to re-surface now and again, in the 19th century with the Dorset poet William Barnes for instance.

Latin borrowings with unaltered form: *genius, species, militia, radius, specimen, squalor, apparatus, focus, tedium, lens, antenna*. Adaption of inflectional endings is usually to be found, though in some instances one simply has truncation of the Latin grammatical suffix: *complexus* > *complex*.

Latin	English	
-atus	-ate	<i>desperate</i>
-itas	-ity	<i>continuity</i>
-entia	-ence, -ency	<i>resistance, frequency</i>
-antia	-ance, -ancy	<i>entrance, necromancy</i>

By the end of the 16th century there was a considerable body of opinion criticising the wholesale borrowing of words from Latin. Richard Mulcaster complains of this in 1582, and in *Love's Labour Lost* Holofernes is ridiculed for his overtly Latinate speech.

Rearranging the spelling

Part of the endeavour of conservative scholars to Latinise their English included the use of altered spellings which were supposed to render the Latin original recognisable in the English form. This curious behaviour would hardly be worth commenting on if it had not had a lasting effect on English in some cases. Where an *l* or *c* (both before a further consonant) was re-introduced it came to be pronounced; this did not happen with pre-consonantal *b*. Recall that these consonants had already been lost as part of cluster simplification from Latin to Old French so that they did not exist in the forms borrowed into Middle English originally.

Inserted *b*

<i>doubt</i>	<	ME <i>doute</i>	Latin <i>dubitare</i>
<i>debt</i>	<	ME <i>dette</i>	Latin <i>debitum</i>

Inserted *l* and *c*

<i>fault</i>	<	ME <i>faute</i>	Latin <i>fallitus</i>
<i>assault</i>	<	ME <i>assaut</i>	Latin <i>assaltus</i>
<i>verdict</i>	<	ME <i>verdit</i>	Latin <i>verdictus</i>
<i>perfect</i>	<	ME <i>perfit</i>	Latin <i>perfectus</i>

In some cases the re-spelling had no effect on the pronunciation, e.g. *indict* < ME *indite* Latin *indicare*, *indictus*. In other cases the inserted letter has no etymological justification. An example of this is *admiral* which was ME *ammiral* (a borrowing in French from Arabic *amir al bahr* ‘commander of the sea’) and which may well have gained the spurious *d* through the influence of *admire*.

Spelling pronunciations have a certain tradition in English. In our time one can see it with words like *again* and *often* which are pronounced by many English speakers as /əˈgeɪn/ and /ɒftən/ respectively although the vowel of the first word was previously short /əˈgen/ and in the latter the post-consonantal /t/ had not been present in the spoken form for centuries, /ɒfn/.

False segmentation A quite different phenomenon to what has just been discussed can be seen where sounds of word are truncated or added by speakers who have not grasped their phonological composition correctly. In English such phenomena could involve the addition or deletion of the /n/ of the indefinite article before nouns with an initial vowel or a nasal. For instance, the /n-/ at the beginning of *nickname* is spurious as the input form was *an ekename*, lit. ‘an also-name’. With *apron* and *adder* the opposite is the case: the original /n-/ came to be regarded as part of the article, the input forms were *nap(e)ron* (from French) and *nædder* (from Old English) respectively.

False segmentation also arose by speakers misinterpreting singular for plural forms. For instance the words *cherry* and *pea* derive from French originals which ended in /-s/ compare Modern French *cerise* and *pois* having this deleted from the singular and added in the plural.

The notion of ‘hard words’

During the 16th and 17th centuries there arose a need for new words for the many discoveries and developments in different areas of science. Many authors felt that English was imperfect when compared to the classical languages Latin and Greek and thought that one means of remedying this deficiency would be to borrow new words from these sources. Indeed the general impression that English had decayed considerably continued into the 18th century (and is still to be found nowadays in many quarters). For instance, Jonathan Swift published a *Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* in 1712 because he was of the opinion that the language was deteriorating rapidly. Attitudes like these led straight to the prescriptivist tradition which came to the fore in the 18th century.

Before this time there was pressure which led to a considerable expansion of the vocabulary of English, largely through borrowings from Latin and Greek. Such loans were

not always welcomed by the general literate public and the expressions which were employed to convey putative new meanings were dubbed 'inkhorn terms' and 'hard words'.

The term would appear to have been used for the first time in the title of John Day's glossary *A gatheryng of certayne harde wordes in the newe Testament, with their exposicion* (1551) a translation of a French work in which the reference 'hard words' renders the expression *mots difficiles* contained in the title of the original work.

The rise of the dictionary

Robert Cawdrey's *Table Alphabeticall* (1604) is normally considered to be the earliest of all 'hard word' dictionaries, as it is the first one to mention this term explicitly on its title-page: 'A Table Alphabeticall, conteyning and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usuall English wordes...'. In compiling his dictionary, Cawdrey drew to a large extent on previous Latin-English dictionaries such as Thomas Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (1565) and Thomas Thomas' *Dictionarium Linguae Latinae et Anglicanae* (1587). The aim of the dictionary is clearly indicated in the subtitle to the work: 'for the benefit and helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons'.

John Bullokar's *English Expositor* (1616) quickly followed suit, thus establishing a tradition of hard word dictionaries. In comparison with Cawdrey, Bullokar included more words and provided more detailed explanations of his entries: some of his glosses were expanded into paragraphs or even short articles taking up at times one of the two columns of the pages of his dictionary. Henry Cockeram's *English Dictionarie* (1623) was the next major work in the tradition of hard word dictionaries. In his search for terms to be included in his work Cockeram relied largely on previous hard word and Latin dictionaries, but also added several entries taken from various texts and not yet reported in those types of publications.

Other authors were soon to follow and produced further hard word dictionaries such as Thomas Blount's *Glossographia* (1656). Apart from dedicated dictionaries there are also grammars with hard word lists, stretching back for considerable time, for instance, Edmund Coote's *The English Schoole-Maister* (1596) an early grammar of the English language contains such a list of hard words, which seems to have inspired Cawdrey in the preparation of his dictionary.

General dictionaries before Johnson were produced by a variety of authors who can be seen as forming the background against which Johnson can be truly assessed. Below is a selection of such dictionaries; the last one can be seen as a precursor of Johnson's great dictionary.

Edward Philips *New Word of English Words* (1658)

Edward Cocker *English Dictionary* (1704)

Nathan Bailey *Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (1721; 1727)

Nathan Bailey et al. *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1730)

Dr. Johnson's dictionary

The single towering figure in early lexicography is undoubtedly Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). Johnson responded to the general feeling of his time that an authoritative work of lexicography for English was needed which would set standards of correctness for the language. He was commissioned by a group of London book-sellers to perform the task and in 1755 after some eight or nine years of preparation his *Dictionary of the English Language* appeared and was recognised in his lifetime as a masterpiece of its kind. Johnson had a great respect for literary authority and sought to clarify definitions by quoting from the great English authors who preceded him, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, etc. His stance was conservative but it was oriented towards attested (literary) English rather than trying to propagate some kind of overly Latinate and ornate use of language. It is difficult to quantify his influence but as a figure he is unmatched until Noah Webster (1758-1843) in America and James Murray (1837-1915) in England/Scotland, the initiator of what was to become *The Oxford English Dictionary* (completed in 1933).

There is a tradition of referring to Samuel Johnson as 'Dr. Johnson'. He did not do a doctoral thesis at a university but received a honorary title from Trinity College, Dublin in 1765.

Changes from the 16th century to the present

Backgrounding of morphology A pervasive theme in the development of English is the backgrounding of morphology. By this is meant that the morphology came to play less and less of a role in the indication of grammatical categories. This development was triggered by the attrition of inflections. A consequence of this is that the remaining inflections were partly re-interpreted or re-deployed for semantic purposes. A clear example of this is provided by the present tense -s in many dialects of English (but not in the standard). Here there is frequently a contrast between present tense verb forms without any endings and those with a generalised -s for both numbers and all persons. The semantic distinction is between an unmarked present (no ending) and a narrative present (with the inflectional -s).

She have no time for the children anymore.

They walks out the door and they meets him coming up the drive.

Still other dialects distinguish between an unmarked present and an habitual aspectual present with the s-ending.

The lads works the night-shift in the summer if they can.

The verbal area

Auxiliary verbs

In present-day English the only auxiliary is have. But formerly English had be in this function with verbs expressing motion or change of state, much as does German to this day, e.g. *He is come* for *He has come*; *She is turned back* for *She has turned back*.

The subjunctive mood

Semantically the subjunctive is used to refer to a situation which is uncertain, unreal or conjectural. From the early modern period onwards there was no inflection for the subjunctive so that it is recognisable by a simple verb form without -s (in the third person singular). The verb be has a special form were which is still used in *if*-clauses in modern English: *If it were necessary we would go*.

Unstressed 'do' with lexical verbs

One of the major changes of the later 16th and the 17th centuries concerns the disappearance of unstressed do with full verbs in declarative sentences of the type *I do like poetry* (non-emphatic). This use has been retained for negative, interrogative and emphatic sentences but otherwise it has been lost. There are many views about the mechanics of the change. In general there is agreement that the unstressed *do* was afunctional and dropped out because of its superfluousness. It was retained longest in the west and south-west of England as is evidenced by writers like Shakespeare.

In many forms of English, particularly overseas, the unstressed *do* was re-functionalised, usually to express habitual aspect. In varieties as diverse as Irish English and African American English sentences like *I do be working all the night* have an habitual connotation.

Double negation

The use of two negators was common to heighten the negation. However, with prescriptive notions in the 17th and 18th centuries this came to be frowned upon. The application of an inappropriate form of logic allowed only one negator because two were regarded as neutralising the negation, i.e. they represented a positive statement (*He doesn't know nobody* = *He knows somebody*). The same type of reasoning was used in German and led to the proscription of double negation here as well. However, many dialectal forms of English allow two or more negators, all of which serve to strengthen the negation, as in *He don't take no money from nobody*.

Use of the perfect and the progressive

Throughout the entire early modern period up to the present-day the use of both the perfect tense (with have as auxiliary) and the progressive with the suffix *-ing* in the present became increasingly more common. For instance, the simple past could be used with questions where nowadays only the perfect is permissible, e.g. *Told you him the story?* for *Have you told him the story?*

The perfect in declarative sentences gained more and more what is termed 'relevance' to the present, i.e. it signals an action or state which began in the past and either still continues or is still relevant to the present. *I have been to Hamburg (recently)* but *I was in China (years ago as a child)*.

The progressive is used to express a continuing action. This essential durative character has meant that it is not used with verbs which express a state, hence **I am knowing* is ungrammatical.

Phrasal verbs

One of the consequences of the demise of inflections in English is that the system of verb prefixes also declined. There are only a handful left today, such as *for-* in *forget, forbear*; *with-* in *withstand, withdraw*; *be-* in *beget*. But in the course of the early modern period, English developed a system whereby semantic distinctions and extensions are expressed by the use of prepositions after the verb, often more than one. There may be even verbs which take more than one preposition in such cases. These verbs are termed collectively phrasal verbs. Note that these phrasal verbs frequently correspond to prefixed verbs in German, the number of these in modern English is very limited and prefixation is by no means productive.

<i>put s.o. up</i>	'to offer accomodation'	German: <i>unterbringen</i>
<i>put up with</i>	'to tolerate'	German: <i>ertragen</i>
<i>put off</i>	'to postpone'	German: <i>verschieben</i>
<i>put s.o. off</i>	'to dissuade'	German: <i>von etwas abbringen</i>
<i>put over</i>	'to convey'	German: <i>vermitteln</i>
<i>put on</i>	'to pretend'	German: <i>angeben</i>
<i>put down</i>	'to kill an animal'	German: <i>einschläfern</i>
<i>put through</i>	'to connect'	German: <i>verbinden</i>
<i>put out</i>	'to inconvenience'	German: <i>stören</i>
<i>put in</i>	'to apply for'	German: <i>sich bewerben</i>

Use of prepositions as full verbs

This is in keeping with the typological profile of English which functionalised prepositions to indicate sentence relationships.

to up the prices; to down a few beers; to round the cliff

Back formation

This is a process whereby a verb is derived from a noun, the reverse of the normal situation in English. The reason is nearly always because the noun appeared first in the language, usually through borrowing.

<i>to opt</i>	<	<i>option</i>	<i>to edit</i>	<	<i>editor</i>
<i>to enthuse</i>	<	<i>enthusiasm</i>	<i>to peddle</i>	<	<i>peddler</i>

Contracted forms in the history of English

Spoken English has always shown contracted forms of auxiliary verbs with particles indicating negation or with pronouns found in verb phrases. In the Old English period these forms were written in the standard koiné, e.g. *nis* 'not is' *nolde* 'not wanted'.

In Modern English there is a precarious balance between contracted and full forms which is maintained by the force of the standard, particularly in the orthography. Hence one has forms like *won't*, *can't*, *don't* but also the full forms *will not*, *can not*, *do not*, used above all in writing. Indeed in colloquial registers there can be even greater reduction as with *I dunno* [dʌnou] for 'I do not know'. The restraining influence of the standard has meant, however, that such forms have not ousted the longer forms in the orthography.

The nominal area

Maximising distinctions

The demise in English morphology which one observes in the history of the language should not be interpreted as an abandonment of grammatical distinctions. Quite the opposite is the case. The introduction of northern, originally Scandinavian forms *they*, *their*, *them* (to replace OE *hi*, *hir*, *hem*) and the development and acceptance of *she* (from OE *heo*) as a distinct form from *he* documents the maximisation of distinctions, although many redundant inflections, such as verbal suffixes, were dropped. In this connection one should mention the rise of *its* as the possessive form of *it* in the early 17th century. Previously the form was *his* but this was homophonous with the form for the third person singular masculine so the change was semantically motivated.

Deictic terms

There is just a two-way system in Modern English, but formerly a three-way system with a term for distant reference, *yon(der)* of uncertain etymology existed and is still found, in Scottish English for instance.

this (close at hand) *that* (over there) *yon(der)* (in the distance)

Relative pronouns

In modern English there is an exclusive use of *which* and *who*, whereby the latter refers to inanimate things and the latter to animate beings. Up to early modern English, however *which* could be used for persons as well and dialectally this is still found in English today: *The nurse which gave him the injection*. Similarly, *that* is generally employed with defining relative clauses today as in *The car that was stolen turned up again*. However, earlier *that* was common in non-defining relative clauses as well, e.g. *The girl, that (who) did her exam in sociology, left London for good*.

Reflexive pronouns

English, like German, frequently used an oblique case form of the personal pronoun with reflexive verbs; the ending *-self* was found only in cases of emphasis. But later the

emphatic element became obligatory in all reflexive uses, so that a sentence like *I washed me quickly* came to be expressed as *I washed myself quickly*. The reflexive pronoun is used in emphatic contexts as well, e.g. *The dean himself wrote the letter* (contrast this with German *selbst/selber* vs. *sich*).

Zero subjects

A characteristic of Modern English is that it does not require a relative pronoun when the reference is an object in the main clause, e.g. *This is the man she saw yesterday*. In early modern English it was common for this to apply in cases with a subject as main clause referent and this is still typical of popular London English (Cockney): *This is the man Ø went to town yesterday*. It may well have been that the latter type was tabooed because it was present in popular London and not because of perceptual strategies; there is no great difficulty in processing the second rather than the first of the following sentences.

The woman Ø he knows has come.

The woman Ø lives here has come.

The prescriptive tradition

The uncertainties of the 16th and 17th century about the suitability of English as a language of science and learning led to quite massive borrowing from classical languages. It also engendered a frame of mind where people thought English was deficient and this in its turn gave rise to many musings in print about just what constitutes correct English. With this one has the birth of the prescriptive tradition which has lasted to this very day. Much of this was well-meaning: scholars of the time misunderstood the nature of language variation and sought to bring order into what they saw as chaos. Frequently this merged with the view that regional varieties of English were only deserving of contempt, a view found with many eminent writers such as Jonathan Swift who was quite conservative in his linguistic opinions. The basic difficulty which the present-day linguist sees in the prescriptive recommendations of such authors is that they are entirely arbitrary. There is no justification for the likes and dislikes of prescriptive authors. These writers are self-appointed guardians and defenders of what they regard as good style. They established a tradition which was to have considerable influence in English society and was continued in a remorseless fashion by such authors as Henry Watson Fowler (1858-1933) who attempted to prescribe certain structures and to halt what they saw as the decline in the English language.

The tradition of grammar writing goes back at least to the 17th century in England. The playwright Ben Jonson was the author of a grammar and John Wallis published an influential *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae* in 1653. This led to a series of works offering guidelines for what was then deemed correct English. The next century saw more grammars in this vein such as Joseph Priestley's *The rudiments of English grammar* (1761). But the pinnacle of prescriptive frenzy was reached by Bishop Robert Lowth (1710-1787) who published his *Short introduction to English grammar* in 1762. This work was influential in school education and enjoyed several editions and reprints. It is responsible for a whole series of do's and don'ts in English such as using whom as the direct object form of who or not ending a sentence with a preposition as in *The woman he shared a room with*. Lowth also formulated a rule for *shall* and *will* for the future tense in English which has been

reiterated up to ten times since but which is however non-existent for many speakers (the reduced form 'll [l] is normal and the full form *will* [wil] is used for emphasis while *shall* is completely neglected). Other influential authors in this vein are Lindley Murray (1745-1826) who produced an *English grammar* in 1794 and William Cobbett whose *English grammar* appeared in 1829.

These authors are responsible for perennial issues in English prescriptive grammar. Apart from the disapproval of prepositional final sentences mentioned above one has the prohibition on the split infinitive, as in *to angrily reply* to a question. These are senseless proscriptions which derive from the entirely subjective opinions of non-linguists. The list with time grew longer and longer and today includes many elements which stem from current changes in English, for instance the indecisiveness about the preposition with the adjective *different* (*from*, *as* or *to* depending on your personal inclinations) and the condemnation of *less* for *fewer* with plural nouns as in prescribed *He has fewer books than she has* rather than *He has less books than she has*. Another instance is the demand for *I* as first person pronoun. English usage today is that *I* only occurs in immediately pre-verbal position; in all other instances *me* occurs:

I came but It's me. Who's there? Me.

The prescriptivists insist absurdly that *I* be used on such occasions and even ask for it in phrases like *between you and me*, i.e. *between you and I* where it never occurred anyway as here the pronoun is in an oblique case whose form was never *I*.

Elocution

Apart from prescriptive grammar there was another favourite linguistic pastime in the 18th century and later: teaching regional speakers of English correct pronunciation, what is called *elocution*. This was widespread on the fringe of the British Isles, in those regions where the 'enlightened' felt there was particular need for remedial activity on their part. For instance the Englishman John Walker produced a *Pronouncing Dictionary of English* in 1774. The Irishman Thomas Sheridan the father of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan was also active in this field and in 1781 published a *Rhetorical Grammar of the English Language* with an appendix in which he attempted to rid Dublin English of its idiosyncrasies of pronunciation and bring it into line with southern mainland English. Like Walker, Sheridan travelled on his linguistic mission of improving the language of the regional speakers. Despite such benign, well-meant but ultimately misguided efforts, English has retained its regional varieties and the behaviour of the masses has not been affected by the notions of the proscribing few.