An exploration of two manuscripts written between AD 900 and AD 1299 as exemplars of Old and Middle English

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Abstract

This article examines the change in the English language that occurs between the Old and Middle English periods. It looks at an extract of Cædmon's Story taken from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* from the Old English period, and the opening 12 lines of *The Owl and the Nightingale* taken from MS. Cotton Caligula A. ix from the Middle English period. This article first briefly explores some of the background events that influenced the Old and Middle English periods. Secondly, the linguistic features of the texts are explored and compared to one another in order to chart the changes that have occurred between the two periods.

Background to the English language

The aim of this article is to explore the changes that occurred in the vocabulary and grammar of the English language between the Old and Middle English periods. The different periods of the English language are difficult to define, as changes to the language did not occur instantaneously with the events that caused these changes. For the purpose of this article, I define the Old English period as being between AD 450 – 1100, and the Middle English period as being between AD 1100 – 1500. This is based on Graddol (1996), and Brinton and Arnovick's (2006) definitions as shown below:

(1) Early Old English (450 – c. 850)
(2) Later Old English (c. 850 – 1100)
(3) Middle English (c. 1100 – 1450)
    (Graddol, *et al.* (eds.) 1996, p.41).

(1) Old English (c. 450 – 1100)
(2) Middle English (1066 – 1500)
    (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, pp.9 – 10).

The Old English extract I use is taken from Cædmon's Story, which was written by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The main influence on the development of the language during the Old English period was the invasion of the West Germanic tribes in the fifth century, who brought with them their native dialects. Overall, they had a great effect on Modern English, and it is estimated that 83% of the 1000 most regularly used words today have their origins in Old English (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.166). Towards the end of this period, the Vikings also invaded Britain. As the West Germanic Tribes continued to make up the majority of the

population, Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, became assimilated into Old English, although some features did not begin to appear until the early 12th century (Crystal 1995, p.25).

The second extract is taken from *The Owl and the Nightingale*, which was written during the Middle English period. The Norman Conquest of AD 1066 was the major influence on the language during this time. The Normans introduced Norman French to England, although it is estimated that 90 – 98% of the population continued speaking English (Stockwell and Minkova 2001, p.35). Overall, approximately 10,000 words entered the language from Norman French (Bragg 2003, p.37), and it is estimated that 75% of these are still in use (Baugh and Cable 2002, p.178). As will be explored in the following pages, the language changes to such an extent that according to Crystal, Middle English becomes "familiar" to the modern reader (Crystal 2004: 105).

I chose these two texts, as Cædmon's Story is from later in the Old English period. This ensured that the language used in this text had became more established than a text written in AD 500 and would begin to include some influences from Old Norse. However, The Owl and the Nightingale was written in the early/mid Middle English period. This meant that by this time Norman French had started to influence the language. As the boundaries between language periods are difficult to define, this also ensures that few features of Early Modern English, AD 1500 – 1700 (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, pp.9–10), would be present in this text.

Background to the texts

Text one: Cædmon's Story from Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Bede

Cædmon's Story tells the story of a cowherd named Cædmon who lived at Whitby Abbey (North and Allard (eds.) 2007, p.189). Bede tells that Cædmon had never learnt how to compose poetry but one night after leaving a feast before he was asked to sing, he had a dream and thereafter was able to sing and compose verses praising God (Bede 1990, pp.248 – 249). The poem Cædmon created in his dream is now known as Cædmon's Hymn, and as these events are estimated to have taken place between AD 657 – 680, and because his work has survived, Cædmon is considered as the "first named English poet" (North and Allard (eds.) 2007, pp.189 – 190).

Bede was born in AD 673 and was placed in the monastery at Wearmouth aged seven in order to receive an education. He later moved to the monastery at Jarrow where he stayed until his death in AD 735 (Farmer in Bede 1990, pp.19 – 20; 22). There is little information about Bede's life, but he wrote over 30 books in Latin, although he also believed that English should be used (Bragg 2003, p.12). *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was finished in AD 731 and has become his best-known piece of work. It is from this that much of the history of Britain and the coming of Christianity is known (Bede's World 2003). In the ninth century, King Alfred ordered *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* to be translated into Old English (Crystal 2004, p.17). The extract used is from a translation written between AD 900 – 950 (Mielniczuk 2004).

Text two: The Owl and the Nightingale

The Owl and the Nightingale is a poem of 1794 lines (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1996, p.81) that tells of a debate between two birds: an owl and a nightingale (Stone 1971, p.155). The poem describes the birds' argument and at the end they fly off to receive judgement from Nicholas of Guildford (Stone 1971, p.155), which also leaves the reader to form their own opinion as the debate is not resolved (Treharne 2004, p.370).

The author of the poem is unknown, although scholars have tried to guess (Wells (ed.) 1907, pp.xxv – xxvi). Many scholars believe that it was written by Nicholas of Guildford (Cartlidge, ed. 2001, p.xiv) as the birds fly off to receive his judgement. However, Wells (1907) says the majority disagree (Wells (ed.) 1907, p.xxvi). This is because the poem starts in the first person, as the author is present at the debate. As at the end of the poem they fly off to see Nicholas, it is unlikely that he is the author, as he probably would not begin to write about himself in the third person (Wells (ed.) 1907, p.xxvi).

The composition date of the poem is unknown. As King Henri is mentioned, many scholars believe this to be King Henri II who died in AD 1189 and therefore puts the composition date at between AD 1189 and 1216 (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1996, p.81). However, Cartlidge (2001) believes that this may actually be later with the possibility of it being composed after AD 1272 and the death of King Henri III (Cartlidge 2001, p.xv).

Extract from text one

(1) Wæs he se mon in weoruldhade geseted oð þa tide þe he
    Was he the man in secular life settled until the time that he

(2) wæs gelyfdre ylde, ond he næfre nænig leoð geleornode. Ond he
    was of-advanced age, and he never any poem learned. And he

(3) for þon oft in gebeorscipe, þonne þær wæs blisse intinga
    therefore often at banquet, when there was of-joy occasion

(4) gedemed, þæt heo ealle sceolden þurh endebyrdnesse be hearpan
    decided, that they all should by arrangement with harp

(5) singan. Þonne he geseah þa hearpan him nealecan, þonne aras he
    to sing. When he saw the harp him approach, then arose he

(6) for scome from þæm symble ond ham eode to his huse. Þa he
    for shame from the feast and home went to his house. When he

(7) þæt þa sumre tide dyde, þæt he forlet þæt hus þæs
    that a certain time did, that he left the house of the

(8) gebeorscipes, ond ut wæs gongende to neata scipene,
    banquet, and out was going to of-cattle stall

(9) þara heord him wæs þære neahte beboden, þa he ða þær
    of which keeping him was that night entrusted, when he there

(10) in gelimplice tide his leomu on reste gesette ond onslepte,
    at suitable time his limbs at rest set and fell asleep,

(11) þa stod him sum mon æt þurh swefn ond hine halette
    then stood him a certain man beside in dreams, and him hailed

(12) ond grette ond hine be his noman nemnde: 'Cedmon, sing me
    and greeted, and him by his name called 'Cædmon, sing me

(13) hwæthwugu.' Þa ondswarede he, and cwæð: 'Ne con Ic noht
    something.' Then answered he, and said: 'Not can I nothing

(14) singan; ond Ic for þon of   þeossum gebeorscipe ut eode, ond hider
      sing;   and I for that from this   banquet   out went and hither
(15) gewat, for þon Ic naht   singan   ne cuðe.'
      came, because I nothing to sing   not knew how.'

Source: Oxford Bodleian Library, Tanner 10 (extract taken from Treharne 2004, pp.4 – 6, translation taken from Crystal 1995, p.20).

Extract from text two

(1) Ich was in one sumere   dale,
    I   was in a   summer valley,
(2) In one suþe diȝele   hale:
    In a   very   hidden corner
(3) Iherde ich holde grete   tale
    Heard I   held   great tale
(4) An hule and one niȝtingale.
    An owl and a   nightingale.
(5) Þat   plait was stif &   starc & strong,
    That plea was stiff and firm and strong,
(6) Sumwile softe &   lud among;
    Formerly soft   and loud among;
(7) An aiþer aȝen   oþer sval,
    An either against   other swell,
(8) &   let þat vole mod   ut al;
    and let that evil mood out all;
(9) &   eiþer seide of oþeres custe
    and either side of other's character
(10) Þat   alre worste þat hi   wuste;
     That all   worst   that they knew;
(11) &   hure & hure of oþeres   songe,
     and at intervals of other's song,
(12) Hi   holde plaiding suþe stronge.
     They held   pleading very strong.

Source: British Library, London, MS Cotton Caligula A. ix (extract taken from Cartlidge 2001, p.2, translation by the Author after Mayhew and Skeat 2005; McSparran (ed.) 2001).

Linguistic analysis of the texts

Vocabulary

Old English words appear very different from Modern English. It is estimated that over 80% of Old English vocabulary has been replaced (Stockwell and Minkova 2001, p.46); however, 76% of the most common 100 Old English words are still in use in Modern English (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.165). Although many words appear unfamiliar in extract one, some are recognisable. In lines five and 15, the

word 'singan' is the Old English origin for the Modern English word 'sing' (Harper 2010). 'Ondswarede' in line 13 means 'answered', and although the spelling of the word has changed, there is similarity between the two (Crystal 1995, p.22). However, many of these words are now obsolete. In line nine, the word 'beboden' translates into Modern English as 'entrusted', however 'beboden' is a form of the word 'bebéodan' (Old English Made Easy 2008) and is now obsolete (Crystal 1995, p.22).

In extract two, many words are becoming more familiar to Modern English making the piece easier to read than extract one. In line ten, the word 'worste', which translates as 'worst', appears and is identical to Modern English with the exception of the final 'e'. Also, in line one the word 'sumere' translates as 'summer' and the two appear very similar. However, some words are now obsolete. In line two, the word 'diʒele' translates as 'hidden', but this word is no longer in use (Freeborn 1998, p.125). This is also seen with 'hale' in the same line, which translates as 'corner' (Freeborn 1998, p.125). In line five there is evidence of alliteration with 'stif & starc & strong', which translates as 'stiff and firm and strong'. Alliteration was widely used in poetry in order for oral poems to be remembered easily. The same is true of rhyming (Crystal 2004, p.93), which is seen through the use of rhyming couplets in extract two such as 'custe' and 'wuste' from lines nine and ten. The use of rhyming couplets in poetry and eight-syllable lines originates from the French (Bragg 2003, p.49). However, in extract two there is only one French word, which is 'plait', meaning 'plea', in line five (Graddol, *et al.* (eds.) 2007, p.68). 'Plea' is a legal word and these entered the language first from French (Bragg 2003, p.37).

The alphabet of Old English was also different to Modern English. The Roman alphabet was introduced by the Irish missionaries and contained 24 letters (Bragg 2003, pp.11 – 12), some of which were influenced by the runic alphabet (Crystal 1995, pp.16 – 17). The word 'wæs' in line one of extract one contains the letter 'æ' known as an 'ash' (Smith 1999, p.47) and this was eventually replaced by 'a' prior to the end of the 13th century (Freeborn 1998, p.25). Other symbols no longer in use are the 'thorn' written as 'þ' and 'eth', written as 'ð' (Smith 1999, p.47). These are seen in line four with the word 'þæt', and line one with 'oð'. The 'thorn' is from the runic alphabet of the West Germanic tribes (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.154), whilst the 'eth' is taken from Irish writing (Freeborn 1998, p.24). Both letters represents the 'th' sound (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.154) and they were often used interchangeably (Smith 1999, p.47). The 'eth' stopped being used by approximately AD 1300 (Freeborn 1998, p.25), whilst the 'thorn' was eventually replaced with 'th' during the 15th century (Freeborn 1998, p.25).

In extract two, the letters begin to resemble the Modern English alphabet. In this extract the 'eth' (ð) and 'ash' (æ) are not used, although the thorn (þ) is still in use as seen in the word 'oþer' in line seven, which translates as 'other'. Both the 'eth' and 'ash' were obsolete by the end of the 13th century (Freeborn 1998, p.25) and this may explain why they are not used in the text. However, other letters are still in use. The word 'niʒtingale' in line four contains the letter 'ʒ' known as a 'yogh' (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.154), which represented the 'g' and 'j' sounds (Crystal 1995, p.16).

Another letter in use is 'ρ', known as a 'wynn' from the runic alphabet (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.154). The 'wynn' represented the 'w' sound, and prior to its introduction either a 'u' or 'uu' was used (Freeborn 1998, p.24). The Normans started replacing the 'wynn' with a 'w' in the 11th century (Crystal 1995, p.264), although it is still used throughout this manuscript, which was written in the 13th century. In

extract two, the 'wynn' has been modified from the original manuscript. An example of this is seen in line one where the word 'was' is originally spelt with a 'wynn' (ƿ). Additionally, in much of the poem a '&' is used, whereas in the original manuscript '7' is used, which means 'and' (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.154).

Old English at first may appear very unlike Modern English due to the spelling. However, by changing the obsolete letters into their modern forms, it is easier to perceive some words as Modern English (Graddol, *et al.* (eds.) 1996, p.112). This is seen with the word 'þæt' in line seven of extract one, which when changed becomes 'that'. Although it is not known how Old English sounded, it is likely that the spelling of words was related to their pronunciation (Singh 2005, p.76). The spelling in Old English was not regular and varied according to the preference of the scribe and their dialect (Crystal 1995, p.17).

The influence of the Norman scribes can be seen in extract two. The Normans changed words spelt with a 'u' into 'ou' (Culpeper and Archer 2009, p.251) but this has not occurred by the time this text was written. In line eight, the word 'out' is still spelt as 'ut'. This spelling is unchanged since Old English and is also found in line eight of the extract from Cædmon's Story. However, other spellings have changed from the earlier period. In line four of Cædmon's Story, the word 'ealle', which means 'all', is spelt differently to 'al' in line eight of The Owl and the Nightingale; although there still appears to be no set spelling as it is also spelt as 'alre' in line ten of the same extract. Another influence of the Norman's scribes was to drop the initial 'h' prior to consonants (Crystal 1995, p.42). The Old English word for 'loud' was 'hlud' (Old English Made Easy 2008). In extract two, line six the 'h' has been dropped giving 'lud'. The influence of the Normans would later change the 'u' to 'ou' giving the Modern English 'loud'.

As stated above, the dialect of the scribes also influenced their spelling. Altogether, there are four recognised Old English dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon (Crystal 1995, p.29). The majority of Old English texts are written in the West Saxon dialect (Baker 2003, p.10) including the above extract from Cædmon's Story (Treharne 2004, p.1). Overall, dialect had the major effect on spelling as words were spelt differently according to the region and pronunciation which led to no uniform system throughout England (Graddol, *et al.* (eds.) 1996, p.72). In line 13 of extract one there is the word 'cwæð', which later developed into 'quoth' (Old English Made Easy 2008) and in Modern English means 'said'. However, in the *Lindisfarne Glosses*, written in the Northumbrian dialect in approximately AD 950 (van Gelderen 2006, p.48) this word is spelt differently as 'cueð' (van Gelderen 2006, p.59). Another example of this spelling variance is found in the Rushworth Glosses, written circa AD 970 in the Mercian dialect (van Gelderen 2006, p.48), where 'cweþ' is used (van Gelderen 2006, p.59).

By the Middle English period, dialects are still largely based on the same areas as Old English but there are now five (Brook 1965, p.60), which are Northern, East Midland, West Midland, Southern and Kentish (Crystal 1995, p.50). The dialect used in extract two is Southern (Crystal 1995, p.36), which used the '-ing' suffix to express the continuous while '-and' was used in the Northern dialect (Crystal 1995, p.50). In line 12 the word 'plaiding' translates as 'pleading' and uses the '-ing' participle. Additionally, the Southern dialect used the third person pronoun 'hi', seen at the beginning of line 12) whereas the Northern and Midland dialects used 'they' (van Gelderen 2006, p.135).

Grammar

The word order of Old English also varies from Modern English. Today English is a subject-verb-object (SVO) language, but in Old English, there is evidence of subject-object-verb (SOV) (Graddol *et al.* (eds.) 1996, p.115). An example of this is found in line two of extract one as 'he næfre nænig leoð geleornode', which translates directly as 'he never any poem learned' (Crystal 1995, p.20), showing a clear SOV structure. This is not the only word order found in Old English. In lines five and six of the same extract, the clause 'þonne aras he for scome' translates as 'then arose he for shame' (Crystal 1995, p.20). This shows a verb-subject order and is often found when adverbials introduce a main clause (Singh 2005, p.88).

In text two, *The Owl and the Nightingale* shows a subject-verb (SV) word order. An example of this can be seen in line one with 'ich was in one sumere dale'. This translates directly as 'I was in a summer valley' which clearly shows the subject before the verb. However, as this extract progresses, the word order becomes more irregular and constructions such as 'Iherde ich holde grete tale' in line three, which translates directly as 'heard I held great tale', are used. This is because this extract is taken from a poem, therefore the need to keep the rhyming means that the word order is manipulated (Graddol *et al,* (eds.) 1996, p.124).

Old English was able to have more freedom with word order due to the inflections in the language, which carried the meaning (Bragg 2003, p.24). Although Modern English uses inflections, Old English inflections were more complex as there were many different forms depending on case, number, person and gender (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.183). In Modern English, personal pronouns are still affected by these same things but there are less forms and the main difference concerns number. Modern English only differentiates between singular and plural (Crystal 1995, p.210) whereas Old English used to have dual forms to refer to two people (Crystal 1995, p.21) when speaking in the first or second person (Smith 1999, p.72). Some forms of the third person singular pronouns are similar to Modern English. This can be seen with the personal pronoun 'his'. In line one of extract one, 'he' is used as the subject of the first clause, the same as today. However, in line 12 the form has changed to 'hine' as Cædmon has become the direct object. In Modern English, 'him' would be used (Graddol *et al,* (eds.) 1996, p.117).

During the Middle English period, personal pronouns still varied according to case, number, gender and person, but changes had occurred to this system (Singh 2005, p.119). The main changes include the loss of the dual forms, the combining of the dative and accusative known as the objective, and the introduction of Scandinavian third person plural pronouns (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, pp.274 – 275). The different dialects of Middle English resulted in different personal pronoun forms being used throughout the different regions (Singh 2005, p.119). In *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the third person plural pronoun forms are not yet fully developed as the Old English forms are still being used. This can be seen in line 12 of extract two as the word 'hi' translates as 'they'. These Old English personal pronoun forms were used in the Southern dialect throughout the Middle English period. However, by the end of this period the Scandinavian forms of 'they', 'their' and 'them' were being used throughout the country (Crystal 1995, p.50).

Verbs in Old English are usually divided into strong or weak depending on how they formed the past participle or preterites (Singh 2005, pp.85 – 86). Weak verbs would generally add a dental suffix with the past participle also adding a 'ge-' prefix

(Brinton and Arnovick 2006, pp.207 – 208). This is seen with the word 'geleornode' from extract one line two, meaning 'learned', which adds the dental suffix '-od'.

By the Middle English period, verbs are largely unchanged as they are still divided into strong and weak forms, which inflect in similar ways with a few exceptions. (Singh 2005, p.121). Weak verbs still add a dental suffix, but they have lost the 'ge-' prefix on the past participle. Instead, they use a 'y-' or 'i-' prefix (Singh 2005, p.122). An example of this is seen in extract two, line three with the word 'iherde' meaning 'heard'.

Adjectives in Old English inflected according to the number, case and gender of the noun they modified. Weak forms are used when determiners precede the adjective, and strong forms are used at all other times (Smith 1999, pp.53 – 54). Strong adjectives in the Old English period used eight different inflections (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.189). However, during the Middle English period, many of these inflections were lost (Baugh and Cable 2002, p.160). The change in inflections went through two phases, one in early Middle English, and another in late Middle English (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.269). The first change resulted in there only being four inflections on strong adjectives (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.269). An example of this can be seen with the plural nominative and accusative cases. In Old English, where the masculine, neuter and feminine of these cases used the inflections 'e', 'u' and 'a' respectively, only the 'e' was used for all genders by the early Middle English period. By the end of the Middle English period these inflections changed again as they were no longer marked by case or gender. As a result the only inflection used was the '-e' for both strong and weak plural adjectives (Brinton and Arnovick 2006, p.269).

Discussion

By comparing the two extracts, some of the changes that have occurred between the Old and Middle English periods can be instantly recognised. This is because words are instantly recognisable and there have been many changes over this 400 year period. Towards the end of the Old English period, it is estimated that there were over 50,000 words in the English language (Crystal 2004, p.162). Following the Norman Conquest over 80% of these words were replaced (Stockwell and Minkova 2001, p.46) with 10,000 new words from Norman French. It is estimated that 75% of these are still used today (Baugh and Cable 2002, p.178). The vocabulary of these two extracts has changed greatly in this short time period. In The Owl and the Nightingale, the alphabet has dramatically changed from Cædmon's Story and many words become familiar when changed to the modern alphabet. Spelling is also starting to change, although it is still not regular.

The grammar of these extracts also clearly shows the language becoming modernised. In *The Owl and the Nightingale* the word order has became more regularised and pronouns are now used more often to compensate for the loss of inflections. The loss of many inflections in both verbs and adjectives sees the language becoming more modern and identifiable with Modern English.

Overall, many changes have occurred throughout this period as seen through the exploration of these extracts. Analysis of the Old English reveals that it is not as irregular as it may first appear, and there are rules and there is consistency, particularly in relation to its grammar. However, these rules are not found in Modern English and it is the lack of understanding that makes it appear difficult to modern

readers. The Middle English text begins to use Modern English constructions and as we are already familiar with these, the text becomes recognisable, despite the irregularities that are still occurring.

Following the Norman Conquest the language appeared to change dramatically, although in many cases this did not become immediately apparent. However, while Norman French had an effect on the language, it would be wrong to say that all these changes occurred due to the Normans. The loss of inflectional endings had already started during the late Old English period (Singh 2005, pp.103 – 104) and instead much of what we see above is due to natural language change. If the Normans had not invaded England then many of these changes would still have happened, although English would not have the rich vocabulary it later acquired.

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