

Give an overview of the main Middle English dialects

The English language is spoken by around 300 million as their first language and a further 400 million speak it as a second (Fennell 2006:31). It is a language that has as many dialects as the number of countries that speak it. In the United Kingdom alone there are ten distinct areas that have their own dialect (Boeree: 2004) from the Southern Cockney to the Northern Geordie. But for a language that is only 1,500 years old, which is relatively recent considering the earliest found Mesopotamian writing has been dated at 3250BCE (almost 5,000 years old) (Fennell 2006:15), has the English language always had different dialects? Admittedly Standard English did not effectively come into play until the end of the Middle English period (around 1500AD) (Crystal 2005:195). But what of before that? Crystal (*ibid.*) states that it is very difficult to clarify a dialectal variation in Old English as most parts of the country have no surviving manuscripts, and there is a certain ambiguity connected to those that did survive as to where they originated as well as by whom they were written. However, during the Middle English time frame (c.1100-1500) there has been enough material unearthed and analysed to successfully piece together a picture of what the country's dialect dispersion may have been like. That is why this essay will concentrate on outlining the different Middle English dialects whilst trying to explain the differences between them.

The general consensus amongst scholars (Crystal 2005:201, Baugh & Cable 2003:191, Fennell 2001:109, Corrie 2008:93 and Singh 2005:113) is that there were five different major dialectal areas, these being Northern, East and West Midland, South-Western (Southern) and South-Eastern (Kentish). Evidence for these different dialects comes from the words, grammar and spelling found in manuscripts. For example the *-ing* suffix (swimming) is written as *-and(e)* in the Northern dialect and as *-end(e)* in parts of the East Midlands. It was written as *-ind(e)* in the West Midlands and *-ing* in the South (including the Kentish region). Other evidence is shown in the words *they*, *their*, and *them*, they were written as this in the North and West Midland dialects, whilst the southern dialects wrote them as *hi*, *here*, and *hem* (Crystal 1990:185). Even modern day words show their Middle English roots, such as *fox* (the *f* shows it is a Northern/Midland word) and the *v* in *vixen* (typically Southern). One would expect *vixen* to be written as *fixen* if it were the northern equivalent (*ibid.*). Because there was no standard of language writers were free to write in the dialect of their part of the country, and it is through this literature that these dialects have been discovered.

That is not to say, however, that they were not aware of this diversity. Baugh and Cable (2003:188) state that in the twelfth century Giraldus Cambrensis comments that the language used in the south of England, particularly in Devonshire, was "more archaic and seemed less agreeable" than what he was used to. Even around the beginning of the fourteenth century the differences were highlighted in the literature. The author of the poem *Cursor Munoli*, written somewhere in the North, writes about wanting to incorporate a piece of writing he had found into his own work, however it was written in Southern English, his solution was to translate it "into our own language for northern folk who can read no other English" (Crystal 2005:207). Crystal goes on to say that the seriousness of comments such as the above have to be questioned as there may have been a slight tendency to overemphasize the difference. Corrie (2008:91) points out that these linguistic differences across dialectal borders could have affected contact between the people of the regions and therefore possibly greatly slowing the spread of linguistic features whilst at the same time entrenching any differences. This could be one of the major reasons as to why a standard did not emerge for nearly three centuries. But language within the dialectal areas did change internally over the Middle English period, for example not only would a text written in the south differ from one written in the West Midlands but a West Midland text written in 1200 would differ greatly from one written two hundred years later in 1400. It is here that complications have arisen when trying to distinguish the regional from the chronological (Crystal 2005:198).

During the Old English period the Kentish (South-Eastern) dialect boundary encompassed the

entire southeastern part of England, including London. However, during the Middle English period its area of linguistic influence steadily decreased due to the intrusion of the East Midland dialect until it had lost London. By the end of the Middle English period Kentish had been confined to Kent and Sussex only, and once the London dialect had begun to take over in the Early Modern period Kentish died out leaving behind no descendant (University of Philadelphia 2011). Nevertheless, this dialect is amongst one of the most interesting from a linguistic point of view as it shows a distinctive innovative style and has exercised a permanent influence on the English language which was incorporated into the work of Middle English writers, such as Chaucer, until eventually becoming a part of Standard English (Crystal 2005:37). Another interesting aspect of the Kentish dialect is that even as late as 1340 there is evidence to show that its syntax is virtually identical with the syntax of its Old English counterpart (University of Philadelphia 2011).

To the west of the Kentish border lay the dialectal realm known as Southern. It was spoken in an area that encompassed the current counties of Cornwall to Gloucestershire. During the Old English period the south was the centre of the Anglo-Saxon court dialect, making the Middle English dialect the direct descendent of the West Saxon dialect. It is a vernacular that shows very little influence from other languages, which explains why it differed so much from the northern dialects (*ibid.*).

North of the previous two dialects lay the Midlands. Originally both part of the Old English Mercian dialectal kingdom the two had split apart from each other during the Middle English period with the line of division roughly following along the southern Pennine Mountains and the Cotswald Hills. A theory as to why this split occurred, and also a possible explanation to the disappearance of the Old English West Saxon Standard, is presented by Crystal (2005:195). The counties that are contained within the West Midland dialect were relatively isolated in a geographical sense from the rest of England, and due to the fact that they are located on the Welsh border they would have almost certainly be subject to different social, political and military influences. Another factor would have been that many Anglo-Saxon lords had fled there to avoid, and distance themselves, from invasions led by the Normans. Scholars have theorized (although Crystal does not state which scholars) that this dialect could be described as being a 'local standard', but Crystal argues that it takes more than two manuscripts (the *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Life of Saint Katherine*) to "justify calling a dialect a 'standard.'" The East Midland dialect is perhaps the most important as it covered the largest area thus making it the most influential. The northern part of the East Midland area saw a large influx of Scandinavian settlement during the Middle English time, which led to a rapid development similar to that of the Northern dialect (University of Philadelphia 2011). This Scandinavian influence gradually filtered south down the country and by the thirteenth century had become the most prosperous part of England (particularly Norfolk and Suffolk). This was partly due to the superiority of their agricultural skills but also because a large number of influential East-Midland speakers had begun to shift to London, taking their dialect with them, ultimately wresting it from the Kentish dialect. It was this East-Midland dialect that eventually became the originator of the Modern English standard (*ibid.*).

Similarly to the East-Midland dialectal area, the Northern vernacular evolved rapidly due to Scandinavian influences, with Old Norse words such as *knife*, *give*, and *call* present in English by 1200 (Crystal 2005:208). By 1300, and inversely to the southern dialects, the syntax and verb and noun system had been totally changed, making it a lot more like Modern English. The change, or simplification, in syntax was due to the ways in which the Normans assimilated themselves into the country. During the first half of the tenth century the Scandinavian settlers were obliged to learn Old English, however certain settlements had been so displaced that the Scandinavians were unable to learn a competent form of Old English, due to a lack of contact with native speakers. This caused a lot of Norse words to be carried over into English (University of Philadelphia 2011). These Scandinavian words had not traveled south and so the southern and northern dialects were now worlds apart. For example someone from the south would say *nimen* and someone from the north would say *taken* for the modern word *take* (Crystal 2005:208).

The boundaries between these five dialects must not be taken as being solid linguistic

boundaries. Even though as stated above the dialect differences may have impeded development across borders there would still have been slight influences and borders could move somewhat. The same can be said within the dialectal areas as well. The word *church* is a prime example, in the north was written as *kirk* or *kirke*, the west spelt it as *cherch* or *chirche*, the east *churche* and the south *cherche*. These are just generalizations as when manuscripts from the Middle English period are studied in more detail it appears that within the East-Midland (in current East Anglia) dialect there are seven different spellings of *church* that show signs of being from all over the country and from all of the major dialects except for South-Eastern. This shows that the reality of these dialects was a lot more complex than simply each part of the country having their own distinct style; it shows an overlap of spellings that manage to create a coexistence with each other during Middle English (*ibid.*).

During the Middle English period it wasn't just English in England that was undergoing changes; Scotland too was creating its unique character. From the literature of the time it is clear that English was already showing signs of development in the language of Scotland (*ibid.*). It is possible that similar developments were occurring in Wales and Ireland but as there are no known surviving manuscripts this theory is unfounded. During the Old English period there was no boundary between England and Scotland and so the Anglo-Saxons had settled there after c.650BCE. It was not until the 11th century that a border was laid between the two countries, during which there is little evidence of the English language having an impact in Scotland (apart from several placenames (such as *Whittinghame*)). It wasn't until the Norman Conquest that English started to influence Scotland. The English fled to Scotland and were welcomed by Malcolm III who did not only speak English, but was also married to an English woman called Margaret. During this time most new towns were given English names, as were the four eldest children of Margaret. By the 1200's English was the overriding language in south and east Scotland, especially in matters of law and commerce. Once the Scottish royal line had died out the foundations of English as the lingua franca were strengthened by new lines of English royals. By the end of the Middle English period the Scottish dialect was still called *Inglis* and wasn't referred to as *Scots* or *Scottish* until the end of the fifteenth century (Crystal 2005:205).

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