

Chapter 5. Middle English

The Norman Conquest introduced a third language, French, to an already bilingual situation in England, consisting of Old English and Latin. Writing about 230 years later, Robert of Gloucester discusses the impact the Norman Conquest had on the English language.

Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle* (Southern dialect, c. 1300)

þus lo þe englisse folc. vor noȝt to grounde com.
vor a fals king þat nadde no riȝt. to þe kinedom.
& come to a nywe louerd. þat more in riȝt was.
ac hor noþer as me may ise. in pur riȝte was.
& thus was in normannes hond. þat lond ibroȝt itwis...
þus com lo engelond. in to normandies hond.
& þe normans ne couþe speke þo. bote hor owe speche.
& speke french as hii dude at om. & hor children dude
also teche.
so þat heiemen of þis lond. þat of hor blod come.
holdeþ alle þulk speche. þat hii of hom nome.
vor bote a man conne frenss. me telþ of him lute.
ac lowe men holdeþ to engliss. & to hor owe speche ȝute.
ich wene þer ne beþ in al þe world. contreyes none.
þat ne holdeþ to hor owe speche. bote engelond one.
ac wel me wot uor to conne. boþe wel it is.
vor þe more þat a mon can. þe more wurþe he is.
þis noble duc william. him let crouny king.
at londone amidwinter day. nobliche þoru alle þing.
of þe ercebissop of euerwik. aldred was is name.
þer nas prince in al þe world. of so noble fame.

thus lo the English folk. for nought to ground came (*were beaten*)
for a false king that not-had no right. to the kingdom.
& came to a new lord. that more in right was.
but their neither (*neither of them*) as one may see. in pure right was.
& thus was in norman's hand that land brought indeed.
thus came lo England into Normandy's hand.
& the Normans not could speak then. but their own speech.
& spoke French as they did at home. & their children did
also teach.
so that nobles of this land. that come of their blood.
hold all the same speech. that they from them took.
for unless a man knows French. one counts of him little.
but low men hold to English. & to their own speech still.
I think there not is in all the world. countries none.
that not hold to their own speech. but England alone.
but well one knows for to understand. both well it is.
for the more that a man knows. the more worthy he is.
this noble duke william. him(self) caused to crown king.
at London on midwinter's day. nobly through all things.
by the archbishop of York. Aldred was his name.
there not-was prince in all the world. of so noble fame.

A French-speaking continuum was created from England to Normandy and Maine by the death of William the Conqueror. In 1154 the throne of England was inherited by Henry of Anjou, uniting England was half of the region now part of France.

Middle English Phonology

Phonological change did not take place because of the Norman Conquest. It was already underway in late OE and continued in ME. However, after the demise of the West Saxon standard, phonological changes become easier to detect through spelling.

Vowels

	OE	ME	Old English	Middle English
1.	/æ/	> /a/	þæt /æ/	that /a/ 'that'
2.	/æ:/ ¹	> /ɛ:/	sǣ /æ:/	sē ² /ɛ:/ 'sea'
3.	/y/	> /i/	synn /y/	sin /i/ 'sin'
4.	/y:/	> /i:/	hȳdan /y:/	hīden /i:/ 'hide'
5.	/εə/ ³	> /a/	hearm /εə/	harm /a/ 'harm'
6.	/εə:/	> /e:/	strēam /εə:/	strēme /e:/ 'stream'
7.	/eə/	> /ɛ/	heofon /eə/	heven /ɛ/ 'heaven'
8.	/eə:/	> /e:/	bēon /eə/	bēn /e:/ 'to be'
9.	/a:/	> /ɔ:/	bān /a:/	bōn /ɔ:/ 'bone'

Sound change (9) occurred after 1250 and only in the south of England. If we know a text is southern we can thus date it to before or after the mid thirteenth century by this criterion. We can also use this criterion for texts which we know were written after 1250 to determine whether they are northern or southern.

Exercise

Transcribe phonetically the OE words below; then indicate the 'stressed vowel change' by writing the number of the appropriate rule from the list of nine changes above. Transcribe phonetically the ME and MnE forms. Remember that unstressed OE vowels were reduced to /ə/ in ME. For MnE do not mark vowel length. The consonants for the most part remained unchanged.

¹ This is the /æ:/ that resulted from *i*-mutation of /a:/ in OE.

² In traditional notation a hook below a vowel indicates that the vowel is lax (open) and a dot indicates that the vowel is tense (close).

³ The pronunciations /εə(:)/ and /εə(:)/ for OE *ǣa* and *ǣo* represent slightly simplified approximations of the actual qualities of these vowels and do not give the best indication of why each vowel developed in the way it did. Most likely, the first elements of each of these diphthongs was different, although spelt the same, and this explains why they developed differently in early ME.

Old English	Stressed Vowel Change	Middle English	Modern English
hæþen		heþen	heathen
cræft		craft	craft
fȳr		fir	fir
healf		half	half
dēop		dep	deep
stān		ston	stone
stēap		stepe	steep
cyssan		kisse	kisse
seofon		seven	seven
glēo		gle	glee
dæl		del	deal
hāl		hol	whole

The above sound changes are changes of vowel quality. There were also changes of vowel quantity (length) with far-reaching consequences.

- Lengthening in late OE before the consonant clusters *ld*, *mb*, *nd*.** OE *cild* /tʃild/ > ME *child* /tʃi:ld/. Lengthening did not occur before three consonants, e.g. *children* /tʃildrən/.
- Shortening in early ME.**
 - Before double consonants and consonant clusters, except those that caused lengthening; e.g. OE *cēpte* /ke:ptə/ 'he kept' > ME *kepte* /kɛptə/.
 - In the first syllable of trisyllabic words. Thus OE *hāliʒdæʒ* /ha:lijdæj/ 'holiday' > ME *halidai* /ha:lidi/.
- Lengthening of *a*, *e*, and *o* in open syllables in disyllabic words.** (Open syllables end in a vowel. In disyllabic words a single consonant between the vowels goes with the second syllable and leaves the first syllable open; two or more consonants make the syllable closed.) Thus OE *nama* /nama/ 'name' > ME *nāme* /na:mə/.

The effect of lengthening can be seen in MnE words such as *bate* with a ‘silent -e’, which in ME was pronounced /ə/, in contrast with words without the historically open syllable, such as *bat*.

Exercise

In each pair of words below, the stressed vowel in one word changed in quantity between OE and ME, the other did not. The phonetic transcription for the ME is provided. Give a phonetic transcription for the early OE and the MnE words and indicate the change, if any, in the quantity of the vowel in ME by writing the appropriate number from the description above in the blank. Since MnE vowel length is determined by the following consonant you do not need to mark vowel length in the MnE column.

	Early Old English	Middle English	Change in Quantity	Modern English
1. a.	þēoft /œə:ft/	þeft /œft/	2	theft /œft/
b.	þēof /œə:f/	þēf /œf/	-	thief /eif/
2. a.	nosu _____	nōse /nɔ:zə/	_____	nose _____
b.	nosþirl _____	nōþirl /nɔsərl/	_____	nostril _____
3. a.	cēpte _____	kepte /keptə/	_____	kept _____
b.	cēpan _____	kēpen /ke:pən/	_____	keep _____
4. a.	behindan _____	behīnde /bəhi:ndə/	_____	behind _____
b.	hindrian _____	hindre /hindər/	_____	hinder _____
5. a.	læfde _____	lafte /aftə/	_____	left _____
b.	læfan _____	lēven /le:ven/	_____	leave _____
6. a.	blēdde _____	bledde /bleddə/	_____	bled _____
b.	blēdan _____	blēde /ble:də/	_____	bleed _____
7. a.	late _____	lāte /la:tə/	_____	late _____
b.	lætera _____	latere /latərə/	_____	latter _____
8. a.	hund _____	hound /hu:nd/	_____	hound _____
b.	hundred _____	hundred /hundrəd/	_____	hundred _____

Consonants

The following changes occurred between OE and ME.

<u>Old English</u>	<u>Middle English</u>
hlud /hlu:d/ 'loud'	lud /lu:d/
hlǣne /hlæ:nə/ 'lean'	leane /hlæ:nə/
hnecca /hnekka/ 'neck'	necke /nekə/
hnutu /hnutu/ 'nut'	nute /nutə/
hring /hring/ 'ring'	ring /riŋg/
hrōf /hro:f/ 'roof'	rof /ro:f/
swētan /swe:tan/ 'sweet' (weak)	swete /swe:tə/
rihtlic /rixtlit/ 'rightly'	rightly /rixtli/
ānlic /a:nlit/ 'only'	onli /ɔ:nli/
swuster /swustər/ 'sister'	suster /sustər/
fæder /fædər/ 'father'	vader /vadər/ (South of the Thames)
self /self/ 'self'	zelf /zɛlf/ (South of the Thames)

Exercise

Give a phonetic transcription of the ME sounds in the examples below.

<u>Old English</u>	<u>Middle English</u>
/hl, hn, hr/	> _____
/n/ after unstressed vowel	> _____
/tj/ after unstressed vowel	> _____
/w/ after consonant and before back vowel	> _____
Initial /f, s/ (South of the Thames)	> _____

Pronunciation

The following guide to pronouncing ME is for the London dialect of Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote between the 1370s and 1400. Apart from differences in spelling and dialect variations, the pronunciations given are generally good for the earlier period of ME.

<u>Sound</u>	<u>Spelling</u>	<u>Example</u>
/a/	a	what
/a:/	a, aa	fader, caas
/ɛ/, /e/	e	hem
/ɛ:/	e, ee	bere, heeth
/e:/	e	swete, neede
/ɪ/, /i/	i, y	list, nyste
/i:/	i, y	blithe, nyce
/ɔ/, /o/	o	for
/ɔ:/	o, oo	lore, goon
/o:/	o, oo	dom, roote
/ʊ/, /u/	u, o	ful, nonne
/u:/	ou, ow	hous, how
/y/	u	vertu
/ə/	e	yonge
/au/	au, aw	cause, drawe
/ei/	ai, ay, ei, ey	fair, may, feith, eyr
/ɛu/	ew	fewe, shewe
/iu/	eu, ew	reule, newe
/ou/	ou, ow	thought, knowe
/oi/	oi, oy	point, joye

By the fourteenth century most of the consonants were pronounced as in MnE. Consonants which were pronounced in ME but which have since become silent in certain positions are:

<i>k</i> before <i>n</i>	knyght	/knixt/
/x/ (<gh>)	knyght	/knixt/
<i>g</i> before <i>n</i>	gnawe	/gnauwə/
<i>l</i> before <i>f, v, k</i>	calf	/kalf/
	halve	/halvə/
	folk	/folk/
<i>w</i> before <i>r</i>	write	/wri:tə/

Early Middle English Grammar

Nouns

The Old English noun declensions were substantially eroded by ambiguities resulting from the reduction of unstressed syllables. These ambiguities sparked a process of *analogical levelling* of the paradigms, whereby the variety of inflexions and declension was diminished by the adoption of endings descended from the OE *a*-stem and weak declensions for nearly all words. We can almost say that by 1300 English had only two declensions.

	Declension A	Declension B
Sg. nom.	kyng	sunne
acc.	kyng	sunne
gen.	kynges	sunne
dat.	kyng	sunne
Pl. nom.	kynges	sunnen <i>or</i> sunnes
acc.	kynges	sunnen <i>or</i> sunnes
gen.	kynges	sunnen <i>or</i> sunnes
dat.	kynges	sunnen <i>or</i> sunnes

The above declensions are highly idealised; no ME text uses this system exactly. In some dialects forms closer to OE were retained much longer, and some dialects replaced the weak plural endings with strong ones earlier than other dialects. For instance, the *-en* plurals normally occur in the South, West Midlands, and Southeast dialects, whilst the *-es* plurals occur in the North first.

Adjectives

The adjective declensions were also substantially levelled, so that they tended to be employed according to the pattern below. As with the nouns, this pattern is idealised, and some texts conform to the pattern more closely than others.

1. Singular adjectives which ended in a consonant in OE have no ending in eME.
2. Singular adjectives which ended in a vowel in OE end *-e* in eME.
3. Singular adjectives in category (1) above end in *-e* if the word immediately follows and article, demonstrative pronoun, or possessive; e.g., *þe alde mann* (this is the rule for using the weak form of the adjective in OE *þe ealda mann*).
4. Plural adjectives end in *-e*; e.g., *þe alde menn*.

Pronouns

There are a myriad of spelling of the personal pronouns, but they essentially conform to the following pattern.

<i>Singular</i>					
	First Person	Second Person	Third Person		
Nom.	ich, I	þou	he	she	hit
Acc.	me	þe	him	hir	hit
Gen.	my, myn ⁴	þy, þyn	his	hir	his
Dat.	me	þe	him	hie	him

<i>Plural</i>			
	First Person	Second Person	Third Person
Nom.	we	ye	þei
Acc.	us	yow	hem
Gen.	ure	youre	hir
Dat.	us	yow	hem

The third person feminine singular and the third person plural forms were subject to significant dialectal variation in the nominative singular. The form *þei* is borrowed from Old Norse. Notice the regional distribution of forms derived from OE and Old Norse.

	Southeast	West Midlands	East Midlands	North
Nom.sg.fem.	hye	ha, ho, s(c)ho	scæ, ʒho	s(c)ho
Nom.pl.	hi	ha, þei	þei	þei

The demonstrative pronouns *þis* and *þat* were for the most part undeclined. Their plurals were *þise* and *þa*, *þase*. In early ME the different case and forms of the definite article were often preserved, but equally often used haphazardly, a sign that the case system was breaking down. Increasingly the ‘invariable’, or undeclinable form *þe* developed.

Verbs

The majority of verbs in OE were weak, and throughout the history of English strong verbs have been ‘re-formed’ on analogy with weak verbs, making the strong verb pattern look increasingly ‘irregular’. This was particularly apparent in the fourteenth century. Chaucer alternated between the strong and weak forms for

⁴ Before nouns beginning with a consonant, *my* and *þy* are used; before nouns beginning with a vowel, *myn* and *þyn* are used.

the preterite tense and past participle in some verbs, and in others he used the older form for one principal part and the newer form for the other.

Exercise

Identify the verb forms from Chaucer below as strong or weak by writing S or W, respectively, in the blank provided.

- _____ 1. He *walked* in the feeldes, for to pryе (A 3458).
gaze
- _____ 2. That in a forest faste he *welk* to wepe (*Troilus* 5.1235).
walked
- _____ 3. Therwith he *weep* that pitee was to heere (A 2878).
wept
- _____ 4. But soore *wep̄te* she if oon of hem were deed (A 148).
sorely one them
- _____ 5. This Pompeus, this noble governour
Of Rome, which that *fleigh* at this bataille (B 3878-79).
who fled battle
- _____ 6. He *fledde* away for verray sorwe and shame (G 702).
true sorrow
- _____ 7. For joye him thoughte he *clawed* him on the bak (A 4326).
it seemed to him
- _____ 8. With that aboute y *clew* myn hed (Hous of Fame 3.1702).
I scratched
- _____ 9. But for the moore part they *loughe* and pleyde (A 3858).
greater laughed played
- _____ 10. For had he *lawghed*, had he loured (Hous of Fame 1.409).
frowned

Verb endings were essentially the same as in OE, except that unstressed vowels were reduced to /ə/, spelt <e>. There existed considerable dialectal variation.

	South, Southeast, West Midlands	East Midlands	North
Present			
3rd sg.	-eþ	-eþ	-es
3rd pl.	-eþ, -ieþ, -iþ, -en (strong verbs)	-en	-es
Present Participle	-inde	-ende	-ande
Past Participle (strong verbs)	y + verb root + -e	-en	-(e)n
Past Participle (weak verbs)	-ed	-ed	-ed

Exercise

In the following passage from the *Ormulum*, describe Orm's verse-type and his use of punctuation. Do you think his final *-e* spelling was always pronounced? How many syllables are there before each 'full stop' (period)? What do the full stops mark?

The Ormulum, late twelfth century

þiss boc iss nennned Orrmulum.
Forrþi þatt Orrm itt wrohhte.

this book is called Ormulum.
Because Orm it wrought (= *made*).

Icc hafe wennd inntill
Ennglissh. Goddspelles hall3he
lare. Affterr þatt little witt
þatt me. Min Drrihhtin hafeþþ
lenedd.

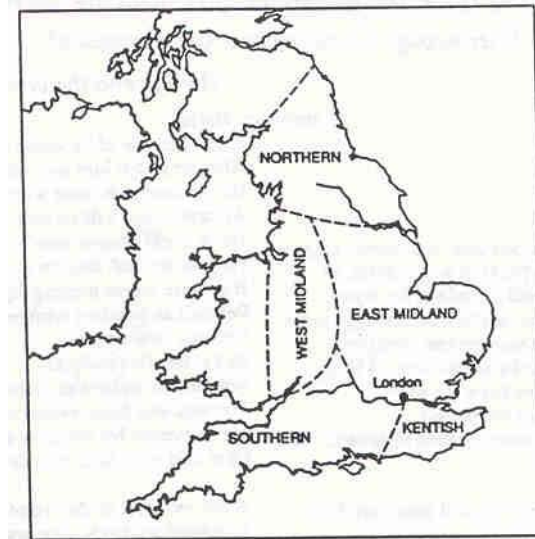
I have turned into
English. (*The*) gospel's holy
lore. After that little with
that me. My Lord has
lent (= *granted*).

Annd wha-se wilenn shall þiss
boc. Efft oþerr siþe writenn.
Himm bidde icc þat he't write
rihht. Swa-summ þiss bov himm
tæcheþþ. All þwerrt-ut affterr
þatt itt iss. Uppo þiss firrste
bisne. Wiþþall swillc rime
alls her iss sett. Wiþþall þe
fele wordess. Annd tatt he loke
wel þatt he. An bocstaff write
twi33ess. E33whær þær itt uppo
þiss boc. Iss writenn o þatt
wise. Loke he wel þatt he't
wrote swa. Forr he ne ma33
nohht elless. Onn Ennglissh
writenn rihht te word. Þatt
wite he wel to soþe.

And whoever intend shall this
book. Again another time write.
Him ask I that he it copy
right. In the same way (*that*) this book him
teaches. Entirely after (*the way*)
that it is. According to this first
exemplar. With all such rhyme
as here is set (*down*). With all the
many words. And (*I ask*) that he look
well that he. A letter writes
twice. Everywhere it within
this book. Is written in that
way. Look he well that he it
wrote so. For he must
not else (= *otherwise*). In English
write correctly the word. That
(*should*) know he well for sure

The Dialectal Areas of Middle English

In Old English, the evidence of the writings suggests that there were four main dialectal areas: West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian, and Northumbrian. In Middle English, they remained roughly the same, except that extant texts from the Mercian Midlands of England show enough differences between the eastern and western parts for us to identify two distinct dialects. So the five principal dialects of Middle English were: Southern, Kentish (or Southeastern), East Midland, West Midland, and Northern. The dialects of Northern English spoken in southern Scotland were known as *Inglis* until about 1500, when writers began to call it *Scottis*, present-day *Scots*.



John of Trevisa on the English Language in 1385

...also of þe forseide saxon tonge þat is deled a þre and ys abyde scarslych wiþ feaw vplondyschmen and ys gret wondur, for men of þe est wiþ men of þe west, as hyt were vnder þe same party of heuene, acordeþ more in sounyng of speche þan men of þe norþ wiþ men of þe souþ.

Þerfore hyt ys þat mercii, þat buþ men of myddel engelond, as hyt were parteners of þe endes, vnderstondeþ betre þe syde ongages, norþeron and souþeron, þan norþeron and souþeron vnderstondeþ eyþer oþer.

Al þe longage of þe norþumbres and specialych at 3ork ys so schar slytting and frotyng and vnschape þat we souþeron men may þat longage vnneþe vnderstonde. Y trowe þat þat ys bycause þat a buþ ny3 to strange men and aliens þat spekeþ strangelych...

The *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, also known as ‘The Prick (*Remorse*) of Conscience’, occurs in one manuscript with the following text written on it:

Þis boc is Dan Michelis of Northgate, ywrite an English of his oȝen (*own*) hand, þet hatte (*is called*) Ayenbite of Inwyt; and is of the boc-house of Saynt Austines of Canterberi.

Þis boc is uolueld (*fulfilled, completed*) ine þe eue of þe holy apostles Symon an Iudas (*October 27*) of ane broþer of the cloystre of Sauynt Austin of Canterberi, in the yeare of oure Lhordes beringe (*birth*) 1340.

We know that Michael finished the book in 1340 and that he was from Kent. The spelling is consistent and provides good evidence for the dialect of Kent.

Nou ich wille þet ye ywyte

Hou it is ywent

Þet þis boc is ywrite

Mid Engliss of Kent.

Þis boc is ymad uor lewede men

Hem uor to berȝ uram alle

manyere zen.

Now I wish that you know

How it is went

That this book is written

With English of Kent.

This book is made for lewd (*unlearned*) men,

Them for to protect from all

manner sin.

Exercise

Consider the passage from the *Ayenbite of Inwyt* below along with the above excerpts and the passage from *The Fox and the Wolf*, which is written in a related dialect. What are the southern and southeastern dialect features? Are there any indications that these are written in a variety of Middle English later than the *Peterborough Chronicle* and the *Ormulum*?

The Ayebite of Inwyt, 1340, Southeastern Dialect

Efterward þer wes a poure man, ase me zayþ, þet hedde ane cou; and yherde zigge of his preste ine his prechinge þet God zede ine his spelle þet God wolde yelde an hondreduald al þet me yeauē uor him. Þe guode man, mid þe rede of his wyue, yeaf his cou to his preste, þet wes riche. Þe prest his nom bleþeliche, and hise zente to þe oþren þet he hedde. Þo hit com to euen, þe guode mannes cou com hom to his house ase hi wes ywoned, and ledde mod hare alle þe prestes ken, al to an hondred. Þo þe guode man yseȝ þet, he þoȝte þet þet wes þet word of þe Godspelle þet he hedde yyolde; and him hi weren yloked beuore his bissoppe aye þane prest. Þise uorbisne sseweþ wel þet merci is guod chapuare, uor hi deþ wexe þe timliche guodes.

Afterward there was a poor man, as one says, that had a cow; and heard from his priest in his preaching that God said in his gospel that God would yield a hundredfold all that one gave for him. The good man, with the advice of his wife, gave his cow to his priest, who was rich. The priest her took blithely, and he sent to the others that he had. When it came to evening, the good man’s cow came home to his house as she was

accustomed, and led with her all the priest's kine (= cows), all to a hundred. When the good man saw that, he thought that that was the word of the Gospel that to-him* had restored (*them*); and to-him they were adjudged before his bishop against the priest. These examples show well that mercy is good trading, for it does increase the temporal goods.

* The obscure English is the result of a mist-translation of the French original.

The Fox and the Wolf, Early Thirteenth Century, Southern Dialect

A vox gon out of þe wode go	A fox went out of the wood (<i>gon...go = went</i>)
Afingret so þat him wes wo	Hungered so that to-him was woe
He nes neuere in none wise	He not-was never in no way
Afingret erour half so swiþe.	Hungered before half so greatly.
He ne hoeld nouþer wey ne strete	He not held (to) neither way nor street
For him wes loþ men to mete.	For to-him (it) was loathsome men to meet.
Him were leuere meten one hen	To-him (it) was more pleasing (to) meet one hen
þen half an oundred wimmen.	Than half a hundred women.
He strok swiþe oueral	He went quickly all-the-way
So þat he ofsei ane wal.	Until he saw a wall.
Wiþinne þe walle wes on hous.	Within the wall was a house
The wox wes þider swiþe wous	The fox was thither greatly eager (to go)
For he þohute his hounger aquenche	For he thought his hunger (to) quench
Oþer mid mete oþer mid drunche.	Either with food or with drink.

Cursor Mundi (Northern dialect, c. 1300) consists of 30,000 lines of verse re-telling Christian legends and the stories of the Bible. The following couplet indicates its Northern origins:

De wrang to here o right is lath	Wrong-doing is loth to hear of righteousness
And pride wyt buxsumnes is wrath.	And pride is angry with humility.

Note that the words *wrang* (OE *wrang*), *lath* (OE *lāþ*) and *wrath* (OE *wrāþ*) still retain the *ā*. In Southern and Midland dialects, they became *wrong*, *loth*, and *wroth*. Here is a larger sample:

Adam had pasid nine hundret yere	Adam had passed nine hundred years
Nai selcut þof he wex unfere	No wonder though he waxed infirm
Forwroght wit his hak and spad	Exhausted with his hoe and spade
Of himself he wex al sad.	Of himself he waxed all weary.
He lened him þan apon his hak	He leaned him then upon his how
Wit Seth his sun þusgat he spak	With Seth his son this-way he spoke
Sun, he said, þou most now ga	Son, he said, thou must now go
To Paradis þat I com fra	To Paradise that I came from
Til Cherubin þat þe yate ward...	To Cherubim that the gate guards...

Þus he said I sal þe sai
Howgate þou sal tak þe wai.

Thus he said I shall to-thee say
How thou shalt take the way.

Describing Dialect Differences

Dialects are varieties of a single language which are ‘mutually comprehensible’; that is, speakers of different dialects can talk to and understand each other. Dialects have most of their vocabulary and grammar in common; therefore, we can make a fairly short list of features to look for when describing the differences between dialects. The texts we have looked at so far suggest that the main linguistic features that mark ME dialectal differences are:

Orthography: Not strictly, speaking dialect, but indicative of the regional origins of texts. Orthography can give us information about pronunciation, but we have to be careful not to assume that there is a one-to-one relation between sound and spelling. Some differences of spelling in ME texts do not reflect differences in pronunciation, e.g. <i> <y>; <u> <v>; <ȝ> <gh>; <ss> <sh>; <þ> <th>; <hw> <qu>, etc. Remember that spelling tends to be conservative and does not necessarily keep up with changes in pronunciation.

Phonology (inferred from spelling): There are many examples. The main one we have looked at is the change of \bar{a} (/a:/) to \bar{o} (/ɔ:/) in the South and Midlands by 1250.

Morphology: We have seen that pronouns were dialectally distributed. Other important dialectal features are the plural endings nouns and the tense markers of verbs. Refer back to the grammar section for this.

Syntax: Dialectal differences in syntax are not well understood for the medieval period, so our main observation concerns the chronological changes found in the *Peterborough Chronicle*.

Lexis: Dialectal vocabulary is particularly rich. We have seen that many Old Norse loanwords were prevalent in the former Danelaw-area. In addition, the literature of northwestern England often has fewer French loanwords.

When looking at texts, you should look for dialectal features in each of these categories.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Reeve’s Tale* features two undergraduates from the north named John and Aleyn who come to the mill of one Symkyn (also called Symond). Aleyn and John intend to supervise the grinding of their corn, as millers were notorious for cheating their customers. Chaucer, who normally writes in a late fourteenth-century London dialect, makes the northern origins of the students clear by using recognisable northern features for their dialogue. Typical northern features are:

- retention of OE *ā* (/a:/) even after 1250
- 3rd person singular present tense *-es*
- use of *is* for 1st person singular present tense of *be*
- northern OE *arun* for the plural present tense of *be*
- large proportion of Old Norse loanwords
- use of *sal* for normal *s(c)hal*

Exercise

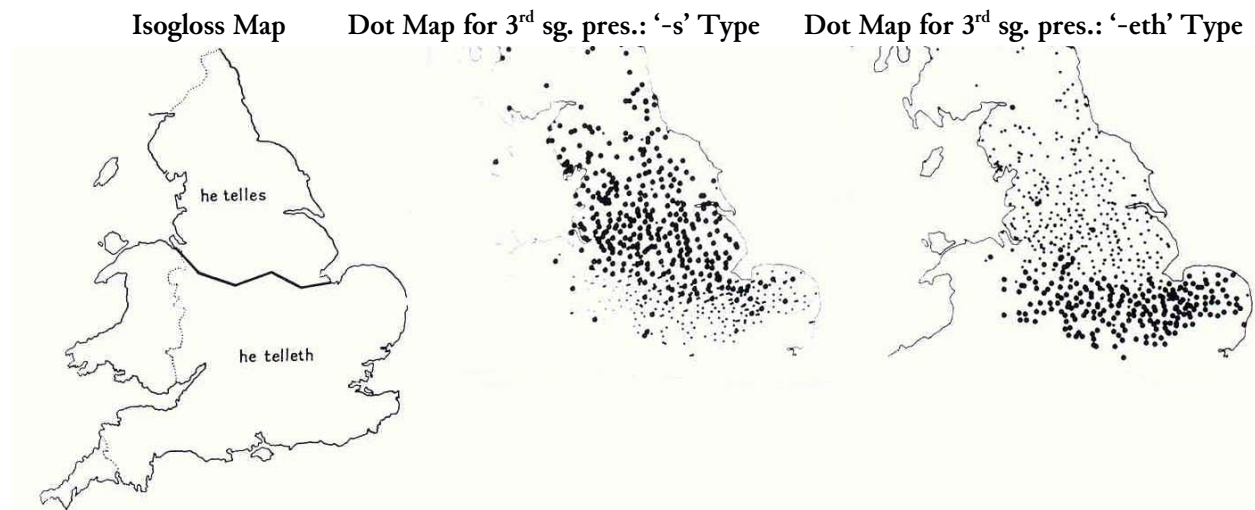
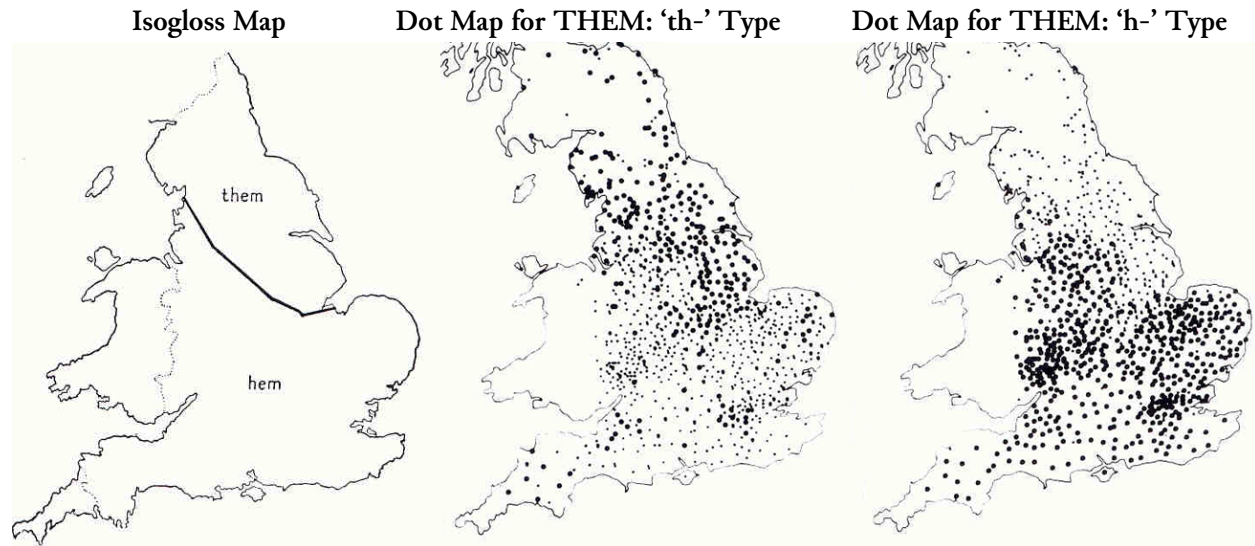
Describe some of the Northern dialect features (orthographic, phonological, morphological, and lexical) highlighted in the following excerpt from *The Reeve's Tale*.

Aleyn spak first: 'Al hayl, Symond, y-fayth!	y-faith = in faith
How fares thy faire doghter and thy wyf?	
'Aleyn welcome,' quod Symkyn, 'by my lyf!	
And John also, how now, what do ye heer?	
'Symond,' quod John, 'by God, nede has na peer.	need has no (OE <i>nān</i>) peer = necessity knows no law
Hym boes serue hymself that has na swayn ,	him behaves = he must (OE <i>behofian</i>); servant (ON <i>sveinn</i>)
Or elles he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.	
Oure manciple, I hope he wol be deed,	believe (OE <i>hopian</i>)
Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed;	so (OE <i>swā</i>); works = aches (OE <i>wyrcan</i>); back teeth (OE <i>wang</i>)
And forthy is I come and eek Alayn,	
To grynde oure corn and carie it ham agayn...'	
'It shal be doon,' quod Symkyn, 'by my fay!	faith
What wol ye doon whil that it is in hande?'	in hand = in process
'By God, right by the hopur wol I stande,'	hopper
Quod John, 'and se howgates the corn gas in.	howgates = what way (Northern)
Yet saugh I nevere, by my fader kyn,	
How that the hopur waggis til and fra .'	to and fro (ON <i>til</i> = to, <i>frá</i> = from)
Aleyn answerde, 'John, and wiltow swa ?	wiltow swa = wilt thou (do) so?
Thanne wil I be bynethe by my croun,	crown = head
And se how that the mele falles down	meal, flour
Into the trough; that sal be my disport.	disport = amusement
For John, y-faith I may been of youre* sort;	
I is as ille a millere as ar ye*.	ill (ON <i>illr</i>) = bad

* In the fourteenth century the English often adopted the French usage of the plural pronoun for to address an individual politely.

The boundary lines that appear on the map of ME dialects shown earlier are oversimplified representations. The *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* reveals more of the complexity of the actual situation. A continuum of overlapping distributions of features is a much more adequate conception than separate and clearly delineated regional dialects. The maps below are examples of the two major approaches to ME

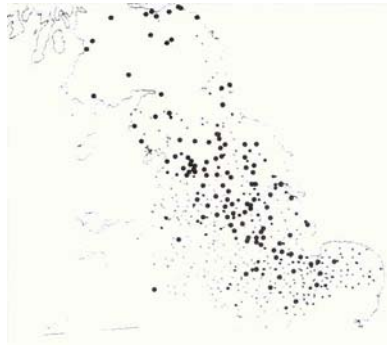
dialectology. One uses *isoglosses*, or solid lines to separate contrasting features; the other uses dots to show the mixture of usages, especially in the border areas. For the dot maps, note that all locations represented by manuscripts for the *Atlas* survey appear on each map. The half-tone shadow dots show that the form in question did not occur. The black dots show that the form did occur, and the three sizes of black dots show relative frequency of the form.



Exercise

1. Study the maps for *hem* and *them* and comment on the advantages of each method of representation. The *th-* form of the third person plural pronoun was adapted from Old Norse. It spread south replacing the native *hem* form.
2. Draw your own isogloss on each of the dot maps so as to put most of the occurrences of the represented feature in the same region. Is it desirable to include *all* occurrences of the feature within the region demarcated by the isogloss? Why or why not? In what sense is an isogloss artificial?

3. If the drawing of a single isogloss is a simplification which requires disregarding some data, the grouping of 'bundles of isoglosses' into dialect boundaries is even more so. The boundaries between *hem* and *them* and between *-eth* and *-es* for the third person singular present form of the verb are important traditional determinants of the southern boundary of the Northern dialect. Describe where the isoglosses overlap and diverge. Compare the path of these two isoglosses with the southern boundary of the Northern dialect as shown on main dialect map. (Remember that the boundary itself is the result of combining these two isoglosses and several others. There is no objective boundary apart from the isoglosses of which the boundary is an abstraction.)
4. The preposition *till* was adopted in OE as *til* from Old Norse *til*. It continues to be used in some constructions alongside the native preposition *to*. Compare the dot map for *til* below with the map of showing boundary of the Danelaw in the Anglo-Saxon period. Comment on the relationship between the external, cultural history of England and the internal, linguistic history as shown by this one word.



5. Look up *dialect* in a dictionary and find the definition that comes closest to describing the variations in ME displayed here.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a famous poem which tells a story of the legendary court of King Arthur. It is associated with a group of late fourteenth-century poems (collectively known as the 'alliterative revival') which demonstrate that features of OE poetic composition were still alive in some form long after the Norman Conquest. The one surviving manuscript is written in a dialect of Cheshire or Staffordshire in the Northwest Midlands. The author's name is not known. The story so far: during New Year celebrations at Camelot, a Green Knight rides in, carrying a battle-axe and challenging any knight to strike off his head with it, provided that he can give a return blow a year and a day later. The two stanzas given here tell what happens.

The grene knyzt vpon grounde grayþely hym dresses
 A littel lut with þe hede, þe lere he discouereþ
 His longe louelych lokkeþ he layd ouer his croun
 Let the naked nec to þe note schewe.
 Gauan gripped to his ax & gederes hit on hyzt
 Þe kay fot on þe fold he before sette
 Let hit down lyztly lyzt on þe naked
 Þat þe scharp of þe schalk schyndered þe bones

The Green Knight upon the girds him with care:
 Bows a bit with his head, and bares his flesh:
 His long lovely locks he laid over his crown,
 Let the naked nape for the need not be shown.
 Gawain gripped to his axe and gathers it aloft –
 The left foot on the floor before him he set –
 Brought it down deftly upon the bare neck,
 That the sharpness of the blow shivered the bones

& schrank þurȝ þe shyire grece & scade hit in twynne,
Ðat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe grounde.
Ðe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe
Ðat fele hit foyned wyth her fete þere hit forth roled.
Ðe blod brayd fro þe body þat blykked on þe grene
& nayþer faltered ne fel þe freke neuer þe helder
Bot styþly he start forth vpon styf schonkes
& runyschly he raȝt out, þere as renkkeȝ stoden,
Laȝt to his lufly hed & lyft hit vp sone
& syþen boȝeȝ to his blonk, þe brydel he cachcheȝ,
Steppeȝ into stelbawe & strydeȝ alofte
& his hede by þe here in his honde haldeȝ
& as sadly þe segge hym in his sadel sette
As non vnhap had hym ayled, þaȝ hedleȝ he were
in stedde.

He brayde his buk aboute
Ðat vgly bodi þat bledde
Moni on of hym had doute
Bi þat his resounȝ were redde.

For þe hede in his honde he haldeȝ vp euen
Toward þe derrest on þe dece he dresseȝ þe face
& hit lyfte vp þe yȝe-lyddeȝ & loked ful brode
& meled þus much with his muthe, as ȝe may now here:
Loke, Gawan, þou be grayþe to go as þou hetteȝ
& layte as lelly til þou me, lude, fynde,
As þou hatȝ hette in þis halle, herande þise knyȝtes.
To þe grene chapel þou chose, I charge þe, to fotte
Such a dunt as þou hatȝ dalt – disserued þou habbeȝ –
To be zederly zolden on Nw ȝeres morn.
Ðe knyȝt of þe grene chapel men knowen me mony;
Forþi me for to fynde if þou fraysteȝ, fayleȝ þou neuer.
Ðerfore com, oþer recreaunt be calde þe behoues.
With a runisch rout þe rayneȝ he torneȝ,
Halled out at þe hal dor, his hed in his hande,
Ðat þe fyr of þe flynt flaze from fole houes.
To quat kyth he becom knwe non þere,
Neuer more þen þay wyste fram queþen he watȝ wonnen.

What þenne?
Ðe kyng & Gawen þare
At þat grene þay laȝe & grenne
ȝet breued watȝ hit ful bare
A meruayl among þo menne.

& cut the flesh cleanly and clove it in twain,
That the blade of bright steel bit into the ground.
The head was hewn off and fell to the floor;
Many folk kicked it with their feet, as forth it rolled.
Blood gushed from the body, bright on the green
& fell not the fellow, nor faltered a whit,
But stoutly he starts forth upon stiff shanks,
And as all stood staring he stretched forth his hand,
Laid hold of his head and heaved it aloft,
Then goes to the green steed, grasps the bridle,
Steps into the stirrup, bestrides his mount,
& his head by the hair in his hand holds,
& as steady he sits in the stately saddle
As he had met with no mishap, nor missing were
his head.

His bulk about he haled,
That fearsome body that bled;
There were many in the court that quailed
Before all his say was said.

For the hede in his hand he holds right up;
Toward the first on the dais directs he the face,
& it lifted up its lids, and looked with wide eyes,
& said as much with its mouth as now you may hear:
'Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed,
& cease not to seek till me, sir, you find,
As you swore in this hall, with these knights hearing.
To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take
Such a dint as you have dealt – you have well deserved
To have your neck knocked on New Year's morn.
The Knight of the Green Chapel I am known to many,
Wherefore you cannot fail to find me at last;
Therefore come, or be counted a recreant knight.'
With roisterous rush he flings round the reins,
Hurtles out at the hall-door, his head in his hand,
That the flint-fire flew from the flashing hooves.
Which way he went, not one of them knew
Nor whence he was come in the wide world

So fair
The king & Gawain gay
Make game of the Green Knight there,
Yet all who saw it say
'Twas a wonder past compare.

Exercise

1. How many different sounds does the letter <3> represent?
2. Complete chart below using the samples above. The forms already given are found elsewhere in the poem. What do these forms tell us about the date and dialect of the poem?

<i>Singular</i>		<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular</i>		<i>Plural</i>
First Person			Second Person		
Nom.		we	Nom.		3e
Acc.		vs, vus	Acc.		yow
Gen.	my	oure	Gen.	þy	yowre
		<i>Singular</i>	<i>Plural</i>		
Third Person					
Nom.		ho, scho		þay	
Acc.		her			
Gen.		hir		her	

3. What inflexion marks plural nouns and what does this tell us about the poem's dialect?
4. The following list of verb forms is taken from the samples above, supplemented with other forms from the poem in parentheses. What do they tell us about the poem's dialect?

Present tense:

2nd person sg.: þou (rede3, hattes, hopes, deles)
3rd person sg.: he/ho/hit dresses, gederes, discouere3, bo3e3, cache3, steppe3
plural: we 3e/þay (fallen, helden = *turn*, 3elden)

Preterite tense:

2nd person sg.: þou (gef = *gave*, fayled, kyssedes = *kissed*)

3rd person sg.: he/ho/hit **Strong verbs:**
bot, fel, let, schrank, start

Weak verbs:

blykked, faltered, foyned, gripped, roled, schyndered, bledde, hit, layd, la3t, lyft
plural: we/3e/þay stoden(maden)

Present Participle: (sykande = *sighing*, wre3ande = *denouncing*)

Past Participle: lut (ayled, payed, hunted, slayn)

William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is an allegory of the Christian life and the corruption of the contemporary Church and society, written in the form of a series of dream visions. It is also associated with the late fourteenth-century 'alliterative revival'. The opening vision takes place in the 'Malvern hills', in the Southwest Midlands, and, although the over 50 manuscripts have a somewhat mixed dialect, it is predominantly that of the Southwest Midlands.

Exercise

In the passages below, identify some of the following features: (1) spelling conventions, (2) evidence of pronunciation changes from OE, (3) pronoun forms, and (4) noun and verb inflexions.

Piers Plowman, c. 1370 (i)	Piers Plowman, c. 1370 (ii)
<p>In a somur sesoun whan softe was þe sonne Y shope me into shroudes as y a shep were In abite as an heremite vnholy of werkes, Wente forth in þe world wondres to here And say many sellies and selkouthe thynges. Ac on a May mornyng on Maluerne hulles Me biful for to slepe, for werynesse of-walked And in a launde as y lay, lened y and slepte And merueylousliche me mette, as y may telle. Al þe welthe of the world and þe wo bothe Wynkyng, as hit were, witterliche y sigh hit; Of treuthe and tricherye, tresoun and gyle, Al y say slepyng, as y shal telle. Estward y beheld aftir þe sonne And say a tour – as y trowed, Treuthe was ther-ynne. Westward y waytede in a while aftir And seigh a depe dale–Deth, as y leue, Woned in tho wones, and wikked spiritus. A fair feld ful of folk fond y þer bytwene Of alle manere men, þe mene and þe pore, Worchyng and wandryng as þis world ascuth...</p>	<p>Now awakeþ Wraþe wiþ two white eizen And neuelynge wiþ þe nose and his nekke hangyng I am Wraþe quod he. I was som tyme a frere And the couentes gardyner for to graffen impes. On lymitours and listres lesynges I ymped Til þei beere leues of lowe speche lordes to plese And siþen þei blosmede abroad in boure to here shriftes. And now is fallen þerof of a fruyt–þat folk han wel leuere Shewen hire shriftes to hem þan shryue hem to hir persons. And now persons han parceyued þat freres parte wiþ hem Thise possessioners preche and depraue freres And freres fyndeþ hem in defaute as folk bereþ witenesse That whan þei preche þe peple in many places aboute I Wraþe walke wiþ hem and wisse hem of my bokes. þus þei be boþe beggers and by my spiritualte libben Or ellis al riche and ryden aboute; I Wraþe reste neuere That I ne moste folwe þis folk, for swich is my grace.</p>

Exercise

In the passages below, identify some of the following features from the late fourteenth-century London dialect of Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Usk: (1) spelling conventions, (2) evidence of pronunciation changes from OE, (3) pronoun forms, and (4) noun and verb inflexions.

Chaucer's 'The Tale of Melibeus'

A yong man whilon called Melibeus mighty and riche bigat vp on his wif þ^t called was Prudence a doghter, which þ^t called was Sophie | vpon a day bifel þ^t he for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye | his wif & eek his doghter, hath he laft inwith his hous, of which the dores weren faste yshette | thre of his olde foos, han it espied, & setten ladders to the walles of his hous, and by wyndowes be entred, & betten his wif, & wounded his doghter with fyue moral woundes in fyue sundry places | this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hir handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hir mouth, and leften hir for deed & wenten away || Whan Melibeus returned was in to his hous, & seigh al this meschief, he lyk a mad man rentynge his clothes, gan to wepe and crye | Prudence his wyf, as ferforth as she dorste, bisoughte hym of hys wepyng for to stynte | but nat for thy he han to crye & wepen euere lenger the moore.

Chaucer's 'The Parson's Tale'

After auarice comth glotonye which is expres eek agayn the comandement of god. Glotonye is vnmesurable appetit to ete or to drynke, or elles to doon ynogh to (= *to give way to, to go some way towards*) the vnmesurable appetit and desordeyne coueitise to eten or to drynke. This synne corruped al this world as is wel shewed in the synne of Adam and of Eve...He that is vsaunt to this synne of glotonye, he ne may no synne withstonde. He moot been in seruage of alle vices, for it is the deueles hoord ther he hideth hym and resteth.

This synne hath manye spesces. The firste is dronkenesse that is the horrible sepulture of mannes resound, and therfore whan a man is dronken he hath lost his resoun—and this is deedly synne. But soothly, whan that a man is nat wont to strong drynke, and peraventure ne knoweth nat the strengthe of the drynke or hath feblesse in his heed, or hath trauailed, thurgh which he drynketh the moore, al be he sodeynly caught with drynke, it is no deedly synne, but venyal. The seconde spece of glotonye is that the spirit of a man wexeth al trouble, for dronkenesse bireueth hym the discrecioun of his wit. The thridde spece of glotonye is whan a man deuoureth his mete and hath no rightful manere of etynge. The fourthe is whan, thurgh the grete habundaunce of his mete, the humours in his body been destempred. The fifthe is foryetelnesse by to muchel drynkyng, for which somtyme a man foryeteth er the morwe what he dide at euen or on the nyght biforn....

Thisse been the fyue fyngres of the deueles hand, by whiche he draweth folk to Synne.

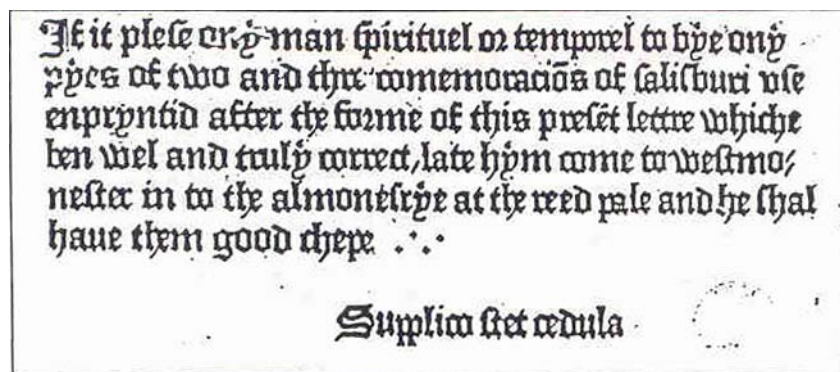
Thomas Usk's appeal, 1384

Also, ate Goldsmithes halle, when al the people was assembled, the mair, John Northampton, reherced as euel as he koude of the eleccion on the day to forn, & seyde that truly: 'Sirs, thus be ye shape for to be ouer ronne, & that,' quod he, 'I nel noght soeffre; lat vs rather al be ded atones than soeffre such a vylenye.' & than the communes, vpon these wordes, wer stered, & seiden truly they wolde go to a nother eleccion, & noght soeffre thys wrong, to be ded al there for attones in on tyme; and than be the mair, John Northampton, was euere man boden gon hom, & kome fast a yein strong in to Chepe with al her craftes, & I wene ther wer a boute x xxx craftes, & aldermen kome to trete, & maked that John Northampton bad the poeple gon hoom, they wolde haue go to a Newe eleccion, & in that hete haue slayn hym that wolde haue letted it, yf they had might; and there of I appele John Northampton.

Fifteenth-century London witnessed the beginning of the development of Standard English. The following passages demonstrate how intimately the process was connected with the adoption of the printing press. William Caxton, known as the first English printer, set up his press in 1476, beginning a revolution in the production of books, which no longer had to be copied by hand. Copying did not, of course, die out immediately – the professional scribes were able to earn a living for some time. Caxton was more than just a printer of other people's writing. He also translated into English and edited many of the books that he printed, and he provided a considerable number of prefaces and commentaries.

The following is an advertisement for Caxton's *Sarum Ordinal* (Salisbury book of church services), c. 1478.

Caxton's *Sarum Ordinal*, c. 1478



If it plese ony man spirituel or temporel to bye ony
pyes of two and thre comemoraciōs of salisbury use
enpnyntid after the forme of this presēt letter whiche
ben wel and truly correct, late hym come to westmo-
nester in to the almonesrye at the reed pale and he shal
haue them good chepe

Supplico stet cedula

In 1482, Caxton printed a revised text of John of Trevisa's description of Higden's *Polychronicon* (see page 47). Caxton wrote: 'I William Caxton a symple persone endeouyred me to wryte fyrst overall the sayd book of *Proloconycon* and somewhat have chaunged the rude and old Englysshe, that is to wete certayn wordes which in these dayes be neither vsyd ne vnderstanden.' Caxton's fifteenth-century text is here printed alongside Trevisa's, which is taken from a different manuscript and slightly expanded. This provides an excellent example of some of the changes that had taken place in the language within a hundred years. It illustrates the lack of standardisation in ME and the way in which differences in the dialects of ME were reflected in writing. Some features of Caxton's punctuation, like his use of the virgule </>, are reproduced, but modern punctuation has been added.

John Trevisa. 1385	Caxton's Version, 1482
<p>As it is i-knowe how meny manere peple beep in þis ilond þere beep also so many dyuers longages and tonges; noþeles walsche men and scottes þat beep nou3t i-medled wiþ oþer naciouns holdeþ wel nyh hir firste longage and speche...</p> <p>Also engliche men þey þei hadde from þe bygynnyng þre maner speche norþerne sowþerne and middel speche in þe myddel of þe lond, as þey come of þre manere peple of Germania, noþeles by comyxtioun and mellyng firste wiþ danes and afterward wiþ normans in meny þe contray longage is apayred and som vseþ straunge wlafferynge chiterynge harrynge and garrynge grisbitynge.</p> <p>This apayryng of þe burþe tonge is bycause of tweie þinges; oon is for children in scole a3enst þe vsage and manere of alle oþere naciouns beep compelled for to leue hire owne langage and for to construe hir lessouns and here þynges a frensche, and so þey haueþ seþ þe normans come first in to engelond.</p> <p>Also gentil men children beep i-tau3t to speke frensche from þe tyme þat þey beep i-rokked in here cradel and kunneþ speke and playe wiþ a childes broche; and vplondisshe men wil likne hym self to gentil men and fondeþ wiþ greet besynesse for to speke frensce for to be i-tolde of...</p> <p>Þis manere was moche i-vsed to for firste deth and is siþþe sumdel i-chaunged. For Iohn Cornwaile, a maister of grammer, chaunged þe lore in gramer scole, and construccioun of frensche into engliche; and Richard Pencriche lerned þe manere techyng of hym and oþere men of Pencrich; so þat now, þe 3ere of oure Lorde a þowsand þre hundred and foure score and fyue, in alle þe gramere scoles of engelond children leueþ frensche and construeþ and lerneþ an engliche...</p>	<p>As it is knowen how many maner peple ben in this Ilond ther ben also many langages and tonges. Netheles walshmen and scottes that ben not medled with other naciouns kepe neygh yet theyr first langage and speche /</p> <p>also englysshmen though they had fro the begynnyng thre maner speches Southern northern and myddel speche in the middel of the londe as they come of thre maner of people of Germania. Netheles by commyxtion and medlyng first with danes and afterward with normans In many thynges the countreye langage is appayred / ffor somme use straunge wlaffyng / chytering harrying garryng and grisbytyng /</p> <p>this appayryng of the langage cometh of two thynges / One is by cause that children that gon to scole lerne to speke first englysshe / & than ben compellid to constrewe her lessons in Frenssh and that have ben used syn the normans come in to Englund /</p> <p>Also gentilmens childeren ben lerned and taught from theyr yongthe to speke frenssh. And uplondyss men will counterfete and likene hem self to gentilmen and arn besy to speke frensse for to be more sette by.</p> <p>This maner was moche used to fore the grete deth. But syth it is somdele chaunged For sir Johan cornuayl a mayster of gramer chaunged the techyng in gramer scole and construction of Frenssh in to englysshe. and other Scoolmaysters use the same way now in the yere of oure lord / M.iiij/C.lx.v. the /ix yere of kyng Rychard the secund and leue all frenssh in scoles and use al construction in englyssh.</p>

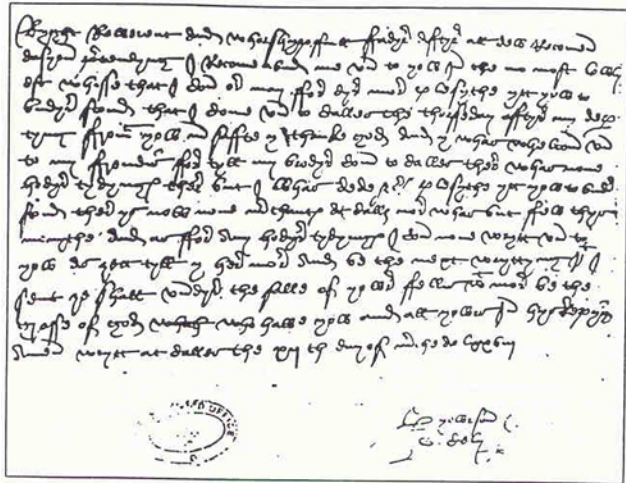
<p>Also gentil men haueþ now moche i-left for to teche here children frensche. Hit semeþ a greet wonder hou3 englische, þat is pe burþe tonge of englissh men and her owne langage and tonge, ys so dyuerse of sown in þis oon ilond, and þe langage of normandie is comlynge of anoþer londe and haþ oon manere soun among alle men þat spekeþ hit ari3t in engelond.</p> <p>...also of þe forsaide saxon tonge þat is i-deled a þre and is abide scarsliche wiþ fewe vplondisse men is greet wonder for men of þe est wiþ men of þe west, as it were vndir þe same partie of heuene, acordeþ more in sownyng of speche þan men of þe norþ wiþ men of þe souþ.</p> <p>Derfor it is þat men of mercii, þat beeþ of myddel engelond, as it were parteners of þe endes, vnderstondeþ better þe side langages, norþerne and souþerne, þan noþerne and souþerne vnderstondeþ eiþer oþer.</p> <p>All þe longage of þe norþumbres and specialliche at 3ork is so scharp slitting frotyng and vnschape þat we souþerne men may þat longage vnneþe understande. I trowe þat þat is bycause þat þey be nyh to staunge men and aliens þat spekeþ strongliche.</p>	<p>And also gentilmen have moche lefte to teche theyr children to speke frenssh Hit semeth a grete wonder that Englysshmen have so grete dyversyte in theyr owne langage in sowne and in spekyng of it / whiche is all in one ylond. And the langage of Normandye is comen oute of another lond / and hath one maner soune among al men that speketh it in england...</p> <p>Also of the forsayd tong whiche is departed in thre is grete wonder / For men of the este with the men of the west acorde better in sownyng of theyr speche than men of the north with men of the south /</p> <p>Therfor it is that men of mercij that ben of myddel england as it were partyners with the endes understande better the side langages northern & sothern than nothrer & southern understande eyther other.</p> <p>All the langages of the northumbres & specially at york is so sharp slytyng frotyng and unshape that we sothern men may unneth understande that langage I suppose the cause be that they be nygh to the alyens that speke straungely.</p>
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One of Caxton's problems as printer and translator is illustrated in a famous story given in the preface to his 1490 translation of a French version of Virgil's Latin poem *The Aeneid*, called *Eneydos*. A book might be bought and ready anywhere in the country, but which dialect of English should a printer use? For example, southern dialects used a word for *egg* derived from OE, whilst northern dialects used a word derived from Old Norse. The story is about the difficulty of asking for eggs for breakfast, but for Caxton it illustrates the problem of choosing a language in translation.

And whan I sawe the fayr & straunge termes therein / I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylnen whiche late blamed me, sayeng that in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes which coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple / and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons. and fayn wolde I satisfye euery man / and so to doo, toke an olde boke and redde therin / and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late, certayn euydences wryton on olde englysshe, for to reduce it in-to our englysshe now vsid / And certaynly it was wretton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe; I could not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden / And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken whan I was borne / For we englysshe men / ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, whiche is neuer stedfaste / but euer wauerynge / wexyng one season / and waneth & dyscreaseth another season / moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in tames (= *the river Thames*), for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande (= *Holland*) / and for lacke of wynde, they taryed atte forlond (= *Foreland*), and wente to lande for to refreshe them; And one of theym named sheffelde (= *Sheffield*), a mercer, cam in-to an hows and exed for mete (= *food*); and specyally he axyd after egges; And the goode wyf answerde, that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no frenshe, but wolde haue hadde egges / and she vnderstode hym not / And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren / then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel / Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, egges or eyren / certaynly it is harde to playse euery man / by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage ... but in my Iudgemente / the comyn termes that be dayli vsed, ben lyghter (= *easier*) to be vnderstode than the olde and aucyent englysshe /

A collection of letters and memoranda of the Cely family, written in London in the 1470s and 1480s shows us how written English was developing along different lines from Caxton's printed texts. They show that there was as yet no standardised written English. Spelling is not good evidence for the pronunciation of spoken English, partly because we do not know the sounds given to particular letters, but also because the spelling of the different writers is so irregular. Individual writers show many inconsistencies of spelling. The Celys were wool merchants, or staplers who sold English fleeces in Calais and Bruges. The letters and accounts provide historians with direct evidence of the workings of a medieval English firm and give language students examples of medieval commercial English, as well as evidence of the speech and writing habits of middle-class Londoners of the period.

George Cely in Calais to Richard Cely in London, 12 March 1478



Transcription

Ryght rewerent and whorshypffull ffadyr afftyr all dew recomen dasyon ptendyng I recomaevnd me vn to yow in the ~~mo~~ most lowly est whisse that I con or may ffor dyr mor plesythe ytte yow to vndyr stond that I come vn to calles the thorsseday afftyr my dep tyng ffrom yow in saffte y thanke god and y whas whelcom vn to my ffreendis ffor tyll my brodyr com to calles ther whas none hodyr tydyng ther but I whas dede // etc // plesythe ytt yow to vnd stond ther ys now none mchants at call3 nor whas but ffew thys monythe / and as ffor any hodyr tydyngs I con none wrytt vn to yow as zett tyll y her mor and be the next wrytting þt I sent 3e shall vndyr the sale of yourr ffellis w mor be the grasse of god ~~whan~~ who have yow and all yourr in hys keypg amen wrytt at calles the xij th day of mche a lxxviii

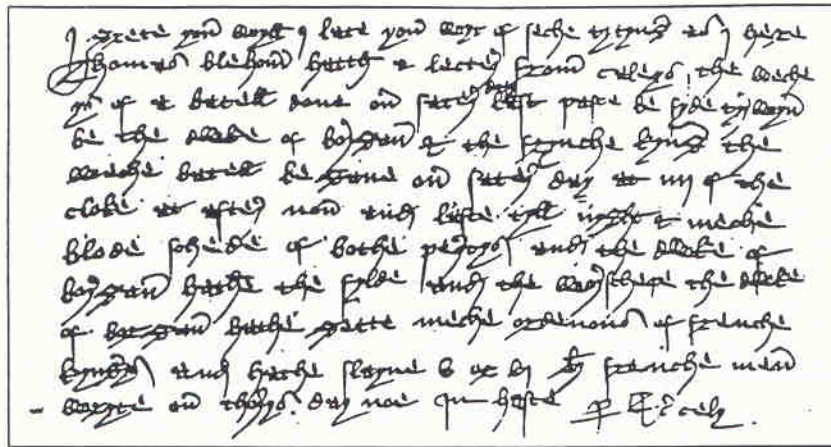
p yowr son
G cely

Version with Modernised Spelling and Punctuation

Right reverent and worshipful father, after all due recommendation pretending (= *having been given*), I recommend me unto you in the most lowest wise that I can or may. Furthermore, pleaseth it you to understand that I came unto Calais the Thursday after my dep(ar)ting from you, in safety I thank God, and I was welcome unto my friends, for til my brother came to Calais there was none other tidings there but (= *except that*) I was dead, etc. Pleaseth it you to understand there is now none merchants at Calais nor was (there) but few this month, and as for any other tidings, I can none write unto you as yet til I here more, and by the next writing that I send ye shall under(stand) the sale of your fells (= *wool fleeces*) with more, by the grace of God, who have you and all yours in his keeping, amen Writ at Calais the 12th day of March, a(nno) 78

per (= *by*) your son
G Cely

Richard Cely (the father) in London to Agnes, Richard and George Cely in Essex, 12 August 1479



Transcription

I grete you wyll I late you wyt of seche tytyng as I here
Thomas blehom hatth a letter from Caleys the weche
ys of a batell done on sater^{day} last paste be syde tyrwyn
be the dwke of borgan & the frynche kyng the
weche batell be gane on sater day at iik of the
cloke at after non and laste tyll nyght & meche
blode schede of bothe pertys and the dwke of
borgan hathe the fylde and the worschepe the dwke
of borgan hathe gette meche ordenons of frenche
kyngys and hathe slayne v or vj ml frensche men
wryte on thorys day noe in haste

p Rc cely

Version with Modernised Spelling and Punctuation

I greet you well. I let you wit (= know) of such tidings as I hear.
Thomas Blehom hath a letter from Calais, the which
is of a batle done on Saturday last past beside Tirwin
by the Duke of Burgundy and the French king, the
which battle began on Saturday at 4 of the
clock at afternoon, and lasted till night, and much
blood shed of both parties, and the Duke of
Burgundy hath the field, and the worship. The Duke
of Burgundy hath got much ordnance of (the) French
king's and hath slain 5 or 6 thousand Frenchmen.
Writ on Thursday now in haste.

per Richard Cely

Exercise

Examine the texts and facsimiles of the Cely letters. How do they compare to Caxton's work. Is the spelling more or less consistent? How closely does the graphology and orthography resemble that of MnE?