Standardization Of The English Language Essay, Research Paper

Standardization of the English Language

There are several important events before 1500 that when listed together show a

series of steps in the struggle for English language supremacy. These steps are

mainly governmental, legal and official events that pushed English usage. In

1356 The Sheriff’s Court in London and Middlesex were conducted in English for

the first time. When Parliament opened in 1362 the Statute of Pleading was

issued declaring English as a language of the courts as well as of Parliament,

but it was not until 1413 that English became the official language of the

courts everywhere. Thirteen years later in 1423, Parliament records start being

written in English. 1400 marks date that English is used in writing wills, a

seemingly small step, but one that impacted many people and began a legacy of

record keeping in English. In 1450 English became the language used in? writing

town laws and finally 1489 saw all statutes written in English. But it was not

until 1649 that English became the language of legal documents in place of Latin.

The formal rules intended to keep the use of French in official capacities were

not enough to combat the effects of the Black Death and the Hundred Years War

between France and England, which both contributed greatly to the rise of

English and fall of French. By the fourteenth century, English was again known

by most people, although French was not forgotten, and the people who spoke

French were generally bilingual. The? Statute of Pleading made it law that

English and not French would be used in the courts. However, it needs to be

emphasized that at the end of this statement, it says that after the pleadings,

debates, etc. in English were finished, they should be entered and enrolled in

Latin. English became the official language of the court in 1413, but French was

permitted until the eighteenth century.

More than the official bureaucratic changes in rules and law were the changes in

the use of the language by the everyday speakers. The changes that distinguish

Early Modern English from Middle English are substantial. The rules for spelling

were set down for the first time. The key is the new consistency used by

teachers, printers and eventually by the general populace. The sign of maturity

for English was the agreement on one set of rules replacing the spelling free-

for-all that had existed.

Out of the variety of? local dialects there emerged toward the end of the

fourteenth century a written language that in course of the fifteenth century

won general recognition and has since become the recognized standard in speech

and writing. The part of England that contributed most to the formation of this

standard was the East Midland type of English that became itst basis,

particularly the dialect of the metropolis, London. East Midland district was

the largest and most populous of the major dialect areas. There were also two

universities, Oxford and Cambridge. In the fourteenth century the monasteries

were playing a less important role in the spread of learning than they had once

played, while the two universities had developed into important intellectual

centers. So far as Cmbridge is concerned any ist influence was exerted in

support of the East Midland dialect. That of Oxford is less certain because

Oxfordshire was on the border between Midland and Southern and its dialect

shows certain characteristic Southern features.

Written London English of the close of the fourteenth century as used by a

number of Middle English authors, such as John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, had

not achived the status of a regional standard but was soon to become the basis

for a new national literary standard of English. It was the language of the

capital. Geographically, it occupied a position midway between the extreme North

and the extreme South. Already by 1430, this new standard had assumed a

relatively mature form. It was spread throughout England by professional clerks

in the administrative apparatus of the country and also became the model for

business aand pri-vate correspondence in English. It was this Chancery standard,

the normal language for all official written communication by the time when

Caxton set up his Printing Press in West-minster (1476), which became the direct

ancestor of Modern Standard English. As a result of this developments, the use

of regional dialects in writing receded more and more in the course of the?

fifteenth century until, in the Early Modern English period, writing came to be

exclusively done in the standard literary language.

The language of Chaucer’s late fourteenth century and of the fifteenth were

often describe as Late Middle English. It could as well be called Early Modern

English. Ich and I ran side by side in Chaucer’s language, and the distinction

between? ye? and? you was still that of nomina-tive versus accusative. Northern

they had replaced the earlier Anglo-Saxon hie, but hem was still alive. Such

became the preferred Chancery form which had ousted sich, sych, seche and swiche.

Which was replacing wich. The auxiliary verbs appear more regularly in their

modern forms: can, could, shall, should and would. A standardised spelling was

developing which was divorced from the phonetic environment so that sound and

spelling were becoming two separete systems.

An important linguistic change was also in syntax. Syntax governs the structure

of a sentence as well as the structure of verbs. Auxiliary verbs came into use,

for example the use of? do and? have which extended the capability of expression

for verbs. The subtle differences between? I walk, I do walk, and? I am walking

are not available in many other languages. This improvement assisted English in

differentiating itself from other languages. The use of? do as a “helping” verb

led the way for a host of other helping verbs: be, have, can, may, will and so

forth. This significant innovation set in motion a new way for verbs to be used.

English now uses subject-verb-object (SVO), which was not always true, nor must

it be true. Other languages use SOV and some do not require a particular order.

These languages use words such as particles, case endings or emphasis for order

selection criteria. In the year 1000, the beginning of the Middle English period,

the direct object appeared before the verb in? 52% of the sentences. By 1500, it

appeared before the verb in only 2% of the sentences. The biggest change was

between 1300 (40%) and 1400 (14%). The result is that today we use the sentence

order established at that time.? The important point was the establishment of

the convention of word order that helped to structure the language for general

use. The significant change in English sentences was the level of complexity

with new structures to support it. Science did not so much create the complexity,

but rather used the available capability.

The changes in grammar during the early modern period were more far reaching the

examples given. In fact, they were so far reaching that the grammar of English

has changed very little since then. What changes have happened have been slight,

gradual and not significant. The English language experienced a major upheaval

in grammar followed by a stability for many centuries. The changes were

fundamental and powerful enough to sustain tremendous change in science,

literature, technology and all other facets of human existence. Besides grammar,

an unusual change in the 1300s occurred called the Great Vowel Shift. For no

obvious reason the pronunciation of most vowels changed. There is a clear

pattern of how they shifted, but not why. There is also no clear benefit to the

language, only that it was part of the overall, dramatic metamorphosis of

English. Every known aspect of the language experienced change and growth.

The Great Vowel Shift had also cosiderably increased the discrepancies between

spelling and proununciation. Therefore were the “spelling-reformers” first to

appear on the scene, beginning with a book in Latin by Sir Thomas Smith,

entitled: De recta et emendata Linguae Anglicanae Scriptione (1568). Soon

followed on the same subject by John Hart An Orthographie (1569), William

Bullokar and Richard Mulcaster’s book The right writing of our English tung

(1582), Simon Daines Orthoepia Anglicana (1640). However, none of these achived

anything like the stabilizing effect on orthography which ultimately proceeded

from Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary of the English Language (1755) whose spelling

has become the ‘normal’ spelling of? Present-Day British Standard English.

The orthographical reformers of the seventeenth century were soon joined by

grammarians. Aims at ‘regularizing grammar’ became more and more pronounced in

the latter part of the seventeenth century and completly dominated grammatical

thinking in the century to follow, and not ‘grammatical thinking’ in the narrow

sense only. The laying down of rules about acceptable usage was now, and

especially in the latter half of the eighteenth century, extended to all

components of Standard English.

In the latter part of the fifteenth century the London standard had been

accepted in most parts of the country. By the middle of the century a fairly

cosistent variety of written English in both spelling and grammar had developed.

With the introdution of? printing in 1476 a new influence of great importance in

the spread of London English came into play. From the beginning London has been

the centre of book publishing in England. Caxton the first English printer, used

the current speech of London in his numerous translations, and the books the

issued from his press and from the presses of his successors gave a currency to

London English that assured more than anything else its rapid adoption. In the

sixteenth century the use of London English had become a matter of precept as

well as practice.

From the time of Caxton on, English is not merely a series of related oral

dialects, which are occasionaly written. It is a fully developed cultural tongue,

the equal, in its own fashion, of the Latin and Greek of Classical antiquity. It

is a language with a numerous body of unified speakers and writers, a language

with a vast potential and actual market. The modern English that emerges from

the era of Chaucer and Caxton is a tongue that still possesses vast

possibilities of change, channeled in the direction of vocabulary rather than of

sounds or grammatical structure.

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