

Question: Discuss the development of the English language from Middle English period to Modern times with reference to changes in phonology (sound), grammar, and lexis. (2006, '07)

Ans. The Middle English period was marked by momentous changes in the English language. A good many of them were due to the Norman Conquest of England. Many other changes are traceable to the Old English period. But they got impetus under the Norman influence.

To begin with, the grammar of English was marked by a reduction in inflections. This can be noticed in the tendency to level all the vowels of final unaccented inflectional syllables under an [e]. In most dialects, 'n' became a stock plural termination. But, gradually '-es' gained preference. In the case of the verbs, some of the strong verbs became weak. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the '-s' plural became generalized. Thus, words like 'keen' and 'fleen' became 'knees' and 'fleas'. As regards the adjectives, it is noticed that the degree forms of the adjectives got settled in the modern times. This is marked in the use of '-er' and '-est' for the monosyllabic adjectives and in the use of 'more' and 'most' for polysyllabic adjectives.

The development of English has also taken place in terms of sound changes. In cases of the short vowels, [a] and [u] were affected. By Shakespeare's time, Chaucer's [a] became an [æ]. [u] underwent the change of rounding and became a vowel as in the words 'but' 'cut', and 'sun'. The long vowels were also affected by change and they came to be pronounced with a greater elevation of the speech organs involved. Vowels like [a,e,o] were raised and [i,u] became diphthongs. Thus, Chaucer's [fi:f] became [faɪv] in Shakespeare.

The English language was also affected by a change in the lexis. In the Middle English period, this was basically due to the French influence. As a result, a good many of the French administrative, ecclesiastical, legal and military terms, words of fashion, art, media found their way into the English language. There were also a large number of words borrowed directly from Latin in this period. This kind of borrowing continued during the Renaissance as well. The Latin words entered mostly through writing. After the nineteenth century, words from science, automobile, computer and medicine were adopted into English. Thus, from the Middle English period to the Modern times, the changes in the English language is a continuous process, and these changes have either simplified the language make it more acceptable to the world community or have broadened its horizons by incorporating newer elements.