

## Middle English Exercise 2: A quick History of English

Language can be defined as a system of conventional signs humans use to communicate. In order for communication to take place, language users must be familiar with the given language system's logic, its conventions, the ways its parts work together to produce meaning. The qualities that distinguish languages from one another are

meaning (a.k.a. semantics)

grammar

lexicon (a.k.a. vocabulary)

(These are also known as the "levels of language.") A language's lexicon is its wordstock, and its grammar is the way the words are put together to produce sentences. Thus, the lexicon and grammar of a language work together to make its meaning. That meaning is conveyed through speech or, typically in more modern cultures, writing.

Middle English exists in a great variety of forms, because English was not yet standardized in the Middle Ages. That process in fact did not fully occur until the eighteenth century, hundreds of years later. Even Early Modern English, the form of the language Shakespeare spoke, had not been fully standardized. It is only with Modern English that we find the kind of consistency of spelling and of usage that, from our perspective, is fundamental to English. English has, in fact, changed dramatically in its 1000+ years of existence. Its history can be broken down into the following periods:

Old English (a.k.a. Anglo-Saxon)	5 <sup>th</sup> century through c. 1100
Middle English	c. 1100-1500
Early Middle English	c. 1100-c. 1340
Late Middle English	c.1340-c.1500
Modern English	from c. 1500
Present-Day English	its current usage

Some standardization seems to be revealed in texts written in Old English, which was used at a time when the writing of that vernacular was more centralized than it was in the later Middle English, when literacy was more widespread and many more voices were expressed in writing. (In addition, far fewer texts in Old English have survived than in Middle English, so the evidence of variety is inevitably less.) In the written texts of Middle English that remain, a number of dialects are witnessed, and texts are abundant, particularly from the Later Middle English period.

These forms of English are spoken of using the following abbreviations:

Old English: OE

Middle English: ME (Early Middle English=EME)

Modern English: ModE

Generally speaking, English went from being a largely Germanic language (one closely related to the ancestor of present-day German) to being a blend of many languages. That process began as Old English shifted to Middle English, with the influence of French, Norse, Dutch, Latin, and other languages. By the time Modern English developed, the language was fully hybrid, having incorporated words from so many languages that its Germanic roots are forgotten by most of its speakers.

The changes are mainly seen in the vocabulary of English, but as we will discover, English's grammar has changed, as well, although the sources of those changes are harder to discern.

Following are four different versions of a familiar passage. Read them, working to make sense of the older forms by noting parallels to the modern ones.

#### **Old English (West Saxon dialect, from the late 9<sup>th</sup> century)**

þu ure fæder, þe eart on heofonum, sie þin nama gehalgod. Cume þin rice. Sie þin wylla on eorþan swa swa on heofonum. Syle us todæg urne dæghwamilcan half. And forðief us ure gyltas swa swa we forðiefað þæm we wið us alyltaþ. And ne læd þu nu us on costnunge, ac alies us fram yfele.

#### **Middle English (Central Midlands dialect, c. 1380)**

Oure fadir, þat art in heuenys, halewid be þi name. þl kyngdom come to. Be þl wile don ase in heuene and in erþe. ziue to us þis day oure breed ouer oþir substaunse. And forziue to us oure dettes, as and we forziuen to oure dettouris. And leede us not into temptatiouns, but delyuere us from yuel.

#### **Early Modern English (Book of Common Prayer, 1549)**

Our Father, which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil.

#### **Modern English (Alternate Service Book)**

Our Father in heaven, your name be hallowed; your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but save us from evil.

As with Exercise 1, the differences among these versions of English that you are mostly likely to notice first are visual differences, the result of the graphology (writing system) and orthography (spelling system) of each. Go through and indicate the differences that strike you as most significant. In the process, bear in mind that Middle English and Old English use characters that no longer exist in Modern English. These are

þ	thorn (OE and ME): “th”
ð	eth (OE and EME): “th”
ȝ	yogh (ME): g, gh, y
ȝ	(OE): g
æ	(OE): a

In order to read OE and ME, a first step will be to “translate” those characters into ones you do recognize. You will also see the letter “u” used for “v” in OE and EME.

Beyond these visual distinctions, other more complex differences can be observed. We will be exploring these in more depth in Exercises 3 and 4. In general, we see how Middle English differs from Modern English in its grammar and lexicon.

### Grammar

Old English and, to some extent, Middle English rely upon **inflections** to indicate the role of a word in a sentence. An inflection is a suffix or, sometimes, prefix that shows how a word relates to another word in a sentence. Modern English retains this quality only in very limited ways. For instance, we add an –s or –es to the end of a noun to indicate the plural, and we use an apostrophe-s with a noun to indicate possession. In the case of verbs, we typically use an –ed ending to indicate the past tense.

Within the examples above, work backwards from the Modern English example, through the Early Modern English, to the Old English, circling along the way any endings that you think are inflectional. This will, of course, be hardest with the unfamiliar Old English, but even there you should be able to see some patterns that likely indicate inflectional endings. What do you conclude?

### Lexicon

While the Middle English version poses difficulties for a modern reader, it can be recognized as English, whereas the Old English might well look like German or another related language. This results not only from the loss of inflections that happened through the Middle English period but also from the way the lexicon of English changed between 1000 and 1250. To put it simply, French (and Latin) influenced English enormously, in the wake of the Norman Conquest in 1066, and by the time English morphed into the form we call Middle English, the lexicon had borrowed widely from French. Note the following French borrowings in the Middle English version:

*substaunse, dettes, temptaciouns, delyuere*