

## 2.1 A version of history

This chapter is called a history of English rather than *the* history of English. It is not *the* definitive history of English, as any history of events can be told in an infinite number of ways. Different histories of English will tell you different things – for example, one version may celebrate the colonial expansion of the British Empire and the subsequent rise of English as a global language, whereas another may despair at the way English has killed off other languages as its use expands across the world. A prescriptivist version may lament the way English changes, but a descriptivist version will seek to understand the reasons behind change. This particular history attempts to present events not as ‘facts’ but as one possible version of a long and complicated story. Charting the history of a language is a challenging puzzle – linguists play detective in piecing together information to try and form a picture of what languages used to look and sound like, and the causes that triggered change.

In Chapter 1, it was argued that language is primarily a *sociocultural* phenomenon. This is important to keep in mind when thinking about and studying language change. Languages change because society changes, not of their own free will. The story of English is bound up with massive societal changes in terms of wars, invasions, inventions, colonisation, conflict, globalisation, and billions of different human voices. This means that language change does not happen in a neat way, with all changes conveniently falling within particular time scales and being easily accountable for. However, certain patterns of language change have allowed linguists to formulate historical linguistic eras. This chapter looks at each of these in turn. They are:

- Old English (OE) 449–1100
- Middle English (ME) 1100–1500
- Early Modern English (EME) 1500–1800
- Late Modern English (LME) 1800 – present day
- Present Day English (PDE) (present day onwards)

Remember that change is gradual – it doesn’t happen overnight, and because of this, dates given are often estimates.

## 2.2 The era of Old English

We begin this history of English in 449AD, with the arrival of a group of Germanic invaders to Britain. Before their arrival, the lands we now call Britain were mostly home to Celts who spoke various Celtic languages such as Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Cornish and Manx. The invaders were made up of a

number of different groups: Jutes, Saxons and Frisians. These groups spoke a number of closely related varieties of Germanic languages, and collectively they came to think of their speech as English, with dialects reflecting the heritage of each different group. Does this mean that we should think of Old English as *Old Englishes* instead? Perhaps. Indeed, an often simplified version of English history downplays the enormous amount of regional variation during this time, construing ‘English’ as one resource that was used in the same way across speech communities. A more accurate view would be that right from the very beginnings of English(es), we see examples of **language contact**, a process of change whereby multiple languages meet and influence each other. Language contact can trigger conflict and sociocultural uniformity in equal measure, but the result is always some kind of linguistic change.

It must be noted that linguistic data from this ‘birth’ of English is completely unavailable. The first attempt to document the history of this era comes from a source published nearly 300 years after the invasion of 449AD, in the form of *Historia Ecclesiastica Genuis Anglorum*, written in Latin by the monk Bede. This means that any history of English – including this one – includes some guesswork. These issues should be taken into account when thinking about language change over time.

### KEY TERMS

**Language contact:** a process of language change whereby multiple languages come into social contact and have linguistic influence on each other, in the form of borrowings, grammatical and phonological change, formation of **pidgins** and **creoles**, and higher rates of multilingualism

**Pidgin:** a language that develops between two speech communities who do not share a common language

**Creole:** a language that originally began as a pidgin, and has become the mother-tongue of a speech community with its own native L1 speakers

### 2.2.1 Missionaries and Latin

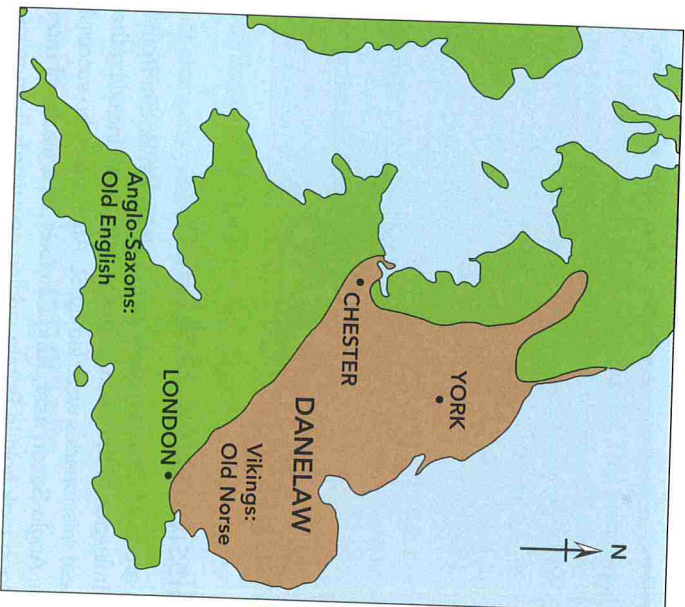
In 597AD, a group of Christian missionaries arrived in Britain from Rome, bringing the influence of the Latin language with them, including the Roman alphabet. These missionaries were led by St. Augustine who successfully converted the Anglo-Saxon ruler, King Ethelbert, in a matter of months. Christianity soon took hold in Britain, adding new words from religious contexts into English such as *monk*, *nun*, *pope*, *candle* and *priest*. And yet, despite its growing influence as a religion, Christianity was largely confined to the educated classes, who were able to access the Latin language in which much of the texts were written, and in which sermons were spoken.



## 2.2.2 The Vikings

In the late eighth century, Britain found itself once again under invasion, this time by Vikings from Denmark, Norway and Sweden. A high number of raids took place until the beginning of the eleventh century, and an agreement was eventually forged between the Viking king Guthrum and the English ruler of Wessex, Alfred. This agreement – known as the Danelaw – saw Britain divided in two, with the Vikings ruling the North and the East, and the Anglo-Saxons ruling the South and West, marked by a road between London and Chester. The Vikings spoke Old Norse, a North Germanic language, which gradually became part of the English language as the interaction between speech communities increased. Most Norse words that were ‘borrowed’ into English during this time were related to administration, law, Old Norse and the military. This is perhaps not surprising, given the ongoing tensions between the Vikings and Anglo-Saxons, as each group tried to wrestle control of the borders set out by the Danelaw.

Figure 2.1: Map showing the division of Britain under the Danelaw



## 2.3 The language of Old English

Are Old English (OE) and Present Day English (PDE) really the same language? To illustrate, look at Figure 2.2, which shows the front of Franks Casket, a box dating from the early eighth century. At the top, bottom and left of the box you will see a series of runes – an alphabetic system used for carving in wood or stone, and widely used throughout the Germanic world.

Figure 2.2: Franks Casket



Is this really the same language as PDE? Texts such as these were much closer linguistically to European and Scandinavian languages than what the successor to OE – Middle English – ended up looking like, so it perhaps seems a little odd that these texts are referred to as ‘Old English’. Here, it is important to note that the etymology (the study of the origin of words) of the term ‘Old English’ is a politically motivated one, introduced by historians who wanted to create the idea that the English language had an inflated sense of longevity, ancient history and rich tradition. James Milroy (2002: 19) calls this the ‘myth of the ancient language’, a term used to try and describe the long ‘journey’ that English had come on, in an attempt to conjure up a sense of linguistic nostalgia and tradition. Even so, when the runes are transliterated into the Roman alphabet, they still make very little sense to a twenty-first century user of PDE (see Text 2A).



## Text 2A

Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig;

warp gasric grom, þær he on greut giswom.

Hronæas ban.

Mæegi.

The flood lifted up the fish on to the cliff-bank;

the whale became sad, where he swam on the shingle.

Whale's bone.

Magi.

## Transcription and translation of runes on Franks Casket

Although the Roman alphabet was used for writing (rather than the runes in Figure 2.2), the linguistic ‘distance’ between the kind of English found in Text 2A and contemporary usage provides a clear idea of just how much languages can change over time. To reiterate a point made in Chapter 1, it is important not to see older varieties of English as somehow inferior to the current version. Languages do not change for the ‘better’ or for the ‘worse’, and OE was still just as expressive and flexible as PDE. It had slang, regional and personal variation, taboo lexis, informal and formal registers, and just as many other linguistic variables as are found in PDE. You will explore more about attitudes to change in Chapter 4.

## ACTIVITY 2.1

## Old English detective

Read Text 2B, a short extract from *De Temporibus Anni* (The Seasons of the Year), an OE text by the monk Ælfric, from around 993AD. Are there any linguistic characteristics (words, letters, grammatical classes, syntactical constructions, etc.) from PDE that you recognise in this text? What do your findings tell you about how English has changed? What kinds of things from OE might have remained? Complete the activity before reading any further. To get you started, the text begins like this: ‘On the fourth day God created the two lights that are the sun and moon...’

## Text 2B

On ðam feorðan dæg gesceap God twa miccle lecht þæt is sunne and mona and betæhte þæt mare lecht is seo sunne to ðam dæge and þæt fæsse lecht þæt is se mona to ðære nihte. On ðam ylcan dæge he geworhte ealle steorran and tida gesette. On ðam fiftan dæge he gesceop eal wyrmycynn and ða micclan hwalas and eal fiscycynn on mislicum and menigfealdum hiwum.

Extract from *De Temporibus Anni*

There are some recognisable elements in Text 2B, such as the prepositions *on* and *to*, the auxiliary verb *is*, and the conjunction *and*. This is very typical of what remains in PDE; much of the OE influence lies in these kinds of short function words. Function words (prepositions, certain auxiliary verbs, conjunctions and determiners) are much more resistant to language change because they are the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the linguistic system and, as such, are less susceptible to change. Changes in vocabulary items usually occur in lexical words (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs). Chapter 3 looks at this in more detail. Indeed, the only instantly recognisable lexical word in Text 2B is a noun: *God*. In the following sections, you will explore some of the written, phonological, lexical and grammatical characteristics of OE. The aim here is not to provide a full description of these, but to illustrate some of the key features and how they fit into the wider picture of language change. Full descriptions can be found in Barber et al. (2012) and Smith (2005), amongst others.

## 2.3.1 Writing system and pronunciation

One of the reasons that Text 2B looks so alien to a modern English reader is because of the **writing system**. The spelling system reflected the phonology of the time, and goes some way to illustrating how the language was pronounced during this period.

- OE used the Roman alphabet, introduced by missionaries. This gradually replaced the runic system.
- Although many letters were the same as PDE, the letters <ƿ>, <ƿ>, <q>, <v> and <z> were hardly ever used.
- The OE letters <ð>, <þ> and <æ> are no longer used. <ð> and <þ> have been replaced by <th>, and <æ> by <a>.
- <pp>, called ‘wynn’, was later replaced by <w>.
- Because the spelling system was not yet standardised, and was written down phonetically, OE had no ‘silent’ letters. So, the initial consonants of words such as *crapa* (servant) and *writan* (write) were pronounced, as were initial consonant clusters *hwær* (where) and *hwit* (white), and medial <h> in words such as *niht* (night). All vowels were pronounced.



- The OE vowel system distinguishes between long and short vowels. The vowel inventory was /y, i, e, æ, a, o, u/, with a short and long version of each phoneme.
- Sometimes <c> was pronounced /tʃ/ and <g> as /j/.
- The consonant clusters <sc> and <cg> were pronounced /ʃ/ and /dʒ/, respectively.

**KEY TERM**

**Writing system:** a method for visually representing spoken language, including letters of alphabets and punctuation marks

## 2.3.2 Lexicon

The OE lexicon consisted of words inherited from its Germanic ancestors and words 'borrowed' from other languages which it had come into contact with, such as Greek, Latin, French and various Scandinavian languages. Many borrowed words are related to Roman technology and religion, reflecting the social context of the time. New words were also formed through compounding and affixation – processes covered in more detail in Chapter 3.

## 2.3.3 Grammar and syntax

The principle difference between OE and PDE is that OE was an inflected language. In PDE, relationships between words are largely expressed by word order; in OE, these relationships are expressed by the endings of words, known as inflections. PDE still retains *some* inflections, such as possessive and plural endings on nouns (e.g. *Eve/Eve's* and *bicycle/bicycles*), and pronouns also change depending on whether they appear in Subject or Object position (e.g. *she loves him* not *she loves he*). OE had a fairly complex inflection system that we describe in terms of case, agreement, number and gender:

- **Case** is a grammatical category related to the morphology of nouns, pronouns, determiners and adjectives, and the role they play in a phrase or clause. OE had four cases:
  - Nominative (the form of the word in Subject position)
  - Accusative (the form of the word in Direct Object position)
  - Genitive (used to express possession)
  - Dative (the form of the word in Indirect Object position, within a preposition phrase).

- **Agreement** is related to the way word forms correspond to others. For example, OE nouns agree with the determiner that precedes them, and are assigned the appropriate case ending:

*Se hlaford bindeþ þone cnapan*

The lord binds the servant

(example taken from Smith 2005: 52)

Here, *se hlaford* (the lord) is the Subject in the nominative case; *þone cnapan* (the servant) is the Direct Object in the accusative case. There are two forms of the determiner *the*: (*se* and *þone*). These are different because they are modifying nouns in different cases.

- **Number** refers to whether a word is singular or plural. Whereas PDE generally indicates number on nouns by adding an '-s' ending and by changing forms of the pronoun (e.g. *this* vs. *those*), OE grammar also indicates number on determiners and adjectives.

**Gender** markings can be one of three types: masculine, feminine or neuter. PDE has no gender markings apart from on pronouns (e.g. *he*, *she* and *it*) and possessive determiners (e.g. *her book/his book*). In OE, the gender category determined the morphological properties of the word. Gender assignment was arbitrary – in other words, there is not always a direct or intuitive form-meaning pairing. For example, *wif* (wife) is grammatically a neuter gender; *cudele* (cuttlefish) is feminine and *stān* (stone) is masculine. The loss of grammatical gender was one of the large-scale changes in the history of English, labelled 'the Great Gender Shift' by Poussa (1992).

**KEY TERMS**

**Case:** a grammatical category related to the morphology of nouns, pronouns, determiners and adjectives, and the role they play in a clause or phrase

**Agreement:** the way that word forms correspond to and 'agree' with others

**Number:** grammatical marking indicating whether a word is in the singular or plural form

**Gender:** a grammatical or semantic category of words, showing contrast between masculine, feminine or neuter



Now we move on to look at OE verbs:

- OE verbs could be in either present or past tense, as is the case in PDE.
- They could be in three **moods** (sometimes referred to as **modality**), referring to the different degrees of possibility they can express: the indicative (for statements and questions), the imperative (for commands), and the subjunctive (for wishes and hypotheticals). We use the subjunctive much less in PDE, although it did have a revival in British English during the second part of the twentieth century.
- Verbs could be strong or weak. Strong verbs form the past tense by changing the vowel (such as present tense *sing* vs. past tense *sang*). Weak verbs form the past tense by morphological inflection, for example by adding *-d* (such as present tense *dance* vs past tense *danced*).

Finally, because of the number of inflections in the grammar, OE syntax displayed a much more flexible word order than PDE allows for: PDE has a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, whereas OE had the following options (where C stands for Complement); SVO, SVOC, CSVO, VOC and VOCS. Over time, OE gradually lost its inflections and word order became more fixed. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, English became heavily influenced by French, which had a rigid word order but few inflections. This meant that OE's capacity for having free word order was lost.

#### KEY TERM

**Mood/modality:** a system of meaning related to a speaker's attitude to, confidence in, or perception about something in the world

## 2.4 The era of Middle English

Middle English (ME) is the term used to describe the varieties of English used between approximately 1100 and 1500. We have access to far more written material from this era than OE, as English remained the primary choice of language for native speakers and was eventually adopted by the Norman-French invaders, who arrived in 1066. Despite the long-lasting influence of French, the status of English during this era grew to one of high prestige, further establishing itself as an important part of national identity.

### 2.4.1 The Norman invasion

In 1066, the English language was changed forever. When the king of Wessex, Edward the Confessor, died in 1060, he appointed Harold Godwinson as his successor, but William of Normandy contested his claim to the throne. This

dispute led to the Norman invasion of Britain and, in 1066, William was crowned the first Norman King of England, becoming William the Conqueror. The Normans spoke Old-Norman (which gradually changed to Anglo-Norman), a dialect of French, which itself is a Romance language derived from Latin. Following his ascension to the throne, William was faced with English rebellions. He exiled the English rebels and rewarded his supporters with lands and the offices of the English nobility. Thus, the English – and the English language – began to lose prestige, being replaced by Anglo-Norman. High status roles were taken by the Normans, while English remained the language of the lower classes.

### 2.4.2 Diglossia, variation and contact

This sociolinguistic shift can be described as **diglossia**: where one or more languages (in this case, Anglo-Norman, French and Latin) assumes the role of 'high status' variety, being used for state and religious purposes; and one language (English) fulfils the role of 'low status', used largely in informal speech circumstances. Regional variation in ME was high: there was no regulation on English in the form of grammars or dictionaries, no standard variety, and the language was rarely written down, further threatening its status. The future of English looked bleak. And yet, despite French rule for over 300 years, the English language survived, primarily because of the huge numbers of native speakers who only spoke English. Over time, the English and Norman languages merged, as natives and Normans married and became socially closer.

#### KEY TERM

**Diglossia:** a term mostly used in sociolinguistics, referring to a situation where two very different varieties of a language exist alongside each other, each holding a distinct social function

#### ACTIVITY 2.2

##### Attitudes to Middle English diglossia

Read Text 2C, and then answer the questions (a–d). This text was written in the late thirteenth century by Robert of Gloucester. For the purposes here, it has been translated into PDE. 'William the Bastard' refers to the Norman invader; 'Harold' refers to the king of England at the time of the invasion.

- What attitudes towards diglossia are presented in the text?
- Imagine you were (i) a Norman invader and (ii) a native English speaker. How might you feel about diglossia, taking into account each sociolinguistic identity?



- c. Why do you think people felt so strongly about language during this time?
- d. What do such attitudes reveal about the way language is tied up with nationalism, nation-building and identity?

## Text 2C

Much sorrow has been often in England,  
As you may hear and understand,  
Of many battles that have been and men have conquered this land.  
First, as you have heard, the emperors of Rome.  
Then the Saxons and Angles with battles strong,  
And then those of Denmark that held it so long,  
At last those of Normandy that be yet here  
Won it and hold it yet; I will you tell in what manner:

When William the Bastard heard tell of Harold's treachery,  
How he had made him king and with such falsehood,  
For that land was given to him, as Harold well knew  
...  
Thus came – lo! – England into Norman's hands,  
And the Normans could not speak anything except their own speech,  
And spoke French as they did at home, and their children did also teach,  
So that high men of this land that of their blood come  
Hold to all that speech that they took of them;  
For unless a man knows French, men think little of him.  
But low men hold to English and to their own speech yet.  
I suppose there be none in all the countries of the world  
That do not hold to their own speech, save for England alone,  
But yet it is well for a man to know both,  
For the more a man knows the more he is worth.

Extract from *The Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester* (c. 1300)

## 2.4.3 The rise of English

While the ME period is noted for French influence on social and linguistic structures, the end of this period saw notions of 'Englishness' emerging and a growing sense of pride in the national language. Events such as the creation of the Magna Carta in 1215 transferred legal power to those who previously had little, and took power away from those who had too much (such as the monarchy and social elite). The Hundred Years' War (actually from 1337 to 1453) between England and France positioned the French language as 'the enemy', further promoting the idea that nationhood and language are closely related. The Black Death in 1348 diminished the rural population so much that they could demand better working conditions and move to areas that offered better prospects, which saw the rise in geographical mobility and social status of the peasant classes who were fiercely proud of the English language. The year 1362 saw the passing of the Statute of Pleading, decreeing that English be the language of the law courts. In 1384, John Wycliffe produced a translation of the Bible in English, challenging the status of Latin as the language of religions. By 1385, English was the chosen language of education in schools. By the end of the fourteenth century, literature was produced in both French and English, and notable writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer opted to use English for their works, reflecting the growing sense of English linguistic identity.

### ACTIVITY 2.3

#### Translating Middle English

Read through Text 2D, an extract from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the English of the late fourteenth century. To the best of your ability, try and produce a modern-day translation. Once finished, use your translation to help you analyse the original. What do you notice in terms of the writing system, vocabulary and syntax? How does this differ from Old English? For example, the first line could be translated as:

In a strange region he scales steep slopes

## Text 2D

Mony kyvf he ouerclambe in contrayez straunge,  
Fer floten fro his frendez fremeedly he rydez.  
At vche warpe oper water per be wyze passed  
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,

And þat so foule and so felle þat fezt hym byhode.  
 So many meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndeþ,  
 Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.  
 Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,  
 Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,  
 Bobe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oberquyle,  
 And etayneþ, þat hym aneledede of þe heze felle;  
 Nade he þen duþty and dryþe, and Dryþtyn had serued,  
 Douteles he hade þen ded and dreped ful ofte.

Extract from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*  
 (Anonymous, late fourteenth century)

## 2.5 The language of Middle English

### 2.5.1 Writing system and pronunciation

- Spelling was still not standardised, and there remained a high amount of variation.
- The OE letters <ð>, <þ> and <æ> gradually fell out of usage. <þ> was retained the longest. OE <3> was retained in some texts, or replaced by <g>.
- The Norman <qu> replaced Anglo-Saxon <cw> in words such as *cuene* (*queen*).
- The /j/ sound gradually became represented as <sh> rather than <sc>.
- Word-initial <hw> became <wh>.
- Word-initial <h> was gradually deleted, in words such as *hnecca* (*neck*).
- The writing-sound system remained phonetic, with all letters being pronounced.
- Many long vowel sounds were written with a double vowel, such as *see* changing to *seē*.
- ME saw a significant increase in the number of diphthongs, when compared against OE.

### 2.5.2 Lexicon

ME is characterised by language contact, and so acquired a high number of borrowings. The main sources of these were French and Latin.

- French borrowings number in their thousands, and reflect the kind of social change occurring during England at the time. Most were nouns. Words were borrowed from categories as diverse as government/administration (e.g. *chancellor*, *crown*, *state*, *treason*); religion (e.g. *sauiour*, *sermon*, *theology*, *virgin*); law (e.g. *attorney*, *justice*, *slander*); military (e.g. *army*, *combat*, *enemy*); food (e.g. *bacon*; *beef*); clothing (e.g. *cape*, *jewel*, *plume*) and culture (*grammar*, *painting*, *music*).
- Borrowings directly from Latin tended to be more formal words, e.g. *allegory*, *contempt*, *gesture*, *necessity* and *testimony*. Many of these borrowings introduced new affixes into English:
  - suffixes: *-able*, *-ible*, *-ent*, *-al*, *-ive*
  - prefixes: *ab-*, *ad-*, *am-*, *ante-*, *con-*, *dis-*, *im-*, *in-*, *pro-*, *re-*, *sub-*.

### 2.5.3 Grammar and syntax

ME is much easier for PDE readers to understand because of the loss of many inflections.

- Nouns, determiners and adjectives were no longer marked for grammatical gender, and verb endings were reduced in variety.
- Most case endings largely disappeared, especially the nominative, accusative and dative case. As a result of this, word order became fixed, losing the flexibility offered by OE.
- English word order was established as Subject-Verb-Object.
- Pronouns retained their gender, number, person and case distinctions.

## 2.6 Early Modern English

Early Modern English (EME) is bookended by two important events: the arrival of printing technology in England in 1476 and the publication of Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. Both of these changed the way that English was written. Because writing is much less liable to change, English underwent an increased process of **standardisation**, where the language became more uniform. Literacy rates increased as a result, triggering huge social change and greater access to culture. Britain increased its international trade activity, bringing



words from various world languages into English, as contact was made around the world. Also of enormous significance during this era was the Act of Union in 1707, which formed the state of Britain between England, Scotland and Wales. This Act triggered the beginning of the British Empire, projecting the English language and its people around the world. By the end of the twentieth century, English was one of the dominant languages of the world.

#### KEY TERM

**Standardisation:** the process under which a language develops a standard 'prestige' variety

## 2.6.1 Literature

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a flurry of creative activity saw a rise in literary works written in English in what is known as the 'golden age' of English literature. Writers such as John Donne, Andrew Marvell, John Milton and William Shakespeare all opted to use English, rather than Latin or French, which had previously been the languages of choice for the social elite and the educated classes. What impact did this have on the English language? First of all, it meant that attitudes towards the language shifted to more positive ones, with English taking on an increased sense of gravitas and social status. Secondly, vocabulary size increased as writers created new word forms and experimented with word meaning, with thousands of words from over fifty languages entering into the language. Shakespeare himself introduced hundreds of words, phrases and idioms that are still in use today (Crystal 2004), as well as experimenting with the syntax of English in highly creative ways. And finally, the increase in written publications helped to standardise the language.

## 2.6.2 Printing, dictionaries and grammars

Another reason why there was a surge of published literary works during this era was because of printing technology, which was brought to England in 1476. The man responsible for this was William Caxton, who published a range of literary works from his London printing press. The location of the press was important – Caxton published using the dialect, grammar and spelling system of the capital city. This helped to promote the idea of a 'Standard English' – a kind of benchmark or reference point to which all other varieties of English were compared. There was a growing sense of the need for English to be 'regulated', and for linguistic uniformity. It follows that the most important objects in this era of English were dictionaries: records of the language which presented a standard

model of English, with a regular spelling system. Two of the most influential dictionaries are owed to two men, Cawdrey and Johnson:

- In 1604, Robert Cawdrey published the first English dictionary, *A Table Alphabeticall*, consisting of around 3,000 short entries. Cawdrey intended his dictionary to be useful for 'Ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskillfull persons, whereby they may more easily and better understand many hard English words'.
- In 1755, Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*, consisting of 40,000 detailed entries. Although Johnson had initially set out to 'fix' what he saw as the chaotic and unruly variation in English spelling, he eventually recognised that language is ever-changing, and conceded that his role was to describe English, rather than prescribe it.

As well as dictionaries, many grammars of English were published in the seventeenth century. The most influential of these was Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* in 1762 and Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* in 1794. Around 200 grammars were published during the EME era, most of which were highly prescriptive, arguing for a 'correct' way of using English and presenting themselves as a kind of 'linguistic manual'. The rise of prescriptivism was accentuated by people such as Jonathan Swift and John Dryden, who called for the creation of an 'English Academy' – a group to decide on correct usage and 'protect' the language from falling into disrepute.

## 2.6.3 The Great Vowel Shift

A major development in English phonology took place across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, known as the Great Vowel Shift (GVS). During this time, the sounds of the long vowels in English changed their places of articulation. Essentially, vowels shifted to a different point of articulation in the mouth, in a process of language change generally referred to as a **chain shift**. This means that when one sound changes it has a knock-on effect on other sounds. The changes are listed in Table 2.1 (adapted from Smith 1999: 131).

Table 2.1: The Great Vowel Shift

Word	ME vowel sound	PDE vowel sound
<i>life, bite</i>	[i:]	[aɪ]
<i>meet</i>	[e:]	[i:]
<i>meat</i>	[e:]	[i:]
<i>gate</i>	[a:]	[eɪ]



Word	ME vowel sound	PDE vowel sound
how, town	[u:]	[au]
mood	[o:]	[u:]
boat	[o:]	[ou]

Quite what triggered the GVS continues to be debated. Linguists have theorised a range of potential factors, such as: an influx of loanwords from other languages; high death rates during the Black Death which caused geographical population changes; and changes in perceived social status of vowel sounds. Given the growing sense of language and regional identity, it is likely that people **hypercorrected** their pronunciation to try and indicate their status. Whatever the reason(s) were, the GVS gave rise to many of the peculiarities of English pronunciation that we have today. Whilst some spellings changed to reflect the change in pronunciation (e.g. *barn* from *bern* and *heart* from *herte*), many did not. So, in PDE we have multiple spellings for one vowel sound (such as the [u:] in *due*, *chew* and *too*), and one spelling for multiple vowel sounds (such as the <ea> in *knead*, *bread*, *wear* and *great*).

### KEY TERMS

**Chain shift:** a situation where a series of sound changes take place, with each one influencing the next

**Hypercorrection:** an over-emphasis shift in linguistic register, usually when a speaker of a non-standard variety goes 'too far' in trying to emulate the standard variety

## 2.7 Late Modern English

From 1800 onwards, the English language accumulated more speakers and a larger vocabulary. Two of the contributing factors to this were growth in other areas: industry and the British Empire. The next sections explore how and why these had an impact on English.

### 2.7.1 Industry

The British Industrial Revolution was a period of great technological change, lasting from around 1760 to 1840. Tasks previously done by hand were gradually automated and performed by machines, with a rise in mass production, transport technology and standards of living. New inventions meant that new words and phrases were needed, so we see terms from semantic fields such

as fashion (e.g. *mackintosh*, *rubber*), technology (e.g. *telephone*, *camera*, *electricity*), science and medicine (e.g. *cholera*, *oxygen*, *vaccine*) and transport (e.g. *train*, *engine*, *piston*) from this era. A spin-off of industrial revolution is urbanisation, resulting in greater population densities – and increased levels of language contact.

### 2.7.2 Colonialism and the British Empire

Between the late sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the British Empire took the English language throughout the world, and brought foreign words back to England. The Empire reached far and wide, with colonies in Egypt, the Americas, Canada, Ireland, Singapore, Nigeria, South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, the West Indies and many others. Figure 2.3 is a map of the world in 1907, with British colonies outlined in red. English was imposed as an official language in many of these colonies, with the British invaders often showing little respect for local indigenous languages. Where large numbers of native speakers existed, such as in India, English was established as the second language. For the colonisers, imposing English as a language was an important way of establishing authority, with the language deployed as a political tool for wresting control of new lands and demonstrating power. Speakers of English are often guilty of seeing themselves as at the top of a hierarchical linguistic ladder, where their access to and use of English offers them rights over those who speak other languages. This is known as **linguicism** (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988) or **linguistic imperialism** (Phillipson, 1992), which will be explored further in Chapter 4. The English language has a violent and somewhat sinister past, rather than the often jingoistic way in which 'the Empire' and the global growth of English is celebrated and reminisced about. Given this sociocultural context, there are a number of metaphors that we might use to reflect the way English changed at this time: ENGLISH IS A POLITICAL TOOL; ENGLISH IS A STEAMROLLER and ENGLISH IS A BULLY.

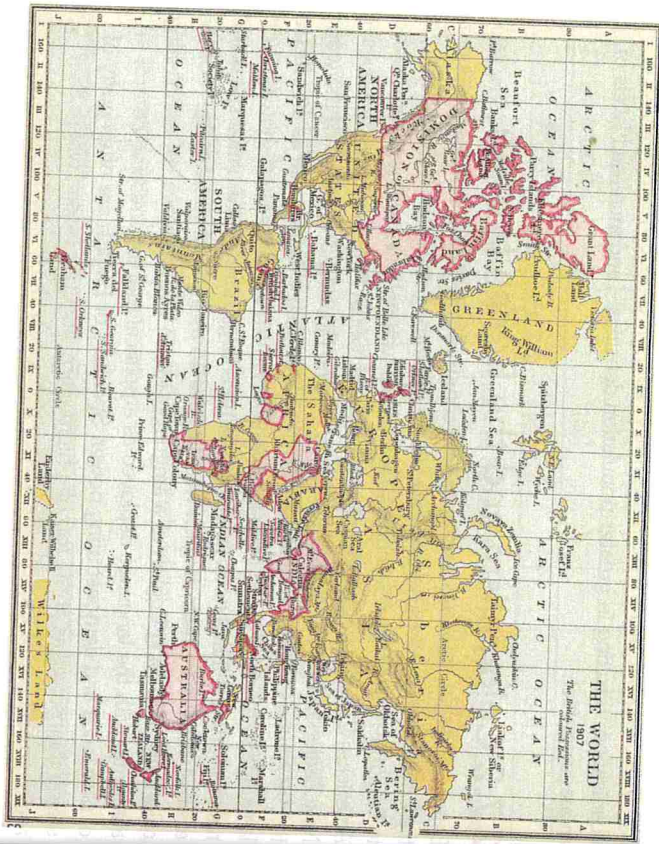
### KEY TERMS

**Linguicism:** a term used to draw parallels between hierarchies on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender and language

**Linguistic imperialism:** an ideological view and process of language change, whereby one language is imposed on speakers who use another language, often undermining the rights of those speakers. It promotes the idea that there is a hierarchy of languages



Figure 2.3: The British Empire in 1907



## 2.8 Present Day English

Present Day English (PDE) refers to any one of the varieties of English currently spoken around the world. As will have become clear through this chapter, it perhaps does not make sense to speak of 'one English' but 'many Englishes', each with its own unique linguistic characteristics. Given the massive amount of variation across these Englishes, just a few of the key features are presented here:

- PDE continues to change, most noticeably with the arrival of new vocabulary and meanings (e.g. *Brexit*, *babycino*, *drunk text*, *superfruit*, *climate and freecycle*, all of which have become popular in recent years).
- Borrowings and phonological and syntactical patterns continue to be adopted from a wide range of cultures, reflecting the process of twenty-first-century globalisation and language contact.
- Technology has influenced the way we use language, particularly in relation to multi-modal communication such as social media and computer tools.
- In the UK, regional accents continue to display diversity and innovation.
- English continues to be used around the world and is widely regarded as the international language of trade, education and the internet.

- English continues to be seen as a prestigious and desirable global language.
- English is seen as responsible for the extinction of less commonly spoken languages, a topic explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

With the affordances that computer tools and the internet offer, English usage is now widely documented. Many universities host **corpora** of language – huge databases of spoken and written speech. Some of these can be explored for free, such as the British National Corpus ([www.cambridge.org/links/tescha6001](http://www.cambridge.org/links/tescha6001)). Academic journals such as *English Today* and *English Language and Linguistics* publish on contemporary usage and record the way that English is changing. With these huge databases of language at their disposal, linguists can now explore how language is used on a much larger scale, without relying solely on a narrow snapshot of data.

### KEY TERM

**Corpora:** (plural of *corpus*) large databases of a language, used for research purposes and to document the way that a language is used and changes

### ACTIVITY 2.4

#### Metaphors of English

Using your knowledge of the way English has changed over time, explore the meaning of the following metaphors (1–10). Consider what each metaphor might mean in relation to the way the language has changed and adapted, thinking about what kind of information is mapped onto ENGLISH in each example. What 'kind' of English is construed in each one? Which metaphor do you think best reflects English, and why? What linguistic expressions might fall under that metaphor? Finally, can you think of other metaphors to describe English? Some suggestions have been made for the first one.

(1) ENGLISH IS A FAST-FLOWING RIVER

This metaphor reflects the idea that English has a strong Germanic identity (the main river), but exists in a network of connections or 'tributaries'. For example, English has been enriched by vocabulary from Scandinavian languages, Norman French, Latin, Greek and others. You might also think of these tributaries as the various regional and global varieties of English (explored further in Chapter 5). Change has happened quickly and steadily, much like the way water moves in a rapidly flowing river. There may be rapids or waterfalls, reflecting high density of change in certain periods such as the Industrial Revolution.



There are no dry parts of the river, reflecting the constant change that English has undergone. The river reaching the sea could reflect the global status and size of English, with other oceans representing other global languages such as Spanish and Arabic. Expressions that fall under this metaphor would be things such as:

the *flow of English is coming quickly*  
*English sprang from a small source and is now an ocean of a*  
*language*

the *change in English is unlikely to dry up anytime soon*

- (2) ENGLISH IS A CONTAINER
- (3) ENGLISH IS A SPONGE
- (4) ENGLISH IS A CURRENCY
- (5) ENGLISH IS A WEAPON
- (6) ENGLISH IS A SPIDER WEB
- (7) ENGLISH IS A PIECE OF CLAY
- (8) ENGLISH IS A FOREST FIRE
- (9) ENGLISH IS A BUSINESS
- (10) ENGLISH IS A MAGPIE

## 2.9 The future of English

Language change is messy, complex and largely unpredictable. In this chapter, you have seen how change in a language is an inevitable consequence of change in society. This means that English *will* continue to change in the future, despite efforts by prescriptivists and self-proclaimed 'defenders' of the language. It will not get 'better' or 'worse', and, once again, it is important to steer clear of such adjectives when thinking and talking about language.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

What does the future hold for English?

There is a range of websites and resources that try to predict the future of English. Using the Internet, explore what some of these sources say. A good place to start is [www.cambridge.org/links/esccha6002](http://www.cambridge.org/links/esccha6002). Think about:

- What view of English do the writers have?
- What metaphors do they draw on when writing about language?
- Do you agree with the way that English is talked about? Why/why not?
- How is the view of language tied up with views around nationalism and patriotism?
- Finally, do you think we can ever predict the future of a language? Why/why not?

## Wider reading

Read more about English and its various histories by exploring the following books:

- Barber, C., Beal, J. & Shaw, P. (2009). *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (1992) *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, J. (2005). *Essentials of Early English*. London: Routledge.
- Watts, R. (2011). *Language Myths and the History of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.