ANALYZING DIALECTS AND WRITTEN DOCUMENTS IN MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

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Abstract: Middle English language, the vernacular spoken and written in England from about 1100 to about 1500, the descendant of the Old English language and the ancestor of Modern English.The history of Middle English is often divided into three periods: (1) Early Middle English, from about 1100 to about 1250, during which the Old English system of writing was still in use; (2) the Central Middle English period from about 1250 to about 1400, which was marked by the gradual formation of literary dialects, the use of an orthography greatly influenced by the Anglo-Norman writing system, the loss of pronunciation of final unaccented -e, and the borrowing of large numbers of Anglo-Norman words; the period was especially marked by the rise of the London dialect, in the hands of such writers as John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer; and (3) Late Middle English, from about 1400 to about 1500, which was marked by the spread of the London literary dialect and the gradual cleavage between the Scottish dialect and the other northern dialects.

Key words: orthography, dialects, ancestor, West Saxon, substitution, hypothesis

During this period the basic lines of inflection as they appear in Modern English were first established. Among the chief characteristic differences between Old and Middle English were the substitution of natural gender in Middle English for grammatical gender and the loss of the old system of declensions in the noun and adjective and, largely, in the pronoun.

The dialects of Middle English are usually divided into three large groups: (1) Southern (subdivided into Southeastern, or Kentish, and Southwestern), chiefly in the counties south of the River Thames; (2) Midland (corresponding roughly to the Mercian dialect area of Old English times) in the area from the Thames to southern South Yorkshire and northern Lancashire; and (3) Northern, in the Scottish Lowlands, Northumberland, Cumbria, Durham, northern Lancashire, and most of Yorkshire.

The Kentish dialect is also found in Old English but during Middle English, the area in which the dialect was spoken diminished. By late Middle English, it was spoken only in Kent and Sussex.

The Southern dialect was also spoken in (west) Sussex as well as south and southwest of the Thames. This dialect is a descendant of the West Saxon dialect in Old English and was quite conservative. It didn't show a lot of influence from other languages which makes it an interesting topic of study!

The Northern dialect is an interesting one too. It is in this dialect that we find very rapid developments in morphology and syntax. This may be due to intense contact with Old Norse, but that's simply a hypothesis – it is quite possible that these changes would have happened regardless.

Last, the East and West Midlands dialects. These dialects are a bit of an intermediate between the conservative dialects of the south and the fast-moving ones in the north.

What is particularly interesting about Middle English is, of course, its spelling. You see, during the Middle English period, there was no standardised spelling, meaning that people spelled according to their own dialect – which gives rise to some interesting variations.

Which is actually what we'll look at next week! You see, this was primarily just a little primer so that you'll know a bit about the Middle English dialects; next week, we'll get to the really interesting stuff: a brief introduction to two amazing resources when it comes to studying Middle English dialectology!

Fourteenth-century English was spoken (and written) in a variety of dialects. Middle English speakers recognized three distinct dialects -- Northern, Midlands, and Southern:

Also, English though they had from the beginning three manner of speech -- Southern, Northern, and Middle speech in the middle of the land, as they come from three manner of people in Germany.[10,184]

Modern scholars distinguish five dialects

The clerks in the Reeve's Tale are from Strother, in the Northern dialect area (north of the river Humber, which divides the Northern from the East Midland dialect area). The Reeve himself is from Norfolk, in the northern East Midlands.
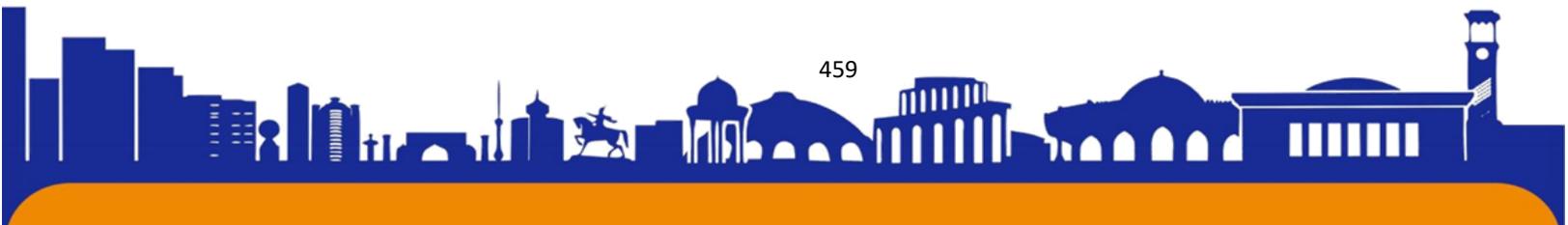
Chaucer is from London. on the Thames, which divides the Kentish and East Midlands dialect areas; it is a distinct area on its own.

The Parson says he is a "Southern man," from the area south of the Thames; but he speaks in the London Dialect. He claims he can not even understand the alliterative poetry common in the North -- he uses nonsense syllables to describe it:

I kan nat geeste `rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre, (Parson's Prologue, X.43).

He may have shared John of Trevisa's attitude toward Northern Speech:

All the language of the Northumbrians, and specially at York, is so sharp, piercing, rasping, and unshapely that we Southern men can hardly understand that language. I suppose this is because they are nigh to foreign men [i.e., Scots] and aliens who speak strangely, and also because the kings of England dwell always far from that country.

By the fifteenth century, London English was firmly established as the dialect spoken by the denizens of power, a fact used for comic effect in The Second Shepherds' Play.

The literary language that Chaucer fashioned become the standard written language of elegant writers and the language of London became the written standard for all formal English. (It is, of course, more complicated than this; for an advanced discussion see: John H. Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century,"

In the late fifteenth century, the printer William Caxton, who greatly influenced what is now Standard Written English complained about the changes in the language since earlier times and its diverse dialects:

[I] took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my lord Abbot of Westminster had shown to me recently certain evidences written in old English for to translate it into our English now used. And certainly it was written in such a manner that it was more like Dutch than English. I could not translate it nor bring it to be understood.

And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken when I was born. For we Englishmen are born under the domination of the Moon, which is never steadfast but ever wavering, waxing one season, and wanes and decreases another season.
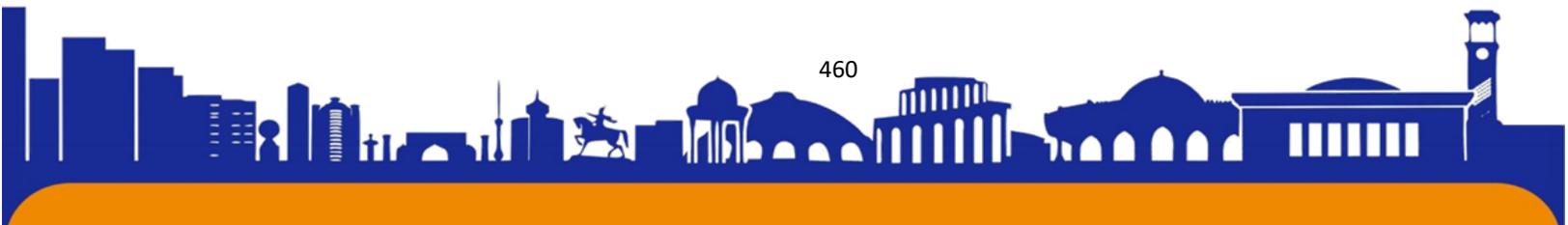
And that common English that is spoken in one shire varies from another. Insomuch that in my days happened that certain merchants were in a ship in the Thames, for to have sailed over the sea into Zeeland, and for lack of wind they tarried at foreland and went to land for to refresh themselves. And one of them named Sheffelde, a mercer, came into a house and asked for food; and especially he asked for eggs. And the good wife answered that she could speak no French.

And the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but wanted to have had eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last another said that he woulkd have "eyren." Then the good wife understood him well.

Lo, what should a man in these days now write, "eggs" or "eyren"?

Caxton solved the problem by using London English and thus set the standard that other printers would follow.

His puzzlement over the changes English had undergone in his lifetime will stir the sympathy of students first encountering Chaucer's language. But the problem is not all that difficult. The fifteenth century was the time of The Great Vowel Shift, which accounts for the greatest difference between Modern English and Chaucer's English, the pronunciation of the "long vowels.

Middle English was the language spoken in England from about 1100 to 1500. Five major dialects of Middle English have been identified (Northern, East Midlands, West Midlands, Southern, and Kentish), but the "research of Angus McIntosh and others... supports the claim that this period of the language was rich in dialect diversity".

Major literary works written in Middle English include Havelok the Dane, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Piers Plowman, and Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The form of Middle English that's most familiar to modern readers is the London dialect, which was the dialect of Chaucer and the basis of what would eventually become standard English.

Academicians and others have explained the use of Middle English in everything from its importance in English grammar, and modern English in general, to fatherhood, as the following quotes demonstrate.

"The transition from Middle to early modern English is above all the period of the elaboration of the English language. Between the late 14th and 16th centuries, the English language began increasingly to take on more functions. These changes in function had, it is argued here, a major effect on the form of English: so major, indeed,
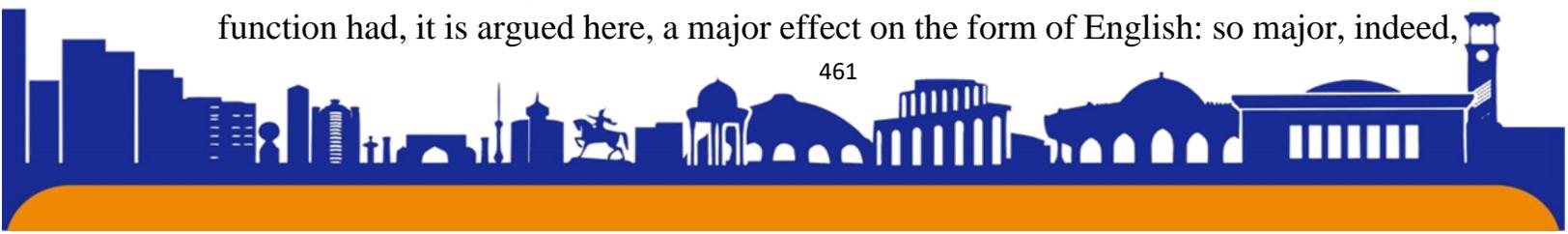
that the old distinction between 'Middle' and 'modern' retains considerable validity, although the boundary between these two linguistic epochs was obviously a fuzzy one."

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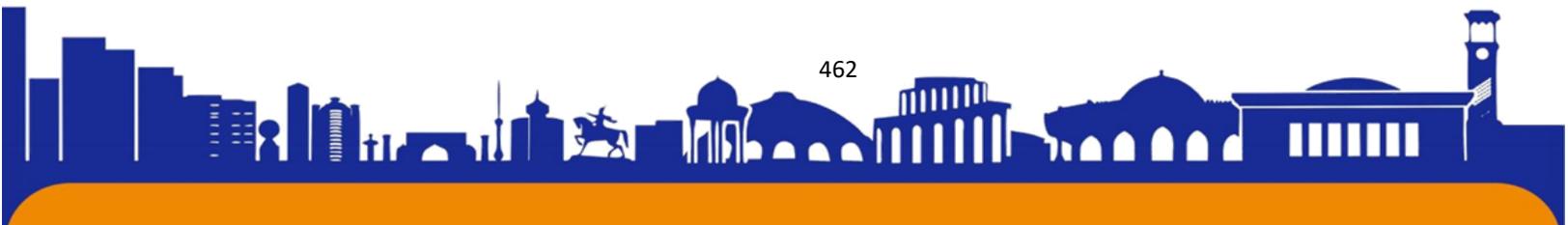
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