Prepared by,
A. Sumaiya Shaheedha
Assistant Professor of English
Jamal Mohamed College

MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE DURING THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

During the Middle English period there were many dialects than in the Anglo Saxon Period. At this time the **East Midland dialect** spoken in and around London slowly gained power for specific reasons:

(i)   London was becoming increasingly important as the centre of English life. Therefore the language spoken in London also became recognized as important.

(ii)   The dialect occupied middle position between the extremes of the North and South. It was less conservative than the southern dialects and less radical than the northern ones. In its sounds and inflections it shared some of the characteristics of both the dialects.

(iii)   The East Midland district was the largest and most populous of the major dialect areas.

(iv)   The great educational centres, Oxford and Cambridge also used the same dialect. It became the language of scholarship.

(v)   The same dialect was used by Chaucer and other prominent writers of the time establishing it as a literary dialect as well.

(vi)   Caxton, the inventor of the printing machine printed his earliest booking in the East Midland dialect thus setting a seal on it as the English language.

ASPECTS OF CHANGE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

The language in the Middle English period underwent a process of simplification, shedding its complicated inflections and reforming its varying spellings. The evolution of language in the Middle English period can be seen in four different aspects: (a) Grammatical changes (b) Changes in pronunciation (c) Change in spelling (d) Changes in vocabulary. In these changes there is a double process at work. The first is a natural process of change occurring independent of external influences. The other process was initiated by the influence of French language.

CHANGES IN GRAMMAR

Grammatical changes led to simplification and levelling bringing uniformity in nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. These changes were due to the change in sounds and the development of analytical tendency.

(i)   The reduction of inflections was the significant characteristic of Middle English grammar. This is most noticeable in the nouns which had lost the distinction of their cases accept the genitive. The nouns in the genitive case had the termination **-es** similar to the modern English **-'s.**

(ii)   Another important development was the formation of a new alternative possessive construction with the preposition **of** by the influence of the French language.

(iii)   The Old English definite article which had different declensions (modification of word to show grammatical function) in all cases and all three genders became indeclinable **the**.

(iv)   Uniformity was achieved in the plural forms of nouns by the leveling all the vowels of the final unaccented inflectional syllables under **e**. For many nouns **-en** was the plural termination. As the prominent East Midland dialect as well as French used **-es** plural termination, this became the most used. At present the real survival of **-en** ending plural is **oxen**.

(v)   The regular ending for the infinitive of verbs was **-en** from Old English **-an**. Later it was preceded by to showing direction. Later on, to was used without any directional sense. Slowly, the redundant termination **-en** was dropped. Chaucer used all three forms showing the fluid state of the transition. For example, verbs with **-en** ending: *to ryden out, to goen on pilgrimage, to seeken*, etc. co-exist with verbs without inflection: *to take our way, to yeve penaunce, to drave*, etc.

(vi) During the Middle English period natural gender was accepted in grammar instead of the illogical gender of the earlier time. The gender got determined according to the sex and based on meaning. Here French gender system did not have any influence. For example, the Old English personal pronoun **heo** became **she** in Middle English.

CHANGES IN PRONUNCIATION

Many sound changes in the Middle English period changed Old English words.

(i) The long $\bar{a}$ of Old English became long $\bar{o}$. For example,

Ex: **Old Eng.**	**Middle Eng.**	**Now**
hām	hoom	(home)
stān	stoon	(stone)
hlāf	loof	(loaf)

However the original 'a' was preserved in the Northern dialect resulting in many doublets. For example, *whole* and *hale* from Old English *hāl*. Also, Norman loan words like *dame*, *chant*, *fame*, etc. preserved their native pronunciation.

(ii) Another sound change that came at a later stage affected the long vowels. By its influence, long $\bar{e}$ became long $\bar{i}$ as in,

Ex: fēt	fīt

In addition to that, long $\bar{o}$ became $\bar{u}$

Ex: fōd	fūd	(food)
bōn	būn	(boon)
dōm	dūm	(doom)

(iii) Later some of the long vowels got shortened as in *book, look, cook*, etc.

(iv) Similarly, the long vowels $\bar{a}$, $\bar{i}$ and $\bar{u}$ became the diphthongs $\bar{e}\bar{i}$, $\bar{a}\bar{i}$ and $\bar{a}\bar{u}$ respectively.

Ex: *modern game, fame, find, fire, house, cow*, etc. had long vowels instead of diphthongs.

(v) In certain words a process call **metathesis** took place by which an **r** and **s** came to change its position.

Ex: **Old Eng.**	**Middle Eng.**	
beornan	bernan, brennan	(to burn)
bryd	bird	(bird)
ðurh	thurh	(through)

(vi) Another sound change was the **lengthening of short vowels in open syllables** and **shortening of long vowels in closed syllables**. This process explains the difference in pronunciation between *filling* and *filing*, *canning* and *caning*, *laddy* and *lady*, etc.

The lengthening and shortening of vowels were the general rules followed in the normal course of change but there were a number of **exceptions to the rule**.

(a) Short vowels in stressed syllables before the consonant combinations **nd**, **mb** and **ld** got lengthened.

Ex: *find, blind, bind, climb, comb, old, field*, etc.

(b) In some words, the lengthened vowels of Old English later got shortened because of the influence of a short vowel in a compound. For example, **friend** has a short vowel instead of a long vowel because of the relation with its compound **friendship**.

(c) Another instance of shortening is found in words with **nd**, **mb**, **ld** combination when they are followed by a third consonant.

Ex: child	children
(long vowel)	(short vowel)

(d) In trisyllabic words even when the first syllable was open it vowels either got shortened or remained shortened.

Ex: Hōly (long vowel)	day (two words)
Hŏliday (short vowel)	(one word with three syllables)

(e) According to the rules the vowels before the combination **-st** was short.
Ex: *best, first, rust,* etc.
But a number of words with **-st** combination in them also had long vowels.
Ex: *fast, priest, ghost,* etc.

CHANGES IN SPELLING

The change in spelling was mostly orthographical without the corresponding phonetic change. This and most other spelling changes were due to the influence of Norman French.

(i) The long **ū** was represented by **ou**. The pronunciation remained the same. The diphthongization was a very late development.

| Ex: hūs | hous | (house) |
| mūs | mous | (mouse) |

(ii) The long **ō** was represented **oo**. The **oo** form became common by 1500.

Ex: hōm	hoom	(home)
fō	foo	(foe)
gōd	good	

(iii) The hard **c** of Anglo Saxon and early middle English became **k** before front vowels **e, i, y** and remained a **c** before the back vowels **a, o** and **u**.

Ex: **Old Eng.**	**Middle Eng.**
cying	king
cēne	keen
cēpan	keep

(iv) The Old English **g** pronounced like modern **y** came to be written as **y**.

| Ex: gearu | year |

(v) The native symbol **ð** disappeared and was replaced by the combination **th**.
(vi) The original **sc** in words like **scip** became **sh** as in **ship**.
(vii) The **cw** in words like **cwēn** (queen), **cwellen** (to kill) and **cwic** (living) was replaced by **qu**.
(viii) In some words of French origin, the initial and stressed **e** immediately preceding **s** as in **estraunge** tended to lose it becoming **straung**.
Ex: *squire, state, scorn, scout,* etc.

CHANGES IN AND ADDITION TO VOCABULARY

The Middle English period from 1100 to 1500 saw greater and more important changes in addition of words and vocabulary than the earlier period. The largest influence came from the Norman Conquest.

(i) The coexistence of the two languages, English and French gave rise to **synonyms** which were total to start with and became differentiated in meaning or usage later.

| Ex: **Native term** | **from French** |
| wedding | marriage |

The native term **wed** meant 'to give a pledge' and the French term **marry** means 'to become a husband'. In modern English 'homely and sentimentality' is attached to **wedding** and 'formality' to **marriage**. The French term marriage was related to ceremony, show and ritual while the native wedding was related to love and fidelity. Similar distinction exists between **kingly** and **royal**, **meal** and **repast** and **home** and **house**. Words used to describe living animals were native and the words for the meat from the animals killed were French.

Ex: **Native**	**French**
sheep	mutton
cow	beef
calf	veal
pig	pork

(ii) The **feudal** and **manorial system** brought in by William the Conqueror contributed many words to the English vocabulary such as, *domain, castle, baron, livery*, etc. The **manor house** was the **Villa**. The labourers working on the manorial estates were **villeins**. The place they lived in was the **village**. The native word **tun** used earlier in the place of village got an elevation to mean a larger unit and has now become the modern **town**. The word **villein** was earlier used to mean labourer but underwent degradation. As labourers were known to be coarse and uncouth in behaviour the word reached the modern sense of **villain** who is a cruel and evil person.

(iii) The beginning of the **legal system** are from the Normans and it introduced many new words such as *trespass, cheat, treason, justice, curfew, judge, jury, indict, verdict, commission, statute, prison, punish, plaintiff, court*, etc.

(iv) The establishment of the mediaeval **ecclesiastical system** by the Norman brought in many French words. The native *priest* and *bishop* were retained. As the Norman Church had more hierarchy and more offices, French terms had to be used such as *abbot, canon, curate, cardinal, friar, beacon*, etc.
While the native word church was retained new words were used for architecture such as *chapel, cathedral, abbey, convent, aisle, altar*, etc. Other French words included were *service, clerk, clergy, parish, apostle, conscience, confession, penance, prayer*, etc.

(v) The word **knight** was of native origin but all other terms associated with chivalry came from Norman French. The terms connected with "luxury trades" of the time are also French. The older, fundamental occupations retain their native terms.

(vi) Many words where brought into English from **medieval scholarship** and **learning** through French. Many learnt and academic words come from French. From the **religious** and **philosophical treatises** of the time some of the words are *mercy, pity, charity, beauty, humility, courtesy, repentance*, etc. The Anglo-Saxon equivalent of newly introduced French words were ignored by the rich and slowly they became obsolete. In some cases both the native and French words existed but each picked up a different meaning. In King James' version of the Bible **charity** is a synonym of **love**. As it got the association of the rich classes it has assumed the meaning of **patronage**.

> Ex: **Old Eng.**   **French**
>   love   charity

(vii) The medieval science of **astrology** flourished at that time and supplied a number of new words. Some specialized terms in astrology became used for general use. For example, **influence** used to refer to the effect of planets on human destiny but has come to mean **effect**.

(viii) The **crusades** were another influence to bring in new words. *Assassin, infidel, miscreant* are of French origin. The word **hazard** was the name of a game but got the extended meaning of **risk**.

(ix) *Algebra, azure, scarlet* and *orange* are some of the **Eastern words** to be used in Middle English.

(x) **Surnames** were adopted by English men by the influence of French custom. Originally surnames were nicknames and they became hereditary out of necessity under the feudal system. The surnames were based on personal characteristics or from the occupation or from place names or from genealogical origin.