

History of English - a brief introduction -

Raymond Hickey
English Linguistics
University of Duisburg and Essen



Why should one take part in a seminar on The History of English?

- 1) In general, to find out about where English came from, how it developed and how it came to have its present form. This also includes learning about the relationship of English to its Germanic neighbours and to other European languages.
- 2) Specifically, to learn more about the different linguistic levels of the English language in their historical dimensions. This includes the following areas.
 - a) How was the spelling of English devised, what principles governed it originally? This helps in trying to grasp the inconsistencies which have arisen in the five centuries since the orthography was developed and so helps one to remember spellings easier.
 - b) How did the current pronunciation norm (Received Pronunciation) develop in England and how does it relate to vernacular forms of English, such as Cockney (the city dialect of London)?



- c) Why is the grammar of English the way it is? Why are there few endings compared to German and why is the syntax (use of prepositions or verbal forms) relatively difficult.
- d) How did the vocabulary of English gain its present form? Why is there a stylistic division in the lexicon of the language with different layers corresponding to different degrees of formality?
- 3) How have different varieties of English arisen outside of England? What were the pathways along overseas forms of English developed in the colonial period?
- 4) To learn about the techniques of historical linguistics, how does one reconstruct previous stages of a language, how does one compare languages, what assumptions are legitimate about diachronic stages of a language.
- 5) To understand more about the phenomenon of language change and ultimately to gain insights into the structure of language in general and how speakers use it.



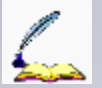
Old English

- ▶ Historical relationship of English and German
- ▶ Techniques of historical linguistics
- ▶ The coming of the English, divisions of Old English
- ▶ The structure of Old English
- ▶ Literature and society in the Old English period
- ▶ The Old English epic *Beowulf*
- ▶ The Scandinavian invasions and effects
- ▶ The Anglo-Saxon chronicle



Middle English

- ▶ The Anglo-Norman period, transition of Old to Middle English
- ▶ French influence on Middle English
- ▶ Spelling practice in Middle English
- ▶ The Great Vowel Shift and English pronunciation
- ▶ Literature during the Middle English period
- ▶ Religious writings in the Middle English period
- ▶ Mythology and literature in the Middle English period
- ▶ Private writing (family letters) in the Middle English period
- ▶ The age of Chaucer; Chaucer's major works



Early Modern Period

- ▶ The introduction of printing and English orthography
- ▶ English at the time of Shakespeare
- ▶ The Inkhorn Controversy and 'hard words'
- ▶ Shakespeare's use of English
- ▶ The rise of the dictionary
- ▶ Views on English in the Augustan Age
- ▶ Grammatical prescriptivism in the 18th century
- ▶ The emergence of standard pronunciation



Views of Language Change

- ▶ Models of language change and the history of English
- ▶ Documents for English and reconstruction techniques
- ▶ Relative chronology in the history of English
- ▶ Language contact and the history of English
- ▶ Typological change and the history of English
- ▶ Grammaticalisation and the history of English



The background to English

This seminar will be concerned with the development of the English language from the earliest attestations and also considered the background to the language before the settlement of England by Germanic tribes.

There are three main divisions in the history of English and these were reflected in the presentations which were given during the term:

Old English	(450 to 1066)
Middle English	(1066 to 1500)
Early Modern English	(1500 onwards)



The origins of English

Themes in this period

- ▶ The Indo-European language family
- ▶ The Germanic languages, major sound changes
- ▶ Historical relationship of English to German
- ▶ The techniques of historical language study
 - Internal reconstruction
 - Comparative linguistics



Old English (450-1066)

External history

- ▶ The coming of the Germanic tribes to England (c 450)
- ▶ The Christianisation of England (c 600)
- ▶ The Scandinavian invasions (c 800)

Literature

- ▶ Epic literature: Beowulf (c 800, manuscript from c 1000)
- ▶ Minor poetry (600 onwards)
- ▶ The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (8th century onwards)

Structure of language

- ▶ Sound system
- ▶ Grammatical system
- ▶ Vocabulary (Latin borrowings; Scandinavian borrowings)



Middle English (1100-1500)

External history

- ▶ The coming of the Anglo-Normans to England (1066)
- ▶ The break with France (1204)
- ▶ The introduction of printing (1476)

Literature

- ▶ Continuations of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
- ▶ Alliterative verse revival (14th century)
- ▶ Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1399)

Structure of language

- ▶ Sound system
- ▶ Grammatical system
- ▶ Vocabulary (Anglo-Norman and Central borrowings)



Early Modern English (1500 onwards)

External history

- ▶ The Renaissance in England (16th century and later)
- ▶ Development of overseas colonies (17th century and later)
- ▶ Transportation of English to the Caribbean, North American
- ▶ Civil war in England and later Restoration
- ▶ 18th century: Transportation of English to overseas locations
- ▶ The development of prescriptive attitudes in 18th and 19th century England

Literature

- ▶ 16th century writers
- ▶ The age of Shakespeare
- ▶ Restoration writers (drama)
- ▶ The Augustan age
- ▶ The rise of the novel (18th century)
- ▶ 19th century poetry and prose
- ▶ Journalistic literature from pamphlets to newspapers



Early Modern English (continued)

Structure of language

- ▶ Sound system
The Great Vowel Shift
- ▶ Grammatical system
- ▶ Vocabulary
- ▶ The Inkhorn Controversy
- ▶ Classical borrowings, Latin and Greek
- ▶ Later French loans, borrowings from other languages



Groups of Indo-European languages

Indo-European

Main Subgroups

Hellenic

Baltic

Slavic

Italic

Celtic

Germanic

Albanian

Armenian

Hittite

Indo-Iranian

Tocharian

Germanic

North Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian(Bokmål & Nynorsk), Danish, Faroese

West English, German, Low German, Frisian, Dutch, Flemish, Afrikaans, Yiddish

East Gothic



Main divisions of Germanic

OLDEST STAGE

North Germanic

Runes (3/4c)
Old Norse (13c)

East Germanic

Gothic (4c)

West Germanic

Old High German (8c)
Old English (7c)
Old Saxon (8c)
Old Frisian (14c)
Old Low Franconian (12c)

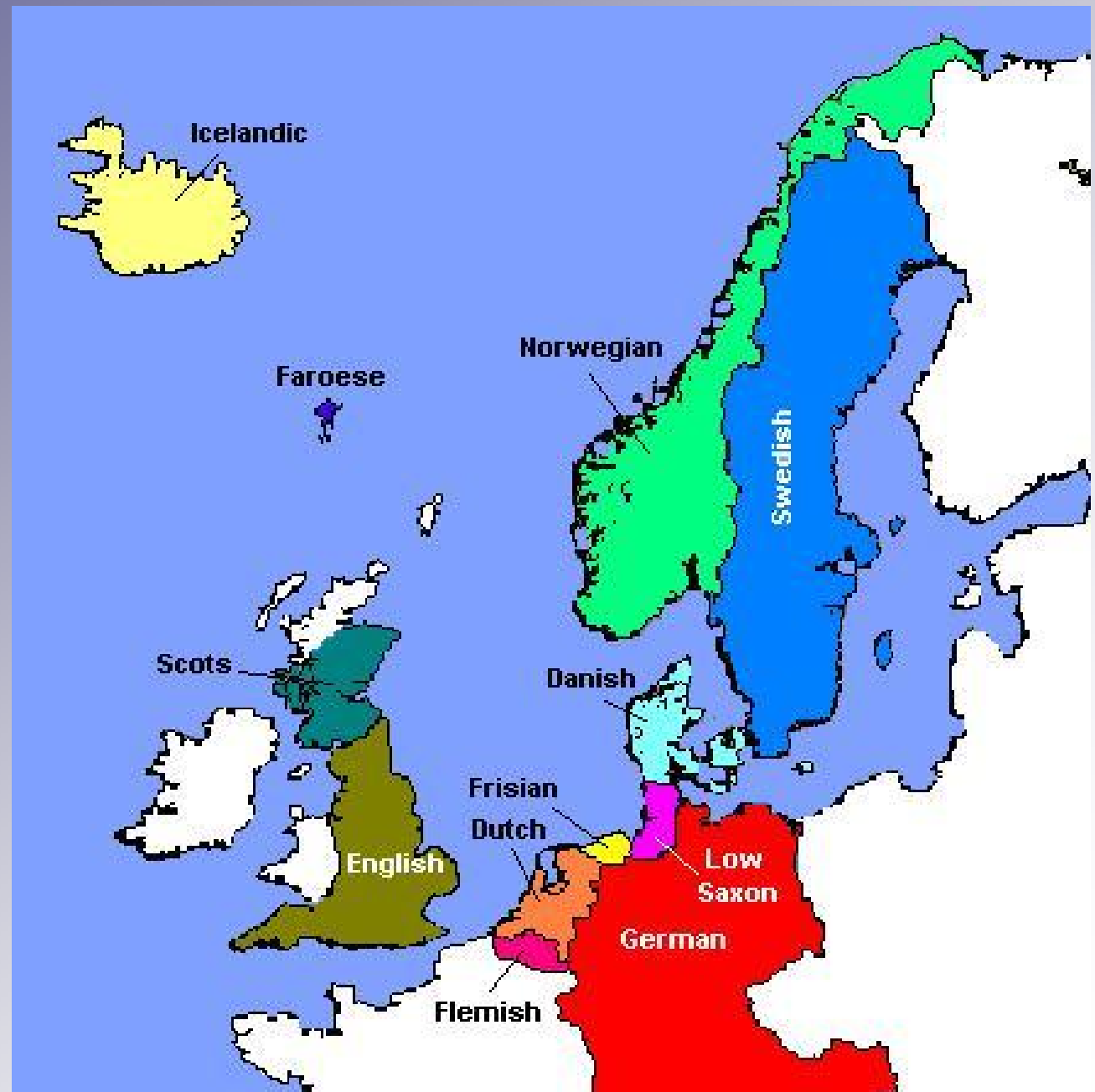
PRESENT-DAY LANGUAGES

Icelandic, Faroese, Swedish,
Norwegian (Bokmål & Nynorsk) and Danish

(none)

High German (Yiddish)
English
Low German
Frisian (North and West)
Dutch, Flemish, Afrikaans

The Germanic languages today





Periods in the development of English

It is common to divide the history of English into three periods and old, a middle and an early modern one. The justification for this is partly external and partly internal. The Old English period begins in the middle of the 5th century with the coming of Germanic tribes to settle in England. The Middle English period begins with the conquest of England by Normans after their success in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the end of this period is marked by the introduction of printing by William Caxton in 1476. The early modern period begins with the 16th century and is characterised by an expansion in vocabulary by borrowing from classical languages, by the gradual conclusion of the Great Vowel Shift (see below) and by the regularisation of English grammar after the demise of the language's former inflectional morphology.



Old English

English has been spoken in England since around 450. To be more precise a set of varieties of West Germanic have been spoken. After the Anglo-Saxon invasion no-one had an awareness of England as such let alone of English. With the establishment of the West Saxon kingdom in later centuries and with the court which formed the pivot point of this kingdom a first inkling of the idea of English developed. With the invasion of England by the Danes (after 800) it became more clear that the Germanic tribes in England were separate from their fellows on the Continent and in Scandinavia. Among the different groupings in England in the Old English period different dialects (that is purely geographical variants) are recognizable: Northumbrian in the north, Anglian in the middle and West-Saxon in the south. Due to the political significance of West-Saxon in the late Old English period (after the 9th century) the written form of this dialect developed into something like a standard. Note that at this time it was Winchester and not London which was the political centre of the country. The term used for the West Saxon 'standard' is *koiné* which derives from Greek and means a common dialect, that is a variety which was used in monasteries in parts of England outside of West Saxony for the purpose of writing.



The dialects of Old English

It is common to divide England into four dialect areas for the Old English period. First of all note that by England that part of mainland Britain is meant which does not include Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. These three areas were Celtic from the time of the arrival of the Celts some number of centuries BC and remained so well into the Middle English period.

The dialect areas of England can be traced back quite clearly to the Germanic tribes which came and settled in Britain from the middle of the 5th century onwards. There were basically three tribal groups among the earlier settlers in England: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. The Angles came from the area of Angeln (roughly the Schleswig-Holstein of today), the Saxons from the area of east and central Lower Saxony and the Jutes from the Jutland peninsula which forms west Denmark today.

Of these three groups the most important are the Saxons as they established themselves as the politically dominant force in the Old English period. A number of factors contributed to this not least the strong position of the West Saxon kings, chief among these being Alfred (late 9th century). The West Saxon dialect was also strongest in the scriptorias (i.e. those places where manuscripts were copied and/or written originally) so that for written communication West Saxon was the natural choice.

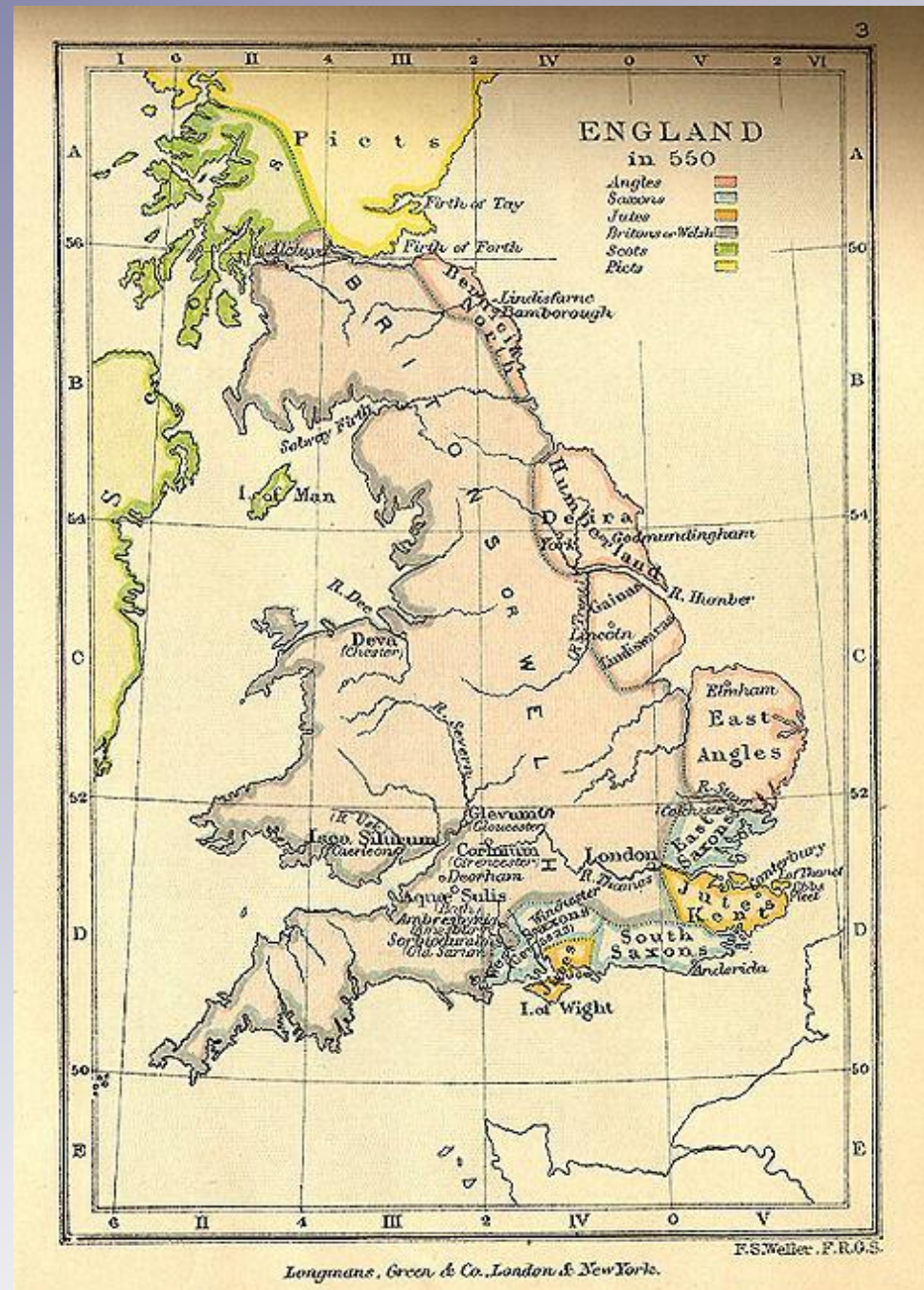


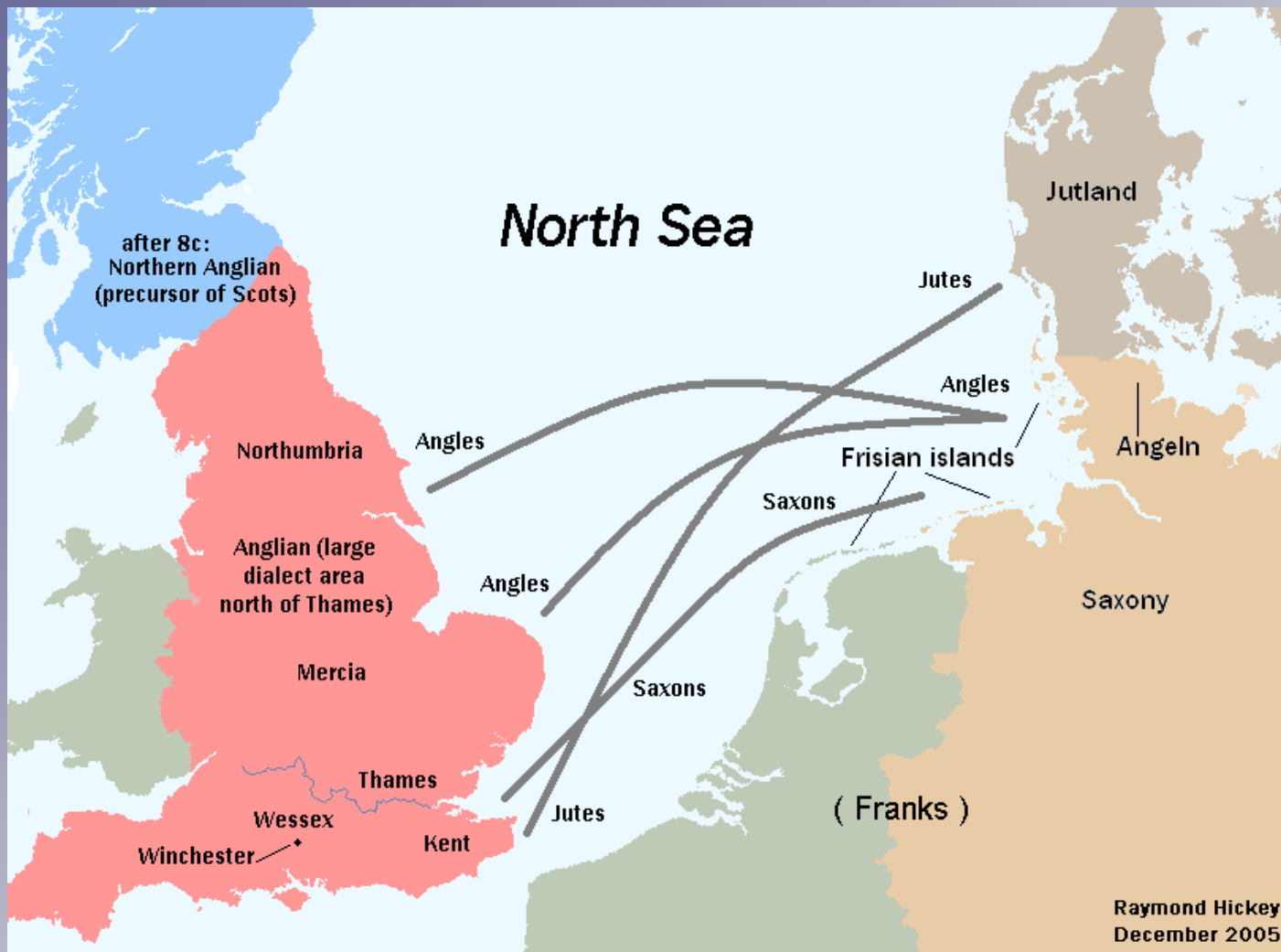
The dialects of Old English (continued)

A variety of documents have nonetheless been handed down in the language of the remaining areas. Notably from Northumbria a number of documents are extant which offer us a fairly clear picture of this dialect area. At this point one should also note that the central and northern part of England is linguistically fairly homogeneous in the Old English period and is termed Anglia. To differentiate sections within this area one speaks of Mercia which is the central region and Northumbria which is the northern part (i.e. north of the river Humber).

A few documents are available to us in the dialect of Kent (notably a set of sermons). This offers us a brief glimpse at the characteristics of this dialect which in the Middle English period was of considerable significance. Notable in Kentish is the fact that Old English /y:/ was pronounced /e:/ thus giving us words like *evil* in Modern English where one would expect something like *ivil*.

England at the time of the Germanic invasions

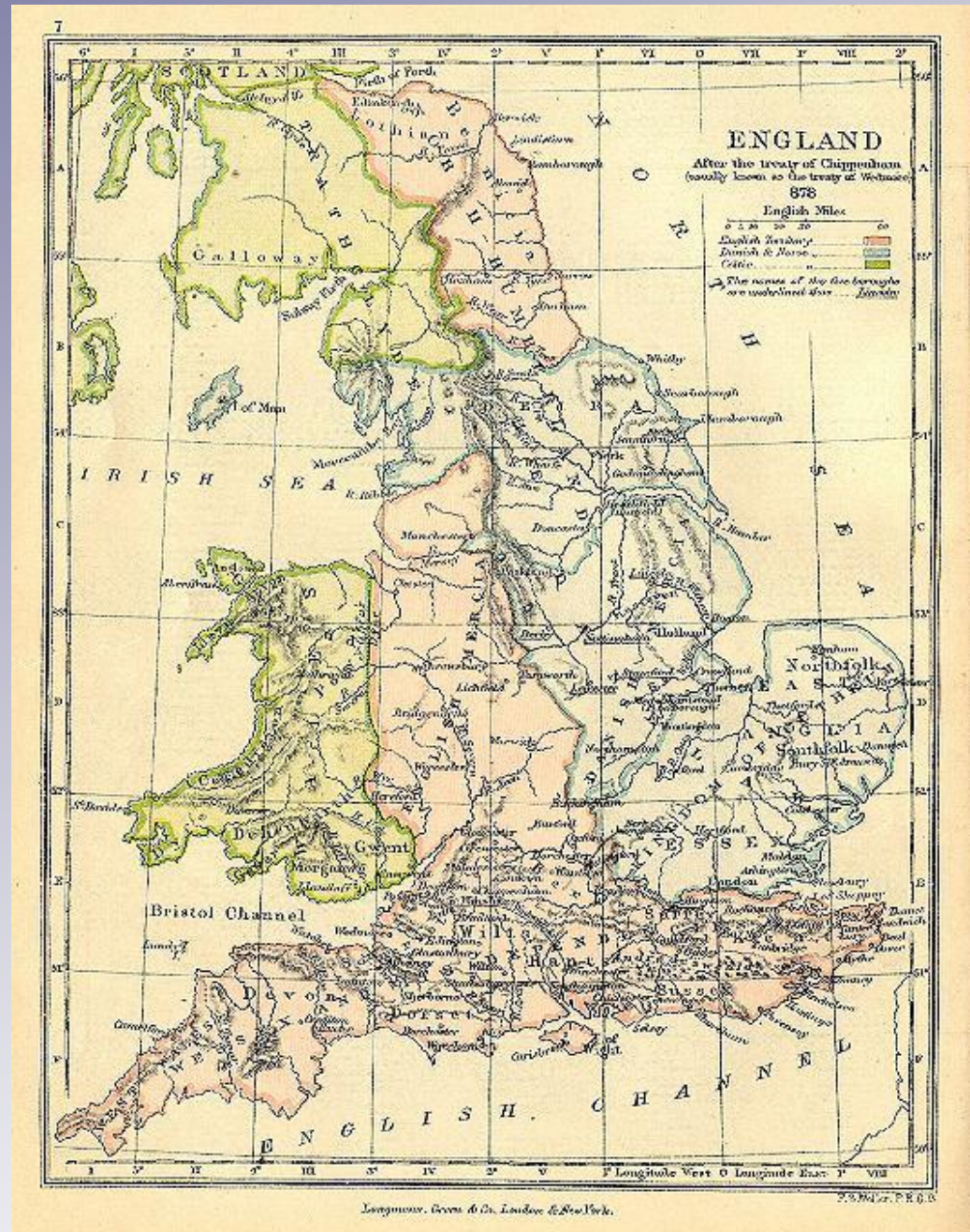




Routes taken across the North Sea by Germanic tribes in the 5c. The Jutes came from Jutland and settled in Kent. The Saxons came from the area of present-day (Lower) Saxony and settled largely south of the River Thames. The Angles came from the lower part of the the Jutland peninsula which is now Schleswig Holstein in Germany and settled in central and northern England.

The lines in the above map are very approximate. Many of the settlers may have crossed the North Sea from the area of present-day Belgium as this would have involved the shortest sea journey.

England during the Viking period





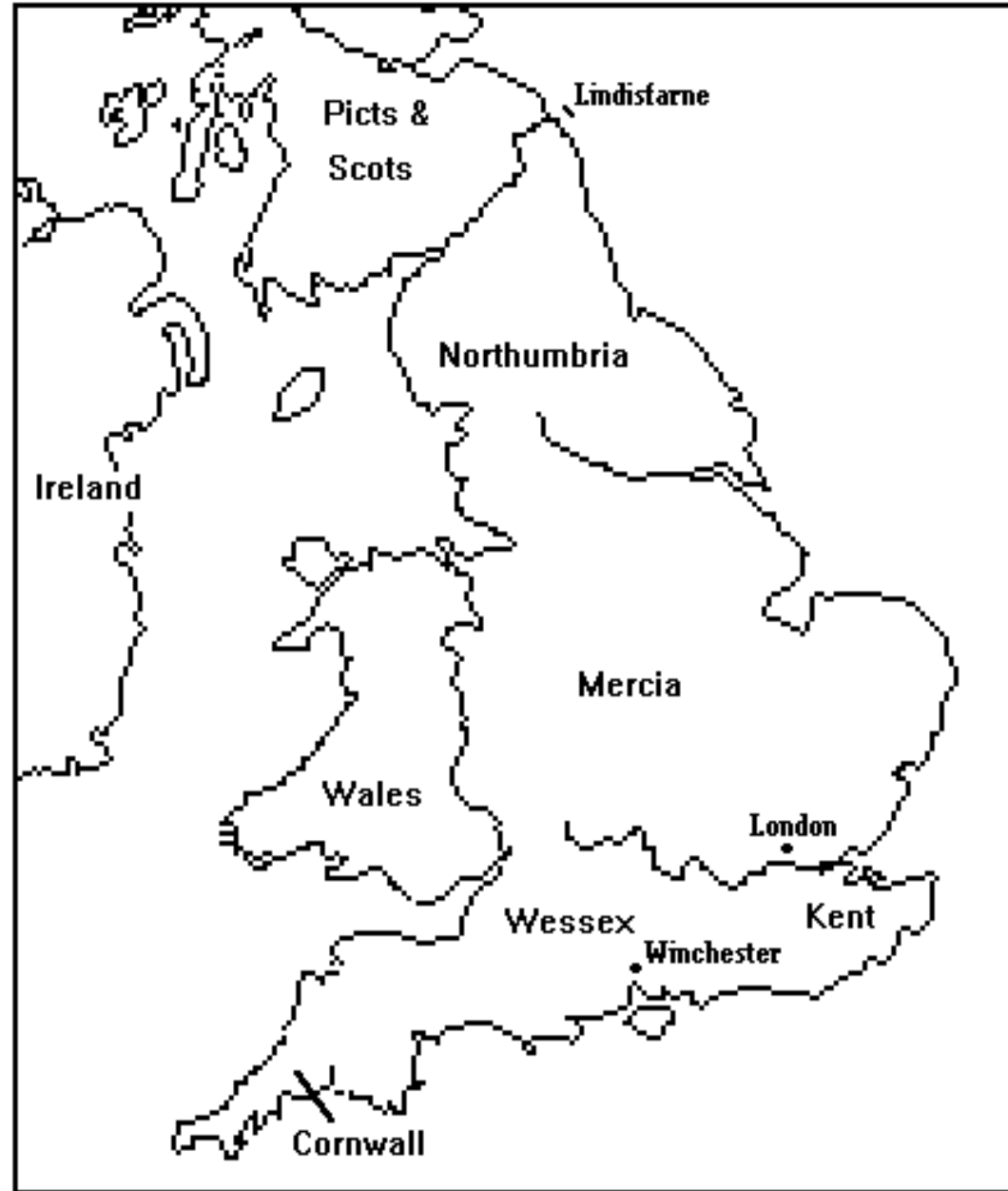
Main Viking expansion routes from the 8th to the 11th centuries

The Danelaw

During the Viking period the territory of England was divided into a Scandinavian and a West Saxon sphere of influence. The former was known as the Danelaw. In this region the greatest influence of the Vikings on the Old English was felt. Many Scandinavian place names are attested in the north of England.

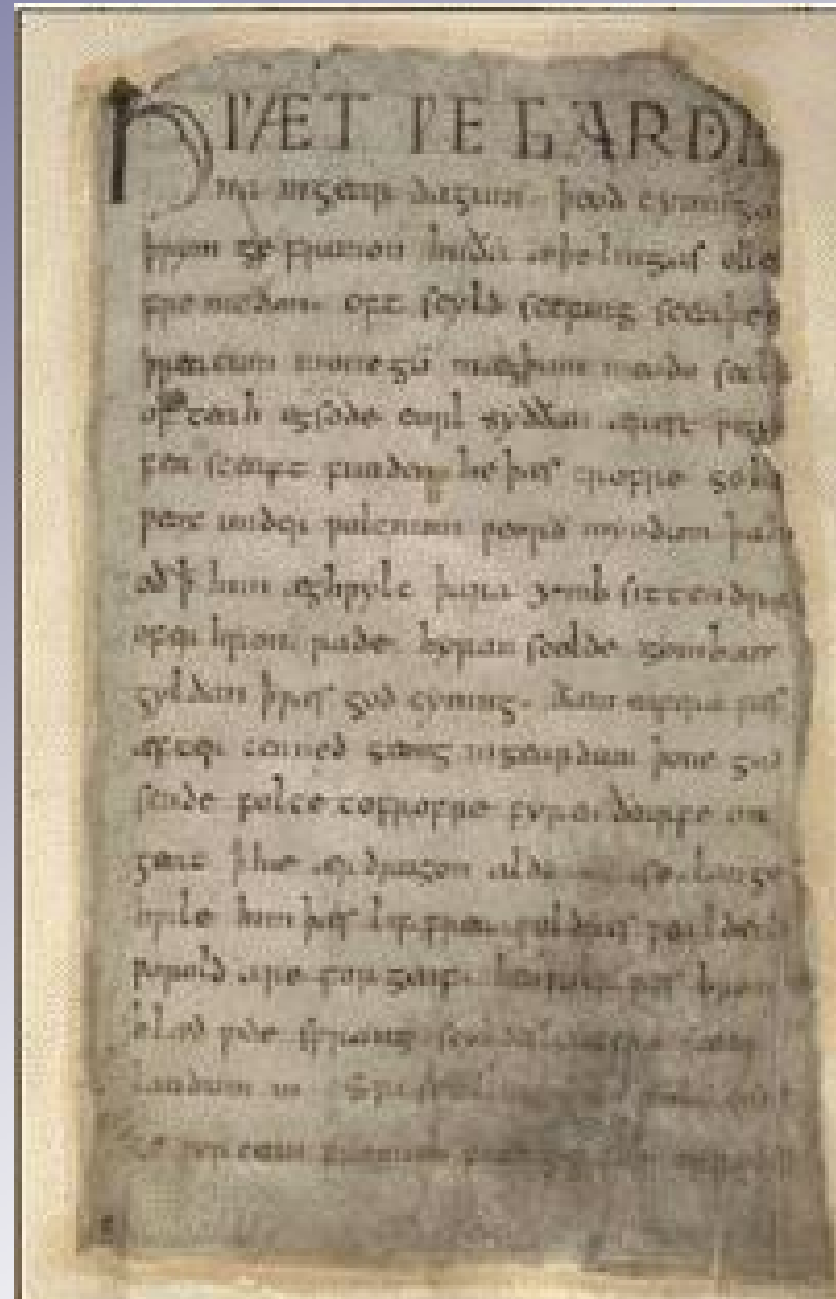


Old English dialect areas





Open page of *Beowulf* manuscript



On the right you see the opening lines of Beowulf. Click on the speaker symbols below to hear sections of the text spoken in what we assume was the West Saxon pronunciation of Old English.

First section



Second section



Third section



[HWÆT WE GARDE-
 What! We Spear-Danes'
 na. in gear-dagum. þeod-cyninga
 in yore-days, tribe-kings'
 þrym ge-frunon huda æpelingas ellen
 glory heard, how the leaders courage
 fremedon.] [Oft scyld scefing sceaþena
 accomplished. Often Scyld, Scef's son, from enemies'
 þreatum monegum mægþum meodo-setla
 bands, from many tribes mead-benches
 of-teah egsode eorl syððan ærest weard
 seized, terrorised earl[s], since first he was
 fea-scaft funden.] [he þæs frofre gebad
 destitute found; he its relief knew,
 weox under wolcnum weorð-myndum þah.
 grew under skies, in honours throve,
 oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymb-sittendra
 until to him each of the neighbours
 ofer hron-rade hyran scolde gomban
 over whale-road submit must, tribute
 gyldan þæt wæs god cyning.] ðæm cafera was
 yield; that was good king! To him heir was
 æfter cenned geong in geardum þone god
 after born young in dwellings, him God
 sende folce to frofre fyren-ðearfe on-
 sent to folk for solace; intense misery
 geat þ hie ær drugon aldor-[le]ase. lange
 saw when they before felt leaderless a long
 hwile him þæs lif-frea wuldres wealdend
 while; to them for it Life-Lord, glory's Ruler
 worold-are for-geaf. beowulf wæs breme
 world honour gave, Beow was famed,
 blæd wide sprang scyldes cafera scede-
 renown widely sprang of Scyld's heir Danish
 landum in. Swa sceal [geong g]uma gode
 lands in. So shall young man by good [deeds]
 ge-wyrcean fromum feoh-giftum. on fæder
 ensure, by fine fee-gifts in father's ...



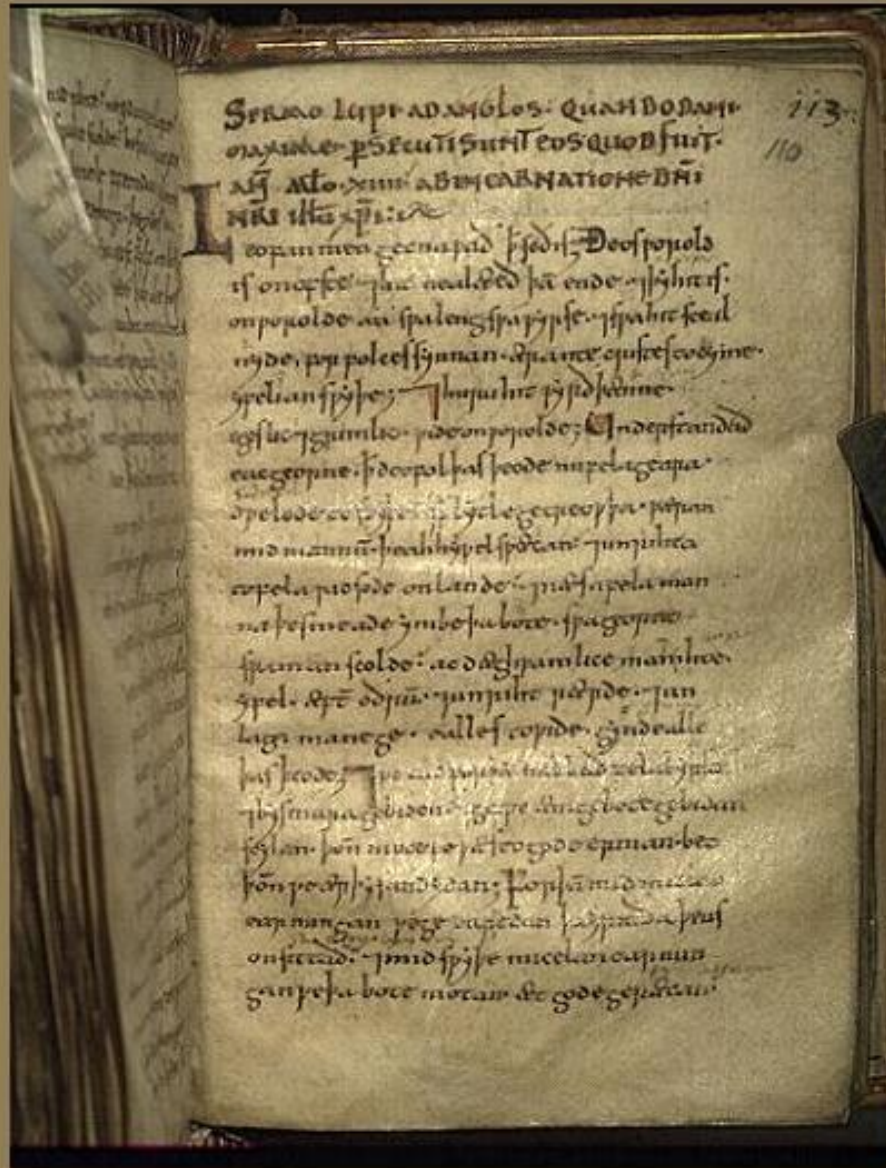
The *Our Father* in Old English

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum;
Si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurþe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Click to listen:



Wolfstan's
*Sermon to
the English*





Middle English

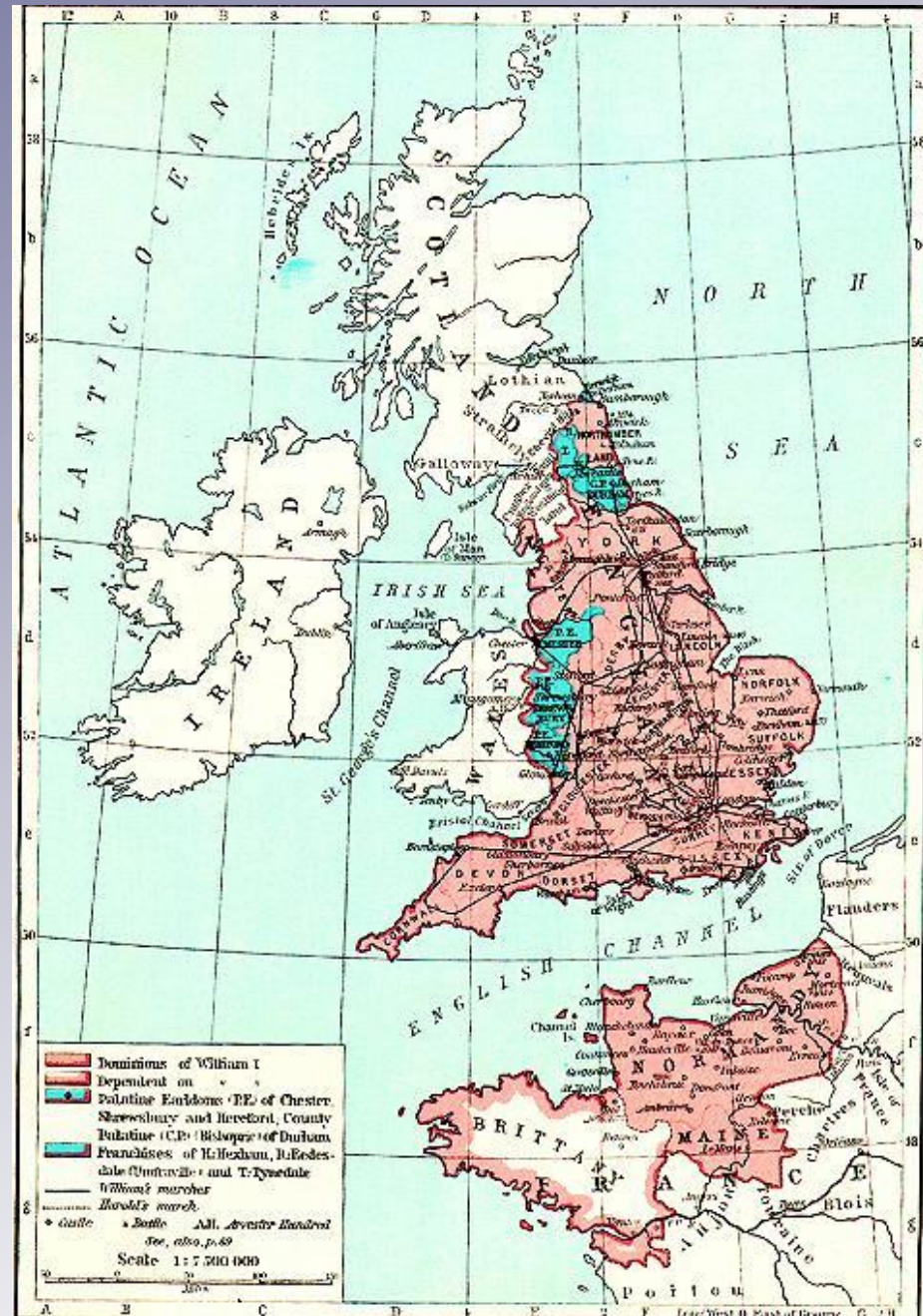
After the invasion of England by the Normans in 1066, the West Saxon 'standard', which was waning anyway due to natural language change, was dealt a death blow. Norman French became the language of the English court and clergy. English sank to the level of a *patois* (an unwritten dialect). With the loss of England for the French in 1204 English gradually emerged as a literary language again. For the development of the later standard it is important to note (1) that it was London which was now the centre of the country and (2) that printing was introduced into England in the late 15th century (1476 by Caxton). This latter fact contributed more than any single factor to the standardisation of English. It is obvious that for the production of printing fonts a standard form of the language must be agreed upon.

This applied above all to spelling, an area of English which was quite chaotic in the pre-printing days of the Middle English period.

England at the time of the Norman Invasion



William the Conqueror



The Bayeux Tapestry depicting scene from the Norman Invasion, 1



The Bayeux Tapestry depicting scene from the Norman Invasion, 2



Middle English dialect areas





The dialects of Middle English

The dialectal position of Middle English is basically a continuation of that of Old English. The most important extralinguistic fact for the development of the Middle English dialects is that the capital of the country was moved from Winchester (in the Old English period) to London by William the Conqueror in his attempt to diminish the political influence of the native English.

NORTHERN

This dialect is the continuation of the Northumbrian variant of Old English. Note that by Middle English times English had spread to (Lowland) Scotland and indeed led to a certain literary tradition developing there at the end of the Middle English period which has been continued up to the present time (with certain breaks, admittedly).

Characteristics. Velar stops are retained (i.e. not palatalised) as can be seen in word pairs like *rigg/ridge; kirk/church*.

The dialects of Middle English



KENTISH

This is the most direct continuation of an Old English dialect and has more or less the same geographical distribution.

Characteristics. The two most notable features of Kentish are (1) the existence of /e:/ for Middle English /i:/ and (2) so-called "initial softening" which caused fricatives in word-initial position to be pronounced voiced as in *vat*, *vane* and *vixen* (female fox).

SOUTHERN

West Saxon is the forerunner of this dialect of Middle English. Note that the area covered in the Middle English period is greater than in the Old English period as inroads were made into Celtic-speaking Cornwall. This area becomes linguistically uninteresting in the Middle English period. It shares some features of both Kentish and West Midland dialects.

The dialects of Middle English



WEST MIDLAND

This is the most conservative of the dialect areas in the Middle English period and is fairly well-documented in literary works. It is the western half of the Old English dialect area Mercia.

Characteristics. The retention of the Old English rounded vowels /y:/ and /ø:/ which in the East had been unrounded to /i:/ and /e:/ respectively.

EAST MIDLAND

This is the dialect out of which the later standard developed. To be precise the standard arose out of the London dialect of the late Middle English period. Note that the London dialect naturally developed into what is called Cockney today while the standard became less and less characteristic of a certain area and finally (after the 19th century) became the sociolect which is termed Received Pronunciation.

Characteristics. In general those of the late embryonic Middle English standard.



Some figures from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer
(1340-1399)



The Friar



The Knight



The Miller



The Pardoner



The Parson



The Reeve



The Wife of Bath



The opening lines of the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer read by an actor in an accent which is assumed to be that used at Chaucer's time (late 14th century).

Click on speaker symbol to listen to reading.



**Whan that Aprill with hise shoures soote
the droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed euery veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
What Zepirus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in euery hold and heeth
The tendre croppes; and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne;
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye,
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages,)
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And Palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes kowthe in sondry londes.
And specially fram euery shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen what that they were seeke.**



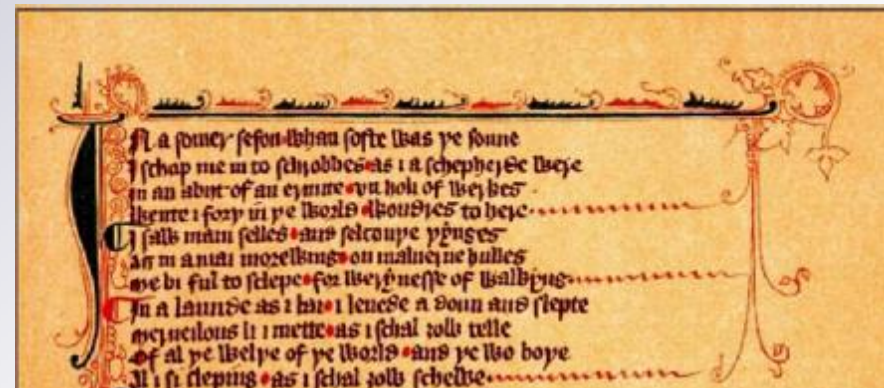
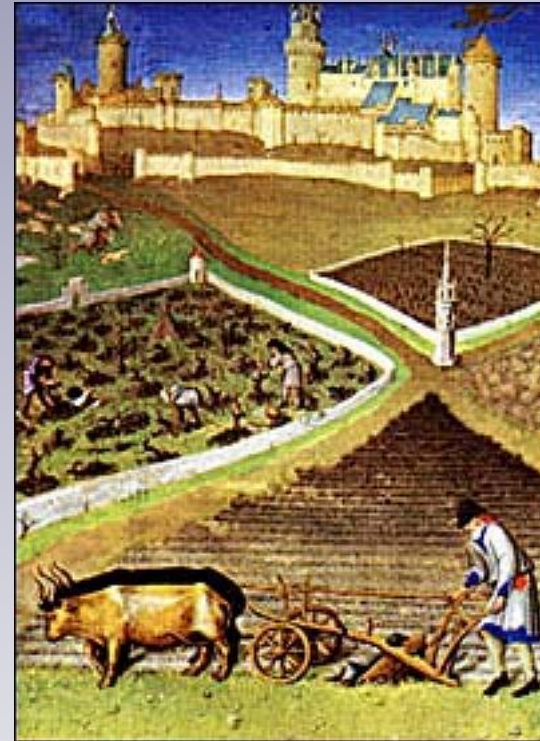
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight



Click to listen:



Piers Plowman





The introduction of printing

Printing was introduced to England in 1476 by William Caxton. This led to an increasing regularisation of orthography and morphology.



Therefore I, William Caxton, a symple persone, have endevoyred me to wrpte fyrst ober all the said Book of Polycronycon, and somnewhat have chaunged the rude and old Englysshe that is to wete, Certain words which in these days be neither usyd ne understanden.





English monarchs

▶ *West Saxon Kings*

▶ 802-839	Egbert	924-939	Athelstan
▶ 839-858	Æthelwulf	939-946	Edmund
▶ 858-860	Æthelbald	946-955	Edred
▶ 860-865	Æthelbert	955-959	Edwy
▶ 866-871	Æthelred	959-975	Edgar
▶ 871-899	Alfred	975-978	Edward (the Martyr)
▶ 899-924	Edward (the Elder)	978-1016	Æthelred (the Unready)
▶			Edmund (Ironside)

▶ *Danish Kings*

▶ 1016-1035	Cnut (Canute)	1040-1042	Harthacnut
▶ 1035-1037	Harold (Regent)	1042-1066	Edward (the Confessor)
▶ 1037-1040	Harold I (Harefoot)	1066	Harold II



English monarchs (continued)

▶ *Norman Kings*

▶ 1066-1087	William I	1087-1100	William II (Rufus)
▶	(the Conqueror)	1100-1135	Henry I

▶ *House of Blois*

▶ 1135-1154	Stephen
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▶ *House of Plantagenet*

▶ 1154-1189	Henry II	1272-1307	Edward I
▶ 1189-1199	Richard I	1307-1327	Edward II (Coeur de Lion)
▶ 1199-1215	John	1327-1377	Edward III
▶ 1216-1272	Henry III	1377-1399	Richard II

▶ *House of Lancaster*

▶ 1399-1413	Henry IV	1413-1422	Henry V
▶ 1422-1461	Henry VI		



English monarchs (continued)

▶ *House of York*

▶ 1461-1470 Edward IV

▶ *House of Lancaster*

▶ 1470-1471 Henry VI

▶ *House of York*

▶ 1471-1483 Edward IV 1483 Edward V

▶ 1483-1485 Richard III

▶ *House of Tudor*

▶ 1485-1509 Henry VII 1547-1553 Edward VI

▶ 1509-1547 Henry VIII 1553-1558 Mary I

▶ 1558-1603 Elizabeth I

▶ *House of Stuart*

▶ 1603-1625 James I (James VI of Scotland)

▶ 1625-1649 Charles I



English monarchs (continued)

▶ *Commonwealth and Protectorate*

- ▶ 1649-1653 Council of State 1653-1658 Oliver Cromwell
- ▶ 1658-1659 Richard Cromwell

▶ *House of Stuart (restored)*

- ▶ 1660-1685 Charles II 1689-1694 William III (with Mary II)
- ▶ 1685-1688 James II 1694-1702 William III (alone)
- ▶ 1702-1714 Anne

▶ *House of Hanover*

- ▶ 1714-1727 George I 1820-1830 George IV
- ▶ 1727-1760 George II 1830-1837 William IV
- ▶ 1760-1820 George III 1837-1901 Victoria



English monarchs (continued)

- ▶ *House of Saxe-Coburg*

- ▶ 1901-1910 Edward VII

- ▶ *House of Windsor*

▶ 1910-1936	George V	1936-1952	George VI
▶ 1936	Edward VIII	1952-	Elizabeth II



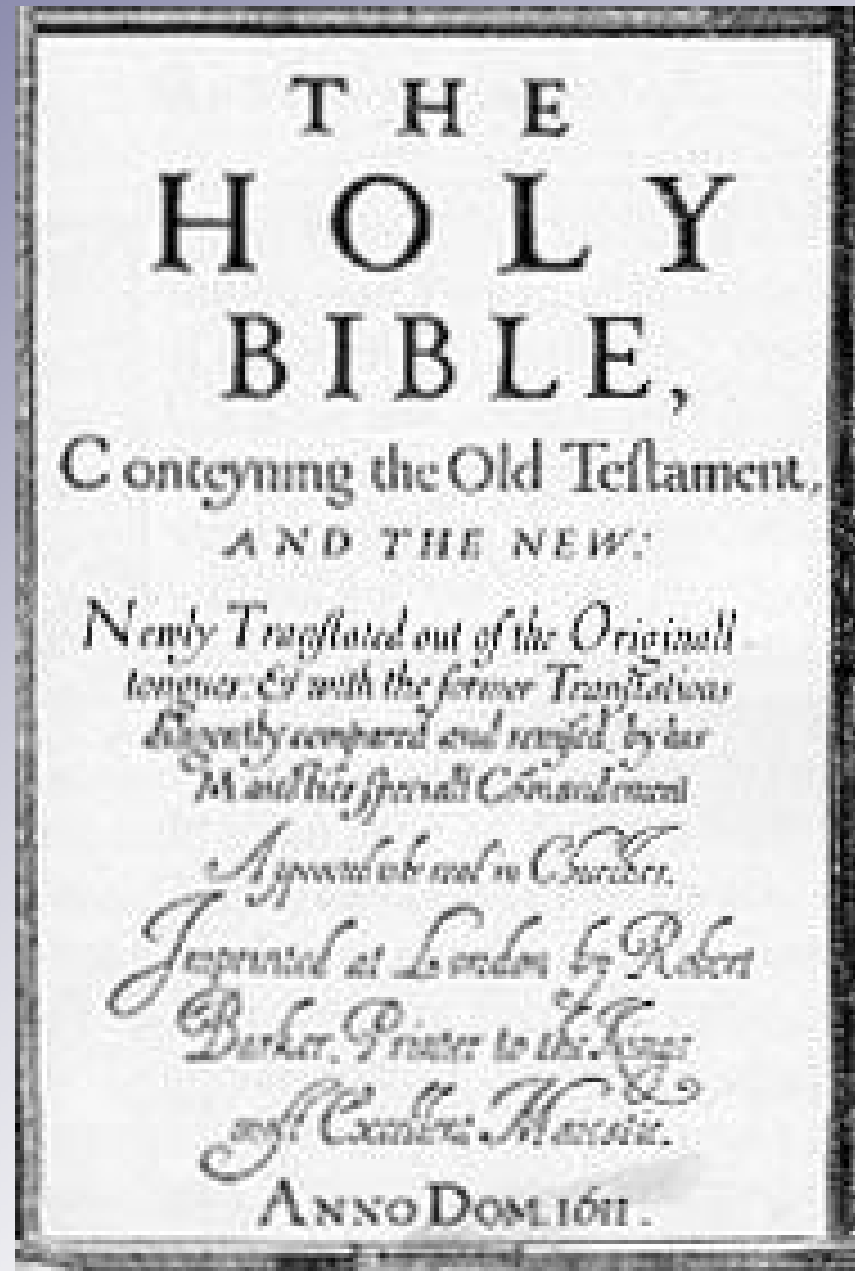
The Great Vowel Shift

The major change to affect the sound system of Middle English is that which resulted in a re-alignment of the system of long vowels and diphthongs which is traditionally known as the Great Vowel Shift. Essentially long vowels are raised one level and the two high vowels are diphthongised. The shift took several centuries to complete and is still continuing in Cockney (popular London speech). The shift of short /u/ to a lower vowel as in present-day southern English *but*, which began in the mid 17th century, is not part of the vowel shift.

Great Vowel Shift

(1300)	1400	1500	1600	1700	1800	present
<i>driven</i>	/i:/	/ii/	/ei/	/ɛi/	/Δi/	/ai/
<i>house</i>	/u:/	/uu/	/ou/	/ɔu/	/Δu/	/au/
<i>feet</i>	/e:/		/i:/			
<i>fool</i>	/o:/		/u:/			
<i>beat</i>	/ɛ:/			/e:/	/i:/	
<i>foal</i>	/ɔ:/			/o:/		/əu/
<i>take</i>	/a:/		/æ:/	/ɛ:/	/e:/	/ei/
<i>sail</i>	/ai/		/æi/	/ɛi/	/e:/	/ei/
<i>law</i>	/au/		/ɔu/	/ɒ:/		/ɔ:/

Title page of the
Authorized Version
of the Bible, the
so-called King
James Bible
(1611)





Dialects of English

The dialects of present-day English can be seen as the continuation of the dialect areas which established themselves in the Old English period. The dialectal division of the narrower region of England into 1) a northern, 2) a central and 3) a (subdivided) southern region has been retained to the present-day. The linguistic study of the dialects of English goes back to the 19th century when, as an offspin of Indo-European studies, research into (rural) dialects of the major European languages was considerably developed. The first prominent figure in English dialectology is Alexander Ellis (mid-19th century), followed somewhat later by Joseph Wright (late 19th and early 20th century). The former published a study of English dialects and the latter a still used grammar of English dialects at the beginning of the present century. It was not until the Survey of English Dialects, first under the auspices of Eugen Dieth and later of Harald Orton, that such intensive study of (rural) dialects was carried out (the results appeared in a series of publications in the 1950's and 1960's).



Dialects of English (continued)

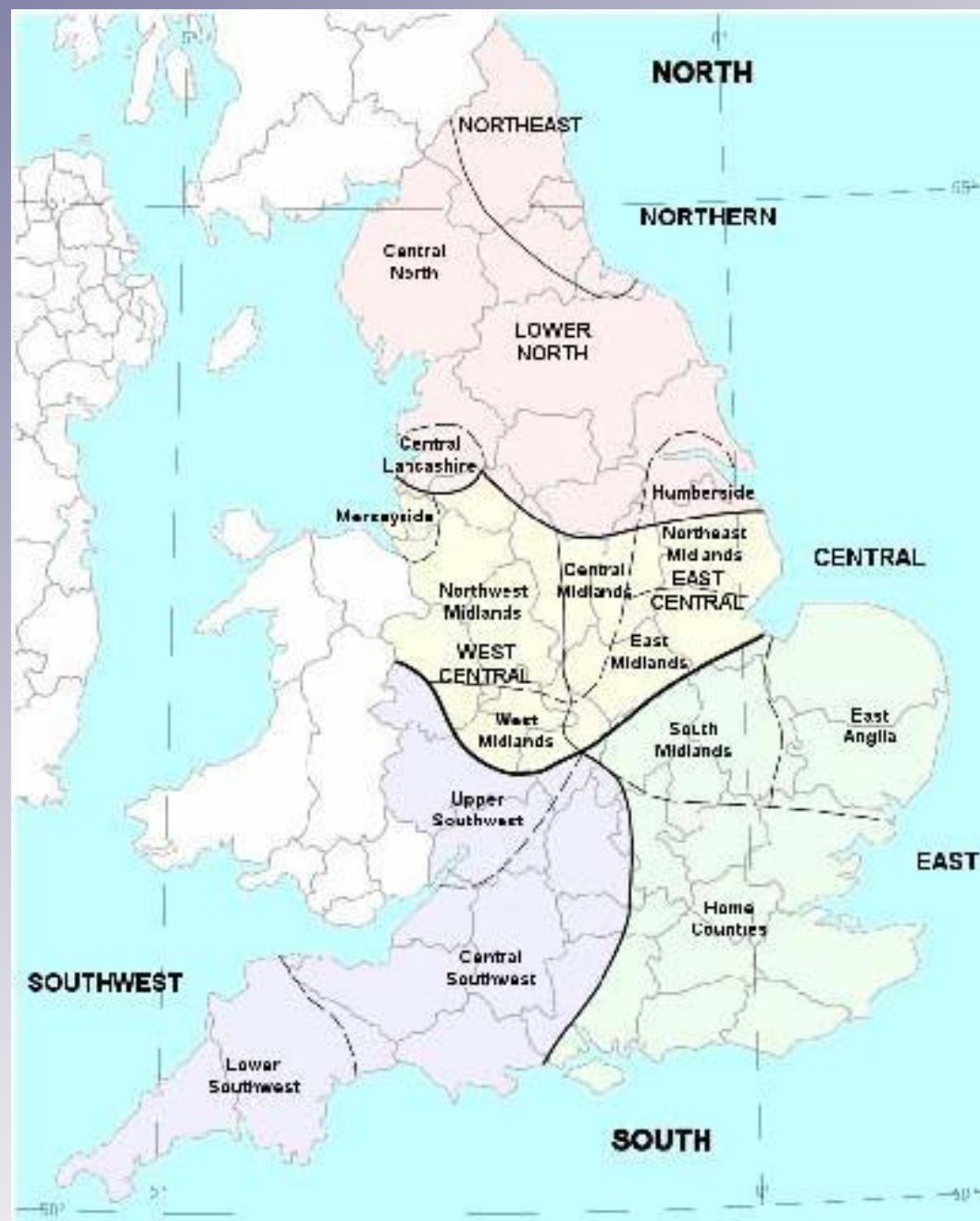
Dialect features

The main divide between north and south can be drawn by using the pronunciation of the word *but*. Either it has a /u/ sound (in the north) or the lowered and unrounded realisation typical of Received Pronunciation in the centre and south. An additional isogloss is the use of a dark /l/ in the south versus a clear /l/ in the north. The south can be divided by the use of syllable-final /r/ which is to be found in the south western dialects but not in those of the south east. The latter show 'initial softening' as in *single, father, think* with the voiced initial sounds /z-, v-, 'eth'/ respectively.

English dialects (traditional)

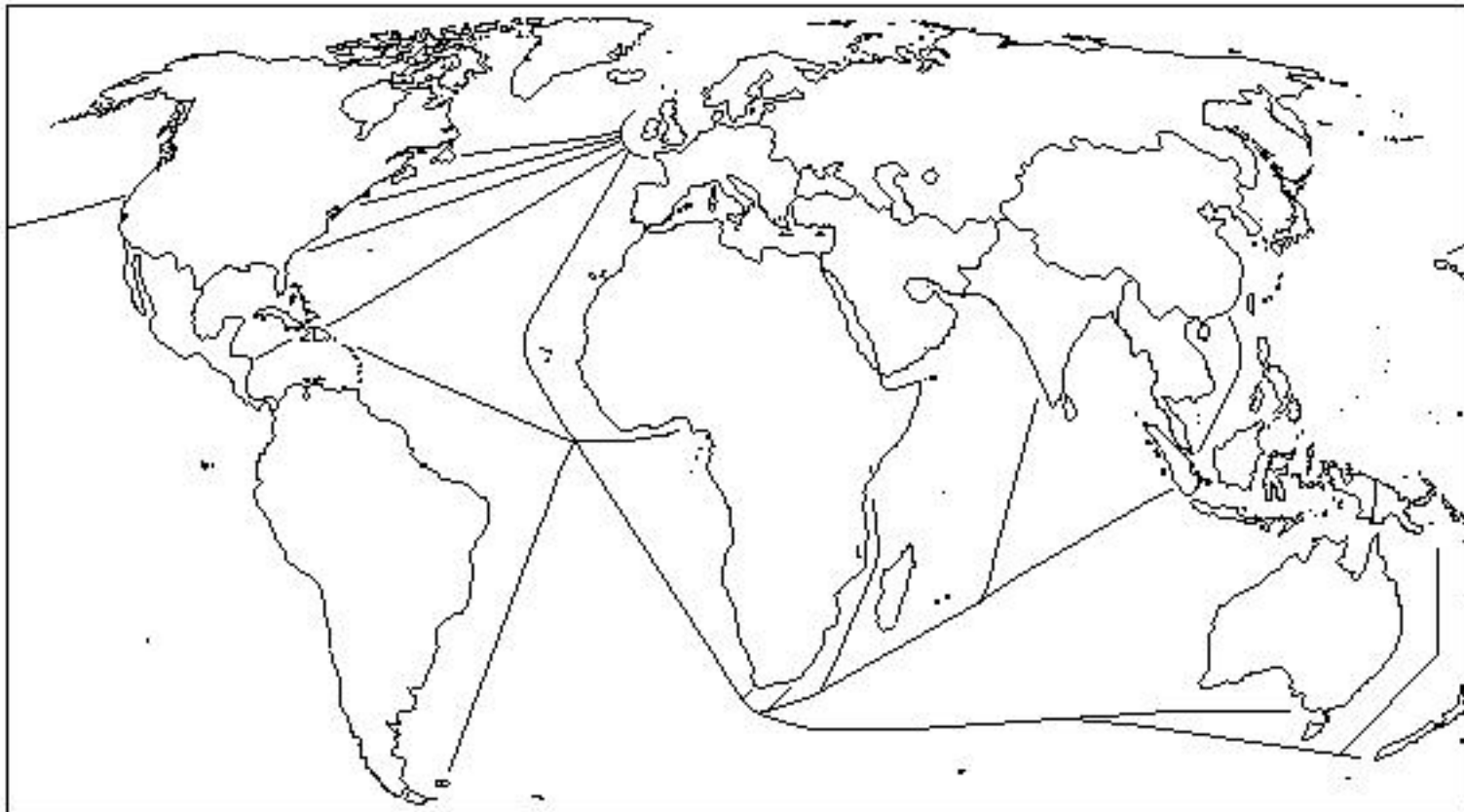


English dialects (contemporary)

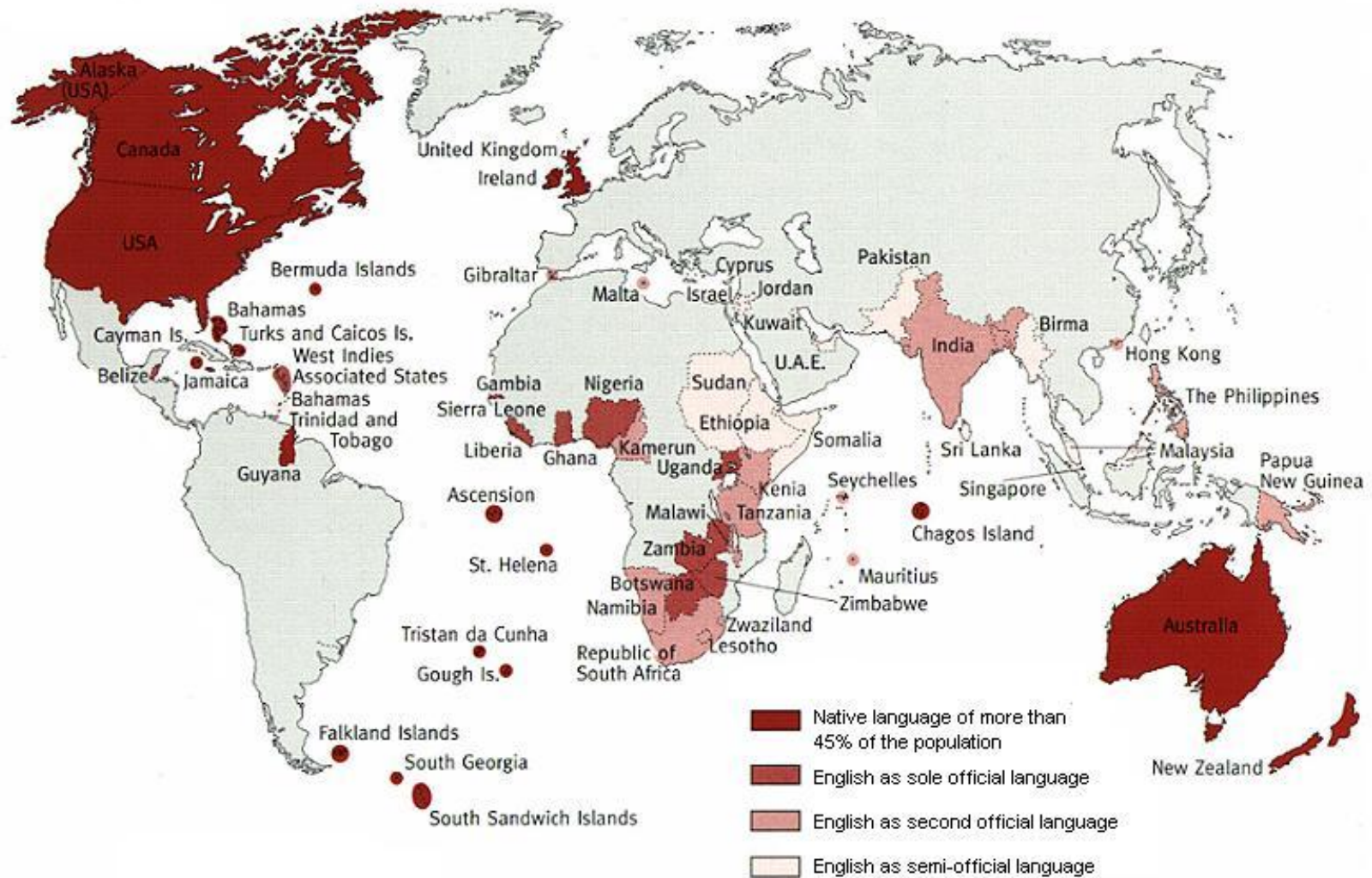


Spread of English in colonial period

Routes taken during the spread of English from the British Isles in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries by the English, Scottish and Irish



English in the world today



Recommended literature



Barber, Charles, Joan C. Beal and Philip A. Shaw 2009. *The English language. A historical introduction*. Second edition of Barber (1993). Cambridge: University Press.

Baugh, Albert C. and Thomas Cable 1993 *A history of the English language*. 4th edition. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall).

Crystal, David 1995. *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language*. Cambridge: University Press

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Fennell, Barbara 1998. *A history of English. A sociolinguistic approach*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hogg, Richard M. and David Denison (ed.) 2006. *A history of the English language*. Cambridge: University Press.

Mugglestone, Lynda (ed.) 2006. *The Oxford History of English*. Oxford: University Press.

Pyles, Thomas and John Algeo 1993. *Origins and development of the English language*. 4th edition. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich).