A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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*Abstract***:** The social factors have influenced in different ways the history of the English language. Within more than 1500 years we can detect a series of events that have caused major changes in the evolution of this language.

Key-words: English, language and power, social influence, technology

Our attempt in the present paper is rather frustrating because one can neither be personal nor unique with historical linguistics – for the periods of a language history remain the same already recorded and interpreted by many other highly experienced specialists. Nevertheless, trying to re-interpret the history of English, our work has as a main goal to outline some cultural events that influenced it. For example, the peasant's revolt of 1381 and the English revolution of the 1640s both had profound consequences for the language, but they are scarcely mentioned in conventional histories. This doesn't mean that the present paper will be of a vital help to history itself either, it will only emphasize some of the elements in the British cultural landscape that left their mark upon the evolution of the language.

A language related to Modern English has been spoken in Britain since the early fifth century. Before the Roman legions left Britain, the eastern coast of England was already being attacked by Saxon invaders from beyond the North Sea. According to Bede the newcomers who began to settle permanently belonged to three tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. The people are generally referred to as Anglo-Saxons, nevertheless their language has always been called English. They conquered the whole England and, consequently, English replaced the Celtic language. The English speakers were in their turn subjected to further raids from across the North Sea – the Danes. The Danish invasion and settlement had a considerable influence on the English language, and many words were borrowed in English, especially into the dialects of the north. The significant depth of the Danish influence on English may have several explanations: the Danish ethno-linguistic impact came at a time when English, as a national language, was still in the making. The early stages of both English and Danish had much more things in common than they have at present – on such a basis, linguistic exchange was easy enough. Though totally assimilated in the course of time, the Danes settled in central England were numerous enough to be able to embed some of their linguistic patterns in the language of the English natives, after a period of bilingualism [1].

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, French became the spoken language of the aristocracy in England, while Latin was adopted as the main written language. English was still spoken by the lower orders of society, but the old written tradition eventually collapsed, and few English written records survive for 200 years after about 1150. French remained in use for some 300 years, until it was gradually replaced by English after the middle of the fourteenth century. The "new" English was strongly influenced by French, and contained a large number of French words and expressions. The French influence can be seen in the language of Chaucer, the founding father of literary English (which he "found brick and left marble"). Although he consistently used grammatical forms of Old English origin, he also stands for a very high degree of French-loan assimilation. [2]

William Caxton introduced printing into England in the 1470s and written texts became much more widely available than before. Printing was the catalyst for the major changes of the sixteenth century which were linked in various ways to the Renaissance and the Reformation. It is from about this time that scholars began to write in English instead of Latin, and as a result many Latin words were borrowed into English. English literature prospered at the end of the sixteenth century, Shakespeare's "age". In the same period was published *The Authorized Version of the English Bible* (1611).

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Language is an important factor in the maintenance of power, and an understanding of power relations is important in tracing the history of a language. As Michel Foucault put it, "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative force whose function is repression" [3].

In the medieval period, the relevant power was possessed by the church. The important language was Latin, and written English was framed in accordance with the language practices of the church. When the power of the church was challenged by the growing power of the state, the prestige of Latin was recreated in English, and the new language of power was a "Latinate form of English" [4].

As far as the modern period is concerned, English was the language of the national state. The development of the nation state, its growth from a kingdom to a major empire, the cult of nationalism at the court of Elizabeth, the revolutions in the seventeenth century, and the nowadays worldwide expansion are all reflected in the history of the language. No doubt, English is one of today's most successful languages and its prominent position is not indicated only by the number of people using it as their native tongue (over 400 million English speakers of Great Britain, the United States of America, Australia, New Zeeland, Canada, and South Africa), but also by the numberless mass of people for whom it is a language of adoption, the most influential lingua franca in today's international affairs. Such a success is to be explained politically by the existence of a worldwide British Empire, although one should also mention the linguistic advantage of this language – its relatively simple structure.

When English was an unimportant vernacular, it was associated with the common people, but after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 it was the language of the "politest part of the nation". Soon there was a widespread belief that the common people did not speak proper English at all.

A shift of power is mediated by intellectual change, in that shifts of power can affect the basic assumptions people make about their language. Some of the major changes that occurred in English in the sixteenth century emanated from the belief of scholars that it was desirable to use English in place of Latin, and from their deliberate efforts to cause change to happen. The shift of power from aristocracy to the middle class is reflected in the eighteenth century concept of politeness, which in turn led to the fixing of standard written English. The increasing economic power of the working class led to the concept of the Queen's English and a narrowed definition of acceptable pronunciation. In the late twentieth century the assertion and recognition of the rights of women have led to a marked change in the use of the personal pronouns in the third person singular and plural, and of the nouns referring to human beings, such as *poetess* and *chairman.*

Language change is facilitated by the development of new technology, in particular technology that leads to improved communications. The effect of technology on language and society depends on who has the power to control the direction of change: in the short term it reinforces existing authority, but in the longer term it can alter the distribution of power.

The introduction of printing made possible the development of a written language which became the national standard of England, and later the basis for the modern worldwide Standard English. At first publishers worked for their ecclesiastical and aristocratic masters, but in fifty years it was clear that the press had generated a new international form of power beyond the control of church and state.

The effect of the effort to set up a standard correctness in language imposed by the rationalistic spirit of the eighteenth century often resulted in false conclusions, as in order to settle disputed points logically the simple reasoning about them was not enough. The lack of a standard to which all might conform was believed to have resulted in many corruptions which were growing up unchecked. One of the most ambitious hopes of the eighteenth century was to stabilize the language, to establish it in a form which would be permanent. The culmination of these efforts proved to be the publication in 1755 of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson,

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in two folio volumes. What Dr. Johnson had done for the vocabulary was attempted for the syntax by the grammarians. Treatises on English grammar had begun to appear in the sixteenth century, and in the seventeenth century there appeared compiled by such men as Ben Johnson or John Milton. On the other hand, the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries affected deeply the spoken language of the English people. The speech of most people in England is now related to the dialect of one of the major conurbations rather than the local village in which they live and the urban dialects of England are much more homogenous than the older rural dialects.

Since the middle of the present century power shifted away from Britain to the United States, and new technologies are creating new relationships that will affect the language in the future in ways we cannot even guess. Although the American Revolution deprived the mother country of one of her promising colonies, it did not prevent the language of this region from remaining English. The beginnings of the English occupation of Australia also occurred in the eighteenth century. The opening up of Africa started at the end of the eighteenth century. The most obvious effects of the English expansion are to be felt in the domain of the vocabulary. Trade routes have always been important ways for the transmission of ideas and words.

In addition to changes which have an identifiable social origin, there is a large mass of changes which have been the result of prestige and fashion. In spite of the fact that we cannot find out why or how some particular innovations occur in the first place, we can nevertheless trace their spread over several generations. Innovations spread along lines of prestige – the capital imitates the fashions of the court, and the provincial towns imitate the capital. In addition to these geographical changes, mention should be made of the age differences and the effects of education. Young people adopt new styles of speech for the same reasons as they adopt new styles of dress and other social habits. Because language plays an important role in English society, there have always been significant differences between the language habits of people with power and prestige and the mass of the population.

Broadcasting and other forms development in the early twentieth century had an initial effect analogous to that of printing, particularly in the spread of Received Pronunciation in Britain. This has brought about increasing uniformity in speech in England during the present century, but the power to control pronunciation has already passed from Britain to the United States. It is too early to attempt to predict the long-term effects of computer-based technology and the use of English on the Internet. In the past years, one could remark an outburst of the high tech domain, regarding the computer science development. The language by means of computers is a proof of the impact of the computers upon mankind's culture. No matter the direction their future may have, computers are constantly becoming more and more important. One should pay the due attention to the history of the "e"-prefix. It seems to be able to combine with almost any other word to connote technological revolution. The word that lies at the basis of all these compounds is the well-known word "e-mail", first recorded as a noun in 1982. Other similar prefixes in similar creations are: V-mail, i.e. sending short video messages by e-mail, I-mode, i.e. an Internet-connected mobile phone system, in early 1999, by DoCoMo, a firm controlled by Nippon Telegram and telephone, etc. [5]

The events of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth affecting the English speaking countries had a great impact on the political and the social level. The great reform measures proved to be important factors in placing the English society on a more democratic basis [6] increasing the opportunities for the mass population to benefit from the cultural advantages available in the course of the century. Thus, the first cheap newspaper (1816) and the establishment of cheap postage (1840), together with the better means of travel and communication brought about by the railroad, the steamboat, the telegraph contributed to the act of spreading the influence of the standard speech. Some of these events had a direct influence upon the English vocabulary but what affected it more are the developments in science and the rapid progress in the filed of intellectual activity. Among the events of the twentieth century which have already had a profound effect on the course of the English language are the collapse of British power after the Second World War and the growth of communications technology on a global scale. In the course of the twentieth century, the power to

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affect change in the English language has begun to shift from prestigious groups in Britain to transnational commercial organizations. English has now to be considered not in a British context but in a world context, and in this new context most people who use English are not native speakers of the language.

Two thousand years ago, a major consequence of the decline of Roman power was that Rome lost its automatic authority with respect to the language. The written language passed into the control of the church, while spoken language was largely dominated by kingdoms set up by Germanic speaking Goths and Franks. In a similar way, the inevitable consequence of the loss of British power is that London, England and even Britain no longer have control over written and spoken English.

The international spread of standard written language means that many groups of people have now equal rights to it. The spoken language is more obviously variable, but Sydney and New York have the same right (and, more importantly, the economic power) to determine its form as London. For this reason, English is not the exclusive property of people who regard themselves as native speakers.

The last hundred of years offer an excellent opportunity to observe the relation between a civilization and a language which represents an expression of it. Within a generation of the invention of the computer, the computer industry was established on a global scale, using English as its language. As the computer culture has expanded into large scale databases, electronic mail and so on, the expansion of English has followed, and the technology is designed in such a way that the user needs to interact in English. Individual programs can as well use other languages, but the program itself will almost certainly use commands in English. If in previous technological revolutions has had to be adapted for different languages, in this case languages other than English have to be interfaced with the resident language of the technology.

English has changed in the course of the present century from being the language of the British empire to the international language of communication. In the new world as it is now, England is adopting much the same relationship to English as Italy did towards Latin in the medieval period. We can be sure that the present "vacuum" will not last for ever. Two thousand years ago, after the collapse of Roman power, the control over the language shifted north to the Franks, the Irish and even the Anglo-Saxons. The Roman soldiers guarding the east coast of Britain in the fifth century could not have foreseen that the language of the Saxon pirates would eventually be used all over the world not only by people but also by inanimate machines.

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