

From Manuscripts to the Internet

How Did Media Influence the English Language?

Saskia Baumgartner, Caroline Kaufmann, Stefanie Mahrer, Kathrin Pavic, Sarah Staehelin

Abstract: We will concentrate in this abstract on only three major stages in the development of Media. In 1477, the first book in England was printed by William Caxton. This was a very important event in terms of Language since it gave rise to standardisation of English language. Caxton used the dialect spoken in the London area as a standard reference and first set a standard in written English. About 450 years later, the BBC broadcast its first program. Its announcers on radio as well as later on TV spoke only RP, thus setting a standard to spoken language. Today, as RP is declining in prestige and considered to be a rather snobbish accent, BBC's announcers speak a great variety of accents. But the medium that is changing language the most today is the Internet, mainly by CMC (Computer Mediated Communication). CMC has features of both written and spoken language and is mainly used in e-mails and Internet Chat Rooms. The most distinct feature of CMC is the use of abbreviations and emoticons (*lol* and ☺). And this shows us that in a way language is going back to where it all started: the use of pictures to convey meaning.

1. Introduction

Language is constantly subject to change. It changes over the centuries, as well as it can change over a few years, as the language used by young people shows. Language of course is influenced by many factors such as class, society, developments in science and political circumstances. One major influence, however, is and has been the media. From the very first manuscript up to today's use of internet language, media has always played a major part in influencing language.

In this paper, we will have a look at how media changed language, from the 8th century on to the 21st. From the early Anglo-Saxon manuscripts to the first printed books, from early newspapers to BBC radio and from television to the Internet, we will look closely at how different forms of media changed and shaped the English language.

2. Manuscripts

The earliest form of books in England are the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. Those early books are very precious and a great source of anything that relates to the Anglo-Saxon world. The example of the *Beowulf*¹ manuscript shows how one such manuscript can trigger a scientific discussion that can go on for years and years.

First, it will be explained how manuscripts were made, who wrote them and who owned them. Then the impact of manuscripts on the English Language will be looked at.

2.1 The Making and Owning of Manuscripts

Manuscripts were made out of the skin of pigs, calves or goats. The skin had to be prepared before it could be used as a page in a manuscript, meaning it had to be stretched, shaved and treated in a very long and diligent process. In the end, a thin leave or membrane was left over on which one could write. The manuscripts consisted of several QUIRES, or sections of pages. These sections were only bound together loosely to make it easy to rebind the manuscripts. This, however, also heightened the chances of parts getting lost (Herrington, 2004).

The texts of the manuscripts were written down by scribes or scriptors, as they were called back then. The texts that were recorded were quite wide-ranged, among them the works of Cicero and Pliny (Brown, 2002c). But the text that was copied the most, was the Gospel. This is because most scribes were monks and their main concern was naturally the Gospel. The monks were trained to write in beautiful letters and some of them were even great illustrators. They provided the manuscripts with pictures and ornaments that supported the text.

¹ The British Library owns the only known medieval manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, which dates from the early 11th century. *Beowulf* is the elegiac narrative of the adventures of Beowulf, a Scandinavian hero who saves the Danes from the seemingly invincible monster Grendel and, later, from Grendel's mother. He then returns to his own country, Geatland, and dies in old age in a vivid fight against a dragon (Kiernan, fathom.com). It is not known when or by whom the poem was actually written and the only manuscript that exists is a source of great disputes between scholars. Some think that the existing manuscript is actually the original while others strongly oppose this view. Also, some scholars think that the manuscript dates from the 9th rather than the 11th century.

The manuscripts were very valuable for obvious reasons: the pages were extremely difficult to make, the ink and the color to draw the pictures for so-called illuminated manuscripts cost a lot of money. These expensive early books were only available to rich people. The people who had money in the Middle Ages were the nobility and the clergy. Often, a nobleman would be the donor of a manuscript, meaning he would pay for its production and not keep it to himself, but rather donate it to a monastery or a convent (Brown, 2002b).

2.2 Literacy

If one looks at who made and owned manuscripts, it is quite obvious that manuscripts simply could not have had a great effect on language. Manuscripts were a good whose possession was constricted to a small group of people. The majority of people could neither read nor write. But even learned people could not all write or read, as Michelle Brown of the British Library claims: “[...] in a period when book production was a manual activity, ‘literacy’ might not necessarily entail the ability to write; works might be dictated to a competent scribe, even by notable scholars of the Middle Ages” (Brown, 2002b). This shows that, even in a circle where manuscripts were relatively widely spread, the owners of manuscripts were not necessarily able to read them. This fact is interesting in so far as it narrows down the number of people who were literate in the modern sense of the word even more and thus reduces the impact of manuscripts on language even more.

2.3 The Impact on Language

The language that was used to write down manuscripts was not at all standardised. Every scribe wrote in his own dialect since there was nothing even close to a standardised English language yet. A monk in the North of England would write completely differently from a monk who lived in a monastery in Cornwall. It was not until the printing press was invented that language became standardised.

One thing however, was standardised in the manuscript era: the use of MAJUSCULES (capital letters) and MINUSCULES (small letters). Generally, the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts were written in minuscules, reserving majuscules for “important” words or NOMINA SACRA, meaning words that relate to God or the Bible. This has led to today’s use of capital letters (Herrington, 2004).

Generally, manuscripts did not have as much an influence on language as they had on the development of the Anglo-Saxon culture. The beautifully drawn and written manuscripts had an impact on how the relatively new Christian church was perceived in England. This was mainly because old, traditional ornaments or images were incorporated into the manuscripts, thus making people feel they already knew some things about the Gospel. Old knowledge of medicine, astronomy and calendars, that had before been passed on orally, could now be saved for the future. Different factors led to the establishment of a highly developed culture in Britain.

3. The Impact of Print on The English Language

The invention of the printing press brought on influential changes to the English Language. First there will be a short summary of the history of the beginning of printing and then the discussion of the impact of the printing press on the English Language.

3.1 A Short History of Printing

Before JOHANNES GUTENBERG printed his famous Bible there has already been printing. In Asia and Europe stamps and boards were used for printing on fabric or paper. The letters had to be cut into wood, which was a very time-consuming and costly procedure. Gutenberg is known as the inventor of the printing press. Around 1450 he had the idea to use MOVABLE TYPES. Movable types had been used in China since the beginning of the 11th century but the type was made out of clay. Gutenberg used metal for his type and used another way of application.

In 1455 the GUTENBERG BIBLE was published in Mainz. It had taken Gutenberg two years to complete it (Gareth, 1997).

William Caxton is considered the first English printer. He was born between 1422 and 1424 in Kent and between 1444 and 1449 he left for Bruges. Bruges was back then a flourishing merchant town in Belgium. From 1462 to 1470 Caxton was governor of the *English Nation of Merchant Adventures*. At some point of time in this period he started to translate *The Recueyell of the Historyes of Troye* from French into English. From 1471 to 1472 Caxton lived in Cologne where he learned to print. In the same year he went back to Bruges where he established a press. With this press the first book in English was printed (Hellinga 1999: 65-68).

In late 1475 or early 1476 he moved back to England. In Westminster he set up a press. Only one year later the first book was printed on English land. Caxton was highly estimated for his careful editing and he used his knowledge of foreign languages (such as Dutch, French, Latin) to translate the works himself. He published over one hundred books during his life.²

3.2 The Impact of Printing on the English Language

3.2.1 Linguistic Situation

When Caxton started printing in the 15th century he faced the problem that there was not yet a standard form of English. We are just at the ending of the Middle English-period and French lost its status as the prestigious language only about one hundred years ago. In 1399 King Henry IV was the first native-speaker of English on the throne of England. The decline of the French language had as well political reasons: Both, France and England were involved in the *Hundred Years War* from 1337. Furthermore, England needed a language for administrative purposes that could be understood not only by a tiny elite but by everyone (Culpeper 1997: 69).

Latin was used until the ending of the Middle English-period as the language of science but English as well took over this field (Schiltz, 2004).

3.2.2 The New Standard

Caxton's wish for a standard had an economical background. He could not afford to print books in different dialects but had to choose one that was prestigious and easily understood by many people. The dialect that happened to fulfil both was the EAST MIDLAND DIALECT. This dialect was spoken in the triangle of the three most influential cities: London, Oxford, and Cambridge. The new standard that emerged was called the CHANCERY STANDARD. This was the variety the chancery or government scribes used. It was mainly based on the London dialect with central Midland elements. Caxton more or less adopted this variety in the books he printed.

We saw that the forming of a widely accepted standard variety of English was due to different factors. Thus Caxton did not define the standard of the English language but by adopting a certain variety he forced its establishment (Culpeper 1997: 69).

² (http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/caxton_william.shtml)

3.2.3 Codifying the English Language

More important in establishing a standard is the emergence of dictionaries, grammar books, and spelling books in the 16th century. Marshall McLuhan argues that :”Print altered not only the spelling and grammar but the accentuation and inflection of languages, and made bad grammar possible” (McLuhan 1962: 231).

3.2.4 Social Dimensions

The invention of the printing press influenced not only the English language but had also social dimensions. The printing press made it possible to produce a larger quantity of books and to reduce the price of a copy. More people could afford to buy books. Reading was no longer restricted to the clergy and the highest social ranks. In fact at the end of the 15th century illiteracy was very high. The lower costs of books increased the literacy among the lower classes and women (Schiltz, 2004).

4. Newspapers and the Press

This chapter is about the press and the kind of language that is used in newspapers. It deals with the origin of the first newspapers written in English, how language is used in the different kinds of newspapers and what factors are responsible for these differences.

4.1 Origin of Newspapers

The first newspapers in England were published in the seventeenth century. The *Weekly News*, for example, began to appear irregularly from 1622 on and *The London Gazette* came out first in 1666. These developments began later in the United States. The *Boston Newsletter* was printed first in 1704 and *The New-York Gazette* in 1725.

In comparison with the development of the press in European countries, the progress in Britain and also in the United States was much greater. According to David Crystal the reason for this is that “as early as the first decades of the seventeenth century, several European countries were publishing rudimentary newspapers, but censorship, taxation, wars, and other constraints allowed little growth.” (Crystal 1997: 83) But also in Britain censorship limited the newspaper content till the end of the seventeenth century.

The nineteenth century brought the greatest progress in the production of newspapers, “thanks to the introduction of new printing technology and new methods of mass production and transportation.” (Crystal 1997: 83) These new methods of production brought about the development of an independent press, especially in the USA. By 1850, there were 400 daily newspapers and by the end of the century even nearly 2000. With the upcoming of the sensational press the sales grew larger and newspaper empires arose. The best-known newspaper of this kind in Britain came out in 1896: *The Daily Mail*. From that time on newspapers written in English dominated the newsstands around the world.

English became thus established as the language of the news. This development was reinforced “by the way techniques of news gathering developed.” (Crystal 1997: 84) Around 1850 the major news agencies grew, especially after the invention of the telegraph. With the emergence of the *New York Associated Press* in 1856 and the *Reuters* agency – launched by Paul Julius Reuters in 1851 in Aachen and afterwards moved to London – “the majority of the information being transmitted along the telegraph wires of the world was English.” (Crystal 1997: 84) Because these agencies were in English speaking countries, English became the most important language of information gathering in the international press.

But one has to take into consideration that even small communities have their own newspapers that deal with the local problems and issues. “They play an important role in the identity of a local community.” (Crystal 1997: 84) That way, newspapers are not only international media but also the media of local communities and therefore published in the home language of these communities.

4.2 The Language of the Newspapers

The question that arises here is: What are the characteristics of the language used in newspapers? According to David Crystal, a special kind of newspaper language does not exist. “The media reflect all aspects of the human condition, and makes available to the public many varieties of language already well known elsewhere, such as those associated with religion, politics, science, and literature, and the more topic-directed aspects of conversation (e.g. discussion, interview, debate, argument, letter)” (Crystal 1995: 380)

In other words, newspapers adapt their language to the kind of topics they deal with. Thus, scientific magazines like *The National Geographic* use a scientific kind of language.

But newspapers do not only suit their language to the topics, but also to the readership they want to attract. Therefore, tabloids like *The Sun* are written in a simple language with large catchy headlines and many coloured pictures. *The Sun* is supposed to be read by working class people and Tory³ supporters whereas more serious papers like the *Guardian* and the *Times* are expected to be read by left-wing, middle-class, Labour supporters. (Reah 1998: 35) “A mass circulation tabloid such as the British *Sun* covers different stories from those in elite readership papers like *The Times* or *Independent*. Still more obvious are the contrast in presentation. The ‘popular’ and ‘quality’ British dailies look entirely different from each other – in design, typography, use of photographs and other visuals techniques.” (Bell 1991: 104) Therefore, the language as well as the layout of a newspaper reflects the social group of people that are intended to read it.

Newspapers and its language also reflect the cultural values of a country. “The print media of different countries or different cultures differ in a variety of ways.” (Reah 1998: 54) Through language certain cultural values are expressed. “For example, if a particular culture has little respect for certain groups, concepts or beliefs, then the language for expressing ideas about those groups, concepts or beliefs will reflect that attitude.” (Reah 1998: 55) If a newspaper writes, for example, about people that have a physical disability, they refer to them as “the handicapped”, or more specifically as “the blind” or “the crippled”. They are labelled by their disability. The use of these terms reflects the attitudes that the society has towards people with disabilities. “Many people with disabilities are very unhappy with this kind of labelling. They reject the label ‘disabled’ and prefer the term ‘differently abled’”. (Reah 1998: 54) Language expresses and reinforces attitudes like these because newspaper texts operate within the value system of a particular culture.

Thus, there is no such thing as typical newspaper language, the language used in the printed news is adapted to its readership and it reflects the values of a culture. These values and with them the language change over time. Thus, the language used in the printed news is changing as well.

³ *Tory* was a nickname given 1679-80 by the Exclusioners to those who opposed the exclusion of James, Duke of York (a Roman Catholic) from the succession to the Crown. Hence, from 1689, the name of one of the two great parliamentary and political parties in England and (at length) in Great Britain. Its main opponent is the *Labour* Party, a political party specially supporting the interests of labour. It was formed in 1906 by a federation of trade unions and advanced political bodies to secure the representation of labour in parliament (OED online).

5. Broadcasting

Nowadays the media are a very influential genre, though not all researchers agree with this. For instance, Milroy and Milroy argue that the media are successful in displaying innovations and spreading new idioms, but television cannot force people to adopt them (Bauer 1994:7-8). Nevertheless, many people adopt the speech style they hear on TV. Milroy, for instance, observed in a study on the working-class in Northern Ireland that the speech of women, who often stay at home is closer to the standard than the speech of women who have extensive kin-ties in their area. These women then use a more localized and non-standard speech variety (Romaine 2000:84). Therefore, the language that is heard on TV or the radio has an influence on society. The language displayed in the media is used as a tool to convey messages. But it is used in a different way than in normal face-to-face conversations as no interaction between the sender of an information and its receiver takes place. For this reason, the receiver has no chance to interrupt the speech flow of the sender. Linguists are interested in the way language is used in the media, how it changes within society and the effects it has on it.

In this part, it will be described how language is used in the media, particularly in the news. But before going into more detail, a short description of the beginnings of British broadcasting will be given.

5.1 The Beginning of the British Broadcasting Company

The history of British broadcasting started in 1919, when some experimental broadcasts were being made (Crystal 1997:87). In 1922, the BBC was established. First, it was formed by six major radio manufacturers and some other, smaller companies. In the beginning, the BBC had the monopoly in broadcasting. The income of the company was rather small, because it was financed by a part of the licence fees that operators of radios - and later televisions - had to pay and not by advertisements. The first broadcast transmission was made on the 14th of November 1922. In the following time, the program was rather limited, among other things, partly because the BBC was strictly controlled by the government in order to prevent any controversial programs. John Reith was the first manager of the BBC. His aim was to broadcast programs that educate, inform and entertain the listeners (Cain 1992:9-12).

In 1927, the British Broadcasting Company was renamed to *British Broadcasting Corporation*. After the invention of television, the BBC was also responsible for the

programs shown by this new medium. Only one television channel existed in Britain until 1955 and there were only 3 radio services until 1967 (Willis et al. 1992:422).

In order to reach its present status, the BBC underwent many changes with regard to programming as well as advertisement policies, its monopoly and the introduction of new TV and radio channels (Willis et al. 1992:425-428).

5.2 Media and RP Pronunciation

The media have never been as influential as today. As most people spend many hours per day in front of the TV, they probably hear more language from the media than they do in conversations. Therefore, one can say that society is influenced by the language that occurs in the media. The examples of Milroy's Belfast study given in chapter 5 shows how, for instance, women are influenced by television. But the language used in the media has also influenced society in another way. This becomes evident due to frequent public complaints concerning the way in which language is used in the media (Bell 1991:1-3). For instance, people expect broadcasters to speak the standard variety called Received Pronunciation. Until recently, the BBC had only employed RP speakers as announcers (Leitner 1983:32). But as nowadays, RP is not as prestigious as it used to be, announcers with other accents are also heard on TV (Culpeper 1997:74). Nevertheless, in the beginning, the BBC even had an Advisory Committee on Spoken English that prescribed the pronunciations of words that might be difficult to pronounce (Leitner 1983:32). So, if announcers speak a variety that seems not close enough to RP, people are likely to criticise them, as mentioned before. Though criticism is inappropriate in this case, because it is based on a relative point of view, likely to be dropped for even the attitudes towards a standard variety of a language are subject to change. Once, it was seen as the standard to say: 'Our father which art in heaven', while nowadays, the correct version would be: 'Our father, who is in heaven'. Standard varieties have changed in the past and they will do so in the future as all living languages are undergoing changes. Labov refers to this as the UNIFORMITARIAN PRINCIPLE (Bauer 1994:2-7).

5.3 News and Language

On TV as well as on the radio, the news are particularly important. They are seen as the genre that is particularly important for setting a language standard within the media. The news are a serious business and so is the language used in this genre (Bell 1991:1). Contrary to most face-to-face interactions, language is not produced by a

single individual in the news media, but by many parties. Journalists, editors, newsreaders are only part of the production of a news story (Bell 1991:33). Their job is to bring together different news fragments in order to create a coherent and understandable text. One device that is used in about 20% of the BBC's news talk is reported speech. It is used as a substitution for, or addition to, visual input such as interviews. Furthermore, its aim is to integrate "media-external sources into a form consistent with the ideological framework of the media institutions" (Leitner 1983:111). This means that BBC's reporting is standardized, i.e. reports have to fit into a certain form and for this reason it can be necessary to put them differently. As a consequence, reported speech is used. Reported speech also creates a neutral and factual impression so that distance between the newscasters and an utterance can be achieved (Leitner 1983:112).

A further point of language use in the news are deictic expression-words such as *I, you, this, that, today*, etc.-can become problematic. In order to use such expressions appropriately, it is advantageous if interlocutors can address each other face-to-face. But today, with the use of modern technology such as televisions, sender and receiver of an information are not necessarily in the same place. Furthermore, with the use of video taping, the temporal dimension is changed. For instance, one can tape the news today and watch them tomorrow. Thus, the word *today* is no longer accurate (Goodman et al. 1996:33).

5.4 Outlook

In conclusion, it seems that people have never been as aware of the niceties in English as at present, due to the influence of the media. Most of the language people hear comes from the television or the radio, because most people spend many hours per day in front of the TV. They expect to hear standard English from newscasters and for this reason BBC has always paid great attention to this variety of English in its programs.

It has been outlined that many people are involved in the production of a news text and how the use of different speech forms such as deictic expressions can become problematic in the media. As the television is a relatively new device, improvements will be made in the future. For instance, new channels will come into existence and therefore, even more and different forms of language will be displayed.

6. Computer Mediated Language

6.1 A Short Computer History

In the late 70s the first personal computers came on the market. For many, the Apple II is the first ‘true personal computer’. It was the first one to have colour graphics and also the first Apple to have a floppy disk drive, although in its first year on the market it still came with an audio cassette drive. A further milestone in PC history was the Commodore 64 of 1982. It was even easier to handle than the Apple II, was cheaper and turned out to become the best-selling PC of all time.

During that time, it became clear that personal computers would become a part of everyone’s life, or at least of the people in the richer countries. Another big step in computer history came with the Internet. The invention of the World Wide Web in the beginning of the 90s made it possible for everyone to go online. PCs and the Internet play an important role as we write and send our letters and our e-mails with their help, read news or articles and chat with each other online. A lot of the things we use our computers for have to do with writing or reading, with communication and (electronic) language. It then would not be surprising if along with our lives that have changed due to PCs and the Internet, also our language has changed.

6.2 Computer Mediated Communication

CMC (COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION) means that human beings communicate with each other with the help of computer (Herring 1996:Introduction). The most common form, and the one we want to focus on, is written CMC. The most popular forms of written CMC that almost everybody is familiar with are e-mail and chats. When it comes to CMC the question most people are concerned with is, whether CMC has more in common with spoken or with written language. And this question is not only something that concerns a few linguists as any teenager who has made his or her first experiences in online chatting knows that CMC does not use the same language as in books but something similar to spoken language.

6.2.2 Similarities of CMC to Spoken and Written Language

There are many different studies that try to give an answer as to whether CMC is more like written or spoken language. One part of Simeon Yates’ study³ compares

³ See: Yates, Simeon J.: Oral and Written Linguistic Aspects of Computer Conferencing: A Corpus Based Study in Herring: 1996. 29-46..

CMC, writing and speech to their use of personal pronouns because ‘[o]ne of the main differences between speech and writing which many researchers focus on is reference to self and other’ (Herring 1996:40). The results were that in the total use of pronouns CMC was closer to writing and in the proportional use of each type of pronoun there were more similarities to speech. There is no clear answer, besides that CMC has features of both, writing and speech.

The simplest way to find similarities of CMC to writing or speech is not to take a look at a study but to have a look at an e-mail or to go to a chat-room as the answers are mostly relatively obvious. As far as similarities to written language are concerned, anybody can see that CMC is text-based, as written language is. Something that CMC and written language also have in common is that you cannot be interrupted as it is the case with spoken language. You can always finish what you wanted to write.

Of course there are different types of written language and spoken language, but CMC seems to be more personal, like speech. There are some features or effects in CMC, especially in chats to support this personal and speech-like atmosphere. For example, hyphens and periods are used to create a pause, capitalization and exclamation marks have the effect of emphasis. Also, there are effects to imitate sounds or laughter, for example *ding dong* or *hahaha*. It is also not unusual to use the effect of gesture, for example when chat partners are simulating they would shake each others hands or hugging each other by adding **shakes hands** or **hugs** to their messages (Herring 1996:56-60).

6.2.3 CMC Features

So far we have learned that CMC has features of written and spoken language and it cannot clearly be attributed to either one or the other. But CMC has also some features on its own. The most well-known is probably the current use of abbreviations. People that are not familiar with chatting on the computer might have problems to understand the many abbreviations the chat language uses there. For example, *lol*, meaning *laughing out loud* or *IMHO*, meaning *In My Humble Opinion*. Something that is also typical of Computer Mediated Communication is emoticons, which you use if you want to show emotion with the help of a few characters. The most common emoticon is :-)) which indicates a smile.

Abbreviations and emoticons are really helpful in writing an informal e-mail, while chatting or lately, in writing text messages on mobile phones. Both features express

something one wants to say or an emotion one wants to submit in a minimum of characters. This way, you can save time, space and even money, if you think of the extremely limited characters you can use in one text message.

7. Conclusion

The manuscripts, that were a first in writing down the spoken dialects, the invention of the printing press, that set a standard to the writing of the English Language, newspapers and telegraphs that established English as the language of the news, broadcasting and the BBC that set RP as the standard variety of English and finally the Internet that changed the Neglish language in simplifying words or using emoticons to convey moods - after having learnt all this and how the ways of communication between people therefore changed over the centuries, it is easy to understand that language necessarily had to change under these circumstances. A very interesting point in this discussion is, how the English language is being simplified. The whole language started out as a very complicated and complex system of declinations and cases. As language was printed, broadcast and went online, it got – in some aspects – reduced until it was there, where it all started out: the drawing of pictures to convey meaning!

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