

Influence of French on English Language

Mrs. P.T. Anbu Hannah Dora

Assistant Professor in French, Holy Cross College (Autonomous)

Nagercoil, Kanniyakumari District, Tamilnadu.

Introduction

No man is an island, so also is a language. It may be a language spoken by a particular community or a people of a locality or nation. It has to have contact with another language due to various reasons, invasion, commerce, travel, intermingling through marriage- to cite a few examples. The English language as it is spoken or written today has been shaped and modified by a number of other languages over the last several centuries. We know that Latin and German were two most important languages that had their impact on English. English language that belongs to the Indo-European family of languages was born out of the dialects of three German tribes namely, Angles, Jutes, and Saxons, who settled in Britain in the fifth century AD. This group of dialects is referred to by linguists as Anglo-Saxon and at some point it distinctly got evolved as what we now call Anglo Saxon. Due to invasion and other political reasons this Germanic language was influenced by Celtic, Latin and Scandinavian.

Britain has all along been a powerful nation with rich culture and literature. But it has a history of coming under French rule in the 11th century. Besides this, the English people have all along been highly adventurous and involved in trade and commerce. All these are responsible for English to get mingled with other languages, especially with French, the language of its immediate neighbour across the English Channel

How French Influenced English

Britain and France are separated by the English Channel that has the narrowest width of fourteen miles between Dover on the British side and Calais on the French coast. Naturally the two countries would be mutually influenced on all spheres with language as no exception. A close look at language shows that it is with the Norman invasion of England in 1066 we see a major impact not merely on the political scenario, but also on the English language clearly visible. William the Conqueror and his band of Normans brought with them Norman French, which later became the official language of the court, government and was considered the language of the elites. Mimicking French accent and speaking good French in England was considered a sign of sophistication and eventually the upper class did not lose the opportunity to learn the new fashionable tongue. Knowledge of Political history is essential to understand the immense impact of French on English language. The historical event that is considered the beginning of the Middle English period is traced to almost one hundred years earlier than the end of the Old English period. This is clearly seen with the time of what is known as the Norman Conquest by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066. From the time of Norman Conquest in 1066 French language

gained great importance. Naturally important positions be it in the church, military, government and other institutions were occupied by the French speaking people and this paved way for getting recognition for French as the dominant language. But in spite of French getting the patronage of people in power and position English continued to enjoy the favour of ordinary people. Britain thus allowed French and English to exist and flourish side by side. The kings of England spoke the French language, had French queens and preferred to live in France. The reason was political but the result was intermingling of two people, nations and languages bringing about a complete change in the linguistic, cultural and political situation in England. English aristocracy and nobility thought it fashionable to know French up to the fourteenth century. Though English did not lose its position as the first language or the major language or the mother tongue of the common man, Latin was used by diplomats, monks and scholars and hence was accepted as the language of official documents, and the church. English and French were just as interwoven as the two cultures of people who spoke them. During the period when Norman French was the dominant language, English was not the favourite language with litterateurs. Old English, as we call the English in use before the Norman Conquest had a complex grammar. But a century later English grammar became much simpler. During this short period, it is estimated that over 10,000 French words found their way into English. Because of socio-political-cultural needs words associated with government, law, art, architecture, literature, fashion, food, and many other aspects of life crept into English and got integrated with the existing vocabulary. These French words were accommodated in English either without changing its original form or with slight changes and about three quarters of these words borrowed at this time are still use and no wonder words borrowed from French during this period and later account for more than a third of English vocabulary. It is estimated that English speakers know around 15,000 French words, even before they start formally learning French. It must be noted that words were borrowed both from Norman French and Parisian French at different times.

Linguist have made different studies to understand the large scale borrowing from French and taking into account the conditions, motives and channels of borrowing they have broken the Middle English period, that is roughly the period between Norman Conquest and Restoration. They accept 1250 as the notional dividing line. It is noticed that till 1250 most of the words borrowed from French were those familiar with and used by the lower class because of speaking with the French people. Church in England that was using Latin for ecclesiastical purposes including worship was accommodative and, and accepted many French words that came directly or through Latin. This as time passed on found entry into English. After 1250 there was an enormous increase in the use of French words as the French upper class gradually started using English carrying many French words to English Ultimately the beneficiary was English vocabulary

Conclusion :

The possibility for languages borrowing words from other languages will be greater in the present world. The world is today a global village and it has shrunk because of developments in technology, transport and communication. These developments have necessitated new words and also new meanings to existing words as it has happened in the case of the word 'mouse' when it is used in the world of computer. Apart from this migration, trade and commerce, international student and human resource mobility, tourism and displacement of people due to various reasons also contribute to languages losing their 'purity' No iron curtain has the strength and ability to prevent a language getting mixed with another, but the modern world has realized the inevitability of mutual dependency to accommodate new ideas and concepts. Politically also Great Britain has come close to the European countries and this is sure to enrich all European languages. No doubt mixing of French and English will continue bringing about a mutually rewarding enrichment.

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