A Social and Culture History of English

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The Late Middle English Period
Outline

- Historical background
- Caxton and the Printing Press
- Beginnings of Standard English
History

- 1381 Peasant’s Revolt
- 1399 Deposition of Richard II, Accession of Henry IV
- 1431 Joan of Arc burnt
- 1435 Congress/Treaty of Arras
- 1454 Richard Duke of York became Protector
- 1455 – 1485 the Wars of the Roses
- 1485 Henry VII was crowned king
History – the Wars of the Roses

- Richard II deposed by Henry IV (reigned 1399 – 1413)
- 1413-1422 Henry V
- 1422 – 1461 Henry VI
- 1455 (first battle of St Albans) – 1485 (Henry VII)
- House of Plantagenet:
  - Lancaster (red) and York (white)
  - 1461-83 Edward IV (York) won the battles against the House of Lancaster
History – the Wars of the Roses

- 1485 Henry VII crowned
- established one House: Tudor
Caxton and the Printing Press
William Caxton
Early Years (London)

- born around about 1422 in Kent, died 1492 in Westminster
- at the age of about 16 he went to London -> apprentice of Robert Large, a member of the Mercer’s Company
Caxton in the Low Countries (Flanders)
Caxton in the Low Countries (Flanders)

- around 1443 he went to Bruges, the most important and prosperous commercial centre in Northern Europe
- in 1452 Caxton was a full member of the Mercer’s Company
- during the 1460s Caxton had a leading role as a merchant: Governor of the English Nation; that also meant that he covered the office as ambassador on behalf of the English king (Edward IV, House of York)
- Caxton, as all other members of the Mercer’s Company, supported the House of York during the Wars of the Roses
- ceased to be Governor in 1470; maybe because of the political changes in England
Caxton in Cologne: First contact with Printing

- since 1471 he lived in the house of his protector, Louis de Gruuthuse
- printing came first to Cologne in the 1460s, introduced by Ulrich Zell; originated in Mainz – J. Gutenberg
- Cologne had a university at that time, so the local market for books was good
- Cologne was also a trading centre and traded with England via waterway (Rhine)
- on 9 September 1471 (Edward IV had gained back his power in England) Caxton finished his translation of *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* and the preface:
- published his first book *De proprietatibus rerum* BUT he was not yet involved in the printing process
From the Low Countries back to England

- in 1476 Caxton went to Westminster
- introduction of the printing press in England (picture)
- printed translation of *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*; this book was originally by the Frenchman Raoul Lefèvre: the FIRST book ever to be printed in English
- *The Play of Chess*; translated Jean de Vignay’s French translation of Jacobus de Cessolis’s Latin original
Caxton’s Readership

- 68% of his publications were in English -> economic reasons, no competition
- 28% in Latin and
- 4% in French (all published in the Low Countries); Church context: Books of Hours, Indulgences
Caxton’s Readership

1. Publications for the Court
   - contained themes like war, knightly exploits and love but also religious texts
   - some were in French
   - translation of *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*

2. Nobles who were close to the Court
   - same topics as for the Court but these were in English

3. non-courtly readers
   - 2nd edition of the *Canterbury Tales*
Comparison of Print versions

The Canterbury Tales, first edition printed by Caxton, digitised by the BML Project, Kato University, March 2002. Copyright the British Library.

http://molcat1.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/search.asp
Chaucer and the *Canterbury Tales*

- Chaucer was born in the early 1340s and was buried 1400 in the *Poets’ Corner* in Westminster Abbey.
- In 1385 he was appointed member of Parliament to represent Kent, so he moved there.
- He is called the *Father of English Poetry*.
The Canterbury Tales

- a series of stories that were told by pilgrims on their way to Canterbury
- often bawdy
- Chaucer was inspired by contemporary European literature
- when Chaucer died, he left the Tales unfinished, but nevertheless they were very successful
Caxton’s English

- his spelling varied within each book (also the within the same title!)
- one of his patrons, Margaret of York (sister to Edward IV), corrected his translations
- he was aware of regional variations
- knew that he should use a type of language that was understood by a larger group of people
- tried to balance his usage BUT aimed at language that was spoken by the gentry and noblemen
- called usage of Old English “plain and rude”, connected with the lower classes
- Preface to *Eneydos*
- at that time in Europe, there were ever stricter norms for Latin books
And when I sawe the fayr & strange termes therin I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylmen whiche late blamed me, saying that in my translacyons I had ouer curousyng termes whiche coulde not be understande of comyn peple and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons and flayn wolde I satysfye euery man and so to doo, toke an olde boke and redde therin and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late, certayn euydences wryton in olde englysshe, for to reduce it in-to our englysshe now vsed And certaynly it was wretone in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe; I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne For we Englysshe men ben borne under the domynacyon of the mone, which is never stedfaste but ever waveryng, wexyng one season and waneth & dyscreaseth another season. And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in tamyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into Zelande and for lacke of wynde, thei taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them; And one of theym named sheffelde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete and specially he axyd after eggys; And the goode wyf answerde, that she could speke no frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wolde haue hadde egges and she understode hym not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde have eyren then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel. Loo, what sholde a man in thys dayes now wryte, egges, or eyren Certaynly it is hard to playse euery man, by cause of dyversite & chaunge of langage.
Caxton’s Printing Workshop: Typeface and Woodcuts

- used a special typeface, similar to handwriting, to appeal to his courtly readership
- the typeface used for the *Canterbury Tales* is called “littera bastarda”
- 2nd edition had a smaller typeface -> economic reason
- 26 woodcuts can be found within the *Canterbury Tales* (picture), created by a local artist


http://www.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/woodcuts.html

http://www.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/printingtype.html
Images

http://www.bookn3rd.com/?p=626

http://www.johnjarroldprintingmuseum.org.uk/history.html
Beginnings of Standard English

Four major dialects in ME:

- Northern
- Midland (East/West)
- Southern
- Kentish

(Shopen, T. and Williams, J.M. Standards and Dialects in English, p.40)
Beginnings of Standard English

- From 1420-1450 towns and guilds wrote their records in English
- The last wills of Henry IV, V, VI were written in English
- 1485 Statutes and Petitions of Parliament were published in English
- by 1489 French was not used anymore
Whereas our mother tongue, to wit, the English tongue, hath in modern days begun to be honorably enlarged and adorned; for that our most excellent lord king Henry the Fifth hath, in his letters missive, and divers affairs touching his own person more willingly choosen to declare the secrets of his will [in it]; and for the better understanding of his people, hath, with a diligent mind, procured the common idiom (setting aside others) to be commended by the exercise of writing; and there are many of our craft of brewers who have the knowledge of writing and readeing in the said English idiom, but in others, to wit, the Latin and French, before these times used, they do not in any wise understand; for which causes, with many others, it being considered how that the greater part of the lords and trusty commons have begun to make their matters to be noted down in our mother tongue, so we also in our craft, following in some manner their steps, have decreed in future to commit to memory the needful things which concern us.

Beginnings of Standard English

- Cities grew (esp. London)
- Rise of the middle class (merchants/craftsmen)
  ➞ Caxton, merchant
Beginnings of Standard English

London dialect:
- Midland dialect: Migration brought influences to and from the whole country \(\Rightarrow\) from a southern to a midland dialect to Standard
- Largest population and area
- Cambridge (Oxford) more important for education than monasteries
- Capital
And þis corrupcioun of Englyshe men yn þer modre-tounge, begunne as I seyde with famylyar commixtion of Danys firste and of Normannys aftir, toke grete augmentacioun and encrees aftir þe commynge of William conquerour by two thyngis. The firste was: by decree and ordynaunce of þe seide William conqueror children in gramer-scolis ageyns þe consuetude and þe custom of all ðer nacyons, here owne modre-tonge loafte and forsakyn, lernyd here Donet on Frenssh and to construyn yn Frenssh and to maken here Latyns on þe same syse. Thje secounde cause was þat by the same decre lordis swonys and all nobyll and worthy mennys children were fyrste set to lrynyn and spoken Frensshe, or þeþey cowed spekyn Ynglyssh and þat all wrytyngis and endentyngis and all maner plees and contrauercyes in courtis of þe lawe, and all maner reknyngis and countis yn howsoolde schulle be doonyn the same. And þis seeyinge, þe rurales, þat þey myghte semyn þe more worchipfull and honorable and þe redlierecomyn to þe famyliarite of þe worthy and þe grete, leftyn hure modre tounge and labouryd to kunne spekyn Frensshe: and thus by processe of tyme barbariʒid thei in bothyn and spokyans neythyr good Frenssh nor good Englyssh.

(qtd. in Graddol et al. 1996: 128f)
Sources

- [http://www.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/homepage.html](http://www.bl.uk/treasures/caxton/homepage.html)
- [http://www.johnjarroldprintingmuseum.org.uk/history.html](http://www.johnjarroldprintingmuseum.org.uk/history.html)
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- [http://www.zum.de/whkmla/histatlas/lowcountries/burgund.gif](http://www.zum.de/whkmla/histatlas/lowcountries/burgund.gif)