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The English Language: An Introduction

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Abstract:

The history of the English language is very intriguing. For our convenience, we divide its development or growth into three periods (Old English, Middle English, Modern English). Today English is a global language, with its varieties (British, American, Indian). In linguistic terms, it belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, a vast group with several branches-

- Germanic
- Celtic
- Italic
- Hellenic
- Baltic
- Slavic
- Indic
- Iranian.

Broadly speaking, English springs from the Germanic branch; likewise, Irish originates from Celtic; French, Italian, etc. from Italic ; Greek from Hellenic; Lithuanian from Baltic; Russian, Bulgarian, etc. from Slavic; Sanskrit and other Indian languages from Indic; and Persian, Kurdish, etc. from Iranian. The English language has undergone extensive changes between old and modern English periods. Old English looks very different and difficult in style. Middle English is slightly easy to grasp and paved the way for a standard language. The credit goes to the poet of The Canterbury Tales for popularizing Midland English that transformed itself into a standard language. English literature is one of the richest literatures in the world. It is indeed a great delight to read it from Chaucer to the present. T S Eliot writes in one of his literary essays that the past literature guides the present literature. Beowulf is among ancient epics –Homer’s The Iliad and The Odyssey in Greek, Virgil’s The Aeneid in Latin ,Ved Vyas’ s The Mahabharata in Sanskrit and Valmiki’ s The Ramayana in Sanskrit .

1. English: A Germanic Language

Historically, English stems from the Germanic branch of the vast Indo- European language family. The other languages of this branch are German, Dutch, Flemish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic etc. They are thought to be derived from a common ancestor-language called proto- Indo-European which perhaps no longer exists.

2. Old English Period (500-1100 A.D)

“Beowulf”, an epic, belongs to this period. It deals with the story of a young warrior called Beowulf who slew a couple of monsters. We know nothing about the poet of this great poem. Along with the story there is a picture of the society and life, in war and peace, the beer drinking, the exchange of gifts, etc.

Apart from this work, Caedmon and Cynewulf, are the earliest poets. They took up religious themes. In general old English poetry is earnest and somber, and pervaded by fatalism and religious feeling. At this time English was enriched by many words from Latin (e.g. angel, martyr, shrine) and from French (e.g. justice, tax, liberty). But changes in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary have made old English no longer understandable to speakers of modern English. Old English vocabulary borrowed words from a wide range of sources-Germanic, Norse, Romanic, Celtic, Scandinavian, besides Latin and French.

3. Middle English Period (1100-1500)

With some difficulty, we can read and understand Middle English; the most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer’s work ‘The Canterbury Tales’. It is the unfinished collection of stories told by the pilgrims on their journey to Canterbury. Its Prologue gives the clearest picture of late medieval life existent anywhere. In Chaucer’s age the English language was still divided by dialects (Northern English, Midland English, Southern English), which differed fundamentally from one another; in this

confusion, little by little, east Midland English tended to gain ascendancy, because it was the speech of the capital city (London) and of the two centers of learning – Oxford and Cambridge. Chaucer chose east midland English for his poetry writing; it was largely on account of his influence that this English became a standard/national language. His poetry is extremely musical. He uses regular meters and end-rimes.

4. Modern English Period (1500 to the Present)

In a word, modern English is shaped by the Renaissance, the Great Vowel Shift, the printing press, the Industrial Revolution, modern technology and the cultural influence of the British rule and Empire. The most prominent characteristic of modern English is its dual character-the combination of native and foreign, of innate and exotic elements, which accounts for the wealth of the English language and literature.

We can understand the comprehensiveness of the English language by reading the plays of Shakespeare, If “Beowulf” is written in old English, “Paradise Lost” is written in modern English. The authorship of the old epic is unknown; Milton wrote “Paradise Lost”- a modern English epic. This poem undertakes to “assert eternal providence and justify the ways of God to men”, Milton chose blank verse for his epic; he described it as “English heroic verse without rime”. In the 19th century, Wordsworth wrote “The Prelude”, a long poem in blank verse. T S Eliot’s 20th century poem, “The Waste Land” is marked by a variety of literary allusions and quotations.

5. Indian English

Indian English claims to be a variety of English; can compete with British English and American English. Indians writing in English are globally recognized and rewarded, excluding translation work. It is happening despite the fact that English is the second language in the country. Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das are well-known Indian English poets. Ezekiel wrote “Night of the Scorpion” and Das wrote “An Introduction”. The diction of these two poems is very simple.

The three great Indian novelists are – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Aravind Adiga are among Contemporary Indian novelists in English. Four Indian English novels have won the Booker prize. They are Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008). Saleem Sinai is the central character in *Midnight’s Children* who narrates the story of the division of a newly independent country. Small things matter a lot in human life and they shape human behaviour too; Madam Roy seems to stress them. The loss of identity or identity crisis is a major theme in Kiran Desai’s fiction. *The White Tiger* is about Balram Halwai’s rise in contemporary Indian society by hook or by crook. Therefore, English is an Indian literary language.

6. References

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