

CHAPTER 2

ENGLISH DOWN THE AGES

The importance and usage of the English language in our modern and globalized world creates the impression that it is the language spoken by the maximum number of people all over the world. However, it is interesting to know that Mandarin Chinese, spoken by approximately 873,000,000 people holds this distinction. English is spoken by about 309,000,000 people, though it is a language which has its presence in all parts of the world and its power is felt the world over. Hindi is the third in terms of the number of speakers in the world. Another surprising fact is that English is just about fifteen hundred years old and the language we are familiar with is less than five centuries old! Moreover, this language has given expression to world class literature in all genres. Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Milton and many others are still considered the greatest masters of their art and are relevant for their ideas and literary genius. The following facts will enable you to understand the reasons which have transformed the once humble East Midland Dialect to a position of unparalleled greatness in our times.

PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

The evolution of the English language from the beginnings in the Anglo-Saxon times to the modern era has been an unbroken one. We can distinguish three main periods in the history and growth of the language in the following manner:-

Old English (OE) - AD 449-AD 1066

Middle English (ME) –AD 1150-AD 1500

Modern English –AD 1500 onwards

OLD ENGLISH

Throughout this period English continued to be the language of everyday speech for the common mass. The divisions made above are more for convenience but it is possible to distinguish certain linguistic features in each of these periods. The OE period is characterized

by inflections. Gradually over a period of time these inflections were found to have been levelled. Literature produced during the age was not of much significance, as court patronage was lacking and the age came to be known as the Dark Age.

MIDDLE ENGLISH

From 1150 onwards English began to emerge as a language of literature. The language was enriched through extensive borrowings from French and Latin. Apart from this two other major developments occurred—one was the invention of the printing press in 1476, the other being a considerable rise in literacy. The Great Vowel Shift also took place during this time. All these factors contributed tremendously to creating a language for both spoken and written purposes.

MODERN ENGLISH

English used since AD 1500 till now is called Modern English. Recently, this period is being sub-divided into Modern and New English. From the beginning of the Modern period to the end of the 19th century, English was basically the language of the British Isles. With the territorial expansion of the British Empire, together with the growth of science, industry, politics and literature, the English language enriched itself by successfully adding to its vocabulary, and the flavour of the countries the British had colonised. In the twentieth century, the erstwhile colonies of the British Empire acquired freedom. The British left the countries, but English remained. Hence new varieties of English have emerged in different parts of the world. Some of these are American English, Indian English, Canadian English, etc. In simple terms the latest period in the growth and development of the English language may be called the era or period of “New Englishes”. This new terminology is enough to indicate how the language manifests itself and moulds to serve the basic purpose of human communication. The story of the English language is like a flowing river, meandering across continents, absorbing the native soil and entering the hearts of the people. No surprise therefore if the people all over the world have accorded the status of an International Language to English.

In the era of globalization English has been found suitable as the language of international communication. It has also equipped itself to serve as the language of the present Cyber age.

In the next few pages we will discuss the characteristics of the English language which have contributed to its growth and development.

Exercises

1. Write T for true and F for false statements :

- a) English was once humble East Midland Dialects.
- b) Old English covers AD 449 –AD 1066.
- c) Middle English did not borrow from French and Latin.
- d) The present era is the period of 'New Englishes'.

2. Answer these questions very briefly:

1. Which language is spoken by maximum number of people?
2. Since when is Modern English in use?
3. Which period is characterised by inflections?
4. Why did the Old English period fail to produce literature of much significance?
5. When did the Great Vowel Shift take place?

