

French Influence on the English Language

The conquest of England in 1066 by William of Normandy was destined to have a profound impact on the life and language of the English people as well, and as such that it changed the whole course of the language. It is an interesting historical fact that the Normans were closely related both to the English and their Scandinavian conquerors. The Scandinavian invaders in England mingled with the Anglo-Saxons and the language that resulted from the fusion was Teutonic to a high degree. But the Franks and the Scandinavians who settled in Normandy adopted French, the language of the conquered people. But it should be noted that at that time there was no standard French language; there were only a number of dialects, descending from colloquial Latin. Among them that of Normandy was one which was introduced into England after Norman Conquest.

It is perhaps a psychological fact that the Normans wanted to be called in by the terms of the conquered people in the highest level, that is, king and queen, which are English. But the names of most of the officers of the state and the names of the governing bodies and their activities are French--chancellor, minister, state, government, parliament, assembly etc.

Again, as a result of feudalism and manorial system which were imported from France, a number of words entered the English vocabulary—fief, feudal, vassal. The native words lord, lady and earl remained in esteem, but most of the designations of rank are French---prince, princess, peer, duke, duchess, baron, etc. Moreover, sir, madam, master, mistress, were introduced by the Normans.

After the Norman Conquest, French was the language of the law courts for more than two centuries. The word law, of course, had come from Scandinavians, but justice, jury, judge court and judicial are all French. So too are bar, bill, bail, prison, act, council, custom, money, rent, and so on. Along with war a number of military terms entered the English vocabulary: army, armour, lance, attack, defend, retreat, surrender, soldier, troop, navy, battle, etc.

The names of the military officers are mostly of French origin---captain, colonel, lieutenant, etc.

The superiority of French cooking is also demonstrated by such terms as boil, broil, fry, greel, roast, and toast. Breakfast is English, but the more sumptuous dinner and supper are French. The names of more elegant occupations like carpenter, draper, joiner, mason, painter and tailor.

The names of commoner parts of human body are English but French face and voice ousted the corresponding English words.

Ecclesiastical matters were for long under the control of the Normans and hence we find in English such French words as religion, service, sermon, baptism, trinity, saviour, prayer, clergy, preach sermon, angel, cardinal, piety, vice, duty, chaste, mercy, pity etc.

The French set the standard of fashion and dress, which is reflected in the words—dress, fashion, apparel, garment, gown, luxury, adorn etc.

Again the French practiced a brighter view of life contrasted with the gloomy and cheerless attitude of the English. This is evident from the existence in English of French words like joy, pleasure, beauty, comfort, flower, dance, music, sport, cards, tournament etc.

The English also borrowed from their ruler words of an exclamatory nature—alas, adieu.

There are some English words which are associated with the long part of the nation and emotionally charged, and more popular, while the corresponding French words are more formal or refined or official. Thus a cottage is finer than a hut; amity lacks the warmth of friendship; a ghost is more terrifying than a spectre. But the French marry and marriage have become more popular than the native wed and wedding.

The French influence was also responsible for a phenomenon which must be termed one of the most prominent features of the English language, namely hybridism. Through hybridism new words were formed in English alternatively from an English prefix with a French word or from a French word with an English suffix or from a French prefix with an English word; for instance un-able, out-cry, court-ship, prophet-ess, bear-able, demi-god, em-bolden etc.

Moreover the French influence indirectly stimulated the decay of inflexions, which hastened the progress of English grammar to simplicity. Again the use of preposition of as a regular sign of genitive and the use of the adverbs more and most are due to the influence of French grammar.

