

## The relative status of the English and French languages in the Middle English period

(from Joe Williams, *Origins of the English Language*, 68ff.)

- 1066. Population of England is 1.1 – 1.7 million; Norman invaders number 5,000 – 12,000; about half the 10,000 landowners after the Conquest are Norman knights
- 1070. King William issues writs in English, some in Latin; none in French
- 1080. English writs disappear; laws are written in Latin
- 1116. A defendant in court testifies in English; by 1198, interpreters appeared in court translating English testimony into French for judges and lawyers
- 1150. first laws written in French
- mid-12<sup>th</sup> c. a Latin vocabulary is produced with translations only into French, not English
- 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> c., most literature written in French, not English
- 13<sup>th</sup> c. – phrase books for teaching business French to English merchants appear
- 1215. earliest French deed.
- 1233. English law terms translated into French “so everyone will understand”
- 1258. Henry III signs the Provisions of Oxford, written in English and French; granting rights to the barons; the first public document in English in 200 yrs.
- 1275. Most laws drawn up are in French, as are most official documents; petitions to Parliament translated into Latin “so all may understand.”
- Between 1066 – 1075, official decrees begin to be written in French, not English
- 1204-05 Philip of France seizes estates of Anglo-Norman barons, who must now choose whether to return to France, giving up their English lands, or stay in England and give up their French holdings.
- 1215 King John signs Magna Carta, giving up significant amounts of royal power to the nobles and Parliament
- 1233 Henry III “imports” French knights and soldiers to run the English royal court; they displace many Anglo-Norman knights in England; Henry also marries Eleanor of Provence, bringing more French influence (not Norman) to the English court
- Norman French works start to lament the decline of Norman French
- in wars between 1258-65, the French “usurpers” are finally driven from England
- books for teaching French to the children of the nobility
- 1284. A bishop complains that the Fellows of Merton College, Oxford, are speaking English at high table
- end of 13<sup>th</sup> c. – writers begin apologizing for their errors in French
- in 1300, the pop. of London is about 14,000
- 1301. Edward II has letters in Latin from the Pope translated into French to be read to the army
- 1322. Parliament decrees that “Lords, barons, knights and worthy men of great towns” should have their children instructed in French so that they would be better able to fight as soldiers in wars.

- 1327. Edward III addresses middle class Londoners in English
- 1327. Ralph Higden complains in the *Polychronicon* that English has become corrupted because unlike other countries, where children do their lessons in their own language, English children do their schoolwork in French, and upperclass children learn French from birth. Those who would be taken for upper class also use French:

and oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylf to gentilmen, and fondeþ wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more 3-tolde of.

- c.1300. *Cursor mundi* (“As the world turns . . .”):

þis ilk bok es translate into Inglis tong to rede for the love of Inglis lede, Inglis lede of England, for the commun at understand

This book is translated into the English tongue as advice for the love of English people, English people of England, for all to understand

- 1325. William of Nassyngton’s *Speculum Vitae*, “Mirror of Life”

And somme can Frensche and no Latyn,  
þat vsed han cowrt and dwellen þerein.  
And somme can of Latyn a party,  
þat can of Frensche but febly;  
And somme vnderstonde wel Englysch,  
þat can noþer Latyn nor Frankys.  
Boþe lered and lewed, olde and 3onge,  
Alle vnderstonden english tonge.

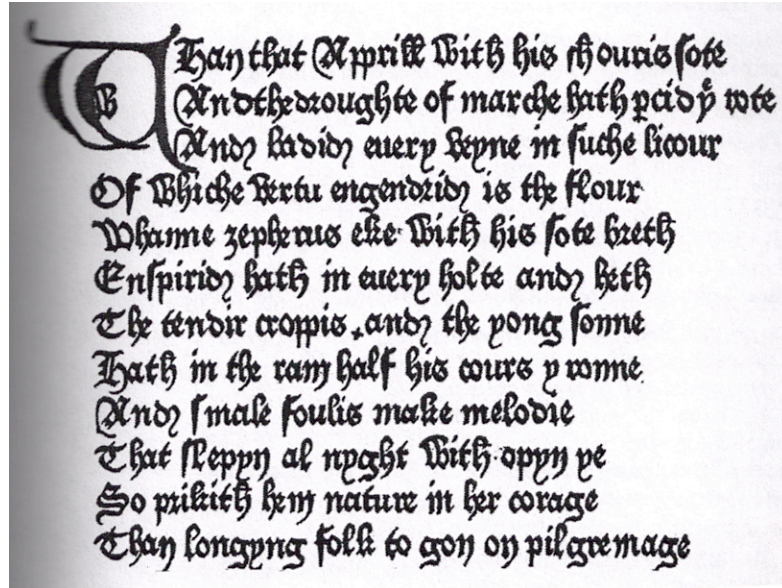
- throughout 14<sup>th</sup> c., most deeds, bills of sale, contracts are written in French; first wills to appear in French
- by 1348, pop. of England is 3.1 – 3.7 million – 30-40% die from Black Death by end of the century; by 1400, pop. is 2.1 million
- mid-14<sup>th</sup> c. almost all correspondence is in French
- 1362. oral court proceedings ordered to be done in English, not French
- 1370s. first deeds and other legal documents written in Middle English; petitions to Parliament start appearing in English
- 1337 start of 100 Years War; 1346 victory over French at Crécy; 1356 victory at Poitiers
- ca. 1380. Oxford University orders grammar masters to teach French and English because students are forgetting their French.
- 1381 Peasants Revolt: peasants withhold labor, move to city to command higher wages; Richard II, who is said to have been completely bilingual, addresses the people in English; proclamations to Londoners are read in French till end of century

- 1396. A new kind of French textbook appears, with model conversations for businessmen traveling abroad.
- 1399 - Richard II is deposed, in English and Latin; Henry IV, said to be a monolingual English speaker, claims throne in English; during reign of Henry IV, English starts to supplant French in royal documents;
- 1400. Chaucer criticizes the Prioress for her English-sounding French, “for French of Parys was to hir unknowe.”
- 1413. death of Henry IV; he leaves first will of a monarch written in English
- 1420s. London’s Guilds begin keeping records in English; letters start appearing in English
- 1430s. Some towns begin translating their documents from French into English
- 1450. One of the last legal documents in French
- mid-15<sup>th</sup> c. – Parliament needs to appoint a French secretary because MPs can’t understand French
- 1476. William Caxton introduces the printing press to England; Caxton dies in 1491, and his successor moves the business from a suburb to London.
- Caxton on egges:

And one of theym named Sheffelde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete; and specyally axed after eggys. And the goode wyf anwerde, the she coude speke no frenshe, but wolde have hadde egges, and she understode hym not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde have eyren. Then the gode wyf sayd that she understode hym wel. Loo, what sholde a many in thyse dayes wryte, egges or eyren?

- 1483. House of Lords said to discontinue use of French
- by end of 15<sup>th</sup> c., French is used only in law courts; Caxton notes, “the mooste quantyte of the people vnerstonde not latyn ne frensshe here in this noble royame of england.”

Beginning of Caxton's edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*:



**B**han that Aprill with his shouris sote  
 And the droughte of marche hath pced y wote  
 And hadid every beyne in suche licour  
 Of whiche vertu engendrid is the flour  
 Whanne zepherus eke with his sote bresth  
 Enspirid hath in every holte and beth  
 The tendir croppis, and the yong somme  
 Hath in the ram half his cours y wome.  
 And smale foules make melodie  
 That sleppn al nyght with oppyn ye  
 So prikith hem nature in her corage  
 Than longyng folk to gon on pilgremage