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# Diachronic Linguistic Study of Lexical Change in English

Keziah Jonah Pam  
and  
Juliet Nkane Ekpang

## Abstract

*This study investigates the lexical change of the English across the periods of the history of the English language. The biblical story of the prodigal son found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15 verses 25 – 32 is used as data for the periods delineated. The study is anchored on the grammaticalization theory which allows diachronic analysis into the areas of semantics, grammar, phonology, and morphology, thus underscoring changes that a language undergoes. The data presented and analyzed demonstrate that the evolvement the grammar and vocabulary of the English language experienced from the 5<sup>th</sup> century is to a great extent distinct and therefore indecipherable to the 21<sup>st</sup> century speakers of the same language. The study recommends that other noticeable changes in the grammar, vocabulary, and other linguistic areas of the English language should be documented. These documented sources can serve as reference materials for the 21<sup>st</sup> century speakers as well as other subsequent century speakers who may pick any document no matter its age, read and appreciate it. The ever evolving nature of the English language as well as other languages across the world should be recorded continuously especially since change is a continuous phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** Diachronic Linguistics, Lexical Change, Old English, Middle English, Present-Day English

## Introduction

Change happens to every facet of life. In fact, the only static phenomenon is change itself. This is true of the English language as well as all languages of the world. The alphabets, sounds, vocabulary, meanings, grammars, among others, experience this change. The English language has metamorphosed over time from what it was when it was first spoken about 1,500 years ago on the British Isles, into what it is today. As such, this change is worthy of investigation and documentation.

The famous biblical story of the prodigal son found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15 verses 25 –32 serves as data for analysis. The choice of the text chosen for analysis is purely out of the availability of the earliest form of writing in English. This choice is also necessitated because of the need to study the same content across the periods of the history of English with the aim of

showing the sharp contrast through the periods. The data was extracted from Jowitt and Pam's lecture materials for ENG 819 – History of English course delivered to Masters Students of the Department of English, University of Jos, from September, 2022 to February, 2023.

### **Diachronic Linguistics**

The field of diachronic linguistics was categorized by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, in 1916 with its closest linguistic neighbor, Synchronic Linguistics. Diachronic linguistics simply put is the historical study of language. Sarkar suggests that diachronic linguistics refers to the study of how a language evolves over a period of time (1309). McMahon uses the term historical linguistics and defines it as the study of language through time, either from the perspective of the present looking back to earlier, unattested stages (the subdiscipline of reconstruction), or from some earlier stage towards the present (the domain of language change) (6748).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper carries out a diachronic study using grammaticalization theory as its investigative basis (Hopper and Traugott 2). The framework allows an analysis that intensely explores into the areas of semantics, grammar, phonology, and morphology hence, underscoring explicit depictions of the lexical and grammatical changes that a language undergoes. The tenets of this framework also extend to studies that encompasses change in the structure of an expression or a class of expressions that does not involve any immediate or intrinsic modification of its surface manifestation (Langacker 58). The theory also takes into consideration the change in grammatical category of words as a result of the evolvement over time. What distinguishes grammaticalization theory from other linguistic approaches according to Heine et al. is that it has a diachronic foundation and the hypotheses proposed on the basis of this theory rest first on regularities in linguistic change and then on typological generalizations across languages (379). This theory is relevant for this study because of its diachronic foundation.

### **Relevant Previous Literature**

Onisim carried out a cognitive linguistic analysis of the parable of the prodigal son. The study presented a cognitively based analysis in an attempt to show the extent to which the parable is a "suitable" vehicle for transmitting Jesus' message and evoking the conceptual domain of divinity that is space for the kingdom of God (135). This study is however different from the current study in that the current study focuses on purely the leanings of historical linguistics with no reference to cognition.

Jack investigated the prodigal son in English and American Literature using two approaches from biblical and literary studies. The literary perspective which relates to this study focuses on the interest in the parable as offering a shared vocabulary to explore universal themes taking into cognizance the variety of ways the story of the prodigal son has been read across time and place. The work discusses specific genres, literary periods, and places. It also employs the hermeneutical resources of literature, theology, and history.

Furthermore, previous researches have however been done in the area of grammar and vocabulary (as well as other areas of linguistic study) in the field of diachronic linguistics across languages generally and English in particular using different data. Prior findings are however verified and corroborated with data collected for this study.

### **Division of the Periods**

The periods of the history of the English Language have been divided by several scholars. Baugh and Cable suggest that the divisions are matters of convenience and the dividing lines between them are purely arbitrary. They surmise that the period from 450 to 1150 is known as Old English, 1150 to 1500 as Middle English, and 1500 to the present day as Modern English (46). Jowitt observes that from the time of the Anglo-Saxon, “Old English has evolved into the language of today. This evolution is generally regarded as falling into three main stages or periods, as follows:

Old English: 500 to about 1100AD

Middle English: about 1100 – 1500 AD

Modern English: 1500 – present day” (12)

The study adopts a quartet division in the periods in order to account for noticeable changes within the Modern English period. Subsequently, Modern English has been divided into two thus:

Early Modern English: 1500 – 1700 AD

Later Modern English: 1700 – Present day.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

#### **(1) c.1000- Old English (OE) [part only]**

Soplice his yltrasunuwæs on æcere, and he com, and þa he þamhusegenealæhte, he gehyrdeþænesweg and þætwered, þaclypode he anneþeow, and acsodehinehwætþætware. Þacwæþ he, þinbroþor com, and þinfæderofslah an fættcealf, forþamþe he hinehalneconfeng.

#### **(2) c.1380– Middle English (ME) [John Wycliffe’s translation]**

Forsoth his eldresone was in the field, and whanne he cam and neizede to the hous, he herde a symfone and a crowde. And he cleipedoon of the seruants,

and axide what thingisthesweren. And he seide to him, Thibrodir is comen, and thifadir hath slayn a fat calf, for he receyued him saf. Forsoth he was wroth, and wolde not entre. Therfore his fadirgon out, bigan to preie him. And he seide to him, Sone, thou art euer with me, and allemynethingis ben thyne. Forsothe it bihofte to ete plenteously, and for to ioye: for this thi brother was deed, and lyuedeazeyn: he peryschide, and he is founden.

**(3) 1611 – Early Modern English (EME): The King James Bible**

Now his elder sonne was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house he heard musicke and dauncing, and he called one of the seruants, and asked what these things meant. And he said vnto him, Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calfe, because he hath receiued him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not goe in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he said vnto him, Sonne, thou art euer with me, and all that I haue is thine. It was meete that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is aliue again: and was lost, and is found.

**(4) 1961 - Present-Day English (PDE): The New English Bible [slightly edited]**

Now the elder son was on the farm, and as he was coming back and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. The servant told him, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and pleaded with him. 'My son,' said the father, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. It is fitting that we should make merry, and be glad. For your brother here was dead, and is alive again, was lost and is found.'

Note: Data has been numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4 for ease of reference.

**Word-for-word translation of 1 above:**

*Soothly (=truly) his elder son (yltrasunu) was on field (æcere), and he came, and when (þa) he the house neared (genealahte), he heard the music (sweg) and dancing (wered), then (þa) called (clypode) he one (anne) servant (þeow), and asked (acsode) him what that was. Then said (cwæþ) he, thy brother came, and thy father slew (ofslōh) one fat calf, because (forþamþe) he him well (halne) received (i.e. met = onfeng) (Jowitt np).*

Text 1 above shows that some letters of the alphabet which were used in Old English have disappeared and consequently, unintelligible for the Present-day speaker of English. 'þ' called thorn and 'æ' called ash have disappeared by the end of the period of the Old English. The whole text has to

be translated into Present-day English because of the great difference in grammar and vocabulary. Examples of the difference in vocabulary across the four periods outlined above are as follows:

1 (OE)	2 (ME)	3(EME)	4(PDE)
yldra	eldere	elder	elder
sunu	sonne	sonne	son
æcere	field	field	field
þa	whanne	when	when
(the)			
broþor	brodir	brother	brother
fæder	fadir	father	father
fætt cealf	fat calf	fatted calfe	fatted calf
onfeng (met)	founden	found	found
þin	thi	thy	your
huse	hous	house	house
sweg (singing)	symfone	musicke	music
wered	—	dauncing	dancin
halne (received-well)	azeyn	aliue	alive

The final –e in Middle English continued to be written as seen in 2 above. Examples are ‘eldere’, ‘crowde’, ‘seide’, ‘euer’, among others. The vocabulary, grammar and spelling of Early Modern English are the same as they normally are in English today with a few exceptions though. The final –e became silent in Early Modern English but continued to be written, for example, ‘sonne’, ‘calfe’, ‘goe’ but there were exceptions. The final –e in ‘elder’ was lost but still in ‘sonne’, ‘musicke’, among others though not pronounced. These indicate a significant change in the English Language. There was also uncertainty in Middle English. The letter *j* was introduced into Middle English from French. Some speakers were not comfortable with this change hence they wrote *i* instead of *j*. An example from 2 above is ‘ioye’ for ‘joy’. In Early Modern English as well, this uncertainty continued. Letter *u* was used instead of *v*. Examples from 3 above are ‘seruants’, ‘vnto’, ‘receiued’, ‘euer’, ‘haue’, and ‘aliue’ instead of ‘servants’, ‘unto’, ‘received’, ‘ever’, ‘have’, and ‘alive’ respectively. This happened as a result of the Norman Conquest in 1066 which brought a huge impact of French on English. This resulted to the relegation of English to the background before its later revival down to 1500. During this period, the Middle English generally experienced loss of inflections with enormous increase in size of the vocabulary (words from French). Early Modern English also experienced an increase in vocabulary. Later Modern English had further growth of the vocabulary which appears totally distinct from what it was when English was first spoken in Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. There were spelling reform proposals. This is evident in the final –e reform as 2, 3 and 4 from the given data.

Some vocabulary experienced either change in meaning or extension of meaning. Some eventually became obsolete. In 3 for example, ‘drew nigh’ sounds archaic. Present-day English would rather use ‘drew near’ or ‘came near’. Words such as ‘musicke’ and ‘dauncing’ are spelled differently (‘music’, ‘dancing’) in Present-day usage. The word ‘preie’ in 2 changed to ‘intreated’ in 3 and then to ‘pleaded’ in 4. Data confirm that a great percentage of the vocabulary of 1 and 2 did not survive to Present-day English as observed from ‘preie’ and ‘intreated’ in the preceding example. A few function words have however survived from 1 and 2, for instance, ‘his’, ‘on’, ‘and’, ‘he’, among others. Fresh wave of borrowing lexical items especially from classical languages like Latin and Greek was experienced around the 16<sup>th</sup> century because English hitherto had a limited number of words and that was the time of Renaissance and advances in various fields of knowledge (Jowitt 35, 56 – 7).

Recently in 2020, twenty-nine ‘Nigerian English’ words and phrases including words derived from Nigerian languages like Hausa and Yoruba, as well as other unique Nigerian coinages were added to the Oxford English Dictionary. Some examples are: ember month, danfo, non-indigene, guber, tokunbo, mamaput, next tomorrow, barbing salon, among others.

Old English had four cases: nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative which correspond approximately to subject, direct object, possessive, and indirect object respectively. Old English was a highly inflected language, that is, it changed its shape through the addition of a suffix, for each case (in both singular and plural). An example in the singular follows: *stan* (stone – N), *stan* (A), *stanes* (G), and *stane* (D). Nouns, adjectives and personal pronouns were all inflected, for example ‘fætt’, ‘cealf’, ‘æcere’. The final –e is a relic of Old English inflection for example ‘clypode,’ ‘halne’. As shown from the data in 2 above, which represents Middle English, most case inflections disappeared. The genitive –s is however still present even in Modern English today. The accusative and genitive forms of personal pronouns are still used in Present-day English (for example, he-his-him as seen in 1, 2, 3 and 4 above).

Although a large number of the inflections of Old and Middle English are gone, there are still some remarkable characteristics which are no longer accepted today. The ‘T forms’ second person singular pronouns and determiners (thou, thine) as in 2 and 3 thus:

Pin (1)            thi (2)            thy (3)            your (4)

and their associated verb forms (–(e)st form) were used in addressing intimate friends, children, social inferiors, the deity, among others. Present-day English universally accepts only the ‘y forms’ (such as *your*, *you* (as in 4)) except perhaps for deity. The third person singular present tense of the verb ended in –(e)th. For instance:

### Hath (3)

It ends in -(e)s today. Below are some features of the evolvement of the vocabulary and grammar of English (though not evident in the data presented):

- For interrogation, verbs and subjects were simply inverted. For instance: 'Go ye' and negation required the placement of the 'not' after the verb 'Go not'. In present day English, the auxiliary verb 'do' is used in both cases.
- The simple present and past forms of the verb were more popular while the progressive and perfective forms were less popular.
- The parts of the verb were occasionally not as they are in present day English.

There may be other features that make the present day English different from what it was around 500AD, since change is constant and incessant.

### Conclusion

The data presented and analyzed showed a significant change in the English language across the three main stages or periods delineated in spelling, vocabulary and grammar. The data also revealed uncertainty especially in the Middle English period. An example of this uncertainty is evident in view of the fact that some speakers of English were not comfortable with the change adopted into English from other languages hence, they continued to write *i* instead of *j* (for instance), after its introduction from French. The data presented and analyzed also demonstrate that the evolvement of the grammar and vocabulary the English Language experienced from the 5<sup>th</sup> century is to a great extent distinct and therefore indecipherable to the present-day speaker of the same language. The study recommends that other noticeable changes in the grammar, vocabulary, and other linguistic areas of the English language should be documented. These documented sources can serve as reference materials for the 21<sup>st</sup> century speakers as well as other subsequent century speakers who may pick any document no matter its age, read and appreciate it. The ever evolving nature of the English language as well as other languages across the world should be recorded continuously especially since change is a continuous phenomenon.

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**Pam, Keziah Jonah** lectures in the Department of English, University of Jos, Jos. Email: [keziahpam16@gmail.com](mailto:keziahpam16@gmail.com)/ [kepam@unijos.edu.ng](mailto:kepam@unijos.edu.ng)

**Juliet Nkane Ekpang** lectures in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar. Email: [julietekpang@yahoo.com](mailto:julietekpang@yahoo.com)