

B.A (H) ENGLISH
PART-IV
HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE-INTRODUCTION

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What is Language and its importance of Language in human Life?

1. Language is an important source of communication. Man is not only affected by it, but also, expresses his personality through it
2. All kinds of information can be sorted out by it and we convey our feelings, thoughts, impressions, experiences to others through it.
3. Language helps in communication with people.
4. Language is a complex system of symbols; it is the source of human thoughts.
5. Language is the easiest source of dual communication.
6. Due to language people all over the world, come close, it creates universal brotherhood.
7. We persuade others through language to think and act.

When one traces the History of Language, esp., British English Language, one has to take a journey back to olden times in order to chronicle the evolution of English language to present day.

➤ **Dead and Living Languages: -**

- i. A language is said to be **dead/archaic/classical** language when it is no longer spoken. Such a language we know only in books. Thus for e.g., Latin is a dead language, because no nation, anywhere, speaks it now. A dead language can undergo no change; it remains, and must remain, as we find it written in books.
- ii. But a **living language** is always changing, just like a tree or the human body. It's dynamic. The human body has its periods or stages. There is the period of infancy; the period of boyhood,

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the period of manhood, and the period of old age. In the same way, a language has its periods.

2. No Sudden Changes:-

The English language has been divided into periods, and then, with some approach to accuracy, certain distinct changes in the habits of our language, in the inflexions of its words, in the kind of words it preferred, or in the way it liked to put its words together. The changes in language are as gentle, gradual, and imperceptible as the changes in the growth of a tree or in the skin of the human body.

The Periods of English Language:-

PERIODS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE		
I.	Ancient English or Anglo-Saxon	449-1100
II.	Early English	1100-1250
III.	Middle English	1250-1485
IV.	Tudor English	1485-1603
V.	Modern English	1603-1900

These periods merge very slowly, or are shaded off, so to speak, into each other in the most gradual way. If we take the English of 1250 and compare it with that of 900, there is a great difference; but if the English of 1100 compared to it the difference is not so marked. The difference between the English of the nineteenth and the English of the fourteenth century is very great, but the difference between the English of the fourteenth and that of the thirteenth century is very small.

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1. Ancient English or Anglo-Saxon, 450-1100:-

This form of English differed from modern English in having a much larger number of inflexions. The noun had five cases, and there were several declensions, just as in Latin; adjectives were declined, and had three genders; some pronouns had a dual as well as a plural number; and the verb had a much larger number of inflexions than it has now. The vocabulary of the language contained very few foreign elements. The poetry of the language employed head-rhyme or alliteration, and not end-rhyme, as we do now.

E.g The works of the poet **Caedmon** and the great prose-writer **King Alfred** belong to this Anglo-Saxon period.

2. Early English, 1100-1250:-

The coming of the Normans in 1066 made many changes in the land, many changes in the Church and in the State, and it also introduced many changes into the language. The inflexions of speech began to drop off, because they were used less and less; and though new *inflexions* from French or from any other language were not adopted, new French *words* began to creep in. In some parts of the country English had ceased to be written in books; the language existed as a spoken language only; and hence accuracy in the use of words and the inflexions of words could not be ensured.

E.g

Two notable books—written, not printed, for there was no printing in this island till the year 1474—belong to this period.

a. These are the **Ormulum**, by **Orm** or **Ormin**.

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b. The **Brut**, by a monk called **Layamon** or **Laweman**.

He tells the story of Brutus, who was believed to have been the son of Æneas of Troy; to have escaped after the downfall of that city; to have sailed through the Mediterranean, ever farther and farther to the west; to have landed in Britain, settled here, and given the country its name.

3. **Middle English, 1250-1485:-**

Most of the inflexions of nouns and adjectives have in this period—between the middle of the thirteenth and the end of the fifteenth century—completely disappeared.

i. **The inflexions of verbs** are also greatly reduced in number.

The **strong**¹ mode of inflexion has ceased to be employed for verbs that are new-comers, and the **weak** mode has been adopted in its place.

a. **During the earlier part of this period**, even country-people tried to speak French, and in this and other modes many French words found their way into English.

A writer of the thirteenth century, **John de Trevisa**, says that country-people “fondeth [that is, try] with great bysynes for to speke Freynsch for to be more y-told of.”

The country-people did not succeed very well, as the ordinary proverb shows: “Jack would be a gentleman if he could speak French.”

Boys at school were expected to turn their Latin into French, and in the courts of law French only was allowed to be spoken.

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But in 1362, Edward III gave his assent to an Act of Parliament allowing English to be used instead of Norman-French.

“The yer of oure Lord,” says John de Trevisa, “a thousand thre hondred foure score and fyve of the secunde Kyng Richard after the conquest, in al the gramer scoles of Engelond children leveth Freynsch, and construeth and turneth an Englysch.”

I. To the first half of this period belong

- a “**Metrical Chronicle**,” attributed to **Robert of Gloucester**
- b. Langtoft’s **Metrical Chronicle**, translated by **Robert de Brunne**;
- c. the **Agenbite of Inwit**, by Dan Michel of Northgate in Kent;

II. But to the second half belong the rich and varied productions

- a. **Geoffrey Chaucer**, our first great poet and always one of our greatest writers;
- b. the alliterative poems of **William Langley** or **Langlande**;
- c. the more learned poems of **John Gower**; and
- d. the translation of the Bible and theological works of the reformer **John Wyclif**.

4. Tudor English, 1485-1603:-

Before the end of the sixteenth century almost all **inflexions** had disappeared. The great dramatist Ben Jonson (1574-1637) laments the loss of the plural ending **en** for verbs:-

As ‘*wenten*’ and ‘*hopen*’ were much more musical and more useful in verse than *went* or *hope* yet its recovery was already past praying for.

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This period is remarkable for the introduction of an enormous number of Latin words, and this was due to the new interest taken in the literature of the Romans—an interest produced by what is called the **Revival of Letters**. But the most striking, as it is also the most important fact relating to this period, is the appearance of a group of dramatic writers, the greatest the world has ever seen.

- a. Chief among these was **William Shakespeare**.
- b. Of pure poetry perhaps the greatest writer was **Edmund Spenser**.
- c. The greatest prose-writer was **Richard Hooker**, and
- d. The pithiest **Francis Bacon**.

5. Modern English, 1603-1900:-

The grammar of the language was fixed before this period. The vocabulary of the language, however, has gone on increasing, and is still increasing; for the English language, like the English people, is always ready to offer hospitality to all peaceful foreigners—words or human beings—that will land and settle within her coasts. And the tendency at the present time is not only to give a hearty welcome to newcomers from other lands, but to revert back to old words and old phrases that had been allowed to drop out of existence. **Tennyson** has been one of the chief agents in this happy restoration.