

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
IN  
HAMPSHIRE AND YORKSHIRE  
A Winchester Heritage Open Day Lecture

Christopher Mulvey

The English Project

and

The University of Winchester

18 September 2020

In the year 500, you would have heard West Saxon being spoken widely in a land we now call Hampshire. In the year 500, you would have heard Northumbrian being spoken widely in a land we now call Yorkshire. In neither land would you have heard the dialect that was to develop into Standard Modern English. To hear that, you would have had to go to proto-Staffordshire. On the other hand, neither Hampshire nor Yorkshire spoke a dialect that vanished. That is what happened to the dialect called Kentish.

Kent was once a kingdom entire to itself and its boundaries have hardly change in the past fifteen hundred years. But what is true of Kent is not true of other English counties; they have expanded; they have contracted; they have disappeared; they have reappeared. So to talk about the English language in any county, we best stick with the boundaries of what are called the Ceremonial Counties. Those are the old counties, the historical counties, the cricket-team counties. There are forty-eight Ceremonial Counties. Everyone has its English language story to tell, but the story told by some counties is more interesting than the story told by others. Among the most interesting are the counties of Hampshire, Yorkshire, Staffordshire, and Kent.

Kent's English story begins with Jutes bringing their West Germanic to land south of the Thames estuary. Angles were then bringing their West Germanic to places between the River Thames and the River Forth. Saxons were bringing their West Germanic to places in and around the Thames Valley.

By the year 550, Angles, Saxons and Jutes had established seven kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Wessex. Since they were all speaking West Germanic, Angles, Saxons and Jutes could understand one another well enough though they were using several different dialects. Of those dialects, we know four: Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish. What happened to East Anglian, East Saxon, and South Saxon? Truly nothing happened to East Anglian, East Saxon and South Saxon, but the only evidence that we have of an Old English dialect is from surviving manuscripts and the only dialects we find in surviving manuscripts are Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish.

As successful kings first became wealthy and then became Christian, they had their monks write in English as well as in Latin. South of the Thames, Kentish monks wrote in Kentish and West Saxon monks wrote in West Saxon. North of the Thames and south of the Humber monks wrote in Mercian. North of the Humber and south of the Forth monks wrote in Northumbrian. The River Humber, flowing powerfully across England, effectively divided the Angles into the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. The River Rother, winding its way through the Romney Marsh, divided the Jutes from the Saxons less effectively. In the course of the ninth century, the kingdoms of Sussex and Kent became shires within the kingdom of the West Saxons.

West Saxon was the dominant dialect of Old England. Its heartland was Hampshire and from there as a manuscript dialect it spread across England propelled to the east and to the north by the drive of Alfred, King of the West Saxons. Alfred had ordered his monks to translate into English, six great religious and historical texts. Those texts were sent to all the bishops in his expanding kingdom. Monks all over England began copying the Alfredian texts and usually they copied them just as they got them, not bothering to translate them into a local Kentish, Mercian or Northumbrian. So it was that Alfred's English, West Saxon English became the prestige dialect of the Anglo-Saxon world. But only as a written dialect. There is no evidence that anyone changed the way they spoke as a result of reading a West Saxon text.

Kentish, Mercian and Northumbrian English were taking a second place to West Saxon English but only for a time, and that time can be dated from 899, the death of King Alfred, to 1066, the death of King Harold. After 1066, English took a dip. Not one of the kings of England from 1066 until 1399 was a native speaker of English. We give them names like William, Richard and Henry, but that was not what they called themselves, and most of them did not bother to learn English. West Saxon English ceased to be a prestige dialect. West Saxon English became West Country English.

What had happened to Northumbrian English? The English language in Yorkshire started as Anglian, a dialect of West Germanic distinct from the Saxon English of Hampshire. That set both forms of English on different tracks. Then Yorkshire English, i.e., Northumbrian English, was hugely influenced by the Norse language, the language of the peoples of Scandinavia. Those peoples, called Northmen, Vikings, Danes, began settling in England in the ninth century. Their first targets were the kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria. By 867, they had established themselves well enough to turn their attention to the kingdom of the West Saxons. For ten years, Danes and Saxons fought themselves to a standstill and a truce was agreed between King Alfred the Saxon and King Guthrum the Dane in 878

London was the pivotal point and the target, and the Saxons conceded London to the Danes. A matching concession by the Danes was their agreeing to become Christian. Becoming Christian in the ninth century gave princes access to a network of royal families that was the new basis of power and wealth in the Christian world. Danish kings began to marry themselves, their sons and their daughters to high-ranking Christians. Some Danish kings took two wives, one with the old beliefs and another with the new beliefs. A territory, that came to be called the Danelaw, was conceded by Alfred. The Danelaw extended from the River Thames to the River Tweed and from the North Sea to Watling Street. Newly-christened Danes began marrying long-christened Angles. The resulting families spoke both Norse and Northumbrian. In time, they came to speak what nineteenth-century scholars called Dano-Anglian. We can call it English, but it was an English different from the English spoken to the west of Watling Street, and especially different from the English spoken south of the Thames.

There are nine hundred Norse words in Modern Standard English, and another nine hundred that we cannot be sure whether they come from Norse or were already in Anglian English. Moreover in the Yorkshire dialect, Broad Yorkshire, as it is called, there are thousands of Norse words. The Northumbrians did not need a Dane to tell them what a leg was nor what an egg was nor what a husband was but they borrowed those words from Norse. Some Norse words did not replace an Anglian word but came to exist alongside it. That produced doublets such as kirk and church, dike and ditch, skirt and shirt, ill and sick, ugly and foul. There are many more.

Norse not only influenced Northumbrian; it also influenced Mercian, especially the Mercian spoken to the east of Watling Street. That Mercian evolved to become the English spoken by Kings Henry IV, V and VI. Many of their courtiers spoke like their kings and so did most of the kings' clerks. This was then a courtly English. As a result, it began a process of refinement, correction and Latinization that reach a peak with the antiquarians of the 1660s. In the eighteenth century, the cult of antiquarian refinement was continued and extended by way of

the dictionary makers. In the nineteenth century, the now fashionable London speech was exported to the public schools of England by schoolmasters employed because they spoke that English. A refined grammar came with a refined pronunciation so that the Westminster dialect came to be called 'Public School English'.

How did that Public School English affect English in Hampshire and Yorkshire?

Dotted about Yorkshire are boarding schools such as Ampleforth College and Harrogate Ladies School. Dotted about Hampshire are boarding schools such as Winchester College and St Swithun's School for Girls. In those schools, children were and are expected to speak Public School English. This is an English marked in three ways: it has no regional colour, it has a distinct sound, and it has a demanding grammar: no double negatives, no double comparatives, no splitting of infinitives and no-ending sentences with prepositions. To speak English thus corrected became a mark of wealth and status.

Many children were sent to boarding schools outside their counties. They returned home with a Public School accent. So the Python, Michael Palin, a Sheffield United Football Club fan and a City of Sheffield native, talks about team and city with no trace of Sheffield or Yorkshire in his voice. He was educated at Shrewsbury School in the county of Shropshire. By contrast the cricketer, Geoffrey Boycott, has a voice strongly marked by his Yorkshire origins. Boycott was educated in local Yorkshire schools, and he failed to pass the examinations that would have enabled him to go to a grammar school.

Grammar schools are well named. Once they were established to teach Latin grammar. In the nineteenth century, the more prestigious grammar schools had begun to call themselves public schools at the same time that they began to charge fees sufficiently high to keep the public out. In response, cities and counties throughout England set up schools modeled on public schools. Called 'grammar schools', the grammar they taught was that of the English described by the Oxford Dictionary as 'the form of the English language widely accepted as the usual correct form'.

The grammar schools of Hampshire and Yorkshire set about correcting children's written English by forbidding double negatives, double comparatives, split infinitives, and those sentence endings. At the same time, children's spoken English was being corrected. Non-standard plurals, verbals, and vocables were brought in line. Double negatives, especially, were and are a strong indicator of limited education and so they have generally been ironed out of educated local dialects. Even Geoffrey Boycott, the Yorkshire cricket player avoids them, and so did John Arlott, the Hampshire cricket commentator. But both men retained their childhood accents, making them a part of their public personalities.

In all the counties of England there are speakers who have had no care to refine their local dialects. They speak natural, as they would say. In all the counties of England there are speakers who have been educated into modifying their home-grown English by making it conform to a greater or a lesser extent to the grammar of Standard English. Many will alter their vocabulary and some will alter their accent. With the altered accents, the dialect may become a sociolect, a marker not of the region of the speakers but of their education. Dialects begin to become sociolects.

These layers of dialect and sociolect account for the majority of speakers in each county, but not all speakers. There is a whole other form of Englishes that can be given the name of ethnolects, dialects of ethnic groups.

The ethnolects of Yorkshire and Hampshire are predominantly spoken by people of Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi origin. Bradford, Sheffield, Leeds and Hull have large Asian populations. And there are ten more Yorkshire towns that have substantial Asian communities. In Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth and Basingstoke have attracted Asian immigrants.

The British-Pakistani population of Bradford is over 100,000, and it represents 20% of the population. It is a population that is largely intermarrying and that means that British-Pakistani English preserves its own forms considerably influenced by the Punjabi in which the older members are fluent and with which the middle-aged are often familiar. The children might not speak Punjabi but their speech is so influenced by Punjabi that they have created a new Northern English dialect.

The Asian communities of Hampshire are fewer and smaller. Southampton's British-Indian community numbers some 8000; Portsmouth's British-Bangladeshi community numbers some 4000. The two communities have distinct dialects, versions of the Asian English dialects of London and Birmingham. Small ethnolect groups can preserve their dialects for long periods, but the story of British Asian in Hampshire is likely to be different from that of British Asian in Yorkshire. Nonetheless, reinforcing even the smallest of these ethnolect groups is the world's largest community of English speakers: the 350,000,000 people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who use English. From that great pool, there is a reinforcing movement of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi people to the cities of Hampshire and Yorkshire.

To end this present story of the English language, let me try my tongue on the rural dialects of Hampshire and Yorkshire. My first sample comes from a great writer but one who did not take West Country English seriously. My second sample comes from a minor writer but one who took Broad Yorkshire English very seriously.

My great writer is William Shakespeare. When he arrived in London, Shakespeare would have spoken with an accent that would have been noticed by Londoners, but his speech was sufficiently close to London speech for the playwright to feel free to mock the speech of those who lived south of the River Thames. In many plays Shakespeare has country clowns speak a bogus dialect now called Mummerset – 'an imitation rustic West Country accent used by actors'. In *King Lear*, the noble Edgar, disguised as a peasant, speaks accordingly:

Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass. An 'chud ha' bin zwagger'd out of my life, 't would not ha'bin zo long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near th' old man; keep out, 'che vor ye, or Ise try whether your costard or my ballow be the harder. 'Chill be plain with you.

Edgar's 'go your gait', meaning 'go your road', is a lapse into northern speech. 'Gait' derives from Norse 'gata'. But Shakespeare was not attempting an accurate dialectal representation. Anything that would sound rustic to Londoners would do. He was no dialect poet.

A man who was a dialect poet was John Castillo. A nineteenth-century stonemason, Castillo wrote in Broad Yorkshire. The opening stanzas of 'Awd Ahzaak' show what a rich language had developed from the ancient fusion of Norse and Anglian:

Yah neet az Ah went heeam fra' wark,  
A lahtle bit afooar 'twaz dark,  
Quite blahth an' cheerful az a lark  
    Ah thowt me-sel';  
An' sat mah down, te rist a bit,  
    At top of t'hill.

Fooaks just wer tonnin' oot ther ky  
A lahtle plain awd man com by:--  
'Cum sit ye doon, gud frinnd,' sez I,  
    'An' rist yer legs':  
He'd been a bit o'floor to buy,  
    An' tweea 'r three eggs.

My apologies to the ancient inhabitants of Hampshire and Yorkshire for not doing justice to their wonderful speech.

And thank you all for listening.