Handbook of Grammar and Usage

PART FIVE

The Evolution of English
Understanding Sentence Elements
Writing Logical and Effective Sentences
Writing Grammatical Sentences
Choosing Effective Diction
Observing the Rules of Punctuation
Observing the Rules of Mechanics
A Glossary of Contemporary Usage
The language that Americans speak and write is descended from the language spoken by the English, Scottish, and Irish immigrants who founded the British colonies in America. Their language, in turn, was descended from the languages of Germanic tribes who, during the fifth and sixth centuries, invaded Britain and settled there. One of these tribes, the Angles, later became known as the Englisc (English) and gave their name to a country and a language, both of which they shared with other peoples—the Saxons, the Jutes, and later, the Danes and the Normans.

The language that has come down to us from that Anglo-Saxon beginning has undergone great changes. Modern college students find Chaucer’s fourteenth-century English something of a puzzle. And before Chaucer—well, judge for yourself. Here is the opening of the Lord’s Prayer as it was written in the ninth, fourteenth, and seventeenth centuries, respectively:

**Old English**
- Fæder ūre þu þe eart on heofonum, sī þin nama gehālgod.
- Tōbecume þīn rice, Gewurpe ðīn willa on eordan swā swā on heofonum.

**Middle English**
- Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halwid be thi name; thi kyng-dom cumme to; be thi wille don as in heuen and in erthe.

**Modern English**
- Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

A contrast of these three versions offers a brief but revealing impression of the changes that occurred in the language during eight hundred years, and these differences would seem even greater if we could reproduce also the changes in sound that took place. For example, Old English ūu and ē were pronounced like the oo in *boot* and the e in *me*, respectively, so that ūre was pronounced “oo ruh” and ē was pronounced “see.”

In grammar, the major change has been the simplification of grammatical forms. Old English (700–1100) was a highly *inflected* language, one that made grammatical distinctions by changes in the form of a word. For example, nouns were declined in five cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and instrumental) as well as in singular and plural numbers. Adjectives and the definite article were declined to agree with the nouns they modified. Here is the declension, in the singular only, of “the good man,” with the approximate pronunciation enclosed in quotation marks to the right:
In Modern English the article and the adjective are not declined at all. The noun retains the genitive case and has singular and plural forms. We distinguish between subject and object by word order, and we have replaced the dative and instrumental endings by the prepositions to and by. As a result, the whole declensional system has been greatly simplified. Verbs still show considerable inflection, though much less than in Old English.

Along with this simplification of grammatical forms went a great increase in vocabulary as new words were introduced through association with foreign cultures. During the eighth and ninth centuries, Scandinavian raiders settled along the coast of England and brought into the language some fourteen hundred place names and about one thousand common words. In 1066 the Normans conquered England, and for three hundred years their French language dominated the court and the affairs in which the nobility was most involved—government, army, law, church, art, architecture, fashions, and recreation. Between 1100 and 1500, over ten thousand French words were absorbed into the language. During the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, English writers borrowed heavily from Latin. Language historians estimate that more than half of the present English vocabulary came from Latin, either directly or through one of the Romance languages, especially French. And as the English-speaking countries grew in political, economic, and cultural importance, their language borrowed from all over the world the words it needed to name the things and ideas that Anglo-Americans were acquiring. Today the vocabulary of the English language is international in origin, as the following list illustrates:

- algebra (Arabic)
- amen (Hebrew)
- bantam (Javanese)
- boor (Dutch)
- caravan (Persian)
- cashew (Portuguese)
- chorus (Greek)
- coffee (Turkish)
- dollar (German)
- flannel (Welsh)
- garage (French)
- garbage (Italian)
- inertia (Latin)
- kimono (Japanese)
- leprechaun (Old Irish)
- polka (Polish)
- polo (Tibetan)
- silk (Chinese)
- shampoo (Hindi)
- ski (Norwegian)
- tag (Swedish)
- toboggan (Micmac)
- vodka (Russian)
- whiskey (Gaelic)