

French Influence on the English Language

The historical events which have materially influenced English language are the settlement in Britain of the Germanic tribes, the Scandinavian invasion, the Norman Conquest and the revival of learning. The Scandinavian and the French elements have helped considerably in the modification of the character of English. The French Influence, it is noted that, not only enriched the English Vocabulary but also simplified English grammar as well. "The Normans became the masters of England and they remained master for sufficiently to leave a deep impression on the English language" as Jespersen comments. It may be observed that, the French culture and civilizations made a such profound, permanent and passionate impact on the English

that there is hardly any sphere of life which had not been affected by the French influence.

After the Norman Conquest the French became the rulers of England. Hence all words connected with government & administration were French in origin, such as "state and Government", "Power and authority", "reign and realm" & many others.

The French were the refined rich & powerful people. Hence all words associated with upper classes are adopted from French. Consequently such words as "feudal and fief", "Prince and peer", "duke and duchess", "count and countess", "glory and honor", "noble and courteous" are borrowed from the French stock. It may be noted however, native words like "lord, lady and earl" also remained in popular use.

As the Normans were the masters and rulers and they took the responsibility of managing the military affairs of the country. Consequently many military words were borrowed from French such as "war and peace", "arms and army", "ensign and banner", "troops and soldiers", "siege and besiege", "navy and admiral", "colonel and lieutenant" and the like.

The French as the rulers also exercise their authority over all the legal judicial matters. Hence a great many English legal words are borrowed from French such as "just and justice", "bar and court", "accuse and convict", "defendant and plaintiff", "felony and crime", "sue and suit", "plea and plead" and some others.

The French also influenced the religious & ecclesiastical matters. Hence the words like "religion and sermon", "prayer and penance", are of French origin. The words relating to moral ideas are also French and these words were derived from the clergymen who taught morality. Such words are "penitence and pity", "virtue and vice", "covet and desire", "duty and charity", "sacrament and sanctity", "grace and conscience". The relation between the French and the English could be determined from various words such as "rich and poor", "master and servant", "command and obey", "riches and poverty" and many others. "It is curious to note" observes Bradley, "that all to the current terms of family relationship outside the immediate circle of the household have been adopted from French."

The gay and sportive French people played many games and sports as their pastime & entertainment. This feature is evident from the

various words derived in this field, such as "leisure and pleasure", "joy and delight", "ease and comfort", "dance and music", "melody" and many others.

The French are also famous for their taste in food and their skill in culinary art. Hence many words relating to the names of food articles and art of cooking are French such as "boil and fry", "toast and roast", "soup and sauce" and many more. The word "kitchen" is native in origin, but sumptuous meals such as "dinner", "lunch and feasts" are French. It is also interesting to note that liking animals like "cow", "ox", "calf", "sheep", "swine", "bear and deer" are English but they appear on the table with French names such as "beef", "veal", "mutton", "pork", "bacon" and "venison".

The French were the leaders of fashion in the Middle ages. Thus we find a great many French words relating to fashion such as taffeta, fur, cable, ermine, and general terms such as gown, robe, costume. The colours, brown, blue, scarlet, tawny are also borrowings of the period. Jewel, ornament, breech, point to the luxuries of the age.

The French set standard of dress and fashion, art and architecture. Hence words relating to these things such as "attire and apparel", "gown and dress", "cloak and veil", beauty and art, "colour and design", "chair and furniture", "carpet and cushion" are of French origin.

The English words are used with French conformity and this practice resulted in the enrichment of English language through a large numbers of synonyms serve the purpose of interpretation and explanation of the French words. Consequently the French word "charity" has been used for native love, "ignorance" for unwisdom "poignant" for sharp, "amity" for friendship "ancient" for old. Jespersen thinks that French influence is also responsible for phenomenon called hybridism. These hybrids were formed either by adding suffixes or prefixes to English words or vice versa. e.g.

French *dis* + English *believe* = disbelieve

English *drink* + French *able* = drinkable

English *over* + French *power* = overpower

English *shepherd* + French *ess* = shepherdess.

The influence of French on English grammar, though slight, is significant for it helped in the progress of simplification. In old English "is" was used to denote possession in the genitive singular but after the French influence the preposition "of" came into use. The verbs

were derived from the French present plural, for example, the verb "survive" was derived from French present plural "nous survivons". Similarly English verb "punish" & "finish" were derived from the French present plural.

It may be observed from the above analysis that French influence exerted a far-reaching effect on the English language. The influence not only helped in the simplification but also enriched the English language to a very great extent and it has been said that process of the French influence even continued in the 20th century.

This abundant linguistic evidence shows that the French were the rich, the powerful and the refined classes, whom the lower classes would imitate, thus resulting in the adoption of more and more French words. The close examination of the French influence has served as the basis for the inference that as far as the vocabulary is concerned, it is the merger of two languages that have vastly increased the resources of the English language.