



Worksheet: Historical Linguistics

Exercise 1: Fill in the blanks

There are periods of English. The period starts around 450 with the It is followed by, a period that lasted from until The most important extralinguistic event which contributed to many changes from Old English (OE) to Middle English (ME) is the in The next period is English, which lasted from around 1500 until around 1700. The main extralinguistic event here is the arrival of in England in Next is English, a period that started around The period of English is called Present-day English (PDE). It is, when this period started: it might be around or around

Exercise 2:

Explain the major challenge of periodisation.

Exercise 3:

Match the linguistic factors to the correct period of English (OE, ME, EModE, LModE)

beginning of Great Vowel Shift – little categorical change – functional diversification of English – borrowings from Old Norse – standardisation – extensive borrowings from French – fully inflectional language – prescriptivism

Exercise 4:

Put each historical event in the correct chronological order. Then, match it to the corresponding period of English.

- Introduction of the printing press (Caxton)
- Arrival of Germanic tribes
- Canterbury Tales written
- Samuel Johnson's Dictionary
- Beowulf composed
- Norman Conquest



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- First radio broadcast
- Shakespeare's works published
- Standardisation efforts intensify
- Great Vowel Shift begins

Exercise 5: True or false?

1. During the OE period, the four Germanic tribes Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frites, attacked England and then proceeded to settle there.
2. OE was an analytic language, whereas PDE is synthetic.
3. The most important piece of literature from the ME period is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
4. The Great Vowel Shift began and ended in the ME period.
5. English reclaimed its status as the language for science, religion law and government during the EModE period. This process is called "standardisation".
6. Barely any categorical change happened to English during the LModE period.

Exercise 6:

During the Middle English period, English, French and Latin were spoken in England. Which language fulfilled which function during this period?

HINT: For some examples, two answers are correct. In these cases, try to differentiate between the language of the lower class and that of the upper class.

	ENGLISH	FRENCH	LATIN
letters			
political speeches			
lectures			
newspapers			
instructions to servants			
family conversations			
poetry			
folk literature			



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Exercise 7:

Below is a list of English word pairs or groups. For each set:

1. Determine which word in each set is primarily of Old English (Germanic) origin and which is of Old French (Romance) origin. You may need to use an etymological dictionary (like the OED).
 - o Which word feels more formal or informal?
 - o Which word is more abstract or concrete?
 - o Which word might be associated with a higher or lower social status during the Middle English period, or even today?
 - o How might their usage reflect the historical roles of English and French speakers?
2. Discuss the subtle differences in meaning, connotation, or register that exist between the words in each pair/group in Present-Day English. Consider aspects like:
 - Fire / Flame
 - Fear / Terror
 - Kingly / Royal
 - Holy / Sacred
3. Briefly explain how the presence of both words in English is a direct consequence of the linguistic situation during the Middle English period, where French was the language of law, government, and high culture, while English remained the language of daily life for the majority.

Exercise 8:

Explain the phonological changes the vowels in *bite* and *boot* underwent during the Great Vowel Shift.

Exercise 9:

List three reasons why languages change over time. For each, provide:

1. A brief explanation (1–2 sentences)
2. One example from the history of English