

William the Conqueror and the Norman Conquest (1066).

One final cataclysm awaited the English language: The Norman conquest of 1066.¹ The Normans were Vikings who, had settled in northern France 200 years before. Like the Celtic Britons before them, they had given their name to a French province, Normandy. But unlike the Celts, they had abandoned their language and much of their culture and become French in manner and speech. The variety of French the Normans spoke was not the speech of Paris, but a rural dialect, and its divergence from standard French became even more pronounced when it took root in England – so much so that historians refer to it not as French, but as Anglo-Norman.

After the Norman conquest, no king of England spoke English for the next 300 years. It was not until 1399, with the accession of Henry IV and the adoption of English as the language of record within Government, that England had a ruler whose mother tongue was English. One by one English earls and bishops were replaced by Normans. French-speaking craftsmen, designers, cooks, scholars, and scribes were brought to Britain.

Norman society had two tiers: The French-speaking aristocracy and the English-speaking peasantry. Not surprisingly, the linguistic influence of the Normans tended to focus on matters of court government, fashion, and high living. Meanwhile, the English peasant continued to eat, drink, work, sleep, and play in English.

The breakdown can be illustrated in two ways. First, the more humble trades tended to have Anglo-Saxon names (baker, miller, shoemaker), while the more skilled trades adopted French names (mason, painter, tailor). At the same time, animals in the field usually were called by English names (sheep, cow, ox), but once cooked and brought to the table, they were generally given French names (beef, mutton, veal, bacon).

Norman French, like Germanic tongues before it, made a lasting impact on English vocabulary. Of the 10,000 words adopted from the Norman French, some three-quarters are still in use – among them justice, jury, felony, traitor, petty, damage, prison, marriage, sovereign, parliament, govern, prince, duke, baron. In fact, nearly all our words relating to jurisprudence and government are of French origin.

[...]

Because English had no official status, for three centuries it drifted. Without a cultural pivot, some place to set a standard, differences in regional usage became more pronounced rather than less. And yet it survived. If there is one uncanny thing about the English language, it is its incredible persistence.

It is a great irony that a language that was treated for centuries as the inadequate and second-rate tongue of peasants should one day become the most important and successful language in the world.

Its lowly position almost certainly helped English to become a simpler, less infected language. By making English language mainly of uneducated people, the Norman conquest made it easier for grammatical changes to go forward unchecked.

1. William of Normandy defeated the English army in Hastings in 1066. He then marched to London and was crowned on Christmas Day in 1066 in Westminster Abbey.

[...]

Isolated from the rest of Europe by the English Channel, the Norman rulers gradually came to think of themselves not as displaced Frenchmen but as Englishmen. Intermarrying between Normans and British contributed to the sense of Englishness. The children of these unions learned French from their fathers, but English from their mothers and nannies. Often they were more comfortable in English.

Gradually, English reasserted itself. French remained, until 1362, the language of Parliament and, for somewhat longer, of the courts, but only for official purposes – rather like Latin in the Catholic church.

By the late 12th century, the harsh, clacking, guttural Anglo-French had become a source of amusement to the people of Paris, and this provided perhaps the ultimate – and certainly the most ironic – blow to the language in England. Norman aristocrats, rather than be mocked for persevering with an inferior dialect that many of them spoke badly anyway, began to take an increasing pride in English.

So English triumphed at last, though of course it was a very different language – in many ways a quite separate language – from the Old English of Alfred the Great. It was simpler in grammar, vastly richer in vocabulary. Alongside the Old English motherhood, we now had maternity, with friendly we had amity, with brotherhood, fraternity, and so on.

Abridged from Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue: The Story of the English Language*, 1990.

