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How Political Aspirations Conceived A Dramatic Linguistic Shift

The 1066 Norman Conquest presents a specific instance of how conflicting political ambitions stimulated a substantial historical and social shift. On the political front, King Harold II and William the Conqueror possessed differing motives in their quest for the English crown. The political conflict witnessed contention between two groups that spoke entirely different languages: the Anglo-Saxons speaking Old English and the Normans speaking Norman French. The Norman victory in 1066 would have long-lasting implications for England and the English language. After the Normans conquered, Old English lost its prominence in England, initiating a linguistic transitional period. As a consequence of the Norman dominance over the hierarchical power structure of Britain, political power yielded dramatic linguistic changes in the English language.

In pre-1066 Anglo-Saxon England, political succession sparked conflicting claims to the throne. Initially, a conflict ensued for the throne because Edward the Confessor did not have any children, and there was a lack of a clear line of succession (Thomas 17). Edward's death resulted in a power vacuum unable to be satisfied through a peaceful transition of power. Harold II claimed Edward bestowed the crown on him, yet even modern scholars dispute the validity of Edward's deathbed grant for Harold (Thomas 17). Harold justified his political pursuit on a widely contested deathbed grant. The unreliable and disputed accord motivated others, such as William and Harald Hardrada, to challenge the legitimacy of Harold's claim by asserting their claim to the throne. The conflict escalated after Harold offended William the Conqueror. After Edward's death, Harold broke his previous oath to uphold William's claim on the throne, making him guilty of perjury and usurpation against William (Thomas 17). Harold's perjury offended William, ensuring the Norman king would embark on a vengeful campaign. From William's

perspective, his invasion was a moral conviction because the Norman invasion retaliated against Harold's supposed treachery. William asserted he possessed a "legitimate claim to the English crown" as he commenced the invasion (Davis 280). After Harold tainted his claim on the throne, William viewed himself as the only justified successor. The impetus of William's invasion relates to his proclamation he was Edward's rightful successor. William's political desire showcases his willingness to consolidate his rule and expand his political influence. William's commitment to preserving and expanding his rule would subsequently manifest in the Norman Conquest. Ultimately, England's undefined political transitions and turmoil spawned the Norman invasion.

Before William besieged Anglo-Saxon England, Old English's developments from diverse dialects allowed Anglo-Saxon speakers to eventually borrow words from Norman French. During the fifth and sixth centuries, Anglo-Saxon dialects included Teutonic and Scandinavian variations ("English" 111). These variations suggest several Anglo-Saxon tribes spoke the same language with many dialect variations consisting of Teutonic and Scandinavian dialects. The language was accessible and discernible to Anglo-Saxons in a particular area. The Anglo-Saxon dialect included various dialects, indicating there were no "standardized" directives for the Anglo-Saxon language. The language did not adhere to strict standardization, so Old English was a permeable and adaptable language. Flexible characteristics would allow Anglo-Saxon speakers to adopt the invasive Norman language into their existing dialect. When the Normans conquered the Anglo-Saxons, Norman words and idioms eventually mixed into the language, assisting the vernacular's comprehension of the language ("English" 111). Before the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Saxon dialects suited the needs of its local speakers, so the language was largely accessible. As the Norman French language interacted with the diversified

Anglo-Saxon dialects, the Anglo-Saxons adopted Norman French words into their Old English dialect. The Normans imposed their language onto the Old English speakers, so the Anglo-Saxons had to respond accordingly by preserving their native tongue and simultaneously adjusting to the new dialect. Therefore, Anglo-Saxon speakers adapted to the “new normal” introduced by the Norman Conquest. When accounting for the various dialect influences on Old English, Anglo-Saxon speakers readily incorporated Norman French into the language because they were already accustomed to incorporating the various dialects of Old English into their speech and writing.

During the final days of Harold II’s rule over England, Old English possessed a prominent status and distinguishable characteristics. Before the Norman Invasion, Old English was a “language of record and for literary expression; it developed a written standardized form, classical Late West Saxon, which was used by scribes outside of its area of origin” (Brinton 9). Written Old English was primarily reserved for scribes, indicating a power-prestige dynamic. Old English scribes inadvertently standardized written Old English by adhering to established written rules of previously written documents. The language’s standardization through written discourse allowed the spoken language to vary among the vernacular. Unlike dialect variations among oral speakers, a written format cannot accommodate different dialects because it complies with precedents in previous writings. Thus, the Anglo-Saxon scribes ensured a written standardization for the Old English language in the West Saxon Dialect

Linguistically, Old English’s inflections were perhaps the most defining feature because one could identify the grammatical function of a noun or adjective by its ending (Thomas 135-136). Old English conditioned Anglo-Saxon speakers to rely on specific parameters to discern meaning. The language also defined grammatical gender meaning within the morphology. Old

English divided nouns and related words into masculine, feminine, and sometimes neutral categories (Thomas 136). Such categories subliminally conveyed a word's specified gender without a speaker explicitly stating the word's gender. The synthetic nature of Old English allowed speakers to assign an artificial gender to their vocabulary using the language's built-in rules. Concurrently, the gender of Old English words only had a tenuous relation to conventional and biological gender (Thomas 136). The linguistic and gendered relationship did not directly correlate with the subject's actual gender and the word's gendered classification. For instance, "wifmann" or "woman" was grammatically masculine (Thomas 136). The gendered Old English vocabulary did not always align with the social connotations of the words. Although "wifmann" translates to "woman", the masculine connotation of "wifmann" indicates the language did not account for the social connotations of words. Preceding the fall of Harold II's rule and Old English's prominence, the language dominated the England scene with established language conventions.

Following William I's successful military campaign against the Anglo-Saxons, Old English written vernacular experienced developments that would affect its future. In the years following the invasion, the remaining Anglo-Saxon monks continued to write in Anglo-Saxon Old English, but the Norman State Church did not train upcoming monks in writing in Old English (Harper 48). By 1120, all Anglo-Saxon monks had either died or retired from their positions, eliminating naturalized Anglo-Saxon speakers, so the Norman monks had to "transcribe it the best as they [could] using Anglo-Saxon characters" (Harper 48). Anglo-Saxon monks inadvertently forced Norman monks to utilize the Old English language. Even though Anglo-Saxon monks had a diminished presence over time, their language did not deteriorate from the Norman monks' written practice. English monks perpetuated the prominence of Old English by continuing to

write in their native language. Norman monks had to interact with the standardized Anglo-Saxon language to transcribe imperative religious texts, so Old English was continually present alongside Norman French in written contexts.

Since monks used Old English and Norman French in the church setting, both languages became susceptible to borrowing from each other, creating the blended Anglo-Norman dialect. After occupying England, the Norman chieftains and clergymen avoided Old English speech despite English being the language of their subjects (Robinson 212). The ruling class neglected to learn Old English, which would eventually result in the demise of Norman French in favor of a blended language with Anglo-Saxon (Robinson 212). Norman authority ultimately sabotaged their language's prominence in the future. The Norman French class segregated their speech from the vernacular, severely limiting the ability of their language to persist through extralinguistic factors. Occupied Anglo-Saxon subjects adopted Norman French traits while also retaining elements of their native Anglo-Saxon tongue. Old English speakers salvaged portions of their language by blending their speech with Norman French, ensuring some of their language would survive.

As William began asserting his control of England, the new Norman ruling class spawned political upheaval with their new linguistic preferences. After seizing the English throne, William sought to recognize and rule English lands that Edward previously dominated through a comprehensive and overarching record of an unprecedented political course of action called the Domesday Book. (Garnett 70). The Domesday Book redistributed the land of conquered England, which affected the native English Anglo-Saxons. William's role was unprecedented because his political aspirations and usurpation of land produced English language differentiation. In an attempt to account for and relish in his newfound power, William instructed

his Norman-French-speaking bishopric administration to launch an inquiry into subjects who owned English land in his Domesday Book (Christelow 528). With William's newly formed administration, the power prestige language shifted to Anglo-Norman from the previously established Old English. William's administration utilized their native Anglo-Norman tongue while in power, indicating how the Norman Invasion produced a swift linguistic preference shift among the ruling powers. When William's bishoprics exerted their dominion over Old English speakers, Old English promptly lost its prominence within the ruling powers because its speakers became politically weakened and subjugated. Suddenly, Old English shifted from the power prestige dialect to the language of the ruled. William's political aspirations caused Old English to collapse from its once prominent status.

In evaluating his English lands, William caused significant dialect differentiation through social disruptions. Using their Norman French dialect, the Norman bishoprics outlined the societal structure, the extent of social status, and wealth within each English county (Christelow 528). The Domesday Book outlined the social structure of Norman-dominated England using the invaders' language. According to the Domesday Book, owners of the king's land found themselves in the upper rank of the societal structure. These landowners consisted of bishops and barons who inhabited the second or, sometimes, a third ranking. Anglo-Norman bishoprics established a societal hierarchy based on land ownership; the new administration exerted their newly acquired power onto the Anglo-Saxon subjects. William's administration's language varied from the Anglo-Saxon vernacular. Such a language separation allowed for the political class to arbitrarily govern the Old English-speaking Anglo-Saxons. While promising to uphold existing laws and tie the "rights" of landowners to the king's power, the Domesday Book utilized Latin translations as a substitute for Old English, distorting the documents defining Anglo-Saxon

landowner rights (Garnett 59). Native Old English speakers could not define their rights as they were described and translated by William's Norman-speaking administrators. Because the Normans confusingly designed the Domesday Book, the Anglo-Saxons were regulated to a subservient social role as the ruling class confusingly defined their rights. Therefore, William established a strict hierarchy where he and his Norman-speaking rulers dominated Anglo-Saxon landowners. Unfortunately for the natives, the Norman Conquest resulted in a linguistic preference shift that generated a rigid social hierarchy.

Alongside the political and social implications of William's conquest, England experienced an influx of linguistically diverse immigrants, which also accounted for the shift in the written purpose of Old English. Immigration facilitated a large language melting pot where "different echelons of Anglo-Norman society" intermixed "with the highest ranks [who held] on to French for the longest period of time" including clergymen (Brinton 191). The incoming immigrants retained their native languages during their relocation. Thus, England became the epicenter for combining many languages other than standard Old English, ensuring Old English would devolve from its original state. Old English was already subject to extensive changes because native speakers were more receptive to incorporating different dialects into their speech. Diverse dialects and languages became widespread across England, and linguistic diversity caused dramatic dialect differentiation over time. England's immigration rates could have convinced William to account for conquered lands to avoid any land ownership discrepancy between the immigrants, natives, and himself. Consequently, William's land accounting effort produced a dramatic departure in England where Old English lost its political and social standings. While Old English ceased to be the central language of England, the purpose of the written language also shifted from its original intention. As previously mentioned, Anglo-Saxon scribes utilized

Old English for record and literacy articulation (Brinton 9). However, the Norman Invasion imposed a notable shift in the purpose of written English that signaled the transition from Old English to Middle English (Brinton 191). The purpose of the Domesday Book indicates a stark contrast between the language's literary purposes before the invasion. Preceding the invasion, written English was for literary discourse and recordkeeping, so bishoprics did not employ written language for political or government purposes. Yet, William mandated his administration write in English for his political gain rather than for literary or recordkeeping purposes. Thus, the Domesday Book existed to account for William's land from immigrants and natives. After the arrival of immigrants in England, the English dialect shifted, coinciding with a shift in written language purposes.

As the Normans overtook the Anglo-Saxon government, the vernacular and scholarly dialects substantially shifted, sparking the decay of Old English. In theory, the influence of the Norman Conquest on the English language showcases how political upheaval creates language differentiation. William's political aspirations validate M.J. Harper's following sentiment: "Language differentiation occurs only when political division or clear geographical barriers [are] interposed" (Harper 115). William's political conquest was the catalyst for English's language differentiation. When language differentiation occurs, languages sharing similar dialects distinguish themselves from one another. As the Normans began to interject their dialect into English, Norman French speakers blended French words to express the same idea into the English language vocabulary (Robinson 212) For example, speaking of "liberty" is also calling the subject "freedom," forming synonyms in the English language (Robinson 212). The word intermixing showcases how English was under the influence of neighboring dialects.

Norman-French surrounded English speakers, allowing for the English language to become porous and adopt French words into the language. Concurrently, Latin words slowly replaced Germanic words, especially words dealing with courtly dealings, such as “stuff” for “matter” (Robinson 212). German soon began to lose its influence on the English language. Latin substitutions were the preference since the Norman French did not require Germanic authority in English. Similarly, Old English speakers were satisfied with the Germanic borrowings, but the presence of the Norman French forced previous Old English speakers to adopt Latin. In the power prestige context, Latin soon replaced Old English in literary and documentary texts with French variations (Brinton 191). Norman-French ruling figureheads caused Old English to change among the vernacular and literary classes. Old English soon became obsolete as the invasion prompted speakers to adapt to the new normal of the Norman French; similarly, the literary Old English transformed into a more Norman French-dominated context. The French and Germanic languages morphed English into Middle English qualities. Following William’s political quest for power, the English language became subject to immense change in the vernacular and the scholarly community.

Using their political offices, the Normans generated political and social change in the English language. Following William’s influential 1066 invasion, less than half-a-dozen out of 180 landlords were English by 1090 (Davis 280). The Normans succeeded in seizing control of the English landlords, so the Normans “could step into their [the English] shoes as a new Norman aristocracy” (Davis 280). As the Normans consolidated their power, English-speaking landlords decreased because the new ruling powers favored Norman French-speaking individuals. Normans’ prejudiced approach to government contributed to the drastic reduction of English bishoprics and landlords. Beforehand, the Anglo-Saxon ruling class was composed of

English speakers, reflecting the linguistic nature of Anglo-Saxon England. With the introduction of new Norman ruling powers, the administrators' language reflected their biases toward their native language. A language discrepancy occurred between the Anglo-Saxon subjects and their new ruling class. The Norman aristocracy did not favor Old English, and they spoke a different language than the Anglo-Saxon commoners. This discrepancy allowed for the English societal structure to shift alongside the political hierarchy. In the aftermath of William the Conqueror's invasion, native Anglo-Saxons experienced "terrible want and suffering where there had formerly been ease and abundance, and it was a common thing for Saxons to sell themselves into slavery for food" ("English" 112). When the Normans invaded England, Norman French was the language for prestige as the conquered Anglo-Saxons attempted to keep some aspects of their speech by learning Norman French. The Anglo-Saxons who sold themselves into slavery retained their native tongue while also adopting the prestige Norman French language. Although the Anglo-Saxons degraded themselves socially, their language persevered by incorporating Norman French qualities. As a result of this societal trend, the Old English speakers retained aspects of their language while blending Norman French into their dialect. Because of the invasion, the English language altered in political and social contexts.

As the Norman Conquest occurred, conflicting political ambitions triggered a substantial linguistic shift in the English language. King Harold II and William the Conqueror spoke separate languages, so their conflict resolution had long-lasting implications for their respective language. William's victory satisfied his political endeavors while also causing the fall of Old English. The political consequences of a Norman triumph introduced means of initiating the English language's dramatic linguistic shift.

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