THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 83: A TRI-LINGUAL NATION

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 83: A Tri-Lingual Nation. In this episode, we're going to dig through the surviving documents from the reign of Henry II to try to figure out the state of language in 12th century England. At first glance, this may seem like a straightforward issue, but the problem is that England had becoming a linguistic melting pot, and the linguistic situation was a bit of mess. Latin, French and English were all in regular use. But very few people spoke all three languages. Each language was largely reserved for certain uses by certain people. So this time, we'll try to sort through the documents and figure out what was going on.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com. Just go to historyofenglishpodcast.com and link from there. The most recent bonus episode posted there looks at the history of words related to family members. You can find out if a 'grandfather' really grand, and if a great-grandmother is really 'great'?

And speaking of the history of words, I want to mention a couple of other podcasts that have come to my attention, and I think they might be of interest to many of you as well. First, Ray Belli has put together a podcast called Words for Granted that looks at the etymology of particular words. Each episode is dedicated to one word. And if you love etymology, I think you'll love his podcast. Again, it's called Words for Granted.

And since I'm mentioning podcasts about etymology, I should also mention Lexicon Valley and A Way With Words. I'm sure many of you are familiar with those. They have been around for a while, but if you're not familiar with them, you should definitely check them out.

So with that, let's turn to this episode. And this time, I want to explore the linguistic situation in England in the second half of the 12th century, and more specifically during the thirty-five year reign of Henry II from the year 1154 until 1189. If this century was the dark Age of English, these years were probably the darkest years. As we'll see, English writing essentially disappeared. And while English was in retreat, the role of French was growing by leaps and bounds.

But let's begin with the situation on the ground when Henry was crowned as King of England in December of 1154. The civil war of the past twenty years had finally come to an end, but the Anarchy of that period left England in a pretty bad state. During Stephen's reign, royal revenues had fallen by two-thirds. Royal lands and castles had been granted to various barons in exchange for their support, so the royal lands had been diminished. In the west, Welsh nobles had claimed several Norman castles. In the north, the Scots effectively ruled the northernmost part of England.

So Henry's primary goal as the new king was to restore England to the condition that existed prior to the Anarchy when his grandfather Henry I reigned as king. It appears that Henry II modeled his reign after that of his grandfather.

Both Henrys put an emphasis on law and order. And both had very long reigns. In fact, they both ruled England for the same period of time – thirty-five years each. So Henry II considered his reign an extension of his grandfather's reign. He basically tried to pick up where his grandfather left off.

That actually became Henry's official policy when he became king. Anything done since his grandfather's reign was presumed to be illegitimate unless Henry himself approved it. As I noted, Henry's predecessor Stephen had granted land and castles to his supporters. And some of his barons had built castles without formal consent and approval. So Henry deemed all of those grants and castles to be illegal and illegitimate unless he confirmed them. The earldoms that Stephen had created were abolished. And most of the lands that had been confiscated were returned to their original landholders. Many of the new castles that were deemed to be illegal were torn down to ensure that the barons couldn't rebel and start a new civil war.

In Henry's first year as king, hundreds of castles were demolished. Some accounts report that over a thousand were torn down, though most were probably little more that enclosed forts. Most of the barons and nobles consented to these actions, but a few objected, and Henry took direct action against them.

In the north, Henry had to forcibly remove a prominent noble [*William of Aumerle*] from his castle in Yorkshire. In the Midlands, another noble named Hugh Mortimer held onto three castles. Henry sent an army to the Midlands to force the issue, and Mortimer eventually submitted and recognized Henry's authority. But other than those exceptions, Henry was able to clean up the mess created by the Anarchy with relatively little resistence.

It appears that the nobles were longing for a return to law and order, so they went along with Henry's new rules. And if anyone tried to object, they had little chance to succeed because Henry could call on soldiers from throughout much of France.

In terms of the actual machinery of government, Henry made sure that the Exchequer was back up and running like it was during his grandfather's reign. Taxes started to roll in again, and royal revenues were increased. In an earlier episode of the podcast, I noted that the records of the Exchequer were written down and rolled up so that they resembled pipes. These records were called the Pipe Rolls. There is one set of surviving Pipe Rolls from the reign of Henry I – for the period from 1129 to 1130. But all of the Pipe Rolls for the next twenty-five years were either lost or never even written down. However, the Pipe Rolls started to be maintained again as soon as Henry II came to the throne. Beginning with Henry's first year as king, there is a continuous record of the Exchequer's activities. All of these financial records provide a wealth of information about this period.

So the Office of the Exchequer was back up and running again. But you might remember that there was another important government office during the reign of Henry's grandfather and that was the Chancery. The Chancery was the office that prepared and issued the writs and charters and other official documents. Again, some of those documents survive. And we actually have

lots of Chancery documents from the period shortly after Henry's reign. Henry breathed new life into the English bureaucracy, and lots of official documents started to be produced.

Given the importance of the Chancery, Henry needed to make sure that it was good hands, so one of his first acts as king was to appoint a new Chancellor to oversee that office. Henry asked the Archbishop of Canterbury [*Theobald*] to recommend someone for the office, and the Archbishop recommended his archdeacon named Thomas Becket. Becket was named as the new Chancellor, and he quickly became one of Henry's closest friends.

Now if you know a little bit about this period of English history, you probably know the name Thomas Becket. He was a very important figure as the royal Chancellor, but he became even more important when the Archbishop of Canterbury died a few years later, and Henry nominated Becket for that position. At that point, Becket became the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and his close relationship with Henry quickly came to an end. We'll look at all of those developments next time. But for now, we'll leave Becket as the new Chancellor in charge of the office that was producing all of those official documents.

And speaking of those documents, virtually all of them were written in Latin. English had quickly fallen out of use in government documents after the Norman Conquest. And since then, Latin had been used almost exclusively in writs and charters and other official documents.

By the way, this was true throughout much of western Europe. Local vernaculars were rarely used in official documents. Even in France, the bureaucrats used Latin – not French. So after the Norman Conquest, England came into line with the rest of western Europe by using Latin for those documents. And of course, the Church also used Latin. And since Latin was considered an international language at the time, most literature and other documents were also usually composed in Latin.

But around this point in the mid-1100s, Latin started to get some competition, and it started to lose its monopoly over written documents. That new competition came from French. From around this point in our story, more and more documents started to be produced in French. And that was true in England as well as on the continent. In fact, the increasing popularity of French only served to push English even further down the totem pole.

We've seen some evidence that French was emerging as an alternative to Latin in earlier episodes. A few episodes back, I noted that the great French epic poem – the Song of Roland – was composed in French around the year 1100. That showed that French had started to achieve an elevated status, and authors and scribes were willing to use it instead of Latin.

In the decades that followed the Song of Roland, other French texts began to appear. Classical works from Greece and Rome were translated into French, and legal documents started to be composed in French.

Even in England, scribes were starting to use French instead of Latin. In fact, in the mid-1100s, an English scribe put together a summary of English laws, but he wrote it down in French. The

document purports to be the laws of Edward the Confessor as confirmed by William the Conqueror, so it is a compilation of English laws. Most scholars agree that it was composed in the mid-1100s – probably between 1130 and 1150, so at some point during the Anarchy. It is called the "Leis Willelme' – literally the 'Laws of William.' This particular law book is fascinating for a couple of reasons.

First, it implies that law enforcement officials were speaking French, not English. So perhaps the author felt that there was a need for a English lawbook written in French. But more importantly, it shows that Latin was losing its monopoly over the law and legal documents.

Another sign of the growing influence of French as a written language was the increasing amount of romance literature that was being composed in French. A few episodes back, I mentioned that the troubadour tradition of southern France was moving north, and it merged with the epic poetry tradition of northern France to produce a new type of literature called the ***romans*** or ***romance***. That term ***roman*** was used because most of those works were composed in the rustic 'roman' language, in other words they were composed in the local French vernacular rather than the formal Latin. As I've noted before, that's how a language like French came to be known as a 'romance language.' And since these stories often involved themes of love, that led to the secondary sense of the word as a love story, and that gave us 'romantic literature.'

Well, in the second half of the 1100s, several of these new romans appeared, and as the name indicates, they were composed in French. These romans were usually based on historical events and famous leaders of the past. Many of them were about the ancient heroes of Greece and Rome. And Charlemagne was another favorite subject.

Well, in Normandy, a poet and writer named Wace decided to get in on the action. He composed one of these French poems or 'romans.' And he also looked to the Greeks for inspiration. But beyond Greece, he looked to Britain as well, specifically the legend of King Arthur. A few episodes back, I noted that Geoffrey of Monmouth had produced an extremely popular book called 'The History of the Kings of Britain.' It was released in the 1130s, and it was read throughout Europe. It purported to be a history of Britain, even though much of it was based on myth. It said that Britain was founded by a Greek hero named Brutus, who was descended from the Trojan hero Aeneas. And the line of kings that followed culminated in a great King named Arthur who defeated rivals throughout Europe.

Well, Wace took this purported 'history' written in Latin, and he re-worked it as one of these new romans composed in Norman French. His new work was called 'Le Roman de Brut' – literally the 'Romance of Brutus.' The poem was completed and released in the year 1155 – the first year of Henry II's reign as King of England. And the poem was dedicated to Henry's wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Though Wace's poem was based on Geoffrey's earlier book, it wasn't a literal translation. It was composed in verse, so it was a long epic poem. It also contained a lot of dialogue and emotional content that wasn't in Geoffrey's original version. The poem is most famous for its section dealing with Arthur because Wace added a couple of new features to the story. It was Wace who

invented the idea of the Knights of the Round Table – a table where all of the knights in Arthur's court had equal status. He also added contemporary features like knights fighting in armor on horseback. So Arthur's court starts to take on contemporary medieval features, even though it was set in the distant past.

Again, Wace's poem was written in Norman French, so that added some interesting features as well. In Geoffrey's original Latin version, Arthur's sword was called ***Caliburnus*** or '***Caliburn***.' Wace gave us a French translation of that Latin name – ***Escaliborc*** or as it would come to be known ***Excalibur***.

So we now have Geoffrey's Latin verison and Wace's Norman French verison, but we still don't have an English version of the story yet. It will be another half century before we get an English verison of Wace's poem. So once again, note how the story of Arthur gets to us. First as a Latin text, then as a French poem, and then finally as a Middle English translation. And that tells you a lot about the relative status of Latin, French and English as written languages. Latin came first, French was emerging as a secondary written language, and English was largely ignored. It was an afterthought.

A few years after Wace completed his version of the Arthur legend, Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter Marie married the Count of Champagne in northern France. Now this was Eleanor's daughter from her first marriage to the King of France. And Marie ended up being an important patron of the arts, just like her mother. One of the poets that Marie supported at her court in northern France was named Chrétien de Troyes. And Chrétien was also fascinated by the emerging legends of King Arthur.

He also composed a series of stories about Arthur and his knights, but whereas Wace presented Arthur as a historical figure, Chrétien was more interested in telling some good stories, especially stories involving love and romance and infidelity. He composed five separate works about Arthur and his knights, and those five works are considered to be the first fully realized Arthurian Romances.

It was Chrétien who moved Arthur's court from the Welsh city of Caerleon to the fictional location of Camelot. Chrétien was also the person who introduced the storyline involving a grail with magical healing powers. And this later evolved into the search for the Holy Grail.

For another one of his stories, Chrétien claimed that his patron Marie gave him the idea for the story. It is the story of a knight who tries to rescue Guinevere after she has been kidnapped. The knight faces many challenges along the way, and he encounters many different people, including a dwarf who drives a cart and forces the knight to ride in it. When the knight finally finds Guinevere, they fall in love and have an affair.

The story was called 'Le Chevalier de la Charrette' – literally 'The Knight of the Cart.' But the story is more commonly known today by the name of the knight who was the focus of the story. His name was Lancelot. And this was the introduction of Lancelot to the Arthurian legend. So if

we are to believe Chretien, the character of Lancelot was at least in part the brainchild of Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Marie.

So now we have almost all of the major characters and components of the King Arthur legend. Over the next two or three centuries, other writers would expand on these characters and story lines, but the basic pieces were in place by the time Chretien completed his romances around the year 1181.

Before we leave the story of Arthur, I should mention one other interesting tidbit. It was during this period that the remains of Arthur and Guinevere were supposedly discovered at an abbey in Glastonbury in southwestern England. According to the story, Henry II was informed by a Welsh minstrel that the area around Glastonbury had once been known as Avalon, and that the real-life King Arthur had been buried there in the cemetery of the old Abbey. Henry was apparently intrigued by the story, and he passed on the information to the monks at the Abbey.

Some time later, the monks excavated the area where the grave was supposedly located, and guess what, they found the skeleton of a man. And they also found some other bones and a lock of hair which they presumed to be the remains of a woman. In the grave, they also supposedly found a lead cross which bore the following inscription: "Here lies buried the famous King Arthur in the Isle of Avalon." Other accounts suggest that the inscription also mentioned Guinevere as well. The bodies were removed from the site and were placed in a tomb in the abbey church. And for some time after then, it was widely believed that the remains of Arthur and Guinevere had been discovered in Glastonbury. Unfortunately, all of this evidence has been lost. The remains disappeared after the monasteries were dissolved in the 1500s. And the lead cross disappeared in the 1700s, so all we are left with is a really fascinating story.

So were those bones really the remains of Arthur and Guinevere? Well, excavations in the 1960s confirmed that the monks did indeed dig a large hole in the cemetery. And it is generally agreed that they pulled some bones out of the hole. But beyond that, most modern historians are skeptical, and it is generally agreed today that it was all a big hoax.

The biggest clue is the inscription on that lead cross. It refers to the body as the "famous King Arthur." Well, I've noted before that there are a few passing references to a Celtic warrior or military leader named Arthur who lived around the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, but those references never mention him as a king, which they almost certainly would have if he had been a king. In fact, Arthur isn't mentioned as a king until Geoffrey of Monmouth's history in the early 1100s that I mentioned earlier. So it seems highly unlikely that the cross would have identified the body as the "famous King Arthur" unless it was added at a later date.

Another important piece of evidence is the fact that much of the abbey had burned down a few years before. It was in bad shape and the monks desperately needed money to rebuild the abbey. So a lot of historians think the whole excavation was a publicity stunt to generate interest in the abbey and to help raise money by making it a tourist attraction for pilgrims and other visitors. Other theories also abound. And to be fair, some people still believe that it really was Arthur's remains. Whatever the truth, it confirms that people of the late 1100s were fascinated by the

stories of Arthur, and most of them thought he had been a real life king at some point in the distant past.

I think the important thing to take from all of this is that the various parts of the Arthurian legend were primarily composed in French during a period in which French was starting to emerge as an alternative to Latin. These poets and writers were some of the first people to use French as a literary language. And thanks to the influence of Henry and Eleanor, this French literature was also spreading to England.

And all of this raises an interesting point that often gets overlooked. King Arthur may have been the legendary King of Britain, but the only people who could read these stories early on were those who could read Latin and French. That meant that the primary audience for these stories were the French-speaking nobles in France and England. But what about all of those other people in England who couldn't speak French or Latin – the common people, the peasants, the English-speakers. Well, it's unclear if they embraced the story in the same way as the nobles. If they knew the stories of Arthur, they knew them through translations. And this may help to explain why the peasants and the common people ultimately invented a hero of their own – a common man who fought against the crooked nobles. His name was Robin Hood. And from the very beginning, the stories of Robin Hood were composed and sung in English. The legend was passed along in songs and ballads, so they passed on in the oral tradition. You didn't have to be literate to know about Robin Hood. So early on, there was an interesting class distinction between the legend of Arthur and the legend of Robin Hood. The nobles read about Arthur in French, and the peasants sang about Robin Hood in English. But as the Arthurian legends were gradually translated and composed in English, some of that class distinction eroded over time.

So this is probably a good point to transition from written languages to spoken languages. As we've seen, the state of the written languages was pretty straight-forward. Latin was the main language, French was rapidly growing as a secondary language, and English was nowhere to be seen. But in terms of the spoken languages, the opposite was true. The vast majority of people in England spoke English as their native language. French was the second most common language. And Latin was mostly limited to people in the government or the Church who had been trained and educated in Latin. So there was an interesting dichotomy between the written languages of England the spoken languages of England.

As we know, English may have been the most commonly spoken language in England, but it was stigmatized and held in very low regard. The preferred languages were French and Latin. French was the language of the nobles. And Latin was the language of the Church and the scribes. So in terms of actual speech, all three languages were in common use at the time. Each had its own purpose and its own audience.

And that was just in England. In Scotland and Wales and Cornwall, most people still spoke Celtic languages. And in northern England and Scotland, the Norse influence was still very strong. And in those regions, there were probably people who still spoke Old Norse as their primary language.

And remember that English itself was highly fractured. English speakers in the south couldn't always understand English speakers in the north and vice-versa. So if you can imagine all of these different languages and dialects being spoken in the same vicinity, it could be very confusing if you were traveling around and interacting with people. And the burgeoning towns and cities attracted a lot of these people who were forced to interact with each other on a day to day basis. As you might imagine, in that linguistic environment, communication was a constant problem, and translators were in high demand.

In Old English, the word for 'translate' was ***awændan*** from the same root as the word ***wind***. It literally meant to 'wind or turn from one language to another." The French word ***translate*** comes from a Latin word which had the exact same meaning. It literally meant to 'carry over or bring over,' and it was used in the sense of switching or moving from one language to another. That word ***translate*** entered English in the early 1300s, as the did the word ***interpret***. And the Old English word ***awændan*** gradually disappeared.

Another French word for an interpreter was a ***latimer***. It literally meant a speaker of Latin, and it was used to refer to someone who translated messages into Latin or from Latin. The word has largely died out of English, but it does survive as the surnames Latimer and Latimore. Both names originally referred to someone whose occupation was a translator. It was common for occupations to pass from father to son. So over time, many occupations became surnames.

There were a couple of places were interpreters were especially important. One place was the courts where officials met to hear and decide disputes. Records of those legal proceedings confirm that interpreters were used to translate between the royal justices who spoke French and the litigants and juries who often spoke English. And in fact, the proceedings themselves were sometimes conducted in Latin, so all three languages might be required to resolve a legal dispute.

Another place where interpreters were often used was the Church. As we've seen, Latin was the official language of the Church, but many of the prominent clerics and priests were from France, and they spoke French as their native language. And most of the congregations spoke English. So all three languages were in use around the Church.

In a few cases, there were priests who could speak all three languages. Take the case of Gilbert Foliot – a prominent bishop during the reign of Henry II. It is reported that he preached fluently in English, French and Latin. This report comes from Walter Map who was active in Henry's court and wrote an account of various people and events associated with the court

Also during Henry's reign, there was a prominent monk in the east of England named Samson. And he eventually became the head of an abbey in Suffolk near the end of Henry's reign (*at Bury St Edmunds*). Again, it is reported that Samson preached in Latin, French and English, even though it was said that his English sermons were delivered in his native Norfolk dialect.

A chronicle (*Liber Eliensis*) maintained at an Abbey in the east of England (*Ely Abbey*) in the 1150s mentions that the prior of the Abbey named Alexander was also fluent in Latin, French and English.

So a few prominent clerics could converse in all three languages, but in most cases, the clerics relied upon translators. For example, there was an abbey at Ramsey near Peterborough. And a chronicle maintained at that abbey reports that the abbots had to retain an interpreter in the first half of the 1100s.

Meanwhile, the Bishop of Lincoln during the reign of Henry II was named Hugh. He was a Frenchman that had actually been recruited to England by Henry. It is reported that he did not understand English at all, and he also required an interpreter when dealing with his English congregations.

Another prominent cleric was William Longchamp, who was another Frenchman who eventually became the Bishop of Ely after Henry's death. And once again, several chronicles report that he did not speak any English at all, so he also would have required an interpreter.

So from these various sources, we can discern that most of the prominent clerics spoke French, and they almost certainly spoke and read Latin, but their knowledge of English was hit and miss. A few of them could preach in English, while most required someone to translate.

So that's the Church officials. What about the government officials – the king and the barons and the nobles? Well, once again, most of them spoke French as their native language, but it appears that more and more of them were learning English as well. As one generation gave way to another, and then another, those grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the original Normans were brought up in this multi-lingual environment. Many were the product of mixed-marriages with mixed Norman and English ancestry. So by the mid-1100s, it appears that many of the nobles also spoke at least a little bit of English.

This was also true for King Henry himself. Even though he was raised in Anjou in France, he was very well educated. And it is reported that he had some knowledge every major language in western Europe. This comes from an account written by Walter Map who I mentioned earlier. Map was active in Henry's court, so he would have had some knowledge of Henry's linguistic abilities. But even though Map suggests that Henry could understand many different languages, Map says that he only spoke in French and Latin. So Henry could understand some English when he heard other people speaking it, but he never actually spoke English himself.

This statement is reinforced by another story that was told by Gerald of Wales. So let me tell you a little bit about Gerald. Gerald was another prominent cleric and church official who was active in Henry's court. He was born in Wales of mixed Norman and Welsh ancestry. And Gerald is a good example of how the children and grandchildren of the Normans acquired other languages over time. He later wrote several histories and accounts of his travels. And from his writings, it appears that he could speak French, English and Latin. And it appears that he also had some knowledge of Welsh. In fact, in the year 1188, he was selected to accompany the Archbishop of Canterbury on a tour of Wales. And it appears that he was chosen in part because he could serve as an interpreter. He later wrote two accounts of that journey with very vivid descriptions. And he wrote some other accounts of that period as well.

In his writings, Gerald mentions that the languages of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany were still mutually intelligible. And then he turns his attention to English. Here is an English translation of his original Latin text:

"... in the southern parts of England, and particularly in Devonshire, the English language seems less agreeable, yet it bears more marks of antiquity (the northern parts being much corrupted by the irruptions of the Danes and Norwegians). The English spoken in the south adheres more strictly to the original language and ancient mode of speaking; a positive proof of which may be deduced from all the English works of Bede, Rhabanus, and king Alfred, being written according to this idiom." [*Descr, of Wales, Bk. I, chap. 6*]

So apparently, Gerald was familiar enough with Old English texts that he could deduce that the southern English dialects were much closer to those texts and the northern dialects were quite different. So once again, we see a very clear distinction between southern English and northern English.

Gerald's writings are important to our story for a couple of reasons. First, he gives us some insight into the English language as it was spoken in the late 1100s. And secondly, he suggests that Henry II had at least some knowledge of English.

In two different works [*"Itinerary through Wales," Bk. 1, chap 6, and "Conquest of Ireland," Bk. 1, chap 40.*], Gerald recounts a particular story about a man approaching Henry and addressing him in English. According to the story, Henry was in Wales. And one morning, he heard mass at a chapel and then he got ready to leave. As he started to mount his horse, he was approached by a Welshman. And the Welshman addressed Henry in the 'Teutonic tongue" – so in English. The man said, "God hold the, cuing," literally 'God hold thee, king,' but Gerald informs us that it meant 'May God protect you, king.' Gerald says that the man continued to speak to Henry in English while Henry stood there and listened. The man said that Christ had commanded that Henry should prohibit all work from being performed on Sundays, including the buying and selling of any goods. The man told Henry that he should pay due attention the performance of the divine offices. And if Henry did that as king, all of his undertakings would be successful, and he would lead a happy life."

Gerald says that Henry apparently understood what the man had just said, and he immediately turned to a knight who was serving as his interpreter, and he told the knight in French to ask the man if he had dreamt all of this. The knight translated the king's question into English for the man, and the man again addressed the king directly in English. So he replied to the king, not the interpreter. The man said that whether or not he had dreamt it, it was important that Henry do what he said, otherwise, before the end of the year, Henry would be very troubled, and he would be unhappy for the rest of his life. The king seemed to disregard the warning, and started to ride away on his horse. But then he suddenly stopped, and ordered his attendants to call the man back so he could speak with the man some more. But the man was nowhere to be found. This story is presented as a foreshadowing of what was to come. Soon after this supposed warning, Henry faced rebellion from his sons and from his wife Eleanor. We'll get to that part of the story in an upcoming episode, but I wanted present this story here, because it suggests that Henry could

actually understand English when it was being spoken. He didn't need anyone to translate it for him. But he never addressed anyone in English. He only spoke in French and Latin. To be fair, it is easy to read too much into this story, but Gerald told it in two different works, and he was very particular in both versions to emphasize that Henry understand what the man said when he spoke English.

Now even though Henry might have been able to understand English, it appears that that skill was not shared by his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine. By all accounts, she did not speak or understand English at all. She relied upon translators throughout her entire life. [*SOURCE: Richard of Devizes, "Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II and Richard I," III, 431. (Rolls Series.)*]

So what we can take from all of this? Well, these are just bits and pieces of information. But if we put it all together, it appears that the nobles and leading church officials in England continued to speak French, and they continued to be educated in Latin. But they were also starting to pick up English as well. Some spoke it fluently. Some could understand it when it was spoken, even though they didn't speak it themselves. Others continued to rely upon interpreters, but they were probably picking up bits and pieces of English along the way.

So if English was infiltrating the highest levels of society, what was happening just below them in the class of lesser nobles – the bureaucrats and the knightly class? Well, here it appears that English was even more common. At this level, there were lots of knights and squires with mixed ancestry with both English and French ancestors. So bi-lingualism was even more common among the knightly class. This also included low level administrators like stewards and bailiffs. These were people who routinely came into contact with commoners who spoke English, but they also spent a great deal of time at court where French was spoken. So it was common for members of this class to serve as translators just as Henry's knight has served as his translator in the story told by Gerald of Wales.

In fact, it appears that many knights in England primarily spoke English. That was really their first language, and they spoke a very rough French as a second language.

From a later collection of letters and other documents compiled from this period called "Materials for the History of Thomas Becket,' we get an interesting story about a teenager in Normandy named Simon. It is reported that his father sent him to England in the 1170s so that he could teach French to the son of a certain knight there. So this suggests that many English knights needed tutors to teach them how to speak proper French. It was still important for knights to speak and understand French, but more and more of them had to study it in order to speak it correctly.

Along these same lines, we have another account from this period from an English statesmen named Gervase of Tilbury. He lived in England in the late 1100s, and he wrote the following: "It is custom among the greatest nobles of England to send their sons to be brought up in France in order to be trained in arms and to have the barbarity of the native language removed." [*SOURCE: Gerv. Tilb. 2. 20 (p. 945).*] So again, the implication is that the French spoken in England had

deteriorated. And if you really wanted to learn how to speak French properly, you had to go to France.

Earlier, I mentioned Gerald of Wales who wrote that story about the Welshman who spoke English to Henry II. Well, in another work by Gerald [*Speculum duorum*], he wrote about John Blund, who was an academic and philosopher from England. Gerald wrote that Blund learned French from his uncles who had studied in France. He wrote that their accent was "elegant and pure and very different from the rough, corrupt French of the English."

So again, these bits and pieces tell us that the knights and administrators and lesser nobles spoke a very rough French, not the proper French spoken across the Channel. And all of that suggests that the French spoken in England was breaking down.

The writer Walter Map, who I mentioned earlier, had a name for this type of French that was spoken in England. He said it was called 'Marlborough French.'

Around this same time, a nun at Barking Abbey in London [*actually in Essex*] composed a Life of Edward the Confessor in French, and she dedicated it to Henry and Eleanor. In the introduction, she apologized for her French. She wrote the following: "I know the faulty French of England, which is where I acquired it; you who learned it elsewhere, correct it when necessary." [*SOURCE: Bartlett, p. 488*.]

So we've established that many of the nobles and clerics at the highest levels were starting to learn English. And now we've seen that most of the knights and lesser nobles were probably bi-lingual, and in fact, they apparently spoke English better than French. Nevertheless, they still needed to speak French, and many of them tried to improve their French when they could.

This takes us down to the next level – to the common people – the native English-speakers. As I've noted before, we have only a few fragments of English writing from this period, but all of the evidence suggests that English speakers were increasingly influenced by the prominent status of French, and many of them were actively trying to pick up as much French as they could. Whereas the nobles could afford translators and interpreters, peasants didn't really have that option. If they wanted to communicate with someone who spoke French, they had to try to learn as many words as they could. Lets also keep in mind that French was the prestige language at the time. It was the language of the nobles and the high church officials. So English peasants acquired a certain admiration of the language. And then we have to keep in mind how I began this episode – with the increasing use of French as a written language for literature. So if you wanted to read and write, you needed to speak Latin or French. And French was clearly emerging as the more popular choice.

So all of this started to have an impact on the English-speaking peasants. More and more of them started to pick up French words, and use them in regular conversation. Even though we don't have any significant English writings from this period, we do have an account from John of Salisbury, who was an English diplomat and writer, and he eventually became Bishop of Chartres in France. John was an Englishman. He had no French ancestry, and he spoke English as his

native language. In his writings in the mid-1100s, he wrote that it was fashionable for English-speakers to use French words in their conversations.

So there is a strong analogy here to the modern influence of English in other parts of the world today. The cultural dominance of English has meant that many English words have been borrowed into other languages. And ironically, many modern French-speakers in France has been frustrated by the adoption of English words. But in a way, it is sort of a modern form of pay-back because the situation was reversed in England in the 1100s and 1200s. And unlike modern France, there was no Academy of the English Language to protect English from all of that outside influence. So during this period, it appears that French words really started to flow into English.

There was also another factor at work. As we've seen before, English was highly fractured in England. English-speakers in one part of the country had a problem communicating with English-speakers in the other parts of the country. It was considered a rough peasant language that varied considerably. So French actually served as a lingua franca. If people spoke in French, it didn't really matter where they were from. So again, there was a strong pull to pick up as much as much French as you could.

The lack of English documents make it difficult to trace these developments, but if we compare the English documents that were composed before Henry II came to power with those that were composed soon after he died, there is evidence of some major changes.

Let's take the Peterborough Chronicle. As I noted last time, it came to an end in the year that Henry became king. As we went though the Peterborough Chronicle entries, I tried to make a note when a new French word was introduced. Scholars who have examined the text have concluded that there are 29 words that were borrowed from French and used for the first time in the Peterborough Chronicle. That includes words like ***miracle***, ***duke***, ***countess***, ***court***, ***chancellor***, ***council***, ***rent***, ***justice***, ***war*** and ***peace***. But all totaled, there are only 29 French words in the entire Chronicle.

Shortly after Henry died, when scribes started to write in English again, one of the first documents to be written was a guide for monks called the "Ancrene Wisse" – literally the Anchorite's Guide. That text has over 250 loanwords from French. So nearly 10 times as many. And that is just one illustration of the increasing number of French words that English speakers were starting to use.

I should also note that throughout the following century, as English writing gradually reappeared, there was an increase in the production of handbooks designed to teach English speakers how to speak French. Bilingual dictionaries used for translations became common. And this is more evidence that English-speakers were trying to pick as much French as they could.

And just to be clear, it wasn't that English-speakers were learning French per se. What they were doing is picking up a few French words here and there and using them in English conversations. So they were borrowing French words, not really speaking French.

You can imagine English-speakers constantly asking, "What is the French word for this?" "What do you call that in French?" And this may help to explain the nature of those borrowed words. The vast majority of the words borrowed from French were words for things – in other words, they were nouns. In fact, the Cambridge History of the English Language [*2nd ed., Norman Blake, pp 429,431*] states that over 70% of the words borrowed from the Romance languages were nouns. English speakers weren't really borrowing new words into their core vocabulary. They were just looking for the right French word to describe a particular thing or idea.

The result was an English language that was increasingly peppered with French words. And those French words were initially much more prevalent in the south, and very gradually to the north over time.

As we put all of these pieces together, and try to make some sense out of the spoken languages of England in the 1100s, a common theme starts to emerge. Whereas shortly after Conquest, English, French and Latin each had very specific roles in English society, and they didn't seem to mix very much, now that was changing. At every level of society, the linguistic barriers were starting to break down.

Many of the highest nobles and church officials were starting to speak English, at least as a second language. Many of the knights and bureaucrats spoke both English and French, but they spoke English better, and they were trying to improve and refine their French. And English-speaking peasants were routinely borrowing French words to supplement their normal vocabulary. All these once distinct languages were bleeding into each other.

The biggest piece of evidence to support this conclusion can be found in is a well-known quote from a document that was produced in the year 1177 in the middle of Henry's reign. I began this episode by noting that Henry made it an early priority to get the Exchequer up and running again. That was the tax collecting office, so Henry needed that office to function like it did during his grandfather's reign to improve the revenues coming in. And to that end, Henry appointed a man named Richard FitzNeal as the head of the Exchequer. His title was the Lord Treasurer, and he was tasked with getting the Exchequer running again. Well, Henry was impressed with FitzNeal's work, and about twenty years later in the year 1177, Henry asked FitzNeal to write a book about his work. The book was written in Latin, and it was called Dialogus de Scaccario, literally 'The Dialogue Concerning the Exchequer. It's a great bureaucratic handbook, and it outlines the procedures of the Exchequer at the time. But for our purposes, it contains one especially fascinating entry. In one part of the book, FitzNeal writes the following:

> "Now that the English and Normans have been dwelling together, marrying each other, and being given in marriage, the two nations have become so mixed and intermingled that it is scarcely possible today, speaking of free men, to tell who is English and who is of Norman race."

Now FitzNeal specifically excludes unfree peasants from this passage. But for free peasants, and free townspeople, and bureaucrats, and knights and squires, FitzNeal suggests that it was almost impossible to distinguish a Norman from an Englishman. This may have been a bit of an

exaggeration, but at the very least, it suggests that the linguistic distinctions that had once separated Normans and Englishmen had eroded over time. The two groups freely borrowed from each other, and a linguistic melting pot had emerged. There was a lot of linguistic instability. And that helps to explain what happened to English during the period when English writing disappeared.

Next time, I want to illustrate how all of those French words were starting to pour into English. Even though many of those words won't be revealed until English writing re-appears in the 1200s, they were almost certainly entering the language in the late 1100s. One area where French words came to dominate was in legal matters. Even today, most of our words associated with law and order come from French. And that's partly because the Normans and then the Angevins had to impose law and order. And no monarch did more to impose law and order than Henry II. So next time, we'll look at law and order, and we'll see how much of modern legalese can be traced back to Henry II.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.