

The History of English

Course description:

This lecture course provides an introduction to the historical development of the English language from its “birth” in the year 449 to the present day. The history of English can be seen as a journey that spans over 1500 years and reflects dynamic cultural, social, and political changes that have shaped the linguistic landscape. Over the centuries, English underwent transformations, fueled by the Renaissance, the printing press, and literature, to name just a few of the manifold influences. English history has a bipartite microstructure in that the nonlinguistic history is given almost as much attention as the linguistic history. This is for the obvious, though not trivial, reason that the linguistic changes cannot be properly understood unless they are placed within the wider context of the linguistic community. After a brief look at the original inhabitants of England in the Stone Age and an account of the Roman settlements, a thorough analysis of the major historical events, in particular those that had a major impact on the language, will be given. This provides a background onto which the linguistic developments will be projected. The three major stages of the language - Old English, Middle English and Early Modern English - will be examined in some detail both from a synchronic and a diachronic point of view. As the English language has undergone changes on an impressively large scale, it is ideally suited to providing insights into the inner dynamics of language, the relationship between synchronic variation and diachronic change as well as the interaction between language and society. Today, English stands as a global lingua franca, spoken by millions as a first or second language. Its evolution continues, shaped by cultural, technological, and societal changes, making the history of the English language an ongoing and dynamic narrative.