

## SOCIO-HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS ANALYSIS OF THE LORD'S PRAYER: OBSERVING THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH BIBLICAL TEXTS

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**Abstract:** Social, cultural, and political factors play a huge role in the evolution of the English language. The present study aims to reveal the evolution of the English language from Old English to Modern English from Biblical texts, particularly Matthew 6:9-13, also known as the Lord's Prayer, utilising the World Englishes (WE) research paradigm. The datasets were analysed using morphosyntactic analysis to observe their grammatical patterns from the three lenses of the World Englishes research paradigm, which are synchronic, diachronic, and varietal analysis. The research concluded that cultural and sociopolitical aspects motivate the evolution of the English language in the form of linguistic simplification and varietal idiosyncrasies.

**Keywords:** *English linguistics, language evolution, socio-historical linguistics, World Englishes*

Language itself is not static, as it continues to develop alongside human civilisation through interactions and is amplified by the effects of globalisation (Crystal, 2018). The evolution of language is a dynamic process that involves sociocultural changes within society (Labov, 2010). As a language, English has been actively and rapidly evolving, starting from its genesis in the form of Old English, which stems from its Germanic roots, until Modern English variants that keep changing based on its dialectical and idiosyncratic properties on a global level (Bilal, Shahid, Iqbal, & Asghar, 2023; Wright, 2012). Scholarly investigations into the development of the English language have underscored its shift from the syntactical level to sociolinguistic aspects. Bondar (2017) analysed the grammatical structure of *habban* + participle II in Old English and concluded that it served as a statal-resultative function, which later shifts to temporal perfect functions by the Early Middle English period. A sociolinguistic study by Walkden et al. (2023) on morphosyntactic changes of Old English suggested that the language was largely shaped by close contact between Celtic and Old English speakers, and changes in Middle English were influenced by French through language transfers.

World Englishes (WE) is a research paradigm that focuses on the development of the English language from a multiplex viewpoint that factors in cultural significances and nuances that play a role in shaping the uniqueness of varieties of Englishes (Bieswanger, 2012; Burridge & Biewer, 2021; Hundt, 2021; Proshina & Nelson, 2020). WE research typically discusses English and its ties to cultural relevance, idiosyncrasies, and translanguaging practices. Past research on Korean English suggested that the cultural dynamics in Korea have propelled the emergence of Korean English, with the Korean language shaping the English usage, which is observable in its phonological features and syntactic patterns (Kiaer & Ahn, 2021). Another research on translanguaging practices suggested that incorporating Glaswegian and Native American in modern English literature adds depth to its cultural and sociopolitical context (Althobaiti, 2023). In sum, on top of linguistic aspects, WE uncover the role of culture that shapes English varieties.

Among the plethora of written literature, translated religious texts represent some of the most consistently maintained and transmitted over time, as it is a long and complex process that does not rely on linguistics alone, but also a multitude of other elements, such as theological interpretations, cultural elements, and sociopolitical landscape (Blumczynski, 2024). Theological and linguistic accuracy, with the addition of cultural appropriacy, are the primary drivers of religious text translation (Israel, 2019; O'Connor, 2021). The accurate and carefully maintained nature of religious texts makes them one of the best media to study the evolution of language (Bondar, 2017; Newhauser, 2009). Research on observing English language change through

biblical texts highlights translation strategies and theological implications. Naudé & Miller-Naudé (2022) compiled the translation strategy that utilises language change in Old, Middle, and Modern English, such as by adding, removing, or preserving linguistic elements from previous iterations to improve readability and accuracy. A study on the linguistic components of Early Modern English in the 1611 King James Version suggested that semantic shifts have substantial implications for theological interpretations (Jose, 2025).

Past scholarships primarily focus on the historical aspects that propel the development of English Biblical texts. However, analysing linguistic evolution through the WE paradigm has rarely been done before. Observing the shift of the English language through carefully maintained discourses, such as religious texts, from a cultural perspective allows a better understanding of its natural shift by unveiling sociolinguistic landscapes and practices, and how idiosyncrasies in English varieties help shape meaning-making. By drawing upon the empirical evidence gathered from the oldest to the most recent bible manuscripts, this paper contributes to the growing body of research in linguistic shifts of the English language by pointing out the role of culture, sociolinguistic landscape, and church policies from the WE perspective, particularly from the synchronic, diachronic, and varietal dimensions by focusing on two research questions (RQs):

1. From a synchronic and diachronic perspective, what cultural and sociopolitical aspects propel the evolution of the English language?
2. From a varietal perspective, how do the idiosyncratic features of Modern English varieties in religious texts illustrate their cultural significances?

## METHOD

This is a qualitative research study utilising socio-historical linguistics analysis, observing the gradual changes of the English language on the morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels. The data of this study are the Biblical verse of Matthew 6:9-13, or known as the Lord's Prayer, gathered from the oldest to the most recent English Biblical manuscripts. The Old English (OE) data was gathered from the Wessex Gospels, that was written around the late 10<sup>th</sup> century (Thorpe, 1848). The Middle English (ME) data in this study were collected from Wycliffe's Bible (Bosworth & Waring, 1888). The dataset from Early Modern English (EMnE) was sourced from the King James Version written in 1611 (Hamlin & Jones, 2010). Finally, the Modern English (MnE) dataset was taken from the 1989 Revised English Bible (REB) for the British English version and the 2015 New Living Translation (NLT) for the American English version. A comparative analysis was performed using the three lenses of the WE research paradigm, which are synchronic, diachronic, and varietal approaches (Bilal et al., 2023; Hundt, 2021). The datasets were analysed from a synchronic and diachronic lens using morphosyntactic analysis to observe their grammatical patterns and the underlying social factors causing them. In addition, the Modern English manuscripts were analysed using a varietal approach, utilising Schneider's dynamic model of WE to analyse postcolonial Englishes (Schneider, 2007).

## FINDINGS

### Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Old, Middle, and Early Modern English

#### a. Old English in Wessex Gospels

As the earliest iteration of the English language, OE is laden with Germanic features, as observed through its lexical, morphological, and syntactic properties (R. M. Hogg & Fulk, 2011; Robinson, 2003). Hence, similarities of syntactic structures in the Wessex Gospels and Present Day German (PDG) were observed, as shown from these examples:

- a) *Eornustlice gebbidap eow ðus*  
**Adv. + V. Imp. + Pron. Dat. + Adv.**
- b) *Ihr sollt so beten*  
**Pron. Pl. + Aux. + Adv. + V. Inf.**
- c) *Ūrne gedæghwāmlīcan hlāf syle ūs tōdæg*  
**Pron. Poss. + Adj. + N Acc. + V Imp. + Pron. Dat. + Adv**
- d) *Gib uns heute unser tægliches Brot*  
**V. Imp + Pron. Dat. + Adv. + Pron. Poss. + Adj. + N**

The flagship element of Old English is its enriched inflectional system that changes word endings based on grammatical cases, gender, and tenses (McFadden, 2015; McLaughlin, 2012). In excerpt a), OE uses the ge+verb imperatives on *gebbidap* and plural dative pronoun *eow*, compared to PDG in excerpt b) that uses the infinitive verb *beten* and plural pronoun *ihr*. Declensions adhering to grammatical cases can be seen in excerpt c), in which the adjective *gedæghwāmlīcan* comes from *gedæghwāmlīc*, which changes form due to the presence of a masculine accusative noun *hlāf*. This is similar to the PDG counterpart, in which the adjective *tægliches* comes from *tæglich*, which also changes forms due to the neuter accusative *Brot*. The inflectional properties of OE affect

the way the language is structured, leading to more flexible syntactical structures (Ringe & Taylor, 2014; Robinson, 2003). The structure in excerpt a) is like PDG, which puts the imperative verb before the subject, followed by the adverb. However, in excerpt c), OE puts the noun phrase before the imperative verb and the subject, as opposed to PDG in excerpt d), which follows the standard imperative order by putting the verb before the subject and object. The flexibility of these configurations affects the perception of the verse itself. While each version acknowledges a higher power of God, the OE version tends to be softer and sounds less “commanding” compared to PDG, as it puts the verb behind the subject rather than putting it at the beginning of the sentence.

#### b. Middle English in Wycliffe’s Bible

Unlike the ornate nature of Old English, Middle English tends to be concise in lexical, syntactical, and orthographical aspects, which is caused by the influence of Latin and French (Allen, 2017; Stenroos & Thengs, 2020). Latin influence on Middle English can be seen through the usage of the word *dettis*, *dettours* (“debt, debtors”) replacing *gyltas*, *gyltendum*, and *temptacioun* replacing *costnunge* (“temptation”). ME preserves four grammatical cases, which are nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive. Other inflectional features include modifications in suffixes like -en/-n for infinitives in *preyen* (“to pray”), -is/-es for plural nouns in *dettis* (“debts”), -id/-ed for past participles in *halewid* (“hallowed”), and unchanged forms for plural imperatives in *yeue* (“give”). The excerpts below indicate the grammatical properties of ME by comparing it with OE.

- a) and foryeue to vs oure dettis, as we foryeuen to oure dettouris  
**CC + V Imp. + Prep. + Pron. + Pron. Poss. + N Acc. + SC + Pron. + V + Prep. + Pron. + N Dat.**
- b) yeue to vs this day oure breed ouer othir substaunce  
**V Imp. + Prep. + Pron. Dat. + Adv. + Pron. Gen. + N. Acc. + Prep. + Det. + N**
- c) *þi* kingdom come to. be *þi* wille don in erthe  
**Pron. Gen. + N + V + To/be + To/be + Pron. Gen. + Aux + V Past Part. + Prep + N**

While Middle English had already lost many of the inflections of Old English, it still retained more grammatical endings and inflectional forms than Modern English does today (Smith, 2017; Wetna, 2017). Some of its inflectional characteristics from OE are still preserved, such as the change of forms in *foryueue*, *foryeuen*, *dettis*, *dettouris*, in excerpt a), depending on their respective grammatical cases. However, some of its grammatical structures had become simplified as well. The ME *breed*, *oure*, and *day* in excerpt (e) is neuter and does not experience changes in form as opposed to the OE version in excerpt (f). The loss of inflections also contributed to minor changes in structure. For example, the inflected *tōbecume* in OE is replaced by a verb followed by *to/be* in ME, and the subjunctive verb *gewurpe* in OE that is placed before the subject is replaced by the participle form *don* and placed after the subject in ME.

#### c. Early Middle English in the 1611 King James Version

Most of the grammatical structure of ME is preserved in the EMnE, with major changes in spelling, as seen in *hallowed*, *leede*, *heauen*, *yvell* as opposed to *halwid*, *lede*, *heuenes*, *yuel* in ME. Unlike ME, which retained the inflectional properties of English, the inflectional properties of EMnE are simplified and reduced to three, which are nominative, accusative/dative, and genitive/possessive, similar to Modern English (Barber, 1997).

- a) *Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heauen.*  
**Pron. Poss. + Aux + To/be + V Past Part. + Prep + N + SC + Pron. + To/be + Prep + N**
- b) *Thy kingdome come*  
**Pron. Poss. + N + V Imp.**
- c) *And forgiue vs our debts, as we forgiue our debtors.*  
**CC + V Imp. + Pron. + Pron. Poss. + N + SC + Pron. + V + Pron. Poss. + N**

Unlike OE, EMnE started to use the SVO pattern more consistently. This is seen in excerpt a), in which EMnE puts the subject, followed by the verb, and the noun. Further examples of the SVO in excerpt a) can be seen in the phrase “as it is in heaven”, in which EMnE uses the pronoun “it” to create a complete sentence connected by the subordinate conjunction, while ME omits it and creates a noun phrase. In addition, EMnE also eliminates a few grammatical components for the sake of clarity and conciseness. ME includes the preposition *to*, complementing the imperative verb *come*, similar to the OE variant *tōbecume*. EMnE, in excerpt b), removes the preposition altogether and uses the infinitive form to act as the imperative verb. In a similar tone, EMnE removes the preposition *to* in both “forgive our debts” and “forgive our debtors”, which was previously present in the ME dataset.

## Varietal Analysis of Modern English in REB and NLT

American independence from British colonialism marks the birth of Modern English (Davis, 2010), resulting in different global English varieties such as American English and British English, and opened the pathway towards the WE paradigm.

a) *Give us today the bread we need*

**V Imp. + Pron. Poss. + Adv. + Det. + N + Pl. Pron. + V Trans.**

b) *your will be done*

**Pron. Poss. + Aux. + To/be + V. Past. Part.**

Inflectional practices in MnE are significantly reduced compared to their earlier counterparts. In imperatives, MnE in shows no traces of declensions and a more rigid syntactic structure of VSO that is common in most modern languages. Nouns such as *bread* do not bear specific gender and grammatical cases, and words that possess multiple parts of speech, such as the transitive verb *need* that can also act as a noun, do not change their form. Most of the grammatical rules in ME and EMnE are preserved in MnE. As opposed to OE that uses the subjunctive third person verb *gewurpe* to indicate wish or desire, MnE in opted for the future perfect form, which consists of the auxiliary verb *will* that is followed by the past participle verb *done*. This form is preserved from ME and EMnE predecessors with minor discrepancies in grammatical structure and more modern spelling systems.

Different varieties of English, both British and American English, possess their own flair in structuring sentences, resulting in a different delivery and tone. The excerpts below illustrate a part of the Lord's prayer written in both Englishes.

d) *In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name.*

e) *Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.*

f) *And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

g) *And forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us.*

Different properties of British and American English in the Lord's Prayer are depicted in the excerpts above. REB in excerpt d) starts the prayer with a lengthy opening *In this manner, therefore, pray*, which is the preserved form from past iterations, while NLT in excerpt e) opted for a shorter alternative *Pray like this*. Another preserved form can be observed in the next sentence, in which REB kept the past participle *hallowed* from previous versions, making it sound more indirect and poetic, while NLT uses the phrase *kept holy*, which uses *kept* as the past participle while keeping the infinitive form of *holy*, resulting in a clearer tone. Similar examples can be seen in excerpts f) and g), as REB fully preserves the older iterations, while NLT replaces the word *debts* to *sins*, and the phrase *those who sin against us*, which sounds more familiar, less archaic, and serves more clarity compared to the former.

## DISCUSSION

*RQ 1: From a synchronic and diachronic perspective, what cultural and sociopolitical aspects propel the evolution of the English language?*

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the grammatical structure of English has experienced constant simplification through the gradual removal of grammatical elements used in previous iterations. As the English language continues to be used more frequently in everyday contexts, its structure has evolved to become simpler and more adaptable to facilitate effective communication between speakers (Bergs, 2017; García-Vidal, 2019). The simplification of the English language is influenced by multiple factors, such as contact with superstratum languages and the dynamics in the political and sociolinguistic landscape (Pam & Ekpang, 2023; Skaffari, 2010; Warner, 2017).

The development of the Wessex Gospels was driven by the need of the Church to help scholars understand Latin texts for religious purposes (Timofeeva, 2022). In addition, since there are multiple OE dialects spoken at that time, such as Northumbrian and Mercian dialects, the West Saxon dialect was used due to its consistency in grammatical structure (R. Hogg & Alcorn, 2012; Toon, 1992). Clergy, elites, and scholars, who received formal education, were the people who had easier access to the Wessex Gospels since they were able to understand its content, which was then used as a teaching aid for illiterate commoners and laypeople (Gameson, 2008). Its particularities, such as its salient Germanic inflectional practices and its Nordic-influenced orthography, were preserved due to its exclusivity to educated people and limited contact with other people. Since language simplification is in line with a higher social scale (Nettle, 2012), there was little need for significant

simplification of the OE grammatical structure, which explains the radical differences in lexical and syntactical aspects of OE to its successors.

The 1066 Norman conquest changed the sociolinguistic landscape of England, as new policies for language use were introduced, such as the mandate to use Latin and French at institutional levels (Davis, 2010). As a result, diglossic practices started to flourish, as people used Latin and French in formal institutions, and English to communicate in everyday situations, propelling the development of ME (Kirtley, 2007; Skaffari, 2010). The creation of the Wycliffe Bible was one of the earliest endeavours to promote the use of Middle English and to elevate its status and cultural legitimacy (Hamlin & Jones, 2010). It captures the complex sociolinguistic landscape as the byproduct of the diglossic phenomenon, visible from the removal of some of the old inflectional systems, adjusted orthography by utilising less Nordic alphabets, and the start of replacing them with the Latin alphabet, and a flood of borrowed words from Latin and French. These diglossic practices not only simplified the grammatical forms of English but also shifted it further away from its Germanic roots, into a more Latin-oriented language, evident through the major influence of French and Latin in shaping the language into English as we know it today (Dalton-Puffer, 1996)

The development of Early Modern English is influenced by three things, which are the advent of printing in England (Davis, 2010), and two written literary works, which are the Shakespearean works and the King James Version Bible (Knapp, 2020; Naudé & Miller-Naudé, 2022). The King James Version was designed specifically to preserve not only the content but also the structure from its original Latin source to maintain historical accuracy (Cheney, 2018; Shmiher & Dzera, 2023). The excerpts from the KJV capture the extensive cultural influence of poetry and literature towards the further evolution of the English language, observed from further linguistic simplification through further removal of ME inflections, and its refined orthography. As Gasparyan (2023) noted, in line with the hype of Shakespearean-style language use, the most prominent element of the KJV is its linguistic eloquence and beauty, observed through its poetry-like language style. Early Modern English in the KJV reflects how cultural significance, particularly the role of literature, propels the evolution and development of the English language.

In conclusion, the English language evolution from OE to EMnE from a synchronic and diachronic perspective has continually experienced simplification processes across its history, influenced by cultural and sociopolitical aspects. These aspects not only illustrate the role of society in shaping the language but also indicate the expanding influence of English, opening the possibility of its impact on a global scale.

*RQ 2: From a varietal perspective, how do the idiosyncratic features of Modern English varieties in religious texts illustrate their cultural significances?*

Using WE perspective, the empirical data suggest the different attitudes and cultural identities of British English and American English, observed from the differences in delivery and tone. These minor differences between American and British English can be seen through the unique idiosyncratic elements that are present within the variety itself (Algeo, 1989; Sung, 2023). These can be seen through the dynamic translation of the Bible, which aims to make the Bible much more accessible and easier to understand by considering specific cultural elements embedded within the language (Lombaard, 2009). The flowery, fancy, and ornate nature of British English found in REB indicates multiple cultural saliences of British English. Firstly, British English tends to conserve older grammatical forms compared to the more modern American English (Tagliamonte, Durham, & Smith, 2014). This is visible through the preservation of old forms, such as *hallowed* and *debtors*. In addition, the biblical text also reveals the indirect nature of British English, which is mostly used as a politeness strategy (Murphy & Felice, 2019; Van Dorst, Gillings, & Culpeper, 2024), as observed in passive forms such as *hallowed be your name*.

On the other hand, the concise, laconic, and straightforward nature of American English demonstrated in NLT indicates the antithesis of British English and a staple of American identity. Based on Schneider's (2007) dynamic model of WE, the nativization, and the endonormative stabilisation are arguably one of the most crucial phases in the development of American English, since this is the point where cultural and sociopolitical elements are deeply ingrained to the point of fostering a linguistic profile that is unique to the Americans. One of the prominent sociopolitical drivers towards these changes is the role of Noam Webster as one of the people who established the existence of American English through dictionaries and writing guides to promote democracy, egalitarianism, and reject British elitism as an American identity (Davis, 2010; Kretzschmar, 2020). In addition, the simpler and straightforward form of American English reflects its multicultural social landscape, as these stylistic choices accommodate diverse cultural groups (Bailey, 2004). This is illustrated in the short opening *Pray like this*, and easy-to-digest phrases such as *those who sin against us*.

In sum, religious texts of American and British English illustrate their respective cultural identities, such as the indirect nature of British English through flowery language use, and the direct nature of American English through laconic language use that is motivated by political endeavours and multicultural social landscapes.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The historical evolution of English from Old to Modern English, as portrayed in religious texts, demonstrates that language change is driven by a combination of political, social, and cultural drivers rather than linguistic factors alone. The Church policies, well-kept nature, and illiteracy of the commoners preserved the Germanic inflectional properties of OE. While diglossia played a huge role in the development of ME, cultural movements were a major part of the EMnE formation. Finally, due to the global expansion of the language, various cultural identities from English varieties like British and American English started to emerge. The authors recognised the limitation of the study, which merely focused on the morphosyntactic features of different versions of the English Bibles. Further research into semantic and pragmatic shifts across Modern English Bible translations, especially among dynamic translations associated with different church traditions (e.g., Evangelical, Anglican), is recommended to strengthen the argument that idiosyncratic elements present in English varieties not only encodes cultural identity but also expands the notion of linguistic relativity, specifically where one's individual perception in the religious context is affected by different English varieties and translation strategies.

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