



THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY FROM *BEOWULF* TO THE MOMENT: the importance of the poem to the English language

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Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa é mostrar a história da língua inglesa desde o poema épico *Beowulf*, principal obra da literatura inglesa, até os dias atuais. Atualmente, o inglês é uma língua global falada por centenas de milhões de nativos e não-nativos, e nós veremos qual a importância de *Beowulf* para o desenvolvimento da língua. Mostraremos o percurso da língua inglesa incluindo todas as fases em que ela passou até chegar no inglês escrito e falado hoje, desde o Inglês Antigo até o Inglês Moderno, mostrando também como ela conseguiu o título de 'língua universal', exemplificando com temas e eventos do século XXI. Também um resumo do poema *Beowulf*, poema épico escrito em Inglês Antigo, há mais de 1000 anos atrás, que conta a história de um herói matador de monstros, sua estrutura e qual sua importância para a língua e cultura inglesa juntamente com sua influência na literatura e mídia atual e personagens inspirados no poema. Para a história da língua inglesa foi usado o livro de VINEY (2008) e para o poema *Beowulf* foi usado sua tradução mais conhecida, a de TOLKIEN (2014). Este trabalho contribui para as reflexões sobre as mudanças da língua inglesa desde o Inglês Antigo até o Inglês Moderno e para as reflexões sobre a obra *Beowulf*.

Palavras-chave: História da língua inglesa. *Beowulf*. Importância. Desenvolvimento.

Abstract

The aim of this research is to show the history of the English language from the epic poem *Beowulf*, the main work of English literature, to the present day. English is nowadays, a global language spoken by hundreds of million of natives and non-natives, and we will see how important *Beowulf* is to language development. We will see the route traveled by the English language, including all the phases it passed until reaching the written and spoken English we use today, from Old English to Modern English, also showing how it achieved the title of 'universal language', exemplifying with themes and events of the 21st century. It is also presented a summary of the *Beowulf*, epic poem written in Old English, more than 1000 years ago, which tells the story of a monster-killing hero, its structure and its importance for the English language and culture together with its influence on literature and current media and characters inspired by the poem. For the history of the English language, the book by VINEY (2008) was used, and for the poem *Beowulf*, its most known translation, by TOLKIEN (2014), was used. This work contributes to reflections on changes in the English

language from Old English to Modern English and to reflections on the work *Beowulf*.

Keywords: History of the English language. *Beowulf*. Importance. Development.

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1 Introduction

The interest in this research came from a conversation with a colleague right after the introductory class to English Literature that showed the history of the English language and some Old, Middle and Modern English masterpieces.

Most of Old English written works that have survived were short religious writings or poems about great heroes, and when *Beowulf* was presented, the interest got bigger.

When it was researched a little more about the poem, it could be seen how influential it was, even today, after a thousand years, that is when we decided to study more deeply and show in a paper the English language development from the poem to the present day.

In the next pages we are going to see the history of the English language from Old to Modern English, what and who *Beowulf* is and why both poem and character are so important to the development of the language. Also, how the English language achieved the title of 'universal language'.

Nowadays, English is a global language known by thousands of million native speakers as well as non-native speakers, and we will see how *Beowulf* has managed to remain intact over the years, as well as how important it is to the English language.

The aim of this research is to show the history of the English language from the epic poem *Beowulf*, the main work of English literature, to the present day.

For the history of the English language, the book by VINEY (2008) was used, and for the poem *Beowulf*, its most known translation, by TOLKIEN (2014), was used.

2 The history of the English language

Nowadays English is a global language known by thousands of million native speakers as well as non-native speakers, however originally spoken and written in very different ways than today. It is spoken as a first language by approximately 400 million people (Viney, 2008). The other parts in the world have their own first language but English is used in education, business, social media, government, television, etc. and it is also used for international communication, in science and medicine, for example.

Besides, there are pieces of music, films and videos in English all over the world and the world's news is reported in English as well as, on television, in a newspaper, the internet and radio.

The English we all know today has become important internationally because Britain was the most important industrial nation in the world in the nineteenth century, and people had to learn it so they could learn how to use the machines. But before that, English went through several phases which are going to be explained below.

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1.1 Old English

It begins sixteen hundred years ago with a set of dialects spoken by the Anglo-Saxons, German people who settled in England about 400 AD. Old English was spoken from the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 12th century and during this time the language changed a lot.

There were three main dialects that made up what we now know as Old English, sometimes called Anglo-Saxon: Kentish, Saxon and Anglian. Differently from other invaders, the Anglo-Saxons kept their own language instead of learning the British Celts language.

The Church taught Christianity but also poetry, Greek and Latin. Because of that, a lot of Latin words entered Old English, most of them were about the life of the Church, for example, **munuc** (monk). At the beginning monks only wrote in Latin, but then they began to write in Old English, which was very unusual because they did not write in their own language until much later.

Old English was usually written with these letters:

Image 1 – Old English Alphabet

a, æ, b, c, d, e, f, Ʒ, h, i, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, þ, ð, u, v, y.

Source: Viney, 2008, p. 9.

There were no capital letters. One visible characteristic of Old English is that not all of its alphabet have survived into today’s English. According to Corbett and Hough (2006, p. 18): “There are two extra consonants /p/ and /ð/, wich both represent the sounds now shown as *th*, whether voiced as in ‘*this*’ or unvoiced as in ‘*thing*’. Ocasionally, voiced th becomes pronounced as d”.

Twenty of the Old English Alphabet letters were adopted from the Latin alphabet. The letters “*Ash*” (æ) and “*Eth*” (ð) were modified from Latin alphabet (Æ, Ð); “*Wynn*” (ƿ) and “*Thorn*” (þ) developed from the runic alphabet (Þ, ƿ); there is also letter “*Yogh*” (Ʒ or ȝ) that is adopted from Germanic alphabet; and all five of them are not in use anymore. The letters /j/, /k/, /q/, /v/, and /z/ were not used on spelling until Middle English.

Table 1 – Extra letters in Old English Alphabet

æ	Ʒ / ȝ	þ	ð	ƿ
<i>Ash</i>	<i>Yogh</i>	<i>Thorn</i>	<i>Eth</i>	<i>Wynn</i>

Source: The author (2020).

The letter ‘*Ash*’ (æ) is an assorted letter that represents, approximately, the sound between the Modern English letters /a/ and /e/. The letters “*Thorn*” (þ) and “*Eth*” (ð) could both represent the “*th*” sound. “*Wynn*” (ƿ) is our Modern English /w/.

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and because the sound is so similar, a lot of editors use only “w” to represent “Wynn” when editing. “Yogh” (ȝ or ȝ) was pronounced and also written in different ways during the time depending on language, period of time in history and also in its position in the word, it could represent, most of the time, the letter /g/ or the sound of /gh/, but also /y/, /w/, /f/, /s/ and /z/.

Because of the different new people arriving all the time, not only the letters but also the words, spellings of words, and everything else in the language was now changing. According to Viney (2008, p. 10):

Writers usually chose their own spellings of words, and they tried to show in the spelling how a word was pronounced. All the letters in a word were pronounced. For example, the letter *h* in **hring** (ring) was pronounced. The pronunciation of the same word varied from one dialect to another, so there were different spellings of the same word.

The vocabulary of Old English was almost completely Germanic. Much of it – about 85 per cent – has disappeared from Modern English and has been replaced with words from Latin or French. However, many of the words in Modern English that are most often used come from Old English. A few examples are: *the*, *and*, *can*, and *get*. Other words in Modern English which come from Old English are for very basic thing and ideas. Some examples are: **mann** (*person*), **cild** (*child*), **hūs** (*house*), **etan** (*eat*), **slæpan** (*sleep*) (VINEY, 2008, p. 10).

Other words that survived from Old English are names of places. The Anglo-Saxons used **ford** for *a place where a river can be crossed*, and it survived in the name of *Oxford*, for example. Some Modern English names of the week come from Anglo-Saxons' gods and goddesses. According to Viney (2008), Tuesday is named after **Tiw**, Wednesday after **Wōden** (both gods of war), Thursday is named after **Thunor** (god of thunder), and Friday after **Frīg** (goddess of love).

1.2 Middle English

Middle English grew from Old English. The grammar now was simpler and the vocabulary richer, also many French and Latin words were added and a lot of Old English words were gone. That was the period that the language changed the most: “In the four centuries that followed the Norman Conquest, the English language changed more than in any other time in history” (VINEY, 2008, p. 21).

One of the biggest changes in verbs from Middle English was in how to put them in the past tense, some of the verbs from Old English began to end with –ed. Viney (2008, p. 21) shows us:

For example, the past tense of *climb* was **clomb**, but the word *climbed* also began to appear in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, most of the thousands of verbs which had entered the language from French also formed the past tense with –ed. Sometimes the change went the other way, so *knowed* became *knew*, but usually –ed was used. There are still about 250 ‘irregular’ past tense verbs in English, but this is only about half the number that were in Old English (VINEY, 2008, p. 21).

Past and Present were the main verb tenses, but in Middle English, other tenses were developed. *Be*, *have*, *shall* and *will* are now used to express the future as in *they have gone*, *it was done*, *he is coming*, (VINEY, 2008) and others, but these tenses were not used very often as they are used today.

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After the Norman Conquest, official papers of the government and the Church were all written in Latin or French, but spoken language was very easily changed because the diversity of different people and languages at this point, so the spoken and written language were very distinct from each other.

By the end of the fifteenth century the English vocabulary was much richer. About ten thousand French words were added to English and most of it are still in use. Words like *medicine*, *literature*, *music* and many more helped science and the arts to get its vocabulary richer and richer. Law, nature, things from home, everything now has new vocabulary and French is always there. Viney (2008, p. 23) shows us that:

French (F) words very often replaced Old English (OE) words: for example *people* (from the French **peuple**) replaced **lêode** (OE). But sometimes both the French and Old English words survived, with small differences in meanings: for example *ask* (OE) and *demand* (F), *wedding* (OE) and *marriage* (F), *king* (OE) and *sovereign* (F). Sometimes French words were used for life in the upper classes, and Old English ones for life in the lower classes. For example, the words for animals in the fields were Old English (*cows*, *sheep*, and *pigs*) but the words for the meat on the table were French (*beef*, *mutton*, and *pork*).

Simultaneously, thousands of Latin words entered into Middle English from law, science, literature or Christianity books. These books had a lot of words that could not be translated into English, so translators often took Latin words and made them into English words. Some of these words are *admit*, *history*, *impossible*, *necessary*, and *picture* (VINEY, 2008).

People used to write and pronounce words in their own dialects, so one word had hundreds of different ways of spelling. Viney (2008, p. 25) explains it better with examples:

There were more than twenty ways of spelling *people* (for example, **pepylle**, **puple**, **peeppe**), more than five hundred ways of spelling *through*, more than sixty ways of spelling *she* and many more variations. Sometimes a spelling from one dialect has survived, together with the pronunciation from another. For example, *busy* is the spelling from one dialect, but the pronunciation /bizi/ is from another (VINEY, 2008, p. 25).

During this time, they also started to replace Old English letters of the alphabet to the alphabet we know now. The Old English letter /ƿ/ was replaced by /g/ ,/æ/ by /a/, /th/ began to be used instead of /þ/ and /ð/, some other letters were added, like /j/ and /z/, the letter /k/ started to be used more often, etc. That happened because letters were written in very similar ways and it was hard to read it.

1.3 Modern English

Just as Middle English developed from Old English, Modern English evolved from Middle English. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Latin was the learning language in Europe and it was considered a richer language than any other language. Yet, English speakers wanted to read stuff in their own language, so with the introduction of printing, books by Roman and Greek writers started to be translated. Still, a lot of Latin words were added to English, as well as French, Italian, Greek,

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Spanish and Portuguese. Then, speakers, especially readers, began to complain about borrowing, they said these words were unnecessary, hard to understand and just a way of showing off writers' knowledge in Latin. But the borrowing continued and words were not that strange anymore.

At the age of Queen Elizabeth the First (Queen of England 1558-1603) things started to change and English began to take its own shape. William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is considered the greatest writer of plays and it was him that brought for English, new words and expressions that are still in use. His plays had a great effect on English. According to Viney (2008, p. 32),

He had the largest vocabulary of any English writer and made about two thousand new words, and a large number of expressions which are now part of Modern English. For example, he wrote: *it's early days (it's too soon to know what will happen)*; *tongue-tied (unable to speak because you are shy)*; *the long and the short of it (all that needs to be said about something)*; *love is blind*.

After Elizabeth's death, she left no children, so her cousin, King James the Sixth of Scotland, became King James the First of England. In 1604, he ordered a translation of the Bible and it was done. The translation was made by fifty-four translators that used older translations as their guide. Differently than Shakespeare, the translators did not make new words, they used old ones, some of them were even becoming unusual. They tried to make the language sound like poetry when read and they mostly succeeded.

The King James Bible appeared in 1611 and was read in churches, houses and schools all over England, Scotland and Wales for the next three hundred years. This helped to bring more of the written English to ordinary people because the Bible was, for most of them, the only book they read more than once. As a result, it also had a great effect on the English language. Viney (p. 34, 2008) will give us some examples:

Many expressions from it (the Bible) became part of language; for example, *the apple of somebody's eye (a person who is loved very much by somebody)*; *by the skin of your teeth (you only just manage to do something)*; *the salt of the Earth (a very honest person)*; *the straight and narrow (an honest way of living)*. Its poetry had a great effect on many English writers in the centuries that followed (VINEY, 2008, p. 34).

After King James, the kingdom of England got very unstable, and so was the language. People wanted order, a man called Jonathan Swift even wrote "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining (fixing) the English Tongue", he was trying to "fix" the language but the idea was not succeeded.

That was because other people understood how changes in language are unavoidable, but they also did realize that they needed to use the same grammar and spelling, that is when the firsts dictionaries and grammar books began to appear with explanations for words and expressions that were harder to understand or for the biggest changes in spellings, like the words "son" and "sun" that have the same pronunciation but different meanings. In the eighteenth century dictionaries began to have explanations for ordinary words too, not only for the difficult ones.

In 1746 Samuel Johnson started to prepare an English dictionary with the incentive of a group of booksellers. He worked on it with the help of six other people,

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for nine years. He read works of hundreds of English writers and began to write the meanings and examples. When “*A Dictionary of the English Language*” (sometimes published as “*Johnson’s Dictionary*”) was published in 1755, it was a success. It explained more than 40,000 words with meaning, pronunciation and history of the word included. He offered as many meanings as he could, some words had more than sixty different meanings, and the examples were usually given from literature (most of them written between 1560 and 1660), so readers could know how to use the words.

The dictionary had its flaws. A lot of explanations were harder than the own words to understand, some expressed Johnson’s personal opinions and others were not in the dictionary just because he did not like them. He also could not fit all of the examples on it so at the end we have fewer examples than in the beginning. Still it was and continued to be the most important English dictionary in Britain for more than a hundred years.

By the second half of the eighteenth century some grammars started to appear too. They were written to try to show people how to speak and write “correctly” or as near as possible from pieces of literature. The ones that were more used were Robert Lowth’s “*Short Introduction to English Grammar*” (1762) and Lindley Murray’s “*English Grammar*” (1795) and both of them had a great effect on grammar in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still have some effect till today, but nowadays, grammar books usually just say how English is used and not how it should be spoken or written.

If speakers from 1800 were able to talk to us today, they would notice that we have made just a few changes on grammar, but we added tons of new words to our vocabulary, thanks to the development of science in the last two hundred years. We now have loads of new words and expressions, new ideas, new machines, materials, plants, animals, diseases and medicines. Many of those are used only by scientists, but some were included on ordinary English as Viney (p. 43, 2008, p. 43) shows us:

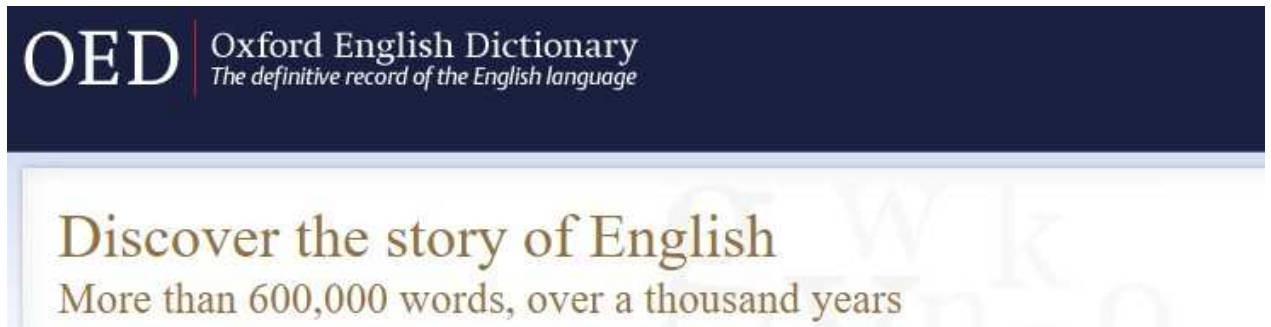
We know that if we have *bronchitis* (this word first appeared in writing in 1814) we can take *antibiotics* (1944) and we know that our *genes* (1911) come to us from our parents in our *DNA* (1944). We argue about whether we should use *pesticides* (1934) in farming, or *nuclear energy* (1945) to make electricity. The use of English in different parts of the world and easier and faster communication have together resulted in the appearance of thousands of other new words. Most of them – about 65 per cent – have been made by putting two old words together, for example: *fingerprint* (1859), *airport* (1919), and *street-wise* (1965). The world of computer has introduced many of this type: *online* (1950), *user-friendly* (1977) and *download* (1980). Some new have been made from Latin and Greek; for example, *photograph* (1839), *helicopter* (1872), *aeroplane* (1874) and *video* (1958).

Besides all that, we still have the words and expressions like “*google it*” that have become a verb now because of the most popular search engine *Google*™, or “*podcast*” bringing together “*iPod*®” and “*broadcast*”. Other words like “*tic-toc*” or “*flip flops*” are named after the sounds of a clock and a type of shoe when you are walking. Also, abbreviations like “*TV*” for “*television*” or “*photo*” for “*photograph*” would make 1800 speakers pretty confused.

This growth is clear when we take a look at “*Oxford English Dictionary*” (*OED*). It contains all English words since 1150, even the ones that are no longer in

use, with examples, when each word was first used in writing and how its use and meaning had changed over the centuries.

Image 2 – Oxford English Dictionary Online (2020 version)



Source: Oxford English Dictionary, 2020, online.

Finding all these words was a really big job, even comparing to Johnson's dictionary because now they have lots of new words and expressions to include, but only today we can actually realize how big job it was. The director of work on the dictionary was a Scotsman, James Murray, he was named the director in 1879. The plan was to finish it in ten years, so Murray organized everything and asked people for examples of how words were used and, after five years, he had the first part of the dictionary completed, but it went only from A to ANT, so he realized he would need more years than just another five. We now know that it took another forty four to have the first edition ready, but sadly, Murray did not see it finished. He died at age 78 in 1915 when he was working on letter U, however, he knew he helped to make a detailed history of the English language dictionary.

The first edition of OED was completed in 1928 and contained meanings and explanations for 414,800 words and expressions. The second one was complete by the time of 1989 and had the explanations for the amount of 615,100 words, even some of them were no longer in use.

The second edition went online in 2000 and are added new words to it every three months, till today, and if necessary, changes and additions to a word or expressions we already have are made. We have both American and British pronounciations.

Image 3 – About the Oxford English Dictionary Online

About

600,000 words ... 3.5 million quotations ... over 1000 years of English

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is widely regarded as the accepted authority on the English language. It is an unsurpassed guide to the meaning, history, and pronunciation of 600,000 words—past and present—from across the English-speaking world.

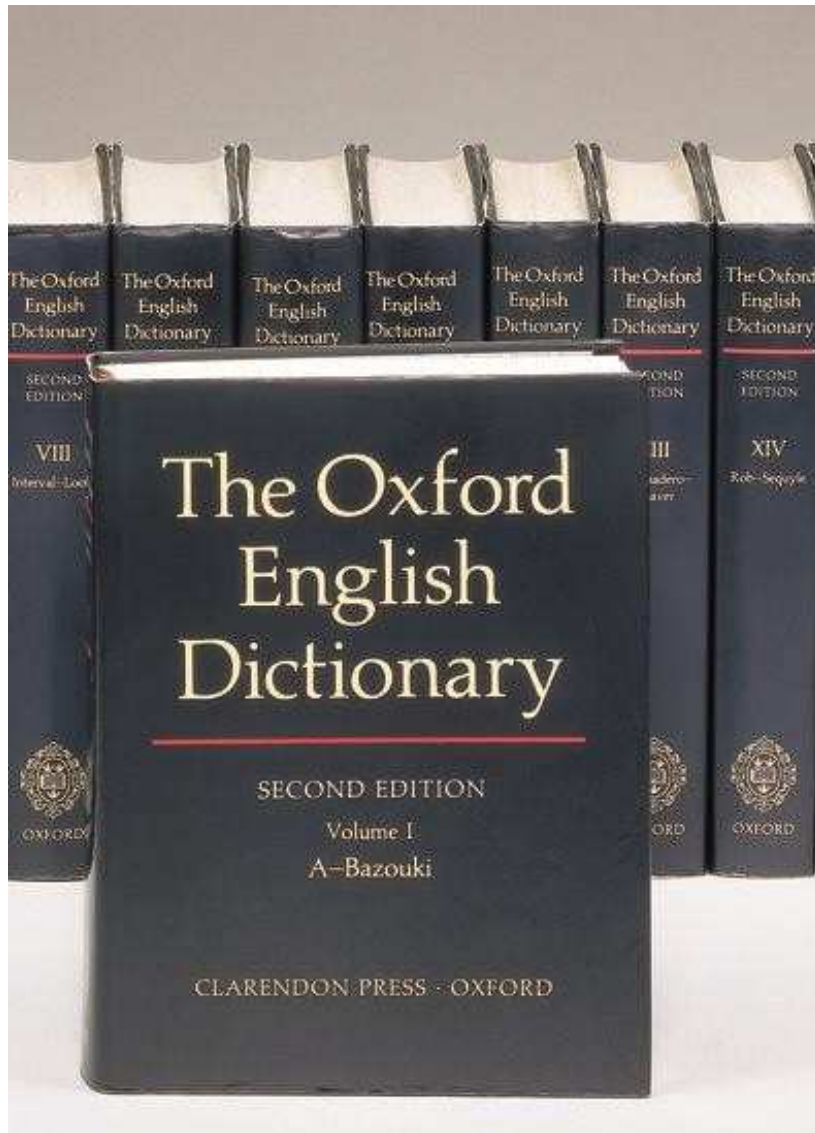
As a historical dictionary, the *OED* is very different from dictionaries of current English, in which the focus is on present-day meanings. You'll still find present-day meanings in the *OED*, but you'll also find the history of individual words, and of the language—traced through 3 million quotations, from classic literature and specialist periodicals to film scripts and cookery books.

The *OED* started life more than 150 years ago. Today, the dictionary is in the process of its first major revision. Updates revise and extend the *OED* at regular intervals, each time subtly adjusting our image of the English language.

Source: OED About Page, 2020, online.

The work on the third edition started in 1993 and it was planned to be complete at 2018 but we probably will see only online versions from now on, since the Chief Executive of Oxford University Press has affirmed that it is unlikely that the next editions will ever be printed.

Image 4 – Oxford English Dictionary - Second Edition (Print



Version)

Source: Simpson; Weiner, 2020, online.

The OED has a great effect on our knowledge of the language and has helped English speakers to understand the language and its changes over the time.

2 *Beowulf* and its importance to the English language

Beowulf is an Old English epic poem that has 3,182 alliterative lines, that means it has no rhymes, but it is sonorous to our ears when it is read. It is considered the first written work in English and one of the most important works of Old English literature, it is indeed a masterpiece. The curious part about it, is that no one knows who the author is. Scholars say that the story started being orally passed from generation to generation and then it was written, but there is no author named. The story deals with events of the 6th century and is believed to be composed about 700 and 750. At the beginning, untitled, was later named after the main character, the

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY FROM *BEOWULF* TO THE MOMENT: the importance of the poem to the English language Scandinavian hero, Beowulf.

Beowulf is a hero most known for 21st century people, especially teenagers, for the famous quote he said in the film “Beowulf” (2007), right before he hurts Grendel: “I am the Teeth in the Darkness, the Talons in the Night. Mine is Strength... and Lust... and Power! I AM BEOWULF!”.

Image 5 – Beowulf (2007) movie poster.



Source: IMDB, 2020, online.

But before that, the poem was formerly historical study material, as it contains scenes that describes the customs and traditions of the English people in the 6th century.

2.1 *Beowulf's* structure

The poem is divided in three acts and tells the story of a brave man that fought with horrible creatures and dragons for no money or power, but for glory, following Vikings principles.

In the first act, Beowulf lands in Hrothgar's kingdom to fight Grendel, a horrible creature that no one can kill, see full Tolkien's (2014, p. 16) description of Grendel below:

Grendel was that grim creature called, the ill-famed haunter of the marches of the land, who kept the moors, the [85] fastness of the fens, and, unhappy one, inhabited long while the troll-kind's home; for the Maker had proscribed him with the race of Cain. That bloodshed, for that Cain slew Abel, the Eternal Lord avenged: no joy had he of that violent deed, but God drove him for that crime

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far from mankind. Of him all [90] evil broods were born, ogres and goblins and haunting shapes of hell, and the giants too, that long time warred with God – for that he gave them their reward.

Grendel is described as an evil creature, sent from hell, he has unknown powers that makes him immune to any weapon of men. So Beowulf fights against Grendel with no weapons and wins the battle with the strength of his own hands, tearing off Grendel's arm, that runs to his hideout in the swamps, where he dies.

In the second act, Grendel's mother wants revenge for her son and she is an even terrible creature, but Beowulf is not afraid of her, so he goes to her, faces her, and kills her too.

On the third act, Beowulf returns to his home land and becomes a king, fighting for his people and for glory until they discover a dragon that lives in a tower where people have gained and kept treasures through the years. Beowulf dies while fighting with the dragon, but he died in battle, with honor, as he wanted. And that is Beowulf, an epic hero, fighting for values and not for money nor power.

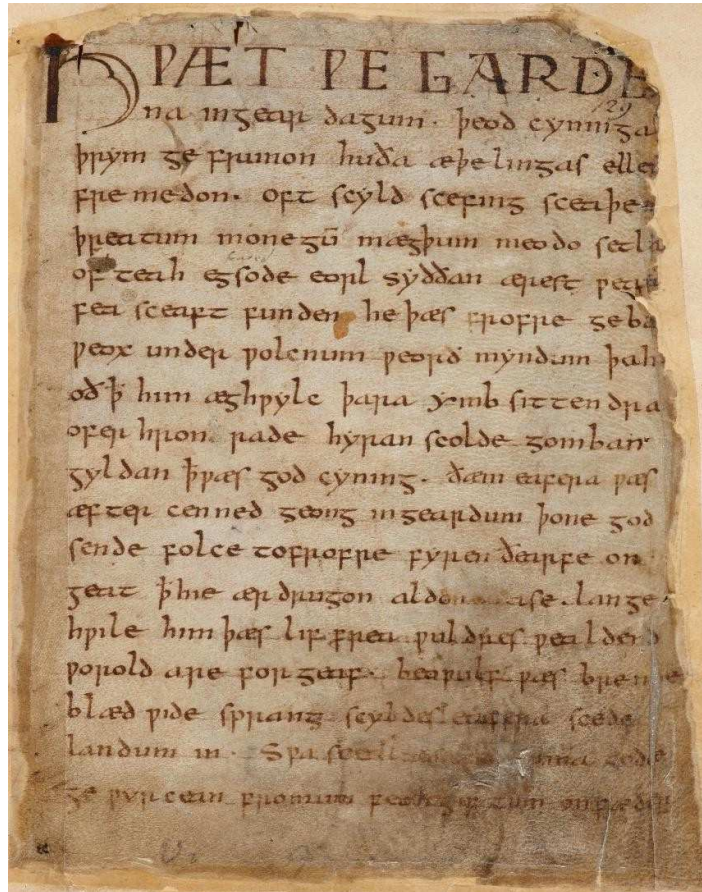
In the poem, Grendel is described as decendent of Cain (Bible character), the first murder in history and some researchers say that Grendel and his mother were the last ones of Cain's decent and that is why some people believe that when he kills Grendel's mother, he is killing paganism. That is because the story takes place in the sixth century when England was slowly invaded by the Angles and the Saxons and the invaders started to impose Christianity when the English people believed in Norse mythology and gods like Odin, Thor, etc. That is why historians believe that *Beowulf's* creator or creators, mixed both beliefs, to save Norse mythology history alive.

There is no evidence of a real person named Beowulf and, there is obviously some things such as beasts, dragons and other creatures that are not real, but there are some other characters, places and events in the poem that are historically verified, so that is a very common belief between *Beowulf* fans and historians.

2.2 *Beowulf and its versions*

More than 200 years ago, appeared the first printed version of this epic poem we now know as *Beowulf*, this version was 'written' by Thorkelin in 1815 and it is a single manuscript that dates about 1000 and is called the "*Beowulf manuscript (Cotton MS Vitellius A XV)*".

Image 6 – First page of *Beowulf* in *Cotton MS Vitellius A XV*.



Source: Wikipedia, 2020, online.

The most known translated version of *Beowulf* for Modern English is J. R. R. Tolkien's one, but we also have a lot of HQs, movies, games and different versions from *Beowulf*.

Tolkien (1892 - 1973) was an English writer, poet, philologist, and academic, best known as the author of the high fantasy works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He was passionate about languages, he spoke more than fifteen. He learned ancient and modern languages. Finnish and Welsh were the basis for creating a new language he calls "the Elvish language", spoken till this day by the author's great fans.

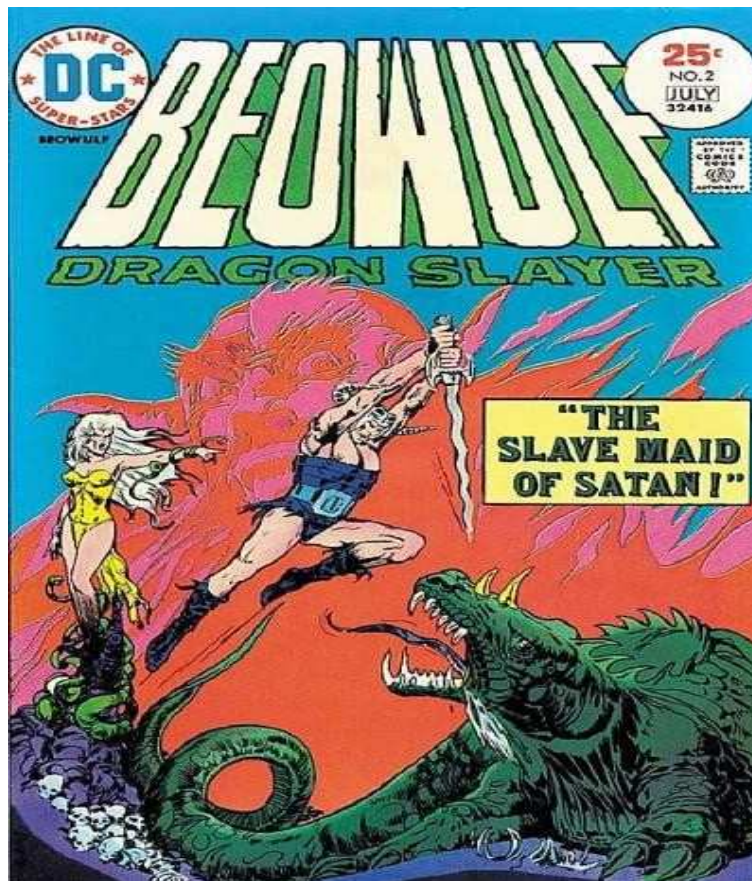
J. R. R. Tolkien was an Anglo-Saxon English teacher at Oxford University and a huge fan of *Beowulf*, he and his colleagues from school, including C. S. Lewis that wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*, used to read *Beowulf* together all the time. Lewis, was the first one to hear about the incredible story of *The Lord of the Rings*, sequel of *The Hobbit*.

Tolkien translated *Beowulf* various times, always changing parts the did not like. The version we know was published for his son Christopher Tolkien that joined all the father's material, together with some personal comments and notes showing a complete version of *Beowulf*.

2.3 *Beowulf* and the modern heroes

Nowadays, we still have stories with such things as ogres, like Shrek, for example, stories of people that fight with dragons for treasures, like in *The Hobbit*, already mentioned above, that was written by Tolkien, most of them inspired by *Beowulf's* creatures. There are also tons of HQs of *Beowulf*, an important one is DC Comics', they had a triad of barbarian heroes comics, *Beowulf* and another two characters had their story told in this format, they were released separately in about 1975, and later, in 2008, *Beowulf* appears again when Wonder Woman is dealing with the end of the Earth and with demoniac creatures and calls *Beowulf* to help her fight with them.

Image 7 – DC Comic's HQ version of *Beowulf*



Source: Guia dos Quadrinhos, 2015, online.

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Image 8 – Beowulf’s appearance in *Wonder Woman: Ends of the Earth - Part Two: The Edge of Insanity*



Source: Amazon Archives, 2008, online.

Themes like “good and evil forces”, first appeared in *Beowulf* but are still used nowadays and our modern heroes like DC’s *Justice League* (2017), or MARVEL’s *Avengers* (2018-9), are trying to save people from creatures like Steppenwolf, Thanos and other villains from evil forces.

2.4 The history of the English language (from *Beowulf* to Brexit)

As we have already seen, European countries and languages had a great influence on the development of English language and also Britain as a country.

The spoken English language was very distant from written English. As

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mentioned before, words like “pig” and “pork”, for example, have the same meaning, but are used in different contexts.

Just as *Beowulf* is believed to have been written to save Nordic mythological belief, it is also the first literary document in English, which makes it a savior of the language of the time as well.

With the Anglo and Saxons invasion, then the French and others, English people were now used to borrow all and every language that were presented to them, and that made English be a very hybrid language, which helped a lot in its expansion around the world nowadays.

In an article by a Portuguese scholar, Marcos Neves, that tells the story of English from *Beowulf* to Brexit, we can see how the English language has become so influential over time. See an excerpt¹:

O Reino Unido foi uma das grandes potências do século XIX. Os E.U.A. foram uma das superpotências do século XX. Os dois países estavam do lado dos vencedores nas duas guerras mundiais. Enfim, por estas e outras razões, o inglês acabou por tornar-se uma língua com uma força internacional que, hoje, parece inabalável.

Mas não nos esqueçamos que, ainda há uns séculos, era um falar do povo, enquanto os nobres conversavam em francês. Hoje, é uma língua aprendida por quase todos os jovens europeus, como segunda língua (NEVES, 2018, online).

He further points out that, even with Brexit (the combination of the words "British" and "exit" meaning the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) on 31th January 2020), the language will not stop being used, and what is its strength and importance today.

E, no entanto, o inglês é uma língua europeia como poucas. E, mesmo na União Europeia, continuará a ser uma das muitas línguas oficiais e continuará, certamente, a ser muito usada na prática, embora passe a ser — depois do Brexit — língua materna de menos cidadãos europeus do que o português (NEVES, 2018, online).

We can see that the importance that the English language has today, not only in Europe, but worldwide, is not only England’s responsibility, it was the cultural and geopolitical relevance of the USA that led English to be “the universal language”. Even so we can still see the evolution and relevance that the language has reached from *Beowulf* to the present day.

3 Conclusion

The way we use the language today, has nothing to do with the British people in particular. When we see a Portuguese person talking to a Frenchman, for example, it is very likely that, most of the time, we hear English, and it is quite common to find people with different languages talking in English, the language that 'everyone

¹ Professor Marcos Neves' quotes were kept in Portuguese so that it would not lose its meaning and the authorship would be maintained.



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understands'. This, as mentioned, has nothing to do with the people, but with the language and its relevance in today's world and, *Beowulf* developed with the English language, adapting to new formats and meanings, without leaving its essence.

Perhaps the biggest reason why *Beowulf* is a timeless work is simply the fact that it is so open and mixed. The story mixes two beliefs. The characters mixes two peoples. And the language connects all readers. The plot captivates from the youngest to the oldest. After all, who does not love a hero? And how does not love *Beowulf*? Such a fair and pure hero, with such honorable and valuable principles.

We could conclude that, even though the poem was written a thousand years ago, in a language that, today not even English native speakers can understand without translation, *Beowulf* has found its place in literature, culture and in the hearts of all its readers forever with honor and glory.

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