



## Rise up, rebel, revolt: how the English language betrays class and power

From Boris Johnson's Latin to everyday Anglo-Saxon - what can the history of modern English tell us about our fractured society?

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**B**oris Johnson is known as a man with some skill in French, Latin and English. When he first spoke on TV about his wish to shut down parliament, he used all three. The language of power was, as ever, French: prorogation, parliament, government. The language of the abstract concepts he said the government needed to deal with was Latin: exciting agenda, violent crime, education, infrastructure, economy. He spoke only one sentence from Anglo-Saxon, the language of England before the conquest. It was the sentence where he spoke about a worker being employed to do a job, a hired drudge bound to do something tedious, concrete and essential that nobody would thank her for and was necessary to make the whole thing work. It so happened that this drudge was the monarch. "That's why," he said, "we are going to have a Queen's speech."

At least six centuries have passed since England was trilingual, since the mass of working people spoke a Germanic language called "English", the nobility spoke a bastardised Norman French and the clergy dealt in Latin. But a stealthy trilingualism is still with us. And the three

medieval estates linked to those three languages - of the worker, the person of power and the cleric - offer an alternative way of understanding society in the here and now.

When, in the first half of the 14th century, the Chester monk Ranulf Higden wrote his history of the world in Latin, he bemoaned the dominance of the French language among the gentry in England. He blamed this on their children being brought up learning French, and on “uplandish men” - peasants, in other words - trying to make themselves look good by Frenchifying their speech.

By 1385, when the scholar John Trevisa translated Higden’s work from Latin into English, the situation was turned on its head: “In all the grammar schools of England, children leave French and construe and learn in English,” Trevisa noted after translating Higden’s pro-English lament. “Now children of grammar school con [know] no more French than their left heel.”



Changing times ... an anti-Brexit protester in March. Photograph: David Whitestone/Alamy Stock Photo

The transformation tends to be presented in popular history as an absolute, as the triumph of English over French, as if languages were hermetic national systems, as if English were taken prisoner by French with the Norman conquest in 1066, was tyrannised by it for the next 300 years, then burst free and drove the aggressor back across the Channel. As well as describing, in English, the death of French as a living language in England, Trevisa sounds the death knell for living Latin by the then radical act of translating a learned work from Latin into English.

But neither French nor Latin went away. They seeped into what we call English and made themselves at home, giving the language its fantastical redundancy, creating something half-Germanic, half-Romance. Trilinguality was internalised. Otherwise the Albert Hall would resound to “Land of hope and woolder/Mother of the frith,” and we’d sing “God beery our gladman Queen” and leave the EU not to take back control but to “take wield again”. We’re

born in English, live, love, wonder, feel and die in English, but we're conceived, we emerge, exist, touch, desire, doubt, experience, suffer, succeed, fail and perish in French and Latin. The intimate relationship between the three languages is there in the very word "relationship", a trilingualism love child, "relation" both French and Latin, -ship an Anglo-Saxon suffix. The redundancy is there in the Latin "intimate", which could just as easily be replaced by the French "close" or the Anglo-Saxon "near".

The infusion of French and Latin into English began long before the 14th century, but the mingling was accelerated by one event that struck England in 1348, the single worst thing to happen to humanity in Europe between the last ice age and the current climate emergency: the Black Death, which killed more than half the population. The plague created linguistic change because it forced the diminished classes to make accommodations with one another - the francophone aristos and the Latinist clerics, in particular, had to befriend the anglophone peasantry whose now scarce labour they depended on. But just as the three languages persist within a single, encompassing English, rather than one tongue being triumphant, so the three estates that spoke them, and the modes of being they represent, linger on in association with those languages.

The characteristic idiom of intellectual analysis is still a highly Latinate English. Almost 1,000 years after the Normans took power in England, the language of power (parliament, government, civil service, police, court, judge) the military (army, navy, soldier, battle, campaign) and finance (interest, rent, money, tax, mortgage, asset, property, inheritance) retains a strong French cast. And, though there are thousands of exceptions, and many Norse imports, Anglo-Saxon-derived words still make up the lexis of the everyday of things before they take proper names - man, woman, child, house, road, star, tree, cloud, bird, head, foot, rain, snow, earth, spade, hammer, spoon.

The three estates that used these three languages before the plague don't map comfortably on to our modern notions of a society trisected into workers, the middle class and the wealthy. In Britain at least, that class division is still real, and conceptually useful, but the persistence in English of that pre-plague linguistic divide points to a subtly different social inheritance. If you break the medieval classes down to the essence of their being you come to worker class, power class and reflective class - those who work, those who fight and those who pray. Those who fall within the last category, the clerics, frame and deploy the abstract concepts, narratives and rules that purport to offer people meaning, consolation, and a sense of a greater order of things. In this sense, the division of society into workers, clerks and the powerful runs as deep in the 21st century as it did in the 14th.

The clerkly class of today is made up of academics, thinktankers, lawyers, writers, many artists, scientists, journalists and students, some comedians and politicians, even some entrepreneurs, as well as actual clerics - anyone whose sense of self depends on an abstract frame of reference. A revolt of workers and the wealthy and powerful against the middle classes makes rather less sense than a revolt of workers and lords against a clerical class whose idealist, universalist abstractions they find inconvenient, obscure and incompatible with a prosperity they feel is dubiously earned. After all, it happened before, during the Reformation, which showed that when workers and lords unite against the clerics, it doesn't mean the end of the clerical class, merely their replacement by a new set of clerics.

My list of modern members of the clerical class has a Remainer look to it, but to say baldly that Brexit is a revolt of the other estates against the modern post-religious version of the clerks is to make this way of looking at the world sound too much like an alternative version of the Marxist class struggle. It's a more subtle, personal, drawn-out process than that.

When for a novel set in the 14th century I teased English out into three distinct, more or less modern idioms, using Frenchness, Germanicity and Latiness to express aristocratic, peasant and clerical worldviews, I found how naturally the neo-aristocratic French-rich idiom expressed ideas of romantic love. I hadn't realised how deeply the ancient sense of proprietorship by the powerful over the depiction of love was embedded in literary, that is clerkly, English. What I also found was that Germanic English had its own idiom of love, more urgent and full-on: but of course it does, because it's all around us, the language of pop, worker art. When you look at the English of hits, it's startling how Anglo-Saxon success is. "I Will Always Love You", "It's Now Or Never", "My Heart Will Go On", "I Want To Hold Your Hand". Popular songs and stories of love and hurt, of gods, heroes, devils and kings, folksy slogans - "Make America Great Again", "It's the Real Thing" - are what's left in English of a pre-Norman time when the power language, the abstraction language and the folk language were the same.

For all the furious name-calling and outrage of the present, the overwhelming mood is of discomfort, a discomfort we would not be feeling if we were happy in our group identities. I doubt that in their hearts the present-day powerful, which is usually to also say wealthy, would be unhappy to be equated with medieval aristocrats (sometimes they still are aristocrats) but their children yearn for validation by the clerkly world of poets and artists and thinkers. Workers and clerks yearn for the power, at least, of financial freedom, which means no less than the power to command others to do your will.

The greatest identity discomfort is between the workers and the clerks. Each feels as resentful of the idea of being confined to a status - the powerless worker, the bloodless cleric - as they are fearful of the direction the world is taking, which is of the merging of workers and clerks into one increasingly educated, increasingly exploited mass. Populism accentuates these fears, heightening such scorn as the workers feel towards the clerks and turning such guilt as the clerks feel in respect of the workers to bitterness - all to the advantage of the neo-aristocrats of modern global power.

And yet we are all in it together; the peasantification of clerkdom goes hand in hand with the replacement of drudge work by machines or by knowledge work - clerkly work. The danger for exploitative power is that instead of resenting the elision of the boundary between clerks and workers, we embrace it. On the one hand, most people, bound in a system where taxes have been usurped by a burden of private fees, have reason to feel they are both the gatherers of the lords' crops and the crops themselves; on the other, we have recent examples, in countries such as Egypt and Ukraine, of what happens when the worker class and the clerk class unite against power. In Britain and in the US I hope it would be a gentler and more successful process, but in English we have the terms in triplicate: rise up, rebel, revolt.

*. To Calais, in Ordinary Time by James Meek is published by Canongate. To order a copy go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com).*

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