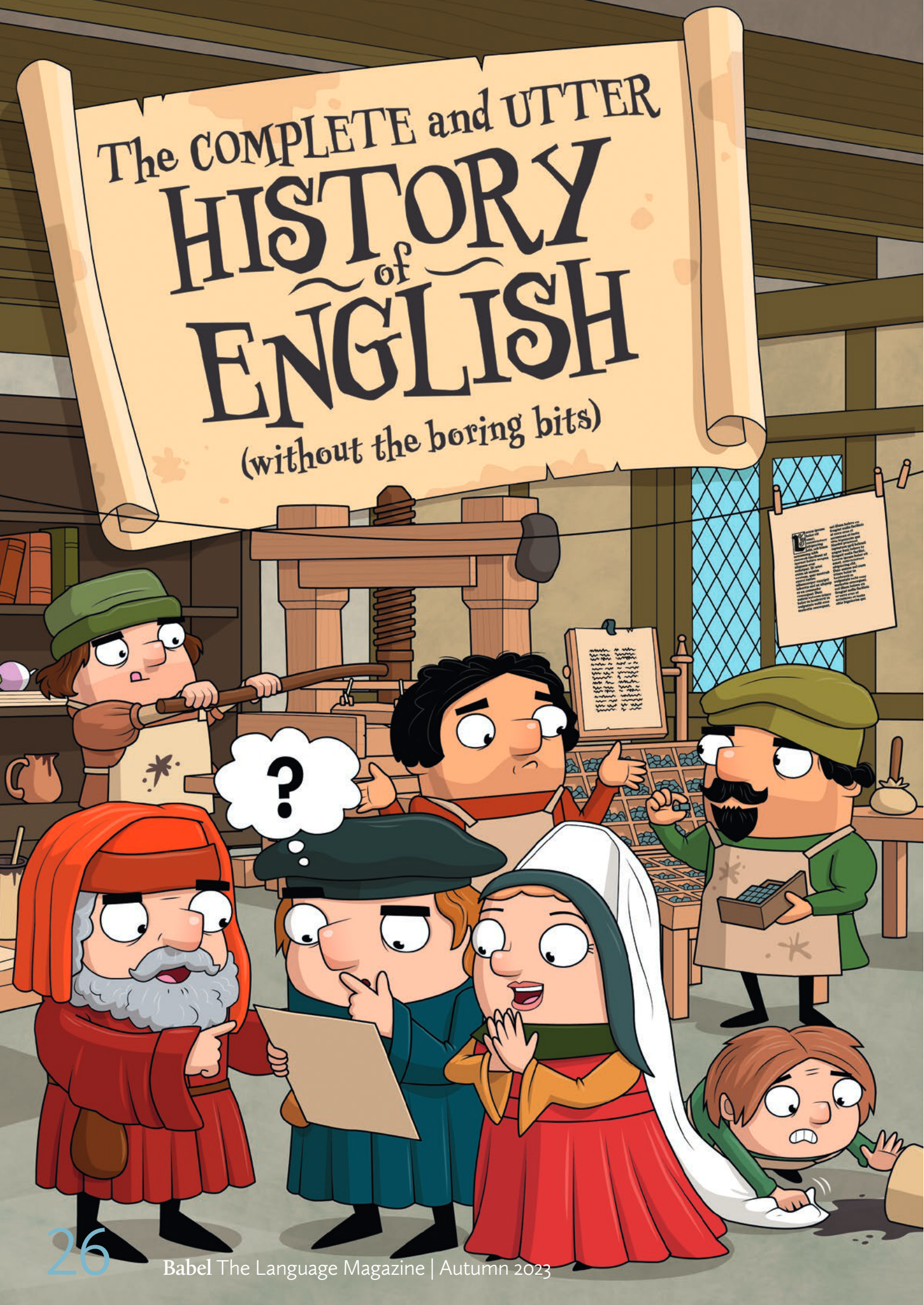

The COMPLETE and UTTER
HISTORY of ENGLISH
(without the boring bits)
?

Part 6:
We must have standards!



It's 1476 and William Caxton, an English merchant in search of a fast buck, sets up a printing press at Westminster, to produce, well, fast books. Before this, if you wanted a copy of a book then you had to do just that: copy it out. And the people doing the copying were usually specially trained monks who were also responsible for cutting the parchment to produce the pages to write on, making the ink and binding the book together when it was finished. All this might take about a year. You can see why playing horrendously violent forms of football, engaging in long games of Nine Men's Morris, and practising elaborate ways to kill people were more popular pastimes than reading.

Caxton, though, had a wily plan to change this. And it was based on a gap in the market that he'd spotted: nobody was printing books in English. The solution, then, was simple. Set up a printing press, adopt the standard dialect of the day and get to work. Except for the fact that there was no standard dialect and nobody in England knew how to operate a printing press.

The second problem was easier to solve than the first one. Caxton did what the Brits have always done when faced with their own inabilities. He simply employed foreign workers to do the job (who no doubt did it better and more cheerfully than any grumbling local scribe might have managed). But this didn't get round the first problem. You'll recall that Middle English spelling was a bit of a free-for-all. The word 'mother', for example, might be spelled as *modir*, *modyr*, *moodre*, *modere* or *moder* (just imagine the stress involved in writing a medieval Mother's Day card). Not only this, but the foreign compositors employed by Caxton weren't familiar with the spellings used by the best of the London-based manuscript copyists, so the kind of chaotic spellings you might encounter in some of Caxton's early books are up there with the best of Middle English. Caxton's solution to this was another time-honoured British technique: acknowledge the problem, adopt an ineffective compromise and leave it to someone else to fix. That someone was Caxton's protégé, who, in a glorious example of nominative determinism, was named Wynkyn de Worde. After Caxton died, De Worde started to employ English compositors well-versed in English scribal traditions, so that in time a relatively fixed system of spelling emerged.

It should be said, though, that the word 'relatively' in the previous sentence is doing a lot of heavy lifting. Early Modern English writing still did some pretty bizarre things. There were two forms of the letter <s>, for example. You used <s> at the end of words and <ſ> at the beginning or in the middle of words. Similarly, <u> could represent both the vowel sound /ʊ/ and the consonant sound /v/. The letter <v> could also represent both the vowel sound /ʊ/ and the consonant sound /v/. The letter <v> tended to be used at the beginning of words, if the word began with an /v / or /ʊ/, while the letter <u> tended to be used in the middle of words, if the sound to be represented was a /ʊ/ or a <v>. Except when the printer forgot or got their type mixed up.

So, was the Early Modern English period really the age of standardisation? Well, yes and no. Admittedly, the written language was gradually being standardised. But have you heard about the Great Vowel Shift? You might need to sit down for this one... ¶

