**A (Very) Brief History of the English Language**

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Indo-European and Germanic Influences

English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The Indo-European family includes several major branches:

Latin and the modern Romance languages;

The Germanic languages;

The Indo-Iranian languages, including Hindi and Sanskrit;

The Slavic languages;

The Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian (but not Estonian);

The Celtic languages; and

Greek.

The influence of the original Indo-European language, designated proto-Indo-European, can be seen today, even though no written record of it exists. The word for father, for example, is vater in German, pater in Latin, and pitr in Sanskrit. These words are all cognates, similar words in different languages that share the same root.

Of these branches of the Indo-European family, two are, for our purposes of studying the development of English, of paramount importance, the Germanic and the Romance (called that because the Romance languages derive from Latin, the language of ancient Rome, not because of any bodice-ripping literary genre). English is in the Germanic group of languages. This group began as a common language in the Elbe river region about 3,000 years ago. Around the second century BC, this Common Germanic language split into three distinct sub-groups:

East Germanic was spoken by peoples who migrated back to southeastern Europe. No East Germanic language is spoken today, and the only written East Germanic language that survives is Gothic. North Germanic evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic (but not Finnish, which is related to Estonian and is not an Indo-European language). West Germanic is the ancestor of modern German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English.

Old English (500-1100 AD)

West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark: the Angles (whose name is the source of the words England and English), Saxons, and Jutes, began populating the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. They spoke a mutually intelligible language, similar to modern Frisian--the language of northeastern region of the Netherlands--that is called Old English. Four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.

These invaders pushed the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants out of what is now England into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, leaving behind a few Celtic words. These Celtic languages survive today in Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, unfortunately, is now a dead language. (The last native Cornish speaker, Dolly Pentreath, died in 1777 in the town of Mousehole, Cornwall.) Also influencing English at this time were the Vikings. Norse invasions, beginning around 850, brought many North Germanic words into the language, particularly in the north of England. Some examples are dream, which had meant 'joy' until the Vikings imparted its current meaning on it from the Scandinavian cognate draumr, and skirt, which continues to live alongside its native English cognate shirt.

The majority of words in modern English come from foreign, not Old English roots. In fact, only about one sixth of the known Old English words have descendants surviving today. But this is deceptive; Old English is much more important than these statistics would indicate. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have Old English roots. Words like be, water, and strong, for example, derive from Old English roots.

Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem Beowulf, lasted until about 1100. This last date is rather arbitrary, but most scholars choose it because it is shortly after the most important event in the development of the English language, the Norman Conquest.

The Norman Conquest and Middle English (1100-1500)

William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD. (The Bayeux Tapestry, details of which form the navigation buttons on this site, is perhaps the most famous graphical depiction of the Norman Conquest.) The new overlords spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman. The Normans were also of Germanic stock ("Norman" comes from "Norseman") and Anglo-Norman was a French dialect that had considerable Germanic influences in addition to the basic Latin roots.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as priest, vicar, and mass came into the language this way), but now there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.

The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, beef and cow. Beef, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic cow. Many legal terms, such as indict, jury, and verdict have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts. This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

Sometimes French words replaced Old English words; crime replaced firen and uncle replaced eam. Other times, French and Old English components combined to form a new word, as the French gentle and the Germanic man formed gentleman. Other times, two different words with roughly the same meaning survive into modern English. Thus we have the Germanic doom and the French judgment, or wish and desire.

It is useful to compare various versions of a familiar text to see the differences between Old, Middle, and Modern English.

In 1204 AD, King John lost the province of Normandy to the King of France. This began a process where the Norman nobles of England became increasingly estranged from their French cousins. England became the chief concern of the nobility, rather than their estates in France, and consequently the nobility adopted a modified English as their native tongue. About 150 years later, the Black Death (1349-50) killed about one third of the English population. The laboring and merchant classes grew in economic and social importance, and along with them English increased in importance compared to Anglo-Norman.

This mixture of the two languages came to be known as Middle English. The most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. In that year, the Statute of Pleading was adopted, which made English the language of the courts and it began to be used in Parliament.

The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

The next wave of innovation in English came with the Renaissance. The revival of classical scholarship brought many classical Latin and Greek words into the Language. These borrowings were deliberate and many bemoaned the adoption of these "inkhorn" terms, but many survive to this day. Shakespeare's character Holofernes in Loves Labor Lost is a satire of an overenthusiastic schoolmaster who is too fond of Latinisms.

Many students having difficulty understanding Shakespeare would be surprised to learn that he wrote in modern English. But, as can be seen in the earlier example of the Lord's Prayer, Elizabethan English has much more in common with our language today than it does with the language of Chaucer. Many familiar words and phrases were coined or first recorded by Shakespeare, some 2,000 words and countless catch-phrases are his. Newcomers to Shakespeare are often shocked at the number of cliches contained in his plays, until they realize that he coined them and they became cliches afterwards. "One fell swoop," "vanish into thin air," and "flesh and blood" are all Shakespeare's. Words he bequeathed to the language include "critical," "leapfrog," "majestic," "dwindle," and "pedant."

Two other major factors influenced the language and served to separate Middle and Modern English. The first was the Great Vowel Shift. This was a change in pronunciation that began around 1400. While modern English speakers can read Chaucer with some difficulty, Chaucer's pronunciation would have been completely unintelligible to the modern ear. Shakespeare, on the other hand, would be accented, but understandable. Long vowel sounds began to be made higher in the mouth and the letter "e" at the end of words became silent. Chaucer's Lyf (pronounced "leef") became the modern life. In Middle English name was pronounced "nam-a," five was pronounced "feef," and down was pronounced "doon." In linguistic terms, the shift was rather sudden, the major changes occurring within a century. The shift is still not over, however, vowel sounds are still shortening although the change has become considerably more gradual.

The last major factor in the development of Modern English was the advent of the printing press. William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1476. Books became cheaper and as a result, literacy became more common. Publishing for the masses became a profitable enterprise, and works in English, as opposed to Latin, became more common. Finally, the printing press brought standardization to English. The dialect of London, where most publishing houses were located, became the standard. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the first English dictionary was published in 1604.

Late-Modern English (1800-Present)

The principal distinction between early- and late-modern English is vocabulary. Pronunciation, grammar, and spelling are largely the same, but Late-Modern English has many more words. These words are the result of two historical factors. The first is the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the technological society. This necessitated new words for things and ideas that had not previously existed. The second was the British Empire. At its height, Britain ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, and English adopted many foreign words and made them its own.

The industrial and scientific revolutions created a need for neologisms to describe the new creations and discoveries. For this, English relied heavily on Latin and Greek. Words like oxygen, protein, nuclear, and vaccine did not exist in the classical languages, but they were created from Latin and Greek roots. Such neologisms were not exclusively created from classical roots though, English roots were used for such terms as horsepower, airplane, and typewriter.

This burst of neologisms continues today, perhaps most visible in the field of electronics and computers. Byte, cyber-, bios, hard-drive, and microchip are good examples.

Also, the rise of the British Empire and the growth of global trade served not only to introduce English to the world, but to introduce words into English. Hindi, and the other languages of the Indian subcontinent, provided many words, such as pundit, shampoo, pajamas, and juggernaut. Virtually every language on Earth has contributed to the development of English, from Finnish (sauna) and Japanese (tycoon) to the vast contributions of French and Latin.

The British Empire was a maritime empire, and the influence of nautical terms on the English language has been great. Words and phrases like three sheets to the wind and scuttlebutt have their origins onboard ships.

Finally, the 20th century saw two world wars, and the military influence on the language during the latter half of this century has been great. Before the Great War, military service for English-speaking persons was rare; both Britain and the United States maintained small, volunteer militaries. Military slang existed, but with the exception of nautical terms, rarely influenced standard English. During the mid-20th century, however, virtually all British and American men served in the military. Military slang entered the language like never before. Blockbuster, nose dive, camouflage, radar, roadblock, spearhead, and landing strip are all military terms that made their way into standard English.

American English

Also significant beginning around 1600 AD was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of a distinct American dialect. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, American English is closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Some "Americanisms" that the British decry are actually originally British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., fall as a synonym for autumn, trash for rubbish, frame-up which was reintroduced to Britain through Hollywood gangster movies, and loan as a verb instead of lend).

The American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like Mississippi, Roanoke, and Iowa. Indian-sounding names like Idaho were sometimes created that had no native-American roots. But, names for other things besides places were also common. Raccoon, tomato, canoe, barbecue, savanna, and hickory have native American roots, although in many cases the original Indian words were mangled almost beyond recognition.

Spanish has also been great influence on American English. Armadillo, mustang, canyon, ranch, stampede, and vigilante are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West.

To a lesser extent French, mainly via Louisiana, and West African, through the importation of slaves, words have influenced American English. Armoire, bayou, and jambalaya came into the language via New Orleans. Goober, gumbo, and tote are West African borrowings first used in America by slaves.