

A Brief History of the English Language

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 (French etc.);
- the Germanic languages (English, German, Swedish etc.);
- the Indo-Iranian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit etc.);
- the Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech etc.);
- the Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian;
- the Celtic languages (Welsh, Irish Gaelic etc.);
- 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, as far as the study of the development of English is concerned, of paramount importance, the Germanic and the Romance (called that because the Romance languages derive from Latin, the language of ancient Rome). English is a member of the Germanic group of languages. It is believed that this group began as a common language in the Elbe river region about 3,000 years ago. By the second century BC, this Common Germanic language had 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 Hungarian and 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)

[CLICK HERE TO SEE A MAP OF ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND](#)

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 to settle in the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. They spoke a mutually intelligible language, similar to modern Frisian - the language of the 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 the Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, unfortunately, is, in linguistic terms, now a dead language. (The last native Cornish speaker died in 1777) Also influencing English at this time were the Vikings. Norse invasions and settlement, 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 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. Take for instance this Old English (c. 1000) sample:

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice gewurþe þin willa on
eorðan swa swa on heofonum
urne gedæghwamlīcan hlaf syle us to dæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Rendered in Middle English (Wyclif, 1384), the same text is recognizable to the modern eye:

Oure fadir þat art in heuenes halwid be þi name;
þi reume or kyngdom come to be. Be þi wille don in herþe as it is
doun in heuene.
yeue to us today oure eche dayes bred.
And foryeue to us oure dettis þat is oure synnys as we foryeuen
to oure dettouris þat is to men þat han synned in us.
And lede us not into temptacion but delyuere us from euyl.

Finally, in Early Modern English (King James Version, 1611) the same text is completely intelligible:

Our father which art in heauen, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heauen.
Giue us this day our daily bread.
And forgiue us our debts as we forgiue our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliuer us from euill. Amen.
For a lengthier comparison of the three stages in the development
of English [click here!](#)



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. And as a result of this the labouring 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 idioms are his. Newcomers to Shakespeare are often shocked at the number of clichés contained in his plays, until they realize that he coined them and they became clichés 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. Vowel sounds began to be made further to the front of 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 military influence on the language during the latter half of twentieth century was significant. 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, a large number of British and American men served in the military. And consequently 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 and other varieties

Also significant beginning around 1600 AD was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of American English. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, some varieties of American English are closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern Standard English ('English English' or as it is often incorrectly termed 'British English') is. Some "Americanisms" are actually originally English English expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., *fall* as a synonym for autumn, *trash* for rubbish, 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. *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.

A lesser number of words have entered American English from French and West African languages.

Likewise dialects of English have developed in many of the former colonies of the British Empire. There are distinct forms of the English language spoken in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and many other parts of the world.

Global English

English has now inarguably achieved global status. Whenever we turn on the news to find out what's happening in East Asia, or the Balkans, or Africa, or South America, or practically anywhere, local people are being interviewed and telling us about it in English. To illustrate the point when Pope John Paul II arrived in the Middle East recently to retrace Christ's footsteps and addressed Christians, Muslims and Jews, the pontiff spoke not Latin, not Arabic, not Italian, not Hebrew, not his native Polish. He spoke in English.

Indeed, if one looks at some of the facts about the amazing reach of the English language many would be surprised. English is used in over 90 countries as an official or semi-official language. English is the working language of the Asian trade group ASEAN. It is the de facto working language of 98 percent of international research physicists and research chemists. It is the official language of the European Central Bank, even though the bank is in Frankfurt and neither Britain nor any other predominantly English-speaking country is a member of the European Monetary Union. It is the language in which Indian parents and black parents in South Africa overwhelmingly wish their children to be educated. It is believed that over one billion people worldwide are currently learning English.

One of the more remarkable aspects of the spread of English around the world has been the extent to which Europeans are adopting it as their internal lingua franca. English is spreading from northern Europe to the south and is now firmly entrenched as a second language in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Netherlands and Denmark. Although not an official language in any of these countries if one visits any of them it would seem that almost everyone there can communicate with ease in English. Indeed, if one switches on a television in Holland one would find as many channels in English (albeit subtitled), as there are in Dutch.

As part of the European Year of Languages, a special survey of European attitudes towards and their use of languages has just published. The report confirms that at the beginning of 2001 English is the most widely known foreign or second language, with 43% of Europeans claiming they speak it in addition to their mother tongue. Sweden now heads the league table of English speakers, with over 89% of the population saying they can speak the language well or very well. However, in contrast, only 36% of Spanish and Portuguese nationals speak English. What's more, English is the language rated as most useful to know, with over 77% of Europeans who do not speak English as their first language, rating it as useful. French rated 38%, German 23% and Spanish 6%

English has without a doubt become the global language.

A Chronology of the English Language

55 BC	Roman invasion of Britain under Julius Caesar
43 AD	Roman invasion and occupation under Emperor Claudius. Beginning of Roman rule of Britain
436	Roman withdrawal from Britain complete
449	Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain begins
450-480	Earliest Old English inscriptions date from this period
597	St. Augustine arrives in Britain. Beginning of Christian conversion
731	The Venerable Bede publishes <u>The Ecclesiastical History of the English People</u> in Latin
792	Viking raids and settlements begin
865	The Danes occupy Northumbria
871	Alfred becomes king of Wessex. He has Latin works translated into English and begins practice of English prose. <u>The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</u> is begun
911	Charles II of France grants Normandy to the Viking chief Hrolf the Ganger. The beginning of Norman French
c. 1000	The oldest surviving manuscript of <u>Beowulf</u> dates from this period
1066	The Norman conquest
c. 1150	The oldest surviving manuscripts of Middle English date from this period
1171	Henry II conquers Ireland
1204	King John loses the province of Normandy to France
1348	English replaces Latin as the medium of instruction in schools, other than Oxford and Cambridge which retain Latin
1349-50	The Black Death kills one third of the British population
1362	The Statute of Pleading replaces French with English as the language of law. Records continue to be kept in Latin. English is used in Parliament for the first time
1384	Wyclif publishes his English translation of the Bible
c. 1388	Chaucer begins <u>The Canterbury Tales</u>
c. 1400	The Great Vowel Shift begins

- 1476 William Caxton establishes the first English printing press
- 1485 Caxton publishes Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur
- 1492 Columbus discovers the New World
- 1525 William Tyndale translates the New Testament
- 1536 The first Act of Union unites England and Wales
- 1549 First version of The Book of Common Prayer
- 1564 Shakespeare born
- 1603 Union of the English and Scottish crowns under James the I (VI of Scotland)
- 1604 Robert Cawdrey publishes the first English dictionary, Table Alphabeticall
- 1607 Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World, established
- 1611 The Authorized, or King James Version, of the Bible is published
- 1616 Death of Shakespeare
- 1623 Shakespeare's First Folio is published
- 1666 The Great Fire of London. End of The Great Plague
- 1702 Publication of the first daily, English-language newspaper, The Daily Courant, in London
- 1755 Samuel Johnson publishes his dictionary
- 1770 Cook discovers Australia
- 1776 Thomas Jefferson writes the Declaration of Independence
- 1782 Washington defeats Cornwallis at Yorktown. Britain abandons the American colonies
- 1788 British penal colony established in Australia
- 1803 Act of Union unites Britain and Ireland
- 1828 Noah Webster publishes his dictionary
- 1922 British Broadcasting Company founded
- 1928 The Oxford English Dictionary is published