

Greek influence on english language

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Indirect and direct borrowings

Since the living Greek and English languages were not in direct contact until modern times, borrowings were necessarily indirect, coming either through Latin (through texts or various vernaculars) or from Ancient Greek texts, not the living language. Some Greek words were borrowed into Latin and its descendants, the Romance languages. English often received these words from French. Their phonetic and orthographic form has sometimes changed considerably. For instance, the place was borrowed both by Old English and by French from Latin platea, itself borrowed from Greek the Italian piazza and Spanish plaza have the same origin, and have been borrowed into English in parallel. The word olive comes through the Romance from the Latin word oliva, which in turn comes from the Greek becomes Latin butyral and eventually English butter.

In some cases, the orthography of these words was later changed to reflect the Greek spelling: e. g. quire was respelled as choir in the 17th century. Many more words were borrowed by scholars writing in post-classical Latin. Some words were borrowed in essentially their original meaning, often transmitted through classical Latin: physics, iambic, eta, necromancy. A few result from scribal errors: encyclopedia the circle of learning', not a compound in Greek. The written form of Greek words in English Many Greek words, especially those borrowed through the literary tradition, are recognizable as such from their spelling. Already in Latin, there were specific conventions for borrowing Greek. So Greek was written as 'c'. These conventions (which originally reflected pronunciation) have carried over into English and other languages with historical orthography (like French). They

make it possible to recognize words of Greek origin and give hints as to their pronunciation and inflection. On the other hand, the spelling of some words was refashioned to reflect their etymology: Middle English character became characters in the 16th century.

The Ancient Greek diphthongs *ai* and *ei* may be spelled in three different ways in English: the digraphs *ae* and *oe*; the ligatures *æ* and *œ*; and the simple letter *e*. Both the digraphs and ligatures are uncommon in American usage, but the digraphs remain common in British usage. Examples are: *encyclopaedia* /*encyclopædia* /*encyclopedia*, *haemoglobin* /*moglobin* /*hemoglobin*, *edema* /*dema* /*edema*, *Oedipus* /*dipus* / *Edipus* (rare). The verbal ending *-ize* is spelled *-ize* in American English and *-ise* or *-ize* in British English. In some cases, a word's spelling clearly shows its Greek origin. If it includes *ph* or includes *y* between consonants, it is very likely Greek. If it includes *rrh*, *phth*, or *chth*; or starts with *hy-*, *ps-*, *pn-*, or *chr-*; or the rarer *pt-*, *ct-*, *chth-*, *rh-*, *x-*, *sth-*, *mn-*, *tm-*, *gn-* or *bd-*, then it is Greek, with some exceptions: *gnat*, *gnaw*, *gneiss*. One exception is *ptarmigan*, which is from a Gaelic word, the *p* having been added by false etymology. The word *trophy*, though ultimately of Greek origin.

Pronunciation

In clusters such as *ps-*, *pn-*, or *gn-* which are not allowed by English phonotactics, the usual English pronunciation drops the first consonant (e. g. *psychology*) at the start of a word; *comparegnostic* [nəˈstɪk] and *agnostic* [əˈɡnɪstɪk]; there are a few exceptions: *ptarmigan* [tɜːˈmiːɡən]. Initial *x-* is pronounced *z*. *Ch* is pronounced like *k* rather than as in "church": e. g.

character, chaos. Consecutive vowels are often pronounced separately rather than forming a single vowel sound or one of them becoming silent (e. g. " theatre" vs. " feat"). Inflectional endings and plurals Though many English words derived from Greek through the literary route drop the inflectional endings (tripod, zoology, pentagon) or use Latin endings (papyrus, mausoleum), some preserve the Greek endings: tetrahedron, schema (cf. cheme), topos, lexicon, climax. In the case of Greek endings, the plurals sometimes follow the Greek rules: phenomenon, phenomena; tetrahedron, tetrahedra; crisis, crises; hypothesis, hypotheses; stigma, stigmata; topos, topoi; cyclops, cyclopes; but often do not: colon, colons not cola (except for the very rare technical term of rhetoric); pentathlon, pentathlons not pentathla; demon, demons not demons; climaxes, not climates. Usage is mixed in some cases: schema, schemas or schemata; lexicon, lexicons or lexica; helix, helixes or helices; sphinx, sphinges, or sphinxes; clitoris, clitorises or clitorides. And there are misleading cases: pentagon comes from Greek pentagon, so its plural cannot be pentagon. However, the Greek verbal suffix -ize is productive in Latin, the Romance languages, and English: words like metabolize, though composed of a Greek root and a Greek suffix, are modern compounds.

Statistics

The contribution of Greek to the English vocabulary can be quantified in two ways, type, and token frequencies: type frequency is the proportion of distinct words; token frequency is the proportion of words in actual texts. Since most words of Greek origin are specialized technical and scientific coinages, the type frequency is considerably higher than the token

frequency. And the type frequency in a large word list will be larger than that in a small word list. In a typical English dictionary of 80, 000 words, which corresponds very roughly to the vocabulary of an educated English speaker, about 5% of the words are borrowed from Greek directly, and about 25% indirectly (if we count modern coinages from Greek roots as Greek).