

# A history of the english language

[Countries](#), [England](#)



A History of the English Language Before the Germanic tribes arrived, the Celts were the original inhabitants of Britain. When the Germanic tribes invaded England, they pushed the Celt-speaking inhabitants out of England into what is now Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland. The Celtic language survives today in the Gaelic languages, and some scholars speculate that the Celtic tongue might have influenced the grammatical development of English, though the influence would have been minimal (Bryson 1990). Around A. D. 850, Vikings or Norsemen made a significant impact on the English language by importing many North Germanic words into the language. From the middle of the ninth century, large numbers of Norse invaders settled in Britain, especially in the northern and eastern areas and, in the eleventh century, a Danish (Norse) King, Canute, ruled England. The North Germanic speech of the Norsemen had a fundamental influence on English. They added basic words such as " that, " " they, " and " them, " and also may have been responsible for some of the morphological simplification of Old English, including the loss of grammatical gender and cases (Bragg 2003). The majority of words that constitute Modern English do not come from Old English roots (only about one sixth of known Old English words have descendants surviving today), but almost all of the 100 most commonly used words in modern English do have Old English roots. Words like " water, " " strong, " " the, " " of, " " a, " " he" " no" and many other basic modern English words derive from Old English (Bragg 2003). Still, the English language we know today is a far cry from its Old English ancestor. This is evidenced in the epic poem Beowulf, which is the best known surviving example of Old English (McCrum, et al 1986), but which must be read in

translation to modern English by all but those relative few who have studied the work in the original. The Old English period ended with the Norman Conquest, when the language was influenced to an even greater extent by the French-speaking Normans. The Norman Conquest and Middle English (1100-1500) In 1066, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons. After the invasion, the Norman kings and the nobility spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman, while English continued to be the language of the common people. This class distinction can still be seen in the English language today in words such as "beef" vs. "cow" and "pork" vs. "pig." The aristocracy commonly ate beef and pork, which are derivatives of Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle and hogs, retained the Germanic and ate cow and pig. Many legal terms, such as "indict," "jury," and "verdict" also have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ruled the courts. It was not uncommon for French words to replace Old English words; for example, "uncle" replaced "eam" and "crime" replaced "fren." French and English also combined to form new words, such as the French "gentle" and the Germanic "man" forming "gentleman" (Bryson 1990). To this day, French-based words hold a more official connotation than do Germanic-based ones. When the English King John lost the province of Normandy to the King of France in 1204, the Norman nobles of England began to lose interest in their properties in France and began to adopt a modified English as their native tongue. When the bubonic plague devastated Europe, the dwindling population served to consolidate wealth. The old feudal system crumbled as the new middle class grew in economic and social importance

as did their language in relation to Anglo-Norman. The highly inflected system of Old English gave way to, broadly speaking, the same system of English found today which, unlike Old English, does not use distinctive word endings. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read (albeit with some difficulty) by modern English speakers. By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility was largely over and the Statute of Pleading was adopted, making English the language of the courts and Parliament. Edward the III became the first king to address Parliament in English in 1362, and the first English government document to be published in English since the Norman Conquest was the Provisions of Oxford. And the most famous literary example of Middle English is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 with the rise of Modern English (McCrum, et al 1986). The rediscovery of classical scholarship created an influx of classical Latin and Greek words into the language. While Latin and Greek borrowings diversified the language, some scholars adopted Latin terms awkwardly and excessively, leading to the derogatory term "inkhorn." An important item for scholars, an inkhorn was simply a horn pot that held ink for quills... but later it became a deprecatory term for pedantic writers who borrowed obscure and opulent terms such as "revoluting" and "ingent affability" (Bragg 2003). The invention of the printing press also marked the division from Old English to Modern English as books became more widespread and literacy increased. Soon publishing became a marketable occupation and books written in English were often more popular than books in Latin. The printing press also served to standardize English. The written and spoken language of London already influenced the entire country, and

with the influence of the printing press, London English soon began to dominate. Indeed, London standard became widely accepted, especially in more formal contexts. Soon English spelling and grammar were fixed and the first English dictionary was published in 1604 (Bryson 1990). In the fifteenth century, the Great Vowel Shift--a series of changes in English pronunciation--further changed the English language. These purely linguistic sound changes moved the spoken language away from the so-called "pure" vowel sounds which still characterize many Continental languages today. Consequently, the phonetic pairings of most long and short vowel sounds were lost, resulting in the oddities of English pronunciation and obscuring the relationship of many English words and their foreign roots. The Great Vowel Shift was rather sudden and the major changes occurred within a century, though the shift is still in process and vowel sounds are still shortening, albeit much more gradually. The causes of the shift are highly debated. Some scholars argue that such a shift occurred due to the "massive intake of Romance loanwords so that English vowels started to sound more like French loanwords. Other scholars suggest it was the loss of inflectional morphology that started the shift" (Bragg 2003). Late-Modern English (1800-Present) The pronunciation, grammar, and spelling of Late-Modern English are essentially the same as Early-Modern English, but Late-Modern English has significantly more words due to several factors. First, discoveries during the scientific and industrial revolutions created a need for a new vocabulary. Scholars drew on Latin and Greek words to create new words such as "oxygen," "nuclear," and "protein." Scientific and technological discoveries are still ongoing and neologisms continue to this day, especially in the field

of electronics and computers. Just as the printing press revolutionized both spoken and written English, the new language of technology and the Internet places English in a transition period between Modern and Postmodern.

Second, the English language has always been a colonizing force. During the medieval and early modern periods, the influence of English quickly spread throughout Britain, and from the beginning of the seventeenth century on, Global English Recently, English has become a lingua franca, a global language that is regularly used and understood by many countries where English is not the first/native language. In fact, when Pope John Paul II went to the Middle East to retrace Christ's footsteps and addressed Christians, Muslims, and Jews, the Pope didn't speak Arabic, Italian, Hebrew, or his native Polish; instead, he spoke in English. In fact, English is used in over 90 countries, and it is the working language of the Asian trade group ASEAN and of 98 percent of international research physicists and chemists. It is also the language of computing, international communication, diplomacy, and navigation. Over one billion people worldwide are currently learning English, making it unarguably a global language. -- Posted January 27, 2008 (THEME)

VOICE ONE: This is Steve Ember. VOICE TWO: And this is Shirley Griffith with the VOA Special English program, EXPLORATIONS. Today we present the second of our two programs about the history of the English Language.

(THEME) VOICE ONE: Last week, we told how the English language developed as a result of several invasions of Britain. The first involved three tribes called the Angles, the Jutes and the Saxons. A mix of their languages produced a language called Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. It sounded very much like German. Only a few words remained from the Celts who had lived

in Britain. Two more invasions added words to Old English. The Vikings of Denmark, Norway and Sweden arrived in Britain more than one thousand years ago. The next invasion took place in the year ten sixty-six. French forces from Normandy were led by a man known as William the Conqueror. The Norman rulers added many words to English. The words "parliament," "jury," "justice," and others that deal with law come from the Norman rulers.

VOICE TWO: Over time, the different languages combined to result in what English experts call Middle English. While Middle English still sounds similar to German, it also begins to sound like Modern English. VOICE TWO(cont):

Here Warren Scheer reads the very beginning of Geoffrey Chaucer's great poem, "The Canterbury Tales" as it was written in Middle English. ("The Canterbury Tales" VOICE ONE: Chaucer wrote that poem in the late thirteen

hundreds. It was written in the language of the people. The rulers of Britain at that time still spoke the Norman French they brought with them in ten sixty-six. The kings of Britain did not speak the language of the people until the early fourteen hundreds. Slowly, Norman French was used less and less

until it disappeared. VOICE TWO: The English language was strongly influenced by an event that took place more than one thousand four hundred years ago. In the year five ninety-seven, the Roman Catholic Church began its attempt to make Christianity the religion of Britain. The language of the Catholic Church was Latin. Latin was not spoken as a language in any country at that time. But it was still used by some people. Latin made it possible for a church member from Rome to speak to a church member from Britain. Educated people from different countries could communicate using Latin. Latin had a great affect on the English language. Here are a few

examples. The Latin word “discus” became several words in English including “disk,” “dish,” and “desk.” The Latin word “quietus” became the English word “quiet.” Some English names of plants such as ginger and trees such as cedar come from Latin. So do some medical words such as cancer. VOICE ONE: English is a little like a living thing that continues to grow. English began to grow more quickly when William Caxton returned to Britain in the year fourteen hundred and sixty-six. He had been in Holland and other areas of Europe where he had learned printing. He returned to Britain with the first printing press. The printing press made it possible for almost anyone to buy a book. It helped spread education and the English language. VOICE TWO: Slowly, during the fifteenth century English became the modern language we would recognize. English speakers today would be able to communicate with English speakers in the last part of the sixteenth century. It was during this time period that the greatest writer in English produced his work. His name was William Shakespeare. His plays continue to be printed, acted in theaters, and seen in motion pictures almost four hundred years after his death. VOICE ONE: Experts say that Shakespeare’s work was written to be performed on the stage, not to be read. Yet every sound of his words can produce word pictures, and provide feelings of anger, fear, and laughter. Shakespeare’s famous play “Romeo and Juliet” is so sad that people cry when they see this famous story. The story of the power hungry King Richard the Third is another very popular play by Shakespeare. Listen as Shep O’Neal reads the beginning of “Richard the Third.” (“RICHARD THE THIRD”) VOICE TWO: The development of the English language took a giant step just nine years before the death of William Shakespeare.



Three small British ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean in sixteen-oh-seven. They landed in an area that would later become the southern American state of Virginia. They began the first of several British colonies. The name of the first small colony was Jamestown. VOICE TWO(cont): In time, people in these new colonies began to call areas of their new land by words borrowed from the native people they found living there. For example, many of the great rivers in the United States are taken from American Indian words. The Mississippi, the Tennessee, the Missouri are examples. Other Native American words included “ moccasin? the kind of shoe made of animal skin that Indians wore on their feet. This borrowing or adding of foreign words to English was a way of expanding the language. The names of three days of the week are good examples of this. The people from Northern Europe honored three gods with a special day each week. The gods were Odin, Thor and Freya. Odin’s-day became Wednesday in English, Thor’s-day became Thursday and Freya’s-day became Friday. VOICE ONE: Britain had other colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and India. The English language also became part of these colonies. These colonies are now independent, but English still is one of the languages spoken. And the English language grew as words from the native languages were added. For example, the word “ shampoo? for soap for the hair came from India. “ Banana? is believed to be from Africa. Experts cannot explain many English words. For hundreds of years, a dog was called a “ hound.? nbsp; The word is still used but not as commonly as the word “ dog.? nbsp; Experts do not know where the word “ dog? came from or when. English speakers just started using it. Other words whose origins are unknown include “ fun,?“ bad,? and “ big.?”/P> VOICE TWO:

English speakers also continue to invent new words by linking old words together. A good example is the words "motor" and "hotel". Many years ago someone linked them together into the word "motel". A motel is a small hotel near a road where people travelling in cars can stay for the night. Other words come from the first letters of names of groups or devices. A device to find objects that cannot be seen called Radio Detecting and Ranging became "Radar". The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is usually called NATO. VOICE TWO(cont): Experts say that English has more words that explain the same thing than any other language. For example, the words "large," "huge," "vast," "massive," and "enormous" all mean something really "big". VOICE ONE: People often ask how many words there are in the English language. Well, no one really knows. The Oxford English Dictionary lists about six hundred fifteen thousand words. Yet the many scientific words not in the dictionary could increase the number to almost one million. And experts are never really sure how to count English words. For example, the word "mouse". A mouse is a small creature from the rodent family. But "mouse" has another very different meaning. A "mouse" is also a hand-held device used to help control a computer. If you are counting words do you count "mouse" two times? (MUSIC) VOICE TWO: Visitors to the Voice of America hear people speaking more than forty different languages. Most broadcasters at VOA come from countries where these languages are spoken. International organizations such as VOA would find it impossible to operate without a second language all the people speak. The language that permits VOA to work is English. It is not unusual to see someone from the Mandarin Service talking to someone from the Urdu

Service, both speaking English. English is becoming the common language of millions of people worldwide, helping speakers of many different languages communicate. (THEME) VOICE ONE: This Special English program was written and produced by Paul Thompson. This is Steve Ember. VOICE TWO: And this is Shirley Griffith. Join us again next week for another EXPLORATIONS program, on the Voice of America. As an important vehicle of communication, the study of English Language arise increasingly attention of various people from the whole world. The history of English is complex and dynamic and it intimately bounds up with the history of the people who speak it because of these political, economic, technological, and military events that shape the balance of power among nations. No one country could depart from it. It was widely used everywhere and became a world language. English as world language played an necessary role in the developing of society. It went through three periods: Old English, Middle English, Modern English(Early-Modern English and Late-Modern English). But ages before even Old English came into being, many other languages had to arise and develop. The oldest of these, as far as we know, was the Indo-European family of languages, which were beginning to be spoken clear back during the Stone Age. During the Stone Age, some Indo-European people lived on the islands of Britain. They split into two groups called the Scots and the Celts. There was another group, who were not Indo-European, called Picts. Together these three peoples are known as Britons. They were constantly making war on each other to retain their own status and had their own languages. At the same time, the Greeks, far to the east of them, were building a great civilization in Europe. Many of our ideas of art, literature,

science, philosophy and government today come from the genius of these ancient people. As the Greek civilization reached a high point, another great civilization was being built in Italy by the Romans, whose language was Latin. When the Romans conquered Greece and made it part of their empire, they borrowed Greek culture which was much older and far superior to their own. After conquering all of Europe, Rome invaded Britain and made it part of the empire, in 43 A. D. Romans brought their advanced culture to the Britons. Not only did they bring their art, literature, law and the Latin language, they established schools, built buildings and roads and provided an army to protect themselves against invaders. About 410 A. D., because of their own national situation, Romans left Briton, meanwhile the Germanic peoples of northern Europe settled Britain and were developing another, separate European culture. Some groups of the Germanic peoples came to be known as Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Goths. They communicated with difficulties each other. Later on, the Germanic languages of the Angles and Saxons combined to become Anglo-Saxon. Since the Angles and Saxons had become the power in England, the Anglo-Saxon language now termed as Old English, became the very early beginning of English. Besides these tribes, four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Merican in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast. These tribes, along with the English language, may well have been wiped out altogether by Viking raiders if not for a Wessex king named Alfred the Great. After defeating the Vikings, who threatened both the English way of life and its language, Alfred the Great encouraged English literacy throughout his kingdom (McCrum, et al 1986). They imported

many North Germanic words into the language, which had a fundamental influence on English. They added basic words such as " that", " they", and " them", and also many have been responsible for some of the morphological simplification of Old English, including the loss of grammatical gender and cases. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have old English roots. Words like be, water, and strong. Old English whose best known surviving example is the poem Beowulf, lasted until about 1100. In 1066, William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons, which changed the whole course of the English Language. After the invasion, the Norman kings and the knightly class spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman, while English continued to be the language of the common people. This class distinction can still be seen in the English Language today, such as " beef" vs. " cow" and " pork" vs. " pig". The aristocracy commonly ate " beef" and " pork", which were derivatives of Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended " cattle" and " hogs", retained the Germanic and ate " cow" and " pig". Many legal terms, such as " indict", " jury" and " verdict" also have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ruled the courts. Sometimes, French words replaced Old English words, for example, " crime" instead of " firen" and " uncle" replaced " eam". And sometimes, French and Old English components combined to form a new word, for instance, they combined the French gentle and the Germanic man to form a new word gentleman. When the English King John lost an important part of its possessions abroad, the nobility gradually relinquished their continental estates. Meanwhile, social and economic changes affecting the English speaking part of population

were taking place. About 150 years later, the Black Death killed about one third of the English population. As a result of this the laboring and merchant classes grew in economic and social importance. And along with them, English won its way back into universal use. The mixture of these two languages (Old French and English) came to be known as Middle English. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, although with difficulty by modern English speakers. By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. And the statute of pleading was adopted, which made English the language of courts and it began to be used in Parliament. Edward the III became the first king to address Parliament in English in 1362, and the first English government document to be published in English since the Norman Conquest was the Provisions of Oxford. And the most famous literary example of Middle English is Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. From 1150 to 1500, about 10, 000 words borrowed from French and most of them still in use. The structure of Middle English is radically different from the structure of Old English. The changes in the English Language in this period are more extensive and fundamental than those that have taken place at any time before or since, which affected English in both its grammar and its vocabulary. Those in the grammar reduced English from a highly inflected Language to an extremely analytic one. Those in the vocabulary involved the loss of a large part of the Old English word-stock and the addition of thousands of words from French and Latin, for instance, the decay of Inflectional endings. In Old English, people often used the vowels [a, o, u, e] in inflectional endings, now the vowels were reduced generally to a uniform [e], strong verbs became weak. French

influence is much more direct and observable upon the vocabulary. We can find many words spoken in the way of French in England. For instance, plateau and reservoir. Just as we mentioned before, French is mainly used by the nobility, while the lower uneducated classes spoke English. The large number of French words borrowed during the Middle Ages has made it easy for us to go on borrowing, and the close cultural relations between France and England have furnished constant opportunity for the transfer of words, which divided by the year 1250. Before 1250, roughly 900 words, we find that many of them were such as the lower classes would become familiar with through contact with a French-speaking nobility. (baron, noble, dame, servant, messenger, feast). After the 1250, situation changed, those who had spoken French were turning increasingly to the use of English. In 1476, with the introduction printing, a new far-reaching influence on all the vernacular languages of Europe came into play. Accordingly The Renaissance brought widespread innovation in the English language. The rediscovery of classical scholarship created an influx of classical Latin and Greek words, not a few from Italian and Spanish into the language. However, the borrowing of words from other languages did not meet with universal favor. Some people adopted Latin terms excessively and roughly, leading to Inkhorn Terms, the derogatory ones. These terms included expending, evolving, ingent affabilitive. Many of them survive today. Shakespeare's character Holofernes in Loves Labor Lost is a satire of an overenthusiastic schoolmaster who is too fond of Latinism. In the fifteenth century, the sound changes and adaptation of Roman Language further the English Language. For example, the a in Old English stan (stone) became a sound like that in

law [st] in central and southern England. In the fifteenth century this sound underwent a further change so that in Shakespeare's pronunciation it has become a close o similar to its pronunciation at the present day (stone). The changes in pronunciation that English consonants underwent in passing from Old to Middle English were rather insignificant, some voiced consonants became voiceless, and vice versa, and consonants were occasionally lost. For instance w before a following o was lost when it followed another consonant: so (OE Swan), ho (who, OE hwa). These changes were not only from Old to Middle, but from Middle English to Modern. All Middle English long vowels underwent extensive alteration in passing into Modern English, for example, in Chaucer's pronunciation this vowel was like the u in full. By the sixteenth century, it seemed to have become in most words the sound we have in but leg, cut, sun, love, with the Anglo-Norman spelling of o for u. Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation (the great vowel shift) started, with vowels being pronounced shorter and shorter. From the 16th century the British had contact with many people from around the world. This, and the Renaissance of Classical learning meant that many new words and phrases entered the language.