

A short story of the english language essay sample

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



There is an old story, I don't know if you've heard it. ' The Tower of Babel' it was titled by those who wrote the most ancient and refuted book of the world: the bible. There it was stated, according to what I've read that there was a time when all the peoples of earth were one and have all one language. At the arrival in a new land, they proclaimed: " Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Ge 11: 4). So they did; a city and a tower were built. The tower could almost reach the sky, so the Lord of heaven came down to appreciate the men's work. In looking what they had built, God muttered these words: " If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them"(Ge 11: 6). I think the Lord was afraid of mankind as one, so he confused their language and made them speak more than one. Never more was there one people in the world. Mankind dispersed to distant lands, telling this same story in different tongues. Thousands of years later, we still speak different idioms but from time to time, there arises a language we all use to communicate with the most distant bothers with whom we don't share the mother tongue. That language, if I'm not wrong, has come to be called " lingua franca" which was the name of a Mediterranean language from the 11th C A. D.

This was a mixture of Italian, Greek, Old French, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic and Occitan that was used as the language of commerce and diplomacy in the eastern Mediterranean. From then on, when a language was used as a vehicular or bridge language between people with different mother tongues, they would call that idiom a " lingua franca". There has been obviously many

“lingua francas” throughout history, according to the fluctuations of political and economic power. For example, there was a time in which Latin was a “bridge language”. Why? Well, there was a time when the Catholic Church was dominant being the Pope one of the most influential advisor of many monarchs around the globe. So, Latin was the main language in books; being the most popular, and first book ever published the bible. Not only that, Latin was also one of the favourites among aristocracy. Nowadays, our lingua franca is used in almost every aspect of our lives, and on most communities of our world. One day I was watching a Japanese movie and the protagonists went on vacations to a region within the same country and used “Check in” when looking for a room on a local hotel. In a Thai drama, the protagonist flew to Korea and chose English to communicate with the locals. In almost all countries, they use the word “Shopping” when talking about a mall where you can buy varieties of products.

To be a pilot, aspirants have to learn a certain quantity of plain-related vocabulary in English because it is the official terminology that is used up in the air. No more examples are needed because it would have no sense to tell you about the reality you live through on an everyday basis. English, our lingua franca, has invaded the world but it wasn't an overnight achievement. English, as all languages has gone through many incidents. Let me take you to the beginning of this short story of English language. First, there were the Britons who occupied what has come to be known as “Great Britain”; or at least a part of it. They spoke “Celtic”, which is a term used to designate the language and culture of those early inhabitants of the British territory. Later,

there came the Romans with their annoying habits of conquering lands. They took over the Britons' land in AD43, and for 400 years southern Britain was part of the Roman Empire. In 410 A. D., the Romans left the territory but... don't get too excited; the Britons were not yet set free. Germanic tribes from Central Europe moved westwards setting along the shores of Northern Europe. These tribes included the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians; all enclosed under the name of " Anglo-Saxons".

They invaded Britain and defeated the Britons. Those poor people were pushed into the forests and the hills of the west. On top of that, their language was modified and only a dozen of Celtic words were adopted into the new Anglo-Saxon idiom. What is more, the Anglo-Saxons called the Britons " wellas", or in modern English: " foreigners". By AD600, the " new locals", the Anglo-Saxons, were settled in Britain, dividing the land into five kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, Kent, Wessex and East Anglia. The different " cynings" or " kings", as they are called now, had constant fights over the lands and from time to time there arose a " bretwalda" which meant " the king of all Britain". The five kingdoms divided the land into different accents that, believe it or not, have survived until now. Another thing, which is very interesting, is that at that time " Old English" (the precedent of English as we know it nowadays) was not the official language, nor the most spoken one. " Old English" was merely a foreign language that was well enriched by many Germanic words. Although much of Modern English comes from the Anglo-Saxon invaders, there were many other cultures and civilizations that contributed to its construction.

For example, during the reign of one of the kings of Kent, king Ethelberht (reigned c. 560-616); English was influenced by Latin and Greek. How? Well, he married Bertha, the Christian daughter of the king of Paris, and was the first British king to convert to Christianity. Moreover, in 597, St. Augustine's mission from the Pope to Britain prompted thousands of such conversions. By the end of the 8th Century, Britain had been invaded again. This time, the Danes were the ones who disturbed the Anglo-Saxons, not only once but for several years. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles the first invasion of the " Vikings" (as the Danes were also called), when they destroyed the Monastery of Lindisfarne, was described as a dreadful day. They wrote: " There were terrible lightning storms, and fiery dragons flew through the air. Heathen men sucked God's church at Lindisfarne". Vikings reign did last some years, but the Anglo-Saxons returned to power with the victory of the West Saxon king: Alfred the Great (king of Wessex) in 871. Those who study this moment in history say that King Alfred's victory over the Danes saved the British kingdom and the English language. Although he wasn't able to defeat the Danes completely, he extended Wessex to West Mercia and Kent.

Alfred greatest wish was to unite his people under a sense of " Englishness". To fulfil this ultimate goal, Alfred advocated justice and order and established a code of laws and a reformed coinage. Moreover, he strongly highlighted the importance of education and encouraged the use of English for writing and speaking (ordering, for example, the translation of books from Latin to English). You might wonder what happened with the Danes. Well, they were driven to the north and occupied Northumbria, East Anglia and

East Mercia. Their territory was known as “ Danelaw”. These lines between king Alfred’s territory and the Danelaw (divided in the north and East between the rivers Thames and Tees) marked different varieties in the English language. In the north, for instance, there was the “ Yorkshire” variety which was full of Viking words as the ones ending in “ TON” (e. g: “ Bolton”, “ Pocklington”). In the year 1000, however, there were centres of power for the language. When you come to wonder which these centres were, the first places that may come to your mind are London (the king’s home), Winchester (where they had the trains and people writing manuscripts), but actually, the real centres of the development of English in the direction in which it was going to be as modern English were places like Wharfedale, where Saxons and Danes converged and negotiated meanings to communicate.

This story has not reached its end just yet, because in the year 1066 the English language had to face another invasion, the Norman invasion. This first invasion was headed by Duke William of Normandy who launched his forces to attack the Vikings when people in British land were unassembled, not to say that there were many social upheavals. From then onwards, and for 300 years to be precise, French speaking kings ruled what we know now as “ the United Kingdom”. It is said that William, the first Norman king of the British kingdom tried to learn English at the age of 43 but couldn’t arguing that he was “ too busy to keep it up”. The kings that were to come after William were often ignorant of their kingdoms language. This meant that French was the language used for government, law and administration.

Notice that even nowadays “ Parliament” and “ Castle” are used, words that have a French origin.

Moreover, the Church was another environment where French was preferred (apart from Latin). Away from the French speaking court, however, it is believed that English was the idiom most used among the citizens. It is supposed that French knights married English women and had English-speaking children. Furthermore, some linguists claim that by the year 1250 “ Anglo-norman” children were learning French as a foreign language, as there were books prepared for English speakers to learn French. Thus, it can be stated that the French from the castles did not replace English, but it did had an influence on it. Though I have already mentioned two words that are used in English and have French origin, I could add “ Royal” or “ Sovereign”, or even “ Café”, and many, many more. Actually, some linguists describe the Norman Conquest as a blessing in disguise, because English vocabulary gained over 10. 000 words. Not only that, the language structure was modified, going from what is called “ Old English” to “ Middle English”. This change was seen especially in the use of prepositions instead of some word endings, and in the order of words in sentences. By the year 1350 a “ Latinised” and “ Frenchified” English was spoken by merchants, courtiers and scholars of the capital.

This variety gave them prestige, superiority, and was known as the beginning of Standard English. This resurgence of English as the language of power, was first shown when in 1362 it was used at the opening of Parliament. Here, literature had its contribution also. Between the years

1380 and 1400, the Canterbury Tales were written by the father of the great English literary tradition: Geoffrey Chaucer. What a challenge it is to understand all the meaning conveyed in his words from our modern perspective. Imagine what a challenge it was to print his words taking into account that at that time English was mostly an oral language. This is the kind of hard work that William Caxton had to deal with when he set his printing press in 1476. Caxton was then, the first in printing books in English, and he was the one that materialized Chaucer's master piece. The problem for him was that he had to adapt Chaucer's manuscript so most people would understand it and therefore buy it. Furthermore, as people at that time tended to spell the way they spoke, and there were many accents, there were also variant spellings for almost every English word.

So he decided to adopt " London English", the English of the monarchs and the capital. Later printers followed into Caxton's footsteps and adapted words to pages even before the spelling of those words was consensus among writers. This was the beginning of a more standardized way of spelling and pronouncing English words. The " Great Vowel shift" was the name authors chose to refer to the shift in English words' pronunciation to the way they are pronounced today. There was another significant modification of English language in the late 15th C as theatre captivated not only the crown but also peoples of all kind. The English of the play scripts and spoken by actors modified English. During the Elizabethan era (from 1558 to 1603) many literature writers emerged exalting English language. It is impossible to talk about this English period without naming Shakespeare's

master pieces. One might think that his words were formal and that he only used the English of aristocracy. In fact, Shakespeare's approach to words was the simplification of terms as he wanted his plays to be popular.

For this to happen he wrote in a way everyone would understand. From members of aristocracy to the commoners, they would all laugh and cry in the same scenes and with the same scripts. That's may be why after hundreds of years his words are still remembered. Afterwards, the discovery of the Americas was another factor that altered English language. English started to travel to distant lands which provoked the adoption of many foreign terms into English. Furthermore, many new words were created by the addition of new prefixes (e. g: uncomfortable, underground) and suffixes (e. g: laughable, investment). Additionally, English was spread into the new colonies, particularly in the territory that is now known as the U. S. A. There English took new accents and words that marked a line between U. K English and the later American English. Later, the Industrial Revolution brought with it many new terms to name the latest developments in science and technology. Moreover, in these modern times the novel became the most preferred genre among people. This caused the introduction of a wider range of spoken and non-standard English into the written form

. What is more, in 1884, a project to compile a " New English Dictionary" begun. Years later, the Oxford English Dictionary was created. It seems this was a time of agreement because in the early 20th C BBC accent was acknowledged by public broadcasting as being the proper way to speak. By the end of this same century, English has already gone worldwide merging

with other local idioms in some cases as many ex colonial territories defended their national identity (promoting local varieties of English language). There is much more to be said about English of course, but for the purposes of this short story of English, it has been enough. The only thing left to be said is that as a backpacker, English has walked very distant paths, crossing lines and borders. It has fought many battles and survived many invasions making its way to become today's world language.

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