

HISTORY OF ENGLISH

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The English language is spoken by 750 million people in the world as either the official language of a nation, a second language, or in a mixture with other languages (such as pidgins and creoles.) English is the official language in England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; however, the United States has no official language.

English was brought to Britain in the 5th Century AD by Germanic settlers from various parts of northwest Germany. The original Old English language was subsequently influenced by two successive waves of invasion. The first was by speakers of languages in the Scandinavian branch of the Germanic family, who colonised parts of Britain in the 8th and 9th centuries. The second wave was of the Normans in the 11th century, who spoke Norman (language closely related to French).

The history of the language can be traced back to the arrival of three Germanic tribes to the British Isles during the 5th Century AD. Angles, Saxons and Jutes crossed the North Sea from what is the present day Denmark and northern Germany. The inhabitants of Britain previously spoke a Celtic language. Most of the Celtic speakers were pushed into Wales, Cornwall and Scotland. One group migrated to the Brittany Coast of France where their descendants still speak the Celtic Language of Breton today. The Angles were named from Engle, their land of origin. Their language was called Englisc from which the word, English derives.

Old English (449 – 1066 CE)

It is convenient to divide English into periods – Old English , Middle English, and Modern English.

The Old English language (also called Anglo-Saxon) dates back to 449 CE. The Celts had been living in England when the Romans invaded. Although they invaded twice, they did not conquer the Celts until 43 CE and Latin never overtook the Celtic language. The Romans finally left England in 410 CE as the Roman Empire was collapsing, leaving the Celts defenseless. Then the Germanic tribes from the present-day area of Denmark arrived. The four main tribes were the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians. These tribes set up seven kingdoms called the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy that included: Mercia, Northumbria, Kent, Wessex, Sussex, Essex, and East Anglia. Four dialects were spoken in these kingdoms: West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian and Northumbrian. The Celts moved north to Scotland, west to Ireland and south to France, leaving the main area of Britain. They had destroyed the Roman civilization in England and built their own, while dominance shifted among the kingdoms beginning with Kent and Northumbria. They aligned with the Celtic clergy and converted to Christianity. Laws and contracts were written down for a sense of permanence and control. The Tribal Hidage, a list of subjects who owed tribute to the king, was written during the Mercian period of power.

Alfred the Great was the king of Wessex from 871-899 while Wessex was the dominant kingdom. During his reign, he united the kingdoms together and commissioned the Anglo-Saxon chronicles, a historical record of important events in England that continued 200 years after his death. Alfred also settled a truce with the Vikings who repeatedly invaded the area. The Treaty of Wedmore was signed in 878 CE and this "Danelaw" gave the northeast

half of England to the Danes for settlement. However, because the languages were so similar, the Danes quickly assimilated and intermarried into the English society.

Although the Danes brought their own writing system with them, called the Futhorc, it was not used in England. It is commonly referred to as Runes. The Insular Hand was the name of the writing system used in England, and it contained many symbols that are no longer found in Modern English: the aesc, thorn, edh, yogh and wynn, as well the macron for distinguishing long vowels.

Middle English (1066 – 1500 CE)

The period of Middle English begins with the Norman invasion of 1066 CE. King Edward the Confessor had died without heirs, and William, Duke of Normandy, believed that he would become the next king. However, upon learning that Harold was crowned king, William invaded England, killed Harold and crowned himself king during the famous Battle of Hastings. Yet William spoke only French. As a result, the upper class in England began to speak French while the lower classes spoke English.

But by 1250 CE, French began to lose its prestige. King John had lost Normandy to the French in 1204 CE, and after him, King Edward I spoke only English. At this time, many foreigners entered England which made the nobility feel more "English" and so encouraged more use of the English language. The upper class tried to learn English, but they did still use French words sometimes, which was considered somewhat snobbish. French still maintained its prestige elsewhere, and the upper class did not want to lose it completely. Nevertheless, the Hundred Year's War (1337-1453 CE) intensified hatred of all things French. The Black Death also played a role in increasing English use with the emergence of the middle class. Several of the workers had been killed by the plague, which increased the status of the peasants, who only spoke English. By 1362 CE, the Statute of Pleading (although written in French) declared English as the official spoken language of the courts. By 1385 CE, English was the language of instruction in schools. 1350 to 1400 CE is known as the Period of Great Individual Writers (most famously, Chaucer), but their works included an apology for writing in English.

Although the popularity of French was decreasing, several words (around 10,000) were borrowed into English between 1250 and 1500 CE (though most of these words were Parisian rather than Norman French). Many of the words were related to government (sovereign, empire), law (judge, jury, justice, attorney, felony, larceny), social life (fashion, embroidery, cuisine, appetite) and learning (poet, logic, physician). Furthermore, the legal system retained parts of French word order (the adjective following the noun) in such terms as fee simple, attorney general and accounts payable.

Beginnings of Modern English

In England, several changes to English had occurred since 1700. These include a loss of the post-vocalic r (so that the r is only pronounced before a vowel and not after); an increase in the use of the progressive tenses; and a rise in class consciousness about speech (Received Pronunciation.) Since 1900, a very large amount of vocabulary words has been added to English in a relatively short period. The majority of these words are related to science and technology, and use Greek and Latin roots.

American English

Immigrants from Southeastern England began arriving on the North American continent in the early 1600's. By the mid-1800's, 3.5 million immigrants left the British Isles for the United States. The American English language is characterized by archaisms (words that changed meaning in Britain, but remained in the colonies) and innovations in vocabulary (borrowing from the French and Spanish who were also settling in North America). Noah Webster was the most vocal about the need for an American national identity with regards to the American English language. He wrote an American spelling book, The Blueback Speller,

in 1788 and changed several spellings from British English (colour became color, theatre became theater, etc.) In 1828, he published his famous American Dictionary of the English Language.

Dialects in the United States resulted from different waves of immigration of English speakers, contact with other languages, and the slave trade, which had a profound impact on African American English. A dialectal study was done in 1920 and the findings are published in the Linguistics Atlas of the U.S. and Canada.

English around the World

Although the United Kingdom, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have English as an official language, the United States does not have an official language. This is how it's possible to become a US citizen without speaking English. Canada also has French as an official language, though it is mostly spoken in the province of Quebec. Because many of the English speakers who originally inhabited Canada came from the US, there is little difference in the American and Canadian dialects of English. Similarly, Australian and New Zealand English have few differences, except Australia was originally settled as a penal colony and New Zealand was not. New Zealanders were more attached to the Received Pronunciation of the upper class in England, so their dialect is considered closer to British English.

Cockney (and its Rhyming Slang) is an interesting dialect of English spoken in London's east end. The initial h of words is dropped, glottal stops are used frequently and labiodentals are used in place of interdental. The Rhyming Slang refers to a word by referring to two things, the last of which rhymes with what is being referred to. For examples, money is "bees and honey," gloves is "turtle doves," suit is "whistle and flute" and trouble is "Barney Rubble." Even more confusing, sometimes the second word (which rhymes with the word being referred to) is omitted, so that money is called just "bees."

British colonialism has spread English all over the world, and it still holds prestige in South Africa, India, and Singapore, among other nations. In South Africa, English became an official language, along with Afrikaans and 9 African languages, in the 1996 constitution. However, only 3% of the country's 30 million people are native English speakers. Twenty percent are descendants of Dutch farmers who speak Afrikaans, and the rest are native Africans. Although the British won the Boer Wars of 1899-1901 against the Dutch farmers (the Boers), Britain still promised the Boers self-government under the Union of South Africa. By 1948, these Afrikaners won state elections and remained in power through the 1990's. Apartheid (which segregated the Afrikaners and Africans) officially ended under Nelson Mandela's reign, and although Afrikaans was the language used more often, the Africans wanted English as the official language. Hence the compromise of 11 official languages.

India became an independent from Britain in 1947, and the English language was supposed to be phased out by 1965. However, today English and Hindi are the official languages. Indian English is characterized by treating mass nouns as count nouns, frequent use of the "isn't it?" tag, use of more compounds, and a different use of prepositions. In Singapore, Chinese, Malay and Indian languages have an impact on the form of English spoken. Everyone is taught English in the school system, but there are a few differences from British English as well. Mass nouns are treated as count nouns, "use to" means usually, and no articles are used before occupations.

Creoles of English can be found on the coast of West Africa, China, and on islands of the Pacific and Caribbean (especially the West Indies.) Originally, these creoles were pidgins so that English-speaking traders could conduct business. Over time, they became the native languages of the children and evolved into creoles.