

A short history of the English language

Ever wondered how English with approximately 750,000 words came to be the wonderfully expressive and multifaceted language it is today?

Unlike languages that developed within the boundaries of one country (or one distinct geographical region), English, since its beginnings 1,600 or so years ago, evolved by crossing boundaries and through invasions, picking up bits and pieces of other languages along the way and changing with the spread of the language across the globe.

Old English (450-1100)

The history of the English language really started with the arrival of three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. These tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and northern Germany. At that time the inhabitants of Britain spoke a Celtic language. But most of the Celtic speakers were pushed west and north by the invaders – mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from “Englaland” [sic] and their language was called “Englisc” – from which the words “England” and “English” are derived. Their language, now known as “Old English”, was soon adopted as the common language of this relatively remote corner of Europe. Although you and I would find it hard to understand Old English, it provided a solid foundation for the language we speak today and gave us many essential words like “be”, “strong” and “water”.

Middle English (1100 – 1500)

The Viking invasion: With the Viking invasions (Vikings were a tribe of Nordic people that ransacked their way through Northern and Northwestern Europe 1,000-1,200 years ago), Old English got mixed up with Old Norse, the language of the Viking tribes. Old Norse ended up giving English more than 2,000 new words, including “give” and “take”, “egg”, “knife”, “husband”, “run” and “viking”.

The French are coming: Although English was spoken widely on the British Isles by 1,000 AD, the Norman invasion established French as the language of royals and of power. Old English was left to the peasants, and despite its less glamorous status, it continued to develop and grow by adopting a whole host of Latin and French words, including everyday words such as “beer”, “city”, “fruit” and “people”, as well as half of the months of the year. By adopting and adapting French words, the English language also became more sophisticated through the inclusion of concepts and words like “liberty” and “justice”.

Modern English

Early Modern English (1500 – 1800) – the tempest ends in a storm: In the 14th-15th century, following the Hundred Years War with France that ended French rule of the British Isles, English became the language of power and influence once again. It got a further boost through the development of English literature and English culture, spearheaded by William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare’s influence on the development of the English language and its unique and rich culture is hard to grasp; the man is said to have invented at least 1,700 words, including “alligator”, “puppy dog”, and “fashionable”, in addition to penning classics like Romeo & Juliet and Hamlet!

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 peoples from around the world. This, and the Renaissance of Classical learning, meant that many new words and phrases entered the language. The invention of printing also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read. Printing also brought standardization to English. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the dialect of London, where most publishing houses were, became the standard. In 1604 the first English dictionary was published.

Last Modern English (1800 – Present): The main difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is vocabulary. Late Modern English has many more words, arising from two principal factors: firstly, the Industrial Revolution and technology created a need for new words; secondly, the English-speaking world was at the center of a lot of scientific progress, scientific advances went hand-in-hand with the evolution of the language.

English goes global

From around 1600, the English colonization of North America resulted in the creation of a distinct American variety of English. Some English pronunciations and words “froze” when they reached America. In some ways, American English is more like the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Some expressions that the British call “Americanisms” are in fact original British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost for a time in Britain (for example trash for rubbish, loan as a verb instead of lend, and fall for autumn; another example, frame-up, was re-imported into Britain through Hollywood gangster movies). Spanish also had an influence on American English (and subsequently British English), with words like canyon, ranch, stampede and vigilante being examples of Spanish words that entered English through the settlement of the American West. French words (through Louisiana) and West African words (through the slave trade) also influenced American English (and so, to an extent, British English).

Today, American English is particularly influential, due to the USA’s dominance of cinema, television, popular music, trade and technology (including the Internet). But there are many other

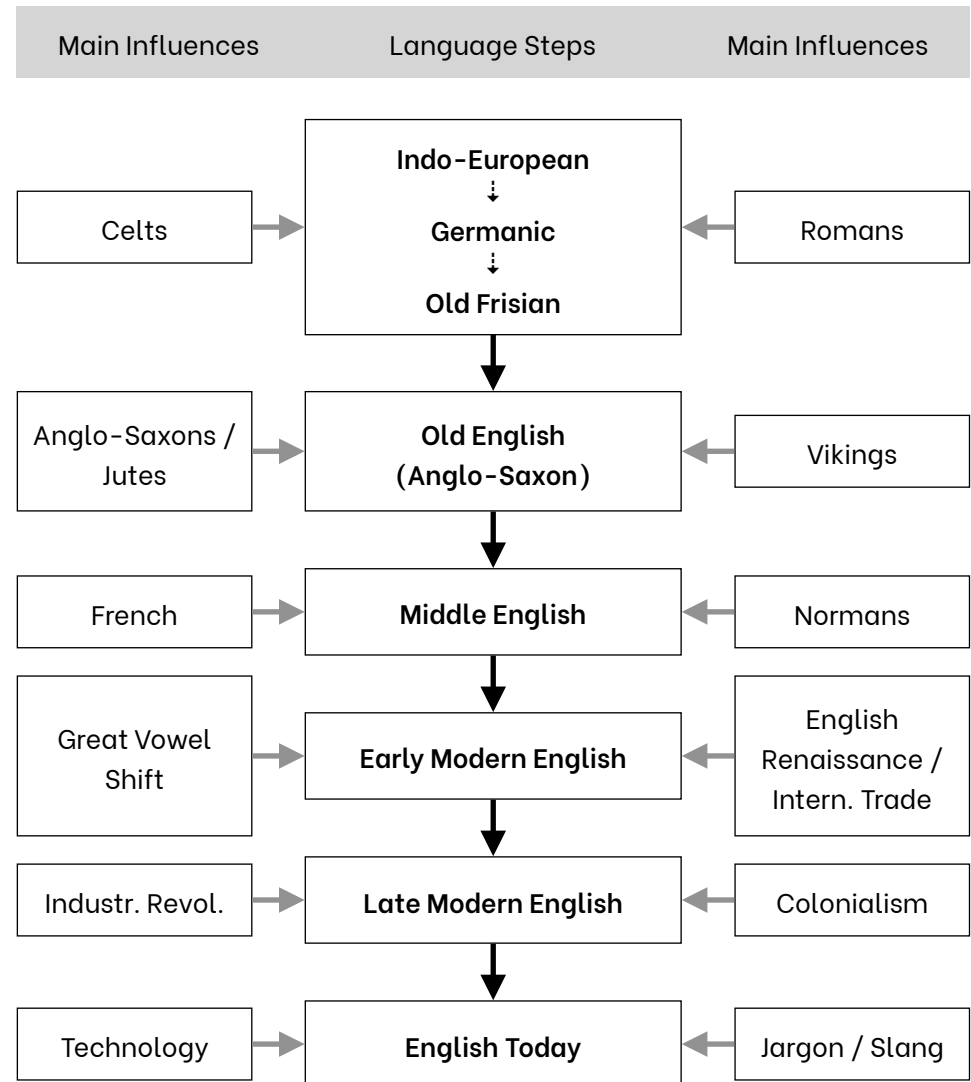
varieties of English around the world, including for example Australian English, New Zealand English, Canadian English, South African English, Indian English and Caribbean English.

English of the 21st century

And on that note: the most amazing thing about English is that it's still evolving. From the development of local dialects and slang in countries as far apart as the US, South Africa and New Zealand, and in cities as different as New York, Oxford and Singapore, to the incorporation of tech vocabulary into everyday English. English is in a constant state of flux.

Vocabulary alone is increasing at a pace of approximately 1,000 new and approved words per year; and these are just the words that are considered important enough to get added to the online version of the English Dictionary! This dramatic increase in new words is largely due to technology, and how people spontaneously coin new words in their email and text transmissions that spread quickly and efficiently via social media. A large percentage of new words are portmanteau words, also called blended words — a word that combines the meaning of two discrete words; for example, cineplex is formed from cinema and complex, bromance is formed from brother and romance, staycation is formed from stay and vacation. You get the idea.

<https://www.lingualearnenglish.com/blog/featured/a-short-history-of-the-english-language/>
[2020-07-08]



Source: <https://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/> [2020-07-08]