

ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY



English is an Anglo-Frisian language 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. Keep reading to learn more.

English Language

English is a West Germanic language which is the dominant language in the United Kingdom, the United States, many Commonwealth nations including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and other former British colonies. It is the second most spoken language in the world. It is estimated that there are 380 million native speakers and 300 million who use English as a second language and a further 100 million use it as a foreign language. It is the language of science, aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. It is listed as the official or co-official language of over 45 countries and is spoken extensively in other countries where it has no official status. English plays a part in the cultural, political or economic life of the following countries. Majority English speaking populations are shown in bold.

- **Antigua**
- **Australia**
- **Bahamas**
- **Barbados**
- **Belize**
- **Bermuda**
- Botswana
- Brunei (with Malay)
- Cameroon (with French)
- **Canada** (with French)
- **Dominica**
- Fiji
- Gambia
- Ghana
- **Grenada**
- **Guyana**
- India (with several Indian languages)
- **Ireland** (with Irish Gaelic)
- **Jamaica**
- Kenya (with Swahili)
- Kiribati
- **New Zealand**
- Nigeria
- Pakistan (with Urdu)
- Papua New Guinea
- Philippines (with Tagalog)
- Puerto Rico (with Spanish)
- **St Christopher and Nevis**
- **St Lucia**
- **St Vincent**
- Senegal (with French)
- Seychelles (with French)
- Sierra Leone
- Singapore (with Malay, Mandarin and Tamil)
- **South Africa** (with Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu)
- Surinam (with Dutch)
- Swaziland (with Swazi)
- Tanzania (with Swahili)
- Tonga (with Tongan)
- **Trinidad and Tobago**
- Tuvalu
- Uganda

- Lesotho (with Sotho)
- Liberia
- Malawi (with Chewa)
- Malta (with Maltese)
- Mauritius
- Namibia (with Afrikaans)
- Nauru (with Nauruan)
- **United Kingdom** and its dependencies
- **United States of America** and its dependencies
- Vanatu (with French)
- Western Samoa (with Samoan)
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

History of the English Language

English is an Anglo-Frisian language 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 (an oil 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. This was quickly displaced. 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.

It is convenient to divide English into periods—Old English (or Anglo-Saxon; to c.1150), Middle English (to c.1500), and Modern English.

Old English

The invaders dominated the original Celtic-speaking inhabitants, whose languages survived largely in Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. The dialects spoken by the invaders formed what is now called Old English. Later, it was strongly influenced by the North Germanic language Norse, spoken by the Vikings who settled mainly in the north-east. The new and the earlier settlers spoke languages from different branches of the Germanic family; many of their lexical roots were the same or similar, although their grammars were more distant, including the prefixes, suffixes and inflections of many of their words. The Germanic language of these Old English inhabitants of Britain was influenced by the contact with Norse invaders, which may have been responsible for some of the morphological simplification of Old English, including loss of grammatical gender and explicitly marked case (with the notable exception of the

pronouns). The most famous work from the Old English period is the epic poem "Beowulf", by an unknown poet.

The introduction of Christianity added the first wave of Latin and Greek words to the language. It has been argued that the Danish contribution continued into the early Middle Ages. The Old English period ended with the Norman conquest, when the language was influenced, to an even greater extent, by the Norman French-speaking Normans.

The use of Anglo-Saxon to describe a merging of Anglian and Saxon languages and cultures is a relatively modern development. According to Lois Fundis, (Stumpers-L, Fri, 14 Dec 2001) "The first citation for the second definition of 'Anglo-Saxon', referring to early English language or a certain dialect thereof, comes during the reign of Elizabeth I, from a historian named Camden, who seems to be the person most responsible for the term becoming well-known in modern times."

Middle English

For the 300 years following the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Norman kings and the high nobility spoke only a variety of French called Anglo-Norman. English continued to be the language of the common people. While the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle continued until AD 1154, most other literature from this period was in Old French or Latin. A large number of Norman words were assimilated into Old English, with some words doubling for Old English words (for instance, ox/beef, sheep/mutton). The Norman influence reinforced the continual evolution of the language over the following centuries, resulting in what is now referred to as Middle English. Among the changes was a broadening in the use of a unique aspect of English grammar, the "continuous" tenses, with the suffix "-ing". English spelling was also influenced by French in this period, with the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds being spelled th rather than with the letters þ and ð, which did not exist in French. During the 15th century, Middle English was transformed by the Great Vowel Shift, the spread of a standardised London-based dialect in government and administration, and the standardising effect of printing. Modern English can be traced back to around the time of William Shakespeare. The most well-known work from the Middle English period is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

Various contemporary sources suggest that within fifty years most of the Normans outside the royal court had switched to English, with French remaining the prestige language largely out of social inertia. For example, Orderic Vitalis, a historian born in 1075 and the son of a Norman knight, said that he only learned French as a second language.

English literature starts to reappear circa AD 1200, when a changing political climate, and the decline in Anglo-Norman, made it more respectable. By the end of that century, even the royal court had switched back to English. Anglo-Norman remained in use in specialised circles for a while longer, but it had ceased to be a living language.

Modern English

From the late 15th century, the language changed into Modern English, often dated from the Great Vowel Shift.

English is continuously assimilating foreign words, especially Latin and Greek, causing English to have the largest vocabulary of any language in the world. As there are many words from different languages the risk of mispronunciation is high, but remnants of the older forms remain in a few regional dialects, notably in the West Country.

In 1755 Samuel Johnson published the first significant English dictionary.

American English and other varieties

Also significant beginning around 1600 AD was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of American English. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, some varieties of American English are closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern Standard English ('English English' or as it is often incorrectly termed 'British English') is. Some "Americanisms" are actually originally English English expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., fall as a synonym for autumn, trash for rubbish, and loan as a verb instead of lend).

The American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like Mississippi, Roanoke, and Iowa. Indian-sounding names like Idaho were sometimes created that had no native-American roots. But, names for other things besides places were also common. Raccoon, tomato, canoe, barbecue, savanna, and hickory have native American roots, although in many cases the original Indian words were mangled almost beyond recognition.

Spanish has also been great influence on American English. Mustang, canyon, ranch, stampede, and vigilante are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West.

A lesser number of words have entered American English from French and West African languages.

Likewise dialects of English have developed in many of the former colonies of the British Empire. There are distinct forms of the English language spoken in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and many other parts of the world.