

## **THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY : BRIEF OVERVIEW**

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The English language has had a remarkable history. English we have today had to overcome many changes and difficulties on the way of its development to win the second (but not long ago it used to be the first) place among the most spoken languages in the world. Though English doesn't have the most speakers, it is the official language of more countries than any other language. Its speakers hail from all around the world, including New Zealand, the U.S., Australia, England, Zimbabwe, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, South Africa, and Canada. It's the world's language of business, technology, sport, and aviation etc. Moreover, English has the largest vocabulary with approximately 500,000 words and 300,000 technical terms.

The English language belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The English language dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century and takes its origin from Germanic dialects. The grammar of English is also distinctly Germanic – three genders (he, she and it) and a simple set of verb tenses.

As any living organism (speaking about the language), the English language has undergone a lot of substantial changes due to both internal and external factors. Needless to say that all the wars, invasions, social issues, conditions of living influenced the development of language (changes in phonetics, grammar and vocabulary). Over the centuries, the English language has been influenced by a number of other languages. Regarding all these factors, it's not surprising that at first the English language was a synthetic language (a language with a high morpheme-per-word ratio) but now it's analytic (a language that conveys grammatical relationships without using inflectional morphemes with a strict word order in the sentence).

According to the historical classification the English language has traditionally been divided into three main periods: **Old English** (450-1100 AD), **Middle English** (1100-circa 1500 AD) and **Modern English** (since 1500).

Old English (450 - 1100 AD): During the 5th Century AD three Germanic tribes (Saxons, Angles, and Jutes) came to the British Isles from various parts of northwest Germany as well as Denmark. These tribes were warlike and pushed out most of the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants from England into Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. One group migrated to the Brittany Coast of France where their descendants still speak the Celtic Language of Breton today. Through the years, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes mixed their different Germanic dialects. This group of dialects forms what linguists refer to as Old English or Anglo-Saxon. The word "English" was in Old English "Englisc", and that comes from the name of the Angles. The Angles were named from Engle, their land of origin. Before the Saxons the language spoken in what is now England was a mixture of Latin and various Celtic languages which were spoken before the Romans came to Britain (54 BC). The Romans brought Latin to Britain, which was part of the Roman Empire for over 400 years. Many of the words passed on from this era are those coined by Roman merchants and soldiers (*win (wine), candel (candle), belt (belt), weall(wall)*).

The influence of Celtic upon Old English was slight. In fact, very few Celtic words have lived on in the English language. But many of place and river names have Celtic origins: *Kent, York, Dover, Cumberland, Thames, Avon, Trent, Severn* etc.

The arrival of St. Augustine in 597 and the introduction of Christianity into Saxon England brought more Latin words into the English language. They were mostly concerned with the naming of Church dignitaries, ceremonies (*church, bishop, baptism, monk, eucharist* and *presbyter*).

Around 878 AD Danes and Norsemen, also called Vikings, invaded the country and English got many Norse words into the language, particularly in the north of England. The Vikings, being Scandinavian, spoke a language (*Old Norse*) which, in origin at least, was just as Germanic as Old English. Words derived from Norse

include: *sky, egg, cake, skin, leg, window, fellow, skill, anger, flat, odd, ugly, get* etc. Several written works have survived from the Old English period. The most famous is a heroic epic poem called "*Beowulf*". It is the oldest known English poem and it is notable for its length - 3,183 lines. Experts say "*Beowulf*" was written in Britain more than one thousand years ago. The name of the person who wrote it is unknown.

*Middle English (1100-circa 1500 AD)*: After William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England in 1066 AD with his armies and became king, he brought his nobles, who spoke French, to be the new government. The Old French took over as the language of the court, administration, and culture. Latin was mostly used for written language, especially that of the Church. Meanwhile, the English language, as the language of the now lower class, was considered a vulgar tongue.

By about 1200, England and France had split. English changed a lot, because it was mostly being spoken instead of written for about 300 years. The use of Old English came back, but with many French words added. This language is called Middle English. Most of the words embedded in the English vocabulary are words of power ( *crown, castle, court, parliament, army, mansion, gown, beauty, banquet, art*). The Middle English is also characterized for the beginning of the Great Vowel Shift. It was a massive sound change affecting the long vowels of English. The most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer's "*The Canterbury Tales*", a collection of stories about a group of thirty people who travel as pilgrims to Canterbury, England.

*Modern English (1500 to the present)*: Modern English developed after William Caxton established his printing press at Westminster Abbey in 1476. Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in Germany around 1450, but Caxton set up England's first press. The Bible and some valuable manuscripts were printed. The invention of the printing press made books available to more people. The books became cheaper and more people learned to read.

By the time of Shakespeare's writings (1592-1616), the language had become

clearly recognizable as Modern English. It was during the English Renaissance that most of the words from Greek and Latin entered English. This period in English cultural history (early 16th century to the early 17th century) is sometimes referred to as "*the age of Shakespeare*" or "*the Elizabethan era*". England began the Industrial Revolution (18th century) and this had also an effect on the development of the language as new words had to be invented or existing ones modified to cope with the rapid changes in technology. New technical words were added to the vocabulary as inventors designed various products and machinery. These words were named after the inventor or given the name of their choice (*trains, engine, pulleys, combustion, electricity, telephone, telegraph, camera* etc).

Britain was an Empire for 200 years between the 18th and 20th centuries and English language continued to change as the British Empire moved across the world - to the USA, Australia, New Zealand, India, Asia and Africa. They sent people to settle and live in their conquered places and as settlers interacted with natives, new words were added to the English vocabulary. For example, '*kangaroo*' and '*boomerang*' are native Australian Aborigine words, '*juggernaut*' and '*turban*' came from India.

English continues to change and develop, with hundreds of new words arriving every year. But even with all the borrowings from many other languages the heart of the English language remains the Anglo-Saxon of Old English.