

## The origin, growth and development of the English Language

Sir William Jones (1746-1794) came to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1783 as judge of the Supreme Court of India. He was a classical scholar with a passion for Greek and Latin literatures. He knew Hebrew, Arabic and Persian when he came to India. He learnt Sanskrit after coming here. In 1784, he founded the Asiatic Society (modelled on the Royal Society of England) to promote Oriental research. Jones served as the President of the Society for ten years from its foundation.

At the meeting of the Asiatic Society in February, 1786 Jones presented a theory that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek had so much similarity in terms of vocabulary and grammar. He hypothesized that these languages could “have sprung from some common source.” He also added Persian, Germanic and Celtic languages to the same family. Inspired by Jones’ above proposition, German philologists searched for the supposed common source between Sanskrit and the European languages. This search led them to discovery of the Indo-European family of languages. Almost half of the world population speak about 400 Indo-European languages. English and German belong to the West Germanic branch of this largest family of languages.

All great languages have humble beginnings and English is not an exception. English began in what is now Britain as ‘a transplanted variety’ of Low German. It did not begin as a single, homogenous language. The Celts had settled in Britain about 400 BC. A Celtic king sought the help of the Jutes to fight the tribes of the Scots and the Picts. About 449 AD, the Jutes migrated in great numbers from their homeland in Jutland (Denmark and north Germany) and settled in Kent. Two more Germanic tribes – the Angles and the Saxons – followed them to Britain. The native Celts fled to Wales and Scotland for safety. Some of the Celts crossed the sea and settled in what is now Brittany in northern France.

The three Germanic tribes that settled in Britain spoke various dialects of the same language - Low German. The mingling of these dialects has provided the basic structure of English. The history of the English language has been divided into three periods – Old English (600-1100), Middle English (1100-1500) and Modern English (1500 onwards). These divisions, based on some historical landmarks, are artificial. However, they serve the purposes of academic study. During the last two centuries, English has occupied the most dominant position in the world. Kenneth Katzner comments:

The spectacular advance of English across the face of the globe is a phenomenon without parallel in the history of language.

*Est. 1987*

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**Old English Period (600–1100)**

Britain had been a Roman colony for about four hundred years before the coming of the Germanic tribes. The Celtic tongues - Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish –survived the four centuries of Roman occupation. But they did not survive the migration of the Germanic tribes except in parts of Wales and Scotland. Hardly any Celtic word remains in present day English. However, the place names (London, Dover, Kent) and river names (Avon, Thames) are of the Celtic origin. About 600 AD, the Germanic dialects merged into one to create a new language - ‘Englisc’ (which later became English). The language got its name from the Angles (also spelled ‘Engels’).

From the middle of the third century, London (Londinium) was the administrative and commercial capital of the British province of the Roman Empire. English words like – candle, cup, mint, street, wall, way, wine – originate from Latin, the language of Roman Empire. The Romans left Britain in 410 AD. Latin came back to Britain very soon. However, it returned as a language of religion and not of administration. In 597, Pope Gregory I sent St. Augustine to Britain with a mission to convert the heathens to Christianity.

St. Augustine’s mission was highly successful. In the next hundred years, Christianity spread across the entire length of Britain. The Christian missionaries gave the English language its alphabet which we follow till date. Venerable Bede (672-735) wrote his history of the English people in Latin. Words that entered the English lexicon through the Church portals include abbot, angel, bishop, martyr, mass, minster, monk, priest etc.

The development of English language is associated with a series of invasions. The Vikings, from Scandinavia, began to raid Britain for plunder in 787. But from the middle of the ninth century they settled in northern and eastern parts of the country. The Vikings were also a Germanic tribe. Their language is known as Old Norse. The Britons spoke Old English at the time and it must not have been difficult for them to understand the dialects of Old Norse.

There are about 1400 words that entered English through Old Norse. The Vikings were barbarians. They fought territorial battles with the Britons till 1013. It is no wonder that they have contributed the two English words that suggest violence – ‘slaughter’ and ‘ransack’. Similarly, Old English and Old Norse words competed for a long time with each other for supremacy in English. The Old Norse word ‘anger’ overtook the Old English word ‘wrath.’ But the Old English ‘no’ and ‘from’ respectively displaced the Old Norse ‘nay’ and ‘fro’. The English words – egg, fellow, husband, skin, sky, ugly, window – are of Old Norse origin. The personal pronouns – they, them – are also from the same source. Old Norse has enriched English grammar with prepositions like down, from, in, to, up etc.

Alfred, the Great was the king of Wessex from 871 to 886. He united the Anglo-Saxon tribes (866-899) and defended his kingdom from the Vikings. He is the only English monarch to be honoured with the sobriquet ‘the Great’. Alfred, the Great promoted reading and writing of English with state assistance. He got key Latin texts, including Bede’s history, translated into English. He commissioned *the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which continued to be updated till the Norman Conquest in 1066. *Beowulf* (probably composed

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between 700-1000) is the only surviving epic in Old English. Its West Saxon dialect sounds a foreign language to the speakers of modern English. The poem shows how complex the Old English grammar was.

King Harold of England was killed on October 14, 1066 at the Battle of Hastings fighting William I, the Duke of Normandy (northern France). William, who became the next King of England, has come to be known as William, the Conqueror. The new French rulers of England were known as the Normans (Northmen). They were, in fact, the descendants of the Vikings who had settled in northern France. But they had given up Old Norse in favour of the French language.

### Middle English Period (1100–1500)

The Old English period ended with the Norman Conquest of England. The Normans themselves spoke a rural French dialect and not the standard Parisian language. But they regarded Old English as a language of peasants and lower classes. French aristocrats and educated Britons also spoke only French. The court and the government functioned only in that language – for about a century and a half.

The Normans lost their French territories in 1204 and their French connection snapped forever. The Norman loss of the French territories was the gain of the English language. The Normans had relegated Old English to a subservient position and tried their best to smother it. But English survived and revived after about first two centuries on the Norman rule. The transition from Old English to Middle English took place under the shadow of the French language.

Old Norse was a Germanic language having great similarities with Old English. French was (is) an Italic language derived from Latin with a difference in grammar and vocabulary. The contact with French caused changes in four aspects of English: grammar, pronunciation, spelling and vocabulary. Old English was a highly inflected language like German and Russian. During Middle English period inflections began to weaken and the word-order became increasingly fixed. Prepositions and periphrases began to be used in place of the lost inflections. English affixes were combined with French words or vice versa to form new words. For example, the Old English suffix 'scipe' was affixed with the French word 'compagne' to form the English noun 'companionship.' English pronunciations and spellings were changed in line with the French language.

Thousands of French words were introduced in the English language during Middle English period. The greatest impact was made on in the field of vocabulary. The ruling French were a small aristocratic nobility. The political or cultural life was their exclusive domain. Almost ninety percent of the British population was illiterate and continued to speak dialects of Old English. It is interesting to note the native English names for the animals and the French names for the meats these animals provide: calf, cow, deer, ox, sheep and swine (animals) and veal, beef, venison, mutton, bacon and pork (meats).

The new French words in Middle English dealt with the fields of government, law, food, art, literature, medicine etc. The Normans introduced the legal system in Britain. The legal terms in English – assize, attorney, indict, license, plaintiff, prison, verdict etc – are of French origin.

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By the time of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), considered ‘the Father of English Literature’, the fusion of Old English and Norman French was complete. English and England respectively became one language and one nation. Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* (1380) in English and established it as a language fit for literary expression. Chaucer knew Latin, French and Italian. His English is enriched with words and expressions from these European linguistic traditions. Thomas Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* (King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table), based on the legends of King Arthur, was published in 1485. This Middle English romance proved a public sensation at the time of its first appearance. It was reprinted several times in the sixteenth century.

The characters in *Canterbury Tales* speak various regional dialects. But the need for clarity in written communication required a standard variety of language. Because London (the national capital) and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were located in the region, the East Midlands dialect of English attained that position. Chaucer also used it. In 1362, English became the language of the Parliament and the judicial system. After the Norman Conquest, Henry IV (reigned 1399-1413) was the first British King whose mother tongue was English.

Many new words of Arabic or Eastern origin entered the language during Middle English period because of the Crusades (1096-1271). These words include algebra, assassin, azure, orange etc. John Wycliffe (1328-1384), the Oxford theologian, desired to make the Bible accessible to English people. He got the Latin Vulgate Bible translated into English with the help of his team. Initially the Church authorities did not raise any objection to the English translation but as it gained popularity among the common folk, they banned it. Wycliffe was branded a heretic. But a thousand of words derived from Latin origin gained currency in common English through Wycliffe’s translation of the Bible. Middle English period is thus remarkable for the extraordinary growth of the English vocabulary.

#### **Modern English Period (1500 onwards)**

Modern English period is further divided into two - Early Modern (1500-1700) and Late Modern (1700 onwards). But such divisions are inadequate to describe the linguistic growth and the global spread of English during the last five centuries. A wide number of factors has contributed to the growth and spread of English: the printing press, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the King James Bible, the discovery of America, the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution, the media and the Internet. Moreover, writers like Shakespeare and Milton have remarkably influenced the growth of English.

Significant phonological changes took place in English during the century following Chaucer’s death in 1400. In 1476, William Caxton brought the printing press from Germany to England. The printed word requires standard forms of grammar and spellings. Caxton had to make his choices out of available dialects. To some extent, he is responsible for the discrepancy between spellings and pronunciations of many English words.

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The Renaissance began in Europe with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. It was a period of intellectual reawakening and revival of classical learning. The Renaissance movement enriched English with thousands of Latin and Greek words. In earlier times, Latin words found their way into English via French. But during the Renaissance English borrowed Latin and Italian words directly. The Reformation was a religious and political movement which had its own impact on English. Milton called himself “the child of Renaissance and Reformation.”

One of the greatest outcomes of the Reformation was the English translation of the Bible known as the King James Bible or the Authorized Version (1611). King James I ordered that only the Authorized Version could be read in the churches in the British territories. The King James Bible has proved one single source of the deepest influence on the development of English. Shakespeare’s influence on English is second only to that of the Bible translations. He has given about 2000 words to English. Milton himself was greatly influenced by the Bible translations and Shakespeare. He has contributed about 630 new words to English.

The discovery of the New World (Americas) finally led to the European settlement in what is now the USA. The British were the dominant of all European nationalities that settled there. The discovery of the American continent has proved instrumental in the growth of a distinct variety of English. Some writers have commented that Great Britain and the USA are two nations divided by the same language – English. The Industrial Revolution and the British Empire took English to the farthest corners of the world. The media and the internet have promoted the growth of English and have also been dominated by the language.

English began as a Germanic dialect in Britain but it has been undergoing constant changes and is still changing. When Dr. Johnson published his dictionary in 1755, some people thought that English has been stabilized forever. Academy Française was established in Paris in 1635 to regulate the development of the French language. There has been no institute like this one in case of the English language. We cannot predict at present what kind of changes are going to take place in English in the next few decades.

Among Teutonic (German) languages, English has the highest Latin element in vocabulary. It has taken words from every part of the world. In spite of all the changes and borrowings, the heart of English has remained Old English of the Anglo-Saxon times. There is a remarkable degree of similarity between a number of words in English and German. Consider the following examples: apple (apfel), blue /(blau), book (buch), father (vater), fish (fisch), mother (mutter), brother (bruder), house (haus), field (feld), milk (milch), ox (ochse), to have (haben), to sing (singen), good (gut), hard (hart), I (ich), here (hier), by (bei), we (wir), water (wasser) etc.

In the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas More and Francis Bacon wrote their important works in Latin because they had little confidence in English. In fact, during the last four centuries, English has grown beyond anyone’s imagination. Today it is spoken as the first language in economically prosperous countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand etc. English also functions as an official language in many African and Asian countries. There is no doubt that English is a powerful language. In the struggle against the British for the Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi was not against English but its undue dominance. Angela Carter comments:

Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation.

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