

## BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith  
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### MY MOTHER TONGUE

A brief account of the origins and evolution of the English language.

We all have a mother tongue. Mine is the English that my grandparents brought with them from Great Britain when they came to the River Plate region about a hundred years ago. I am certainly not alone. Statistics vary but, worldwide, those whose first language is English would seem to number between 350 and 400 million. The total is much higher if non-native speakers are included, which makes English one of the most widely spoken language on Earth. But what exactly is English? Where does it come from? How did it start? To answer these questions, we must travel back in time.

The roots of the English language can be traced to a succession of migrations and conquests that took place a long time ago in the area we now call the British Isles. The earliest known inhabitant of the region was Paleolithic Man, who roamed the northwest corner of Europe as the Ice Age receded and lived in what would eventually be Great Britain. Very little is known about those hunter-gatherers, and the bones they left behind reveal nothing about the language they spoke. Such northbound migrations presumably became more difficult when the region broke away from the continent in about 6,500 BC and formed the islands we know today.

Neolithic (New Stone Age) Man appeared in the area in about 5,000 BC. This race of people came north

from the Mediterranean, bringing with them a rudimentary form of agriculture and domesticated animals. They left no record of their language, although some think it may be related to the mysterious tongue spoken by the Basques living in the Pyrenees in northern Spain. On the other hand, they did leave monuments like Stonehenge, which are just as mysterious.



- **The Celts**

The Celts were a race of people whose influence was felt throughout Europe and as far to the east as Greece and Asia Minor during the first millennium BC. They apparently began crossing the water and settling in what we now call the British Isles in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. They brought with them a version of the Indo-European language that evolved into the Celtic that is still spoken in certain areas to this day. These clans, closely related to the Gauls of northern Europe, conquered and absorbed the earlier settlers of the islands and became the established inhabitants that Rome subsequently referred to as the Britons.

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### • The Romans

In 55 BC Julius Caesar was conducting his Gallic Wars and invaded Britannia for the first time. The Celtic tribes, however, were in no mood to be pushed around, and forced the Romans to retreat across the Channel. But the setback was only temporary, and a subsequent invasion in AD 43 established a Roman province that lasted for nearly 400 years.

Roman influence gradually spread, forcing rebellious Celts to take refuge in the mountainous terrain of the north and west. As we still see today, it is difficult to flush stubborn insurgents out of mountain hideouts, so the Romans contented themselves with ruling the bulk of the southeastern region, building the famous Hadrian's Wall in the north, and keeping military detachments along the troublesome borders.



Thus began a new era in the nascent history of the Britons. Latin was the language of the ruling elite and in time was also spoken by the upper echelons of society. But it did not replace Celtic, which was the common language of the people as a whole and was widely used throughout the entire Roman period.

### • The Germanic Tribes

As the Roman Empire began to collapse in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, it retracted its long tentacles from its distant provinces and the legions retreated from Britannia. Into the vacuum they left behind came a new force that would change the islands forever and introduce the language that would define the Britons down to the present day. Under the protective rule of the Romans, the Celts had lost some of their warlike nature, and were now vulnerable to the new threat looming in the east.

In about the year 450, Germanic tribes started arriving from what we now call Denmark and the Netherlands. Three tribes—the Jutes, the Angles, and the Saxons—came in successive waves and settled mainly in the southeastern part of the island. Like the Romans before them, these tribes forced the Celts out of their lands and towns and pushed them into the western mountains. In time, the Angles and the Saxons established kingdoms, and by the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Saxon leaders were acknowledged as kings of all England.

By about the first millennium AD, the country was called Englalund, which meant “land of the Angles”. The Germanic tribes that settled there were referred to as Angelcynn (“Angle-kin” or Angles race), and the language they spoke was known as Englisc, which was derived from “Engle”, the Old English version of Angles. The English we speak today is therefore a descendant of the language brought to England by those Germanic tribes, who

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spoke a West German dialect of the Indo-European family of languages.

But that isn't the end of the story. Not by a long shot. Since the arrival of those Germanic tribes, the language has evolved through three main periods, dated approximately as follows: Old English (450-1150), Middle English (1150-1500), and Modern English (1500 to the present).

Ɗan ſhe Ɗiſſe Old Anzliſh Tunzian eode ſpecan  
 Than ſhe zan to-ſpaken biſ Mibble Englyſſhe Tongue  
 Then ſhe wente to ſpake thiſ Early Mloderen Englyſh Tongue  
 Then ſhe went to ſpeak thiſ Late Modern Engliſh Tongue

### • The Christians

Christianity was first brought to the British Isles in about 200 AD during the Roman Period, but the Anglo-Saxon invasion reversed much of that process in southern and eastern England. The re-Christianization began in 597 when [Augustine](#), the first Archbishop of Canterbury, took office. Since the Church enjoyed an almost total monopoly on literacy at that time, it undertook a far broader range of functions than we might expect today. It operated as a civil service and was responsible for legal documents, education, and social services. Even the Treasury was run by the Church. As a result, there was closer contact with all things Latin which led to a renewed influx of Latin words into the language, though primarily in matters of religion, learning, the law, and public administration, so that these borrowings didn't directly affect the common man.

### • The Vikings

The Viking Age spanned the late 8<sup>th</sup> through the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which time the seafaring Danes raided and invaded eastern portions of the British Isles. The latter part of this period brought widespread Viking settlement and a significant influence on the local vocabulary, and for a while England was ruled by Danish kings. The Vikings spoke Old Norse, which was related to Old English, since both were descended from the Germanic group of languages, and words were lent and borrowed between them over a number of generations.

### • The Normans

The Norman conquest of 1066 had a greater influence on the English language than any other event in its history. Originally from Scandinavia, these conquerors had settled in northern France in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries and had become totally assimilated. By the time of the invasion, Normandy was essentially French, and the Normans were among the most civilized and sophisticated people in Europe.

When they arrived in England, they vanquished King Harold and his Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings and assumed control of the country for the next two centuries. The vast majority of the English aristocracy either died on the battlefield or was subsequently executed or exiled, and the power vacuum was filled by Normans. So, as had happened during the Roman period, the ruling elite now spoke a foreign language. Through intermarriage, and for political and other

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reasons of expediency, many English men and women soon began to speak French, and it wasn't long before the distinction between speakers of the two languages was social rather than ethnic.

The bulk of the population spoke the Germanic language that was steadily developing into Modern English, but the ruling classes spoke French. There was inevitably some overlap and a much closer relationship with the continent, which had a profound effect on the grammar and vocabulary of the host language. During this period, it lost many of its Old English words and was deluged with French and Latin ones that were borrowed to express new concepts in government, religion, the law, military matters, fashion, cuisine, social life, art, learning, and medicine. It is interesting to note that, of the thousands of French words that entered the language during this phase, some 75% are still in use today. As a result of these borrowings, modern English is richly endowed with synonyms. In many cases, we have three choices of words thanks to the English, French, and Latin roots of the language. For example: we can say fire, flame, or conflagration. And we can ask, question, or interrogate.

This period also saw an influx of words from the languages of the Low Countries—Flemish, Dutch, and Low German—due to the close contact that existed between the Britons and the people of Flanders, Holland, and northern Germany. But all these changes and additions must be kept in perspective. Though the evolving

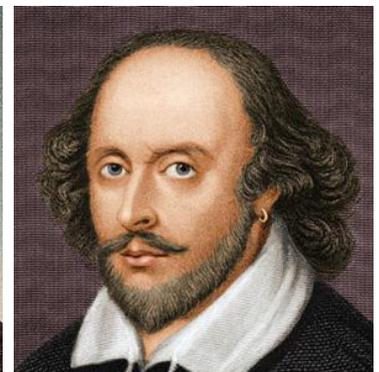
incarnations borrowed heavily from other languages and were influenced by foreign grammar to varying degrees, the ultimate version was a modern English whose essential features were inherited from the Germanic dialects of those who came to England in the fifth century.

### • The Modern Era

By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century France's grip on England had weakened, and political and economic realities were forcing many of the rich and powerful—who had for several generations treated the two countries as one—to choose whether to remain in England or settle permanently in France. This led to a resurgence of English throughout the land, and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century it was once again the common language, proudly spoken by all—rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief. This in turn fueled a demand for English literature, which reached unprecedented heights in the works of some of the greatest writers in the English language: Chaucer (circa 1343-1400) and Shakespeare (1564-1616).



Geoffrey Chaucer



William Shakespeare

As political and economic ties to France unraveled and England settled into its

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newfound independence, the language coalesced into four dialects, one for each of the major regions of the country. In time, a need arose for a standardized version and—just as the standard form of French was based on the Parisian version, and Castilian became the dominant form of Spanish—the basis for Standard English was the dialect spoken in and around London. As the Renaissance spread across Europe, new factors came into play that directly influenced the development of a standardized form of English: the printing press, the rise of popular education, greater communication, and an early form of social conscience. In response to the changing times, English kept evolving, as any living language is constantly doing, and was hungrily absorbing words from Greek, Italian, and Spanish, as well as the perennial favorites, French and Latin.

It wasn't long before the colonial era began, and England became a major world power. As the British Navy set out

to “rule the waves” in an early version of globalization, trade flourished and commodities from distant lands were imported for consumption in the British Isles. Along with raw materials and exotic delicacies from the far corners of the Empire came new words, seasoning and enriching the language that had been evolving for a thousand years. And then one day the Mayflower set sail for America and opened the door to a whole new chapter in the evolution of the English language. But that's another story.

**Acknowledgements:** The author is indebted to Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable for their book, “A History of the English Language,” from which many historical facts and insights have been drawn.

Those interested in further research might consider exploring linguistic works by Bill Bryson, David Crystal, and many other writers, too numerous to mention.

## ANGLICAN CHURCH OF URUGUAY



The English-speaking congregation of Holy Trinity Cathedral invites all residents and visitors to its **English service every Sunday at 10 am** with an Anglican Eucharist celebrated according to the 1979 Prayer Book of the the Episcopal Church of the USA.

Baptized Christians of all denominations are invited to receive Holy Communion in order to be spiritually fed and united to their brothers and sisters in Christ.