



My Mother Tongue

By Tony Beckwith

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We all have a mother tongue.

Mine is the English that my grandparents brought with them from Great Britain when they settled in Argentina 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 languages on Earth. But, what exactly is English? Where did it originate? How did it start? To answer these questions we must travel back in time.

The English we speak today is a descendant of the language brought to the British Isles.

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 around 6500 BC and formed the islands we know today.

Neolithic Man appeared in the area around 5000 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 7th 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 would subsequently refer to as the Britons.

The Romans

In 55 BC, Julius Caesar was conducting his Gallic Wars and invaded Britannia for the first time. The Celts, who were in no mood to be conquered, fought back with vigor and sent the Romans home to the continent empty-handed. But the setback was only temporary, and a subsequent invasion in AD 43 established a Roman province on the island that lasted for nearly four hundred years.

Roman influence gradually spread, forcing the rebellious Celts to take refuge in the highlands of the north and west. It was as difficult then as it is today to flush 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 as they adapted to life in a Roman province. 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—the common language of the people as a whole—which continued to be widely used throughout the entire Roman period.

The Germanic Tribes

As the Roman Empire began to decline in the early 5th century AD, it retracted its long tentacles from distant provinces, and the legions were withdrawn from Britannia. Into the vacuum they left behind came a new invader that would change the islands forever and lay the foundations of 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. Around the year 450, Germanic tribes started arriving from present-day 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. To a greater extent than the Romans before them, they forced the Celts out of their lands and towns, and marginalized them from the mainstream of their own country. The Celtic language was relegated to the fringes of this new society, and Latin was no longer used widely. The difference this time was that the Romans had always been an occupying power, subject to the recall that eventually withdrew them from their Britannic province. But the newcomers were there to stay. In time, the Angles and

the Saxons established kingdoms, and by the middle of the 9th century, Saxon leaders were acknowledged as kings of all England.

By the first millennium AD, the country was called Englaland, which meant “land of the Angles.” The Germanic tribes that had settled there were referred to as the 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 the British Isles around fifteen hundred years ago by those tribes, who 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 the Jutes, the Angles, and the Saxons, 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).

The Christians

Christianity was first brought to the British Isles around AD 200 during the Roman period, but the Anglo-Saxon invasion reversed much of that process in southern and eastern England. The re-Christianization of the area began in the latter part of the 6th century when Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, took office. Since the church enjoyed an almost total monopoly on literacy at that time, it was involved in a far broader range of functions than we might expect today. The church 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 ➤

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result, there was a renewed influx of Latin words that were absorbed into the language, but since they were primarily concerned with religion, learning, the law, and public administration, these borrowings did not directly affect the common man to any significant degree.

The Vikings

The Viking Age spanned the late 8th through the 11th 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 same Germanic roots. Words, myths, and legends were absorbed into the Anglo-Saxon language and culture 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 9th and 10th 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 the Normans 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 in government and the church was filled by the Normans. So once again, as had happened during the Roman period, the ruling elite spoke a foreign language. This was surely an excellent time to be a translator living in London! Through intermarriage, and for political and other reasons of expediency, many English men and women soon began to speak French, and it was not long before the distinction between speakers of the two languages was social rather than ethnic.

The bulk of the population spoke what was steadily developing into Modern English, but the ruling classes

tions that were grafted onto the core Anglo-Saxon 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 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—creating an ever greater flexibility of

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spoke French. There was inevitably some overlap and a much closer relationship with the continent, both of which had a profound effect on the grammar and vocabulary of the host language. During this period, many Old English words were discarded and replaced 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, albeit in altered forms. As a result of these borrowings, modern English is richly endowed with synonyms. In many cases, we can choose from three alternative words thanks to the substantial French and Latin contribu-

expression—and were influenced by foreign grammar and syntax 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 5th century.

The Modern Era

By the middle of the 13th century France’s grip on England had weakened, and political and economic realities were forcing many of the rich and powerful—who had grown accustomed to treating the two countries as one—to choose whether to remain in England or settle permanently in France. These circumstances led to a resurgence of English throughout the land, and by the 14th 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, for example, Chaucer (1343-1400) and Shakespeare (1564-1616).

As political and economic ties to France unraveled and England settled into its newfound independence, the language coalesced into four main dialects, one for each of the major regions of the country. In time, a need arose for a standardized version and—just as standard French was based on the Parisian dialect 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 doing constantly, and was hungrily absorbing words from Greek, Italian, and Spanish, as well as the perennial favorite sources, French and Latin.

It was not 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 material and exotic delicacies from the far corners of the Empire came new words to season and enrich 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: I am 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 the extensive linguistic works by David Crystal, Bill Bryson, and many other writers too numerous to mention.

Baugh, Albert C., and Thomas Cable. *A History of the English Language*, 5th Edition (Prentice Hall, 2001).

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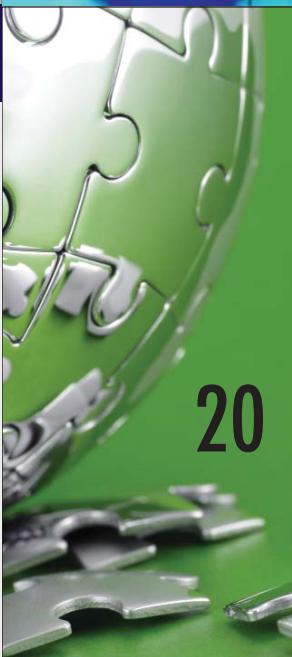
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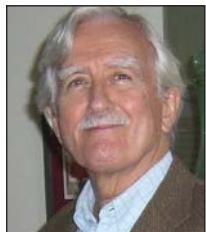
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U.S. Justice Department Wants Language Access

On February 17, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a memorandum directing all federal agencies to ensure language access to limited-English-proficient individuals (LEPs). The memo from Attorney General Eric Holder cites a 2006 language access survey that found disparities in understanding and compliance of equal language access throughout the federal government. In the memo, Holder restates LEP access as not only a moral and legal obligation, but also an issue of vital importance in times of national emergencies, such as Hurricane Katrina and the Gulf Oil Spill. Federal interagency language access conferences over the past few years show that the federal government is making progress in providing LEP services. What is missing, says Holder, is a comprehensive plan and a unified approach. The memo provides the following list of eight action items agencies must undertake to ensure equal language access.

1. Establish a Language Access Working Group responsible for implementing LEP regulations.
2. Evaluate and update current response to LEP needs.
3. Establish a schedule to evaluate LEP services, policies, plans, and protocols routinely.
4. Ensure that agency staff can identify and respond to LEP situations competently.
5. Notify the public, and particularly LEP communities, of equal language access services.
6. Assess agency positions for needs of LEP employees.
7. Collaborate with other agencies to ensure quality translation and standardized federal terminology.
8. Issue guidelines for compliance to recipients of the agency's federal financial assistance.

For more information, please visit the Federal Coordination and Compliance Section website at www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor or www.lep.gov.