



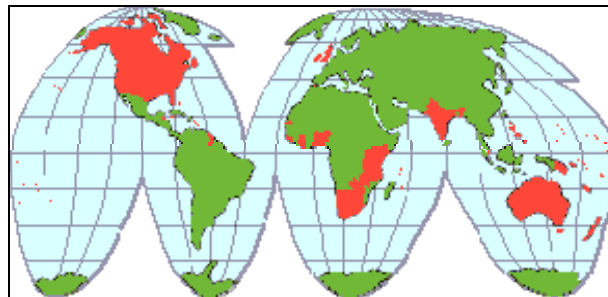
The Origin and History of the English Language

<http://www.englishforums.com/English/OriginHistoryEnglishLanguage>

English is a Germanic Language of the Indo-European Family. It is the second most spoken language in the world.

It is estimated that there are 300 million native speakers and 300 million who use English as a second language and a further 100 million use it as a foreign language. English plays a part in the cultural, political or economic life of many countries in the world such as:

Antigua	Liberia
Australia	Namibia (with Afrikaans)
Bahamas	New Zealand
Barbados	Philippines (with Tagalog)
Belize	Puerto Rico (with Spanish)
Bermuda	South Africa (with Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu)
Canada (with French)	Swaziland (with Swazi)
Dominica	Tanzania (with Swahili)
Grenada	Trinidad and Tobago
Guyana	United Kingdom and its dependences
India (with several Indian languages)	United States of America and its dependencies
Ireland (with Irish Gaelic)	Zambia
Jamaica	Zimbabwe
Kenya (with Swahili)	
Lesotho (with Sotho)	



English is on its way to becoming the world's unofficial international language. Mandarin is spoken by more people, but English is now the most widespread of the world's languages.

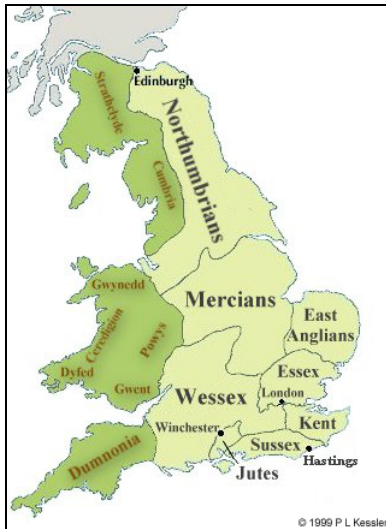
Half of all business deals are conducted in English. Two thirds of all scientific papers are written in English. Over 70% of all post or mail is written and addressed in English. Most international tourism, aviation and diplomacy is conducted in English.

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 which was quickly displaced and 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. An Anglo-Saxon inscription dated between 450 and 480 AD is the oldest sample of the English language.

During the next few centuries four dialects of English developed:

Northumbrian in Northumbria, north of the Humber
Mercian in the Kingdom of Mercia
West Saxon in the Kingdom of Wessex
Kentish in Kent



During the 7th and 8th Centuries, Northumbria's culture and language dominated Britain. The Viking invasions of the 9th Century brought this domination to an end along with the destruction of Mercia. Only Wessex remained as an independent kingdom. By the 10th Century, the West Saxon dialect became the official language of Britain. Written Old English is mainly known from this period. It was written in an alphabet called Runic, derived from the Scandinavian languages. The Latin Alphabet was brought over from Ireland by Christian missionaries.

At this time, the vocabulary of Old English consisted of an Anglo Saxon base with borrowed words from the Scandinavian languages (Danish and Norse) and Latin. Latin gave English words like street, kitchen, kettle, cup, cheese, wine, angel, bishop, martyr, candle. The Vikings added many Norse words: sky, egg, cake, skin, leg, window (wind eye), husband, fellow, skill, anger, flat, odd, ugly, get, give, take, raise, call, die, they, their, them. Celtic words also survived mainly in place and river names (Devon, Dover, Kent, Trent, Severn, Avon, Thames).

In 1066 the Normans conquered Britain. French became the language of the Norman aristocracy and added more vocabulary to English. Because the English underclass cooked for the Norman upper class, the words for most domestic animals are English (ox, cow, calf, sheep, swine, deer) while the words for the meats derived from them are French (beef, veal, mutton, pork, bacon, venison).

The Germanic form of plurals (house, housen; shoe, shoen) was eventually displaced by the French method of making plurals: adding an s (house, houses; shoe, shoes). Only a few words have retained their Germanic plurals: men, oxen, feet, teeth, children. French also affected spelling so that the **cw** sound came to be written as **qu** (eg. cween became queen).

Only in the 14th Century English became dominant in Britain again. In 1399, King Henry IV became the first king of England since the Norman Conquest whose mother tongue was English.

By the end of the 14th Century, the dialect of London had emerged as the standard dialect of what we now call Middle English.

Modern English began around the 16th Century and, like all languages, is still changing. One change occurred when the **th** of some verb forms became **s** (loveth, loves: hath, has).

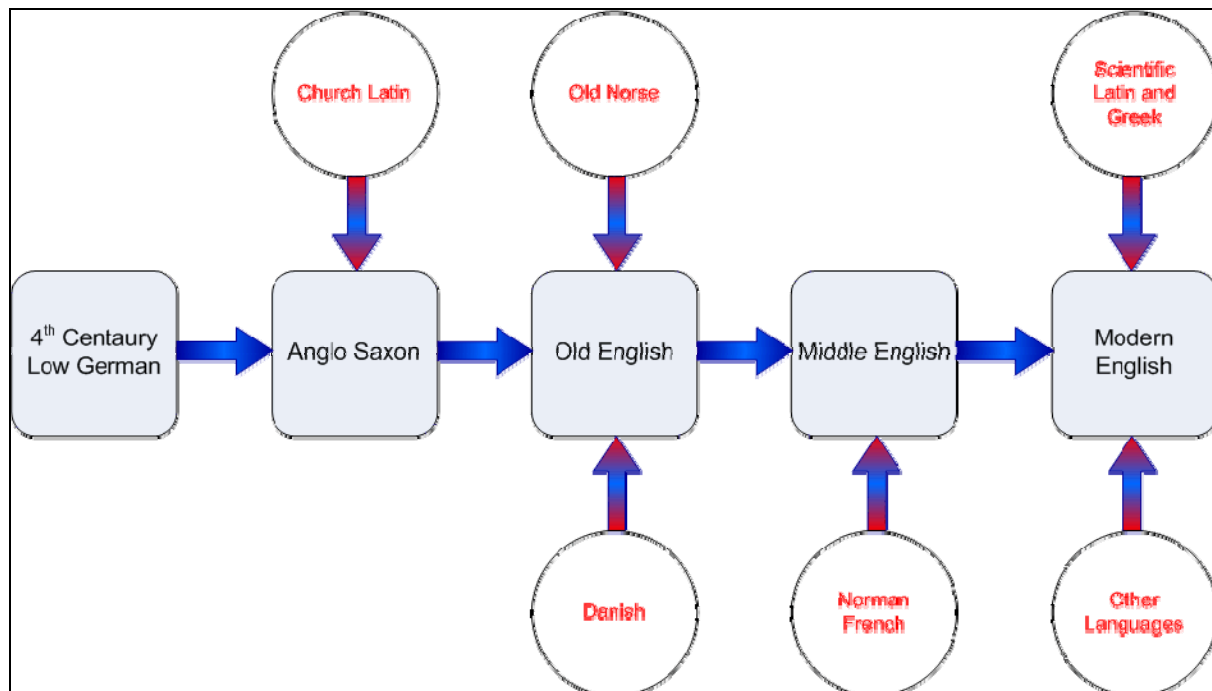
Since the 16th Century, because of the contact that the British had with many peoples from around the world, and the Renaissance of Classical learning, many words have entered the language either directly or indirectly. New words were created at an increasing rate. Shakespeare, for example, coined over 1600 words.

Borrowed words include names of animals (giraffe, tiger, zebra), clothing (pyjama, turban, shawl), food (spinach, chocolate, orange), scientific and mathematical terms (algebra, geography, species), drinks (tea, coffee, cider), religious terms (Jesus, Islam, nirvana), sports (checkmate, golf, billiards), vehicles (chariot, car, coach), music and art (piano, theatre, easel), weapons (pistol, trigger, rifle), political and military terms (commando, admiral, parliament), and astronomical names (Saturn, Leo, Uranus).

Languages that have contributed words to English include Latin, Greek, French, German, Arabic, Hindi (from India), Italian, Malay, Dutch, Farsi (from Iran and Afghanistan), Nahuatl (the Aztec language), Sanskrit (from ancient India), Portuguese, Spanish, and Ewe (from Africa).

Even with all these borrowings the heart of the language remains the Anglo-Saxon of Old English. Only about 5000 or so words from this period have remained unchanged but they include the basic building blocks of the language: household words, parts of the body, common animals, natural elements, most pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs.

Historical Summary



A Family Tree

