

# History of the English Language: Influences & Development

Angela Janovsky

## Importance of Language

Language is a major distinguishing feature of humans as a species. No other species can communicate as clearly and effectively as we can. Across the globe, many different languages have developed over long periods of time. Let's look briefly at how the English language developed.

## The Beginnings of English

Languages are split into **language families**, which are basically related groups of languages. Think of a language as a living entity that does not die out completely. Instead, it will evolve in order to accommodate a changing society. For example, Latin is often thought of as a dead language. But you can also view it as a language that changed to become Spanish, French, and even Italian. We'll focus today on English, which is a part of the **Germanic language family**.

England has been inhabited back to the dawn of man. Little is known of the language of the very first people, but eventually the Celts grew to be popular in the area between 400 and 200 BCE. The Celtic people became more widespread and even sacked Rome in 390 BCE. The Germanic and Latin languages of the time were incorporated into their Celtic language. Remnants of this language are present-day Irish, Scottish, and Welsh.

## Roman Influence

The British islands, which are present day Wales, England, Ireland, and Scotland, were left to their own devices until the Romans began invasions around 50 BCE. They occupied the area for nearly 400 years, until finally leaving to defend lands closer to Italy in 410 CE. Over these years, the Romans had a major impact on the language.

Have you even taken a French or Spanish class? If you have, you most likely have noticed many similar words. For example, *baguette*, *ballet*, *café*, and *fiancé* are all French words that we use in English. Also, *alligator*, *alpaca*, *burrito*, and *coyote* are all of Spanish origin. Remember, French and Spanish are classified as Latin languages, whereas English is Germanic. The few hundred years of Roman occupation is just the beginning of the Latin influence on English.

## Germanic Influence

You might be wondering, 'If the Latin languages had such an impact, then why is English classified as a Germanic language?' The answer is that the main influence on English actually came from the Germanic tribes who settled in central Europe. These languages include German, Dutch, Austrian, and Swedish.

Germanic invasions brought in an age of destruction and dark times. The invasion began around 449 CE after the Romans had left the territory. The Briton people had been dependent on the Romans for so long that they were not able to defend themselves from invading forces. The tribes that invaded were the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.

Because of these tribes, the ancestors of Englishmen are classified as **Anglo-Saxons**. The Anglo-Saxon people pushed the Britons back towards present-day Ireland and Scotland. This invasion continued through the fifth century, and by the sixth century all the structure left by the Romans was in shambles. The Germanic tribes had such an influence on the region that English is known as a Germanic language.

## Christian Influence

The first Romans brought Christianity to the Britons, but after the Germanic invasion, the religion almost completely died out. In 597 CE, Pope Gregory sent missionaries to the land to convert the people back to Christianity. This happened without much resistance, but the pagan influence of the Germanic people can still be seen today. For example, the holiday Easter is named after Germanic goddess Eastre.

At this time, the Latin alphabet was immediately incorporated into the language, since it is the alphabet of Christianity. Before this time, not much was written down due to little opportunities for education. Now, English began to be written down, and words from the Latin language became much more common. With this, education strengthened and a sort of intellectual movement began. Before now, English had been known as a lower-class language, but with education and writing, it grew to be respected.

### **The Viking Invasions**

The next invading group was another Germanic group: the Vikings. These people came mostly from Danish Vikings in 787 CE. The Vikings invaded from the north, began to work their way towards the heart of the English society, and brought back a Germanic influence on English. Over a few hundred years of fighting and changes in the throne, the Vikings were eventually defeated and an English king took control. However, he died in 1066, which created a weakened kingdom. This would set the stage for the Norman invasion.

### **The Norman Invasion**

Days after the king's death, Duke William of Normandy, France, invaded and conquered the English land, bringing in hundreds of years of French influence. The major impact of this historical event was the number of **loanwords**, which are borrowed words, incorporated into the English tongue. The Normans occupied the territory for over 300 years, but the lower classes were allowed to continue speaking their native English, which declined throughout those years but was never fully replaced by French. Technically, France was not ruling over England. Instead, England was still its own country, but with French rulers.

### **The Black Death**

By the mid 1300s, the Normans and Englishmen had merged to the point where there was little real difference. At this time, the Black Death started to appear, and by its end, two-thirds of Europe's population perished. However, during this time of turmoil, the English language became more important, as it was the only language of the lower classes. Also around this time, the Hundred Years' War began, which pitted England against France. These two events allowed the English language to again take over as the official language of the region.

### **Modern English**

During the next few hundred years, the English language continued to evolve and grow. Colonization and the invention of the printing press were huge influences on the spread of English. At the same time, other languages continued to have an influence. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the **Renaissance**, which was a revival of classical culture, brought the Latin language back to the forefront. In addition, exploration, the Industrial Revolution, and the American Revolution brought even more languages face to face with English. The largest effect of these events was more and more loanwords entering the English language.

Today, we still see English as an evolving language. The influence of technology has had a major impact on our everyday speech. For example, since print is the main writing on emails, text messages, websites, etc., cursive writing is much less prevalent. Also, our vocabulary changes often due to technology. Today, the word 'Google' has grown from being only a proper noun to a verb. You can tell someone to 'Google it' if he needs information on a topic. Overall, our language will continue to evolve and adapt to our growing needs as a society.