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History of English Language

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Contents:

1. Introduction	Go
2. Indo European and Germanic Influences.....	Go
3. Old English	Go
4. The Norman Conquest and Middle English	Go
5. Early Modern English (1500 - 1800)	Go
6. Late Modern English	Go
7. American English	Go
8. A Chronology of the English Language	Go
9. Summary	Go
10. References	Go

Introduction:

[go to index](#)

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

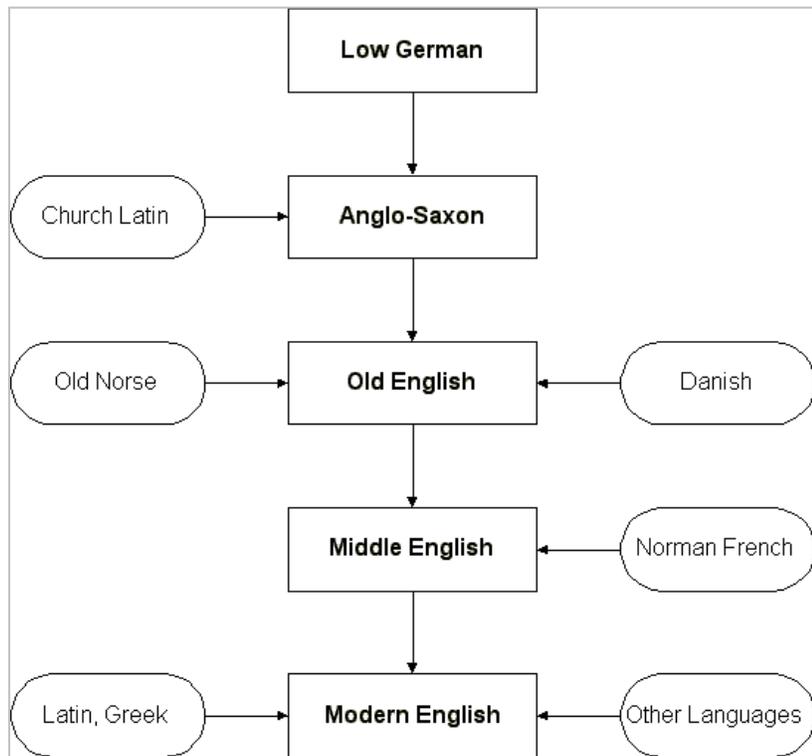
It is estimated that there are 300 million native speakers and 300 million who use English as a second language and a further 100 million use it as a foreign language. It is the language of science, aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. It is listed as the official or co-official language of over 45 countries and is spoken extensively in other countries where it has no official status. This compares to 27 for French, 20 for Spanish and 17 for Arabic. This domination is unique in history. Speakers of languages like French, Spanish and Arabic may disagree, but English is on its way to becoming the world's unofficial international language. Mandarin (Chinese) 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 / 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. This was quickly displaced. 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 480AD 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. This has remained the writing system of English.

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).

Many pairs of English and Norse words coexisted giving us two words with the same or slightly differing meanings.

Indo-European and Germanic Influences

[go to index](#)

English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The Indo-European family includes several major branches:

- Latin and the modern Romance languages;
- The Germanic languages;
- The Indo-Iranian languages, including Hindi and Sanskrit;
- The Slavic languages;
- The Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian (but not Estonian);
- The Celtic languages; and
- Greek.

The influence of the original Indo-European language, designated proto-Indo-European, can be seen today, even though no written record of it exists. The word for father, for example, is vater in German, pater in Latin, and pitr in Sanskrit. These words are all cognates, similar words in different languages that share the same root.

Of these branches of the Indo-European family, two are, for our purposes of studying the development of English, of paramount importance, the Germanic and the Romance (called that because the Romance languages derive from Latin, the language of ancient Rome, not because of any bodice-ripping literary genre). English is in the Germanic group of languages. This group began as a common language in the Elbe river region about 3,000 years ago. Around the second century BC, this Common Germanic language split into three distinct sub-groups:

East Germanic was spoken by peoples who migrated back to southeastern Europe. No East Germanic language is spoken today, and the only written East Germanic language that survives is Gothic.

North Germanic evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic (but not Finnish, which is related to Estonian and is not an Indo-European language).

West Germanic is the ancestor of modern German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English.

Old English (500-1100 AD)

[go to index](#)

West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark: the Angles (whose name is the source of the words England and English), Saxons, and Jutes, began populating the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. They spoke a mutually intelligible language, similar to modern Frisian--the language of northeastern region of the Netherlands--that is called Old English. Four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.

These invaders pushed the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants out of what is now England into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, leaving behind a few Celtic words. These Celtic languages survive today in Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, unfortunately, is now a dead language. (The last native Cornish speaker, Dolly Pentreath, died in 1777 in the town of Mousehole, Cornwall.) Also influencing English at this time were the Vikings. Norse invasions, beginning around 850, brought many North Germanic words into the language, particularly in the north of England. Some examples are dream, which had meant 'joy' until the Vikings imparted its current meaning on it from the Scandinavian cognate draumr, and skirt, which continues to live alongside its native English cognate shirt.

The majority of words in modern English come from foreign, not Old English roots. In fact, only about one sixth of the known Old English words have descendants surviving today. But this is deceptive; Old English is much more important than these statistics would indicate. About half of the most commonly used words in modern English have Old English roots. Words like be, water, and strong, for example, derive from Old English roots.

Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem Beowulf, lasted until about 1100. This last date is rather arbitrary, but most scholars choose it because it is shortly after the most important event in the development of the English language, the Norman Conquest.

The Norman Conquest and Middle English (1100-1500)

[go to index](#)

William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD. (The Bayeux Tapestry, details of which form the navigation

buttons on this site, is perhaps the most famous graphical depiction of the Norman Conquest.) The new overlords spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman. The Normans were also of Germanic stock ("Norman" comes from "Norseman") and Anglo-Norman was a French dialect that had considerable Germanic influences in addition to the basic Latin roots.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as priest, vicar, and mass came into the language this way), but now there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.

The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, beef and cow. Beef, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic cow. Many legal terms, such as indict, jury, and verdict have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts. This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romance roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

Sometimes French words replaced Old English words; crime replaced firen and uncle replaced eam. Other times, French and Old English components combined to form a new word, as the French gentle and the Germanic man formed gentleman. Other times, two different words with roughly the same meaning survive into modern English. Thus we have the Germanic doom and the French judgment, or wish and desire.

It is useful to compare various versions of a familiar text to see the differences between Old, Middle, and Modern English. Take for instance this Old English (c.1000) sample:

*Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod tobecume þin rice gewurþe þin willa on eorðan swa swa on
heofonum
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.*

Rendered in Middle English (Wyclif, 1384), the same text is recognizable to the modern eye:

*Oure fadir þat art in heuenes halwid be þi name;
þi reume or kyngdom come to be. Be þi wille don in herþe as it is dounin heuene.
yeue to us today oure eche dayes bred.
And foryeue to us oure dettis þat is oure synnys as we foryeuen to oure dettouris þat is to
men þat han synned in us.
And lede us not into temptacion but delyuere us from euyl.*

Finally, in Early Modern English (King James Version, 1611) the same text is completely intelligible:

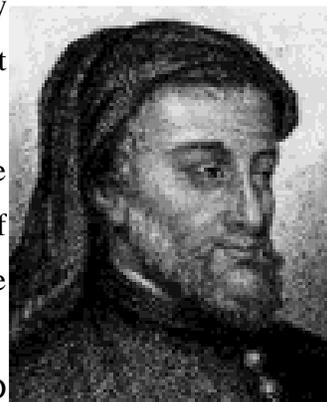
*Our father which art in heauen, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heauen.
Giue us this day our daily bread.
And forgiue us our debts as we forgiue our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliuer us from euill. Amen.*

In 1204 AD, King John lost the province of Normandy to the King of France. This began a process where the Norman nobles of England became increasingly estranged from their French cousins. England became the chief concern of the nobility, rather than their estates in France, and consequently the nobility adopted a modified English as their native tongue. About 150 years later, the Black Death (1349-50) killed about one third of the English population. The laboring and merchant classes grew in economic and social importance, and along with them English increased in importance compared to Anglo-Norman.

This mixture of the two languages came to be known as Middle English. The most famous example of Middle English is Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. In that year, the Statute of Pleading was adopted, which made English the language of the courts and it began to be used in Parliament.

The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

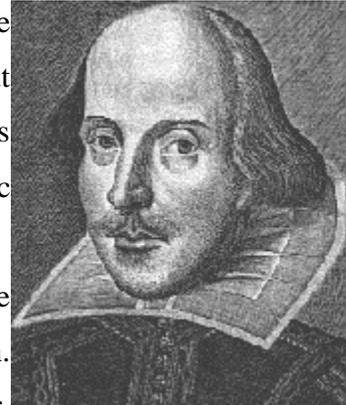


Early Modern English (1500-1800)

[go to index](#)

The next wave of innovation in English came with the Renaissance. The revival of classical scholarship brought many classical Latin and Greek words into the Language. These borrowings were deliberate and many bemoaned the adoption of these "inkhorn" terms, but many survive to this day. Shakespeare's character Holofernes in *Loves Labor Lost* is a satire of an overenthusiastic schoolmaster who is too fond of Latinisms.

Many students having difficulty understanding Shakespeare would be surprised to learn that he wrote in modern English. But, as can be seen in the earlier example of the Lord's Prayer,



Elizabethan English has much more in common with our language today than it does with the language of Chaucer. Many familiar words and phrases were coined or first recorded by Shakespeare, some 2,000 words and countless catch-phrases are his. Newcomers to Shakespeare are often shocked at the number of cliches contained in his plays, until they realize that he coined them and they became cliches afterwards. "One fell swoop," "vanish into thin air," and "flesh and blood" are all Shakespeare's. Words he bequeathed to the language include "critical," "leapfrog," "majestic," "dwindle," and "pedant."

Two other major factors influenced the language and served to separate Middle and Modern English. The first was the Great Vowel Shift. This was a change in pronunciation that began around 1400. While modern English speakers can read Chaucer with some difficulty, Chaucer's pronunciation would have been completely unintelligible to the modern ear. Shakespeare, on the other hand, would be accented, but understandable. Long vowel sounds began to be made higher in the mouth and the letter "e" at the end of words became silent. Chaucer's *Lyf* (pronounced "leef") became the modern *life*. In Middle English *name* was pronounced "nam-a," *five* was pronounced "feef," and *down* was pronounced "doon." In linguistic terms, the shift was rather sudden, the major changes occurring within a century. The shift is still not over, however, vowel sounds are still shortening although the change has become considerably more gradual.

The last major factor in the development of Modern English was the advent of the printing press. William Caxton brought the printing press to England in 1476. Books became cheaper and as a result, literacy became more common. Publishing for the masses became a profitable enterprise, and works in English, as opposed to Latin, became more common. Finally, the printing press brought standardization to English. The dialect of London, where most publishing houses were located, became the standard. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the first English dictionary was published in 1604.

Late-Modern English (1800-Present)

[go to index](#)

The principal distinction between early- and late-modern English is vocabulary. Pronunciation, grammar, and spelling are largely the same, but Late-Modern English has many more words. These words are the result of two historical factors. The first is the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the technological society. This necessitated new words for things and ideas that had not previously existed. The second was the British Empire. At its height, Britain ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, and English adopted many foreign words and made them its own.

The industrial and scientific revolutions created a need for neologisms to describe the new creations and discoveries. For this, English relied heavily on Latin and Greek. Words like oxygen, protein, nuclear, and vaccine did not exist in the classical languages, but they were created from Latin and Greek roots. Such neologisms were not exclusively created from classical roots though, English roots were used for such terms as horsepower, airplane, and typewriter.

This burst of neologisms continues today, perhaps most visible in the field of electronics and computers. Byte, cyber-, bios, hard-drive, and microchip are good examples.

Also, the rise of the British Empire and the growth of global trade served not only to introduce English to the world, but to introduce words into English. Hindi, and the other languages of the Indian subcontinent, provided many words, such as pundit, shampoo, pajamas, and juggernaut. Virtually every language on Earth has contributed to the development of English, from Finnish (sauna) and Japanese (tycoon) to the vast contributions of French and Latin.

The British Empire was a maritime empire, and the influence of nautical terms on the English language has been great. Words and phrases like three sheets to the wind and scuttlebutt have their origins onboard ships.

Finally, the 20th century saw two world wars, and the military influence on the language during the latter half of this century has been great. Before the Great War, military service for English-speaking persons was rare; both Britain and the United States maintained small, volunteer militaries. Military slang existed, but with the exception of nautical terms, rarely influenced standard English. During the mid-20th century, however, virtually all British and American men served in the military. Military slang entered the language like never before. Blockbuster, nose dive, camouflage, radar, roadblock, spearhead, and landing strip are all military terms that made their way into standard English.

American English

[go to index](#)

Also significant beginning around 1600 AD was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of a distinct American dialect. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, American English is closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Some "Americanisms" that the British decry are actually originally British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., fall as a synonym for autumn, trash for rubbish, frame-up which was reintroduced to Britain through Hollywood gangster movies, and loan as a verb instead of lend).

The American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like Mississippi, Roanoke, and Iowa. Indian-sounding names like Idaho were sometimes created that had no native-American roots. But, names for other things besides places were also common. Raccoon, tomato, canoe, barbecue, savanna, and hickory have native American roots, although in many cases the original Indian words were mangled almost beyond recognition.

Spanish has also been great influence on American English. Armadillo, mustang, canyon, ranch, stampede, and vigilante are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West.

To a lesser extent French, mainly via Louisiana, and West African, through the importation of slaves, words have influenced American English. Armoire, bayou, and jambalaya came into the language via New Orleans. Goober, gumbo, and tote are West African borrowings first used in America by slaves.

A Chronology of the English Language

[go to index](#)

55 BCE	Roman invasion of Britain under Julius Caesar
43 CE	Roman invasion and occupation under Emperor Claudius. Beginning of Roman rule of Britain
436	Roman withdrawal from Britain complete
449	Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain begins
450-480	Earliest Old English inscriptions date from this period
597	St. Augustine arrives in Britain. Beginning of Christian conversion of the Anglo-Saxons
731	The Venerable Bede publishes The Ecclesiastical History of the English People in Latin
792	Viking raids and settlements begin
865	The Danes occupy Northumbria
871	Alfred becomes king of Wessex. He has Latin works translated into English and begins practice of English prose. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is begun
911	Charles II of France grants Normandy to the Viking chief Hrolf the Ganger. The beginning of Norman French
c.1000	The oldest surviving manuscript of Beowulf dates from this period
1066	The Norman conquest
c.1150	The oldest surviving manuscripts in Middle English date from this period
1171	Henry II conquers Ireland

- 1204** King John loses the province of Normandy to France
- 1348** English replaces Latin as the medium of instruction in schools, other than Oxford and Cambridge which retain Latin
- 1349-50** The Black Death kills one third of the British population
- 1362** The Statute of Pleading replaces French with English as the language of law. Records continue to be kept in Latin. English is used in Parliament for the first time
- 1384** Wyclif publishes his English translation of the Bible
- c.1388** Chaucer begins *The Canterbury Tales*
- c.1400** The Great Vowel Shift begins
- 1476** William Caxton establishes the first English printing press
- 1485** Caxton publishes Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*
- 1492** Columbus discovers the New World
- 1525** William Tyndale translates the New Testament
- 1536** The first Act of Union unites England and Wales
- 1549** First version of *The Book of Common Prayer*
- 1564** Shakespeare born
- 1603** Union of the English and Scottish crowns under James the I (VI of Scotland)
- 1604** Robert Cawdrey publishes the first English dictionary, *Table Alphabeticall*
- 1607** Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World, established
- 1611** *The Authorized, or King James Version, of the Bible* is published
- 1616** Death of Shakespeare
- 1623** Shakespeare's *First Folio* is published
- 1666** The Great Fire of London. End of The Great Plague
- 1702** Publication of the first daily, English-language newspaper, *The Daily Courant*, in London
- 1755** Samuel Johnson publishes his dictionary

1770	Cook discovers Australia
1776	Thomas Jefferson writes the Declaration of Independence
1782	Washington defeats Cornwallis at Yorktown. Britain abandons the American colonies
1788	British penal colony established in Australia
1803	Act of Union unites Britain and Ireland
1828	Noah Webster publishes his dictionary
1851	Herman Melville publishes Moby Dick
1922	British Broadcasting Corporation founded
1928	The Oxford English Dictionary is published

Summary:

It's never easy to pinpoint exactly when a specific language began, but in the case of English we can at least say that there is little sense in speaking of the English language as a separate entity before the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain. Little is known of this period with any certainty, but we do know that Germanic invaders came and settled in Britain from the north-western coastline of continental Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries. The invaders all spoke a language that was Germanic (related to what emerged as Dutch, Frisian, German and the Scandinavian languages, and to Gothic), but we'll probably never know how different their speech was from that of their continental neighbours. However it is fairly certain that many of the settlers would have spoken in exactly the same way as some of their north European neighbours, and that not all of the settlers would have spoken in the same way.

The reason that we know so little about the linguistic situation in this period is because we do not have much in the way of written records from any of the Germanic languages of north-western Europe until several centuries later. When Old English writings begin to appear in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries there is a good deal of regional variation, but not substantially more than that found in later periods. This was the language that Alfred the Great referred to as 'English' in the ninth century.

The Celts were already resident in Britain when the Anglo-Saxons arrived, but there are few obvious traces of their language in English today. Some scholars have suggested that the Celtic tongue might have had an underlying influence on the grammatical development of English, particularly in some parts of the country, but this is highly speculative. The number of loanwords known for certain to have entered Old English from this source is very small. Those that survive in modern English include brock (badger), and coomb a type of valley, alongside many place names.

The next invaders were the Norsemen. From the middle of the ninth century large numbers of Norse invaders settled in Britain, particularly in northern and eastern areas, and in the eleventh century the whole of England had a Danish king, Canute. The distinct North Germanic speech of the Norsemen had great influence on English, most obviously seen in the words that English has borrowed from this source. These include some very basic words such as take and even grammatical words such as they. The common Germanic base of the two languages meant that there were still many similarities between Old English and the language of the invaders. Some words, for example give perhaps show a kind of hybridization with some spellings going back to Old English and others being Norse in origin. However, the resemblances between the two languages are so great that in many cases it is impossible to be sure of the exact ancestry of a particular word or spelling. However, much of the influence of Norse, including the vast majority of the loanwords, does not appear in written English until after the next great historical and cultural upheaval, the Norman Conquest.

The centuries after the Norman Conquest witnessed enormous changes in the English language. In the course of what is called the Middle English period, the fairly rich inflectional system of Old English broke down. It was replaced by what is broadly speaking, the same system English has today, which unlike Old English makes very little use of distinctive word endings in the grammar of the language. The vocabulary of English also changed enormously, with tremendous numbers of borrowings from French and Latin, in addition to the Scandinavian loanwords already mentioned, which were slowly starting to appear in the written language. Old English, like German today, showed a tendency to find native equivalents for foreign words and phrases (although both Old English and modern German show plenty of loanwords), whereas Middle English acquired the habit that modern English retains today of readily accommodating

foreign words. Trilingualism in English, French, and Latin was common in the worlds of business and the professions, with words crossing over from one language to another with ease. One only has to flick through the etymologies of any English dictionary to get an impression of the huge number of words entering English from French and Latin during the later medieval period. This trend was set to continue into the early modern period with the explosion of interest in the writings of the ancient world.

The late medieval and early modern periods saw a fairly steady process of standardization in English south of the Scottish border. The written and spoken language of London continued to evolve and gradually began to have a greater influence in the country at large. For most of the Middle English period a dialect was simply what was spoken in a particular area, which would normally be more or less represented in writing - although where and from whom the writer had learnt how to write were also important. It was only when the broadly London standard began to dominate, especially through the new technology of printing, that the other regional varieties of the language began to be seen as different in kind. As the London standard became used more widely, especially in more formal contexts and particularly amongst the more elevated members of society, the other regional varieties came to be stigmatized, as lacking social prestige and indicating a lack of education.

In the same period a series of changes also occurred in English pronunciation (though not uniformly in all dialects), which go under the collective name of the Great Vowel Shift. These were purely linguistic 'sound changes' which occur in every language in every period of history. The changes in pronunciation weren't the result of specific social or historical factors, but social and historical factors would have helped to spread the results of the changes. As a result the so-called 'pure' vowel sounds which still characterise many continental languages were lost to English. The phonetic pairings of most long and short vowel sounds were also lost, which gave rise to many of the oddities of English pronunciation, and which now obscure the relationships between many English words and their foreign counterparts.

During the medieval and early modern periods the influence of English spread throughout the British Isles, and from the early seventeenth century onwards its influence began to be felt throughout the world. The complex processes of exploration, colonization and overseas trade that characterized Britain's external relations for several centuries became

agents for change in the English language. This wasn't simply through the acquisition of loanwords deriving from languages from every corner of the world, which in many cases only entered English via the languages of other trading and imperial nations such as Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, but through the gradual development of new varieties of English, each with their own nuances of vocabulary and grammar and their own distinct pronunciations. More recently still, English has become a lingua franca, a global language, regularly used and understood by many nations for whom English is not their first language. (For further information on this see the pages on Global English on this site). The eventual effects on the English language of both of these developments can only be guessed at today, but there can be little doubt that they will be as important as anything that has happened to English in the past sixteen hundred years.

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[go to index](#)

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