Origin and Evolution of the English Language

By Joyce Arthur
For Friends in Wonderment, Dec 8, 2019
English – the global “lingua franca”

- English is mainly a mix of Old High German, Old Norse, and Anglo-Norman (with possible Celtic influences)
- English has largest vocabulary of any language, with over 615,000 entries in OED
- English is only language with a thesaurus of synonyms
- Average active vocabulary of an English speaker is about 20,000 words
- Only 1,000 common words found in 89% of everyday writing
- 11% of the English language is just the letter E
- 43 words account for half of all words in common use.
- A dozen words account for at least 25% of all words:
  - and, be, have, that, it, in, of, the, a, to, will, I, you
### Language Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>L1 speakers</th>
<th>L2 speakers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. English</td>
<td>379 million</td>
<td>753 million</td>
<td>1.13 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mandarin</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>1.12 billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hindi</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>615 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Spanish</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Arabic</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. French</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Bengali</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Russian</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Portuguese</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. French</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Indonesian</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Urdu</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. German</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Japanese</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Swahili</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Marathi</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Origin of English

- English is one of about a dozen similar languages that began as a single language, known as Proto-Germanic
- It developed in southern Scandinavia, original home of the Germanic tribes, who later expanded into continental Europe
- Closest relative to English is Frisian, a Dutch variant
- English absorbed large numbers of words from Scandinavian, French, and Latin, and later other languages.
Brittanic History

- Celts lived throughout Europe (from around 400 BC), but were marginalized to Ireland, Britain, and Brittany by time of Roman conquest in 43 AD (which lasted to about 200 AD).
- Saxons, Angles, Jutes, and Frisians began arriving in British Isles in 449 AD from what is now Denmark, North Germany, and Friesland. They spoke Germanic languages that came to be known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon.
- Anglo-Saxons were dominant in most of England and southern Scotland.
- Cornwall, Ireland, Wales and northern Scotland remained largely Celtic-speaking.
- Danish and Norwegian Vikings invaded in 787, and again in 991, eventually controlling much of Britain. They spoke Old Norse, a close relative of Old English. (Danish dynasty ends in 1042.)
Brittanic History (2)

- Norman conquest of 1066 occupied Britain, South Wales, and Ireland.
- Normans came from Normandy in northern France – they were a mix of local French people and Vikings from Norway (who arrived 9th century).
- Normans spoke a French dialect. For next 300 years, French is the language of government, the arts, and learning in Britton.
- 100 years’ war with France (1337-1453) ended with defeat of French.
- Anglo-Saxon language gradually merged with Norman French to become "Middle English".
- This evolved into modern English. About 30% of English words come from French, mostly from the Normans.
Spoken vs. written English

- Written language is more formal and slower to change.
- Spoken language constantly evolves – written language catches up later.
- It’s impossible to keep living languages “pure.”
- Old English had gendered nouns like other Germanic languages.
- Spoken language tends to become simplified – elites spoke more “purely” than peasants, who were mostly illiterate.
- Introduction of formal French into England at Norman conquest (1066) meant end of writing in English.
- When written English came back over 12th / 13th century, it was “Middle English” and had lost a vast amount of grammar.
  - The loss of gendered nouns meant the loss of gendered adjectives and adverbs.
  - Many words that started as nouns became verbs in English with no spelling or ending changes – e.g., view, silence, rule, outlaw, worship, ban, ship, drink, fight, fire, sleep, copy. Modern examples: impact, fax, friend.
Celtic origins of “do” and “ing”

Meaningless “do” (or “dummy do”) is used only in English:
- How do you do?
- Don’t do that.
- Did you do this?

English is the only Germanic language to use a verb-noun progressive (“I am singing”) as the primary way to express present tense.

Both conventions occur only in Celtic languages:
- Goidelic branch: Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic, Manx
- Brythonic branch: Welsh, Breton, Cornish, Gaulish
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Translation 1</th>
<th>Translation 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frisian</td>
<td>Fynsto fan appels?</td>
<td>Like you of apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Hou je van appels?</td>
<td>Like you from apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>Hou jy van appels?</td>
<td>Like you from apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Magst du Äpfel?</td>
<td>Like you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>Liker du epler?</td>
<td>Like you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Gillar du äpplen?</td>
<td>Like you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>Kan du lide æbler?</td>
<td>Can you like apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>Ert þú hrifin af eplum?</td>
<td>Are you fond of apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Gaelic</td>
<td>An toil leat ûbhlan?</td>
<td>The will with you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Gaelic</td>
<td>An maith leat úlla?</td>
<td>The good with you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh</td>
<td>Dych chi'n hoffi afalau?</td>
<td>Is [do] like you apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornish</td>
<td>Yw da genes avalow?</td>
<td>Are [do] you like apples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornish</td>
<td>A wodhes'ta kewsel Kernewek?</td>
<td>Do you speak Cornish?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Language Similarities: “We are going to school”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frisian</td>
<td>Wy geane nei skoalle</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>We gaan naar school</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>Ons gaan skool toe</td>
<td>We go school to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>Wir gehen zur Schule</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>Vi skal på skolen</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Vi går till skolan</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>Vi går i skole</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>Við förum í skólann</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh</td>
<td>Rydyn ni'n mynd i'r ysgol</td>
<td>We go to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Gaelic</td>
<td>Tha Sinn a 'dol don sgoil</td>
<td><strong>We are going to school</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish Gaelic</td>
<td>Táimid ag dul ar scoil</td>
<td><strong>We are going to school</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornish</td>
<td>Thera ve 'cones</td>
<td>I am working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dec 8, 2019
Ye Olde English

Beowulf was written in Old English about 1100 AD

Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon, hu ða æbelingas ellen fremedon. Oft Scyld Scefing sceæpæna þreatum, monegum mæþæm, meodosetla ofteah, egsonde eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð fæsecaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad, weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah, oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsettendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning.

Listen: You have heard of the Danish Kings, in the old days and how they were great warriors. Shield, the son of Sheaf, took many an enemy's chair, terrified many a warrior. After he was found an orphan, he prospered under the sky until people everywhere listened when he spoke. He was a good king!
### Middle English

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote “Canterbury Tales” between 1387 and 1400

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote</td>
<td>When April with its sweet-smelling showers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,</td>
<td>Has pierced the drought of March to the root,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And bathed every veyne in swich licour</td>
<td>And bathed every vein in such liquid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which vertu engendred is the flour;</td>
<td>By which power the flower is created;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth</td>
<td>When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired hath in every holt and heeth</td>
<td>In every wood and field has breathed life into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne</td>
<td>The tender new leaves, and the young sun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Early Modern English (1500-1800)

- Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation started – the “Great Vowel Shift”.
- Vowels were being pronounced shorter and shorter.
- From the 16th century, the British were in contact with many peoples from around the world.
- Then the Renaissance introduced many new words and phrases.
- The invention of printing led to a common language in print, and brought standardization to English spelling and grammar.
- In 1604, the first English dictionary was published.
Shakespeare and Modern English

- Shakespeare coined over 2,000 English words and countless phrases:
  - Barefaced, critical, leapfrog, monumental, castigate, majestic, obscene, frugal, radiance, dwindle, countless, submerged, excellent, fretful, gust, hint, hurry, lovely, summit, homicide

- One fell swoop
- In my mind’s eye
- To be in a pickle
- Vanish into thin air
- Budge an inch
- Play fast and loose
- The sound and the fury
- Cold comfort
- Flesh and blood
- Foul play
- Tower of strength
- Breathing one’s last
Late Modern English (1800-Present)

- The main difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is vocabulary.
- Late Modern English has many more words, arising from two main factors:
  - Industrial Revolution and technology created a need for new words
  - British Empire at its height covered one quarter of the earth's surface, and the English language adopted foreign words from many countries.
Dictionaries

- English has the best dictionaries in the world.

- 1604: A table Alphabeticall of Hard Words, by Robert Cawdrey (3,000 words)
- 1721: Universal Etymological Dictionary, by Nathaniel Bailey
- 1755: Dictionary of the English Language, by Samuel Johnson (43,000 words)
- 1806: Compendious Dictionary of the English Language, by Noah Webster
- 1884: The New English Dictionary on Historical Principles (first of 12 volumes of what eventually became OED)
Simplified English Grammar

- Pronouns are largely uninflected, except that personal pronouns still have three cases:
  - Subjective: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who
  - Objective: me, you, him, her, it, us, them, whom
  - Possessive: my / mine; your / yours; his / her / hers; its; our / ours; their / theirs; whose

- Far fewer case forms than other languages:
  - Possessives: English adds ‘s to end
  - Plurals: English adds s to end of most (only 3 survivors of German style: children, brethren, oxen)
  - Verbs have 4-6 forms: ride, rides, rode, riding, ridden (German has 16 for same word)
  - Adjectives never change. Only known exception is blonde / blond
Mercifully free of gendered nouns

Minimized use of articles (the, a/an)
- It’s time to go to bed
  (most other languages need to say: “It’s the time to go to the bed”)
- Life is short / Between heaven and earth

More sounds than almost any other language – 44 to 52 sounds – vowels, consonants, diphthongs (two vowels together)

Deceptive complexity – many common words with multiple meanings and usages:
- What, right, sit, place, fine, like, line, round, make, get
Origins of “th” sound

- Very rare in the world
- Occurs in Welsh, Icelandic, Greek, Arabic, and Albanian, and no other languages.
- It goes back to Proto-Germanic, but other languages have lost it.
- Pronouns “they, them, their” came from Scandinavia
- The word “their” is the same in English and Scottish Gaelic.
There’s nothing certain about English pronunciation.

- heard - beard
- road – broad
- five – give
- fillet – skillet
- early – dearly
- beau – beauty
- steak – streak
- ache – mustache
- low – how
- doll – droll
- scour – four
- four – tour
- grieve – sieve
- paid – said
- break – speak
- ginger – finger

Words pronounced differently if noun or verb:
- Reject, project, defect, rebel, record, convert, produce
- Noun vs adjective/adverb: minute, moment
Opposite meanings

Some English words have two **opposing** meanings. These are called contronyms:

- **Sanction** – official permission or prohibition
- **Cleave** – to cut in half or stick together
- **Sanguine** – hotheaded or calm
- **Fast** – stuck firmly or moving quickly
- **Bolt** – to secure a door or run away
- **Ravish** – to rape or to enrapture
- **Trying** – doing your best or being annoying
- **Wind up** – to finish something or start something (a watch)
- **Quinquennial** – lasts for 5 years or happens once in 5 years
Fossil words

- **Neck** used to mean a piece of land, preserved in “neck of the woods”

- **Tell** used to mean count, preserved in “bank teller”

- **Prove** used to mean test, preserved in “proving ground”

- Other fossil words (in italics):
  - Short *shrift*  
  - *Rank* and *file*  
  - Not a *whit*  
  - *Newfangled*  
  - *Spick-and-span*  
  - *Kith* and kin  
  - *Hem* and *haw*  
  - *Raring* to go  
  - Out of *kilter*  
  - At *bay*  
  - To and *fro*
Other English eccentricities

- The longest English word has 45 letters: “pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis”
- Nine different ways to pronounce ‘ough’ in English. This sentence contains all 9:
  - “A rough-coated, dough-faced, thoughtful ploughman strode through the streets of Scarborough; after falling into a slough, he coughed and hiccupped.”
- The toughest tongue-twister in English:
  The sixth sick sheik’s sixth sheep’s sick.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Universal English words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Airport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In honour of those trying to learn English.

Thank you!