

UNIT 1

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

English is a West Germanic language that was first spoken in early medieval England and is now the most widely used language in the world. It is spoken as a first language by the majority populations of several sovereign states, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and a number of Caribbean nations; and it is an official language of almost 60 sovereign states. It is the third-most-common native language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. It is widely learned as a second language and is an official language of the European Union, many Commonwealth countries and the United Nations, as well as in many world organisations.

English arose in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England and what is now southeast Scotland. Following the extensive influence of Great Britain and the United Kingdom from the 17th to mid-20th centuries through the British Empire, it has been widely propagated around the world. Through the spread of American-dominated media and technology, English has become the leading language of international discourse and the *lingua franca* in many regions.

Historically, English originated from the fusion of closely related dialects, now collectively termed Old English, which were brought to the eastern coast of Great Britain by Germanic settlers (Anglo-Saxons) by the 5th century; the word *English* is derived from the name of the Angles, and ultimately from their ancestral region of Angeln (in what is now Schleswig-Holstein). The language was also influenced early on by the Old Norse language through Viking invasions in the 9th and 10th centuries.

The Norman conquest of England in the 11th century gave rise to heavy borrowings from Norman French, and vocabulary and spelling

conventions began to give the appearance of a close relationship with those of Latin-derived Romance languages (though English is not a Romance language itself) to what had then become Middle English. The Great Vowel Shift that began in the south of England in the 15th century is one of the historical events that mark the emergence of Modern English from Middle English.

In addition to its Anglo-Saxon and Norman French roots, a significant number of English words are constructed on the basis of roots from Latin, because Latin in some form was the *lingua franca* of the Christian Church and of European intellectual life and remains the wellspring of much modern scientific and technical vocabulary.

Owing to the assimilation of words from many other languages throughout history, modern English contains a very large vocabulary, with complex and irregular spelling, particularly of vowels. Modern English has not only assimilated words from other European languages, but from all over the world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists more than 250,000 distinct words, not including many technical, scientific, and slang terms.

The word *English* derives from the eponym *Angle*, the name of a Germanic tribe thought to originate from the Angeln area of Jutland, now in northern Germany.

Significance

Modern English, sometimes described as the first global *lingua franca*, is the dominant language or in some instances even the required international language of communications, science, information technology, business, seafaring, aviation, entertainment, radio, and diplomacy. Its spread beyond the British Isles began with the growth of the British Empire, and by the late 19th century its reach was global. Following British colonisation from the 16th to 19th centuries, it became the dominant language in the United States, Canada, Australia and New

Zealand. The growing economic and cultural influence of the US and its status as a global superpower since World War II has significantly accelerated the spread of the language across the planet. English replaced German as the dominant language of science-related Nobel Prize laureates during the second half of the 20th century. English equalled and may have surpassed French as the dominant language of diplomacy during the second half of the 19th century.

A working knowledge of English has become a requirement in a number of fields, occupations and professions such as medicine and computing. As a consequence, more than a billion people speak English to at least a basic level. It is one of six official languages of the United Nations.

One impact of the growth of English is the reduction of native linguistic diversity in many parts of the world. The influence of English continues to play an important role in language attrition. Conversely, the natural internal variety of English along with creoles and pidgins has the potential to produce new distinct languages from English over time.

History

English originated in those dialects of North Sea Germanic that were carried to Britain by Germanic settlers from various parts of what are now the Netherlands, northwest Germany, and Denmark. Up to that point, in Roman Britain the native population is assumed to have spoken Common Brittonic, a Celtic language, alongside the acrolectal influence of Latin, due to the 400-year period of Roman Britain. One of these incoming Germanic tribes was the Angles, whom Bede believed to have relocated entirely to **Britain. The names 'England' (from *Engla land* "Land of the Angles") and *English* (Old English *Englisc*) are derived from the name of this tribe—but Saxons, Jutes and a range of Germanic peoples from the coasts of Frisia, Lower Saxony, Jutland and Southern Sweden also moved to Britain in this era.**

Initially, Old English was a diverse group of dialects, reflecting the varied origins of Anglo-Saxon England but the West Saxon dialect

eventually came to dominate, and it is in this that the poem *Beowulf* is written.

Old English was later transformed by two waves of invasion. The first was by speakers of the North Germanic language branch when Halfdan Ragnarsson and Ivar the Boneless started the conquering and colonisation of northern parts of the British Isles in the 8th and 9th centuries. The second was by speakers of the Romance language Old Norman in the 11th century with the Norman conquest of England. Norman developed into Anglo-Norman, and then Anglo-French – and introduced a layer of words especially via the courts and government. As well as extending the lexicon with Scandinavian and Norman words, these two events simplified the grammar and transformed English into a borrowing language—unusually open to accepting new words from other languages.

The linguistic shifts in English following the Norman invasion produced what is now referred to as **Middle English**; **Geoffrey Chaucer's** *The Canterbury Tales* is its best-known work. Throughout this period, Latin in some form was the *lingua franca* of European intellectual life – first the Medieval Latin of the Christian Church, and later the humanist Renaissance Latin – and those who wrote or copied texts in Latin commonly coined new terms from that language to refer to things or concepts for which there was no native English word.

Modern English, which includes the works of William Shakespeare and the King James Version of the Bible, is generally dated from about 1550, and after the United Kingdom became a colonial power, English served as the *lingua franca* of the colonies of the British Empire. In the post-colonial period, some of the newly created nations that had multiple indigenous languages opted to continue using English as the *lingua franca* to avoid the political difficulties inherent in promoting any one indigenous language above the others. As a result of the growth of the British Empire, English was adopted in North America, India, Africa, Australia and many other regions – a trend that was reinforced by the emergence of the United States as a superpower in the mid-20th century.

Classification and related languages

Germanic family

The English language belongs to the Anglo-Frisian sub-group of the West Germanic branch of the Germanic languages, a member of the Indo-European languages. Modern English is the direct descendant of Middle English, itself a direct descendant of Old English, a descendant of the Proto-Germanic language. Typical of most Germanic languages, English is characterised by the use of modal verbs, the division of verbs into strong and weak classes, and common sound shifts from Proto-Indo-European **known as Grimm's law. The closest living relatives of English (besides the English languages and English-based creole languages) are the Frisian languages of the southern fringes of the North Sea in the Netherlands, Germany, and Denmark.**

After Frisian come those Germanic languages that are more distantly related: the non-Anglo-Frisian West Germanic languages (Dutch, Afrikaans, Low German, High German, Yiddish), and the North Germanic languages (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Faroese). None of the Continental Germanic languages is mutually intelligible with English, owing in part to divergences in lexis, syntax, semantics, and phonology, and to the isolation afforded to English by the British Isles, although some, such as Dutch, do show strong affinities with English, especially to its earlier stages. Isolation has allowed English (as well as Icelandic and Faroese) to develop independently of the Continental Germanic languages and their influences.

Impact of Old Norse

Due to the Viking colonisation and influence of Old Norse on Middle English, English syntax follows a pattern similar to that of North Germanic languages, such as Danish, Swedish, and Icelandic, in contrast with other West Germanic languages, such as Dutch and German. This is especially evident in the order and placement of verbs.

Some North Germanic words entered English from the settlement of Viking raiders and Danish invasions that began around the 9th century. Many of these words are common and are often mistaken for being native, which shows how close-knit the relations between the English and the Scandinavian settlers were. Dutch and Low German also had a considerable influence on English vocabulary, contributing common everyday terms and many nautical and trading terms.

Other Germanic languages

English has been forming compound words and affixing existing words separately from the other Germanic languages for more than 1500 years but shows different patterns in this regard. For instance, abstract nouns in English may be formed from native words by the suffixes “-hood”, “-ship”, “-dom” and “-ness”. All of these suffixes have cognates in most or all other Germanic languages, but their usage has diverged, as German “Freiheit” vs. English “freedom” (the suffix “-heit” being cognate with English “-hood”, while English “-dom” is cognate with German “-tum”; but note North Frisian *fridoem*, Dutch *vrijdom*, Norwegian *fridom*, “freedom”). The Germanic languages Icelandic and Faroese also follow English in this respect, since, like English, they developed independent of German influences.

french

Many French words are also intelligible to an English speaker, especially when they are seen in writing (as pronunciations are often quite different), because English absorbed a large vocabulary from Norman and French, via Anglo-Norman after the Norman Conquest, and directly from French in subsequent centuries. As a result, a large portion of English vocabulary is derived from French, with some minor spelling differences (e.g. inflectional endings, use of old French spellings, lack of diacritics, etc.), as well as occasional divergences in meaning of so-called false