

English Language

Contributed by sezai kalafat
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English language English language, member of the West Germanic group of the Germanic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages (see Germanic languages). Spoken by about 470 million people throughout the world, English is the official language of about 45 nations. It is the mother tongue of about 60 million persons in the British Isles, from where it spread to many other parts of the world owing to British exploring, colonizing, and empire-building from the 17th through 19th cent. It is now also the first language of an additional 228 million people in the United States; 16.5 million in Canada; 17 million in Australia; 3 million in New Zealand and a number of Pacific islands; and approximately 15 million others in different parts of the Western Hemisphere, Africa, and Asia. As a result of such expansion, English is the most widely scattered of the great speech communities. It is also the most commonly used auxiliary language in the world. The United Nations uses English not only as one of its official languages but also as one of its two working languages. There are many dialect areas; in England and S Scotland these are of long standing, and the variations are striking; the Scottish dialect especially has been cultivated literarily. There are newer dialect differences also, such as in the United States, including regional varieties such as Southern English, and cultural varieties, such as Black English. Standard forms of English differ also; thus, the standard British (“the king's English”) is dissimilar to the several standard varieties of American and to Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and Indian English. History of English Today's English is the continuation of the language of the 5th-century Germanic invaders of Britain. No records exist of preinvasion forms of the language. The language most closely related to English is the West Germanic language Frisian. The history of English is an aspect of the history of the English people and their development. Thus in the 9th cent. the standard English was the dialect of dominant Wessex (see Anglo-Saxon literature). The Norman Conquest (11th cent.) brought in foreign rulers, whose native language was Norman French; and English was eclipsed by French as the official language. When English became again (14th cent.) the language of the upper class, the capital was London, and the new standard (continued in Modern Standard English) was a London dialect. It is convenient to divide English into periods—Old English (or Anglo-Saxon; to c.1150), Middle English (to c.1500; see Middle English literature), and Modern English; this division implies no discontinuity, for even the hegemony of French affected only a small percentage of the population. The English-speaking areas have expanded at all periods. Before the Normans the language was spoken in England and S Scotland, but not in Cornwall, Wales, or, at first, in Strathclyde. English has not completely ousted the Celtic languages from the British Isles, but it has spread vastly overseas. A Changed and Changing Language Like other languages, English has changed greatly, albeit imperceptibly, so that an English speaker of 1300 would not have understood the English of 500 nor the English of today. Changes of every sort have taken place concomitantly in the sounds (phonetics), in their distribution (phonemics), and in the grammar (morphology and syntax). The following familiar words show changes of 1,000 years: The changes are more radical than they appear, for Modern English M and are diphthongs. The words home, stones, and name exemplify the fate of unaccented vowels, which became u, then u disappeared. In Old English important inflectional contrasts depended upon the difference between unaccented vowels; so, as these vowels coalesced into u and this disappeared, much of the case system disappeared too. In Modern English a different technique, word order (subject + predicate + object), is used to show what a case contrast once did, namely, which is the actor and which the goal of the action. Although the pronunciation of English has changed greatly since the 15th cent., the spelling of English words has altered very little over the same period. As a result, English spelling is not a reliable guide to the pronunciation of the language. The vocabulary of English has naturally expanded, but many common modern words are derived from the lexicon of the earliest English; e.g., bread, good, and shower. From words acquired with Latin Christianity come priest, bishop, and others; and from words adopted from Scandinavian settlers come root, egg, take, window, and many more. French words, such as castle, began to come into English shortly before the Norman Conquest. After the Conquest, Norman French became the language of the court and of official life, and it remained so until the end of the 14th cent. During these 300 or more years English remained the language of the common people, but an increasingly large number of French words found their way into the language, so that when the 14th-century vernacular revival, dominated by Chaucer and Wyclif, restored English to its old place as the speech of all classes, the French element in the English vocabulary was very considerable. To this phase of French influence belong most legal terms (such as judge, jury, tort, and assault) and words denoting social ranks and institutions (such as duke, baron, peer, countess, and parliament), together with a great number of other words that cannot be classified readily—e.g., honor, courage, season, manner, study, feeble, and poor. Since nearly all of these French words are ultimately derived from Late Latin, they may be regarded as an indirect influence of the classical languages upon the English vocabulary. The direct influence of the classical languages began with the Renaissance and has continued ever since; even today Latin and Greek roots are the chief source for English words in science and technology (e.g., conifer, cyclotron, intravenous, isotope, polymeric, and telephone). During the last 300 years the borrowing of words from foreign languages has continued unchecked, so that now most of the languages of the world are represented to some extent in the vocabulary. English vocabulary has also been greatly expanded by the blending of existing words (e.g., smog from smoke and fog) and by back-formations (e.g., burgle from burglar), whereby a segment of an existing word is treated as an affix and dropped, resulting in a new word, usually with a related meaning.

Bibliography See H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (rev. 4th ed. 1963); G. W. Turner, *The English Language in Australia and New Zealand* (1966); M. Pei, *The Story of the English Language* (new ed. 1968); P. Roberts, *Modern Grammar* (1968); M. M. Orkin, *Speaking Canadian English* (1971); T. Pyles and J. Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (3d ed. 1982); W. F. Bolton, *A Living Language* (1982); B. Kachru, ed., *The Other Tongue*

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