

The history of the English language and its vocabulary

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The history of the English language and its vocabulary is very confused. To see this, we have to consider the various sources of English words over the last 1000 years or so.

English is a Germanic language, and more specifically, a West Germanic language like Dutch and German. The language which is most closely related to English historically is Frisian, now a minority language in the northern part of the Netherlands. Most of the very fundamental parts of the English vocabulary are directly related to words that appear in the other West Germanic languages. This includes words like *calf, cloud, eye, fall, field, full, hair, high, house, laugh, lie* ('be prone'), *moon, mother, own, sit, smile, swim, way, weep* and many more.

English still has a few words from the people who lived in England before the arrival of the Germanic people, but they are not common words and there are very few of them. There are rather more place names that include such words, but their original meanings have largely been lost. Relevant words include *avon* ('river' now in place names), *brock* ('badger', now dialectal), *coracle* ('small boat'), *down* ('hillside'), *gull* ('seabird'), *pen* ('hill', mostly now dialectal or in place names).

When Christianity was brought to England by St Augustine in the late 7th century, some Latin words arrived with it. These words were outnumbered by the later adoption of a host of Latin words, but show part of the way in which the vocabulary of English developed. The relevant words include *create, describe, idea, involve, item, respect, school*.

In 793AD, the monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumberland, in the north of England, was attacked by Vikings. The Vikings came from modern-day Denmark and Norway, and they spoke a North Germanic language, related to Icelandic. After years of warfare with the English, they settled down in England. It is not entirely clear whether they could understand the language of England or not, but a mixed language arose in the areas where they settled with some words of English and some words of Scandinavian. Many of those words persist, sometimes as dialectal words in Britain, sometimes as normal English words. For example, *kirk* and *church* mean the same thing, but *kirk* is restricted to northern parts of Britain, including Scotland. The plural of *egg* used to be *eyren* in the south but has become *eggs* everywhere. And even common words like *they* and *sky* come from the Scandinavian settlers, and the *-s* that marks 3rd person singular of the present tense of verbs like *runs* has its origins in the Scandinavian language. Other Scandinavian words still in use in English include *call, cast, die, law, leg, low, raise, same, skill, skirt* ('piece of clothing'), *take, want, weak, window* and many others. The Scandinavian settlers remained the people in power in most of the northern part of England until 1066, when England was attacked by another foreign enemy.

This enemy's king was called William and he spoke a dialect of French. His ancestors were also Vikings, called the Normans (that is, the North Men), and had settled in Normandy in France. In 1066 he saw an opportunity, because of the disagreement about who should be king in England, to attack and take over the country. He succeeded at the battle of Hastings, where the English king Harald was killed, so he became known as William the Conqueror. He took over the government of England, bringing with him many French customs and words.

At first, only the followers of William and the people who aspired to political power in England spoke any French. The ordinary people still spoke a mixture of their own West Germanic language with some Scandinavian words mixed in. Gradually, however, more and

more French words were used, though pronounced most often with an English accent. As French and English became more mixed, the grammar of the usual language of English also changed, becoming simplified from both the older form of English and the older form of French. By about 1400, the general language of England was so different from the language of England in 1066 that it was a completely different language. Today this language is called Middle English.

Many of the most important words that the French brought with them belonged to the realms of religion (*priest, basilica*) and the language of the law (*judge, chattels*) because it was the French speakers who encoded the law, and words for fine food (*beef, venison*). But there were also many words denoting ordinary things. In current English, many words have French origins, although their meanings and their forms may have changed considerably from those of the original French. To simplify, we can think of Middle English as being derived in part from West Germanic, in part from North Germanic and in part (especially in terms of the vocabulary) from dialectal French.

These early French loan words include *able, age, change, country, different, large, number, order, point, power, remain, try, use, value, very* and others.

This new language developed slowly until the 16th century, when several things happened to change matters. Scholars call the developing language of this period Early Modern English.

The first was that people throughout Europe started to become prouder of their own, everyday language. Before this period, the dominant view had been that Latin and Greek were the best languages, and the most suited for speaking or writing (especially writing) about serious matters: serious because they dealt with religion, with important matters of science and the law or the best literature. When this happened, the everyday languages of Europe needed a larger vocabulary to deal with the topics that had, until that point, been dealt with in the Classical Languages. The words of the Classical Languages were stolen to fill the gaps, or, where individual contemporary languages of Europe were seen as being particularly prestigious in certain areas, European words were borrowed. The translation of the Bible into English and other languages (and eventually the use of English rather than Latin in the church) is an indication of the new view of the status of English. Some of the Latin words borrowed during this period are *area, analysis, calculate, central, contact, emerge, generate, maximum, normal, sector, significant, specific, status*.

The major sea-faring nations of Europe began to venture further from home and to discover other countries with very different cultures and very different languages. Not having words for the things they discovered there, they needed to find new words for the animals, plants, foods, practices and beliefs that they found in the wider world. Such words were available in the languages of the peoples they visited and were borrowed in large numbers (if not always – or ever – accurately). While borrowings from European languages tended to be seen as prestigious words, the words from further afield were often words learnt from sailors, traders, soldiers and the like, and, whatever their final status in English, were not necessarily prestigious in the donor languages. Some of them became slang words in English. Some of the relevant words (including the language they came from) are *barbecue* (Haitian), *bungalow* (Hindustani), *cash* (Tamil), *cassowary* (Malay), *coffee* (Arabic), *jaguar* (Tupi-Guarani), *kangaroo* (Guugu Yimidhirr), *shogun* (Japanese), *tank* (Gujarati), *tattoo* (Polynesian), *tea* (Chinese), *totem* (Ojibwa), *tulip* (Turkish). New words for products from around the world continue to be added to the English vocabulary in modern times. Examples include *brainwash* (Chinese), *dim sum* (Chinese – Cantonese), *lingerie* (French), *sauna* (Finnish), *Schadenfreude* (German), *spaghetti* (Italian), *udon* (Japanese).

To deal with this flood of new vocabulary, primarily from French, Latin and Greek, but also from all corners of the world, academies were set up in some countries to regulate the local languages. England never set up an academy, but dictionaries started to appear in the seventeenth century to help readers understand the new words. Some of these were translating dictionaries, others were monolingual dictionaries. It is only in the twenty-first century that the creation of dictionaries and thesauruses has diminished, as the use of the internet made it uneconomical to produce new works of this kind on paper.

With the industrial revolution, a completely new set of words was needed to describe the machines, processes and products that started to become available and familiar. Some of these words disappeared as quickly as they arrived (the *smokebox* of steam locomotives, the *spinning jenny*, an *airship*, a *phonograph*). Others – so far, at least – have persisted (*classroom*, *input*, *interest rate*, *technician*). In some cases, words for new inventions were shared among many European languages (not always in precisely the same form), and sometimes vanished again. For example, English *automobile*, corresponds to German *Auto*, to Swedish *bil*, Italian *automobile* and Russian *avtomobil*.

The words of different sources often behave differently in English. For example, elements of Greek origin often attach to other Greek elements (prefixes, suffixes or in compounds), so that the prefix *a-* (a negative marker, or meaning ‘not’) typically is used on words which were originally Greek as in *ahistorical*, *aperiodic*, *atypical*. Latin prefixes often change their form depending on the next sound/letter, so that the prefix *ad-* (meaning ‘to, toward’) arises in many forms, such as are seen in *acclamation*, *adhesive*, *affix*, *agglutinate*, *allocate*, *annunciation*, *appropriate*, and so on. French nouns that end in the letter <u> can have plurals with <x>, like *plateau*, plural *plateaux*. While these patterns can be helpful if you recognize the origins of the word, the words are not, in general terms, easily attributable to particular languages or periods. Furthermore, when words have become part of English for a long time, they can start to behave like English words despite foreign origins. The word *ahistorical* cited above as a Greek word would have been *anhistorical* if it followed the rules of Greek. There are generalizations that can be made about the way in which words of different origins are spelt, so that with experience the learner can start to see which words have common origins, but in most cases it is easier to learn that the plural of *plateau* is *plateaux*, just as we have to learn that the plural of *foot* is *feet* as an irregular pattern, rather than to learn the generalization about French plurals.

One of the points that has been ignored in what has been said above is that at every point in the history of English it has been possible to create new words from the resources of English. In such cases we talk of word-formation. Word-formation involves a number of disparate phenomena, but the common ones are prefixation, suffixation and compounding. In prefixation an element which is not a word is put in front of a word to make a new word. Examples include *unhappy* from the word *happy* and the prefix *un-* which means something like ‘not’, and *rebuild* from a word *build* and the prefix *re-* meaning ‘again’. In suffixation an element which is not a word is put after a known word to make a new word. Examples include *happiness* from the word *happy* and the suffix *-ness* (the change of spelling from <happy> to <happi> is automatic), and *smallish* from the word *small* and the suffix *-ish* meaning something like ‘to a limited extent’. In a compound, two words are put together to make a new word. Examples include *boathouse* from the words *boat* and *house* and meaning ‘a type of house that has something to do with boats’ (the boats are kept in a boathouse), and *windmill* from the words *wind* and *mill* and meaning ‘a mill which has something to do with the wind’ (the wind powers the mill).

Just as in other parts of grammar, there are fixed rules for adding prefixes, suffixes and making compounds, so that you cannot freely invent words from such elements without a solid understanding of the grammar of word-formation. Sometimes the prefixes and suffixes have different meanings in different sets of words, sometimes the elements of a compound allow you to see what the whole word means, while in other cases you can use the elements of a compound to remind you of what the word as a whole means, but cannot easily work out what the compound will mean if you have never met it before. Some examples may make this clearer. The word *driver* has a suffix *-(e)r* attached to the word *drive*. It can mean ‘a person who drives’, for instance, drives a taxi or a bus. But *driver* can also mean ‘a club with which you hit a golf ball a long way’, and to carry out this action is also called *to drive*. Note that the *-er* means a person in one sense of the suffixed word *driver*, but it means an implement in another sense of what is apparently the same word. Once you understand the words, you can see why the form can have both meanings, but you cannot necessarily predict precisely what a *driver* will be if you have never seen the word before. Or consider the compound *fruit fly* which, predictably, means ‘a fly which has something to do with fruit’ (the fly eats fruit). A *butterfly*, on the other hand, is not ‘a fly which eats butter’, but ‘an insect with colourful wings that comes out in the daytime and gathers nectar from flowers’. You cannot see why a butterfly is called a *butterfly*, and cannot predict its meaning from the elements of the word.

Usually new words have more predictable meanings than well-established words if they are created by these processes. Their spellings are also more predictable if they are new (there is no obvious reason why *fruit fly* is written as two words and *butterfly* as one). This general pattern is equally true of words which were borrowed a long time ago. The word *retrieve* is an old borrowing from French, but even if you speak French it is hard to see that it is made up of a prefix *re-* (meaning ‘again’) and a word *trouver* (meaning ‘find’), so that *retrieve* once meant ‘find again’ (but is used to mean ‘to get back’). *Respond* is borrowed from Latin, originally from a prefix *re-* meaning ‘again’ and *spondere* meaning ‘promise’, but today it just means ‘to answer’, so that even if you knew what *spondere* originally meant, you would not be able to work out what the modern English word means. On the other hand, *reshoot*, a relatively modern word, means ‘to shoot (a scene in a film) again’, and can be worked out if you know this usage of *shoot*.

Again, this means that it is often the case that you have to learn the meanings of words independently of the elements that make them up, and only later can you work out how the words are made up of smaller meaningful pieces. This is just like idioms. When you first meet the expression *cool one’s heels*, you just have to learn that it means ‘be forced to wait’, you cannot work it out from the elements. Only later can you see that if you have come *hot foot* (‘in a hurry’) and you have to wait, your “hot feet” get cool again.

Many of the common borrowed words found in English have been used in English for a long time. Also, when learners first meet these common borrowed words or common cases of words created by word-formation, they do not have the experience to analyse the words into their component parts to see how the elements within them might help with understanding them. It follows that learners who come across these words relatively early in the process of learning English cannot work out what the words mean, but simply have to learn what they mean, in the same way that they have to learn what *skirt*, *country* and *analysis* mean.

For example, among many others, the most common 1000 words of English include the words in the following list, all of which might contain clues to their meaning, but some whose meaning has become impenetrable, others of which contain clues which can be perceived only with experience.

<i>Word</i>	<i>Source</i>
authority	Latin
available	Latin
business	word-formation
committee	word-formation
economy	Greek
environment	French
health	word-formation
inform	Latin
introduce	Latin
involve	Latin
people	French
produce	Latin
provide	Latin
telephone	Greek elements
understand	word-formation

At the same time, there are some words whose elements provide support for understanding. Such words are rarer, and are often not created by word-formation in English. Although the elements are available in English, they often require some active interpretation for the learner to make sense of them.

<i>Word</i>	<i>Comment</i>
active	from Latin, but both <i>act</i> and <i>-ive</i> are found in English
different	from Latin via French, but both <i>differ</i> and <i>-ent</i> are found in English
especially	the <i>-ly</i> is added by English word-formation and creates a regular meaning, but requires you to know <i>especial</i> (or even <i>special</i>)
normal	from Latin, but both <i>norm</i> and <i>-al</i> are found in English, though <i>normal</i> in English is more common than <i>norm</i>
pressure	from Latin, but both <i>press</i> and <i>-ure</i> are found in English

This does not mean that there is no value to seeking support from the elements of words in trying to understand the whole word. In some cases, students should be doing this from the very earliest days of learning English. Some examples of elements which should make it easier to see what a word means are given in the list below. The elements have been separated off from the rest of the word with hyphens.

<i>Word</i>	<i>Comment</i>
car-s	Although there are many nouns with irregular plurals (e.g. <i>one foot, two feet</i>), the <i>-s</i> is the most usual way of making a noun plural in English. The spelling remains relatively constant for marking a plural, but the pronunciation changes, so that the <i>-s</i> in <i>car-s</i> is pronounced differently from the <i>-s</i> in <i>cat-s</i> .
pink-ish	When added to adjectives or numbers, the suffix <i>-ish</i> regularly carries the meaning 'approximating to'. <i>Pink-ish</i> means 'slightly pink', <i>thirty-ish</i> means 'somewhere near 30'
re-write	Although <i>re-</i> is often obscure in French and Latin borrowings, when it is used in English it typically means 'again'.

un-kind	The prefix <i>un-</i> regularly produces a negative, although what the negative meaning involves is different when <i>un-</i> is added to an adjective (as in <i>un-kind</i> ‘not kind’) and when added to a verb (as in <i>un-tie</i> ‘reverse the action of tying’).
walk-ed	The suffix <i>-ed</i> can create past tenses of regular verbs (e.g. <i>She walked to work this morning</i>) or the past participle of regular verbs (e.g. <i>She has walked to work every day this week</i>). The <i>-ed</i> is pronounced differently in <i>walk-ed</i> , <i>wave-d</i> and <i>wait-ed</i> .
write-s	Although this <i>-s</i> looks the same as the <i>-s</i> which marks the plural on nouns, when it occurs on verbs it makes the form of the present tense of the verb required for the third person singular. The variable pronunciation is the same for both <i>-s</i> affixes.

Similarly, some compounds can be easily interpreted because of the elements they contain. Some examples are given below.

<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
catfish	a fish which resembles a cat in some way
gunboat	a boat which is armed with guns
naysayer	a person who regularly says ‘nay’ (i.e. ‘no’), a person who regularly disagrees
oatcake	a hard biscuit-like food made of oats
sandbox	a box containing sand, e.g. on railway lines or for children to play in
woodpile	a pile of pieces of wood, usually for putting on a fire
workbasket	a basket containing things required for work, usually for sewing

Sometimes words can begin or end with things that look as though they might be prefixes or suffixes, but which are not. For example, *hammer* looks as though it might end in the suffix *-er*, but there is no verb *ham(m)* to which it could be added to make *hammer*. *Bargee* ‘a person who operates a barge’, looks as though it could end in the suffix *-ee* (like *employee*), but the meaning is wrong and it probably is not a suffix. *Union* might look as though it has the prefix *un-* added to *ion*, but it does not, it is a borrowing from French and the *uni-* at the beginning is related to the Latin word for ‘one’. *Rubbish* might look as though it has a suffix *-ish* added to *rub*, but that fails to give the right meaning for the word. *Butter* is not a person or animal who butts. Similarly, *cartridge* might look like a compound made up of *cart* and *ridge*, but it is not related to either of those words in terms of its meaning, *catacoustics* could look as though it referred to the sounds cats make, but the *cat* element has nothing to do with felines (although it must be recognised that *catgut* does have something to do with felines – by historical error), but that *catgut* does not come from cats, and *detergent* has nothing to do with *detering* and nothing to do with *gents*.

We also find instances where, although a prefix or suffix or compound element reflects a genuine use of the element, it does not, in modern English, provide any useful information for the interpretation of the word. For example *mews* is, today, a singular word, though it was originally plural. The word *midwife* does contain a prefix, but it comes from a preposition meaning ‘with’ and has nothing to do with the form we find in *mid-winter*.

Another factor which complicates the understanding of instances of word-formation is the use of figurative language. This is very common, but not restricted to word-formation. For example, a clown is an entertainer who dresses colourfully and makes people laugh, especially in the circus, but if you call politicians *clowns* you mean that they cannot be taken seriously and are ridiculous or clumsy. A compound like *bedhead* involves working out that

head is a figurative usage meaning ‘the place where you put your head’, and a word like *blue-skies* (usually in *blue-skies research*) means that the research is unlimited, with no immediate practical application. The word *cannibalize* does not mean, as it might seem, ‘to turn into a cannibal’ but ‘to repair a machine or vehicle with parts taken from other machines’.

The challenge for the teacher in all of this is to determine which elements are useful enough for students because they will be helpful in interpreting a valuable set of words without misleading the students too often. Various textbooks make proposals about affixes which can be introduced relatively early, though they do not all agree, but part of what makes individual affixes relevant is the kind of English the student is learning (scientific English, medical English, business English, conversational English, and so on). Teachers also have to consider how much time they want to spend in pointing out how the meaning of individual words is carried by the elements of the words. Some of this is inevitable, but the degree to which this is done depends on the interest and the style of the teacher.