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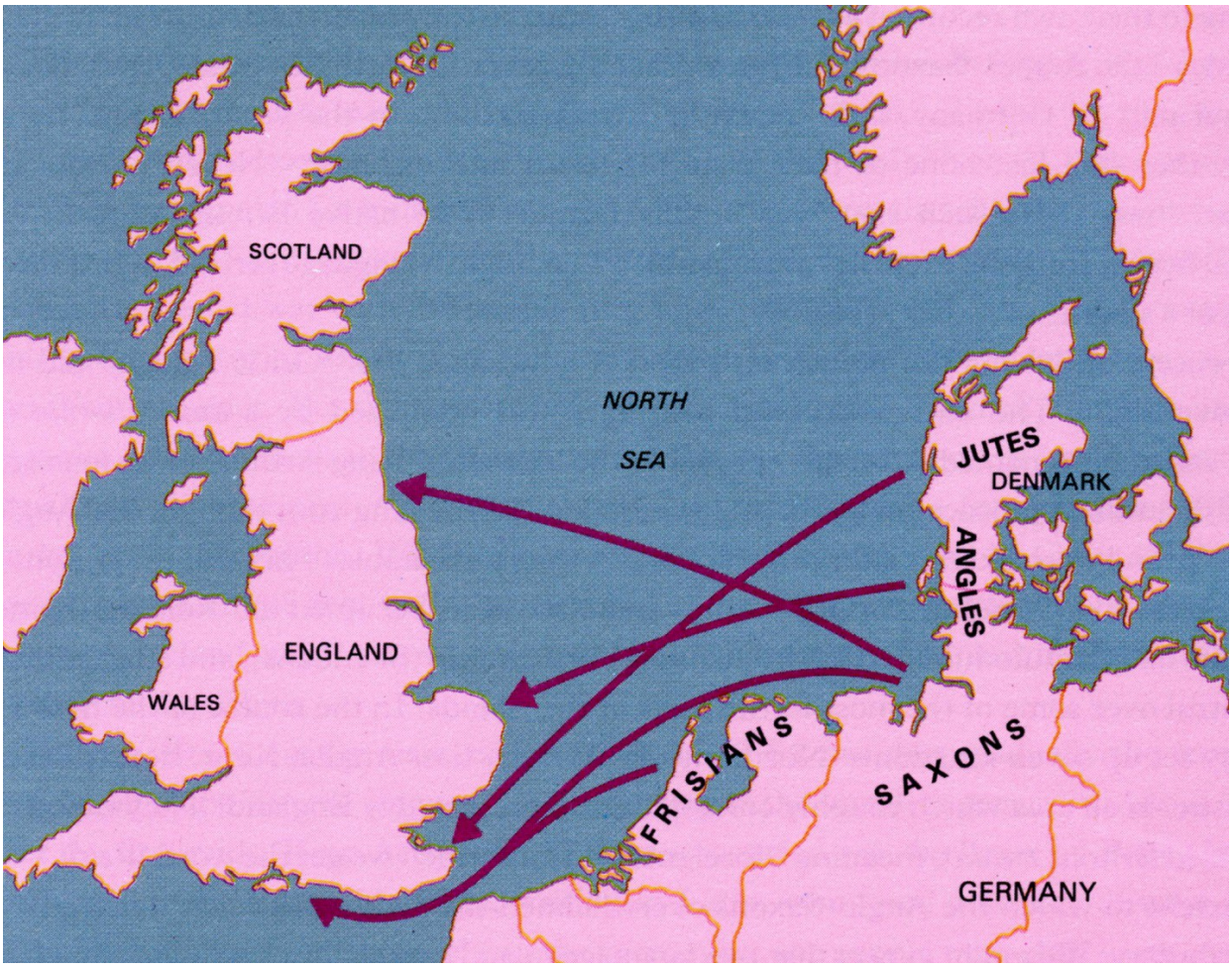
A(short)History of the English Language



Germanic Tribes and the Vikings Leave their Mark: 480-900

1. Which 3 Germanic tribes came to England after the Romans left in the 5th century AD?
2. Why were Anglo-Saxon words more useful than Latin?
3. Which language did the Christian church bring in?
4. Which 'Action Man' words did the Vikings bring with them when they came to England in 800AD?
5. Approximately how many words did the Vikings give the English language?

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The Norman Conquest of 1066

1. Did the English, the Church, and the invading Normans speak the same language?
2. What is the difference between cow/beef, swine/pork, sheep/mutton etc.?
3. Approximately how many words came from Norman French?
4. How long did the 100 Years war last?
5. Which language became the most powerful after the end of the war?

Shakespeare's Influence on the English Language: 1564-1616

These Shakespearean phrases are still used today. What do you think they mean?

1. Your own flesh and blood

2. To eat someone out of house and home

3. Good riddance

4. To break the ice with someone

5. Dead as a doornail

6. To get your money's worth

7. To give someone short shrift

Watch the clip.

1. What did Shakespearean language show the world?
2. How many words did he give to the English language?

Old English (500-1100 AD)

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 language similar to modern Frisian - the language of northeastern region of the Netherlands - that is called Old English.

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.

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: give, take, dream and skirt.

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 statistic is deceptive**; Old English is much more important than this number 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.

The Norman Conquest and Middle English (1100-1500)

William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD. 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 the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity, **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 Romantic 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 from the Bible:

Fæder ure þuþe 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 starts to become 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 heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debters.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evill. 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)

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.