

# British Culture 3 - The History of English

## INTRODUCTION

More people are trying to learn English than any other language in the world. English is the language of political negotiations and international business. It has become the international language of science and medicine. International treaties say passenger airplane pilots must speak English.

English is the major foreign language taught in most schools in South America and Europe. English is the official language of more than 75 countries including Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia, and South Africa.

In countries where many different languages are spoken, English is often used as an official language to help people communicate. India is a good example. English is the common language in this country where at least 24 languages are spoken by more than one million people.

People often ask how many words there are in the English language. Well, no one really knows. The Oxford English Dictionary lists about six hundred fifteen thousand words. Yet the many scientific words not in the dictionary could increase the number to almost one million.

## INFLUENCE 1

The English language is a result of the invasions of the island of Britain over many hundreds of years. The invaders lived along the northern coast of Europe.

The first invasions were by a people called Angles about 1,500 years ago. The Angles were a German tribe who crossed the English Channel. Later two more groups crossed to Britain. They were the Saxons and the Jutes.

These groups found a people called the Celts, who had lived in Britain for many thousands of years. The Celts and the invaders fought. After a while, most of the Celts were killed, or made slaves. Some escaped to live in the area that became Wales. Through the years, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes mixed their different languages. The result is what is called Anglo-Saxon or Old English. Old English is extremely difficult to understand. Only a few experts can read this earliest form of English. Several written works have survived from the Old English period. Perhaps the most famous is called *Beowulf*. It is the oldest known English poem. Experts say it was written in Britain more than one thousand years ago. The name of the person who wrote it is not known. *Beowulf* is the story of a great king who fought against monsters. He was a good king, well liked by his people.

## INFLUENCE 2

The next great invasion of Britain came from the far north beginning about 1,100 years ago. Fierce people called Vikings raided the coast areas of Britain. The Vikings came from Denmark, Norway and other northern countries. They were looking to capture trade goods and slaves and take away anything of value.

In some areas, the Vikings became so powerful they built temporary bases. These temporary bases sometimes became permanent. Later, many Vikings stayed in Britain.

Many English words used today come from these ancient Vikings. Words like "sky," "leg," "skull," "egg," "crawl," "lift" and "take" are from the old languages of the far northern countries.

## INFLUENCE 3

The next invasion of Britain took place more than 900 years ago, in 1066. History experts call this invasion the Norman Conquest. William the Conqueror led it.

The Normans were a French-speaking people from Normandy in the north of France. They became the new rulers of Britain. These new rulers spoke only French for several hundred years. It was the most important language in the world at that time. It was the language of educated people. But the common people of Britain still spoke Old English.

Old English took many words from the Norman French. Some of these include "damage," "prison," and "marriage." Most English words that describe law and government come from Norman French, words such as "jury," "parliament," and "justice."

The French language used by the Norman rulers greatly changed the way English was spoken by 800 years ago. English became what language experts call Middle English. As time passed, the ruling Normans no longer spoke true French. Their language had become a mix of French and Middle English.

Middle English sounds like modern English. But it is very difficult to understand now. Many written works from this period have survived. Perhaps the most famous was written by Geoffrey Chaucer, a poet who lived in London and died there in 1400. Chaucer's most famous work is "The Canterbury Tales," written more than 600 years ago. "The Canterbury Tales" is a collection of poems about different people traveling to the town of Canterbury.

## INFLUENCE 4

In the year 597, the Roman Catholic Church began its attempt to make Christianity the religion of Britain. The language of the Catholic Church was Latin. Latin was not spoken as a language in any country at that time. But it was still used by some people. Latin made it possible for a church member from Rome to speak to a church member from Britain. Educated people from different countries could communicate using Latin. Latin had a great effect on the English language. Here are a few examples. The Latin word "discus" became several words in English including "disk," "dish," and "desk." The Latin word "quietus" became the English word "quiet." Some English names of plants such as ginger and trees such as cedar come from Latin. So do some medical words such as cancer.

## INFLUENCE 5

English began to grow more quickly when William Caxton returned to Britain in the year 1476. He had been in Holland and other areas of Europe where he had learned printing. He returned to Britain with the first printing press. The printing press made it possible for almost anyone to buy a book. It helped spread education and the English language.

Slowly, during the fifteen hundreds, English became the modern language we would recognize. English speakers today would be able to communicate with English speakers in the last part of the sixteenth century. It was during this time period that the greatest writer in English produced his work. His name was William Shakespeare. His plays continue to be printed, acted in theaters, and seen in motion pictures almost four hundred years after his death.

## INFLUENCE 6

The development of the English language took a giant step just nine years before the death of William Shakespeare. Three small British ships crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1607. They landed in an area that would later become the southern American state of Virginia. They began the first of several British colonies. The name of the first small colony was Jamestown. In time, people in these new colonies began to call areas of their new land by words borrowed from the native people they found living there. For example, many of the great rivers in the United States are taken from American Indian words. The Mississippi, the Tennessee, the Missouri are examples.

Other Native American words included "moccasin", the kind of shoe made of animal skin that Indians wore on their feet. This borrowing or adding of foreign words to English was a way of expanding the language.

Britain had other colonies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and India. The English language also became part of these colonies. These colonies are now independent, but English still is one of the languages spoken. And the English language grew as words from the native languages were added. For example, the word "shampoo" for soap for the hair came from India. "Banana" is believed to be from Africa.

(Abridged and adapted from <http://www.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/>)

## OTHER INFLUENCES

The development of the Internet, trade, Global English, science are also important factors that considerably change the English language.