

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Layers of Language:
A Brief History of Written English

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~ Module 13, Session 2 ~
Lecture Notes

English is one of the youngest languages of the World. Its written form developed many years after early cave drawings, the later Sumerian cuneiforms, and Egyptian hieroglyphics. These pictographs were a form of logographic writing where a symbol stood for whole words or syllables, and were often difficult to interpret. They also took considerable time and space, and required some artistic talent.

The final major stage of writing is phonetic or alphabetic writing where written language corresponds to spoken language, and signs represent sounds. The first written languages contained only consonants, but the Greeks created the first true alphabet by reassigning some consonant symbols to vowel sounds.

Our alphabet, the Roman alphabet, developed between 1700 and 1500 BCE (Before Common Era) as the Romans adapted Etruscan script. Letter formations were refined and mastered by the first century BCE. While capital letters were used exclusively at first, lower case letters appeared in the 4th century. The English alphabet reached 26 letters after medieval scribes add *w* and Renaissance printers separated the *i* and *j* as well as *u* and *v*.

Most English words come from three basic language origins: Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Greek. Readers who understand the differences in words from these origins can use this information in reading and spelling unfamiliar words.

Words entered the British Isles due to important events in history (See Henry, 1999, & 2003). During the period of Old English (450-1150), Anglo-Saxon was the dominant language. The vocabulary stressed the people, objects, and events of daily life. The Romans adapted the Roman alphabet from the Greek, and Christian missionaries reintroduced it to the British Isles by around 600 CE.

Later, the Danes (Scandinavians primarily from Norway and Denmark) invaded and brought new words into the language. The Norman Conquest, led by William the Conqueror in 1066, brought the decline of Old English. This was the transition point to Middle English (1150-1500), when, according to Claiborne (1983) "...more than ten thousand French words passed into the English vocabulary, of which 75 percent are still

in use” (p. 112). Anglo-French compounds and affixed words (e.g., gentlewomen, gentleman; faithful, faithfulness) appeared during this period.

Latin again penetrated the language during the 14th and 15th centuries, during the Renaissance. Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* in the late 1300s. Many of the words we use today are borrowed from the Romance languages of this period. The use of the term *Romance* implies Latin-based terms coming primarily from Romania, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and France.

At this time, too, Latin affixes entered the language in great numbers. Adding prefixes and suffixes to roots greatly expanded the number of words formed by any one Latin root (e.g., *spect*, *inspect*, *inspection*, *spectator*, *respect*, *respectful*, *respectfully*, etc.). During this time prefixes such as *counter-*, *dis-*, *re-*, *trans-*, *sub-*, *super-*, *pre-*, *pro-*, and *de-*, along with suffixes *-able*, *-ible*, *-ent*, *-al*, *-ous*, and *-ive* were added.

Late Middle English (1422-1500) is known for the growing importance of the written word. The Dutch pressman William Caxton introduced the printing press into England using the English spoken in London by the well-to-do. The arrival of the printing press in England encouraged new spelling conventions to be set into place at this time.

During the period of Modern English (1500 to the present), even more of English orthography (its spelling system) was locked into type. The sound patterns of the language were changing, especially in the vowel sounds. Vocabulary continued to expand, especially in the use of Greek and Latin morphemes (meaning units) in forming scientific terms. In fact, many Latin roots came directly from the Greek.

Remember that other cultures also added to the English language, especially to American English. Americans took words from Native Americans as they settled. Dutch settlers and African slaves brought additional words. Many new words also formed during the Westward movement, including *cantankerous*, *caboodle*, and *rambunctious*. As new immigrants enter the country new terms become part of English. Think of the foods from various countries that are familiar such as *burritos* and *tacos*, *Brie* and *bouillabaisse*, and *chow mein* and *wonton* soup.

American English continues to expand with new innovations. Radio, television, computers, and space exploration brought us bandwidth, videocassette, microbits, astronaut, and teleprompter.

The 1980s and 1990s brought numerous new words and phrases to the language such as *baby boomer*, *awesome*, *airhead*, *couch potato*, and *proactive*.

RESOURCES

(These resources are also given as a handout for Session 2)

Books for Students on the History of English

Brook, D., & Zallinger, J. D. (Illustrator). (1998). *The journey of English*. New York: Clarion Books.

Krensky, S. (1996). *Breaking into print: Before and after the invention of the printing press*. Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company (Canada).

Klausner, J. (1990). *Talk about English: How words travel and change*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.

Samoyault, T. (1996). *Alphabetical order: How the alphabet began*. New York: Penquin.

Resources for Teachers

Ayto, J. (1999). *Twentieth century words*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Balmuth, M. (1982). *The roots of English*. Baltimore: York Press.

Barnett, L. (1964). *The treasure of our tongue*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bryson, W. (1990). *The mother tongue: English and how it got that way*. New York: William Morrow.

Claiborne, R. (1983). *Our marvelous native tongue*. New York: Times Books.

Henry, M. K. (2003). *Unlocking literacy* (chapter 2). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, Publishing.

Henry, M. K. (1999). A short history of the English language, In J Birsh, (Ed.), *Multisensory teaching of basic language skills*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes, Publishing, pp. 119-140.

Lederer, R. (1991). *The miracle of language*. New York: Pocket Books.

Logan, R. K. (1986). *The alphabet effect*. New York: St. Martins Press.

Manguel, A. (1996). *A history of reading*. New York: Viking.

McCrum, R., Cran, S., & MacNeil, R. (1986). *The story of English*. New York: Viking.

Nist, J. (1966). *A structural history of English*. New York: St. Martins Press.

Pei, Mario (1965, 1949). *The story of language*. New York: J. B. Lippincott.

Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct*. New York: William Morrow.

Soukhanov, A. H. (1995). *Word watch*. New York: Henry Holt.