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Episode #134

A Short History of The English Language

19th Feb, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about where the English language comes from.

[00:00:29] Now, you might think the answer is obvious, England, but it is a lot more complicated—and indeed more interesting—than that.

[00:00:39] English is a strange mix of different languages, and for the past almost two [millennia](#)¹ it has been in a constant state of change, taking words and influences from all sorts of other languages to create the strange language that I am speaking today.

¹ thousands of years



[00:00:57] It goes without saying that this is a subject that is super interesting to me, [with my linguist's hat on²](#), and should also be a fun one for you, as an English learner.

[00:01:09] So I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:01:11] Before we get right into that though, I first want to want to thank my father, who is an English teacher, and was a huge help in writing this episode. So, thanks dad.

[00:01:23] And my second administrative point is to remind you that you can follow along to this episode with the subtitles, the transcript and its key vocabulary, so you don't miss a word and build up your vocabulary as you go, over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:40] For those of you who aren't yet members of Leonardo English, I'd definitely recommend checking out our membership. It gives you access to all of the bonus episodes, so I think that's almost 50 hours in total, plus our live sessions, learning materials, and more.

[00:01:57] So if that's of interest, and I certainly hope it is, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:02:06] OK then, English.

[00:02:09] You've no doubt heard all sorts of statistics about how many people speak English.

² as a linguist



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[00:02:15] If you Google it, you'll find the Internet telling you that something like 1.3 billion people speak English.

[00:02:23] Then digging down deeper, you'll find that, of those, around 360 million people are native speakers of English, that they were **brought up**³ speaking English.

[00:02:36] And as I imagine we both know, English is the most commonly studied second language in the world, with a **supposed**⁴ 1.5 billion people learning it.

[00:02:48] Now, the definition of 'learning' here is quite **loose**⁵, and not all of these 1.5 billion people are **diligent**⁶ students like you are, but the point is that there can be little doubt that English has come to be the world's **dominant**⁷ language by a significant **margin**⁸.

³ if you are brought up doing something, you grow up doing it

⁴ claimed by other people to be true

⁵ not firm

⁶ careful

⁷ strong and important

⁸ the amount that something is different to something else



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[00:03:08] For all of the newspaper [headlines](#)⁹ about how Mandarin, Spanish or Arabic might be the languages of the future, none of these languages have anywhere near the global [attractiveness](#)¹⁰ of English.

[00:03:23] English has come to be the world's [lingua franca](#)¹¹. Jobs, universities, life has all started to require English in a way that it didn't even 20 years ago.

[00:03:36] But of course you know this, because you are listening to a podcast in English.

[00:03:41] What is a lot more interesting than me [spouting off](#)¹² statistics about how important English has become is to actually learn about the history of the language, and to ask ourselves how it developed over the years, and how it reached this position of global [dominance](#)¹³.

[00:04:00] So, let's do that.

⁹ the main title of a newspaper

¹⁰ the quality of being attractive to many

¹¹ a language used by people when their main languages are different

¹² talking for a long period of time

¹³ the quality of being more important



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[00:04:02] One of the main reasons why English has become such a **dominant** language is its **adaptability**¹⁴, and its ability to constantly **absorb**¹⁵ words from other languages.

[00:04:15] You see, despite what your English teacher might have told you, English is a language that is completely **unconcerned**¹⁶ with **purity**¹⁷.

[00:04:25] It has developed over the years precisely because of its **ability**¹⁸ to become less and less **pure**¹⁹, because of its ability to **breed**²⁰ with other languages and grow stronger and stronger.

[00:04:38] There are two **analogies**²¹ that I think are useful here, when thinking about English.

¹⁴ ability to change

¹⁵ take something in

¹⁶ not worried about or interested in

¹⁷ the quality of not being mixed with anything else

¹⁸ the power or skill to do something

¹⁹ not mixed with anything else

²⁰ type of animal

²¹ comparisons between similar things, usually to explain another idea



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[00:04:45] The first is of a [mongrel](#)²², which is what you get when two dogs of different [breeds](#)²³ have a puppy. It's [impure](#)²⁴, in the sense that it will be a mix of the two, but it doesn't make it any less beautiful.

[00:05:02] English is in many respects, a [mongrel](#) language.

[00:05:07] And our second [analogy](#)²⁵ is of a big [pot](#)²⁶, a big [saucepan](#)²⁷, that you use to cook soup in.

[00:05:15] If you are cooking a soup, you might start with a base of something, but you keep the [pot](#) cooking over time, and add more and more ingredients.

[00:05:26] The flavour develops, and as you add more and more ingredients, perhaps even [exotic](#)²⁸ ingredients like spices, the soup develops a more and more unique flavour.

[00:05:39] This is perhaps the best way to think about English, as a soup that has been cooking for almost two [millennia](#), where the cook is happy to add almost any

²² a dog whose parents are different types of dogs

²³ types of animal

²⁴ not pure

²⁵ a comparison between similar things, usually to explain another idea

²⁶ a deep, round container

²⁷ a pan with straight sides used for cooking

²⁸ unusual and exciting, usually because it comes from far away



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ingredient he is presented with, and the result is this complicated but rich language soup.

[00:05:58] So, keeping with our soup [analogy](#), the base for English comes from three [tribes](#)²⁹ - the Saxons, the Jutes, and the Angles. These [tribes](#) originally weren't British, or at least they didn't come from Britain - they came from continental Europe, the areas around modern day Denmark and northern Germany.

[00:06:24] It's the last of these three [tribes](#), the Angles, who gave English its name, and the base of our English soup comes from the language spoken by the Angles and the Saxons, Anglo-Saxon.

[00:06:38] You might have heard this [referred to](#)³⁰ as Old English.

[00:06:43] These tribes came to Britain after the Romans left in the middle of the fifth century, and the language they spoke is the base for English.

[00:06:54] Now, if you or I heard someone speaking Anglo-Saxon now, would we understand them?

[00:07:02] Probably not.

²⁹ groups of people who live together

³⁰ called



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[00:07:03] The vast majority of Anglo-Saxon words have died out, they have disappeared from modern day English, but the words that have survived are words that you certainly will know.

[00:07:17] Love, big, green, ship, kind, wife, these are all examples of words that come from Anglo-Saxon.

[00:07:27] As a general rule, and of course there are thousands of [exceptions](#)³¹ to this, English words that come from Anglo-Saxon are usually short, without many [syllables](#)³².

[00:07:39] Indeed, words with Anglo-Saxon [origins](#)³³ are some of the most common words in the English language, [accounting for](#)³⁴ around 70% of the English that you will hear in normal, day-to-day speech.

[00:07:54] That's not to say someone who only spoke Anglo-Saxon could listen to this podcast and understand 70% of what I was saying - these words have been [adapted](#)³⁵ since then, but they have [roots](#)³⁶ in Anglo-Saxon.

³¹ things that are not included in a general rule

³² single units of speech

³³ where something comes from

³⁴ being responsible for

³⁵ changed

³⁶ origins, where something comes from



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[00:08:08] And a [tip³⁷](#) for you is to use short, Anglo-Saxon words whenever you can.

[00:08:16] I can't take any [credit³⁸](#) for this [tip](#), it actually comes from Winston Churchill, probably the most famous [orator³⁹](#) in the English language.

[00:08:26] He famously said that "Short words are best, and old words when short are best of all."

[00:08:34] So, when [in doubt⁴⁰](#), use short words.

[00:08:38] I know this might sound uncomfortable for native speakers of certain languages, where using longer, more complicated vocabulary is considered better, but in English it isn't.

[00:08:52] So, we have our base for English soup, but what next? We've only got to the 5th century AD, and the soup has only started [bubbling⁴¹](#).

[00:09:03] The next big event in the English language was the invasion by the Vikings, in the 8th Century AD. For those of you that want to learn more about that, Episode 96 is the one for you.

³⁷ small piece of advice

³⁸ if you take credit for something, you say you are responsible for it

³⁹ someone who is good at speaking

⁴⁰ if you are in doubt, you don't know what you should do

⁴¹ if a sauce is bubbling, bubbles form because it is hot



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[00:09:17] Anyway, the Vikings came mainly from modern day Scandinavia, and [settled](#)⁴² in the north and middle of England.

[00:09:26] Aside from [terrorising](#)⁴³ the local population, they left a linguistic mark on the English language, and words such as husband, sky, and [skull](#)⁴⁴ come from the Norse languages spoken by the Vikings.

[00:09:41] Fast forward around 300 years and we have the next big addition to our English soup, and that was the invasion by the Norman French, by William The Conqueror in 1066.

[00:09:55] Now, these Normans were, technically, Vikings themselves, they had [settled](#) in Northern France about 200 years earlier, but they spoke Norman French, a language similar to the French that is spoken in France today.

[00:10:12] As is often the [case](#)⁴⁵ with invaders, they didn't make much attempt to speak the local language, which was at that time a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Norse—we can't really call it English yet—and instead Norman French was the language of [courts](#)⁴⁶, and the language of administration.

⁴² started to live in an area for a long period of time

⁴³ deliberately frightening

⁴⁴ the bones of the head

⁴⁵ situation

⁴⁶ places where kings and queens live



[00:10:32] And it continued like this for several hundred years.

[00:10:36] In fact, it wasn't until the year 1415, after the English victory over the French at Agincourt, that English started to become the official language, and indeed the letter sent back to England telling the news of the unexpected victory was one of the first official ones to be written in English.

[00:10:59] But, the [switch](#)⁴⁷ wasn't immediate, and Norman French left a large impact on the local language.

[00:11:07] This is especially the case for words that describe law and government - the laws and administration were all in Norman French, and thus even when the language switched to English, Norman French words remained.

[00:11:25] So, if you think of words like justice, which is 'justice' in French, [traitor](#)⁴⁸, which is 'traître' in French, [sovereign](#)⁴⁹, which is 'souverain' in French, and [parliament](#)⁵⁰, 'parliament' in French.

[00:11:40] French also brought new, interesting, inventions to English, such as different words for animals and their meat.

⁴⁷ change

⁴⁸ someone who isn't loyal to their country

⁴⁹ king or queen

⁵⁰ the group of elected politicians who make laws



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[00:11:50] To give you an example, you have a cow when it's alive, or beef when it's on a plate. Sheep when it's in a field, and mutton when it's on a plate. And a pig becomes pork when you eat it.

[00:12:05] These are all French [borrowings](#)⁵¹, they are words from French, before this English didn't have these extra words to describe the different states of an animal.

[00:12:17] And words taken from the French tended to be considered more [fancy](#)⁵², more important.

[00:12:25] So the Anglo-Saxon 'cook' has an alternative of 'chef', which sounds a lot more [fancy](#).

[00:12:33] And, like with cook and chef, in many cases, English doesn't replace the previous words with the French ones - the French ones just take on a slightly different, often [superior](#)⁵³, meaning.

[00:12:49] This is one of the reasons why English is so rich in [synonyms](#)⁵⁴, why there are so many different ways of saying the same thing.

⁵¹ things that are taken from something else (and normally returned)

⁵² important because they are expensive and fashionable

⁵³ better than

⁵⁴ words or phrases that mean the same things as something else



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[00:12:59] To give you another example of this, let's take a look at different ways that you can say 'smell'.

[00:13:07] You can say stink, pong, whiff, perfume, fragrance, scent, essence, bouquet and aroma.

[00:13:16] Now, the first three on that list, stink, pong, whiff, all now have slightly negative [connotations](#)⁵⁵, you might walk into a rubbish [dump](#)⁵⁶ and say 'it stinks'. These three all come from Anglo-Saxon.

[00:13:31] The remaining ones come from French, and all have positive [connotations](#), when you think of fragrance, perfume, or a bouquet, this is more likely to be associated with the smell of flowers or something nicer than a [rotting](#)⁵⁷ fish.

[00:13:50] And it's through French's [origins](#) as a Romance language that most of our Latin words are added to English.

[00:13:59] One question you might have is, well, if the Romans conquered Britain, why isn't English more similar to Latin? The Romans did leave some linguistic [influences](#)⁵⁸

⁵⁵ the additional meaning of a word, over and above its main meaning

⁵⁶ a place where large amounts of rubbish is left

⁵⁷ decomposing, decaying

⁵⁸ effects



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on English, but most Latin words were actually added to English well after the Romans had [departed](#)⁵⁹.

[00:14:18] Latin was the language of the church, and thus a lot of the English words that come from Latin are religious - [candle](#)⁶⁰, pope, school, and so on.

[00:14:33] But although many words in English do have Latin [roots](#), these are mostly words that have come from the French, which is of course a Latin-based language.

[00:14:45] And then it comes to words that are invented by [innovative](#)⁶¹ Brits themselves - English isn't only a language of [thieves](#)⁶², we also create a lot of our own words.

[00:14:56] The most famous of these creators of words is, of course, William Shakespeare.

⁵⁹ left

⁶⁰ a piece of wax in a stick with a string in the middle, used to produce light

⁶¹ using new methods and ideas

⁶² people who steal (take without permission)



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[00:15:02] Shakespeare is thought to have invented about 1,700 words, many of which are in common use today, from bedroom to kissing, [critic](#)⁶³ to eyeball, Shakespeare is [without a doubt](#)⁶⁴ the most [prolific](#)⁶⁵ individual [contributor](#)⁶⁶ to the English language.

[00:15:22] So, when people say that English is the language of Shakespeare, it really is.

[00:15:28] And as the British started to [venture](#)⁶⁷ further afield, to colonise large parts of the world, they brought language back to Britain.

[00:15:37] Words like pyjama and [chutney](#)⁶⁸ come from India, [safari](#)⁶⁹ from the Arabic, and ketchup from Hokkien, a language spoken in modern day south-east China.

[00:15:50] Now, [borrowing](#)⁷⁰ words from other languages isn't unique to English, almost every language does it, but it's the [extent](#)⁷¹ to which English takes words from

⁶³ someone who says they do not like something (and provides reasons for it)

⁶⁴ certainly

⁶⁵ producing a great number of something

⁶⁶ someone who plays a part in a larger project

⁶⁷ move, travel

⁶⁸ a mixture of fruit, spices and sugar

⁶⁹ an organised journey to see wild animals, normally in Africa

⁷⁰ taking

⁷¹ level, amount



other languages and makes them an important part of English that separates English from most other languages, and adds to its [richness](#)⁷².

[00:16:10] You might be surprised that we've got so far in the history of the English language without mentioning the place with the most native English speakers in the world, the United States of America.

[00:16:22] The centre of the English language now isn't the small island where it first developed, but the world's most powerful country, across the Atlantic Ocean.

[00:16:32] And although we can spend hours talking about the linguistic reasons that English has been such a successful language, the main reason is that it's the most commonly spoken language in the US.

[00:16:46] Note, I didn't say the official language because it's not actually the official language, you might find that surprising. The US doesn't have an official language, although English is of course the most common language, and [de facto](#)⁷³ national language.

[00:17:02] And now, there are 55 countries that have English as an official language, from the United Kingdom to Malta, Pakistan to the Philippines, and in each of these countries there's a slightly different English spoken.

⁷² the quality of being rich

⁷³ existing without question, although not necessarily legal



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[00:17:15] I'm not just talking about accents, but different words, expressions, ways of saying things. Yes, we might all be able to understand each other, and we are all technically speaking the same language, but the beauty of English is its [adaptability](#), its [willingness](#)⁷⁴ to change, to [absorb](#) new words as time goes on.

[00:17:39] The Oxford English Dictionary, arguably the bible of the English language, publishes a list of new words every year, and every year when this list comes out there are letters in to newspapers [lamenting](#)⁷⁵ the [decline](#)⁷⁶ of the language, saying how we need to [preserve](#)⁷⁷ this beautiful language and that it is ridiculous that we accept any new word just because it has become [mildly](#)⁷⁸ popular.

[00:18:07] But, I would argue that one of the main reasons that English has become so popular, and gone from a language spoken by a few thousand people on a small, wet island in Northern Europe through to the world's [de facto](#) second language is precisely because of its [willingness](#) to [adapt](#)⁷⁹, to [evolve](#)⁸⁰ in order to survive.

⁷⁴ the quality of being happy to do something

⁷⁵ complaining

⁷⁶ the decrease in quality

⁷⁷ keep something as it always has been

⁷⁸ slightly, not very much

⁷⁹ change

⁸⁰ change



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[00:18:30] So, to return to our original [analogy](#) of the soup, we now have this huge [pot](#), or perhaps a series of different large [pots](#)⁸¹ cooking away in different countries all over the world.

[00:18:42] And the beautiful thing is that we are all cooks, or should I say chefs, and that almost every ingredient we add makes the soup richer, more delicious, and able to be enjoyed by even more people from all over the world.

[00:19:00] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The History of The English Language.

[00:19:06] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:19:11] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:19:14] For the members among you, you can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:24] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world, to unlock the transcripts, the subtitles, and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com

⁸¹ deep, round containers



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[00:19:42] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:47] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Millennia	thousands of years
With my linguist's hat on	as a linguist
Brought up	if you are brought up doing something, you grow up doing it
Supposed	claimed by other people to be true
Loose	not firm
Diligent	careful
Dominant	strong and important
Margin	the amount that something is different to something else
Headlines	the main title of a newspaper
Attractiveness	the quality of being attractive to many
Lingua franca	a language used by people when their main languages are different
Spouting off	talking for a long period of time
Dominance	the quality of being more important



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Adaptability	ability to change
Absorb	take something in
Unconcerned	not worried about or interested in
Purity	the quality of not being mixed with anything else
Ability	the power or skill to do something
Pure	not mixed with anything else
Breed	type of animal
Analogy	comparisons between similar things, usually to explain another idea
Mongrel	a dog whose parents are different types of dogs
Breeds	types of animal
Impure	not pure
Analogy	a comparison between similar things, usually to explain another idea
Pot	a deep, round container
Saucepan	a pan with straight sides used for cooking
Exotic	unusual and exciting, usually because it comes from far away



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Tribes	groups of people who live together
Referred to	called
Exceptions	things that are not included in a general rule
Syllables	single units of speech
Origins	where something comes from
Accounting for	being responsible for
Adapted	changed
Roots	origins, where something comes from
Tip	small piece of advice
Credit	if you take credit for something, you say you are responsible for it
Orator	someone who is good at speaking
In doubt	if you are in doubt, you don't know what you should do
Bubbling	if a sauce is bubbling, bubbles form because it is hot
Settled	started to live in an area for a long period of time
Terrorising	deliberately frightening



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Skull	the bones of the head
Case	situation
Courts	places where kings and queens live
Switch	change
Traitor	someone who isn't loyal to their country
Sovereign	king or queen
Parliament	the group of elected politicians who make laws
Borrowings	things that are taken from something else (and normally returned)
Fancy	important because they are expensive and fashionable
Superior	better than
Synonyms	words or phrases that mean the same things as something else
Connotations	the additional meaning of a word, over and above its main meaning
Dump	a place where large amounts of rubbish is left
Rotting	decomposing, decaying
Influences	effects



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Departed	left
Gospel	any of the four books of the Bible that talk about the life of Jesus Christ
Candle	a piece of wax in a stick with a string in the middle, used to produce light
Innovative	using new methods and ideas
Thieves	people who steal (take without permission)
Critic	someone who says they do not like something (and provides reasons for it)
Without a doubt	certainly
Prolific	producing a great number of something
Contributor	someone who plays a part in a larger project
Venture	move, travel
Chutney	a mixture of fruit, spices and sugar
Safari	an organised journey to see wild animals, normally in Africa
Borrowing	taking
Extent	level, amount
Richness	the quality of being rich



De facto	existing without question, although not necessarily legal
Willingness	the quality of being happy to do something
Lamenting	complaining
Decline	the decrease in quality
Preserve	keep something as it always has been
Mildly	slightly, not very much
Adapt	change
Evolve	change
Pots	deep, round containers

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

