DISCOVERING WORDS

JULIAN WALKER

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Contents

Introduction	4
Arts and Communications	15
Body and Health	21
Clothes and Fabrics	27
Environment and Weather	32
Faith and Ideas	36
Family and People	40
Food and Drink	45
Garden	53
Home	56
Law	60
Learning	64
Military	68
Nature	72
Science	78
Sports and Games	82
State and Politics	86
Tools and Materials	91
Trade and Money	94
Transport	98
Work	104
Abstract Nouns	108
Adjectives	113
Verbs	120
Bibliography	124
Index	127

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Introduction

WHEN we speak English we benefit from over twenty-five centuries of living culture, though we seldom think about where the words we use come from or how they got to us. But the study of the history of words reveals extraordinary and often unexpected voyages across time and space. The richness of the English language as seen in the extent of its vocabulary comes from a history of the movement of people across boundaries, the sharing of ideas and the vigour of enquiring minds. Writing and speaking English is the celebration of this history.

When we sit on the sofa to watch the television screen while eating a pizza or curry, hoping the phone will not ring, we are using words borrowed or constructed from a wide range of languages. Some of them we recognise as foreign in origin, because they somehow do not sound English, while others have become so naturalised through use that they appear to be quintessentially English. They may have come directly or via one or more other languages ('screen'), may have displaced other words ('sofa' for 'settle'), may have come as part of war, migration or colonisation ('curry'), or been consciously invented to supply the need for naming a technological invention ('phone'). They may even combine roots from two or more languages ('television'), or be in the process of change through which clear evidence of their origin may be lost ('when').

Sometimes the journeys of words are unexpected. 'Pizza' is derived ultimately from a language very similar to English (and is

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related to the word 'bite'), yet retains an unmistakably Italian feel. 'Eat' may sound a basic Germanic type of word, similar to the German *essen*, but can be traced back to similar words in Latin and Greek, and beyond to Sanskrit, one of the world's oldest languages, used in northern India since over three thousand years ago. A word may travel from the British Isles to a language in another country and come back to English many centuries later; this has happened for many of the words of Celtic origin in English, other than place-names.

There are many reasons for the richness of English. Waves of immigration and invasion brought the dialects spoken by various groups of people from the area covering present-day coastal Belgium, Holland, northern Germany and Denmark into contact with a mixture of Celtic and Latin, soon dominating or excluding them and creating what we know as Old English, or Anglo-Saxon (to avoid confusion, I shall use 'Old English' for the language, 'Anglo-Saxon' for the people); later invasions from Scandinavia and France changed the language both structurally and in terms of vocabulary. New words arrived later with the propensities for trade, colonisation, conquest, travel and invention, which have characterised British history.

Ideas as well as items bring new words, for how else can they be discussed and used? The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought extensive and innovative thinking in the fields of arts and architecture, science, philosophy, politics and engineering, all fields requiring an extensive new vocabulary. Often words were borrowed directly from other languages – 'calibre' and 'bayonet' from French, 'miniature' from Italian, 'veneer' from German. Or a word might emerge from academia to fit a new way of thinking, such as 'democracy'; a word newly invented in another language, such as 'oxygen', might travel across national boundaries, sometimes, as in the case of 'gin', deriving from the place of origin of the idea or invention. Or a new concept, such as 'microscope', might require the construction of a new word from words in another language, usually Latin or Greek, reflecting the esteem in which these languages were held.

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From early on, the names of traded goods have been added to the English lexicon, while from the late Middle Ages words arrived that form a historical map of the growth of what would become the British Empire. Both of these chart the interaction between Britain and the rest of the world in terms other than migration. New practices from abroad tended to arrive with their own words. French clothes fashion brought ‘petticoat’, Italian garden design brought ‘patio’ and ‘gazebo’, while Dutch marine engineering brought ‘pump’ and ‘derrick’. Foods and materials, such as ‘tomato’ or ‘denim’, might come with a name which would be anglicised beyond recognition, through spelling or pronunciation or both.

Advances in science, engineering and technology have always required the invention of new words or the borrowing of foreign ones, from the ‘cannon’ of the sixteenth century, borrowed from French, to the ‘internet’ of the twentieth century, reputedly coined by the United States Defense Department. The adoption of brand names for generic usage dates back to the rise of branded goods in the nineteenth century, including ‘aspirin’ in 1899, and ‘linoleum’ as early as 1864.

There is a well-known idea that the Norman Conquest brought about a two-tier linguistic structure reflecting the two-tier social structure; in this, the Norman lord of the manor ate ‘beef’, from an animal tended by his Saxon serf, who called it a ‘cow’. But all levels of society had to ‘cook’, from Latin via Old English, and ‘eat’, which is related to both early Germanic and Latin. In a delightful twist, the later French nickname for an English person, *un rosbif*, comes from ‘roast’ and ‘beef’, both words which came to English from French.

Language has always been used to mark distinction and exclusivity, as well as to communicate. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a great debate went on over the creation of new Latin-based words; some of them were accepted into common usage, while others remained for a short time the preserve of scholars, before disappearing altogether. In more recent times we have grown used to the idea of jargon being used to exclude or overwhelm the uninitiated, whether it be Cockney rhyming slang, the acronyms produced by government, or the terms used in the local hardware store.

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There is a story that Queen Anne in 1710 described St Paul's Cathedral as 'terrible and awful'; the variations of vocabulary in different versions of the story indicate that it probably did not take place, but it still serves to illustrate a point about how the meanings of words change. In the early eighteenth century this description meant that the building inspired awe and wonder, much as we might say 'awesome and terrific'. These two pairs of words come from the same root, but have acquired completely opposite meanings, comparatively recently. It is a process that occurs frequently with slang – currently 'wicked' means something far from 'evil', while someone can be described with approval as simultaneously both 'cool' and 'hot'.

From one root a word can diverge into different, even contradictory, applications: 'person', coming from the Latin *persona*, a mask worn in the theatre by an actor, became at the same time the word for the character in a drama, and the living body of an individual. Shakespeare used both meanings, referring to 'our person' for the body of King Henry V, and Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presenting 'the person' of Moonshine.

'Discuss', coming from Latin words meaning 'to break apart', was used by Chaucer in the fourteenth century to mean 'to disperse' or 'dispel', from which it developed to 'to examine by argument, investigate or decide', close to the modern meaning of considering a matter calmly.

There are still those who feel that if English were 'fixed', the benefits in comprehension would outweigh the disadvantages. In 1651 John Cheke wrote: 'I am of this opinion that our own tung should be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borrowing of other tunges…' But according to Bill Bryson the language is currently adopting up to twenty thousand new words every year, as many as Shakespeare used in all his works. New words will influence the existing vocabulary, and the likelihood of a fixed set of spellings, meanings and usages is as remote now as it was when in 1712 Jonathan Swift complained about 'a succession of affected phrases, and new, conceited words'.

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How English has changed

It is possible that the Celtic-speaking Britons, not being the first inhabitants of Britain, took over existing place-names, but these are no longer distinguishable. The words from pre-Roman cultures that have survived are mostly place-names or to do with the natural environment. Celtic words that have survived include 'crag', 'brock' (badger) and 'coomb', but many words came later from Celtic to English via other languages – 'embassy' via French and Latin, 'cargo' via Spanish, and 'caricature' via Italian. The 350 years of Roman rule in Britain would have affected Celtic, as it affected the Germanic languages of northern Europe, and a few remnants of these remain, particularly in place-names.

It is from about fifteen hundred years ago that we can date a language identifiable, though not yet recognisable, as English. The Germanic settlers of the time brought with them a variety of dialects, about which little is known, but from these emerged the language we know as Old English, whose first written texts date from the seventh century. Many of these migrants brought with them Latin words which they had acquired through trade and contact, words such as 'mill' and 'pound'. The extent and success of the Germanic social and linguistic takeover can be seen in the word 'Welsh', describing one group of the earlier inhabitants who had been driven to the edge of the island: the word is Old English for 'foreign'.

The spread of Christianity from the sixth century brought some liturgical Latin to Old English, but for legal and administrative purposes most new words were formed from existing Old English roots. From the middle of the ninth century Scandinavian or Norse invaders and settlers came to the north and east of England bringing a language that had evolved from the same roots as Old English. The mix of the two gave rise to some hybridisation, while the enlargement of the lexicon from population intermingling gave the possibility of two words for essentially the same thing, with the potential for distinction of meaning, as in 'skin' (from the Norse) and 'hide' (from Old English). Sometimes a word was

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adopted in two forms, giving divergent meanings, such as ‘skirt’ and ‘shirt’.

The arrival of a French-speaking governing class in 1066 marks the beginning of the gradual change to what we know as Middle English; from this period Old English was replaced by Latin as the language of administration, while Anglo-Norman took over as the spoken language of the ruling class, and the language of literature and, later on, the administration of manors and taxes; as the languages merged through social interaction, a doubling of the lexicon occurred again. The extensive grammatical system of changing word-endings in Old English died out, as word order became fundamental in structuring the meaning of sentences.

For about 150 years the status of English, the language spoken by the vast majority of the people, is unclear, so little writing having survived. As Anglo-Norman declined, so Middle English developed, until around the end of the fourteenth century it began to be used for administration. However, during this period, thousands of words came from French into English; many of these had originated in languages spoken in distant areas many centuries earlier, such as Arabic, Greek or Sanskrit.

From the thirteenth to the early seventeenth century the sound of the vowels in spoken English changed. Though political and other upheavals such as the Black Death brought about changes and migrations in the workforce in England and elsewhere, no simple reason can be given for the Great Vowel Shift. Long vowels came to be vocalised higher in the mouth and changed into diphthongs (double vowel sounds); for example Middle English *fif*, rhyming with ‘leaf’ and ‘chief’ in modern Received Pronunciation, changed to late sixteenth-century ‘five’, rhyming with modern RP ‘hive’ and ‘alive’.

The advent of printing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought about some standardisation in the language, and the dominance of the dialect of the London area. The spread of classical learning and the increasing cultural influence of Italy led to the ‘inkhorn terms’ debate over the desirability or otherwise of so many new Latin-based terms, a debate which was repeated in the

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nineteenth century by campaigners for a supposedly purer non-Latin lexicon. The brilliant rise of literature in English from *Piers Plowman* in the middle of the fourteenth century, including Chaucer, Wycliffe and Tyndale, the translators of the Bible, to Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare brought about an explosion of new vocabulary in English. Shakespeare alone is believed to have introduced over fifteen hundred new words. There were moves towards the end of the sixteenth century to regularise English spelling, by Mulcaster and others, as part of the move towards raising the status of English in schools; but the vagaries of compositors meant that printing did less to support this than might be expected.

The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the British Empire led to two different kinds of growth in the language. New fields of science, technology and intellectual investigation required new words; and contact with people in all parts of the world brought vocabulary for goods, processes and activities that often arrived through other languages. Thus the word 'sequin' arrived from Arabic via Italian and French.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought two great debates about how the English language should progress. Firstly, should there be a 'fixing' of the language, a defining of what was 'good' English? Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* first published in 1755, set a standard for the spelling and meaning of English words, provoking reactions from many writers, including Noah Webster, the editor of the famous 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*. The second debate was similar to the 'inkhorn' debate of earlier times, a move to reject the increasing flow of Latinate words in favour of Old English word construction, on the basis of an idea that these were more 'natural' to English. As late as 1906, Fowler's *The King's English* was advising people to 'prefer the Saxon word to the Romance'.

The vast increase in the number of people speaking English has led to borrowings from indigenous languages, this especially being the case in colonised areas of Africa, Asia and America where societies were already multilingual, and where borrowings and influences between languages were common. In some cases words

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entered English which had been created within a pidgin (a language created from other languages which has no native speakers), of which English was one of the constituents.

Where people have moved away from the United Kingdom and established populations centred elsewhere, the changes in the language at home have not been repeated in new settlements. Thus American English retains a number of words that were common in British English hundreds of years ago but have been superseded; 'trash' and 'fall' were both common in English in the seventeenth century but have now been replaced in Britain by 'rubbish' and 'autumn'. However, words that have been acquired by non-British English, for example 'stampede' and 'cafeteria', Spanish words in American English, have been later passed on to British English.

The movement of words globally continues as English becomes the dominant language of such worldwide fields as sport (Croatian *tenis*, French *le football*), the internet (Turkish *Internet)* and finance (German *die Finanz*). As more and more people around the world speak English as a second or third language, and as we invent new ways of communicating through language, such as computer chatrooms or text messaging, new words keep on being fed into the language from outside, or constructed from within, and English goes on growing.

A note on neighbouring languages and their periods

The changes in languages are slow, though they often result from a discrete political change, and the dates given are no more than convenient points during a period of change.

The Germanic group of languages, to which English belongs, is a branch of the Indo-European language family.

The Latin spoken in the Roman Empire differed varyingly from written Latin, known as Classical Latin; I have used the word Latin to refer to Classical Latin, and Greek for the Greek used in the last five hundred years BC.

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The peoples who migrated from the Continent to England from around AD 450 spoke West Germanic dialects. It is now thought unlikely that they all spoke the same form of language, though nothing much is known about them before about 600. Their migration over a period of several hundred years was initially from the Danish peninsula and the coastal areas to the south-west as far as the mouth of the Rhine. Old English developed in different dialects throughout England, though early written texts are surprisingly similar, deriving mostly from the West Saxon area; but after the loss of status of English following the Norman Conquest it was the dialect of the East Midlands and London that became the antecedent of standard English.

Two geographically close languages that developed while Old English was developing in England were: *Old Frisian*, from about 700 to 1500, spoken along the coastline between the Rhine and the Elbe; *Old Saxon*, spoken up to about 1000 in the North Sea and other coastal areas of northern Germany.

Languages nearby that developed while Middle English was developing in England include: *Middle Low German*, spoken in the northern Germanic area (based around the North Sea and Baltic Sea) from about 1100 to 1600; *Middle Dutch*, used to the west, and *Middle High German*, to the south, from about 1100 to 1600. *Old Norse* was spoken in the Scandinavian countries from about 800 to 1300.

The westward migration of the Franks from Germany from the third century influenced the Latin spoken in northern France that they adopted, classed as *Late Latin*. This developed divergent forms in speech (*Vulgar Latin*) and writing (*Medieval Latin*); Vulgar Latin evolved into *Old French* around the ninth century. Medieval Latin continued to be used in Europe through the medieval period. *Norman French* was French spoken in Normandy as opposed to Parisian French; it was influenced by the Vikings who settled in Normandy. This was the language spoken by the Normans in England from 1066, but it developed mixed forms in Anglo-Norman. *Anglo-Norman* (sometimes called *Anglo-French*) was French spoken in England after 1066 and was influenced over time

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by Parisian French. *Parisian French* was spoken in northern France outside Normandy and Brittany during the medieval period. *Middle French* is considered to have lasted from about 1300 to 1600.

Gothic was the Germanic spoken by a group of peoples from eastern Europe, some of whom in the fifth century AD migrated west from the area of the Balkans to Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Acknowledgements

I have made frequent references in this book to dictionaries published between 1600 and the present. Chiefly they are by Robert Cawdrey (*A Table Alphabeticall of Hard Usual English Words*, 1604), John Bullokar (*The English Expositor*, 1616), H. Cockeram (*The English Dictionarie*, editions of 1623 and 1670), Stephen Skinner (*Etymologicon Linguae Anglicanae*, 1671), Nathaniel Bailey (*An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, 1721), Samuel Johnson (*A Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755, plus editions of 1773, 1790, and Fulton's miniature edition of 1822), Noah Webster (*A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*, 1806; *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, first edition 1828, tenth edition 1832), Andrew Findlater (*Chambers Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 1882), H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 1974), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* in editions from 1971 and 1989 and online, particularly for its documentations of dated usage.

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