

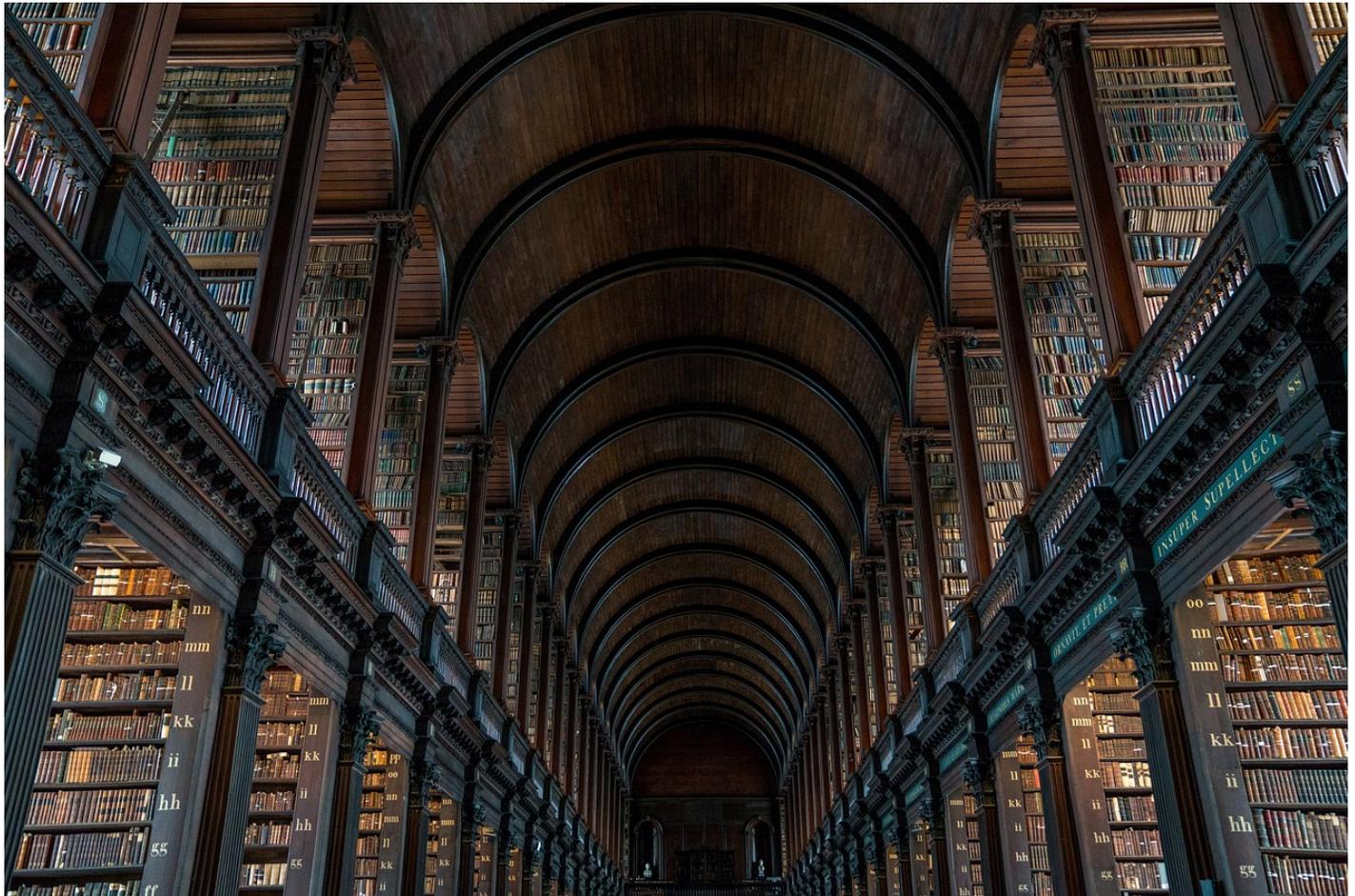
History of English

[English Language History](#)

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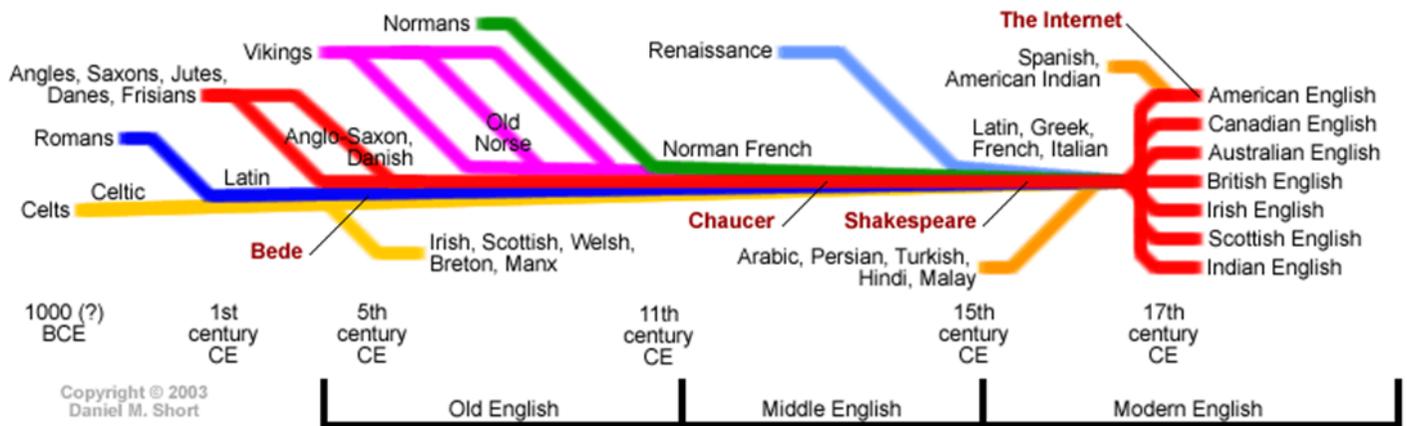


By [Richard Barker](#) Updated: November 15, 2023



The history of the English language is a complex tapestry of gradual developments and short, sharp shocks, of isolation and mutual influences, of borrowings and obsolescences. I am unlikely to do it justice in this short exposition, but it may at least suffice to give an overview of the main developments. There are many sources of further information which can be consulted by those requiring more (or less) detail, some of which are listed on the [Sources and Links](#) page.

The main phases can be conveniently (if a little simplistically) divided into:



Simplified timeline of developments in the English language

- **Before English (Prehistory – c. 500AD)** (including Indo-European, Spread of Indo-European Languages, Germanic, The Celts, The Romans)
- **Old English (c. 500 – c. 1100)** (including Invasions of Germanic Tribes, The Coming of Christianity and Literacy, The Anglo-Saxon or Old English Language, The Vikings, Old English after the Vikings)
- **Middle English (c. 1100 – c. 1500)** (including Norman Conquest, French (Anglo-Norman) Influence, Middle English After the Normans, Resurgence of English, Chaucer and the Birth of English Literature)
- **Early Modern English (c. 1500 – c. 1800)** (including Great Vowel Shift, The English Renaissance, Printing Press and Standardization, The Bible, Dictionaries and Grammars, Golden Age of English Literature, William Shakespeare, International Trade)
- **Late Modern English (c. 1800 – Present)** (including The Industrial and Scientific Revolution, Colonialism and the British Empire, The New World, American Dialect, Black English, Britain's Other Colonies, Language Reform, Later Developments, 20th Century)
- **English Today** (including Who Speaks English?, English as a Lingua Franca, Reverse Loanwords, Modern English Vocabulary, Modern English Spelling)

The dates attributed to the various phases are somewhat arbitrary, but they do provide some convenient markers and give a general idea of the timescales involved. However, different studies do use different demarcations. For example, Early Modern English is sometimes considered to begin as early as

1400, and Modern English by 1550 (i.e. pre-Shakespeare), but I have used 1500 and 1800 as a more convenient split.



Richard Barker

Richard is an English teacher with over 25 years of experience. He has dedicated his life and career to his passion for English, literature, and pedagogy, guiding multiple generations of students on their journey to discovery.

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