

History of English

ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

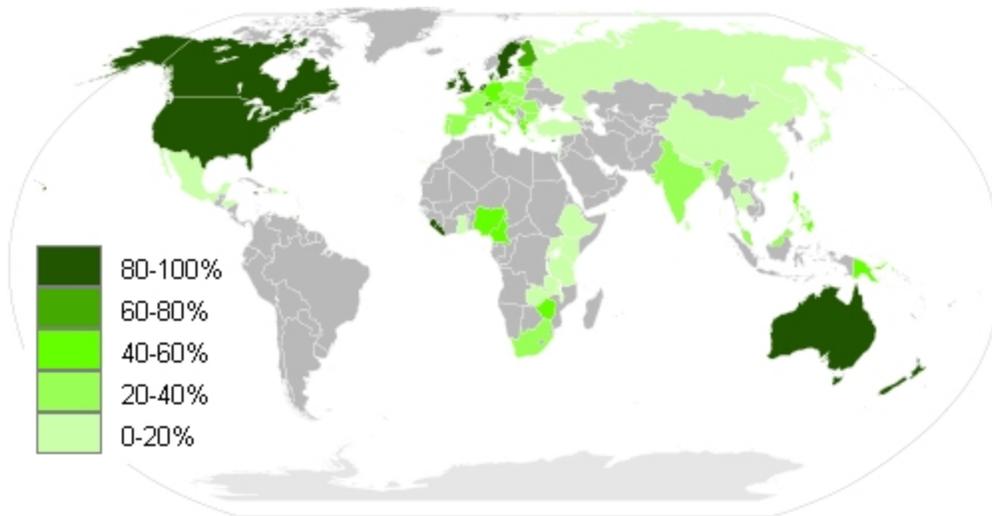
English Today

 By Richard Barker | Updated: April 3, 2024



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Who Speaks English?



World map coloured according to percentage of English speakers by country (from [Wikipedia](#))

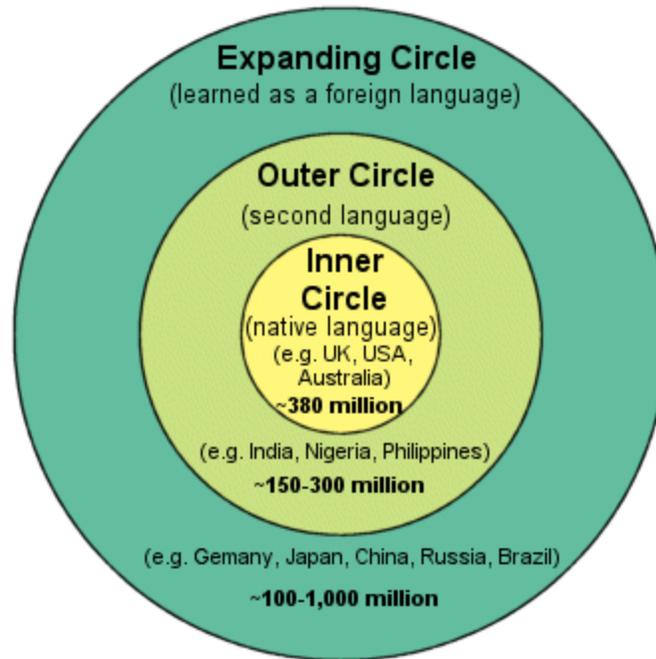
Today, English is the second or third most popular mother tongue in the world, with an estimated 350-400 million native speakers. But, crucially, it is also the common tongue for many non-English speakers the world over, and almost a quarter of the globe's population – maybe 1½-2 billion people – can understand it and have at least some basic competence in its use, whether written or spoken.

It should be noted here that statistics on the numbers around the world who speak English are unreliable at best. It is notoriously difficult to define quite what is meant by “English speaker”, let alone the definitions of first language, second language, mother tongue, native speaker, etc. What level of competency counts? Does a thick creole (English-based, but completely incomprehensible to a native English speaker) count? Just to add to the confusion, there are at least 40 million people in the nominally English-speaking United States who do NOT speak English. In addition, the figures, of necessity, combine statistics from different sources, different dates, etc. You may well see large variations on any statistics quoted here.

But best recent estimates of first languages suggest that Mandarin Chinese has around 800-850 million native speakers, while English and Spanish both have about 330-350 million each. Following on, Hindi speakers number 180-

200 million (around 240 million, or possibly much more, when combined with Urdu), Bengali 170-180 million, Arabic 150-220 million, Portuguese 150-180 million, Russian 140-160 million and Japanese roughly 120 million. If second-language speakers are included, Mandarin increases to around 1 billion, English to over 500 million, Spanish to 420-500 million, Hindi/Urdu to around 480 million, and so on, although some estimates for English as a first or second language rise to over a billion. In fact, among English speakers, non-native speakers may now outnumber native speakers by as much as three to one.

In terms of total population, in a world approaching 7 billion, the top three countries by population are China (1.3 billion), India (1.2 billion) and USA (about 310 million), followed by Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Russia and Japan. Thus, the USA is by far the most populous English-speaking country and accounts for almost 70% of native English speakers (Britain, by comparison has a population of just over 60 million, and ranks 22nd in the world). India represents the third largest group of English speakers after the USA and UK, even though only 4-5% of its population speaks English (4% of over 1.2 billion is still almost 50 million). However, by some counts as many as 23% of Indians speak English, which would put it firmly in second place, well above Britain. Even Nigeria may have more English speakers than Britain according to some estimates.



Braj Kachru's Three Circles of English (own graphic, adapted from [Wikipedia](#))

English is the native mother-tongue of only Britain, Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a handful of Caribbean countries. But in 57 countries (including Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Philippines, Fiji, Vanuatu, etc), English is either as its “official language” or a majority of its inhabitants speak it as a first language. These are largely ex-colonial countries which have thoroughly integrated English into its chief institutions. The next most popular official language is French (which applies in some 31 countries), followed by Spanish (25), Arabic (25), Portuguese (13) and Russian (10).

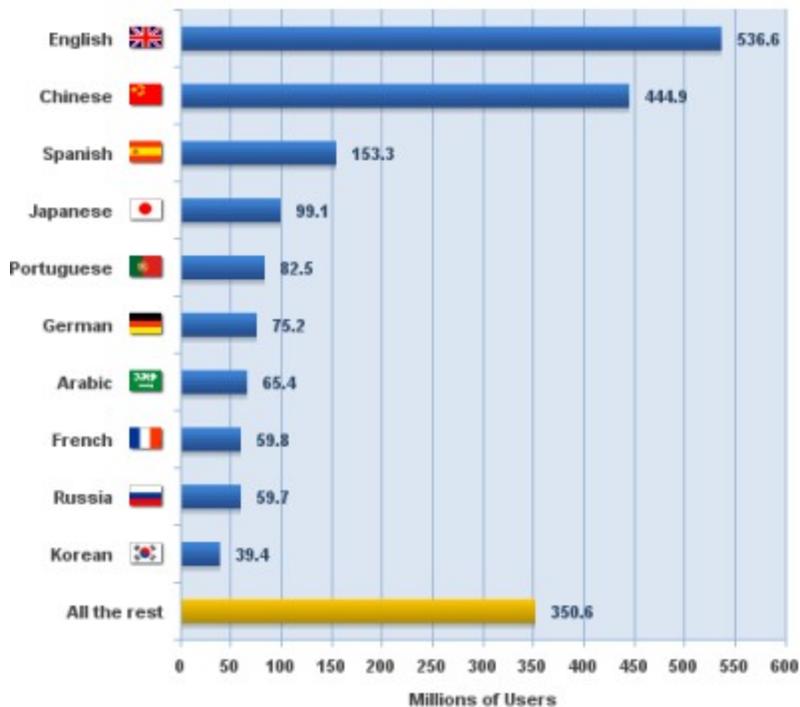
Although falling short of official status, English is also an important language in at least twenty other countries, including several former British colonies and protectorates, such as Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cyprus, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates. It is the most commonly used unofficial language in Israel and an increasing number of other countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway and Germany. Within Europe, an estimated 85% of Swedes can comfortably converse in English, 83% of Danes, 79% of Dutch, 66%

in Luxembourg and over 50% in countries such as Finland, Slovenia, Austria, Belgium, and Germany.

If the “inner circle” of a language is native first-language speakers and the “outer circle” is second-language speakers and official language countries, there is a third, “expanding circle” of countries which recognize the importance of English as an international language and teach it in schools as their foreign language of choice. English is the most widely taught foreign language in schools across the globe, with over 100 countries – from China to Russia to Israel, Germany, Spain, Egypt, Brazil, etc, etc – teaching it to at least a working level. Over 1 billion people throughout the world are currently learning English, and there are estimated to be more students of English in China alone than there are inhabitants of the USA. A 2006 report by the British Council suggests that the number of people learning English is likely to continue to increase over the next 10-15 years, peaking at around 2 billion, after which a decline is predicted.

English as a Lingua Franca

Top Ten Languages in the Internet 2010 - in millions of users



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm
Estimated Internet users are 1,966,514,816 on June 30, 2010
Copyright © 2000 - 2010, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Top ten languages in the Internet (2010) (from
[Internet World Stats](#))

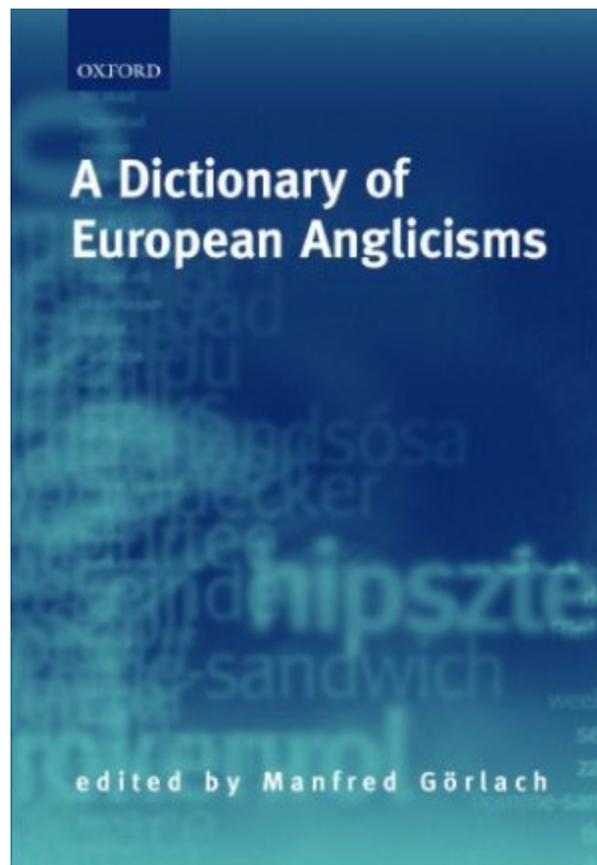
Any number of other statistics may be quoted, none of them definitive, but all shining some light on the situation. However, absolute numbers aside, it is incontrovertible that English has become the lingua franca of the world in the fields of business, science, aviation, computing, education, politics and entertainment (and arguably many others).

Over 90% of international airlines use English as their language of choice (known as “Airspeak”), and an Italian pilot flying an Italian plane into an Italian airport, for example, contacts ground control in English. The same applies in international maritime communications (“Seaspeak”). Two-thirds of all scientific papers are published in English, and the Science Citation Index reports that as many as 95% of its articles were written in English, even though only half of them came from authors in English-speaking countries. Up to half of all business deals throughout the world are conducted in English. Popular

music worldwide is overwhelmingly dominated by English (estimates of up to 95% have been suggested), and American television is available almost everywhere. Half of the world newspapers are in English, and some 75% of the world mail correspondence is in English (the USA alone accounts for 50%). At least 35% of Internet users are English speakers, and estimated 70-80% of the content on the Internet is in English (although reliable figures on this are hard to establish).

Many international joint business ventures use English as their working language, even if none of the members are officially English-speaking. For example, it is the working language of the Asian trade group ASEAN and the oil exporting organization OPEC, and it is the official language of the European Central Bank, even though the bank is located in Germany and Britain is not even a member of the Eurozone. Switzerland has three official languages (German, French and Italian and also, in some limited circumstances, Romansh), but it routinely markets itself in English in order to avoid arguments between different areas. Wherever one travels in the world one sees English signs and advertisements.

Reverse Loanwords



"A Dictionary Of European Anglicisms"

(from [Oxford University Press](#))

Although a huge number of words have been imported into English from other languages over the history of its development, many English words have been incorporated (particularly in the last century) into foreign languages in a kind of reverse adoption process. Anglicisms such as *stop*, *sport*, *tennis*, *golf*, *weekend*, *jeans*, *bar*, *airport*, *hotel*, etc, are among the most universally used in the world.

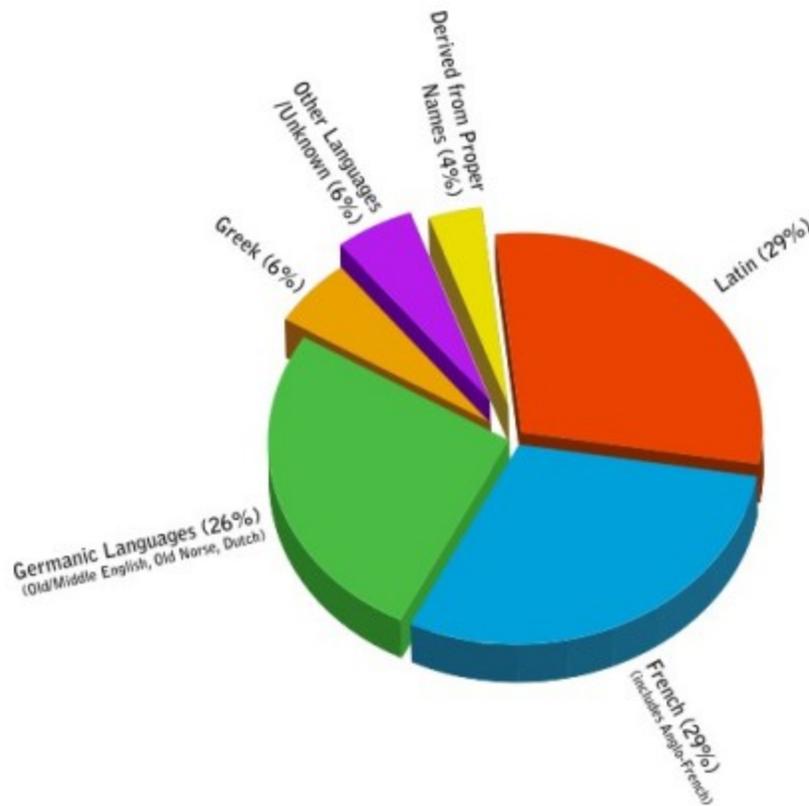
But a more amusing exercise is to piece together the English derivations of foreign words where phonetic spelling are used. To give a few random examples, *herkot* is Ukrainian for "haircut"; *moving pikceris* is Lithuanian for "movie" or "moving pictures"; *ajskrym* is Polish for "ice-cream"; *schiacchenze* is Italian for "shake hands"; etc. Japanese has as many as 20,000 anglicisms in regular use ("Japlish"), including *apputodeito* (up-to-date), *erebata* (elevator), *raiba intenshibu* (labour-intensive), *nekutai* (neck-tie), *biiru* (beer), *isukrimu* (ice-cream), *esukareta* (escalator), *remon* (lemon), *mai-kaa* (my car) and

shyanpu setto (shampoo and set), the meanings of which are difficult to fathom until spoken out phonetically. “Russlish” uses phonetic spellings such as *seksapil* (sex appeal), *jeansi* (jeans), *striptiz* (strip-tease), *kompyuter* (computer), *champion* (champion) and *shusi* (shoes), as well as many exact spellings like *rockmusic*, *discjockey*, *hooligan*, *supermarket*, etc. German has invented, by analogy, anglicisms that do not even exist in English, such as *Pullunder* (from *pullover*), *Twens* (from *teens*), *Dressman* (a word for a male model) and *handy* (a word for a cellphone).

After many centuries of one-way traffic of words from French to English, the flow finally reversed in the middle of the 20th Century, and now anywhere between 1% and 5% of French words are anglicisms, according to some recent estimates. *Rosbif* (roast beef) has been in the French language for over 350 years, and *ouest* (west) for 700 years, but popular recent “Franglais” adoptions like *le gadget*, *le weekend*, *le blue-jeans*, *le self-service*, *le cash-flow*, *le sandwich*, *le babysitter*, *le meeting*, *le basketball*, *le manager*, *le parking*, *le shopping*, *le snaque-barre*, *le sweat*, *le marketing*, *cool*, etc, are now firmly engrained in the language.

There is a strong movement within France, under the stern leadership of the venerable Académie Française, to reclaim French from this onslaught of anglicisms, and the country has even passed laws to discourage the use of anglicisms and to protect its own language and culture. New French replacements for English words are being encouraged, such as *le logiciel* instead of *le soft* (software), *le disc audio-numérique* instead of *le compact disc* (CD), *le baladeur* instead of *le walkman* (portable music player), etc. In Québec, the neologism *le clavardage* (a portmanteau word combining *clavier* – keyboard – and *bavardage* – verbal chat) is becoming popular as a replacement for the common anglicism *le chat* (in the sense of online chat rooms). Norway and Brazil have recently adopted similar measure to keep English out, and this kind of lexical invasion in the form of loanwords is seen by some as the thin end of the wedge, to be strenuously avoided in the interests of national pride and cultural independence.

Modern English Vocabulary



English words derived from different sources (from [Wikipedia](#))

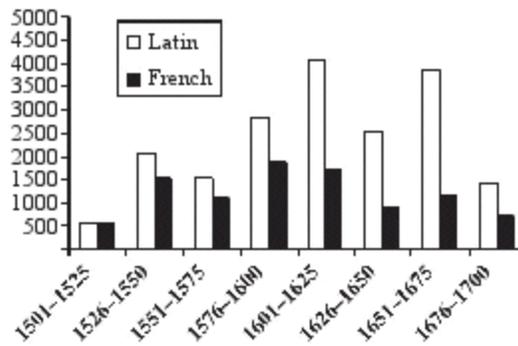
After centuries of acquisition, borrowing and adaptation, English has ended up with a vocabulary second to none in its richness and breadth, allowing for the most diverse and subtle shadings of meaning. No other language has so many words to say the same thing (consider the multiplicity of synonyms for *big* which are in daily use, for example). It is often considered to have the largest vocabulary of any language, although such comparisons are notoriously difficult (as an example, it is impossible to compare with Chinese, because of fundamental differences in language structure).

Just how many words there currently are in the English language is open to conjecture. The Global Language Monitor (a Texas-based company that analyzes and tracks worldwide language trends) claims that the English language now boasts over a million words, but in reality it is almost impossible to count the number of words in a language, not least because it is so hard to

decide what actually counts as a word. For instance, how are we to treat abbreviations, hyphenated words, compound words, compound words with spaces, etc? The latest full revision of the *“Oxford English Dictionary”*, published in 1989 and considered the premier dictionary of the English language, contains about 615,000 word entries, listed under about 300,000 main entries. This includes some scientific terms, dialect words and slang, but does not include more specialized scientific and technical terms, nor the large number of more recent neologisms coined each passing year. *“Webster’s Third New International Dictionary”*, published in 1961, lists 475,000 main headwords.

The working vocabulary of the average English speaker, though, is notoriously difficult to assess (it is hard enough to count the words used in written works – estimates of the number of words in the *“King James Bible”* range from 7,000 to over 10,000, and estimates of Shakespeare’s vocabulary range from 16,000 to over 30,000). An average educated English speaker has perhaps 15,000 to 20,000 words at his or her disposal, although often only around 10% of these are used in an average week’s conversation (typically, we “know” at least 25% more words than we ever actually use). Some studies suggest that just 43 words account for fully half of the words in common use, and just 9 (*and, be, have, it, of, the, to, will, you*) account for a quarter of the words in any random sample of spoken English.

The English lexicon includes words borrowed from an estimated 120 different languages. Attempts have been made to put in context the various influences and sources of modern English vocabulary, although this is necessarily an inexact science. Some studies have put Germanic, French and Latin sources more or less equal at between 26-29% each, with the balance made up of Greek, words derived from proper names, words with no clear etymology and words from other languages. Other studies put the French input higher, the Latin lower and suggest that other languages have contributed as much as 10% of the vocabulary. None of the studies is considered definitive.



Early Modern English loans from Latin
& French (from [Google Books](#),
originally from T. Nevaleinen “An
Introduction to Early Modern English”)

As we have seen, English has throughout its history accumulated words from different sources which act as synonyms or near synonyms to native or traditional words, a process which started with the early invasions by Vikings and Normans, and continued with the embracing of the classical languages during the Renaissance and the adoption of foreign words through trading and colonial connections. Many of these developed different social connotations over time. For example, introduced Norman French words tended to be, and often still tend to be, considered classier and more refined than existing Anglo-Saxon words (e.g. the Norman *desire* compared to the Anglo-Saxon *wish*, *odour* compared to *smell*, *chamber* to *room*, *dine* to *eat*, etc). It has also been suggested that many English words have three synonyms appropriate to the different levels of culture (popular/literary/scholarly), often corresponding to Old English/French/Latin roots, as illustrated by groups of words like *rise/mount/ascend*, *fear/terror/trepidation*, *think/ponder/cogitate*, *kingly/royal/regal*, *holy/sacred/consecrated*, *ask/question/interrogate*, etc (sometimes referred to as “lexical triplets”).

The sheer number of English synonyms can make for a rather unwieldy and untidy language at times, though, and its embarrassment of riches can sometimes seem a little gratuitous and unnecessary. This is particularly evident in the large number of redundant phrases (composed of two or more synonyms) which are in everyday use, e.g. *beck and call*, *law and order*, *null*

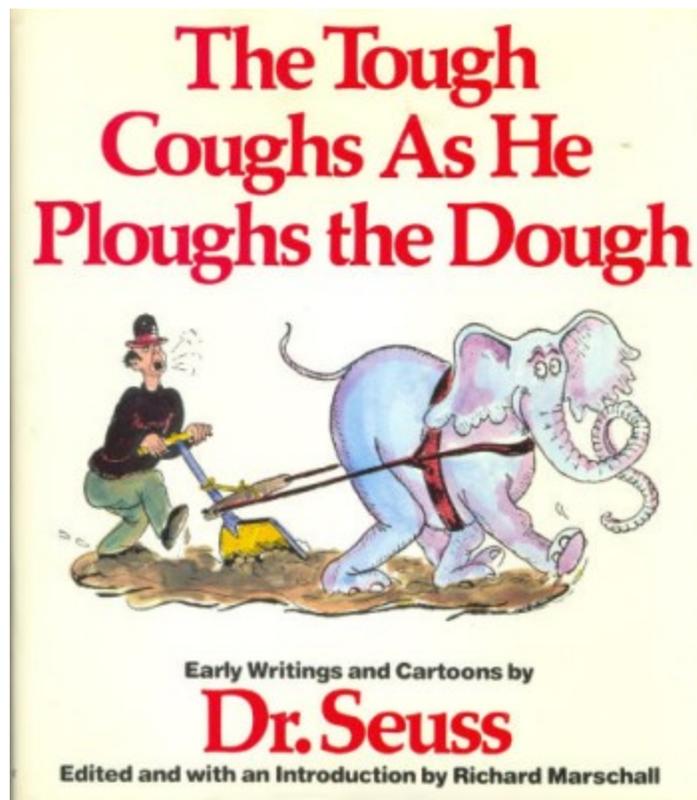
and *void*, *safe* and *sound*, *first* and *foremost*, *trials* and *tribulations*, *kith* and *kin*, *hale* and *hearty*, *peace* and *quiet*, *cease* and *desist*, *rack* and *ruin*, etc.

Also, despite the sheer volume of words in the language, there are still some curious gaps, which have arisen through quirks in its development over the centuries, such as the unused positive forms of common negative words like *inept*, *ineffable*, *dishevelled*, *disgruntled*, *incorrigible*, *ruthless*, *disastrous*, *incessant* and *unkempt*, most of which used to exist but have died out for unknown reasons.

Perhaps even stranger, given the generous availability of words, is English's tendency to load single words with multiple meanings. For example: *fine* has at least 14 definitions as an adjective, 6 as a noun, 2 as a verb and 2 as an adverb; *round* has 12 uses as an adjective, 19 as a noun, 12 as a verb, 1 as an adverb and 2 as a preposition; *set* has an incredible 58 uses as a noun, 126 as a verb and 10 as an adjective (the "*Oxford English Dictionary*" takes about 60,000 words – the length of a short novel – to describe them all).

As in any language, meanings have shifted over time, sometimes many times, but in some cases the same word can have even ended up with two contradictory meanings (contronyms), examples being *sanction* (which has conflicting meanings of permission to do something, or prevention from doing something), *cleave* (to cut in half, or to stick together), *sanguine* (hot-headed and bloodthirsty, or calm and cheerful), *ravish* (to rape, or to enrapture), *fast* (stuck firm, or moving quickly), *oversight* (watchful control, or something not noticed), etc.

Modern English Spelling



"The Tough Coughs As He Ploughs the Dough"

by Dr. Seuss plays on the oddities of English
spelling (from [Amazon](#))

Largely as a result of the vagaries of its historical development, modern English is a maddeningly difficult language to spell correctly. The inveterate borrowing from other languages, combined with shifts in pronunciation and well-meaning reforms in orthography have resulted in a language seemingly at odds with itself. While Old English was about 90% phonemic (i.e. words sound the same as they look), modern English is probably closer to 40% phonemic. There are a large number of possible spelling rules (up to 100 by some counts), and a large number of exceptions to those rules, and the language continues to confound both native speakers and foreigners alike.

Often, the desire to standardize the language, such as occurred with the introduction of the printing press, has itself led to anomalies and inconsistencies in its spelling, or has at least frozen existing inconsistencies in place. Spelling reform, which took place at various times, both in Britain and particularly in the United States, has further complicated the picture, despite a

professed desire for simplification, and we now have many differences between American and British spellings to add to its intrinsic difficulties (e.g. *realize/realise, center/centre, dialog/dialogue, aging/ageing, traveler/traveller*, etc).

Although English has “only” forty to fifty different sounds (still much more than many languages), there are over 200 ways of spelling those sounds. For instance, the sound “sh” can be spelled in a bewildering number of different ways (as in *shoe, sugar, passion, ambitious, ocean, champagne*, etc); a long “o” can be written as in *go, show, beau, sew, doe, though, depot*, etc; a long “e” can be spelled as in *me, seat, seem, ceiling, siege, people, key, machine, phoenix, paediatric*, etc; and a long “a” can be rendered as in *hey, stay, make, maid, freight, great*, etc. As George Bernard Shaw pointed out, the word *fish* could just as easily be spelled *ghoti*, using the “gh” sound in *enough*, the “o” sound from *women*, and the “ti” from the middle of *nation*.

There is a whole catalogue of silent letters in English, often letters that were added to spellings during the English Renaissance out of a misplaced desire for etymological authenticity, or existing letters that have ceased to be pronounced for one reason or another. In fact, of the 26 letters of the alphabet, only 5 (F, J, Q, V and X) are NEVER silent! There are too many to detail, but some examples include: the silent “b” in *comb, debt, climb*, etc; the silent “c” in *scene, scent, science, scissors*, etc; the silent “k” in *knife, knock, know*, etc; the silent “n” in *damn, hymn, column*, etc; the silent “p” in *psalm, psychiatry, ptarmigan*, etc; the silent “gh” in *night, through, taught*, etc; the silent “g” in *gnome, gnaw, sign*, etc; the silent “l” in *palm, salmon, yolk*, etc; the silent “u” in *biscuit, building, tongue*, etc; the silent “w” in *wreck, knowledge, sword*, etc; and the silent “h” in *hour, honour, honest*, etc, as well as in *annihilate, vehement, vehicle, ghost, rhyme, rhubarb, rhythm, exhaust, exhibition, exhort*, etc.

English has many words which are identical in meaning but different in spelling and pronunciation, otherwise known as synonyms. But it also has homophones or heterographs (words with different spellings and different

meanings, but identical pronunciation), such as *hour* and *our*, *plane* and *plain*, *right*, *wright*, *write* and *rite*, etc; homographs or heteronyms (words with identical spellings, but different meanings and pronunciations), such as *axes*, *bass*, *defect*, *desert*, *record*, *tear*, etc; and true homonyms (words with the same spelling and the same pronunciation, but different meaning), such as *stalk*, *bank*, *fluke*, etc.

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Some confusing words in American dialect (4 sec). (from alt.usage.english).

To confuse matters further, in some accents, some sounds have merged to the extent that they are no longer distinguishable (e.g. *pin* and *pen*, and *merry*, *marry* and *Mary*, in some American accents; *talk* and *torque*, and *court* and *caught* in some British accents). Simplified Americanized spellings of *lite* for *light* and *thru* for *through* have arisen in recent years, largely due to advertising campaigns.

The sheer variety of English spelling is formidable. There are words with five consecutive vowels (*queuing*); words with technically no vowels (*rhythm*, *pygmy*); words with six consecutive consonants (*catchphrase*, *watchstrap*); words with alternating vowels and consonants (*overimaginative*, *versimilitudes*); words with triple letters (*headmistressship*, *bulllike*); words that include eight of the same letter (*possessionlessness*); long words which use none of the same letters (e.g. *uncopyrightable*); words spelled the same way backwards as forwards (*deified*, *racecar*, *rotator*); etc, etc.



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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