ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

Late Modern English (c. 1800 – Present)

By Richard Barker | Updated: September 19, 2024

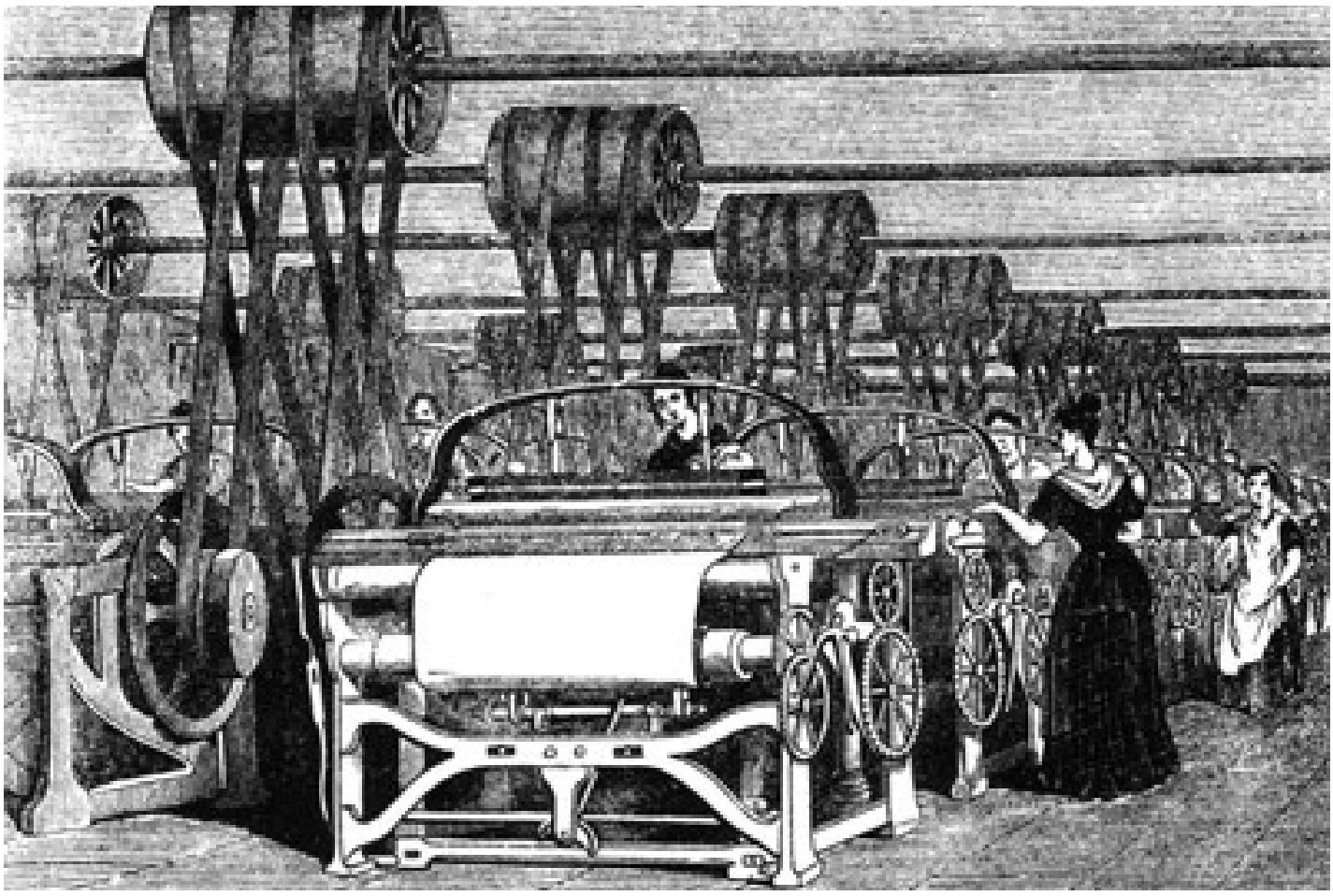
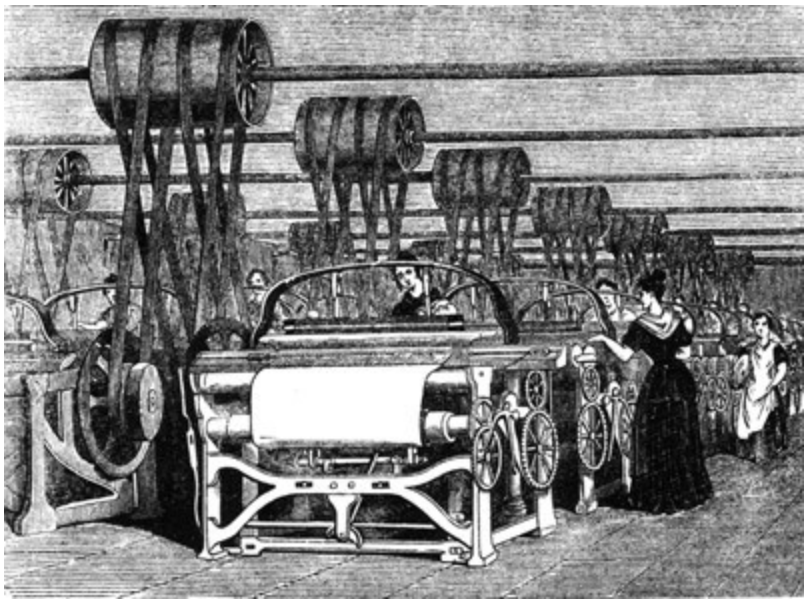


Table of Contents

The Industrial and Scientific Revolution



Steam-powered looms were just one of the innovations of the Industrial Revolution (from How Stuff Works, original from Getty Images)

The dates may be rather arbitrary, but the main distinction between Early Modern and Late Modern English (or just Modern English as it is sometimes referred to) lies in its vocabulary – pronunciation, grammar and spelling remained largely unchanged. Late Modern English accumulated many more words as a result of two main historical factors: the Industrial Revolution, which necessitated new words for things and ideas that had not previously existed; and the rise of the British Empire, during which time English adopted many foreign words and made them its own. No single one of the socio-cultural developments of the 19th Century could have established English as a world language, but together they did just that.

Most of the innovations of the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th Century were of British origin, including the harnessing of steam to drive heavy machinery, the development of new materials, techniques and equipment in a range of manufacturing industries, and the emergence of new means of transportation (e.g. steamships, railways). At least half of the influential scientific and technological output between 1750 and 1900 was written in English. Another English speaking country, the USA, continued the English language dominance of new technology and innovation with

inventions like electricity, the telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the sewing machine, the computer, etc.

The industrial and scientific advances of the Industrial Revolution created a need for neologisms to describe the new creations and discoveries. To a large extent, this relied on the classical languages, Latin and Greek, in which scholars and scientists of the period were usually well versed. Although words like *oxygen*, *protein*, *nuclear* and *vaccine* did not exist in the classical languages, they could be (and were) created from Latin and Greek roots. *Lens*, *refraction*, *electron*, *chromosome*, *chloroform*, *caffeine*, *centigrade*, *bacteria*, *chronometer* and *claustrophobia* are just a few of the other science-based words that were created during this period of scientific innovation, along with a whole host of "-ologies" and "-onomies", like *biology*, *petrology*, *morphology*, *histology*, *palaeontology*, *ethnology*, *entomology*, *taxonomy*, etc.

Many more new words were coined for the new products, machines and processes that were developed at this time (e.g. *train*, *engine*, *reservoir*, *pulley*, *combustion*, *piston*, *hydraulic*, *condenser*, *electricity*, *telephone*, *telegraph*, *lithograph*, *camera*, etc). In some cases, old words were given entirely new meanings and connotation (e.g. *vacuum*, *cylinder*, *apparatus*, *pump*, *syphon*, *locomotive*, *factory*, etc), and new words created by amalgamating and fusing existing English words into a descriptive combination were particularly popular (e.g. *railway*, *horsepower*, *typewriter*, *cityscape*, *airplane*, etc).

Colonialism and the British Empire

The British Empire at its height (in pink)

British colonialism had begun as early as the 16th Century, but gathered speed and momentum between the 18th and 20th Century. At the end of the 16th Century, mother-tongue English speakers numbered just 5-7 million, almost all of them in the British Isles; over the next 350 years, this increased almost 50-fold, 80% of them living outside of Britain. At the height of the British Empire (in the late 19th and early 20th Century), Britain ruled almost one quarter of the earth's surface, from Canada to Australia to India to the Caribbean to Egypt to South Africa to Singapore.

Although the English language had barely penetrated into Wales, Ireland and the Scottish Highlands by the time of Shakespeare, just two hundred years later, in 1780, John Adams was confident enough to be able to claim (with a certain amount of foresight, but quite reasonably) that English was "destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age". In 1852, the German linguist, Jacob Grimm, called English "the language of the world", and predicted it was "destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe".

It was taken very much for granted by the British colonial mentality of the time that extending the English language and culture to the undeveloped and

backward countries of Africa and Asia was a desirable thing. The profit motive may have been foremost, but there was a certain amount of altruistic motivation as well, and many saw it as a way of bringing order and political unity to these chaotic and internecine regions (as well as binding them ever more strongly to the Empire). To some extent, it is true that the colonies were happy to learn the language in order to profit from British industrial and technological advances.

But colonialism was a two-way phenomenon, and Britain's dealings with these exotic countries, as well as the increase in world trade in general during this time, led to the introduction of many foreign loanwords into English. For instance, Australia gave us a set of words (not particularly useful outside the context of Australia itself) like *boomerang*, *kangaroo*, *budgerigar*, etc. But India gave us such everyday words as *pyjamas*, *thug*, *bungalow*, *cot*, *jungle*, *loot*, *bangle*, *shampoo*, *candy*, *tank* and many others.

The rise of so-called "New Englishes" (modern variants or dialects of the language, such as Australian English, South African English, Caribbean English, South Asian English, etc) raised, for some, the spectre of the possible fragmentation of the English language into mutually unintelligible languages, much as occurred when Latin gave rise to the various Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, etc) centuries ago. As early as 1789, for example, Noah Webster had predicted "a language in North America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German or from one another". However, in retrospect, this does not seem to have happened and, in the age of instantaneous global communication, it now seems ever less likely to occur in the future.

The New World

Settlement of the English Colonies

It was largely during the Late Modern period that the United States, newly independent from Britain as of 1783, established its pervasive influence on the world. The English colonization of North America had begun as early as 1600. Jamestown, Virginia was founded in 1607, and the Pilgrim Fathers settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620. The first settlers were, then, contemporaries of Shakespeare (1564-1616), Bacon (1561-1626) and Donne (1572-1631), and would have spoken a similar dialect. The new land was described by one settler as “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men”, and half of the settlers were dead within weeks of their arrival, unaccustomed to the harsh winter. In fact, the colony would probably have gone the way of the earlier ill-fated Roanoke Island settlement attempt of 1584 were it not for the help of an American native called Squanto, who had learned English from English sailors.

Parts of the New World had already been long colonized by the French, Spanish and Dutch, but English settlers like the Pilgrim Fathers (and those who soon followed them) went there to stay, not just to search for riches or trading opportunities. They wanted to establish themselves permanently, to work the land, and to preserve their culture, religion and language, and this was a crucial factor in the survival and development of English in North America. The German "Iron Chancellor" Otto van Bismarck would later ruefully remark that "the most significant event of the 20th Century will be the fact that the North Americans speak English".

Interestingly, some English pronunciations and usages "froze" when they arrived in America while they continued to evolve in Britain itself (sometimes referred to as "colonial lag"), so that, in some respects, American English is closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Perhaps the best-known example is the American use of *gotten* which has long since faded from use in Britain (even though *forgotten* has survived). But the American use of words like *fall* for the British *autumn*, *trash* for *rubbish*, *hog* for *pig*, *sick* for *ill*, *guess* for *think*, and *loan* for *lend* are all examples of this kind of anachronistic British word usage. America kept several words (such as *burly*, *greenhorn*, *talented* and *scant*) that had been largely dropped in Britain (although some have since been recovered), and words like *lumber* and *lot* soon acquired their specific American meanings. Something approaching Shakespearean speech can sometimes be encountered in isolated valleys in the Appalachian or Ozarks, where words like *afeard*, *yourn*, *sassy* and *consarn*, and old pronunciations like "jine" for *join*, can still sometimes be heard.

The settlement of America served as the route of introduction for many Native American words into the English language. Most of the early settlers were austere Puritans and they were quite conservative in their adoption of native words, which were largely restricted to terms for native animals and foods (e.g. *raccoon*, *opossum*, *moose*, *chipmunk*, *skunk*, *tomato*, *squash*, *hickory*, etc). In many cases, the original indigenous words were very difficult to render in English, and have often been mangled almost beyond recognition (e.g. *squash* is from the native *quonterquash* or *asquutasquash*, depending on the region;

racoon is from *raugraughcun* or *rahaugcum*; *hickory* is from *pawcohiccora*; etc). Some words needed to describe the Native American lifestyle were also accepted (e.g. *canoe*, *squaw*, *papoose*, *wigwam*, *moccasin*, *tomahawk*), although many other supposedly Native-derived words and phrases (such as *brave*, *peace-pipe*, *pale-face*, *war-path*, etc) were actually spurious and a product of the fertile imaginations of 19th Century American romantic novelists. New words were also needed for some geographical features which had no obvious English parallel in the limited experience of the settlers (e.g. *foothill*, *notch*, *bluff*, *gap*, *divide*, *watershed*, *clearing*, etc).

Immigration into America was not limited to English speakers, though. In the second half of the 19th Century, in particular, over 30 million poured into the country from all parts of the world. At the peak of immigration, from 1901 to 1905, America absorbed a million Italians, a million Austro-Hungarians, half a million Russians and tens of thousands each from many other countries. Many nationalities established their own centres: the Amish or Pennsylvania Dutch (actually Germans, as in Deutsch) tended to stay in their isolated communities, and developed a distinctive English with a strong German accent and an idiosyncratic syntax; many Germans also settled in Wisconsin and Indiana; Norwegians settled in Minnesota and the Dakotas; Swedes in Nebraska; etc.

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Dialect of Tidewater Community of Tangier Island, Virginia (17 sec) (from The Story of English PBS series (Ep. 3)).

Often foreigners were despised or laughed at, and the newcomers found it in their best interests to integrate well and to observe as much uniformity of speech and language as possible. This, as well as the improvements in transportation and communication, led to fewer, and less distinct, dialects than in the much smaller area of Britain, although there are some noticeable (and apparently quite arbitrary) regional differences, even within some states.

A few isolated communities, like the so-called “Tidewater” communities around Chesapeake Bay in Virginia (who were mainly descended from settlers from Somerset and Gloucestershire in the West Country of England, unlike the Massachusetts settlers who were largely from the eastern counties of England), have managed to retain the distinctive burring West Country accent of their forebears. But, by the 19th Century, a standard variety of American English had developed in most of the country, based on the dialect of the Mid-Atlantic states with its characteristic flat “a” and strong final “r”. Today, Standard American English, also known as General American, is based on a generalized Midwestern accent, and is familiar to us from American films, radio and newscasters.

British Colonization of North America (1713-1763)

American language zealots like John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster revelled in the prospect of a plain English, free of the regional dialects and class distinctions of Britain. Long before the Declaration of Independence, British visitors to America often remarked that the average American spoke much better English than the average Englishman. After the American War of Independence of 1775 – 1783, there was some discussion about whether English should remain the national language, but it was never really in any doubt, and was not even mentioned in the new Constitution (even today, the USA does not have an “official language”, as indeed neither does Australia or Britain itself).

The colonization of Canada proceeded quite separately from that of America. There had been British, French and Portuguese expeditions to the east coast of Canada even before the end of the 15th Century, but the first permanent European settlement was by France in 1608. British interests in Canada did not coalesce until the early 18th Century but, after the Treaty of Paris of 1763, Britain wrested control of most of eastern Canada from the French, and it became an important British colony. It was the War of 1812 against the Americans, as much as Confederation and independence from Britain in 1867, that definitively cemented the separate identity of English Canada.

English in Canada has also been influenced by successive waves of immigration, from the influx of Loyalists from the south fleeing the American Revolution, to the British and Irish who were encouraged to settle the land in the early 19th Century to the huge immigration from all over the world during the 20th Century. But, more than anything, the speech of the Loyalists arriving in southern Ontario from states like Pennsylvania and New York, formed the basis of Canadian speech and its accent (including the distinctive pronunciation of the “ou” in words like *house* and *out*, and the “i” in words like *light*). Modern Canadian English tends to show very little regional diversity in pronunciation, even compared to the United States, the Irish-tinged dialect of Newfoundland being far and away the most distinctive dialect.

Canadian English today contains elements of British English and American English in its vocabulary (it also uses a kind of hybrid of American and British spelling), as well several distinctive “Canadianisms” (like *hoser*, *hydro*, *chesterfield*, etc, and the ubiquitous *eh?* at the end of many sentences). Its vocabulary has been influenced by loanwords from the native peoples of the north (e.g. *igloo*, *anorak*, *toboggan*, *canoe*, *kayak*, *parka*, *muskeg*, *caribou*, *moose*, etc), as well as the French influence (e.g. *serviette*, *tuque*) from Lower Canada/Quebec.

American Dialect

Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-06) (from Wikipedia)

In 1813, Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter: “The new circumstances under which we are placed call for new words, new phrases, and for the transfer of old words to new objects. An American dialect will therefore be formed”. As the settlers (including a good proportion of Irish and Scots, with their own distinctive accents and usages of English) pushed westward, new terms were indeed introduced, and these pioneers were much less reticent to adopt native words or, indeed, to make up their own. The journals of Lewis and Clark, written as they explored routes to the west coast in 1804-6, contain over 500 native words (mainly animals, plants and food). The wild “outlands” west of the Mississippi River gave us the word *outlandish* to describe its idiosyncratic characters.

John Adams’ much-vaunted “plain English” took a back seat in the hands of colourful characters like Davy Crockett (who was himself of Scots-Irish decent) and others, who saw western expansion as an excuse to expand the language with new words and quirky Americanisms like *skedaddle*, *bamboozle*, *shebang*, *riff-raff*, *hunky-dory*, *lickety-split*, *rambunctious*, *ripsnorter*, *humdinger*, *doozy*, *shenanigan*, *discombobulate*, *absquatulate*, *splendiferous*, etc, not to mention evocative phrases like *fly off the handle*, *a chip on the shoulder*, *no axe to grind*, *sitting on the fence*, *dodge the issue*, *knuckle down*, *make the fur fly*, *go the whole hog*, *kick the bucket*, *face the music*, *bite the dust*, *barking up the wrong tree*, *pass the buck*, *stack the deck*, *poker face*, *in*

cahoots, *pull up stakes*, *horse sense*, *two cents' worth*, *stake a claim*, *strike it rich*, *the real McCo*y and even the phrase *stiff upper lip* (in regard to their more hidebound British cousins). From the deliberately misspelled and dialectical works of Artemus Ward and Josh Billings to popular novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *"Uncle Tom's Cabin"* (1852) and Mark Twain's *"Huckleberry Finn"* (1884), this American vernacular spread rapidly, and became in the process more publicly acceptable both in everyday speech and in literature.

Many Spanish words also made their way into American English during the expansion and settlement of the Spanish-influenced American West, including words like *armadillo*, *alligator*, *canyon*, *cannibal*, *guitar*, *mosquito*, *mustang*, *ranch*, *rodeo*, *stampede*, *tobacco*, *tornado* and *vigilante* (some of which were also originally derived from native languages). To a lesser extent, French words, from the French presence in the Louisiana area and in Canada, contributed loanwords like *gopher*, *prairie*, *depot*, *cache*, *cent* and *dime*, as well as French-derived place names like *Detroit*, *Baton Rouge*, *Des Moines*, etc.

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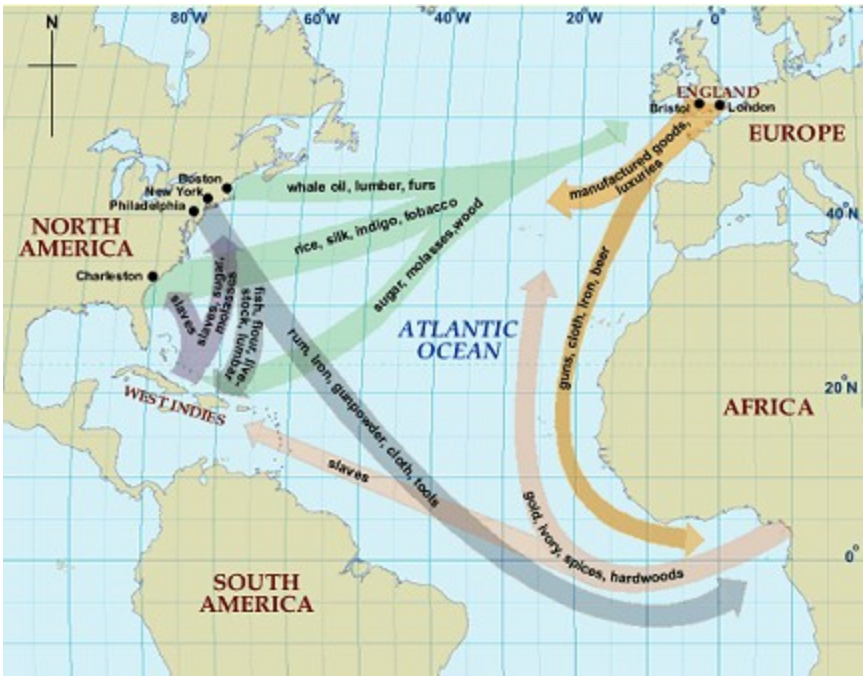
Thomas Edison talks about electricity in 1908 (example of General American accent of the time) (29 sec) (from Internet Archive).

The number of American coinings later exported back to the mother country should not be underestimated. They include commonly used word like *commuter*, *bedrock*, *sag*, *snag*, *soggy*, *belittle*, *lengthy*, *striptease*, *gimmick*, *jeans*, *teenager*, *hangover*, *teetotal*, *fudge*, *publicity*, *joyride*, *blizzard*, *showdown*, *uplift*, *movie*, *obligate*, *stunt*, *notify*, *redneck*, *businessman*, *cocktail*, *skyscraper*, *bootleg*, *highfalutin*, *guesstimate*, *raincoat*, *cloudburst*, *nearby*, *worthwhile*, *smooch*, *genocide*, *hindsight* and *graveyard* among many others. Even the word *roundabout* originally came from America, even though traffic circles hardly exist there. Perhaps the quintessential Americanism is *OK* (*okay*), which has become one of the best known and most widespread terms

throughout the whole world. Its origins are somewhat obscure and still hotly debated, but it seems to have come into common usage in America during the 1830s. Many of these Americanisms were met with a certain amount of snobbery in Britain, and many words thought to be American in origin were vilified as uncouth and inferior by the British intelligentsia (even though many of those denigrated actually turned out to be of older English provenance in the first place).

Today, some 4,000 words are used differently in the USA and Britain (*lift*/*elevator*, *tap*/*faucet*, *bath*/*tub*, *curtains*/*drapes*, *biscuit*/*cookie* and *boot*/*trunk* are just some of the better known ones) and, increasingly, American usage is driving out traditional words and phrases back in Britain (e.g. *truck* for *lorry*, *airplane* for *aeroplane*, etc). American spelling is also becoming more commonplace in Britain (e.g. *jail* for *gaol*, *wagon* for *waggon*, *reflection* for *reflexion*, etc), although some Americanized spelling changes actually go back centuries (e.g. words like *horror*, *terror*, *superior*, *emperor* and *governor* were originally spelled as *horrour*, *terrour*, *superiour*, *emperour* and *governour* in Britain according to Johnson's 1755 *"Dictionary"*, even if other words like *colour*, *humour* and *honour* had resisted such changes).

Black English



Atlantic slave trade triangle

The practice of transporting cheap black labour from western Africa to the New World was begun by the Spaniards in the 16th Century, and it had been also used by the Portuguese, Dutch and French, but it was adopted in earnest by the British in the early 17th Century. The British had established numerous outposts in the Caribbean (dubbed the “West Indies” by Columbus out of the conviction that he had reached the spice islands of the Indies, or Asia, by a western route), and had developed a whole trading empire to take advantage of the tropical climate of the region. The labour-intensive work on tobacco, cocoa, cotton and particularly sugar plantations required large numbers of cheap workers, and the Atlantic slave trade triangle (Britain – West Africa – Americas) was developed to supply it, although soon a demand also grew for household servants.

The numbers of African slaves in the America alone grew from just twenty in 1619 to over 4 million at the time of the American abolition of slavery after the Civil War in 1865 (the British had abolished the slave trade earlier, in 1807). The slaves transported by the British to work in the plantations of the American south and the islands of the West Indies were mainly from a region of West Africa rich in hundreds of different languages, and most were superb natural linguists, often speaking anywhere between three and six African languages fluently. Due to the deliberate practice of shipping slaves of different language backgrounds together (in an attempt to avoid plots and rebellions), the captives developed their own English-based pidgin language, which they used to communicate with the largely English-speaking sailors and landowners, and also between themselves.

A pidgin is a reduced language that results from extended contact between people with no language in common. Verb forms in particular are simplified (e.g. “me go run school”, “him done go”, etc), but adjectives are also often used instead of adverbs, verbs instead of prepositions, pronouns are no inflected, etc. The resulting stripped-down language may be crude but it is usually serviceable and efficient.

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Gullah is a patois dating back to the days of slavery (17 sec) (from The Story of English PBS series (Ep. 5)).

Once established in the Americas, these pidgins developed into stable creoles, forms of simplified English combined with many words from a variety of African languages. Most of the African slaves made landfall at Sullivan Island, near Charleston, South Carolina, and even today Gullah can be heard in many of the Sea Islands off the coast of the Carolinas and Georgia. Gullah is an English-African patois (the name is possibly derived from the word *Angola*), thought to be remarkably unchanged from that spoken by African slaves two or three centuries ago. Gullah and similar "plantation creoles" provided the basis of much of modern Black American English, street slang and hip-hop, but interestingly it also significantly influenced the language and accent of the aristocratic white owners, and the modern English of the southern states.

The popular Uncle Remus stories of the late 19th Century (many of them based around the trickster character of Brer Rabbit and others like Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, etc) are probably based on this kind of creole, mixed with native Cherokee origins (although they were actually collections made by white Americans like Joel Chandler Harris). The following passage is from Charles Colcock Jones Jr.'s 1888 story *"Brer Lion an Brer Goat"*:

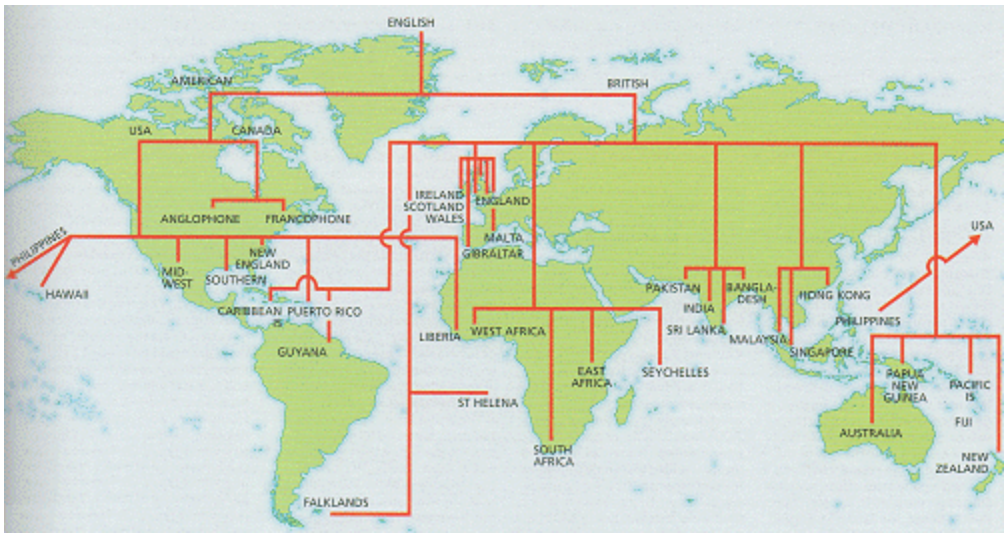
> *Brer Lion bin a hunt, an eh spy Brer Goat duh leddown topper er big rock duh wuk eh mout an der chaw. Eh creep up fuh ketch um. Wen eh git close ter um eh notus um good. Brer Goat keep on chaw. Brer Lion try fuh fine out wuh Brer Goat duh eat. Eh yent see nuttne nigh um ceptin de nekked rock wuh eh duh leddown on. Brer Lion stonish. Eh wait topper Brer Goat. Brer Goat keep on chaw, an chaw, an chaw. Brer Lion cant mek de ting out, an eh come close, an eh say: "Hay! Brer Goat, wuh you duh eat?" Brer Goat skade wen Brer Lion rise up befo um, but eh keep er bole harte, an eh mek ansur:*

> *“Me duh chaw dis rock, an ef you dont leff, wen me done long um me guine eat you.” Dis big wud sabe Brer Goat. Bole man git outer diffikelty way coward man lose eh life.*

Many of the words may look strange at first, but the meanings become quite clear when spoken aloud, and the spellings give a good approximation of a black/Caribbean accent (e.g. *notus* for *notice*, *bole* for *bold*, *ansur* for *answer*, *skade* for *scared*, etc). *Dis*/*dem*/*dey* are used for *this*/*them*/*they* in order to avoid the difficult English “th” sound, and many other usages are familiar from modern Caribbean accents (e.g. *mout* for *mouth*, *ting* for *thing*, *gwine* for *going*, etc). For simplicity, adjectives often stand in for adverbs (e.g. *coward man*) and verbs may be simplified (e.g. *Brer Lion bin a hunt*) or left out completely (e.g. *Brer Lion stonish*). Double adjectives (e.g. *big big*) are often used as intensifiers, although not in this particular passage.

Jamaican creole (known locally as “Patwa”, for patois) was one of the deepest in the Caribbean, partly because of the sheer numbers transported there, and the accent there is still so thick as to be almost undecipherable. Variations of English creoles gradually mixed with other creole forms based on French, Spanish and Portuguese, leading to a diverse range of English varieties throughout the Caribbean islands, as well as adjacent areas of Central and South America. Familiar words like *buddy* for *brother*, *palaver* for *trouble*, and *pikni* for *child*, arose out of these creoles, and words like *barbecue*, *savvy*, *nitty-gritty*, *hammock*, *hurricane*, *savannah*, *canoe*, *cannibal*, *potato*, *tobacco* and *maize* were also early introductions into English from the Caribbean, often via Spanish or Portuguese.

Britain’s Other Colonies



A family tree representation of the spread of the English language around the world (from The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, after Peter Strevens)

But North America was not the only "New World". In 1788, less than twenty years after James Cook's initial landing, Britain established its first penal colony in Sydney, Australia (once labelled merely as Terra Australis Incognita, the Unknown Southern Land). About 130,000 prisoners were transported there over the next 50 years, followed by other "free" settlers. Most of the settlers were from London and Ireland, resulting in a very distinctive and egalitarian accent and a basic English vocabulary supplemented by some Aboriginal words and expressions (e.g. *boomerang*, *kangaroo*, *koala*, *wallaby*, *budgerigar*, etc). The Australian Aborigines were nomadic and reclusive, and their numbers relatively small (perhaps 200,000, speaking over 200 separate languages), so the loanwords they contributed to English were few and mainly limited to local plant and animal names.

Over time, the convicts who had served out their time became citizens of the emerging country, and became euphemistically known as "government men", "legitimates", "exiles" or "empire builders". Some British slang words, especially Cockney terms and words from the underground "Flash" language of the criminal classes, became more commonly used in Australia than in Britain (e.g. *chum*, *swag*, *bash*, *cadge*, *grub*, *dollop*, *lark*, *crack*, etc), and some distinctively Australian terms were originally Old English words which largely died out

outside of Australia (e.g. *cobber*, *digger*, *pom*, *dinkum*, *walkabout*, *tucker*, *dunny*).

New Zealand began to be settled by European whalers and missionaries in the 1790s, although an official colony was not established there until 1840. New Zealand was keen to emphasize its national identity (and particularly its differences from neighbouring Australia), and this influenced its own version of English, as did the incorporation of native Maori words into the language.

British settlement in South Africa began in earnest in 1820, and nearly half a million English-speaking immigrants moved there during the last quarter of the 19th Century, eager to take advantage of the discoveries of gold and diamonds. The Dutch had been in South Africa since the 1650s, but the wave of British settlers soon began to anglicize the Afrikaans (Dutch) and black population. English was made the official language in 1822 and, as in Australia, a distinctive homogeneous accent developed over time, drawing from the various different groups of settlers. Although English was always – and remains – a minority language, spoken by less than 10% of South Africans, Afrikaans was seen by the 80% black majority as the language of authority and repression (the word *apartheid*, in addition to *trek*, remains South Africa's best known contribution to the English lexicon), and English represented for them a means of achieving an international voice. In 1961, South Africa became the only country ever to set up an official Academy to promote the English language. The 1993 South African constitution named no less than eleven official languages, of which English and Afrikaans are but two, but English is increasingly recognized as the lingua franca.

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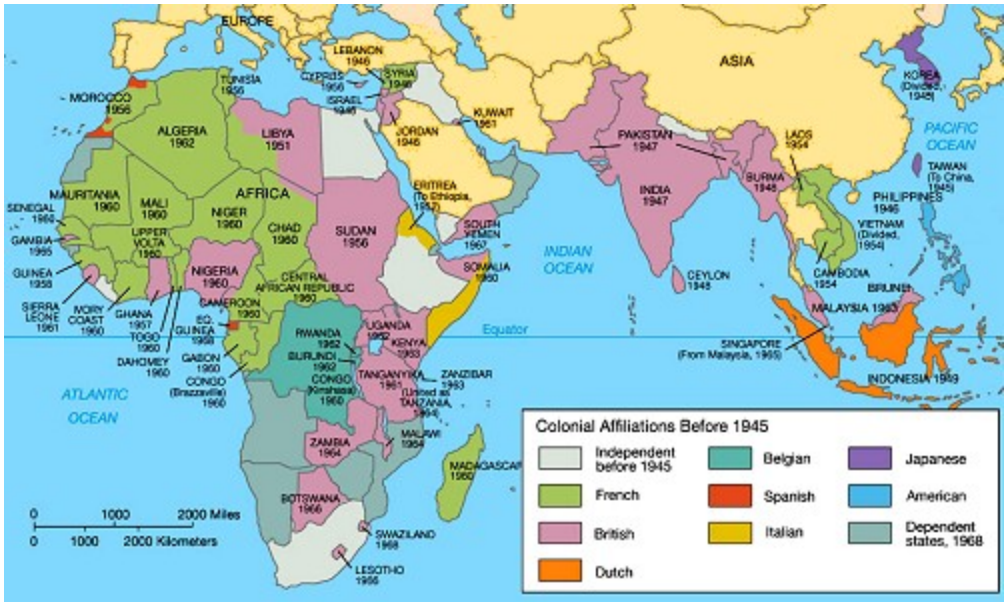
Nigerian pidgin English (21 sec) (from Matador Network).

In West Africa, the English trading influence began as early as the end of the 15th Century. In this language-rich and highly multilingual region, several English-based pidgins and creoles arose, many of which (like Krio, the *de facto* national language of Sierra Leone) still exist today. Sierra Leone, Ghana, Gambia, Nigeria and Cameroon were all run as British Crown Colonies in the 19th Century, and the influence of the English language remains of prime importance in the region. Liberia, founded in 1822 as a homeland for former American slaves (similar to the way in which Sierra Leone had been established by the British in the 1780s), is the only African country with an American influence.

In East Africa, British trade began around the end of the 16th Century, although systematic interest only started in the 1850s. Six modern East African states with a history of 19th Century British imperial rule (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe), gave English official language status on achieving independence in the 1960s. English is widely used in government, civil service, courts, schools, media, road signs, stores and business correspondence in these countries, and, because more British emigrants settled there than in the more difficult climate of West Africa, a more educated and standard English-speaking population grew up there, and there was less need for the development of pidgin languages.



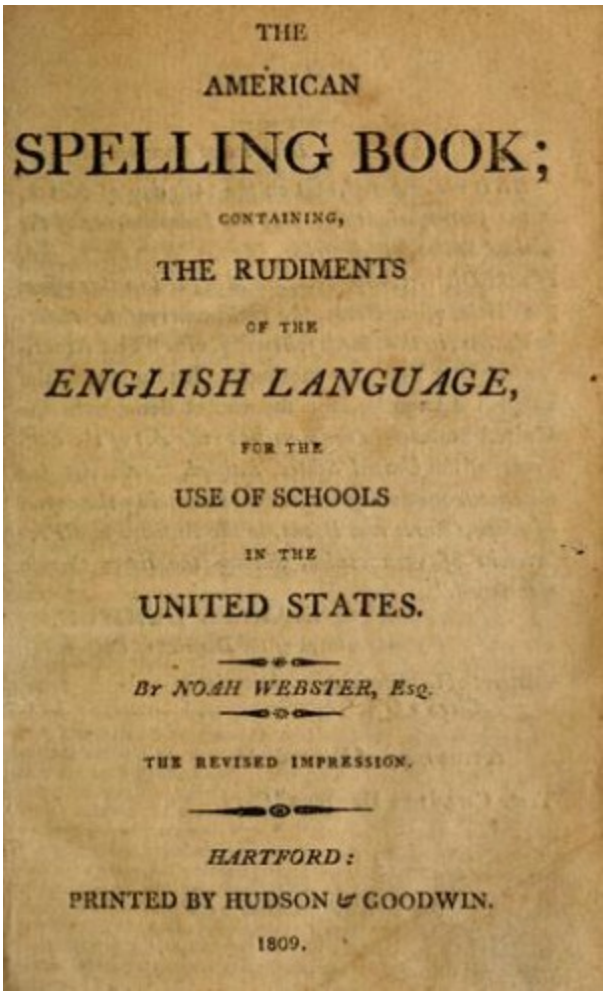
Decolonization after 1945 (from University of Oregon)

The British East India Company established its first trading station in India in 1612, and it expanded rapidly. At first, the British traders had to learn the various languages of India in order to do business (Hindi, Bengali, Gujurati and others). But soon, schools and Christian missions were set up, and British officials began to impose English on the local populace. During the period of British sovereignty in India (the "Raj"), from 1765 until partition and independence in 1947, English became the medium of administration and education throughout the Indian sub-continent, particularly following Thomas Macaulay's famous (or infamous) *"Minutes"* of 1835. This was welcomed by some (particularly in the Dravidian speaking areas of southern India, who preferred English as a lingua franca to the Hindi alternative), but opposed and derided by others. A particularly florid and ornate version of English, incorporating an extreme formality and politeness, sometimes referred to as Babu English, grew up among Indian administrators, clerks and lawyers.

Although now just a "subsidiary official language" (one of 15 official languages in a country which boasts 1,652 languages and dialects), and much less important than Hindi, English continues to be used as the lingua franca in the legal system, government administration, the army, business, media and tourism. In addition to Britain's contribution to the Indian language, though, India's many languages (particularly Hindi) gave back many words such as *pyjamas*, *bandanna*, *pundit*, *bungalow*, *veranda*, *dinghy*, *cot*, *divan*, *ghoul*, *jungle*, *loot*, *cash*, *toddy*, *curry*, *candy*, *chit*, *thug*, *punch* (the drink), *cushy*, *yoga*, *bangle*, *shampoo*, *khaki*, *turban*, *tank*, *juggernaut*, etc.

English also became the language of power and elite education in South-East Asia, initially though its trading territories in Penang, Singapore, Malacca and Hong Kong. Papua New Guinea developed differently, developing a pervasive English-based pidgin language known as Tok Pisin ("Talk Pidgin") which is now its official language. The Philippines was an American colony for the first half of the 20th Century and the influence of American English remains strong there.

Language Reform


THE
AMERICAN
SPELLING BOOK;
CONTAINING,
THE RUDIMENTS
OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE,
FOR THE
USE OF SCHOOLS
IN THE
UNITED STATES.
By NOAH WEBSTER, Esq.
THE REVISED IMPRESSION.
HARTFORD:
PRINTED BY HUDSON & GOODWIN.
1809.

Noah Webster's *"The American Spelling Book"* (from Open Library)

George Bernard Shaw (or possibly Oscar Wilde or Dylan Thomas or even Winston Churchill, the attribution is unclear) once quipped that "England and America are two countries separated by a common language", and part of the reason for the differences between the two versions of English lies in the American proclivity for reform and simplification of the language. In the 1760s, Benjamin Franklin campaigned vigorously for the reform of spelling (he advocated the discontinuation of the "unnecessary letters "c", "w", "y" and "j" and the addition of six new letters), as later did Noah Webster and Mark Twain. To be fair, there were also calls for reform in Britain, including from such literary luminaries as Alfred Lord Tennyson, Arthur Conan Doyle, George

Bernard Shaw and even Charles Darwin, although the British efforts generally had little or no effect.

Both Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster were totally convinced that American English would evolve into a completely separate language. Towards the end of the 19th Century, the English linguist Henry Sweet predicted that, within a century, "England, America and Australia will be speaking mutually unintelligible languages, owing to their independent changes of pronunciation" (as it has turned out, with the development of instantaneous global communications, the different dialects seem likely to converge rather than diverge, and American economic and cultural dominance is increasingly apparent in both British and, particularly. Australian speech and usage).

Noah Webster is often credited with single-handedly changing American spelling, particularly through his dictionaries: *"The American Spelling Book"* (first published in 1788, although it ran to at least 300 editions over the period between 1788 and 1829, and became probably the best selling book in American history after *"The Bible"*), *"The Compendious Dictionary of the English Language"* (1806), and *"The American Dictionary of the English Language"* (1828). In fact, many of the changes he put forward in his dictionaries were already underway in America (e.g. the spelling of *theater* and *center* instead of *theatre* and *centre*) and many others may well have happened anyway. But he was largely responsible for the revised spelling of words like *color* and *honor* (instead of the British *colour* and *honour*), *traveler* and *jeweler* (for *traveller* and *jeweller*), *check* and *mask* (for *cheque* and *masque*), *defense* and *offense* (for *defence* and *offence*), *plow* for *plough*, as well as the rather illogical adoption of *aluminum* instead of *aluminium*.

Many of Webster's more radical spelling recommendations (e.g. *soop*, *groop*, *bred*, *wimmen*, *fether*, *fugitiv*, *tuf*, *thum*, *hed*, *bilt*, *tung*, *fantom*, *croud*, *ile*, *definit*, *examin*, *medicin*, etc) were largely ignored, as were most of his suggested pronunciation suggestions (e.g. "deef" for *deaf*, "booty" for *beauty*, "nater" for *nature*, etc), although he was responsible for the current American pronunciations of words like *schedule* and *lieutenant*. Webster also claimed to

have invented words such as *demoralize*, *appreciation*, *accompaniment*, *ascertainable* and *expenditure*, even though these words had actually been in use for some centuries.

For many Americans, like Webster, taking ownership of the language and developing what would become known as American Standard English was seen as a matter of honour (honor) for the newly independent nation. But such reforms were fiercely criticized in Britain, and even in America a so-called "Dictionary War" ensued between supporters of Webster's Americanism and the more conservative British-influenced approach of Joseph Worcester and others. When the Merriam brothers bought the rights to Webster's dictionaries and produced the first Merriam-Webster dictionary in 1847, they actually expunged most of Webster's more radical spelling and pronunciation ideas, and the work (and its subsequent versions) became an instant success. In 1906, the American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie tried to resurrect some of Webster's reforms. He contributed large sums of money towards the Simplified Spelling Board, which resulted in the American adoption of the simpler spellings of words such as *ax*, *judgment*, *catalog*, *program*, etc. President Theodore Roosevelt agreed to use these spellings for all federal publications and they quickly caught on, although there was still stiff resistance to such recommended changes as *tuf*, *def*, *troble*, *yu*, *filosofy*, etc.

Literary Developments

From *"Jabberwocky"* by Lewis Carroll

A vast number of novels (of varying quality and literary value) were published in the 19th Century to satisfy the apparently insatiable appetite of Victorian Britain for romantic stories, ranging from the sublimity of Jane Austen's works to the florid excesses and hackneyed phrasing typified by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's famous opening lines "It was a dark and stormy night..." Due to the strictures of prudish Victorian society, an inventive list of euphemisms were popularized for body parts and other unmentionable concepts, a prudery perhaps epitomized by Thomas Bowdler's "bowdlerization" of the works of Shakespeare in which offending words like *strumpet*, *whore*, *devil*, etc, were removed or toned down.

The early 19th century language of Jane Austen appears to all intents and purposes to be quite modern in vocabulary, grammar and style, but it hides some subtle distinctions in meaning which have since been lost (e.g. *compliment* usually meant merely polite or conventional praise; *inmate* connoted an inhabitant of any sort rather than a prisoner; *genius* was a general word for intelligence, and did not suggest exceptional prowess; *regard* encompassed a feeling of genuine affection; *irritation* did not carry its modern

negative connotation, merely excitement; *grateful* could also mean gratifying; to *lounge* meant to stroll rather than to sit or slouch; to *essay* mean to attempt something; etc). To Austen, and other writers of her generation, correct grammar and style (i.e. "correct" according to the dictates of Robert Lowth's *"Grammar"*) were important social markers, and the use of non-standard vocabulary or grammar would have been seen as a mark of vulgarity to be avoided at all costs.

New ideas, new concepts and new words were introduced in the early science fiction and speculative fiction novels of Mary Shelley, Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. Lewis Carroll began to experiment with invented words (particularly blended or "portmanteau" words) in poems like *"Jabberwocky"* (1872). *Chortle* and *galumph* are two words from the poem that made the jump to everyday English, but the work is jam-packed with nonsense words as may be seen from its first few lines: *"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe: / All mimsy were the borogoves, / And the mome raths outgrabe"*).

But some truly revolutionary works were just around the corner in the early 20th Century, from Virginia Woolf to T.S. Eliot to William Faulkner to Samuel Beckett and, perhaps most emphatically, the innovations of the Irishman, James Joyce, in *"Ulysses"* and *"Finnegan's Wake"* (although, of the hundreds of new words in these works, only *monomyth* and *quark* have enjoyed any currency, and that rather limited). A single sentence from *"Finnegan's Wake"* (1939) may suffice to give a taste of the extent of Joyce's neologistic rampage:

> *The allwhite poors guardiant, pulpably of balltossic stummung, was literally astundished over the painful sake, how he burstteself, which he was gone to, where he intent to did he, whether you think will, wherend the whole current of the afternoon whats the souch of a surch hads of hits of hims, urged and staggered thereto in his countryports at the caledosian capacity for Lieutuvisky of the caftan's wineskin and even more so, during, looking his bigmost astonishments, it was said him, aschu, fun the concerned outgift of the dead med dirt, how that, arrahbejibbers, conspuent to the*

> *dominical order and exking noblish permish, he was namely coon at bringer at home two gallonts, as per royal, full poultry till his murder.*

0:00 / 1:12

James Joyce reads an excerpt from "Finnegan's Wake" (Book I Ch. 8) (72 sec) (from The Floating Library).

Clearly, this is English taken to a whole new level, pushing the boundaries of the language, and it is considered one of the most difficult works of fiction in the English language. Although the basic English grammar and syntax is more or less intact, it is written in an experimental stream-of-consciousness style, and contains masses of literary allusions, puns and dream-like word associations. Almost half of the vocabulary consists of neologisms (particularly compound words like *allwhite*, *bigmost*, *countryports*, *outgift*, etc, and portmanteau, or blended words, like *guardiant*, *wherend*, *conspuent*, etc), and many of the words that are recognizable are used in an idiosyncratic and non-standard way. Some of Joyce's word inventions (not in this sample) are 100 letters long. Initial reception of the work lurched between rabid praise and expressions of absolute incomprehension and disdain, and even today it remains a polarizing issue. The book continues to be more written about than read.

In the late 19th Century, the Scottish lexicographer James Murray was given the job of compiling a *"New English Dictionary on Historical Principles"*. He worked on this project for 36 years from 1879 until his death in 1915, and his results were completed by others and published in 1928 as the *"Oxford English Dictionary"*. It contained 415,000 entries supported by nearly 2 million citations, and ran to over 15,000 pages in 12 volumes, and was immediately accepted as the definitive guide to the English language. Interestingly, this version used the American "-ize" ending for words such as *characterize*, *itemize*, etc, rather than the British practice (both then and now) of spelling

them *characterise*, *itemise*, etc. Although supplements were issued in 1933 and 1972-6, it was not revised or added to until 1989, when the current (second) edition was published, listing over 615,000 words in 20 huge volumes, officially the world's largest dictionary.

20th Century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Sir Ernest Gowers' *"The Complete Plain Words"* (from Wikipedia)

By the end of the 19th Century, the USA had overtaken the UK as the world's fastest growing economy, and America's "economic imperialism" continued the momentum of the British Industrial Revolution into the 20th Century. The American dominance in economic and military power, as well as its overwhelming influence in the media and popular culture has ensured that English has remained the single most important language in the world and the closest thing to a global language the world has ever seen.

Perhaps in reaction to the perceived appropriation or co-option of English by the United States, a certain amount of language snobbery continued to grow

in England. In 1917, Daniel Jones introduced the concept of Received Pronunciation (sometimes called the Queen's English, BBC English or Public School English) to describe the variety of Standard English spoken by the educated middle and upper classes, irrespective of what part of England they may live in. The invention of radio in the 1920s, and then television in the 1930s, disseminated this archetypal English accent to the masses and further entrenched its position, despite the fact that it was only spoken by about 1 in 50 in the general population. At the same time, regional accents were further denigrated and marginalized. However, since the Second World War, a greater permissiveness towards regional English varieties has taken hold in England, both in education and in the media.

There was a mid-century reaction within Britain against what George Orwell described as the "ugly and inaccurate" contemporary English of the time. In Orwell's dystopic novel *"Nineteen Eighty-Four"*, words like *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime*, *newspeak* and *blackwhite* give a nightmarish vision of where he saw the language going. The "Plain English" movement, which emphased clarity, brevity and the avoidance of technical language, was bolstered by Sir Ernest Gowers' *"The Complete Plain Words"*, published in the early 1950s, and the trend towards plainer language, appropriate to the target audience, continued in official and legal communications, and was followed by a similar movement in the United Sates during the 1970s. Gowers himself thought that legal language was a case apart, being more of a science than an art, and could not be subject to Plain English rules, but in more recent years there has been a trend toward plainer language in legal documents too.

The 20th Century was, among other things, a century of world wars, technological transformation, and globalization, and each has provided a source of new additions to the lexicon. For example, words like *blockbuster*, *nose-dive*, *shell-shocked*, *camouflage*, *radar*, *barrage*, *boondocks*, *roadblock*, *snafu*, *boffin*, *brainwashing*, *spearhead*, etc, are all military terms which have made their way into standard English during the World Wars. As an interesting aside, in 1941, when Sir Winston Churchill wanted to plumb the depths of the English soul at a particularly crucial and difficult time in the Second World

War, almost all of the words in the main part of his famous speech (*"we shall fight on the beaches... we shall never surrender"*) were of Anglo-Saxon origin, with the significant exception of *surrender* (a French loanword). The speech is also a good example of what was considered Received Pronunciation at the time.

0:00 / 0:34

Winston Churchill's 1941 War Speech (32 sec).

The push for political correctness and inclusiveness in the last third of the 20th Century, particularly by homosexuals, feminists and visible minority groups, led to a reassessment of the popular usage of many words. Feminists called into question the underlying sexism in language (e.g. *mankind*, *chairman*, *mailman*, etc) and some have even gone to the lengths of positing *herstory* as an alternative to *history*. For a time, stong objections were voiced at the inherent racism underlying words like *blacklist*, *blackguard*, *blackmail*, even *blackboard*, and at the supposedly disparaging and dismissive nature of terms like *mentally handicapped*, *disabled*, *Third World*, etc. But there has also been a certain amount of positive re-branding and reclamation (also known as reappropriation) of many pejorative words, such as *gay*, *queer*, *queen*, *dyke*, *bitch*, *nigger*, etc, by those very same marginalized segments of society.

The explosion in electronic and computer terminology in the latter part of the 20th Century (e.g. *byte*, *cyberspace*, *software*, *hacker*, *laptop*, *hard-drive*, *database*, *online*, *hi-tech*, *microchip*, etc) was just one element driving the dramatic increase in new English terms, particularly due to the dominance of the USA in the development of computer technology, from IBM to Apple to Microsoft. Parallel to this, science fiction literature has contributed it own vocabulary to the common word-stock, including terms such as *robotics*, *hyperspace*, *warp-speed*, *cyberpunk*, *droid*, *nanotech*, *nanobot*, etc.

Later, the Internet it gave rise to (the word *Internet* itself is derived form Latin, as are *audio*, *video*, *quantum*, etc) generated its own set of neologisms (e.g. *online*, *noob*, *flamer*, *spam*, *phishing*, *larping*, *whitelist*, *download*, *blog*, *vblog*, *blogosphere*, *emoticon*, *podcast*, *warez*, *trolling*, *hashtag*, *wifi*, *bitcoin*, *selfie*, etc). In addition, a whole body of acronyms, contractions and shorthands for use in email, social networking and cellphone texting has grown up, particularly among the young, including the relatively well-known *lol*, *ttfn*, *btw*, *omg*, *wtf*, *plz*, *thx*, *ur*, *l8ter*, etc. The debate (*db8*) continues as to whether texting is killing or enriching the English language.

Present Day

Cellphone texting is increasingly popular, especially among teens

The language continues to change and develop and to grow apace, expanding to incorporate new jargons, slangs, technologies, toys, foods and gadgets. In the current digital age, English is going though a new linguistic peak in terms of word acquisition, as it peaked before during Shakespeare's time, and then again during the Industrial Revolution, and at the height of the British Empire. According to one recent estimate, it is expanding by over 8,500 words a year (other estimates are significantly higher), compared to an estimated annual

increase of around 1,000 words at the beginning of the 20th Century, and has almost doubled in size in the last century.

Neologisms are being added all the time, including recent inclusions such as *fashionista*, *metrosexual*, *McJob*, *McMansion*, *wussy*, *bling*, *nerd*, *pear-shaped*, *unplugged*, *fracking*, *truthiness*, *locavore*, *parkour*, *sexting*, *crowdsourcing*, *regift*, *meme*, *selfie*, *earworm*, *meh*, *diss*, *suss*, *emo*, *twerk*, *schmeat*, *chav*, *ladette*, *punked*, *vaping*, etc, etc.

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend towards using an existing words as a different part of speech, especially the "verbification" of nouns (e.g. the word *verbify* is itself a prime example; others include to *thumb*, to *parrot*, to *email*, to *text*, to *google*, to *medal*, to *critique*, to *leverage*, to *sequence*, to *interface*, to *tase*, to *speechify*, to *incentivize*, etc), although some modern-sounding verbs have surprisingly been in the language for centuries (e.g. to *author*, to *impact*, to *message*, to *parent*, to *channel*, to *monetize*, to *mentor*, etc). "Nounification" also occurs, particularly in business contexts (e.g. an *ask*, a *build*, a *solve*, a *fail*, etc).

Compound or portmanteau words are an increasingly common source of new vocabulary (e.g. *stagflation*, *edutainment*, *flexitarian*, *Disneyfication*, *frenemy*, *confuzzle*, *gastropub*, *bromance*, *hacktivist*, *chillax*, *infomercial*, *shareware*, *dramedy*, *gaydar*, *wellderly*, *techlash*, etc).

The meanings of words also continue to change, part of a process that has been going on almost as long as the language itself. For instance, to the disgust of many, *alternate* is now almost universally accepted in North America as a replacement for *alternative*; *momentarily* has come to mean "very soon" and not (or as well as) "for a very short period of time"; and the use of the modifier *literally* to mean its exact opposite has recently found it way into the Oxford English Dictionary (where one of its meanings is shown as "used for emphasis rather than being actually true"). In some walks of life, *bad*, *sick*, *dope* and *wicked* are all now different varieties of good.

In our faddy, disposable, Internet-informed, digital age, there are even word trends that appear to be custom-designed to be short-lived and epehemeral, words and phrases that are considered no longer trendy once they reach anything close to mainstream usage. Examples might be *bae*, *on fleek*, *YOLO* (you only live once), *fanute*, etc. Resources like the Urban Dictionary exist for the rest of us to keep track of such fleeting phenomena.

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.

In this section