

File 10.11

A Chronological Table of the History of English

The English language has changed dramatically over its history. As one can tell from the versions of the Lord's Prayer in File 10.1, a speaker of Modern English would not understand Old English at all and would have to work hard to figure out the Middle English text. Even the Early Modern English of Shakespeare is different enough from Modern English to warrant annotated versions of his plays.

While all languages naturally change over time, and English is no exception, some dramatic changes have been induced or encouraged by major historical events as well. The following tables present some of the major influences and developments in the history of English. The first section mentions some of the major landmarks in the internal history of English—that is, the actual changes in the language itself that have been influenced by outside events. The second section presents major landmarks in the external history of English—that is, factors such as conquest of English speakers by speakers of other languages; intellectual attitudes toward languages; social, religious, and political changes, and so on, which affect how a language changes. English has been influenced by other languages throughout its development and has borrowed a great many vocabulary items, samples of which are presented in the chart.

Internal History

1. Proto-European to Germanic Grimm's Law
2. OE to ME

Loss of /x/

Adoption of /ʒ/

Allophonic variants [f]/[v], [θ]/[ð], [s]/[z], [ŋ]/[n] become phonemic.

Vowel reduction and subsequent loss of final [ə] in unstressed syllables lead to loss of case endings, more rigid word order, greater use of prepositions.
3. Middle English to Early Mod English (1300–1600) The Great Vowel Shift
Simplification of some initial consonant sequences: [kn] > [n] (*knee*); [hl] > [l] (*hlaf* > *loaf*); [hr] > [r] (*hring* > *ring*); [wr] > [r] (*wrong*).

External History

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Language Influence</i>	<i>Stages</i>
700-900? B.C.	Settlement of British Isles by Celts	Celtic—in London, Dover, Avon, Cornwall Latin—preserved in a few forms: -chester < castra 'camp'	Pre-English
55 B.C.	Beginning of Roman raids		
43 A.D.	Roman occupation of "Brittania"		
Early 5th c.	Romans leave British Isles		
449 A.D.	Germanic tribes defeat the Celts	Germanic—Anglo-Saxon	Old English (450-1100)
ca. 600 A.D.	England converted to Christianity (Borrowings: <i>abbot, altar, cap, chalice, hymn, relic, sock, beet, pear, cook, rue, school, verse</i>)	Latin, via the Christian Church	
ca. 750 A.D.	<i>Beowulf</i> writings are composed (only extant manuscript written ca. 1000 A.D.)		
9-11th c.	Invasions by Scandinavians (Borrowings: <i>birth, sky, trust, take, skirt, disk, dike</i> ; simplified pronoun system)	Scandinavian / Norse	Middle English (1100-1450)
1066 A.D.	Battle of Hastings—Norman Conquest (Borrowings: <i>court, enemy, battle, nation, crime, justice, beef, pork, veal, mutton, charity, miracle</i>)	Norman French, Latin via Norman French for learned vocabulary	
ca. 1200 A.D.	Normandy and England are separated		
13th-14th c.	Growing sense of Englishness		
1337-1450	Hundred Years' War		
1340-1450	Chaucer		Early Modern English (1450-1700)
1476	First English book is published; spelling standardized		
1564-1616	Shakespeare (Greek & Latin borrowings: <i>anachronism, allusion, atmosphere, capsule, dexterity, halo, agile, external, insane, adapt, erupt, exist, extinguish</i>)	Latin and Greek, via the influence of printing and the Renaissance in Europe	
16th-19th c.	Imperialism (Borrowings: <i>mogul, rajah, safari, loot, bandana, pajama</i>)	Swahili, Hindi, Tamil, Chinese, etc., via the various colonies	Modern English (1700-present)
19th-20th c.	Development of North American, Australian, African, Caribbean, South Asian varieties of English; Scientific and Industrial Revolution	Technical and regional vocabularies	