



INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

A LESSON ON ENGLISH

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THE OMNIVORE: HISTORY OF ENGLISH PART I

This is a two-part newsletter. Part II of "The Omnivore: History of English" will appear in the August 2008 ALOE.

An "omnivore" (Latin "omni" meaning "all," and "vor" meaning "eat") is a creature that eats everything. Seeming to lack discretion, common sense and choosiness, the omnivore eats all in its path.

The English language is, by this standard, an omnivore. Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Old French, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, more Latin, Greek (through Latin and directly borrowed) and innumerable loan words have produced a language with a vocabulary of over 1.5 million words (by contrast, Spanish has about 80,000 words.) With such a huge pool of words, English is the champion of supplying words with subtle shades of meaning, nuance and connotation. For this reason, if no other, English is in a privileged position in modern world languages.

The historical origins of English

When Julius Caesar, later to be Roman Emperor, invaded Britain in BC 54-5, the British Isles were inhabited by Celtic tribes. Their Celtic languages still survive as Gaelic in Scotland & Ireland, Welsh, in Wales, and Manx in the Isle of Man, as well as Breton in France. The Romans brought Latin to Britain, which was part of the Roman Empire for over 400 years. Christianity came to England in 597 AD, bringing its rich vocabulary of Greek and Latin words. With the coming of Christianity, monasteries and churches were built, and a new way of saving and propagating knowledge came into being. It's reported that Old English was strengthened with more than 400 new words by this event; the Greek and Latin words introduced were well-adapted to express abstract ideas.

Unlike French, Spanish and Italian, which came directly from Latin, Old English was therefore a blend of some original Celtic words mixed with some Latin and Greek words. The language changed most dramatically, however, when Angles and Saxons tribes invaded Britain from the East, from what is now Germany. They spoke different dialects of an early Germanic language, from which modern German developed. This explains why modern German and English are often similar, as many of their words developed from the same original language.

In 878 AD, the Vikings invaded Britain from Scandinavia, bringing with them the Norse language, though this was similar to the old English or Anglo-Saxon language already used.

The dramatic arrival of the Norman army from France, led by King William the Conqueror in 1066, and the defeat of the English King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, brought very big changes to English life. The Normans brought with them the Old French language, which became the language of the Royal Court, and the ruling and business class.

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Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

A Lesson on English

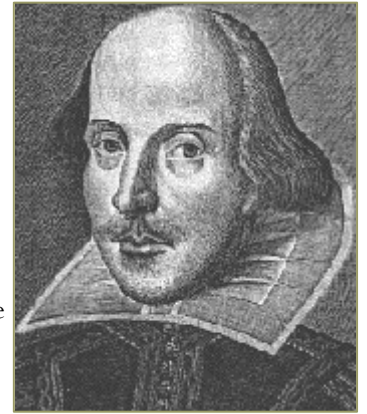
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William Shakespeare

The Renaissance in Europe was a time of great advance of learning and culture. By this time, English was not very different from the English used today. And the most famous person to write in English in this period was William Shakespeare (1564-1616). His insight into human nature, and his gift for using words, make him possibly the most famous playwright of all time! Having in his hands such a new rich language must have helped him, too.



Shakespeare gave the English language many phrases and sayings, which English speakers still use every day. Often, they do not realize these words came from Shakespeare's plays or poems! Do you know some of these?

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" (Romeo and Juliet)

"If music be the food of love, play on and give me excess." (12th Night)

"Of one who loved not wisely but too well." (Othello)

"All our yesterdays.." "Out, out brief candle." (MacBeth)

"To be or not to be....." (Hamlet)

INDO-EUROPEAN AND GERMANIC INFLUENCES

English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The Indo-European family includes several major branches:

- Latin and the modern Romance languages;
- The Germanic languages;
- The Indo-Iranian languages, including Hindi and Sanskrit;
- The Slavic languages;
- The Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian (but not Estonian);
- The Celtic languages; and
- Greek.

The influence of the original Indo-European language, (designated proto-Indo-European) can be seen today, even though no written record of it exists. The word for father, for example, is vater in German, pater in Latin, and pitr in Sanskrit. These words are all cognates: similar words in different languages that share the same root.

Of these branches of the Indo-European family, two are, for our purposes of studying the development of English, of paramount importance, the Germanic and the Romance (called that because the Romance languages derive from Latin, the language of ancient Rome). English is classified in the Germanic group of languages, but the influence of Latin is found throughout the language, especially in words that have come into English through Old French, after William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066.