A Brief Timeline of English

The prompt to read this information appears on p. 14 of *Acting on Words*

German-speaking peoples introduced the stock of English to Britain, with their first invasion in the fifth century. But a great many other tongues would add their distinctive taste to the stew, including Latin, Greek, Norse, and French. As to where the Germanic tongues derived, a single unknown Indo-European source may exist for a significant proportion of today's languages, including English. Calvert Watkins in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* cites the word "day" as coming from the Indo-European "dyeu" meaning "to shine." The root word for "day" in many languages traces to this common Indo-European ancestor, and from that root have also derived various words for "deity" (one who shines brilliantly).

The following timeline derives from material in various sources, such as *The Story of English* by Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil and the online World Wide Words articles of Michael Quinion. We have not followed our own advice elsewhere to trace all information "to its roots," to "August journals," leading experts and the like, because we would never complete this brief amateur's sketch if we did. Our intention is simply to "whet your appetite" and encourage you not to take any of our statements here as those of authorities. Find points of particular interest to you and pursue those beyond this extremely limited overview.

First century BCE Julius Caesar and the Romans arrive, conquering the Gaelic-speaking Celts. The Romans introduce Latin and its Classical Age culture.

Fifth century CE Rome's overextended empire collapses and the Classical Age gives way. The "barbarians"—Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invade, bringing what is to become Old English. As Michael Quinion notes, the Old English word "Welsh," meaning "foreigner" and "slave" is applied to all the native peoples of Britain. The Celtic people of Wales call themselves "Cymr" and their Gaelic language "Cymraeg." The Story of English (SE) observes that the "ambiguity, innuendo, and word-play" of Old English are to become a "distinguishing characteristic" of modern English.

597 The Romans return, now bringing Christianity. Old English meets Latin. Churches and monasteries are introduced as centers of teaching as well as religion. Greek, Latin, and Hebrew words provide new means for abstract thought. Old English words are applied in new, more sophisticated ways.

750 – 1050 Viking (Danish) invasions. The Danes end up controlling the north, the English-speaking Saxons the south. Pidginization takes place between the two Germanic-based languages, a process that gradually simplifies the structure of Old English.

1066 Norman invasion. French dominates the court, administration, law, and the church for the next three hundred years. Linguistic "apartheid" occurs (SE 73) as religion, law, science, and literature are conducted in French.

1150 Among the English-speaking "lower orders," Middle English (the language of Chaucer) takes over from Old English, and lasts until about 1500 AD.

1340 Geoffrey Chaucer is born. Like Michel Tremblay in 1960s Quebec, who chooses to write in the language (joual) of everyday people, Chaucer chooses to write not in Latin or French but English. His *Canterbury Tales* (circa 1390) is widely acclaimed as the first great written work of the English language.

From the 1400s into the 1500s, the main effects of "the great vowel shift" occur (though the process runs from 1100 to 1700). This shift in pronunciation of the long vowels constitutes the major distinction between Chaucer's language—Middle English—and ours—Modern English. See the following Web page at Harvard University: http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/vowels.html

1476 William Caxton introduces the printing press into England; among other works, he prints those of Geoffrey Chaucer.

1500 Middle English yields to Modern English (illustrated by the works of the Elizabethans).

1558 Elizabeth I takes the throne. The Renaissance flourishes in England. Empire-building, taking over from that of Rome, results in absorption of words, customs, and literatures from all around the world.

1588 – 1613 Thirty-eight plays wholly or partially written by Shakespeare (1564-1616) are performed; his sonnets and five other long poems are written. Many argue that no other single writer has had as profound an influence on the English we use today. See Norrie Epstein, *The Friendly Shakespeare*, Penguin: New York, 1993, 227- 234; also see Robert McCrum, William Cran, Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English*, BBC Publications: London, 1986, 98 – 106.

1606 In the year that Shakespeare writes *Antony and Cleopatra*, pioneers financed by a London company arrive on the east coast of what is now the United States of America. The American colonies will break away from England in 1776, launching a different version of the language-- "American English"-- one that currently reaches out to the world through American empire-building as Elizabethan English once did through Renaissance colonization.

1611 As Shakespeare works on his final plays, The King James Bible is published. The language of this one source will all but equal the influence of Shakespeare on English literature in the following four centuries.

1900s Technical innovations of the Information Age—radio, television, films and by the end of the century, the personal computer and internet—combine with the rise of the American empire (now taking over the empire-building preoccupation from Britain) to transform English. Marshall McLuhan (1911 - 1980) theorizes that "the medium is the message"; visual and oral dimensions return to English usage (marginalized from the 17th century onwards), but thousands of Indigenous languages—repositories of oral culture--die or appear endangered. More and more people begin talking of a "global language"—English—and some cannot help drawing parallels to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, Genesis 11: 1-9.

English Today

Today English goes on changing—evolving or degenerating, according to individual viewpoint—at a remarkable rate. Some believe that in Canada, for instance, the young people talk like Valley girls, the old like American TV characters; in short, the character of Canadian English has all but died. Linguists beg to differ, suggesting that Canadian regionalisms and nationalisms are as strong as ever. The 2004 documentary *Talking Canadian* describes a new "great vowel shift" taking place across the northern United States, a shift that appears non-existent a few miles north across the border where the ubiquitous Valley-girl "like," used for multiple grammatical purposes, drives certain parents crazy. Why do we adopt some "foreign" characteristics and not others? Why do we innovate and cling to certain of our own uniquely Canadian linguistic manners? Obtaining and using the Canadian Oxford Dictionary and/or the Nelson Canadian Dictionary as well as a sound non-Canadian dictionary will help you to deal with the complexities of a language this is arriving from and perhaps heading toward many different directions.

Here are some more **opinions and facts** about English, again mostly taken from *The Story of English*

- English is always in flux, beyond the control of schoolteachers or bureaucrats (SE 11)

- English is a continuum of styles, and varieties need not be treated pejoratively (SE 13). Many language analysts now speak of "Englishes."

- Over 20 years ago, English was used by at least 750 million people; barely half of those spoke it as a mother tongue (SE 19).

- English is more widely scattered around the world than any other language.

- According to Yale University Department of Linguistics (qtd. in SE}, the world's languages number some 6,000. English has the largest vocabulary of any. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) lists about 500,000 words; a further 500,000 technical and scientific terms remain uncatalogued. In contrast, French has fewer than 100.000 words and German around 185,000 (SE 19). However, as Michael Quinion notes, deciding what to call a word is easier than it sounds.

- The King James Bible is made up of only 6,000 different words. Shakespeare used upwards to 29,000 different words in his plays and poems (Epstein 224)

- Politics and language are intimately connected

For Further Practice

1. Without relying on Wikipedia, do some research to see how many words are officially included in the English language today.

2. Without relying on Wikipedia, do some research to see how many people today around the world speak English as a first language, as a second language.

3. Without relying on Wikipedia, do some research to see how many words are thought to be in today's English language. (Hint: See what Michael Quinion has to say about the difficulties of answering this question).

4. Sample at least one short piece of writing by Chaucer. Listening to a recording of the piece will greatly enhance the experience. You can also read the same piece in a modern English translation. A good starting point might be "The Nun's Priest's Tale from The Canterbury Tales," a beast tale applied for purposes of wry humour. Also read "The King and I," Acting on Words, p. 399, then do a little research into Michel Tremblay's life and work. See Chapter 12 on comparison-contrast methods. Outline an essay comparing the significance of Chaucer's and Tremblay's language choices.

5. According to William Hamilton (293), the name Saskatchewan derives from Cree for "swift-flowing river": "Kisikachewin Sipi" Research the meaning and origin of a non-English place name in your locality. Ideally, check your findings with authorities who speak the language concerned and know the local history. See Chapter 18 on how to

document personal communications, and see "Interviews" at Chapter 18, website, for information and advice on conducting interviews.

Focus Questions

The authors of *The Story of English* write with great excitement and enthusiasm about the contemporary prevalence of a language that once was spoken by no more people than speak Cherokee today (19). Is this excitement one-sided? See the Endangered Language Fund Web page of Yale University at http://sapir.ling.yale.edu/~elf/ as you consider different ways to respond.

What are some possible losses or problems that come with the world dominance of one particular language?

The Private Lives of English Words

You can find a number of entertaining books on the histories of English words. One example is *The Private Lives of English Words* by Heller, Humez, and Dror (Wynwood Press, 1991) . Following is an excerpt on the word "woodchuck."

> The animal known in Linnaean nomenclature as *Acromys monax* "lone bear-mouse" or *Marmota monax* "lone mountain-mouse" is also known by the names groundhog, whistlepig, and, of course, woodchuck, all misnomers, since it is neither mouse nor pig, and its connection with wood and chuk is also unclear.
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> The Cree Indian word *otchek* "marten, fisher" seems to have been the origin of woodchuck. Originally misheard, it was re-analyzed as if it were a compound of English wood and chuk, and then applied to the wrong animal.
>
> (216-217)

For Further Practice

1. We have seen other suggestions for the origin of the word "woodchuck." Do a little research to see if you find agreement or disagreement with the above speculation.

2. Find the origin of at least one other English word or phrase (e.g. to wool gather) and exchange your findings with your course-mates and instructor.

Canadian Words

Can you think of words that are distinctly Canadian?

Would you have included "cottage roll," "date square," butter tart," eavestrough," and "shit disturber"? *Talking Canadian* tells you about the history of these and many more words that have a uniquely Canadian usage. It also explains why Canadians began to spell "–or" words "–our," how that usage almost disappeared but oddly survived.

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