

English language

 309 languages 

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English is a [West Germanic language](#) in the [Indo-European language family](#), whose speakers, called [Anglophones](#), originated in [early medieval England](#) on the island of [Great Britain](#).^{[4][5][6]} The namesake of the language is the [Angles](#), one of the ancient [Germanic peoples](#) that [migrated to Britain](#). It is the [most spoken language](#) in the world, primarily due to the global influences of the former [British Empire](#) (succeeded by the [Commonwealth of Nations](#)) and the [United States](#).^[7] English is the [third-most spoken native language](#), after [Standard Chinese](#) and [Spanish](#).^[8] It is also the most widely learned [second language](#) in the world, with more second-language speakers than native speakers.

English is either the official language or one of the official languages in [59 sovereign states](#) (such as [India](#), [Ireland](#), and [Canada](#)). In some other countries, it is the sole or dominant language for historical reasons without being explicitly defined by law (such as in the United States and [United Kingdom](#)).^[9] It is a [co-official language of the United Nations](#), the [European Union](#), and many other international and regional organisations. It has also become the [de facto lingua franca](#) of diplomacy, [science](#), technology, international trade, logistics, tourism, aviation, entertainment, and the [Internet](#).^[10] English accounts for at least 70% of total speakers of the [Germanic language branch](#), and as of 2021, [Ethnologue](#) estimated that there were over 1.5 billion speakers worldwide.^[3]

[Old English](#) emerged from a group of West Germanic dialects spoken by the [Anglo-Saxons](#). Late Old English borrowed some grammar and core vocabulary from [Old Norse](#), a [North Germanic language](#).^{[11][12][13]} Then, [Middle English](#) borrowed vocabulary extensively from [French dialects](#), which are the source of approximately 28% of [Modern English words](#), and from [Latin](#), which is the [source of an additional 28%](#).^[14] As such, though most of its total vocabulary comes from [Romance languages](#), Modern English's grammar, phonology, and most commonly used words in everyday use keep it [genealogically](#) classified under the Germanic branch. It exists on a [dialect continuum](#) with [Scots](#) and is then most closely related to the [Low Saxon](#) and [Frisian languages](#).

Classification

English is an [Indo-European language](#) and belongs to the [West Germanic](#) group of the [Germanic languages](#).^[15] Old English originated from a Germanic tribal and [linguistic continuum](#) along the [Frisian North Sea coast](#), whose languages gradually evolved into the [Anglic languages](#) in the British Isles, and into the Frisian languages and [Low German/Low Saxon](#) on the continent. The Frisian languages, which together with the Anglic languages form the [Anglo-Frisian languages](#), are the closest living relatives of English. Low German/Low Saxon is also closely related, and sometimes English, the Frisian languages, and Low German are grouped together as the [North Sea Germanic languages](#), though this grouping remains debated.^[12] Old English evolved into [Middle English](#), which in turn evolved into [Modern English](#).^[16] Particular dialects of Old and Middle English also developed into a number of other Anglic languages, including [Scots](#)^[17] and the extinct [Fingallian dialect](#) and [Yola language](#) of Ireland.^[18]

Like [Icelandic](#) and [Faroese](#), the development of English in the British Isles isolated it from the continental Germanic languages and influences, and it has since diverged considerably. English is not [mutually intelligible](#) with any continental Germanic language, as it differs in [vocabulary](#), [syntax](#), and [phonology](#). However, some of these, such as Dutch or Frisian, do show strong affinities with English, especially with its earlier stages.^[19] [\[page needed\]](#)

Unlike Icelandic and Faroese, which were isolated, the development of English was influenced by a long series of invasions of the British Isles by other peoples and languages, particularly [Old Norse](#) and [French dialects](#). These left a profound mark of their own on the language, so that English shows some similarities in vocabulary and grammar with many languages outside its linguistic [clades](#)—but it is not mutually intelligible with any of those languages either. Some scholars have argued that English can be considered a [mixed language](#) or a [creole](#)—a theory called the [Middle English creole hypothesis](#). Although the great influence of these languages on the vocabulary and grammar of Modern English is widely acknowledged, most specialists in language contact do not consider English to be a true mixed language.^{[20][21]}

English is classified as a Germanic language because it shares [innovations](#) with other Germanic languages including [Dutch](#), [German](#), and [Swedish](#).^[22] These shared innovations show that the languages have descended from a single common ancestor called [Proto-Germanic](#). Some shared features of Germanic languages include the division of verbs into [strong](#) and [weak](#) classes, the use of [modal verbs](#), and the sound changes affecting [Proto-Indo-European consonants](#), known as [Grimm's](#) and [Verner's laws](#). English is classified as an Anglo-Frisian language because Frisian and English share other features, such as the [palatalisation](#) of consonants that were velar consonants in Proto-Germanic (see [Phonological history of Old English § Palatalization](#)).^[23]

History

Main article: [History of English](#)

Overview of history

English
Pronunciation
Native to
Speakers
Language family
Early forms
Writing system
Signed forms
Official status
Official language in
31 non-sovereign entities
Working language
Various organisations
Language codes
ISO 639-1
ISO 639-2
ISO 639-3
Glotolog
Linguasphere



■ Countries and territories where English is the native language of the majority
 ■ Countries and territories where English is an official or administrative language but not a majority native language

This article contains [IPA phonetic symbols](#). Without proper rendering support, you may see [question marks](#), [boxes](#), or [other symbols](#) instead of [Unicode characters](#). For an introductory guide on IPA symbols, see [Help:IPA](#).

Part of a series on the
English language

Topics

[English-speaking world](#) · [As a second language](#) · [History](#)

Advanced topics

[English as a lingua franca](#) · [European language](#) · [Modern English](#) · [Loanwords](#) · [Linguistic purism](#)

Phonology

[Phonology \(History\)](#)

Dialects

American · Anglian · Antarctic · Antiguan and Barbudan · Australian · Bajan · Bangladeshi · Bay Islands · Belizean · Bermudian · British · Brunei · Cameroonian · Canadian · Caribbean · Cornish · England · Falkland Islands · Fijian · Gambian · Ghanaian · Gustavia · Indian · Irish · Jamaican · Kenyan · Liberian · Malawian · Malaysian · Manx · Myanmar · Namibian · Nepali · New Zealand · Nigerian · Pakistani · Philippine · San Andrés-Providencia · Scottish · Sierra Leone · Singapore · South African · South Atlantic · Sri Lankan · Ugandan · Welsh · Zimbabwean · [see also](#): [List of dialects of English](#)

The earliest varieties of an English language, collectively known as [Old English](#) or "Anglo-Saxon", evolved from a group of [North Sea Germanic](#) dialects brought to Britain in the 5th century. Old English dialects were later influenced by [Old Norse](#)-speaking [Viking invaders and settlers](#), starting in the 8th and 9th centuries. [Middle English](#) began in the late 11th century after the [Norman Conquest](#) of England, when a considerable amount of [Old French](#) vocabulary was incorporated into English over some three centuries.^{[24][25]}

[Early Modern English](#) began in the late 15th century with the start of the [Great Vowel Shift](#) and the [Renaissance](#) trend of borrowing further [Latin](#) and [Greek](#) words and roots, concurrent with the introduction of the [printing press](#) to London. This era notably culminated in the [King James Bible](#) and the works of [William Shakespeare](#).^{[26][27]} The printing press greatly standardised English spelling,^[28] which has remained largely unchanged since then, despite a wide variety of later sound shifts in English dialects.

Modern English has spread around the world since the 17th century as a consequence of the worldwide influence of the [British Empire](#) and the United States. Through all types of printed and electronic media in these countries, English has become the leading language of international discourse and the [lingua franca](#) in many regions and professional contexts such as science, navigation, and law.^[4] Its [modern grammar](#) is the result of a gradual change from a [dependent-marking](#) pattern typical of [Indo-European](#) with a rich [inflectional morphology](#) and relatively [free word order](#) to a mostly [analytic](#) pattern with little inflection and a fairly fixed [subject–verb–object word order](#).^[29] Modern English relies more on [auxiliary verbs](#) and [word order](#) for the expression of complex [tenses](#), [aspects](#) and [moods](#), as well as [passive constructions](#), [interrogatives](#), and some [negation](#).

Proto-Germanic to Old English

Main article: [Old English](#)

The earliest form of English is called [Old English](#) or Anglo-Saxon (c. 450–1150). Old English developed from a set of [West Germanic](#) dialects, often grouped as [Anglo-Frisian](#) or [North Sea Germanic](#), and originally spoken along the coasts of [Frisia](#), Lower Saxony and southern [Jutland](#) by Germanic peoples known to the historical record as the [Angles](#), [Saxons](#), and [Jutes](#).^[30] From the 5th century, the Anglo-Saxons settled Britain as the Roman economy and administration collapsed. By the 7th century, this Germanic language of the Anglo-Saxons became dominant in Britain, replacing the languages of [Roman Britain](#) (43–409): [Common Brittonic](#), a Celtic language, and [British Latin](#), brought to Britain by the Roman occupation.^{[31][32][33]} At this time, these dialects generally resisted influence from the then-local Brittonic and Latin languages. [England](#) and [English](#) (originally *Ænglaland* and *Ænglisc*) are both named after the Angles.^[34] English may have a small amount of [substrate](#) influence from Common Brittonic, and a number of possible [Brittonicisms in English](#) have been proposed, but whether most of these supposed Brittonicisms are actually a direct result of Brittonic substrate influence is disputed.

Old English was divided into four dialects: the Anglian dialects ([Mercian](#) and [Northumbrian](#)) and the Saxon dialects ([Kentish](#) and [West Saxon](#)).^[35] Through the educational reforms of King Alfred in the 9th century and the influence of the kingdom of [Wessex](#), the West Saxon dialect became the [standard written variety](#).^[36] The epic poem [Beowulf](#) is written in West Saxon, and the earliest English poem, [Cædmon's Hymn](#), is written in Northumbrian.^[37] Modern English developed mainly from Mercian, but the [Scots language](#) developed from Northumbrian. A few short inscriptions from the early period of Old English were written using a [runic script](#).^[38] By the 6th century, a [Latin alphabet](#) was adopted, written with [half-uncial letterforms](#). It included the runic letters *wynn* ⟨ƿ⟩ and *thorn* ⟨þ⟩, and the modified Latin letters *eth* ⟨ð⟩, and *ash* ⟨œ⟩.^{[38][39]}

Old English is essentially a distinct language from Modern English and is virtually impossible for 21st-century unstudied English-speakers to understand. Its grammar was similar to that of modern German: [nouns](#), [adjectives](#), [pronouns](#), and [verbs](#) had many more [inflectional endings](#) and forms, and word order was [much freer](#) than in Modern English. Modern English has [case forms](#) in pronouns (*he*, *him*, *his*) and has a few verb inflections (*speak*, *speaks*, *speaking*, *spoke*, *spoken*), but Old English had case endings in nouns as well, and verbs had more [person](#) and [number](#) endings.^{[40][41][42]} Its closest relative is [Old Frisian](#), but even some centuries after the Anglo-Saxon migration, Old English retained considerable [mutual intelligibility](#) with other Germanic varieties. Even in the 9th and 10th centuries, amidst the [Danelaw](#) and other [Viking invasions](#), there is historical evidence that Old Norse and Old English retained considerable mutual intelligibility,^[43] although probably the northern dialects of Old English were more similar to Old Norse than the southern dialects. Theoretically, as late as the 900s AD, a commoner from certain (northern) parts of England could hold a conversation with a commoner from certain parts of Scandinavia. Research continues into the details of the myriad tribes in peoples in England and Scandinavia and the mutual contacts between them.^[43]

The translation of [Matthew 8:20](#) from 1000 shows examples of case endings ([nominative](#) plural, [accusative](#) plural, [genitive](#) singular) and a verb ending ([present](#) plural):

- *Foxas habbað holu and heofonan fuglas nest*
- Fox-as habb-að hol-u and heofon-an fugl-as nest-ø
- fox-NOM.PL have-PRS.PL hole-ACC.PL and heaven-GEN.SG bird-NOM.PL nest-ACC.PL
- "Foxes have holes and the birds of heaven nests"^[44]

Influence of Old Norse

From the 8th to the 11th centuries, Old English gradually transformed through [language contact](#) with [Old Norse](#) in some regions. The waves of Norse (Viking) colonisation of northern parts of the British Isles in the 8th and 9th centuries put Old English into intense contact with Old Norse, a [North Germanic](#) language. Norse influence was strongest in the north-eastern varieties of Old English spoken in the [Danelaw](#) area around York, which was the centre of Norse colonisation; today these features are still particularly present in [Scots](#) and [Northern English](#). The centre of Norsified English was in the [Midlands](#) around [Lindsey](#). After 920 CE, when Lindsey was incorporated into the Anglo-Saxon polity, English spread extensively throughout the region.

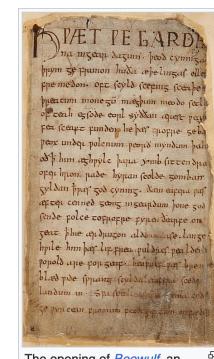
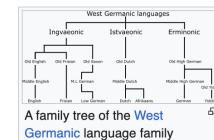
An element of Norse influence that continues in all English varieties today is the third person pronoun group beginning with *th-* (*they*, *them*, *their*) which replaced the Anglo-Saxon pronouns with *h-* (*he*, *him*, *her*).^[45] Other core [Norse loanwords](#) include "give", "get", "sky", "skirt", "egg", and "cake", typically displacing a native Anglo-Saxon equivalent. Old Norse in this era retained considerable mutual intelligibility with some dialects of Old English, particularly northern ones.

Middle English



Anglo languages

- English
- Scots
- within the **Anglo-Frisian languages**, which also include
 - Frisian (West, North, Saterland);
- within the **North Sea Germanic languages**, which also include
 - Low German/Saxon;
- within the **West Germanic languages**, which also include
 - Dutch in Europe and Afrikaans in Africa
- German (High):
 - Central; in Lux.: Luxembourgish
 - Upper
- Yiddish



The opening of [Beowulf](#), an Old English epic poem handwritten in half-uncial script between 975 AD and 1025 AD:
Hƿa eadraða gāru ƿeardum / þeod cyniga / þrym ge frunon...
("Listen! We of the Spear-Danes from days of yore have heard of the glory of the folk-kings...")

Englischmen peyz hy hadde fram be bygynnyng pre manner speche, Souperon, Northeron, and Myddel speche in be myddel of pe lond, ... Nōpeles by comyxstion and melyng, furst wip Danes, and afterward wip Normans, in menye be contray longage ys asperyed, and som vseþ strange wlaſſyng, chyteryng, harryng, and garryng grisbyting.

Although, from the beginning, Englishmen had three manners of speaking, southern, northern and midlands speech in the middle of the country, ... Nevertheless, through intermingling and mixing, first with Danes and then with Normans, amongst many the country language has arisen, and some use strange stammering, chattering, snarling, and grating gnashing.

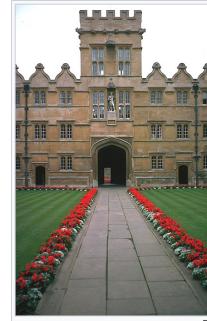
John Trevisa, c.1385^[46]

Middle English is often arbitrarily defined as beginning with the [conquest of England](#) by [William the Conqueror](#) in 1066, but it developed further in the period from 1150 to 1500.^[47]

With the Norman conquest of England in 1066, the now-Norsified Old English language was subject to another wave of intense contact, this time with [Old French](#), in particular [Old Norman French](#), influencing it as a superstrate. The Norman French spoken by the elite in England eventually developed into the [Anglo-Norman language](#).^[24] Because Norman was spoken primarily by the elites and nobles, while the lower classes continued speaking English, the main influence of Norman was the introduction of a wide range of [loanwords](#) related to politics, legislation and prestigious social domains.^[13] Middle English also greatly simplified the inflectional system, probably in order to reconcile Old Norse and Old English, which were inflectionally different but morphologically similar. The distinction between nominative and accusative cases was lost except in personal pronouns, the instrumental case was dropped, and the use of the genitive case was limited to indicating [possession](#). The inflectional system regularised many irregular inflectional forms,^[48] and gradually simplified the system of agreement, making word order less flexible.^[49]

The transition from Old to Middle English can be placed during the writing of the *Ormulum*,^[50] The oldest Middle English texts that were written by the [Augustinian canon Orm](#), which highlights the blending of both Old English and Anglo-Norman elements in English for the first time.

In Wycliffe's Bible of the 1380s, the verse Matthew 8:20 was written: *Foxis han dennes, and briddis of heuene han nestis*.^[51] Here the plural suffix -n on the verb *have* is still retained, but none of the case endings on the nouns are present. By the 12th century Middle English was fully developed, integrating both Norse and French features; it continued to be spoken until the transition to early Modern English around 1500. Middle English literature includes [Geoffrey Chaucer's](#) *The Canterbury Tales*, and [Thomas Malory's](#) *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the Middle English period, the use of regional dialects in writing proliferated, and dialect traits were even used for effect by authors such as Chaucer.^[52]



The University of Oxford in Oxford, the world's oldest English-speaking university and world's second-oldest university, founded in 1096



The University of Cambridge in Cambridge, the world's second-oldest English-speaking university and world's third-oldest university, founded in 1209

Early Modern English

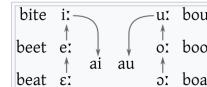
Main article: [Early Modern English](#)

The next period in the history of English was Early Modern English (1500–1700). Early Modern English was characterised by the [Great Vowel Shift](#) (1350–1700), inflectional simplification, and linguistic standardisation.

The Great Vowel Shift affected the stressed long vowels of Middle English. It was a [chain shift](#), meaning that each shift triggered a subsequent shift in the vowel system. [Mid](#) and [open vowels](#) were [raised](#), and [close vowels](#) were [broken](#) into [diphthongs](#). For example, the word *bite* was originally pronounced as the word *beet* is today, and the second vowel in the word *about* was pronounced as the word *boot* is today. The Great Vowel Shift explains many irregularities in spelling since English retains many spellings from Middle English, and it also explains why English vowel letters have very different pronunciations from the same letters in other languages.^{[53][54]}

English began to rise in prestige, relative to Norman French, during the reign of [Henry V](#). Around 1430, the [Court of Chancery](#) in [Westminster](#) began using English in its [official documents](#), and a new standard form of Middle English, known as [Chancery Standard](#), developed from the dialects of London and the [East Midlands](#). In 1476, [William Caxton](#) introduced the [printing press](#) to England and began publishing the first printed books in London, expanding the influence of this form of English.^[55] Literature from the Early Modern period includes the works of [William Shakespeare](#) and the [translation of the Bible](#) commissioned by [King James I](#). Even after the vowel shift the language still sounded different from Modern English: for example, the [consonant clusters](#) /kn/ gn sw/ in *knight*, *gnat*, and *sword* were still pronounced. Many of the grammatical features that a modern reader of Shakespeare might find quaint or archaic represent the distinct characteristics of Early Modern English.^[56]

In the 1611 [King James Version](#) of the Bible, written in Early Modern English, Matthew 8:20 says, "The Foxes haue holes and the birds of the ayre haue nests."^[44] This exemplifies the loss of case and its effects on sentence structure (replacement with subject–verb–object word order, and the use of *of* instead of the non-possessive genitive), and the introduction of loanwords from French (*ayre*) and word replacements (*bird* originally meaning "nestling" had replaced OE *fugol*).^[44]



Graphic representation of the Great Vowel Shift showing how the pronunciation of the long vowels gradually shifted with the high vowels i: and u: breaking into diphthongs and the lower vowels each shifting their pronunciation up one level

Spread of Modern English

By the late 18th century, the [British Empire](#) had spread English through its colonies and geopolitical dominance. Commerce, science and technology, diplomacy, art, and formal education all contributed to English becoming the first truly global language. English also facilitated worldwide international communication.^{[28][4]} English was adopted in parts of North America, parts of Africa, Oceania, and many other regions. When they obtained political independence, some of the newly independent [states](#) that had multiple [indigenous languages](#) opted to continue using English as the official language to avoid the political and other difficulties inherent in promoting any one indigenous language above the others.^{[57][58][59]} In the 20th century the growing economic and cultural influence of the United States and its status as a superpower following the Second World War has, along with worldwide broadcasting in English by the [BBC](#)^[60] and other broadcasters, caused the language to spread across the planet much faster.^{[61][62]} In the 21st century, English is more widely spoken and written than any language has ever been.^[63]

As Modern English developed, explicit norms for standard usage were published, and spread through official media such as public education and state-sponsored publications. In 1755, [Samuel Johnson](#) published his [A Dictionary of the English Language](#), which introduced standard spellings of words and usage norms. In 1828, [Noah Webster](#) published the [American Dictionary of the English language](#) to try to establish a norm for speaking and writing American English that was independent of the British standard. Within Britain, non-standard or lower class dialect features were increasingly stigmatised, leading to the quick spread of the prestige varieties among the middle classes.^[64]

In modern English, the loss of grammatical case is almost complete (it is now only found in pronouns, such as *he* and *him*, *she* and *her*, *who* and *whom*), and SVO word order is mostly fixed.^[64] Some changes, such as the use of [do-support](#), have become

universalised. (Earlier English did not use the word "do" as a general auxiliary as Modern English does; at first it was only used in question constructions, and even then was not obligatory.^[65] Now, do-support with the verb *have* is becoming increasingly standardised.) The use of progressive forms in -*ing*, appears to be spreading to new constructions, and forms such as *had been being built* are becoming more common. Regularisation of irregular forms also slowly continues (e.g. *dreamed* instead of *dreamt*), and analytical alternatives to inflectional forms are becoming more common (e.g. *more polite* instead of *politer*). British English is also undergoing change under the influence of American English, fuelled by the strong presence of American English in the media and the prestige associated with the United States as a world power.^{[66][67][68]}

Geographical distribution

See also: List of countries and territories where English is an official language, List of countries by English-speaking population, and English-speaking world

As of 2016, 400 million people spoke English as their [first language](#), and 1.1 billion spoke it as a secondary language.^[70] English is the [largest language by number of speakers](#). English is spoken by communities on every continent and on islands in all the major oceans.^[71]

The countries where English is spoken can be grouped into different categories according to how English is used in each country. The "inner circle"^[72] countries with many native speakers of English share an international standard of written English and jointly influence speech norms for English around the world. English does not belong to just one country, and it does not belong solely to descendants of English settlers. English is an official language of countries populated by few descendants of native speakers of English. It has also become by far the most important language of international communication when people who share no native language meet anywhere in the world.

Three circles of English-speaking countries

The Indian linguist [Braj Kachru](#) distinguished countries where English is spoken with a [three circles model](#).^[72] In his model,

- the "inner circle" countries have large communities of native speakers of English,
- "outer circle" countries have small communities of native speakers of English but widespread use of English as a second language in education or broadcasting or for local official purposes, and
- "expanding circle" countries are countries where many people learn English as a foreign language.

Kachru based his model on the history of how English spread in different countries, how users acquire English, and the range of uses English has in each country. The three circles change membership over time.^[73]

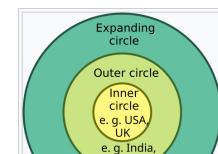
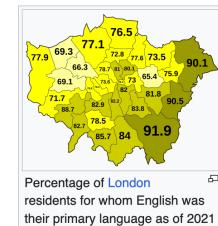
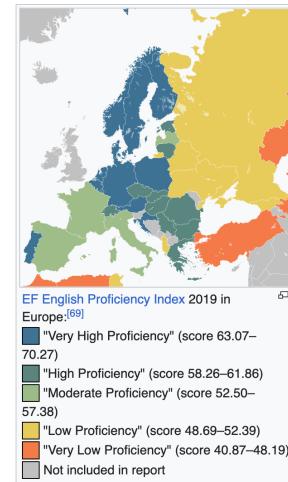
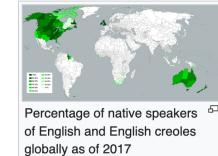
Countries with large communities of native speakers of English (the inner circle) include Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand, where the majority speaks English, and South Africa, where a significant minority speaks English. The countries with the most native English speakers are, in descending order, the [United States](#) (at least 231 million),^[74] the [United Kingdom](#) (60 million),^{[75][76][77]} [Canada](#) (19 million),^[78] [Australia](#) (at least 17 million),^[79] [South Africa](#) (4.8 million),^[80] [Ireland](#) (4.2 million), and [New Zealand](#) (3.7 million).^[81] In these countries, children of native speakers learn English from their parents, and local people who speak other languages and new immigrants learn English to communicate in their neighbourhoods and workplaces.^[82] The inner-circle countries provide the base from which English spreads to other countries in the world.^[73]

Estimates of the numbers of [second language](#) and foreign-language English speakers vary greatly from 470 million to more than 1 billion, depending on how proficiency is defined.^[9] Linguist [David Crystal](#) estimates that non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1.^[83] In Kachru's three-circles model, the "outer circle" countries are countries such as the [Philippines](#),^[84] [Jamaica](#),^[85] [India](#), [Pakistan](#), [Singapore](#),^[86] [Malaysia](#) and [Nigeria](#)^{[87][88]} with a much smaller proportion of native speakers of English but much use of English as a second language for education, government, or domestic business, and its routine use for school instruction and official interactions with the government.^[89]

Those countries have millions of native speakers of [dialect continua](#) ranging from an [English-based creole](#) to a more standard version of English. They have many more speakers of English who acquire English as they grow up through day-to-day use and listening to broadcasting, especially if they attend schools where English is the medium of instruction. Varieties of English learned by non-native speakers born to English-speaking parents may be influenced, especially in their grammar, by the other languages spoken by those learners.^[82] Most of those varieties of English include words little used by native speakers of English in the inner-circle countries,^[82] and they may show grammatical and phonological differences from inner-circle varieties as well. The standard English of the inner-circle countries is often taken as a norm for use of English in the outer-circle countries.^[82]

In the three-circles model, countries such as Poland, China, Brazil, Germany, Japan, Indonesia, Egypt, and other countries where English is taught as a foreign language, make up the "expanding circle".^[90] The distinctions between English as a first language, as a second language, and as a foreign language are often debatable and may change in particular countries over time.^[89] For example, in the [Netherlands](#) and some other countries of Europe, knowledge of English as a second language is nearly universal, with over 80 percent of the population able to use it,^[91] and thus English is routinely used to communicate with foreigners and often in higher education. In these countries, although English is not used for government business, its widespread use puts them at the boundary between the "outer circle" and "expanding circle". English is unusual among world languages in how many of its users are not native speakers but speakers of English as a second or foreign language.^[92]

Many users of English in the expanding circle use it to communicate with other people from the expanding circle, so that interaction with native speakers of English plays no part in their decision to use the language.^[93] Non-native varieties of English are widely used for international communication, and speakers of one such variety often encounter features of other varieties.^[94]



Very often today a conversation in English anywhere in the world may include no native speakers of English at all, even while including speakers from several different countries. This is particularly true of the shared vocabulary of mathematics and the sciences.^[95]



Pluricentric English

English is a [pluricentric language](#), which means that no one national authority sets the standard for use of the language.^{[96][97][98][99]} Spoken English, including English used in broadcasting, generally follows national pronunciation standards that are established by custom rather than by regulation. International broadcasters are usually identifiable as coming from one country rather than another through their accents,^[100] but newscaster scripts are also composed largely in international [standard written English](#). The norms of standard written English are maintained purely by the consensus of educated English speakers around the world, without any oversight by any government or international organisation.^[101]

American listeners readily understand most British broadcasting, and British listeners readily understand most American broadcasting. Most English speakers around the world can understand radio programmes, television programmes, and films from many parts of the English-speaking world.^[102] Both standard and non-standard varieties of English can include both formal or informal styles, distinguished by word choice and syntax and use both technical and non-technical registers.^[103]

The settlement history of the English-speaking inner circle countries outside Britain helped level dialect distinctions and produce [koinoised forms](#) of English in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.^[104] The majority of immigrants to the United States without British ancestry rapidly adopted English after arrival. Now the majority of the United States population are monolingual English speakers.^{[74][105]}

- [Australia](#) has no official languages at the federal or state level.^[106]
- In [Canada](#), English and French share an [official status](#) at the federal level.^{[107][108]} English has official or co-official status in six provinces and three territories, while three provinces have none and Quebec's only official language is French.^[109]
- English is the official second language of [Ireland](#), while Irish is the first.^[110]
- While [New Zealand](#) is majority English-speaking, its two official languages are [Māori](#)^[111] and [New Zealand Sign Language](#).^[112]
- The [United Kingdom](#) does not have an official language. In Wales and Northern Ireland, English is co-official alongside [Welsh](#)^[113] and [Irish](#)^[114] respectively. Neither Scotland nor England have an official language.
- In the [United States](#), there is no official language at the federal level.^{[115][116]} English has official or co-official status in 32 states, as well as all five territories.^[117] Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have no official language.

English as a global language

Main article: [English as a lingua franca](#)

See also: [Foreign-language influences in English](#) and [Study of global communication](#)

English has ceased to be an "English language" in the sense of belonging only to people who are [ethnically English](#).^{[120][121]} Use of English is growing country-by-country internally and for international communication. Most people learn English for practical rather than ideological reasons.^[122] Many speakers of English in Africa have become part of an "Afro-Saxon" language community that unites Africans from different countries.^[123]

As decolonisation proceeded throughout the British Empire in the 1950s and 1960s, former colonies often did not reject English but rather continued to use it as independent countries setting their own language policies.^{[58][59][124]} For example, the view of the [English language](#) among many Indians has gone from associating it with colonialism to associating it with economic progress, and English continues to be an official language of India.^[125] English is also widely used in media and literature, and the number of English language books published annually in India is the third largest in the world after the US and UK.^[126] However, English is rarely spoken as a first language, numbering only around a couple hundred-thousand people, and less than 5% of the population speak fluent English in India.^{[127][128]} David Crystal claimed in 2004 that, combining native and non-native speakers, India now has more people who speak or understand English than any other country in the world,^[129] but the number of English speakers in India is uncertain, with most scholars concluding that the United States still has more speakers of English than India.^[130]

Modern English, sometimes described as the first global [lingua franca](#),^{[61][131]} is also regarded as the first [world language](#).^{[132][133]} English is the world's most widely used language in newspaper publishing, book publishing, international telecommunications, scientific publishing, international trade, mass entertainment, and diplomacy.^[133] English is, by international treaty, the basis for the required [controlled natural languages](#)^[134] [Seaspeak](#) and [Airspeak](#), used as [international languages](#) of seafaring^[135] and aviation.^[136] English used to have parity with French and German in scientific research, but now it dominates that field.^[137] It achieved parity with [French](#) as a language of diplomacy at the [Treaty of Versailles](#) negotiations in 1919.^[138] By the time of the foundation of the [United Nations](#) at the end of [World War II](#), English had become pre-eminent^[139] and is now the main worldwide language of diplomacy and international relations.^[140] It is one of six official languages of the United Nations.^[141] Many other worldwide international organisations, including the [International Olympic Committee](#), specify English as a working language or official language of the organisation.

Many regional international organisations such as the [European Free Trade Association](#), [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#) (ASEAN),^[62] and [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation](#) (APEC) set English as their organisation's sole working language even though most members are not countries with a majority of native English speakers. While the European Union (EU) allows member states to designate any of the national languages as an official language of the Union, in practice English is the main working language of EU organisations.^[142]

Although in most countries English is not an official language, it is currently the language most often taught as a [foreign language](#).^{[61][62]} In the countries of the EU, English is the most widely spoken foreign language in nineteen of the twenty-five member states where it is not an official language (that is, the countries other than Ireland and [Malta](#)). In a 2012 official Eurobarometer poll (conducted when the UK was still a member of the EU), 38 percent of the EU respondents outside the countries where English is an official language said they could speak English well enough to have a conversation in that language. The next most commonly mentioned foreign language, French (which is the most widely known foreign language in the UK and Ireland), could be used in conversation by 12 percent of respondents.^[143]

A working knowledge of English has become a requirement in a number of occupations and professions such as medicine^[144] and computing. English has become so important in scientific publishing that more than 80 percent of all scientific journal articles indexed by [Chemical Abstracts](#) in 1998 were written in English, as were 90 percent of all articles in natural science publications by 1996 and 82 percent of articles in humanities publications by 1995.^[145]

International communities such as international business people may use English as an [auxiliary language](#), with an emphasis on vocabulary suitable for their domain of interest. This has led some scholars to develop the study of English as an auxiliary language. The trademarked [Globish](#) uses a relatively small subset of English vocabulary (about 1500 words, designed to represent the highest

use in international business English) in combination with the standard English grammar.^[148] Other examples include [Simple English](#).

The increased use of the English language globally has had an effect on other languages, leading to some English words [being assimilated](#) into the vocabularies of other languages. This influence of English has led to concerns about [language death](#),^[147] and to claims of [linguistic imperialism](#),^[148] and has provoked resistance to the spread of English; however the number of speakers continues to increase because many people around the world think that English provides them with opportunities for better employment and improved lives.^[149]

Though some mention a possibility of divergence of English dialects into mutually unintelligible languages, most think a more likely outcome is that English will continue to function as a [koineised](#) language, in which the standard form unifies speakers from around the world.^[150] English is used as the language for wider communication in countries around the world.^[151] Thus English has grown in worldwide use much more than any [constructed language](#) proposed as an [international auxiliary language](#), including [Esperanto](#).^{[152][153]}

Phonology

Main article: English phonology

The [phonetics](#) and [phonology](#) of the English language differ from one dialect to another, usually without interfering with mutual communication. Phonological variation affects the inventory of [phonemes](#) (i.e. speech sounds that distinguish meaning), and phonetic variation consists in differences in pronunciation of the phonemes.^[154] This overview mainly describes the [standard pronunciations](#) of the [United Kingdom](#) and the [United States](#): Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA). (See § [Dialects, accents and varieties](#), below.)

The phonetic symbols used below are from the [International Phonetic Alphabet \(IPA\)](#).^{[155][156][157]}

Consonants

Main article: English phonology § Consonants

Most English dialects share the same 24 (or 26 if marginal /χ/ and glottal stop (/ʔ/) included) consonant phonemes. The consonant inventory shown below is valid for [California English](#),^[158] and for RP.^[159]

Consonant phonemes										
		Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal	
Nasal		m			n			ŋ*		
Plosive		p b			t d			k g	(?)	
Affricate					tʃ dʒ					
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ		(χ)		h	
Approximant	Central					j**	j	w		
	Lateral				l					

* The sound /ŋ/ can only occur as a coda.

** Conventionally transcribed /t̬/

In the table, when [obstruents](#) (stops, affricates, and fricatives) appear in pairs, such as /p b/, /tʃ dʒ/, and /s z/, the first is [fortis](#) (strong) and the second is [lenis](#) (weak). Fortis obstruents, such as /p tʃ s/ are pronounced with more muscular tension and breath force than lenis consonants, such as /b dʒ z/, and are always [voiceless](#). Lenis consonants are partly [voiced](#) at the beginning and end of utterances, and fully voiced between vowels. Fortis stops such as /p/ have additional articulatory or acoustic features in most dialects: they are [aspirated](#) [pʰ] when they occur alone at the beginning of a stressed syllable, often unaspirated in other cases, and often [unreleased](#) [p] or pre-glottalised [ʔp] at the end of a syllable. In a single-syllable word, a vowel before a fortis stop is shortened: thus *nip* has a noticeably shorter vowel (phonetically, but not phonemically) than *nib* [nɪb] (see below).^[160]

- lenis stops: *bin* [bɪn], *about* [ə'baʊt], *nib* [nɪb]
- fortis stops: *pin* [pɪn]; *spin* [spɪn]; *happy* ['haepɪ]; *nip* [nɪp] or [nɪʔp]

In RP, the lateral approximant /l/, has two main [allophones](#) (pronunciation variants): the clear or plain [l], as in *light*, and the dark or [velarised](#) [ɫ], as in *full*.^[161] GA has dark /l/ in most cases.^[162]

- clear /l/: RP *light* [laɪt]
- dark /l/: RP and GA *full* [fʊɫ], GA *light* [laɪɫ]

All [sonorants](#) (liquids /l/, r/ and nasals /m, n, ŋ/) devoice when following a voiceless obstruent, and they are syllabic when following a consonant at the end of a word.^[163]

- voiceless sonorants: *clay* [klaɪ]; *snow* RP [snoeɡ], GA [snoɣ]
- syllabic sonorants: *paddle* ['pæd.lɪ], *button* ['bʌt.n]

Vowels

Main article: English phonology § Vowels

The pronunciation of vowels varies a great deal between dialects and is one of the most detectable aspects of a speaker's accent. The table below lists the vowel [phonemes](#) in Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA), with examples of words in which they occur from [lexical sets](#) compiled by linguists. The vowels are represented with symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet; those given for RP are standard in British dictionaries and other publications.^[164]

In RP, vowel length is phonemic; [long vowels](#) are marked with a triangular colon (◊) in the table above, such as the vowel of *need* [ni:d] as opposed to *bid* [bɪd]. In GA, vowel length is non-distinctive.

In both RP and GA, vowels are phonetically [shortened before fortis consonants](#) in the same [syllable](#), like /tʃɪf l/, but not before lenis consonants like /dʒɪv v/ or in open syllables: thus, the vowels of *rich* [rɪtʃ], *neat* [nɪt], and *safe* [seɪf] are noticeably shorter than the vowels of *ridge* [rɪdʒ], *need* [ni:d], and *save* [seɪv], and the vowel of *light* [laɪt] is shorter than that of *lie* [laɪ]. Because lenis consonants are frequently voiceless at the end of a syllable, vowel length is an important cue as to whether the following consonant is lenis or fortis.^[165]

The vowel /ə/ only occurs in unstressed syllables and is more open in quality in stem-final positions.^{[166][167]} Some dialects do not contrast /l/ and /ə/ in unstressed positions, such that *rabbit* and *abbot* rhyme and *Lenin* and *Lennon* are homophonous, a dialectal feature called the [weak vowel merger](#).^[168] GA /ɜ:/

Monophthongs			Closing diphthongs		
RP	GA	Word	RP	GA	Word
i:	i	need	eɪ	ɛɪ	bay
ɪ		bid	əʊ	əʊ	road
e	ɛ	bed	aɪ		cry
æ		back	aʊ		cow
ɔ:	ɑ:	bra	ɔɪ	ɔɪ	boy
ɒ		box	ɔ:	ɔ:	
ʊ		cloth	u:	u:	
ɔ:	ɔ:	paw	ʊ:	ʊ:	
ʌ	ə	food	ʌ:	ʌ:	
ə:	ə:	good	ə:	ə:	
ʌ:	ʌ:	but	ɔ:	ɔ:	
ɔ:	ɔ:	bird	ə:	ə:	
ə:	ə:	comma			

Centring diphthongs		
RP	GA	Word
ɪə	ɪə	peer
ɛə	ɛə	pair
ʊə	ʊə	poor

and /ər/ are realised as an *r-coloured vowel* [œ], as in *further* ['fəðər] (phonemically /fɜðər/), which in RP is realised as ['fəðə] (phonemically /fɜðə/).^[169]

Phonotactics

An English syllable includes a syllable nucleus consisting of a vowel sound. Syllable onset and coda (start and end) are optional. A syllable can start with up to three consonant sounds, as in *sprint* /sprɪnt/, and end with up to five, as in (for some dialects) *angsts* /'ɑŋkst̩z/. This gives an English syllable the following structure, (CCC)V(CCCCC), where C represents a consonant and V a vowel; the word *strengths* /strenkθəs/ is thus close to the most complex syllable possible in English. The consonants that may appear together in onsets or codas are restricted, as is the order in which they may appear. Onsets can only have four types of consonant clusters: a stop and approximant, as in *play*; a voiceless fricative and approximant, as in *fly* or *sly*; s and a voiceless stop, as in *stay*; and s, a voiceless stop, and an approximant, as in *string*.^[170] Clusters of nasal and stop are only allowed in codas. Clusters of obstruents always agree in voicing, and clusters of sibilants and of plosives with the same point of articulation are prohibited. Several consonants have limited distributions: /l/ can only occur in syllable-initial position, and /r/ only in syllable-final position.^[171]

Stress, rhythm and intonation

See also: Stress and vowel reduction in English, Intonation (linguistics) § English, and English Prosody

Stress plays an important role in English. Certain **syllables** are stressed, while others are unstressed. Stress is a combination of duration, intensity, vowel quality, and sometimes changes in pitch. Stressed syllables are pronounced longer and louder than unstressed syllables, and vowels in unstressed syllables are frequently **reduced** while vowels in stressed syllables are not.^[172] Some words, primarily short function words but also some modal verbs such as *can*, have **weak and strong forms** depending on whether they occur in stressed or non-stressed position within a sentence.

Stress in English is **phonemic**, and some pairs of words are distinguished by stress. For instance, the word *contract* is stressed on the first syllable (*/kɒntrækt/ KON-trakt*) when used as a noun, but on the last syllable (*/kən'trækɪt/ kən-TRAKT*) for most meanings (for example, "reduce in size") when used as a verb.^{[173][174][175]} Here stress is connected to **vowel reduction**: in the noun "contract" the first syllable is stressed and has the unreduced vowel /b/, but in the verb "contract" the first syllable is unstressed and its vowel is reduced to /e/. Stress is also used to distinguish between words and phrases, so that a compound word receives a single stress unit, but the corresponding phrase has two: e.g. a *burnout* (*/bɜːrnəʊt/*) versus *to burn out* (*/bɜːrn əʊt/*), and a *hotdog* (*/hɒtdog/*) versus a *hot dog* (*/hɒt ɒg/*).^[176]

In terms of **rhythm**, English is generally described as a **stress-timed** language, meaning that the amount of time between stressed syllables tends to be equal.^[177] Stressed syllables are pronounced longer, but unstressed syllables (syllables between stresses) are shortened. Vowels in unstressed syllables are shortened as well, and vowel shortening causes changes in **vowel quality: vowel reduction**.^[178]

Regional variation

Varieties of Standard English and their features^[179] [hide]

Phonological features	United States	Canada	Republic of Ireland	Northern Ireland	Scotland	England	Wales	South Africa	Australia	New Zealand
<i>father–bother merger</i>	yes	yes								
<i>/b/ is unrounded</i>	yes	yes	yes							
<i>/ɔː/ is pronounced [ə:]</i>	yes	yes	yes	yes						
<i>cot–caught merger</i>	possibly	yes	possibly	yes	yes					
<i>fool–full merger</i>				yes	yes					
<i>/t, d/ flapping</i>	yes	yes	possibly	often	rarely	rarely	rarely	yes	often	
<i>trap–bath split</i>			possibly	possibly		often	yes	yes	often	yes
<i>non-rhotic (/r/-dropping after vowels)</i>						yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<i>close vowels for /æ, ɛ/</i>								yes	yes	yes
<i>/ɪ/ can always be pronounced [tʃ]</i>	yes	yes		yes	yes				yes	yes
<i>/ɑ/ is fronted before /r/</i>		possibly	possibly						yes	yes

Varieties of English vary the most in pronunciation of vowels. The best-known national varieties used as standards for education in non-English-speaking countries are British (BrE) and American (AmE). Countries such as **Canada**, **Australia**, **Ireland**, **New Zealand** and **South Africa** have their own standard varieties which are less often used as standards for education internationally. Some differences between the various dialects are shown in the table "Varieties of Standard English and their features".^[179]

English has undergone many **historical sound changes**, some of them affecting all varieties, and others affecting only a few. Most standard varieties are affected by the **Great Vowel Shift**, which changed the pronunciation of long vowels, but a few dialects have slightly different results. In North America, a number of chain shifts such as the **Northern Cities Vowel Shift** and **Canadian Shift** have produced very different vowel landscapes in some regional accents.^[180]

Some dialects have fewer or more consonant phonemes and **phones** than the standard varieties. Some conservative varieties like Scottish English have a **voiceless [w]** sound in *whine* that contrasts with the voiced [w] in *wine*, but most other dialects pronounce both words with voiced [w], a dialect feature called **wine–whine merger**. The voiceless velar fricative sound /χ/ is found in Scottish English, which distinguishes *loch* /χɒk/ from *lock* /lɒk/. Accents like **Cockney** with "*h*-dropping" lack the glottal fricative /h/, and dialects with **th-stopping** and **th-fronting** like **African-American Vernacular** and **Estuary English** do not have the dental fricatives /θ, ð/, but replace them with dental or alveolar stops /t, d/ or labiodental fricatives /f, v/.^{[181][182]} Other changes affecting the phonology of local varieties are processes such as **yod-dropping**, **yod-coalescence**, and reduction of consonant clusters.^{[183][page needed]}

General American and Received Pronunciation vary in their pronunciation of historical /r/ after a vowel at the end of a syllable (in the **syllable coda**). GA is a **rhotic dialect**, meaning that it pronounces /r/ at the end of a syllable, but RP is non-rhotic, meaning that it loses /r/ in that position. English dialects are classified as rhotic or non-rhotic depending on whether they elide /r/ like RP or keep it like GA.^[184]

Dialects and low vowels				
Lexical set	RP	GA	Can	Sound change
THOUGHT	/ɒ/	/ə/ or /a/		cot-caught merger
CLOTH	/ɒ/		/a/	lot–cloth split
LOT	/ɒ/	/a/		
PALM	/a/			father–bother merger
BATH	/a/	/æ/		
TRAP	/æ/		/æ/	trap–bath split

There is complex dialectal variation in words with the **open front** and **open back vowels** /æ ə ɔ ɒ/. These four vowels are only

distinguished in RP, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In GA, these vowels merge to three /ə/ or /ɛ/ and in Canadian English, they merge to two /ɛ/ or /ɪ/.^[186] In addition, the words that have each vowel vary by dialect. The table "Dialects and open vowels" shows this variation with lexical sets in which these sounds occur.

Grammar

Main article: [English grammar](#)

As is typical of an Indo-European language, English follows **accusative morphosyntactic alignment**. Unlike other Indo-European languages though, English has largely abandoned the inflectional **case system** in favour of **analytic** constructions. Only the **personal pronouns** retain morphological case more strongly than any other **word class**. English distinguishes at least seven major word classes: verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, determiners (including articles), prepositions, and conjunctions. Some analyses add pronouns as a class separate from nouns, and subdivide conjunctions into **subordinators** and **coordinators**, and add the class of interjections.^[187] English also has a rich set of auxiliary verbs, such as *have* and *do*, expressing the categories of mood and aspect. Questions are marked by **do-support**, **wh-movement** (fronting of question words beginning with *wh-*) and word order **inversion** with some verbs.^[188]

Some traits typical of Germanic languages persist in English, such as the distinction between irregularly inflected **strong** stems inflected through **ablaut** (i.e. changing the vowel of the stem, as in the pairs *speak/spoke* and *foot/feet*) and weak stems inflected through affixation (such as *love/loved*, *hand/hands*).^[189] Vestiges of the case and gender system are found in the pronoun system (*he/him*, *who/whom*) and in the inflection of the **copula** verb to *be*.^[189]

The seven word-classes are exemplified in this sample sentence:^[190]

The chairman of the committee and the loquacious politician clashed violently when the meeting started.

Det. Noun Prep. Det. Noun Conj. Det. Adj. Noun Verb Advb. Conj. Det. Noun Verb

Nouns and noun phrases

Main article: [English nouns](#)

English nouns are only inflected for number and possession. New nouns can be formed through derivation or compounding. They are semantically divided into **proper nouns** (names) and common nouns. Common nouns are in turn divided into concrete and abstract nouns, and grammatically into **count nouns** and **mass nouns**.^[191]

Most count nouns are inflected for plural number through the use of the plural **suffix** -s, but a few nouns have irregular plural forms. Mass nouns can only be pluralised through the use of a count noun classifier, e.g. *one loaf of bread*, *two loaves of bread*.^[192]

Regular plural formation:

- Singular: *cat, dog*
- Plural: *cats, dogs*

Irregular plural formation:

- Singular: *man, woman, foot, fish, ox, knife, mouse*
- Plural: *men, women, feet, fish, oxen, knives, mice*

Possession can be expressed either by the possessive **enclitic** -s (also traditionally called a genitive suffix), or by the preposition *of*. Historically the -s possessive has been used for animate nouns, whereas the *of* possessive has been reserved for inanimate nouns. Today this distinction is less clear, and many speakers use -s also with inanimates. Orthographically the possessive -s is separated from a singular noun with an apostrophe. If the noun is plural formed with -s the apostrophe follows the -s.^[188]

Possessive constructions:

- With -s: *The woman's husband's child*
- With of: *The child of the husband of the woman*

Nouns can form **noun phrases** (NPs) where they are the syntactic head of the words that depend on them such as determiners, quantifiers, conjunctions or adjectives.^[193] Noun phrases can be short, such as *the man*, composed only of a determiner and a noun. They can also include modifiers such as adjectives (e.g. *red, tall, all*) and specifiers such as determiners (e.g. *the, that*). But they can also tie together several nouns into a single long NP, using conjunctions such as *and*, or prepositions such as *with*, e.g. *the tall man with the long red trousers and his skinny wife with the spectacles* (this NP uses conjunctions, prepositions, specifiers, and modifiers). Regardless of length, an NP functions as a syntactic unit.^[188] For example, the possessive enclitic can, in cases which do not lead to ambiguity, follow the entire noun phrase, as in *The President of India's wife*, where the enclitic follows *India* and not *President*.

The class of determiners is used to specify the noun they precede in terms of **definiteness**, where *the* marks a definite noun and *a* or *an* an indefinite one. A definite noun is assumed by the speaker to be already known by the interlocutor, whereas an indefinite noun is not specified as being previously known. Quantifiers, which include *one, many, some* and *all*, are used to specify the noun in terms of quantity or number. The noun must agree with the number of the determiner, e.g. *one man* (sg.) but *all men* (pl.). Determiners are the first constituents in a noun phrase.^[194]

Adjectives

Main article: [English adjectives](#)

English adjectives are words such as *good, big, interesting*, and *Canadian* that most typically modify nouns, denoting characteristics of their **referents** (e.g., *a red car*). As modifiers, they come before the nouns they modify and after determiners.^[195] English adjectives also function as predicative complements (e.g., *the child is happy*).

In Modern English, adjectives are not inflected so as to **agree** in form with the noun they modify, as adjectives in most other Indo-European languages do. For example, in the phrases *the slender boy*, and *many slender girls*, the adjective *slender* does not change form to agree with either the number or gender of the noun.

Some adjectives are inflected for **degree of comparison**, with the positive degree unmarked, the suffix -er marking the comparative, and -est marking the superlative: *a small boy, the boy is smaller than the girl, that boy is the smallest*. Some adjectives have irregular **suppletive** comparative and superlative forms, such as *good, better, and best*. Other adjectives have comparatives formed by **periphrastic constructions**, with the adverb *more* marking the comparative, and *most* marking the superlative: *happier or more happy, the happiest or most happy*.^[196] There is some variation among speakers regarding which adjectives use inflected or periphrastic comparison, and some studies have shown a tendency for the periphrastic forms to become more common at the expense of the inflected form.^[197]

Determiners

Main article: [English determiners](#)

English determiners are words such as *the, each, many, some*, and *which*, occurring most typically in noun phrases before the head nouns and any modifiers and marking the noun phrase as **definite** or **indefinite**.^[198] They often agree with the noun in **number**. They do not typically inflect for degree of comparison.

Pronouns, case, and person

Main article: [English pronouns](#)

English pronouns conserve many traits of case and gender inflection. The personal pronouns retain a difference between subjective and objective case in most persons (*I/me, he/him, she/her, we/us, they/them*) as well as an animateness distinction in the third person singular (distinguishing *it* from the three sets of animate third person singular pronouns) and an optional gender distinction in the animate third person singular (distinguishing between *she/her* [feminine], *they/them* [epicene], and *he/him* [masculine]).^{[199][200]} The **subjective case** corresponds to the Old English **nominative case**, and the **objective case** is used in the sense both of the previous **accusative case** (for a patient, or direct object of a transitive verb), and of the Old English dative case (for a recipient or **indirect object** of a transitive verb).^{[201][202]} The subjective is used when the pronoun is the subject of a finite clause, otherwise the objective is used.^[203] While grammarians such as Henry Sweet^[204] and Otto Jespersen^[205] noted that the English cases did not correspond to the traditional Latin-based system, some contemporary grammars, for example Huddleston & Pullum (2002), retain traditional labels for the cases, calling them nominative and accusative cases respectively.

Possessive pronouns exist in dependent and independent forms; the dependent form functions as a determiner specifying a noun (as in *my chair*), while the independent form can stand alone as if it were a noun (e.g. *the chair is mine*).^[206] The English system of grammatical person no longer has a distinction between formal and informal pronouns of address (the old second person singular familiar pronoun *thou* acquired a pejorative or inferior tinge of meaning and was abandoned).

Both the second and third persons share pronouns between the plural and singular:

- Plural and singular are always identical (*you, your, yours*) in the second person (except in the reflexive form: *yourself/yourselves*) in most dialects. Some dialects have introduced innovative second person plural pronouns, such as *y'all* (found in **Southern American English** and **African-American (Vernacular) English**), *youse* (found in **Australian English**), or *ye* (in **Hiberno-English**).
- In the third person, the *they/them* series of pronouns (*they, them, their, theirs, themselves*) are used in both plural and singular, and are the only pronouns available for the plural. In the singular, the *they/them* series (sometimes with the addition of the singular-specific reflexive form *themself*) serve as a **gender-neutral** set of pronouns. These pronouns are becoming more accepted, especially as part of the **LGBTQ culture**.^{[199][207][208]}

English personal pronouns

Person	Subjective case	Objective case	Dependent possessive	Independent possessive	Reflexive
1st, singular	<i>I</i>	<i>me</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>mine</i>	<i>myself</i>
2nd, singular	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>yours</i>	<i>yourself</i>
3rd, singular	<i>he/she/it/they</i>	<i>him/her/it/their</i>	<i>his/her/its/their</i>	<i>his/hers/its/theirs</i>	<i>himself/herself/itself/themself/themselves</i>
1st, plural	<i>we</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>ours</i>	<i>ourselves</i>
2nd, plural	<i>you</i>	<i>you</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>yours</i>	<i>yourselves</i>
3rd, plural	<i>they</i>	<i>them</i>	<i>their</i>	<i>theirs</i>	<i>themselves</i>

Pronouns are used to refer to entities **deictically** or **anaphorically**. A deictic pronoun points to some person or object by identifying it relative to the speech situation—for example, the pronoun *I* identifies the speaker, and the pronoun *you*, the addressee. Anaphoric pronouns such as *that* refer back to an entity already mentioned or assumed by the speaker to be known by the audience, for example in the sentence *I already told you that*. The reflexive pronouns are used when the oblique argument is identical to the subject of a phrase (e.g. "he sent it to himself" or "she braced herself for impact").^[209]

Prepositions

Main article: [English prepositions](#)

Prepositional phrases (PP) are phrases composed of a preposition and one or more nouns, e.g. *with the dog, for my friend, to school, in England*.^[210] Prepositions have a wide range of uses in English. They are used to describe movement, place, and other relations between different entities, but they also have many syntactic uses such as introducing complement clauses and oblique arguments of verbs.^[210] For example, in the phrase *I gave it to him*, the preposition *to* marks the recipient, or Indirect Object of the verb *to give*. Traditionally words were only considered prepositions if they governed the case of the noun they preceded, for example causing the pronouns to use the objective rather than subjective form, "with her", "to me", "for us". But some contemporary grammars no longer consider government of case to be the defining feature of the class of prepositions, rather defining prepositions as words that can function as the heads of prepositional phrases.^[211]

Verbs and verb phrases

Main article: [English verbs](#)

English verbs are inflected for tense and aspect and marked for agreement with present-tense third-person singular subject. Only the copula verb *to be* is still inflected for agreement with the plural and first and second person subjects.^[196] Auxiliary verbs such as *have* and *be* are paired with verbs in the infinitive, past, or progressive forms. They form **complex** tenses, aspects, and moods. Auxiliary verbs differ from other verbs in that they can be followed by the negation, and in that they can occur as the first constituent in a question sentence.^{[212][213]}

Most verbs have six inflectional forms. The primary forms are a plain present, a third-person singular present, and a preterite (past) form. The secondary forms are a plain form used for the infinitive, a gerund-participle and a past participle.^[214] The copula verb *to be* is the only verb to retain some of its original conjugation, and takes different inflectional forms depending on the subject. The first-person present-tense form is *am*, the third person singular form is *is*, and the form *are* is used in the second-person singular and all three plurals. The only verb past participle is *been* and its gerund-participle is *being*.

English inflectional forms

Inflection	Strong	Regular
Plain present	<i>take</i>	<i>love</i>
3rd person sg. present	<i>takes</i>	<i>loves</i>
Preterite	<i>took</i>	<i>loved</i>
Plain (infinitive)	<i>take</i>	<i>love</i>
Gerund–participle	<i>taking</i>	<i>loving</i>
Past participle	<i>taken</i>	<i>loved</i>

English has two primary tenses, past (preterite) and non-past. The preterite is inflected by using the preterite form of the verb, which for the regular verbs includes the suffix *-ed*, and for the strong verbs either the suffix *-t* or a change in the stem vowel. The non-past form is unmarked except in the third person singular, which takes the suffix *-s*.^[212]

	Present	Preterite
First person	I run	I ran
Second person	You run	You ran
Third person	John runs	John ran

English does not have future verb forms.^[215] The future tense is expressed periphrastically with one of the auxiliary verbs *will* or *shall*.^[216] Many varieties also use a *near future* constructed with the phrasal verb *be going to* ("going-to future").^[217]

	Future
First person	I will run
Second person	You will run
Third person	John will run

Further aspectual distinctions are shown by auxiliary verbs, primarily *have* and *be*, which show the contrast between a perfect and non-perfect past tense (*I have run* vs. *I was running*), and compound tenses such as preterite perfect (*I had been running*) and present perfect (*I have been running*).^[218]

For the expression of mood, English uses a number of modal auxiliaries, such as *can*, *may*, *will*, *shall* and the past tense forms *could*, *might*, *would*, *should*. There are also *subjunctive* and *imperative moods*, both based on the plain form of the verb (i.e. without the third person singular *-s*), for use in subordinate clauses (e.g. subjunctive: *It is important that he run every day*; imperative *Run!*).^[216]

An infinitive form, that uses the plain form of the verb and the preposition *to*, is used for verbal clauses that are syntactically subordinate to a finite verbal clause. Finite verbal clauses are those that are formed around a verb in the present or preterite form. In clauses with auxiliary verbs, they are the finite verbs and the main verb is treated as a subordinate clause.^[219] For example, *he has to go* where only the auxiliary verb *have* is inflected for time and the main verb *to go* is in the infinitive, or in a complement clause such as *I saw him leave*, where the main verb is *see*, which is in a preterite form, and *leave* is in the infinitive.

Phrasal verbs

English also makes frequent use of constructions traditionally called *phrasal verbs*, verb phrases that are made up of a verb root and a preposition or particle that follows the verb. The phrase then functions as a single predicate. In terms of intonation the preposition is fused to the verb, but in writing it is written as a separate word. Examples of phrasal verbs are *to get up*, *to ask out*, *to back up*, *to give up*, *to get together*, *to hang out*, *to put up with*, etc. The phrasal verb frequently has a highly *idiomatic* meaning that is more specialised and restricted than what can be simply extrapolated from the combination of verb and preposition complement (e.g. *lay off* meaning *terminate someone's employment*).^[220] In spite of the idiomatic meaning, some grammarians, including Huddleston & Pullum (2002:274), do not consider this type of construction to form a syntactic constituent and hence refrain from using the term "phrasal verb". Instead, they consider the construction simply to be a verb with a prepositional phrase as its syntactic complement, i.e. *he woke up in the morning* and *he ran up in the mountains* are syntactically equivalent.

Adverbs

Main article: [English adverbs](#)

The function of adverbs is to modify the action or event described by the verb by providing additional information about the manner in which it occurs.^[188] Many adverbs are derived from adjectives by appending the suffix *-ly*. For example, in the phrase *the woman walked quickly*, the adverb *quickly* is derived in this way from the adjective *quick*. Some commonly used adjectives have irregular adverbial forms, such as *good*, which has the adverbial form *well*.

Syntax

Modern English syntax language is moderately *analytic*.^[221] It has developed features such as *modal verbs* and *word order* as resources for conveying meaning. *Auxiliary verbs* mark constructions such as questions, negative polarity, the *passive voice* and progressive *aspect*.

Basic constituent order

English word order has moved from the Germanic *verb-second* (V2) word order to being almost exclusively *subject–verb–object* (SVO).^[222] The combination of SVO order and use of auxiliary verbs often creates clusters of two or more verbs at the centre of the sentence, such as *he had hoped to try to open it*.

In most sentences, English only marks grammatical relations through word order.^[223] The subject constituent precedes the verb and the object constituent follows it. The example below demonstrates how the grammatical roles of each constituent are marked only by the position relative to the verb:

The dog bites the man

S V O

The man bites the dog

S V O

An exception is found in sentences where one of the constituents is a pronoun, in which case it is doubly marked, both by word order and by case inflection, where the subject pronoun precedes the verb and takes the subjective case form, and the object pronoun follows the verb and takes the objective case form.^[224] The example below demonstrates this double marking in a sentence where both object and subject are represented with a third person singular masculine pronoun:

He hit him

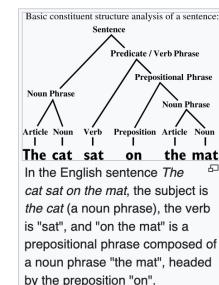
S V O

Indirect objects (IO) of ditransitive verbs can be placed either as the first object in a double object construction (S V IO O), such as *I gave Jane the book* or in a prepositional phrase, such as *I gave the book to Jane*.^[225]

Clause syntax

Main article: [English clause syntax](#)

In English a sentence may be composed of one or more clauses, that may, in turn, be composed of one or more phrases (e.g. Noun Phrases, Verb Phrases, and Prepositional Phrases). A clause is built around a verb and includes its constituents, such as any NPs and PPs. Within a sentence, there is always at least one main clause (or matrix clause) whereas other clauses are subordinate to a main clause. Subordinate clauses may function as arguments of the verb in the main clause. For example, in the phrase *I think (that)*



you are lying, the main clause is headed by the verb *think*, the subject is *I*, but the object of the phrase is the subordinate clause (*that you are lying*). The subordinating conjunction *that* shows that the clause that follows is a subordinate clause, but it is often omitted.^[226] Relative clauses are clauses that function as a modifier or specifier to some constituent in the main clause: For example, in the sentence *I saw the letter that you received today*, the relative clause *that you received today* specifies the meaning of the word *letter*, the object of the main clause. Relative clauses can be introduced by the pronouns *who*, *whose*, *whom*, and *which* as well as by *that* (which can also be omitted).^[227] In contrast to many other Germanic languages there are no major differences between word order in main and subordinate clauses.^[228]

Auxiliary verb constructions

Main articles: *Do-support*, *English auxiliary verbs*, and *Subject–auxiliary inversion*

English syntax relies on auxiliary verbs for many functions including the expression of tense, aspect, and mood. Auxiliary verbs form main clauses, and the main verbs function as heads of a subordinate clause of the auxiliary verb. For example, in the sentence *the dog did not find its bone*, the clause *find its bone* is the complement of the negated verb *did not*. Subject–auxiliary inversion is used in many constructions, including focus, negation, and interrogative constructions.

The verb *do* can be used as an auxiliary even in simple declarative sentences, where it usually serves to add emphasis, as in "I *did* shut the fridge." However, in the negated and inverted clauses referred to above, it is used because the rules of English syntax permit these constructions only when an auxiliary is present. Modern English does not allow the addition of the negating adverb *not* to an ordinary finite lexical verb, as in "*I know not*"—it can only be added to an auxiliary (or copular) verb, hence if there is no other auxiliary present when negation is required, the auxiliary *do* is used, to produce a form like *I do not (don't) know*. The same applies in clauses requiring inversion, including most questions—invocation must involve the subject and an auxiliary verb, so it is not possible to say "**Know you him?*"; grammatical rules require *Do you know him?*".^[229]

Negation is done with the adverb *not*, which precedes the main verb and follows an auxiliary verb. A contracted form of *not -n't* can be used as an enclitic attaching to auxiliary verbs and to the copula verb *to be*. Just as with questions, many negative constructions require the negation to occur with do-support, thus in Modern English *I don't know him* is the correct answer to the question *Do you know him?*, but not "*I know him not*", although this construction may be found in older English.^[230]

Passive constructions also use auxiliary verbs. A passive construction rephrases an active construction in such a way that the object of the active phrase becomes the subject of the passive phrase, and the subject of the active phrase is either omitted or demoted to a role as an oblique argument introduced in a prepositional phrase. They are formed by using the past participle either with the auxiliary verb *to be* or *to get*, although not all varieties of English allow the use of passives with *get*. For example, putting the sentence *she sees him* into the passive becomes *he is seen (by her)*, or *he gets seen (by her)*.^[231]

Questions

Both yes–no questions and wh-questions in English are mostly formed using subject–auxiliary inversion (*Am I going tomorrow?*, *Where can we eat?*), which may require do-support (*Do you like her?*, *Where did he go?*). In most cases, interrogative words (wh-words; e.g. *what*, *who*, *where*, *when*, *why*, *how*) appear in a fronted position. For example, in the question *What did you see?*, the word *what* appears as the first constituent despite being the grammatical object of the sentence. (When the wh-word is the subject or forms part of the subject, no inversion occurs: *Who saw the cat?*) Prepositional phrases can also be fronted when they are the questions theme, e.g. *To whose house did you go last night?*. The personal interrogative pronoun *who* is the only interrogative pronoun to still show inflection for case, with the variant *whom* serving as the objective case form, although this form may be going out of use in many contexts.^[232]

Discourse level syntax

While English is a subject-prominent language, at the discourse level it tends to use a topic-comment structure, where the known information (topic) precedes the new information (comment). Because of the strict SVO syntax, the topic of a sentence generally has to be the grammatical subject of the sentence. In cases where the topic is not the grammatical subject of the sentence, it is often promoted to subject position through syntactic means. One way of doing this is through a passive construction, *the girl was stung by the bee*. Another way is through a cleft sentence where the main clause is demoted to be a complement clause of a copula sentence with a dummy subject such as *it* or *there*, e.g. *it was the girl that the bee stung, there was a girl who was stung by a bee*.^[233] Dummy subjects are also used in constructions where there is no grammatical subject such as with impersonal verbs (e.g., *It is raining*) or in existential clauses (*there are many cars on the street*). Through the use of these complex sentence constructions with informationally vacuous subjects, English is able to maintain both a topic-comment sentence structure and a SVO syntax.

Focus constructions emphasise a particular piece of new or salient information within a sentence, generally through allocating the main sentence level stress on the focal constituent. For example, *the girl was stung by a bee* (emphasising it was a bee and not, for example, a wasp that stung her), or *The girl was stung by a bee* (contrasting with another possibility, for example that it was the boy).^[234] Topic and focus can also be established through syntactic dislocation, either preposing or postponing the item to be focused on relative to the main clause. For example, *That girl over there, she was stung by a bee*, emphasises the girl by preposition, but a similar effect could be achieved by postposition, *she was stung by a bee, that girl over there*, where reference to the girl is established as an "afterthought".^[235]

Cohesion between sentences is achieved through the use of deictic pronouns as anaphora (e.g. *that is exactly what I mean* where *that* refers to some fact known to both interlocutors, or *then* used to locate the time of a narrated event relative to the time of a previously narrated event).^[236] Discourse markers such as *oh*, *so*, or *well*, also signal the progression of ideas between sentences and help to create cohesion. Discourse markers are often the first constituents in sentences. Discourse markers are also used for stance taking in which speakers position themselves in a specific attitude towards what is being said, for example, *no way is that true!* (the idiomatic marker *no way!* expressing disbelief), or *boy! I'm hungry* (the marker *boy* expressing emphasis). While discourse markers are particularly characteristic of informal and spoken registers of English, they are also used in written and formal registers.^[237]

Vocabulary

It is generally stated that English has around 170,000 words, or 220,000 if obsolete words are counted; this estimate is based on the last full edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* from 1989.^[238] Over half of these words are nouns, a quarter adjectives, and a seventh verbs. There is one count that puts the English vocabulary at about 1 million words—but that count presumably includes words such as Latin species names, scientific terminology, botanical terms, prefixed and suffixed words, jargon, foreign words of extremely limited English use, and technical acronyms.^[239]

Due to its status as an international language, English adopts foreign words quickly and borrows vocabulary from many other sources. Early studies of English vocabulary by lexicographers, the scholars who formally study vocabulary, compile dictionaries, or both, were impeded by a lack of comprehensive data on actual vocabulary in use from good-quality linguistic corpora,^[240] collections of actual written texts and spoken passages. Many statements published before the end of the 20th century about the growth of English vocabulary over time, the dates of first use of various words in English, and the sources of English vocabulary will have to be corrected as new computerised analyses of linguistic corpus data become available.^{[239][241]}

Word-formation processes

English forms new words from existing words or roots in its vocabulary through a variety of processes. One of the most productive processes in English is conversion,^[242] using a word with a different grammatical role, for example using a noun as a verb or a verb as a noun. Another productive word-formation process is nominal compounding,^{[239][241]} producing compound words such as *babysitter* or *ice cream* or *homesick*.^[242] A process more common in Old English than in Modern English, but still productive in Modern English, is the use of derivational suffixes (-*hood*, -*ness*, -*ing*, -*ility*) to derive new words from existing words (especially those of Germanic origin) or stems (especially for words of Latin or Greek origin).

Formation of new words, called **neologisms**, based on Greek and/or Latin roots (for example *television* or *optometry*) is a highly productive process in English and in most modern European languages, so much so that it is often difficult to determine in which language a neologism originated. For this reason, American lexicographer Philip Gove attributed many such words to the "international scientific vocabulary" (ISV) when compiling *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961). Another active word-formation process in English is the creation of **acronyms**,^[243] words formed by pronouncing abbreviations of longer phrases as single words, e.g. *NATO*, *laser*, *scuba*.

Word origins

Main articles: Foreign-language influences in English and Lists of English words by country or language of origin

See also: Linguistic purism in English

English, besides forming new words from existing words and their roots, also borrows words from other languages. This borrowing is commonplace in many world languages, but English has been especially open to borrowing of foreign words throughout the last 1,000 years.^[245] Nevertheless, most of the core vocabulary and the most common words in English are still West Germanic.^{[246][247]} The English words first learned by children as they learn to speak are mainly Germanic words from Old English.^[239] It is not possible to speak or write English without Germanic words, but it is possible to write or speak many sentences in English without foreign loanwords.^[248]

But one of the consequences of long language contact between French and English in all stages of their development is that the vocabulary of English has a very high percentage of "Latinate" words (derived from French, especially, and also from other Romance languages and Latin). French words from various periods of the development of French now make up one-third of the vocabulary of English.^[249] Linguist Anthony Lacoudre estimated that over 40,000 English words are of French origin and may be understood without orthographical change by French speakers.^[250] Words of Old Norse origin have entered the English language primarily from the contact between Old Norse and Old English during colonisation of eastern and northern England. Many of these words are part of English core vocabulary, such as *egg* and *knife*.^[251]

English has also borrowed many words directly from Latin, the ancestor of the Romance languages, during all stages of its development.^{[241][239]} Many of these words had earlier been borrowed into Latin from Greek. Latin or Greek are still highly productive sources of stems used to form vocabulary of subjects learned in higher education such as the sciences, philosophy, and mathematics.^[252] English continues to gain new loanwords and **calques** ("loan translations") from languages all over the world, and words from languages other than the ancestral Anglo-Saxon language make up about 60% of the vocabulary of English.^[253]

English has formal and informal **speech registers**; informal registers, including child-directed speech, tend to be made up predominantly of words of Anglo-Saxon origin, while the percentage of vocabulary that is of Latinate origin is higher in legal, scientific, and academic texts.^{[254][255]}



English loanwords and calques in other languages

Main article: Englishisation

English has had a strong influence on the vocabulary of other languages.^{[249][256]} The influence of English comes from such factors as opinion leaders in other countries knowing the English language, the role of English as a world *lingua franca*, and the large number of books and films that are translated from English into other languages.^[257] That pervasive use of English leads to a conclusion in many places that English is an especially suitable language for expressing new ideas or describing new technologies. Among varieties of English, it is especially American English that influences other languages.^[258] Some languages, such as Chinese, write words borrowed from English mostly as **calques**, while others, such as Japanese, readily take in English loanwords written in sound-indicating script.^[259] Dubbed films and television programmes are an especially fruitful source of English influence on languages in Europe.^[259]

Orthography

See also: English alphabet, English Braille, and English orthography

Since the ninth century, English has been written in a **Latin alphabet** (also called Roman alphabet). Earlier Old English texts in Anglo-Saxon runes are only short inscriptions. The great majority of literary works in Old English that survive to today are written in the Roman alphabet.^[38] The modern English alphabet contains 26 letters of the Latin script: a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z (which also have capital forms: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z).

The spelling system, or **orthography**, of English is multi-layered and complex, with elements of French, Latin, and Greek spelling on top of the native Germanic system.^[260] Further complications have arisen through **sound changes** with which the orthography has not kept pace.^[53] Compared to European languages for which official organisations have promoted spelling reforms, English has spelling that is a less consistent indicator of pronunciation, and standard spellings of words that are more difficult to guess from knowing how a word is pronounced.^[261] There are also systematic spelling differences between British and American English. These situations have prompted proposals for spelling reform in English.^[262]

Although letters and speech sounds do not have a one-to-one correspondence in standard English spelling, spelling rules that take into account syllable structure, phonetic changes in derived words, and word accent are reliable for most English words.^[263] Moreover, standard English spelling shows etymological relationships between related words that would be obscured by a closer correspondence between pronunciation and spelling—for example, the words *photograph*, *photography*, and *photographic*,^[263] or the words *electricity* and *electrical*. While few scholars agree with Chomsky and Halle (1968) that conventional English orthography is "near-optimal",^[260] there is a rationale for current English spelling patterns.^[264] The standard orthography of English is the most widely used writing system in the world.^[265] Standard English spelling is based on a graphomorphemic segmentation of words into written clues of what meaningful units make up each word.^[266]

Readers of English can generally rely on the correspondence between spelling and pronunciation to be fairly regular for letters or **digraphs** used to spell consonant sounds. The letters b, d, f, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y, z represent, respectively, the phonemes /b/, /d/, /f/, /h/, /dʒ/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /t/, /v/, /w/, /y/, /z/. The letters c and g normally represent /k/ and /g/, but there is also a **soft c** pronounced /s/, and a **soft g** pronounced /dʒ/. The differences in the pronunciations of the letters c and g are often signalled by the following letters in standard English spelling. Digraphs used to represent phonemes and phoneme sequences include ch for /tʃ/, sh for /ʃ/, th for /θ/ or

/ð/, /ŋ/ for /ɪ/, /qu/ for /kw/, and /ph/ for /f/ in Greek-derived words. The single letter *x* is generally pronounced as /z/ in word-initial position and as /ks/ otherwise. There are exceptions to these generalisations, often the result of loanwords being spelled according to the spelling patterns of their languages of origin^[263] or residues of proposals by scholars in the early period of Modern English to follow the spelling patterns of Latin for English words of Germanic origin.^[267]

For the vowel sounds of the English language, however, correspondences between spelling and pronunciation are more irregular. There are many more vowel phonemes in English than there are single vowel letters (*a, e, i, o, u, w, y*). As a result, some "long vowels" are often indicated by combinations of letters (like the *oa* in *boat*, the *ow* in *how*, and the *ay* in *stay*), or the historically based silent *e* (as in *note* and *cake*).^[264]

The consequence of this complex orthographic history is that learning to read and write can be challenging in English. It can take longer for school pupils to become independently fluent readers of English than of many other languages, including Italian, Spanish, and German.^[268] Nonetheless, there is an advantage for learners of English reading in learning the specific sound-symbol regularities that occur in the standard English spellings of commonly used words.^[263] Such instruction greatly reduces the risk of children experiencing reading difficulties in English.^{[269][270]} Making primary school teachers more aware of the primacy of morpheme representation in English may help learners learn more efficiently to read and write English.^[271]

English writing also includes a system of punctuation marks that is similar to those used in most alphabetic languages around the world. The purpose of punctuation is to mark meaningful grammatical relationships in sentences to aid readers in understanding a text and to indicate features important for reading a text aloud.^[272]

Dialects, accents and varieties

Main articles: [List of dialects of English](#), [World Englishes](#), and [Regional accents of English](#)

Dialectologists identify many English dialects, which usually refer to regional varieties that differ from each other in terms of patterns of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The pronunciation of particular areas distinguishes dialects as separate regional accents. The major native dialects of English are often divided by linguists into the two extremely general categories of British English (BrE) and North American English (NAE).^[273] There also exists a third common major grouping of English varieties: Southern Hemisphere English, the most prominent being Australian and New Zealand English.

Britain and Ireland

See also: [English language in England](#), [Estuary English](#), [English language in Northern England](#), [Welsh English](#), [Scottish English](#), [Scots language](#), [Ulster English](#), and [Hiberno-English](#)

The grid displays nine speech examples, each with a play button, duration, and a brief description of the accent:

- Top row:
 - 0:41 An example of a man with a contemporary Received Pronunciation accent (Alain de Botton).
 - 0:39 An example of a man with a Cockney accent (Danny Baker).
 - 0:28 An example of an Essex man with a working-class Estuary English accent (Russell Brand).
- Middle row:
 - 0:32 An example of a man with a (West) Yorkshire accent (Damien Hirst).
 - 0:34 An example of a man with a contemporary Liverpool accent (John Bishop).
 - 0:40 An example of a man with a (South) Wales accent (Rob Brydon).
- Bottom row:
 - 0:34 An example of a man with one of the many accents of Scotland (Alex Salmond).
 - 0:21 An example of a man with a Northern Irish accent (George Best).
 - 0:37 An example of a woman with one of the many accents of the Republic of Ireland (Mary Robinson).

The fact that English has been spoken in England for 1,500 years explains why England has a great wealth of regional dialects.^[274] Within the United Kingdom, Received Pronunciation (RP), an educated accent associated originally with the South East of England, has been traditionally used as a broadcast standard and is considered the most prestigious of British accents. The spread of RP (also known as BBC English) through the media has caused many traditional dialects of rural England to recede, as youths adopt the traits of the prestige variety instead of traits from local dialects. At the time of the 1950-61 Survey of English Dialects, grammar and vocabulary differed across the country, but a process of lexical attrition has led most of this variation to disappear.^[275]

Nonetheless, this attrition has mostly affected dialectal variation in grammar and vocabulary. In fact, only 3% of the English population actually speak RP, the remainder speaking in regional accents and dialects with varying degrees of RP influence.^[276] There is also variability within RP, particularly along class lines between Upper and Middle-class RP speakers and between native RP speakers and speakers who adopt RP later in life.^[277] Within Britain, there is also considerable variation along lines of social class; some traits, though exceedingly common, are nonetheless considered "non-standard" and associated with lower-class speakers and identities.

An example of this is *h-dropping*, which was historically a feature of lower-class London English, particularly Cockney, and can now be heard in the local accents of most parts of England. However, it remains largely absent in broadcasting and among the upper crust of British society.^[278]



A map showing the main dialect regions in the United Kingdom and Ireland

English in England can be divided into four major dialect regions: South East English, South West English (also known as West Country English), Midlands English and Northern English. Within each of these regions, several local dialects exist: within the Northern region, there is a division between the Yorkshire dialects, the Geordie dialect (spoken around Newcastle, in Northumbria) and the Lancashire dialects, which include the urban subdialects of Manchester (Mancunian) and Liverpool (Scouse). Having been the centre of Danish occupation during the Viking invasions of England, Northern English dialects, particularly the Yorkshire dialect, retain Norse features not found in other English varieties.^[279]

Since the 15th century, South East England varieties have centred on London, which has been the centre from which dialectal innovations have spread to other dialects. In London, the Cockney dialect was traditionally used by the lower classes, and it was long a socially stigmatised variety. The spread of Cockney features across the South East led the media to talk of Estuary English as a new dialect, but the notion was criticised by many linguists on the grounds that London had been influencing neighbouring regions throughout history.^{[280][281][282]} Traits that have spread from London in recent decades include the use of intrusive R (drawing is pronounced drawing /drɔːɪŋ/), t-glottalisation (Potter is pronounced with a glottal stop as Po'er /poʔə/) and th-fronting, or the pronunciation of th- as /f/ (thanks pronounced fanks) or /v/ (bother pronounced boven).^[283]

Scots is today considered a separate language from English, but it has its origins in early Northern Middle English^[284] and developed and changed during its history with influence from other sources, particularly Scots Gaelic and Old Norse. Scots itself has a number of

regional dialects. In addition to Scots, [Scottish English](#) comprises the varieties of Standard English spoken in Scotland; most varieties are Northern English accents, with some influence from Scots.^[285]

In [Ireland](#), various forms of English have been spoken since the [Norman invasions](#) of the 11th century. In [County Wexford](#) and in the area surrounding [Dublin](#), two extinct dialects known as [Forth and Bargy](#) and [Fingallian](#) developed as offshoots from Early Middle English and were spoken until the 19th century. Modern [Irish English](#), however, has its roots in English colonisation in the 17th century. Today Irish English is divided into [Ulster English](#), the Northern Ireland dialect with strong influence from Scots, and various dialects of the Republic of Ireland. Like Scottish and most North American accents, almost all Irish accents preserve the [rhoticity](#) which has been lost in the dialects influenced by RP.^{[18][286]}

North America

Main articles: [American English](#), [General American English](#), [Southern American English](#), [African-American Vernacular English](#), [Canadian English](#), and [Atlantic Canadian English](#)

Speech example 0:57 An example of a Midwestern American man with a General American accent (Emery Emery). Problems playing this file? See media help.

Speech example 0:36 An example of an Alabamian woman with a contemporary Southern American accent (Martha Roby).

Speech example 0:41 An example of a man with a New York City accent (Chuck Zito).

Speech example 0:40 An example of a man with a Boston accent (Marty Walsh).

Speech example 1:42 An example of two men with AAVE accents, the interviewer from Georgia (D. J. Shockley) and the interviewee from Louisiana (Russell Gage).

Speech example 0:27 An example of an Ontarian woman with a Standard Canadian accent (Margaret Atwood).

Due to the relatively strong degree of mixing, mutual accommodation, and koinéization that occurred during the colonial period, [North American English](#) has traditionally been perceived as relatively homogeneous, at least in comparison with British dialects. However, modern scholars have strongly opposed this notion, arguing that North American English shows a great deal of phonetic, lexical, and geographic variability. This becomes all the more apparent considering social, ethnolinguistic, and regional varieties such as [African American English](#), [Chicano English](#), [Cajun English](#), or [Newfoundland English](#).^[287] American accent variation is increasing at the regional level and decreasing at the very local level,^[288] though most Americans still speak within a phonological continuum of similar accents,^[289] known collectively as [General American English](#) (GA), with differences hardly noticed even among Americans themselves, including [Midland](#) and [Western American English](#).^{[290][291][292]} In most American and Canadian English dialects, [rhoticity](#) (or r-fullness) is dominant, with non-rhoticity (or r-dropping) being associated with lower prestige and social class, especially since the end of [World War II](#). This contrasts with the situation in England, where non-rhoticity has become the standard.^[293]

Separate from General American English are American dialects with clearly distinct sound systems that have developed over time, including [Southern American English](#), the English of the coastal [Northeastern United States](#)—including [New York City English](#) and [Eastern New England English](#)—and [African-American Vernacular English](#); all of these, aside from certain subdialects of the American South, were historically non-rhotic.

[Canadian English](#) varieties, except for those of the [Atlantic provinces](#) and perhaps [Quebec](#), are generally considered to fall under the General American English continuum, although they often show [raising](#) of the vowels /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ before voiceless consonants and have distinct norms for writing and pronunciation as well.^[294] [Atlantic Canadian English](#), notably distinct from [Standard Canadian English](#),^[295] comprises [Maritime English](#) (or Maritimer English) and [Newfoundland English](#). It was mostly influenced by [British](#) and [Irish English](#), [Irish](#) and [Scottish Gaelic](#), and some [Acadian French](#).^[296] Regions such as [Miramichi](#) and [Cape Breton Island](#) have a wide variety of phrases and words not spoken outside of their respective regions.

In [Southern American English](#), the most populous American "accent group" outside of General American English,^[297] rhoticity now strongly prevails, replacing the region's [historical non-rhotic prestige](#).^{[298][299][300]} Southern accents are colloquially described as a "drawl" or "twang",^[301] being recognised most readily by the Southern Vowel Shift initiated by [glide-deleting](#) in the /aɪ/ vowel (e.g. pronouncing spy almost like spa), the "Southern breaking" of several front pure vowels into a gliding vowel or even two syllables (e.g. pronouncing the word "press" almost like "pray-us"),^[302] the [pin–pen merger](#), and other distinctive phonological, grammatical, and lexical features, many of which are actually recent developments of the 19th century or later.^[303]

Spoken primarily by working- and middle-class [African Americans](#), [African-American Vernacular English](#) (AAVE) is also largely non-rhotic and likely originated among enslaved Africans and African Americans influenced primarily by the non-rhotic, non-standard [older Southern dialects](#). A minority of linguists,^[304] contrarily, propose that AAVE mostly traces back to African languages spoken by the slaves who had to develop a [pidgin](#) or [Creole English](#) to communicate with slaves of other ethnic and linguistic origins.^[305] AAVE's important commonalities with Southern accents suggest it developed into a highly coherent and homogeneous variety in the 19th or early 20th century. AAVE is commonly stigmatised in North America as a form of "broken" or "uneducated" English, as are white Southern accents, but linguists today recognise both as fully developed varieties of English with their own norms shared by large speech communities.^{[306][307]}



Australia and New Zealand

Main articles: [Australian English](#) and [New Zealand English](#)

Speech example 17:36 An example of a man with a general Australian accent. Problems playing this file? See media help.

Speech example 0:39 An example of a South Australian woman with a broad Australian accent (Julia Gillard).

Speech example 0:35 An example of a Queensland man with a cultivated Australian accent (Geoffrey Rush).

Speech example 0:19
An example of a woman with a New Zealand accent (Eleanor Catton).

Speech example 8:38
An example of a man with a New Zealand accent (John Key).

Since 1788, English has been spoken in [Oceania](#), and [Australian English](#) has developed as the first language of the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Australian continent, its standard accent being [General Australian](#). The [English of neighbouring New Zealand](#) has to a lesser degree become an influential standard variety of the language.^[308] Australian and New Zealand English are each other's closest relatives with few differentiating characteristics, followed by [South African English](#) and the English of South East England, all of which have similarly non-rhotic accents, aside from some accents in the [South Island](#) of New Zealand. Australian and New Zealand English stand out for their innovative vowels: many short vowels are fronted or raised, whereas many long vowels have diphthongised. Australian English also has a contrast between long and short vowels, not found in most other varieties. Australian English grammar aligns closely with British and American English; like American English, collective plural subjects take on a singular verb (as in *the government is* rather than *are*).^{[309][310]} New Zealand English uses front vowels that are often even higher than in Australian English.^{[311][312][313]}

Southeast Asia

Main articles: [Southeast Asian English](#), [Singapore English](#), [Philippine English](#), [Malaysian English](#), and [Brunei English](#)

Speech example 19:35
An example of a male teenager with a Singaporean accent.

Speech examples 0:59
Examples of a man and woman with Filipino accents.

Problems playing this file? See [media help](#).

The first significant exposure of the [Philippines](#) to the English language occurred in 1762 when the [British occupied Manila](#) during the [Seven Years' War](#), but this was a brief episode that had no lasting influence. English later became more important and widespread during American rule between 1898 and 1946 and remains an official language of the Philippines. Today, the use of English is ubiquitous in the Philippines, being found on [street signs](#) and marquees, in government documents and forms, in courtrooms, in the media and entertainment industries, in the business sector, and in various other aspects of daily life.^[314] One particularly prominent form of English usage in the country is found in everyday speech: most [Filipinos](#) from [Manila](#) use or, at the very least, have been exposed to [Taglish](#), a form of code-switching between [Tagalog](#) and English.^[315] A similar code-switching method is used by urban native speakers of [Bisayan languages](#) under the name of [Bislish](#).

Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia

See also: [South African English](#), [Nigerian English](#), [Caribbean English](#), and [South Asian English](#)

Speech example 0:57
An example of a man with a South African accent.

Speech example 0:38
An example of a woman with an educated Nigerian accent (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie).

Speech example 1:42
An example of a woman and man with Jamaican accents.

Speech example 0:40
An example of a Northeast Indian woman with an Indian accent (Arundhati Roy).

English is spoken widely in southern Africa and is an official or co-official language in several of the region's countries. In [South Africa](#), English has been spoken since 1820, co-existing with [Afrikaans](#) and various African languages such as the [Khoekhoe](#) and [Bantu languages](#). Today, about nine percent of the South African population speaks [South African English](#) (SAE) as a first language. SAE is a non-rhotic variety that tends to follow RP as a norm. It is one of the few non-rhotic English varieties that lack intrusive R. The second-language varieties of South Africa differ based on the native languages of their speakers.^[316] Most phonological differences from RP are in the vowels.^[317] Consonant differences include the tendency to pronounce /p, t, ʈ, k/ without aspiration (e.g. *pin* pronounced [pɪn] rather than as [pʰɪn] as in most other varieties), while r is often pronounced as a flap [ɾ] instead of as the more common fricative.^[318]

Nigerian English is a variety of English spoken in [Nigeria](#).^[319] It has traditionally been based on British English, but in recent years, because of influence from the United States, some words of American English origin have made it into Nigerian English. Additionally, some new words and collocations have emerged from the variety out of a need to express concepts specific to the culture of the nation (e.g. *senior wife*). Over 150 million Nigerians speak English.^[320]

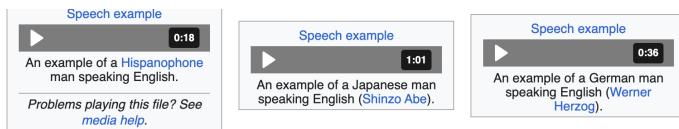
Several varieties of English are also spoken in the Caribbean islands that were colonial possessions of Britain, including Jamaica, the Leeward and Windward Islands and Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, the Cayman Islands and Belize. Each of these areas is home both to a local variety of English and a local English-based creole, combining English and African languages. The most prominent varieties are [Jamaican English](#) and [Jamaican Creole](#). In Central America, English-based creoles are spoken on the Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua and Panama.^[321] Locals are often fluent in both the local English variety and the local creole languages, and [code-switching](#) between them is frequent. Indeed, a way to conceptualise the relationship between such creole and standard varieties is to view them as a spectrum of language registers in which the most creole-like forms serve as the "basilect" and the most RP-like forms serve as the "acrolect", the most formal register.^[322]

Most Caribbean varieties are based on British English and consequently, most are non-rhotic, except for formal styles of Jamaican English which are often rhotic. Jamaican English differs from RP in its vowel inventory, which has a distinction between long and short vowels rather than tense and lax vowels as in Standard English. The diphthongs /eɪ/ and /oʊ/ are monophthongs [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] or even the reverse diphthongs [iə] and [uə] (e.g. *bay* and *boat* pronounced [bɛ:] and [bɔ:t]). Often word-final consonant clusters are simplified so that "child" is pronounced [tʃail] and "wind" [win].^{[323][324][325]}

As a historical legacy, [Indian English](#) tends to take RP as its ideal, and how well this ideal is realised in an individual's speech reflects class distinctions among Indian English speakers. Indian English accents are marked by the pronunciation of phonemes such as /t/ and /d/ (often pronounced with retroflex articulation as [ʈ] and [ɖ]) and the replacement of /θ/ and /ð/ with dentals [t̪] and [d̪]. Sometimes Indian English speakers may also use spelling-based pronunciations where the silent ⟨h⟩ found in words such as *ghost* is pronounced as an Indian [voiced aspirated stop](#) [g̪].^[326]

Non-native varieties

Main article: [Non-native pronunciations of English](#)



Non-native English speakers may pronounce words differently due to having not fully mastered English pronunciation. This can happen either because they apply the [speech rules](#) of their mother tongue to English ("interference") or through implementing strategies similar to those used in [first language acquisition](#).^[327] They may create innovative pronunciations for English sounds, not found in the speaker's first language.^[327]

See also

- [Linguistic purism in English](#)
- [English-speaking world](#)
- [English-only movement](#)
- [List of countries and territories where English is an official language](#)

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External links

- Accents of English from Around the World (University of Edinburgh) Sound files comparing how 110 words are pronounced in 50 English accents from around the world.
- International Dialects of English Archive – recordings of English dialects and international L2 accents

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