

# **History of the English Language**

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Lecture 1

## **Introduction to the History of English**

English is a language of global importance. It is generally acknowledged to be one of the major languages of the world. English is the dominant language in the United Kingdom, the United States, many Commonwealth nations including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and other former British colonies. It is the second most spoken language in the world. English is widely used as an international language of communication. As a social phenomenon, language is inseparable from society. Every major event in the history of a certain people is reflected in its language. To understand the language for everyday communication and the language of documentation a teacher of English should know its history.

History of the English Language is one of the fundamental courses forming the linguistic background of a specialist in philology. It is aimed at understanding the essence of the language, and at tracing the connections between historical events and modern life. History of the English Language studies its rise and development, place in the system of language families, structure and linguistic peculiarities, the influence of different languages on it.

English is a language of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today. The various Indo-European languages are usually divided into two groups – eastern and western. The major branches of the eastern group are: the Indo-Iranian languages

(Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit etc.); the Slavic languages (Russian, Polish, Czech etc.); the Baltic languages of Latvian and Lithuanian (but not Estonian). The main languages in the western group are: the Celtic languages (Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Erse or Irish Gaelic, Manx etc.); the Germanic languages (English, German, Swedish etc.); Greek; Latin and the modern Romance languages (the Italic group). This classification illustrates that English belongs to the group of Germanic languages, and languages of Celtic origin spoken in Wales, Ireland, the Highlands of Scotland, and in the Isle of Man.

English belongs to the Germanic branch of languages, which is usually divided into 3 groups: East-Germanic, West Germanic, and North-Germanic. The East-Germanic group contains only dead languages: Gothic, Burgundian and Vandalic. The only well known language of this group is Gothic. It was spoken by Germanic tribes Goths at the beginning of our era. Gothic is known from a 4-th century translation of the Bible by bishop Ulfilas. North-Germanic evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic (but not Finnish, which is related to Hungarian and Estonian and is not an Indo-European language). The West Germanic group includes German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English.

The development of the English language is mostly divided into three periods: Old English (500-1100 AD), Middle English (1100-1500), and New English (Early Modern English (1500-1800) and Late-Modern English (1800-Present)). According to the H. Sweet's classification which is based on the development of grammatical system, these periods are also called as: Old English – the Period of Full Endings, e.g. *sunu*, Middle English – the Period of Levelled Endings, e.g. *sune*, New English – the Period of Lost Endings, e.g. *son*. [H. Sweet, A New English Grammar, Oxford, 1892, v. I, p. 211.]

For the sake of convenience the most important historic events which had a great influence on the history of English are taken as landmarks separating the three periods. The Old English period began in 449 with the Germanic conquest of Britain.

The Middle English period began in 1066 with the Norman conquest of Britain. The Modern English period began in 1475 with the introduction of printing and the formation of the English national language. The most considerable changes in the language took place in the Middle English period when English transformed its synthetic character into analytical.

The first inhabitants of the British Isles were nomadic Stone Age hunters, who came from the Mediterranean between 3000 and 2000 BC. They are called the Iberians. During the period from 6-th to 3-rd century B.C. the Celtic tribes invaded Britain. The Picts penetrated into the mountains in the North; the Scots crossed over to Ireland and settled there. The Britons, powerful Celtic tribes, occupied the southern part of the island, which was named after them as Britain. In Celtic society the tribal form of government prevailed. Celtic women had equal rights with the men. They could become warriors, enter battles, divorce husbands and rule the tribe. The early British and Irish civilization were illiterate. The priests had immense power over the members of a tribe. Celtic priests were called the Druids. They formed an intellectual class of philosophers, judges, teachers, doctors, astronomers and astrologers in British pre-Christian society. The Druid priests very often advised tribal chiefs and the whole tribe. Their knowledge was very profound and based on their interaction with the environment. Some English geographical names are the words of Celtic origin. For example, the river *Avon* in Celtic means a river, the *Derwent* means clear water.

The Romans came to the British Isles in the first century B.C. The period of Roman occupation brought dramatic change in the life of the Druids, because most of their cultural heritage was lost. The Roman Conquest influenced the life of Britons greatly. The civilized Romans began to build towns, roads, wells, and public baths. York, Gloucester, Lincoln and London were the main Roman towns. New words appeared in the language of Celts. Among them are historical names and names of places such as *Britannia*, *Caledonia*, *Cambria*, *Hibernia* the Roman names of Britain, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, respectively. The names like *Winchester*,

*Lancaster, Leicester* and others contained the component which derived from the Latin word “*castra*” – a camp. The stem “*coln / col*” could be found in the names, which denoted colonies (from Latin “*colonia*”), e.g. *Lincoln, Colchester*. With the decline of the Roman Empire, the Romans had to leave Britain in 407 A.D. They had to defend Rome against the Goths, the barbarian tribes who laid siege to the town.

The history of the English language as such started with the arrival of three Germanic tribes (the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes) who invaded Britain in 449. Most of the Celtic speakers had to move to the west and to the north, to the territories of contemporary Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The invaders formed seven Germanic kingdoms. The Angles formed Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia. The Saxons founded Wessex, Essex and Sussex. The Jutes occupied Kent. All these kingdoms fought with one another for supremacy. In the 7-th century political supremacy was gained by Northumbria. As a result the oldest English documents were written in the Northumbrian dialect. In the 8-th century the leadership passed to Mercia. At last at the beginning of the 9-th century Wessex gained its predominance. The king of Wessex, Egbert, became the first king of England in 829. He was acknowledged by Kent, Mercia and Northumbria as the king of the whole kingdom.

The imprint life of the Anglo-Saxons, who were pagans, we can observe in New English. They believed in many gods and worshipped the nature. The days of the week were named after their gods. Sunday meant Sun’s day, Monday – the Moon’s day, Tuesday – the day of Tu or Tueso, the god of darkness, Wednesday – Woden’s day, the day of the god of war, Thursday was the day of the god of Thunder, Thor, Friday was Freya’s day, the goddess of Peace and Plenty, Saturday was named after Saturn, a Roman God of agriculture and trade.

The most important historical event that influenced the development of the English language at that period was the introduction of Christianity in the 7-th century. It resulted in the substitution of the Latin alphabet for a special Germanic alphabet, called Runic which was used before that. Monasteries became the centers

of learning where the first libraries and schools were set up. Christianity gave Britain Roman culture and the Latin and Greek languages. The monks copied out the books and translated them from Latin and Greek into Anglo-Saxon.