The History of the English Language

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1 A world language

The English language is spoken today in parts of Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and in some of the islands of the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. It is spoken as a first language by 370 to 400 million people. It is also used as a second language by a similar number of people, and as a foreign language by hundreds of millions more. English is probably used in some way by about a quarter of all the people in the world. Because so many people, in so many places, speak or use English, it is often called a ‘world language’.

Who uses English, and why is it such a widely spoken language? In countries like Britain and the US, English is the first language of most people: in other words, it is the first language people learn as children and they communicate in English all the time. In other countries, like India, Kenya, Singapore, and Papua New Guinea, large numbers of people use English as a second language. They have their own first language, but because English is one of the official languages, they use it in education, business, government, radio, and television. Finally, in many countries English is taught in schools as a foreign language, but it is not an official language.

English is also used for many different kinds of international communication. People in science, medicine, and business often communicate in English. English is the language of much of the world’s pop music and films. The ‘languages’ of international sea and air traffic control, known as ‘Seaspeak’ and ‘Airspeak’, use English. They use a small number of
English words and sentences to make communication clearer and simpler. (For example, in Seaspeak instead of saying ‘Sorry, what was that?’ or ‘What did you say?’ you say ‘Say again’.) Much of the world’s news is reported in English on television, the radio, the Internet, or in newspapers.

The spread of English around the world began with the British settlement of North America, the Caribbean, Australia, and Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It continued in the nineteenth century when the British controlled parts of Africa and the South Pacific. English also became important internationally because in the nineteenth century Britain was the most important industrial nation in the world. Many new machines came from Britain, so people had to learn English in order to learn how to use them.

In the twentieth century, the use of English spread with the growth in international business. Air travel developed, making more international business possible. Faster ways of international communication, like the telephone and more recently the computer, became more widely used. Many people wanted to do business with American companies because the US was rich, and in order to do this they had to speak English. When international companies and organizations developed, English was often chosen as the working language. For example, English is the working language of the European Central Bank, although the bank is in Germany. In Asia and the Pacific, nine out of ten international organizations work only in English.

English is important not because it has more first-language speakers than other languages (Chinese has more) but because it is used extremely widely. Will this situation continue? This is an interesting question, but first let us look at how English began.
The beginnings of English

Our understanding of the history of English began at the end of the eighteenth century when Sir William Jones, a British judge who lived in India, began to study Sanskrit. This is a very old language of India, and at the time was used in Indian law. Like others before him, Jones noticed many similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and other European languages. For example:

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People had thought that Latin, Greek, and all European languages came from Sanskrit, but Jones disagreed. In 1786 he wrote that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin all came from a ‘common source’, which had perhaps disappeared. There was a lot of interest in his idea and other people began to study these three languages. Their work proved that Jones was right. We now know that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, and many other languages all belong to one enormous ‘family’ of languages called the Indo-European family.

Jones’s ‘common source’ from which all these languages developed is now known as Proto-Indo-European. It is
thought that a group of people called the Kurgans spoke this language, or dialects of it, and lived in what is now southern Russia from some time after 5000 BC. In about 3500 BC the Kurgans probably began to spread west across Europe and east across Asia. As groups of Kurgans travelled further and further away from each other, they began to develop stronger differences in their dialects. With the passing of time, these dialects became different languages. When some of them (the Greek, Anatolian, and Indo-Iranian languages) appear in written form in about 2000 to 1000 BC they are clearly separate languages.

Similarities between some languages as they are spoken today suggest that they probably come from Proto-Indo-European. For example, there are similar words in European and Indo-Iranian languages for people in the family (mother, father), animals (dog, sheep, horse), parts of the body (eye, ear), the weather (rain, snow), and for weapons. These similarities allow us to imagine something of the life of the Kurgans: they worked on the land some of the time, made clothes from wool, and used wheels.
More than 2 billion people speak an Indo-European language as their first language. The speaker of Hindi in India, the speaker of Portuguese in Brazil, and the speaker of English in Australia all express themselves in Indo-European languages.

The Celts were the first group of Indo-European speakers to move across Europe. Towards the end of the fifth century BC they began to leave their homeland north of the Alps in central Europe. They went to the Black Sea, Turkey, south-west Spain and central Italy, the whole of Britain, and Ireland. As they travelled, different dialects of their language developed. The Celts who settled in Turkey spoke Galatian, those in Spain spoke Celtiberian, and those in France, Italy, and northern Europe spoke Gaulish. The Celts who went to Ireland and later Scotland spoke Goidelic (Gaelic) and those who went to southern England and Wales spoke Brythonic (or British).

Unfortunately for the Celts in Britain, other people wanted to take advantage of the island’s good farming land and valuable metals. In AD 43 the Romans invaded Britain. They remained there for almost four hundred years, and almost all of what is now England came under their control. (They never went very far into Wales or Scotland.) They introduced a new way of life and a new language – Latin. British Celts in the upper classes and the towns became used to life with laws and police, roads, baths, and theatres. Some learnt to speak and write Latin. However, a new language did not develop from Latin in Britain as French did in Gaul and Spanish did in Spain.

From the middle of the third century AD, the Romans grew weaker and weaker as the Germanic peoples of northern Europe invaded more and more Roman lands. In AD 410
the Romans finally left Britain. Without the Roman army to guard it, the country was in danger from other invaders.

In AD 449, people from Jutland in modern Denmark – the Jutes – arrived in southern Britain and the Angles – also from Denmark – came and settled in eastern Britain. In 477 the Saxons, from what is now Germany, came and settled in southern and south-eastern Britain. These three Germanic peoples were very different from the Romans. The Romans had governed the British Celts, but they had not taken their lands. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons came in larger numbers and they settled on the lands belonging to the British Celts. Some of the British Celts left and went north, some went west into Wales and Cornwall, and others went over the sea to Brittany, in what is now northern France.

The Jutes stayed in Kent, in the south-east of Britain, but the Angles moved north and the Saxons went south-west. They slowly organized themselves into seven kingdoms in what is now England and south-east Scotland. In the seventh century the kingdom of Northumbria, in the north, was very strong and a great centre of learning. In the eighth century Mercia, in the centre, became the most important kingdom, and in the ninth century Wessex, in the south and south-west, became the strongest kingdom.

The invaders called the British Celts wealas meaning foreigners. Later this meant both Celts and servants. From wealas comes the Modern English word Welsh. The British Celts called all the invaders ‘Saxons’ at first, but in the sixth century the word Angli was used to mean the whole group of invaders. Later Angli became Engle. Today we call them ‘Anglo-Saxons’. From the various Germanic dialects used by these people, English developed.
The History of the English Language

About a quarter of the people in the world today speak or use English. In homes and schools, offices and meeting rooms, ships and airports, people are speaking English everywhere.

How has this happened? How did English begin, and what will become of it in the future? The history of the English language is a journey through space and time, from thousands of years ago to today and beyond, and to all parts of the world. Come on that journey and meet the monks and soldiers, the kings and scientists, the printers, poets, and travellers who have helped to make the English of today. (Word count 16,753)