

# The Legacy of Origin and Development of English Language

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R.M. Dhanapala

## Abstract

The English language functions as a lingua-franca in the world facilitating communication among different nations. The purpose of this review paper is to ascertain the origin of English language and how it developed all over the world by a majority of nations. The study is based on the review of literature available on the history of the language. From the literature it was found that English language originated in Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century when the Germanic tribe named Angels who invaded from 'Englaland' using a language called 'Englisc' from which the words 'England' and 'English' derived. Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, and Late Modern English were the periods that gave rise to the development of English language. English was a flexible language to adapt many of the vocabulary of other languages and the British Colonization was a major reason for the spread of the language across the world. However, the evolution of English language is so complex that the primitive English language that existed is almost non-existent today.

## Introduction

English is thought to be one of the most important languages in the world. There are many reasons why English is so important and one of the reasons

is that English is spoken as a first, second, or foreign language in many countries. English language plays an important role in the global arena facilitating communication among nations in trade, banking, education, tourism, transportation, health, scientific development, printing industry, development programmes and social welfare. Although English was the first West Germanic language spoken in medieval England, now it has become a global lingua franca. It has been the first language for a majority of the population in several countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and a few Caribbean nations (Rao, 2019). Around 375 million people speak it as a first language and more than 750 million people speak it as a second language. Moreover, English has official or special status in almost 70 countries. By observing these statistics, one can easily understand why English occupies such an important role as a global language. The place of English has been heightened by the tangible link between globalization and English and is attributed to many a global events and changes that had taken place in the world. Giddens (2000) asserts, “Globalization is a separation of space and time, with instantaneous communications, knowledge and culture could be shared around the world simultaneously”.

Considering the role of English as a global language, the purpose of this review article is to identify the history and the origin of the English language and the development of it all over the world.

### **Materials and Methods**

This paper presented as a Review Paper is an outcome of review of literature related to the origin and development of English in Britain, the spread of the language across the world, and the legacy, historical perspectives and English in the global context. The development of the paper is mostly based

on the related literature available and the paper is presented as a review on the subject area. In this section, the topics areas such as; the origin of the English language, the spread of English across the world, the status of English in the world have been discussed.

### **The origin of the English language**

The English language is a part of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. The arrival of the three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5<sup>th</sup> century paved way for the historical perspectives of the English language. The three Germanic tribes; the Angels, the Saxons, and the Jutes crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and Northern Germany (see Figure 1). The island of Britain was originally inhabited by primitive Celtic tribes known as Britons (English and Western Literature, 1984). At that time, the inhabitants of Britain spoke a Celtic language but most of the Celtic speakers were pushed West and North by the invaders - mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from "Englaland" [*sic*] and their language was called "Englisc" - from which the words "England" and "English" are derived.



*Figure 1: Entering of Germanic invaders to Britain on the east and south coasts in the 5th century*

English language has undergone substantial changes through time from its inception and a brief analysis of the timeline of history of English reveals that it is traditionally divided into four periods.

- Old English: before 1100 AD
- Middle English: 1100 to 1500 AD
- Early Modern English: 1500 to 1800 AD
- Late Modern English: after 1800 AD

### **Old English (450-1100 AD)**

The Germanic tribes who invaded Britain spoke similar languages, which in Britain developed into what we now call Old English. Though Old English did not sound or look like English spoken today, about half of the most

commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words *be*, *strong* and *water*, for example, derive from Old English. Some words that are derived from Old English are: *axode*(asked), *habba* (have), *rihtlice* (rightly), *engla* (angels), *heofonum* (heaven), *swilcum* (such), *hu* (how) and *beon* (be). Old English was spoken from 450 AD until around 1100 AD. Figure 2 depicts a part of the first folio of the heroic epic poem *Beowulf*, written primarily in the West Saxon dialect of Old English.



*Figure 2: Part of the Cotton MS Vitellius A XV manuscript currently located within the British Library.*

### **Middle English: 1100 to 1500 AD**

In 1066 AD William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy invaded and then conquered England. Normandy is a part of France and the Normans (people of Normandy) spoke a dialect of Old French that is known as Anglo-Norman. Hence, Anglo-Norman became the language of the Royal Court, the ruling classes and business classes of England. There was a sort of linguistic class division in this period in which French was the language that the upper classes spoke, and English was the language that the lower classes spoke. But later in 1204 AD, King John lost the province of Normandy to the

King of France. Because of this, the Norman nobles of England started to take more distance from the French Normans. England became the main concern of the Norman nobles. From 1349-1350 the black death killed around one-third of the English population. Because of these deaths the labouring classes grew in social and economic importance. Along with the rise of the importance of the labouring classes, English became more important compared to Anglo-Norman as well. The nobility soon used a modified English as their native tongue. By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was pretty much over.

In Britain English was the dominant language again, but many French words were added to the vocabulary of English. This mixture of languages (English and Anglo-Norman which was a dialect of Old French) is called Middle English. Middle English as opposed to Old English, can be read, but it would still be difficult for modern English-speaking people. The Middle English period ended around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

### **Early Modern English (1500-1800)**

The early modern period (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries) is often considered as the Golden Age of English literature. It was during this period that the scholars started writing in English. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of scholars such as More and Newton still wrote in Latin as English language had not been considered to be a proper intellectual language. These scholars coined a lot of words mainly with Latin-based roots (e.g., describe, animate, exhaust) which are still in the use of English language. Towards the end of the period of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation took place. The Great Vowel Shift in English started. From the 16th century, the British

had contact with many peoples from around the world. This was considered the period of Renaissance of Classical learning which meant that many new words and phrases entered the language. The invention of printing also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read (see Figure 3, lines from Hamlet, as an example). Printing also brought standardization to English. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the dialect of London, where most publishing houses were, became the standard. In 1604 the first English dictionary was published.

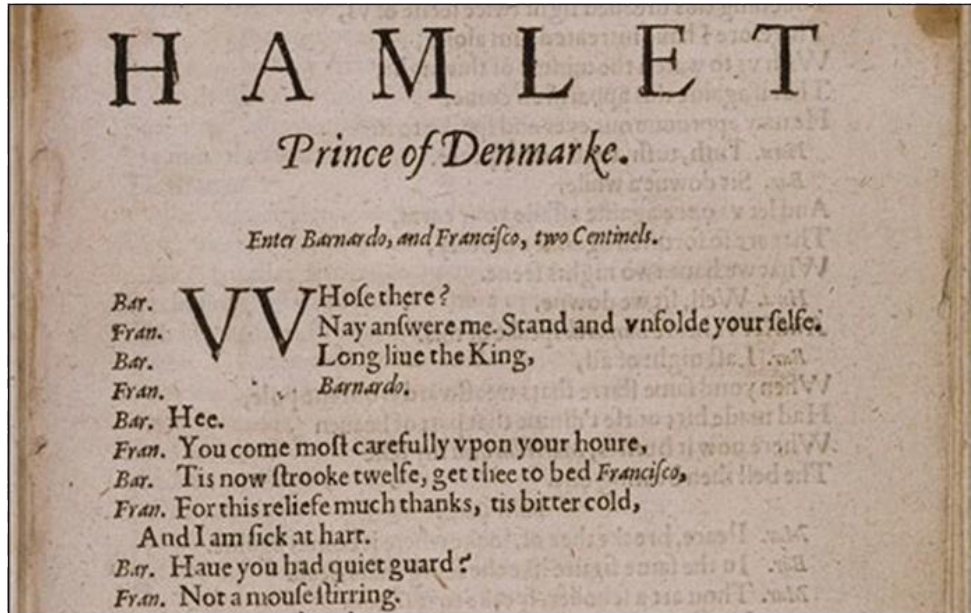


Figure 3: Lines from Hamlet, written in Early Modern English by Shakespeare (public domain)

### Late Modern English (1800-Present)

The main difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is vocabulary. The pronunciation and grammar of Early Modern English period continued into the Late Modern English period, but the

vocabulary of English grew considerably during the period of Late Modern English. The influences of industrial revolution, scientific advancement, and colonialism had a huge impact on the vocabulary development. As a result of the expansion of the British Empire, English language facilitated to accommodate many foreign words to its vocabulary. Words such as ‘bungalow’ and ‘pajamas’, borrowed from Hindi and other Indian languages were added to English language. Further, in connection with Britain’s colonial expansion through maritime mode, words and phrases of sailors were adapted into the vocabulary of Late Modern English. During the last half of the 20th century the military influence on the English language was significant. Before the Great War, both Britain and the United States had small, volunteer militaries. English military slang existed, but this barely had an impact on standard English. However, during the mid-20th century, a big number of British and American men joined the military forces. As the military started to play a bigger role in a lot of people’s lives, military slang had a big impact on standard English. Military terms like ‘landing strip’, ‘camouflage’, ‘spearhead’, ‘blockbuster’, ‘roadblock’, and ‘nose dive’ started massively entering the standard English language.

### **The spread of English across the world**

The expansion of British colonial power and the emergence of the United States as leading economic power of the nineteenth century resulted in the spread of English language across the world (Crystal 2003). The British colonial settlements in the 16<sup>th</sup> century helped to spread the English language overseas. According to Leith (2002), in 1607 the British launched their colonial activities in North America by establishing colonies in Jamestown in Virginia. The expansion of English language, the language of the British, came under two types of settlements described as “settler countries” and



“non-settler countries” (Sekhar, 2012). Australia, United States and Canada were settler countries where British settled there and the non-settler countries were countries like Sri Lanka, India, South Africa, Nigeria, Jamaica and other landscapes. The establishment of British colonies in Africa after 1880 had a different type of ruling where a small number of British employees were engaged in colonial administration and the inhabitants in the Western African countries such as Nigerians and Sierra-Leone were given English education by missionaries (Leith, 2002). As Moore (2001) points out, India had a remarkable impact from the British towards English language. Indian novelists and poets like R.K. Narayan have contributed immensely to English literature due to the expansion of English language in India by the British colonial administration.

The establishment of British colonies in North America in the year 1607 with the establishment of the colony of Jamestown in “Virginia” had a remarkable impact on the expansion of English around the world. The defeat of France and its allies by the British navy subsequently in the war which lasted nearly seven years further strengthened the power of the British. However, in 1776, thirteen American colonies declared “Independence from British Empire”. During this period, British could take control over Jamaica, the Bahamas and Barbados in South America (Sekhar, 2012). According to Sekhar, in Caribbean Islands and South American colonies, British were able to introduce English language in education, administration etc.

In 1783, British lost the control over American colonies and moved to Asia. They were able to start trading ports in Australia in 1788 and in New Zealand in 1840. Singapore was held as a British -held country trading post in 1819 and Hong Kong as an economic centre in 1841. The establishment of

posts by the British in these countries was driven largely by economic motives and this promoted the spread of English.

There is a tangible relationship between colonization and the spread of English language across the world. British have succeeded in ruling nearly quarter of the globe; from the kingdom of England passing through the British Isles and reaching North America and Oceania. Hence, English language spread across the world presumably having varieties of English such as British English, American English, Australian English and South African English. De Souza (2010) distinguishes two natures of existence and spread of English due to colonization. He explains these two kinds as follows:

“We must note an important difference between the export of English to such countries as the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the West Indies and the export of English to Sri Lanka and India. In the former countries, English came to be used by the entire population, and for all purposes served by a language. Thus, the language was adapted to the culture, and to the daily life of all the people. Features of the same went for the fauna and flora, the food and drink of the people, where they differed from those of the “home” country. Even in the West Indies, where the greatest degree of cultural adaptation took place. In all these countries, as technological and industrial developments took place, the language was adapted to these.”

( De Souza, 2010, p.31)

However, in India and Sri Lanka, English never became the common language of the people but served only on a small minority. Further, for this

reason, English language cannot serve all purposes, even for those who know it (De Souza, 2010).

### **Status of English in the world**

The place of English in the world has direct reference to the status of global language. As Crystal (2003, p. 3) points out, the achievement of global status by a language is derived when it develops a “special role” that is recognized in every country. When a large number of people in a country speak a language as a mother- tongue, the language achieves the status of special role. Countries such as USA, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and several Caribbean countries use English as mother- tongue. It is clear and understood that only a few countries speak English as a mother-tongue worldwide. According to Robert & Richards (1997), a language is recognized in communities due to official recognition and the other is to accord status in foreign language teaching. English is by now emerging as the most widely used foreign language in more than 100 countries such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil (Crystal, 2003. p.5).

The place of English is also attributed to the number of people who speak English worldwide. According to the full report (Cambridge English, 2016. p.4) over 1.75 billion people speak English worldwide- that is roughly a quarter of the world’s population.

The availability of three types of English Speakers worldwide has presumably contributed to the place of English that has taken today (Graddol, 2000. p.10). According to Graddol, the three types of English speaker in the world today are; first-language speakers (L1), second -

language speakers (L2), and the people learning English as a foreign language (EFL). First-language speakers are those who speak English as the first language and these first -language speakers live in countries in which the dominant culture is based on English. Speakers of English as a second language are those who have or use English as an additional language. Speakers of English as a second language might use a local form of English but they may also be fluent in international varieties of English. The next group of people are the increasing number of people who learn English as a foreign language known as EFL speakers. In EFL, English is taught to people whose main language is not English and who live in a country where English is not the official or main language.

The English Effect (2013, p.5) records that there are many reasons that attribute to the evolution of English language to its present status. Two qualities namely momentum and adaptability have been pointed out as reasons for this state. The acquisition of the territory of Louisiana by the United States-Louisiana Purchase – in 1803 was proved to be a major significance for the development of English language because this established English as dominant over French in the United States. By now, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the empire of the United Kingdom shrank. Hence, the rapidly growing American global influence gave English language a momentum which is unique in modern history.

With regard to adaptability, English language has the unique feature of being adaptable to any situations by way of absorbing, adopting, and soaking up vocabulary from any other languages in the process of its spreading. The English lexicon was adaptable to facilitate Malay, Hindi, Arabic and Spanish words through the effect of colonization and trade.

Two stages known as imperialism and neo-imperialism were responsible for the spread and development of English as a global language. The first stage, the imperialism, was the result of the empire building of Britain. The second stage, the neo-imperialism, was the result of the cultural, political, and economical superiority of the USA. According to Phillipson (1992, p. 182), after World-War II, the administrators and the leaders of the colonized countries maintained the effect of English language by selecting the language as an official or national language as they were the products of colonial education. Further, Phillipson points out that the primary aim of education in the colonies became the acquisition of the English language, and the future academic and financial success of those living in colonized countries came to depend mainly on their English language ability.

The importance of English language in the present context has been highlighted by some scholars such as Graddol (1997, p.3) and Baker & Wright (2006, p.12). The emphasis that English is an 'exceptional' language as the language is preferred and chosen for education, occupation and communication. Countries in the world choose English as one of the compulsory subjects in the school education. Further, English is taught in universities as a supporting or compulsory subject. Since English is used as a lingua franca in communication in the context of economic or business activities, in the international trade, companies require their workers to possess a sound knowledge of English.

The international agencies such as United Nations and its subsidiary organizations, established to support global reconstruction and future governance after the world war, use English as a major working language. It

is estimated that 85% of international organizations now use English as one of their working languages. Further, English is used exclusively in international publications and meetings. Crystal (1997) estimates 99% of European organizations as listed in recent year book of international associations cite English as a working language as opposed to 63% French and 40% German. Technological developments such as Internet has replaced the patterns of communication of world's citizens and the way organizations operate. Clement (2019) pointed out that most popular language used online by the internet users is English and the percentage of the worldwide internet users is 25.2. The share of the Chinese language ranked second which has 19.3 percentage of the internet users worldwide. Hence, English language is used internationally in most of the major disciplines.

## **Results and Discussion**

English language, which is a part of Germanic branch of the Indo-European family, did not solely originate from Britain itself. Though in Britain, people spoke Celtic language initially, due to invasion of the Germanic tribes particularly the Angels whose language was 'Englisc' led to the development of English language in England. The legacy of development of English language is attributed to four periods namely; Old English (before 1100 AD), Middle English ((1100 to 1500 AD), Early modern English ((1500 to 1800 AD), and Late modern English (after 1800 AD). The English language used in these periods was very much different from the language what we encounter today. From the literature, it is clear that most of the words of other languages such as French, Latin etc. have been adapted in the English language what we speak today from the inception. In the Early modern English period, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries can be considered as the Golden Age of English literature. During this era, the invention of printing industry

led to the establishment of a common language and in 1604, the first English dictionary was published. To the spread and development of the English as a global language, the colonial activities, the changes in the social, economic and scientific developments along with military involvements and maritime travel have contributed immensely. Further, another important area for the evolution of English language as described by The English Effect (2013), were the concept of ‘momentum’ of British power in different regions and the ‘adaptability’ of the language by way of absorbing, adopting vocabulary from other languages.

## **Conclusions**

The legacy of the English language can not be solely attributed to the British inhabitants lived in England alone. The invasion of Germanic tribes initiated the establishment of English language and the subsequent conquering of countries by the British across the world as colonies facilitated the development and the spread of English across the world. From the literature, it is understood that English language was initiated with the arrival of Germanic tribes in Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the vocabulary of the other languages crept into English language due to subsequent establishment of British colonies all over the world. However, the evolution of English language is so complex that the primitive English language that existed is almost non-existent today.

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