

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

The English language

1 The global language

If any language can claim to be the international or global language, it is English. There are a lot more people in China and communities in South-East Asia who have a common writing system but they actually speak eight different languages. This is changing fairly rapidly in the 21st century and Mandarin is likely to become more widespread as China's economic power continues to increase but, for the moment, the spread of Chinese speakers around the world is much narrower than that of English speakers.

Native speakers of Spanish can be found in more countries than are native speakers of English. There are some 20 Spanish-speaking nations, mostly in South and Central America, but the number of people learning Spanish as a second language around the world is relatively small.

The special place of English in the world depends on a number of factors:

- the period of British imperialism when English speakers ruled over countries all over the world, including North
- America, the Indian subcontinent, many parts of Africa, Australasia and the Caribbean
- the rise of the United States of America as the greatest economic, military and cultural power on earth
- the dominance of English in technological development, especially the internet.

English is the native language of a relatively few countries, but it is the *lingua franca* (the commonly shared and understood language) in many others. In many multilingual countries English is the language of government and legal documents, and sometimes too of education. Such countries include India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Malaysia and Singapore. It is the language most commonly learned as a second language worldwide. It is the language that people are most likely to have in common in international gatherings of sportspeople, politicians and diplomats, and academics. It is the language in which backpackers from all over the world are most likely to communicate.

This special status of English does not depend on any intrinsic qualities of the language itself. There is a myth that English is easy to learn because its grammar is simple. It is true that, in learning English, you do not need to memorise the arbitrary gender of thousands of nouns or to remember to ensure that your adjectives agree in number and gender with your nouns, but the apparent 'simplicity' of English conceals great difficulties for the learner. Most of the difficulties present no problem to native speakers, but the idiomatic nature of English is of its very nature illogical: why do we *put up with* something rather than *put with up* something? Why can we say *a chair* and *a table* but not *a furniture*? Why is *three blind mice* right but *blind three mice* wrong?

And then there is the spelling system, which has been subjected to so many contradictory influences that it seems to make no sense at all.

It is probably true that English is a fairly easy language to learn a little of, but a very difficult language to speak or write really well. What is quite true is that English is spoken and written very widely around the world – not just in those countries in which native speakers of English are born. As a result, new varieties of English are developing all the time. The days when English belonged only to those who live in England (or its colonies) have long gone.

1 Can you think of any reasons why English has become the global language?

2 What are the positives of having a global language? How might it make life easier?

3 Is there a negative side to having a global language? Explain your answer.

2 Varieties of English

There have always been diverse forms of English. Right at the beginning, the English language was formed from the dialects of three related but different Germanic tribes who had invaded and settled in the country that we know as England. In the many centuries when English was spoken only by people living in the geographical region of England, there were marked differences between the dialects of regional areas. It was possible to tell where someone had been born in England by the nature of their speech – from their accent, their word choice and sometimes even their grammatical use.

During the years of exploration and then imperial expansion, the English language was exported to every corner of the world. English speakers picked up new words wherever they went, and those words became part of the language, but new communities of English speakers were established everywhere. Each community developed its own dialects. We all recognise that someone is an American or a South African or a New Zealander by the way that person speaks. Within communities we recognise different dialects belonging to different social groups. It seems that the English of people of Italian-Australian background may vary in some ways from the English of people of, say, Chinese-Australian background, especially in accent, although not a great deal of research has yet been done on this area. Many Indigenous Australians speak and write standard Australian English in many contexts, but use Aboriginal English within the Indigenous community. Aboriginal English is a distinctive variety of English, with characteristic features of word choice, grammatical structure and pronunciation.

Around the world new languages have developed that blend features of English with words from other languages used in a particular region. These languages are usually spoken by those who have been influenced by English but cannot speak it. A flourishing example is Singlish, a colloquial language widely spoken in Singapore although discouraged by education authorities and regarded as inappropriate in formal situations. Singlish incorporates words and characteristics from a range of languages, including Malay, Cantonese, Tamil, Bengali and Punjabi. Languages like these are called *creoles*, a term that was first used for the languages developed among African-American communities in the southern states of the United States, where English was combined with a mix of words and features from the speakers' original countries.

At one stage there was speculation that, with global communication, we would all end up speaking a kind of North Atlantic English – American English with British overtones. Surprisingly, despite globalisation, there is some evidence that our regional dialects are becoming more definite, not less so. The way Australians and New Zealanders pronounce words today – especially in their use of vowel sounds – is more different today than it was 50 years ago.

- 4 Can you think of any words or phrases that you or your family pronounce differently to your classmates? Where do you think the difference has come from?

3 The history of the English language

The Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes began invading England from the early part of the fifth century. The tribes who had lived in the area for some thousand years and had outlived 500 years of Roman invasion – the Celts – were virtually driven out. They are the ancestors of the people of Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and their Celtic languages are very different from English.

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes spoke closely related languages and over the centuries they developed a common speech that we now know as Old English. Old English was in some ways more like Latin than modern English, as it was heavily inflected: that meant that the relationships between the words in a sentence depended on the endings of those words (or sometimes on a vowel change within the word), rather than on word order. But the few early texts that survive show that the word order that is so important in modern English – the subject-verb-object order – was quite often used. A new wave of invaders arrived in England from 747 onwards. Over the next 200 years lots of Vikings settled, especially in the north of England. They too spoke a Germanic language and had many words in common with the languages of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, but it seems that there was some confusion with inflections. By the time of the Norman Conquest of 1066 – the single biggest event in the history of the English language – Old English was becoming less reliant on inflections and more reliant on word order.

When the Normans invaded, England became bilingual. The invaders spoke Norman French; their subjects spoke English, which was for a long time regarded as a far inferior language. The two groups had to communicate and, over a period of a few hundred years, the extraordinary result was that, by the middle of the 14th century, English was the official language of England. The language of the conquered had won out over the language of the conquerors.

5 Research the origin of the word 'English'. How does it relate to the invasion of Germanic tribes into England?

6 Why was Old English more like Latin than modern English?

English was of course a very different language from what had been spoken in pre-Conquest England. The process of loss of inflections that had begun during the Old English period accelerated in the Middle English period and there was a huge influx of French words into the vocabulary of English. Many of the anomalies of our spelling system also began at this time.

Most scholars date the period of Modern English from the 15th century. Although the language of the 15th and 16th centuries looks quite odd to 21st-century eyes, the basics are in place: the grammar is roughly the same (although we were later to lose the pronouns *thou*, *thee* and *thine*). The introduction of printing had a huge influence on standardisation of the language, as did urbanisation. As London grew in size and economic power, it became the base for a standard English that was the language of the powerful.

The second biggest influence on the history of the English language was the period that began with the age of adventure. As England opened up to the rest of the world, there was the influence of the Renaissance, bringing with it Greek and Latin scholarship and the huge impact of those languages on the vocabulary of English. As English explorers and then empire-builders spread around the world, they both spread the English language and acquired thousands of words from other languages. One of the distinctive features of English is its ability to absorb words from elsewhere.

English continues to absorb words and to invent new words from existing resources in the 21st century.

7 What is a 'loanword'?

8 Investigate the origins of the following words, listing which languages from which they have been borrowed.

- dam
- chemistry
- bully
- coffee
- smorgasbord
- pet
- trousers
- avatar
- balcony
- tea
- alcohol

4 The English spelling system

The invention of printing was the stimulus for the development of standardised spelling and punctuation systems in English. Until that time, writers spelt words the way they sounded – and spelling changed as pronunciation changed. Apart from the efforts in the United States in the 19th century – when Noah Webster conducted a determined campaign to make English spelling more logical – spelling has not changed much in the last four centuries, although pronunciation has changed quite a lot over that time.

While a lot of words in English can be ‘sounded out’ and are easy to learn to spell, there are many others that need to be learnt. Modern campaigns exist to work for reform of spelling, but there are huge difficulties, including the loss of clues to meaning if words like *psychology* and *psychiatry* were spelt the way they sound, losing their connection to the Greek root *psyche*. Most importantly, there are so many different ways of pronouncing English around the world. If we spelt words the way we pronounced them, we would run the risk of being unable to understand each other and so lose the greatest advantage of English.