
ION HOROBIN
How
nglish
Became
English

How English Became English

A Short History of a Global Language

SIMON HOROBIN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2016

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015952191

ISBN 978–0–19–875427–5

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix
List of Illustrations xi

1. What is English? 1
2. Origins 14
3. Authorities 39
4. Standards 72
5. Varieties 99
6. Global Englishes 131
7. Why Do We Care? 152

Further Reading 167
Index 171

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to Andrea Keegan who commissioned this book and to anonymous reviewers for their incisive comments on previous drafts. I also wish to thank Jenny Nugee, who provided much helpful guidance throughout the writing process. I am grateful to the President and Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford, for permission to reproduce MS lat. 105, and to Christine Ferdinand and James Fishwick for their assistance. This book has benefited from the insights and advice of numerous friends and colleagues; in particular I wish to thank Deborah Cameron, who read the entire book in draft and made many helpful suggestions, Lynda Mugglestone, Charlotte Brewer, Jeremy Smith, David Crystal, Tim Machan, and Seth Lerer. I am also grateful to my students, especially Lucy Diver, Rosie Durkin, John Phipps, Molly Janz, Alice Richardson, Luc Rosenberg, Jack Solloway, Alice Theobald, and Alice Troy-Donovan, for many fruitful discussions of the issues raised here while I was writing this book. I alone remain responsible for the opinions and for any inaccuracies that remain.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1 The future of English? CartoonStock.com. 12

2 The Indo-European language family tree. 16

3 A manuscript of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Magdalen College, Oxford, MS lat. 105, f. 99r. The President and Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford. 22

4 The language of medicine. CartoonStock.com. 34

5 The greengrocer's apostrophe. Duncan Cumming. 37

6 The problem of literally. *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast. 44

7 The ultimate authority? H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926), title page. Public Domain. 51

8 List of top sources cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition. OED.com. 59

9 Dialect map: words used to refer to a cow-shed in England and Wales. a NATCECT publication, courtesy of the University of Sheffield. 115

10 Calvin and Hobbes on 'verbing'. Calvin and Hobbes © 1993 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of Universal Uclick. All rights reserved. 125

11 Kachru's model of global Englishes. Public Domain. 139

12 Advertisement in Singlish. Pulai Ubin, Singapore. Michael Elleray/Wikimedia. 143

13 Fewer or less? *The New Yorker*, Condé Nast. 157

1

What is English?

> ENGLISH. *adj*.
> Belonging to England; thence English is the language of England.
>
> Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

Samuel Johnson's straightforward identification of English as the language of England hardly begins to capture the diversity and complexity of the language's use in the twenty-first century; English today is spoken by approximately 450 million people all over the world. But the language used by its many speakers varies, in pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, to such an extent that it seems necessary to ask whether these people can all be considered to be speaking English. Even more people speak English as a second language, with figures varying from 1 billion to 1.5 billion people, and with considerably greater levels of linguistic divergence. Are all these people speaking the same language, or are we witnessing the emergence of new Englishes? Since more than half of the world's native English speakers live in the USA, we might wonder whether the balance of power has shifted such that to speak 'English'

today is to speak General American rather than Standard British English. Does English no longer 'belong to England', as Dr Johnson confidently claimed, but rather to the USA, or to everyone who wishes to employ it?

English has been in use for 1,500 years; during that time it has changed to such an extent that the form of the language used by the Anglo-Saxons is unrecognizable to contemporary English speakers. Today we refer to this language as Old English, but should we perhaps think of it as a different language altogether? Modern Italian is descended from the Latin spoken by the Romans, but these are considered to be different languages. Might that not also be true of Old English and Modern English?

The following sections contain five different translations of the same passage from the New Testament (Luke 15: 11–16). Despite being very different, each of these has a claim to represent a kind of English. But are they all forms of English, or different languages in their own right? What criteria should we apply when attempting to make such distinctions?

Old English

He cwæð: soðlice sum man hæfde twegen suna. þa cwæð se yldra to his fæder; Fæder. syle me minne dæl minre æhte þe me to gebyreð: þa dælde he him his æhte; þa æfter feawa dagum ealle his þing gegaderude se gingra sunu: and ferde wræclice on feorlen rice. and forspilde þar his æhta lybbende on his gælsan; þa he hig hæfde ealle amyrrede þa wearð mycel hunger on þam rice and he wearð wædla; þa

> *ferde he and folgude anum burhsittendan men þæs rices ða sende he hine to his tune þæt he heolde his swyn; þa gewilnode he his wambe gefyllan of þam biencoddun þe ða swyn æton. and him man ne sealde.*

Given how different the language of this extract is from Modern English, you may be wondering how it could be considered a form of English at all. It is taken from a translation into Old English—the scholarly term that refers to the language used by the Germanic tribes who invaded and settled in Britain in the fifth century AD up to the Norman Conquest in 1066. But, while its vocabulary may appear quite unrelated to that of Modern English, this is in part the consequence of a different spelling system—including the letters 'þ' 'thorn', 'æ' 'ash', and 'ð' 'eth', which are no longer used in English. If we look closely, we can spot a number of familiar words, such as *sunu*, *fæder*, and *tune*, which are the ancestors of Modern English *son*, *father*, and *town*. Other words are harder to recognize, but are nevertheless demonstrably the root of the Modern English equivalent: *mycel* 'much', *twegen* 'two', *dæl* 'dole'. All of these are English words, yet their spellings and pronunciations have changed so that we no longer immediately recognize them as such.

In other cases, it is not just the spelling and pronunciation that have changed. The word *sylle* is the origin of our Modern English word *sell*, but here it means 'give'; similarly, *wambe* is Modern English *womb*, but here it refers to the stomach. If we turn from the lexical, or content, words in the passage to its grammatical items—prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions—we find that many are identical to

their Modern English equivalents: *he*, *him*, *his*, *me*, *and*, *to*. But, despite these clear correspondences, this Old English extract remains significantly different from Modern English, to the extent that contemporary speakers of English are unable to read it without special study.

Early Modern English

> *And hee said, A certaine man had two sonnes: And the yonger of them said to his father, Father, giue me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he diuided vnto them his liuing. And not many dayes after, the yonger sonne gathered al together, and tooke his iourney into a farre countrey, and there wasted his substance with riotous liuing. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he beganne to be in want. And he went and ioyned himselfe to a citizen of that countrey, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would faine haue filled his belly with the huskes that the swine did eate: & no man gaue vnto him.*

This second example, taken from the Authorized, or King James, Version of the Bible published in 1611, is much closer to Modern English. Considering it was written four hundred years ago, it is striking how easy it is for a contemporary English speaker to understand. Although some of the vocabulary sounds old-fashioned, most of the words are still in use, albeit not always with the same meaning. Words like *liuing*, *substance*, *swine*, *fain*, and *vnto* lend the passage an archaic and formal feel, but present few barriers to comprehension. By contrast, the use of the word *belly*

strikes a discordant note, since it seems oddly colloquial for such a serious context.

The seemingly random sprinkling of 'e's at the ends of words contributes to the olde Englishe appearance; other spelling differences include the interchangeable use of 'u' and 'v'—compare *gaue* and *vnto*—and 'i' where Modern English employs 'j', *iourney*—the Modern English distribution of i/j and u/v was not established until the eighteenth century. Grammatical distinctions are minor; instead of *did eat*, Modern English would now say *ate*. The syntax of the passage varies from Modern English translations in preferring a paratactic sentence structure—one that begins each new sentence with the conjunction *and*—a device that is condemned by modern style guides as clumsy and childish.

Scots

> *This, tae, he said tae them: 'There wis aince a man hed twa sons; an ae day the yung son said til him, "Faither, gie me the faa-share o your haudin at I hae a richt til". Sae the faither haufed his haudin atweesh his twa sons. No lang efterhin the yung son niffert the haill o his portion for siller, an fuir awa furth til a faur-aff kintra, whaur he sperfelt his siller livin the life o a weirdless waister. Efter he hed gane throu the haill o it, a fell faimin brak out i yon laund, an he faund himsel in unco mister. Sae he gaed an hired wi an indwaller i that kintra, an the man gied him the wark o tentin his swine outbye i the fields. Gledlie wad he panged his wame wi the huils at they maitit the swine wi, but naebodie gied him a haet'.*

This third version is much less clearly recognizable as a form of English; it is in fact a translation into Modern Scots by William Laughton Lorimer, published in 1983. But, as with the Old English translation, many of the most basic words—grammatical items and common nouns—are identical to those of Modern English: *this*, *he*, *said*, *them*, *there*, *man*, *your*, *and*, *the*, and so on. Other words are evidently related to Modern English equivalents, once we make allowance for the different spelling: *richt* 'right', *faither* 'father', *gie* 'give', *twa* 'two', *aince* 'once', *lang* 'long'. Some of these reflect different spelling conventions, while others point to alternative pronunciations.

But this is not simply English with an accent, since not all differences can be explained as the result of spelling and pronunciation changes. Some of the words have no recognizable English equivalent. This is the result of Scots borrowing words from other languages, such as *niffert* 'exchanged', from Old Norse, *sperfelt* 'scattered', from Old French, and *panged* 'stuffed', from Middle Dutch. The word *fell* 'cruel' (related to the word *felon*) does survive into Modern English, but only in the phrase *one fell swoop*—often mistakenly confused with *foul*.

As well as these lexical differences there are grammatical distinctions, such as the use of the demonstrative pronoun *yon*, not found in Standard English. Even the innocuous preposition *til* 'to', a borrowing from Old Norse, attests to a different history for this variety; although *til* is not used in Standard English, it is still found in northern dialects of English, testifying to the close historical relationship between Scots and northern English. While Scots and

English evidently have much in common, Scots is more intimately connected to the northern English dialects rather than its standard form. Other differences set Scots apart from English entirely, testifying to its long history as an independent language.

Tok Pisin

> *Na Jisas i tok moa olsem, 'Wanpela man i gat tupela pikinini man. Na namba 2 pikinini i tokim papa olsem, "Papa, mi ting long olgeta samting yu laik tilim long mi wantaim brata bilong mi. Hap bilong mi, mi laik bai yu givim long mi nau". Orait papa i tilim olgeta samting bilong en i go long tupela. I no longtaim, na dispela namba 2 pikinini i bungim olgeta samting bilong en na i salim long ol man. Na em i kisim mani na i go i stap long wanpela longwe ples. Em i stap long dispela ples, na em i mekim ol kain kain hambak pasin, na olgeta mani bilong en i pinis. Na taim olgeta mani bilong en i pinis, taim bilong bikpela hangre i kamap long dispela ples. Na em i no gat wanpela samting. Olsem na em i go kisim wok long wanpela man bilong dispela ples. Na dispela man i salim em i go long banis pik bilong en bilong lukautim ol pik. Em i lukim ol pik i kaikai ol skin bilong bin, na em i gat bikpela laik tru long kisim sampela na pulapim bel bilong en. Tasol i no gat wanpela man i givim kaikai long em'.*

This fourth extract is undoubtedly the hardest to justify as an example of English, since it appears to bear few similarities to the language spoken today. The translation is in Tok Pisin, one of three official languages spoken in Papua

New Guinea. But, while the language of this extract may appear entirely foreign, some of the grammatical and core lexical items are those of Modern English: *man*, *yu*, *mi*, *bilong*, *gat*, *samting*, albeit with differences in spelling indicative of alternative pronunciations. There are other words that, although their English origin is no longer evident, are derived from Modern English equivalents; the word *pela*, for instance, originates in the English word *fellow*. But, while such connections point to a shared heritage, the role of the word *pela* sets Tok Pisin apart from English. In Tok Pisin, *pela* functions as a grammatical ending added to nouns to mark when they are plural, demonstrating a major difference in the grammatical structures of Tok Pisin and English.

The reason for the connections we have observed is that Tok Pisin is an English-language creole—a term used to refer to a simplified version of English mixed with one or more other languages, employed by non-native speakers as a lingua franca (a language used as a means of communication by speakers of different languages). Are English language creoles like Tok Pisin additional forms of English, or languages in their own right? Given their reduced vocabulary and simplified grammar, is it appropriate to think of creoles, and the more basic form known as a pidgin, as languages at all? Are they better considered as evidence of idiosyncratic and failed attempts to acquire English, similar to the crude efforts found in the spam emails offering highly lucrative business proposals that flood our inboxes?

Modern English

> *Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate". So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything'.*

This final example may seem uncontroversial, since it is self-evidently a translation into standard Modern English. But, while we call this English, many of the key terms it employs, *estate*, *property*, *divided*, *spent*, *famine*, *country*, *citizen*, and *stomach*, are borrowings from other languages. Since English includes numerous loanwords of this kind, many of which have been in use for centuries, this reliance upon foreign words may appear entirely unobjectionable. Yet the extent to which the English language should rely on words borrowed from foreign sources, rather than preferring ones of Old English origin, has been hotly debated for centuries, and continues to be contested today by proponents of pure English.

Attempts to create a purer form of English can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Sir John Cheke (1514–1557), noted linguist and Professor of Greek at Cambridge University, was so determined that the English tongue should be preserved 'pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of

other tunges' that he produced a translation of the gospel of St Matthew using only native words, forcing him to coin neologisms ('new words') such as *mooned* 'lunatic', *hundreder* 'centurion', and *crossed* 'crucified'. This policy recalls an Old English practice in which Latin words like *discipulus* were rendered using native formations like *leorningcniht*, or 'learning-follower', rather than by borrowing the Latin word, as Modern English does with *disciple*.

Attempts to fashion a purer form of literary English can be seen in the poetry of Edmund Spenser in the sixteenth century and William Barnes in the nineteenth century. Barnes' arguments against borrowing were primarily directed at perspicuity and ease of understanding—although his proposed replacements, such as *two-horned rede-ship* 'dilemma', *one-head thing-name* 'proper noun', and *fore-begged thought-putting* 'hypothetical proposition', were arguably no less opaque. Yet the debate about linguistic purity cannot be divorced from one of nationalism; for Barnes, borrowing, or what he dismissively referred to as 'Gallicizing, Latinizing, and Hellenizing', was a 'proof of national inferiority'—an admission that English was insufficient for its purposes and must rely on other languages to make good its weaknesses.

The concern with clarity was taken up by George Orwell in his 1945 essay, 'Politics and the English Language'. Orwell lamented the way bad writers are 'haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones'. Today's plain English movements continue to campaign for the use of straightforward words in place of pompous jargon—frequently a case of preferring a native word over a foreign borrowing.

What is the status of foreign words in English today? Should we be restricting the number of words adopted from other languages? Are foreign words corrupting the purity of the English tongue, leaving it impoverished and capable only of unintelligible gobbledygook, or do borrowed words add to the diversity and richness of English?

I might have added a further version to the translations of the Bible quoted in the previous sections: one rendered into text speech by the Bible Society of Australia. Commissioned in 2005 in order to make the Bible more accessible to young people and to harness new technology to facilitate distribution, this version employs the abbreviations typical of SMS texting. It opens: 'In da Bginnin God cre8d da heavens & da earth.' Does the prevalence of this kind of writing herald the emergence of a new kind of English, or are such creative reworkings merely a passing fad? Is this an acceptable form of communication, or a corruption of correct English spelling and grammar? By giving text speech legitimacy in this way, are we accepting lower standards of literacy, and thereby condemning future generations to a lifetime of underachievement? Or is this how we will all be writing English in the future, as digital media become increasingly central to learning and communication? (See Figure 1).

Each of these translations raises different questions about the status of the English language, its linguistic forebears, and progeny. To answer these questions, the following chapters will look back at where English came from, and how it has developed into the language used throughout the world today. As the balance of power shifts from the traditional authorities—dictionaries, style guides, and the

Figure 1 The future of English?

British upper classes—we will consider what the future holds for Standard British English. Will it retain its status as a prestige variety of English, recognized and valued throughout the world, or will other regional standards challenge its position? Will the future see more pidginization, as compromise varieties like Euro English emerge, forged in the boardrooms of international business and the corridors of the European parliament? As American English increases its dominance, will it come to replace British English, or will the two languages develop independently, so that George Bernard Shaw's quip about England and the USA being 'separated by a common language' will become truer than he imagined?

2

Origins

Where does the English language come from? Since there are many correspondences between Modern English and Modern French—think of common words like *money*, *fruit*, *chamber*, *table*—it is often thought that the two languages are closely related. Since French is a Romance language, one derived from Latin, it is presumed that English is from the same source. This assumption gains support from the large number of English words of Latin origin; common words like *village*, *picture*, and *figure* all descend from Latin. But these correspondences relate to individual words rather than grammatical structure, and consequently are of less significance when tracing the origins of a language.

While it is true that a language inherits much of its vocabulary from earlier stages in its history, it is also common for words to be borrowed from other, unrelated, languages. Modern English includes words from a variety of different languages, such as *tea* (Chinese), *curry* (Tamil), *sugar* (Arabic), but these words are the result of later contact through trade rather than genetic inheritance. Such words may give the appearance of a genetic affiliation, but, to determine whether such correspondences are indicative of