

Why is English so complicated?

An approach to English word formation

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Abstract: This paper shows how English is so difficultly understood and introduces the ways that English is formed.

Keywords: Approach, word formation, process, English

1. Introduction

One of the most common sources of new words in English is the process, simply labeled borrowing, that is, the taking over of words from other language. Throughout its history, the English language has adapted a vast number of loanwords from other languages, including ‘alcohol’ (Arab), ‘boss’ (Dutch), ‘croissant’ (French), ‘piano’ (Italy), ‘pretzel’ (German), ‘robot’ (Czech), ‘tycoon’ (Japan), ‘yogurt’ (Turkish), ‘zebra’ (Bantu), ...

For the above instances, it is not sufficient to title the term ‘borrowings’. Yet we have to observe it in many aspects or angles so that we can and have a considerable understanding. Especially, the cultural aspects should be focused on because culture is only shown through language explicitly and implicitly. For example, when one tribe entered England, the culture, to some extent, affected on the English culture in many social fields as: culture, education, art, politics, economy,

Owing to the limit of time and knowledge in this field, the writer himself thinks that this paper should be considered as a reference document for people who are interested in this. In addition, the paper actually shows a great attempt of the writer to deal with this topic and this proves at least but not last that this paper is worth for further studying and making as a reference.

2. Content:

To deal with this topic, we should go through for some pre-requisites, then discuss the etymological development of English vocabulary, and finally, we shall discuss the creation of new words before outlining the most important characteristics of modern English vocabulary

2.1. The origin of English

The 5000 or so languages of the world can be grouped into about 300 language families, on the basis of similarities in their basic word stock and grammars. One of these families, the Indo-European includes most of the languages of Europe, the Near East and North India. One branch of the Indo-European family is called Italic (from which Latin and later the Romance languages developed). Another is called Germanic and West Germanic which, in turn, developed into modern German, Dutch, Frisian, and English.

** How English came to England.*

The first people known to have inhabited the land that was later to become England were Celts. They are presumed to have come to the island around the middle of the 5th millennium BB. Their languages were yet another branch of the Indo-European language family.

** The name of the language.*

The Germanic invaders referred to the native Celts as Wealas (foreigners) from which the name ‘Welsh’ is derived. The Celts called the invaders ‘Sassenachs’ ‘Saxon’s, regardless of their specific tribes, a practice which was followed by the early Latin writers. By the end of the 6th century, however, the term Angli ‘Angles’ was in use. The word ‘Englaland’ (land of Angels), which later gave ‘England’, did not appear until the beginning of the 10th century.

2.2. Historical development of English vocabulary

We shall discuss in turn the Old, Middle, Early Modern and Modern periods, with special emphasis on their perspective characteristics at the lexical level. We shall also highlight the major contributions of each period to the development of English lexis as a whole.

** The Old English period (450-1066)*

The first Old English (OE) manuscripts were simply a few scattered inscriptions written around the fifth and sixth centuries in the runic alphabet brought in by the Anglo-Saxons. These scattered inscriptions give very little information in the language. The literary began only after the arrival of Christian missionaries from Rome in AD 597.

In most general terms, if we allow for the unfamiliar spelling and the unexpected inflections, we still notice a marked difference between the words used in prose are very close to Modern English, words in poetic texts are different. In addition, there are many differences between the way vocabulary was used in OE and the way it is used today. First, the Anglo-Saxon preference for expressions that are synonymous, far exceeds that found in Modern English, as does their ingenuity in the construction of compound. Secondly, the absence of a wide-ranging vocabulary of loan words also forces them to rely more on word formation processes based on native elements. Thirdly, the latter period of OE was characterized by the introduction of number of ‘loan-translation’ (or calques).

** The Middle English period (1066- 1500)*

The Middle English period has a much richer documentation than is found in OE. As Crystal (1995: 34) explains, ‘this is partly due to the fact that the newly centralized monarchy commissioned national and local surveys which resulted in a marked increase in the number of public and private documents.

In this period, Middle English poetry was influenced by French literary tradition both in content and style. Much of the earlier Middle English literature is of unknown authorship, but by the end of this period the situation had gradually changed.

Moreover, Middle English is particularly characterized by intensive and extensive borrowing from other languages, especially the French due to the Norman Conquest.

** Early Modern English (1500-1800)*

The transition from Middle English to Modern English would be too abrupt without the recognition of an Early Modern English period. However, there is no consensus about the beginning of this transitional period. Some consider an early date, around 1400 or 1450, others a later date, around 1500, to mark its beginning.

The period encompasses the ‘Renaissance’ which runs from the middle of the 15th century until around

1650. It is characterized by a renewed interest in the classical languages and literatures and by major developments in the sciences and arts. It includes the Protestant Reformation, important scientific discoveries, and the exploration of Africa, Asia and the Americas. All these factors had a major impact on the English language, especially on its vocabulary.

** The Modern English period (1800-present)*

From the point of view of lexis, Modern English may be characterized by three main features: the unprecedented growth of scientific vocabulary, the assertion of American English as a dominant variety of the language, and the emergence of other varieties known as “New English”.

English scientific and technical vocabulary has been growing steadily since the Renaissance. But the 19th century saw an unprecedented growth in this domain, as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the subsequent period of scientific exploration and discovery.

2.3. The process of borrowing

By definition, there is a sense in which neither term is really appropriate, on the grounds that the receiving languages never return the borrowed word (Crystal 1955:126) “English may be considered an insatiable borrower, in the sense that while other language take special measures to exclude foreign words from their lexicons, English seem to have welcomed such words throughout its history. For example: “Chess” (Middle French ← Arabic ← Persian (king)).

** Latin words in English*

In this period, the Anglo-Saxons must have encountered Latin as used by the continental Roman armies, but only a few words have subsequently come into English as a result of these early contacts. In England, some early borrowings were concerned with the military domain, commerce and agriculture. Here, most of the Latin borrowings in this period were professional or technical terms, belonging to fields such as religion, law and literature, scholastic activities and sciences in general.

The simultaneous borrowings of French and Latin words led to a highly distinctive feature of modern English vocabulary: sets of three items, all expressing the same fundamental notion but differing slightly in meaning or style. For example: kingly, royal, regal, rise, mount, ascend...

** Scandinavian loanwords in English*

The second major influence on English lexis

came as a result of the Viking raids on Britain, which begin in AD 787 and continued at intervals for some 200 years. The linguistic effect on this prolonged period of contact between the Anglo-Saxons and the Danish settlers was threefold. First, a large number of settlements with Danish names appeared in English. Secondly, there was a marked increase in personal names of Scandinavian origin. And finally, many general words entered the language and became part of common English vocabulary.

With the close cultural relationships mentioned above for so long, we would expect extensive borrowing. However, most of the Scandinavian words in Old English did not actually occur in written records until the Middle English period.

** Greek loans words.*

As a classical language, Greek provided English as well as other European languages, with a considerable number of technical terms in all branches of human knowledge. Some Greek words were borrowed via Latin and French, some were derived from Greek and Latin elements while others were taken directly from Greek.

Many of the Greek loan words were considerable learned, and some still are but others have passed into the stock of more or less everyday vocabulary.

** French loanwords.*

Borrowing from French has occurred ever since the Middle Age, although not always on the same scale. Before 1066, there were close contacts between the English and the French cultures following the exile to Normandy of Edward the Confessor.

As the period progressed, the influence of French vocabulary on English became increasingly noticeable. It is estimated that by the end of the 13th century, some 100,000 French words had come into English. These words were in part to do with law and administration, but they also included words from fields such as medicine, arts fashion and every day life.

In general, French words borrowed since the 7th century are less completely naturalized than other loans (amateur,...). Later borrowings from French also reflect French dominance in the spheres of fashion, lifestyle, arts and sciences (gown, luxury, romance, tragedy,...).

** German and Dutch loans*

From the Middle Age on, commercial relationships

have existed between Flemish, Dutch and others forms of Low German. Because of the eminence of the Dutch is seafaring activities, their languages has contributed many nautical terms to English (bowline, yacht,...). The Dutch and Flemish were also famous for their cloth making and associated commercial activities.

When compared to Low German, High German has had comparatively little impact on English. Words have been borrowed in specialists fields such as geology and mineralogy (cobalt, quartz, zinc...) and some food and drink terms have accompanied their items (noodle,...).

Conclusion

The historical aspect of English really encompasses more than the three stages of development just under consideration. English has what might be called a prehistory as well. As we have seen, our language did not simply spring into existence; it was brought from the Continent by Germanic tribes who had no form of writing and hence left no records. However, they have had somehow to reconstruct what that language was like in its lexicon, phonology, grammar, and semantics as best they can through sophisticated techniques of comparison developed chiefly during the last century.

Because ancient and modern languages like Old Norse and Gothic or Icelandic and Norwegian have points in common with Old English and Old High German or Dutch and English that they do not share with French or Russian, it is clear that there was an earlier unrecorded language that can be called simply Germanic and that must be reconstructed in the same way.

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