

*Muhamed Pašanbegović, prof.*

## MAJOR PERIODS OF BORROWING WORDS FROM OTHER LANGUAGES IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

### *Summary*

This paper presents a short overview of the history of the English language and its expansion through borrowing of words from other languages. The borrowed words are referred to as 'loanwords'. Unlike any other language, English vocabulary consists of 70% 'loan words'.

The history of English and thus 'borrowing' is divided into four periods: Old English Period (500-1100), Middle English Period (1100-1500), Early Modern English Period (1500-1800) and Late Modern English Period (1800-present). Each of the four periods is discussed in terms of the influential languages that dominated these periods and their contribution to the development of the English language.

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The practice of taking a word from a foreign language and introducing it into another is called borrowing. The borrowed word is referred to as a 'loanword'. This is not a modern phenomenon brought about by globalization or the virtual disappearance of borders, as we see in the example of the European Union, but it is something that has taken place whenever different language speaking peoples or communities came into contact with each other.

In comparison with many other languages the vocabulary of English is of very diverse origin. Unlike any other language, English vocabulary consists of 70% 'loan words'. If we consider the fact that the Oxford Dictionary has over 500,000 entries, that means that around 350,000 words in English have been borrowed from other languages. When did this borrowing begin? Did borrowing occur as an isolated linguistic phenomenon or were

other extralinguistic factors involved? When was borrowing of words from other languages most intense? Does borrowing still occur and to what extent?

The history of borrowing begins in approximately 449 AD with the arrival of West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark. These Germanic invaders included the tribes of Angles (whose name is the source of the words England and English), Saxons and Jutes. The invasion of England by the Germanic tribes ushered in the first of the four conventional periods of the history of English, the Anglo-Saxon or the Old English Period, which extended from 500-1100 AD. The invaders pushed the Celtic-speaking inhabitants of the present-day England into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, leaving behind a few Celtic words.

Indeed, the number of Celtic words taken into English in the whole of its history has been very small. The names of some English towns were taken over from the Celts, for example London and Leeds. Rivers often have Celtic names: Avon and Ouse are Celtic words for 'water' and 'stream'; Derwent, Darent, and Dart are all forms of the British name for 'oak river'; the Thames is the 'dark river'; while Trent apparently means 'trespasser', that is, a river liable to flooding.<sup>1</sup>

The failure of Celtic to influence Old English is largely do to the fact that the Celts were displaced from what is today England, and the small number of them that remained living among the Anglo-Saxons couldn't hope to exert much influence on English. After all, they were the conquered people "whose language had no prestige compared with that of the conquerors, and the Anglo-Saxons had settled in such large numbers that there could be no question of their absorption by the Celts."<sup>2</sup>

Little is known about the Anglo-Saxons until after their conversion to Christianity in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century. The missionaries from Rome carried out the conversion to Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1993) p. 101

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102

Conversion to Christianity introduced two things to Old English: writing and loanwords. However, one estimate is that only 3% of Old English vocabulary consisted of loanwords. Most of these words came from Latin, "given the fact that religious texts were written in Latin and the early Christian missionaries were influential in spreading literacy."<sup>3</sup> They introduced around 450 words, all of them having to do with the Church (e.g. *altar, angel, paradise, nun, psalm, master, disciple*). A few words came from Greek (*devil, church*) and some from Celtic (*bin, dun, brock*).

By the late 8<sup>th</sup> century the Scandinavian Vikings invaded England, and by the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century they had conquered almost half of the territory of England. The Vikings concluded their settlement in England by the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The similarity between the Scandinavian languages (Old Norse and Old Danish) and Anglo-Saxon English made it easy for many words to be adopted into the English vocabulary:

Old English and Old Norse were still reasonably similar, and Englishmen and Danes could probably understand each other, and pick up each other's language, without too much difficulty. In later Old English Period we must visualize various bilingual situations. There would be Englishmen speaking Old Norse, and Danes speaking Old English, and when they didn't know a word in the other language they would use a word from their own...And no doubt there were children of mixed marriages...Thus great mixing took place between the two languages.<sup>4</sup>

A great many words of Scandinavian origin (about 1,800) have survived into present day English: (*band, bull, call, die, egg, get, guess, leg, sister, take*). Also, some of the most important grammatical words are also of Scandinavian origin, (*they, their, them*).

The next period in the history of English, which extended from after the Norman invasion and up to the year 1500, is known

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Culpeper, *History of English* (Routledge, 1997), p. 24

<sup>4</sup> Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (New York, 1993), p. 130

as the Middle English Period. When William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England in 1066, his invasion, unlike the previous two, did not involve a massive migration of people. This invasion primarily involved the imposition of a Norman upper class. The rulers of Normandy had originally been Scandinavian Vikings, who occupied parts of northern France. In 912 they were recognized by the French crown. After a few generations the Scandinavian Vikings abandoned their language and took up French. Less than forty years after the Norman invasion a vast number of original English aristocrats were no longer in possession of their lands, and by 1100 AD overwhelming majority of England's bishops and abbots were Normans. This meant that French became the language of the ruling class and English remained the language of the ruled. For the next 300 years French remained the prestige language in England. The following comment, found in the Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester, best describes the status of those who spoke French and those who didn't:

Thus came England into Normandy's hand:  
and the Normans then knew how to speak  
only their own language, and spoke French as  
they did at home, and also had their children  
taught it, so that noblemen of this land, that  
come of their stock, all keep to the same  
speech that they received from them; for  
unless a man knows French, people make  
little account of him. But low men keep to  
English, and to their own language still. I  
think that in the whole world there are no  
countries that do not keep to their own  
language, except England alone. But people  
know well that it is good to master both,  
because the more a man knows the more  
honored he is.<sup>5</sup>

During the Middle English Period over 10,000 words were adopted from French. Most of these words came from areas such as religion (abbot, cardinal, confession, heresy), law (accuse, convict,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 136

crime, evidence, judge, jury, pardon, statute), education (college, dean, grammar, noun, study, subject, university), medicine (cure, disease, drug, plague, poison, powder), military (army, battle, capture, enemy, retreat, soldier). The widespread use of French Middle English can be seen from looking at the most famous example of Middle English - Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in which, "discounting proper names, there are 39 words of French origin in the first 43 lines of the Prologue."<sup>6</sup> However, French was not the only language from which the loan words came into English. During the Middle English Period trade and the Crusades led to contacts with the Middle East and thus borrowing of Arabic words. Once again, Chaucer was the first to use many Arabic words. Since Chaucer was deeply interested in medieval science and philosophy and used his acquired knowledge in these fields in his works, including his Treatise on the Astrolabe, written in 1391. Some of the Arabic loanwords used in Chaucer's words include: almanac, almury, nadir, alkali, tartar, satin, jupon, fers, checkmate, fen, ribibe. Most of the Arabic words were loaned through French since, as mentioned earlier, French was the language of the educated class in England. However, beginning in the mid 14th century the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. In 1362 the Statute of Pleading was adopted, making English the language of the courts. English also began to be used in Parliament.

While French had exerted a powerful influence on the English language during the Middle English Period, it was Latin that dominated the Early Modern English Period (1500-1800). The new waves of loanwords were brought into the English language thanks to the revival of classical works and the advent of the printing press. In 1476 William Caxton set up the first printing press in England. Books became cheaper and as a result, literacy became more common. In order to make the texts more widely available, translation of works from Latin became common. However, those who translated from Latin often had trouble finding English equivalents for many of the Latin words. One simple solution was to use the Latin words. As a result, by the year 1700 around 13,000 new loanwords entered the English language from Latin. Some of the examples of Latin loanwords include *absurdity*, *benefit*, *exist*, *external*, *obstruction*, *relevant*, *vacuum*, *virus*, *fact*,

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<sup>6</sup> W.F. Bolton and David Crystal, *The English Language* (London, 1993), p. 169

*exact and eradicate*. This period also saw the printing of the first English dictionary in 1604.

The borrowing from Latin, as well as Greek, continued into the Late-Modern English Period (1800-Present), with the influx of new loanwords steadily increasing. The influx of new loanwords in the Late-Modern English was resulted by two historical factors. The first was the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the technological society. The second was the British Empire. The first factor necessitated new words for things and ideas that were not previously encountered and the second factor saw the British adopt a great number of foreign words. This was not surprising since the British Empire, at its height, ruled one quarter of the earth's surface. During the time of the British Empire virtually every language on earth made its contribution to the development of English, from American Indian languages (moccasin) to Arabic (sultan, sheikh, hashish, harem).

More recently English has gone global and as a result it has come into contact with languages right round the world. As a consequence, English is no longer borrowing from Classical languages, but has turned to European, African and other languages and "some studies suggest that Japanese accounts for 8% of borrowings in the last fifty years, and African languages for 6%. Some examples of vast contributions to English include the following: Chinese (ketchup, typhoon), Eskimo (kayak, igloo), Hawaiian (hula, ukulele), Hebrew (kosher, kibbutz), Hindustani (guru, pundit), Japanese (tycoon, judo, karate), Persian (shah, dervish, divan, caravan, bazaar), Polynesian (taboo, tattoo), Turkish (yoghourt, kiosk, fez).<sup>7</sup>

Since the number of those wishing to learn English is increasing every day and since English has reached every corner of the world, it is very likely that the practice of borrowing will extend to languages that have not been a source of 'loanwords' but will make their contribution to English.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Culpeper, *History of English* (Routledge, 1997), pp. 25-26

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## **GLAVNA RAZDOBLJA POSUĐIVANJA RIJEČI IZ DRUGIH JEZIKA U HISTORIJI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA**

### *Sažetak*

Ovaj rad predstavlja kratak pregled historije engleskog jezika i njegovo širenje kroz posuđivanje riječi iz drugih jezika. Ovaj pregled počinje sa osvrtom na dolazak Anglo-Saksonaca i prati razvijanje engleskog jezika od 5. stoljeća pa nadalje.

Historija engleskog jezika je podijeljena u četiri perioda: staro-engleski period (500-1100), srednjo-engleski period (1100-1500), rani moderno-engleski period (1500-1800) i kasni moderno-engleski period (od 1800. do danas). Svaki od ova četiri perioda je razmatran u pogledu uticajnih jezika koji su dominirali u ovim periodima i njihovom doprinosu engleskom jeziku.

أهم فترات استعارة الكلمات من اللغات الأخرى في تاريخ اللغة  
الإنجليزية  
خلاصة البحث

يعرض هذا البحث ملخصاً لتاريخ اللغة الإنجليزية وتوسعها من خلال استعارة الكلمات من اللغات الأخرى. يبدأ البحث بذكر وصول الأنجلو-ساكسونيين وتطور اللغة الإنجليزية من القرن الخامس فما بعده. ينقسم تاريخ اللغة الإنجليزية إلى أربع مراحل: مرحلة اللغة الإنجليزية القديمة (500-1100)، المرحلة الوسطى للغة الإنجليزية (1100-1500)، بداية مرحلة اللغة الإنجليزية الحديثة (1500-1800)، ومرحلة اللغة الإنجليزية الحديثة (1800 إلى اليوم). درس البحث هذه المراحل كلها من ناحية اللغات التي كانت سائدة فيها وأثرها في اللغة الإنجليزية.