



Forum: Free Express

Topic: The Glorious Messiness of ENGLISH - Robert Macneil

Subject: The Glorious Messiness of ENGLISH - Robert Macneil

Posted by: wolfy

Posted on: 2009/2/27 20:29:16

The Glorious Messiness of ENGLISH

Its tolerance for change represents our deeply rooted ideas of freedom

If you are like most Americans, you probably don't think there is very much that is funny about English. There's too much pain involved in trying to get it right.. But if we who were born to the language have so much trouble, think of the poor foreigners struggling with it.

I have a collection of such efforts:

For instance, the well-intentioned person who placed this sign in a Tokyo hotel: "You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid."

In a Pakistani hotel: "Please leave your values at the front desk."

And my favorite of all time, in a Zurich hotel:

"Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedrooms, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose."

The story of our English language is typically one of mass stealing from other languages. That is why English, today, has an estimated vocabulary of over one million words, while other major languages have far fewer.

French, for example, has only about 75,000 words total, and that includes English expressions like snack bar and hit parade.

The French, however, do not like borrowing foreign words because they think it corrupts their language. The government tries to outlaw words from English and passes decrees saying jumbo jet is not desirable; so they invent a word, gros porteur

French kids are supposed to say balladeur instead of Walkman but they don't.

Walkman is fascinating because it isn't even English.

Strictly speaking, it was invented by the Japanese manufacturers who put two simple English words together to name their product. That doesn't bother us, but it does bother the French. Such is the Glorious messiness of English.

That happy tolerance, that willingness to accept words from anywhere, explains the richness of English and why it has become, to a very real extent, the first truly global language.

How did the language of a small island off the coast of Europe become the language of the planet—more widely spoken and written than any other has ever been?

The history of English is embedded in the first words a child learns about his identity. (I, me, you); possession (mine, yours); the body (eye, nose, mouth); and necessities (food, water);

These words all come from Old English or Anglo-Saxon English, the core of our language. Usually short, crisp and direct, these are words we still use today for the things that really matter to us.

Great speakers often use Old English to arouse our emotions.

For example, during World War II, Winston Churchill made this speech, stirring the courage of his people against Hitler's armies poised to cross the English Channel:

“We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender.”

Virtually every one of these words came from Old English., except the last—surrender, which came from Norman French. Churchill could have said, “We shall never give in,” but it is one of the lovely—and powerful—opportunities of English that a writer can mix, for effort, different words from different backgrounds. Yet, there is something direct to the heart that speaks to us from the earliest words in our language.

When Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 B.C., English did not exist.

The Celts spoke languages that survive today as Welsh, Gaelic and Breton.

Where those languages came from is a mystery, but there is a theory.

Two centuries ago, an English judge in India noticed that several words in Sanskrit closely resembled some words in Greek and Latin. For instance, the Sanskrit word for “father”, pitar, was quite like the Latin word pater.

A systematic study revealed that many modern languages descended from a common parent language, lost to us because nothing was written down.

Identifying similar words, linguists have come up with what they call an Indo-European parent language, spoken until 3500 to 2000 B.C. These people had common words for snow, beech, bee and wolf but no word for sea.

So, some scholars assume they lived somewhere in north-central Europe, where it was cold. Traveling east, some established the languages of India and Pakistan, and others drifted west towards the gentler climates of Europe. Some who made the earliest westward migration became known as the Celts, whom Caesar's legions found in Britain.

Another infusion of words came when Germanic tribes slipped across the North Sea to settle in Britain. Most scholars agree that the Jutes from Jutland (present day Denmark) and the Saxons (from what is now Germany) migrated to the south of Britain, and the Angles (also from Germany) settled in the north and east. Together they formed what we call Anglo-Saxon society.

The Anglo-Saxons passed on to us their farming vocabulary, including sheep, ox, shepherd, earth, swine, wood, field, and work. They must have enjoyed themselves because they also gave us the words glee, laughter, and mirth.

The next big influence on England was Christianity.

Wanting to bring faith to the Angles, Pope Gregory the Great sent monks who built churches and monasteries. This enriched the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary with some 400 to 500 words from Greek and Latin, including angel, disciple, litany, martyr, mass, relic, shrift, shrine, and psalm.

Into this relative peaceful land came the Vikings from Scandinavia, who began raids of plunder and conquest. They also happened to bring to English many words that begin with sk, like sky and skirt. But, Old Norse and English both survived, and so you can rear a child (English) or raise a child (Norse). Other such pairs survive: wish and want, craft and skill, hide and skin. Each such addition gave English more subtlety, more variety.

Another flood of new vocabulary occurred in 1066, when the Normans conquered England. Linguistically the country now has three languages: French for the aristocrats, Latin for the churches, and English for the common people.

In everyday life the Normans ate beef, from the French boeuf.

The English ate ox or cow, the Normans ate venison, the English, deer

But English today has all those words to use.

Religion, law, science and literature were generally conducted in Latin and French, as words like felony, perjury, attorney, bailiff and nobility testify. The word jury sprang from the Norman French word juree, "oath."

With three languages competing, there were sometimes three terms for the same thing. For example, Anglo-Saxon had the word kingly, but after the Normans, three synonyms entered the language: royal, regal, and sovereign. The extraordinary thing was that French did not displace English.

Over three centuries English gradually swallowed French, and by the end of the 15th Century what had developed was a modified, greatly enriched language---Middle English---with about 10,000 borrowed French words.

Around 1476 William Caxton set up a printing press in England and started a communications revolution. Printing brought into English the wealth of new thinking that sprang from the European Renaissance. Translations of Greek and Roman classics were poured onto the printed page, and with them thousands of Latin words like agile, capsule and habitual, and Greek words like catastrophe, lexicon and thermometer.

Since the Renaissance spurred a scientific revolution, English had to accommodate it. New discoveries needed new descriptions, creating words like atmosphere, pneumonia and skeleton.

Galileo and Newton were redefining the natural world, which gave rise to such words like encyclopedia, explain, gravity, paradox, external, and chronology.

Today, we still borrow from Latin and Greek to name new inventions, like video, television, synthesizer, and cyberspace.

All told, some estimate that the Renaissance added another 12,000 words to the English vocabulary. Words came from everywhere. The English word *admiral* came from the Arabic *amir al-bihar*, high leader. *Al-kuhl*, Arabic for antimony powder, became our alcohol. In chess, *checkmate* came from the Persian *shah mat* (The king is dead).

The King James Bible and the plays and poems of Shakespeare gave the English language a currency that it has been spending every since, and the boldness of Elizabethan navigators began the process that carried it all over the known world--- and enriched it in return.

Settlers landed in British North America, and contact with Native Americans introduced wigwam words like *hickory*, *pecan*, *raccoon*, and *opossum*. As well as descriptive words like *totem*, *papoose*, *moccasin*, and *tomahawk*. Expressions such as *play possum*, *bury the hatchet*, and *go on the warpath*, became common.

Later, with the American Revolution, there were two sources of English---American and British. Scholars in Britain worried that the language was out of control, and some wanted to set up an academy to decide which words were proper and which were not.

Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, wanted to make developing a new word a crime as serious as making your own money. Fortunately, the natural instincts of the English-speaking people laughed him aside.

That tolerance for change also represents our deeply rooted ideas of freedom.

Danish scholar Otto Jespersen wrote in 1905, "The English language would not have been what it is if the English had not been for centuries great respecters of the liberties of each individual and if everybody had not been free to strike out new paths for himself."

I like that idea!

Consider that the same cultural soil producing the English language also nourished the great principles of freedom and rights of man in the modern world.

The first shots sprang up in England, and they grew stronger in America.

The English-speaking peoples have defeated all efforts to build fences around their language.

Indeed, our language is not the special preserve of grammarians, language police, teachers, writers, or the intellectual elite. English is, and always has been, the tongue of the common man.

Think of how much powerful idiomatic English has come from poker players, cowboys and jazz musicians. Now, it is arising from computer hackers, rap musicians and even Valley Girls. Some words may be thought beautiful and some ugly; some may live and some may die. BUT, it is all English, and it has always belonged to everyone.