

Shoebox

GRAMMAR



The Origins of English

Ask pretty well anyone in a school, in daily life or even at a university where English originally came from, and most people will look at you strangely as if such a question is so obvious that no-one would even think it was necessary to ask it. If you persisted, they would tell you that English came from *England*, of course, and excuse themselves.

On the surface, such an answer appears to be eminently true and sensible. Most people just accept without too much thought that the language *English* comes from the country *England*, a logical enough assumption since that is the way we name languages, like *Spanish* from Spain and *German* from Germany.

But the story is a lot more interesting than a simple phonetic similarity. In fact, English did *not* originally come from England and, in all my years of asking students and adults where it first originated, *no-one* has given me the correct answer.



Sir William Jones, linguistic superman

Let's begin with a quite amazing English gentleman who started the world thinking¹. Sir William Jones, super linguist, was born in London in 1746. It is reported that he knew Greek, Latin, Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and the basics of Chinese writing while still young, and by the end of his life, had between reasonable and fluent knowledge of forty-one languages.

In the 1780s, as a married Sir William, he was in India serving as a judge in the Supreme Court of Judicature in Bengal and beginning his fascination with the life, languages, botany, local laws, music, geography and literature of India. We do not know the exact place of his discovery, maybe as he was having tea, or brushing dust off an old Sanskrit² text somewhere, but we do know that Jones discovered something rather curious in the language, something that should not have been true, but was.

He noticed as he was reading that he could understand some of the words. You can understand his astonished excitement! How could it be possible that any of the words could be similar? Sanskrit was a written language, not a spoken one, so it was not the sort of language he would have heard spoken around a dinner table or at the local pub. Secondly, there was a significant geographical barrier between England and India, and thirdly, how could it be that an ancient language was so similar to the English he spoke and knew?

We're not sure what it was that first triggered his thoughts along these lines. Maybe he was comparing the Sanskrit and English words for *mother*. He would have known it to be a universal word common to every language spoken by people with normal reproductive methods, so it should have appeared in every language at every stage of human development. As such, along with words like *head, foot, man, woman, heart*, it would be a good marker for checking for similarities between languages. He wouldn't have chosen regional words such as *monkey* or *rice* which would only appear in certain geographic regions.

The Sanskrit word for mother is *mātr*. Apart from the middle sound changing from *th* to *t* and the vowels being slightly different, it's recognisable as the same word. Coincidence maybe? Jones probably thought so, so he checked the same word in other languages, and discovered something remarkable.

In Latin, the word was *māter*, in Greek, *mētēr*, in Dutch *moder*, Lithuanian *motė*, Danish *moder*, German *Mutter* and in French, *mere*. All start with the same sound *m*, all (except French, which is notorious for leaving out consonants) have a *t* or *d* sound in the middle, and all finish similarly.

Imagine him sitting back in his chair, thinking, *How could this happen?* Maybe he went through a number of possibilities to explain it.

1 In fact, the subject for which he became famous was started over a hundred years earlier, but that's another story.

2 Sanskrit is an ancient Indian language found only in religious writings, but extinct as a modern day spoken language until recently when it was revived. Now it has a few thousand speakers in several Indian locations.



Could one language group have defeated another in war and forced their language onto the vanquished?

He would have been familiar with the French invasion of England in 1066 many centuries earlier, and the many and more recent battles and wars between British imperial and local Indian forces, so perhaps there might have been some truth in such a theory. But the Anglo-Saxon language of the English in 1066 had absorbed the French rather than succumbing to it, and the British conflicts with Indian forces had been for the sake of trade and land rather than language. In any case, the Sanskrit that Jones was reading had been written centuries before the English arrived.

Could languages have just borrowed words from each other and added their own accents to it?

Again, Mr Jones would have been familiar with examples of this in English, which borrowed new words from Latin, old Norse and French that it previously didn't have. But he would have shaken his head and rejected the idea swiftly, realising that it would have been rather unlikely for a language to borrow a word for a concept it already had.

Could traders, travellers and pilgrims have shared their languages through an extensive transportation network?

For some of the European languages, rubbing shoulders geographically, he could have put it down to people borrowing words off each other, although why borrow a word you already have? But Sanskrit? How did a dead Indian language get hold of a word whose nearest possible neighbour was 5000km away?

So Sir William set up a list of other universal words, made a careful examination of them, and found, to his astonishment, many more similarities.

And not only did he find other comparable words, eliminating the possibility of coincidence, but discovered that there were comparable languages that had more similarities than you would think proper. It was almost as if some amorous father language had run around in the dim distance, fathering a whole family of languages, all bearing a resemblance to him.

And it didn't end there. Not only did these languages have similar words, but even their grammatical patterns were similar.

You can imagine Sir William, sitting down by lamplight one evening, a gin and tonic to fortify him and a giddy smile on his face, writing these words, which he would later give as part of his address to the Asiatic Society on 2 February 1786,



“The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists. There is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtick, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the Sanskrit; and the old Persian might be added to the same family.”

You have to take your hat off to him, a true archaeologist of words. He had discovered something remarkable, something quite astounding, something that would have linguists and historians getting excited for years to come.

Jones' 'common source' turned out to be Proto-Indo-European (PIE), an amorous old gentleman indeed, the father of many languages, spoken by millions of speakers from India to Europe. And where did they begin? Linguists debate, but we're going to put the original speakers of this language, a group known as the Yamnaya Culture, in an area north of the Black Sea in what is now Ukraine. Remembering our earlier question of where English first originated, we now have our answer: Ukraine. The earliest non-written traces of English are found here.

But how do we know this if there are no written records? By comparing current languages through the fascinating and complex field of historical linguistics, where linguists compare languages back through the ages, finding similarities in both language and geography, until they are able to trace them all back to a common origin. Again, that's not within the scope of this text, although there are some scholarly books and journals you can explore.

About 5000 years BC (the date varies considerably among scholars), the Yamnaya people started to move, as can be seen in the following map.



Here's where Sir William's original discovery gets interesting. As we can see from the more detailed map following, the original PIE speakers moved north, east, west and south, taking their language with them. Many went westwards into what would one day be known as Europe, where their languages developed into Italic (and in turn into Latin, French, Catalan, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish and others), Celtic (into Gaulish, Manx, Breton, Gaelic, Welsh and others), Greek, Armenian and Albanian (which stayed fairly stable), and Germanic (we'll come to this in a moment.)



The northern branch developed into Balto-Slavic (into Lithuanian, Latvian, Russian, Polish, Czech, Bulgarian and Serbia-Croatian) The eastern branch, which moved into what is now southern Russia and Kazakhstan and spoke Tocharian, died out, as did a southern branch known as Anatolian.

But the main southern branch, which moved through Turkmenistan on its way ultimately to India, put down strong and populous roots, developing into Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Persian, Pashto and Kurdish as well as the Sanskrit that Sir William discovered.

The Germanic branch we met earlier developed into Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Icelandic. And about a thousand years ago, the Angles, a group of people from the Angeln region in the north German region of Schleswig-Holstein (this area still has this name today), took to their boats and sailed to Britain. And their language? *Angl-isc*, which eventually changed into *English*. The language of the Angles. At this point, we have a name for the language we know today, even though texts written in this language, such as the classic epic poem *Beowulf*, are mostly unintelligible, with only words here and there making sense.

As a result, people from everywhere from Ireland to Russia and Latvia to India share a common linguistic heritage. Yes, our languages are incomprehensible to each other, but it's amazing how many similarities there are.

For the record, English is one of three languages (the other two are Modern Low German and Frisian) in the Low German family, which is part of the West Germanic group, which is one of three Germanic language groups.

Our journey has brought us now to your class and the wide range of cultural and linguistic heritages your students bring with them. As a teacher, it is worth noting that some of these students, given the same starting point, have distinct linguistic advantages over others. Due to their Indo-European linguistic ancestry, South American and most European students will have quite a long list of cognates (similar words in different languages with the same meaning) with English, so their learning path might possibly be shorter. Students from Asian, African and Arabic countries, with no Indo-European heritage on the other hand, speak languages with no or very few cognates, which means that every word is new and they start from a position further back along their learning journey.

However, it is curious that English has adopted many words from other languages. This next quote has several variations, and has been also attributed to James Nicoll, George Bernard Shaw and possibly others, but the general gist is the same.

English doesn't borrow words from other languages; it chases them down dark alleys, knocks them over and goes through their pockets for loose metaphors / grammar / vocabulary.

In fact, English has such words as *zero* from Arabic, *ketchup* from Hokkien, *taboo* from Hawaiian, *coach* from Hungarian and *boondocks* from Tagalog, a Philippines language. It is indeed a child of many mothers!