What is English?

A short history of the origins and development of the English language
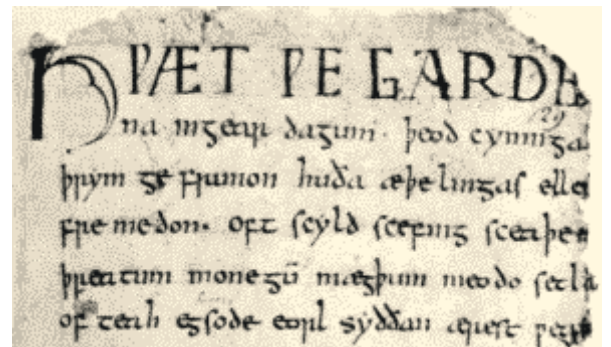
The history of the English language really started with the arrival of three Germanic tribes who invaded Britain during the 5th century AD. These tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea from what today is Denmark and northern Germany. At that time the inhabitants of Britain spoke a Celtic language. But most of the Celtic speakers were pushed west and north by the invaders—mainly into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from Englaland and their language was called Englisc—from which the words England and English are derived.

Germanic invaders entered Britain on the east and south coasts in the 5th century.
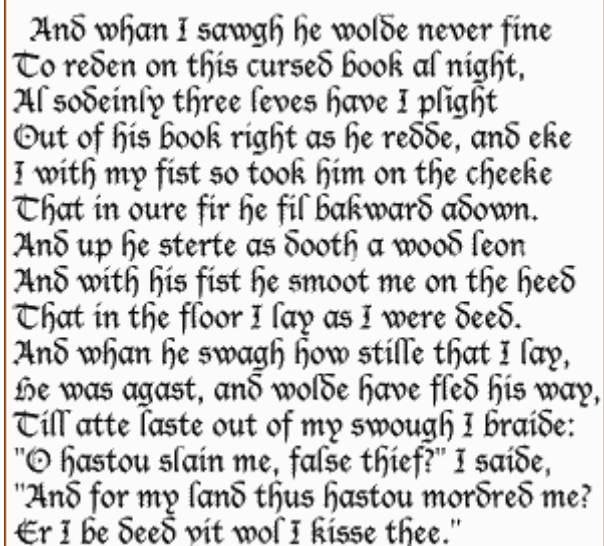
Old English (450-1100 AD)

The invading Germanic tribes spoke similar languages, which in Britain developed into what we now call Old English. Old English did not sound or look like English today. Native English speakers now would have great difficulty understanding Old English. Nevertheless, about half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words *be*, *strong* and *water*, for example, derive from Old English. Old English was spoken until around 1100.

Part of *Beowulf*, a poem written in Old English.

Middle English (1100-1500)

In 1066 William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy (part of modern France), invaded and conquered England. The new conquerors (called the Normans) brought with them a kind of French, which became the language of the Royal Court, and the ruling and business classes. For a period there was a kind of linguistic class division, where the lower classes spoke English and the upper classes spoke French. In the 14th century English became dominant in Britain again, but with many French words added. This language is called Middle English. It was the language of the great poet Chaucer (c1340-1400), but it would still be difficult for native English speakers to understand today.
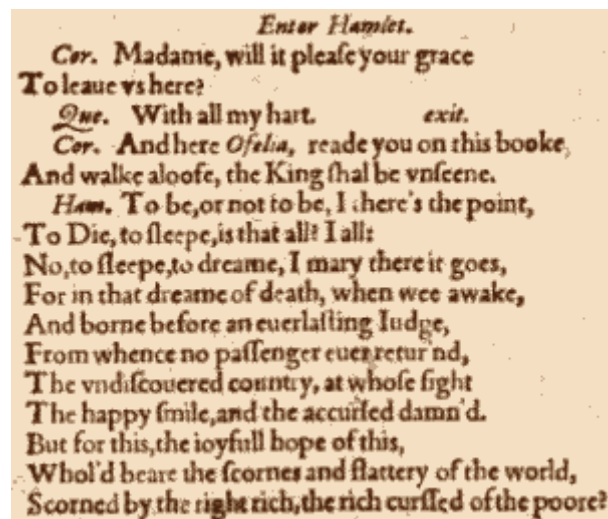

And whan I sawgh he wolde never fine
To reden on this cursed book al night,
Al sodeinly three leves have I plight
Out of his book right as he redde, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheeke
That in oure fir he fil bakward adown.
And up he sterte as dooth a wood leon
And with his fist he smoot me on the heed
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
And whan he swagh how stille that I lay,
he was agast, and wolde have fled his way,
Till atte laste out of my swough I braide:
"O hastou slain me, false thief?" I saide,
"And for my land thus hastou mordred me?
Er I be deed yit wol I kisse thee."

An example of Middle English by Chaucer.

Modern English

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and distinct change in pronunciation (the Great Vowel Shift) started, with vowels being pronounced shorter and shorter. From the 16th century the British had contact with many peoples from around the world. This, and the Renaissance of Classical learning, meant that many new words and phrases entered the language. The invention of printing also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read. Printing also brought standardization to English. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the dialect of London, where most publishing houses were, became the standard. In 1604 the first English dictionary was published.

Enter Hamlet.
Cor. Madame, will it please your grace
To leaue vs here?
Que. With all my hart.   exit.
Cor. And here Ofelia, reade you on this booke,
And walke aloofe, the King shal be vnseene.
Ham. To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
For in that dreame of death, when wee awake,
And borne before an euerlasting Iudge,
From whence no passenger euer retur'nd,
The vndiscouered country, at whose sight
The happy smile, and the accursed damn'd.
But for this, the ioyfull hope of this,
Whol'd beare the scornes and flattery of the world,
Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poore?

Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" lines, written in Early Modern English by Shakespeare.

Late Modern English (1800-Present)

The main difference between Early Modern English and Late Modern English is vocabulary. Late Modern English has many more words, arising from two principal factors: firstly, the Industrial Revolution and technology created a need for new words; secondly, the British Empire at its height covered one quarter of the earth's surface, and the English language adopted foreign words from many countries.
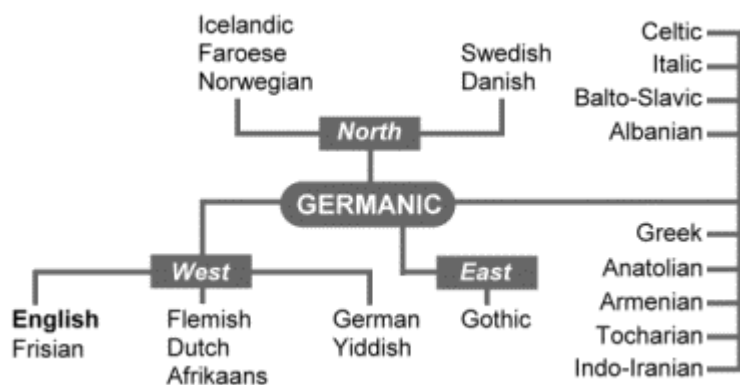
Varieties of English

From around 1600, the English colonization of North America resulted in the creation of a distinct American variety of English. Some English pronunciations and words "froze" when they reached America. In some ways, American English is more like the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Some expressions that the British call "Americanisms" are in fact original British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost for a time in Britain (for example *trash* for rubbish, *loan* as a verb instead of lend, and *fall* for autumn; another example, *frame-up*, was re-imported into Britain through Hollywood gangster movies). Spanish also had an influence on American English (and subsequently British English), with words like *canyon, ranch, stampede*

and *vigilante* being examples of Spanish words that entered English through the settlement of the American West. French words (through Louisiana) and West African words (through the slave trade) also influenced American English (and so, to an extent, British English).

Today, American English is particularly influential, due to the USA's dominance of cinema, television, popular music, trade and technology (including the Internet). But there are many other varieties of English around the world, including for example Australian English, New Zealand English, Canadian English, South African English, Indian English and Caribbean English.

The Germanic Family of Languages

English is a member of the Germanic family of languages.
Germanic is a branch of the Indo-European language family.

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A brief chronology of English

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BC 55	Roman invasion of Britain by Julius Caesar.	
BC 43	Roman invasion and occupation. Beginning of Roman rule of Britain.	Local inhabitants speak Celtish
436	Roman withdrawal from Britain complete.	
449	Settlement of Britain by Germanic invaders begins	
450-480	Earliest known Old English inscriptions.	
1066	William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invades and conquers England.	Old English
c1150	Earliest surviving manuscripts in Middle English.	
1348	English replaces Latin as the language of instruction in most schools.	
1362	English replaces French as the language of law. English is used in Parliament for the first time.	Middle English
c1388	Chaucer starts writing *The Canterbury Tales*.	
c1400	The Great Vowel Shift begins.	
1476	William Caxton establishes the first English printing press.	Early Modern English
1564	Shakespeare is born.	
1604	*Table Alphabeticall*, the first English dictionary, is published.	
1607	The first permanent English settlement in the New World (Jamestown) is established.	
1616	Shakespeare dies.	
1623	Shakespeare's First Folio is published	
1702	The first daily English-language newspaper, *The Daily Courant*, is published in London.	
1755	Samuel Johnson publishes his English dictionary.	
1776	Thomas Jefferson writes the American Declaration of Independence.	

1782 Britain abandons its American colonies.	
1828 Webster publishes his American English dictionary.	
1922 The British Broadcasting Corporation is founded.	Late Modern English
1928 The *Oxford English Dictionary* is published.	