
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Is English really English?

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This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgina

And I'm Georgina.

Neil

Gödne mergen! Mé lícap pé tó métanne!

Georgina

I beg your pardon, Neil? Is something stuck in your throat?! Are you speaking a foreign language?

Neil

Ha! Well, actually Georgina, I was saying, 'Good morning, pleased to meet you' in English - but not the English you and I speak. That was Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, the earliest form of English, spoken in the Middle Ages – so, between the 5th and 15th century.

Georgina

It doesn't sound anything like the way people talk nowadays.

Neil

No, but it's surprising how many of the words we use today have survived from Old English – beer, wine, drink, fish, bread, butter, eye, ear, mouth, head, hand, foot, life, love, laughter, mother, daughter, sister, brother, son, father – all Anglo-Saxon words!

Georgina

Wow, so many everyday words! But what about the classics - Latin and Greek? I thought a lot of English vocabulary came from there.

Neil

That's also true, but the history of English is the history of **invasions** – you know, when the army of one country fights to enter and control another country.

Georgina

Like the Roman invasion of Britain?

Neil

Right, and later invasions too, by Norse-speaking Vikings and Germanic Saxons. In fact, Georgina, that reminds me of my quiz question.

Georgina

Go on then, but in modern English if you don't mind...

Neil

OK. Well, the year 1066 is remembered for a famous battle when the French-speaking Norman king, William the Conqueror, invaded England – but what is the name of the famous battle? Is it:

- a) The Battle of Waterloo?,
- b) The Battle of Hastings?, or,
- c) The Battle of Trafalgar?

Georgina

Hmm, my history's not great, Neil, but I think it's, b) The Battle of Hastings.

Neil

OK, Georgina, we'll find out 'later' - another Old English word there! But it's not just words that survive from Anglo-Saxon, it's word endings too – the **suffix**, or letters added to the end of a word to modify its meaning.

Georgina

Right, like adding 's' to make something plural, as in: one bird, two birds. Or the 'ness' in 'goodness' and 'happiness'. And 'dom', as in, 'freedom' and 'kingdom'.

Neil

Poet Michael Rosen is fascinated by Old English. Here he is talking about word suffixes to Oxford University professor Andy Orchard for BBC Radio 4's programme, Word of Mouth.

Georgina

Listen out for the proportion of modern English that comes from Anglo-Saxon.

Michael Rosen

'I walked' – that 'walked' the 'et' bit on the end.

Professor Andy Orchard

Yeah, the 'ed' ending. Most modern verbs – if we were to say, 'I texted my daughter', I mean text obviously comes from Latin... 'I tweeted' – we still lapse to the Anglo-Saxon.

Michael Rosen

And, generally when I'm speaking, just let's do it in mathematical terms, what proportion can we say is Old English? Can we say, like, about 80% **in common parlance**, sorry to use a French word there?

Professor Andy Orchard

In speech it would be something like that – in the written language, less. They're the basic **building blocks** of who we are and what we think.

Neil

Professor Orchard estimates that 80 percent of spoken English **in common parlance** comes from Anglo-Saxon. **In common parlance** means the words and vocabulary that most people use in ordinary, everyday conversation.

Georgina

So Anglo-Saxon words are the **building blocks** of English - the basic parts that are put together to make something.

Neil

He also thinks that the languages we speak shape the way we see the world.

Georgina

Here's Michael Rosen and Professor Andy Orchard discussing this idea on BBC Radio 4 programme, Word of Mouth:

Michael Rosen

Can we say that English speakers today, as I'm speaking to you now, view the world **through Anglo-Saxon eyes**, through Anglo-Saxon words? Can we say that?

Professor Andy Orchard

Well, in Old English poetry it's always raining and I suppose it's always raining today. There is a retrospective element, that we're still inhabiting that worldview, those ideas; the same words, the same simple ideas that they inhabited. And

what's extraordinary if you think about the history of English is despite the **invasions** by the Norse and by the Norman, and then despite the years of empire when we're bringing things back, the English that we're speaking today is still at its root Old English word, **at its heart** Old English word, still very much English.

Neil

Michael Rosen asks if English speakers see the world **through Anglo-Saxon eyes**. When we see something **through someone's eyes**, we see it from their perspective, their point of view.

Georgina

And Professor Orchard replies by saying that despite all the history of invasion and empire, the English we speak today is still Old English **at heart** – a phrase used to say what something is really like.

Neil

Wow! So much history crammed into six minutes! And now, time for one more history fact.

Georgina

Do you mean your quiz question, Neil? What's the name of the famous battle of 1066?

Neil

What did you say, Georgina?

Georgina

I said b) The Battle of Hastings.

Neil

Which was... the correct answer! The Battle of Hastings in 1066 played a big part in the Norman Conquest and mixing French words into the language.

Georgina

And I also know how the English ruler, King Harold, died – shot through the eye with an arrow!

Neil

Ouch! OK, let's recap the vocabulary, some of which exists because of **invasions** – when one country enters and controls another.

Georgina

A **suffix** is added to the end of a word to make a new word.

Neil

The phrase **in common parlance** means using ordinary, everyday words.

Georgina

Building blocks are the basic parts used to make something.

Neil

To see things **through someone's eyes** means, from their point of view.

Georgina

And finally, **at heart** is used to say what something is really like.

Neil

That's all for this programme. Join us again soon at 6 Minute English but for now, 'far gesund!' – that's Old English for 'goodbye'!

Georgina

Far gesund!

VOCABULARY

invasion

when an army of country uses force to enter and take control of another country

suffix

letter or group of letters added to the end of a word to make a new word

in common parlance

using the words that most people use in ordinary conversation

building blocks

the basic parts that are put together to make something

through someone's eyes

from someone else's point of view; how someone else would experience something

at heart

used to say what something is really like