

英語の歴史

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The Origin of the English Language

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Abstract

This article reproduces and summarizes the contents of an English history class that I have lectured at Saitama University (2003-06) and Meiji University (2005-11). This time, I will post the contents of Old English from my lecture record in particular. Of course, it's not just a summary of books on the history of the English language I have read so far, but a unique article with original perspective and knowledge of European culture and history I have acquired through my life as a university lecturer. The English used here is American English, and the level of English is for students in general liberal arts courses at the university. It is a record that I want many English learners to have a comprehensive understanding of the historical, linguistic, political, and cultural background of English. Besides, it is going to mention the future of English, the ideal form as a global language.

Keywords : Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Beowulf

The Celts and the Romans

Towards the end of the 5th century BC the Celts or Celtic, one of the old groups of Indo-European people began to leave their homeland in central Europe. In fact, *Alps* or *Donau* are originally Celtic words. They moved everywhere, making many dialects of their language developed. Around the first century BC, they landed on the British Isles because of the heavy pressure of

expanding Germanic tribes. They started to live in Britain, and mixed in with the former people whose ancestry had come from Iberian Peninsula in 3000 BC. They lived in round houses made of wood in small villages. They made iron tools and weapons. Some of them started trading with the Roman Empire. They sold lead, gold, tin, slaves, cattle, and so on. They believed in many gods, and Druids or priests had great power religiously and politically. Incidentally the language spoken by the

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Celts in present-day Ireland and Scotland is called Gaelic.

In 55 BC and in 54 BC Julius Caesar with the Roman fleet attacked Britain in vain. Then in AD 43 the mighty Roman troops invaded Britain again. An army of 45,000 soldiers landed at Richborough in Kent. They marched into the country and conquered every tribe one by one. Then the Romans built roads and bridges and forts made of stones. The Emperor Hadrian decided to build a 120-kilometer-long wall right across the country that separated the two countries, England and Scotland. The wall, which is called Hadrian's Wall was completed in AD 128. The Roman legions remained there for almost four centuries, and almost all regions now called England and Wales (not Scotland) came under their control. The Romans built strong towns to keep peace and comfortable houses. They introduced a good way of life and a new language—Latin. British Celts in the upper classes became used to new life of Roman ways, their laws (arguments could be settled peacefully), police, religion, and education. They enjoyed Roman baths and theaters. The Celtic words in those days that remain in current English are of course the mixture of old Celtic and Latin that Roman armies and merchants brought. To be precise such words should be called Romano-Celtic.

The Celtic word for *river* survives in the river name Avon. Stratford-Upon-Avon is one of examples, which is famous for the birthplace of William Shakespeare. *Strat* is originally from Latin, meaning “street” or “road.” The word *Thames* is Celtic, meaning “dark river,” and the word *dubris*, or *dwfr* which meant “water” in Celtic, became the place name, *Dover*, the port

city in southern England, famous for White Cliffs of Dover or the Straits of Dover.

After all the British Celts or Britons could not leave many words in English today. But even now there are lots of place names connected with the Celtic language. For example, the name of the capital city of England, London is Celtic (Romano-British name was *Londinium*). *London* is originally a Celtic tribal name, but the word *lond* itself means “wild.” Canterbury, the capital city of the Celtic Kent is also connected with the Celtic language (or Old English?). It means “Kent-town.” *Caea* or *Car* in Caerphilly, Caernarvon, or Carlisle means “fortified place” in Celtic. *Cumb* in Cumbria or Cumberland means “deep valley” in Celtic. Edinburgh, Deira, Devon, Bernicia are also connected with Celtic.

The typical and permanent linguistic remains of the Roman rule in Britain is certainly the place names connected with their major settlements such as the towns ending in *-caster*, *-cester*, or *-chester*. These are derived from the Latin word *castra*, for “camp,” or “military camp.” The word later meant any walled and fortified, inhabited place. Examples include Lancaster, Worcester, Chester, Colchester, Rochester, Portchester, and Winchester.

In Scotland they still use the word *loch* (originally *luh*), which means “lake.” Of course, *whisky* (*whiskey*), meaning “water of life,” is also originally from Gaelic.

Celtic people are said that they are full of imaginative and lyrical spirits, and they are good at music or art. They love fairy tales and myths. It is a bit surprising to notice the fact that many of the excellent writers in English literature are originally Celtic. For example, Jonathan Swift (the masterpiece, *Gulliver's Travels*), Oscar Wilde

(*Salome, The Happy Prince, The Picture of Dorian Gray*), George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*, the basis for the musical play and movie *My Fair Lady*), Robert Burns (*Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, Tam o' Shanter, Auld Lang Syne*), Sir Walter Scott (*The Lady of the Lake, Waverley, Ivanhoe*), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*New Arabian Nights, Treasure Island, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). English people tend to be rational, reasonable, and practical, but the Celts, the people of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales sometimes have a vivid poetic mind. Enya, a popular Irish musician is also Celtic in origin as you know.

The Anglo-Saxons and Old English

From the middle of the 3rd century AD, the Romans grew weaker and weaker as the Germanic peoples of northern Europe invaded more and more Roman lands. In AD 410 when the Germanic barbarians threatened their Italian homeland, the Romans finally decided to leave Britain to help defend their Roman Empire in Europe. Without the Roman army, the country was in danger of being attacked by other invaders.

In the 5th century, Germanic warrior tribes, the barbarians, came to England from the west coast of the European continent, across the sea. According to Bede (673?-735), the first English historian, in his *Ecclesiastical History of English Nation* written in Latin in AD 731, the Angles, people from Angeln, northern part of Germany today, arrived and settled in eastern England in AD 449. And then the Saxons, people from the regions now known as the Netherlands and also northern part of Germany, came and settled in eastern and southern England. And the Jutes,

people from Jutland, now Denmark, came to southern England. So, some of British Celts left their homeland and went north, perhaps into Scotland, others went west into Wales or Cornwall, and there were also some groups who went over the sea to the continent, staying in Brittany, France.

It is true that Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were so violent and savage that they took British Celts' lands by force. Some Britons had to escape from new invaders, and others became their slaves. On the other hand, some scholars point out these days there were also many peaceful immigrants from northern Europe in search of fertile land to live.

The Jutes stayed in the south of England and their mainstream tribes formed the kingdom of Kent in the 6th century and other tribes started to live in the Isle of Wight, which became part of the Kingdom of Wessex, which means "the country of West Saxons," in the 7th century. The Angles occupied large region of the Midlands, moving north to Scotland. They took over two-thirds of land which is now called England and the south-east area of Scotland. They formed three kingdoms, Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria. On the other hand, Saxons went south-west of Britain. They started to organize themselves into three kingdoms, Wessex, Essex (East Saxons), and Sussex (South Saxons). The size of the land that the Saxons ruled was one-third of present-day England. By 600, Britain was divided into seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. At first the Kingdom of Kent was the most powerful but in the 8th century, Wessex became the most powerful and important kingdom.

It was the background of King Arthur's legend that the Celtic people had to leave their old land

and were driven to a remote region, 'Celtic Fringe.' Then King Arthur appears. He is supposed to be the king of British Celts in the 5th or 6th century, who repels the Saxons.

The British Celts called all the invaders 'Saxons' at first, but later in the 6th century the word 'Angli' was used to mean the whole group of invaders. Then 'Angli' became 'Engle.' The people from Germany were called *Angelcynn* and their language was *Englisc* (the *sc* was used for the sound of *sh*). By the 10th century, the country was generally known as *Englaland*, which means the land of the 'Angles.' And this expression is still used in the modern English. Curiously Alfred, king of Wessex, called himself English in the 9th century.

Today we call the barbarian tribes in those days 'Anglo-Saxons.' But the word 'Anglo-Saxons' began to be used after the Renaissance (14th to 16th century period), when it referred to all features of the period, that is, tribe, race, culture, and language. As for 'Old English,' the phrase appeared in the 19th century.

Old English or the English of the Anglo-Saxons (in short, Anglo-Saxon) is the language that was spoken from the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 12th century in England and southern part of Scotland today. Mainly four dialects of Old English emerged, that is, West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian, and Northumbrian. There were not remarkable differences of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in those dialects.

When the invaders from the Continent dispossessed native Britons of their lands, they called the local inhabitants *wealas*, meaning "foreigners" in their language. The word became the Modern English word *Welsh*.

Old English spoken in early days, that is, in the 5th and 6th centuries in Britain did already have some Latin words, which the Anglo-Saxons had borrowed from the Romans before invading the British Isles. Or before their invasion, the British Celts might have already used Latin words, because Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire. And the Roman armies staying in Britain surely had been using Latin. When they left Britain, they left many Latin words. The words such as *belt* (belt), *catte* (cat), *cyse* (cheese), *disc* (dish), *plante* (plant), *straet* (street), *weall* (wall), and *win* (wine), these words, are all originally from Latin and were included in the Old English vocabulary. About 400-500 Latin words began to appear in Old English manuscripts. And it is said the total number of Latin words in present-day English is about 200 words. But of course, the number includes Latin words which later Christian missionaries brought. In summary, in Old English, there were 400-500 Latin words. Some were brought in by the Romans first, then by the Anglo-Saxons, and others by Christian missionaries.

Most Anglo-Saxon settlers could not read or write. They did not have a developed society. They were just hunting, fishing, farming (growing vegetables, barley, and wheat), and drinking. They were passionate about fighting. They respected the person who was killed in battle. They built their villages surrounded by high wall made from split tree trunks. They lived in small wooden houses, also kept horses, hawks, and hounds. Nevertheless, there were some people who could read and write. They used runes, the runic alphabet. These were 24 letters which had been used by the Germanic peoples in northern Europe. The word 'rune' originally meant "secret"

in Gothic. It dates from around the 2nd or the 3rd century. No one knows where these alphabets came from. But maybe it is a development of one of the alphabets of southern Europe, probably the Roman alphabet. The alphabet we use today is originally from Greek. The first two letters of Greek alphabet are *alpha* and *beta*.

The runic scripts could well have been invented in the Rhine area. Perhaps there were lively trade contacts between Germanic peoples and the Romans in the early centuries of the era. The runes were carved in stones or weapons and were often used to show the maker or the owner. They were used as a good luck charm or an ornament.

The arrival of St Augustine in AD 597 brought changes to Anglo-Saxon life. He came to Kent from Rome with about 40 monks to spread the teaching of Christianity. The mission of Augustine had been inspired by the man whose later title was Pope Gregory the Great. When he was walking around one morning in the market of Rome, Gregory happened to come across some fair-haired boys about to be sold as slaves. He was told they came from Britain and they were not Christian. What was Britain? He was told those boys were called 'Angles.' He thought they had an angelic face and that such boys should be co-heirs with the angels in heaven. Gregory intended to go to Britain by himself but in the end, he sent Augustine to the land of the Angles.

Augustine and his followers would have been worried about the notoriously savage tribes they were trying to convert to Christianity. However, they were warmly welcomed in Canterbury where a small Christian community had already existed. St Augustine converted Ethelbert, King of Kent, who became the first Anglo-Saxon

Christian king. The conversion of England to Christianity was gradual but resolved peacefully. By the end of the 7th century all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms became Christian. As for Wales, the Welsh had already been Christians since the Roman Conquest. The descendants of Roman Britons living in Ireland had also been Christians.

Missionaries introduced the habit of reading and writing. And then in little more than a century the Bible and other large number of religious manuscripts were written in Latin. At the same time Old English manuscripts (translations) were also written in the 8th century. Unfortunately, most of them were burned to ashes by the Viking who came to Britain later.

The missionaries and monks built churches, and there they taught Greek and Latin as well as Christianity. As a result, lots of Latin words (about 500 new words) entered Old English. Those new words are mainly connected with Christianity and learning. For example, *munuc* (monk) , *mynster* (minster) , *school*, *fenester* (window) , *cest* (chest) , *spendan* (to spend) , *to dance*, and *tyrnan* (to turn) . *Pope* is Greek, and Greek words such as *angelos* (messenger) and *diabolos* (slanderer) were transformed into *angel* and *devil*.

Or some of the Old English words at that time, such as *heaven*, *hell*, *god*, *gospel* (originally meaning good news, god-spell) , *holy*, *sin*, were given new meanings with a deeper significance. These words are typical ones which are deeply connected with Christianity.

At first the monks wrote in Latin only, but then they began to write in Old English, too. They usually spelled every word based on their own pronunciation. But it may be better to say that the spelling was dependent on the dialect rather

than on the individual. Different pronunciations of the same word co-existed from region to region because there were so many dialects. In the south-east of the country, for example, the word for 'evil' was spelled *efel*, but, in other places, *yfel*. More than hundreds of such kind of spelling differences existed. Of course, in those days, all the letters in a word had to be pronounced. For example, the letter *h* in *hring* (ring) was pronounced as it was spelled.

The difference of dialect originally comes from the different linguistic backgrounds of the invading tribes, who landed on the British Isles and settled in different places from each other. The area occupied by the Angles produced two main dialects, Mercian and Northumbrian. The former was spoken in the Midlands, between the River Thames and the River Humber, and as far west as the boundary with present-day Wales. The latter, Northumbrian was spoken to the north of Mercian, extending into the eastern lowlands of present-day Scotland, where it confronted the Celtic language of the Britons of Strathclyde (in Gaelic, meaning "valley of the River Clyde") .

West Saxon was spoken by Saxons, in south of the Thames and west as far as Cornwall (where we can hear Celtic spoken) . Most of the Old English manuscripts are written in West Saxon, because it was the kingdom of Wessex (originally from West-Saxon) , under King Alfred, whose country became the leader politically and culturally at the end of the 9th century. However, modern standard English is not from West Saxon but from Mercian, since Mercian was the dialect spoken in the area around London, as the city became powerful and very influential in the Middle Ages.

Kentish was spoken by the Jutes mainly in the

area of present-day Kent county and the Isle of Wight. In origin the place name Kent comes from the word *Cantus* in Celtic, which means "border." Canterbury Cathedral, the head of Church of England today, St Augustine's Abbey, and St Martin's Church are all located in Canterbury, Kent, listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The vocabulary of Old English was made up almost completely of Anglo-Saxon words. And about 70 percent of the words had disappeared from present-day English. However, about 100 most common words in Modern English that are often used in our daily life came from Old English. Examples include *the*, *and*, *can*, *get*, *person*, *child*, *house*, *eat*, *sleep* etc. Other words which survive to this day are seen in place names. For example, *ford* in *Oxford* means "a shallow river which could be crossed," *ham* in *Birmingham* means "village," *ton* in *Brighton* means "farm" or "village," and *wic* in *Warwick* means "house" or "village." Four names for the days of the week also come from Anglo-Saxon gods and goddesses. Tuesday and Wednesday are named after gods of war, *Tyr* and *Woden*. Thursday is named after god of thunder, *Thunor*. And Friday is named after goddess of love and beauty, *Frīg*.

Old English sometimes made new words by putting two individual words together. For example, *banhus* (bone-house) meant "body," *beadoleoma* (battle light) meant "sword," *bōccræft* (book-skill) meant "literature," *hronrad* (whale-road) meant "the sea," and *sunmandæg* (sun's day) meant "Sunday."

One of the typical features of Old English is much more varied word order than present-day English. The words in a sentence in Old English appeared in a different order like other Germanic languages. In present-day English, the word order

is almost fixed. At present, *A helped B* and *B helped A* have different meanings, which we can understand from the word order. But in Old English people understood the meaning of a sentence from the word-endings. And these endings showed the subject of the sentence, or the object of the sentence. So, in Old English *A helped B* and *B helped A* can bear the same meaning. It is said that Old English was an inflected language, that is to say, the role performed by a word in the sentence was signaled by the ending. Today, most of these endings were extinct. We can understand the difference between *A helped B* and *B helped A* solely by the word order. The subject comes first, the verb comes next, and the object comes last. But the verb in a sentence frequently appears before the subject, especially when the sentence begins with a word which means “then” or “when,” as in *Ʒa ongon he singan*. (Then began he to sing) . Moreover, verbs are sometimes placed at the end of sentences.

In Old English there were so many different forms of verbs, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and the definite article. Especially there were far more irregular verbs in Old English than present-day English. In Old English there were around twice as many irregular verbs as present-day English. The past tense of regular verbs was made by adding: *-de*, *-ede*, or *-ode*. For example, the past tense of *libban* “to live” was *lifde*, and the past tense of *lufian* “to love” was *lufode*. In addition, nouns had three genders, and adjectives and articles changed with the gender of the noun. There were also the pronouns *wit* meaning “we two” and *git* meaning “you two.”

Articles, prepositions, and adjectives usually stand before the co-occurring nouns, just as they

do today. Sometimes the word order is completely the same as today. For example, *Hwat sceal ic singan?* (What shall I sing?)

The Vikings and Old English

There is one clear stream from Old English to present-day English especially in grammar, and also in pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary. And about one-third of the words we use today are from Old English.

The history of Britain is said to be the history of repeated invasions. Newcomers to the island country brought their own language with them and left a lot of words when they left. Namely Celtic, Latin, Greek, and the language of Anglo-Saxon, which is the most important mainstream of English. And then in the Anglo-Saxon period, there was another major influence of this kind. That is to say, another big linguistic invasion had taken place as a result of the Viking raids.

In the 8th century Britain was invaded by the Vikings (so called by the Anglo-Saxons) , or Scandinavian raiders, Danes and Norwegians. Danes first appeared in 787. Since then they came from Denmark or Sweden (Norway?) and stole gold and silver from towns in northern England. And gradually they settled there. In 850 a large Viking army attacked London and Canterbury, and the war continued until 878. In 866 the Vikings had seized York and ruled most parts of Northumbria and Mercia. Then Alfred (849-899) , king of Wessex, fought the Danish Viking invaders and won an important battle, and made an agreement with them to divide England into two regions. After that, the northern and eastern part became areas that were subject to Danish law, known as the *Danelaw*, controlled by the Vikings. And the rest of England was controlled

by the Saxon king, Alfred the Great.

In order to restore monasteries and to improve education, King Alfred decided to make English, not Latin, the language of learning and literature. So, at the age of forty he learned Latin and began translating books into Old English. Later he advised to translate one of the important books in Latin into English, entitled *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, written by a monk called Bede, mentioned above, now known as Bede Venerable, or the Venerable Bede, in 731. He also ordered to write a history of England in English, *Chronicum Saxonicum*, or *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It described the things that had happened in the past in England, and also what happened every year at the time when the writers lived. It was the first chronicle in Europe that was written in the vernacular language.

In the Danelaw the Scandinavian (Norwegian?) language, Old Norse, spoken by the Vikings and Old English spoken by the Anglo-Saxons coexisted. The two languages were used simultaneously and one important effect was that Old English became simplified. Many of the word-endings disappeared. Plural endings became simpler just as the -s endings widely used, and many verbs which changed their forms irregularly to show the past tense now began to adopt the regular -ed ending.

Furthermore, thousands of words from Old Norse entered Old English. Even now about 1,000 words of Old Norse remain in Standard English vocabulary, with hundreds more in the dialects of northern England and Lowland Scotland. The words beginning with *sk-* like *skin*, *skirt*, and *sky* are originally from Old Norse. Some Old English words were replaced by Old Norse. For example, *swostor* “sister” (OE) became *syster* (ON) . In

some cases, both Old English and Old Norse words shared the same meaning, such as *sick* (OE) and *ill* (ON) . And notably enough, the Old Norse usage of the verb ending -s for the third person, singular, and present tense began to be used widely. Three of the Old Norse personal pronouns *they*, *their*, *them*, gradually replaced the Old English forms *hie*, *hira*, *hem*. Also *are*, which originated in Old Norse, took over one of the most important forms of *be*-verb in Old English.

The Vikings (Danes and Norwegians) left many words frequently used even today, such as *are*, *bag*, *bank*, *birth*, *both*, *bull*, *call*, *cake*, *die*, *egg*, *fellow*, *gap*, *garden*, *get*, *give*, *guess*, *harbor*, *happy*, *ill*, *kid*, *knife*, *leg*, *loan*, *low*, *odd*, *race*, *root*, *rotten*, *scare*, *seat*, *sister*, *skin*, *sky*, *steak*, *take*, *their*, *they*, *trust*, *want*, *weak*, etc. And also, they left many place names. More than 1,400 Scandinavian place names appear in northern England. Over 600 end in -by, which means “farm” or “town, village” in Scandinavian (for example, *Derby*, which means “many deer near one village,” or *Rugby*, very famous place names in England) . Others end in -thorp(e) meaning “village,” such as *Althorp* and *Linthorpe*.

Family names that end in -son suggest that their ancestors came from the home ground of the Vikings. Examples include *Jefferson*, *Madison*, *Jackson*, *Harrison*, *Johnson*, *Simpson*, *Wilson*, *Nixon* (son of Nicholas) , *Stevenson*, and *Anderson* (son of Andrew) . By the way, *Andersen* is a Danish writer of children’s stories, and of course it means “son of Andrew,” too.

From 1016 to 1042 England had been ruled by three Danish kings, namely Canute (1016-35) and his sons, Harold (1037-40) , and Hardecnute (1035-37, 1040-42) . In 1015 Canute started to bring an extensive invasion fleet to Kent. The

English king, Edmund carried on struggles against Danish attacks. Edmund was so mighty that Canute didn't have any other way but to agree to share England with him. But Edmund died suddenly in November 1016. Maybe he had been murdered, so Canute got all of England. After that Canute collected two other kingdoms, Denmark in 1019, and Norway in 1028. So, England became part of the Danish Empire until 1042. Canute however was not a barbarian nor overconfident ruler. He was a sincere and pious Christian. He knew there were limitations to what one man could do. He made the great effort to keep his kingdoms in good order. He realized that once he was dead, his sons or relatives would not keep his three kingdoms nor rule each of them well.

A famous episode has been told about King Canute. One day Canute's courtiers had said that the sea would obey him with the dignity of the King. So Canute ordered to put a chair on the shore of Bosham, Wessex. Then he commanded the waves to go back. And finally got very wet by the seawater, he knew that King's powers were not limitless, that only almighty God has the authority, and that how stupid his men's flatteries were.

When Danish king Hardecanute died, because of too much drink, the English people welcomed his successor, Anglo-Saxon King Edward, afterwards known to history as Edward the Confessor. He was a brother of King Edmund. After 25 years of exile in Normandy, he returned from France to become King of England. It is said that he was more interested in religion than in ruling his country. He was, above all, a devout Christian and a person who sincerely loved peace. He remained single and had no children.

The greatest Old English poem that has survived is *Beowulf*. It is a narrative poem of about 3,200 lines. And nobody knows the name of the author. This was probably written in the 8th century or in the 9th century, although it was not actually written down until about two hundred and fifty years later. It tells the story of a brave young man from the 6th century southern Sweden called Beowulf. He goes to Denmark to help the King in trouble with a terrible creature. Beowulf finds the terrible troll called Grendel, fights against the monster, and kills it. And then he also kills its vengeful mother coming to attack him. Later Beowulf becomes king. And he fights a fierce battle and kills a fire-breathing creature to defend his country. But he is wounded terribly and dies. Beowulf is the first hero in English literature. Of course, it is the first English epic, showing elements of life and death, bravery, courage, strong spirit, vitality, the cruel nature of Northern Europe, and Christianity.

Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel hāten,
mære mearcstapa, sē þe mōras hēold,
fen ond fæsten; fielcynnes eard
wonsæli wer weardode hwīle,
siþðan him Scyppend forscifen hæfde
in Cāines cynne —

Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg,

lines 102-107

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