

## WORDS POUR INTO ENGLISH – part 1

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In part one of a three-part article, Jean Aitchison begins her exploration of how words enter the English language.

### Why students of English need new words

Words pour into the English language all the time. New ones pop up continually in newspapers, television, radio, and recently, the World Wide Web. They are added to the tens of thousands already in existence. An educated native speaker of English - whether from the US, Britain, Australia, or any country where English is the main language of communication - knows at least 50,000, which is only a part of the overall number that exist. Around 20,000 words are learnt by English native speakers by the age of 13. Ideally, students of English need this number of words in order to write or talk about the various topics they might need to discuss.

But which words should people know? This changes constantly as fresh topics become newsworthy, and produce new **lexical items** (words, groups of words, or words with new meanings). Students of English need to learn these new additions to the language, and also get an explanation of what they mean. A good way to do this is to consult an online dictionary such as the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online ([www.ldoceonline.com](http://www.ldoceonline.com)) because this dictionary is always kept up to date. But for people who do not have access to the World Wide Web, the lexicographers and publishers of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* have created this New Words supplement to help students with these new words.

### Three ways that new words come into English

Words come into the language in three major ways. First, they may enter English as **loanwords**, words taken into English from another language, or sometimes from a regional dialect or another variety of English. English has accepted words from many different languages. A strong trend is for words from American English to spread to other varieties of English. Many words included in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English New Words* supplement are already well known in American English, but are new to British English and English worldwide.

Second, new words can be created by **word formation**, when words are formed by taking existing words, or pieces of words, and putting them together to make new ones (for example, *chat room* or *change management*).

Third, new words can come from **layering**, when an existing word splits into more than one meaning. This results in **polysemy** (several or many meanings of the same word), for example,

the new use of the word *campus* - the land and buildings belonging to a large company: *Microsoft's campus in Redmond, Washington*).

These three routes will be discussed below. As will become clear, English vocabulary is growing in much the same way as it always has done - though the speed and amount of growth through the new words have increased dramatically in recent years, as English has become the language of global business and new technology.

### Historical loanwords

Unlike some other languages, English has never tried to prevent foreign words from coming into it. Words have entered from French, Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Hindi, as well as many other languages. These words have often lost their feeling of being foreign and become English words.

In 1066, William the Conqueror invaded England from Normandy in France. French became the language of power and prestige. A history of Britain, written about 1300 by Robert of Gloucester, makes this clear. He states (in translation):

So that noblemen of this land, descended from [the French conquerors of England] all keep to that same speech...for unless a man knows French, people take little account of him...but low people keep to English.

At this time, numerous French words entered the language, especially those concerned with power, such as *duke*, *duchess*, *count*, *countess*; or words concerned with authority, such as *parliament*, *government*; or with law, such as *accuse*, *attorney*, *crime*. Other French words that were adopted related to fashion, such as *apparel*, *dress*; or to the arts, such as *music*, *poem*; or to moral qualities, such as *courtesy*, *charity*.

Existing English words did not necessarily disappear. Often they remained alongside the newer French ones, but were used in more ordinary surroundings. For example, the English-speaking lower classes retained the names of the animals *cow*, *sheep*, *swine* (all from Old English). Meanwhile, the French names, *beef*, *mutton*, and *pork*, were adopted when these animals were eaten as meat, as meat was more commonly eaten by the rich, noble families.

Latin, the language of the church, also played a major role. In some cases, English, French, and Latin words with similar meanings are found side by side, as with *help* (English), *aid* (French), and *assistance* (Latin) and *book* (English), *volume* (French), and *text* (Latin).

Many Latin words were adopted into English during the 16th and 17th centuries. These were mainly part of the written language, and tended to be intellectual in nature, such as *species*, *specimen*, *tedium*, *squalor*, and *antenna*. Some, such as those just listed, were taken over in their Latin form, but others were adapted to English spelling, such as *history*, *maturity*, *polite*, and *scripture*. Few people nowadays would recognize the Latin basis of words such as *history*

or *polite*.

In the 17th century, some English speakers became concerned at the extra Latin words that were flooding into English. The Elizabethan playwright Ben Jonson makes fun of this trend in his play *Poetaster* (1601), when one of the play's characters vomits out a list of words, many of which were meant to be joke words:

barmy froth, chilblained, clumsy, clutched, conscious, damp, defunct, fatuate, furibund, glibbery, incubus, inflate, lubrical, magnificate, oblatrant, obstupefact, prorumped, puffy, quaking custard, reciprocal, retrograde, snarling gusts, snotteries, spurious, strenuous, turgidous, ventositous.

Yet a number of them are in everyday use today, for example *clumsy* (which, perhaps suprisingly, was a new word in Jonson's day), *conscious*, *damp*, *defunct*, *puffy*, *reciprocal*, *retrograde*, *spurious*, *strenuous*.

In the 17th century, English was in contact with other major European languages, and this is reflected in words being 'borrowed' from French (*colonel*, *machine*, *cartridge*), from Spanish (*armada*, *banana*, *galleon*), and from Italian (*ballot*, *carnival*, and *madrigal*).