Three Time Periods and Three Layers of the English Language

The Three Layers of the English Language: Anglo-Saxon, Latin, and Greek

The Anglo-Saxon Layer of Language

Anglo-Saxon words tend to be short, one-syllable words that describe common, everyday things. Some Anglo-Saxon words are:

- **Nature**: sky, sun, moon, God, water, man, woman
- **Body parts**: head, nose, ear, tongue, knee, foot, leg, heart
- **Animals**: cow, horse, sheep, deer
- **Trees**: oak, beach, ash

The spellings are often irregular, which is problematic because there is a heavy concentration of these words in text that first and second grade students read. Some of the unusual spelling features of these words are silent letters (kn, gn, etc.), vowel teams, consonant digraphs, and diphthongs. Multisyllable words are created by combining two simple words in a compound word (horsefly) or by adding an affix. Anglo-Saxon words also have inflected endings (s, ed, ing).

When the Latin layer entered English, some of the pronunciations and spellings changed (Lever, 2007). One example of a change is that at one time some Anglo-Saxon words had a letter h at the beginning of the word, especially in front of the letters w, l, and r (hw, hl, and hr). For example, the word what was spelled h-w-a-e-t. The word ring was spelled h-r-i-n-g, and the initial /h/ sound was pronounced; the word was /h/ /r/ /i/ /ng/. In some cases the letters were relocated. The word bird was spelled b-r-i-d. The letter r was relocated in the word.

The Latin Layer of Language

Latin is the language that is the basis of romance languages such as French and Spanish. It includes words that are completely different from the Anglo-Saxon layer. Although the Anglo-Saxon words tend to be short, one-syllable words, Latin words are multisyllabic because they must include a root and at least one affix (a prefix or a suffix). Anglo-Saxon words describe common things; in contrast, Latin words include more advanced content words found in social science, physical science, and literature.

The spelling of Latin words is more predictable and easier than Anglo-Saxon in many cases. Vowel teams rarely appear in Latin Roots, yet can appear in some suffixes such as -ion, -ial, or -ient. The primary syllable type found in Latin words is closed, whereas Anglo-Saxon words can include any of the six syllable types.

There are a few other notable spelling and pronunciation complexities of Latin words. One spelling complexity is that the final letter in a Latin morpheme often changes depending upon the letters at the juncture between the affix and the root. For example, the final consonant of a Latin prefix can change to sound better when combined with the root. An example of this is when the prefix in the word *inlegal* is changed to *illegal* because it sounds better and is easier to pronounce. There are also many rules for changing letters before adding a suffix ending; sometimes the final consonant is doubled, a final letter is changed from y to i, or...
a final silent e is dropped before adding an ending that starts with a vowel. One of the most complex aspects of Latin words is that the stressed syllable can change, which can result in a change in pronunciation. An example of this is when the word medical changes to medicinal.

The Greek Layer of Language

Greek words are formed by combining two or more morphemes to make a word. Greek morphemes are known as Greek Combining Forms and can appear in multiple positions in the word (biography, antibiotic).

This is in contrast to Latin words that have a bound root that cannot stand alone and is positioned in the middle if there is both a prefix and a suffix. Although the construction of Greek words is similar to compounding an Anglo-Saxon word, one important difference is that the Greek Combining Forms don’t stand alone like base words in Anglo-Saxon do; for example, tele and photo (telephoto) don’t stand alone while air and plane (airplane) do.

A large majority of Greek words that have been incorporated into English relate to science, including medicine, and mathematics. There are several distinct spellings that signal the word’s Greek origin, including the letters ch for /k/, ph for /f/, and y for /ĭ/ or /ī/. Example words that include these spellings are photosynthesis, chronic, geophysical and psychology. There are many mathematical words that incorporate the Greek Combining Forms for numbers including, mono (1), di (2), tri (3), etc. Other common Greek Combining Forms are bio (life), mania (madness), ology/logy (the study of), phobia (irrational fear or hatred), syn (together or with), and graph (written or drawn).

The Three Time Periods of the English Language

Old English: 450–1150 C.E.

The Old English period of the language was from 450 to 1150 C.E. when a variety of Germanic groups settled in parts of England. These groups included the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Anglo-Saxon was the dominant language used during this extensive period. The language focused on words for the events of daily life and objects or people who were part of that life. This period continued until the time of the Norman Conquest when William the Conqueror left Normandy and successfully invaded England, bringing with him the French language. Although the Norman-French language was the official language, English continued as the language of the people. In spite of the fact that the Norman French language never caught on, English did evolve during this period. Latin-based words entered the English language at this time.

Middle English: 1150–1500

There were substantial changes in English during this shorter period when the language went from predominantly Anglo-Saxon words to an influx of French and Latin words. One expert estimated that more than ten thousand French words were transferred into the English language (Henry, 2010). Some compound words were created with a combination of Anglo and French words. Latin affixes were added to both Anglo-Saxon Base Words and Latin Roots, thereby expanding the number of words exponentially. The French words described food, government, and the arts and brought entirely new spelling patterns to English in words like beautiful, cuisine, baguette, etc. The printing press was developed during this time so there was more attention to consistent spellings.
Modern English: 1500 to present

English continues to expand during this period, which is known principally for adopting pronunciation and spelling conventions of the melting pot of words adopted into the language. In the early part of this period the “Great Vowel Shift” occurred during which some of the pronunciations from Shakespeare’s days were converted. As Marcia Henry (2010) explains in her book, the vowel sound in the word house was originally pronounced “hoos,” was then converted to /o/ as in “hose”, and finally in the 20th century it became /ou/. As the number of printed books increased, Noah Webster published his first dictionary in the 1780s, and attention focused increasingly on the standardization of spelling. The English language continues to expand today as new words are created. Consider how many technology words didn’t exist until quite recently. “Google” is a now used as a verb meaning to search on the internet, “technophobia” has recently emerged, a “blog” is a short informal piece posted on the internet, and “friend” is now used as a verb when expanding one’s contacts on a social networking site. As words are incorporated into our language, they eventually are added to the dictionary.

Reference