

The Language That Built English Isn't What You Think
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdQYETYcsM0>
Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/airlearnenglish.pdf>

Here is a completely ordinary English sentence. They wanted to get a better chance to use the skill they had. 15 words. Let's break it down.

"They." "Them." "Get." "Want." Old Norse. Vikings. "Better." "Skill." Old English, Anglo-Saxon. "Chance." "Use." French. Norman conquest, 1066.

Three languages. One sentence. 15 words. And we haven't even touched the Latin underneath the French, or the Greek underneath the Latin.

English is not one language. It is a pile up, 2000 years of invasion, conquests and empires crashing into one small island, and leaving pieces of themselves behind.

I have ranked the five languages that left the deepest mark. And the one at the top, the one that changed English more than any other, more than French, more than Latin. is not the one anyone expects.

Welcome to the Airlearn Language Show. Here's something this video is going to prove without even trying.

If 30% of everyday English comes from French and it does, then anyone who speaks English already partially knows French.

The vocabulary is hiding there. The roots are already in your mouth. And the same goes for Norse, for Latin, for Greek.

Which means if you've ever thought of learning a new language was just starting from zero, it probably isn't.

And Airlearn is a great place to find out how much of a head start you actually have. Link is in the description.

Here's the ranking. Number five, Greek. Greek never invaded England. Never conquered a single English speaker. No Greek army landed on a British shore.

And yet, the moment you walk into a hospital, opened a science book, or used the word democracy, you are speaking Greek.

Greek entered English through the back door, through Latin, through the church, through centuries of European scholarship treating ancient Greek as the language of serious thought.

Almost every scientific, medical, and academic term in English is Greek underneath.

Biology. Philosophy. Theology. Psychology. Telephone. Photography. Catastrophe. Diagnosis. Skeleton. Epidemic. None of these words were spoken in ancient Athens.

Most of them were assembled centuries or millennia after Greece fell, built from Greek roots by scientists, doctors and scholars who needed precise vocabulary and reached for Greek, because Greek had already built the conceptual categories they needed words for.

Greek never touched English directly. It colonized English through ideas. Every time a new discipline needed a name, every time a new technology needed a word, every time precision mattered more than familiarity, Greek was waiting.

It is still waiting. Every new scientific field coined in the last hundred years is named in Greek.

It sits at number five because of the influence, extraordinary as it is, is almost entirely vocabulary, and borrowed indirectly at that. Everything above it got closer, Got deeper. Changed not just the words, but the structure.

Number four Latin. Latin hit English not once, but three separate times, each wave leaving a different layer. The first wave, the Roman occupation of Britain 43 to 410 CE.

Rome built roads, walls and cities across Britain and left a thin residue of words behind.

Street. Wall. Wine. Port. Camp. Shallow marks. The occupation was real, but the Romans never deeply integrated when the Celtic and the Germanic populations that followed.

The second wave, Christianity. In 597 CE, Augustine arrived in Britain and began converting the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The church brought Latin with it, and Latin flooded into English as the language of religion, education and administration.

Church. School. Master. Verse. Priest. Monks. These are all Latin arrivals from the Christian mission.

The Third wave, The Renaissance. English scholars in the 15th and 16th centuries went directly back to Latin text and rated them for prestige vocabulary.

Educated. Illuminate. Manuscript. Legal. Discuss. These words weren't inherited, they were deliberately imported by people who wanted English to sound more serious, more intellectual, more like the ancient world they were trying to revive.

And then there's the hidden layer. Much of what English calls French vocabulary is actually Latin once removed, words that Latin gave to Old French, which Norman conquerors then brought to England in 1066.

When you count the Latin inside, French inside, the English, Latin's reach in this language is almost incalculable.

It sits at number four because it worked primarily through vocabulary and formality, rather than through structural rewiring, that the top two entries achieved.

Number three, French. On October 14th, 1066, William of Normandy defeated the English King Harold at the Battle of Hastings.

Within a few years, French was the language of the English court, the aristocracy, the law and the church and ministration. It stayed that way for roughly 300 years.

What that meant in practice, the people who ruled England spoke French. The people who worked the land spoke English.

And that division cut directly into the vocabulary. English kept the animal on the farm. French brought the meat to the table.

The peasant tended the cow, Old English, "cu."

The Norman nobleman ate the beef, Old French, "boeuf."

The farmer raised the pig, Old English "picg." The aristocrat ate the pork, Old French "porc."

The shepherd kept the sheep, Old English. The lord ate the mutton, Old French.

That split is still the language right now. You were living inside a class system that ended 700 years ago.

Every time you choose, “begin” and “commence” between “ask” and “inquire”, between “help” and “assist.” The Germanic word is casual. The French word is formal.

The reason is that for three centuries in England, formal meant French. English absorbed roughly 10,000 French words during this period.

Almost everything in the domains of government, law, art, and cuisine has a French core. Government. Parliament. Justice. Attorney. Judge. Jury. Marriage. Dinner. Cuisine. Beauty. Fashion.

When you write a professional email and reach for the formal word, you are reaching for French every single time without knowing it.

It sits at number three, because 300 years of ruling class influence, vast as it was, changed the wardrobe, but not the skeleton. The two entries above it changes skeleton.

Number two, Old Norse. This is the controversial pick. French has more words in the dictionary. Latin has more historical prestige.

But the argument for Old Norse above both of them, is one of the strongest arguments in the history of English linguistics.

The Vikings did not just add words to English. They changed how English works. Start with the pronouns. "They." "Them." "Their." The third person plural pronouns, the most basic grammatical machinery for talking about other people are Old Norse.

Before the Viking settlements in northern and eastern England, Old English used completely different forms.

The Norse forms were so much cleaner than English, so English simply adopted them wholesale.

“Are”, the plural form of the verb “to be,” was one of the most used words in the language Norse.

Then the everyday vocabulary: "Get." "Give." "Take." "Want." "Call." "Die." "Hit." "Skin." "Skull." "Egg." "Window." "Husband." "Knife." "Wrong." "Flat." "Loose." "Ugly." "Weak." All Norse.

Not scholarly words, not formal words, the words of daily life, the words you use when you are not thinking about what words you are using.

But the deepest impact was structural, and this is why Norse sits above French.

Old Norse and Old English were related languages, similar enough that speakers on both sides could roughly communicate, different enough that the grammatical endings caused constant confusion.

In the mixed communities of Viking settled England, both sides started dropping the endings to make themselves understood.

The complex case system of Old English four cases, grammatical gender, elaborate agreement between adjectives and nouns began collapsing.

Without the Norse contact, English would have preserved much of that complexity. It would sound significantly more like German today, which kept its cases, its gender, its grammatical agreement.

The simplicity of modern English, no grammatical gender, minimal case endings, streamlined verb conjugation is largely a Viking legacy.

French changed what English wore, Norse changed how English thought.

Number one, Anglo-Saxon. Before Latin. Before Norse. Before French. Before any of it.

In the 5th century CE, Angles, Saxons and Jutes crossed from their European continent and settled in Britain, bringing a West Germanic language with them.

This became Old English. This became the foundation. And foundations do not announce themselves.

They sit underneath everything, invisible, doing the structural work that makes the whole building possible.

Every basic word in English is Anglo-Saxon. "I." "You." "We." "Is." "Was." "Have." "Do." "Go." "Come." "See." "Eat." "Drink." "Sleep." "Love." "Hate." "Live." "Die." "Mother." "Father." "Child." "House." "Water." "Fire." "Earth." "Hand." "Heart." "Blood." Sun." Moon."

The 100 most frequently used words in English are almost entirely Anglo-Saxon.

Not because Old English had the most words, French gave English more words by volume.

Not because Old English had the most prestige Latin dominated scholarship for centuries.

But because the words you use when you stop performing and just talk, the words that are in your mouth before your brain has decided what to say, the words of the body in the home, and the basic facts of being alive, those are still the words that arrived on a boat from the North Sea coast 1500 years ago.

French gave English its formal wardrobe. Norse gave it its pronouns and simplified its grammar. Latin gave it its textbooks. Greek gave it its lab coat.

But the body underneath all of it, breathing, thinking, feeling in words nobody had to teach you to reach for is still Anglo-Saxon.

That is why it is number one. Not because it contributed the most to English as a dictionary. Because without it there is no English for any of the others to change.

Five languages. One pileup on a small island. Greek colonized English through ideas without ever touching it directly.

Latin arrived in three waves and hid inside French for good measure.

French dressed English in formality for 300 years, and the class system is still audible every time you choose the fancier word.

Old Norse rewired the pronoun, simplified the grammar, and made English permanently less German.

And Anglo-Saxon the foundation, the body, the words underneath all the other words.

Here's what I keep coming back to. Every time someone calls English a mess, too many exceptions, too many borrowed words, no logical system, they're accidentally describing the history of Britain.

Every exception is a moment of contact. Every irregular plural is a ghost of grammar rule that another language partially overwrote. Every synonym pair is an invasion.

The mess is the record. And here is the part nobody mentions. This history is a shortcut.

If 30% of English vocabulary is French, you already have 30% of French in your mouth without knowing it.

If you understand that bio means life, geo means earth, photo means light. You can decode thousands of words across a dozen languages. The history of English is not just interesting. it's useful.

Airlearn is built around exactly that, not just teaching you a language in isolation, but showing you how it works and why, how the pieces connect.

It's a solid place to go to after a video like this. Link is in the description. See you in the next one.