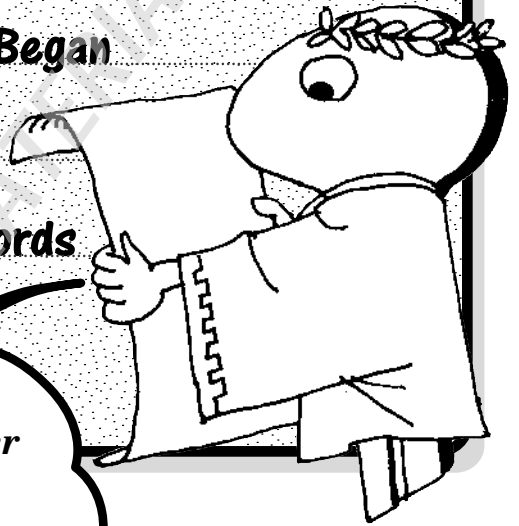


KEY 1

KNOW THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE

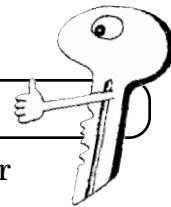
- ✓ **Theories About How Language Began**
- ✓ **How Language Changes**
- ✓ **Looking at Some Interesting Words**



Isn't it amazing that all over the world newborn babies grow up to speak the language that their parents speak? If you had been born in France, you'd be speaking French.

Maybe you can speak, read, write, or understand two languages. That would make you bilingual. (You'd be trilingual if you could speak three languages; some people speak even more.) Your native language, or "mother tongue," is the first language you learned, most likely the one you speak at home. Now you may be taking a foreign-language course in school.

Theories About How Language Began



Words give you power. They give you the ability to share your thoughts and ideas. Written words can help you tune in to the thoughts of people who lived long ago or who live far away. Words also help you to imagine anything—experiences you’ve never had and events far into the future. (For a sampling of some English words and the ideas they let you express, see the words on “The Ultimate Word List” at the back of this book.)

No one knows when or how language first began. *Linguists*, the experts who study language, have some theories, or ideas, about the origin of language.

Language as Instinct

Many modern linguists think the human brain is hard-wired for language. Your ability to speak and understand words is *instinctual*, meaning it comes naturally. This ability makes you different from all other species. Babies learn to speak spontaneously—without formal instruction. The babbling or nonsense sounds that infants make are part of learning the vocabulary and grammar of their native language.

Say It with Gestures

Some linguists believe that before people used language, they communicated with *gestures*, movements of their hands and arms. The earliest people conveyed meaning by making faces, pointing, motioning, or touching objects. Gradually, they began to use sounds that they agreed would stand for the objects around them. Those sounds were the first words.

Words enabled people to talk about things they could not see or touch. In the middle of summer, for instance, they could talk about the snow and ice that would come in winter. And even though the sun was

shining brightly, they could talk about the moon and stars they could not see until nighttime.

The Bowwow Theory

This theory and the next two were popular during the nineteenth century but aren't endorsed by most linguists today. (Their names make fun of these theories.) Some people believed that language began when people imitated the sounds made by the things they were describing. *Roar*, *buzz*, and *crash*, for instance, are *echoic*, or *onomatopoeic*, words. That means the spoken words sound like the sounds they are describing.



According to the linguist Mario Pei, the sound of a sneeze is written differently in different languages. You'd write *ker-choo* in English, *gu-gu* in Japanese, *hah-chee* in Chinese, and *ap-chi* in Russian.

Yo-Ho, Heave-Ho Theory

Other linguists believed that language came from the sounds (grunting, groaning, and rhythmic chanting) that people made as they worked together at some task. No one knows what those grunts, groans, and chants sounded like. (“Yo ho, heave-ho” is a chant that sailors sometimes used as they pulled together on a rope.) For the earliest speakers, language was especially useful while hunting, sharing food, and protecting themselves from attacks.

The Pooh-Pooh Theory

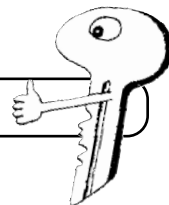
The English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) believed that language developed from instinctive cries that humans made to express emotions, such as fear, anger, pleasure, and pain. For instance, you might say “*mmmm*” when you are licking a chocolate ice-cream cone or “*ow!*” when someone steps on your toe.

So What Do You Think?

Remember, those are all *theories*—guesses about why something happens. No one knows for sure why and how language began. Which theory about the origin of language makes the most sense to you? Why? Can you think of another explanation for the first human speech?

How Language Changes

Languages are changing and growing all the time. That's true not just for English but for every *living language*. (A living language is one that's still being spoken.) Languages change in three basic ways.



New Words Come

New words are coined—made up—to describe scientific discoveries and new inventions and experiences. Fax (short for *facsimile*) entered English in the 1980s, when the device for transmitting documents through phone lines was invented. Think of *e-mail*, *smog*, *software*, *robotics*, *laser*, and *hologram*—all those words came along in the late twentieth century.

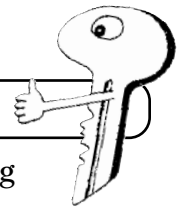
Old Words Go

Gradually, words disappear because they are no longer used. *Thee*, *thou*, and *ye* are *archaic* (no-longer-used) forms of *you*. You might find the archaic *ere* (*before*) or *o'er* (*over*) in poetry but not in speech.

Meanings Change

A word may stay, but its meaning may change. Whoever could imagine that the word *bead* meant “prayer” when it began in Middle English? Or that there’d be this new meaning for the word *burn*: You can *burn* a CD from online music files. *Slang*, a form of informal speech, gives us a never-ending supply of new meanings for old words. *Cool*, for example, once referred only to temperature. For many decades, *cool* has meant “excellent” or “very good.”

Looking at Some Interesting Words



Every word has a story. Most English words have come a long way through many languages. A dictionary tells a word’s history in an *etymology* that’s usually printed after the pronunciation and before the definitions. Etymologies trace the origin and development of words. They show a word’s original language and form and other languages and forms the word has moved through as it has developed.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Nouns Become Verbs

- One of the ways in which language changes is that words take on new meanings. Sometimes the part of speech also changes. For example, someone starts using a noun as a verb, and eventually that usage becomes widespread. Some words that started out as nouns and became verbs include babysit (from *babysitter*) and intuit (from *intuition*).

Here are some recent examples of verbs made from nouns.

- Will you please e-mail me the date and time of your arrival?
- Stacy's grandmother faxed her the recipe for potato pancakes.
- When he was searching for a job, Runar networked with his former classmates and everyone else he knew.
- Lauren hopes to broker a new contract with her employer.

Etymologies go backward in time. They begin with the most recent form of the word and go back to the oldest known form. Etymologies use abbreviations and symbols to tell a story about the word.

Fr = French	ME = Middle English	lit. = literally
Gr = Greek	OE = Old English	prob. = probably
L = Latin	< = derived from	? = unknown

Here’s what the etymology of the English word *person* might look like:

person (PER·sun) *n.* [ME *persone* < OFr < L *persona*, lit., mask (esp. one worn by an actor), character, role, person, prob. < Etruscan *phersu*, mask]

Can you “translate” this etymology? Here’s what it says: The English word *person* comes from the Middle English word *persone*, which in turn comes from an Old French word and before that from the Latin word *persona*. Literally, *persona* means “mask,” especially one worn by an actor, so *persona* came to refer to a character, role, or person. Probably the word *persona* came from the Etruscan word *phersu*, which means “mask.”

Wow! That’s a lot of information packed into a two-line etymology. No wonder dictionary writers use abbreviations and symbols. You can read dictionary etymologies whenever you want to find out about a word’s history. You can find a key to the abbreviations and symbols at the front of every dictionary.

Eponyms

How would you like to have a word named after you—not just any word, but a word you personally inspired? It’s fun to learn about *eponyms*, words that have been named after real or mythical people. *Pennsylvania*, for example, is an eponym, named for the state’s founder, William Penn. Here are some common eponyms:

- **boycott** *v.* to join with others in refusing to buy, use, or sell a product.

The story behind the word. Captain C. C. Boycott was a land agent in Ireland. In 1880, he raised the land rents so high that his tenants and neighbors joined together and refused to deal with him. It was the first boycott.

- **Ferris wheel** *n.* an amusement-park ride consisting of a gigantic vertical wheel that revolves on a fixed axle. Passengers ride in seats that hang between two parallel rims.

The story behind the word. George W. G. Ferris, an American engineer from Galesburg, Illinois, designed and built the first Ferris wheel ride for the World’s Fair held in Chicago in 1893.

- **gerrymander** *v.* to redraw an election district to give one political party an advantage. The purpose of redrawing a voting district is to weaken the political power of ethnic, racial, or urban voters.

The story behind the word. Elbridge Gerry (1744–1814) signed the Declaration of Independence. Then, he served as governor of Massachusetts and U.S. vice president (1813–1814) under President James Madison. In 1812, while Gerry was still governor of Massachusetts, Essex County was redrawn to give his own political party an advantage. The redrawn district looked something like a salamander, so a political cartoonist coined the word *gerrymander* (*Gerry* + *mander*).

- **maverick** *n.* someone who acts independently. A maverick acts according to his or her beliefs, refusing to go along with what others are doing.

The story behind the word.

Samuel Maverick (1803–1870), a Texas rancher, refused to brand his cattle despite the fact that all the other ranchers were branding theirs.

- **sandwich** *n.* two slices of bread with meat, cheese, fish, or other filling between them.

The story behind the word.

John Montagu (1718–1792), the fourth earl of Sandwich, didn't want to stop playing cards at a gambling table. He ordered a servant to bring him roast beef wrapped in bread, and the sandwich was born.

- **sideburns** *n.* whiskers on a man's face in front of the ears, especially when no beard is worn.

The story behind the word. During the Civil War, Union General Ambrose Everett Burnside (1824–1881) wore a mustache and side whiskers but shaved his chin clean. This style of beard was called *burnsides*, after the general. Eventually, the word order reversed to become *sideburns*.



Borrowed Words

When borrowed words become part of the English language, they often get a new pronunciation. For example, the word *denim*, the sturdy cotton material used for blue jeans, came from the French. It was originally *serge* (a type of cloth) *de Nîmes*, from Nîmes, the city where it was made. The French say “duh•NEEM,” but Americans changed it to “DEN•im.”

Borrowed Words

Without borrowing, you wouldn't be eating cookies or coleslaw—they'd be called something else. English is a much richer language because of the many foreign words that it has borrowed. After the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, when French became the official language of the English government and the court, thousands of French words came into the English language.

Wherever people traveled, they found new animals, foods, places, and ideas that had been named in other languages. And they knew a good word when they heard or saw it. So English grew and grew, enriched by borrowed words from many different languages.

Here are some of the languages that have given us words and just a few of the many English words we've borrowed from them:

Borrowed Words

African	banana, bongo, chimpanzee, mumbo jumbo, yam
American Indian	chipmunk, moccasin, moose, powwow, raccoon
Arabic	algebra, assassin, coffee, cotton, jar, sofa
Chinese	china, silk, tea, typhoon
Dutch	boss, landscape, pickle, sketch, sled, split, stove, wagon
French	barber, detail, essay, government, justice, liberty, proof, ticket, treaty
German	delicatessen, dollar, hamburger, kindergarten, noodle, pretzel
Inuit (Eskimo)	anorak, igloo, kayak
Italian	balcony, carnival, piano, sonnet, spaghetti, umbrella
Old Norse	both, cake, freckles, happen, happy, leg, sky, take, ugly, want
Russian	cosmonaut, mammoth, parka, steppe
Scandinavian	geyser, gremlin, rug, ski
Spanish	alligator, barbecue, lasso, ranch, stampede, tomato

Ready, Set,



REVIEW

Language History

- Match each of the numbered words with the language that English borrowed it from. (At the end, every English word should be matched with one foreign language.) While you're at it, write a definition of each word. Then, use a dictionary to check your guesses.

- | | |
|--------------|--------------------|
| 1. bonanza | a. Spanish |
| 2. banjo | b. Dutch |
| 3. skunk | c. French |
| 4. sleigh | d. Arabic |
| 5. pretzel | e. American Indian |
| 6. vogue | f. Italian |
| 7. spaghetti | g. African |
| 8. zero | h. Norwegian |
| 9. ski | i. Hindi |
| 10. shampoo | j. German |

- Do a little detective work. In a dictionary that shows etymologies, look up three of the words from the list below. First, discover what the word means. Then, use the etymology to decipher the story behind the word. You may need to look up a person's name, too. Tell each word's story to a friend or family member.

teddy bear
Celsius

Bunsen burner
Fahrenheit

Geiger counter
pasteurize

3. What language does each of the following English word come from? Use a dictionary to find each word's etymology.

zero	cookie	walrus	canyon	pasta
skunk	waffle	cockroach	potato	attorney

4. What's the story behind the name of your state? Many state names and other place-names come from American Indian languages. Check the etymology of your state's name in a dictionary to find out about it.