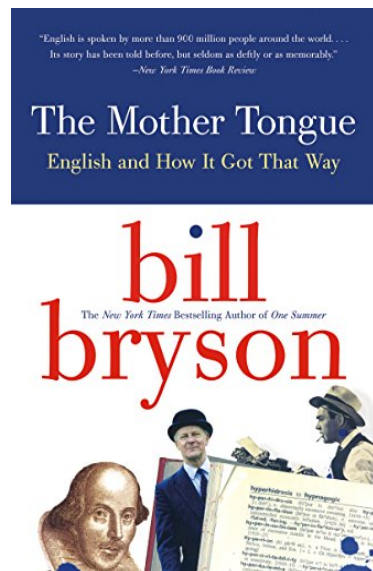


The Mother Tongue Book Summary, by Bill Bryson (archive)

by Allen Cheng

<https://www.allencheng.com/the-mother-tongue-summary-bill-bryson/>



Around 1.5 billion people around the world speak English—roughly 20 percent of the human population. How has our language achieved this global status? How did English evolve over time into the language we speak and write today? What are its unique quirks, strengths, and shortcomings that set it apart from the world's other languages? _The Mother Tongue _takes us on a journey through the history of the English language, exploring its richness and variety, and pointing the way toward what the future might have in store for it.

1-Page Summary of The Mother Tongue

All human societies feature one crucial building block of social organization—language. The spoken and written word is what binds individuals together and helps us form stable communities. In modern history, the English language has come to occupy a dominant position. Today, **English is spoken by** **around 1.5 billion people across the globe, **making it the world's most widely spoken language.

At first glance, it might seem unlikely that the native tongue of a people occupying just one part of an island off the coast of northwestern Europe would become the international language of business and diplomacy. To understand how this came to be, we need to understand the history of English and the processes by which it evolved into the language we speak and write today. What are the origins of English? What are the characteristics of the language that made it easier for people all over the globe to adopt and spread it? What quirks and features of English make it unique? And what is the future of the language?

The History of English

Roots of English

Most of the languages of Europe and Asia belong to** **one great Indo-European family of languages. **English is a member of the Germanic family of languages** (the West Germanic branch, to be precise), which is itself part of the larger Indo-European language family.

The story of English began when Germanic peoples known as the Angles and Saxons, hailing from what is now Northern Germany, began migrating to and conquering the Roman province of Britannia in the mid-5th century CE. These Angles and Saxons brought their Germanic language to their new home, where **it morphed over time into the language we now call Old English**. Some of our most fundamental words today come from Old English, particularly words related to family—*man*, *wife*, *child*, *brother*, and *sister*, to name a few. Old English was a rich literary language as well, leaving behind a trove of letters, charters, religious works, and legal texts. Old English works like *Beowulf* and *Caedmon's Hymn* are the starting points of English literature.

From the 8th to the 10th centuries CE, the British Isles were invaded and settled by the Vikings of Scandinavia. The Viking immigrants and their Norse language further enriched the Old English vocabulary, adding important words like *husband*, *sky*, and *leg*. Old English also absorbed syntax and grammatical structure from Old Norse, a testament to the language's fluidity, even at this early stage in its development.

In 1066, the Norman king William I conquered England and displaced the reigning Anglo-Saxon ruling elite. Norman French came to exert its own powerful influence on English vocabulary and structure—no fewer than **10,000 words can be traced to the time of the Norman Conquest**.

Historical Evolution

Throughout the later Middle Ages, **English evolved organically and developed many of its more recognizable features**. One such feature was uninflected verbs with stable consonants (in other words, they are mostly the same regardless of gender, tense, case, and mood). Another was the simplification of noun endings to denote plurals (almost all English nouns are today pluralized with the addition of a simple *_s* at the end).

In England,** the speech patterns of the capital city of London came to establish the standard for how the language was spoken in the rest of the country,** although this was a long and uneven historical process that didn't happen all at once or with the same speed everywhere. Vestigial features of older forms of the

language remain in place to this day, with archaic pronouns like *thee* and *thou* still spoken in parts of Yorkshire.

Perhaps the most famous change in pronunciation was the Great Vowel Shift running roughly from 1400-1600 CE, during which English speakers began pushing vowels closer to the front of their mouths. The word *life*, for example, was pronounced _lafe _in Shakespeare's time, with the vowel lodged further back in the throat.

At this time, English began to be regarded for its potential as a language of literature. **No writer took greater advantage of the incredible flexibility and richness of the English language than Shakespeare.** The Bard of Avon alone added some 2,000 words to the language, such as *mimic*, *bedroom*, *lackluster*, *hobnob*. He also introduced a host of new phrases we still use today, like “one fell swoop” and “in my mind's eye.” Shakespeare greatly elevated and exalted the English language.

For much of the history of the language, however, words defied standard spelling, with even Shakespeare offering a bewildering array of different and inconsistent spellings for the same words throughout his works. **The first steps toward standardization only began with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century** and the gradual spread of written works (and thus, literacy) throughout England.

By 1640, there were over 20,000 titles available in English, more than there had ever been. As printed works produced by London printers began to spread across the country, local London spelling conventions gradually began to supplant local variations. What this also meant was that **old _spellings _became fixed just as many word _pronunciations _were shifting because of the Great Vowel Shift.** Our inheritance is a written language with many words spelled the way they were pronounced 400 years ago.

As a result, **English spellings often bedevil non-native speakers, as well as those who've spoken the language their whole lives.** Pronunciation and spelling are frequently divergent. To take just one example, the _sh _sound can be spelled *sh* as in *mash*; _ti as in *ration*; _or _ss _as in *session*. The troublesome orthography (the set of conventions for writing) of English can be seen in words like *debt*, *know*, *knead*, and *colonel*, with their silent letters, as well as their hidden, but pronounced letters.

Formalizing English

The Failure of Official Rules

This incongruity of spelling and pronunciation led some notable public figures to champion more robust efforts at spelling standardization and simplification by the end of the 18th century. By the late 19th century, spelling reform groups like the American Philological Association even began to lobby for new spellings like *tho*, *wisht*, and _hav _in an effort to have spelling more closely match pronunciation.

Despite the great passion and energy poured into spelling reform efforts, however, they mostly failed in their mission. Language is such a fluid and organic tool, used differently by so many people and susceptible to innumerable internal and external influences, that **it is quite impossible for some centrally directed body to impose reforms top-down—the development and evolution of language has always been a bottom-up process.**

The organic and sometimes haphazard evolution of English led some figures to call for the establishment of a central body to create rules about and regulate the usage of the language.

But this idea was also greeted with hostility by opponents like the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson, US President Thomas Jefferson, and theologian Joseph Priestley, all of whom argued that an “official” authority on English** would inhibit the evolution of the language and freeze it at a particular point in time**.

Many of the “rules” of English are the arbitrary creations of self-appointed authorities who lived centuries ago and offered little or no rationale for the rules they promulgated. They often rested upon no logic or reason and **were the products of nothing more than prejudice and bias, **with the** **traditional speech of poorer and more marginalized groups being castigated and stigmatized, and that of elites being enshrined as the “official” and “proper” form of the language.

Dictionaries

Although efforts to codify official rules of English have met with little success, **English has succeeded in producing the greatest and most comprehensive dictionaries to be found in any language.**

Britain’s most famous lexicographer was Samuel Johnson. Despite unusual spellings (he retained a fondness for the unnecessary Anglo-Saxon *k* in words like *musick*), some incorrect definitions, and occasionally inflated prose, his 1735 *Dictionary of the English Language* remains a masterpiece of English literature. He was the most significant figure since Shakespeare to truly capture the beauty and richness of the language.

The most comparable figure in America was Noah Webster. **Webster’s English dictionary was the most thorough of its day, with over 70,000 words catalogued.** Driven by a fierce patriotic pride in his young nation and a conviction that American English was just as worthy of exaltation as British English, Webster contributed to some of the distinctive features and pronunciations of the language on his side of the Atlantic.

The crown jewel of all English dictionaries is the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. Originally published in 1884, the OED set out not only to list and define every word used in the English language since the 12th century, but also to trace their etymologies and evolving meanings and spellings throughout history.** **With nearly half a million word entries, **the _OED_ is a staggering intellectual achievement, one of the greatest pieces of scholarship in world history.** Nothing comparable exists in another language.

Word Origins

We’ve seen how different migrant groups to the British Isles shaped the overall structure of the language, aided by individual innovators like Shakespeare, Johnson, and Webster. But now, let’s take a closer look to see how specific _words_ _came_ to be formed. **Words come into being by five main processes:**

1. Accident or mishearing—_sweetheart_ _was_ once *sweetard*, but evolved into its present form

through persistent misuse.

2. Borrowing or adapting from other languages, as with a word like *_breeze*, *_derived* from the Spanish *_briza* *_*(although this particular word has become so thoroughly anglicized that we forget it is actually derived from a foreign source).
3. Invention out of whole cloth like, as in the way *_hound* *_became* *dog*, with no known explanation as to how it took place.
4. Shifting meaning over time—*_nice*, *for example*, *_has* meant everything from foolish to strange to wanton to lascivious. Only in the mid-18th century did it acquire something akin to its present meaning.
5. Alteration through prefixes and suffixes, like how an adjective like *_diverse* *_can* easily become a verb like *_diversify* *_or* a noun like *diversification*.

Pronunciation and Dialect

As we've seen, English words are derived from many different sources**. **This helps to explain why **English is rich with varied pronunciation and dialects**. There are an astonishing variety of dialects within England (let alone Wales, Scotland, and Ireland). The linguist Simeon Potter has observed that **there is more difference in speech between two points 100 miles distant from each other in England than there is in the whole of North America. **

One of the clearest manifestations of local dialect is slurring—the addition, subtraction, or substitution of letters in spoken English that aren't reflected in the spelling. The general trend is one of subtraction, losing letters and syllables over time and letting pronunciations become looser and more casual. **The words that tend to be slurred the most are local and familiar place-names**—like how “Baltimore” becomes “Balamer” in the mouths of locals.

But it's not just geography—**social class can also be a powerful influence on English dialects. **The American dialectologist William Labov observed in the 1930s that middle-class New Yorkers were far more likely to pronounce the *_r* *_sound* in words like *door*, *car*, and *more* than were their fellow working-class New Yorkers. Pronouncing one's *_r* *_sounds* was an indicator of higher social status.

American English

American English differs in many respects from British English. Earlier, we explored the astonishing variety of dialects that can be found in the UK, even between towns that are short distances apart from one another. American speech, on the other hand, is comparatively homogenized, to such an extent that speakers on the East and West Coasts (roughly 3,000 miles apart) speak with virtually indistinguishable accents.

Indeed, despite the massive waves of immigration during the 19th century, **American speech patterns did not diverge over time; instead, they converged**. The movement of people within the US created a linguistic melting pot of intermingling, which homogenized speech patterns. As time went on, people faced social pressures to conform to “normal” American speech, especially the children of immigrants, who faced even stronger pressure to shed the accents and idioms of their parents.

Over time, English-speaking Americans developed their own unique vocabulary and pronunciations,

many of which became widely adopted in England, as well as in whole other languages. The ubiquitous *ok* is maybe the best example, having worked its way into languages across every inhabited continent. Its history and origins are unclear, although linguists believe it may have arisen out of the ironic wordplay of early 19th century American jokesters. Around this time, some well-educated young people in American cities led a fad of creating acronyms for deliberately misspelled phrases—thus, “ok” came from “oll korrekt,” meaning “all correct.”

America has exerted a powerful influence over English, especially as the reach of US media and Hollywood films has extended around the world. American idioms like *don't have* are replacing *haven't got* in Britain, while *truck* is gradually edging out the more uniquely British *lorry*. We can also see this in British spelling, as the *_u_* in *humour* and *colour* is slowly becoming extinct in the UK.

The Success of English Around the World

We've seen how English evolved over a long historical process, spreading to America where it took on its own unique form—which, in turn, shaped how the language was spoken in the mother country. But the reach of English, of course, extends far beyond Britain and America—**English is a world language, with official status in 59 countries, a higher figure than for any other language.** Of course, not everyone in these countries actually speaks English (in fact, many people in the US and the UK don't) but its widespread reach can't be denied. How did it achieve this global status?

The residual historical legacy of the British Empire, plus the emergence of the United States as a global superpower, naturally played major roles in rendering English the global *lingua franca*. But certain features of the language itself aided in its worldwide adoption by native speakers of other languages: **Its spelling is relatively phonetic; it is almost entirely free of gendered nouns; and it lacks the accent marks and diacritics that subtly transform pronunciation.** Thus, it is relatively easy to speak and write English.

Moreover,** English is based on a phonetic alphabet.** **That is, the written characters correspond to particular sounds.** This is a great advantage and makes writing and pronouncing words simple, because there are only so many sounds that can be represented by the letters. It limits the number of characters that comprise the writing system.

We've seen how, even in its earliest stages, English was highly flexible in accepting new words from Norse and Norman French. The process also works the other way around—English words themselves have been readily adopted by other languages, often with only slight modifications to fit the native tongue. The Japanese, in particular, are adept at adapting English words into their notoriously difficult and inaccessible language. These are known as *wasei-eigo*, or “Japanese-made-English.” Thus, *smart* became *sumato*, *_rush hour_* became *rushawa*, *idol* became *aidoru*, and so on.

Quirks of English

We've explored the origins of English, its evolution over time, and its emergence as a dominant language of global business and politics. But English is also a language of literature and oratory, capable of eloquently expressing the most powerful human emotions and desires. It possesses a number of unique

properties, quirks, and complexities that set it apart from other tongues. What, then, are some of the language's unique traits that make it so rich and evocative?

One of the best ways to get a true flavor of the English language is through its swear words. Unlike some other languages, like Japanese, English features a rich vocabulary of swear words. **English swear words derive their power from the fact that they are highly emotive, as well as forbidden**, and tend to be oriented around two themes: obscenity, which is either the disgusting and/or taboo (often having to do with bodily functions or sex); or blasphemy, which involves sacrilege or invoking the name of God in vain. In English, *shit*, *piss*, *fuck*, and *cunt* would fall into the former category; *hell*, *damn*, *goddamn* and *Jesus Christ* (in certain contexts) would fall into the latter.

Cunt is perhaps the most obscene word in the English language, but it was entirely commonplace and inoffensive a few centuries ago, existing even in the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare. Throughout the history of the English language, however, there have been shifting definitions of which words were and weren't considered offensive. What was perfectly acceptable in one era could be considered highly offensive in another.

By the Victorian Age (1837-1901), many English words that would have scarcely raised an eyebrow in the Middle Ages or in Shakespeare's time were considered totally out of bounds. Indeed, this era was famous for its prudishness and squeamishness. Even non-taboo parts of the body were considered too delicate to mention in polite society. Thus, *legs* became *limbs* and *belly* became *midriff*.

Beyond the ingenuity one can deploy with swearing (*fuck* alone is incredibly versatile, able to express the full range of emotions and be used as any part of speech), English** affords ample opportunity for wordplay and creativity. **The forms of wordplay are greatly varied.

Palindromes (sentences spelled the same backwards and forwards) are among the most creative and most challenging to write. Consider how difficult it is to come up with a palindrome like "Rise to vote sir" or "A nut for a jar of tuna" that satisfy the criteria _and _form coherent statements.

Anagrams (words or phrases made from rearranging the letters of other words and phrases) are also highly popular. Thus, one can turn Emperor Octavian into "Captain over Rome" or Osama Bin Laden into "Is bad man alone."

Perhaps the most famous wordplay in spoken English is the phenomenon of cockney rhyming slang. This is a linguistic characteristic specific to the cockneys of London's East End, believed to have started around the mid-19th century. In this rhyming slang, the speaker replaces a word (like *mate*) with a multi-word phrase (like *china plate*), the last word of which rhymes with the word that's been replaced. Thus, "How are you, mate?" would become "How are you, china plate?" But in reality, it goes a step *further*. The second, rhyming word is often *dropped*. Thus, "How are you, mate?" would really become "How are you, china?" This renders the etymology of these phrases deeply obscure and often baffling to outsiders.

Next Steps for English

Given its dominant status,** it is convenient, advantageous, and expedient for people around the world to

have a working knowledge of English**. Yet even within countries that have high levels of English proficiency, people are still quite proud of their native languages and wish to preserve them. Indeed, many parts of the world view the English language itself as a symbol of western colonialism.

For these reasons,** English speakers should never be reduced to complacency by the seeming triumph of their language**. Things can always change, and the supremacy of English may one day be supplanted by a rival claimant.

What, then, is the future of the language? With America's powerful economic and cultural influence over the world,** the likely trajectory seems to be a homogenization of English **to conform to the way it's spoken in the United States. These trends are reinforced by the influences of mass media, which expose us to dialects of speech that we would never have otherwise heard. Thus, a melting pot of English, rather than a polarization of different dialects, looks to be where we're headed.

On the one hand, this is positive. Americans, Britons, Australians, Canadians, South Africans, Jamaicans, and all other English-speaking nations will understand one another better, creating stronger conditions for political, social, and economic cooperation. But, on the other hand, something irreplaceable would be lost—the variety and flavor of our rich and beautiful language.

Full Summary of The Mother Tongue

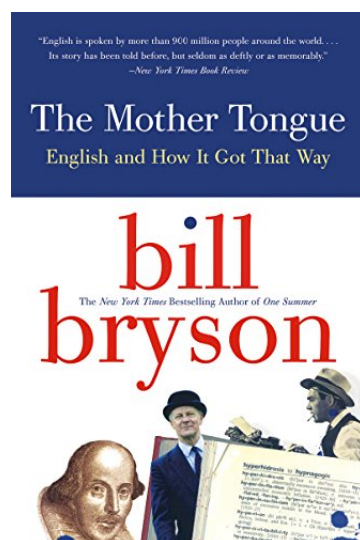
Chapter 1: The Origins of English

All human societies feature one crucial building block of social organization—language. The spoken and written word is what binds individuals together and helps us form stable communities. **In modern history, the English language has come to occupy a dominant position.**

(Shortform note: According to [The Economist](#), around 1.5 billion people across the globe speak English with at least some degree of proficiency, making it the world's most-spoken language.)

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