

Verb Tense Review: A Little History of English

READING TEXT

In the fifth century, the Roman Empire collapsed. The Latin-speaking Romans left England, and not long after the story of English began. The Romans had defended the Britons, the original inhabitants of what is now England, from an aggressive people called the Picts. When the Romans left, the Britons invited some tough tribes from Northwest Europe, the Anglos, the Saxons and the Jutes, to come to Britain to defend the Britons against the Picts. Eventually, these mercenaries, who called themselves the English, decided to stay in England and to kick the Britons out. The Britons went to what today are known as Scotland, Wales and the French province of Brittany.

The Britons spoke a Celtic language; the English spoke a Germanic language called Old English. The next group of people to have an influence on English were the Vikings. By 878, the Vikings controlled half of England. They spoke Old Norse, a Germanic language similar to Old English. Today's English words “egg”, “gate” and “husband” all come from Old Norse.

Some linguists believe that Old Norse made another contribution to English - the death of the gender system. In many European languages such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, German and Czech, all objects have a masculine, feminine or sometimes neutral identity. English used to be like this too. Old Norse and Old English were so similar that speakers of the two could understand each other. The only problem was that the gender systems were completely different. The solution was to drop gender in English, and to adopt the neutral gender. That is why today the singular pronoun for almost everything except people is “it”.

The next big event in the history of English was the Norman Conquest of 1066. The Normans, or north men, were descendants of the Vikings, who had invaded northwestern France. They spoke French, and after they took over England, the English government was run by a French-speaking elite for almost three-hundred years.

Today's English still shows the influence of this French elite. For example, people who flip hamburgers in a fast food restaurant are “cooks”, while those who make duck à l'orange in fine restaurants are “chefs”. Words such as “assembly”, “government”, “law”, “legal” and “parliament” all come from French. Here is a little puzzle. Can you explain why the names of the following animals come from Old English while the names of their meat comes from Old French?

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ENGLISH ORIGIN	FRENCH ORIGIN
calf -----	➤ veal
cow -----	➤ beef
pig -----	➤ pork, bacon, ham
sheep -----	➤ mutton

Can you explain it? _____

In 1476, a businessman named William Caxton imported Guttenberg's printing press from Germany to London. For the first time, it was possible to make multiple copies of texts. After people started to see more and more written texts, they began to standardize spelling for the first time. Ever since, pronunciation has continued to change rapidly, but spelling has changed very slowly. That is why two people living in Birmingham, England and Birmingham, Alabama speak very differently, but their spelling is almost identical.

There are however, a few differences in today's British and American spelling. For example, words that end in “-se” in Britain often end in “-ze” in the U.S. (ex. G. B. organise, U.S. organize). British words which end in “-our” usually end in “-or” in the States (ex. G.B. harbour, U.S. harbor). Canadians, typically, “sit on the fence”. We use the American “curb” and “jail”, not the British “kerb” and “goal”. We spell the “thing in the middle”, the “centre”, like the British, not the “center” in the American manner.

The cultural resistance to changing spelling even while we accept pronunciation changes has created some pronunciation problems. For example “ough” has seven different pronunciations in English.

WORD	PRONUNCIATION
cough	off
rough	uff
through	ue
although	oe
thoroughly	uh
bough	ow (how)
bought	aw (saw)

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The Anglo-Irish writer, George Bernard Shaw, created a famous joke to demonstrate the craziness of the English spelling system.

George Bernard Shaw's Spelling Joke

1. Try to pronounce this word: GHOTI.
2. The proper pronunciation is “fish”. That’s right! It’s pronounced as “fish”. How can this be?
3. Here is the explanation:
 - enough The “gh” represents the sound usually associated with “f”.
 - women The “o” represents the sound usually associated with “i”.
 - attention The “ti” represents the sound usually associated with “sh”.

Therefore, in English, “ghoti” could be pronounced “fish”. It isn’t, of course. Shaw wanted the English spelling system to be reformed, and he used this little joke to demonstrate that reform was necessary.

English words are not only difficult to spell, but there are a lot of them. English has the most words of any of the world’s languages. There are twice as many living words in English as in French for example. This is because of the hybrid roots of English and the traditional openness of English culture to the creation or adoption of new words. Shakespeare alone is credited with having created more than one hundred words. For the last two centuries, two English-speaking countries, first Britain and then the United States have been the dominant world powers. Because of this, English today is spoken by more people than any other language. It is spoken as a first language in many countries, such as Canada, the U.S.A., the U.K., New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. It is spoken as a lingua franca in countries such as India and Nigeria. It is a second language in places such as Quebec, Japan, Korea, China and Latin America. Some linguists now think there are Englishes instead of one English language. It would be fascinating to know what the next 1500 years will bring.

Read the text again. Circle SIMPLE PRESENT verbs, put a box around SIMPLE PAST verbs and underline PRESENT TENSE verbs. Can you find any CONTINUOUS verbs or examples of USED TO?

Intermediate 2 – Reading Exercise 1 – Verb Tense Review: A Little History of English

Write a sentence with each of the following words and expressions.

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. | TRIBE | _____ |
| 2. | CELTIC | _____ |
| 3. | MERCENARIES | _____ |
| 4. | GERMANIC | _____ |
| 5. | VIKINGS | _____ |
| 6. | TO COLLAPSE | _____ |
| 7. | INHABITANTS | _____ |
| 8. | TO HAVE AN
INFLUENCE ON | _____ |
| 9. | TO DROP | _____ |
| 10. | TO ADOPT | _____ |
| 11. | DESCENDANTS | _____ |
| 12. | TO IMPORT | _____ |
| 13. | DOMINANT | _____ |
| 14. | A LINGUA FRANCA | _____ |

Answer to the “meat puzzle”.

In the period following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the elite spoke French, but the peasants spoke English. Therefore, the poor people who worked on farms with the animals called the beasts by their traditional English names, while the aristocrats who ate the meat gave their food French names. The French, “veau”, “boeuf”, “porc”, “bacon”, “jambon” and “mouton” became the English veal, beef, pork, bacon, ham and mutton.

Answer the following questions.

1. Why is English not a Latin language like French, Spanish or Portuguese?

2. What type of language did the Britons speak?

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3. What type of language is English? (Is it a Latin, Germanic or Celtic language?)

4. Where did the Britons go after the English arrived?

5. What theory explains why objects are not masculine or feminine in English?

6. What influence did French have on English?

7. Why has English spelling become so tricky?

8. Why are there so many words in English?

9. Before you started this course, what was your perception of English?

10. Has your perception changed? If so, how?
