

# Impact of other languages on the origin and development of Old English

D.N. Aloysius

## සාරාංශය

ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව අද ලොව පුරා ව්‍යාප්ත ව විශ්ව භාෂාවක් බවට පත් ව ඇත. මෙම විශේෂ තත්ත්වයට අවතීර්ණ වීමට එයට ගතවර්ෂ ගණනාවක් අවශ්‍ය වී ය. වර්තමාන ලෝක ජනගහනයෙන් කිලියනයකට වැඩි ප්‍රමාණයක් ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව භාවිත කරයි. තව ද එය රටවල් අතර සන්නිවේදන කටයුතු වල දී බහුල ව භාවිත කරනු ලබයි. එ බැවින් මෙම ගෝලීය භාෂාව පිළිබඳ මනා අවබෝධයක් තිබීම උචිත ය. ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ සම්භවයට මෙන් ම සංවර්ධනයට විවිධ භාෂාවන් වල දායකත්වය ලැබී ඇති බැව් පැහැදිලි වේ. මේ සඳහා මූලික දායකත්වය ලබා දී ඇත්තේ කෙල්ටික් භාෂාව ය. එම භාෂාවෙන් ඉංග්‍රීසියට විශේෂ වූ වචන වර්තමානයේ දී වූව ද විද්‍යමාන වේ. ඉන් පසු ව ස්කැන්ඩිනේවියන් භාෂාවේ බලපෑම් ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාව වෙත යොමු වී ය. මෙහි බලපෑම් කෙල්ටික් භාෂාවට වඩා තීව්‍ර වී ය. එය ඉංග්‍රීසි ගබ්ඳ කෝෂයට අලුත් වචන එකතු කළා මෙන් ම ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ ව්‍යාකරණ වලට වැදගත් යමක් එකතු කළේ ය. මින් අනතුරු ව ලතින් භාෂාවන් ග්‍රීක භාෂාවන් ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ ගබ්ඳකෝෂයට විවිධ සමාජ ක්ෂේත්‍ර වලට අදාළ වචන ගොන්නක් එකතු කරමින් අති විශාල දායකත්වයක් ලබා දුන්නේ ය. මේ ආකාරයට මුල්ම අවධියේ දී ඉංග්‍රීසි භාෂාවේ සංවර්ධනය සඳහා පැරණි භාෂාවන් වූ කෙල්ටික්, ස්කැන්ඩිනේවියන්, ලතින් සහ ග්‍රීක භාෂා වලින් ලැබුණ දායකත්වය ඉමහත් ය.

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Author Details: ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ කම්කාරිය, සමාජීය විද්‍යා අංශය, සමාජීය විද්‍යා හා මානවශාස්ත්‍ර විද්‍යා, ශ්‍රී ලංකා රජයේ විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය, මහින්තලේ. [aloysiusrit@gmail.com](mailto:aloysiusrit@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

At present, English is considered to be the global language as it is geographically spread all over the world and used by approximately, one billion people of the global population as a first language, second language and foreign language. Today, the English language has become more popular than other languages among many countries in the world. Hence, it is worth to explore and investigate how this prominent language originated and spread throughout the world so rapidly. English is a West Germanic language, which was first spoken in early medieval England

and presently, it is the most widely used language in the world.<sup>1</sup> It is spoken as a native language by the majority of the people of the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and a number of Caribbean countries. It is the third most common native language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish.<sup>2</sup> It is also widely learnt as a second language and foreign language all over the world and is an official language of the European Union, many Commonwealth countries and the United Nations, as well as in many other world

organizations. Three Germanic tribes invaded Britain during the 05<sup>th</sup> century. These tribes were Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who came from Denmark and northern Germany. When they arrived in Britain, the inhabitants of Britain spoke Celtic. But, after their arrival, most of the Celtic people were expelled by the invaders to Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Celtic was the first language, which influenced Old English. Other main languages that influenced Old English or Anglo-Saxon were found to be Scandinavian, Latin and Greek languages. So, the objective of the present study is to investigate how those four ancient languages contributed to expand the English language during the Anglo-Saxon period from 450 AD to 1100 AD.

Germanic tribes, who invaded Britain, spoke similar languages, which gradually developed into Old English, which is much more different than modern English. Today, even native English speakers find it difficult to understand Old English. However, half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots.

### **Celtic Influence on Old English**

Old English culture and language spread rapidly across east and central parts of Britain during the 06<sup>th</sup> and 07<sup>th</sup> centuries while the dominant culture and language of the Celtic people, who captured Britain around 600 BC,<sup>3</sup> remained. Even today, their languages are found to be preserved in the areas, where they had inhabited as a way of protecting their heritage. However, the Celtic people, who invaded Britain, seem to have integrated with the people, who were living there when they came to the island, absorbing elements of the language spoken by this group. The Celts had already spread their influence across the most of central Europe and interacted with the Germanic tribes. Dialects spoken in northern Spain are

heavily influenced by Celtic to this day. There is also a noticeable correspondence between northern Italian place names and similar names in Cornwall, starting with *tre*, a Celtic word for a farm or settlement.

Celtic words in Old English come from identifiable sources from the continent usually words associated with conflict and battle. Celts were often used as armies for hire. Celtic loan words were taken over after their settlement, usually place names, and words from Ireland frequently associated with Christianization of Britain. However, the Anglo-Saxons terrorized Celts rather than integrated with them and so their languages became isolated until the Norman Conquest<sup>4</sup> created a linguistic hierarchy with Celtic languages firmly<sup>5</sup>.

The social stigma on the Celtic languages in British society during the long period of thousand years seems to be responsible for its lack of vocabulary in the English language, which is a language renowned for its borrowing of words from many other languages. Celtic languages were considered as inferior and as a result it did not get ant recognition during that specific period. In general, the words that have survived are the words with geographical significance and place names. Only such names remained and all other words vanished due to less respect towards them. Some adopted words such as bucket, car, crockery, slogan and flannel, truant and geol survived. The survival of the Celtic languages can be seen in the areas, which were densely occupied by the Celts during that period. In many such areas, Celtic influence on the English language is mostly obvious through place names. The Celtic language was also known as the British language, which was the language of Britons, who were the native inhabitants of the land. Some Celtic names survive in the areas, where the Celts occupied for a long time. The names of rivers such as the Thames and the Yare

and important Roman towns such as London, York and Lincoln still remain as Celtic words. We also find a number of names, which are the compounds of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon words. 'bre' and 'pen' are two Celtic words, which appear in a number of names for 'hill'. For example, Brill in Buckinghamshire is a combination of 'bre' and Old English, 'hyll'. Breedon on the Hill in Leicestershire is a combination of 'bre' and 'dun', both Celtic words, and Brewood in Staffordshire is combined with Old English wudu. It is also found that the use of "Combe" or "Coombe" as part of many place names derives from the Celtic word, kumb, which meant "valley". It was later adopted into Anglo Saxon English. The Celtic word 'tor' is mainly used in the south-west of Britain. 'Tor' means "rock" in English and it is with the granite peaks on Dartmoor and Bodmin moor, Hay Tor, Hound Tor etc. This was later incorporated into the name of the coastal town, 'Torquay'.

The contribution of Celtic languages to the English language seems to be much less when compared to that of other languages to the former. However, the place names such as London, York and Lincoln introduced by the Celtic languages remain even today with their own identity.

























### **Scandinavian Influence on Old English**

During the 05<sup>th</sup> century AD, three Germanic tribes, Angles, Saxons and Jutes invaded Britain. After that, with their knowledge of building ships and their skills to navigate, the Danes, Norwegians and Swedes, who were collectively known as Vikings<sup>6</sup>, arrived in Britain. The English language as time passed by came into contact with different speech communities such as Celtic, Latin, Greek and Scandinavian.<sup>7</sup> The Germanic tribes of the Jutes, Angles and Saxons laid the foundation for the English language when they invaded England in the fifth






















and sixth centuries. During the first seven hundred years of the existence of language, three major influences on its development can be observed. First, English had the contact with Celtic and then with the Roman<sup>8</sup> and eventually the Scandinavian language.

Apart from Greek and Latin, only Scandinavian language made substantial contribution to the English vocabulary during the Anglo Saxon period. The contribution of Celtic language was really much less during that period. The Scandinavian<sup>9</sup> colonization of the British Isles had a considerable impact on the English language and its vocabulary and culture. Enormous similarity is found between these two languages, English and Scandinavian, in nouns like 'man', 'wife', 'father', 'folk', 'mother', 'house', 'life', 'winter', 'summer'; verbs like 'like', 'will', 'can', 'meet', 'come', 'bring', 'hear', 'see', 'think', 'smile', 'ride', 'spin'; and adjectives and adverbs like 'full', 'wise', 'better', 'best', 'mine', 'over' and 'under'. Due to the Scandinavian influence, there exist a large number of places that bear Scandinavian names. More than 600 places in English have names ending in by<sup>10</sup>. Numerous examples can be cited to prove this fact. Grimsby, Whitby, Derby and Rugby are some of them. Althorp, Bishopsthorpe and Lintroppe consist of the Scandinavian word 'thorp', which means village. An isolated piece of land in Scandinavian was called thwaite. We find such endings in Applethwaite and Braithwaite. They are considered as place names. There is another Scandinavian word, 'toft', which means a piece of ground. Brimtoft, Eastoft and Nörtoft ending in 'toft' are also some place names. We also find a number of words relating to law or social and administrative system entering in the English language. The word, 'law' itself is of Scandinavian origin and the words such as nioing (criminal), mall (action of law), wapentake (an administrative district), husting (assembly), stefnan

Runic alphabet FHTFRK

							
f	u	p	a	r	k	g	w
fehuz wealth	ūruz aurochs	purisaz giant	ansuz god	raipō riding	kaunaz ulcer	gebō gift	wunjō joy
							
h	n	i	j	i	p	z	s
hagalaz hail	naupiz need/hardship	isa ice	jera year/harvest	eihwaz yew tree	perp luck	algiz sedge (?)	sōwulō sun
							
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o
teiwaz the god Tyr	berkana birch twig	ehwaz horse	mannaz man	laguz water	inguz the god Ing	dagaz day	ōpila inherited lanc

Ancient Latin alphabet

										
L	K	I	H	Z	F	E	D	C	B	A
[l]	[k]	[i]	[h]	[z]	[f]	[e]	[d]	[k]	[b]	[a]
										
X	U	T	S	R	Q	P	O	N	M	
[ks]	[u/w]	[t]	[s]	[r]	[k <sup>h</sup> ]	[p]	[o]	[n]	[m]	

(summon) are found to be Scandinavian words. After the Scandinavians had steadily settled down in England, a number of Scandinavian words added to the English vocabulary were much higher. We also find some other common words in English that owe their origin to the language of the Scandinavians such as bank, birth, bull, dirt, egg, gap, kid, link, race, skirt, sister, window, low, meek, rotten, shy, tight, weak, bait, crawl, dig, gape, kindle, lift, screech, thrust, they, their, then, aloft, athwart and many more.

Regarding grammar, many of the pronominal forms like 'they', 'them', 'their' etc are of the Scandinavian origin. The use of 'shall' and 'will' and the prepositional use of 'to', 'till', 'fro', are due to Scandinavian influence.

**Influence of Latin on Old English**

During the Anglo Saxon period, Latin influenced the development of Old English more than any other non-West Germanic language, with which Old English came into contact. Influence of

Latin on Old English was chronologically divided into three time periods. The first time period occurred on the continent prior to the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in England. The second period of Latin influence was from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in England up to their Christianization. The last period of Latin influence spans from the time of Christianization up to the arrival of the Normans in 1066<sup>11</sup>.

Prior to the Christianization of England, the English language didn't have a proper alphabet and as a result, runic letters were used. Much less is known how the Runic alphabet<sup>12</sup> originated. The word, rune means 'letter', 'text' or 'inscription' in Old Norse<sup>13</sup>.

The most significant influence that Latin had on Old English was the use of the ancient Latin alphabet<sup>14</sup>. Latin also held the most pervasive influence on Old English in the area of vocabulary. It was found that in total approximately 450 Old English words, mostly nouns were borrowed from Latin (Baugh: 106). Around 170 of these words entered the Old English lexicon during the continental period (Hogg: 302; Williams: 57). They are related mostly to plants, household items, clothing and building materials. Accordingly, they represent the influence of spoken Latin rather than Classical Latin.

The influx of such words clearly reflects the influence of the literate, Classical Latin culture associated with the Church following the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons.

A few words relating to Christianity such as church and bishop were borrowed earlier. The list of such loan words includes abbot, alms, altar, angel, anthem, Arian, ark, candle, canon, chalice, cleric, cowl, deacon, disciple, epistle, hymn, litany, manna, martyr, mass, minster, noon, nun, offer, organ, pall, palm, pope, priest, provost, psalm, relic, rule, shrift,

shrine, shrive, stole, synod, temple, and tunic.

The church also exercised a profound influence on the domestic life of the people during that period. This resulted in the adoption of many new words, such as the names of articles of clothing and household use; cap, sock, silk, purple, chest, mat, sack words denoting foods, such as beet, cabbage, lentil, millet, pear, radish, doe, oyster, lobster, mussel, to which we may add the noun cook; names of trees, plants, and herbs, such as box, pine, aloes, balsam, fennel, hyssop, lily, mallow, marshmallow, myrrh, rue, savory and the general word plant. Some words related to education and learning reflects another aspect of the church's influence. They are school, master, Latin, verse, meter, gloss, notary. A number of miscellaneous words, like anchor, coulter, fan (for winnowing), fever, place, sponge, elephant, phoenix, coin, and some more or less learned or literary words, such as circle, legion, giant, consul, and talent. The words cited in these examples are mostly nouns, but Old English borrowed also a number of verbs and adjectives such as spend, exchange, compose, torture, weigh, prick, to dance, grind, turn; crisp<sup>15</sup>.

Latin also forms a familiar element in English place-names such as Chester, Colchester, Dorchester, Manchester, Winchester, Lancaster, Gloucester, Worcester, and many others. The words, port (harbor, gate, and town) portus and porta; munt (mountain) mons, montem; torr (tower, rock), street, wall, wine were introduced by Latin language.

A lot of medical terms also originated from Latin language such as cancer, paralysis, plaster, and words relating to the animal kingdom, like viper, camel, scorpion, tiger, belong apparently to the same category of learned and literary borrowings.

## Greek alphabet

letter	Greek		Phoenician		English
	ancient	modern	spelling		
A	aleph	alp <sup>h</sup> a	'alfa	ἄλφα	alpha
B	beth	βεῖτα	'vita	βῆτα	beta
Γ	gimel	gamma	'gamma	γάμμα	gamma
Δ	daleth	delta	'delta	δέλτα	delta
Η	heth	ηεῖτα, εῖτα	'ita	ἦτα	eta
Θ	teth	t <sup>h</sup> εῖτα	'theta	θῆτα	theta
Ι	yodh	ιῶτα	'jota	ἰῶτα	iota
Κ	kaph	kappa	'kapa	κάππα	kappa
Λ	lamedh	lambda	'lam <sup>ḏ</sup> a	λάμβδα	lambda
Μ	mem	my:	mi	μῦ	mu
Ν	nun	ny:	ni	νῦ	nu
Ρ	reš	rw:	ro	ῥῶ	rho
Τ	taw	tau	taf	ταῦ	tau

### Greek influence on Old English

Ancient Greek is alien to most modern English speakers, but it remains a foundational source of their language. Modern English is complex and varied due to the influence of other languages including Greek. It is generally referred to as a Germanic language, which is more confusing as there are other equally powerful language influences. Old English was, thus, well shaped by its own considerable inheritance from Greek<sup>16</sup>.

Greek alphabet<sup>17</sup> was the greatest gift that Old English had inherited from Greek. It is also found that many letters in English have been borrowed from ancient Greek. For instance, the English letters “a” and “b” are variations on the Greek letters “alpha” and “beta.”

It has been found that some English words originated directly from Greek or borrowed from other languages like Latin, French or German, which were believed

to be formed out of the various elements of common Greek words. The influence of Greek vocabulary on English is most obvious in the fields of technical and academic language. Diagnosis, analysis, synthesis and antithesis derived from some Greek words. Moreover, the names of academic disciplines are often formed by combining the Greek word "logos" with another Greek word. "Logos" means "speech" or "thought" and, in this context, it means the study of something. For instance, geology combines "geo," the Greek word for Earth, with "logos" to mean the study of the Earth.

Greek heavily influenced Latin, which was the dominant language of cultural exchange in Europe for centuries. Approximately half of all English words come from Latin and a substantial portion of those have their ultimate origin in Greek. Much of what English has borrowed from French and German also came from Greek through the medium of Latin. According to "Lingua Franca", the biannual newsletter of the foreign language department at Salem State University, "village," "magnify," "bonus" and "fame" are all words that Latin borrowed from Greek and that English subsequently borrowed from Latin.

English grammar is heavily influenced by Greek and even the term "grammar"

originated from Greek. It is also found that the most elemental grammatical concepts in English like noun, subject, predicate, adjective, preposition and pronoun are also found to be basic to Greek. The word, "democracy" dates back to ancient Greece. Also, many conjugations of the word "auto" are all originally Greek: "autocracy," "autonomy," "autobiography" and "autograph" are easily recognizable examples.

### **Conclusion**

It is now apparent that during the Old English period, four main languages such as Celtic, Scandinavian, Latin and Greek contributed to expand the English language. According to the study, much less contribution was made by the Celtic language as it was not recognized by the Germanic tribes. The Celts were condemned and chased away by them. Hence, the Celtic language was not much spread over the island as the other languages. Anyway, at last, a few Celtic words survived during that period. However, the spread of the Scandinavian, Latin and Greek languages was not so disturbed like that. That was the reason for such languages to have survived today along with a large number of words belonging to various activities and fields.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Mydans, Seth (14 May 2007) "Across cultures, English is the word" *New York Times*. Retrieved 21 September 2011

<sup>2</sup> Ethnologue, 1999 Archived from the original on 29 April 1999. Retrieved 31 October 2010

<sup>3</sup> Claire Lovis-2001

<sup>4</sup> Norman Conquest took place in 1066 s

<sup>5</sup> Celtic influence on the English-language...omes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercyc/courses/6361Lovis.htm-25.09.2013

<sup>6</sup> They are also known as Scandinavians or Norsemen

<sup>7</sup> Scandinavian Influence on the English Language- by Johannes Huhmann- University of Manchester

<sup>8</sup> Latin

<sup>9</sup> Scandinavia, today's Norway, Sweden and Denmark: Scandinavian invaders are known as Vikings

<sup>10</sup> Danish word –'by' means town or farm

<sup>11</sup> Influence of Latin on Old English by Edward Moore

<sup>12</sup> Runic alphabet Origin-[www.omniglot.com/writing/runic.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/runic.htm)-04.10.2013

<sup>13</sup> Language of the Vikings, is a North Germanic language once spoken in Scandinavia-  
<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/oldnorse.htm>

04.10.2013

<sup>14</sup> Ancient Latin alphabet-[www.omniglot.com/writing/latin.htm](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/latin.htm)-04.10.2013

<sup>15</sup> Latin Influences on Old English-by Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable An excerpt from Foreign Influences on Old English

<sup>16</sup> By Ivan Kenneally-June 11, 2013

<sup>17</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek\\_alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_alphabet)-04.10.2013

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