

# The History of English: Many Cultures, Many Contributions

Exploring  
English as a  
Discipline of  
Study!

[1] The world is becoming a “global village” right before our eyes. English is emerging as the international language. It is the first language of many nations and the second language in countries such as India and Nigeria.

[2] Why is English so adaptable? Its history provides one clue. English has always been open to new words from different tongues. This is not the situation in France, Italy, or Spain, where language academies have kept their respective languages free from foreign words.

[3] Many cultures have contributed to modern English. In the fifth century, Anglo-Saxons from continental Europe who spoke a Germanic tongue invaded the British Isles. Therefore, English contains various basic words that derive from German. For instance, the English words “home” and “garden” descended from the German *heim* and *garten*, respectively.

[4] The French conquest of England (1066) changed English significantly. First, because French was originally a Latin dialect, many prefixes, suffixes, and root words entered English. Second, many French words related to food, fashion, the arts, and government enriched the English vocabulary. Some French words replaced their Germanic counterparts; others coexisted with them as synonyms. For example, while the English “home” derives from the German *heim*, several English words derive from *domus*, the Latin word for “home.” Examples are “domestic,” “domicile,” and “domain.”

[5] As soon as the British set foot in the New World, an American vocabulary began to develop. The first British colonist quickly adopted Native American\* words. By 1621, for example, the Indian words “canoe” (a slender, lightweight boat tapered at each end) and “maize” (corn) were common American terms. Other words were borrowed from the Dutch, who had preceded the British in New York. Thus Americans use Dutch “cookie” instead of British “biscuit.” Although some early British travelers to America scorned these additions to English, the colonists found them vivid and practical.

[6] Travelling west, American pioneers encountered a Spanish-speaking ranching\* society. Some Spanish words such as “sombrero” (a wide-brimmed hat) kept their original form. Others, however, became Americanized. “Ranch,” for instance, derives from Rancho, a temporary, one story house for travelers or ranch workers. The American slang expression “It’s a cinch” (“it’s sure or easy”), derives from cincho, a strap that secured a pack or saddle to a horse’s back.

[7] The following sentence was recently overheard on New York City’s Lower East Side, home to diverse immigrants. “Amigo,” called one individual to another, “Get me a bagel\* and coffee at the deli, okay?” “Amigo,” Spanish for “friend,” is understood without translation. “bagel,” a Yiddish\* word, was brought to America by Eastern European Jews at the turn of the century. “Deli,” an abbreviation of the German *delikatessen*, is both a store that sells cooked meats and the meats themselves. Two “deli” items that are now completely Americanized are frankfurters (hot dogs) and hamburgers.

[8] American English still welcomes new words. Sometimes one foreignism replaces another. For example, “honcho” from the Japanese *hancho* has replaced the Dutch boss to describe a powerful person in politics or business. According to H. L. Mencken, a prominent American linguist, American English is enriched by “transfusions” of foreign words. “The day the gates go up,” he wrote, “... the language begins to die.”

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**Native Americans:** the tribal people popularly called the American Indians

**Ranching:** the raising of cattle and sheep on a large scale

**Bagel:** a soft, chewy roll with a hole in the center that is boiled and then baked

**Yiddish:** a language based on 15<sup>th</sup> century German dialects with a mixture of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic words

This **deli** (from German)  
advertises bagels (from  
Yiddish) and coffee (from  
Arabic qauwah).



Adapted solely for this class assignment from Pacheco & Gregg (2003).  
*The Powerful Reader: Thematic Approach to Developing Reading Skills.*