

# LANGUAGE, LEXICON AND LOLLIPOPS

**PETER TRUDGILL** on how our vocabulary has grown by collecting words from our European cousins



north of Britain). These include common, everyday items like *angry*, *egg*, *flat*, *gasp*, *get*, *guess*, *hit*, *ill*, *knife*, *leg*, *lift*, *low*, *same*, *sick*, *scare*, *take*, *tight*, and *window* – and, perhaps surprisingly, the pronouns *they*, *their*, and *them*. Many Norse words replaced their Old English equivalents: our original word for *egg* was *ey* (the modern Dutch word is *ei*). In some cases, though, we have retained words from both language sources, with a slight change in meaning: Norse *skirt* alongside Old English *shirt*, and Norse *disk* versus English *dish*.

English is a West Germanic language, and most of our basic vocabulary is shared with Dutch and German, including words for the numbers from one to a thousand; basic body parts like *hand*, *arm*, *foot*, *finger*, *toe*, and *eye*; and the terms for the primary family relatives *father*, *mother*, *brother*, *sister*, *son*, and *daughter* – though the words *uncle*, *aunt*, *nephew*, *niece*, and *cousin* are French in origin.

But of all the words in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, only 27% are Germanic in origin, and many hundreds of those are not West Germanic but North Germanic – Old Norse. Most, though by no means all, of the rest of our words come from other European languages. Around 28% of our English words are from French, with another 28% derived from Latin; and a total of about 15% come from Ancient Greek, Italian, Dutch and German.

Of course, these numbers apply to the words that are in the dictionary, not to the vocabulary we actually use in our everyday lives: the majority of our most frequently used words, like *the*, *and* and *but*, come from Old English stock; and most of the other words we utter over the course of a day are English in origin.

Latin vocabulary has been entering the English lexicon for many hundreds of years, starting with words for sophisticated portable items which the Romans had but we lacked, such as *wine* and *tile*. The influence of Latin as the international language of learning then continued for centuries, with English acquiring scores of words ranging from *abdomen* to *arduous*, and *clavicle* to *cumulative*.

Ancient Greek has also provided us with a great deal of our learned vocabulary – e.g. *amnesia*, *iconoclast*, *heptagon* and *synergy* – and a number of more ordinary words, such as *athlete*, *energy* and *helicopter*.

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Very many of our French-origin words came into English from Norman French after 1066. These were typically words to do with government and war, like *court*, *crown*, *state*, and *government* itself; *battle*, *enemy*, *lance* and *castle*. The Normans also introduced many religious words like *faith*, *saint* and *mercy*; and vocabulary dealing with art and fashion: *beauty*, *figure*, *dress* and *garment*. Many Norman French words have become very much entrenched as part of our normal way of speaking: *just*, *very*, *people*, *face*, *place*, *piece*, *easy*, *strange*.

Sometimes Norman words did not replace English ones but relegated them to a more lowly or informal status: Norman *chair* versus English *stool*, *aid* versus *help*, *conceal* versus *hide*. Famously, the upper-class Normans also provided us with vocabulary for food such as *beef*, *pork*, *joint*, *cutlet*, *dinner*, and *supper*; while we retained more proletarian English words like *ox*, *pig*, *tongue*, *brains*, and *breakfast*.

Sometimes we took a word from Norman French and then, later, also from Parisian French. We have Norman *warden* versus Parisian *guardian*, and other such pairs like *catch* and *chase*, *cattle* and *chattel*, *warranty* and *guarantee*, *reward* and *regard*. More recent French imports include *brochure*, *baton*, *ballet*, *bizarre*, *brusque*, and *beret*.

And we should not forget other less prominent European languages which have also contributed to our lexicon. Romani has given us the words *pal*, *cushy*, and *lollipop*. And Yiddish, the German-derived language of the East European Jews, has contributed *glitch*, *nosh*, *schmaltz*, and *schnozz*.

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## GUICHET

*Guichet* is a French word referring to a hatch which tickets are issued through. It came into English in the 1800s. It is the same word as *wicket*, which arrived in English in the early 1300s. The difference between the two is due to the fact that *wicket* came from the northern French dialect of the Normans, while *guichet* is from the central French dialect of Paris.

Photos:  
The Postal Museum



through the filing system one of the UK's biggest employers.

The Post Office is a national institution. Before the controversial privatisation of Royal Mail in 2013 it was also a nationalised institution. The choices in the bookshop give away this history, with memoirs from postie turned Labour Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, and former Postmaster General Tony Benn. In the museum you can see samples of stamps without the Queen's head which Benn commissioned from David Gentleman in 1964. Her Majesty objected and the idea was dropped.

A ride on Mail Rail is irresistible, if not for the claustrophobic. As I descended below Mount Pleasant and was crammed into the compact narrow gauge carriages with a group of journalists, I had the same feeling that Jeff Goldblum's character must have had on first seeing Jurassic Park. After the postponed opening of the exhibit due to damp in the tunnels interfering with the digital displays, what could possibly go wrong?

Happily nothing. In fact Mail Rail is great fun, like Disneyland but with a social purpose. If visitors combine it with the nearby Coram Fields and Foundling Museum, home to Hogarth

and Handel collections, then they can have a day of cultural bliss in Bloomsbury.

Imagine a world without love-letters, or, the history of literature without the epistolary novel: *Dangerous Liaisons*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or *The Colour Purple*. We have a lot to thank the post for.

In his beautiful treatise on the mail, *The Post Card*, the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida reflects that for a postal system to work it must be possible for a message to go astray. The letter does not always arrive at its destination, he says.

It is a thesis about destiny, namely, that things do not always turn out as you plan. Mail Rail used to carry four million letters a day, now this traffic happens in cyberspace and these once busy tunnels are a theme-park ride. Maybe this melancholy possibility of failing to arrive is what I like about graveyards and Post Offices, although perhaps the latter is more useful to end up in than the former.

■ Martin McQuillan is a writer, academic and post obsessive. His film *Love in the Post* is available through Amazon



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