

Università di Cagliari



Corso di Laurea in
Lingua e Comunicazione
Anni 1 e 2

The English Language, an Introduction

a.a. 2020-2021

Inglese 1

English is a member of the Indo-European family of languages.

This broad family includes most of the European languages spoken today.

The Indo-European family includes several major branches:

Latin and the modern Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian etc.);

the **Germanic languages** (English, German, Swedish etc.);

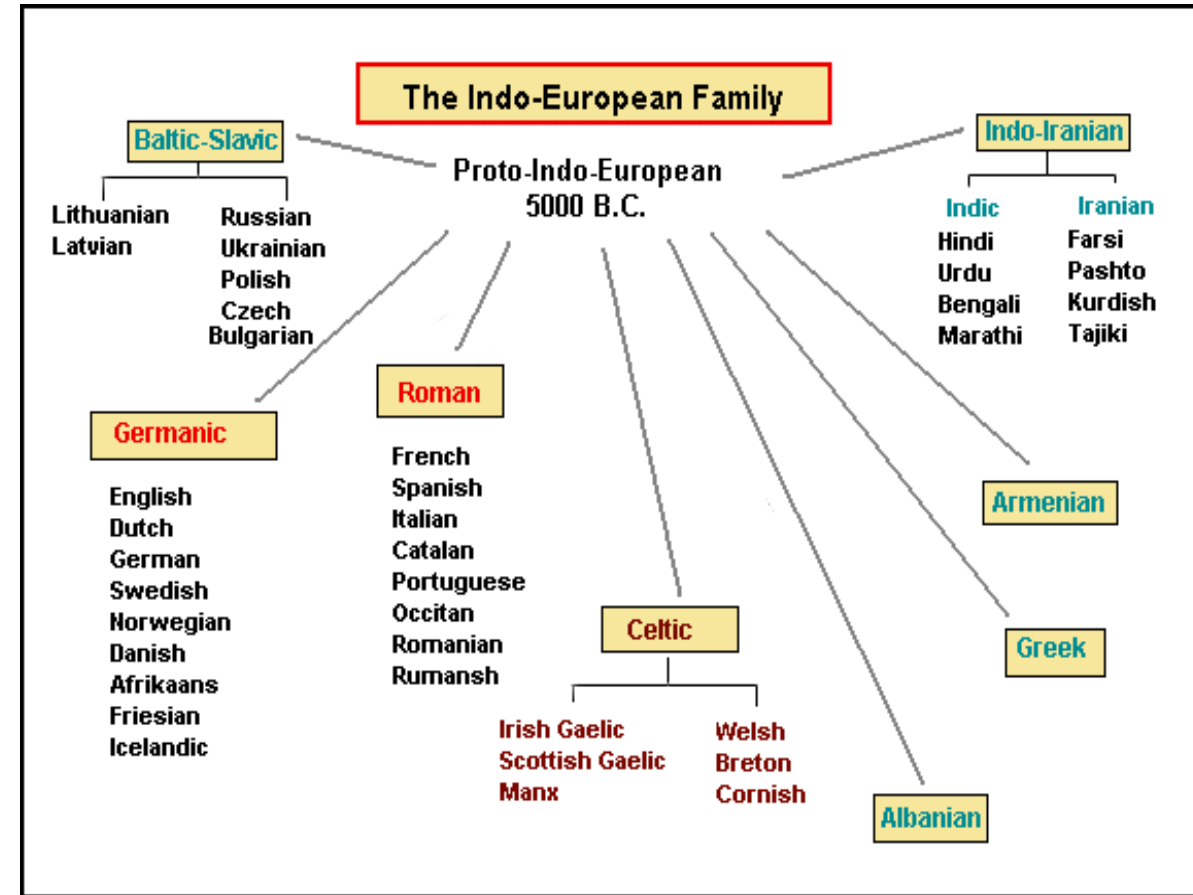
the **Indo-Iranian languages** (Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit etc.);

the **Slavic languages** (Russian, Polish, Czech etc.);

the **Baltic languages** of Latvian and Lithuanian;

the **Celtic languages** (Welsh, Irish Gaelic etc.);

Greek.



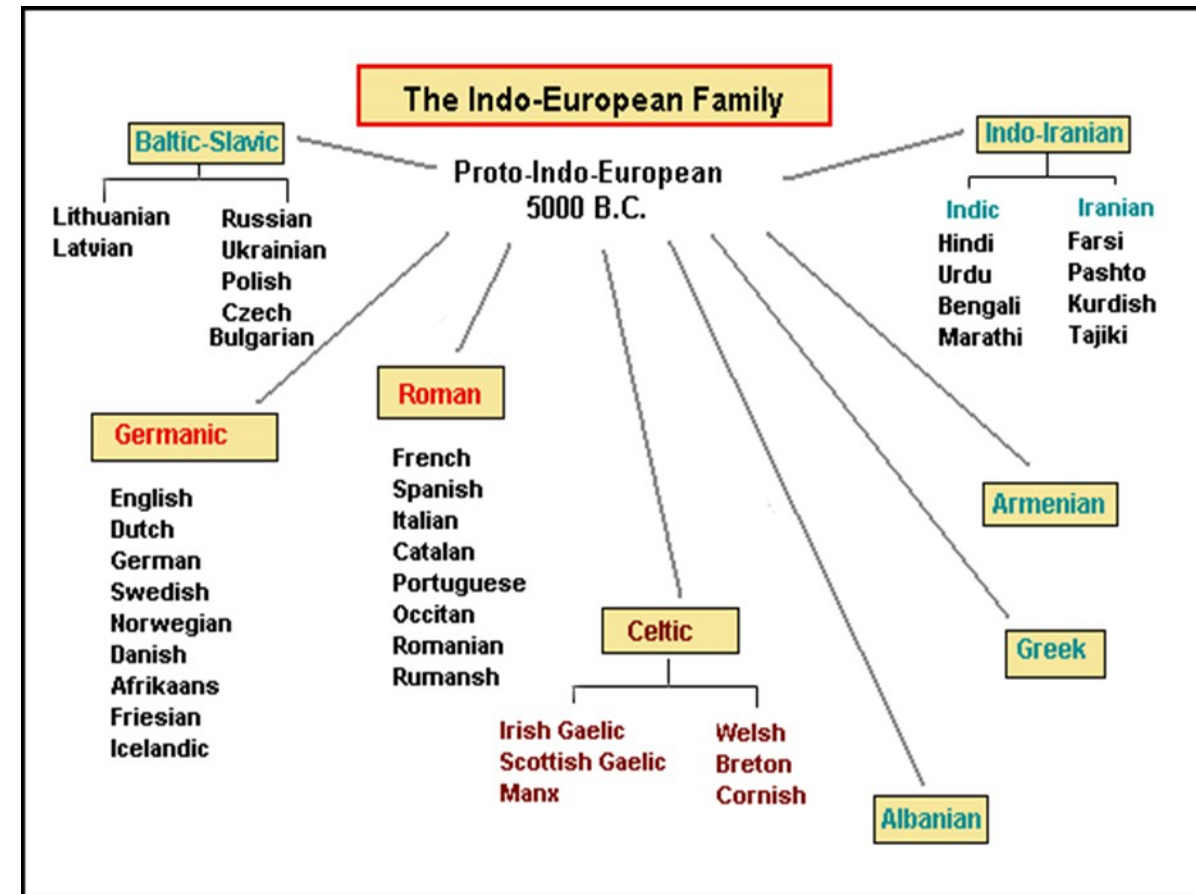
The influence of the original Indo-European language can be seen today, even though no written record of it exists.

The word for *father*, for example, is *vater* in German, *pater* in Latin, and *pitr* in Sanskrit.

These words are all **cognates**, similar words in different languages that share the same root.

Of these branches of the Indo-European family, two are, as far as the study of the development of English is concerned, of paramount importance:

the **Germanic** and the **Romance** (called that because the Romance languages derive from Latin, the language of ancient Rome).



English is a member of the **Germanic group** of languages.

It is believed that this group began as a common language in the **Elbe river region** about 3,000 years ago.

By the second century BC, this Common Germanic language had split into three distinct sub-groups:

✓

East Germanic was spoken by peoples who migrated back to southeastern Europe. No East Germanic language is spoken today, and the only written East Germanic language that survives is Gothic.

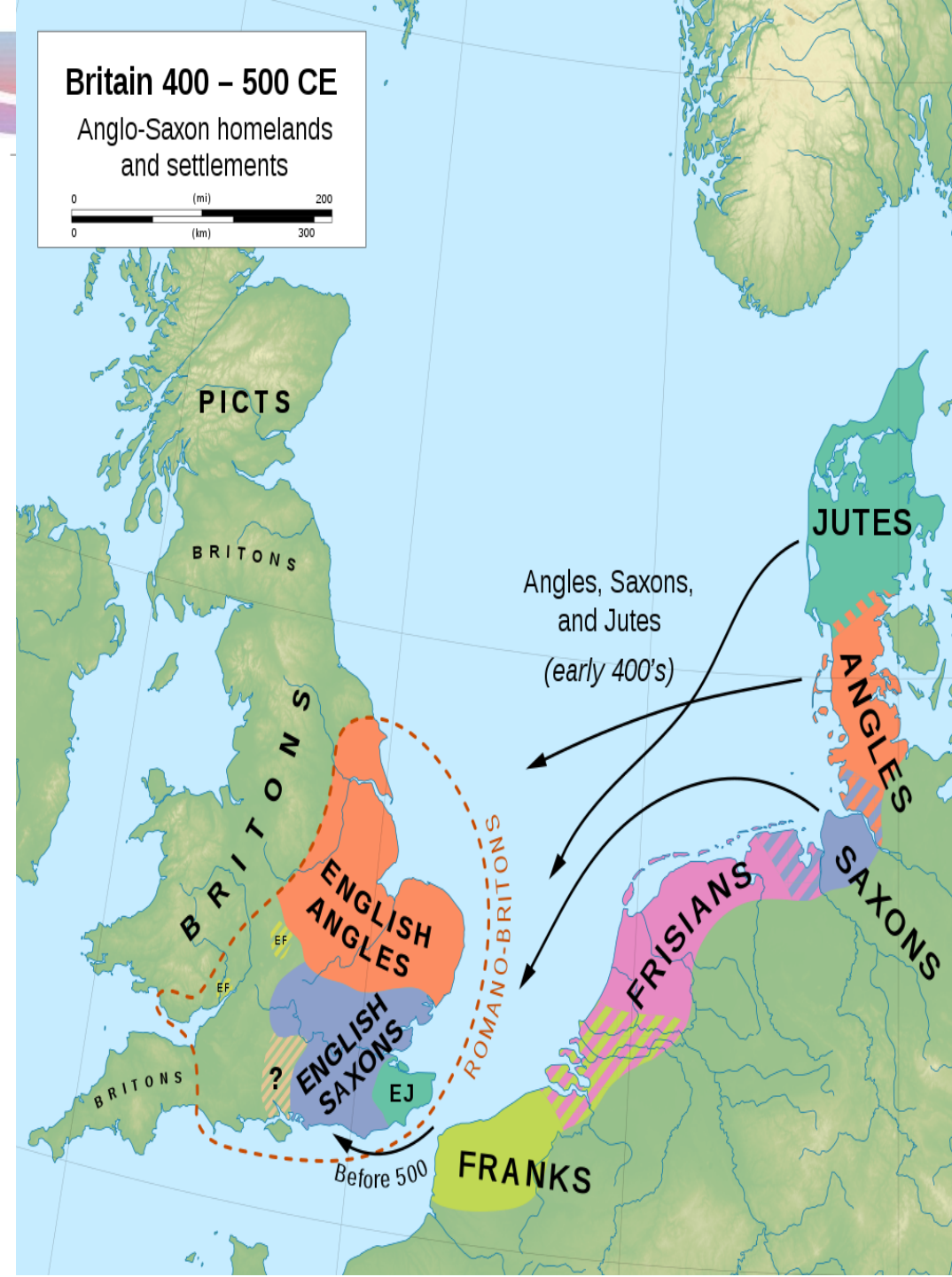
✓ North Germanic evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages of Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic (but not Finnish, which is related to Hungarian and Estonian and is not an Indo-European language).

✓ West Germanic is the ancestor of modern German, Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, and English.



Introduction

- *There are three phases in the evolution of the English Language:*
- *Old English (450-1150); Middle English (1150-1500)
Modern English (1500-present)*
- *The early inhabitants of the British isles spoke Celtic Languages which belonged to the Indo-European family.*
- *Latin had a considerable influence on the English language, particularly during the Christianization of Britain (writing extensive texts on parchment instead of incising small texts on wood, bone or stone).*



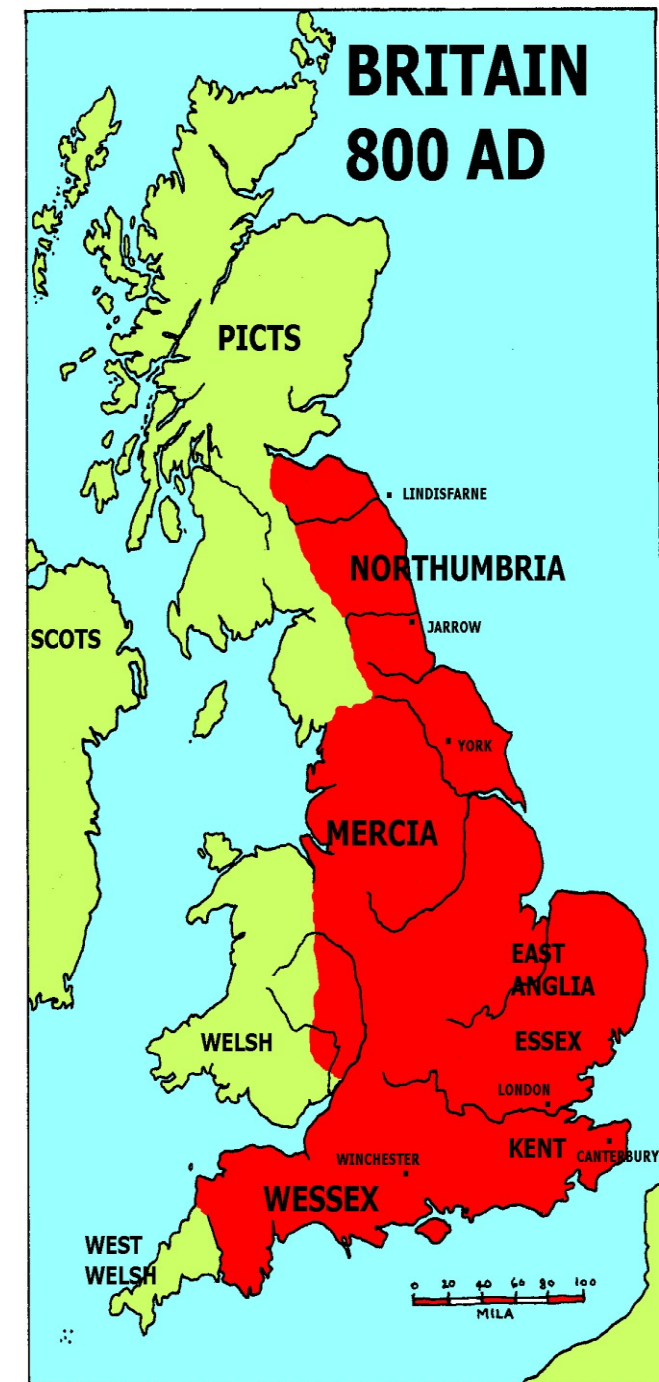
Old English (500-1100 AD)

West Germanic invaders from Jutland and southern Denmark: the **Angles** (whose name is the source of the words England and English), Saxons, and Jutes, began to settle in the British Isles in the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

They spoke a mutually intelligible language, similar to modern Frisian - the language of the northeastern region of the Netherlands - that is called **Old English**.

Four major dialects of Old English emerged, Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the Midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the Southeast.

These invaders **pushed** the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants **out of what is now England** into Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Ireland, leaving behind a few Celtic words.



Old English (500-1100 AD)

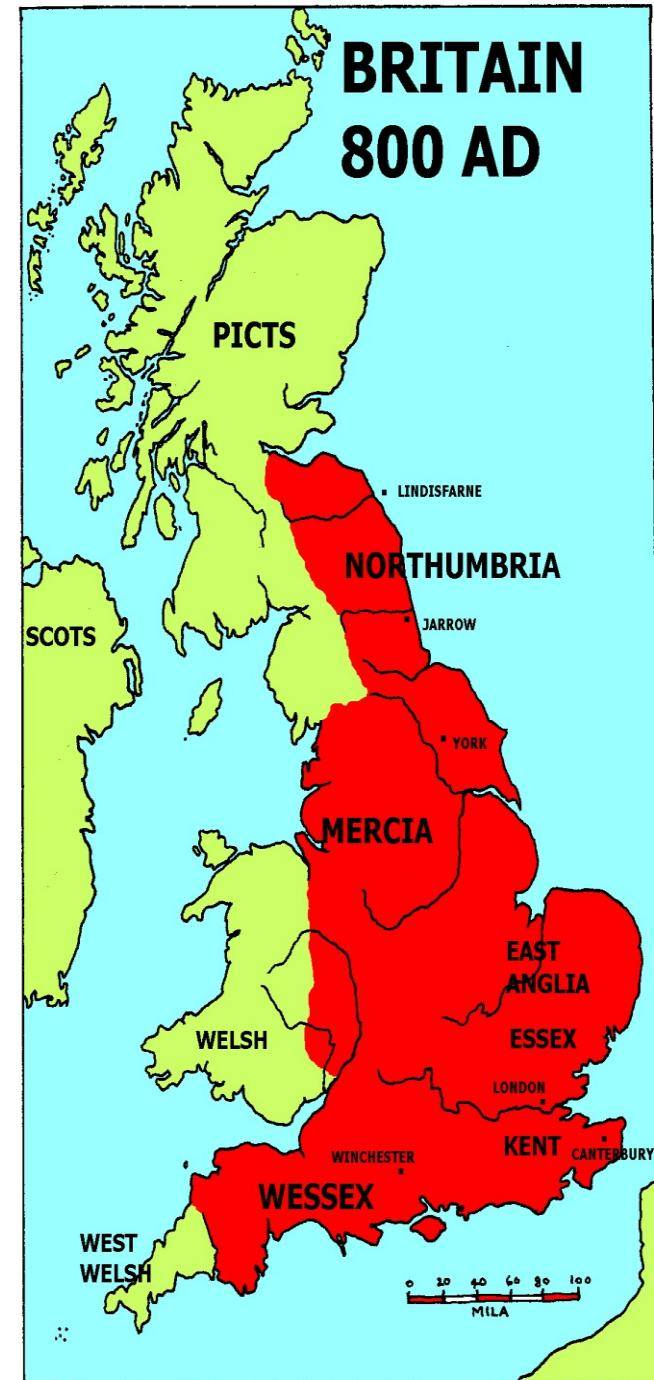
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These **Celtic languages** survive today in the **Gaelic languages** of Scotland and Ireland and in Welsh. Cornish, unfortunately, is, in linguistic terms, now a dead language.

Also influencing English at this time were the **Vikings**.

Norse invasions and settlement, beginning around 850, brought many North Germanic words into the language, particularly in the north of England.

Some examples are *dream*, which had meant 'joy' until the Vikings imparted its current meaning on it from the Scandinavian cognate *draumr*, and *skirt*, which continues to live alongside its native English cognate *shirt*.





Old English

- The invading Germanic tribes spoke similar languages, which in Britain developed into what we now call Old English.
- Old English did not sound or look like English today. Native English speakers now would have great difficulty understanding Old English.
- Nevertheless, about half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words *be*, *strong* and *water*, for example, derive from Old English. Old English was spoken until around 1100.
- It was an inflecting language (the meaning of words changed according to their declensions)



Old English, whose best known surviving example is the poem [Beowulf](#), lasted until about 1100. Shortly after **the most important event** in the development and history of the English language, the **Norman Conquest** (1066 AD).

The Norman Conquest and Middle English (1100-1500)

William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, invaded and conquered England and the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 AD.

The new overlords spoke a dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman.

The Normans were also of Germanic stock ("Norman" comes from "Norseman") and Anglo-Norman was a French dialect that had considerable Germanic influences in addition to the basic Latin roots.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, Latin had been only a minor influence on the English language, mainly through vestiges of the Roman occupation and from the conversion of Britain to Christianity in the seventh century (ecclesiastical terms such as *priest*, *vicar*, and *mass* came into the language this way).

Now, there was a wholesale infusion of Romance (Anglo-Norman) words.

THE NORMAN INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH

The influence of the Normans can be illustrated by looking at two words, *beef* and *cow*.

Beef, commonly eaten by the aristocracy, derives from the Anglo-Norman, while the Anglo-Saxon commoners, who tended the cattle, retained the Germanic *cow*.

Many *legal* terms, such as *indict*, *jury*, and *verdict* have Anglo-Norman roots because the Normans ran the courts.

This split, where words commonly used by the aristocracy have Romantic roots and words frequently used by the Anglo-Saxon commoners have Germanic roots, can be seen in many instances.

Sometimes French words replaced Old English words; *crime* replaced *firen* and *uncle* replaced *eam*.

Other times, French and Old English components combined to form a new word, as the French *gentle* and the Germanic *man* formed *gentleman*.

Other times, two different words with roughly the same meaning survive into modern English. Thus we have the Germanic *doom* and the French *judgment*, or *wish* and *desire*.

This mixture of the two languages came to be known as [Middle English](#). The most famous example of Middle English is [Chaucer's Canterbury Tales](#).

Unlike Old English, Middle English can be read, albeit with difficulty, by modern English-speaking people.

By 1362, the linguistic division between the nobility and the commoners was largely over. In that year, [the Statute of Pleading was adopted, which made English the language of the courts and it began to be used in Parliament](#).

The Middle English period came to a close around 1500 AD with the rise of Modern English.

Many students having difficulty understanding [Shakespeare](#) would be surprised to learn that he wrote in modern English.

Elizabethan English has much more in common with our language today than it does with the language of Chaucer.

Many familiar words and phrases were coined or first recorded by Shakespeare, some 2,000 words and countless idioms are his.

Early Modern English

Early Modern English (1500-1800)

Towards the end of Middle English, a sudden and **distinct change in pronunciation (the Great Vowel Shift)** started, with vowels being pronounced shorter and shorter. From the 16th century the British had contact with many peoples from around the world.

This, and the **Renaissance of Classical learning**, meant that many new words and phrases entered the language.

The **invention of printing** also meant that there was now a common language in print. Books became cheaper and more people learned to read. Printing also brought **standardization to English**. Spelling and grammar became fixed, and the **dialect of London**, where most publishing houses were, **became the standard**. In 1604 the first English dictionary was published.



Late-Modern English (1800-Present)

The principal distinction between early- and late-modern English is **vocabulary**.

Pronunciation, grammar, and spelling are largely the same, but Late-Modern English has many more words. **These words are the result of two historical factors**.

The first is the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the technological society. This necessitated new words for things and ideas that had not previously existed.

The second was the British Empire. At its height, Britain ruled one quarter of the earth's surface, and English adopted many foreign words and made them its own.

Varieties of English

From around 1600, the **English colonization of North America** resulted in the creation of a distinct American variety of English.

Some English pronunciations and words "froze" when they reached America. In some ways, American English is more like the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is.

Some expressions that the British call "**Americanisms**" are in fact original British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost for a time in Britain (for example *trash* for rubbish, *loan* as a verb instead of lend, and *fall* for autumn; another example)

Varieties of English

Spanish also had an influence on American English (and subsequently British English), with words like *canyon*, *ranch*, *stampede* and *vigilante* being examples of Spanish words that entered English through the settlement of the American West.

French words (through Louisiana) and **West African words** (through the slave trade) also influenced American English (and so, to an extent, British English).

Today, **American English** is particularly influential, due to the USA's dominance of cinema, television, popular music, trade and technology (including the Internet). But there are many other **varieties of English** around the world, including for example Australian English, New Zealand English, Canadian English, South African English, Indian English and Caribbean English.