

The Secret Life of Words

How English Became English

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*Defining the World: The Extraordinary Story
of Dr Johnson's Dictionary*

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1. Ensemble

Together, at the same time; the united performance of all voices

From the French, which derives from the late Latin *insimul*, comprising *in*, 'in', and *simul*, 'at the same time'

'All these trifling things . . . collectively form that pleasing *je ne sais quoi*, that *ensemble*' - Lord Chesterfield, 1748

On a smoky October morning in 1697, a Puritan magistrate called Samuel Sewall went to visit the Lieutenant Governor at Dorchester, which is now a suburb of Boston on the American east coast. Born in England, in a rural part of Hampshire, Sewall had arrived in America as an adolescent. He had studied at Harvard, had managed the Boston printing press, and in 1692 had been one of the nine judges appointed to hear the Salem witch trials. Not long before his trip to Dorchester he had publicly expressed shame over his role in the last of these, but that October morning this bulky, big-framed figure had more appetizing business on his mind. Dorchester seems to have been a place to go for good things to eat; Sewall had once taken his wife, Hannah, there so they could feast on cherries and raspberries. At the Lieutenant Governor's he met with his friend Samuel Torrey, a man chiefly distinguished for having declined the presidency of Harvard College, and together they breakfasted on 'Venison and Chockalatte', with Sewall amusedly reflecting that 'Massachuset and Mexico met at his Honour's Table.'¹

Samuel Sewall's breakfast sounds a little quirky, but its two elements are richly symbolic. The venison was indeed good Massachusetts fare, even if the taste for it was one he had acquired not in New England, but in England's New Forest. The word, meanwhile, derived from the Latin *venari*, 'to hunt', and had entered English through French following the Norman Conquest - one of many culinary

markers of the Normans' influence. At first in English it had applied to the flesh not just of deer, but also of hare, rabbit and even boar. By the fifteenth century it seems to have been widely understood as restricted to deer's meat, and this is what Sewall's venison will almost certainly have been, although it is worth noting that John Josselyn writes in *New England's Rarities* (1672) that 'Bears are very fat in the fall of the leaf, at which time they are excellent venison.' We can be sure, regardless, that the dish Sewall ate tasted wild and gamy. But what of its accompaniment? He and Samuel Torrey consumed something we would not now recognize as chocolate. To English-speakers of the seventeenth century, *chocolate* usually denoted the drink made from the dark pods of the cacao tree or – Sewall's preferred form – a ball of paste confectioned out of these. Its name had been learnt from the Spanish, who had heard in Nahuatl, the ethereal language of the Aztecs, the noun *xocolatl*, meaning 'bitter water'.

That breakfast in Dorchester was a blend, then, of the old and the new, in terms of both gastronomy and vocabulary. Moreover, old and new alike were 'borrowed'. 'We . . . have been remarkable borrowers', the philologist James Harris could opine half a century after Sewall's breakfast. By 'We' he meant speakers of English, and he cited the examples of literary terminology taken from Greek, the language of music from Italian, and terms of cookery from French. 'These many and very different Sources of our Language may be the cause, why it so deficient in *Regularity* . . . Yet we have this advantage to compensate the defect, that what we want in *Elegance*, we gain in *Copiousness*.'

These many and different sources are the ingredients of this book. English was imported into Britain, as it later was into North America: the history of this hybrid tongue and above all of its vocabulary, which has proved hospitable to words from more than 350 other languages, is the history of who its speakers really are. So this is the story of the acquisitiveness of English, and of the meetings between what purists may label 'our' language and the external influences that have shaped it. At the same time, it considers the roles of individual people in this history, as agents and as barriers.

We need to communicate – that much is clear. Words bind us together, and can drive us apart. Not all communication is verbal, but language is our most dynamic instrument of communication, and words, imperfect though they often are, prove more lasting than gestures. We tend to accept unquestioningly our ability to express ourselves in language: the sources of our language and its power are rarely of concern to us. From time to time we may pause to wonder what, if anything, a *walnut* has to do with walls, or why, when it is not a kind of fish, a *crayfish* is so called. Actually, the word *walnut* is a modern form of the Old English *walhnutu*, which literally meant 'foreign nut'. The nut grew mainly in Italy, and when introduced into northern Europe it was labelled 'foreign' in order to distinguish it from the native hazelnut. For its part, *crayfish* is a corruption of the Old French name for this freshwater crustacean, *crevice*, which derived from the German *crebiz* and survives in modern French as *écrevisse*. Its *fish-y* quality is the result of a sort of creative mishearing. The important point, though, is that we seldom ask why we speak the language that we do, what we have in common with its other speakers, what its pedigree and career tell us about our ancestors, or what particular ways it has of framing our perceptions of the world. Perhaps we should.

Language is a social energy, and our capacity for articulate speech is the key factor that makes us different from other species. We are not as fast as cheetahs – or even as horses. Nor are we as strong as bulls or as adaptable as bacteria. But our brains are equipped with the facility to produce and process speech, and we are capable of abstract thought. A bee may dance to show other bees the location of a source of food, a green monkey may deliver sophisticated vocal signals, and a sparrow may manage as many as thirteen different types of song, but an animal's system of communication has a limited repertoire: ours, on the other hand, is 'open', and its mechanisms permit a potentially infinite variety of utterances.³ For at least 80,000 years and perhaps as many as 150,000, language has enabled the sharing of ideas, communication between and within different groups, warfare (and its avoidance), courtship and mating, and the manufacture of what we may broadly label 'tools'.

Every language has a character. Our relationship with our own

language can be complacent, but when we speak a foreign tongue we sense more keenly the 'characterfulness' of that language, the peculiar ways it channels history and culture, its special version of the world, its distinctive textures and codes. Different languages seem suited to different areas of experience. Tradition has it that Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, preferred to speak French to diplomats, Italian to ladies, German to stable boys and Spanish to God. English he seems to have used sparingly — to talk to geese. Nicholas Ostler, in his macro-history *Empires of the Word*, sketches 'some of the distinctive traits of the various traditions: Arabic's austere grandeur and egalitarianism; Chinese and Egyptian's unshakeable self-regard; Sanskrit's luxuriating classifications and hierarchies; Greek's self-confident innovation leading to self-obsession and pedantry; Latin's civic sense; Spanish rigidity, cupidity, and fidelity; French admiration for rationality; and English admiration for business acumen'.⁴ This type of generalization is attractive, albeit limiting, and hints at a deeper truth: that our languages reveal the nature of our world, and the history of their development is a history of consciousness.

Studying language enables an archaeology of human experience: words contain the fossils of past dreams and traumas. If you are reading this book in its original English, you and I are sharing not only a language, but also an assortment of inherited values and cultural traditions, for our language contains traces of the histories of those who have spoken and written it before us. Even if we are at odds in many of our attitudes, we share certain modes of expression that are unique to this language — sayings, for instance, and clichés, shibboleths and slang. We share a sense of the familiar associations of words. Our language creates communities and solidarities, as well as divisions and disagreements. These are very possibly imaginary or illusory, but potent all the same.

Words are witnesses. To quote George Steiner, 'When using a word we wake into resonance . . . its entire previous history.'⁵ When new territory is breached, its novelty is reflected in language. I am sure you will have had the experience of looking up a word in a dictionary and finding that it comes from somewhere else. But there are other languages whose speakers will not have shared this.

A person who speaks Arabic or, say, Hungarian will be able to trace most of the elements of his or her vocabulary back to that language's now-exhausted ancestors, rather than to other living languages. English is, to an unusual degree, a place of strange meetings.

This has prompted some to label English 'promiscuous', a whore among languages. The image is useful, but it needs tightening a little: it is a mistake to think that English is wonderfully (or shamefully) open to offers. Its adventures have been many and various, but its appetites have been confident, not insecure. In one sense, English *has* proved to be a whore among languages: in order for it to lay itself open to new intrusions or infusions, there has usually had to be a clear offer of reward. The supposed hospitality of the English language is not exactly benevolent. Sensitivity to the routes by which words have entered our language is important to our understanding of who we are, and this understanding, while often invigorating, can also be unsettling, a reminder of a turbulent, brutal or exploitative past.

Initially English was coerced into absorbing foreign terms, as Latin, Norse and French influences encroached on its territory. Since then, in the course of its travels, English has reversed the process, forcing itself on speakers of many other languages. It has done so not thanks to any special qualities it possesses, but because political events have made it so useful and necessary a language to understand. Its history is a history of encounters — profound, lucrative, violent. Yet to those who know the language intimately it has a strange power of alchemy, the capacity to transform whatever it touches.

A new word is a solution to a problem. It answers a need — intellectual, experiential. Often the need is obvious, but sometimes it is unseen or barely felt, and then it is only in finding something to plug the gap that we actually realize the gap was there in the first place. We all know the experience of coming up against a new word. I could have written 'seeing' or 'hearing', but the preposition *against* has its place here: when we encounter a word we have not seen before, the experience is a collision. What did you think the first time you chanced upon *chutzpah*, which is of Yiddish origin, or *aficionado*, which is from Spanish and originally denoted a devotee

of bull-fighting? A likely reaction is bewilderment: what is this word? A second reaction is to ask what its existence tells us. A third is to start using it.

We relish playing with words: making them up, acquiring them, bending them to new purposes. Often this book examines writers who have used language innovatively. Some are chosen because of their enduring influence, others because they are barometers of their age's linguistic atmosphere. Imaginative writing is, to paraphrase George Orwell, a flank attack on positions inaccessible from the front; one of a writer's weapons is novelty, the potency of a new technique or term. We owe *pandemonium* to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (where it is 'the high Capital of Satan and his Peers'), *diplomacy* to Edmund Burke, and *pessimism* to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *Picnic* was first used by the Earl of Chesterfield, the modish eighteenth-century politico and arbiter of public taste, whose letters were considered by Dr Johnson to 'teach the morals of a whore and the manners of a dancing master'. Sir Thomas Browne, an eccentric doctor and collector who lived during the seventeenth century, seems to have coined *amphibious* and *anomalous*. Among more recent innovators was the Russian-born Vladimir Nabokov, whose novel *Bend Sinister* is trophied with delightful oddities like *kuazinka* ('a slit between the folding parts of a screen') and *shchekotiki* (which is 'half-tingle, half-tickle').⁶

The American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that 'Language is the archives of history': additions to a language may signal a new political movement, a recent discovery, or a sweeping revision of attitudes. Spotting innovations in language affords us an impression of the changing practical, intellectual, social and aesthetic needs of society. Our changing pleasures and priorities, along with our dislikes and anxieties, are reflected in our vocabulary. Words become obsolete as the things they denote disappear or significantly alter; plenty of loans lapse, though some, having done so, are later renewed.

English has existed for only 1,500 years. Its history is usually divided into two periods: in the first, which lasted up until the end of the sixteenth century, the language was being formed; and since then it has been spread – or, in academic parlance, propagated – throughout

the world. (This, at least, is the standard view, although a handful of mavericks have put forward a different account – suggesting, among other things, that English was being spoken in Britain before the arrival of the Romans, and that Latin is partly derived from English, rather than the other way round.⁷) Over its lifetime, English has come into contact with a vast range of other languages, at first through contact with invaders and colonists, and then through its speakers' colonial and commercial exploits, which have conveyed the language into almost every corner of the world, forever accumulating new material along the way.

A thousand years ago there were about 50,000 English words: today, according to whose estimate you accept, there are 700,000, 1 million or even double that number.

Very few 'new' words are fresh coinages. Most are borrowings, compounds, fusions of existing terms, or revivals of old ones. Prefixes and suffixes can multiply the terms that branch from a single root. Abbreviations evolve in step with our desire to speed life up. A word which has traditionally been one part of speech can become another: take for example the development of *executive*, which was an adjective for 150 years before it became also a noun. We are familiar with the way a word can extend its meaning: experience amplifies it, or hammers it down to an airy sort of thinness. Misunderstandings, be they ingenious or wilful, are another source of new words. So is 'back-formation', in which a word is created by removing a prefix or suffix from a longer word that already exists. Examples are the verbs *to sculpt*, which first appeared long after *sculptor* and *sculpture*, and *to enthuse*, which is antedated by *enthusiasm*. *Genetic* was used in its technical sense by Charles Darwin in *On The Origin of Species* (1859), but Wilhelm Johannsen's coinage *gene* is not attested till 1911. Of all these types of novelty, borrowings are the most provoking, for they testify to one culture chafing against another.

Our vocabulary is amazingly heterogeneous. Fewer than a quarter of today's English words reflect the language's Germanic origins. Mention of these Germanic origins seems an appropriate moment to speak briefly of English's place among the languages of the world. The West Germanic group to which it belongs includes not just

German, but also Dutch, Yiddish and Luxembourgish. Among its North Germanic relatives are Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and – most obscurely – Faroese. These two groups, along with the extinct East Germanic languages (chief among them Gothic), are parts of the much larger Indo-European family of languages. This includes the Italic group, which contains Latin and today consists principally of the Romance languages French, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Romanian and Italian. The Indo-European family also encompasses Slavic languages such as Russian, Bulgarian, Polish and Czech; Baltic ones (Latvian, Lithuanian); Indo-Iranian ones, among them Persian, Gujarati, Bengali and Kurdish; together with Greek, Albanian, Armenian and the extinct Tocharian languages spoken within the ancient trade network known as the Silk Road. According to one popular hypothesis, the common ancestor of these languages, 'Proto-Indo-European', was spread by the advance of farming about 9,000 years ago.⁸ Many of these languages parted company several millennia ago: a phrase in the Indo-European language Latvian, 'Patikami ar jums iepazītīti', meaning 'Pleased to meet you', may look no more familiar to us than the same phrase in (non-Indo-European) Estonian, 'Meeldiv teid kohata'.

A friend of mine, on being presented with the incomplete list above, concluded, 'It might just be quicker to say which languages aren't Indo-European.' It would not be. The languages of China and the indigenous languages of the Americas are other significant groups. The Afro-Asiatic family, which includes Arabic, is but one of several important groupings in Africa, where there are more different languages than on any other continent. Other notable families are the Dravidian, the Austro-Asiatic (such as the Khmer of Cambodia), the Indo-Pacific and Austronesian (Javanese, for instance), and the Altaic, a controversial designation which embraces among others Turkish, Azeri and Uzbek. Within Europe, the most conspicuous examples of languages outside the Indo-European family are Hungarian and Finnish, which are both, like Estonian, members of the Uralic family. Furthermore, there are 'isolates' that bear little resemblance to any other living tongue; the most celebrated example is probably Basque, known to its roughly 600,000 speakers as Euskara.

English is anything but isolated. To return to a figure from a

moment ago, English has absorbed words from more than 350 other languages. Borrowings have their origins in a political or diplomatic moment, and testify at a more profound level to a social, cultural or economic motive. Languages become 'great' not because of any inherent qualities they may be deemed to have, but because of the political, military and intellectual force behind them. When colonists arrive in a country, they exchange their language with the native inhabitants, and sometimes force it down their throats. They may also try to foist their religion on them. Yet at the same time they adopt indigenous terms. An invader's vocabulary will expand to reflect the concerns of those he has invaded. In such situations, bilingualism has often been necessary and inevitable. But English-speakers without any capability in a foreign language have assimilated snippets here and there, and these new elements have assured English's opulently international character. The hybridity of the British and the Americans and other English-speaking communities (in Canada, for instance, and Australia) is registered in the hybrid languages we employ. A borrowed word is distinguished from other new terms in having already 'proved' itself: a compound or a word to make up has no pedigree, but a loanword has previously shown itself, in another language, to be viable. About half of English words have been borrowed, and many of the other half are compounds or mutations of earlier borrowings. The linguist John McWhorter comments, 'English's vocabulary is like San Francisco's architecture: thriving and beautiful but with ultimately sparse roots.'⁹

Moreover, since the time of Chaucer in the fourteenth century, its number of inflexions has dramatically decreased, and as an 'analytic' language – that is, one in which meaning is mainly shaped by word order and the use of particles such as prepositions and conjunctions – it has been able to absorb words without any concern for how to fit them into its grammar. In an English sentence, word order is paramount: change the order and you radically change the meaning ('Fred ate ostrich' is obviously different from 'Ostrich ate Fred') – something untrue of Latin or Basque or Sanskrit or the Australian Aboriginal language Dyirbal. This feature of English has allowed its writers and speakers a remarkable flexibility. A newly adopted noun can easily be turned into an adjective – once you

know what a *chimera* is, you're just a whisper away from *chimerical* – and just about anything can be made into a verb. If I have accepted the Japanese words *shiatasu* and *sashimi*, I'll have no problem saying, 'I'm going to get shiatused' or 'Let's sashimi the tuna.'

Studying a language involves an understanding of its syntax, punctuation, rhetorical nuances and patterns of formality. This book, however, is concerned with vocabulary. Except in circumstances where there is strong cultural pressure to assimilate other features of a different language, borrowing is restricted to this domain, for languages (and people) resist adopting new forms of grammar. The development of the word-stock is a measure of society's development. Words – or lexemes, as linguists call them – are 'the means by which we make direct reference to extralinguistic reality, converting our basic perception of the world around us into language', and they 'serve as labels for segments of . . . reality which a speech community finds nameworthy'.¹⁰ In our daily lives we are continually conscious of our growing or changing personal vocabularies, and from an early age this is the domain where our increasing competence is most clear. Later – much later – this is one of the domains where our decline is first registered: we forget words, and are troubled by our doing so. We've most of us had the experience of watching an elderly relative groping for a particular noun: *voucher* or *colander* or *blanket*.

New ideas and products are named, and their names usually tell us something of where they have come from. Borrowings have a 'psychological climate'.¹¹ Rather than using history to explain language, we can use details of language to open up a historical vista. Before the sixteenth century there are no significant borrowings from Spanish and Portuguese; those that followed tell us about the competition between the different European seaborne empires and about the rewards of exploration. In similar vein, if we look at loans from Latin and Greek we can draw conclusions – albeit perhaps rather impressionistic ones – from the fact that *area* and *crisis* were borrowed earlier than *alibi* and *dogma*, which in turn came before *persona* and *euphoria*.

If we can quickly grasp why the words *Bolshevik* and *Soviet* first appear in the English-language press in 1917, it may be more

titillating to find out that we can trace to 1966 – the year England won the football World Cup – *The Oxford English Dictionary's* first citations of *chlamydia*, *jactuzzi*, *freak-out* and *mind-fuck*. We would be surprised to find a reference to the artistic *avant-garde* in Jane Austen, but it would not seem out of place in Virginia Woolf; and when we come across the *avant-garde* in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which was published in 1485, we recognize it must be an obsolete military term. Some borrowings are much earlier than we would tend to expect. It seems odd to find Dr Johnson mention a *duret*, as he does in a magazine essay dating from 1758, or to find a volume from 1698 referring to a *shaman* – a word acquired from Russian, which had absorbed it from the Tungusic languages of eastern Siberia. *Parachute* and *commuter* were adopted earlier than we might expect (1785 and 1865), as was *electron* (1891), but of course, one can talk about something before it exists. *Communist* made its first appearance before Marx and Engels drew up their *Communist Manifesto*. It is perhaps also a surprise to find that *déjà vu* was until fifty years ago a specialized term of psychology, and that the Latin *Jesus*, ultimately from the Aramaic language spoken by Christ himself, established itself only in the sixteenth century, displacing the French *Jesu* and the common abbreviation *IHS*.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the limits of our language mark the limits of our world. At its most trivial there is the sensation that many readers will recognize: you come back from a foreign holiday with new terms of approval and terms of disgust, and at the same time you have certain new enthusiasms and an appreciation of new flavours – and possess new words with which to bring them to life. When King James VI of Scotland travelled to Oslo in the winter of 1589 to claim his bride, he returned with the toast *skol*. It's not hard to imagine what he must have got up to while he was there. Less than half a century later, Englishmen serving alongside Swedes during the Thirty Years War learnt the word *plunder*, which the Swedes had acquired from their German allies, and it was widely used during the Civil War, mainly in connection with the rapacious Royalist troops.¹²

More immediate examples are readily available. In the last few decades cheap air travel has made the world seem smaller, and few parts of the globe appear to be beyond our reach. Not many of the

words we pick up on our travels survive the return journey: when you are in Bangkok it may be useful to know that a canal is a *klong*, and in Greece you may well discover that the word *malaka*, meaning 'wanker', is often used in all-male groups as a jocular term of endearment, but neither is likely to become a staple of your life at home. In general, loanwords cluster around a momentous event or a powerful phenomenon, not some brief encounter.

Essentially, there are two kinds of loan: words to denote phenomena that have never before been given expression, and words to denote phenomena for which there already exist quite adequate terms. In the second camp there are a number of striking subsets: words adopted because they seem especially colourful and felicitous, or for reasons of decorum, or in a spirit of technical exactitude, or for reasons of fashion. When a word is imported even though an equivalent term already exists, the result tends to be that the meaning of the older word changes.

There is, to use a well-worn phrase, a 'tipping point' where esoteric usage slips into the mainstream. Normally the transfer of a foreign word into English is effected by someone who has a good knowledge of both languages, but soon the word will be used by people who know little or nothing of the donor language and may even be unaware that the word is borrowed. As this happens, specialists worry about their language being cheapened by everyday use, and the layperson worries about being swamped by jargon. Here is the Roman poet Horace in the *Ars Poetica*:

Why should I be grudging the right to add a few words to the stock if I can . . . ? It has always been accepted, and always will be, that words stamped with the mint-mark of the day should be brought into currency. As the woods change their foliage with the decline of each year . . . so words die out with old age; and the newly born ones arrive and prosper just like human beings in the vigour of youth . . . It is usage which regulates the laws and conventions of speech.¹²

More than this, usage is what makes words live. And usage will always prevail over theory.

At what point can a word truly be said to have been borrowed? One conventional view is that a 'foreign' word, even if in fairly common use, will be recognizable by its retaining a plainly un-English pronunciation and any accents or other diacritic signs such as, say, a circumflex; when it appears in print, it will be set in italics. But within the compass of such a rule there is, in practice, plenty of grey area. Most of us will accept that *élite* has been fully assimilated and that *égalité* hasn't, but what of *élan*, *esprit*, *entrepôt*, or for that matter *ensemble*? And, staying with French, what of *papier mâché*, which means something different to us from what it means in France, where it signifies little more than 'chewed paper'? (The French name for our papier mâché is *carton-pâte*.) We would tend to accept that *papier mâché* has been completely absorbed, but it does not fit the rule I cited a moment ago. Other examples are plentiful; the rule is flawed. *Vive la différence*.

The language scholar David Crystal provides the example of a purportedly English-language menu in a Nigerian restaurant including such items as *agidi*, *edikagong* and *fofofo*.¹⁴ Someone whose first language is English and who is living in Nigeria or has Nigerian friends may be familiar with these dishes, but most English-speakers in Sunderland, Seattle or Singapore probably won't be. (*Restaurant*, we may note in passing, is pronounced in three distinct ways; none is quite the same as the French version, and each bears witness to a different degree of comfort with its Frenchness.) A list from 1969 of common Hawaiian loans in English' comprises 205 items, although on closer inspection the list consists of words with which few readers will be acquainted: representative examples are *mailihini*, meaning 'a newcomer', and *humuhumunukunuuiauaa*, a type of fish with a snout like a pig's — the name maybe longer than the fish.¹⁵ Many more readers, though, will accept that the Hawaiian *ukulele* is now an English word, and will be at ease with *aloha*, *hula*, *kahuna* as a word for an expert and the garland called a *lei*. We will tend to dispute the status of individual borrowings, as our experiences differ. An English-speaking native of East Harlem is more likely than I am to have picked up and accepted a Spanish word. On the other hand, having travelled quite widely in the British Isles, I am more likely to know a few words of Gaelic and Welsh.

Eventually a borrowed word may be 'conventionalized': its frequent use, together with changes in the way it is pronounced, means that it stops being considered foreign at all. Moreover, its meaning may rapidly alter after it has been assimilated. Even though a borrowing may begin with the need to remedy a particular deficiency in our language, the word acquired is highly susceptible to change, not only because it is novel, but also because it is isolated. Its links with the language from which it was borrowed are broken, and it has no semantic connections with other words in the language into which it has been absorbed.¹⁶

It is the borrowings from Latin, French and Scandinavian that have made the clearest impression on English, but many other languages have contributed: Greek, Italian, Spanish and Dutch have all been generous lenders, and among those that have provided at least a hundred borrowings we find, perhaps surprisingly, Russian, Urdu, Turkish and Malay. Some of the contacts have occurred within the British Isles: *penguin*, *corgi* and *flummery* are all borrowed from Welsh, while *puffin* and *bludgeon* appear to be Cornish, and *slogan* derives from a Gaelic battle cry. (Curiously, *penguin* derives from the Welsh words for 'white' and 'head', whereas of course penguins have black heads.) Others have been more remote: *elixir* is Arabic, *futon* Japanese, and *chimpanzee* comes from the West African language Tshiluba. *Sauna* is Finnish, *marmalade* is Portuguese (and originally referred to quince jelly), while *skitboleth*, which I used a few pages ago, is a Hebrew word for a stream, and enabled the people of Gilead to identify their Ephraimite enemies, who habitually mispronounced it. Some words' sources are unexpected. I can remember being surprised to find that *kiosk* is Turkish — as may be the card game *bridge* — and that *berserk*, like *geyser* and *narwhal*, is Icelandic: it seems to derive from the name of the bearskin coats worn by the fiercest Norse warriors. *Loan* itself is Norse. It has even been proposed — originally by Robert Ripley, in one of his widely syndicated *Believe It or Not* columns, and subsequently by people impressed by Ripley's suggestion — that *talk* is our one direct borrowing from Lithuanian. Sadly, the word does not come from this source, and there may in fact be no English word adopted directly from Lithuanian, though *eland*, the

name of a type of antelope, may have come from the Lithuanian for a type of elk, via Dutch.¹⁷

One of the effects of English's very diverse borrowings is that, while slivers of other languages look and sound familiar to us, there is no one language to which ours feels truly proximate. A German listening to a Dutchman will often be struck by the closeness of their vocabularies. Momentary illusions notwithstanding, speakers of English do not share this experience — except if they visit a few island communities off the coast of northern Germany.

While the adoption of foreign terms can facilitate traffic between the English-speaking world and other cultures, such language is sometimes used not in the interests of clarity, but for less democratic reasons. Loans tend to enjoy a certain mystical allure, and sometimes they are used to endow ordinary thoughts with extraordinary lustre. (*Allure*, by the way, is an example of a foreign word that has been adopted, has fallen into obsolescence, and has then been adopted afresh.) Elites, or those who consider themselves elite, reach for exotic vocabulary to impress those they consider their inferiors or to signal their distance from them. Perhaps a particular writer likes the German word *Weltanschauung*, believing that it projects her meaning more elegantly than the English 'world view': if she speaks it, though, she may be greeted with a few cheery *Gesundheit*s. Throughout the history of English, the decision of a speaker or writer to borrow a word — be it from Latin, Greek, Hindi or Japanese — has been divisive, possibly an act of snobbery or self-importance, and an at least covert statement about his or her education.

Naturally, words of this stripe are not used just in the interests of self-promotion. At their most valuable, they compress a great deal of information into a small amount of space. Looking at another German word that has been adopted into English, *Schadenfreude*, we can see that it expresses in very compact form an idea that would otherwise call for several words — along the lines of 'a nasty pleasure in other people's misfortunes'. According to the *OED*, it first crops up in an essay by the philologically minded cleric Richard Chenevix French in 1852, not long before he became dean of Westminster. A few years later Thomas Carlyle had a stab at a brief definition,

suggesting it was joy not so much in making mischief as in seeing justice done. There is nothing intrinsically German about enjoying the misadventures of others, but this German word is more succinct than anything English can otherwise muster. The Germans also have a word that neatly conveys the idea of a song you are unable to get out of your head. This is *Ohrenwurm* – literally, an ‘ear worm’, burrowing into the soft pulp of your brain. Of course the German language does not have a monopoly on this kind of concision. Terms from Latin can be every bit as spruce: at first blush, *procrastination* may seem a long word for an everyday phenomenon, but it would be hard to put the idea across any more briefly. By much the same token, the French have borrowed from English *le weekend* because it conveys the weekend’s opportunities for relaxation and leisure more decisively than the native *la fin de semaine*.

Still, borrowed words are often redolent of the environment from which they were acquired. I may be able to refer to *moped* without thinking of Sweden – I mean the motorized scooter, not the past participle of *mope* – or to a *paper tiger* without any sense of its origins in the Chinese, but I am pretty much certain to be aware that in using *yin* and *yang* I am deploying Chinese terms, and to feel some intangible quality of Swedishness when referring to a *smorgasbord*. Such associations can give us great opportunities for nuance – for subtle gradations of register and meaning. As the horrible and bewilderingly well-informed narrator of John Lanchester’s novel *The Debt to Pleasure* remarks, ‘One should note that to be *bourgeois* is not at all the same thing as to be middle-class . . . Styles of self-satisfaction vary from country to country, just as to be bored is not the same thing as to suffer from *ennui*. The condition of feeling *ensam* is not identical with being lonely, and *Gemütllichkeit* is to be distinguished from *comfines*.’¹⁷

Sometimes loanwords seem to manifest and affirm stereotypes: thus, regrettably, many British people are hostile to Germany and Germans, and their idea of Germany is immediately evoked by the words *Gestapo* and *Nazi*, by the dubious charms of *lederhosen* and *kitsch*, or maybe by the romantic pessimism of *Weltschmerz*. While this pattern of thought may seem odious and crude, the fact remains that what we take from a culture becomes what we know of it.

The ambiguity of those last few words is deliberate and fertile. For example, what we know of India is encapsulated in a vocabulary of Indianness which we sense we possess. And at the same time the aspects of Indianness that find their way into our language are ‘becoming’; they are compatible with our needs and values, with what we want or feel able to believe.

This theme of appropriating what we find congenial is implicit in a further category: the loan translation or ‘calque’. This comes from the French verb *calquer*, meaning ‘to trace’ (as in making a copy using tracing paper), and derives ultimately from the Latin verb *calcare*. Many English calques are sourced in French. When we speak of a *marriage of convenience*, the phrase is a version of the much older *mariage de convenance*. Other examples are *man of letters* (which renders *homme de lettres*), *to hold one’s peace* (*tenir sa paix*), *bluestocking* (*blaus-bleu*) and *the order of the day* (*l’ordre du jour*). So too we have *hit* (*miss*, *to learn by heart*, *a thousand thanks* and *to cut one’s nose off to spite one’s face*, all of which apparently ‘trace’ the form of French phrases. *Right here* may be another example, and *that goes without saying* is calqued on the French *cela va sans dire*, while *notwithstanding* is calqued on the Old French *lehnwort*, and a couple of other instances of loan translations from German are *antibody* (which is based on *Antikörper*) and *wishful thinking* (from *Wünschdenken*), while, to give just one more example, *barefoot doctor* is a calque of a term in Chinese.

Uncovering the route by which a word has entered one’s language offers several layers of reward. We may well enjoy knowing that *muslimism* comes from a Latin word for a sausage, that *muscle* is related to *mouse* (a bunched muscle being a bit like a quivering mouse), that *mortgage* literally means ‘death grip’: in each case the link is unexpected and droll. An *album* is, in the strictly etymological sense, something white, like a blank writing tablet, and *to prevaricate* means ‘to plough crookedly’; *nickname* is a corruption of ‘an ekename’ (literally an added name); the noun *hyperbole*, which we take from Greek, conveys the sense of throwing something too far; and *travails* comes from the French word for a Croatian, thanks to the French capturing this flimsy garment from Croatian mercenaries in the seventeenth century. The verb *to trounce* is related to *truncheon*.

Glamour is etymologically linked to *grammar* – an understanding of the workings of language was once seen as an occult accomplishment – and, similarly, there are forgotten links from *dainty* to *dignity* and from *cadence* to *chance*. *Cushy* comes from the Hindi *khush* meaning ‘excellent’, and has nothing to do with the word *cushion* (which for its part comes from Latin *cūlcita*, a mattress – also the source of *quilt*). *To doodle* originally meant playing the bagpipes, and can be traced to a Turkish word for a flute. Less startling is the information that *etymology* itself is a compound of the Greek for ‘true’ and ‘word’, but we may still be surprised that it was imported into English from French.

I could carry on in this vein for a long time. My point, however, is simple: words frequently come from unlikely places, and the unlikelihood is illuminating. Even when the sources are less surprising, the force of an etymology can be bold. The word *silk*, for instance, has made a long journey through Chinese via Greek and Latin to English. The word’s journey evokes the romance of the Silk Road, and it is worth noticing too that the transition from the Latin *sericus* to the English *silk* – from an *r* sound to an *l* – may well have been produced by adoption into the Slavonic languages of silk’s early traders in the Baltic. The word *empire*, which will come up frequently in the course of this book, derives from the Latin *imperium* and thus, inevitably, calls to mind the immense cosmopolitan might of the Roman people. The story of Rome – its imagery, its language – has been an inspiration for every imperial power since.

Sometimes the lexical archaeologists disagree: for instance, the end-of-year celebration known as *hogmanay* has been variously construed as a Celtic exclamation, a version of the Greek *hagia mene* (‘holy month’), a rendering of the French druids’ cry of ‘Au gui l’an neuf’ or a corruption of the Latin *hoc anno novo*. Deciding between competing explanations is usually a matter of identifying which account fits best with our understanding of history. But on the whole etymology is a more secure business, revealing the lustrous past concealed in every word. The poet Don Paterson suggests that ‘Words are locked tombs in which the corpses still lie breathing.’¹⁸ It is an image which nicely suggests the more macabre stories preserved in words.

Already I have referred several times to ‘borrowing’ and ‘loan-words’. Both are misnomers: the language from which we acquire the word does not have to give it up. A word may be on probation, and for a time it may have a disreputable or intimidating image, but we are not expected to return it. What, though, makes a loan-word stick? Most new words sparkle briefly, then fade. Those that endure are the ones that are useful, deal with matters of lasting significance, and achieve a high level of exposure. They tend as well to be easy to handle – or at least not furiously complicated. I may like *pimpinpauxa*, which is the Basque for a butterfly, but I shall struggle to convince many other people of its usefulness.

To quote the French scholar Louis Deroz, ‘L’emprunt est un intrus’: ‘The loanword is an intruder.’¹⁹ Borrowed words do not slip into a language unnoticed; their arrival may be only gradual, but it is keenly felt. No loanword is ever universally welcomed, and each borrowed term is a tiny affront to the language that borrows it; yet a language totally hostile to change is a language in decline. As Islanders, the people of Britain have long had a sense of their apartness, but this has fuelled rather than stymied an appetite for reaching across the seas to discover the many and alluring forms of ‘otherness’. For its part the United States, the world’s most populous English-speaking nation, is also one of the most socially and ethnically diverse, and its eclectic identity is grounded in the understanding that change will tend to bring about improvements.

There is another aspect to Deroz’s observation: he implies that borrowing is not seamless, that its boundaries are ragged. When words are borrowed, they alter. This is true of their meanings as well as of their pronunciation. The degree to which this happens varies, but sometimes it is profound. Think back to *restaurant*, or compare, for instance, the pronunciations of these words, all of which are also derived from French: *marriage*, *garage*, *montage*. A loanword’s level of acceptance is manifest in the way we articulate it. It is evident, too, in our willingness to use the word in ways other than that in which it was originally borrowed – as another part of speech, or in a derivative compound. Furthermore, we will happily use a word we recognize as borrowed to afford us what we think is insight into the culture where it originated. ‘I know your words: I know

your mind' goes the inevitable, dangerous, reasoning. Even if we feel confident that we understand, say, *jihad* or *Lebensraum*, we should be wary of using *our* understanding of them as keys into languages and world views where their significance is far more complex.

Borrowing is not a one-way street. For instance, in Kashmiri you may hear a word like *bathroom* or *widow*, and in Serbo-Croat *shrapnel* or *sout*. In French, as I have noted, there is *le weekend*, along with *les bluejeans*, *le rip-off* and the calque *gratte-ciel* (skyscraper), which are seen by purists as grave embarrassments. The Swahili *madigadi* is a version of the English 'mudguards', and the same language takes the delightful word *kipilefti*, meaning 'traffic island', from the English 'keep left'. In Yoruba, a *square* root is *sikua nutu*.²⁰ Russian borrowings from English include the slightly sinister *biznismen*, as well as *dzhemper* ('jumper') and *vokzal* ('station'). The last of these is a corruption of Vauxhall, the name of an area in south London once famous for its pleasure gardens; a Russian delegation of the 1840s stopped there and took this word, displayed on a sign, to be the generic name for a station. Borrowing is a subject that could fill volumes. But here we are concerned only with the traffic in one direction: into English.

Before we go any further, another word about terminology. Languages are not concrete, and it is not quite accurate to claim that a language 'alters' or 'spreads', or that it 'penetrates' a new area. When one says that a language changes, for instance, what one really means is that some parts of that language come to be used differently from the way they were previously used. Change results from human choice and from contact between individuals who speak differently. It begins with people, not with languages. Nevertheless, in the interests of concision, I shall throughout this book refer to the English language's 'changing', its 'conquest' of fresh territory, and its 'appetite', as well as to words 'entering' the language, and shall assume that readers recognize this as a kind of shorthand. I shall also try where I can to say something about the people whose actions and achievements are amalgamated — compacted, hidden — in the words concerned.

2. Invade

To enter in a hostile manner, or with armed force; to intrude upon, infringe, encroach on, usurp

From the Latin verb *invadere*, 'to go or walk in'

Sometimes it takes an outsider to recognize the heart of a country and its culture. Writing in the 1850s about his experiences of Britain, Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to the 'composite character' of its inhabitants. 'Every thing English is a fusion of distant and antagonistic elements. The language is mixed . . . [and] the currents of thought are counter.' The people combined 'contemplation and practical skill; active intellect and dead conservatism; . . . aggressive freedom and hospitable law'. 'Scattered by their wars and affairs over the face of the whole earth, and homesick to a man', they made up 'a country of extremes'. 'Who can discriminate them anatomically,' he wondered, 'or metaphysically?' 'Mixture', he concluded, 'is the secret of the English island.'

This mixture is audible and legible in our daily use of English words. Often we have three terms for the same thing — one Anglo-Saxon, one French, and one clearly absorbed from Latin or Greek. The Anglo-Saxon word is typically a neutral one; the French word connotes sophistication; and the Latin or Greek word, learnt from written text rather than from human contact, is comparatively abstract and conveys a more scientific notion. Consider, for example, the verbs *rise*, *mount* and *ascend*, or *go*, *depart* and *exit*. In each case, the first word has an Anglo-Saxon source and is informal, the second is French and comparatively formal, while the third is Latin and suggests something more specialized or technical. A more extreme example is *fire*, *flame* and *conflagration*; another, *holy*, *sacred*, *consecrated*. In this book you will frequently find the Anglo-Saxon word and the French term, but this is the last you will hear of the rather more