

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax
English for Life in the UK
Season 2: Episode 7: The Development of the English Language
December 2020

(Music)

Mark Hello and welcome to the podcast: **English for Life in the UK**. This podcast is for anyone who wants to improve their English and learn more about life in this country. If you want to get the transcript - that's the written version of this episode and all our others - you can do that on our website and the information about that is at the end of this podcast.

So today we're going to talk about the development of the English language and I'm joined by Christine, as usual. Hello, Christine - how are you? Are you well?

Christine I'm quite well. I'm sort of hiding indoors from the weather.

Mark What's the weather like, at the moment?

Christine Well, it's cold and it's damp and it's foggy. And it's definitely not my favourite kind of weather!

Mark Best to be inside in weather like that, isn't it? Now I'm also delighted to say that for the first time on the podcast, we've got with us Phoebe. So hello, Phoebe - how are you? And would you like to just tell our listeners a little bit about yourself?

Phoebe Hi, Mark - thank you for having me here. Yes - I'm Phoebe - I work at the St Augustine's Centre, and I used to volunteer before I started working there, and I'm particularly interested in this subject today because at university I studied German and Linguistics, so hopefully, I can add something here.

Mark That's great! That's great - so we've got an expert with us this week!

Phoebe That might be a bit of a push!¹ (*laughing*)

Mark I'm sure it'll be fine. OK that's great. Phoebe - you're going to start off for us and tell us a little bit about the history of the English language.

Phoebe Yes - I am - and I find languages and English, my own language, really fascinating, but before I talk about English, I thought I would take us back even further in history. Before we were speaking English in Britain, when the country was populated by Celtic people and they spoke Celtic languages - for example, Gaelic, which still exists in some parts of Scotland today. Welsh is also a Celtic language and what happened is when the Anglo-Saxons - who I know you've talked about on the podcast before - the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, in the East, and they pushed the Celts to the north and to the west of Britain, into Scotland and Wales, and this is why the Celtic languages of Gaelic and Welsh are in the north and the west of the British Isles. And also Cornish - did you know that Cornish is a language that used to be spoken in Cornwall? - and that's right in the very southern- and western-most parts of England, and yeah, that used to be a language, as well. Celtic languages are dying a little bit unfortunately, there's less [fewer] speakers now, but lots of people are trying really hard to keep these languages alive.

(3:40)

So that's some Celtic languages in the British Isles, and then the Anglo-Saxons bring their language with them, which is the start of English. And, then - as you spoke about in the last podcast - we have the Norman-French invasion and they bring their French

¹ this phrase 'a bit of a push' means an exaggeration or something that might be difficult to achieve

language with them, and so then, we have this combination of both Anglo-Saxon English and French, and together they make what becomes our English language. But we also have lots of other influences as well, later on.

So I know John talked about some of the different words that you can have in English, and also with French origins, as well. And now, we have so much vocabulary in English, because we just accept so many words and we don't really get rid of any words: we keep them all and we give them all slightly different meanings, so plenty of words for English-learners to get to grips with.

And I thought ... I've got some more examples here of Anglo-Saxon and French words, where we kept both. For example, 'lovely' and 'beautiful' - which of those do you think is French?

Mark So, it's 'beautiful' that comes from the French, because the French word is 'beau'.

Phoebe Yes - exactly - and we have 'thoughts' and 'ideas' - so ideas there, being French like 'idee' and 'thoughts' in English, in Anglo-Saxon.

And we have 'end' and 'finish' - as well - which is interesting, because you speak French and I speak German, and Anglo-Saxon is a Germanic language - so in German we say 'Enden' that's 'end' - and in French you would say 'fini' - yeah - very interesting.

And also, this foreign influence on English is one of the reasons why we have such different spellings. I don't know if any of the listeners are struggling with spelling in English. I certainly struggle with spelling in English and I've been practising for about 20 years now! English does not often spell words how they sound and that is because we keep the spelling of the language that we take the word from, so if it's a French-origin word, it will have similar French spelling. If it comes from Latin, we will keep the Latin spelling, or Germanic. So, we have our English words are: 30% of the words in English come from French; around 30% come from Latin; around 25% are from Germanic languages, and the rest is a mix of other different languages.

(7:02)

So we have all these different influences of spellings, and we use the Latin alphabet too, in English, but in Latin they had five vowels and so they had five different letters for vowels: they had A - E - I - O and U.

But in English, we have so many more vowel sounds, so we had to be creative with how we spell these vowels [sounds] and so we put different vowel letters together, to make different vowel sounds, and I think this is another reason why spelling is very difficult in English.

Christine It's interesting as you said, Phoebe - there are no rules for spelling, in English - it's quite infuriating when you're learning it - I mean, even the few rules that there are - for example: "i before e except after c" - there are many exceptions. It's very difficult.

Phoebe And another reason for that is because of all the different dialects. In English - I know you've talked about this before, when you have people on the podcast who are from different parts of UK, as us three are, as well - and so, in the ... after the Norman invasion and English became the language of the Court², - it was French for a while - so that was the language of writing everything - that was in English - but in all the different parts of Britain, we were speaking in different ways and, maybe, some people from different parts of Britain couldn't understand each other.

² Court = this refers to the Royal Court : that is, the monarch's household and staff and the language for legal purposes across the country.

And then, in the 1490's, something very significant happens and it changes the way that we write English very significantly. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Mark Was that when the ... when printing first started, Phoebe?

Phoebe Exactly - so they I think it was invented in Germany, but a man called William Caxton brought the printing press to England. So, now we had a way to write and share lots and lots of things, and we could share this, all over the country, but everyone was speaking a similar language of English, but they were all writing it differently. So basically, William Caxton had to decide how he wanted to write everything down and this became a standard. So, we talk about standardising English and making it the same for everybody who spoke it. And because William Caxton was from the south of England, he chose southern varieties of English, so imagine what English language could look like, if the printing press had been brought to York and not to London! And if William Caxton was from the north and not the south, we could be speaking a very different language.

(10:15)

And then, after this printing press came to England and standardised the spelling, what happened in English is called - in linguistics, we call it, the "Great Vowel Shift". And basically, the way we say our vowels changed. I will not attempt to try to impersonate the way we used to say vowels, because I think it will be embarrassing (*laughter*) but we changed the way that we say our vowels, but this happened after the printing press, and after, we decided we wanted to spell all the words so that means that the way that we spell the words, is the way we used to say them, for some words, and that's why the vowels and the way that we write things, does not always match how we say them. Because it matches how we used to say them, you know 500 or 600 years ago, which is another very confusing thing for learners. (*Laughing*)

Christine It's interesting what you were saying, Phoebe, about the spelling and settling down after the printing: it still hadn't settled in Shakespeare's time. He spelt many of the words that he used differently. In fact, I read that he spelt his own name in five different ways, in five different places.

Mark Well, thanks, Phoebe - that was absolutely fascinating - and, I think for those people learning English, it really does help them to understand why it is a difficult language to learn and all we can say to you is: just keep at it, and you'll gradually get there but don't worry about making mistakes, because we all make mistakes, and that includes all of us - make spelling mistakes - and we have different words, depending which part of the country we come from. So, keep going at your English, and you will definitely get to the stage where you can be understood and to understand others. In fact Christine, I think you're going to talk to us a bit about English today and how it's used today, not just here, but around the world.

Christine Yes - it is very interesting, talking about the development of the English language and how it's developed in this country. But of course, it is used, right across the world. I mean there's almost 400 million people who speak English as their first language in the world. And there's more than a billion on top of that, who speak it as a second language. And, in fact, it's an official language³, in more than fifty countries. And that doesn't include the likes of the UK and the US, who don't have official languages. Of course, that number of countries reflects the colonisation of countries in the world,

³ Official language = a language acknowledged by Government; in which official documents are printed and transactions must be conducted, such as in legal processes. The devolved government of Wales has both English and Welsh as official languages.

they are mainly former members of the British Empire, where English is spoken. And it doesn't mean, within these countries with English as an official language, it doesn't mean that everybody speaks English. For example, India is one of them and not everybody in India speaks English.

(13:36) Also, English in those countries may be quite different from English in, say, Yorkshire, or London, because the language has developed differently, in different countries. In fact, I can't really tell the difference, but I believe there are several different accents in America and people do know where people come from, by their accent. And certainly, in this country - in this small United Kingdom - there are huge differences in the way people speak English. The most obvious difference you can tell is where somebody comes from. Now, I don't know if you can tell and Phoebe mentioned it earlier, but I come from Scotland, and my accent is different from Mark's and Phoebe's - they both come from England. And, I think most people, I can certainly always tell if somebody comes from England, or Scotland, or Wales, or Northern Ireland. Is that the same for you, Mark and Phoebe?

Mark Yes, I think there are strong differences in accent, between those .. between the different countries, in the United Kingdom, but also within England as well.

Phoebe I love to practice doing different accents and I notice my accent also changes, according to who I'm with, which is interesting. But one thing you can do is say all the country names in their accent. I'll try.

Christine Go on.

Phoebe England. Ireland. Scotland. Wales. *(Christine laughing)*. I tripped up on Wales, I think.

Christine Oh, I think it was quite good, Phoebe, well done.

Mark Very good.

Christine And as Mark, you were saying, that you can tell the difference, I think, between different parts, within those countries. I mean, I think, I bet everyone of us would be able to tell the difference from somebody who came from Liverpool, or Bristol, or Birmingham, or Newcastle. I mean there are really quite distinctive local accents. But, when I was young, you know, the school I went to, it was a rural ...it was in East Fife, so that's a rural part of Scotland. There were a lot of fishing villages along the coast. And at secondary school, where people came from about 7 or 8 of the different fishing villages - certainly, one of the teachers, a local person, knew which village people came from, by the way they spoke. There was such a localised difference between the accents. I don't know if that's still the case, now because of course, we have much more in common, through mass media and movement - we're much more of a better connected society.

(16:42)

Phoebe There's also a difference, as well, Christine, in the words that people say.

Christine Yes.

Phoebe Not just the way they say the words.

Christine Yes. Quite right, Phoebe - I don't go to church - but if I did, I would call it the "kirk".

Phoebe That's the Scottish word for "church"?

Christine Exactly! If I was going to have a here, I have a 'sandwich', but when I was in Scotland, I would have a 'piece'; that's the Scottish word for 'sandwich'. And do you know, it's not just the words or the accent, the sounds, vowel sounds, that change: the grammar changes, as well. For example -

I might say "I'm the oldest one here, am'n't I?"

And Mark would say - "No - I'm the oldest, aren't I?"

So Mark would say "I am, aren't I?" because he's English - but I say "I am, am'n't I?" because I'm Scottish, and you'll notice it's more logical, to be Scottish, and say "I am, am'n't I?" than it is to say: "I am, aren't I?"

I mean there are other things that are different - about - it's not just where you come from. It was George Bernard Shaw - quite a famous playwright, about a hundred years ago, he was the one who said -

"It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman hate or despise him."

And what (*Phoebe laughing*) ... he says that, of course, because you can tell someone's social class: whether they're very poor, or very wealthy, and also, how educated they are and that might make a big difference.

Phoebe Yeah - I would say you can try, and certainly, Christine - I think the only thing you can tell for sure when someone talks, is their age, because your voice does change as you get older.

Christine Your voice does change, but also, the style of speaking has changed now. I can tell that younger - people, much younger than me - speak in a very different way and it's not just the fact that their voices sound younger. Also, I mean, George Bernard Shaw was talking 100 years ago - I think there's more of a levelling. Language is not such a clear indicator of class as it used to be.

But also, given the difference, of course, we all speak differently, in different contexts. You know, and we learn everyday speech and people learn that and people learning English will learn that everyday language - the correct English, probably, but when you go on the bus and you're chatting to the bus driver, he might speak quite differently to you, and very informally, and if you learn to speak - as many children do, when they're growing up - they learn ... they don't speak English as a first language, when they come to this country, and learn English in the playground - the kind of informal, very personal language that they learn, it doesn't serve them well, when it comes to studying, for example. It's different. There is a more formal kind of English that you need, for example, when you're studying or say, you were ever in court⁴ - you know, that formal English can be quite different from that every-day English and people can get into trouble [difficulties]. You know, it's a complex and fascinating web, this English language, and negotiating your way through it is something that well, we're all interested in here and we've made it our life's business.

Mark And I do think the other thing which is why, erm - I think it's easier for people in France to learn English, than for me to learn French - I would say that, wouldn't I? - is because of mass media. English is so dominant in mass media - that, whether it's music, or films, or television - erm - English is becoming the international language and so wherever you are in the world, that's something that you will hear and pick up.

Christine It is. It is.

Mark Well, that was fascinating - thank you very much - and I hope listeners have found that useful and maybe reassuring: that actually learning this complicated English language is going to be difficult, but it's also very rewarding, and very important, because it is such a dominant language, across the world now.

Phoebe Yeah - and it would be so interesting to hear from listeners who are learning English around the world: where are they learning English? do they watch films in English, in the mass media, to help them? Are they having business meetings in English? I'd love to know.

⁴ court= here, referring to a legal setting: a courtroom for an official hearing, or a trial, or a legal appeal

Mark And, of course, we do have an email address which is how you can contact us and if you'd like to make contact, we'd love to hear from you - and the email address is : englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

(Music)

Language Support

(22:45)

Mark This is the part of the podcast where I usually choose some words and phrases from this episode, to talk about in more detail. However, as this whole episode has been about language, I want to focus on one other thing we didn't cover in the episode and that is: the difference between **British English and American English**. This is important because you will come across examples of both - certainly in television, the media, generally - then you will find a lot of American English used and obviously, as we are based in the UK, it's important to know the difference between American and British English.

Most of it, of course, is exactly the same, but there are some differences, for example, in vocabulary:

- if you're talking about parts of a car, for example - in America, they would talk about 'the hood' - and we would talk about 'the bonnet', as being the front of the car, under which is usually the engine.

And, at the back of the car, in America, they talk about 'the trunk', whereas we talk about 'the boot' as being where you store things.

Then there's a difference ... although we can use the word 'vacation', we will usually use the word 'holiday' - so, we will usually say "I'm going on holiday". Americans will always say 'vacation' - "I'm going on vacation" - and they will use 'holidays' for very specific days, such as Thanksgiving. Another example would be: we're talking in England, of walking on the 'pavement', by the side of the road; in America, they would talk about the 'sidewalk'. And one other important language difference, which is also a cultural difference, is, when we talk about 'football', in America, they will talk about 'soccer' because 'American football' is something quite different. So that's vocabulary.

There are some grammar differences, particularly, in the past tense. Whereas in America, they would always use "... -ed" at the end of verbs, we will often use "...-t", although we can use the -ed, as well. So, for example, in America, they would say 'learned', we would often say 'learnt' - although you can use 'learned'. Similarly, in America, they'd say 'dreamed' - we would very often say 'dreamt'.

And then there are the examples when the Americans would add "...-en" as an ending, for the past tense. The most common one of these is the verb 'to get' - where the Americans would say, for example - "I have never gotten caught", whereas, in English, we would always say "I have never got caught".

Then there are some examples of spelling differences; for example, the word "color/colour" ends in an "-o-r" in American English but in "-o-u-r" in British English. And the same for the word "labor/labour".

And then the endings of a word, such as 'organise'. In English, in England, in English, we would usually spell 'organise' as '...ise', at the end, whereas Americans would usually use '...-ize' - 'organize'.

So, just some examples there, of differences between American and British English.

That's it for this week. You can find the transcript - that's the written version of this episode - on our website:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And that's where you can also find links to all the other episodes, and the transcripts, so you can listen and read along at the same time. That's also where you can find out how to donate, to help our work. We are a charity, supporting particularly, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants but also, all those in need in our local area and we would welcome your support, if you felt able to give it. If you follow on the website, the links to "**Get Involved**" and "**Donate**".

We also have an email address - that's **englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com**

And we would love to hear from you - your thoughts on our podcast and ideas for the future.

We also have a Twitter account : **@EsolSaint**
and there is additional material on that site.

I'll spell out all those addresses:

So, the website: w-w-w-.s-t-a-u-g-u-s-t-i-n-e-s-c-e-n-t-r-e-h-a-l-i-f-a-x.org.uk

So that's the website.

The email is: **englishforlifeintheUK@gmail.com** - And that's "English for" spelt: f-o-r

And finally, the Twitter account: is : @ [at] [capital E] E-s-o-l- [capital S] -S-a-l-n-t

Thank you very much for joining us and we will be back with you, again, very soon.
Goodbye for now.

(Music). (29:57) (ends).