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SOMETHING OF WHAT ENGLISH OWES TO FRENCH

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From the point of view of English, French cannot be considered as simply one of the languages of Europe. As an example of influence of one language upon another, its immense contribution to English is a unique phenomenon in the world experience of language development.

Story Untold

For the better part of two centuries, there has seemed to be a conspiracy of silence about the influence of French on the formation of modern English. To any serious student of the history of the English language, it must always have been inescapably clear, but it has seldom received anything like the emphasis it deserves. Even scholarly books, dealing with "the Latin in English," obliged to admit that most of it came "through the French," conveyed the notion of a sort of short corridor of no importance in itself. Untold numbers of high school teachers of English, having learned some Latin but being ignorant of French and of the real history of English, have disposed of as simply "Latin" any word which could be traced back, however indirectly, to remote Latin ancestry. With all the confidence of ignorance, this unrealistic conception has been planted once for all in the minds of generations of students.

Then there has been the conventional disposition of English as a "Germanic" language. It cannot, of course, be classed as a "Romance" language, since it was not developed from Latin as the Romance languages mainly were. It has, to be sure, certain unmistakable Germanic elements, but it is certainly by far the *least* "Germanic" of any language that could be considered in that classification at all.

Somewhat current centuries ago was the smart playful remark that English was "nothing but French badly pronounced." This was of course a gross exaggeration, but no more misleading than other generalizations of later times which have been taken more seriously.

Loose Reference to "Latin"

It is unrealistic to describe summarily as "Latin" any words which can possibly be traced back to Latin originals, without discriminating as to the way in which they became a part of English speech. While it

is true that in the main the French words now assimilated in English had at one time developed from Latin, that consideration seems rather beside the point. During the centuries that they had been French words, before entering English, many of them changed so much from the Latin, not only in form, but in meaning and use, that any mention of the remote ancestor is rather irrelevant. *It was certainly not because of the Latin descent that English adopted them.* Indeed, along with French words ultimately derived from Latin, English took in no small number of other French words which had never come from Latin at all. Independently of any more distant indirect source, they simply came into English as the French words that they happened to be. Often they represented ideas which the ancient Latins could never have foreseen.

Perhaps the most important fact about them is that as a class they entered English *orally*. That is no doubt why most of the French words imbedded in English are never thought of as being "foreign" at all; they belong as truly to English speech as do any other words in the language. Consider such common offhand examples as *table, chair, fruit, grape, peach, sugar, garden, hoe, carrot, air, music, court, suit, pen, pencil, large, fine, pure, color, sound, place, people, language, power, space, form, very*. Not all of these words came into French from Latin, but they all came into English from French.

Most of the truly Latin words in English were introduced by scholars, or came through translations of learned books. They are likely to seem abstract, pale, colorless, because they do not have their roots deeply planted in everyday life; they are comparatively "bookish" in tone. One acquires them by reading or going to school or listening to lectures, instead of possessing them by just naturally growing up among English-speaking people. They do not belong so thoroughly to the living body of English speech. They are often extremely useful, but not essential to the same degree as the ordinary words of everyday life. To be sure, in this changing world no vocabulary will always "stay put," and sometimes technical terms which were originally very scholarly will find their way into the commonest popular speech.

"Percentages" Misleading

Attempts have often been made to measure the different ingredients in English by percentages. Such efforts are bound to be futile, for they can start only from the crude assumption that words are equal units, whereas they are nothing of the sort. Sometimes one or two words will carry most of the meaning in a sentence, while the others do little more than adjust these principal words to the situation in

which they are placed. The really interesting thing about the French words in English is not so much their large number (though that in itself is impressive enough) as their importance to the *meaning* of almost any sentence in which they occur.

Contribution to Structure

It is inaccurate to assume, as many have done, that French influence has merely contributed vocabulary without affecting the syntax. The falseness of such a notion may be illustrated by one of the rare Anglo-Saxon words which have retained their form during a thousand years—the preposition *of*. The point is that the *use* of the word has entirely changed. Instead of meaning only “from,” as in Anglo-Saxon, it long ago became practically equivalent to French *de*. In Old English religious literature one finds the expression *rodctacn*, which might be translated literally as “rood token.” Now, however, any English-speaking person would express the idea by saying “the sign of the cross.” Here we may notice not merely the words *sign* and *cross*, but the word-order which corresponds exactly to that of the French phrase *le signe de la croix*. The English idiom for this idea is neither Anglo-Saxon nor Latin, but French in its plan of construction. And this single detail of the new use of a preposition made possible a clarity and grace in sentence-structure which the older language could not achieve.

It may be observed in passing that the commonest terms we use for classifying words grammatically—noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction—are essentially French. Anglo-Saxon had only the loose term *word*.

Grammatical Forms

French has indeed supplied English with an astonishingly large part of its grammatical equipment. When a new word is coined in modern English, the kind of grammatical ending which it is almost certain to receive will show the profound influence of French upon the very *structure* of the language. New words formed nowadays are not likely to have endings like *-dom* or *-hood* or *-ness*, on such Anglo-Saxon patterns as *kingdom* or *brotherhood* or *kindness*. Instead it will seem natural to use one of the many terminations inherited from French, as are *-ity*, *-ance*, *-et* or *-ette*, *-ery*, *-ment*, *-tion*, *-ation*, *-age*, *-ine*, *-ure*, *-ic* (*-ique*), *-able*, *-al*, *-ess*, *-ee*, *-eer* (*-ier*), *-ism*, and various others. A fairly recent coinage, for example, is the word *weaponry*; to the old Anglo-Saxon word *weapon* was naturally added the ending *-ry* of French origin. Still more recent coinages on this same pattern are

rocketry and *missilry*. Classical-minded people may prefer to consider some of these endings as “Latin” or “Greek,” but they became established in English because they had been made thoroughly familiar by the adoption of so many French words which were formed in similar ways.

Melting-Pot Myth

For a long time, it has been a commonplace to refer to America as a “melting-pot.” This was a convenient way of alluding to the fact that the population included representatives of many national origins. As is typical of slang, the expression is a grotesque exaggeration. There has been nothing approaching such an amalgamation of diverse racial strains—*all* inhabitants representing the same proportions of *all* the contributing elements—as could be truly symbolized by the fusing together of different metals in a crucible.

Some people have even carried over this fanciful metaphor into the conception of *language*. They appear to forget entirely that English was already fully formed before it was brought to the New World. Since then it has undergone no basic change in the nature of its ingredients. Nevertheless the notion of the language as a hodge-podge of heterogeneous elements seems to have perennial appeal. In one way or another it has been expressed again and again.

At a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1942, one of the principal speakers made a sweeping generalization: “Just as our country is a meeting-place for all the peoples and races of the world, so our language gladly and willingly received contributions from all of them. English is a United States of the languages of mankind.”

A more conspicuous instance was a pamphlet issued by the publishers of Webster’s Dictionaries in 1926 and widely circulated over a period of years. As an initial summary of linguistic origin, it announced that “the English language is called the descendant and representative of the Anglo-Saxon, but *many other languages* have contributed a *large proportion* of the words that we use daily.” (italics ours) There followed a list of forty-seven words, indeed a miscellaneous-looking collection, obviously chosen carefully for the express purpose of showing as many different “other languages” as possible. In reality, however, they did not represent nearly so great a variety of “origins” as might at first appear. Ignored as if it were insignificant was the important question of how these words actually *came into English*. Yet from the natural point of view of the English language, a

word's "origin" is primarily and particularly where it came from *into English speech*. So far as English is concerned, the word's "derivation" means from what other language it was taken and adopted. As soon as we consider the list from this point of view, the picture takes on quite another aspect.

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, for instance, plainly indicates no less than thirteen of these words (*cocoon, zigzag, tapioca, jubilee, vampire, candy, turban, crystal, sugar, jocko, garden, gravel, and coach*) as having come into English from French. *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia*, where word-histories are given in more detail, shows also three more (*floss, cigar, and polka*). For simplification, moreover, we are leaving out of account various other items in the list which might be called mixed or doubtful cases, but whose direct ancestry, from our point of view, seems about as clearly French as anything else. Relative importance of different sources can be seen by observing that among the forty-seven words, at least sixteen of which came from French, not more than one or two could be claimed as having come into English from any other single language.

Yet this kind of misleading generalization continues unabated. An article published in a widely-circulated newspaper in 1957 is a striking example. Though the writer gave considerably more recognition to the French element in English than is usual in such discussions, this was done only in a very limited and arbitrary manner. It is amusing, for instance, to read an offhand reference to "such fluffy French words as *burlesque, caprice, bagatelle, chassis*, and many others." Here the first three "fluffy" items belong to the class of "literary" words which, however numerous, form a very minor part of the French contribution, whereas *chassis*, like *garage* and *chauffeur*, came in naturally along with *automobile*, a word coined in France for an invention whose name is one of the small handful of words that have spread beyond the realm of western civilization into truly worldwide use.

Throughout this confident account one meets categorical pronouncements which give an impression of bewildering complexity. "From the Hebrew we get *Satan*, but Persia offered us *paradise!* . . . From Arabic we got . . . *syrup*. We filched *sugar* from the Hindus . . . we lifted *cotton* and *mohair* from the Arabic . . . Persia gave us . . . *caravan, turban, . . . lime, lemon, and orange, check, bazaar, and . . . chess* . . . The Arabs gave us *lute, monsoon, . . . carat, zenith, alkali, cipher, . . . mattress, arsenal, and giraffe* . . ."

Now the fact is that *all* the specimen words we have just quoted simply came into English from French, as the quite French words that

they had become, and they entered English in the same way as did other French words that may have come originally from Latin, Germanic tongues, or somewhere else. The picture is somewhat confused, of course, by mentioning indiscriminately, along with these, some words which perhaps *can* be attributed directly to such alleged exotic sources. These, however, may be equally misleading in another way, if it is implied (as it seems to be) that English has any peculiarity in possessing them. Most of them, sometimes in variant forms, will be found no less naturalized in other European languages—which probably knew them before English ever did.

Notion of "Anglo-Saxon"

During World War II, in response to a question as to the "secret" of his effective oratory, Sir Winston Churchill modestly replied: "My method is simple. I like to use Anglo-Saxon words with the least number of syllables."


Now that great statesman's superb and extremely effective command of English is of course universally recognized. Nevertheless this statement of his involves some fundamentally false ideas about language. One of these is the idea that so-called "Anglo-Saxon" words are somehow more truly *English*, and therefore more forceful and effective, than other kinds of words in the language can possibly be.

Our brief quotation from Sir Winston should be almost sufficient in itself to demonstrate the inaccuracy of what it says. All the strength of its meaning is precisely in the words *method*, *simple*, *use*, *number*, and *syllables*, all of which came into English from French. As for the term "Anglo-Saxon" (improperly applied here, of course), it represents a purely *Latin* method of forming international adjectives, one which is often convenient nowadays in combinations like Franco-American, Greco-Roman, or Russo-Chinese. That peculiar manner of compounding is not an Anglo-Saxon thing. But perhaps the best way to see the nature of the element in English which is arbitrarily called "native" will be to remove from Churchill's two short sentences everything *except* the Anglo-Saxon words. All that we have left is: "My—is—I like—to—words with the least—of—" In contrast to this vague and incoherent jumble, it will be perceived that the five French words, taken by themselves, *almost* suffice to express clearly and completely what the speaker wished to say: "Method simple—use (small) number (of) syllables." If one were sending a telegram, even the "of" might be dropped out. Moreover, though "of" is an old Anglo-Saxon word, this *use* of it clearly reflects the French idiom which English had not yet acquired in Anglo-Saxon times.

A Classic Demonstration

Lincoln's famous *Gettysburg Address* has been much praised as an example of perfection in English prose. Certainly it cannot be disposed of as "Anglo-Saxon." Two outstanding words, *dedicate* and *consecrate*, are classified as having come into English from Latin. They express the solemn nature of the occasion, the performance of a rite; they carry an air of impersonal formality. Really different in nature, much more deeply a part of the language, are the numerous words from French without which the meaning could not possibly be expressed: *continent, nation* (five times), *conceived* (twice), *liberty, proposition, equal, engaged, civil, war* (twice), *testing, endure, battle, portion, final, place, proper, larger, sense, brave, power, detract, note, remember, unfinished, nobly, advanced, task, remaining, honored, increased, devotion* (twice), *cause, measure, resolve, vain, government, people* (three times), and *perish*.

In general, the Anglo-Saxon element performs its customary function with "grammar words" which cement these meaningful concepts into a *pattern* that we grasp readily as we go along. The burden of the thought, however, is unmistakably carried by the indispensable words which centuries ago were adopted from French.



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