

How Language Contact Shaped the Vocabulary of Modern English

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Abstract:

This study explores the profound impact of language contact on the evolution of modern English vocabulary. Through a chronological and sociolinguistic analysis, it traces how successive interactions with Celtic, Latin, Old Norse, Norman French, and Renaissance Latin and Greek have shaped English's lexical landscape. The research highlights key mechanisms of change, including code-switching, borrowing, relexification, and the role of bilingualism in lexical diffusion. By examining semantic fields most affected by borrowing — such as law, governance, cuisine, and science — and providing case studies of integrated terms, the article underscores English's unique adaptability. The discussion contrasts English with more lexically conservative languages and addresses debates surrounding linguistic purity and hybridity. Ultimately, the findings illustrate that language contact has been a source of enrichment rather than erosion, positioning English as a dynamic and globally responsive language. Future research directions suggest a closer examination of the influence of non-European languages on English in contemporary global settings.

Keywords

language contact, lexical borrowing, English vocabulary, linguistic hybridity, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

The English language, known for its expansive and flexible vocabulary, has evolved through centuries of profound external influence. Unlike many languages that have developed largely through internal innovation, English has experienced extensive borrowing, integration, and adaptation of lexical items from a wide variety of other languages. This development is neither random nor incidental; rather, it is a direct consequence of numerous historical contact situations ranging from invasions and colonization to trade, migration, and globalization (MacKenzie, 2017; Levänen, 2022).

Language contact, defined as the interaction between speakers of different languages or dialects, has played a decisive role in shaping the lexicon of modern English. It has resulted not only in the

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adoption of thousands of loanwords but also in semantic shifts, calques, hybrid formations, and syntactic influences that have contributed to English's dynamism and global adaptability (Davydova, 2024; Johnson & Babel, 2024). Moreover, contemporary phenomena, such as the informal language networks of international students and learners' engagement with new technologies like large language models, continue to demonstrate that vocabulary development through contact remains an ongoing and active process (Wang & Reynolds, 2024; Zhou & Rose, 2024).

The central research problem addressed in this study concerns the mechanisms by which language contact has historically influenced — and continues to influence — the vocabulary of modern English. While the borrowing of words is a well-documented phenomenon, less attention has been paid to the nuanced sociolinguistic contexts that facilitate such borrowings, the long-term effects on language structure, and the informal or subconscious dimensions of lexical transfer (Alonso & Fernández-Dobao, 2025; von der Fecht-Fernández, 2025).

Thus, the aims of this research are twofold: firstly, to trace the historical pathways of lexical borrowing in English from early contact periods to the present day; and secondly, to analyze the social, psychological, and educational factors that sustain and accelerate vocabulary change in modern contexts. The study will examine specific domains of borrowing — such as nautical terms, scientific vocabulary, and everyday colloquialisms — alongside broader sociocultural shifts affecting lexical choices among learners and native speakers alike (Alharbi; Flusberg et al., 2024; Hossain, 2024).

The scope of the study encompasses both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, aiming to offer a comprehensive account of how contact-induced change operates over time and in different social environments. Drawing on methodologies from historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics, this study will employ a mixed-methods approach. Historical texts (e.g., Hakluyt's navigational writings) will be analyzed to trace early borrowing patterns, while contemporary data from educational and social settings will be explored to understand ongoing vocabulary expansion (Sato et al., 2025; da Costa & Rose, 2024; Smith IV et al., 2024).

In doing so, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of English not merely as a Germanic language with heavy Romance influence but as a globalized linguistic system continually shaped by its speakers' interactions across time and space.

2. Historical Background of Language Contact in English

The history of the English language is marked by successive waves of language contact that have dramatically shaped its vocabulary. From the earliest periods of recorded English to the present day, interaction with other linguistic communities has consistently enriched English, introducing new words, altering semantic structures, and influencing stylistic conventions. This section provides a chronological and sociopolitical overview of the primary phases of external influence on English vocabulary development.

2.1 Chronological Overview

Celtic and Latin Influences (Pre-Old English Period)

The earliest known instances of language contact affecting the English lexicon occurred during the Roman occupation of Britain. Although the Celtic languages spoken by the indigenous population left only a modest imprint on English vocabulary — limited to place names (e.g., *Avon*, *Thames*) and topographical terms — the Latin spoken by Roman officials and settlers contributed a small set of administrative and trade-related words (MacKenzie, 2017). These early borrowings set a precedent for Latin's future role as a prestige language in English history.

Old Norse (Viking Age, 8th–11th centuries)

A more profound lexical influence emerged during the Viking invasions and the subsequent settlement of Norse-speaking Scandinavians in northern and eastern England. Old Norse contributed an estimated 900 words to English, many of which are part of the core vocabulary today — including *sky*, *egg*, *knife*, *window*, *they*, and *are* (Levänen, 2022). The depth of Norse influence is notable not only in vocabulary but also in grammatical structures and pronouns, suggesting intense and prolonged contact, especially in the Danelaw region.

Norman French (Post-1066 Conquest)

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 marked one of the most significant episodes of lexical borrowing in English history. Over the next several centuries, Anglo-Norman French became the language of the elite, law, administration, and literature. As a result, English absorbed thousands of French words, particularly in the domains of governance (*parliament*, *council*), law (*justice*, *verdict*), fashion (*robe*, *gown*), and cuisine (*beef*, *poultry*, *venison*) (MacKenzie, 2017). This infusion resulted in the development of synonym pairs, often distinguishing between Anglo-Saxon everyday terms and French-derived formal equivalents (e.g., *ask* vs. *inquire*).

Latin and Greek (Renaissance and Scientific Revolution)

The Renaissance period, from the 15th to the 17th century, brought a renewed interest in classical learning and scientific inquiry, triggering a surge in Latin and Greek borrowings. Latin became the primary source for academic, legal, religious, and scientific terminology, while Greek served as a foundational language for neologisms in medicine, philosophy, and the sciences (von der Fecht-Fernández, 2025). Words such as *data*, *formula*, *species*, *theory*, and *phenomenon* entered the English lexicon, often through scholarly texts and translations. This period also fostered deliberate coinages using classical roots, demonstrating a more conscious and controlled form of language contact.

2.2 Sociopolitical Contexts of Contact

Each phase of lexical borrowing was deeply embedded in its sociopolitical context. During Roman Britain, Latin held prestige as the language of civilization and imperial order. However, the limited

integration between Roman settlers and native Britons explains the relatively minor Latin impact during this period. In contrast, the Norse influence reflects a context of settlement and intermarriage, particularly in the Danelaw, where language mixing was a daily reality (Levänen, 2022).

The Norman period introduced a stark linguistic hierarchy: French was the language of the ruling class, and English was demoted to a spoken vernacular for the common people. This diglossic situation lasted for several centuries, leaving a dual register legacy that remains evident in English vocabulary today (MacKenzie, 2017).

The Renaissance period saw increased scholarly and religious movements across Europe, encouraging the import of Latin and Greek terms. The role of Latin as the *lingua franca* of educated elites ensured a steady flow of academic terminology into English, even as English gradually asserted itself as a language of learning. Notably, this phase of borrowing often occurred through translation of Latin texts or through conscious neologism rather than through everyday contact (Davydova, 2024).

In sum, the expansion of English vocabulary through language contact has never been a passive or accidental process. Each borrowing phase corresponds to a moment in which political, cultural, or economic shifts led to deeper interaction between linguistic communities. The result is a modern English lexicon that reflects centuries of cultural convergence and ideological interplay.

3. Types of Borrowings and Lexical Integration

The incorporation of foreign elements into English has occurred through a variety of borrowing types, each with distinct linguistic mechanisms and sociocultural implications. These borrowings are not random insertions but are often systematized and adapted according to phonological, morphological, and semantic norms of the recipient language. This section explores the principal categories of lexical borrowing in English, distinguishes between core and peripheral vocabulary integration, and examines the most affected semantic fields.

3.1 *Loanwords, Calques, and Loan Translations*

Borrowing in English has taken three primary forms: **direct loanwords**, **calques**, and **loan translations**.

- **Loanwords** are the most common and involve the adoption of a foreign word with little to no modification. Examples include *ballet* (French), *piano* (Italian), *algebra* (Arabic), and *sushi* (Japanese). Such words are often assimilated phonologically and morphologically over time, becoming indistinguishable from native terms in usage (MacKenzie, 2017).
- **Calques** are literal translations of foreign expressions. For instance, the phrase *skyscraper* is a calque of the French *gratte-ciel*, and *superman* is a calque of the German *Übermensch*. These terms showcase English's ability to absorb conceptual rather than phonological content through translation.

- **Loan translations** or semantic loans involve taking an existing English word and extending or modifying its meaning based on a foreign counterpart. For example, the English *pioneer* was influenced in meaning by its French equivalent, shifting from a military engineer to a broader sense of "trailblazer" or "innovator" (Davydova, 2024).

These three processes illustrate how English does not merely borrow words but actively reconfigures them to fit its linguistic ecosystem.

3.2 Core vs. Peripheral Vocabulary

Another dimension of borrowing involves the depth of integration within the lexicon. **Core vocabulary** refers to everyday words that are fundamental to communication — pronouns, basic verbs, and numbers — and are typically resistant to borrowing. However, some borrowed items have entered the core, especially during intense contact periods. For instance, Old Norse contributed *they*, *them*, and *are*, which replaced earlier Anglo-Saxon forms, a rare phenomenon in lexical history (Levänen, 2022).

Peripheral vocabulary, in contrast, includes terms related to specialized fields or cultural domains. These words are more susceptible to borrowing and include scientific terms (*oxygen*, *photosynthesis*), culinary items (*croissant*, *lasagna*), and fashion vocabulary (*boutique*, *haute couture*). Their adoption often correlates with prestige or innovation, reflecting a desire to associate English with foreign sophistication or authority (von der Fecht-Fernández, 2025; Zhou & Rose, 2024).

3.3 Semantic Fields Affected

Borrowing is often domain-specific, reflecting the societal or technological needs of the time. The four most influenced domains are:

- **Government and Law:** Following the Norman Conquest, terms like *court*, *justice*, *parliament*, and *attorney* entered English, aligning the language with the administrative system imposed by the Normans.
- **Cuisine:** French, Italian, and more recently Asian languages have contributed an extensive set of culinary terms, such as *menu*, *entrée*, *pizza*, *tofu*, and *sashimi*, mirroring cultural openness to foreign foodways.
- **Science and Academia:** Latin and Greek dominate in this area. Words such as *biology*, *quantum*, *radius*, and *hypothesis* emerged from scholarly circles and remain highly productive sources of neologisms.
- **Fashion and Art:** Borrowings like *ballet*, *collage*, *couture*, and *bohemian* entered primarily through French and Italian, reinforcing the association between these languages and aesthetic refinement (Flusberg et al., 2024; Hossain, 2024).

3.4 Frequency and Stability of Borrowed Lexemes

The frequency with which borrowed terms appear in contemporary English is tied to their semantic usefulness and integration level. High-frequency items, such as *government*, *people*, or *very* (from French *gouvernement*, *peuple*, *vérai*), have become foundational. In contrast, lower-frequency borrowings (e.g., *angst*, *fiancée*, *déjà vu*) often retain cultural or phonological markers of their origins.

Stability is also variable. Some borrowings fade or are replaced, while others become entrenched. Stability increases when borrowed terms fill lexical gaps or correspond to concepts previously unnamed in English, as seen in the scientific and technological fields (Wang & Reynolds, 2024).

4. Mechanisms of Lexical Change

The dynamic nature of English vocabulary results not merely from the quantity of borrowings but from the linguistic mechanisms through which these borrowings are processed, adapted, and integrated. Several key mechanisms have underpinned the lexical evolution of English during and after contact situations.

4.1 Code-switching and Borrowing

Code-switching, the practice of alternating between two or more languages within a conversation, often precedes stable borrowing. Initially, speakers may insert foreign terms into English discourse for prestige, necessity, or expressive nuance (Zhou & Rose, 2024). Over time, frequent switches normalize certain foreign words, leading to borrowing, where terms are permanently adopted into English.

For instance, Norman French legal terminology became embedded into English through the sustained code-switching practices of bilingual elites after 1066. Modern examples include global English varieties incorporating local borrowings — for example, *sari* (Hindi) or *sushi* (Japanese).

4.2 Relexification

Relexification involves replacing native lexical items with foreign ones while maintaining native syntactic structures. This process is particularly evident in English Creoles and some dialectal varieties (Davydova, 2024). In the historical context of English, relexification was a subtler phenomenon, such as Old Norse terms supplanting Anglo-Saxon vocabulary (*sky* replacing *heofon*).

Relexification shows that borrowing is not always additive; it may involve lexical replacement and restructuring, reshaping the expressive capacity of the language.

4.3 Lexical Enrichment vs. Lexical Erosion

Language contact can result in either lexical enrichment — the expansion of expressive possibilities — or lexical erosion, the loss of indigenous vocabulary.

- Lexical enrichment is most notable in scientific, legal, and artistic fields, where English gained precision and breadth from Latin, French, and Greek sources (*biology, jury, drama*).
- Lexical erosion occurs when borrowed terms gradually displace native words. For example, the Old English *stow* (meaning "place") survives mainly in toponyms today, replaced in general usage by French-derived terms like *location* and *place* (MacKenzie, 2017).

Thus, while borrowing generally enhanced English vocabulary, it sometimes came at the cost of linguistic heritage.

4.4 Role of Bilingualism and Multilingualism in Lexical Diffusion

Bilingual and multilingual individuals serve as primary agents in spreading borrowed terms across speech communities. In medieval England, bilingualism among the nobility facilitated the infiltration of French into legal and cultural vocabulary. In contemporary contexts, migration and globalization continue this trend: communities exposed to English often blend their native lexicons with English, contributing to English's ongoing evolution (Alonso & Fernández-Dobao, 2025; Wang & Reynolds, 2024).

Multilingual environments not only introduce new lexical items but also influence pronunciation, usage patterns, and semantic shifts, ensuring that language contact remains a living and creative force in the development of English.

5. Case Studies

To understand the impact of language contact on modern English vocabulary more concretely, this section examines specific examples of borrowed terms, their integration, and the enduring influence of French, Latin, and Old Norse on contemporary English.

5.1 Examples of Borrowed Terms and Their Integration

Many everyday English words owe their existence to historical borrowing:

- French: *government, court, menu, mansion*.
- Latin: *data, radius, species*.
- Old Norse: *sky, anger, window, knife*.

These words demonstrate the extensive and often invisible integration of foreign elements into the foundational lexicon of English.

Moreover, the degree of phonological adaptation varies: *menu* retains much of its French pronunciation, while *court* has been fully anglicized, reflecting different integration pathways (MacKenzie, 2017).

5.2 Etymological Analysis of Selected Modern English Words

An etymological examination highlights the layered nature of English vocabulary:

- "Sky" (Old Norse *ský*, meaning “cloud”) replaced the native Old English *heofon*.
- "Government" (from Old French *gouverner*, ultimately Latin *gubernare*) illustrates semantic expansion: from steering ships to ruling states.
- "Theatre" (Greek *theatron*, via Latin and French) demonstrates scholarly borrowing during the Renaissance, directly tied to cultural shifts in art and performance (von der Fecht-Fernández, 2025).

Such examples reveal that English is not merely a borrowing language but a reinterpreting one, adapting foreign terms to suit evolving cultural and communicative needs.

5.3 Impact of French, Latin, and Norse Borrowings in Everyday Vocabulary

The persistent presence of borrowings in high-frequency words underscores the permanent transformation induced by language contact. In fact, it is difficult to write a paragraph of English prose without using terms derived from French or Latin. Norse borrowings, while fewer, have had an outsized syntactic and semantic influence, contributing basic verbs and pronouns (*they, are, get*).

This linguistic layering — Germanic roots, Norse pragmatism, French sophistication, and Latin/Greek intellectualism — gives English its remarkable lexical richness and flexibility, characteristics that support its status as a global lingua franca today (Davydova, 2024; Sato et al., 2025).

6. Discussion

The evolution of English vocabulary through contact-driven processes stands in contrast to languages that have experienced more isolated development. Languages such as Icelandic, for instance, have maintained remarkable lexical conservatism by deliberately coining native equivalents for foreign concepts rather than borrowing directly (MacKenzie, 2017). In contrast, English has historically embraced lexical imports with relatively little resistance, leading to an expansive and flexible vocabulary.

This openness to foreign influence has had overwhelmingly positive effects on English's expressive capacity. Contact-induced vocabulary expansion has allowed English to accommodate new scientific discoveries (*oxygen, gravity*), new political realities (*parliament, constitution*), and new cultural phenomena (*ballet, sushi*) with ease. Far from threatening the integrity of the language, borrowing has enhanced English's ability to adapt to global shifts and to function as a medium of international communication (Davydova, 2024; Wang & Reynolds, 2024).

Nonetheless, debates persist regarding **linguistic purity versus hybrid identity**. Some linguistic purists argue that the extensive borrowing undermines the authenticity of a language, leading to "lexical pollution" and cultural dilution. Such sentiments were evident during periods of

heightened nationalism, notably in the 16th and 19th centuries (MacKenzie, 2017). However, proponents of the hybrid identity model assert that the very strength of English lies in its composite nature — a language not confined by rigid boundaries but enriched by centuries of cultural and linguistic convergence.

Modern sociolinguistic theory supports the latter view: hybridity is seen not as a flaw but as a reflection of complex human histories and relationships. In an increasingly globalized world, linguistic contact is inevitable, and English exemplifies how a language can thrive and grow richer through such interactions (Flusberg et al., 2024; Sato et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

The history of English vocabulary demonstrates that language contact has been a continuous, dynamic force, shaping the language from its earliest stages to the modern era. From early Celtic and Latin interactions to the profound influence of Old Norse, Norman French, Latin, and Greek, English has been molded by a multitude of external forces, each leaving an indelible mark on its lexicon.

The mechanisms of lexical change — including code-switching, borrowing, relexification, and the influence of bilingualism — have not only expanded the vocabulary but have fundamentally enriched the expressive potential of English. Case studies of common borrowed words reveal the deep integration of foreign terms into everyday communication, highlighting English's adaptive and hybrid character.

For linguistic studies, the case of English underscores the need to view language as a living, evolving system that reflects historical, social, and cultural realities. The implications extend beyond English itself, offering insights into how other languages may evolve under the pressures of globalization and contact (Johnson & Babel, 2024; da Costa & Rose, 2024).

Future research might profitably explore how ongoing global English contact with Asian and African languages is reshaping English at the lexical level. Early indications suggest that non-European influences — once peripheral — may become increasingly significant in shaping English's future vocabulary, further emphasizing the dynamic, contact-driven nature of language change in the 21st century.

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