

# English as a Classical language

David Crystal

Ask what other language is related to English, and most people think first of German. And you can, indeed, trace English back through Anglo-Saxon to show its relationship to the other Germanic languages of Northern Europe, both German itself and languages such as Frisian. The grammar and sound system of English have a great deal in common with those languages. But when it comes to vocabulary, it is a very different story. Less than a quarter of modern English vocabulary is Germanic in origins. And when you ask, 'Where have most of the words in English come from, then?' the answer is very clear: Latin and Greek.

One of the distinguishing features of English is its readiness to borrow words. English has always been a vacuum-cleaner of a language, sucking in words from any other language that its speakers come into contact with. If you call up the 'etymology' file of the electronic *Oxford English Dictionary*, you will find over 350 languages from which English has 'borrowed' words. (I use inverted commas, because this is a curious sense of 'borrowing'. After all, one is not giving anything back.) But some languages have always been a much greater source of new words than others. And none of them comes anywhere near the debt which English owes to the Classical languages.

People usually don't realize the size of this debt. It is difficult to quantify, because all estimates about the size of the 'word-hoard' of a language are difficult to make. Nobody actually knows how many words there are in English. The British *OED* contains some half a million words; so does the American *Merriam-Webster Third International*. But if you compare the coverage of these two major dictionaries, you find they are by no means the same. A specialist dictionary (of botany or linguistics, for example) will also bring to light many terms that are not in either. And as English spreads around the world, it introduces thousands of new words from its contact languages that have begun to appear only in regional dictionaries – such as the *Dictionary of South African English* or the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*.

## 'Two-thirds of English words are Classical in origin'

Yet it is impossible to avoid the general impression you obtain as you leaf through the pages of a big general dictionary of standard English: over two-thirds of the vocabulary is Classical in origin. Often, the words have entered English via French, Spanish, Italian and the other so-called 'Romance languages'. Often they have been borrowed from Greek and Latin directly. Often it is difficult to say which route the words have taken to enter English. But in the final analysis, the routes are not important. The words are grounded in the Classics.

And once in, they have proliferated. A single Classical root does not come in as a single word. Once it arrives it is 'given the treatment'. It is combined with prefixes and suffixes, many of which will also be of Classical origin. *History* generates *historic(al)*, *historian*, *prehistoric*, *unhistorical*, and much more. Words may be joined to other roots, to produce 'compound words': *school* arrives in English in Anglo-Saxon times, *grammar* in the Middle English period – and in due course

we get *grammar-school*. Because of these several processes of word-formation, the Classical element in English has grown enormously. Indeed, the total Classical vocabulary in English today is far greater than the total known words of Ancient Greek and Latin combined.

Nor is this a fact of purely historical interest. It is of course fascinating to note the arrival of Classical words, from the earliest times. In the early Anglo-Saxon period not just *school*, but *altar*, *preach*, *Mass*, *plant*, *rose*, *lily*, and many more. In later Anglo-Saxon times, *clerk*, *sabbath*, and *philosopher*, alongside *grammar* and many more. In the Middle Ages, an enormous inpouring: in law and administration (*alias*, *homicide*, *prosecute*, *testimony*), science and learning (*allegory*, *history*, *library*, *ligament*), religion (*diocese*, *pulpit*), and a host of general words – *adjacent*, *exclude*, *interest*, *picture*, *popular*, *private* ... This is the age of 'word pairs' – the emergence of two words, one Classical, one Germanic, virtually synonymous, but with subtle differences of tone and style, such as *begin* (Germanic) vs. *commence* (Classical), *child* vs. *infant*, *freedom* vs. *liberty*, *help* vs. *aid*, *meal* vs. *repast*.



A cyberman from Dr Who.

The Renaissance brought another huge inpouring, especially from Greek – *anachronism*, *autograph*, *idiosyncrasy*, *temperature*, *tibia*, *virus* – and the word *lexicon* itself. The Industrial Revolution and its consequences motivated a further influx, as the need for scientific vocabulary arose – chemistry (*sodium*, *silicon*, *chloroform*), geology (*oligocene*, *cretaceous*, *triassic*), medicine (*laryngitis*, *aphasia*, *haemophilia*), and a host of -ologies, -onomies, and -isms (*biology*, *ethnology*, *taxonomy*, *metabolism*).

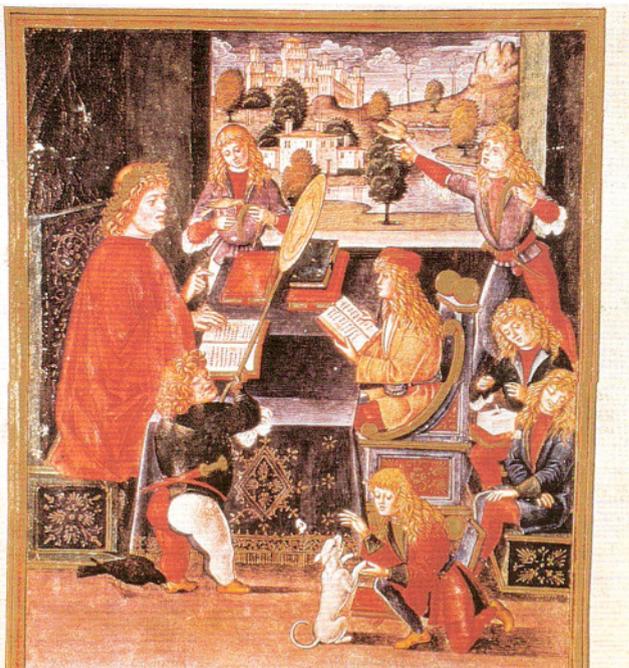
You can trace the stops and starts in human intellectual progress through the pages of an etymological dictionary.

## 'Classical languages continue to be used'

But in many ways more important than the historical perspective is to follow the living history of language change today, and to see the Classical languages continuing to be used as a dynamic source of new words, of lexical creation. And not just in academic domains, such as those in the previous paragraph. What is so fascinating is to see how we still rely on Latin and Greek to talk about entities and events which are at the heart of modern life. So many of the modern words which are considered to be especially 'cool' have a Classical character, thanks chiefly to the prefixes they rely on.

Ten minutes on a single search-engine produced the following list, using just two prefixes. *Cyber-* yielded *cyberconnection*, *cybercraft*, *cyberia*, *cybermail*, *cybernetic*, *cyberport*, *cyber-rave*, *cyberstore*, and *cybertown*. One legal site in the UK characterized itself as dealing with *cyberrights* and *cyberliberties*. A South African site had *cyberways* and *cybermalls*. *Mega-* yielded *megabucks*, *megadeath*, *megagame*, *megalinks*, *megamathematics*, *megapage*, *megasearch*, *megasite*, and *megazone*. It would not take you long to add 100 more. And I haven't even got to *nano-*, *tele-*, and *techno-* yet.

The growth in modern English vocabulary isn't totally due to Classical factors. The case for English as a Classical language



*Learning one's Latin past and future tenses is made more interesting in this manuscript of the Latin Grammar of Aelius Donatus by a colourful scene of the young Maximilian Sforza, for whom the manuscript was written in the 1490s, at his lessons.*

mustn't be overstated. The common use of compounds with *Web*, or the use of the suffix *-ware*, show Anglo-Saxon influence. Many compounds continue to be formed from Germanic elements (*ram-raid*). New uses continue to be given to old words (*to out*, *to hack*), and borrowings still arrive in the language from all kinds of sources (*karaoke*, *intifada*, *bungee*). You will find a representative list in any book of 'new words', such as the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words*. But the use of Classical sources, whether people are conscious of it or not, continues to be the leading factor in the ongoing growth of English vocabulary.

It is the unparalleled mix of Classical and Germanic elements in English which gives the language its distinctive lexical identity. Some scholars have argued that it is precisely this lexical mix which has given English an advantage over other languages in facilitating its global spread. Certainly, many learners of English comment on the sense of *déjà vu* they feel when encountering English vocabulary. In fact, there's a tailor-made example. A French student beginning to learn English already knows the English for *déjà vu*, without having to do any learning at all. (I always think it particularly ironic, in fact, that those in France who object to the 'anglicization' of French, condemn as 'English words' several which come from the same etymological stable as French itself. 'Le computer' has been panned as an English word, for example, though in its etymology it has exactly the same point of origin as French *compter*, 'to count' – Latin *computare*.)

### 'The woof is Roman as well as the embroidery'

The growth of the European Union has brought fresh interest in the role of the Classical languages in the formation of the languages of Europe. For anyone who wishes to demonstrate a unifying historical tradition, Classical vocabulary provides an obvious domain of illustration. Some writers have even begun to talk of 'Eurolatin' and 'Eurogreek'. In one such article, Alan Kirkness reviews the evidence, and concludes 'The cliché that Latin (or Greek) is a dead language needs to be reconsidered.' In another, Jean-Marc Gachelin ends his survey of the Romance element in English by quoting Sir Francis Palgrave's summary:

'the warp may be Anglo-Saxon, but the woof is Roman as well as the embroidery.'

Some authors have gone a step further, and devised teaching methods which build on this foundation, analysing the Classical element in English and using it either to introduce English-speaking students to foreign languages or to improve their own understanding of English. One such book, called *Quick Vocabulary Power*, introduces students to difficult or unfamiliar English words by working steadily through the Greek and Latin roots and prefixes of which they are composed. To take just one example, starting from the root *-path-* ('feeling, suffering, disease'), and referring to such prefixes as *a-* ('without'), *anti-* ('against'), *em-* ('inside, within'), and *sym-* ('with, together'), the authors introduce the words *antipathy*, *apathy*, *empathy*, and *sympathy*. Adding various suffixes and roots produces *apathetic*, *pathology*, *psychopath*, and much more. Even imaginary words can be created: what might an *antipathologist* do? I know several teachers who have brought such a dimension into their classwork, and there is widespread agreement about the value of this kind of exercise.

### 'Living dead languages'

Is it too much to hope that, alerted to the shaping role of the Classical languages on English, people will find fresh reason to look again at these sources, from which English gains so much of its vitality? At the very least, those who have learned to value these languages for their intrinsic linguistic properties as well as for the literary and historical perspectives they express, can feel rightly smug, as they observe that the language which has become the world's Number 1 *lingua franca* has obtained this position partly because of its use as the medium of science and technology, in whose lexicon they reign supreme. But to convey these realities to a wider public, we need to find fresh ways of talking.

I agree with Alan Kirkness. I have no objection to the word 'dead' being used for languages that are no longer spoken and which exercise no ongoing linguistic influence on modern languages. Hittite, Iberian, and Etruscan are all genuinely dead, on that count. But by the same criterion, to use the same adjective for Latin and Greek doesn't seem right. There is too much going on. We need new descriptive labels, therefore. 'Living dead' might have been all right, if that phrase hadn't been monopolized by vampire enthusiasts. Can you invent a new adjective to best describe the dynamic, vitalizing role that Classical languages continue to manifest in the 21st century? – with a Classical root, of course.

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*The Oxford Dictionary of New Words is edited by Elizabeth Knowles and Julia Elliott and published by Oxford University Press. Quick Vocabulary Power: a Self-Teaching Guide is by Jack Romine and Henry Ehrlich and published by Wiley. The articles by Gachelin and Kirkness which David Crystal mentions were published in English Today volumes 23 (1990) and 49 (1997).*

## Competition

Can you rise to David Crystal's challenge? **Omnibus** offers a copy of David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* for the best classically derived adjective to describe the 'living dead' status of Latin and Greek today. With David Crystal as judge, of course! Send your entries to **Omnibus**, JACT, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU by January 6th 2002.