The Dichotomy of English:

Anglo-Saxon vs. French and Latin
words in the English language

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English is an extraordinary language. Comprising over a million words, its origins are diverse, its history odd, and its current composition baffling to those who try to conquer it. Every language is unique, but English is inimitable. One of its extraordinary assets is the wide array of synonyms available to speakers. A user may choose between many different words depending on their audience, whether they are writing or speaking, and what their social status is.

This in itself is perhaps not quite so extraordinary, except maybe as regards the sheer number of synonyms available. More interesting, however, are the origins of these words. Upon close examination, it will be found that two sets of words will emerge: those of Anglo-Saxon (Old English) origin, and those of French or Latin origin. There are, of course, many other words in English derived from various diverse origins, such as Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, and more, but the vast majority are of the origins previously cited.

Significantly, these two sets follow a distinct pattern. Anglo-Saxon words are, for the most part, simple, everyday words in common usage. Words such as "see," "good," and "take" are Anglo-Saxon. But French- and Latin-derived words are often more sophisticated. "Perceive," "benevolent," and "appropriate" mean the same as the afore-mentioned Anglo-Saxon words, but these Latin words would be much more likely to be used in an official document.

How did this dichotomy come about? What, in the history of English, caused these

words to divide into "common" and "sophisticated" along language lines? The key to this question lies in two places: St. Augustine's efforts to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, and the Norman invasion and years following it.

English Language History

In 449 AD, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes sailed over from their homes in Denmark and Germany and invaded the British Isles. They brought with them their language, what scholars today call Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. This language quickly overtook Celtic, the language of the native Britons, and the British Isles thenceforth became English-speaking (McCrum, Cran, and Macneil 60).

The next major change in English came in 597 AD, when St. Augustine and his monks were sent to convert the inhabitants of the future England to Christianity. They brought with them their Greek and Latin, handy words to express complicated ideas. Anglo-Saxon had plenty of simple words, but their vocabulary was very limited when it came to more complex ideas (64-65). The terminology of the church filled in this gap nicely, thus introducing into Old English many new words of Latin origin, as well as Greek and some Hebrew (67).

Next came the Viking raids, beginning in the mid-700s and continuing until Alfred the Great defeated these Danes and Norsemen in 878. The Vikings spoke Old Norse. During the successful period of the raids, the English language was almost in danger of being wiped out because of the extensiveness of the Vikings' conquests (68-69).

Fortunately for English, Alfred won the war, and afterwards, in a move towards political solidarity, emphasized the necessity of the English language. In order to do this he had many works of Latin translated into English (69). So the Viking raids, instead of wiping out English, had the effect of making it more deeply ingrained, although Norse did have a profound effect on English and many of our Modern English words are of Scandinavian origin (71).

The important event that ultimately changed Old English to Middle English came in 1066, with the Norman invasion. This invasion brought French-speakers into power in England, a fact that had enormous consequences for the English language. Since French was the language of the powerful, all "official" business was conducted in French or Latin. Science, religion, government, and justice, as well as any major writings, were simply not done in English (73).

French and Latin in English

Returning briefly to the opening statement of this paper, English is a very large language. According to Mario Pei's *The Story of the English Language*, there are over a million words in English, but only a fraction of them are in general use. The average adult might have perhaps 50,000 words in their vocabulary (91). Over three-fourths of the words in English are scientific or technical terms, or else professional jargon or slang (204), and nobody knows or uses all the words, nor has a comprehensive dictionary ever been made (92).

Of the English words in common use today, perhaps one fifth are Anglo-Saxon, and three fifths are Latin, Greek, and French (92). The Anglo-Saxon words, however, far outstrip the others in frequency of use. The 100 most frequently used English words are almost all Anglo-Saxon (Crystal 124); words such as *hand, foot, land, sun, cow, drink, say,* and *have*—such ordinary words as these—are of Anglo-Saxon origin.

So where do French and Latin words come in? The answer is that they are still used for conducting official business, although perhaps not quite so obviously. John Nist, in *A Structural History of English*, claims that English is divided into strata. The words found within these strata are very much divided on lines of origination. Basic English is Anglo-Saxon, while literary usage is primarily French; words in scientific and technological areas are Latin and Greek. In addition, he adds that law is French, medicine Greek, and theology Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (10).

Perhaps this is an oversimplification. It is certainly not an unsubstantiated claim, however. Scientific nomenclature is, indeed, primarily derived from Latin; take *vector, triceps,* and *acid* for examples. Theology is also certainly from Latin and Greek: witness *eschatology* (Greek) and *occult* (Latin). Law, too, is both Latin and French: *postmortem* and *habeas corpus* for Latin, and *plaintiff* and *attorney* for French.

It is thus clear that the influences of Latin and French, along with a few others, have transformed the English language over the years. Where Anglo-Saxon terms were insufficient or too simple for the conquerors, the conquering languages filled in. These

languages provided many of the distinguishing synonyms of English as well (Pei 41).

Moreover, as French and Latin were for so long considered "professional" or "superior"

languages, their derivatives have, even today, an air of sophistication.

"…They have made our English tongue a gallimaufray"

These alterations and influences were not, and are not now, without opposition. In

1579, an anonymous author "E.K." wrote the above words, lamenting the loss of the purity

of English and its transformation into a "hodge-podge of al other speches" (qtd. in Crystal

125). Nor is he alone in his sentiments. George Orwell wrote in 1946:

> Bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are
> nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander
> than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like *expedite, ameliorate, predict,
> extraneous, deracinated, clandestine, subaqueous* and hundreds of others
> constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers…(qtd. in
> Crystal 124)

What do we do with these words? Orwell is quite correct when he says that we

perceive the foreign words in our language to be grander than those of Anglo-Saxon stock.

Take any legal document, and one will find such precise and arguably superfluous words

and phrases as "insolvent liquidation," "directly or indirectly," "prohibited," and so on.

Moreover, such complicated language can even be harmful. During the 1970s, the

National Council of Teachers of English founded their Doublespeak campaign, whose

purpose was to expose and elucidate the complicated and convoluted statements of the

government and of others, which, through their enveloping confusion, served well as

propaganda (Crystal 176). For example, in 1977 the Pentagon described a neutron bomb as "an efficient nuclear weapon that eliminates an enemy with a minimum degree of damage to friendly territory" (176). Such statements as these cover up the real meanings behind the fancy words.

Similarly, the United Kingdom launched their Plain English Campaign in 1979. Their aim was to simplify legal documents so that all could understand them. Arguments against such a campaign included the contention that "plain English" can be rather ambiguous (377). But the benefits of simplification are also obvious, making documents more accessible to those not trained in legal jargon.

Mario Pei states that specialized vocabularies are peculiarly suited to influence us in certain ways (204-5). In order to be accepted in certain groups, one must know that group's language. He says, "There is a set of recommended phrases to be memorized and used when the right occasion arises—a phraseology that will mark you as a connoisseur and esthete, and set you apart forever from the lowly mob…" (205). He gives such examples as *calculated dissonances* in music, *Constructivism* and *Fauvism* in modern art, and *sensorialism* in literature (205). All of these words are of French or Latin descent.

Pei also concurs with the conclusions of the Doublespeak and Plain English campaigns. He says, "The language of the bureaucrats and administrators must needs be recognized as an outgrowth of legal parlance. There is no other way to explain its pervading, pervicacious and pernicious meanderings" (211). Among his examples of

"Gobbledygook" are *directives, survivability,* and *termination capability* (211)—again, all of which are Latin.

Conclusions: Inimitable English

So much of the confusion in English seems to have descended from those un-asked-for and sometimes unwelcome additions to Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin. While Anglo-Saxon words are in very common use, and could not be done without, French and Latin words are less frequent but more noted. This group of words seems to be uniquely suited to confusing, concealing, and complicating our lives with their convolutions. While we may have a perfectly acceptable Anglo-Saxon word to use, we often prefer its French and/or Latin synonyms when we are attempting to sound sophisticated.

And this sophistication comes not necessarily from particular capabilities of the words themselves, but from a long history of their *use* by "sophisticated" people. Granted that French and Latin derived words are usually longer and have more nuances of meaning, we would still rather use them even when trying to get a particularly important point across—something that might be better done concisely and simply—merely because we "sound" better.

Nevertheless, English is one of the most versatile languages available. The preciseness of its synonyms, the shades of definition found in it—even, for example, the many names for colors—make it a resource of immense value. This resource can be used for good or for ill, to limit or to enable. It is to be hoped that those who use it will use it for

good and not for ill, but history has often shown us otherwise.

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