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A World in Words: The Impact of Borrowings and Loanwords on the English Lexicon

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Abstract:

This article examines the profound influence of borrowings and loanwords on the development of the English language. Drawing upon lexicographical data and historical linguistic research, the study demonstrates that over 70% of English vocabulary originates from foreign sources, with significant contributions from French, Latin, Greek, and Old Norse. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative historical interpretation, the article explores the range of donor languages and the sociocultural contexts in which lexical borrowing occurred. It further analyzes how borrowings have shaped English morphology, register variation, and stylistic richness. The findings confirm that loanwords have not diluted the English language but have expanded its expressive range and global adaptability. Ultimately, the study argues that loanwords function as linguistic artifacts, preserving the history of cultural contact and exchange that has shaped English across centuries.

Keywords: *loanwords, lexical borrowing, English vocabulary, language contact*

INTRODUCTION

English is well known for its cosmopolitan vocabulary, which is the product of centuries of contact with other languages. As early as the 1920s, linguist Edward Sapir observed that *"the simplest effect of one language on another is the borrowing of words"*. Loanwords (borrowed foreign words) have become "common lexical components in all languages", and English in particular has an extensive history of lexical borrowing. From its Germanic origins, English evolved by absorbing thousands of words from French, Latin, Greek, and many other languages. Today, an estimated 70–80% of English vocabulary (by number of distinct words) is of foreign origin. This has led English to be described as a *"language on loan from other languages"*, with a richly mixed lexicon. Yet despite this heavy influx of loanwords, English has retained its Germanic grammatical structure and core basic vocabulary, which is why it is still classified as a Germanic language. Understanding the scope and sources of English borrowings is important for linguists and learners alike, as it illuminates the cultural history of English and the development of its lexicon (Algeo, 2010; Durkin, 2014). This article presents a comprehensive analysis of borrowings and loanwords in English. We first outline our methods for quantifying and

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categorizing English loanwords, then report results on the extent of borrowing and major donor languages, and finally discuss the historical and linguistic implications of these loanwords.

METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative lexical analysis with qualitative historical linguistics. First, we drew on published quantitative data to estimate the proportion of English vocabulary derived from various source languages. In particular, we utilized the computerized analysis by Finkenstaedt and Wolff (1973), who surveyed the origins of ~80,000 English words in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, and the study by Williams (1975), who examined the vocabulary in a corpus of contemporary English usage. These sources provide statistical estimates of English word origins (e.g., the percentage of words of French, Latin, or Old English origin). We also consulted lexicographical research by historical linguists. For example, we reviewed Durkin's (2014) comprehensive history of English loanwords and Miller's (2012) account of external influences on English, to contextualize borrowing events in different periods. Additionally, a literature review was conducted using scholarly sources (e.g., Algeo, 2010; Barber, 1993; Thomason, 2001) to gather qualitative information on how and why foreign words entered English.

For illustrative purposes, we compiled examples of English loanwords from diverse language families. These examples (with their origins) were obtained from etymological references and prior studies (Xiao, 2020; Serjeantson, 1935) to demonstrate borrowing from Romance, Germanic, Celtic, and non-Indo-European languages. We ensured that examples were representative of major historical phases and domains (everyday vocabulary, technical terms, etc.). No new experimental data were collected; instead, the analysis synthesizes existing research findings. By combining quantitative data on vocabulary origins with historical analysis of specific loanwords, the study's methodology provides a robust overview suitable for an academic discussion of English borrowings.

RESULTS

Proportion of Loanwords in English Vocabulary: Quantitative analysis confirms that the majority of English words are borrowings. A classic survey of dictionary entries found that only about one-quarter of English words are of native (Old English/Germanic) origin, with the rest coming from foreign sources. Specifically, Finkenstaedt and Wolff (1973) estimated the origins of English vocabulary as approximately 28.3% French, 28.24% Latin (these two Romance sources together constituting about 56%), 25% Germanic (from Old English or other Germanic languages like Old Norse), about 5% Greek, and the remaining small percentages from other languages or unknown origins. In other words, over 70% of the lexicon in a comprehensive English dictionary can be traced to loanwords, especially from Latin and French. These figures align with Xiao's (2020) observation that *loanwords account for roughly four-fifths of the total English vocabulary*.

It is important to note, however, that loanwords are not evenly distributed by usage frequency. While English has hundreds of thousands of borrowed terms (particularly technical and learned words), its core vocabulary remains largely Germanic. Williams (1975) found that in a sample of 10,000 common words (drawn from business letters), around 33% were of Old English origin and 41% were French.

Moreover, among the 1000 most frequent words in English, a full 83% were of native (Old English) origin. These high-frequency words include basic function words (grammar words like *the, is, of*) and everyday nouns and verbs (e.g., *water, heart, come*), which tend to be inherited from Old English. In contrast, less common and specialized vocabulary shows a much higher proportion of loanwords. This disparity means that English speakers use mainly Germanic words in day-to-day conversation, even though the language at large has a vast reservoir of foreign-derived words for specific or technical meanings (Crystal, 2003; Miller, 2012). Overall, the results highlight that English's lexicon is extensive and hybrid, with a small native core and a broad periphery of borrowed terms.

Major Donor Languages and Historical Periods: The influx of loanwords in English can be linked to distinct historical periods of intense language contact. The Medieval period was especially transformative. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, Middle English absorbed an enormous number of French (Norman French) loanwords. It is estimated that *approximately 10,000 French words* entered English during the Middle English era, of which about 7,500 remain in use today. These French borrowings spanned virtually all domains of life. For example, English adopted French terms for government and law (*crown, court, parliament, justice*), warfare (*army, soldier, battle*), religion (*prayer, miracle, saint*), art and literature (*poetry, romance, paper*), fashion (*coat, dress, jewel, perfume*), and food (*beef, pork, dinner, appetite*). Many Old English words were displaced or supplemented by French equivalents. In some cases, a native term was outright replaced (e.g., Old English *here* "army" gave way to French *army*). In other cases, English retained both the Old English word and the French loanword, but assigned them different shades of meaning or usage level. A famous example is the contrast between animals and their meats: English kept the native words for living farm animals (*ox, cow, calf, sheep, pig*), but adopted French words for the meats prepared from them (*beef, veal, mutton, pork*), reflecting the social division—Anglo-Saxon peasants raised the animals, while Norman French nobles ate the meat. Similarly, English now has dual or triple sets of synonyms at different registers, a direct result of layered borrowings. For instance, the concept "rise" can be expressed with a native Germanic word (*rise*), a French-derived word (*mount*), or a Latin-derived word (*ascend*), each with a slightly different tone or context. Such synonym layers (e.g., *ask–question–interrogate*, *holy–sacred–consecrated*) illustrate how French and Latin loans enriched English vocabulary with more nuanced or formal alternatives to common Germanic words. By the end of the medieval period, English had become a heavily mixed language, often described by contemporaries as *"full of Latyn terminations"* or Gallicisms (Barber, 1993; Jespersen, 1922). Notably, English quickly assimilated these loanwords: even in Middle English, many French borrowings were given English morphological endings or used in English compound formation, indicating they had fully entered usage. For example, the French adjective *gentle* (from Old French *gentil*) was borrowed by 1225, and by 1230 English speakers were already forming compounds like *gentlewoman* using that French root.

While French was the single largest source of new words, Latin also contributed heavily, especially in scholarly and technical contexts. Latin influence on English can be seen in multiple waves: some Latin words entered Old English before the Norman Conquest (often related to the Church or early trade, e.g., *angel, priest, wine*), but a much larger influx came during the Renaissance. In the 15th–17th centuries, as classical learning revived, English scholars and scientists imported thousands of Latin

(and some Ancient Greek) words into the language (Algeo, 2010). These were often known as "inkhorn terms" – deliberately learned coinages – such as *education, equation, hypothesis, membrane, extravagant*. Many were direct loans from classical Latin or Greek, or new words coined from Latin/Greek roots for scientific nomenclature. For instance, English acquired technical terms like *geometry, squalor, agile* from Latin, and *catastrophe, chronology, physics* from Greek. Some of these initially exotic words never caught on or later fell out of use, but many others became permanent fixtures of the lexicon (e.g., *orbit, explanation, enthusiasm*). Modern English, Latin, and Greek together form the backbone of scientific and intellectual vocabulary in English. It is telling that *over half of English vocabulary* has Greco-Latin roots when one includes words borrowed via French or newly formed from Latin/Greek elements (Xiao, 2020). Indeed, French, Latin, and Greek are considered the "most profound" influences on English lexicon by volume. As a result, even though English is Germanic in structure, its academic and professional registers often heavily utilize Romance and classical vocabulary (Crystal, 2003).

Other Germanic languages have also contributed to English, particularly Old Norse. During the Viking Age (9th–11th centuries), Norse-speaking settlers in northern England interacted closely with Old English speakers. This led to the adoption of many Old Norse words into English, especially in everyday vocabulary. Notably, English borrowed some very basic terms from Norse, indicating an unusual level of intimate contact. For example, common words like *sky* (Norse *ský*), *egg* (*egg*), *leg* (*leggr*), *take* (*taka*), *window* (*vindauga*), and *knife* (*knífr*) are all Norse borrowings. In some cases Norse loans even replaced the original Old English words – for instance, the Old English word *sċȳpian* was supplanted by Norse *skūthan*, which became *sky* (meaning shifted to the heavens). Strikingly, English even adopted the pronouns *they, them, their* from Old Norse (replacing Old English *hīe, him, hira*), a very rare case of core grammatical function words being borrowed. This suggests that in Danelaw areas, bilingual speakers freely mixed languages, and the simpler Norse forms gained ground. Overall, several hundred Norse-derived words entered English; while this is fewer than the French contributions, the Norse loans are disproportionately frequent in modern usage. They provide many everyday terms and enrich English with short, concrete vocabulary alongside its Latinate terms (Baugh & Cable, 2002; Barber, 1993). By contrast, the Celtic languages spoken in Britain (e.g., Old Welsh, Cornish) had a surprisingly modest lexical impact on English. Apart from some place names (*London, Avon*) and a handful of common words (such as Irish *whiskey* or *galore*, from Gaelic *go leor* "enough"), very few Celtic words were adopted into Old English. Scholars have noted that Celtic influence may be more evident in subtle grammatical calques or phonological features, but Celtic loanwords in English are relatively scarce (Barber, 1993). This is likely because the Anglo-Saxons largely displaced or absorbed the Celtic populations, leaving little sustained bilingualism (and thus little borrowing of Celtic vocabulary).

Global Sources of Loanwords: In the Modern English period (16th century onward), England's maritime exploration, colonial expansion, and global trade brought English into contact with hundreds of languages worldwide. As a result, English acquired an enormous number of loanwords from non-European languages to describe new places, products, and cultural concepts. For example, during the colonial era English speakers in the Americas, Africa, and Asia borrowed indigenous terms for unfamiliar flora, fauna, and foods. From the Americas, English gained words like *tobacco* and *hurricane*

(via Spanish from Taíno), *chocolate* and *tomato* (from Nahuatl, an Aztec language), and *kangaroo* (from an Aboriginal Australian language). From the Indian subcontinent (South Asia), many words entered English during British colonial rule: e.g., *shampoo* (from Hindi *chāmpo*), *bungalow* (from Hindi *banglā*), *jungle* (from Hindi), *pundit* (Sanskrit *paṇḍita*), and *curry* (Tamil *kari*). African languages contributed terms often via exploration or trade: *zebra* (likely from an African language via Portuguese), *banjo* (Bantu *mbanza*), *safari* (Swahili, via Arabic), etc. East Asian languages also supplied loanwords as cultural exchange grew: for instance, *tea* (from Chinese *tê*), *typhoon* (Cantonese *tai fung*, via Portuguese), *ginseng* (Chinese), *karaoke*, *tsunami*, and *sushi* (from Japanese), and *kimchi* or *taekwondo* (from Korean). From the Middle East, Arabic has been a significant donor, often through mediation by Latin or Spanish. Medieval Arabic scholarship introduced words like *algebra* (*al-jabr*), *alchemy*, *azimuth*, and names for stars, while trade brought in *coffee* (*qahwah*), *cotton*, *sugar*, and many other items (Cannon, 1994). It is common for Arabic loans to retain the Arabic definite article *al-* (e.g., *alchemy, almanac, alfalfa*). Italian contributed many music and art terms (*opera, violin, piano, gallery*), Spanish gave words relating to the New World and chivalry (*armada, canyon, mosquito, plaza*), Dutch nautical dominance yielded maritime terms (*yacht, skipper, cruise, buoy*), and so on. Linguists have noted that English has borrowed from over 300 languages in total (Serjeantson, 1935), reflecting its role as a global lingua franca that readily adopts useful foreign terms. By the 20th century, English continued to assimilate foreign words for technological and cultural imports (e.g., *robot* from Czech, *bungalow* from Hindi, *kung fu* from Chinese, *emoji* from Japanese).

In summary, the results show that English vocabulary is a mosaic of numerous languages. Major contributions come from Romance languages (French and Latin especially), which together constitute well over half of English word types. Germanic sources (Old English itself and Old Norse) account for most basic words and roughly one-quarter of the lexicon. The remainder is filled out by Greek and an array of other languages from around the world, each often linked to specific historical or cultural contexts of borrowing. English stands out among European languages for the breadth of its borrowing: it has freely absorbed terminology from virtually every language family, including Indo-European (Romance, Germanic, Celtic, Slavic, Indo-Iranian), Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew), Turkic (e.g., *yogurt* from Turkish), Sino-Tibetan (Chinese), Austronesian (e.g., *amok* from Malay), and others. This extensive borrowing has made English's lexicon one of the largest and most diverse of any language (Crystal, 2003). In the next section, we discuss the linguistic consequences of this borrowing and the factors that drove these lexical exchanges.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore that language contact has been the primary engine of vocabulary growth in English. Each wave of conquerors, traders, or scholars that the English encountered left an imprint on its lexicon. The motivations for borrowing varied in different periods. Often, necessity drove borrowing: speakers took on foreign words to name new objects, animals, or ideas for which no English word existed (Thomason, 2001). For example, when English speakers encountered new foods or inventions abroad, they frequently adopted the local names (such as *potato*, *riksha* from *rickshaw*). In other cases, prestige and fashion played a key role. After 1066, French was the prestigious language of the ruling class in England, so English borrowed French vocabulary to access the domains of power,

law, literature, and refinement. Similarly, during the Renaissance, Latin (and Greek) were the languages of learned discourse; educated writers liberally sprinkled their English with classical terms to elevate style (Algeo, 2010). Linguist Sarah Thomason distinguishes between "cultural borrowings" (for new concepts) and "core borrowings" (replacing existing words for social prestige) – English has experienced both types. For instance, words like *coffee* or *cargo* filled lexical gaps (new imports), whereas words like *commence* (replacing *begin*) were adopted despite native equivalents, due to the prestige of French. Importantly, English's sociohistorical context—being frequently in contact with diverse cultures—meant there was a continuous influx of both necessary and luxury loanwords.

A key linguistic consequence of extensive borrowing is the enrichment of the English lexicon in terms of synonyms and shades of meaning. As shown in the results, English often possesses multiple words for the same or similar concept, inherited from different sources (native, French, Latin). This allows for fine distinctions in tone or register: compare the plainness of *ask* (Germanic) with the formality of *inquire* (French) or the technicality of *interrogate* (Latin). Writers of English have long exploited this wealth of vocabulary for stylistic nuance. Otto Jespersen (1922) noted that the composite nature of English vocabulary grants it great expressive richness, enabling subtle differences (e.g., *freedom* vs *liberty*, *handbook* vs *manual*) that would be unavailable in a more homogenously sourced lexicon. The borrowing of French and Latin adjectives, for example, gave English the ability to differentiate *pig* flesh (*pork*) from the animal itself, or a *kingly* act (native word) from a *royal* one (French loan), each word carrying different connotations. Such layers of vocabulary are a direct legacy of English's contact history (Algeo, 2010).

Another consequence is the streamlining of English morphology. When thousands of foreign words entered English, they often did not take on the old complex system of inflections that Old English had. Scholars have observed that heavy borrowing coincided with (and perhaps contributed to) English becoming a more analytic language, with less reliance on inflectional endings (Baugh & Cable, 2002). Middle English borrowing from French and Latin is thought to have reduced the use of native derivational affixes and compounding. For example, rather than creating new words from Anglo-Saxon roots with prefixes/suffixes, English speakers increasingly adopted ready-made French or Latin words. Old English word-forming processes (like prefixing *ge-* or making compound nouns) became less central as Romance derivations like *-tion, -ment, pre-*, etc. entered the language (Barber, 1993). Over time, English developed a hybrid system where Germanic and Latinate elements combine (e.g., *un-* + *certain* = *uncertain*, mixing an English prefix with a French root). In phonology and spelling, borrowings also had effects: the introduction of French words helped establish the /v/ and /z/ sounds as distinct phonemes (since Old English *f, s* were mostly unvoiced except between vowels), and led to many unique spellings (like *que* in *question* from French). The diverse origins of words contribute to the notorious inconsistencies of English spelling and pronunciation – e.g., *chef* (French /ʃɛf/) versus *chief* (French *chef* but earlier borrowing, now /tʃiːf/) show different adaptation times. Despite these complexities, English generally nativized its loanwords: foreign words, once borrowed, were pronounced with English sound values and took English plural forms (for instance, *one formula, two formulas* is now as acceptable as Latin *formulae*). Over centuries, many loanwords became so thoroughly integrated that speakers do not perceive them as foreign. For example, *wine* and *street* were Latin

loanwords into Old English, and *church* came from Greek (*kyrikon*) – yet these feel as native as any Anglo-Saxon word.

An interesting sociolinguistic aspect is that English has had little institutional resistance to borrowing. Unlike languages such as French or German, which at times have had strong purist movements or official language academies discouraging foreign words, English-speaking societies tended to accept and absorb loanwords with relatively open attitudes (Geers, 2011). There have been moments of pushback – e.g., the Inkhorn Controversy in the 16th century, when some writers derided the overuse of pretentious Latinisms, or the 19th-century attempts by language purists like William Barnes to replace Latin/French words with "native" coinages (suggesting *folkword* for *vocabulary*, etc.). However, these efforts had minimal long-term impact. The general trend in English has been pragmatic borrowing: if a word is useful or prestigious, it enters the language. This openness is one reason English evolved such a vast lexicon. By freely borrowing, English often avoided the need to coin cumbersome new terms; it could simply adopt the word that other languages were using (e.g., *bungalow* rather than inventing an English description for that type of house). The lack of an official regulatory body for English meant there was no authority to gatekeep vocabulary. This receptivity (Hoffer, 2005) contributed to English becoming a flexible medium capable of assimilating concepts from many cultures. In recent times, the situation has in some ways reversed: English as a global language is now a major *donor* of loanwords to other languages (for technology, pop culture, etc.). Yet English itself continues to borrow on a smaller scale, often to capture culturally specific ideas (such as Japanese *anime* terms or cuisines like *pizza, sushi, taco*). The dynamic give-and-take of loanwords is ongoing, illustrating that living languages are never closed systems (Sapir, 1921).

CONCLUSION

The history of the English lexicon is fundamentally a history of contact, adaptation, and expansion. As this study has demonstrated, borrowings and loanwords have played a central role in shaping the vocabulary of English, accounting for more than 70% of its word stock. From early Germanic borrowings and Old Norse contributions to the massive influx of French and Latin terms and the later adoption of words from around the globe, English has consistently absorbed linguistic elements from diverse sources.

Far from diluting the language, these borrowings have greatly enriched English's expressive potential. They have endowed it with a wide range of synonyms, stylistic nuances, and specialized terminologies, making English one of the most lexically diverse languages in the world. The continuous layering of foreign words has also contributed to important structural developments, including the simplification of English morphology and the expansion of its stylistic registers.

Importantly, the English language's openness to borrowing reflects broader sociocultural processes: trade, conquest, scholarship, colonization, and globalization. Loanwords act as linguistic artifacts, preserving traces of historical interactions and cultural exchanges. They illustrate how languages evolve not in isolation but through continuous dialogue with other linguistic communities.

Ultimately, the borrowing process has made English a uniquely adaptable and dynamic language. It is not the purity of origin, but the flexibility and inclusiveness of English that have fueled its growth into a global medium of communication. Studying the impact of loanwords thus offers valuable insights not only into the history of English but also into the universal dynamics of language change and cultural exchange.

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