



Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language

Seth Lerer

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Why is there such a striking difference between English spelling and English pronunciation? How did our seemingly relatively simple grammar rules develop? What are the origins of regional dialect, literary language, and everyday speech, and what do they have to do with you?

Seth Lerer's *Inventing English* is a masterful, engaging history of the English language from the age of *Beowulf* to the rap of Eminem. Many have written about the evolution of our grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary, but only Lerer situates these developments in the larger history of English, America, and literature.

Lerer begins in the seventh century with the poet Caedmon learning to sing what would become the earliest poem in English. He then looks at the medieval scribes and poets who gave shape to Middle English. He finds the traces of the Great Vowel Shift in the spelling choices of letter writers of the fifteenth century and explores the achievements of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 and *The Oxford English Dictionary* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He describes the differences between English and American usage and, through the example of Mark Twain, the link between regional dialect and race, class, and gender. Finally, he muses on the ways in which contact with foreign languages, popular culture, advertising, the Internet, and e-mail continue to shape English for future generations.

Each concise chapter illuminates a moment of invention—a time when people discovered a new form of expression or changed the way they spoke or wrote. In conclusion, Lerer wonders whether globalization and technology have turned English into a world language and reflects on what has been preserved and what has been lost. A unique blend of historical and personal narrative, *Inventing English* is the surprising tale of a language that is as dynamic as the people to whom it belongs.

Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language Details

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From Reader Review *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language* for online ebook

Kvn says

I'm not going to lie, the book *is* a little dry. (rhyme not intended) However, any investigation into the convoluted origins of the English language is bound to include some fascinating insights, and this book is packed full of just that sort of thing.

Chanita.Shannon says

... He writes with friendly reverence of the masters—Chaucer, Milton, Johnson, Shakespeare, Twain—illustrating through example the monumental influence they had on the English we speak and write today (Shakespeare alone coined nearly 6,000 words). Anecdotes illustrate how developments in the physical world (technological advances, human migration) gave rise to new words and word-forms. With the invention of the telephone, for instance, a neutral greeting was required to address callers whose gender and social rank weren't known. America minted "hello" (derived from the maritime "ahoy"), and soon Twain enshrined the term in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Lerer is not just a scholar (he's a professor of humanities at Stanford and the man behind the Teaching Company's audio and videotape series *The History of the English Language*); he's also a fan of English—his passion is evident on every page of this examination of how our language came to sound—and look—as it does and how words came to have their current meanings. ... Whether it's Lerer's close examination of the earliest surviving poem in English (the seventh-century Caedmon's Hymn) or his fresh perspective on Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, the book percolates with creative energy and will please anyone intrigued by how our richly variegated language came to be. (Apr.)

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DaughterDaDa says

I picked this up because I thoroughly enjoyed the audiotapes of his lectures on the History of the English Language. For hard-core philologists.

Kees says

very interesting to learn about the Great Vowel Shift and why it is a Cow that we eat as Beef.

Nancy says

I bought this because I enjoyed the DVDs from The Teaching Company. I am pleasantly surprised that it doesn't seem at all to be just a re-hash of the course!

Cat. says

As the subtitle alludes to, this is the history of English for people who haven't done much reading on the subject. That could mean deadly dull mixed with infuriating for the left-out bits, or--if done by a good writer--it could mean coherent and fun.

Luckily, in this case, it's the second choice. Lerer never rests long enough on a subject, or century, to induce boredom, staying just long enough to explain why this particular development was important, what EXACTLY the change was (how the language existed before and after), and all the while using accessible words and tone. There is no academic apple-polishing here, just good honest explication. For instance, this is the first time I've been able to understand Old English pronunciation words ending in 'e' and those pesky dual 'th' symbols.

Frankly, I was totally on his side because he uses Emily Dickinson as one of his muses in the chapter on the changes the American dialect brought to the language. Yay. And another "yay" for raising the Mark Twain flag later on and crediting him with not just attentiveness to dialect, but also his ability to invent new concept through slang and idiom. There is a sense that he almost feels that Twain was a watershed (my pun) in the development of American English. I heartily agree.

Jaylia3 says

This took a while to finish--I read a chapter a day. Most of the chapters end like the grand finale of a book--Lerer writes in his intro that chapters don't need to be read in sequence. Lerer loves his subject and language in general, but sometimes I (maybe peevishly) think that his great enjoyment comes a little bit at his reader's expense. There is a glossary in back, but for me it could be twice as long. It doesn't include all the many polysyllabic words with Latin and Greek roots ending in "-ology", or "-graphy", or etc., that (for me) clog up the text and make reading sometimes have the cumbersome feel of translating. Lerer uses dramatic figurative language, and like early English poets he loves alliteration. (It's a lively lexical landscape!) His words bristle with so much life and almost self-aware purpose that sometimes his pages feel noisy and crowded. And then there are the sentences like, "Behind them lies a conception of vernacular character and the character of the vernacular." (P 116)

Those mild complaints aside, this is a fascinating subject and Lerer is a knowledgeable and enthusiastic guide. I really love his Teaching Company lectures on the history of the English language and it's nice to have some of that information in book form.

C.C. Thomas says

This is not a book to pick up and read for pleasure...unless you are a word geek like me. I did read the book for pleasure, though, and so my review will focus on that rather than the scholarly implications and uses this book would have.

As for pleasure, I couldn't really rate it above just an average book. I do read linguistic books quite often, just for fun, and this wasn't nearly as good as some others I have read. The first part of the book was extremely tedious to get through. That might be because I have already read similar books and have even taken classes in the subject of Old and Middle English, or it could be because the author, I felt, gave too much of the book in that language and didn't really make it accessible for a casual reader. It was as if he knew way more than he was telling and couldn't really figure out a way to bridge his knowledge with someone much less knowledgeable. However, if you can hold on to the last half of the book, you're liable to be in for a real surprise. I just loved the last few chapters, about the impact of African American music and Mark Twain on the development of the American language. Those were both really new topics for me and I read them eagerly and with great interest. They even included fellow Kentuckian Jesse Stuart! Could my interest have been because the second half was clearly American and the first half, the Queen's English? Possibly so.

Regardless, if you're a scholar, I can't imagine a better book to encourage and enhance your studies. If you're just a casual linguist like me, it might be better to take the author's advice in the introduction and read a chapter here and there and let it sink in, rather than straight through, like I did. My way made for a bumpy, long ride.

Emily says

I am no linguist, and not particularly skilled at finessing the subtleties of sounds we humans speak into meaning: monophthongs versus diphthongs, vowels held long in the front versus short in the back. But I am a person endlessly fascinated by the English language, and the way its history reflects the greater history of the people who have spoken it and shaped it over the years. As a passionate non-specialist, then, I found Seth Lerer's *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language* highly satisfying: Lerer's essays on English lingual history are clear and juicy, with just enough patient explanation of technical linguistic terms to enable the casual reader to follow along easily. More than that, he analyzes the unexpected ways in which social and political movements have influenced the course of the language's evolution.

The theme that struck me most, through all of Lerer's chapters, was how fundamentally political language is, and how double-edged. From the very beginning of our history as English speakers, we've been engaged in a complicated relationship with how (or whether) our language should expand to include outside influences, and what lingual "purity" would even look like. This may sound familiar: it's still being played out in the fight to establish English as the official language of the United States, a move motivated by fear of the growing Spanish-speaking populations here. But it's nothing new. In one early section I found particularly fascinating, Lerer discusses the first known rhymed poem written in English. Some background for those who don't know: Anglo-Saxon or Old English poetry didn't generally rhyme; instead, it was organized around principles such as alliteration, kennings (novel compound words that expressed a single concept, like the coinage "whaleroad" for the ocean), and numbers of stressed syllables per line. Rhymed poetry was typical of Latinate literature, and began to filter into English after the Norman (French) invasion of 1066. But what I found so striking was that this poem, which incorporated a brand-new verse technology learned

directly from the French, was in content a protest poem against those very same invaders, a lyric composed on the death of William the Conqueror, which catalogued his atrocities:

Castelas he let wyrcean,
7 earne men swiðe swencean,
Se cyng waes swa swiðe stearc,
7 benam of his underþeoddan manig marc
goldes 7 ma hundred punda seolfres.
Det he name be wihte
7 mid mycelan unrihte
of his landloede
for littelre neode.
He waes on gitsunge befeallan,
7 graedinaesse he lufode mid ealle.
He saette mycel deorfrid,
7 he laegde laga þærwið
þet swa hwa swa sloge heort oððe hinde,
þet hine man sceolde blendian.

[He had castles built
and poor men terribly oppressed.
The king was very severe,
and he took from his underlings many marks
of gold and hundreds of pounds of silver.
All this he took from the people,
and with great injustice

from his subjects,
to gratify his trivial desire.
He had fallen into avarice,
and he loved greediness above everything else.
He established many deer preserves,
and he set up laws concerning them,
such that whoever killed a hart or a hind
should be blinded.:]

This poem strikes me as so poignant. The author (a monk at the outlying Peterborough monastery) must have consciously chosen to write it in rhyming form, as the vast majority of the English poetry of the period wasn't rhymed. I can't resist speculating on why, therefore, he didn't take the more obvious route of a defiantly Anglo-Saxon verse form to protest the Norman tyranny. Was it a melancholy gesture away from the poetic forms he felt were his own, looking toward a period of colonization? Or did the mixed messages of the poem reflect his own conflicted feelings, his resentment of Norman oppression battling with admiration of the new French styles in verse and culture? Lerer points out that the very first word in the poem, "castelas" or castles, was an importation from Norman French: Anglo-Saxons didn't build in stone, but in wood, and readers of *Beowulf* will remember their vast-timbered halls. The Normans, on the other hand, peppered English soil with stone castles as part of their program of commandeering the land for royal use. In this poem, then, we can see the simultaneous transformation of language, landscape, and ways of thinking. Fascinating stuff.

And this tension between the old and new, between expansive cosmopolitanism and protective nativism, continues through nearly every essay in Lerer's book. There are intriguing debates, in the centuries after his life, about whether Chaucer's popularization of so many French-derived words was a boon or a curse: Edmund Spenser wrote that Chaucer had tapped "the well of English undefiled," whereas early philologist Alexander Gil said that he "rendered his poetry notorious by the use of Latin and French words," going on to call the resulting English an "illegitimate progeny" and a "monster." Interestingly, in both these cases the "undefiled" English is perceived as of a higher class: to Spenser, the addition of the colonizer's French-derived words raises the language to new poetic heights, whereas by Gil's time it's possible to complain that "everyone [e.g., even the commoner:] wishes to appear as a smatterer of tongues and to vaunt his proficiency in Latin, French (or any other language)." Gil, therefore, as a mark of educated difference, advocates a return to the "purity" of Anglo-Saxon-derived words. (The irony? His anti-Latinate treatise is written in...Latin.)

But Lerer makes the point, again and again, that attempts to restrict the growth of the language are both misguided and doomed to failure. From the huge influx of foreign-derived words during the commerce and exploration boom of the sixteenth century, to the formation of Atlantic creoles as a product of the slave trade, to the jargon introduced into our speech by the soldiers of successive wars, Lerer insists that our language reflects the way we live, and that to expect anything else is foolhardy. I strongly agree with this idea: modern English is not debased, any more than Anglo-Saxon English encapsulated some mythical "purity." We

should revel in the richness and diversity of our language, not fight it.

One of the most touching chapters of *Inventing English* deals with Samuel Johnson's personal transformation over the course of writing his *Dictionary*. Beginning the task with the goal of "fixing" the language in place, of ascertaining proper usage and recording it for all time, he gradually came to appreciate the untameable flow of the English tongue:

[A:]fter years of false starts, failures, and impediments - he was unable to complete the task in the three years he set himself; his wife died in the process; his amanuenses found his work almost impossible to follow; he abandoned Chesterfield's patronage - after all this he realized that it is impossible to fix a language. In the preface to the *Dictionary* that finally appeared in 1755, he saw a language not imperial but "sublunary," mutable and transitory. Like Caxton, who saw English living under the "domynacioun of the moon," Johnson found himself incapable of fixing usage. His purpose, now, had become "not to form, but register the language; not to teach men how they should think, but relate how they have hitherto expressed their thoughts."

I was cheering Johnson on here. His journey was not an easy one - he spent eight years basically despondent - but to me, the outcome was so worthwhile: an appreciation of the strength, richness, and changeability of his mother tongue.

Inventing English was full of fascinating little tidbits; I was constantly reading this or that juicy anecdote out loud to David as I perused it. "Did you know," I would say, "that 'hubbub' was originally an onomatopoeic term based on what English people heard in the speech of the Irish and Welsh?" Or "Wow, did you know 'dude' originated as a term for a citified dandy? I always thought it originally described cowboys!" These little insights are fascinating and thought-provoking, but Lerer also does a good job of taking his history beyond the anecdotal, and tying these small examples into a larger context of social and political change. I ardently enjoyed it, and might even follow up a few of the chapters with some more in-depth reading.

Nathan Albright says

Fond readers of this blog, at least those who pay attention to my book reviews, will likely note that I am fond of reading about linguistics for fun [1]. At time I even converse with people about this subject when they share an interest in it, although that is not often. This book deals, technically, mostly with a related subject to linguistics, namely philology. Nevertheless, like books on linguistics this book discusses the great vowel shift, especially as it is shown in the justly famous Paxton family letters, and so it belongs in the general family of books about the linguistics of English. This sort of book has a rather specific target audience: if you like reading books about the change of English over time from Old English to today, with a focus on written language, the fecundity of English when it comes to both creating and appropriating words, and the complexity of English grammar and spelling and its political context, you will likely find something here to enjoy despite it being a somewhat challenging book to read. The fact that the author references Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the Uncle Remus stories that formed the basis of *Song of the South* gives the story some additional cachet for certain audiences.

The slightly more than 250 pages of material in this book are made up of 19 mostly short chapters that take a

broad look at the changes in the written (and spoken) English language over the course of its history so far, from the origins of English poetry during the times of Caedmon, to the language of Beowulf, to the dramatic effects of the Norman conquest that formed the end of Old English. After this the author discusses the influence of French in Middle English, Chaucer's bold and inventive encouragement to Middle English as a written language, and the variety of Middle English dialects that existed, if sometimes poorly attested, for centuries. A discussion of the great vowel shift and the making of English prose through the efforts of Caxton and others precedes a chapter on Shakespeare's English as well as the flowering of new words in 17th century English and the inevitable reaction by Orthoepists who sought to create a standard English dialect. Samuel Johnson's efforts at creating his idiosyncratic dictionary follow before the book takes a turn towards American English in chapters on lexicography, dialect, Mark Twain, and African American English. The last three chapters of the book look at the influence of the Oxford English Dictionary, the role of war on language, and the widespread nature of contemporary English before some appendices, glossaries, references, acknowledgments, and an index.

Ultimately, this book promotes the sort of descriptivist English that is very common among those who seek to describe the varieties of English rather than promote a standard sort of language. Nevertheless, the book does acknowledge the contrary pulls that exist in English between a love of creativity and a desire for standardization, between the influence of conservative forms of English throughout the centuries and that of French, Latin, and other languages with which English has had fateful interactions. The author celebrates diversity while still understanding the need for different dialects of English to be able to understand each other. Likewise, this book offers considerable insight into the way that English became a language known for vagueness and misdirection during the period of Norman domination, yet another loss suffered by the people of England after the wicked conquest of William of Normandy. At any rate, although this book talks a lot about the past, it is clear that the author has a certain expectation about the future and that there will continue to be a great deal of interest in the changes of English that are yet to come, something that does not appear to trouble the author in the least.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2015...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

Jess Neuner says

The English language has a fascinating history, from Anglo-Saxon epic poems like Beowulf, through Shakespeare's plays to exploration and invasion to modern English. Lerer's *Inventing English* is a collection of essays that cover the entire history of the English language, one interesting topic at a time, from the beginning of written English with Caedmon's Hymn, to the rap music of Eminem today.

If you're already familiar with the history of English, there will likely will not be a lot that's new, as this is meant to be an overview, an introduction, to the subject. But the way it's written, it's still a fascinating read, just in a more accessible, less textbook-like format. I liked that it's not only understandable for people who aren't linguists, but also an enjoyable read for anyone who does study this subject. Even though I've studied this at university, there was still a lot of new, interesting information.

Each chapter is a separate essay from the others, arranged in chronological order, but they all follow the overall theme that language is highly politicised. Anyone complaining now that the young or immigrants are ruining the English language by insisting on using it incorrectly or by adding loanwords is making the same argument that people have been since we spoke Old English. From the very beginning, speakers of English have been afraid of the language changing, wanting to keep it 'pure', even though for a language, there's really no such thing. There's always been a fair amount of tension between old and new in any language, the old often reluctant to let the new in.

Lerer's point is that language is not something that ought to be regulated or controlled - how it's meant to be spoken is the way it is spoken. The people who use it make the language, not rules that may be a hundred years out-of-date. Language is meant to reflect the way we currently live, to fit itself to the needs of its speakers. A living language is one that does this - any language that doesn't adapt and change is a dead language, like Latin. Our language is far richer and more diverse because of its outside influences and we should celebrate that rather than try to restrict it.

kkurtz says

this is a 'must read' for anyone with a passion for reading, writing,...or speaking. From Beowulf to 21st century slang,& everything in between, Lerer covers all the bases.

This book is a thoroughly enjoyable & readable history of the english language. The chapter on Mark Twain is worth the price of admission alone, with an extensive history of the word 'dude'.

MrsMJ says

Worth reading, but be ready... Great information, but boring/hard to trudge through at times... That says a lot since this is a subject I'm highly interested in (I study linguistics and read textbooks for fun ?). Worth reading because of the info, but just be ready to push through the boring parts.

Jeremiah says

If you're bothering to read this, you'd probably love this. You're the sort who'd love to learn about the variations in pronunciation and grammar across early England and how Chaucer mastered and united them

all in *Canterbury Tales*. You'd like nothing better than to learn about Twain's role solidifying American slang. Further, reading about what consonants slid in and out of use throughout European history, how precisely the Great Vowel shift worked, and what paratexis is, sounds like your idea of a fun time. And it certainly is for me. While it keeps a healthy distance from textbook formality, it goes in depth with the niche subject. It even touches on literary criticism by way of examining how Milton and company use specific words. It gets challenging but it's so fun. If you're enough of a reader to reach the end of a random paragraph online, this book is for you.

Bob says

Lerer is a professor of humanities at Stanford and concerns himself with socio-linguistic issues: language as a signifier of social class, gender, political power, and national identity. The first chapters proceed chronologically: Old English and the problems of grafting Christianity into a Germanic language; the beginnings of literary English; adapting the language to a French government; Chaucer and courtly speech; dialects; the Great Vowel Shift; chancery English (and orthography); Shakespeare; the exploration of the new world; and then branches to topical treatments, American English, American Dialects, the OED; warfare and military language; Black English; and slang.

Lerer has a very personal voice, and the book is **not** as its subtitle suggests "a portable history of the language" but a series of topical essays with a great deal of food for thought and excellent individual bibliographies.

"Enabling immediate communication by distant interlocutors, the telephone not only revolutionized the passage of information, it changed irrevocably social relationships in late-nineteenth century America...But the problem for the early telephone was how to address someone you could not see. Forms of address are invariably linked to social class and gender...The conundrum for the telephone was what to say first to a speaker whose class or gender you could not know. And so a neutral word was needed. Phone greetings, culturally are arbitrary, German *bitte*, Italian *pronto*, Spanish *bueno*..." and he continues very entertainingly to Morse's use of "Ahoy" and Edison introduction of "hello."
