CRAZY ENGLISH

The Ultimate Joy Ride Through Our Language

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English is a Crazy Language

English is the most widely spoken language in the history of our planet, used in some way by at least one out of every seven human beings around the globe. Half of the world’s books are written in English, and the majority of international telephone calls are made in English. English is the language of over sixty percent of the world’s radio programs, many of them beamed, ironically, by the Russians, who know that to win friends and influence nations, they’re best off using English. More than seventy percent of international mail is written and addressed in English, and eighty percent of all computer text is stored in English. English has acquired the largest vocabulary of all the world’s languages, perhaps as many as two million words, and has generated one of the noblest bodies of literature in the annals of the human race.
The strange case of the English language

CRAZY ENGLISH
Sound and Sense

What do these words have in common: bash, clash, crash, dash, gash, gnash, hash, lash, mash, slash, smash, thrash, and trash?

"The words all rhyme," you answer.

Right. But can you spot what it is that the thirteen words share in their content?

Faces are bashed, gashed, slashed, and smashed. Cars crash. Hopes are dashed. Enemies clash. Teeth gnash. Beef is hashed. Potatoes are mashed. Rooms are trashed. And prisoners are lashed and thrashed.

Now the pattern becomes clearer. All of these -ash words are verbs that express terrible actions of great violence. Why, over the more than 1500-year history of the English language, have speakers seized on the -ash sound cluster to create words that describe mutilation?
The manner of the sucking babe, sound from words material is made by the pursing of lips in Italian (meaning coincident), this is, this persians, man (meaning, "eater," maha, meaning "great" (meaning)).

The word for mother (and mana and mom) in most languages begins with the letter "m." Let's start with initial consonant sounds.

The dying-dough theory of word formation.

Dying-dough theory of word formation.

The ancient Greek philosophers Pythagoras (whose name comes from the word, which is related to the Greek word for "accurate").

The universe is like a great ball and the every...
Think of all the words you know that begin with fl-. Your list will probably include the likes of flicker, flutter, flurry, flip, flap, fly, flow, flash, flee, flare, fling, flush, flame, flail, and flounce. Could the fact that the tongue darts forward whenever we form fl- in our mouths account for the sense of movement, usually rapid movement, in all of these words?

Why do so many words beginning with sn- pertain to the nose: snot, sneeze, snort, snore, sniff, snaffle, snuff, snarl, snivel, snoot, snout, sneer, and snicker? And why are so many other sn- words distasteful and unpleasant: sneak, snide, snob, snitch, snit, snub, snafu, snoop, snipe, snake, and snaggle tooth? To appreciate the nasal aggression inherent in sn-, form the sound and note how your nose begins to wrinkle, your nostrils flare, and your lips draw back to expose your threatening caning teeth.

Think for a moment of how forcibly the sound of an initial b is expelled as it flies from the lips like a watermelon seed. Then observe how many words beginning with that letter denote the expulsion of breath—breathe, blow, blab, blather, bluster, babble, bloviate, and blubber—or the application of force—batter, blast, bang, bust, bruise, bludgeon, bump, break, butt, beat, bash, bounce, and bomb.

Listen now to the sounds of vowels in the middle of words:

What happens to the pattern of internal vowels in strong, irregular verbs: sing, sang, sung; ring, rang, rung? Place your thumb and forefinger on your Adam’s apple as you say these words aloud and you will notice that, as the verbs move backwards in time (today I sing, yesterday I sang, for years I have sung), the vowels themselves echo the process by traveling back in the throat.

Consider the short i vowel in words like little, kid, slim, thin, skinny, imp, shrimp, midget, pygmy, and piddling. What do these words have in common? They all denote smallness or slightness. Why? Perhaps because, when we pronounce the short i, we tighten our lips together and make our mouths small.

Now that you are opening your ears to sound and sense, consider these questions about a few sounds that come at the ends of words:

Why is it that many words ending with -ng echo with metallic resonance: bong, boing, gong, ping, ring, clang, and ding-dong?

Why is it that the final voiceless stops p, t, and k come at the end of quick-action words, like pop, clip, snap, rap, tap, slap, whip, pat, cut, slit, hit, dart, flit, crack, click, flick, smack, whack, strike, and peck? Robert Browning put this pattern to sensitive use in “Meeting at Night”:

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match

Why are almost all words that end with -unk unpleasant in their suggestions: clunk, junk, punk, drunk, dunk, skunk, stunk, flunk, bunk, unk, funk, and gunk?

Why do so many words ending with -ush have to do with water: flush, gush, lush, mush, rush, slush, and (orange) crush?

Why does the following cluster of -allow words convey qualities that indicate a lack of something? A callow youth
The Sounds of English
The Indo-European family

'Indo-European' is the name scholars have given to the family of languages that first spread throughout Europe and many parts of southern Asia, and which are now found, as a result of colonialism, in every part of the world. The parent language, generally known as 'Proto-Indo-European', is thought to have been spoken before 3000 BC, and to have split up into different languages during the subsequent millennium. The differences were well established between 2000 and 1000 BC, when the Greek, Anatolian, and Indo-Iranian languages are first attested.

Who were the Indo-Europeans?

Archaeological evidence shows the existence of a semi-nomadic population living in the steppe region of southern Russia around 4000 BC, who began to spread into the Danube area of Europe and beyond from around 3500 BC. The people are known as the Kurgans, because of their burial practices ('kurgan' being the Russian for 'burial mound'). Kurgan culture seems to have arrived in the Adriatic region before 2000 BC, and this coincides well with the kind of time-scale needed to produce large amounts of linguistic change. The ancestors of the Kurgans are not known, though there are several similarities between Proto-Indo-European and the Uralic family of languages (p. 304), spoken further east, and these may well have had a common parent, several thousand years before.

By comparing the similar vocabulary of the extant Indo-European languages, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the geographical origins and life-style of the people. For instance, many family words (such as 'mother', 'husband', 'brother') can be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European. These include several words for 'in-law', which seem to have been used solely with reference to the wife who was given a position within the husband's family, rather than in the usual way, and that the society must therefore have been patriarchal in character.

The reconstructed language has words for horses, dogs, sheep, pigs, and other animals; there is a word for some kind of vehicle, and this vehicle definitely had wheels; there are many words for parts of the body; there are several words relating to farming, and a few words relating to tools and weapons; many abstract notions are attested, relating to such fields as law, religious belief and social status; numerals went to at least 100. Words relating to fauna and flora are of particular interest, for they can provide clues as to the place of origin of the people. There are no words for 'palm tree' or 'vine', for example, which suggests, independently of any archaeological evidence, that the migrations did not begin in the Mediterranean area. But other clues often seem contradictory. The word for 'beech tree' is widely attested, and, as this tree does not grow in Asia, it has been suggested that the Indo-Europeans must have originated in north-central Europe. On the other hand, there is little evidence of a common word for 'oak', which is also a European tree, and if this word was not known to the Indo-Europeans, the view is supported that their migration must have begun in Asia after all. Indo-European philology ($50) raises many fascinating questions of this kind.

The discovery of Proto-Indo-European

It was not possible to deduce the existence of this family of languages until scholars became aware of the systematic resemblances which can be found between European languages and Sanskrit, the oldest-attested language of the Indian sub-continent. When these were first noticed, in the 16th century, many people thought that Sanskrit was the parent of the European languages; but towards the end of the 18th century the systematic studies began which showed conclusively that this was not the case.

Following an early statement of the common origin hypothesis in 1786, by Sir William Jones, the early 19th century produced several major works which laid the foundation of Indo-European philology. In 1816, the German philologist Franz Bopp published a study, whose scope is well illustrated by its title (translated): On the conjugation system of the Sanskrit language, in comparison with those of the Greek, Latin, Persian and Germanic languages. The relationship of Germanic to Latin, Greek, Slavic and Baltic was demonstrated in a work written in 1814 by the Danish linguist, Rasmus Rask, but not published until 1818, Investigation on the Origin of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language. Further philological treatises followed, mainly written by Germans, such as Jakob Grimm and August Schleicher. In 1833, Bopp began the publication of the first major Indo-European grammar: Comparative Grammar of Sanskrit, Zend, Greek, Latin, Lithuanian, Old Slavic, Gothic and German. It took 19 years to complete, and by its third edition incorporated Old Slavic, Celtic and Albanian. In due course, this work and its contemporaries became out of date, as a result of the vast amount of philological study undertaken in the second half of the 19th century. A further publishing landmark was Karl Brugmann's Outline of Comparative Indo-European Grammar (1857–1916). A new Indo-European Grammar, the outcome of a project directed by the Polish linguist, Jerzy Kuryłowicz, commenced publication in 1968.

William Jones (1746–94)

British lawyer and jurist, whose presidential address to the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1786 contained the following observation, generally quoted as the first clear statement asserting the existence of Indo-European:

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists.
What did Proto-Indo-European sound like?

There are no written records relating to this period. The Kurgans must have been illiterate — unlike the peoples of Egypt and Mesopotamia of the time. So the entire character of Proto-Indo-European has been the result of painstaking reconstruction on the part of philologists, using the methods outlined on p. 292.

There is general agreement about the number of contrasts in the consonant system (p. 165), though the status of some of the less well-attested sounds (such as /b/) is disputed. This system seems largely to have been composed of plosives (p. 157), organized into three series: voiceless, voiced, and (less definitely) voiced aspirate. Four main places of articulation were used: labial, dental, palatal or velar, and labio-velar. There was a single fricative, which was voiced or voiceless according to context. In addition, there were probably one or more laryngeal consonants (see below). There were two nasals, two continuants, and two semi-consonants (p. 152), all of which could occur at the centres of syllables as well as at syllable edges. This system may be summarized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sounds</th>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Palatal/ Velar</th>
<th>Labio-velar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>k*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>g*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced aspirate</td>
<td>bh</td>
<td>dh</td>
<td>gh</td>
<td>gh*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricatives</td>
<td>s(z)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasals</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-consonants</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>l</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>j</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is more disagreement over the vowel system—vowels, as always (p. 167), being more difficult to analyse. Four main contrasts are generally recognized: mid-front, mid-back, open and central, the first three occurring both in long and short forms (though how far these were independent contrasts, as opposed to laryngeally controlled variants, is unclear). In addition, some scholars recognize two further contrasts in close position, /i/ and /u/, but the overlap with the use of these sounds as semi-consonants makes this analysis less certain also. The possible vowel system can thus be summarized as follows:

(i) 
(e/e): a (u) o/o: 
(a/a):

THE LARYNGEAL THEORY

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (p. 407) put forward the view that, in order to explain various anomalies in early Indo-European forms, an extra set of sounds would have to be postulated as occurring in Proto-Indo-European. Saussure did not suggest any phonetic details for these sounds, but later they came to be called laryngeals, a term taken from the study of Semitic languages (p. 316), where consonants in the region of the larynx were known to occur. Laryngeal consonants did not occur in any Indo-European language known at the time, but the previous existence of some kind of sound, it was argued, was indicated by the way they had caused the changes to take place in adjacent vowels (altering their length and quality) that had long been noticed in the extant languages.

The laryngeal theory was immediately controversial, and received little support for many years. But attitudes changed after 1927, when it was found that Hittite (discovered several years after the theory was postulated) had a sound, represented by $h$, that occurred in some of the places where Saussure had predicted the laryngeals should be. However, the phonetic character of these laryngeals is still quite unclear, and philologists disagree on how many laryngeal sounds there were, whether their phonetic properties can (or should) be defined, and whether better analyses can be found. It is generally recognized that there must have been three (some say four) types, pronounced somewhere in the back part of the mouth, probably as fricatives or glottal stops (p. 157). They are usually symbolized by $H$ or $\sigma$, and numbered with subscripts ($H_1$, $H_2$, etc. or $\sigma_1$, $\sigma_2$, etc.) Alternative analyses which postulate an earlier vowel, rather than a laryngeal, have also been proposed.

Laryngeal theory can be illustrated in this way:

Most Proto-Indo-European basic forms (or 'roots') had a structure of Consonant–Vowel–Consonant (CVC, which is often written as C+CV when discussing this language), e.g. *blero- 'bring', *meds-, 'measure'. But several forms had only one consonant, e.g. *es- 'be', *do- 'give'. It is argued that these roots can be reconstructed as having the regular CVC structure, by postulating a laryngeal as the ‘missing’ consonant, e.g. *Hier, *doh-. In roots such as *doh-, with a preceding vowel, when the laryngeal finally disappeared, it caused the vowel to lengthen, as is attested in Latin dōnum ‘gift’, and elsewhere. Using these techniques, it is possible to show that almost all the roots of the proto-language (there are still a few exceptions, such as numerals) had a CVC structure.

Some grammatical features

People often think that the oldest languages must have been simpler than their modern counterparts (§49). The noun inflections of Proto-Indo-European clearly show this not to be so. It is possible to reconstruct three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter) and up to eight cases (nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative, ablative, locative, instrumental). Adjectives agreed in case, number, and gender with the noun. The verb system was also rich in inflections, used for aspect, mood, tense, voice, person, and number (p. 93). Different grammatical forms of a word were often related by the feature of ablaut, or vowel gradation: the root vowel would change systematically to express such differences as singular, plural, or past and present tense, as is still the case in English foot/feet or take/took.
55 Indo-European varieties

Our father, who art in Heaven...

\[\ldots\]

... like... your words are written in the sky (Welsh)

A r-neathir, atà a r-neamh (Irish Gaelic)

Ar r-neathair a tha air néamh (Scottish Gaelic)

Ayr ain, t' ayns niau (Manx)

Agnan tas ny, us yn nef (Cornish)

Germanic

Unser Vater, der Du bist im Himmel (German)

Und du, vos bist im himl (Yiddish)

Fader ùre, bò be eart on heoflon (Old English)

Onze vader, die in de hemel (Dutch)

Fader vår, du som er i himmelen (Norwegian)

Fader vår, som är i himmelen (Swedish)

Vor Fader, du som er i himlere (Danish)

Italic

Pater noster, qui es in caelis (Latin)

Notre père, qui es aux cieux (French)

Padre nuestro, que estás en los cielos (Spanish)

Paí nosso, que estás nos céus (Portuguese)

Pare nostre, que estau en lo cel (Catalan)

Albanian

A ti nè qe je nè qiell

Greek

Pater 'émón, 'o en tois ouranois (New Testament)

Patéra mas, pou elai stious ouranous (Modern)

Baltic

Teve mūsū, kurs esis danguje (Lithuanian)

Mūsu tēvus debesis (Latvian)

Tāwa noōson, kas tu essei en dangon (Old Prussian)

Slavic

Očće naš, iže jas na nebesích (Old Church Slavonic)

Očće naš, sušči na nebesach (Russian)

Očće naš, kateri ješč je nebe (Belorussian)

Očće naš, što na nebi (Ukrainian)

Očće naše, ktorý ješč je nebesie (Polish)

Očće naš, ktorý ješč je nebesie (Czech)

Očće naš, ktorý sive na nebesie (Slovak)

Očće naš, či na neboto (Macedonian)

Očće naš, ktorý si na nebesa (Serbo-Croat)

Očće naš, ktorý si na nebesi (Hungarian)

Očće naš, ktorý si na nebesi (Bulgarian)

Očće naš, ktorý si na nebesi (Slovene)

Armenian

Mer hayr'i or erkin'um (East)

Ov hayr mer or erkin' en (West)

Iranian

Max hýr, kaey dær sár'v'y midan (Ossetic)

Yá báw-k' ámá, ka la asmán-á-y (Kurdish)

Ei pedar-e-má, ke dar ásmán ast (Persian)

Phiu mani, ki blishtá asti (Baluchi)

Aj imuj plára, če pa ásmán koe ye (Pashto)

Indo-Aryan

Bho asmákhám svargastha pই (Sanskrit)

Sagathá no pitá (Pali)

He hamáre svargbási pitá (Hindi)

He sáde pitá, jhrá sugh vic hai (Panjabi)

E asám-já piu, jo ásmána men åne (Sindi)

Aisám mál, yus ásmáns path chu (Kashmiri)

He hámár svargvási pitá (Nepali)

O akáasmánná amár bápá (Gujarati)

He ámacya svargatilá pýtá (Marathi)

Svargayéhi vásásíla aapé piyánëni (Sinhalese)

He ámár svargat thaká píti (Assamese)

He ámáder svargastha píti (Bengali)

He ámáhánánakfa svargasta pít (Onya)

Dáde amará, kaj isién k'o deivi (Romany)

The Indo-European family tree, reflecting geographical distribution