

# BORROWED WORDS IN MODERN ENGLISH

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English language has "borrowed" words for centuries. But is it now lending more than it's taking?

English speakers may not be famous for being au fait with foreign languages, but all of us use words taken from other languages every day.

In that last sentence **au fait** is an obvious example, but **famous**, **foreign**, **languages**, **use**, and **taken** are also borrowed words. Knowledge of what is being borrowed, and from where, provides an invaluable insight into the international relations of the English language.

Today English borrows words from other languages with a truly global reach. Some examples that the Oxford English Dictionary suggests entered English during the past 30



years include **tarka dal**, a creamy Indian lentil dish (1984, from Hindi), **quinzhee**, a type of snow shelter (1984, from Slave or another language of the Pacific Coast of North America), **popiah**, a type of Singaporean or Malaysian spring roll (1986, from Malay), **izakaya**, a type of Japanese bar serving food (1987), **affogato**, an Italian dessert made of ice cream and coffee (1992).

One obvious thing that these words have in common is that not all English speakers will know them. Probably affogato and tarka dal are likeliest to be familiar to British readers, but they do not yet belong to the vocabulary that you would expect just about every British person to know, and experiences will differ greatly in different parts of the world.

Some words slowly build up in frequency. For instance, the word **sushi** is first recorded in English in the 1890s, but the earliest examples in print all feel the need to explain what sushi is, and it is only in recent decades that it has become ubiquitous, as sushi has spread along the high street and into supermarket chiller cabinets in most corners of the English-speaking world. But, commonplace though sushi may be today, it hasn't made its way into the inner core of English in the same way as words like **peace**, **war**, **just**, or **very** (from French) or **leg**, **sky**, **take**, or **they** (from Scandinavian languages). This isn't just because they were borrowed longer ago. It owes a great deal to the different influences that foreign languages have had on the word-stock of English over the centuries.

The number of new borrowed words finding their way into the shared international vocabulary is on a long downward trend

It's very hard to be precise about the boundaries of the vocabulary of any language, especially a global one like modern English. Every speaker of a language has a slightly different vocabulary. English speakers living in New Zealand are likely to be familiar with a wider range of words of Maori origin, like **Pakeha**, a New Zealander of European descent, **aroaha** (sympathy, understanding), **kia ora** - a greeting or farewell. English speakers in Scotland may know more words of Scottish Gaelic origin, like **cranachan**, a type of dessert, **pibroch**, bagpipe music, **Sassenach**, Englishman. Dictionaries, even very big ones like the Oxford English Dictionary, monitor those words that have some traction in English across the world. This sort of monitoring reveals some surprising trends. Although English is now borrowing from other languages with a worldwide range, the number of new borrowed

words finding their way into the shared international vocabulary is on a long downward trend.

One big reason for this is the success of English as an international language of science, scholarship, business, and many other fields. If we think about words coming into English from foreign languages in the 18th and 19th Centuries, we may think first of the impact of colonialism and expanding trade. Words like **jungle** (1776), **bangle** (1787), **yoga** (1818), **khaki** (1863) came into English from languages of South Asia. But in many other cases new words slipped into English as a result of scientific coinages in other European languages. For example, **oxygen** reflects the French name oxygène that the scientists Lavoisier and Guyton de Morveau gave to the recently discovered element in the 1780s. The word is formed from elements that ultimately come from Greek, but it was coined in French and then borrowed into English.

A similar story applies to **paraffin**, formed in German in 1830 (from Latin elements), and then borrowed into English in 1835. Other borrowings like **semester** (1826) or **seminar** (1889) reflect German innovations in higher education. Such borrowings are still sometimes found today, but have become much less common, as English has become the lingua franca of the world of learning (and of so many other fields). Today, the balance is tipping much more towards English as a donor of new words (e.g., **internet**, **computer**, **cell phone**, **meeting**, **business**) rather than a borrower. By contrast, new borrowings into English today tend to cluster much more closely in a few subject areas, especially names of food and drink.

If we look back further, it was in the Middle Ages that the everyday vocabulary of English was affected most deeply by borrowing from other languages. In the wake of the Norman Conquest, French and Latin put English in the shade for centuries as the language of learning. The church, law, and officialdom. Even everyday business records were typically written in Latin or French down to the late 1300s. This has left an indelible mark on the English language today. Words like **age**, **air**, **cause**, **city**, **idea**, **join**, **material**, **poor**, **suffer**, **tax** have become part of the fabric of modern English. Not far short of half of the 1,000 most frequently occurring words in modern written English have come into the language from French or Latin, mostly in the period from 1066 to 1500.

Fewer in number, but even more striking in their impact on the language of everyday life, are those words that came into English from Scandinavian languages. When communities of Scandinavian settlers in late Anglo-Saxon England began to switch to using English, they brought with them some words that have become part of the most basic layer of the vocabulary of English, such as **give**, **take**, **hit**, **leg**, **skin**, **sky**, and even the pronoun **they**. This was greatly helped by the close similarities between the early Scandinavian languages and medieval English.

Close contact does not inevitably lead to borrowing. For example, although English has been rubbing shoulders with Welsh and other Celtic languages in the British Isles for many centuries, relatively few words have come into everyday English from this source. There are some examples, like **trousers**, **gull**, **clan**, or (maybe) **baby**, but they are tiny in number compared with the vast numbers borrowed from French and Latin, and they have had less impact on the everyday language than words from Scandinavian sources.

Ultimately, patterns of borrowed words reflect complex patterns of cultural contacts across the centuries. Names of foods, plants, animals, and other features of the natural world are borrowed as part of the basic traffic between peoples in different parts of the world. Borrowings affecting other areas of the vocabulary typically follow the pathways of power and prestige between languages. English today may, for once, be more of a lender than a borrower. If we try to look decades or centuries into the future, who knows?