

TRANSCRIPT

HOW DID ENGLISH EVOLVE? KATE GARDOQUI

I'm going to start with a challenge. I want you to imagine each of these two scenes, as much detailed as you can. Scene 1: They gave us a hearty welcome. Well, who are the people who are giving a hearty welcome? What are they wearing? What are they drinking?

Ok. Scene 2: They gave us a cordial reception. How are these people standing? What kind of expression is on their faces? What are they wearing? and drinking?

Fix these pictures on your mind's eye, then jot down a sentence or two to describe them. We'll come back to them later.

Now, on to our story.

In the year 400 CE (Christian Era), the Celts and Britons were ruled by Romans. This had one benefit for the Celts: the Romans protected them from the barbarian Saxon tribes of Northern Europe.

But then the Roman Empire began to crumble and the Romans withdrew from Britain. With the Romans gone the Germanic tribes, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians quickly sailed across the water, did away with the Celts and formed kingdoms in the British Isles. For several centuries these tribes lived in Britain and their Germanic language, Anglo-Saxon, became the common language, what we call Old English.

Although modern English speakers may think Old English sounds like a different language, if you look and listen closely, you'll find many words that are recognizable. For example here's what the Lord's Prayer looks like in Old English. At first glance it may look unfamiliar but update the spelling a bit and you'll see many common English words.

So the centuries passed, with Britons happily speaking Old English but in the 700s a series of Viking's invasions began which continued until a treaty split the island in half. On one side were the Saxons, on the other side were the Danes, who spoke a language called Old Norse.

As Saxons fell in love with their cute Danish neighbours and marriages blurred the boundaries, Old Norse mixed with Old English and many Old Norse words, like freckle, leg, root, skin and want are still a part of our language.

Three hundred years later, in 1066, the Norman conquest brought war again to the British isles. The Normans were Vikings who had settled in France. They had abandoned the Viking language and culture in favour of a French lifestyle but they fought like Vikings. They placed a Norman king on the English throne and for three centuries, French was the language of the British royalty. Society in Britain came to have two levels: French-speaking aristocracy and Old English-speaking peasants. The French also brought many Roman Catholic clergymen with them who added Latin words to the mix. Old English adapted and grew as thousands of words flowed, many

having to do with government, law and aristocracy: words like council, marriage, sovereign, govern, damage and parliament.

As the language expanded English speakers quickly realized what to do if they wanted to sound sophisticated. They would use words that would come from French or Latin. Anglo Saxon seemed so plain, like the Anglo Saxon peasants who spoke them.

Let's go back to the two sentences you thought about earlier. When you pictured the hearty welcome, did you see a hearty scene with relatives hugging and talking loudly, were they drinking beer, were they wearing lumberjack shirts and jeans?

What about the cordial reception? I bet you pictured it far more classy and refined crowd, blazers and skirts, wine and caviar. Why is this? How is it that phrases that considered just synonymous by the dictionary can evoke such different pictures? feelings?

Hearty and welcome are both Saxon words. Cordial and reception come from French, the connotation of nobility and authority has persisted around the words of French origin and a connotation of peasantry, real people salt of the earth has persisted around Saxon words. Even if you never heard this history before, the memory of it persists in the feelings evoked by the words you speak. on some level it is a story you already knew because wether we realize it consciously or only subconsciously our history lives in the words we speak and hear.