

1 Introduction

English is the most widely spoken language in the world; owing to a number of reasons, it has acquired the status of the global lingua franca. It is spoken as a first language by the majority populations of Britain, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and many Caribbean countries. This makes English the third most common native language in the world, after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. In addition, English is the official language of almost 60 states, the European Union, and many world organizations. It is also widely learned as a second language.

The English language of today is the result of linguistic and sociolinguistic change over several thousand years. English underwent a major phonetic, phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic transformation. The sound changes that took place during the history have left footprints in the English spelling system, which reflects earlier stages of pronunciation, neglecting the present phonetic form. The original Germanic word stock of English was significantly enriched by lexical units from other languages, especially French, Latin, and Scandinavian. English gradually lost inflection and developed from a predominantly synthetic to a predominantly analytical language. The brief survey of the most important changes of the English language presented in the subsequent chapters is divided into the traditional development periods: Proto-Indo-European, Proto-Germanic, Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English. The development of Late Modern English (since ca. 1700) is not dealt with in the present book.