





# From Riddle to Twittersphere: David Crystal tells the story of English in 100 words

David Crystal set himself the challenge of covering the history of English in 100 words. He explains what his list tells us about the origins and evolution of our mother tongue – and we also invite you to get creative with our poetry competition.

By David Crystal

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If you can tell the history of the world in 100 objects, as the British Museum's Neil MacGregor did last year, then it ought to be possible to tell the history of a language in a similar number. But, as with objects, it isn't enough for each word to be interesting in its own right. It has to represent a whole class of words. It has to tell a story. And each of these individual stories should add up to the history of the English language as a whole.

When I embarked on this project, some words gave me no choice. They just had to be in – such as the earliest example of a written word in the language. Thanks to an exciting archaeological find, we know this to be *roe*. That starts the story. And the latest word to arrive? Well, as new words come into the language every day, all I could do here is choose an example which points to the future. I picked *Twittersphere*. That left 98 more to find.

We need principles on which to base a selection. The obvious one is chronological. The history of English is traditionally divided into periods: Old English, from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in AD 449 until the 11th century; Middle English from then until the 15th century; Early Modern English from then until the 18th century; and Modern English thereafter. It's important to choose words that show the passage of time in this way.

But words are more than just linguistic objects. They are windows into the world of those who use them. Part of the challenge, then, is to find words that best give us a real insight into social history. For the Anglo-Saxons, my choice included *loaf* and *mead*, *street* and *lea*. For the medieval period, *swain* and *pork*, *dame* and *royal*. For the time of Shakespeare and



the King James Bible, alphabet and dialect, shibboleth and potato. For the next centuries, gazette and fopdoodle, lunch and tea. And so to modern times, with jazz and Watergate, PC and apps, LOL and unfriend. They make interesting bedfellows.

At any one time language is a kaleidoscope of styles, genres and dialects. The story of English has to show these differences too. In particular, the words we use when we speak are not the same as those we use when we write. It's the colloquial words which tend to be neglected, and so in my list along with dialect and debt we find doobry and dilly-dally. And I include words that represent a history of debate over usage, such as ain't and disinterested, as well as words that tell the story of regional dialects, such as brock, egg and wee. Far more people speak a non-standard variety of English than speak standard English, and their story must also be told.

Nor must we neglect the commonest everyday words. Word books traditionally focus on unusual and quirky items. They tend to ignore the words that provide the skeleton of the language, without which it would fall apart, such as and and what, or words that provide structure to our conversation, such as hello. These get my full attention. Apart from anything else, they provide some of the best stories – as do slang, cant and taboo words. There can't be any pussyfooting if you're a serious linguist. The rude words are just as much a part of our linguistic history, and they have to be represented too. I chose three, in this article, blushing represented by their initials, A, B and C.

Professional words, such as those associated with the law, medicine, religion and academia, provide another historical strand. Of the million plus words in English, three quarters belong to the various domains of science and technology.

Words such as species, billion and DNA represent the tip of a huge lexical iceberg of scientific terminology. And along with professional language, we need to recognise the role of jargon and cliché, along with all the negative press they attract – as suggested here by cherry-picking.

A feature of English that makes it different compared with all other languages is its global spread. Around a third of the world's population – about two billion people – use English now, and one of the consequences has been the emergence of international dialects, each with its own local vocabulary. The process started when British and American English diverged, but it has continued since with many "new Englishes" in south and south-east Asia, Australia and New Zealand, the Caribbean and Africa. All have contributed many words to English, as shown by skunk and taffeta, dinkum and dude, mipela and lakh.



Nor must a word book forget the nuts and bolts of language. Vocabulary is a matter of word-building as well as word-using. Most words in English are in fact derived from other words. We start with one word, such as nation, and generate a word family: national, nationalise, nationalisation, denationalisation, antidenationalisation... That set of words makes use of prefixes and suffixes. But there are several other important processes of English word formation, and these also need to be represented in a wordbook.

A word like doable shows how a Germanic language element can be combined with an element from another language, such as French or Latin. Dilly-dally shows how words can be reduplicated. Edit and UFO show how they can be shortened or abbreviated. Brunch and webzine show how elements can be conflated or compounded. Ology shows how a suffix can turn into a word. Mega shows the same thing happening for prefixes. And names can become words – first names (valentine), surnames (Alzheimer's), place names (Watergate) and product names (escalator).

English is also a playful language, whose speakers love to use their imaginations in creating new vocabulary, and who are prepared to depart from tradition when coining words. Not all languages are like this. Some are characterised by speakers who stick rigidly to a single cultural tradition, resisting loanwords and trying to preserve a perceived notion of purity in their vocabulary (as with French and Icelandic). English speakers, for the most part, are quite the opposite. Shakespeare was one of the finest rule-benders, showing everyone how to be daring in the use of words. That's why you see such items as bone-house, undeaf, schmooze and muggle in the list.

The most interesting side to vocabulary, I find, is when the exploration of word origins (etymology) brings to light results that are unexpected or intriguing. We see people adapting the language in order to make sense of it, as in the case of bridegroom. We see extraordinary reversals of meaning over long periods of time, as with wicked. And we see some unexpected links between words, as in the surprising history of grammar. Not all word origins are known, and there have been some long-standing arguments. But every etymology at some point takes us by surprise. As I was researching each chapter of this book I learnt something new about the history of English words.

Looking down the complete list of 100, the thing that most strikes me is their diversity – a reflection of the colourful political and cultural history of the English-speaking peoples over the centuries. English speakers from all parts of the world have used their language like a vacuum cleaner, eagerly sucking in words from other languages whenever they find it useful to do so. And because of the way English has travelled around the globe, courtesy of its soldiers, sailors, traders and civil servants, several hundred languages have contributed



to its lexical character.

Some 80 per cent of English vocabulary is not Germanic at all. If a present-day Dr Who were to travel back to AD 449, when the first Anglo-Saxon boats arrived, his biggest issue would not be alien monsters, but getting the Anglo-Saxons to understand his alien words.

## **POETRY COMPETITION**

\*To celebrate David Crystal's *The Story of English in 100 Words*, the Telegraph and Profile Books are offering you the chance to take part in a competition. The challenge is to write a poem (on any subject) in no more than 100 words that uses at least 25 of David Crystal's list (see below). The more of his words you can use the better. The winner will receive a signed copy of the book and £100 worth of books from Profile.

Email your entries to [poetrycomp@profilebooks.com](mailto:poetrycomp@profilebooks.com) or post them to David Crystal Poetry Competition, Profile Books, 3A Exmouth House, Pine Street, London EC1R 0JH. The deadline is Monday November 7. The winning poem will be announced on December 10 and published by the Telegraph. The judges are David Crystal, Lorna Bradbury, Deputy Literary Editor of the Telegraph, and Sam Humphreys, an editor at Profile.

**\* *The Story of English in 100 Words* by David Crystal is published by Profile at t 11.99 from [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://books.telegraph.co.uk)**

## **THE LIST**

- 1 Roe The first word (5th c)
- 2 Lea Naming places (8th c)
- 3 And An early abbreviation (8th c)
- 4 Loaf An unexpected origin (9th c)
- 5 Out Changing grammar (9th c)
- 6 Street A Latin loan (9th c)
- 7 Mead A window into history (9th c)
- 8 Merry A dialect survivor (9th c)
- 9 Riddle Playing with language (10th c)



- 10 What An early exclamation (10th c)
- 11 Bone-house A word-painting (10th c)
- 12 Brock A Celtic arrival (10th c)
- 13 English The language named (10th c)
- 14 Bridegroom Popular etymology (11th c)
- 15 Arse An impolite word (11th c)
- 16 Swain A poetic expression (12th c)
- 17 Pork An elegant word (13th c)
- 18 Chattels A legal word (13th c)
- 19 Dame A form of address (13th c)
- 20 Skirt A word doublet (13th c)
- 21 Jail Or Gaol? Competing words (13th c)
- 22 Take away A phrasal verb (13th c)
- 23 Cuckoo A sound-symbolic word (13th c)
- 24 C--- A taboo word (13th c)
- 25 Wicked A radical alteration (13th c)
- 26 Wee A Scottish contribution (14th c)
- 27 Grammar A surprising link (14th c)
- 28 Valentine First name into word (14th c)
- 29 Egg A dialect choice (14th c)
- 30 Royal Word triplets (14th c)
- 31 Money A productive idiom (14th c)
- 32 Music A spelling in evolution (14th c)



- 33 Taffeta An early trade word (14th c)
- 34 Information(s) (Un)countable nouns (14th c)
- 35 Gaggle A collective noun (15th c)
- 36 Doable A mixing of languages (15th c)
- 37 Matrix A word from Tyndale (16th c)
- 38 Alphabet Talking about writing (16th c)
- 39 Potato A European import (16th c)
- 40 Debt A spelling reform (16th c)
- 41 Ink-horn A classical food (16th c)
- 42 Dialect Regional variation (16th c)
- 43 Bodgery Word-coiners (16th c)
- 44 Undeaf A word from Shakespeare  
(16th c)
- 45 Skunk An early Americanism (17th c)
- 46 Shibboleth A word from the King James Bible (17th c)
- 47 Bloody Emerging swear word (17th c)
- 48 Lakh A word from India (17th c)
- 49 Fopdoodle A lost word (17th c)
- 50 Billion A confusing ambiguity (17th c)
- 51 Yogurt A choice of spelling (17th c)
- 52 Gazette A taste of journalese (17th c)
- 53 Tea A social word (17th c)
- 54 Disinterested A confusable (17th c)



- 55 Polite A matter of manners (17th c)
- 56 Dilly-dally A reduplicating word (17th c)
- 57 Rep A clipping (17th c)
- 58 Americanism A new nation (18th c)
- 59 Edit A back-information (18th c)
- 60 Species Classifying things (18th c)
- 61 Ain't Right and wrong (18th c)
- 62 Trek A word from Africa (19th c)
- 63 Hello Progress through technology (19th c)
- 64 Dragsman Thieves' cant (19th c)
- 65 Lunch U or non-U (19th c)
- 66 Dude A cool usage (19th c)
- 67 Brunch A portmanteau word (19th c)
- 68 Dinkum A word from Australia (19th c)
- 69 Mipela Pidgin English (19th c)
- 70 Schmooze A Yiddishism (19th c)
- 71 OK Debatable origins (19th c)
- 72 Ology Suffix into word (19th c)
- 73 Y'all A new pronoun (19th c)
- 74 Speech-craft An Anglo-Saxonism  
(19th c)
- 75 DNA Scientific terminology (20th c)
- 76 Garage A pronunciation problem



(20th c)

77 Escalator Word into name into word (20th c)

78 Robot A global journey (20th c)

79 UFO Alternative forms (20th c)

80 Watergate Place-name into word (20th c)

81 Doublespeak Weasel words (20th c)

82 Doobry Useful nonsense (20th c)

83 Blurb A moment of arrival (20th c)

84 Strine A comic effect (20th c)

85 Alzheimer's Surname into word

(20th c)

86 Grand Money slang (20th c)

87 Mega Prefix into word (20th c)

88 Gotcha A non-standard spelling

(20th c)

89 PC Being politically correct (20th c)

90 Bagonise A nonce-word (20th c)

91 Webzine An internet compound

(20th c)

92 App A killer abb (20th c)

93 Cherry-picking Corporate speak (20th c)

94 LOL Netspeak (20th c)

95 Jazz Word of the century (20th c)



96 Sudoku A modern loan (21st c)

97 Muggle A fiction word (21st c)

98 Chillax A fashionable blend (21st c)

99 Unfriend A new age (21st c)

100 Twittersphere Future directions? (21st c)

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