

The Mother Tongue Study Guide

The Mother Tongue by Bill Bryson

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Plot Summary

This nonfiction piece is a collection of thoughts on the English language, its history, and its place in the world. Bryson uses humor as well as scholarship to guide the reader through the various linguistic and social movements that result in the English language. The challenges of the modern world are reflected in the challenges of the English language as it both dominates abroad and seeks protection in its homelands. Bryson provides the reader with a fully fleshed out understanding of the English language and draws from some of its greatest users, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, to make his points clear.

After a quick examination of the role that English plays in the world today, Bryson goes back in time to study the origins of language itself. After explaining the physical properties that enabled early humans to speak, Bryson traces the initial human communities as they make their way across Europe to found what is today the United Kingdom. The history of the language on this island is full of interesting twists and turns as the language shifts with each change in power. From the Celts and the Romans to the Anglo Saxons and the Normans, the language of England grows and develops with each new wave of immigration and takes into itself words and ideas from far-flung corners.

The transient nature of the English language continues as the English speaking colonies of the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand develop into their own national identities with their own brands of English. While many have historically feared that the English language would splinter all over the world, in fact, the language has managed to incorporate the new and different accents into a world language that no one country owns. The influences between the colonies and the United Kingdom shift and change each other so that all English speaking countries are affected by the range of English available in the world and are able to connect to a variety of different accents and cultures around the world.

In addition to the history of language, Bryson examines how language functions. He charts its changing pronunciation and spelling and discusses how the language that currently exists today reflects the prejudices of many centuries of printed material. Tracing the influence of Shakespeare and other notable figures in the development of language, he also provides historical and linguistic detail about the first printed books, linguistic studies, and dictionaries of the English language.

A final section of the book deals with the lighthearted side of the language question. Here, Bryson examines the ins and outs of swearing as well as explaining the naming traditions for people and places in the English-speaking world. Bryson also includes a section on word games in English and demonstrates their popularity as an expression of the cultures that have produced them. This humorous side balances against the more elaborate scholarship that attends the rest of the book.



Chapter 1 The World's Language

Chapter 1 The World's Language Summary and Analysis

Bryson discusses the place of English in the world, including both successful and unsuccessful use of the language by non-native speakers. English words and phrases have entered the vocabularies of many other languages around the world, reflecting the power that English has in the modern world. English is often the neutral language chosen for international businesses that have workers and management that speak different native languages. English language learning, therefore, is a large industry throughout the world.

Bryson compares and contrasts English to other world languages and discusses the relative merits of the different ways that language is constructed. On one hand, English has a vocabulary that is significantly larger than other languages, allowing speakers to express ideas that are more precise. Similarly, English grammar has some complexities that allow speakers to make distinctions not available in other languages. On the other hand, many languages make distinctions that the English language does not, and have specific words for conditions that do not have an English equivalent. English, therefore, needs to borrow these words.

Bryson goes into a long exploration about the groups of words that certain languages have to express and that the English language expresses with one general category word. He argues that English lacks such words because these words are not necessary for the lives of the average English native speaker, though they may be necessary to the lives of the speakers of other languages.

Some believe the English language has another advantage in its flexibility. Grammatical features such as active and passive voice give English speakers a greater range of expression. However, such grammatical rules can make learning English unnecessarily complicated to the point that many native speakers cannot adequately describe the grammatical structure of many expressions.

There is debate about the simplicity of English spelling and pronunciation. While the relationship between spelling and spoken English is simpler than some languages, it is far more difficult than others. Bryson attributes much of the discussion on spelling and pronunciation to the prejudices that speakers of one language have about another. The problem is shown through the ways that native speakers of English tend to think their language is superior.

English avoids many of the complexities of address that are present in other languages. The simple "you" of English cuts out many of the social markers of other languages. Similarly, the lack of grammatical gender is often cited as an equalizing force in English. This tendency continues in the conciseness of the language, particularly in its use of



acronyms and jargon. At the same time, the complexity of English can be difficult to explain to non-native speakers, as many words are used in many different ways that do not have fixed rules.

This opening chapter brings up some of the basic questions that will be covered throughout the book. One of the most subjective of these questions is the debate on the superiority of English over other languages. Throughout the book, Bryson will explore the relative strengths and weaknesses of English, and will usually side with the idea that English is special because of its flexibility of use. At the same time, however, Bryson's exploration of the complexities of English, such as spelling, pronunciation, and word use, calls into question the idea that English is superior to other languages. One of the other issues that this chapter sets up is the dominance of English abroad and its use as an international language. Bryson points out the many ways that English is misused abroad and begins to speculate about the place of English in the international community.



Chapter 2 The Dawn of Language

Chapter 2 The Dawn of Language Summary and Analysis

Bryson draws on archaeological evidence to show the development of human speech. The difference between Cro-Magnon man and Neanderthal is reduced to the place of the larynx, or voice box, in the throat. The larynx of the species that eventually became human beings was deeper in the throat, allowing Cro-Magnon people to have a wider range of sounds to use in developing a spoken language. The Neanderthals were unable to keep up with the Cro-Magnons because they were unable to communicate on the same level of complexity.

Building on the foundations of language, human speech spread throughout the world. In many cases, languages are clearly related to one another, but sometimes the differences between languages bring up interesting questions about their origins and place within the human story. Many of the related languages come from people widely distanced by geography. Many theories argue that languages are related by certain sounds or sound clusters that are necessary for basic speech, including onomatopoeia, which is the use of words to represent the sound made by something.

Some linguists argue that children learn to speak their respective languages by listening to their parents and imitating them. However, other linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, argue that children bring with them certain "ground rules" that help them learn language. This idea is based on the idea that children have an inherent interest in speech sounds as opposed to other sounds. Furthermore, children from different language backgrounds go through many of the same stages when learning to speak, showing a clear progression toward a grammatical complexity and fluency. Such learning is not explained simply by the contact that children have with parents. Grammar knowledge comes from an inherent ability in the child while vocabulary relies largely on the child's exposure to the speech of their primary caregiver. One of the most interesting cases of this is in the development of a pidgin into a Creole. In this case, children develop the structure of the pidgin into a fully formed grammatical language, a Creole, which has many features not used or developed by the parent generation.

This idea leads to the theories of how languages around the world contain common foundations. Sir William Jones, a British judge, is one of the first to recognize the similarities between the ancient language of Sanskrit and languages of Europe. This leads to the development of the Indo-European language family. Many competing theories exist as to where the original Indo-European group lived or how they spread across India and Europe. English is an Indo-European language. It is part of a smaller West Germanic subgroup.

Other Indo-European subgroups important to English and Celtic, once spoken across Europe but now mainly heard in the Scottish Highlands, and Latin, once the language of



the Roman Empire and in modern times the root of the Romance Languages, such as French and Spanish. Many of the changes from Latin to the Romance languages show a division between the speech of the upper classes of Rome, which are not seen in the Romance languages, and the speech of the common people, or vulgate, which shows a clear root word relationship to the modern Romance languages.

This chapter traces the anthropological history of the human race. Bryson points to evidence that the positioning of the larynx gives human beings the ability to speak to the degree of complexity that they are able to. This gives human beings an advantage over other human-like species that are not able to develop the same level of complexity in their own speech abilities. From this beginning, Bryson expands his historical survey to include the various kinds of languages and to give some modern theories about how the human community branched out and fractured into the many different language groups there are today. He takes the history of language to the point where several language groups in Europe emerge to form what is now English.



Chapter 3 Global Language

Chapter 3 Global Language Summary and Analysis

Bryson considers the nature of language and comments on the elements that English lacks but which other languages have, as well as the elements lacking in other languages that are present in English. In addition to these linguistic differences, many cultural differences exist in the physical communication strategies available, such as proximity between speakers, hand gestures, and facial expressions.

Languages change over time, and often die out as the group of native speakers dies out or switches over to languages that are more popular. The English language has changed considerably to the point that modern and historical versions of English are often not mutually intelligible. In addition, many languages go beyond national borders, creating language areas rather than countries. Many languages overlap geographically or are used for different activities by the same group. These language issues are often political, as different language groups fight for recognition or equality in a country.

Language differences within a country are often divisive. French and English speaking areas of Canada are often at odds over bilingual policies. The Basque Country of Spain often engages in violence to protect its language. Welsh speakers have been successful in protecting and promoting the language in Wales while Gaelic in Ireland has fallen out despite large government support of the language. Many minority languages face similar situations, with most inevitably dying out.

Bryson turns from the specific history of English to discuss how languages change and develop in general. One of the topics that he returns to throughout the book is the subject of minority languages that die out through social or political oppression. This sets up an interesting parallel to English, which has gone through many stages of change and disuse. In this chapter, Bryson hopes to provide the backdrop of language politics to help the reader navigate through the specific history of English and see how it compares with other languages throughout the world. In this way, Bryson shows that English has been affected by many of the same problems and predicaments as other languages.



Chapter 4 The First Thousand Years

Chapter 4 The First Thousand Years Summary and Analysis

Bryson traces the development of English on the island of what is now the United Kingdom. Under Roman occupation, the Celtic tribes control much of the island. After the Romans leave England in A.D. 450, several Germanic tribes migrate to the island. The Angles, Jutes, and Saxons settle in England over several generations. The Angle tribe gives the future land of England its name. Compared to the Celts, who are strongly influenced by Roman culture, the Angles are uncultured and illiterate. Much of the information that modern scholars have to work with comes from the Venerable Bede, a monk who writes a book on the History of England. Many words in modern English can be traced to Celtic and Anglo Saxon roots. Written English owes a debt to St. Augustine, who brings Christianity and literacy to the island. The process from Old English to modern English is a long and convoluted one. Modern speakers would probably not recognize Old English as English at all.

The next major change comes with the Vikings who attack England as well as much of the rest of Europe. In 850, Danish Vikings establish a large presence in Northern England. Many words and elements of grammar come into English through its contact with the Danish. The final big invasion comes in 1066 when the Normans, who have previously settled in France, invade England. The Normans bring with them French language and culture. The change to the language creates a class-based system in which French words are used for things appropriate to the upper class, and Anglo-Saxon words are applied to things related to the common people. English becomes heavily influenced by French and still shows it in the modern day. Because the official language is French, English is able to develop among the common people without much supervision. Because of this, many of the more complicated grammatical forms drop out and simplify. Sometime in the 12th century, Middle English emerges and begins to resemble modern English. Slowly, the Norman connection to France drops away until English is the common language of all the people of England.

The regional differences in England are quite pronounced. People from different regions have a difficult time understanding each other. London slowly emerges as a national center. The English language goes through immense changes as the regional dialects battle for inclusion in the national language. Though the London dialect primarily dominates, other pockets of words reflect other regional dialects. Because English is in flux, writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare are able to invent new words and phrases. Shakespeare's own writing is unavailable. Only the copies produced by his friends and admirers exist to show the way that Shakespeare used language. Those who made copies of his work might have added many of the language changes attributed to Shakespeare.



The history of the English language follows a long and slow development in which elements of many languages are combined to form English. The beginnings of English in the Celtic tribes of England are affected by the series of invasions from other groups, including the Vikings, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Normans. With each of these invasions, the language spoken on the island changes significantly in order to respond to the changing power structures and necessities of daily life. What Bryson is keen to point out, however, is that the language of the common people, though constantly changing, remained spoken and in common use. Bryson uses this to show how English is different from many languages that have died out due to invasion and political power struggles. Instead of viewing English as a battle for dominance, Bryson envisions it as a cohesive structure that develops out of the material available.



Chapter 5 Where Words Come From

Chapter 5 Where Words Come From Summary and Analysis

Bryson begins his exploration of English vocabulary, including the many gaps that exist in the English language. At the same time, he shows the wealth of synonyms that allow a speaker to express their own class status in addition to the range of their vocabulary. In addition, Bryson points out words that have multiple meanings, including the most striking example being the word "fine," which can be used in many, often unrelated, ways. In order to explain how English develops the complex vocabulary it has today, Bryson posits several overall ways that new words are created and become part of the language.

Bryson first examines the category of words that are created by error. In these cases, word formation comes from some misunderstanding. Some words result from the mishearing of a word that sounds similar. The context in which that word is heard encourages the listener and speaker to change its pronunciation slightly in order to form a new word. Often, words are created by the method of applying the grammatical rules of another type of word and creating new grammatical structures, such as creating verbs from nouns or singular nouns from plurals. Lastly, in this group are the words that are mistaken by famous authors. Bryson points out such mistakes by Shakespeare and Robert Browning.

The second category of words includes words adopted from other languages. The words that enter English have often already undergone adaptations in several other languages before being adopted in English. This gives English several related words from the same roots that show various cultural influences. Often these words develop a very different connotation from what they are in their original language. In addition, many adopted words are changed to reflect English phonology, making them almost unrecognizable in their original languages.

The third category is words that are created. Many words have no origin but spring up independently to describe both familiar and unfamiliar things. Sometimes words fall out of fashion only to be picked up later. Writers are often responsible for coining new words and introducing them into the language. Shakespeare, in particular, invents over a thousand new words. Many of these invented words do not enter mainstream English, but those that do appear indispensable to modern English speakers. The tendency to invent new words continues in the present day, particularly in the technology and government organization areas.

The fourth category of words includes those that change meaning over time. Many words have changed their meanings so drastically over time that they now mean the opposite of what they once did. This process of changing meaning makes much written English of the past confusing to the modern reader. Many clichés are based on this

principle, where the original meaning of the words and the modern meaning are drastically different.

The last category is those words created by adding or subtracting word parts. Many suffixes and prefixes are added, subtracted, or otherwise manipulated to create new words. This leads to the large but inconsistent use of affixes in the English language. In addition, many words are created by the combination of other words; thereby, giving English its commonplace compound noun formations.

Bryson explores how new words are coined in English. English is well known for the breadth of its vocabulary and its use of synonyms to express shades of meaning. Bryson explains how many of the words in English came to be and how this effects the speaking of English today. The ways in which words are coined in the past continue to influence how new words are added to the language today. One of the key points that Bryson makes in this chapter is that the English language is not controlled or monitored by an academic group. Instead, common people are able to affect the vocabulary of the language when they choose to use a new word or to create a new word to describe a thing or condition that is important to their daily life.



Chapter 6 Pronunciation

Chapter 6 Pronunciation Summary and Analysis

Bryson discusses the changing pronunciation of English over time. One of the points that he mentions is that the vowel system of English has a range of possibilities that are not available in other languages. This combines with the complex spelling rules for vowels to create a language for which the pronunciation rules can be very difficult to define. Bryson compares English to other languages that have clearer sound-spelling relationships, and discusses how English speakers categorize their language differently in order to make up for the complexity of spelling-pronunciation rules.

Bryson examines how many words have changed pronunciation given the regional pronunciations of various speakers. Another aspect that influences pronunciation is the slurring of speech that many English speakers use when speaking very quickly or informally. The slurring of speech is common to most English speakers, though many like to point to specific regions or nationalities. One example of a place given special concern for its pronunciation is Baltimore, Maryland, where the art of slurring words makes it difficult for people outside this area to understand the Baltimore English-speaking people. Many professionals who work in occupations where it is very important to be understood precisely develop special codes to communicate better. Pilots, for example, developed some expressions to make numbers and letters clearer when communicating by radio.

One of the historical issues explored in this chapter is the Great Vowel Shift. This occurs in English sometime in the 1500s and leads to great changes in how English speakers pronounce vowels. This makes works written earlier, such as Chaucer, difficult for modern English speakers to read aloud. It also shows itself in the inconsistent spellings of Shakespeare and other writers who worked during the time when this pronunciation shift occurs. The Great Vowel Shift explains why there are so many ways to spell things in English. The theory is that, at one time, these different ways of spelling corresponded to distinct pronunciations, but today those words are all pronounced the same way.

This chapter emphasizes the regional nature of English. Many English speakers promote the particular variety of English that they speak while ridiculing how speakers from other regions speak. Bryson argues, however, that many of the things that regional accents are criticized for are common throughout the English speaking world to a lesser or greater degree. At the same time, however, Bryson is able to point out specific examples to illustrate his points, such as slurring and the addition of letters to words.

The other major focus of this chapter returns to Bryson's historical survey of the English language. The Great Vowel Shift is significant because it allows Bryson to explain some of the spelling and pronunciation issues in English from an historical perspective. This information gives more weight to his discussion of Chaucer and Shakespeare and why the two writers are so difficult for modern readers to easily understand. The Great Vowel

Shift provides the historical context that Bryson will rely on throughout his remaining discussion of the changing nature of English.



Chapter 7 Varieties of English

Chapter 7 Varieties of English Summary and Analysis

Bryson begins this chapter with some of the more humorous examples of the ways English is spoken in regions throughout the world. The emphasis is that all English speakers can understand each other despite the differences in vocabulary and pronunciation. One of the interesting ideas that he introduces is that English in the United Kingdom is more varied than it is in the United States, though he goes on to present evidence both for and against this idea.

Bryson attempts to divide the United States into distinct accents but recognizes the futility of such a task. The regional accents overlap each other and provide smaller and smaller areas where people all speak with the same accent. Instead, Bryson argues, there are regional trends where there are common accent features but no large region contains speakers who all speak in exactly the same way. Many linguists have tried to organize information about how people in North America speak English but the project is so large that the information collected is largely out of date by the time it is ready for publication. One instance in particular is the DARE, or Dictionary of American Regional English.

Bryson explores how different vocabulary and pronunciation take hold in different regions of the world. The difference between American and British English vocabulary is examined to show how some terms gain a new spin on their original meaning while others hold their original meaning. Interestingly, many words in American English keep the original meaning of a word while the British develop a specific change to what the word once meant. At the same time, the pronunciations of many words in America reflect what American speakers think that British speakers say and attempt to imitate them.

The chapter focuses on the differences between British and American English while providing some commentary on how the languages vary within the nation as well. One of the interesting ironies provided in this chapter is the American preoccupation with imitation of British expressions and pronunciations. Often, in the attempt to imitate the British, American speakers use words and pronunciation that are not British at all, or that have long since fallen out of fashion in Britain. At the same time, Bryson provides similar examples of how the lower classes of Britain imitate the upper classes and result in pronunciation that is quite different from the original model. In this way, Bryson stresses how the varieties of English are heavily influenced by social reasons, often as one group seeks to belong to another that they think is of higher status.



Chapter 8 Spelling

Chapter 8 Spelling Summary and Analysis

The writing system of English comes from a long process developing from pictographs to a phonetic system. This writing system allows English speakers to efficiently communicate in writing where other pictographic systems struggle to teach the written language. This leads to a discussion of Asian pictographic languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, and the relevant advantages and disadvantages of such systems. While there is a lesser sound-symbol connection, the use of pictographs allows a greater range of dialects to communicate using the same system as well as the ability to connect modern and ancient texts.

Spelling in English is viewed as difficult or simple depending on the point of view. Many words follow multiple spelling patterns or none at all. Often, the choice of spelling in English is based on how the word entered the English language, usually modifying the spelling or pronunciation of a new word. At the same time, many historical spellings are preserved in the same way, though the modern pronunciation has drastically changed. Because there is no official authority over the English language for many centuries, a variety of spelling patterns manage to take root and have remained so ever since.

Spelling throughout English language history has often neglected concern over imposing standardized rules. For centuries, spelling has been random and many writers spell the same word differently within the same sentence. Names, as well as regular words, are spelled a variety of ways. The invention of the printing press begins to change this by both bringing some uniformity to the language while preserving many of the more random spelling patterns in English. The printing revolution in England begins in the 1500s and encourages the adoption of a standardized spelling system. This leads to the dominance of the London area pronunciation and spelling throughout England.

The problem with the standardization is that it takes place during a time when English pronunciation is in flux. For this reason, modern spellings reflect the phonetic system used in the 1500s rather than what is used today. Another issue in printed English is the need to conform to the rules of Latin as English spellings are changed to reflect their Latin roots. Another point is that English adopts foreign words without changing their spellings.

The problems lead many to propose spelling reform to make English more phonetic and logical. Ben Franklin and Noah Webster championed the simplification of English spelling. The idea of spelling reform continues throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, producing organizations such as the American Philological Association and the Simplified Spelling Board. Government support through the National Education Association and some politicians succeeded in some changes. Though the movement eventually dies out, many public figures, such as George Bernard Shaw, insist on the use of simplified spellings in their published works.



On a positive note, English spellings allow for distinctions between commonly pronounced words. Similarly, the phonetic spelling of each regional dialect would make it difficult to have a national standardized spelling system.

Bryson attributes the English spelling system to the development of the printing press. Previous to this invention, people spelled things in a variety of ways. The printing press provides the necessary standardization to make people in different parts of the country spell things the same way. Unfortunately for modern readers and writers, these spelling conventions reflected the pronunciation of speakers of the historical period. English has shifted fundamentally since then, but the spellings remain the same.

Many people advocate spelling reform to make the English language easier to read and write. While some of these reforms have taken root, many have not. One thing to consider, argues Bryson, is that regional pronunciations vary so much that a phonetic spelling system would not be able to catch these varieties. Instead of one written language that all English speakers can understand, there would have to be many different spelling varieties to accommodate all the different pronunciation styles of English speakers.



Chapter 9 Good English and Bad

Chapter 9 Good English and Bad Summary and Analysis

Bryson discusses the grammatical aspects of the English language with particular attention to parts of speech and how words are used in different ways to express both different and similar meanings. He gives many examples of how English grammar is misused, even by academic experts on the subject. One of the reasons for this, according to Bryson, is that English grammar rules are based on Latin, which has a different grammatical structure than English.

Attempts to analyze and regulate the English language go back sometime and eventually result in various organizations that left no lasting changes. The proposals of national academies, such as the Academie Francaise, have generally failed as reforming tools. Instead, the language is left to academic and public figures to use and often misuse. Bryson explores a range of issues in English grammar that have no absolute necessity but are prohibited by various academic circles and grammar publications.

Academies insisting on some of the most illogical rules of English grammar do so out of prejudice and conditioning in that those rules have been passed down over generations or which conform to one social group that is looked at as superior for no reason other than the initial prejudice. This argument continues in the modern debates over how words are used in dictionaries. All of this points to the initial understanding that English is a language of constant change that cannot be confined to arbitrary rules on the authority of academics.

One of the major issues that Bryson emphasizes throughout the book is that a higher authority does not control the English language. Instead, English is the language of the people who speak it. These speakers change and develop the language through natural social channels rather than follow the rules set out by academics. In this chapter, Bryson attempts to debunk many of the spelling and grammar rules that are not understood by the average person and argues that these rules are invented by academics and therefore have no real role in how English is spoken and written.

Bryson shows many of the failed efforts of academics to reform the language, and uses France as a consistent example of how language can be controlled by an academic system instead of following natural social forces. Bryson's argument is that as English comes into its own as a modern language of international importance there will be less need on the part of academics to make English seem important by imposing rules that have no real purpose.



Chapter 10 Order Out of Chaos

Chapter 10 Order Out of Chaos Summary and Analysis

Bryson describes the difficulty of determining both the number of words in the English language and how many of these words the average person knows and uses. Part of this problem is the unreliability of dictionaries to describe the meanings of words as well as list all the words known to speakers of English. Because English grows and changes at such a fast rate, it is practically impossible for a dictionary to keep up.

Though other dictionaries existed before, the one written by Samuel Johnson is one of the longest standing early examples of an English language dictionary. This dictionary is published in 1755 after nine years of work and contains over 43,000 words. It has numerous misspellings and other errors but also many definitions with political overtones that express Johnson's views of life.

Noah Webster's dictionary surpasses that of Johnson's. Webster begins writing spelling textbooks before moving on to writing a dictionary of over 70,000 words. This achievement is trumped forty years later by the long collection that created the Oxford English Dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary stands as the largest collection of information on the English language with over 600,000 words.

The descriptions of various dictionary projects show the complexities of organizing the English language as well as the social issues involved. In this chapter, Bryson focuses on the personalities that composed the first dictionaries in English and how their personal lives are reflected in their work. It is interesting to see the irony of how the personal affects something that most readers find to be boring and objective. Instead, the personality of the dictionary writer shows through, such as in Johnson's word choice and humorous definitions.

In addition, Bryson stresses the huge human effort to compose such dictionaries and the years of hard work that goes into them. At the same time, however, Bryson shows how the dictionaries are plagued with many of the same problems of other human endeavors. The monumental scope of the project is far beyond the people to set out to make it. After each long diligent process to form a new dictionary, the work is immediately out of date as new words develop in the ever-changing English speaking world.



Chapter 11 Old World New World

Chapter 11 Old World New World Summary and Analysis

English went through many changes as it advanced to North America. Settlers borrowed many words from Native American languages, Spanish, and French to describe places and objects in their new environment. In addition, they created new compound words and gave new meanings to old words. One of the most interesting of these new words is "O.K." which has several theories of origin. One theory is that it is the initials of some authority figure who stamped their initials on objects as a type of quality assurance. The second theory is that it comes from the name of a place. The third theory is that the intentional misspelling "oll correct" is abbreviated by some social wits of the 1800s.

The other major language issue in North America is the assimilation of immigrant groups. Rather than breaking into many small language pockets, the immigrant groups to North America quickly adopted English as a national language and abandoned the languages of their parents. The English of North America preserves many words that died out in England or kept their original meaning, while that the same words in England changed or became more specific.

There have been many American words added to the British vocabulary despite academic protest and belittling of the American English language. In the modern age, there are many American terms borrowed by the British, including many grammatical styles and word usages. Overall, the American influence in the twentieth century has been quite strong and introduced many new words and expressions into British life.

One of the issues that Bryson returns to throughout the book are the differences between British and American English. The underlying dynamic between the two countries is one that puts a lot of social pressure on how people communicate in the language. On the one hand, the British generally look down on American pronunciation and vocabulary and have historically tried to eliminate it from British habits. On the other hand, Americans have often tried to imitate British pronunciation and vocabulary because it has a high prestige in North America.

The irony, however, is that the words that enter the modern vocabulary of both nations generally come from the United States. In fact, as Bryson points out, many of the new words that enter other languages throughout the world come from the entertainment and technology fields that originate in the United States. In this way, the influence of American English has slowly seeped into modern British culture, through this use of international entertainment and technology.



Chapter 12 English as a World Language

Chapter 12 English as a World Language Summary and Analysis

People throughout the world study English, and many other languages have borrowed English words and expressions to illustrate the conditions of modern life. All of these borrowings prompt many to use English as an international language. Many people use English to communicate across borders. Other international languages have been proposed from time to time, including Volapuk, Esperanto, Basic English, and Seaspeak. Each of these languages pass through a period of interest and exploration. Both Seaspeak and Esperanto have continued to find valuable purposes in international communication.

After detailing the ways that other language groups adopt English and apply themselves to diligent study of the language, Bryson laments the lack of such effort on the part of English native speakers to learn other languages, pointing out the errors in translation when English speaking world leaders are forced to rely on the translators provided by other countries. Given the interest in studying English around the world, English speakers are becoming a minority of single-language users around the world. Particular problems of translation are discussed, focusing on Japanese. Translations between English and Japanese are problematic because of the different ways in which the languages are structured, as well as the conditioning of people in each nation about how to communicate. Japan is used as an example of the difficulties of international communication.

Bryson provides the reader with examples of how the world has attempted to create a world language. After showing the problems with various created languages, Bryson argues that English is already ready to serve this function as an international language. The reason for this is the dedication of people throughout the world to learn English for the purpose of communication. One of the ironies that Bryson shows in this chapter is that while English grows into an international language, native English speakers become more closed off from learning other languages. In this way, English speakers develop all over the world but the native speakers of English narrow their language use and rely on translators rather than on learning other languages.



Chapter 13 Names

Chapter 13 Names Summary and Analysis

Bryson discusses a variety of naming traditions in the English-speaking world. As far as people are concerned, he discusses the process of the development of the British surname from Middle Ages to the present, explaining many of the strange and confusing pronunciations and combinations that develop into modern British surnames. A similar study is made of American surnames, tracing the immigrant names that adapt and change to suit American pronunciation and spelling patterns.

In addition to people names, place names have also had a similar process in both England and America. The original names in Celtic or Native American times have slowly shifted in spelling and pronunciation over time so that often the modern name looks or is spelled in a way that greatly contrasts with its original name or meaning.

Commercial names also go through a period of change and adaptation as they seek to reach a worldwide market. Many companies branding themselves abroad have to consider how the new name translates into many languages to avoid creating a new name that would sound negative to customers abroad.

Bryson provides this look at naming traditions in English to explore many of the issues he mentions earlier in the book. The shifts in pronunciation of place names is particularly telling of how English speakers have changed their pronunciation over time, thus making it difficult for those not raised in the same system to be able to pronounce place names in the same way as those who have. The same processes occur on both sides of the Atlantic, showing that this tendency is something common to both nations rather than just the result of one group's interactions. The old Celtic and Native American names present similar problems and English speakers develop similar solutions as they adapt the names into English.



Chapter 14 Swearing

Chapter 14 Swearing Summary and Analysis

Bryson traces the development of swear words in English and other languages. Throughout English literature, spoken swear words have been largely unrecorded and are difficult to trace. The use of modern swear words has evolved over time, adapting terms from other languages or slowly changing the meaning of words over time. Many modern swear words come from words used in polite speech centuries ago. On the other hand, many words which were once taboo are not considered quite innocent.

Many swear words come from a religious context and are slowly changed and made socially acceptable. Looking at historical examples, such as those in Shakespeare's works, it is possible to see the development of religious curses into expletives and vice versa. The history of swear words takes on a different turn in later generations as society becomes more concerned with polite speech, leading to more restrictions on the use of swear words in public. This trend is seen on both sides of the Atlantic and results in changes to many words seen as indecent. In modern times, the tendency to censor swear words continues more in the US than England, but both countries struggle with the place of expletives in public life. Some swear words have acquired different meanings in each country.

Swearing in English is difficult to trace because it is typically spoken rather than written down. For this reason, it is difficult for historians to know what kinds of swear words are used in the past. This ties in with Bryson's overall idea that it is difficult to trace the history of language using only the written records that remain today. Many of the issues that Bryson examines from an historical perspective show the creativity and ingenuity of historians to piece together a record of the human community without definitive proof.

The other issue Bryson deals with relates the historical and the modern. Censorship in the modern age follows many of the same lines as the historical one. This shows that swear words must have been more common in the spoken language of people than they are shown in the written record. The modern censorship issue reflects a long-standing concern with how language is represented in a public forum, and how it is regulated in a way that is not possible to regulate spoken English.



Chapter 15 Wordplay

Chapter 15 Wordplay Summary and Analysis

Bryson describes the history of various word games, beginning with the crossword puzzle, which is invented by an American newspaper editor in 1913. The crossword puzzle is not accepted as an intellectual exercise until several decades later when intellectual papers such as the London Times and New York Times began printing them. Another popular word game is Scrabble, which is invented in 1931 and becomes widespread in 1953. The palindrome is another arduous word game in which a sentence must be read the same backward and forward. The anagram rearranges the letters in a word to describe it. The rebus uses letters and symbols to give a coded message, such as is commonly seen in American license plates. A holorime is a line that sounds two distinct ways because of the combination of sounds. This is heard when people misquote the lyrics of songs. Another English pastime deals with misused words, such as the spoonerisms, or phrases with transposed words, made by Reverend Spooner in the early 1900s. Other language games include boontling, a made-up language of a small town in California. The rhyming slang of the cockneys of the East End of London also has an element of wordplay.

Bryson's analysis of word games in English continues the idea that English is somehow special and superior to other languages. Bryson uses the word games available in English to show the versatility and cleverness of English speakers in devising word tricks. Much of Bryson's commentary is positive and filled with descriptions that show how English is specially made to accommodate these word games that other languages are not capable of or interested in playing.



Chapter 16 The Future of English

Chapter 16 The Future of English Summary and Analysis

Bryson covers many of the modern discussions on the status of English and its future role in the world. One of the main issues is the English-only movement in the US that seeks to make English the official language and limit the use of other languages. The reaction to the large and growing Hispanic population of the US prompts this movement, though very little actual change has been made. The other major issue is the fragmenting of different forms of English, such as those of America, England, and Australia. While some believe that these areas will develop mutually unintelligible dialects, Bryson posits that such predictions have been made in the past and that none are likely to come true.

Bryson examines many of the issues in modern day English speaking countries. One of these issues he treats with great irony. This issue is the protection of English in the United States and Britain by those speakers of English who feel threatened by those who speak other languages. Bryson points out that the English language is growing throughout the world and is in no danger of dying out or even suffering minor losses. He argues that the ideas of groups such as those who campaign for English as the official language of the country are not based on reality but instead on a loss of power and dominance. Bryson argues that English is poised to remain a strong force in the international arena for quite a long time to come and that English will continue to grow, change, and develop, as it has throughout its history.



Characters

Samuel Johnson

Noah Webster

George Bernard Shaw

William Shakespeare

The Anglo Saxons

The Normans

The Celts

The Romans

Geoffrey Chaucer

Noam Chomsky

Sir William Jones

Cro-Magnon

Venerable Bede



Objects/Places

The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom consists of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Each of these areas has experienced long-term language shift. This shift is generally toward English and away from other regional languages such as Welsh, Gaelic, Cornish, and others. The book often uses the United Kingdom and Britain interchangeably.

Wales

Wales is one of the parts of the United Kingdom. Historically, Wales has been dominated by England and its citizens forced to speak English. In modern times, however, there is a great deal of interest in preserving the Welsh language and promoting Welsh culture.

Ireland

Ireland is controlled by Britain for many centuries until reaching independence in the modern era. Ireland has worked diligently to preserve and restore the Gaelic language in Ireland as a sign of national pride. However, these attempts have proven unsuccessful and the language is quickly disappearing in Ireland.

London

London is the capital of Great Britain. It is also the center of printing of the English language. For this reason, the London dialect of English has taken center stage among written and spoken versions of English.

Baltimore

Baltimore is mentioned as a location in the United States where people slur their words to a great degree.

DARE

The Dictionary of American Regional English attempts to describe all the accents found in North America. This task is very time consuming and the books published to describe language are quickly out of date.



The Great Vowel Shift

The Great Vowel Shift occurs sometime in the 1500s. The pronunciation of English vowels changes to produce the long and short vowels used today. Historians are unsure why this occurred or exactly when it occurred but they can trace some of the development in the works of writers and poets.

Romance language

Romance languages come from Latin, the language of the Roman Empire. Many languages, such as Italian, Spanish, and French, come from the language of the common people under the Roman Empire, while Latin is the language of the upper classes. Over time, these common languages develop into the national languages today.

Indo-European languages

Indo-European languages originate from a common language ancestor that no longer exists. The languages shifted and changed as people migrated through Europe and India. Sir William Jones discovers the commonalities of Indo-European languages during his study of Sanskrit.

Larynx

The larynx is the voice box. The position of the larynx in modern humans allows humans to use language to a degree of complexity not found in other animals.

Word games

Word games such as crossword puzzles, palindromes, and anagrams are ways to have fun with language. English language word games can range from the very complex to the very simple.

The Oxford English Dictionary

The Oxford English Dictionary is the largest collection of English words to date. Since its beginning in the nineteenth century, the dictionary has grown to accommodate additions to the English language. It is published in large multiple volume sets.

Academie Francaise

The Academie Francaise regulates the use of the French language in France. English has no such organization so the language changes to reflect the real use of regular people.



Themes

The History of English

One of the main ideas to develop throughout the book is the history of English as the continuation of the history of language itself. After humans gain the ability to speak, they spread across the globe and form new language communities. The island of the United Kingdom has a particular historical background that allows the English language to form and develop over time. One of the most dramatic ways that this is shown is through the changing political landscape of the island itself.

The original inhabitants of the island are the Celts. The Celts are taken over by the Romans and adopt many aspects of Roman culture. After the Romans leave the island, a series of Germanic tribes invades the island. These peoples are known as the Anglo Saxons. The Anglo Saxons change the language almost entirely and the modern day language reflects more Anglo Saxon influence than Celtic. The next wave of immigration is from a group of French speaking descendents of the Vikings, known as the Normans. The Normans bring French language and culture. The English language is mainly the language of the common people at this point and begins to show clear influence from the French language.

Eventually, a version of the English that is spoken today becomes the major language of the island. However, change does not stop there. Over time, the grammar and pronunciation of the language change significantly as the different dialects spoken around the island take on a more regular pronunciation and spelling. One of the forces that solidified English is the printing press, which helped to fix spelling and pronunciation rules. The English language continues to change and develop over time.

The Rules of English

The English language is originally the language of the common people and was not spoken by the aristocracy. For this reason, English is allowed to develop and change without any overarching monitoring authority. English borrows words, phrases, and grammatical structures from other languages, particularly French, as it develops its own way of speech and writing.

Throughout the ancient and middle ages, most written work was written out by hand and therefore was full of variations of spelling. The invention of the printing press changed this in that it began to systematize English spelling and establish the London dialect as dominant over the language. Unfortunately for modern readers of the language, the spelling system established at the time of the printing press reflects a much earlier version of English pronunciation and results in the many confusing spelling patterns for modern readers.



The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see a huge interest in systematizing the language and making it more intellectually rigorous. Many of the first comprehensive dictionaries are written at this time, including Samuel Johnson's dictionary, Noah Webster's dictionary, and the Oxford English Dictionary. In addition, many educational groups attempt to regulate the spelling and pronunciation in order to simplify it as well as make it more understandable across different accents.

The Role of English in the World

The English language holds a unique position in the world. Through the imperial ambitions of the British and the commercial ones of the Americans, English has taken on the character of a world language. Millions of people around the world study English as a way to improve their employment and academic prospects. The business of teaching and learning English is a strong growth industry in many parts of the world, including English-speaking countries.

Bryson traces many of the humorous examples of English being used and misused around the world. He points out the different ways that other cultures use English and the problems resulting from the confusion and misunderstanding of non-native speakers. In addition, he regrets that more native speakers of English do not study other foreign languages in order to participate more fully in the exchange of language and ideas.

Bryson also examines many of the serious aspects of the role of English in the world. He looks at the role that English and non-English speakers play in countries such as the United States, where the encroachment of the Spanish language on English dominance is met with fear and anger. The English-only movements that result from such fear show the difficulty of the role that English plays in the world, both at home and abroad.



Style

Perspective

The book is written from a variety of perspectives. In some cases, the author uses the first person to describe his own experiences. In others, he refers to the reader as "you" as though assuming that the reader is also a native speaker of English and is able to commiserate with the author on certain points in the narrative. At still other points, the author uses the third person, usually to describe historical events in an objective way.

The shift of perspective gives the book a very personal and informal tone while still allowing it to cover general ideas in a semi-scholarly way. The reader is sometimes engaged as part of the book and at other times is a more passive observer of the history that Bryson describes. Overall, the changing perspective allows Bryson to include a range of information and maintain a humorous and lightheartedness throughout the book.

Bryson's motivation for writing this book result from his cross continental experiences living in England and the United States. In seeking to explain the differences between the two countries, he also delves into their common linguistic heritage. The book mixes scholarly and personal experience to give it a very anecdotal feel.

Tone

For the most part the book takes on a conversational tone that encourages the reader to engage with the often comical world of language development. The scholarly materials used to give weight to the arguments is usually presented as a broad survey of information with specific details thrown in to give example and clarify meaning. Many examples are used to show the ridiculous or random nature of language development and to question both the motives and the results of those who try to manipulate language history.

The book's author takes a very personal approach and often includes personal experiences or personal questions about language in general and the English language specifically. These anecdotes are usually presented within the scholarly research in order to add a more human element to these informational materials. The author takes great leaps of imagination in working with the surrounding historical literature and posits many conjectures about their relevance to the study of the English language.

Structure

The book is written in a series of chapters. The opening chapters concentrate on the timeline of linguistic development of all languages before shifting to the specific



conditions that created the English language. These chapters provide both a physiological and an historical approach to the development of language.

After establishing the origins of language, Bryson turns to the specific features of the English language that make it unique. His exploration of vocabulary and grammatical structures balances against an interest in the sillier side of language, such as of word games and naming traditions. Included here are also detailed descriptions of the first dictionaries and the methods with which people have organized the English language and how these patterns of organization specifically suit English.



Quotes

"It is often said that what most immediately sets English apart from other languages is the richness of its vocabulary. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* lists 450,000 words, and the revised *Oxford English Dictionary* has 615,000, but that is only part of the total." (Chapter 1)

"Although this was an immensely long time ago - some 20,000 years before the domestication of animals and the rise of farming - these Cro-Magnon people were identical to us: They had the same physique, the same brain, the same looks. And, unlike all previous hominids who roamed the earth, they could choke on food. That may seem a trifling point, but the slight evolutionary change that pushed man's larynx deeper into his throat, and thus made choking a possibility, also brought with it the possibility of sophisticated, well-articulated speech." (Chapter 2)

"All evidence suggests that minority languages shrink or thrive at their own ineluctable rate. It seems not to matter greatly whether governments suppress them brutally or support them lavishly." (Chapter 3)

"There was, in short, a great deal of subtlety and flexibility built into the language, and once they learned to write, they literary outpouring was both immediate and astonishing assured. This cultural flowering found its sharpest focus in the far northern kingdom of Northumbria. Here, on the outermost edge of the civilized world, sprang forth England's first great poet, Caedmon; its first great historian, the Venerable Bede; and its first great scholar, Alcuin of York, who became head of Charlemagne's palace school at Aachen and was one of the progenitors of the Renaissance." (Chapter 4)

"It has been said that English is unique in possessing a synonym for each level of our culture: popular, literary, and scholarly - so that we can, according to our background and cerebral attainments, rise, mount, or ascend a stairway, shrink in fear, terror, or trepidation, and think, ponder, or cogitate upon a problem." (Chapter 5)

"The British authority Simeon Potter says there are forty-four distinct sounds - twelve vowels, nine diphthongs (a kind of gliding vowel), and twenty-three consonants. The International Phonetic Alphabet, perhaps the most widely used, differentiates between fifty-two sounds used in English divided equally between consonants and vowels, while the *American Heritage Dictionary* lists forty-five for purely English sounds, plus a further half-dozen for foreign terms." (Chapter 6)

"A paradox of accents is that in England where people from a common heritage have been living together in a small area for thousands of years, there is still a huge variety of accents, whereas in America, where people from a great mix of backgrounds have been living together in a vast area for a relatively short period, people speak with just a few voices." (Chapter 7)



"Unluckily for us, English spellings were becoming fixed just at the time when the language was undergoing one of those great phonetic seizures that periodically unsettled any tongue. The result is that we have today in English a body of spellings that, for the most part, faithfully reflect the pronunciations of people living 400 years ago." (Chapter 8)

"Without an official academy to guide us, the English-speaking world has long relied on self-appointed authorities such as the brothers H.W. and F.G. Fowler and Sir Ernest Gowers in Britain and Theodore Bernstein and William Safire in America, and of course countless others." (Chapter 9)

"This volume (later called the *Elementary Spelling Book*) went through so many editions and sold so many copies that historians appear to have lost track. But it seems safe to say that there were at least 300 editions between 1788 and 1829 and that by the end of the nineteenth century it had sold more than sixty million copies - though some sources put the figure as high as a hundred million. In either case, with the possible exception of the Bible, it is probably the best-selling book in American history." (Chapter 10)

"The new settlers in America obviously had to come up with new words to describe their New World, and this necessity naturally increased as they moved inland. Partly this was achieved by borrowing from others who inhabited or explored the untamed continent." (Chapter 11)

"As a result of these inevitable shortcomings, most other linguistics authorities, particularly in this century, have taken the view that the best hope of a world language lies not in devising a synthetic tongue, which would almost certainly be doomed to failure, but in making English less complex and idiosyncratic and more accessible." (Chapter 12)

"For much of history, surnames, or last names, were not considered necessary. Two people named, say, Peter living in the same hamlet might adopt or be given second names to help distinguish them from each other - so that one might be called Peter White-Head and the other Peter Son of John (or Johnson) - but these additional names were seldom passed on." (Chapter 13)

"English is unusual in including the impossible and the pleasurable in its litany of profanities. It is a strange and little-noted idiosyncrasy of our tongue that when we wish to express extreme fury we entreat the object of our rage to undertake an anatomical impossibility or, stranger still, to engage in the one activity that is bound to give him more pleasure than almost anything else." (Chapter 14)

"Unlike American crosswords, which are generally straightforward affairs, requiring you merely to fit a word to a definition, the British variety are infinitely more fiendish, demanding mastery of the whole armory of verbal possibilities - puns, anagrams, palindromes, lipgrams, and whatever else springs to the deviser's devious mind." (Chapter 15)



"All of these bring into people's homes in one evening a variety of vocabulary, accents, and other linguistic influences that they would have been unlikely to experience in a single lifetime two generations ago. If we should be worrying about anything to do with the future of English, it should be not that the various strands will drift apart but that they will grow indistinguishable. And what a sad, sad loss that would be." (Chapter 16).



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the Great Vowel Shift and its effect on pronunciation in English.

Compare and contrast the three dictionary makers and how they went about organizing and developing their dictionaries.

What role did Shakespeare play in developing the English language, particularly relating to vocabulary?

What is the status of English as an international language? Will this continue or change?

Discuss the relationship between American and British English and how this reflects the social ideas of both countries.

How do the anthropological studies of human speech influence the reader's understanding of language?

Compare and contrast the various invasions of the British Isles and the effect that they had on the development of English?

Do you agree with Bryson that English is a language of the common people? Why or why not?