Prologue

English is very much a European language, as the story of its origins shows. These origins lie rather long ago chronologically, but not particularly far away geographically. It was more than 1,500 years ago that boatloads of Germanic people started crossing the North Sea to the eastern shores of Britain. But they had not come from very far away. The Germanic people who arrived were mostly members of the tribal groupings we now refer to as the Jutes, Angles, Saxons and Frisians, who had resided mainly in coastal districts just across the North Sea from Britain.

The Jutes had originally come from the furthest north, from northern and central Jutland, now part of Denmark. The Angles lived in areas to the south of them in southern Jutland and Schleswig-Holstein. The Saxons were located to the west of them, along the North Sea coastal areas of northern Germany in the Elbe–Weser region. And the Frisians came from Friesland, the area of coastline between the homeland of the Saxons and the mouth of the River Rhine in the modern Netherlands.

The great estuaries of the English east coast – such as the Humber, the Wash, the estuary of the Stour and the Orwell at Harwich and the Thames Estuary – formed major entry points into Britain for many of these people.

Of these Germanic tribes, it was the Saxons who eventually gave their name to the areas of southern England known as Wessex, Sussex, Middlesex and Essex, the names referring respectively to the West, South, Middle and East Saxons. In these Saxon-dominated areas of England, we find a few toponyms which indicate rather clearly that most people in Wessex were not Angles, such as the settlement of Englefield, now in Berkshire, which meant the ‘field of the Angles’, and Englebourne, ‘stream of the Angles’, in Devon.

There were also Frisians around, as we can see from the Suffolk village names Friston and Freston, ‘homestead of the Frisians’, as well as from the name Frisby in Leicestershire. But most of non-Saxon England and south-eastern Scotland came to be dominated by Angles. In these Anglian zones, there are still to this day village names such as Saxham, ‘home of the Saxons’, near Bury St Edmunds, and Saxton, ‘homestead of the Saxons’, in North Yorkshire: these villages were obviously so called because there was something unusual about being a Saxon in Suffolk and Yorkshire.

Although Essex and Middlesex and Sussex were named after the Saxons, it was the Angles who had the honour of eventually giving their name to England, ‘the land of the Angles’, and to the English language. But why were they called Angles?

We first hear about them from the Roman historian Tacitus (c. AD 56–120) in his work Germania, on the Germanic tribes. They seem to have come originally from
the area of Germany which is known as Angeln, a peninsula located on the eastern coast of Schleswig-Holstein, on the Baltic Sea. Angeln lies between the Flensburg Firth, which today forms part of the border between Denmark and Germany, and the Schlei Inlet, which leads from the Baltic Sea to the town of Schleswig. Almost everybody from the Angeln area seems to have emigrated to Britain in the fifth century AD.

There are different theories about the origin of the name Angeln. It could be derived from the word which has come down into modern German as eng, ‘narrow’, referring perhaps to the narrow waters of the Schlei Inlet. Or it could be related to angle ‘bend, corner’, or to angling as in fishing: angle in the fishing sense originally referred to the bent or angled implement fishermen use for catching fish on a line. It would be rather amusing to think that, ultimately, the name of our now world-dominating language was derived from a simple word meaning ‘fish-hook’.

English, then, is very much a language from Europe. But in the modern world it is also very much a language of Europe. Over the last millennium and a half, from these origins in a rather small area of Germania, English has become a language of European-wide importance. There are countless examples of this one could cite. When Finnish tourists get off the plane in Athens, they do not expect to find Finnish-speaking Greeks, but they do expect to be able to communicate in English. In official EU meetings in Brussels and Strasbourg, simultaneous translation is used; but when an Estonian MEP has a quiet chat in the corridor with one of their Slovenian counterparts, or a Latvian official wants to buttonhole an Italian, it is almost certain that they will speak English to each other. At the European Football Championships, a Portuguese full back may shout at a Bulgarian referee, but what language is he shouting in? If he wishes the referee to understand what he is saying, it is certainly more likely to be English than anything else. English is the default language for international communication in most parts of Europe.

Of all the European nations, only two – Ireland and the UK – are inhabited mainly by native English speakers; and in only two other countries, Cyprus and Malta, is English an important language of internal communication. There are more native speakers of German than of English in Europe, but German still plays nothing like the same kind of international role.

This has had some effect on the language itself. The EU has published a document called ‘Misused English Words and Expressions in EU Publications’. One of the words they cite is actorness, which seems to mean ‘the quality of being an actor’, an actor being a person or organisation involved in doing something.

Even in our everyday lives, English has been influenced by its role in Europe. Although I was studying A-level French in the 1960s, I had no idea what tranche meant. If I had looked it up in my dictionary, it would have said ‘slice’ — as in cake. But now most people know this word: the first instance in English of tranche comes from 1963, and since then it has become a normal English term for an instalment of a payment.
It is not surprising that English, in its turn, has influenced European languages. Fascinatingly, some of the English words which continental languages have adopted are not really English at all – like *actorness*. The German for a mobile phone is *ein Handy*. The French for a dinner jacket is *un smoking*. The same sort of thing happens in reverse. If you ask for a *latte* in London, you will get a cup of coffee. If you do the same in Milan, you might get a glass of milk, but there is no guarantee at all that you will be served a coffee.

English is very useful as a European lingua franca – a means of communication which can be used between speakers who have no native language in common. Even though Europe is the least multilingual continent in the world, it is still far from monolingual. The twenty-six countries that make up the EU do not actually have twenty-six major languages between them, because some countries share a language: German in Germany, Austria and Luxembourg; French in France and Belgium; Dutch in Belgium as well as Holland; Greek in Cyprus and Greece. But Europe also has very many minority languages, of varying sizes: at the extremes, Catalan has millions of speakers, while the Pite Sami (Lappish) language of northern Scandinavia has only about twenty; and there is a long list of languages which come demographically in between – North Sami, Romany, Basque, Breton, Welsh, Gaelic, Frisian, Romansh, etc.

People who are keen on European solidarity will be glad to know that, with a few exceptions, all of these languages descend from a single parent language known as Indo-European. The major exceptions are Finnish, Estonian, Sami and Hungarian, which are all related to one another; Turkish; Maltese, which is historically a variety of Arabic; and the pre-Indo-European language Basque, which may well once have been spoken over the whole of Western Europe, in which case there was probably no need for a European lingua franca in 5000 BC. Now there is, and English is fulfilling this role.

This has nothing to do with the qualities of the English language itself. It is a historical accident. English became the world language for economic, military and political – not linguistic – reasons. The situation came about as a result of the British Empire’s many decades of economic and political domination of the world from the eighteenth century onwards and, later, the same kind of dominance as exercised by the USA, which had itself become English-speaking as a result of colonisation by the British Empire.
Introduction

In the preparation of these columns, the first of which appeared in print in July 2016, my remit from the New European newspaper has been to write about language and languages in Europe. This has not at all meant that I have never written about other parts of the world, but it does mean that each column has at least some connection with at least one language of European origin. Although the focus is very much on Europe, the columns have been written by an Englishman who lives in England and is a native speaker of English; so when I write ‘we’, I often mean English speakers; and when I write ‘in this country’, I mean England, or Great Britain, or the United Kingdom.

This book collects together four years’ worth of my weekly columns. It can obviously be read, if desired, from beginning to end, but the columns are all free-standing; some facts and figures are repeated from one column and another; and the pieces have been grouped together in thematic sections, which will also make for easier browsing if that is the preferred approach. Many of the pieces are accompanied by a box containing a short discussion of a particular word which occurs in that article.

* I am very grateful to Jasper Copping and the other Archant staff at the New European in Norwich for their original invitation to contribute to the journal, and for their continuing support.

I am also particularly grateful to the very large number of linguistic scientists who have helped me in the writing of these columns by supplying information, examples and corrections. I have been working as an academic linguist for five decades now, and over that period of time I have been fortunate enough to come to know a very large number of experts around the world in the many different areas of linguistics and language study. Since I started writing these columns, I have constantly been plaguing these unfortunate colleagues for confirmation and information; and the wonderful thing has been that if they did not know the answers to my questions themselves, they were almost certain to know somebody who did. Many of the columns in this book I would never have dared to publish without first checking facts with, and obtaining examples from, one or more of these kind contacts, including also personal friends who I have consulted in their capacity as native speakers of a particular language which I needed information on, or as experts on other topics, such as botany. They have all been extremely generous with their time and erudition. I hope they have not minded too much that I have been so irritatingly demanding.
The list of people whose brains I have unscrupulously picked in this way is exceedingly long, and I am most grateful to all of them. They are:


It is also rather likely that I have forgotten quite a number of people who I should have thanked, and if so I apologise to them. But there is one person who there is absolutely no danger of me forgetting to thank for her vital contribution to this book, and this is my wife, Jean Hannah, who I am most enormously grateful to for the brilliant way in which she has used her linguistic knowledge, and her first-class editorial skills, to refine and improve every single one of the pieces which now appear in these pages.
1 Words

The origins of English amongst the Germanic peoples of northern Europe, as described in the Prologue, explain why English is classified as a member of the Germanic language family and is, specifically, a West Germanic language. Much of its basic vocabulary is shared with the other West Germanic languages such as Dutch and German, including words for the numbers from one to a thousand; basic body parts like hand, arm, foot, finger, toe and eye; and the terms for the primary family relatives, father, mother, brother, sister, son and daughter – though the words uncle, aunt, nephew, niece and cousin are French in origin.

But of all the words in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, only 27 per cent are Germanic in origin, and many hundreds of those are not West Germanic but North Germanic – Old Norse. Most of the rest, though by no means all, are from other European languages. Around 28 per cent of our English words come from French, with another 28 per cent derived from Latin; and a total of about 15 per cent are from Ancient Greek, Italian, Dutch and German.

Of course, these numbers apply to words as they appear in the dictionary, not to the vocabulary we actually use in our everyday lives: the majority of our most frequently used words, like the, and and but, come from West Germanic Old English stock, and most of the other words we utter over the course of a day are English in origin.

Latin vocabulary has been entering the English lexicon for many hundreds of years, starting with words for sophisticated portable items which the Romans had but we lacked, such as wine and tile. The influence of Latin as the international language of learning then continued for centuries, with English acquiring scores of words ranging from abdomen and arduous, to ubiquity and ulterior.

Ancient Greek, as we shall see in this chapter, has also provided us with a great deal of our learned vocabulary – amnesia, iconoclast, heptagon and synergy are but a few examples – and numerous more ordinary words, such as athlete, energy and helicopter. As we shall also see, English has a number of Greek–Latin doublets such as sympathy–compassion, hypodermic–subcutaneous and synchronous–contemporary.

There are more than 1,500 words of Old Norse origin in Modern English (and more than that in the local dialects of the north and east of Britain). These include common everyday items like angry, egg, flat, gasp, get, guess, hit, ill, knife, leg, lift, low, same, sick, scare, take, tight and window – and, perhaps surprisingly, the pronouns they, their and them. Many Norse words actually replaced their Old
English equivalents: our original word for ‘egg’ was ey (the Modern Dutch word is ei). In some cases, though, we have retained words from both language sources, with a small difference in meaning. Doublets of this kind include Norse skirt alongside Old English shirt, and Norse disk versus English dish.

Very many of our French-origin words came into English via Norman French, after 1066. These were typically words having to do with government and war – the word government itself, court, crown, state; and battle, enemy, lance and castle. The Normans also introduced many religious words such as faith, saint and mercy, as well as vocabulary dealing with art and fashion: beauty, figure, dress and garment. Some Norman French words have become very much entrenched in our language as part of our normal way of speaking: just, very, people, face, place, piece, easy, strange. Sometimes Norman words did not replace English ones but relegated them to a more lowly or informal status, so we have pairs such as Norman chair versus English stool, aid versus help, conceal versus hide. Famously, the upper-class Normans also provided us with vocabulary for food such as beef, pork, joint, cutlet, dinner and supper, while we retained more proletarian English words like oxtail, tongue, brains and breakfast.

Sometimes we took a word from Norman French and then, later, also from Parisian French. The English language contains doublets such as Norman warden versus Parisian guardian, catch versus chase, cattle and chattel, warranty and guarantee, reward and regard. Parisian guichet, a word which came into English in the 1800s, refers to a hatch which tickets are issued through, but in origin it is the same word as the Norman-origin form wicket, which arrived in English in the early 1300s. More recent French imports include brochure, baton, ballet, bizarre, brusque and beret.

And we should not forget other less prominent European languages which have also contributed to our lexicon. Romani has given us the words pal, cushy and lollipop, amongst others. And Yiddish, the German-derived language of the East European Jews, has contributed items such as glitch, nosh, schmaltz and schnozz.

In this chapter, we look at only a very small selection, albeit hopefully a particularly interesting one, of English vocabulary items, as well as words from many other languages.

1.1 Manly, Male, Masculine, Macho

You sometimes hear it said that English has more words than other languages. But what does it imply for a language to ‘have’ a word? Is it enough for that word to exist in a dictionary somewhere? If so, English certainly does very well on the lots-of-words front: the Oxford English Dictionary contains over 600,000 words. But this is really due more than anything else to the diligence of the Oxford lexicographers, the length of time they have been working on the dictionary (over 160
years), and the time-depth of the forms of the English language they have been studying (going back well over 1,000 years).

It is safe to say, too, that very few native speakers of English actually know even a small percentage of that number of the words. Looking at a sequence of forty words beginning with B in the *OED*, I found that I had never heard of fifteen of them, even though I am perhaps professionally obliged to know more about words than most other people. No doubt some readers of the *New European* will know what *baccated* means – ‘berried, berry-bearing’ – but I most certainly did not.

It is true, though, that English has over the centuries borrowed very many words from other – mainly European – languages, and that as a consequence it seems to have quite a number of sets of near-synonyms which correspond to single words in other languages. The example which is always cited in student textbooks is the triplet formed by *regal*, *royal* and *kingly*. My German dictionary gives *königlich* as a possible translation for all of these, although there are other possible German words as well; and my French dictionary similarly comes up with *royal* for all three.

The three English words are not totally synonymous, although their meanings are, of course, closely related. *Kingly* is the original Germanic-origin form. It derives from Old English *cyning*, ‘king’, which has been part of our language ever since there was such a language. *Kingly* corresponds to German *königlich*, Dutch *koninklijk* and Swedish *kunglig*.

*Royal* came into English from outside the Germanic language family. It was borrowed from the Anglo-Norman tongue which arrived in England in 1066; the word is first attested in English from about 1400. *Royal* is the Old French descendant of the Latin word *regalis*, from *rex*, ‘king’, altered through processes of sound change over the centuries — the Catalan is *reial* and the Spanish *real*. But Old French also borrowed *regalis* directly from Latin in the form of *regal*, which was in its turn also borrowed into English.

The way the English language has expanded its European-origin vocabulary over the centuries gives us many other similar examples of near-synonyms. *Male* is the relatively neutral English word which does duty as the opposite of *female* – the *OED* has a very nice technical definition of *male*: ‘of the sex which can beget, but not bear, offspring’. Like *royal*, this word came originally from Latin (from *mascu-lus*, ‘male’), but it was borrowed into English from the Anglo-Norman descendant of this Latin word, *masle*. Our word *masculine*, on the other hand, was taken into English directly from the Latin. It is a more semantically loaded word than *male*: English speakers are very aware of the difference between the meanings of *maleness* and *masculinity*. A perhaps even more loaded term is the word *manly*. This, like *kingly*, comes from our original native stock of Germanic words. German *männlich* simply means ‘male’, but *manly* means a lot more than just that. A related and even less neutral English word is *macho*, which did not enter into written (originally American) English to any extent until the 1960s, when it was borrowed from
Spanish, where it is simply a word meaning male. It, too, has its origin in the Latin word *masculus*.

The fact is that, while some of our compatriots may currently be trying to reject their European Union citizenship, they would find it impossible to reject their European vocabulary.

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<td>The original meaning of Old English <em>man</em> was ‘human being’ – which is why we also find this element in <em>woman</em>. The ancient word for ‘man’ was <em>wer</em>, with the same origin as Latin <em>vir</em>, ‘man’. We have now lost <em>wer</em>, except in <em>werewolf</em>, but we have borrowed the Latin equivalent in words like <em>virile</em> and <em>virility</em>.</td>
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### 1.2 Boys and Girls

Some categories of words seem to be much more stable over the centuries than others. The Germanic words for female and male offspring, *daughter* and *son*, have hardly changed over two millennia. English *daughter* corresponds to Scots, Frisian and Dutch *dochter*, German *Tochter*, Danish and Norwegian *datter*, Swedish *dotter*, Norwegian *dåtter*, Faroese and Icelandic *dóttir*. Similarly, the equivalents of English *son* are Frisian *soan*, Dutch *zoon*, German *Sohn*, Danish *søn*, Norwegian *sønn*, Swedish *son* and Faroese and Icelandic *sonur*. Philologists agree that these words go back to ancient Germanic *duhter* and *sunuz*; and in fact they go back even further – something like 6,000 years – to ancient Indo-European *dhugheter* and *suhnu*.

Compare this with the numerous changes which have happened to our everyday words for young people generally. In English, the most common word for a young female human being is *girl*. But in the north of Britain *lass* and *lassie* are extremely common; and until relatively recently the East Anglian word was *mawther*, with *maid* and *wench* being normal in different parts of western England. The Frisian word for girl is *famke*, the Norwegian is *jente*, the Danish is *pige*, the Swedish *flicka* and the Icelandic *stelpa*. The Faroese *genta* does show a resemblance to the Norwegian; and we can see a relationship between *maid*, German *Mädchen* and Dutch *meisje*; but the variation is considerable compared to *daughter*.

The English word *girl* itself is rather tricky in other ways, too. It didn’t appear in English until about 1300, when it seems to have referred to both males and females. And nobody knows for sure where the word came from. Some experts think there may have been an Old English word *gyrela* meaning ‘dress’, in which case *girl* may represent a jocular usage, rather like the slang form *skirt* for ‘girl’. Others believe it was a late mediaeval borrowing from Low German *gör*, ‘small child’: there is
a Modern German word Göre which means ‘cheeky little girl’ – but then there is the problem of where did the l come from?

There has also been some ideological discussion in recent decades in the English-speaking world about the usage of girl to refer to adults, the argument being that it is demeaning to refer to people over the age of majority by using a word for a child. In fact, the normal meaning of girl in most contexts in Modern English, as the Oxford English Dictionary states, is precisely that of ‘a young or relatively young woman’. A female child would most normally be referred to as a ‘little girl’, and a young teenager as a ‘young girl’. Most native English speakers, if told that a woman was coming to see them, would be rather surprised if, when she arrived, she turned out to be eighteen.

The English word boy shows an almost equally varied set of correspondences: dreng in Danish, gutt in Norwegian, pojke in Swedish, strákur in Icelandic – though admittedly Dutch jongen, Frisian jonge and German Junge present a more united front. The word boy, too, is mysterious; no one is very sure where it came from. Like girl, it arrived in English around 1300. Its original meaning was ‘male servant’, reminding us of French garçon meaning ‘boy’ but also ‘waiter’. Danish dreng also used to mean ‘servant’. There is a suggestion that boy came from Anglo-Norman emboyé, ‘in chains’, from Latin boia, ‘leg iron’, hence ‘slave, servant’. But it could have been borrowed from Frisian, Dutch or Low German. Nobody really knows.

So, while we are entirely sure about the origins of words like daughter and son which are thousands of years old, we are not at all sure about a couple of words which arrived only 600 years ago.

Why is this? Maybe words for boys and girls vary and change more than others because they so often originate in colloquial or humorous nicknames and endearments.

### KID

The original meaning of kid was ‘a young goat’. It came into English from Old Norse. The related German Kitz most often means ‘fawn, young deer’, but can also be ‘young goat’. Kid started being used as a jocular word for a child in the sixteenth century, and became established as a common and increasingly less informal word during the 1800s.

### 1.3 Madam

It is often the fate of words and phrases, over the millennia, to get shorter and shorter. The Latin phrase hoc die, ‘this day’ famously became so shortened in French – as hui ‘today’ – that French speakers increased its length again by saying au-jour-d’hui, literally ‘on the day of this day’. Modern French août, ‘August’,