

Greek and Latin roots in the English language



One of the reasons that the English language has flourished in recent centuries is because of its ability and willingness to absorb words from other languages. In its way, English survives as a living language because it is, put simply, very spongy. When English sees a word with no appropriate English equivalent, which is functionally necessary to the language, it adopts it. Sometimes spelling changes, and sometimes alphabets do – because not all languages we borrow from use our standard, A–Z Roman alphabet – so our absorbed words, or ‘loanwords’ aren’t always obvious to the naked eye.

Loanwords are a key part of the English language.

Loanwords don’t always follow the rules of English grammar and spelling and this contributes to difficulties in *learning* English anew. However, at the same time, loanwords provide non-English speakers in an English-speaking environment with a pool of mutually intelligible words.

English is an Indo-European language that belongs to the Germanic family of languages. The Germanic languages are subdivided into West Germanic, North Germanic and East Germanic branches – although East Germanic languages are extinct. The West Germanic and North Germanic languages used today are as follows.

West Germanic

Afrikaans
Dutch
English
Frisian
German
Yiddish

North Germanic

Danish
Faroese
Icelandic
Norwegian
Swedish

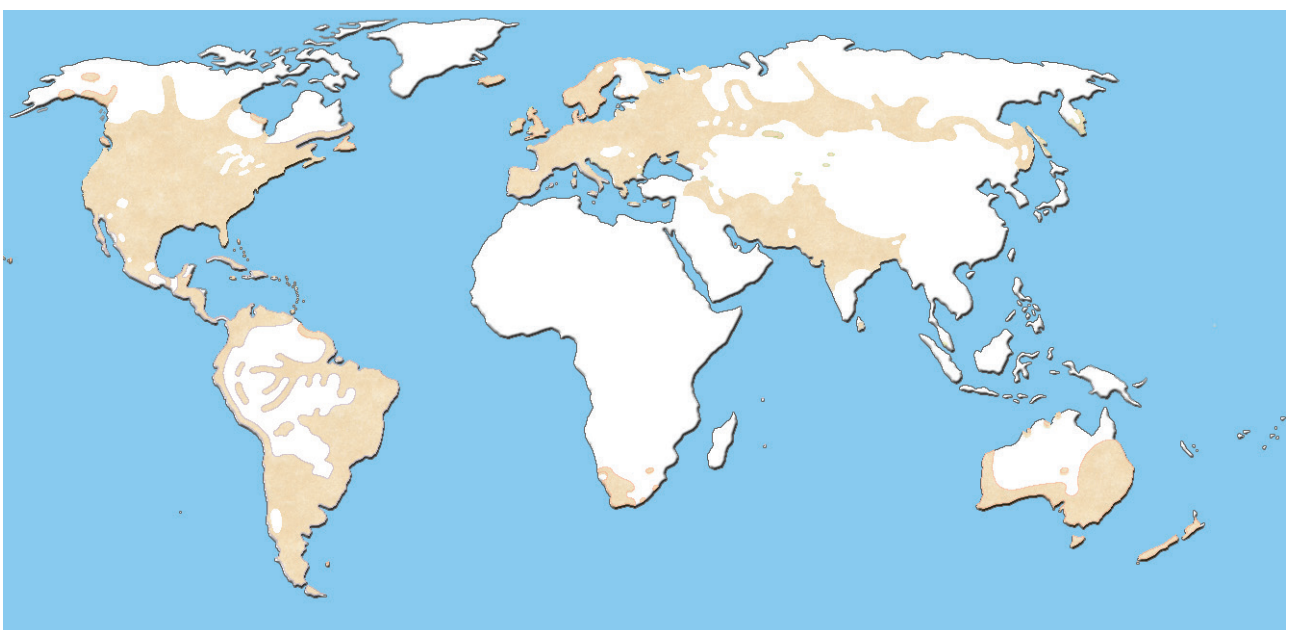
The Germanic languages were originally spread across parts of Europe. Today, native speakers of Germanic languages can be found across the globe.

Figure 1 Native speakers of Germanic languages today

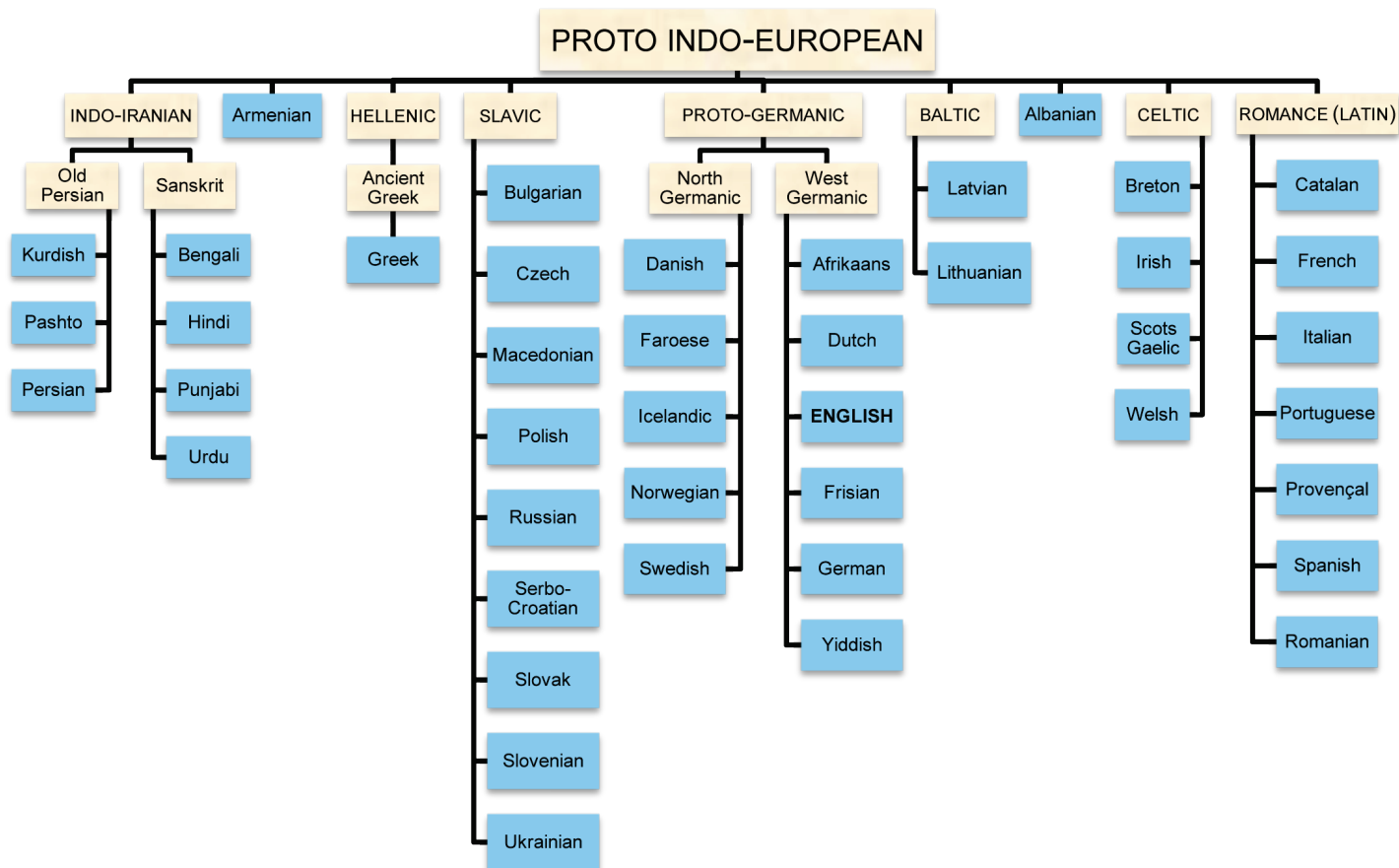


Like human beings, human languages have common ancestors. These Germanic languages date back to a 'protolanguage' called **Proto-Germanic**, and even further back to another protolanguage, called **Proto Indo-European**. Proto Indo-European, or just Indo-European, is also the most recent common ancestor of all of the Celtic, Romance, Hellenic, Baltic, Slavic, Indo-Iranian, Armenian and Albanian languages.

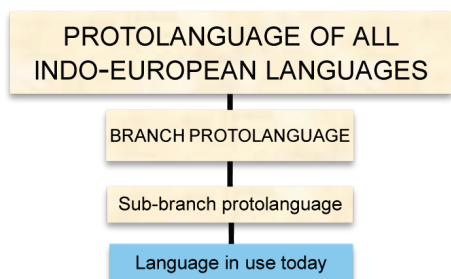
Figure 2 Native speakers of Indo-European languages today



The Indo-European languages in use today – and their ancestors



Key



From the Indo-European language tree, it might seem that English split off from other branches a long time ago. Although this is true, the proximity of speakers of other languages to English speakers – whether through invasion, colonisation, trade or travel – has meant that English never stopped adopting words from other languages.

We have a great many words and parts of words that come from Latin and Ancient Greek. The following table shows only a few of them.

Root	Meaning	Language of origin	Example words	
ab- a- abs-	Away, from, off, without	Latin	absent abandon aversion	abduct abnormal abate
aqu-	Water	Latin	aquarium aqueduct	aquatic aqueous
arthr- arthro-	of the joints and the limbs	Greek	arthrogram	arthroplasty
bi- bio-	Life	Greek	biology biosphere biodegradable	bionic biopsy
bi-	Two	Latin	binoculars bipolar	binary bipartisan
calc-	Stone	Greek and Latin	calculus	calcium
cardi- cardio-	Heart	Greek	cardiovascular echocardiogram	
dict-	To say or to speak	Latin	dictionary dictator	predict dictum
dys-	Bad, badly, sick	Greek	dystopia dysfunctional	dyslexia dystrophy
eco-	house, dwelling, habitat	Greek	economy ecosystem	ecology ecotourism
encephal- encephalo-	of the brain	Greek	encephalogram	encephalic
equ-	level, balanced, even	Latin	equal equitable	equate equator
-ectomy	surgical removal of a body part	Greek	appendectomy	mastectomy
ethn-	race, people, tribe, nation	Greek	ethnoreligious	ethnicity
femin-	woman, female	Latin	feminine	feminist
frang- frac- frag- fring-	break	Latin	fragment fringe fragile	fracture fraction fractal
ge-	Earth	Greek	geology	geomatics
gram-	writing, letter, book, alphabet, drawing, record	Greek	grammar epigram	diagram gramophone
-graph	equipment or equipment to record data	Greek	electrocardiograph	
-graphy	the process of recording data	Greek	computerised tomography angiography	
haem- haemo-	blood	Greek	haemorrhage	haemophilia
heter-	other, different, second, another	Greek	heterogeneous	heterotrophic

Root	Meaning	Language of origin	Example words	
hyster– hystero–	of the uterus, the womb, of women (<i>archaic, derogatory</i>)	Greek	hysteria hystereuryisis	hysterical
hyper–	above, beyond, extreme, too much	Greek		
hypo–	too little, below normal	Greek		
ign–	fire	Latin	ignite ignition coil	igneous rock
in– im–	within, on (first meaning) not (second meaning)	Latin	invite impossible (second meaning)	import (first meaning) immutable
inter–	between, among, mutually, together	Latin	internet interactive	interpersonal intercept
–itis	inflammation	Greek	appendicitis	bronchitis
jung– junct–	joining, joint	Latin	conjunction juncture	junction
juxta–	near, close to, beside	Latin	juxtapose	
kine–	movement, motion, gesture	Greek	kinetics	kinesiology
lact–	milk	Latin	lactose	lactation
lapar– laparo–	of the abdomen, the flank	Greek	laparoscopy	
liber–	free	Latin	liberal	liberty
–logy	a field of academic study, the study of	Greek	etymology	psychology
manu–	hand, handwriting	Latin	manuscript labour manubriums	manual manufacture
melan– melano–	dark, black in colour	Greek	melanin	
mort–	death, subject to death	Latin	mortal mortal sin	mortician mortgage
narr–	tell, speak, recount, report	Latin	narration narrative therapy	narrator
nomin–	name	Latin	nominalisation	nominate
–oma –omata	growth, tumour, mass	Greek	sarcoma carcinoma	adenoma
omni–	all	Latin	omnivorous omniscient	omnipotent omnipresent
–onym	word, name	Greek	synonym pseudonym	antonym acronym
ost– oste– osteo–	of the bones	Greek	osteoarthritis osteopathy	osteology
patho– –pathy	feeling, pain, suffering, passion, disease	Greek	sympathise pathos	empathy pathetic
phil–	love, affection, friendship,	Greek	philosophy	Francophile

Root	Meaning	Language of origin	Example words
-phile	enjoyment		
-phob phob-	fear	Greek	arachnophobia phobia claustrophobic
phleb- phlebo-	veins, blood	Greek	phlebotomy
-plasia	development, growth, formation	Greek	dysplasia hyperplasia
por- poro-	porous, absorbent, pore, cavity, opening	Greek	porotic
quasi-	similar to but not actually, resembling, as if	Latin	quasiparticle quasi-experiment quasi-intellectual quasi-democratic
qui-	quiet, at rest, repose	Latin	quiescent quiet requiem quit
quot-	how great a part? how many times?	Latin	quotient quota quote
re- red-	back, again, repetition	Latin	repeat rebirth reprint redact
rhin-	nose	Greek	rhinoplasty rhinoceros rhinitis otorhinolaryngology
rump- rupt-	break, tear, bend, rend, burst, destroy, force	Latin	interrupt abrupt corrupt eruption
sacr- secr-	sacred, bone	Latin	sacrifice consecrated sacrosanct sacrilege sacrum sacral
salv-	save, rescue, safe, unharméd, sound, alive	Latin	salvage salvation salve
schis- schiz-	split, break, divide, rift, fissure	Greek	schism schizotypal schizophrenia schizocarp schizogenesis
semi-	half	Latin	semi-trailer semifinal semicolon semibreve semilunar
sept- septen- septim- septuagen-	seven seven each seventh seventy each	Latin	septet septuple septenary septimation septuagenarian
somn-	sleep	Latin	insomnia somnolent somniaambulist somniferous
sorb- sorpt-	suck	Latin	sorbet absorbency self-absorption
tac- tic-	silence, quiet, left unsaid	Latin	taciturn reticence
tax-	order, appraise, arrange,	Greek	taxes taxicab

Root	Meaning	Language of origin	Example words	
	arrange, battle, rank		chemotaxis taxidermy	taxonomy
techn–	ability, skill, craft, art, trade, means, cunning	Greek	technical geotechnology	technology technique
tempor–	(stretch of) time, occasion, of the head	Latin	tempo temporal lobe temporise temporomandibular joint	temporary temple
therm–	warmth, heat, temperature	Greek	hypothermia thermometer	ectotherm thermal socks
–tomy	to cut, an incision	Greek	colostomy	episiotomy
typ–	model, mould, stamp, type, impression, blow	Greek	stereotype typography phenotype	typical archetype typify
uber–	the most extreme, highest or greatest, fruitful, over, above	Latin (super) Greek (hyper)	ubermensch	uber-trendy
ultim–	farthest, last, ended	Latin	penultimate ultima	ultimatum
urb–	city, town	Latin	suburb exurb	urban urbanisation
vac–	empty, blank	Latin	vacuum vacancy	vacant
verb–	word	Latin	verbose non-verbal communication verbatim	verbal verbiage
xen– xeno–	strange, alien, foreign	Greek	xenon xenagogy	xenoglossia xenogenesis
–y	condition, in the process of, state, quality (forms action nouns with verbs)	Latin (–ia) Greek (–ια)	inquiry surgery	jealousy cookery
zo– zoo–	of animals, living beings	Greek	zoo zoid	zoology zoography

Using the chart above, provide definitions for the following words, break each word down into its component parts, and use it in a sentence.

1 Apathy

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

2 Pathology

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

3 Haematology

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

4 Encephalitis

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

5 Hysterectomy

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

6 Arthritis

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

7 Osteoporosis

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

8 Laparotomy

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

9 Xenophobia

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

10 Geography

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

11 Encephalography

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

12 Ethnography

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

13 Hypoplasia

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

14 Haematoma

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

15 Melanoma

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	

16 Immortal

Parts	
Meaning	
Sentence	