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# A LESSON ON ENGLISH

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## THE OMNIVORE: HISTORY OF ENGLISH PART II AMERICAN ENGLISH

This is a two-part newsletter. Part I of "The Omnivore: History of English" appeared in the July 2008 ALOE.

A significant development in the history of English, beginning around 1600 AD, was the English colonization of North America and the subsequent creation of a distinct American dialect. Some pronunciations and usages "froze" when they reached the American shore. In certain respects, American English is closer to the English of Shakespeare than modern British English is. Some "Americanisms" that the British decry are actually originally British expressions that were preserved in the colonies while lost at home (e.g., *fall* as a synonym for autumn, *trash* for rubbish, *frame-up* which was reintroduced to Britain through Hollywood gangster movies, and *loan* as a verb instead of lend).

The American dialect also served as the route of introduction for many native American words into the English language. Most often, these were place names like *Mississippi*, *Roanoke*, and *Iowa*. Indian-sounding names like *Idaho* were sometimes created that had no real Native American roots. Names for other things besides places were also common: *Raccoon*, *tomato*, *canoe*, *barbecue*, *savanna*, and *hickory* have Native American roots, although in many cases the original Indian words were mangled almost beyond recognition.

Spanish has also been a great influence on American English. *Armadillo*, *mustang*, *canyon*, *raunch*, *stampede*, and *vigilante* are all examples of Spanish words that made their way into English through the settlement of the American West.

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## Odd English

Attempts to free the English language of words considered discriminatory (sexist, racist, age-ist, etc.) have made it a matter of sensitivity when certain words are used or not used:

*manpower, Englishmen, workman, businessman, fireman, postman, sportsmanship, founding fathers, Mother Nature, etc.*

George Bernard Shaw, British playwright, crusaded to simplify the spelling of English.

To illustrate the craziness of English spelling, he coined the word "ghoti" as a spelling for "fish."

How did he get this? Pronounce "gh" as in "enough"; "o" as in "women", "ti" as in "nation."

A Lesson on English

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How would you pronounce  
tchst, sthm and tchph?

Hint: matchstick, asthma  
and catchphrase use these  
“unpronounceable”  
combinations.

## “FILLER WORDS”

Vocalized pauses (filler or bridge words) in English include such words as “umm, well, anyway, like, & you know.”

Americans may use “. . . Umm” as often as 10 or 15 times a minute, or 1,000 times an hour, often without being aware of so doing.

In Russian, filler words might be Znachit (“it means”) Germans say oder (“or”) or nicht (“no”); Spanish may say este (“this”). Czechs may say jasne (“it’s clear”) or no tak (“well, so...”)

Japanese may say hai, meaning “yes”: not “yes” in the sense of agreement, but in the sense of “I hear you.” This comes from their taboo on negative words.



Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

## Facts about English

*As a background for the study of the English language, consider the following facts:*

- ◆ There are between 5000 - 6000 languages living today (being spoken on a regular basis). English is just one of them, yet it is the official language for 2 billion people (out of 6.2 billion in the world).
- ◆ American English dictionaries list about 500,000 words; probably another 1,000,000 technical and scientific words can be added. By contrast, German has 185,000 words and French less than 100,000.

*English in daily usage facts:*

- 75%** of the world’s mail, telex, and cables are in English;
- 80%** of the information stored on the world’s computers is in English;
- 50%** of the world’s technical and scientific periodicals are in English;
- English** is the language of sports, fashion, entertainment, engineering, science and the Olympics;
- CNN** (broadcast in English) is seen daily in more than 140 countries.
- English** is the world-wide language of business. If a Czech does business in Norway, neither person is likely to speak the other’s language, so they use English.

*In 12 countries, English is the native language. In 44 more countries, it is the official or unofficial second language; in 50 more, it is widely studied.*

- ◆ Hong Kong has two official languages: English and Cantonese Chinese.
- ◆ Ireland has both Irish Gaelic and English.
- ◆ Israel’s official language is Hebrew, with 15% speaking Arabic, but English is the language of business.
- ◆ In the Philippines the official language is Filipino, or Tagalog, which sounds something like Spanish. However, there are 80 dialects of this language, so English is the common, unifying language.