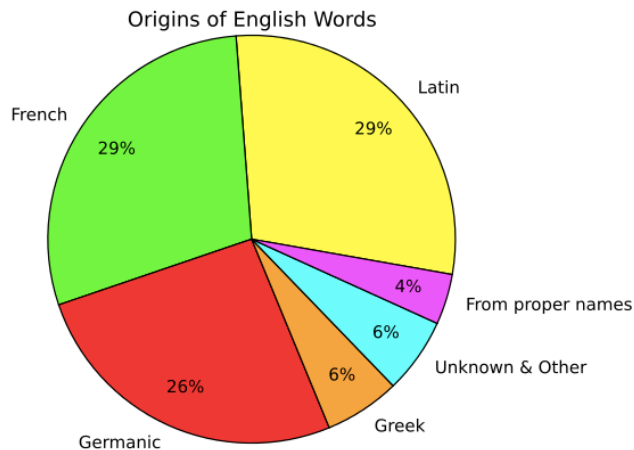


English Etymology

Etymology is the study of word origins, and how the meanings and forms of words change over time. Resources: Oxford English Dictionary, Wiktionary, and Online Etymological Dictionary.

One sees this image, or something close to it, on many websites about the English language. (This version is from Wikimedia Commons.)



The percentages are doubtless true for some definition of "English words." But we don't know how many total words we're talking about. Nor do we know what kinds of words each slice of the pie chart includes. My impression is that the chart is the sum total of entries in an "unabridged" dictionary. Such dictionaries include a lot of learned and technical terms that come from Latin and Greek. More common words in English tend to be Germanic, or to come from French.

As an example: in the text below (from the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale "Rapunzel"), I have highlighted each of the words in the color that the pie chart associates with their etymological origin.

The prince was overcome with grief, and in his despair he threw himself from the tower. He escaped with his life, but the thorns into which he fell poked out his eyes. Blind, he wandered about in the forest, eating nothing but grass and roots, and doing nothing but weeping and wailing over the loss of his beloved wife. Thus he wandered about miserably for some years, finally happening into the wilderness where Rapunzel lived miserably with the twins that she had given birth to.

In the passage from "Rapunzel," a few common words are of French origin, one ("tower") is a very old European word that ultimately derives from Latin, and the vast majority of the words - all of them everyday words, many "grammatical" or "connective" words - are Germanic in origin. English is still mostly Germanic in etymology, *particularly* the words that we use most frequently on an everyday basis.

But of course it depends on what you're discussing. The Department of Energy defines "neutron" in the following brief passage. I have highlighted the word origins to match the Wikimedia graph:

Neutrons, along with protons, are subatomic particles found inside the nucleus of every atom. The only exception is hydrogen, where the nucleus contains only a single proton. Neutrons have a neutral electric charge (neither negative nor positive) and have slightly more mass than positively charged protons.

Suddenly, only the connective words in the passage are Germanic, while all the words that represent things and concepts are from French, Latin, or Greek.

English can be described as a Germanic language that uses a high percentage of technical terms that come from French, Latin, and Greek.

Quite a few words that English takes from French came to French from Latin, so the word's whole history needs taking into account. I have highlighted the words by their immediate source language. But knowing their ultimate origins teaches us much about language and indeed social history too.

For instance, the Wiktionary etymology for "prince" gives: "From [Anglo-Norman](#), from [Old French](#) *prince*, from [Latin](#) *prīnceps* ("first head"), from *prīmus* ("first") + *capiō* ("seize, take")." The Oxford English Dictionary gives a far more detailed history of the word's journey from "first head" to the common present-day "heir to a throne."

We will look at the historical reasons for English's mixed vocabulary in a different lesson. For today, we will first note some interesting etymological "stories" that show how the older meanings of words can still resonate within their current meanings. Knowing some etymology helps expand an appreciation for the logic and complexity of vocabulary.

- *prince*, from French, goes back to Latin *prīnceps* which means "first head," and is related to words like "principal" and "principle." Etymologically a prince is the "first" among a people (though in English it has become subordinate to Germanic *king*; we think of a prince as a king's heir)
- *grief*, from French, is related to Latin *gravitas*, and thus to "gravity": a heavy feeling

- *despair* is from French *des* + *esperer*: "*esperer*" means "hope" and despair is its opposite
- *neutron* and *proton* are modern coinages from Greek roots, meaning neutral and positive particles respectively
- *electric* is from the Greek word for "amber," because amber causes a static-electric charge when rubbed
- *hydrogen* is a modern coinage from Greek, meaning "water maker" because it is one of the two components of water
- *nucleus* is Latin for "kernel"