

The English language belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European family of languages. The closest undoubted living relatives of English are Scots and Frisian. Frisian is a language spoken by approximately half a million people in the Dutch province of Friesland, in nearby areas of Germany, and on a few islands in the North Sea. The history of the English language has traditionally been divided into three main periods: Old English (450-1100 AD), Middle English (1100-circa 1500 AD) and Modern English (since 1500). Over the centuries, the English language has been influenced by a number of other languages.

Old English (450 - 1100 AD): During the 5th Century AD three Germanic tribes (Saxons, Angles, and Jutes) came to the British Isles from various parts of northwest Germany as well as Denmark. These tribes were warlike and pushed out most of the original, Celtic-speaking inhabitants from England into Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. One group migrated to the Brittany Coast of France where their descendants still speak the Celtic Language of Breton today. Through the years, the Saxons, Angles and Jutes mixed their different Germanic dialects. This group of dialects forms what linguists refer to as Old English or Anglo-Saxon. The word "English" was in Old English "Englisc", and that comes from the name of the Angles. The Angles were named from Engle, their land of origin.

Before the Saxons the language spoken in what is now England was a mixture of Latin and various Celtic languages which were spoken before the Romans came to Britain (54-5BC). The Romans brought Latin to Britain, which was part of the Roman Empire for over 400 years. Many of the words passed on from this era are those coined by Roman merchants and soldiers. These include win (wine), candel (candle), belt (belt), weall (wall). ("Language Timeline", the British Library Board). The influence of Celtic upon Old English was slight. In fact, very few Celtic words have lived on in the English language. But many of place and river names have Celtic origins: Kent, York, Dover, Cumberland, Thames, Avon, Trent, and Severn. The arrival of St. Augustine in 597 and the introduction of Christianity into Saxon England brought more Latin words into the English language. They were mostly concerned with the naming of Church dignitaries, ceremonies, etc. Some, such as church, bishop, baptism, monk, eucharist and presbyter came indirectly through Latin from the Greek. Around 878 AD Danes and Norsemen, also called Vikings, invaded the country and English got many Norse words into the language, particularly in the north of England.