

Our Greatest Treasure – The English Language

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

In today's episode, Cathy Booth will be talking to Professor Christopher Mulvey, to find out why English has become a global language, why the Queen doesn't speak like a Hampshire farmer, and what Winchester has to do with it all. Over to you, Cathy.

Introductions

Cathy: My guest today is Professor Christopher Mulvey, an Emeritus professor of English from the University of Winchester. He is a trustee of The English Project and general editor of the Winchester University Press. Hello, Chris.

Chris: Hello.

Cathy: Hello. What is The English Project all about?

Chris: Well, The English Project has a mission to explore and explain the English language in order to educate and entertain the English speaker. And we feel English speaker is anybody throughout the world who speaks the English language and our goal is to set up a museum of the English language in Winchester in Hampshire.

Cathy: Set up a museum?

Chris: Yes, a museum of the English language, which would tell the whole history. It'll explore English through time and space, so it'll start way back in the fifth century and come right up to the 21st century.

It would also start, in, we might call it Britannia and then spread out to the whole world. There are 70 English language communities in the world. Some of them are huge, like the North American one that has over 3 million speakers and some of them are more tiny like Barbados. So I think has about 700,000 speakers. All the Englishes are different, but they're all interchangeable and we can all understand one another.

We're talking here about the native speakers of the English language. We're also very interested in all those people who speak English as a foreign language or speak it as a second language.

Cathy: I see. And why are you choosing Winchester for this museum?

Chris: Well, Winchester is a lovely place and it's where I live, and where my university is placed, but, there are a lot of Winchesters in the world. There's a Winchester here in Hampshire, there's one in New Hampshire and there are 25 more Winchesters in the United States and there's one in Canada too. I know there's one in Australia. Any of those Winchesters could be the place of this museum.

But nonetheless, English Winchester calls louder than most Winchesters. First of all, it's the first Winchester, second, it's the Winchester of Alfred The Great. And we count him as the first patron of the English language. He was a King who taught himself to read and write in English, which is fantastic – so unusual. And then his programme of translation of Latin works into English that took place here in Winchester in Hampshire, meant that he produced a series of six great books which were copied by the monks and spread all the way up to the border with Scotland. And so his English, which is West Saxon English, became a kind of standard English. There were four versions of English operating through what we might call England then. And, it was King Alfred's West Saxon English that became the first classical English. It's not the English that we're speaking now.

Cathy: What is the difference?

Chris: Well, there were four major dialects. English started, well, a hundred thousand years ago, 'cause all languages started a hundred thousand years ago, but there might just be one time when human beings started to talk a language and now they've evolved into the 7,000 languages which exist in the world today. But, English that we can call English, we take that language as it evolved, brought over to the Island of Britannia, as the Romans called it, in the fifth century, round about 450. Angles, Saxons, Jutes and maybe other tribes began to invade Britannia because the Romans had left – Germanic hordes had actually invaded Rome. So, all the legions were pulled out and drawn back to Italia. And then these Germanic peoples began to see this very desirable landscape, a very profitable place to be actually. They began to move across the North Sea. Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, speaking a language that we call West Germanic. And they brought different versions of it or different dialects of it. And those become North English, Southern English, Midlands English. Those are not quite the right terms. Technically, there's a Northumbrian and Mercian and Kentish and West Saxon. And those are the origins of all the English dialects that we have today.

Cathy: Which one became the most dominant?

Chris: Well, in the time of King Alfred, which, he was sort of at its height in 888, it's an easy number to remember. The West Saxons created the kingdom of Wessex and they then began to move out and the West Saxons, for whatever reasons, became the most dominant. The only people could hold on against them were the Danes, but they then got submission from all the other leaders and Kings of Britannia who were of Germanic origins. And so West Saxon became the dominant dialect. But it suffered a tremendous setback one day.

Cathy: Why is that?

Chris: 14th of October 1066. Do you know what happened?

Cathy: Oh, right, yes!

Chris: The Norman French invaded, who were also a Germanic people although Northern Germanics, who'd now adopted the French language. Amazingly, they did that in about one generation. Extraordinary, how languages can change. They invaded by way of Hastings, and they swept aside the West Saxons after they'd killed King Harold with that arrow in his eye, and they completely dominated all the way up to the Firth of Forth.

All the Saxon nobles fled to what we now call Scotland. And that was a sort of stopping point of the Normans. They dominated the huge space, 350 miles of it. And they of course didn't speak English and were not interested in English. English they considered to be the language of the defeated.

By 1350 though, English was returning in force cause the Normans were never more than 5% of the population. By the way, we'll come to that 5% again. They dominated the country. They spoke French. All of their court spoke French. French became the ruling language when the written great language was Latin.

So Latin and French dominated. But the population as a whole, which might've been as many as 3 or 4 million, were all speaking English, and by 1350 English had begun to return. French remains the polished language, the sophisticated language. But, more and more people wanted to use English in the law courts in London. Up to that point you were not allowed to speak in English in the court. You had to have an interpreter. And by the way, the lawyers still have a lot of French in their language. But, by 1400 English, we got the first King of England who was a native English speaker, after the old Saxon Kings, after Harold, that was Henry the Fourth.

He'd grow up speaking English remarkably, and then he became King about 1388, whenever he killed Richard the Second. So English returned, but the English returned was the English of London, not the English of Winchester. And that is a version of Midlands English or Mercian.

We now think of that as a language of Wolverhampton, but it evolved in London into the language of Her Majesty. It became the dominant version of the English language in England.

Cathy: So is that the one that you would hear on the BBC?

Chris: In its most refined form, yes. That's what we call English public school English. That's the English spoken by our present prime minister. I'm speaking a slightly lower form of it, home counties English, kind of grammatically correct English. But I say house haus not house hais. I say, get out aut. Not get out ite.

Cathy: And what kinds of English do we find in Hampshire today?

Chris: West Saxon English didn't disappear, of course. It disappeared from writing to a large extent, but of course—the population, I'll call them the peasantry, continued to speak it.

And then it evolves into West Country English. Which remarkably, in the 15th/16th century, and really in the 17th century, the English began to expand out of England. And they moved to Africa, they moved to India. But the place that we'd think about mostly is that they moved to North America, the Americas. And the main city of migration was Bristol, and the largest populations en masse to move, particularly to what became Virginia, from West of England, and they were talking West Country English. And that's the basis of Southern English in the United States. The kind of thing you get in Johnny Cash. And that is what really happens to West Saxon. West Saxon becomes West Country English, and then it becomes Southern American.

Changes after WWII

Cathy: And what effect did World War Two have on Hampshire English?

Chris: Well, that's very interesting. Really, West Country English was pretty dominant in Hampshire up until the Second World War. But in the Second World War, remarkably they began to plan the welfare state, and also a whole series of new cities to export, what they call the overspill of population in London. Partly because they knew the population would expand, but also because so many houses were being destroyed in London through the bombing. And then they planned to set up three cities in Hampshire.

Only two of them really fully developed and they are Basingstoke and Andover. By 1950, they began to decant or export large numbers of people from London, who took up home in Basingstoke. Basingstoke was a lovely little village, which it isn't anymore. And Andover was another little sort of township, with the huge expansion of populations. They arrived all together. They arrived with their children. When children go to a school, they normally just adopt the accent of the local children. But in this case, the London children overwhelmed the Hampshire children, you might say, and so, in Northeast Hampshire, you've got really an extension of London English or Home County.

West Country English still remains. When I arrived in Hampshire 40 years ago, there seemed to be much more prominent. There's a chap at the university, 'ello Chris, I like you. You're a nice man. I said, well, thank you very much. I'm not getting it quite right, but he really did speak with a rural accent, and that's very commonplace. Maybe a bit less commonplace. So many people like me have arrived in Hampshire bringing Home Counties English with us that the English of Hampshire has altered quite a bit. Then there are lots of other groups who speak different kinds of English. There are ethnic groups, and there are groups to serve societal, social groups. And then, of course, you've got upper, middle- and lower-class accent.

Hampshire English

Cathy: So there's different versions of Hampshire English, depending on your ethnic background?

Chris: Yes. There was a large migration of Asian peoples into England from the 1960s. Here we're talking about Pakistani peoples and Indian peoples, and they arrived as communities in both Southampton and Portsmouth. In Portsmouth you've got a Bangladeshi community. And in Southampton you've got a Sikh or Indian community. They speak in English and they're bringing their own English with them because one of the great centres of English language today is India, where there must be, maybe as many as 300 million people or more using English.

In Portsmouth you get then a Bangladeshi version of English. We would just recognise all those as being Asian English, but they're relatively distinct versions. There are communities of such people in Birmingham and in Leeds and in Bradford and so on.

These are a demonstration of the way that English began to spread across the world and began to be adopted. Not as a foreign language. A foreign language is when you learn English at school, or second language is when you learn it on the street or for commercial reasons, or you just pick it up.

But on the other hand, the English spoken by the Bangladeshis or, by the Bangladeshi British in Portsmouth, is its own version of English. And just one of the many different forms of English that we've got in England today.

Cathy: And you mentioned there's different class versions of Hampshire English?

Chris: Yes. The word Hampshire English is probably not quite the right word. We might say the English language in Hampshire, and that appears in a number of different dialects and ethnolects. And what you're talking about, they were called sociolects. You get different kinds of English spoken by different social groups, and English is actually quite pronounced in this way.

Japanese apparently doesn't have sociolects, but it must have something else. Sociolect is a dialect spoken by a particular social group. And what you and I are now talking is a kind of home counties English and it's a middle-class English. It's grammatically correct, but it is rather different from the upper-class English spoken by the 5% of those persons who went to boarding school or who imitate that accent.

Now, that's the speech really of Boris Johnson or David Cameron, and it's a highly inflected version of that Westminster English, which evolved as the dialects of the court. The Queen might say if she asked you to leave, which she probably wouldn't, somebody else would ask you to leave the house. "Get out aut of my house haus."

I haven't got it quite right, but we call it a posh accent. 5% of people learn it at home and then another additional two and a half percent learn it by going to upper class boarding school. Very handy accent to have. Is also therefore called a public school accent round about 1900 and then from 1930s onwards starts to be called BBC English, because the BBC would only employ people who had public school accent.

Changing to BBC English

Cathy: When did that change?

Chris: Well, it began to change, I think at about the 1970s/1980s. Partly when they began to develop a whole 40 or more local stations, like the one you've got in Southampton and the one in Birmingham, or one in Newcastle. And in those local regional stations, they began under some kind of real social pressure to employ people with local accents.

But if you look at somebody like, Joan Bakewell or Kate Adie, they speak with a sort of BBC accent. But, when they were at school, I mean, as children, they spoke with Northern accents. Kate Adie with a Sunderland accent. I can't imitate it, but she couldn't get a job unless she spoke with a highly inflected upper-class accent. But, in a way the Beatles did in all that. The Beatles refused to accommodate when they spoke in their Liverpool voices, and in the 1960s a big pressure began against the BBC accent. And some of my younger nephews have refused to talk like me or their father, and they have adopted what's called Estuarina.

" 'ello uncle, 'ow you feelin'?"

Cathy: *laughs*

Chris: There's nothing you can do about it because they became a reverse. The prejudice was to go upwards up until 1950/1960, and then there became a kind of controversial debate about things. And then, youngsters now often wouldn't want to talk like what's called Estuarina London. It's a kind of accent that mixes Cockney with Afro-Caribbean, and it's the accent really of musicians, rock stars and people of that kind.

English as a Global Language

Cathy: How interesting, right. Well, how has English become so widespread? How does it become such a global language as it is?

Chris: Yes, this is a very interesting point.

First of all, it's nothing to do about the inherent merits of the English language. All that we as linguists would say all languages are equal. There's a lot to be said about that because not all languages will have the same number of words, but in deep level grammar all languages are equal, there's no one language to be preferred over another.

However, the English language, which up until, should we say 1600, was really only spoken by people who lived in England and not people in Wales or the North of Scotland or in Ireland. But from 1600 onwards, the English got their act together after the Great Civil Wars of the 17th century and the religious wars by 1600.

They began now to move out and create what we came to call by 1800, the British Empire. And by the time of the British Empire, English was being spoken in Canada or in Australia, in America, in lots of parts of Africa. And particularly of course in India, and it became the

administrative, the dominative language, the educational language. In all those countries you got local populations able to speak English because they needed to get on in life or to deal with the British administrators and governments. When England began to falter, 1945 we might say, it was not the strict end of the British Empire, but the real end of any kind of British dominance there was another huge superpower that took over. And of course that was the United States.

So, the language of the sea is English because the Royal Navy and the merchant fleet of the 19th century was totally English. The language of international aviation is English because the Americans developed and expanded aviation. So, for 200 years the major force in the world was an English-speaking force. Now, whether we will remain in that position, at the moment, according to Professor David Crystal, there are over 2 billion people using English, and that's more than a quarter of the population of the world.

Cathy: And the English accent, do you see that staying different in the different countries or with globalisation will we all merge to sound the same?

Chris: No, that's an interesting bit there. There are 700 accents actually in the British Isles. It's not the same as dialects, but it's a hundred different ways of speaking this.

What is happening is that on a local street level, you've got a massive number of different ways of pronouncing English, but you don't have many ways of writing it.

There are only two distinct ways of writing English. It's either with American spelling or British spelling. American English is really quite a lot different from British English. Harry Potter, by the way, it's translated into American English for the American children. I mean, there are about 20 little changes on each page, you'll hardly notice them. And they actually changed the title of the Philosopher's Stone, I think they call it the Sorcerer's Stone. So, there are subtle differences, but written English is pretty well universal.

Cathy: Sorry to interrupt, but what sort of differences are there? I mean, I know about the word spelling colour and things like that, but you know, you said 20 changes on a page.

Chris: Ah that's very difficult. You see, my problem was that I lived in America for 15 years. My English became a kind of mixture of British and American English.

One of the things the Americans say, I dove into the pool. Now, I would say I dived into the pool. And dove is old Saxon, the old English, past participle, what would be called a strong verb, there are tons of little differences like that, which if somebody said to you, I dove into the pool, you'd know what they meant. You'd think it was a bit odd and you might think it was wrong, but, they also say ruffs instead of roofs¹. There's lots of difference in the – but there are subtle differences in grammar, and I must make a list of them 'cause I haven't got them, but there's lots of different words. They say I have had it fit in place. We'd say fitted.

Modern British English has evolved much more towards what it called weak verbs. And the

¹ Phonetic spellings are rufs for American and ru:fs for British according to tophonetics.com

Americans would preserve quite a few, old, strong verbs as the're called. So, to the Americans we sound old fashioned. To us, they sound old fashioned. In Elizabethan times, for instance, shops and stores were sort of alternate. The Americans would always say, I'm going to the store or stores, we'd say we're going to the shops, but both words are equally old.

Cathy: And you were saying that there's lots of different accents and that those won't merge, with multimedia.

Chris: Um - no, there is a feeling – it's quite a few people, so everybody's beginning to talk alike.

No, there's no kind of dominant accents. I mean, I say there are 700 accents in the British Isles, that's what I'm told by the authority at the British Library. But, in fact, they're sort of dominant, what we would call Southern English, Midlands English, London English, home counties-English. What they tend to do is they all evolve, but sort of simultaneously, a bit like sort of evolution. The lions and the gazelles and the wildebeests they are all changing. But the lions never become wildebeests. However, the accents are evolving continuously and they, to some extent, remain distinct. The point about it is we all are using English in order to understand each other. So there is a tendency towards a centre as a centripetal force, it draws you inwards. And that's because, we all need to understand each other. The great attractive force is probably American English. When we say the world is talking English, mainly the world now is beginning to be talking American English, or using it as their standard.

Museum of the English Language

Cathy: Now, I just wanted to go back to the museum that you were talking about.

Chris: Oh, yes.

Cathy: So, what are the plans for that? And where are they up to?

Chris: Well, we have an idea that an English language museum is something that is perfectly possible, with information technology.-It would be focused mainly on the spoken language and the history of the spoken language, as far as we can get that. We would like to locate it in a building in Winchester. We need a lot of money for that. Like the starting point would be 25 million pounds to get going. We are now working with the Hampshire Cultural Trust because there's a great deal of interest in setting up a museum which focuses upon Anglo-Saxon England and King Alfred.

And we would very much combine with them. We would have a museum which would be giving you a sense of the wonderful richness and strangeness and variety of the English languages right across the world. We would have holographic figures talking in all the different accents and different Englishes of the world.

I went to a wonderful language museum in São Paulo once where they had done a history of the Portuguese language, or Brazilian language. They called it Portuguese, of course. And I saw how lively it could be, it could be absolutely wonderful with information technology.

Because this is where King Alfred's English became the first dominant kind of English, and so that's why it could be located here. We shouldn't have it in Oxford or Cambridge or London. Because those have got too sort of dominant a way of their own kind.

Although it might be a good idea to have such a museum in Edinburgh, because that Scots English is one of the lovely kinds of – they're all lovely – I mustn't say any one's more attractive than another!

Cathy: That's great. Was there anything else that you wanted to touch on, Chris?

Chris: No, the only thing I might say is, had the French not arrived, and had King Alfred's English remained the English of the English peoples and become the standard of at least Britain. Then the Queen, when she speaks to us on the 25th of December, would be saying to us²: "My 'usband and I would like to wish you a very Merry Christmas." But that's, that's not what she says.

Cathy: That's lovely. Well, thank you very much indeed.

Chris: You're most welcome.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.

² Professor Mulvey speaks with a 'rural' accent rather than his usual middle-class home counties accent."