

Where Do Words Come From?

"English doesn't just borrow words from other languages. It follows them down dark alleyways, beats them unconscious, and goes through their pockets for new vocabulary" –James Nicoll

- Are there any words in English or any other language that you particularly like or dislike?
- Are there any English words or phrases that people use in your native language? How do you feel about them?
- What other language is similar to your native language? Do you find it easy to understand?
- Do you know the origins of any words?



1. Below are some interesting facts about the English language. Match the first half of the fact to the second.

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) The original name for butterfly was... | 1. means a fear of long words. |
| b) The longest English word without a vowel is... | 2. can be pronounced 9 different ways. |
| c) The most common letter in English is... | 3. rhythm. |
| d) The word "Hippopotomonstrosesquippedaliophobia"... | 4. flutterby. |
| e) A word made by blending two words together such as "brunch" or "podcast" is a... | 5. every 2 hours. |
| f) A new English word is added to the dictionary... | 6. approximately 25,000 words. |
| g) In English the letters "ough"... | 7. portmanteau. |
| h) The average native English speaker knows... | 8. "e." |



2. Match the words in the box with their origins below

assassin

phoney

whiskey

sandwich

quarantine

checkmate

barbarian

mortgage

a) This word originally comes from Greek, as the ancient Greeks thought that many foreign languages just sounded like a person saying “bar bar bar bar” over and over.

b) In the 1800s a British Earl was frustrated that he could not simultaneously play cards and eat. In a moment of inspiration, he had his servants place his meal between two slices of bread, and the now ubiquitous dish is named after the town which he ruled over.

c) In the 14th century the bubonic plague (also known as the black death) swept over Europe, killing 30% of the population. Italy tried to stop the spread of the plague mandating that all incoming ships had to be isolated on nearby island for forty days. In Italian “*quaranta giorni*” means forty days.

d) This word comes from the Arabic phrase “*sah mat*” which translates to “the king is dead” or “the king is helpless.”

e) In the 1600s pirates used to sell fake jewellery for a quick buck. The jewellery was referred to as *fawney* in British pirate slang, but today the word has evolved to mean a person or thing that is fake.



f) This word means “death contract” (or “death pledge” to be more precise) in French, and when you sign one, you may well feel like you’re signing your life away.

g) This was originally called *uisgebeatha*, which is derived from the two Gaelic words *uisge* (water) and *beatha* (life). Therefore this word literally means “water of life.”

h) In the 11th century there was a group of Shiite Muslims in Persia and Syria notorious for seeking out and killing the leaders of opposing groups. They were called *al-Hashishiyyun*, which literally translates to “hash eater” because they were well known for chewing on hash (a concentrated form of marijuana) before attacking.





3. You are going to watch a video about the origin of the word “OK.” The video contains the vocabulary in the box. Complete the sentences with the vocabulary.

fad	abbreviation	intentionally	debut
corny	lucky break	obscure	acknowledge

- a) I got my in 2017 when I was offered my dream job.
- b) He uses pick-up lines to try to talk to girls at bars.
- c) He only listens to musicians nobody else has ever heard of.
- d) Apparently the latest is buying cheap shoes and decorating them yourself.
- e) Only after his death did the world Vincent Van Gogh’s genius.
- f) The Beatles made their in 1962 with the song “P.S I Love You.”
- g) FOMO is an of “fear of missing out.”
- h) He’s so aggressive, every time I walk past him he bumps into me.



4. Watch “Why we say “OK”¹ and answer the questions.

- a) What did “OW” stand for?
- b) How did the phrase “OK” start?
- c) Why did Martin van Buren adopt “OK” as a nickname in his re-election campaign?
- d) How and why did “OK” make the crossover from slang to legitimate English?
- e) Why do so many companies change the first letter of their name from “C” to “K”?
- f) What is one myth about the origin of the word “OK”?



5. Optional task/homework: research words with interesting origins (either in your own language or in English), find one word with an interesting origin and in the next lesson explain the word and its origin to your class.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UnIDL-eHOs&ab_channel=Vox