# The English Language

by
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Obviously there's a connection between English and our hobby...It's the language our covers are printed in! But, languages, like people, have a history and are always changing. The language you speak today isn't the same language it was for Shakespeare, or even Abraham Lincoln. And, it probably won't be the same as your great grandchildren's.

The English language, as we know it, didn't start developing until 1066. That's when the Normans (from the other side of the English Channel) invaded, conquered, and then settled down to rule the Anglo-Saxons in England. They mixed, and so did the languages. People on each side began borrowing words from the other.

Now, the Anglo-Saxon language is classified as 'guttural *[no slight intended to all of our Anglo-Saxon readers]* because so many of the sounds necessary to speak it originated from way down in the throat. The Norman language, meanwhile, was a 'nasal' language, because so many of the sounds necessary to speak it originated from the nasal passages. When the two mixed—it was chaos!

For example, today we have an entire group of words ending in "gh" ('enough,' 'trough,' 'laugh,' etc.). Those were good old Anglo-Saxon words, and the 'gh' sound in Anglo-Saxon was one of the harsh, guttural sounds. The Normans adopted these words, but it was simply too hard and too foreign for them to pronounce that 'gh' sound...so, they adopted the Anglo-Saxon spelling, but changed the pronunciation to suit their Norman sensibilities = the 'gh' sound in those words were then pronounced as an 'f'. Thus, today we use these Anglo-Saxon words, but with the Norman pronunciation. This is also a perfect example of why students can't be good spellers simply by spelling phonetically.

There are many other such examples. But, pronunciation wasn't the only factor.
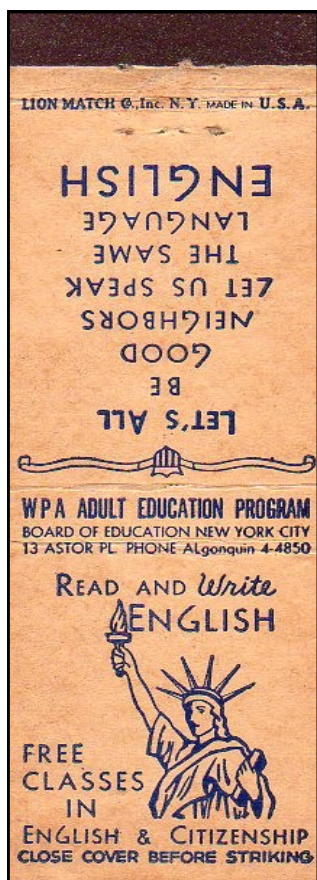
Spelling was another. The Normans also adopted a bunch of Anglo-Saxon words that started in 's' ('sity,' 'senter,' etc), for example, but in the Norman language that 's' sound was always written with a 'c'. Thus, today we have these Anglo-Saxon words, but with the Norman spelling. This type of 'fusion' was very common.

We can't blame it all on the Normans and Anglo-Saxons, though. Some of the words we use today are just plain errors that have become the norm. The most famous example is 'i<u>s</u>land'. There's not a school kid in America that hasn't wondered, "What in the world is that 's' doing in there?". Well, it's a mistake! It seems that there was a Medieval scholar who, as a hobby, liked to trace the origin of words. He took a current word of his day, the Anglo-Saxon 'iland' and traced it to the earlier Latin word, 'insula'. Thereafter, whenever he wrote the word, he always spelled it 'i<u>s</u>land' as a reminder of its origins. Later, when dictionaries were invented (to help type-setters spell words uniformly, by the way), his spelling of the word was the one that was included. Later researchers, though, found that 'iland' actually came from the earlier Anglo-Saxon word, 'ea-land' (meaning 'water lily')...so the 's' is a mistake....and since English, unlike some other world languages, has never been updated...we're stuck with it.

Another example was spelling Anglo-Saxon words such as 'gost,' 'gastly,' etc. as 'ghost,' 'ghastly,' and so forth. The early German printers were responsible for that. For a hundred years after Guttenberg invented the printing press, the only place you could get your manuscript printed was in Germany. When those German printers saw English manuscripts with the 'g' sound in the beginning, they typeset those words with 'gh,' since that's how they were spelled in German....and that's the way we spell them today.

Of course, changes in the language continue to take place all the time. The Pilgrims brought over English words such as 'school' and 'schedule,' for example, which they pronounced with a soft 's-h-h-h' sound, as the spelling would indicate. But, it wasn't long before their descendents had changed that 'sch' to the 'sk' sound that we use now...and on and on...

At the same time, regional differences spring up in the same language to produce 'accents' and colloquialisms, and sometimes these differences, alone, are so pronounced *[ha! a pun!]* it's difficult for one person to understand the other.

And then there are all the new words that are continually being added almost daily. In fact, language is like an escalator. Some words are continually being 'dropped off' at one end, as they become obsolete (such as 'bussing' - meaning kissing), while newly coined words are continually being added at the other end (just look at the array of new words that have come into use with just the use of the computer).

Plus, in the case of English, there are other current factors operating for change. Business and government have already, unfortunately, moved to a multiple language system. And, as the newest generation grows up with texting, the spelling system that you and I grew up with may well undergo a tremendous metamorphosis. Moreover, many schools, for example, have already stopped requiring students to write in cursive...so, cursive writing, which I've always thought can be so beautiful and elegant (depending on the hand that writes it) may soon be a thing of mythic tales, as well.

Today, these and a host of other language idiosyncrasies are called "Modern English." The language that you and I write and speak in may well one day be simply a quaint anachronism of the past. But, no matter what the future has in store for the language, itself, *[and here's where I tie all this into matchcover collecting—ha!]* it will always be stored, preserved, and available for viewing on....yes!.....matchcovers!