

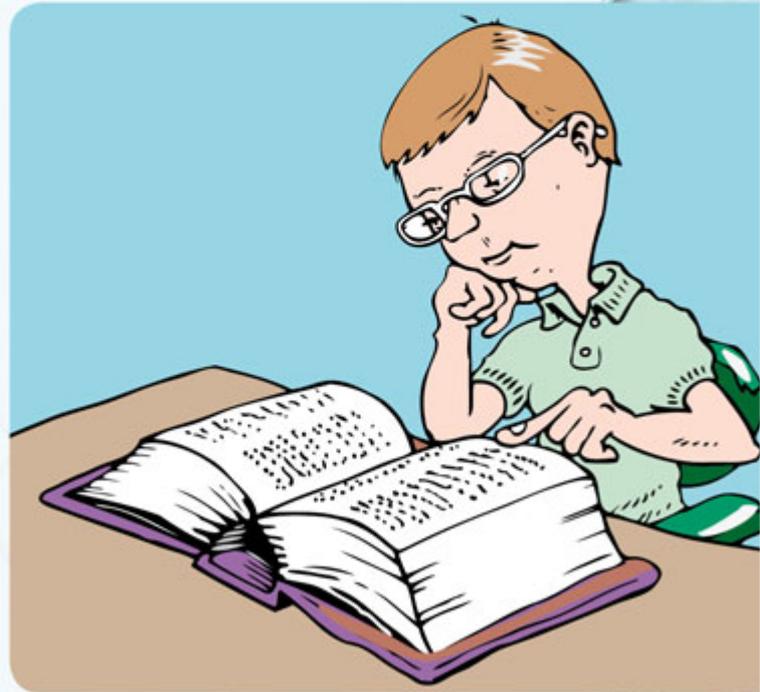
# Dictionary reliability



The English language has acquired words over the centuries from people of different races—from anyone the English had political, social or commercial contact with. English, then, is a mixture of native words borrowed from about fifty other languages. About thirteen per cent of our words are derived from Greek, but a far larger percentage come from Latin, French, Italian, Spanish and the English colonies; for example, *khaki* has an Indian origin. Some come from unexpected sources: *silk* has been ‘adapted’ from a Chinese word. In fact, about seventy per cent of all English words are borrowed. Nevertheless, English retains its place in the world as a language because its grammar, syntax and large stock of common words are, to all intents and purposes, combined to form a separate, individual identity.

The ease with which English has absorbed words has made it a leader among world languages, but the catch is that this feature has also made it one of the most difficult languages to speak and write correctly. The word *café* does not sound at all like *safe*, especially when it is most often written as *cafe*!

Although English has been persistent in borrowing words, it has been inconsistent in adapting them to English usage. This is evident when one realises that some words have been completely adapted, some partially adapted and some remain unchanged despite their use in English. English retains many words that are spelled or pronounced in ways that seem strange. Many borrowed words have been so completely



absorbed that we are no longer aware of their foreign origin. They have been Anglicised.

Because English is ever evolving it can be the cause of arguments as to what stage the inclusion of a foreign word is at. One can consult a dictionary but it must be the latest version. People who rely on ‘old’ family dictionaries are often misinformed. That old family dictionary might have *jail* simply as *gao*! Both spellings may be acceptable but in later dictionaries *jail* may be recognised as the preferred spelling.

The added problem is that two respected dictionaries may represent the word in different ways, or one dictionary may have a word that is not in another of comparable size.

Adapted from *Building an Effective Vocabulary* by Murray Bromberg and Cedric Gale, Barron Educational Series, NY, 1966.