

The English language. It's the official language of 54 different countries and is spoken by over a billion and a half people worldwide. Adding together native speakers, people who speak English as a second language or an additional language and people who are learning English, and it's the most commonly spoken language across the globe. So what makes English so great? And why do people want to learn English?

This is the British Library in London. It's the national library of Great Britain and there are over a hundred and fifty million items here from every age of the written word. Let's go inside.

The Library's collection has developed over two hundred and fifty years and it keeps on growing. There are books, magazines and manuscripts, maps, music and so much more. Every year, 3 million new items are added, so an extra 12 kilometres of shelves have to be put up.

Roger Walshe is the Head of Learning.

Richard: Roger, why is the British Library a good place to come to find out about the English language?

Roger: Well, there's lots of reasons. We've a hundred and fifty million items from all over the world, so we capture a snap shot of what the language is like. But I think perhaps more importantly, we have documents here that go right back a thousand years to the beginning of the language. And so what you can see is how this changed and evolved over time. And when you see it changing like that you get a feel for where it might be going in the future.

Richard: So how has English changed over time?

Roger: Oh, it's changed hugely. If you look back to old English - like a thousand years, it's almost like German. Very, very difficult to read, only a few people can do so. Then you look up to, say, Shakespeare's period: early modern English. Printing has come in and that begins to standardise the language.

Richard: So what impact has technology had on the English language?

Roger: Well, it has two big impacts: one is that lots of new technical words come into the language. We see this in the industrial revolution over a hundred years ago. But the other, bigger, influence is that it enables people all over the world speaking English to communicate with each other, underneath YouTube clips or in chat rooms, and they're influencing each other's English.

Richard: That's great, Roger. Is there something you can show me?

Roger: Absolutely. We've got some great stuff. If you'd just like to follow me...

Richard: So Roger, what's this?

Roger: Well this is one of the treasures in the British Library's collections. English goes back about a thousand years to Old English. This is Middle English, about five hundred years ago, and it's the first book ever printed in the English language.

Richard: So who actually printed this?

Roger: This was printed by William Caxton. Very famous. He went on to print Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the first bestseller in the English language. And one of the difficulties you have as an early printer is that there's no standard language. There's no dictionary, there's no grammars, there's no guides to usage really, so he often had to make up how to spell words himself.

Richard: And is the spelling consistent throughout the book?

Roger: Well, no, it's not, even on this page here. This is a kind of a foreword - an introduction to the work. He says he translates it from the French. He has here 'to French': f - r - e - n - s - s - h - e.

Richard: Right.

Roger: That's how he spells French. But if you go back to the centre of the page here, you've got 'French' again, and it's got one 's' in it: f - r - e - n - s - h - e.

Richard: Incredible... And this looks a lot more modern here, what's this over here?

Roger: This is a very different work. It's something we chose. It's from 1867, so a hundred and thirty years ago and we're all familiar with how people use mobile phones now to text each other - SMS. And they shorten words and they use letters to get their message across. This is a poem written in the nineteenth century in which somebody has done exactly that; he says 'I wrote to you before' - he uses a number 2, letter 'B', the number 4.

Richard: That's amazing. So what does this tell us about the English language?

Roger: Well, it tells us it's very versatile. It tells us that people play with it and sometimes the changes they make stay. Some of those changes were made 500 years ago, some of them were made 100 years ago. But some of the changes we make now in internet chatrooms and the way we talk to each other and the way people around the world use English will become the future of English as well.

I'd never really thought about English changing, but of course new words are

being added all the time and not all types of English are the same.