

C. WHOSE WORDS ARE THEY ANYWAY?

English is a mixture, of words taken from a range of countries, at different times. Going back through words is one way of going back through what has happened in time.

The Greeks had a letter phi, sounding like an f, which is why words like dolphin, elephant and philosopher are spelt that way.

The Romans had words with mn in, which is why we have autumn and column, even though we don't say the n at the end.

The Normans invaded, and brought French words like table, accent, action, nation.

All these are still in use today, in French and in English.

But words could also be picked up from people who went abroad and came back to the UK, bringing with them words like these:

Arabic – assassin, sherbet, arsenal

Caribbean – barbecue, cannibal, potato

Africa – safari, trek, chimpanzee

India – pyjamas, shampoo, bungalow

Assignment: Write a minisaga (a story of exactly 50 words) in English, which must include one word each from the following seven origins: Greek, Roman, Norman, Arabic, Caribbean, African, Indian.

Keeping out the Invaders

Words have always travelled both ways between the US and the UK. Under these headings, make a list of up to six pairs of words, which mean the same:

AMERICAN

sidewalk

cookie

BRITISH

pavement

biscuit

Words travel between countries, but they are not always welcome.

The Japanese have a new word makuru, meaning “to eat a hamburger.” There is a French phrase “bouffer un macdo” which means the same, but not all French people are happy about that. They tried to make French people say “balladeur” instead of “walkman”; it sounds more poetic, but it still wasn't popular.

There are new words like l'internet, les surfers, le site web, cliquer (to click), le point.com (dot.com), but a government group is trying to get the French to use their own words. To describe the web, for instance, they want the French to say la toile (which means canvas), rather than le oeub.

We also get new words travelling to this country, for food, music, clothes and technology.

- Think of five words which have recently come into use, and try to work out where they come from.
- Are there any new words that you don't like, or think we shouldn't use?