

YOU'RE LIKELY TO BE CLIPPED

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In Hamlet, Polonius tells King Claudius that "brevity is the soul of wit". If we can believe the results of a biblical study, it is also the soul of English. The number of syllables different languages require to translate the Gospel according to Mark were compared. Here are the results: English, 29,000; Teutonic languages (average), 32,650; French, 36,500; Slavic languages (average), 36,500; Romance languages (average), 40,200; Indo-Iranian languages (average), 43,100.

Richard Lederer in *The Miracle of Language* writes that "short words are bright like sparks that glow in the night, prompt like the dawn that greets the day, sharp like the blade of a knife, hot like salt tears that scald the cheek, quick like moths that flit from flame to flame, and terse like the dart and sting of a bee." If you're exceedingly perceptive, you'll have noticed that Lederer has chosen only monosyllabic words in this description.

Of the fifty most commonly used English words, not one of them is polysyllabic. Twenty words account for 25 per cent of all spoken English words.

In 1066, the Normans invaded England. By the end of the fifteenth century, over 10,000 French words came into the English language. Invariably, these words are longer than an equivalent Anglo-Saxon rooted word, e.g., **question** instead of **ask**, **finish** instead of **end**, and **difficult** instead of **hard**.

French brought a wealth of technical words into English. Virtually all the words to describe government, law and religion come from French. Old English was not particularly descriptive, and French also provided a wealth of adjectives.

There was a hierarchical structure between words of Anglo-Saxon derivation and those of French vintage. The humble trades like baker, miller and shoemaker were of the former, and the more skilled trades like mason, tailor and painter came from the latter. An animal while alive had an English name such as sheep, ox, cow and pig. Becoming a meal francicized the animal into beef, mutton, veal and bacon.

For all its borrowings, the soul of the language remained Anglo-Saxon. Linguist Albert Baugh wrote that regardless of class origins, everyone still "ate, drank and slept...worked, played, spoke, sang, walked, ran, rode, leaped and swam. They lived in houses with halls, rooms, windows, doors, floors, steps and gates...His spirit may be French but his mind was still English as were nearly all his body parts: arms, legs, hands,

feet, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, brain, liver, lungs, arse and ballocks."

As a result of the invasion by the Danes and the Normans two centuries later, 85,000 Anglo-Saxon words disappeared. This left only 4500 Old English words which represent less than one per cent of the words found in the Oxford English Dictionary. They are, however, the basic words of English, such as brother, sister, live, love, fight, man, wife and child. They also include many of the indispensable function words like at, but, for, in, on and to.

The advantage of short words is that they take less time to say. And, although intrinsically short, the English language employs a variety of techniques to shorten words even more.

Chief among the shortening techniques is clipping. The verb to dis is increasingly transcending Black English usage as a shorthand way of saying "express disrespect for". In many cases the stumped version becomes more common than the original. Examples of this are bra instead of brassiere, and flu (which has the distinction of being clipped at both ends) instead of influenza.

In some cases the original long word or phrase is totally abandoned as in pianoforte which was shortened to piano. Others in this genre include zoological garden (zoo), cabriolet (cab), omnibus (bus), quacksalver (quack), pantaloons (pants), periwig (wig) and mobile vulgus (mob).

Acronyms, in which the first letters or first syllables replace long phrases, is another shrinking method. They are particularly prevalent in the field of technology. If laser radar was used recently in giving you a speeding ticket, you were done in by Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation, and RADio Detection And Ranging.

As a result of its borrowings from other languages, English is blessed with a large vocabulary that allows for a myriad of linguistic nuances. There are times when we can suffer from an overabundance of riches.

Only thirty per cent of English words are of Anglo-Saxon origin. They are, however, the words that are most easily understood. Peter Farb in *Word Play* claims that in many classrooms half of the words used aren't understood, and that 80 per cent of those non-understood words are of Latin and Norman derivation. Farb says that parents would be better served if report cards said the "child could do better" rather than "academic achievement is not commensurate with individual ability".

Victoria Branden in *In Defense of Plain English* decries this lusting for Latinate polysyllables. "Talking classy" (as she dubs it) "is a linguistic disease, spreading its malignancy everywhere...infecting both the written and spoken word."

As iconoclast Mark Twain put it, "I never write metropolis when I can get the same for city. I never write policeman because I can get the same for cop."