

THE SECRET LIFE OF WORDS: HOW ENGLISH BECAME ENGLISH

Communication is essential to our lives, but how often do we stop to think about where the words we use have come from? Have you ever thought about which words in English have been **borrowed** from Arabic, French or Dutch? A recent book by Henry Hitchings, *The Secret Life of Words*, shows how and why English has absorbed words from more than 350 other languages, many originating from the most unlikely of places, such as *shampoo* from Hindi and *kiosk* from Turkish. Indeed, words do have a secret life, or rather a secret past. One learns things like that the English words taken from Basque are only two: *anchovy* and *Basque*. But etymology is just Hitchings' starting point; he shows us that the history of our vocabulary is the history of our place in the world.

Hitchings' book covers the history of the English language from pre-Roman Britain to the latest street **slang**, though individual chapters tend to concentrate on particular cultural encounters or themes, sometimes in an extended way. A chapter called "Powwow", for instance, is an interesting account of the British early exploration of America and their encounter with its languages. A chapter called "Connoisseur" explores the 18th century's extensive relation between English and French, the rise of scientific writing, the use of Italian terms in music, and the lexicon of travel and exploration, including an account of the first confrontations of the British with Australian Aboriginal languages.

— We usually talk of "borrowing" words. It is a way of describing in a simple manner a process that is very complex. Hitchings gives an intelligent account of what really happens when two languages come into contact. There is an exchange of terms; but the **breadth and depth** of that exchange is dependent upon the strength of the relationship. Long connections between two languages are likely to generate more borrowings. English, for example, has taken more words from French than from anywhere else, because the British have been engaged with French culture for a thousand years. But English has also taken a surprising amount from Native American languages, because the British settled there and, at the beginning, enjoyed fruitful relationships with the Native Americans. In contrast, English has taken next to nothing from Australian Aboriginal languages.

One of the themes of *The Secret Life of Words* is the recurring tension between those who want the language to be pure, simple and Germanic, and those who **relish** complexity and adopting new words. Hitchings points out that words only come into the language because there is a need for them, though at the same time, he thinks that "there are strong reasons for wanting a large degree of stability in our language."

Hitchings is clearly well informed on this subject. His book includes an extensive bibliography and index and many clarifying and interesting footnotes. Furthermore, the book is written in a clever, persuasive and delightful style and contains entertaining observations. All in all, *The Secret Life of Words* is an exhaustive account not only of the history of English, but also of how words witness history, reflect social change and remind us of our turbulent past.

Text adapted from *The Independent* (May 4, 2008)

borrow: manllevar / tomar prestado

slang: argot

breadth and depth: amplitud i profunditat / amplitud y profundidad

relish: gaudir / disfrutar

Part 1: Reading comprehension

Choose the best answer according to the text. Only ONE answer is correct.

[4 points: 0.5 points for each correct answer. Wrong answers will be penalized by deducting 0.16 points. There is no penalty for unanswered questions.]

1. Who is Henry Hitchings?
 - ☐ The author of a very influential English grammar.
 - ☐ An expert in the etymology of Arabic, French and Dutch.
 - ☐ The author of a book on the history of the English language.
 - ☐ An expert on the influence of English communication in many languages.
2. We learn from the text that the Basque language
 - ☐ has had a common past with the development of English.
 - ☐ has as many borrowings from English as from French.
 - ☐ has a difficult etymology because of its secret past.
 - ☐ has had a minor influence on English vocabulary.
3. According to the text, English can be seen as a language
 - ☐ capable of absorbing many foreign words.
 - ☐ that is spoken by the majority in 350 countries.
 - ☐ unable to adopt words from Hindu and Turkish.
 - ☐ that became popular with the study of etymology.
4. The aim of Hitchings' book is
 - ☐ to study how "Powwow" can be useful in world explorations.
 - ☐ to analyse the effect of borrowing on English vocabulary.
 - ☐ to explain the difficulties of English in borrowing words of French origin.
 - ☐ to determine the benefits of English as a language for scientific writings.
5. The text explains that borrowings are normally the result of
 - ☐ having many "connoisseurs" studying languages in your own country.
 - ☐ nations wanting to impose their own language on colonized peoples.
 - ☐ strong relationships between people speaking different languages.
 - ☐ the love of the British for discovering remote places in the world.
6. Hitchings argues that English can only develop if
 - ☐ it remains pure and simple and uses words of Germanic origin.
 - ☐ it becomes a language largely appreciated by purist grammarians.
 - ☐ it becomes a language that proves able to accept needless words.
 - ☐ it remains largely stable but adopts new useful words.
7. According to the author, Hitchings has written a book
 - ☐ that is full of information but with some boring chapters.
 - ☐ with not enough specific bibliography on its subject.
 - ☐ which is highly specialized but enjoyable to read.
 - ☐ that will encourage readers to learn foreign languages.
8. The text suggests that words
 - ☐ can be a source of knowledge about our historical past.
 - ☐ can carry secrets that are only known to native speakers.
 - ☐ from foreign languages should not be officially accepted.
 - ☐ have been borrowed so that languages can have many synonyms.

Espai per al corrector/a

Correcta	Incorrecta	No contestada

Part 2: Writing

Choose ONE topic. Write about number 1 or 2. Minimum length: 100 words.

[4 points]

1. You have been invited to spend some time with the Jones, an Australian family, in Sydney. Write a letter or an e-mail to their 17-year-old daughter Sarah, talking about the things you expect to learn during your stay in Australia.

2. Today the influence of English on other languages appears to be very extensive. What are the pros and cons of that situation? Do you think we are using too many English words in our own languages? Write an opinion essay presenting your views on these questions.

Recompte de les respostes

Nota de comprensió escrita

Correctes	Incorrectes	No contestades

SÈRIE 5

Reading comprehension

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- d) An expert on the influence of English communication in many languages.

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