



# The Origins of the Chinese and English Languages, a Compare and Contrast

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper compares the Chinese and English languages, trying to clear the argument that the two are from different worlds. To explain this claim, we collected data from both the speaking and writing perspective, providing links between these languages. Our results showed that the languages have certain similarities and should clear the aging stereotypes.*

## INTRODUCTION

As time has progressed, ancient languages have evolved in terms of writing, reading, and speaking, slowly progressing to the modern languages that we know today. Out of all these languages Chinese, despite often being regarded as an arduous language to learn for non-Chinese speakers, does have some similarities with English. In this essay, I will justify the reasoning behind why the stereotypes of Chinese being a laborious language is a false statement by comparing both the English and Chinese language background formation and modern usage. Chinese developed from its most original form--the Oracle Bone inscription - and the English language evolved from Old English.

## CHINESE AS A WRITING & SPEAKING LANGUAGE

The three main writing styles that are practiced in China include simplified characters, traditional, and informal slang/phonetics. The simplified characters are just what they sound like, a simpler form of Chinese that requires fewer pen-strokes. The simplified characters began appearing only after the PRC, the People's Republic of China (1949), tried to improve literacy among the Chinese. In contrast, traditional Chinese is practiced in places outside of mainland China, like in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia. Newspapers and textbooks tend to be written in traditional Chinese in those areas, which ends up reducing the likelihood that people learn simplified Chinese. The last language, the phonetic characters, is frequently used in Hong Kong as slang. They were originally designed to sound out the Cantonese dialect. The system of "pinyin," although not recognized as a formal writing style in China, helped to make the Chinese language more understandable to the Western world. The system uses Roman Characters and makes it easy for people, even

Chinese, to know how to pronounce certain words that might include thirty-five pen-strokes.

How the Chinese language evolved from an earlier non-linguistic symbolic system to a mature one today is still a mystery. Many scholars consider the Oracle Bones inscription, commonly known for its "vivid" description of a picture, as the first recognizable form of Chinese writing, dating back 3500 years. Oracle bones are pieces of drawings on ox scapula and turtle plastron as a way to communicate with others. Around 5,000 distinct characters are found inscribed on these bones.

After thousands of years of development, the Small Seal characters began to slowly appear. It is also known as the Xiaozhuan, in which all lines are an even thickness, and circles compose the majority part of the language. The Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC) created the first Chinese empire and standardized customs and laws, which meant that for the first time in Chinese history, the government took action to regulate the society. Although the connection is loosely connected, the establishment of the Chinese government would eventually help the text to be more organized. Compared to the Oracle Bone Inscription, the Small Seal Character eliminated all of the irregularities, and all words were structurally adjusted into an imaginary square box for writing under the enforcement of the government. In fact, the Small Seal characters are still occasionally used for formal inscriptions today in China.

How is the most ancient language able to connect to the writing that the language Mandarin speakers are speaking now? Evidence has shown that the structural principles seem to have developed in the Shang system and carried over to become today's modern language. The SVO sentence (Subject-Verb-Object) has been the case for thousands of years. In fact,



although Mandarin is constantly viewed as descending from the Oracle Bone Script, there still is not enough information for modern Chinese speakers to understand the language, the Oracle Bone Script, during the Shang Dynasty.

Despite the fact that most forms of Chinese share the same writing system, speakers all use “tone” to represent differences in meaning between words and syllables to prevent repetition in sound. Modern Chinese has four tones based on the Beijing dialect, with 22 initial consonants and 1,300 various syllables. Chinese has multiple language systems or dialects, so it is evident that one coming from Northwest China might have difficulties communicating with someone in Shanghai, due to the different forms of dialects. Despite the appearance of numerous Chinese dialects, the written language is still the most common form of communication within the nation. In fact, even if people are not able to understand each other verbally, the uniform written language within China still provides understanding, regardless of what dialects they speak.

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Directly following the invasion of three Germanic tribes—the Jutes, Saxons, and Angles, the term “Old English,” which started from the 5th century through the 11th century, was introduced. Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, was the language spoken and written in England before 1100 and is the ancestor of Middle English and Modern English. At the beginning of the 5th century, local people were speaking Celtic in England, while the official language was still Latin.

Old English was first written using runes with markings on woods, bone, or stone. It is because of this that there are not many examples that survive in the modern language. What really changed the events is when the Anglo-Saxons introduced Christianity and the Church, therefore starting to write on “paper” parchment.

Early Middle English is categorized as the first time when descriptive grammar appeared in written form, and the arrangement of words and phrases created well-formed sentences. Early Middle English is also a period of time when Norman and French dialects still had dominant language influence in English up until the 14th century. Late Middle English appeared during the 14th century when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote “The Canterbury Tales” and became recognized as the “Father of English Literature.” In fact, the main part of Late Middle English was brought up by clerks who were fluent in both French and Latin, and it was their job to prepare official court documents. They started using dialects that sounded more like modern English compared to the Early Middle English era.

The English language evolved toward Early Modern English from the early 15th century to the 17th century. Essentially, it was the period when the English Renaissance started and there was a significant amount of change in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. At the beginning of the 16th

century, William Shakespeare reformed English through his hugely influential work as a playwright. Words that were difficult to express in English, Shakespeare borrowed words from other nations, modified them, and added them to the English language. It is this idea that inspired the author and poet after Shakespeare to borrow words or create words with their own experience, for example, the exposure to war, colonization, and slavery.

This idea was solidified into Late Modern English as the need for words in science and technology increased. Scholars created words using Greek and Latin roots, such as “bacteria, history, and nuclear,” which are all words that were created during this time frame. Overall, the transition from Old English might seem like a completely different language from Modern English, since new ideas such as syntax, grammar, and pronunciation were being formed and added into the language.

## **COMPARISON AND CONTRAST**

Chinese and English are readily related to each other in that they both have the “borrowing system,” where Chinese borrowed words from Korean and Japanese, while English borrowed from Norman French and Latin Arabic. Studies show that students in Korea, Japan, and China felt more comfortable reading daily reading materials if they learned about 2,000 characters. Chinese still has the same morphology, syntax, and stylistics as English, provided that it has no morphological change, and its syntax closely resembles that of English. The system of Pinyin, Chinese Pinyin, and English are similar in pronunciation as well.

Chinese and English also have the same word order and sentence structure, but in Chinese, the ordinary sentence is formed with the subject, verb, direct object, and adjective for the direct objects. For example, in the sentence “那个穿黑色衣服的人是我的老师”, or “That person wearing a black cloth is my teacher.” The phrase “穿黑色衣服 (wearing a black cloth)” is an adjective for the subject “人.” “是” works as a linking verb, which makes the subject and direct object equal, and the phrase “我的 (my)” is an adjective for “老师 (teacher)”. Another fundamental similarity is that in both languages, they use either “已经 (already)” to represent the idea that the action happened in the past, just like in English, where a student can put “already” at the end of the sentence to express a similar idea.

Dialects share major similarities between the Chinese and English as spoken languages. Chinese, over its development of thousands of years, has developed different dialects within different regions. For example, there are Cantonese, Mandarins and Wu, whereas in English, different nations tend to have different dialects. For example, British English is different from American English in pronunciation and several writing syntaxes.

On the other hand, in Chinese, there is no rule for verbs, nouns, and adjectives that must agree with each other based

on gender, number, or person. There are no verb tenses in Chinese writing. Words, including time phrases or words that represent order, are added to clarify the past and future tenses. Chinese typically uses the active voice to express an idea and always puts the subject at the beginning of the sentence. In daily life, one seldomly uses the phrase “the food was eaten by me” but rather “I eat the food.” Another major difference is that the order when a Chinese speaker would prefer to express a request using a short number of words while the English speaker uses lots of adjectives, or subject modifiers, eventually forms sentences that are complex and hard to understand.

Another major difference between these two languages is the tone versus the words’ meaning. In Chinese, most words only have one meaning, and therefore, it is easy to distinguish which word is being used based on the pronunciation. In English, however, words must be used with a context if a word has multiple meanings. For instance, the verb “want” in English both expresses the idea of desire to obtain something and the lack of something. In Chinese, there is no such context-needed material, but words might have different meanings based on the tone. For example, Chinese words such as “shuijiao” can both mean dumplings(水饺shuǐjiǎo) and sleep(睡觉shuìjiào). The only way to distinguish those is by their tone and which syllable within the word is being emphasized.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the languages being fundamentally different, I would argue that Chinese and English share similarities, both from historical standpoints. Chinese and English both come from ancient “hieroglyphic” origins. Also, from the writing and speaking standpoints, Chinese and English share fundamentally similar sentence structure and usage for verbs. Although always recognized as a difficult language to learn, Chinese is easily seen to be related to and casts insight into the English language.

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