

# Create a Language Clinic – Chapter 2

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## Chapter Two: The English Issue, From the Language Builder's Perspective

The problem with having English as your first language, from the language builder's perspective, is that English is a language that never met a word it didn't like.

It got its birth as the Norman soldier's attempt to pick up Anglo-Saxon barmaids, and the Norman tongue had been pretty promiscuous even before that. It started out when Roman Latin kept illicit company with Germanic nouns and African adjectives and Greek verbs and a whole lot more, squished a little of this with a bit of that, and a pinch of everything else, squeezed the whole mess into mostly-regular Latin grammar, bred like mad, and then tore across western Europe spreading civilization and what would become all the Romance languages; Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and so on, before falling into disarray and disuse.

Centuries passed, while Latin's clan of offspring shifted and evolved.

Then Latin's child Old French, carried by invading Normans, met my blue-painted intransigent Germanic-speaking Anglo-Saxon ancestor horde, and in the crash, all of Latin's beautiful, logical rules broke, and squishy Latinate multi-syllable soft sounds careened into rough-edged Celts and the advent of four-

letter words that *only had four letters* .

Since then, English, the bastard child of frequent and messy cultural collisions, has gone on to add words from every other language on the planet that ever had an idea it didn't already contain. It has freely coined words when its speakers came up with concepts for which there were no words. It has cheerfully embraced, and then co-opted, and frequently mangled, the grammars and vocabularies of other places and peoples, under the absolute certainty that even though there were already a hundred ways to say "Dinner was great," *having a hundred and one ways would be better* .

English speakers have never accepted the limitations of the language. They have always just built more language to accommodate their needs, and then encouraged everyone else to jump onboard. Think Silicon Valley and the explosion of techie terms as a recent example of this. English goes anywhere and does anything, never takes *No!* for an answer, and even though it's a beast to learn well, can be picked up in a workable basic form by just about anyone, anywhere, using tons of words new speakers already know (because English raided *their* language for vocabulary a century or five ago.)

Every rule in English has an exception, or half a dozen of them, every part of speech has sections that have been tacked on like body parts to Frankenstein's monster, and everything you can say one way, you can say at least a dozen other ways, and probably closer to a hundred.

Because of this, English speakers (and therefore English-speaking language builders) have built into their subconscious minds this inherent linguistic sense that anything is possible, that the language rules are really just general guidelines, that such rules as exist are mostly made to be broken, and that these rules certainly need not apply to them if they don't want them to.

Pause here for a moment. Consider what I said at the beginning of this course about a language being the soul of its people.

See what I mean?

Now.

Realize that the majority of languages on the planet are *nothing like English*. They have a fixed set of regular rules with few exceptions (and those generally dealt with in a single, sane fashion), and people *follow* these rules. They have a word hoard grown at home and kept at home, and these languages add to their hoard with outside words reluctantly, if at all. (Witness France's eternal war against permitting any English words to creep into French vocabulary.) Such languages have one or two right ways to say something, and have markedly smaller vocabularies, limiting ideas and concepts that can be discussed.

Modern European languages (excluding official French) have the same expanding vocabularies as English, which weighs in at around a million words. Best guess on Russian is that it has about 500,000 words in its word hoard, while German has around 200,000 words, Italian and Spanish have fewer than 200,000 but more than 100,000 words, and French has fewer than (but not much fewer than) 100,000 words. Generally these other languages have more regular rules, too.

However, many other languages have vocabularies ranging from a very low 750 words for one Creole pidgin variant up to around 20,000 words, about the size of the average English speaker's working vocabulary. And these smaller languages tend to have very regular (if complex) rules, few exceptions, and few or no loan words.

The English-speaking language builder's bone-deep assumptions about language and what it is and how it works shatter like glass on the rigid anvil of the majority of the worlds 6,912

known living languages<sup>1</sup> (and God only knows how many dead ones).

## **In many languages, there is only one right way to do anything.**

Imagine there is only one right word to describe something. In most languages, a woman cannot be gorgeous, bodacious, bootylicious, drool-worthy, stunning, ravishing, or hot. She can simply be beautiful. Well, she can probably be hot, too, but only if the weather stinks.

Imagine there is only one right verb for a given situation. In many languages, you cannot sashay, prance, amble, wander, stroll, strut, swagger, shimmy, wriggle, float, tiptoe, galumph, creep, clomp, stomp, tromp, march, dawdle, meander, drag, scurry, hurry, careen, race, bounce, hop, skip, traipse, or ooze into a room. You can only walk.

The mind of the English-speaker rebels at such confinement.

But imposing these constrictions in a created language do make it a whole lot easier to build. Regular rules with no exceptions, limited vocabulary, refusal to accept loan words or expand—all of these are a great aid if you're building the language from the ground up.

In some cases, such limits will fit your work perfectly. In other cases, they won't.

Perhaps you won't want a restrictive, limited language. Restrictive languages will influence the people who speak them, just as wide-open messes of languages influence their speakers.

**Because a language is the soul of its people.**

When you're designing your languages, keep this point in mind,

and make your languages fit the people who speak them. (Or make your people fit their language, if you're building the language as your first step.)

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