

It's All Greek (And Latin) to Me

Have you ever said that you could 'predict' something, said something was 'incredible' or asked to use the 'telephone'? Ever discussed different dinosaurs or said you were studying 'biology' or 'geography'? If so, you've used Latin and Greek, probably without even realising you were doing it.

Why? English is a complex language that has developed over many millennia. Every time a new group of people came into contact with those speaking English, they added something to the language. This has been the case several times with Latin and Greek.

The Latin Bits

Latin was the language of the Roman people. This group is mostly associated with the area we now call Italy, where the society developed. Modern Italians speak Italian, a closely related language. The Roman Empire, however, was a vast political and martial enterprise that took over most of Europe for a long period of time.

By AD 43, Britain (or at least most of the south) had been annexed by the Emperor Claudius.

Over the next 350 years, Britain was ruled by the Romans. Their armies came, their governors came and their language came (for a time).

It isn't only place names that use Latin. The names we give to each of the months of the year are also based on their Latin equivalents. These are often straight forward transformations. The Romans named the months of the year after Gods, Emperors and simply by their number in the year – the Roman year started in March. Here are a few examples:

January - Januarius - named for **ianua** or door, Janus the god of beginnings and endings

July - Julius - originally **Quintilis** or fifth month, named after Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the year of his assassination

October - named after **octo**, meaning eight

Direct Roman rule in Britain ended in AD 410 when the Romans needed their armies for counterattacks in many locations across central



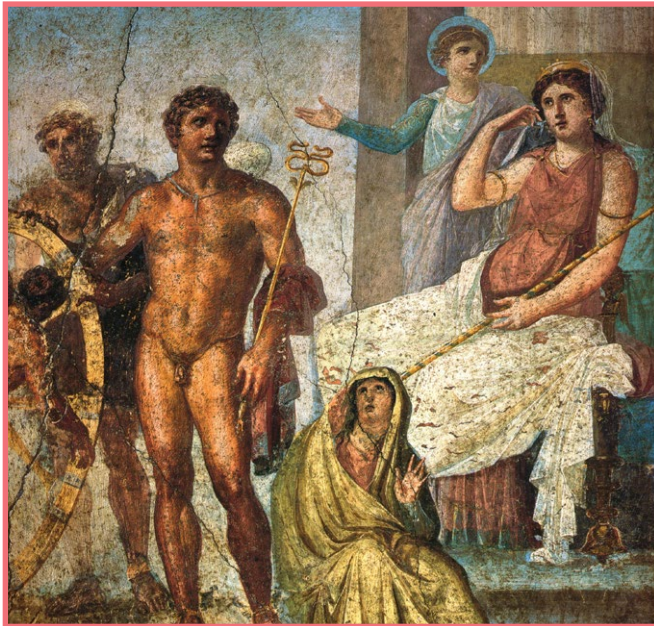
Europe. When the Roman armies left, they took their language with them. Afterward, Christian missionaries travelled to England to spread the word about the Bible and they spoke Latin too.

The Christians introduced Latin to the Angles and Saxons in Britain and it became the language of religion, science and philosophy. By AD 600, Christianity had spread throughout the British Isles and the language, Latin, had spread with it.

This use of the Latin language exists even today. It is still the language of some church services, the language used for legal terms and the language used throughout the colleges at Cambridge and Oxford. Latin became even more commonplace when the Normans, who spoke a Romance language (Old French, arrived. Their language brought more Latin words to us.

It's All Greek

Okay – that's Latin you may say, but what about Greek? What are Greek words doing in our language?



It is through the Latin language that we have most of our Greek words in English. The Greeks were the people who lived in the city states that made up ancient Greece. They were also known as the **Hellenes**.

The Romans lived relatively close to the Greeks and borrowed many things from their culture such as their mythology (their stories about gods and heroes) and many of their words. These became incorporated into Latin and then Latin was passed on to us.

We get words from Greek roots in many other ways as well.

Scientists originally wrote in Latin and Greek. These were the languages of academia. This meant that many of the words they invented to explain scientific and medical phenomena came from Greek roots. This practise continues today. Many body parts, diseases and medicines are given names using Greek root words.

The branches of science and maths are given Greek names as well (Biology, Chemistry etc).

Chemistry probably comes to us by way of Old

French, Arabic and Greek! It probably started out as the word **khemia**, from Greek meaning 'the art of transforming metals'. It then became the Arabic word, **al-kimiya** and was transported to Britain via France. This created the Late Middle English word, **alchemy**.

Alchemy was a branch of science that investigated how different metals, like lead, could be turned into gold. This later became the field of science we know as chemistry.

By the way – it turned out that you couldn't turn anything into gold (no matter how hard you tried). The story of Rumpelstiltskin is just that, a story!

The idiom 'It's all Greek to me' has been around since about 1600. It appears in the play 'Julius Caesar' by William Shakespeare and refers to something being unintelligible or gibberish.

Some words are taken directly from Greek but given new meanings as technology developed.

Telescope was an ancient Greek word meaning far-sighted. It was meant to refer to people

with the ability to see long range or into the future. It came from the words **tele** (far) and **scope** (sight). Later, the word was borrowed to describe the wonderful new device that allowed people to see the stars up close.



A similar word was later created to describe the opposite piece of equipment. **Microscope** comes from **mikro** (meaning small) and **scope** (sight).

Latin and Greek account for a significant portion of influence on English. Along with the Romance languages (French and Italian) that are derived from Latin, the words of Greek and Latin account for over 60% of our total vocabulary in English.

In 1842, an English biologist named Sir Richard Owen coined the phrase 'dinosaur' to describe the fossils that were being discovered around the world. The word comes from the Greek: **dino** means fearfully great or terrible and **saurus** means lizard.

This is now known to be a false name as dinosaurs are not actually lizards. The name has been around so long however that it has stuck and the Greek names for dinosaurs have become one of the most famous uses of Greek in English.

So when you consider English – it really is all Greek (and Latin) to everyone!