

*In his regular column, Babel's resident etymologist, **Simon Horobin**, explores the wonderful world of word origins*

How do you pronounce the word 'garage'? Is the stress on the first or second syllable? Does the second syllable rhyme with 'barrage' or with 'fridge'? The reason for the different pronunciations is that the word is a borrowing from French; despite being recorded in English since the beginning of the 20th century, it is still being assimilated to a native pronunciation. There are thousands of French words in English, many of which were adopted as a consequence of the influx of French speakers following the Norman Conquest of 1066. Words like 'fruit', 'people' and 'colour' date back to this period, but no longer stand out as borrowings because they have been fully anglicised. The English word 'courage' underwent a similar journey to 'garage'. Rhymes in Chaucer's poetry show that in the 14th century it was pronounced as the modern French word 'courage', but it has since become fully anglicised.

There was another wave of French borrowing in the 18th century, when words like 'connoisseur', 'vis à vis', 'à propos' and 'faux pas' were introduced. These still stand out today as French words, both in their spelling and pronunciation. While this is partly because they are more recent adoptions, it is also a consequence of the prestige of French vocabulary and accent in this period. Not everyone approved of this process of 'Gallicisation'; in the preface to his Dictionary of the English Language (1755), Dr Johnson expressed the concern that it would lead to the English babbling a dialect of French. In the dictionary itself Johnson heaped censure on recent French loans, such as 'finesse' ("an unnecessary word which is creeping into the language") and 'ruse' ("a French word neither elegant nor necessary"). Other writers sought to promote the use of English alternatives to French loanwords, such as 'mount' instead of 'cavalier', 'part' instead of 'rôle' and 'operation' instead of 'manoeuvre'. It is ironic that the words offered as English alternatives are often themselves earlier borrowings from French.

Such attempts to police the borders of the language and repel any French invaders are doomed to failure. The higher status of French words continues to be felt today in the way that French words typically occupy a higher register to their English counterparts. The French borrowing 'commence' offers a more formal alternative to the English 'begin', while 'regard' is a more impressive way of saying 'look at'. So, while Dr Johnson's worst fears may not have been realised, English speakers still turn to French words to show off, as is nicely captured in the joke: 'Pretentious? Moi?' ¶