ASK a linguist

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Why does French, unlike other romance languages (like Italian and Spanish), have such a huge discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation?"

Romance languages are part of the Indo-European language family tree. They are also known as the Romanic or Latin languages, and are those languages that developed from Latin. The most well-known Latin languages are Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Romanian. The vocabulary, structure and grammar of these languages are similar, as these examples of verb forms and nouns demonstrate:

Verbs in English and Romance languages

English	Latin	Italian	Spanish	Portuguese	French	Romanian
'To sing'	*cantare*	*cantare*	*cantar*	*cantar*	*chanter*	*a cânta*
'To enter'	*intrāre*	*entrare*	*entrar*	*entrar*	*entrer*	*a intra*
'To give'	*dare*	*dare*	*dar*	*dar*	*donner*	*a da*

Nouns in English and Romance languages

English	Latin	Italian	Spanish	Portuguese	French	Romanian
'Sky'	*caelum*	*cielo*	*cielo*	*céu*	*ciel*	*cer*
'Wine'	*vinum*	*vino*	*vino*	*vinho*	*vin*	*vin*
'Night'	*noctis*	*notte*	*noche*	*noite*	*nuit*	*noapte*

These languages have developed from what is known as Vulgar ('common') Latin, as opposed to Classical Latin. Vulgar Latin has two branches – Western Romance and Eastern Romance – based on geographical perspectives. For example, Eastern Romance includes Romanian, which is spoken in Romania and Moldova.

However, these territories had their own historical developments that had a significant influence on the languages of the peoples who inhabit these regions. French, as part of the Gallo-Roman branch, was influenced by the oïl languages that were spoken in the northern half of France, as opposed to the oc languages, which were spoken in the southern half of France and were more similar to Latin. From a lexical and phonetic perspective, Gallo-Roman was 'Germanised' following the conquest of Gaul by the Franks in AD 486. The Roman control and Latinisation of Gaul had lasted for five centuries before this moment. After the Frankish victory, Gaul became ruled by the Merovingians, and so the Northern part of Gaul, once under the rule of the Romans, developed under the Merovingian culture.

It is believed that the [h] in words with Latin origin, such as *huit* ('eight' – Latin *octo*, Romanian *opt*, Italian *otto*) and *huître* ('oyster' – Latin *ostrea*) are due to an older Germanic pronunciation.

Regarding morphology and syntax, Germanic languages had a greater influence on oïl languages than on the Southern, Occitan languages, which stayed closer to Latin. Examples are the drop of final [e] in pronunciation in German dialects and the way schwa behaves in initial syllables. Compare, for example, *gelücke* with *Glück* ('happiness'), or *petit* with *p'tit* ('small').

Therefore, across centuries, these languages have developed differences at all levels – phonetic, lexical, semantic, etc. – that can be explained by the events, rules and influences (political, sociolinguistic, etc.) that have taken place at various moments within these territories. French has developed over time and, unlike other Romance languages, has received a stronger Germanic influence through oïl languages, which explains its differences in spelling and pronunciation compared to other Latin languages. ¶

Do you have a burning linguistic question, something you've always wanted to know about language? Contact us on Twitter, Facebook or email and we will pose your question to an expert linguist and attempt to answer it in the next issue of Babel.

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