A Linguistic Invader: Anglo-Saxon
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As a name used to designate people or populations, as an adjective to describe just about everything—economies, fields of specialisation, mentalities, spaces—the term is very much in vogue, especially in France. Of course it has also been used by geographers, or at least by a number of geographers. Thanks to them, a new section, a new area of global space, has emerged in literature: an Anglo-Saxon ‘world’.

But perhaps there is reason to be concerned about some of the uses of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’—uses which represent a certain drifting away from the meanings we might consider ‘correct’, precise, and close to the time-honoured usage that has generally been confirmed by those close to the subject. We may even think of it as a Gallicism, and especially as a term lacking in precision, used incorrectly, a factor of confusion—to the degree to which it is in fact used as a substitute for other expressions that are equally simple, but much more precise, and adapted to the classification and description of the kinds of facts that are of interest to geographers. It therefore seemed worthwhile to formulate a number of observations about the term in Cybergeo. The journal is well known for its commitment to clarity of expression, which justifies our subjecting our readers to a brief examination of the meanings that are assigned to a term that is widely used today, along with several critical observations about them.

Definition 1. The populations that came into the present-day British Isles after the withdrawal of Rome. The language of these populations. In this first and very specific meaning: the Anglo-Saxons and the Anglo-Saxon language, as opposed to all the populations that came into these Isles at a later date, in particular the Normans, and the language resulting from the introduction of terms of French origin. See Documents 1A and 1B.

Definition 2. Especially in the United States, the descendants of the populations that came from the British Isles, as over against all the other populations of the country, the Blacks (now designated as ‘Afro-Americans’) and above all the Latinos, but also, the descendants of people who originated in other parts of Europe (the Slavs, the Italians, even the Irish and the Jews). The very precise expression that links origin—with a strong racial, even racist connotation—with religion, to create the category of the ‘White-Anglo-Saxon Protestant’, or WASP, is well known. But it is not the only case in which this term is found, as Document 2 attests. The term ‘WASP’ often acquires a pejorative connotation, with a play on words between the acronym WASP and the noun ‘wasp’, designating a creature that is considered rather unpleasant.

Definition 3. Especially outside of Anglophone countries, the term takes on a broad and vague meaning, to refer to any person with a background in British civilization or the English language, or to any institution characteristic of Great Britain or the United States. This usage, it is true, has long been widespread, often with pejorative connotations and references to the notion of race. See Documents 1 and 3. But it has a tendency to become generalised, particularly outside Anglophone countries, and especially in France (See Document 4), in such a way that we may have good reasons to consider it abusive.
First of all because it tends to replace more precise terms, in particular ‘Anglophone(s)’ and ‘Anglo-American(s)’, and to be used at a far remove from practices based on definitions 1 and 2 above. It results in vague categories being introduced in place of precise definitions. There are even occasional absurdities, as for example, references to the ‘Anglo-Saxon Indian’ press – a media phenomenon that is not ‘Anglo-Saxon’ according to any of the meanings defined above. The expression may, however, even be extended to use on France-Culture and by a female student in the research programme of an École Normale Supérieure! More generally, the systematic (and lazy) substitution of ‘Anglophone’ by ‘Anglo-Saxon’ ends up placing in the first category populations that would never be listed there by authors from the United States; this is only a venial sin, one might say, but we have reason to be irritated by these vague definitions bordering on actual error.

The automatic and, once again lazy, use of the expression also presents the disadvantage of obliterating too easily a number of real differences between the two great zones of Anglophone civilization on opposite sides of the Atlantic. No one can deny that there are analogies in the economic, social and legal systems, a common cultural inheritance—but there are also fundamental differences. Even at the linguistic level, isn’t it said that ‘The United States and England are two great countries separated by a common language?’—because it is more than nuance that differentiates the uses made of English (a language which, from this side of the Atlantic, is often considered to be rather badly treated on the other side...) But of course even more marked cleavages appear in just about every area, something which we tend to overlook. Thus, to close with two examples, wouldn’t we be lacking in sensitivity, even cultural awareness, to characterize William Faulkner and George Bernard Shaw as ‘Anglo-Saxon’ writers, when there is nothing more quintessentially American than the first and nothing more properly British than the second—even if both are ‘Anglophones’? However much we might criticize the British National Health service, is it legitimate, in point of fact, to deny its originality by comparison with the system in the United States that leaves a large portion of the population without health insurance, all the while referring to an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ medical organization’, a formula frequently heard in the present debates about Social Security? Certainly it may be impossible to achieve a drop in the use of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in the definition given to it by French writers: its use has become more or less established. But to avoid the systematic use of it, to prefer more exact terms like ‘Anglophone(s)’ and ‘Anglo-American(s)’ could spare us many approximations and even keep us from writing absurdities.

Document 1 A:

Chambers’ 20th Century Dictionary
Revised Edition 1952
“Anglo-Saxon. Old English. One of the Germanic settlers in England or Scotland, or of their descendants. A Saxon of England, as distinguished from the Old Saxons of the continent. Anybody of English speech.”
**Document 1 B :**

Le Grand Robert  
“Anglo-Saxon”: ADJ.  
1/ Relating to the Germanic invaders (Angles, Saxons, Jutes) of Great Britain in the 6th Century.  
Noun. A person who belongs to one of the peoples of British civilization. “He agreed with his friends on this point, that the unknown stranger must be English or American, because the name Britannia led him to think so, and in addition, through his unkempt beard, beneath this underbrush that served for his head of hair, the engineer thought he recognized the characteristic traits of an Anglo-Saxon.” Jules Verne, Île Mystérieuse.  
NM Linguistics: Anglo-Saxon. Old English.”

**Document 2 :** Paysages de California.  


“The “Copse at Hurstbourne” is one of those fancy-sounding titles for a brand new tract of condominiums on the outskirts of town. “Copse” as in “a thicket of small trees”, “Hurst” as in “a hillock or a mound” and “bourne” as in “brook or stream”. All these geological and botanical wonders did seem to conjoin within twenty parcels of the development, but it was hard to understand why it could not have just been called “Shady acres”, which it was. Apparently people aren’t willing to pay a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for a home that doesn’t sound like it is part of an Anglo-Saxon land grant. These often quite utilitarian dwellings are never named after Jews or Mexicans. Try marketing Rancho Festein if you want to lose money in a hurry. Or Paco Sanchez Park. Middle class Americans aspire to tone, which is equated, absurdly, with the British gentry; I had already passed Essex hill, Stratford Heights, and Hampton Ridge.”

“It has been observed that a change took place in the temperament of the Anglo-Saxon-turned-Yankee over several generations under the influence of the climate of the northeastern United States.”

**Document 3**

### A Google Survey

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Definition 1</th>
<th>Definition 2</th>
<th>Definition 3</th>
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| “Anglo-Saxon”
English | 19 cases | 0 cases | 1 case |
| “Anglo-Saxon” plus
“United States”
English | 7 cases | 6 cases | 7 cases
Of which 3 were translated quotations from French texts |
| “Anglo-Saxon”
French | 2 cases | 0 cases | 18 cases
All examples of “Anglophone” or “Anglo-Américan”. |

NB Summary of the first 20 citations for each of the three queries made to the research engine: that is, all the citations of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in English (line 1) or in French (line 3), or of the combination of ‘Anglo-Saxon + United States’ in English (line 2). We did not take into account the 3 or 4 citations in each case of the Wikipedia encyclopedia, which is usually given top priority, and provides several definitions, like the other dictionaries.

The fact that definition 3—where ‘Anglo-Saxon’ could usually be replaced by ‘Anglo-American’ or ‘Anglophone’—is used almost exclusively in French, is very apparent.