## The Origins of Legal English

**by Rupert Haigh**

Legal English reflects the mixture of languages which has produced the English language generally. However, it owes a particular debt to French and Latin. Following the Norman invasion of England in 1066, French became the official language of England, although most ordinary people still spoke English. For a period of nearly 300 years, French was the language of legal proceedings, with the result that many words in current legal use have their roots in this period. These include property, estate, chattel, lease, executor and tenant. During this period, Latin was used in England. English remained the spoken language of the majority of the population, but almost all writing was done in French or Latin.

4. **Consideration.** It is a good thing to show consideration for other people, but in legal English consideration means the reciprocal promises made by the parties to a contract.

5. **Construction.** Construction means building or a building, but the construction of a contract means the interpretation of a contract.

### False Friends

One of the peculiarities of legal English is that many words which have one meaning in ordinary English have quite a different meaning in legal English. Here are some examples.

1. **Consideration.** It is a good thing to show consideration for other people, but in legal English consideration means the reciprocal promises made by the parties to a contract.

2. **Furnish.** Ordinary people furnish their houses, but lawyers often have to furnish (i.e. provide) each other with documents.

3. **Frustration.** If you are delayed on the way to the office, this may cause some frustration. On the other hand, when lawyers talk about the frustration of a contract, they are talking about a force majeure situation.

4. **Construction.** Construction means building or a building, but the construction of a contract means the interpretation of a contract.