

# The Origins of English

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One of the Indo-European languages

A large “family” of related languages that stretches geographically from western Europe to India

English is in the Germanic “branch” of the family tree

This includes English

German

Dutch

Scandinavian languages

# The Origins of English

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Other I-E branches of significance:

Italic (Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese)

Hellenic (Greek)

Celtic

Balto-Slavic (Russian, Polish, etc.)

Indo-Iranian (Farsi/Modern Persian, Sanskrit, Hindi)

# What defines “Germanic” languages?

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Major developments differentiating Germanic languages from other I-E languages:

- Large number of words in Germanic languages with no known cognates in non-Germanic I-E languages
- Development of a two-tense verb system: present and past
- Development of dental suffix /d/ or /t/ to indicate past tense on weak verbs
- Development of weak and strong declension for adjectives
- Stress moves to initial syllable rather than being variable depending on syllable length
- Modification of some I-E vowels
- The First Sound Shift, aka “Grimm’s Law”

# Grimm's Law

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Named for Jakob Grimm of Grimms' fairy tales fame

He noted a systematic series of sound changes between Germanic languages and other I-E languages.

1<sup>st</sup> sound change:

- Except when preceded by /s/, I-E /p, t, k/ → Gmc /f, θ, x/
- (/x/ later becomes /h/ initially)
- Thus, Latin *pater* → English *father*;
- Latin *dentt* → English *toothh*;
- Latin *cord-* → English *heart*

# Grimm's Law

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2<sup>nd</sup> sound change:

- I-E /b, d, g/ → Gmc /p, t, k/
- Thus, I-E \**dheub* → English *deep*;
- Latin *duos* → English *two*;
- Latin *genus* → English *kin*

3<sup>rd</sup> sound change:

- I-E /bh, dh, gh/ → Gmc /b, d, g/

# Germanic verbs

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Developed a two-tense system: present and past

- There is no “future” tense in Germanic languages
- “Tense” refers specifically to the conjugation of an individual verb
- Germanic languages use modals (aka, “helping verbs”) to create a sense of *aspect*
- This includes future aspect: *We will go*;
- Progressive aspects: *We are going*;
- Perfective aspects: *We have gone*

# Germanic verbs

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Three main categories:

“Be” verbs

Strong verbs

Weak verbs

# “Be” verbs

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*Be* verbs are the most irregular system of verbs in any I-E language

This is especially true of English and other Gmc languages

Why? Our *be* verb system is actually the coalescence of THREE separate I-E verbs into a single system.

- Two different present tense verbs: *be* and *am*
- And a past tense form: *was*

This irregularity was fossilized through constant use—we use these verbs more than any other

# “Strong” verbs

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Strong verbs are frequently (and erroneously) referred to as “irregular” verbs.

These are verbs which form the past tense via a change in the vowel of the base morpheme

- For example: run/ran
- Drink/drank
- Eat/ate

The changes in these verbs are entirely systematic:

- Sing/sang/sung vs. drink/drank/drank

This change in the vowel of the base morpheme is an inflection, yes...

But the past tense is an allomorph of the present tense form

# “Weak” verbs

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Weak verbs in Gmc languages are those which attach a dental suffix—an inflectional morpheme—to the word to show the past tense.

- Walk/walked
- Twist/twisted
- Initiate/initiated

All new verbs in English are added as weak verbs; we do not add strong verbs to the language

Many verbs in English that were once strong have become weak over time

- OE *helpan* (“help”) had the past tense *holp*
- Cf. PDE *plead, pled/pleaded* or *dive, dove/dived*

# The stages of English

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Old English (OE): ca. 500-1100

Middle English (ME): ca. 1100-1500

Early Modern English (EModE): ca. 1500-1800

Late Modern English (LModE): ca. 1800-2000

Present-Day English (PDE) or Post-Modern English: ca. 2000-present

# The stages of English

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The “borders” of these stages are somewhat arbitrary

But each corresponds roughly to an important social, political, or technological development:

- The beginning of the OE period corresponds to the Anglo-Saxon migrations to England starting ca. 449 AD
- The beginning of the ME period corresponds to the Norman Invasion in 1066
- The beginning of the EModE period corresponds to the establishment of the printing press in England in 1476
- The beginning of the LModE period corresponds to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of democracies
- The beginning of the PDE period corresponds to the ubiquity of the internet

So, something happens and a generation or so later the language has changed significantly!

# The Old English period (500-1100)

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Important events affecting the etymology of English in this period:

- Ca. 410: Rome withdraws its legions from Britain
- 449: Anglo, Saxon, and Jute tribes “invade” Britain/England at the behest of (inept) Celtic warlords
  - English is geographically separated from other Gmc-speaking communities and thus develops into its own language
- 597: The (re)introduction of Christianity to England
  - Borrowings from Latin (largely ecclesiastical in nature)

# The Old English period (500-1100)

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- 787: Viking invasions begin
- 865: Scandinavian occupation of northwest England begins
  - Scandinavian settlement eventually results in many borrowings from Old Norse (ON) into English
- 871: Ascension of Alfred the Great of Wessex
  - Establishes a lasting peace with Scandinavian residents
- 1066: Norman Invasion
  - English ceases to be the prestige language; hundreds of French borrowings begin

# Old English lexicon

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## Native Germanic word stock

- As a general rule, OE lexicon is much more “German” than PDE

## Many OE words survive today

- *Man, land, winter, come, go, word, ofer, to, was, sweord, wulf, heard, etc.*

## Yet many fell out of the language at various points

- *Blican*, to shine;
- *dugub*, band of (young) men;
- *guma*, warrior/man

# Old English lexicon: borrowing

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## Borrowings from Celtic

- Mostly geographic terms and place names:
- *Crag*, *Stratford-on-Avon*

## Borrowings from Latin

- Ecclesiastical terms via the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity
- *Preost*, *masse*, *mynster*, etc.

# Old English lexicon: borrowing

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## Borrowings from Old Norse

- While not readily attested till the ME period, borrowing would have begun during the later OE period

## Nouns:

- *Skull, sky, window, skirt, law, etc.*

## Prepositions: *till, fra* (“to and fro”)

## Verbs:

- *Take, die*

# Old English lexicon: borrowing

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A major influence of Old Norse on English: pronouns

OE masculine singular pronoun: he (nom.), hine (acc.), his (gen.), him (dat.)

OE plural pronouns: hi (nom.), hi (acc.), hire (gen.), him (dat.)

- As vowels degraded over time, confusion undoubtedly arose
- Especially between speakers of Old English and Old Norse, who could be living side-by-side

The solution? Borrow the Norse pronouns!

- Our *th*- plural pronouns are borrowed from Old Norse

Not documented till the ME period, but the borrowing would have started during the OE period

# Old English lexicon: derivation

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Derivation was not as extensive in OE as it was in later stages of the language

Two examples: *-had* and *for-*

OE *mægden*, “girl” + *-had* = “virginity”

OE *wundian*, “to wound” + *for-* = *forwundian*, “to wound severely”

# Old English lexicon: compounding

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Compounding is a distinctively Germanic means of lexical creation

Frequently in the form of *determinative* compounds (first element determines the second)

- *Meodosetla*, “mead benches”

Often such compounds were used to create semantic abstractions

- OE *bochord* (lit. “book-hoard”) = library
- OE *wordhord* = vocabulary

Overtime some became amalgamated

- E.g., *lord* (*hlaf-weard*, the bread-guard), *daisy* (*dæges-eye*, the eye of the day)

# Old English lexicon: compounding

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Some compounds were created by authors for poetic use

This allowed poets to maintain alliterative verse and develop a sense of variation

Thus many compounds in OE poems are *hapax legomenon*, a word that appears only once in written records:

- E.g., *sweordplega*, “sword-play, battle”

Other poetic compounds, called kennings, were much more deliberately metaphoric

- *Hronrade* = “whale-road” = ocean
- *Banlocan* = “bone-locker” = body

# Old English illustrated

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Hwæt, wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum,

þēodcyninga þrym gefrūnon,

hū ðā æpelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scēfing sceapena þrēatum,

Monegum mægþum mēodosetla oftēah,

eġsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð

fēasceaft funden.