Chapter 8
Accidents of history: English in flux
/ˈæksɨdn̩ts əv ˈhɪstrij/

/ˈɪŋglɨʃ ɨn ˈflʌks/

In this chapter, we look at a broad outline of the history of English, or rather, the history of those people who have spoken English since it *was* English. Understanding their history helps us understand why the English vocabulary and spelling system are the way they are today. We learn about the sources of much of the English vocabulary, the reasons for some of the vagaries of English spelling, and about some of the reasons why languages change and continue to change in general.

8.1   Linguistic change, and lots of it

English is really not the same language it was a thousand years ago. Languages change, continually and steadily in general, but few languages have changed as much in as short a time as English has. Speakers of modern French or Icelandic can read prose written in Old French or Old Icelandic without any significant special training. They read it with some difficulty, sort of like the difficulty you might experience reading Shakespeare or Donne—but they can read it. Speakers of modern English, however, usually need to take one or more university-level courses before they can begin to read Old English texts.

To get a feel for how much the language has changed over the years, have a look at the Old English text I've provided and glossed below, and then read the free translation of the text at the end. [100]

The excerpt is from one of the documents that the English king Alfred the Great caused to be written around 900 AD. It's a description of what a Viking trader told Alfred about a northward voyage he had made. The Viking's name was Ohthere, and he came to see Alfred sometime after 890, when he made the voyage. Ohthere had sailed farther north than anyone ever had before, to a latitude of 71° 15', which was farther than anyone would again for more than 500 years. The excerpt describes what he told Alfred about the people of the very northernmost lands, where he met both Finns and a people called the Beormas, and collected a tax from them. The text is revealing about the contemporary culture both of the Finns and the Norwegians, and also about that of the English who were writing it down.

Now, to make some sense of the Old English text below, you need to know just a few things about their writing system. It was generally fairly phonetically accurate. Almost all the recognizable symbols represent the same sounds that they represent in the IPA. In particular, the vowels generally have their IPA values: 'o' = /o/ as in *boat*, 'e' = /e/ as in *gate*, etc. The consonant symbol 'ð' represents the same thing it does in IPA, the voiced interdental fricative /ð/, as in *father*.

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[100] (Text from Cassidy & Ringler. Translation based on that of John Tucker, http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/worldcall_2003/oldenglish/index.htm and glosses from Grant Chevalier, http://www.ucalgary.ca/UofC/eduweb/engl401/texts/ohthfram.htm)

There are a few symbol/sound relationships in this text that will be new to you, which are summarized in the table below. Try to get a little familiar with them before looking at the text, as it'll help sort out things that are *really* different from modern English from things that just *look* different.

Symbol	Sound (features)	Sound (IPA)	Example OE word(s)	Modern English sound-alike word
þ ('thorn')	Interdental fricative	/θ/ or /ð/	*þæt*, 'that'	*that*
c next to a front vowel	voiceless palatal affricate	/tʃ/	*micle*, 'much'	*Mitchell*
sc before a front vowel	voiceless palatal fricative	/ʃ/	*sceall*, 'shall' *scip*, 'ship'	*shall* *ship*
g next to a front vowel	palatal glide	/j/	*twentig*, 'twenty'	*twenty*
y	high, front, rounded vowel	/y/	*gyt* 'yet'	Not in modern English — an /i/ with lip-rounding
h in middle of word	voiceless velar fricative	/x/	*eahta*	Not in modern English — Like German 'ch' in *Ich, Bach, Buch*.

The following represents approximately a quarter of the complete text of *The Voyage of Ohthere*—the second quarter, in fact.

1 Fela   spella   him sædon   þa Beormas ægþer ge of hiera agnum lande   ge of
   Many   stories   him said   the Beormas both   of their own   land [and] of
2 þæm landum þe   ymb   hie utan   wæron, ac he nyste   hwæt   þæs
   the lands which   about   them outside were   but he not.knew what   the
3 soþes   wæs,   for þæm   he hit   self ne geseah. þa Finnas,   him þuhte,   ond
   sooth   was,   for that   he it   self not seen.   The Finns,   him thought, and
4 þa Beormasspræcon neah   an geþeode.
   the Beormas spoke   nigh   one language.
5 Swiþost   he for   ðider,   to ecan þæs landes   sceawunge, for þæm
   Especially   he fared   thither, besides these lands   surveying   for the
6 horshwælum,   for þæm   hie   habbaþ swiþe   æþele ban   on hiora
   horsewhales,   for that   they   have   very   noble bone   in their
7 toþum — þa teð hie brohton sume þæm   cyninge —   ond hiora   hyd bið swiðe

teeth — the teeth they brought some to.the   king —   and their   hide is   very

8   god to   sciprapum.   Se   hwæl   bið micle læssa   þonne   oðre   hwalas: ne
good for shipropes.   This   whale   is   much less   than   other   whales: not

9   bið he   lengra   ðonne   syfan elna   lang.   Ac on   his agnum   lande   is
is   he   longer   than   seven ells   long.   But in   his own   land   is

10 se betsta   hwælhuntað: þa   beoð   eahta and   feowertiges elna lange,
the best   whalehunting: they   are   eight and   forty   ells long,

11 and þa mæstan   fiftiges elna   lange;   þara   he sæde þæt he, syxa sum ofsloge
and the biggest   fifty   ells   long;   of them he said that he, six some, slew

12 syxtig   on   twam   dagum.
sixty   in   two days.

13   He wæs swyðe   spedig man   on þæm æhtum   þe heora   speda   on beoð,
He was very   rich man   in those possessions which their   riches   in are,

14 þæt is on wildrum.   He hæfde   þa gyt,   ða   he þone cyningc sohte,
that is in wild [animals].   He had   then yet when   he the   king   sought,

15 tamra   deora   unbebohtra syx hund.   Þa   deor   hi hatað 'hranas';   þara
tame   beasts   un-be-bought six hundred. Those beasts   they called 'hranas';   there

16 wæron   syx stælhranas,   ða beoð   swyðe   dyre mid   Finnum,   for ðæm hy
were   six decoy hranas, that are   very   dear among Finns,   for that   they

17 foð þa   wildan hranas mid.   He wæs mid   þæm   fyrstum mannum on
capture (the) wild hranas with.   He was among   the   first   men   in

18 þæm lande;   næfde   he þeah   ma ðonne   twentig hryðera and twentig sceapa
that land;   not.had he yet   more than twenty cattle   and twenty sheep

19 and twentig swyna,   and þæt lytle þæt he   erede   he erede   mid horsan. Ac
and twenty swine,   and that little that he plowed he plowed   with horses. But

20 hyra   ar   is   mæst   on   þæm   gafole   þe   ða Finnas him gyldað.
their   property is   mostly in   that   tax   which the Finns them yeilded.

21 Þæt   gafol   bið on deora   fellum and on   fugela feðerum   and hwales bane
That   tax   is   in beasts' skins and in   birds' feathers   and whales' bone

22 and on   þæm   sciprapum   þe   beoð   of hwæles hyde   geworht and of
and in   those   shipropes   which   are   of whales' hide   wrought and of

23 seoles. Æghwilc   gylt   be hys   gebyrdum.   Se   byrdesta   sceall
seals'. Each   pays   by his   birth.   The   top-birthed shall

24 gyldan fiftyne   mearðes fell   and fif hranes   and an   beran fel   and tyn
yield   fifty   marten's skins and five hrana's and one bear's skin   and ten

25 ambra   feðra   and berenne kyrtel   oððe   yterenne and twegen   sciprapas;
ambers' feathers and bearskin kirtle   or   otterskin and two   shipropes

26 ægþer   sy syxtig   elna lang: oþer   sy of hwæles hyde   geworht,   oþer
both   being sixty   ells long: either being of whales' hide wrought,   either

27 of sioles.
of seals'.

Free translation:

The Beormas told him many stories, both of their own land and of the lands around them, but he didn't know what the truth was, because he did not see it for himself. The Finns and the Beormas seemed to him to speak nearly the same language.

Besides surveying the land, he mainly went there for the walruses, because their teeth contain very fine bone — they brought some of the teeth to the king — and their hide is very good for ship-rope. This whale [the walrus] is much smaller than other whales, it doesn't reach more than 26 feet in length. However, the best whale-hunting is in his own land [Norway]. [There], they are a hundred and eighty feet long, and the biggest a hundred and eighty eight feet; he said that he and five others killed sixty of them in two days.

He was a very rich man in those things that their riches are in, that is in wild beasts. He still had, when he sought the king, six hundred unsold tame beasts. They called those beasts 'reindeer'; there were six decoy reindeer that were very costly among the Finns, because they use them to capture the wild reindeer. He was among the leaders of the land, even though he didn't have more than twenty cattle and twenty sheep and twenty swine, and what little land he ploughed, he ploughed with horses. But his riches are mostly derived from the tax that the Finns paid them. That tax is paid in beast skins and in feathers and whale bone and in ship-rope made of whale and seal skin. Each pays according to his rank. The highest ranked shall pay fifty marten skins and five reindeer skins and one bear skin, and 320 gallons of feathers and a bearskin or otterskin coat and two ship-ropes, each being 225 feet long, made either of whale hide or of seal hide.

What are some differences you notice between Old English and modern English, besides the orthographic and phonological differences mentioned above? There are significant differences at every level: differences in syntax, morphology and vocabulary. For instance, have a look at all the noun phrases below. They are the NPs in the text that are modified by a relative clause. I've provided glosses and identified the syntactic categories of each listeme:

(121)   Syntactic differences between OE and Mod E

a.   ...þæm landum þe   ymb   hie   utan   wæron,   (Line 2)
     ...those lands which about them   outside were
     ...Det   N   [s Comp P   Pron   Adv   V   ]

b.   ...þæm æhtum   þe   heora speda on beoð, (Line 13)
     ...those possessions   which their riches in are
     ...Det   N   [s Comp Pron   N   P   V   ]

c.   ...þæm gafole þe   ða Finnas him   gyldað.   (Line 20)
     ...that tax   which the Finns them   yielded.
     ...Det   N   [s Comp Det N   Pron.   V   ]

d.   ...þæm sciprapum þe beoð   of hwæles hyde   geworht (Ln. 22)
     ...that ship-rope which be of whales' hide   wrought
     ...Det   N   [s Comp   AuxV P N   N   V   ]

   In all of these cases, the determiner and noun are followed by a modifying relative clause, introduced by the complementizer *þe*, 'which'. But the words in the relative clause are not in the same order they would be in their modern English equivalent! In all the OE examples above, the verb in the relative clause comes at the end—but that's not where we put it now. To say (121)c in modern English, for instance, we would say *...that tax which the Finns yielded*[101] *to them*, not *...that tax which the Finns to them yielded*. In modern English, the verb directly follows its subject, in this case *the Finns*, and precedes the object, rather than coming at the end of the sentence as it does in Old English. Similarly for the others: the

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[101] Of course, a more accurate translation here would be 'paid', but I've used the modern cognate of *gyldað*, 'yielded', because it's still occasionally used with the meaning of giving or rendering, and it illustrates the pronunciation of the letter 'g' as /j/ next to front vowels—the OE root and the modern English root don't sound as different as they look in this instance. Plus, the OE spelling reveals the connection to other related words whose 'g's didn't undergo palatalization, like *gold*, *gild*, 'to put gold on', and the former Dutch currency, the *guilder*.

modern English equivalent of (121)d is *that shiprope which is wrought*[102] *of whales' hide*, with the verb preceding the object, not ...*that shiprope which is of whales' hide wrought*, with the verb following the object. For (121)b, we'd have *those possessions which their riches are in*, not *which their riches in are*. And (121)a would be something like *those lands which are about them*, not *those lands which about them are*. If you know any German or Dutch, you may notice that this Old English word order, with the verb at the end, is like the word order of those languages in the same kind of clause. So you can see that the syntax of English has changed in the last thousand years.

There are many, many morphological differences between Old English and modern English. To take one example, let's see if we can figure out how nouns were pluralized in Old English. There are several plural nouns in the text above, and a couple that occur both in singular and plural form. If we look at all these nouns together, we see that many different suffixes seem to do the job of representing plural number. I've extracted all the plural nouns in the text, and any corresponding singulars, and listed them below. They are subscripted with the line number(s) in which they appear in the text, so you can find them in context later:

(122) *Morphological differences: plural nouns*

Sg. noun	Plural noun	English gloss	Suffix(es)?
	horsan[19]	'horses'	*-an*
	spella[1]	'stories'	-a
	sceapa[18]	'sheep'	*-a*
	hryðera[18]	'cows'	*-a*
	swyna[19]	'swine'	*-a*
	speda[13]	'riches'	*-a*
man[13]	mannum[17]	'men'	*-um*
	æhtum[13]	'possessions'	*-um*
	wildrum[14]	'wild (beasts)'	*-um*

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[102] Again, a better translation would be 'made', rather than 'wrought' — but 'wrought' is still occasionally used in modern English. It's cognate with the word 'work' and to the 'wright' in words like 'playwright' or 'shipwright'.

	dagum$_{12}$	'days'	*-um*
	elna$_{9, 10, 11, 26}$	'ells'	*-na*
hwæl$_8$	hwalas$_8$, horshwælum$_6$	'whales, horsewhales'	*-as, -um*
	sciprapas$_{25}$, sciprapum$_{8, 22}$	'ship-ropes'	*-as, -um*
lande$_{1, 9, 18}$	landes$_5$, landum$_2$	'lands'	*-es, -um*
	Finnas$_3$, Finnum$_{16}$	'Finns'	*-as, -um*
	teð$_7$, toþum$_7$	'teeth'	*-Ø, -um*
fel$_{24}$	fell$_{24}$, fellum$_{21}$	'skins'	*-Ø, -um*
	feðra$_{25}$, feðerum$_{21}$	'feathers'	*-a, -um*
	deora$_{15}$, deor$_{15}$	'beasts'	*-a, -Ø*

For some, we have both singular and plural forms. For others, we have only plurals, but many of these words have made it through to modern English, so we can identify which part's the suffix and which the root without too much trouble. In *horsan*, for instance, it seems clear that *-an* is a suffix on a root *hors-* (especially if we compare it to the first part of *hors-hwalum$_6$*, literally 'horse-whales', referring to what we now call walruses.) Assuming that much, it's probably safe to conclude that even in the unrecognizable words *hryðera* and *æhtum*, the *-a* and the *-um* are suffixes, since we see them in other words too.

If that was all there were to it, we might be able to decide that *–an, –a, –um,* and *–as* were all just different plural suffixes that went with different sets of stems, like *-s* (*horse-s*), *-i* (*almun-i*), and *–Ø* (*sheep-Ø*) in modern English. But things start to get very confusing when we look at our last seven plural nouns. There, it seems like we've got *two* possible suffixes that mark plurality! Six of them show up once with *—um* and once with some other suffix from the list above. The last shows up with the null suffix (*-Ø*) and the *-as* suffix from the list above What's going on?

It turns out that the suffixes on Old English nouns included other information as well as plurality. Remember that English pronouns have different forms depending on where in the sentence they appear? The third person pronoun is pronounced *he* as a subject, but when it's a possessor, it's *his*, and anywhere else in the sentence, it's *him*. Old English marked these and other distinctions on *all* nouns, not just pronouns, rather like German or Latin does. The suffix attached to the various nouns above is

indicating both plurality and *case*—the role the noun is playing in the sentence.[103]

Exercise 1: Locate in the text all the nouns in the list above that end in –*um*. (The line numbers where they occur are given in the subscripts.) Can you figure out what common environment all the –*um* words share?

Finally, there are obviously plenty of vocabulary differences. Old English clearly had a lot of suffixal listemes that modern English lacks. Besides the noun suffixes discussed above, there were similar adjective suffixes that agreed with the nouns they modified, like the -*um* in *fyrst-um* *mann-um*$_{17}$, 'first man.' Verbs also seem to have a number of affixes that no longer exist in modern English either: for example the -*e* in *soht-e*$_{14}$, 'sought' and *þuht-e*$_3$, 'thought'; the -*on* in *wær-on*$_{15}$, 'were' and *sæd-on*$_1$ 'said'; and the *ge-* in *ge-worht*$_{26}$, 'wrought' and *ge-seah*$_3$, 'seen'. Just looking at the single verb *gyld-*, 'yield', we see the following forms in the text: *gyld-að*$_{20}$, *gyl-t*$_{23}$, and *gyld-an*$_{24}$. Looking at the verb *be*, 'be', we see the following: *wær-on*$_2$, 'were', *wæs*$_3$, 'was', *bið*$_7$, 'is', *is*$_9$, 'is', *beoð*$_{10}$, 'are', *sy*$_{26}$, 'be'. Some of these suffixes lingered into the Early Modern English period. The King James Bible (1611) often uses the 3rd person present –*th* suffix, which we also see in the -*að* in *gyld-að* and the –*oð* in *beoð*. Here are the first few lines of the 23rd Psalm from that bible:

(123)   The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
          He mak<u>eth</u> me to lie down in green pastures,
          He lead<u>eth</u> me beside the still waters,
          He restor<u>eth</u> my soul.

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[103] To be strictly accurate, it's indicating gender and declension class as well.

Other function listemes are also different. The pronouns are different—*hie₆* for 'they' and *heora₁₃* for 'their'. The complementizers are different—*for þæm₆* , literally 'for that', instead of modern English 'because'. The conjunctions are different—*ac₉* instead of 'but'. The quantifiers are different or changed in funtion—*fela₁* instead of 'many', for example, and *ægþer* (which became modern English 'either') meant 'both' in Old English.[104] The prepositions are different or changed in function, so we see *mid₁₆* for 'among' and also *mid₁₉* for 'with', *on₉* for 'in', and *to₈* for 'for'. We see many function listemes we recognize in the text *(him, þæt, of, and)*, but many—probably most—are foreign to speakers of modern English.

There are, of course, many obvious differences in content listemes as well. There are content listemes that are simply completely different from their modern English equivalents, like *fugela₂₁,* 'birds', *hataþ₁₅,* 'called', *hryðera₁₈,* 'cattle', *erede₁₉,* 'plowed', and *fel,* 'skin, hide'. There are others that may be recognizable to some of you but are archaic, obsolete or dialectal in modern English: *kyrtel₂₅,* 'kirtle (coat, tunic)', *ðider₅,* 'thither (there)', *soþes₃ ,* 'sooth[105] (truth)'. And there are others that you may recognize but whose meanings have changed significantly. The word *deor₁₅,* which became our modern English word *deer,* used to mean just '(wild) beasts, animals', not 'deer'. Similarly, *þuhte₃* has became our modern verb 'think', but in Old English its meaning was 'seem'. (The Shakespearean word *methinks* meant something more like 'it seems to me that...' than 'I think that...') Finally, the words *spedig₁₃,* 'rich', and *speda₁₃* 'riches', have become the modern English word *speedy* and *speed,* but they've lost their former meaning of 'wealth', 'success' or 'good fortune' and retained only the meaning 'fast. The archaic farewell expression, *Godspeed,* originally conveyed a meaning like 'God give you success', not 'God give you speed'.

Despite these differences, there are clearly many very recognizable words in the Old English texts, whose forms and meanings have changed

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[104] Weirdly, *oþer₂₆,* which became the modern English adjective *other,* originally meant what modern English *either* means, as you can see from its use in the text.
[105] As in *soothsayer.*

very little, setting aside the different spelling conventions, and all those suffixes. Some like this are *hors-, hwæl-, man-, feðr-, scip-, swyn-*, and many others. The main difference in content words between Old and modern English is an *absence*: in Old English texts, there are very few words from Latin, Greek, French or other Romance languages. Indeed, there are few borrowings of any sort: the vocabulary is fairly homogenously Germanic in origin. In modern English, on the other hand, it is estimated that about fifty percent of the words in common use are of non-Germanic origin.

Exercise 2: In the previous sentence, 6 of the 14 nouns, verbs and adjectives are of Latinate origin. Which ones? One of the words is of indeterminate origin. Which one?

Where did all those new words come from? And where did all those affixes go?

8.2   Layers of vocabulary and accidents of history

In Chapters 4 and 5, we saw that the English vocabulary is partitioned into two main groups—Latinate and Germanic—which behave differently with respect to certain morphological patterns. How did English get to have so many words of Latinate origin in it? English is historically a Germanic language, related to Swedish, Dutch, German, and other languages of that group. How did it become so chock-full of words from Romance languages? And how did it even get to England in the first place? All the other Germanic languages are spoken in the northern part of mainland Europe, where the Germanic tribes had settled, sometime before 1000 B.C.

The accidents of history have forced English into very intimate contact with several other European languages. In those situations, the other languages usually had the upper hand, so to speak—they were spoken by the socially and culturally prestigious, and by those in political

and military power. The early political history of England is one of repeated conquest and subordination, and the profound changes in the language between 1000 AD and 1500 AD, which created Modern English out of Old English in the relatively short time span of 500 years, are a direct consequence of those political events, which we'll review next.

8.3   A brief history of England, as relevant to the English vocabulary

There are essentially four main periods in the history of English, once it had arrived in England:

1.   600-1000 AD: Old English
              1000-1100   *transition*
2.   1100-1400 AD: Middle English
              1400-1500   *transition*
3.   1500-1750 AD: Early Modern English
4.   1750-present: Modern English

We'll look at each period in turn, looking mainly at the events that had an effect on the English vocabulary. First we answer the question: How did the English get to England?

8.3.1   55 B.C. to 600 A.D. : How the English came to England

Before 449 AD, the primary inhabitants of the British isles were *Celts*[106], who had invaded from the east hundreds of years earlier and driven out earlier, non-Indo-European tribes. They spoke Celtic languages: Welsh, Manx, Gaelic, and Briton. In fact, before the Roman Empire began to seriously expand around 125 B.C., most of Europe was inhabited by Celts.[107]

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[106] /kɛlts/

[107] The French cartoon series *Asterix the Gaul*, is set in a Celtic village in what is now France that is resisting the armies of Rome. *Gaul* is related to *Gael*, from which we get the name *Gaelic*, the language of Ireland and Scotland which is still spoken today. It's also where the word *Celt* came from.

In 55 B.C. the Romans finally got around to invading Britain. Caesar's first invasion wasn't successful, but a century later Romans came again, and ruled southern Britain from 43 A.D. to 410. The Britons under Roman rule were converted to Christianity by Roman missionaries, but the Celtic cultures otherwise retained their own essentially separate identities and language during this period. The Romans left Britain in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, partly because their empire was under attack in mainland Europe from rebelling Germanic tribes: Goths, Franks and Vandals, all former Roman allies, attacked the Romans. In 410, Visigoths, headed by their king Alaric, burned Rome.

The departure of the Romans left the Britons without the military shield they'd become used to. In that same year, 410, they were being attacked by Picts and Scots, both other Celtic tribes who lived in Scotland. They begged Rome for military aid, but Rome had no resources to spare.

The beleaguered Britons, looking around for allies, noticed that just across the Channel, three German tribes, the Jutes, Saxons and Angles, had military strength to spare. In 449 the Britons invited them to come over and help protect Britain against the northerners, in exchange for a piece of land in the east.

Here's a translation of a description of this period written by St. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of England*, around 730 A.D., explaining how the Germanic tribes were given an inch and took a mile:

> Then the nation of the Angles, or Saxons...arrived in Britain with three ships of war and had a place in which to settle assigned to them...in the eastern part of the island. Accordingly they engaged with the enemy, who were come from the north to give battle, and the Saxons obtained the victory. When the news of their success and of the fertility of the country, and the cowardice of the Britons, reached their own home, a more considerable fleet was quickly sent over, bringing a greater number of men, and these, being added to the former army, made up an invincible force.
> Those who came over were of the three most powerful nations of Germany—Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. ... In a short time, swarms of the aforesaid nations came over into the island, and the foreigners began to increase so much, that they became a source of terror to the natives themselves who had invited them. ... Public as well as private buildings were overturned; the priests were everywhere slain before the altars; no respect was shown for office, the prelates with the people were destroyed with fire and sword; nor were there any left to bury those who had been thus cruelly slaughtered. Some of the miserable remnant, being taken in the mountains, were butchered in heaps. Others, spent with hunger, came forth and submitted themselves to the enemy, to undergo for the

sake of food perpetual servitude, if they were not killed upon the spot. Some, with sorrowful hearts, fled beyond the seas. Others, remaining in their own country, led a miserable life of terror and anxiety of mind among the mountains, woods and crags.

By 600 A.D., Germanic tribes controlled Britain. The Celts were driven south, west, and north, into Wales, Cornwall, Devon, and Scotland. Irish Celtic raiders attacked the hapless Britons from the west, and carried off prisoners. (One of the Briton prisoners was St. Patrick, who converted Ireland to Christianity.) The southern part of Britain, ruled by the Germanic invaders, came to be called by the name of one of the tribes: Angle-land, or *England*.

8.3.1.1   Loanwords from before English was English

The Angles, Saxons and Jutes, *before* they came to Britain, had had lots of interaction with Roman military personnel, merchants, and colonists. Even before they came to England, they had borrowed some Latin words from them: *wine* (Latin *vīnum*), *street* (Latin *strata*), *mile* (Latin *mille passum,* 'thousand (paces)'), *pan* (Latin *panna*), *wall* (Latin *vallum*).

Once arrived, the Anglo-Saxons were barely talking to the resident Celts—more often, killing them—and, as rulers, were certainly not speaking Briton. Hence only a few loanwords from Celtic languages made it into English at this time: *bin* and *druid* are a couple of examples that have made it to Modern English; others were borrowed and later lost. Lots of British place names are Celtic, though: *Avon, Thames, Wight*, etc.

8.3.1.2   The Anglo-Saxons and Christianity

Although the Anglo-Saxons, like all the residents of Europe, had been in contact with Latin-speaking Romans over the previous several hundred years, they didn't get very intimate with Latin until they adopted Christianity. Then they heard considerably more Latin as it was the language of the church.

The original Anglo-Saxons were pagans, holding religious beliefs similar to those you may be familiar with from the Norse legends. The Norse theology, whose pantheon includes Odin, Freya, Thor, Loki, etc., is

the source of our names for weekdays: *Woden's day* (Wednesday), *Thor's day* (Thursday), *Freya's day* (Friday). The subjugated Celts were Christian, but they weren't interested in ministering to their oppressors, and the Roman church had other things to worry about at first.

However, in the late 500s, Pope Gregory saw a couple of beautiful Anglo-Saxon slaves in the marketplace in Rome (when he supposedly made a famous Latin play on words: *Non Angli, sed Angeli*— 'not Angles, but angels') and sent a mission to Britain to convert them. The Angles were hard to convert, partly because the church structure imposed priests from abroad, rather than promoting locals, but after a hundred or so years the Celtic Christians got into the act too, and the conversion was close to total.

Loanwords from Latin during this period, then, mostly have to do with the church: *apostle, deacon, demon, pope, school, hymn* were all borrowed around this time. Keep in mind that up to this point written records in OE were very sketchy: literacy and books were for the rich only, and Latin was the lingua franca, so everything was written in it. It wasn't until after 800 A.D., that a number of substantial texts became available in OE. At that point, most Anglo Saxons had become Christian, and were interested in learning to read, so they could read the Bible. King Alfred, who attached great importance to literacy, decided that it was easier to just learn to read than to have to learn to read *and* learn Latin at the same time, so he caused a number of texts to be translated into Old English. This isn't to say that England wasn't cultured — in fact, with the Roman missions, great centers of learning had arisen, and many people came from all over Europe to study in England — but prior to Alfred, it was all in Latin.

8.3.2   600-900 A.D. The English and the Vikings

The Anglo-Saxons established a stable government and defended England against incursions for the next three hundred years. The biggest threat came from the north. From around 790 to 880, England was repeatedly raided by Scandinavian Vikings (also called Norsemen, or Danes), who essentially ruled the northern and eastern parts of Britain under a system now called the *Danelaw*. Old Norse was spoken widely

throughout this area, because the Vikings not only landed and extracted tax, but moved in and married Englishwomen. Old Norse was a household language in the northern half of the island.

When the Viking raiders came south, they had a very bad effect on the archival material of the day. Most of the loot worth taking in southern England was in the churches and monasteries, which the Vikings usually burned, along with all the books in them. King Alfred, who ruled England from 871-899, defeated the Vikings decisively. More importantly for us, Alfred was a scholarly man who attached great importance to literacy and learning. Almost none of his subjects knew Latin, so Alfred had many important texts translated into Old English, and thus provided some of the most extensive written evidence that we have about what Old English was like (including the excerpt about the Viking trader Ohthere that we looked at above).

After Alfred's death, England remained united for a century, and then the Norsemen returned. This time, the English were beaten into submission, and Canute, king of Denmark and Norway, became ruler of England.

8.3.2.1   Old Norse and Old English

In this period, a lot of Scandinavian loanwords entered English, although it's hard to tell sometimes exactly which words those were, because Old Norse and Old English were closely related Germanic languages, so lots of their vocabulary sounded very similar. There were a couple of sound changes that distinguished the two languages, however, so if we see a a word with a sound pattern that belongs to Old Norse but not Old English, we know the source. Some examples: OE *æg*, 'egg', became in early Middle English *ei* (Remember that the OE spelling 'g' represented a velar fricative in this kind of environment, and such fricatives are easily lost in coda position.) By late Middle English, though, the Old Norse word *egg,* with a genuine voiced velar stop in it, had replaced *ei*. OE *sweostor*, 'sister', became Middle English *suster*, but was eventually replaced by Old Norse *systir*, which became our modern *sister*.

Old English also borrowed some function words from Old Norse, which is itself extremely remarkable. Content words are borrowed back

and forth between languages all the time, but it is very rare for a new function word or to enter a language via borrowing. Remember the failure of the introduction of a non-gendered 3rd person pronoun into English discussed in the previous chapter? In fact, what Old English got from Old Norse was a set of pronouns.

If you look at the third person plural pronouns in our *Ohthere* text, you'll see that in Old English, they all began with an /h/, not with /ð/, like modern English *them, they, their*. OE had a masculine subject pronoun, *he*, and its object variant, *hine,* its dative variant *him* (now the default in ModE) and its possessive variant, *his*. Similarly, it had a feminine subject pronoun *heo*, a feminine object pronoun *hiere* (the source of ModE *her*), and a feminine possessive *hie*. The reason we now have *they, them, their* is because the original Old English third person plural pronouns were replaced wholesale by their Old Norse counterparts, which began with the interdental fricative. Similarly, on the way to ME, the feminine singular subject form *heo* was replaced by the Old Norse *she*, although English kept the object form *her*.

Sometimes a borrowing from Old Norse wouldn't displace the equivalent Old English word. Rather, one or the other would take on a more specific meaning, and the two words would continue to coexist. Some pairs like that are *shirt/skirt*, and *shy/scare*. In Old English, the original Proto-Germanic /k/ sound had disappeared entirely from consonant clusters beginning with /s/; rather, the whole cluster became the palatalized fricative /ʃ/. (That's why the spelling 'sc' in Old English was pronounced /ʃ/.) But when the Old Norse speakers interacted with the English, they picked the /sk/ clusters right back up in a number of borrowed words. Old Norse *skirt* came to mean a garment for the lower half of the body, even though in Old Norse it had originally been entirely equivalent to Old English *shirt*, referring to a tunic worn over the torso. Similarly, Old English *shy*, 'to take fright', and Old Norse *scare*, with a similar meaning, came to coexist with meanings 'to take fright' and 'frighten.'

> **Exercise 3:** Using the OED or another dictionary containing etymological information, see if you can find any other *sh/sk* pairs of this type, where one is etymologically English and the other etymologically Norse.

Some other borrowings from Old Norse during this period include *aloft, anger, bag, bang, club, die, flat, gift, husband, ill, knife, leg, outlaw, sky, skin, skill, until, cut.*

What is particularly worth noting is that the kind of borrowings we see from Old Norse differ markedly from borrowings from the Romance languages that we've seen and will see. These Old Norse words are everyday words, that name concepts that Old English certainly *already had words for*—things like *sister, sky, leg, knife* and *club*. Old Norse even contributed some function words to Old English, as we've seen — the pronouns. This pattern of borrowings speaks of a very different kind of contact between Norse speakers and English speakers than between English speakers and Latin, French or Celtic speakers. Latin and Celtic borrowings, before the Norse came, were limited pretty much to things the English didn't have words for: place names and religious concepts. Those borrowings are entirely typical: languages are generally very happy to borrow content words for novel concepts; English just took what it needed in those cases. The Old Norse borrowings, on the other hand, seem to reflect a history of two similar languages intermingling, trading everyday terms and function words because both languages were in use by similar people in everyday contexts. Because many of the Danish settlers intermarried with the English, Old Norse and Old English were both household languages, used in an often bilingual environment.

The Danes ruled England from 1016 to 1042, but then their empire disintegrated, and the English line returned to the throne once more—but not for long. For 24 years, in fact.

8.3.3   1066-1200: Norman Rule

In 1066, England's King Edward died without an heir. Duke William of Normandy, in France, was a distant relative—the Norman French were French-speaking descendants of Danes who had invaded France centuries before[108]. William took advantage of the opportunity to challenge the English nobility's choice of a successor, King Harold: he declared himself the rightful king of England, with the Pope's support, and invaded. He conquered the English that same year, had himself crowned, and by 1070 controlled all of England, though not Wales or Scotland. He's known as William the Conqueror, or sometimes William the Bastard, depending on perspective. The most important foreign language in England was now emphatically French.

For the next hundred and fifty years, the Norman French ruled England, as well as their holdings in France. William took land from the English nobility and redistributed it to his French followers or appropriated it to the crown. The language of the courts and the nobility was exclusively French.

French became the official language of government: in the courts, the schools, the parliament. French was also important in the church, because many of the highest ecclesiastical posts were given to William's followers, as well as the estates of rebellious (and hence dead) English nobility. Also, French artisans, monks, priests, soldiers, traders and workmen tagged along to England. Everyone who was anyone, socially and politically, spoke French: it was the language of an entire socioeconomic class. Trade with Normandy was booming, because William was still Duke of Normandy. His realm crossed the Channel: the French speakers were citizens of a sort of international state, while the English speakers remained tied to the English soil. Communication between the two classes was generally quite limited.

Literacy was the province of the French speakers. Not much change happened to English during this time — the situation was close to that of the Romans ruling the Celts 900 years earlier: a conquering people

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[108] 'Norman' and 'Normandy' are derived from 'North-man', 'Norse-man'.

ruling a conquered people, with only as much linguistic or cultural exchange as was absolutely necessary in that situation. The wholesale intermingling of the two vocabularies had not yet really begun.

8.3.4   1200-1450: Anglicization of the Normans

In 1200, though, John, King of England and Duke of Normandy, married the wrong woman. She had been engaged to a French nobleman, who appealed to the king of France. John was rude when called to account by the king, and was punished for his social shortcomings when his Norman holdings were confiscated by the French crown. The kings of England were no longer Dukes of Normandy: the French connection had been severed. The holdings of other English nobles in France were confiscated by the king of France. Relations worsened between the kings of the two countries, and it became politically expedient to take an "England for the English" stance. By 1295, Edward I was claiming that the king of France meant to wipe out the English language. In 1327, the historian Higden complained that the teaching of French in England had led to the "corruption" of the English language. And then England and France went to war—the Hundred Years' War—and French was out. In 1362, the Statute of Pleadings made English, rather than French, the official language of the courts and Parliament.

8.3.4.1   The Norman French borrowings

Suddenly, the ruling class of England, who had been native speakers of French, were now true residents of England. They began to speak English more and more. Now the stage was set for French vocabulary to begin pouring into English at a tremendous rate. The upper classes, speaking English, used French vocabulary when they needed to refer to a concept that that they didn't know the English word for, or that English didn't have a word for. Since social climbers tend to emulate the speech of the upper classes to which they aspire, native English speakers began to use these French terms too. 10,000 French words entered English during this period (Chaucer's English). 75 percent of these words are still in use.

These borrowings include words from government—*parliament, minister, territory, counsellor, council, people, power*, from finance—*treasure*, from titles—*duke, sovereign, royal, monarch, prince, count, princess, principality, baron, baroness, noble*, from the military—*sergeant, peace, battle, admiral, captain, lieutenant*, from law—*judge, jurisdiction, advocate, jury, court, law, prison, crime, accuse*, from a r t —*tragedy, comedy, ballad, artist, critic, dance*, from medicine—*surgeon*, from cuisine—*dinner, supper, sauce*, from the Church—*religion*. (In fact, the very words *government, finance, military, law, art, medicine,* and *cuisine* are themselves all borrowings from French during this period. Here are some other examples of general borrowings from Norman French: *gentle, blame, catch, mercy, puny, mountain, lunatic, vinegar, mustard, salad.*

The class distinction encoded between French vocabulary and English vocabulary at this time is frequently illustrated with the following list of French-origin/English origin word pairs:

(124)   Meat   Animal
          beef   *cow*
          veal   *calf*
          mutton   *sheep*
          pork   *pig*
          venison   *dee*r

The words for the meats come to us from the people who got to eat it; the words for the animals come to us from the people who had to raise them. English is unusual in having etymologically unrelated words for these two kinds of concepts; most languages use the same name for both the meat and the animal, as English does with *chicken* and *lamb*.

French, *n., a.* The people or language of France; pertaining to the people or language of France. From Old English *frencisc*, 'Frankish', with palatalization of /k/ and umlaut of /æ/ in the root /frænk/ triggered by the high front vowel of the suffix /ɪʃ/.

8.3.4.2   The loss of Old English inflection

This period also saw another, perhaps more important change in English: the almost total loss of the rich inflectional system that is so characteristic of most other Germanic languages. The distinct class, gender and case suffixes on nouns, adjectives and determiners disappeared almost entirely, leaving only the modern possessive inflection *'s* and the plural *-s*; the verbal suffixes showing agreement with the number and person of the subject, as well as tense and mood, was also completely lost, leaving only the past tense marking *-ed*, the 3rd singular present tense *-s* and the progressive *-ing*. The 3rd singular *-eth* ending and the 2nd singular *-est* ending hung around in religious texts for a while, because of the conservativeness of ceremonial language that we've remarked on before, but by 1400, the entire complicated system has essentially disappeared. In the space of 200 years, English went from being a highly inflected language with relatively free word order to being an almost completely isolating language with quite fixed SVO word order.

It's hard to say why this change was so fast, radical and complete. One major contributor to the decline was a new phonological trend of reducing vowels to /ə/ in unstressed syllables. Since the inflectional endings were all unstressed, the vowel reduction blurred acoustic clues to the different inflectional classes and made them much more difficult to distinguish. It may have also been helped along by the number of second language speakers of English during this time: both the native speakers of French in the south and the native speakers of Old Norse in the north had different systems of gender and inflection in their own languages. Given that the English inflectional markings were hard to hear because of reduction, and given that a complex inflectional system is one of the most difficult aspects of a new grammar for a second language learner to master, it may be that the second language speakers of English helped spread the use of uninflected bare root forms. Whatever the cause, by 1400, no one learning English as a first or second language had to worry about noun class, case or gender, and the complexity of the verbal inflection was also severely reduced.

8.3.4.3   Middle English borrowings from other languages

Latin was still the language of religion and scholarship, and borrowing from Latin continued in ME just as it had in OE: *scribe* and *baptist* were borrowed from Latin during this period. Besides Latin, there was considerable trade with the people of the Lowlands (Netherlands, Holland) during this period—the Dutch. Some common words to do with commodities, seafaring and commerce were borrowed from them at about this time: *mart, market; pickle, spool, sled, buoy,* and *dote*.

8.3.5   1450-1600 The English Renaissance

> renaissance, *n*. The great revival of arts and letters, under the influence of ancient Greek and Roman models, which began in Italy in the 14th century and continued during the 15th and 16th. From French *re-*, 'again', and *naissance*, 'birth'.

Although the Norman French borrowings were very significant, expanding the total recorded vocabulary of English from about 35,000 to 45,000 words, that number seems small when compared to the influx of words that was to come.

Under the reign of the Tudors, culminating with Elizabeth I, English really came into its own as a language of culture and literature. With the advent of the printing press, invented by Gutenberg in 1452 and brought to England by Caxton in 1476, literacy on a wide scale became possible, and a much larger population began to write books, as well as read them.

The Renaissance was a period of renewed interest in classical Greek and Roman culture, and the huge collection of learning they had amassed. In the Renaissance, any university-educated man was conversant with both Greek and Latin, and would often choose to write in the latter. Newton, for example, composed his *Principia Mathematica* entirely in Latin, although his later work *Opticks* was in English. Writers who are now considered masters of English prose or poetry, like John Milton and John Donne, also wrote in Latin. Scholars associated literary and

rhetorical excellence with Latin, which was the standard educated language of Europe. English came under intense criticism for being too rude, base, and inadequate to express refined thoughts and ideas with eloquence. Certainly it lacked terms referring to technical details of grammar, logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, astronomy and geography, which were topics of intense study among the scholarly Renaissance men. And English didn't yet have an established literature, no 'great books' to demonstrate how well-suited it was as a medium of expression. Greek and Latin were in a prime position to influence the development of prestige English.

8.3.5.1   Greek and Latin borrowings: Inkhorn terms

Whenever a scholar needed a technical term to refer to a concept that English didn't have name for, they would import one from Greek or Latin. If Greek or Latin didn't have name for the concept either—a situation that became increasingly frequent as scientific knowledge rapidly expanded beyond the dreams of the ancients—they would make up a name for the concept *out of Latin and/or Greek roots*, rather than from English roots. This practice continues to this day. As a result, many borrowed Latin terms, and newly formed words from Latin roots and affixes that had never been uttered in Cicero's time, entered English in this period. Many didn't make it down to the present day, but many others were picked up by contemporaries and are still with us today. These words were often somewhat derisively called 'inkhorn' terms; 'inkhorn' referred to the vessel made of horn that a scribe would keep his ink in, and came to connote pedantry and obscurantism.

Here's a sampling of successful inkhorn terms that were borrowed or coined during this period: *expend, celebrate, extol, clemency, relinquish, contemplate, dexterity, refine, savage, education, dedicate, obscurity, intimate, insinuate, explicate, inclination, politician, idiom, function*, asterisk, asteroid, disaster[109]*...* and many, many, *many* others. Some made it, some didn't. Some that didn't make it were *splendidious,*

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[109] *Disaster* contains the same root as *asterisk* and *asteroid*: *aster*, Latin for 'star'.

adnichilate, continguate, collaude, obtestate, fatiguate, and lots of others. It's often mysterious why one version of a word made it and another didn't: why *magnificent* but not *magnificate?* We have *filter, filtrate* and *filtration*—why not *register, *registrate* and *registration*?

XX rumination on medical terminology?XX

8.3.5.2 English borrowing from itself

The influx of non-English terms and expressed disdain for English's expressive capacity caused something of a backlash among English writers who were beginning to have a sense of pride in the English literature already extant. Influential poets (Spenser) looked to older works, like Chaucer and non-standard English dialects to expand their expressive vocabulary without going foreign, and a few of these revived words remain in the language: *astound, doom, filch, flout, freak, askew, squall, don, belt, glance, endear, disrobe, wakeful,* and *wary*. Sometimes the word was misinterpreted, since people were unfamiliar with it. When Shakespeare wrote about *wyrd sisters* he was using an Old English noun, *wyrd*, which meant "happening" and also "force that decrees or forsees what happens". That is, they were 'fate sisters' or 'fortune sisters'. But it was obsolete when he used it, and playgoers understood it as an adjective, not a noun, taking it to mean something like 'far-out' (because the witches were so freaky)—hence the meaning of *weird* today.

8.3.5.3 Borrowings from other languages

French was still a prestige language in this period, especially after the end of the Hundred Years' War. It remained the language of polite correspondence between nobility— and between lovers. The prestigious French, though, was different from the Norman French that had come over with William: it was Parisian French, and the children of English nobility began to take French lessons in "polite" French, as a foreign language, not a native tongue. French lingered, in the courts (because the lawyers were reluctant to speak understandably lest they lose their monopoly on the job), and weirdly, in correspondence.

> "There was a sense of propriety in the choice of language — a letter 'should be' in French just as it 'should begin' with a salutation, include the date and place of composition, and end with another salutation and a signature, etc. … The early 15th-century author of a textbook for adults who wanted to learn French gave three reasons for doing so: communication with the inhabitants of France, understanding the English laws, and correspondence between men and women."   XX source XX

For a long time, for English speakers, French was the *langue d'amour*.

Besides Latin, Greek, Old English and French, this period saw an increase in significant contact with the languages of other seafaring nations of Europe. There had already been some borrowing from far-away languages during the Middle English period, due to importation of new commodities: *cinnamon* (Hebrew)*, musk* (Persian)*, lemon* (Arabic)*, silk*(Chinese), *pepper, sugar, indigo, ginger, sandal* (Hindi) and *damask* (from Damascus) are a few examples. Increased trading resulted in the importation of words from other European languages, in particular Spanish and Portuguese. From Spanish came *armada, embargo, sherry, mosquito*, among others, and from Portuguese, *molasses, Madeira*. Also, because ships from Spain and Portugal were world travelers, bringing back commodities from all around the world, English acquired some words from other, non-European languages *via* Spanish and Portuguese, which had borrowed them first: *yam, cocoa, canoe, hammock, hurricaine, potato, maize, tobacco, chocolate, tomato, banana, avocado*

Trade with the Netherlands continued apace, and so there were more borrowings from Dutch around this time: *skipper,*[110] *huckster, booze, dock, smuggle, gin, dollar*. The Dutch school of painting gave *landscape* and *sketch*. And, since the Dutch were also out there trading in the Far East, English also got a couple of words from other languages via Dutch: *paddy, rattan, amok, tea, coffee*.

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[110] The borrowing of *skipper* created another *sh/sk* pair in English—*skipper* is formed on the Dutch root meaning 'ship'. The English equivalent, spelled 'scip' in our Old English text, had lost its /k/ several hundred years earlier.

8.3.6   1600-1750: Restoration, Expansion

In this period, the English monarchy was temporarily abolished and then restored. Early on, Elizabeth I's navy, commanded by Sir Francis Drake, defeated the Spanish Armada, establishing England's naval preeminence among the nations of Europe. English monarchs then began a program of exploration, trade and expansion that ultimately created the British Empire. In 1583, Elizabeth claimed the island of Newfoundland, on the north-east coast of North America, creating the first official British colony. In 1600, she chartered the East India Company, granting it a monopoly on trade with the Far East. In 1607, the Jamestown colony was founded in Virginia, and thirteen years later, the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. This was the beginning of the extraordinary chain of events by which English has become the most widely-spoken language in the modern world.

During this period, the different Englishes of the different English colonies began to diverge somewhat. The English in India brought home several Hindi words: *curry, bungalow, chintz, dungaree, punch, mongoose*, *cash, pajamas, cot, pagoda, tattoo, polo, loot, juggernaut,* also *sahib, rupee, coolie.* English speakers in America were interacting with the indigenous population, and borrowing words for the new places, animals and plants they encountered: *oppossum, raccoon, skunk, squash, hickory, tamarack, pecan, moccassin, succotash*, *toboggan, coyote, totem, woodchuck, quahog, Mohawk*, *Ohio, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Connecticut.* But in neither India nor America did the cultures interact in such a way that the English speakers borrowed large quantities of words: the invaders had the upper hand, so like the Romans and Anglo-Saxons in Celtic Britain, the Vikings in England and the first generation of Norman French in England, the conquerors spoke their own language and disdained to learn more than a necessary handful of words from the languages of the subjugated natives.

8.3.7   1750-modern day:

With the continued development and prosperity of the colonies in America, India, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Africa, English became a true world language. Besides the several dialects that were flourishing in the British Isles, the varieties of English spoken in each of the colonies began to acquire their own unique characteristics of pronunciation and vocabulary.

No matter the variety, speakers of English are able to communicate with more people now than has ever before been possible, for speakers of any language. The recent astonishing prosperity of the English-speaking world, particularly the United States, has forced English to function rather like Latin did in Europe at the height of the Roman empire, as a kind of lingua franca, spoken as a second language by millions of people. The scientific publications upon which technological success depends are generally published in English. Literature written in English is accessible to a wider audience than literature in any other language. Among modern languages, English is now one of the superpowers.

> **lingua franca**, *n*. /ˈlɪŋgwəˈfræŋkə/ Any of various languages used as common or commercial tongues among peoples of diverse speech. From Italian *lingua franca*, 'tongue of the Franks', referring to a mixed language or jargon used in the Middle East in the 1700, consisting largely of Italian words deprived of their inflexions.

8.4   The rise of prescriptivism: How to really speak good.

With the Restoration around 1600 came an increased sense of pride in the accomplishments and potential of the great authors of English literature. With that pride, however, came a sense of dismay at the inevitable process of language change, and the beginnings of grammatical prescriptivism began to appear—the notion of 'proper' usage, and the idea that the language is debased by 'improper' use. Samuel Johnson, when pitching the first English dictionary to potential investors, stated that his goal was to 'fix' the language—establish correct usage for all time, based on the

usage of the most respected writers of the day—but by the time he finished it, he had come to recognize that any dictionary can only be a record of a language, not a rulebook for it. Nonetheless, the idea of 'correct' usage, once it had taken hold, became one of the most tenacious myths of academia. Looking at the model of the *Académie Française*, the legally sanctioned authority on correct usage of French, many English scholars felt it was important to establish usage rules for 'good grammar.'

Perhaps partly as a reaction to the increasing variation, the prescriptive movement continued to gather steam at the end of the 18th century. Latin and Greek, and to a lesser degree French, still had a firm place in the educational curriculum in schools and universities in Britain, and the grammarians treated Latin as a sort of ideal language. Imagining that Latin's grammar had an inherent internal logic that English lacked, they invented several 'rules' of English grammar that were intended to force speakers into more Latin-like patterns. One such example is the famous prohibition on stranding a preposition, as in *Who did you talk to*? Because Latin indicates the meaning conveyed by the preposition *to* with a suffix on the equivalent of *who*, rather than as a separate phonological word, it's in fact impossible to separate the noun and the preposition. In English, however, it's frequently very awkward *not* to strand prepositions. When chastised by an editor for stranding a preposition, Winston Churchill is famously said to have replied, 'That is the sort of English up with which I will not put". A similar 'rule' of Latin, imported into English, is the famous prohibition against splitting infinitives; again, because Latin infinitival verb forms are a single phonological word, there is no way to interpolate anything into a Latin infinitive. But in English, it's quite natural to boldly insert adverbs between 'to' and the verb, because 'to' can be its own phonological word.

The grammarians wrote widely-adopted textbooks of grammar, prescribing certain forms of speech and proscribing others, and mixing genuinely helpful guidelines for clarity of presentation and flow with arcane regulations on the use of pronouns and prepositions. Some of their edicts survive to this day. Certainly the attitude that some varieties of English are 'better' than others survives robustly, and speakers of nonstandard varieties are often made to feel ashamed of their own dialect while being taught the standard one.

8.5 English orthography: The Roman alphabet, the quill pen, the printing press and the Great Vowel Shift.

Old English spelling was fairly phonologically consistent. As is typical when a language is first written down alphabetically, the orthography was fairly well adapted to the needs of the language, and although there was some variation among individual scribes, by and large a given spelling transparently represented a given sound.

From 1066 until 1362, however, Norman French was the official language of England, and most literate people were French speakers, writing French and Latin. When English was written, it was written by people who didn't know the Old English orthography. By the time English again became the official language of England, the old runic letters for the interdental fricatives, þ and ð, had begun to be replaced by their modern digraph equivalent, 'th', the invention of the Norman French scribes for writing a sound they themselves were unfamiliar with.[111] Similarly, the use of /h/ in the middle of a word to represent a velar fricative was augmented by adding a 'g', so the word spelled 'eahta' in line 10 of Ohthere's Voyage acquired a 'g' in the Middle English period, which it retains in its modern English spelling: 'eight'. The French scribes also began to use alternative symbols for the /k/ sound. In Old English, it was invariably represented with a 'c' (as in *scare*), but in French the symbols 'k' and 'qu' were also used, and began to appear in English texts as well. In Old English, the word we pronounce /kwɪk/ had been written *cwice* (with a final 'e' inflection), but spellings like *cwike* and *quike* had begun to crop up as early as 1200.

The original 23 letters of the Latin alphabet had to work hard to represent the 45+ distinct sounds of English. Besides using 'th' to represent two distinct sounds, and 'gh' for the unfamiliar velar fricative,

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[111] The thorn, þ, lasted the longest in written English. Printers who didn't have a thorn in their stock of type would sometimes substitute a *y* as the closest thing they had, resulting in spellings like 'ye' for 'the'—hence the use of *Ye* to achieve a fake-archaic look in names like *Ye Olde Sweete Shoppe*. The substitution of *y* for thorn didn't last long, though, and most people reading (and writing) *Ye Olde...* don't realize that the *Y* is supposed to be pronounced as /ð/.

the French scribes used digraphs that were already in use in French for the voiceless palatal fricative /ʃ/ 'sh' and affricate /t͡ʃ/ 'ch'. Chaucer, the great Middle English poet, used these conventions while writing between 1370 and 1400:

"Here begynyth the manciple his tale." [112]

The Roman alphabet had to stretch considerably to accommodate English even with these additions. The main stretch was one that had been around even in Old English—the Roman alphabet had only 5 vowel symbols. Old English, and Middle English had many more vowel distinctions than that, as does modern English. In particular, early English distinguished between short and long pronunciations of vowels. Long pronunciations were the same as the short pronunciations, but just a bit longer. In Old English, the additional vowel symbol *æ* was available, but there were no established conventions for representing the short and long vowel distinctions. Scribes of Middle English sometimes used combinations of vowel letters to indicate the long/short contrast, but often they would just use a single vowel, as their Old English predecessors mostly had. In IPA, the symbol indicating a long pronunciation is a colon

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[112] From The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile of Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 4.27, circa 1412. Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1979. 3 volumes. Call Number: (RARE) PR 1850 1979. A *manciple* is like a quartermaster; responsible for ordering provisions and supplies for some group.

placed after the vowel, so the Middle English word for 'house', would be transcribed /huːs/. Scribes would sometimes write it as *hus* and sometimes *hous*, but the pronunciation intended would remain the same. Naturally, native speakers of the period didn't have problems with this—after all, they knew how the words sounded.

Now, in the late Middle English period, in 1476, the first moveable-type press was brought to England from the Netherlands by William Caxton. He, and other printers who followed him, were faced with the task of choosing spellings for his English translations of work from other languages, as well as for his editions of Chaucer and other English writers. He didn't have much in the way of examples, but he did have access to manuscript versions of Chaucer's works, who died around 1400. Caxton often tried to follow Chaucer's example, as Chaucer was nationally and internationally renowned. Caxton knew that English was in a state of flux; he commented on the situation in the preface to one of his books:

And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences[113] wryton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to our englysshe now vsed. And certaynly it was wreton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe, I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden. And certaynly our language now vsed varyeth ferre from that, whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne.[114]

Caxton and the other printers' choice of spellings reflected the tendency of speakers to look to older generations for linguistic standards that we have

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[113] Another modern English letter was introduced around this period, or rather, acquired its modern pronunciation. Before this the labial consonant /v/ had been written with the same symbols as the labial (rounded) vowel /u/; the letters 'v' and 'u' were used as symbols for either the vowel or the consonant, with a semi-convention of using 'v' when either was the first symbol in a word, and 'u' in the middle of words. The string 'euydences' is Caxton's spelling of the word 'evidences'; 'vsed' is his spelling for 'used'.
[114] Excerpted from Bolton (1982: 173). Here is a free modern English paraphrase of this excerpt: "My Lord the Abbot of Westminster showed me some documents written in Old English, with the idea that I might produce a version of them in our current English. The Old English was written so that it looked more like German than English; I could not translate it or understand it. Certainly, English as spoken now varies greatly from that which was used and spoken when I was born."

remarked on before. Unfortunately for generations of English spellers (and IPA learners), starting around the time of Chaucer's death (late 1300s, early 1400s), a major sound change took place in English. All the long vowels played musical chairs in the mouths of English speakers between 1400 and 1500. Spelling became standardized more or less based on the spellings chosen *before* the sound change—around the time Chaucer was writing — but then the sounds changed, while the spelling stayed the same. Consequently, the vowels the spellings came to stand for in English were not the usual values those symbols had in other languages.

From Old English times all the way through to Chaucer's day, the vowel spellings made sense in the Roman alphabet. That is, the symbols 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', and 'u' had approximately the values they have in IPA today—essentially the same values they have in Spanish, French or Italian today. But by the time most of the printing and spelling got done, the sound change was pretty much over, and the standardized spellings no longer corresponded to pronunciation in the way they had before.

We can form a general picture of what happened to the long vowels if we compare the IPA symbols for front vowel sounds to their modern English spellings:

(125)   <u>IPA transcriptions</u>   <u>Modern English spelling</u>
/fijt/   'feet'
/fejt/   'fate'
/fajt/   'fight'

Ignoring the /j/ off-glide, we can see where modern English has 'e', the IPA has 'i'; where modern English has 'a', the IPA has 'e', and where modern English has 'i', the IPA has 'a'. If you were read these modern English spellings as if the symbols stood for their IPA pronunciation, you get something like a Chaucerian pronunciation. The modern English pronunciations are the result of the vowel shift. In other words, the long mid front vowel /e/ became the high front vowel /i/. Similarly, the low front vowel /a/ became the mid front vowel /e/, the long high front vowel /i/ became the low front diphthong /aj/. An analogous change happened in the long back vowels, but it hasn't left such an obvious trace in the spellings of those vowels. One that's obvious is in the

double 'o' convention: in Modern English, a double 'o' is pronounced as the high back vowel /u/, as in 'goose,' — in Chaucer's time, that word contained a long version of the mid back vowel /o/, hence the spelling. Here are some representative words that used to contain the canonical long vowels of Middle English and have since undergone the Great Vowel Shift:

(126)   Middle English long vowels:

aa	*tame, cake, rain, sane, late, staves ...*
ee	*geese, feet, meet, wreath, treat, please, sea, beet…*
ii	*knight, light, write, kite, wise, my, by…*
ɔɔ	*no, so, boat, dote, wrote, moat…*
oo	*goose, boot, moot, loot, root, do, to, you…*
uu	*house, louse, how, our…*

The diagram below shows the general effect of the change on vowel height[115]:
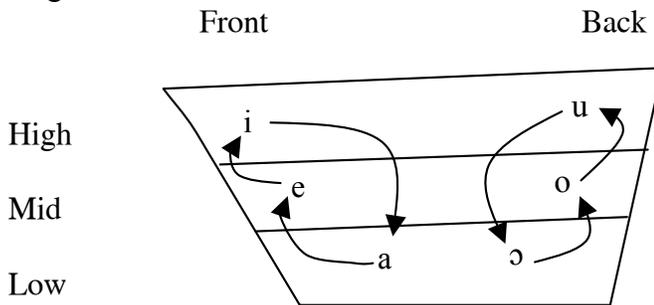
All the vowels' heights increased, whether front or back—low vowels became mid vowels, and mid vowels became high vowels. High vowels couldn't raise any higher, of course; they became low, strongly diphthongized vowels—/i/ became /aj/.

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[115] This picture is somewhat oversimplified; for a more complete account, see some of the 'Further Reading' sources at the end of the chapter.

This didn't happen with short vowels: the short vowels have pretty much the values, and spellings, that they had in Middle English. The correspondence between the short vowels and their IPA symbols is consequently much more straightforward:

(127)   <u>IPA Transcriptions</u>   <u>Modern English</u>
    <u>spelling</u>
        /pɪt/   'pit'
        /pɛt/   'pet'
        /pæt/   'pat'
        /pʊt/   'put'
        /pɑt/   'pot'

We also see similar pairs in a number of irregular verbs and their past or participial forms:

(128)   *Vowel alternations derived from short/long contrast + GVS*
        a.   **/ij/ ~ /ɛ/:** k**ee**p/k**e**pt, cr**ee**p/cr**e**pt, f**ee**l/f**e**lt, l**ea**p/l**ea**pt,
                sl**ee**p/sl**e**pt, sw**ee**p/sw**e**pt, w**ee**p/w**e**pt, bl**ee**d/bl**ed,**
                speed/sped, d**ea**l/d**ea**lt, kn**ee**l/kn**e**lt, br**ee**d/br**e**d, l**ea**d/l**e**d,
                f**ee**d/f**e**d, dr**ea**m/dr**ea**mt, l**ea**ve/l**e**ft
        b.   **/aj/ ~ /ɪ/:** l**i**ght/l**i**t, h**i**de/h**i**d, wr**i**te/wr**i**tten, r**i**de/r**i**dden,
                sl**i**de/sl**i**d, b**i**te/b**i**t
        c.   **/uw/ ~ /ɑ/:** sh**oo**t/sh**o**t, l**o**se/l**o**st

***also: trisyllabic laxing pairs? *serene/serenity, nation/national, sign/signature, cone/conical.* XX

The connection between the long vowels and their short counterparts thus lives on as an irregular morphophonological alternation in modern English, even though the short/long distinction is no longer made in modern English.
    Understanding the Great Vowel Shift helps us to understand why the same symbol 'e' is used to stand for a high front vowel, as in 'keen', and a mid front vowel, as in 'ken.' Back in Middle English., the vowel in

these two words sounded much the same; one vowel was just longer than the other. 'Keen' was pronounced /ke:n/; 'ken' was pronounced /ken/. After the long vowels underwent the Great Vowel Shift, though, the two vowels sounded considerably different—/ke:n/ became /kijn/—though they continued to be spelled the same.

As a result of the vowel shift, we have pairs like the following:

(129) st**a**ves/st**a**ff   /ej/ ~ /æ/
d**ee**p/d**e**pth   /ij/ ~ /ɛ/
sh**ee**p/sh**e**pherd   /ij/ ~ /ɛ/
w**i**se/w**i**sdom   /aj/ ~ /ɪ/
ch**i**ld/ch**i**ldren   /aj/ ~ /ɪ/
Chr**i**st/Chr**i**stmas   /aj/ ~ /ɪ/
w**i**de/w**i**dth   /aj/ ~ /ɪ/
kn**ow**/kn**ow**ledge   /ow/ ~ /ɑ/
b**o**ne/b**o**nfire   /ow/ ~ /ɑ/

These pairs in particular reflect an interesting phonological alternation in Old English that made a big difference in what words underwent the Great Vowel Shift in Middle English.

In Old English, as you will recall, there were many inflectional suffixes, most of which began with a vowel. Adding such a suffix to a word ending in a consonant meant that the consonant was *resyllabified*—rather than remaining as the coda of the last syllable of the stem, the final consonant became the onset in the new syllable created by adding the suffix. (We see a similar effect today in words like *beaten*, which syllabifies as *bea.ten*, although morphologically it is *beat-en*.) If we take *-as*, the plural suffix we saw on *hwæl*, 'whale', in our Old English text, we can see that if we add it to *hwal*, the first syllable of the word will lose its coda consonant *-l*. Similarly, adding *-as* to the stem *stæf* will take the *f* of the root out of the coda of the first syllable and put in the onset of the second syllable.

This mattered because in Old English, the vowel of a stressed, open syllable was *automatically* lengthened. So without any suffix, e.g. in

the singular, *stæf* would be a closed syllable, and the vowel *æ* would remain short. But in the plural, the *f* would resyllabify because of the additional suffix, causing the first syllable—now *stæ*—to be open, not closed, and consequently causing the vowel *æ* to be long, not short.[116] Now we have a situation where, in the plural, the vowel is long, but in the singular, it's short. Consequently, in the plural, the vowel was subject to the Great Vowel Shift but in the singular, it wasn't—giving us the contrast between *staff/staves.* The same phenomenon is at work in *wise/wisdom.* The addition of the *-dom* suffix to the root *wis-* meant that the /s/ of the root was forced into the coda of the root syllable, so the vowel of the root was short in *wisdom.* When the root was used by itself, as an adjective, though, it would usually have a vowel-initial suffix attached to it, agreeing in case, number and gender with the noun it was modifying. That suffix would trigger resyllabification of the *-s* into the onset of the last syllable, which in turn would trigger lengthening of the vowel /i/ in the root. So the vowel was usually long in the Old English adjective *wise*, but short in the derived noun *wisdom.* Consequently, the vowel in *wise* underwent the Great Vowel Shift, changing from /i:/ to /aj/, but the vowel in the root of *wisdom* didn't.

Our spelling conventions for indicating whether or not the pronunciation of the letter 'i' should be /aj/ or /ɪ/ has its roots in these phonological rules. Any vowel symbol that comes before a single consonant and a silent 'e' is pronounced with its post-GVS 'long' pronunciation: *kite* = /kajt/, not /kɪt/; *rate* = /ɹejt/, not /ɹæt/, etc. Any vowel symbol that comes without the silent 'e' gets the short, non-GVS pronunciation, so *kit* = /kɪt/ and *rat* = /ɹæt/. The silent 'e' is the last reminder of that whole enormous family of Old English suffixes that triggered resyllabification of the final consonant and consequently required lengthening of the vowel.

Similarly, the convention according to which we double the final consonants of suffixed words for 'short' pronunciations of vowel symbols,

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[116] Incidentally, the /f/ between two vowels became voiced here, turning into /v/, as we saw in chapter 5.

(so that 'rating' = /ɹejtɪŋ/ but 'ratting' = /ɹætɪŋ/), was invented because of the Old English rule we discussed above: vowels in Old English syllables with codas were short, while vowels in syllables without codas were long. Doubling the consonant artificially forced an orthographic coda onto the first syllable in a word like *ratting*, and reminded Middle English speakers that the vowel in such cases was not long.

We owe some other spelling irregularities to sound changes as well. In words like *lamb*, *bomb,* and *thumb* the final 'b' used to be pronounced, and hence was written. The phonotactic rules of governing coda consonant clusters changed, however, so that voiced stops couldn't follow nasals unless both were alveolar—so /nd/ sequences are still pronounceable, as in *land, hand* and *canned*, but /mb/ and /ŋg/ at the end of a word became impossible. The legacy of those formerly permissible coda clusters is still with us, though, in the form of the silent *b* at the end of these words. The same explanation applies to the silent 'k' in words like *know, knit, knight,* etc.; a /kn/ onset cluster was phonotactically legitimate in Old and Middle English, but became impossible at some point in the Middle English period; consequently we have the spelling for such clusters but not the pronunciation. Phonological change also explains the silent 'gh' in words like *light, right, thought, caught,* etc.; the velar fricative that that 'gh' represented disappeared from the language sometime in the Middle English period.

Spelling irregularities in English also arose from less rule-governed sources. Spellings of Latinate words often remained very similar to the spellings they had in their original Latin or French source, and of course Latin and French had their own spelling conventions. The variation in pronunciation of *c* and *g* before front vowels (*generic* vs *garage*, or *cell* vs *cake*) is an importation from those languages, in which front vowels triggered palatalization of velar stops. Similarly, the change in pronunciation of 't' or 's' to a palatal fricative before certain suffixes that end in a high front vowel, as in *donate/donation* or *incise/incision* is an importation of a Romance palatalization rule. All such imported spellings reduced the symbol/sound regularity in English spelling.

Another interesting source of a few idiosyncratic spelling irregularities were the quill pens used by scribes during the Middle

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English period. The letters u, i, v, w, m, and n were all written using a sequence of a particular short downstroke of the quill, called a *minim* (the word *minim* itself would have been written using only minims). When several letters made of minims came in sequence, they were exceptionally hard to decipher. Was it an *i* and an *m*, or two *n*s?

A close-up of the Ellesmere Chaucer.[117]
"Heere bigynneth Chaucers tale..."
Notice the minims in 'bigy**nn**eth', and in 'Cha**u**cers'.

Consequently, in some frequent words spelled with sequences of these letters, a convention arose whereby one of the offending vowels was changed to an *o*, so that the vowel-consonant sequence was clear. In general, this caused little pronunciation difficulty, because the words were common enough that everybody could just recognize them. Some words whose spellings were affected this way were *woman* (originally *wimman*), *come* (originally *cume*) and *love* (originally *luve*).

One final source of spelling irregularities in English dates from the inkhorn era: some zealous Latin scholars felt that not only should the spellings of newly borrowed Latin words be faithful to the Latin original, but that the spellings of some words of Latinate origin that were borrowed hundreds of years before should *also* reflect the spelling of the Latin original, even when subsequent phonological change in French and/or English had caused significant alteration to the pronunciation of the Latin form. Consequently several words with a long pedigree of English use, which had been spelled phonetically accurately according to the spelling conventions of the time, had various silent letters inserted into their

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[117] http://www.uwm.edu/Library/special/exhibits/clastext/clspg075.htm

spelling to indicate their etymological relationship to the Latin cognate. The silent 'b' in *debt* was inserted for that reason, although it had been spelled *dette* when it was borrowed, with that pronunciation, from Old French, in the Middle English period. Now we can recognize *debt*'s etymological connection with *debit* from its spelling, though we pay an orthographically heavy price. Similarly, a silent 'p' was inserted into *receipt* for the same reason, although *conceit* and *deceit* escaped such treatment, despite being based on the same -*ceive* root, originally Latin *capĕre*, 'to take'. The 's' in *island* and the 'c' in *indict* have this same source.

8.6   *Summary*

In this chapter, we have looked at some of the historical reasons for why modern English is the way it is. The obvious and major differences between Old English and modern English, and between modern English and any other Germanic language, are largely the result of a complex series of events of English history, that brought English into contact with other European languages, often as a subordinate language. Phonological change and language contact triggered the morphological changes that have made the grammar of modern English significantly different from that of Old English. Language contact and the use of English in the literary and scholarly realm resulted in the remarkable diversity of etymological sources of the modern English vocabulary. The modern English spelling system is a historical by-product of all of these events, reflecting phonological and morphological change as well as the effects of significant borrowing.