

МІНІСТЕРСТВО ОСВІТИ І НАУКИ УКРАЇНИ
КИЇВСЬКИЙ НАЦІОНАЛЬНИЙ УНІВЕРСИТЕТ ІМЕНІ ТАРАСА ШЕВЧЕНКА

М. Я. Оленяк

Історія англійської мови: *ще одна історія*

Навчальний посібник

УДК 811.111'01(075.8)
О-53

Рецензенти:

д-р філол. наук, проф. Н. П. Ізотова
(Київський національний лінгвістичний університет);
канд. філол. наук І. М. Запхляк
(Донецький національний університет імені Василя Стуса);
д-р філол. наук, проф. Л. Л. Славова
(Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка);
канд. філол. наук, доц. М. О. Возна
(Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка)

*Рекомендовано до друку
вченою радою ННІ філології
(протокол № 7 від 27 лютого 2026 року)*

Оленяк М. Я.

О-53 Історія англійської мови: ще одна історія : навч. посіб. /
М. Я. Оленяк. Київ : ВПЦ "Київський університет", 2026. 194 с.

ISBN 978-966-933-435-0

Містить теоретичний матеріал, що супроводжується завданнями для самоконтролю.

Для студентів філологічних спеціальностей, які знайомляться з історією англійської мови на початковому етапі професійної підготовки.

УДК 811.111'01(075.8)

ISBN 978-966-933-435-0

© Оленяк М. Я., 2026
© Київський національний університет імені Тараса Шевченка,
ВПЦ "Київський університет", 2026

ПЕРЕДМОВА

Навчальний посібник «Історія англійської мови: ще одна історія» присвячений комплексному аналізу історичного розвитку англійської мови як динамічної системи. Основна мета видання – висвітлити закономірності формування мовної структури в контексті екстралінгвістичних чинників, що супроводжували трансформацію англійської мови від германських діалектів раннього середньовіччя до статусу мови глобального спілкування.

Вивчення історії мови є фундаментом філологічної освіти, оскільки дозволяє зрозуміти внутрішню логіку сучасних мовних явищ. У посібнику детально розглянуто ключові етапи еволюції мови, зокрема:

- Давньоанглійський період: аналіз синтетичної будови мови, германської лексики та ранніх латинських запозичень.
- Середньоанглійський період: дослідження наслідків нормано-французького впливу, що призвів до докорінної реструктуризації словникового складу та граматичної системи.
- Ранньонорманоанглійський період: вивчення масштабних фонетичних змін, зокрема великого зсуву голосних, а також впливу книгодрукування на стандартизацію орфографії та граматики.

Особлива увага приділяється роботі з автентичними джерелами. Приклади подані в оригінальному написанні з відповідним лінгвістичним коментарем. Методичний апарат видання включає розроблені до кожного розділу питання для самоконтролю. Вони спрямовані не лише на перевірку засвоєння фактичного матеріалу, а й на розвиток навичок компаративного аналізу та етимологічної дедукції. Такий підхід стимулює самостійну дослідницьку роботу студента та критичне осмислення діяхронічних змін.

Видання розраховане на студентів філологічних факультетів, аспірантів та всіх, хто цікавиться діяхронічною лінгвістикою. Сподіваюсь, що поєднання теоретичної бази з аналізом першоджерел сприятиме глибшому розумінню лінгвістичних процесів та допоможе в опануванні навичок наукового аналізу тексту.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	6
--------------------------	----------

SECTION 1. PRE-ENGLISH PERIOD

Indo-European Language	8
Germanic Languages.....	12
Grimm's Law	14
Verner's Law.....	17
Germanic Writing Systems	20
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 1)	23

SECTION 2. ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

Etymology	26
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 2)	32

SECTION 3. OLD ENGLISH

The Old English Period: Historical Background.....	34
The Name of the Language	36
Corpus of Old English	37
Editing Old English.....	39
Old English Letters	41
Old English Sounds	43
Reading Rules: Consonants.....	45
I-Mutation (Umlaut) in Old English.....	48
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 3)	50
Old English Grammar	52
Old English Vocabulary	61
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 4)	72
Translating Old English Texts	74
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 5)	93

SECTION 4. MIDDLE ENGLISH

The Middle English Period: Historical Background	96
The Decay of Inflections.....	99

The Peterborough Chronicle.....	101
Corpus of Middle English.....	103
Middle English Spelling	105
Middle English Manuscript Features	106
Norman Influence	109
<i>Ye</i>	110
Middle English Sounds	111
The Great Vowel Shift.....	115
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 6)	117
Middle English Grammar	120
Middle English Vocabulary.....	128
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 7)	134

SECTION 5. EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

The Early Modern English Period.....	138
Caxton's Problem	139
The Elizabethan Era of English	141
Shakespeare's Influence on English.....	142
The Biblical Legacy: Idioms of the 1611 Authorized Version.....	147
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 8)	155
Early Modern English Grammar	157
The <i>Thou/You</i> Problem.....	158
Johnson's Dictionary.....	161
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 9)	163

SECTION 6. MODERN ENGLISH

Modern English	166
A Decade of Dictionaries and Encyclopedias	166
Colonialism And Its Influence on English.....	169
Modern English Vocabulary	171
History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 10)	175
Self-Assessment Test.....	176
Key to the Self-Assessment Test.....	192
References and Further Reading.....	193

INTRODUCTION

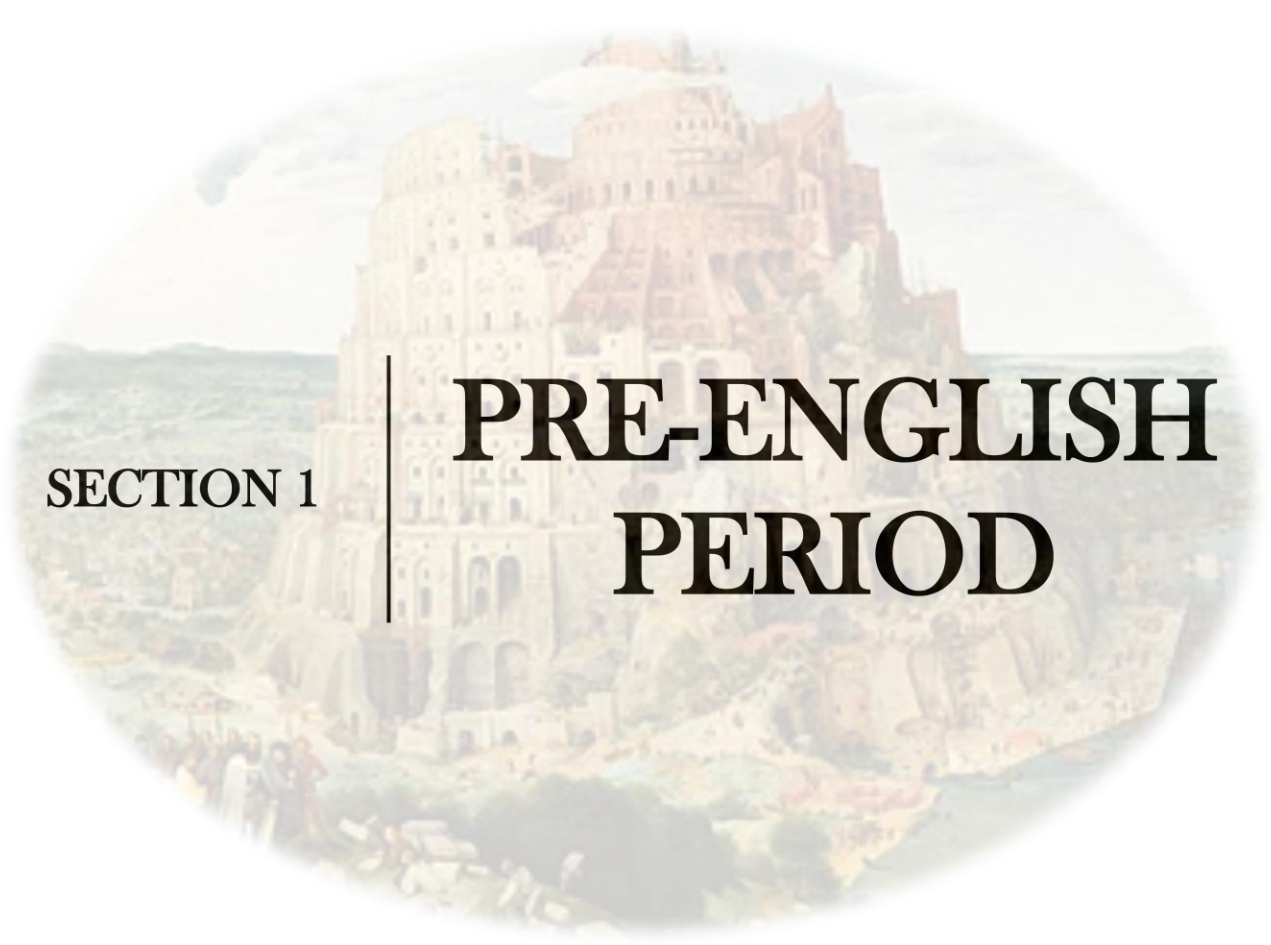
English is, without doubt, the most widely used and influential language in the world today. One of the main reasons for this is its extraordinary flexibility – its remarkable ability to absorb words and expressions from a vast range of other languages and cultures.

The history of English answers a lot of puzzling questions such as: Why do we have two words for everything? Why is the animal in the field a *cow* (Germanic), but the meat on our plate *beef* (French)? How did a language from a small island become a “global” tongue? Was it due to the inherent simplicity of its grammar, or the sheer might of the empires that carried it? And why is English spelling so famously chaotic? Why do *though*, *through*, and *enough* share the same final letters but differ completely in pronunciation? Is English still “English”? With more non-native speakers than native ones today, who actually “owns” the future of the language?

To answer these questions, we have to look back to where it all began. The story begins with the Celts, the earliest known inhabitants of the British Isles, who spoke various Celtic languages. Over time, the islands were invaded and settled by different groups – Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans – each leaving their linguistic fingerprints on what would become English. Interestingly, despite being the original population, the Celts left surprisingly little behind in the English language: a few words, mostly place names, but not much more.

The history of English, then, is the story of how that early language changed – constantly, creatively, and often unpredictably – into the global phenomenon it is today.

The present volume enters a field shaped by several influential accounts of the English language’s past, from the classic narratives of Baugh and Cable to the more discursive and reader-oriented studies of David Crystal, as well as the large-scale collaborative histories produced under the auspices of Cambridge University Press. While indebted to this tradition, the present book adopts a different perspective in its organisation and emphasis.

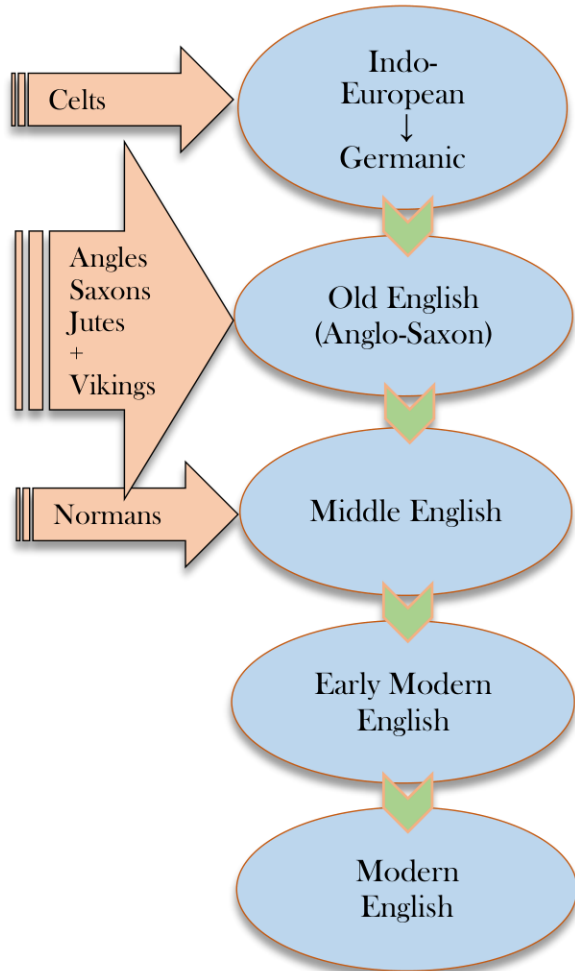
A circular, faded illustration of the Tower of Babel, a massive stone structure with multiple levels and arches, built on a hill. The tower is surrounded by a city and a river. The sky is cloudy.

SECTION 1

PRE-ENGLISH PERIOD

INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGE

When we trace the history of English all the way back to its earliest roots, we end up in a rather surprising place – not in Britain at all. Where we end up is in the vast

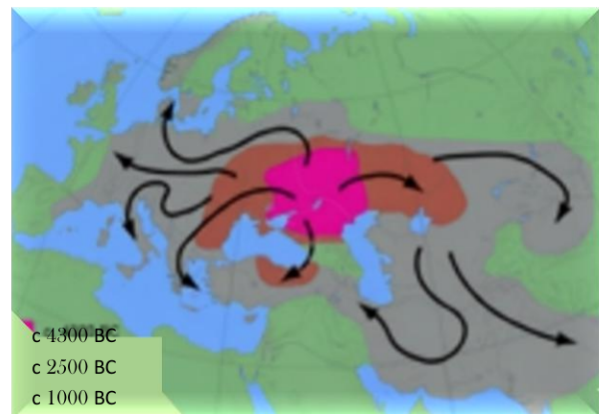


steppe lands of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which include modern-day Ukraine. Between roughly 5000 and 2500 BC, this region was home to the Yamna culture – mobile herders and some of the earliest horse riders. Scholars believe these people spoke *Proto-Indo-European*, the common ancestor language from which most modern European and many Asian languages descend.

Now, we’ve never seen a single word of Proto-Indo-European written down. No inscriptions, no manuscripts. So how do we know it existed? The answer lies in comparison. By carefully studying patterns across related languages – including English,

Ukrainian, Latin, Sanskrit, and many others – linguists have been able to reconstruct what this ancient language might have sounded like.

This map shows how the Indo-Europeans migrated. At the beginning, they all lived together and spoke one language. But as they started moving in different directions across Europe and Asia, looking for new pastures and hunting grounds, their language began to change bit by bit. Over

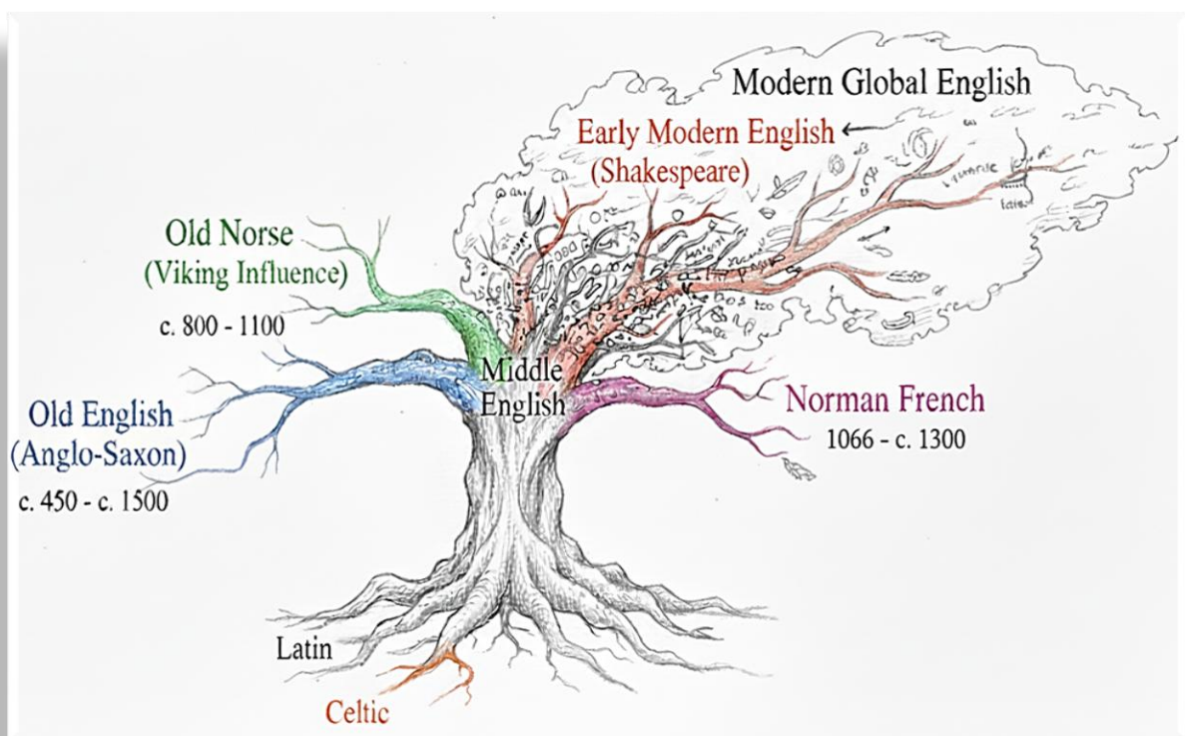


Indo-European migrations

many years, those changes added up so much that people from different areas could hardly understand each other – or sometimes couldn't understand each other at all.

This is how many different languages grew out of the original Indo-European language. Of course, we're not going to look at every Indo-European group and language here. Instead, we'll focus on the particular groups who eventually gave rise to English.

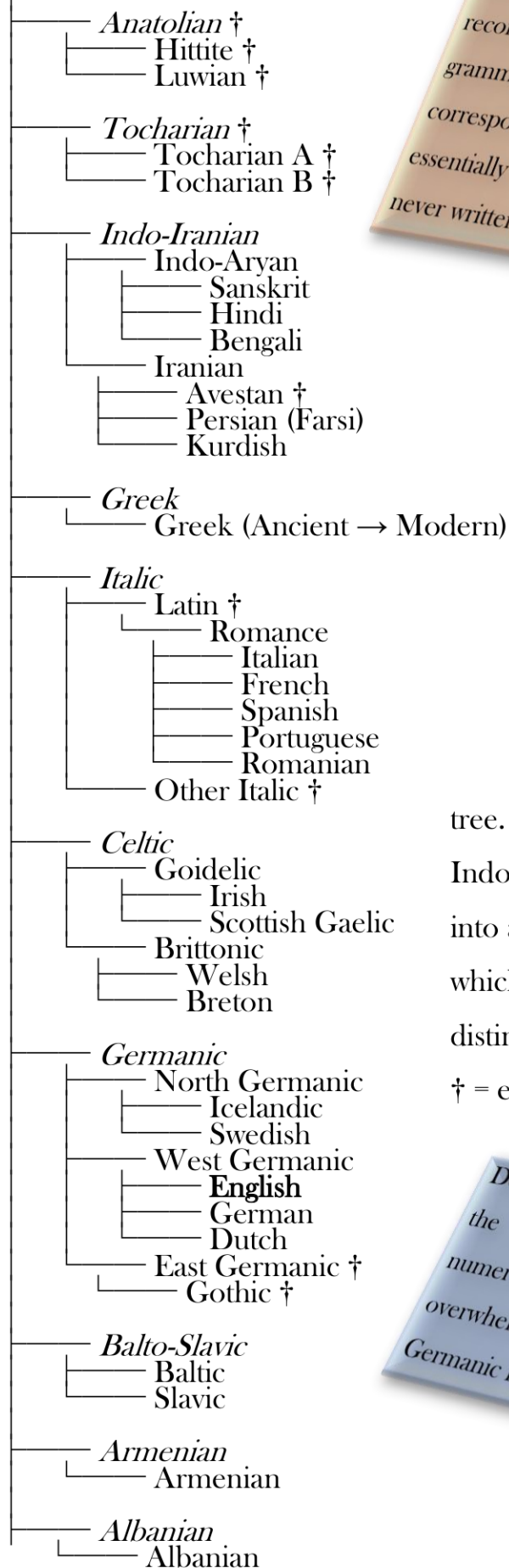
Languages are like people. They *develop* over time, they can be *genetically related*, they can be *living languages* and *dead languages*; there are *ancestor languages*, *parent languages* and *daughter languages*; languages can be *donors* and *recipients*.



Evolution and Origins of the English Language

When we say two languages are genetically related, we mean they come from the same parent language, just like siblings share the same parents. The parent language is the older language that “gave birth” to other languages, which we call daughter languages. Just as your family tree shows how you are connected to your relatives through shared ancestors and genetic inheritance, the language family tree maps out how languages evolved from common sources.

INDO-EUROPEAN



Proto-Indo-European (PIE) is entirely reconstructed. Linguists have inferred its sounds, grammar, and vocabulary by comparing systematic correspondences across daughter languages – essentially reverse-engineering a language that was never written down.

Shared vocabulary allows scholars to infer aspects of PIE culture: its speakers probably knew wheeled vehicles, practiced animal husbandry, and had a sky-father deity (**Dyēus ph₂tér*), reflected in Zeus, Jupiter, and Tyr.

This is the Indo-European language family tree. By approximately 1000 BC, the original Indo-European language had already broken up into a dozen or more major language branches, which later split further into many hundreds of distinct daughter languages.

† = extinct languages or branches

Despite heavy borrowing from French and Latin, the most basic English words – pronouns, numerals, kinship terms, auxiliary verbs – are overwhelmingly Indo-European and often Germanic in origin.

Indo-European is the ancestral language from which most European and many South Asian languages are descended. Yet, there are no written records of it, so everything we know comes from careful reconstruction by linguists.

How do we know anything about it? The answer lies in the comparative method. By carefully examining similarities and recurring patterns across the many daughter languages – such as English, German, Latin, Sanskrit, and Greek – researchers have been able to partially reconstruct the sounds, words, and grammar of this ancient tongue. Interestingly, many scholars believe that modern Lithuanian is probably the closest living language to that original Indo-European tongue – it has changed less over time than most of the others.

The common ancestry of these diverse languages can sometimes be seen quite clearly in the existence of *cognates* – words in different languages that come from the same original word. For example:

- *father* in English, *pater* in Latin and Greek, *fadir* in Old Norse, *pitr* in ancient Vedic Sanskrit.
- *three* in English, *tres* in Latin, *tris* in Greek, *drei* in German, *twee* in Dutch, *tīn* in Sanskrit.
- *is* in English, *est* in Latin, *esti* in Greek, *ist* in Gothic, *asti* in Sanskrit.
- *me* in English, *mik* or *mis* in Gothic, *me* in Latin, *eme* in Greek, *mam* in Sanskrit.
- *mouse* in English, *Maus* in German, *muis* in Dutch, *mus* in Latin, *mus* in Sanskrit.

Notice that while these words may look quite different at first, their connection becomes clear once we understand how sounds change over time. One of the most important ideas for linguists comparing languages is the principle of regular sound change. Sounds in languages do not change randomly; they follow predictable patterns. By looking at root words in different languages, linguists can determine whether differences between words are systematic and therefore likely the result of a shared ancestry.

FROM LONDON TO KYIV: The Indo-European Family

When we look at English and Ukrainian, they seem entirely different. One uses the Latin alphabet, the other Cyrillic; one is Germanic, the other Slavic. However, if we peel back 5,000 years of history, we find that they share the same DNA.

The “Family” Words

The most stable words in any language are those for family members and basic numbers. Notice how the ancient Proto-Indo-European (PIE) roots have survived in both languages, despite the thousands of miles between them:

English	Ukrainian	PIE Root
Mother	мати	* <i>māter-</i>
Brother	брат	* <i>bhrāter-</i>
Sister	сестра	* <i>swesor-</i>
Daughter	донька	* <i>dhugheter-</i>

The Law of Sound Change

Why does English have a “th” (as in *three*) while Ukrainian has a “t” (три)? This is not random! As we learned in **Grimm’s Law**, the Germanic branch shifted the original PIE /t/ sound into a /th/ sound.

The Slavic branch (including Ukrainian) did not undergo this specific shift, which is why Ukrainian often sounds “closer” to the original ancient root:

- **Number 3:** English *three* vs. Ukrainian три (try)
- **Salt:** English *salt* vs. Ukrainian сіль — both from PIE **sāl-*

The “Widow” Case

One of the most remarkable cognates is the word for a woman who has lost her husband. It has remained almost identical for millennia:

- **English:** Widow
- **Ukrainian:** Вдова
- **Latin:** Vidua
- **Sanskrit:** Vidhavā

These aren’t “borrowings” (English didn’t take the word from Ukrainian, or vice-versa). Instead, they are cognates – words that have descended from a single “ancestor” language spoken on the Eurasian steppes long before the invention of writing.

Take, for example, the Latin word *pater* and the English word *father*. At first, they don’t look exactly the same – but linguists notice that the Latin “p” corresponds regularly to an “f” in English. This pattern allows them to argue that *pater* and *father* both come from the same ancient word.

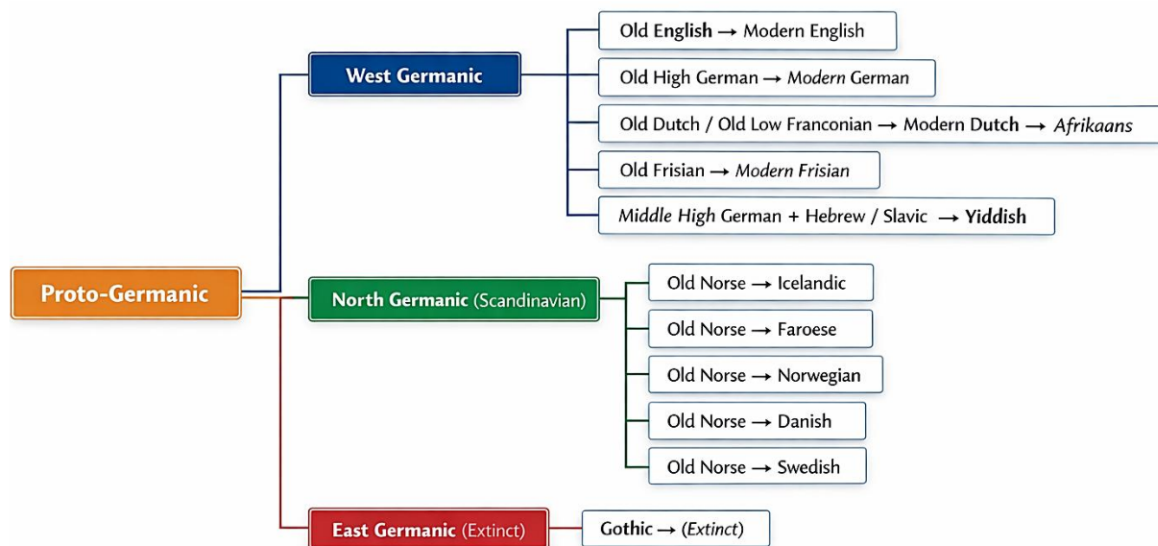
It’s like solving a puzzle. By understanding these rules, linguists can work backward to reconstruct Proto¹-Indo-European (PIE) – the “mother tongue” spoken roughly 6,000 years ago. While no written record of PIE exists, we can “hear” it today every time we say words like *mother*, *star*, or *brother*.

GERMANIC LANGUAGES

English belongs to the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family – alongside languages like German, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages. For a long time now, linguists have found it useful to divide the early Germanic-

¹A “proto” language (from the Greek *prōtos*, meaning “first”) is the hypothetical, reconstructed ancestor of a group of related languages.

speaking peoples into three main groups: East Germanic, North Germanic, and West Germanic. This isn't just a random classification – it reflects how the languages developed as different groups of speakers moved and settled across Europe. Old English, the ancestor of Modern English, belonged to the West Germanic group.



Evolution of Germanic Languages from Proto-Germanic to Modern Forms

The East Germanic branch is the one that disappeared the earliest. Its principal language was Gothic, spoken by the Goths as they moved through parts of Europe. Gothic didn't last long – it was eventually replaced by Latin and faded from use.

The North Germanic branch developed in Scandinavia and Denmark. It gave rise to the modern Scandinavian languages – like Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.

Then there's the West Germanic group, the one that concerns us most, because that's where English comes from. In the early stages, West Germanic included several distinct dialects: Old Saxon, Old Low Franconian, Old Frisian, and Old English. Of these, Old English and Old Frisian were particularly close – they form what linguists call the Anglo-Frisian subgroup.

It's important to remember that the Germanic tribes didn't speak one standard language – they used a variety of dialects and often came into contact with speakers of other varieties. And when they arrived in Britain, they didn't just interact with each other.

They also encountered people who spoke Celtic languages, the native tongues of the British population, as well as a form of Latin still lingering from the days of Roman rule, which had ended not long before.

GRIMM'S LAW



Jacob Grimm
(1785 – 1863)

This section sheds light on the development of the Germanic languages from Proto-Indo-European. What exactly happened to words.

One of the most famous sound changes in the history of language is something called Grimm's Law - named after Jacob Grimm, the German philologist who first described it in 1822 (yes, the same Grimm who helped collect fairy tales!).

Grimm's Law² explains how certain consonants in the Germanic languages changed from their original forms in Proto-Indo-European.

This wasn't just a case of a few random words changing - it was a systematic shift, part of a wider pattern of how sound change happens gradually and predictably over time.

The shift - known as the First Consonant Shift - took place between roughly 2000 and 500 BC, and it's one of the key features that sets Germanic languages apart from their Indo-European cousins. For example, the /p/, /t/, and /k/ sounds in Indo-European became /f/, /th/, and /h/ in Germanic. That's why Latin *pater* matches English *father*, and Greek *treis* (three) matches English *three*.

² What later came to be known as *Grimm's Law* was not originally formulated by Jacob Grimm as a "law" in the modern linguistic sense. In the first edition of *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819), Grimm presented the sound correspondences between Indo-European and Germanic as a series of observations rather than as an exceptionless system. Only in the substantially revised second edition (1822) did these correspondences acquire a clearer structural coherence. The label *law* was applied retrospectively, reflecting the growing nineteenth-century conviction that sound change operates with regularity - a principle that would later be central to Neogrammarian linguistics.

So, when we talk about Grimm's Law, we're really talking about finding regular sound correspondences between Germanic languages (like English and German) and non-Germanic Indo-European languages (like Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit). These correspondences fall into three main categories.

1) Indo-European voiceless stops /p, t, k/ correspond to Germanic voiceless fricatives /f, þ, h/.

2)

Indo-European	Germanic	EXAMPLES	
Voiceless stops	Voiceless fricatives	IE (non-Germanic)	Germanic
/p/	/f/	Ukr <i>п'ять</i> Gr <i>patēr</i> L <i>nepōs</i>	E <i>five</i> E <i>father</i> E <i>nephew</i>
/t/	/θ/	Gr <i>treis</i> / Ukr <i>mpu</i> Ukr <i>mamip</i> / Pol <i>matka</i>	E <i>three</i> E <i>mother</i>
/k/	/h/	Pol <i>kto</i> L <i>quis</i> L <i>quid</i>	E <i>who</i> OE <i>hwæt</i> E <i>hundred</i>

3) Indo-European voiced stops /b, d, g/ correspond to Germanic voiceless stops /p, t, k/.

Indo-European	Germanic	EXAMPLES	
Voiced stops	Voiceless stops	IE (non-Germanic)	Germanic
/b/	/p/	Lith <i>dubús</i> Ukr <i>болото</i>	E <i>deep</i> E <i>pool</i>
/d/	/t/	Gr <i>dyo</i> L <i>duo</i> Ukr <i>два</i> / Pol <i>dwa</i> Ukr <i>дерево</i> / Pol <i>drzewo</i>	E <i>two</i> Goth <i>twai</i> E <i>tree</i>
/g/	/k/	L <i>genu</i>	E <i>knee</i>

It's important to remember that Grimm's Law refers to sound change, not spelling change. So, when we talk about, say, a /g/ → /k/ shift, we mean the pronunciation of the

sound /g/ becoming /k/. That /k/ sound can show up in Modern English as either a *k*, as in *king*, or a *c*, as in *cold*. The letters may differ, but the sound is the same.

- 4) Indo-European voiced aspirated stops /**bh**, **dh**, **gh**/ correspond to Germanic voiced stops without aspiration /**b**, **d**, **g**/.

Indo-European	Germanic	EXAMPLES	
Voiced aspirated stops	Voiced stops without aspiration	IE (non-Germanic)	Germanic
/bh/	/b/	Snsk <i>bhárāmi</i>	Goth <i>bairan</i>
/dh/	/d/	Snsk <i>mádhya</i>	E <i>middle</i>
/gh/	/g/	Snsk <i>stighnomi</i> Snsk <i>ghagh</i>	Germ <i>steigen</i> E <i>giggle</i>

Now that we've looked at how /p/ became /f/ and /d/ became /t/ in isolation, let's zoom out. What Jacob Grimm discovered wasn't just a list of random changes; it was a **total reorganization** of the consonant system. The table below summarizes the three sound-change patterns illustrated in the previous tables.

Voiceless stops → Voiceless fricatives (Except following [s])	Voiced stops → Voiceless stops	Voiced aspirated stops → Voiced stops
/p/ → /f/ /t/ → /θ/ /k/ → /h/	/b/ → /p/ /d/ → /t/ /g/ → /k/	/bh/ → /b/ /dh/ → /d/ /gh/ → /g/

By around 500 BCE, the sound changes described by Grimm's Law appear to have run their course. We know this because when the Germanic tribes later came into contact with the Romans, they borrowed many Latin words, yet none of these loanwords were affected by the Germanic consonant shift. In other words, the sound changes had already taken place.

This helps explain why English often contains pairs of words that seem completely unrelated at first glance, but in fact go back to the same Indo-European root – one entering English through the Germanic line of descent, the other through Latin. Consider *father* and *paternal*, or *ten* and *decimal*, *horn* and *cornucopia*, *three* and *triple*. Although these words differ in form and sound, their ancestry is shared. Such pairs are known as etymological doublets, reflecting different historical paths from a common root.

And while Jacob Grimm gave us the formal description of the consonant shift, he wasn't the first to spot it. In fact, the Danish linguist Rasmus Rask had already noticed the pattern before Grimm published his work. Grimm gave it structure and visibility, but Rask helped lay the groundwork.

VERNER'S LAW

Now, if Grimm's Law explained so much about the sound changes from Indo-European to Germanic, why were there still so many exceptions? That's where another brilliant linguist comes in: Karl Verner.

Verner noticed that these "exceptions" weren't random at all. In fact, they had a regular pattern of their own. By comparing Sanskrit and Germanic words, he discovered a fascinating thing: the position of stress in a word affected how nearby consonants were pronounced.

Here's a simple example to see how stress can affect consonants. Say the words *exist* and *exit*. Most people pronounce them as /ɪg'zɪst/ and /'ɛksɪt/. Notice something? In *exit*, the /k/ sound is voiceless. But in *exist*, it often sounds more like a /g/ – a voiced sound. What's happening here is that the unstressed syllable before the consonant, plus surrounding voiced sounds, causes the change.



Carl Verner
(1846-1896)

Verner realized this exact same "softening" happened in early Germanic. He concluded that the changes described by Grimm occurred first – but then, a second wave of sound changes followed, triggered by the placement of stress in words.

And here's the twist: after these changes took place, the stress shifted to the first syllable of most Germanic words. That shift hid the evidence of what had caused the second set of changes – making the pattern difficult to recognize unless you looked closely, as Verner did. He published his findings in 1875, and the pattern is now known as Verner's Law.

THE "GHOST" IN YOUR MOUTH: Tooth & Dental

Why does English use **tooth** (Old English *tōþ*) but describe it with the word **dental** (from Latin *dentis*)? They look different, but they are actually the same word! According to **Grimm's Law**, the Indo-European /d/ sound changed to /t/ in Germanic languages.

- **Latin (Non-Germanic):**

Kept the original /d/, giving us *dens/dentis*.

- **English (Germanic):**

Shifted the sound to /t/, giving us *tooth*.

Similarly, the Indo-European /p/ changed to /f/. This is why the Latin *piscis* corresponds to the English *fish*, and Latin *pater* corresponds to English *father*. When you see these "pairs" in English today, you are seeing a 2,000-year-old phonetic fingerprint.

So, what does Verner's Law explain? According to Grimm's Law, Indo-European voiceless stops like /p/, /t/, and /k/ shifted to the voiceless fricatives /f/, /θ/ (as in *thing*), and /x/ (a sound like Scottish *loch*). But Verner showed that if these fricatives came after an unstressed syllable and were surrounded by voiced sounds, they shifted again – this time to voiced fricatives, like /v/, /ð/ (as in *this*), and /g/.

Even more surprisingly, Verner found that /s/, a voiceless fricative, could shift to /z/ in these environments – and in West Germanic languages, that /z/ often shifted once more to /r/, in a process known as rhoticism. Meanwhile, /ð/ (from earlier /θ/) often became /d/.

The most famous example of this "hidden" history is a pair of words we use every single day: *was* and *were*. In Proto-Indo-European, the singular and plural forms of "to be" had different stress patterns.

➤ The singular (*was*): Originally, the stress was on the first syllable (**wóse*). Because the stress was before the /s/, the consonant stayed a "sharp" /s/. Thousands of years later, we still say *was*.

➤ The plural (*were*): In this form, the stress was originally on the *ending* (**wes-ún*). Because the /s/ was in an unstressed spot, Verner's Law kicked in and turned that /s/ into a vibrating /z/.

But why don't we say "weze" one might ask? This leads to the final twist: Rhoticism. In the branch of language that became English, that /z/ sound eventually vibrated so much that it turned into an /r/. What makes Verner's Law so clever is that shortly after these changes happened, Germanic languages underwent a "Fixed Stress Shift", moving the accent to the first syllable of almost every word. This shift hid the evidence. It wiped away the original stress patterns that caused the changes in the first place, leaving behind what looked like "irregular" words.

The same goes for -d/-th word pairs. For example, the difference between *death* and *dead*³ ultimately goes back to a single Proto-Indo-European root, *dheu-* (often cited as *dhō-*), meaning "to die". This root itself contained no final *t*; instead, the *t* entered the picture through different suffixes used to form nouns and adjectives. As these forms passed into the Germanic languages, they were shaped by Grimm's Law, which turned an inherited *t* into a *th* sound (/θ/). What happened next depended crucially on where the stress fell in the original Proto-Indo-European word. In the noun, reconstructed as **dhéu-tus*, the stress fell on the root. Because the stressed syllable immediately preceded the consonant, the resulting *th* remained voiceless, producing Proto-Germanic **dauθuz* and, eventually, Modern English *death*. In the adjective, reconstructed as **dheu-tós*, the stress fell on the suffix rather than the root. Here, the *th* followed an unstressed syllable, surrounded by voiced sounds, became voiced under Verner's Law, changing from /θ/ to /ð/. This produced Proto-Germanic **dauðaz*, which later hardened to *d* in Modern English, giving us *dead*. Today, both words are stressed on the first syllable, so the original reason for the difference has disappeared.

³ Pairs like *long* and *length* show the same general idea as *dead* and *death*: they come from the same root but were formed with different suffixes, and early sound changes affected them in different ways. However, unlike *dead/death*, the difference between *long* and *length* is not caused by Verner's Law. Instead, it comes from adding a suffix and from later simplification of consonant clusters.

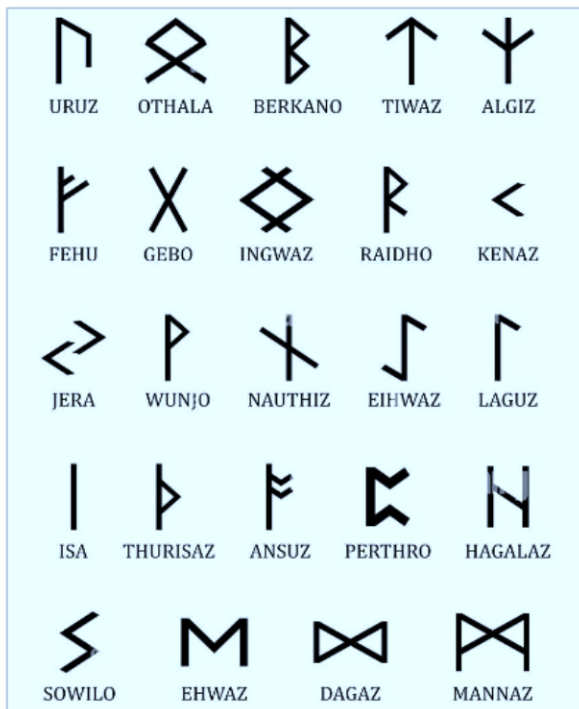
So, thanks to Verner, what once looked like a messy set of exceptions to Grimm's Law turned out to be part of a neat and logical system – all hidden beneath a shift in word stress.

GERMANIC WRITING SYSTEMS

There was no single "Germanic script" used universally. Writing systems changed with contact, religion, and function, not because of internal linguistic evolution.

Over time, they used three different alphabets to record their language:

1. Runic
2. Gothic
3. Latin



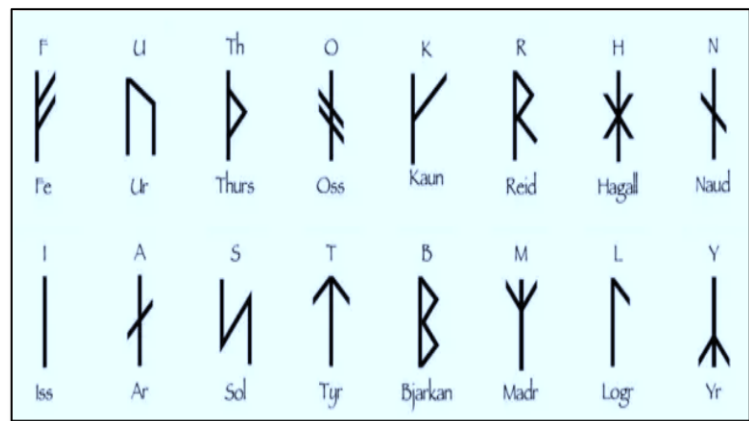
Elder Futhark

1) Runic writing – usually known as the *runic alphabet or Futhark* – represents the earliest attempt by Germanic speakers to put their language into writing. From roughly the second century to the twelfth century CE, runes were used to record Proto-Germanic and a range of early Germanic languages, including Old Norse, Old English, Old Frisian, and Old High German. Unlike picture-based systems, runes formed a fully alphabetic script, but one shaped by its material environment: their straight, angular lines reflect the practical demands of carving

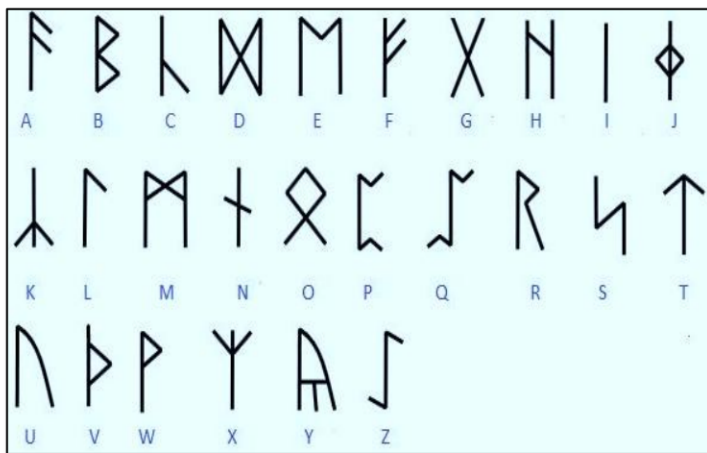
words into stone, wood, and metal rather than writing them on parchment.

Over the centuries, the system evolved in different directions. The *Elder Futhark*, with its twenty-four characters, served the earliest inscriptions; the *Younger Futhark*, pared down to just sixteen runes, dominated Scandinavia in the Viking Age; and the

Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, moving in the opposite direction, expanded the inventory to more than thirty symbols to capture the sounds of Old English and Old Frisian. Most runic texts are short and functional – names, ownership marks, and memorials.



Younger Futhark



The Anglo-Saxon Futhorc

The runes weren't just letters; they often carried symbolic or magical meanings as well. The word "rune" itself originally meant "mystery" or "secret", and these letters were once thought to have magical powers. In the early days, only a select few could read or write them – often monks or wise men –

while most of the population remained illiterate and unaware of their meaning. So, runes were more than just letters – they were part of a symbolic, secretive world, and for a long time, they gave the written word a sense of something sacred or hidden.

This is the first known written English sentence, dated to about 450-480 AD, reads "*This she-wolf is a reward to my kinsman*". It is an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription on a gold medallion found in Suffolk.





Younger Futhark Inscription on Bone



This is a zoomorphic silver-gilt knife mount with runic inscription. Anglo-Saxon, late 8th century.



The left half of the front panel of the 7th century Franks Casket, depicting the Germanic legend of Weyland Smith and containing a riddle in Anglo-Saxon runes.

2) The *Gothic alphabet* is believed to have been created by the Gothic bishop Ulfila, which is why it's often called the Ulfilian alphabet.

The Gothic alphabet was based mainly on the Greek alphabet, but it also included a number of letters from the Latin and Runic alphabets. It was used exclusively by the Goths. This alphabet



Gothic Bishop Ulfila

was created for the Gothic translation of the Bible, carried out by Ulfila, for the Goths living in the lower Danube region. The Gothic alphabet had 27 characters: 25 modified Greek letters plus 2 runes to represent sounds unique to Gothic.

Like the Greek alphabet, Gothic letters were also assigned numerical values. Interestingly, two letters – representing the numbers 90 and 900 – had no phonetic (sound) value.

λ	β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Υ	Ζ	Η	Φ	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ	Ν
ahsa	beirken	giba	dags	aihvus	qairthra	iuja	hagl	thiuth	eis	kusma	lagus	manna	nouths
a	b	g	d	e	q	z	h	p	i	k	l	m	n
[a/a:]	[b/v]	[g/ŋ/x]	[d/ð]	[e/e:]	[kʷ]	[z]	[h/x]	[θ]	[i:/i:]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	20	30	40	50

Ç	Π	Π	Υ	Κ	Σ	Τ	Υ	ƒ	Χ	Θ	Q	↑
jer	urus	pairthra	raida	sauli	teius	winja	faihu	iggws	hwair	othal		
j	u	p	r	s	t	w	f	x	h	o		
[j]	[u/u:]	[p]	[r]	[s]	[t]	[w/y]	[f]	[kʰ]	[x]	[o/o:]		
60	70	80	90	100	200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900

The Gothic alphabet

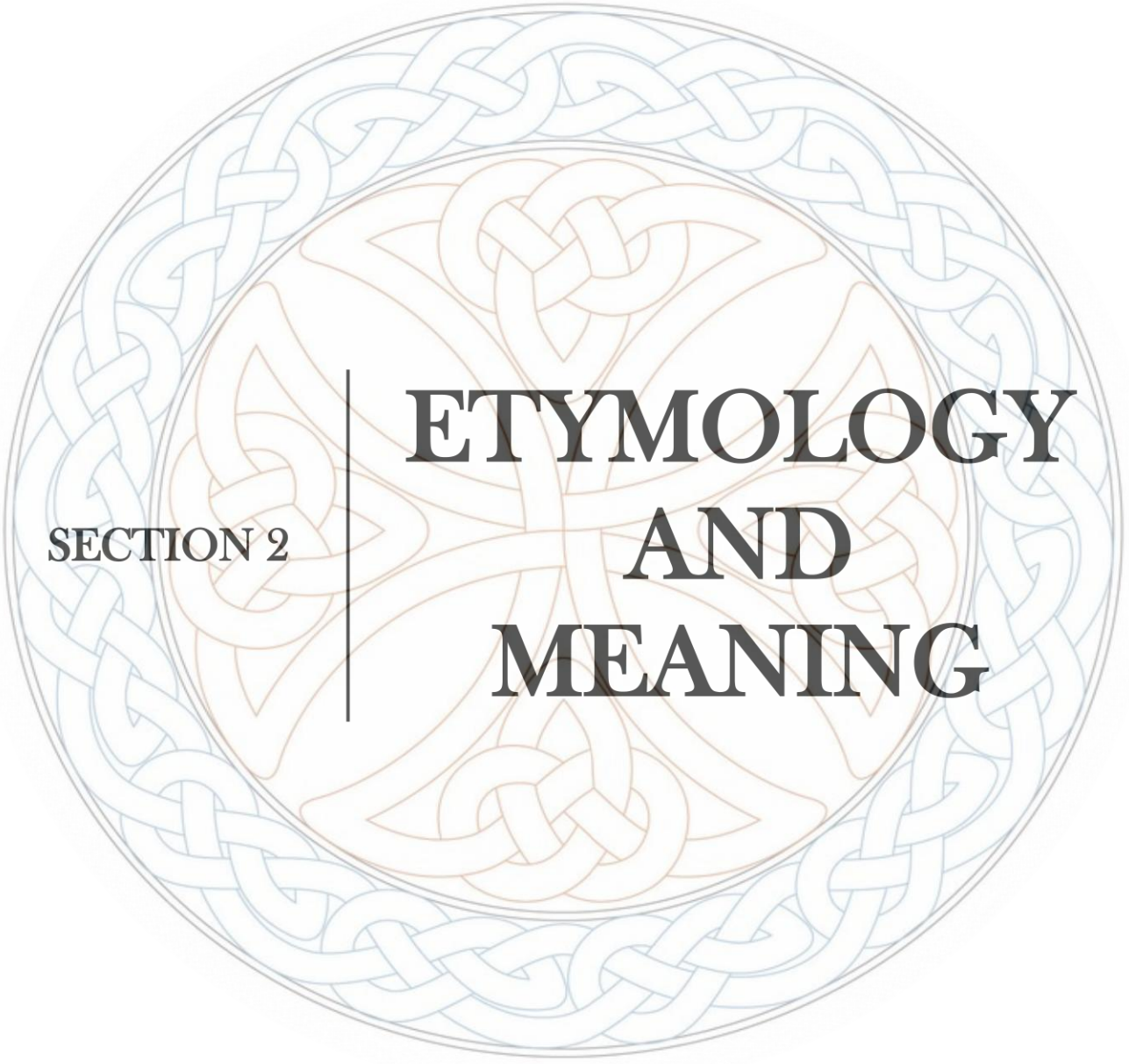
3) The latest alphabet adopted by the Germanic tribes was the *Latin alphabet*, introduced alongside the spread of Christianity.

However, the Latin alphabet was not perfect for Germanic languages because it couldn't represent all the sounds they needed. For example, Old English had sounds like /w/ and /θ/ that the Latin alphabet couldn't show properly. To solve this, some runes were kept – such as ƿ and þ – and some Latin letters were modified. For instance, the letter ȝ was used to denote both /θ/ and /ð/, alongside the rune þ.

 History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 1)

1. According to most scholars, when did the English language originate?
2. How is the long history of English usually divided?
3. Where do the earliest roots of English trace back to geographically?
4. What is Proto-Indo-European, and why is it important for the history of English?
5. How do linguists know about Proto-Indo-European if no written records exist?
6. What method do linguists use to reconstruct the sounds of Proto-Indo-European?
7. How did the original Indo-European language change as people migrated?

8. Why do some languages become very different from each other over time?
9. What are cognates, and why are they important in historical linguistics?
10. Explain the principle of regular sound change with an example from the text.
11. How can linguists argue that Latin *pater* and English *father* come from the same original word?
12. What challenges do you think linguists face when reconstructing languages like Proto-Indo-European?
13. To which branch of the Indo-European family does English belong?
14. What are the three main groups of early Germanic-speaking peoples?
15. What happened to the East Germanic branch and its principal language, Gothic?
16. Besides interacting among themselves, what other languages did the Germanic tribes encounter when they settled in Britain?
17. Who was Jacob Grimm and why is he important in the history of language study?
18. What is Grimm's Law?
19. During what time period did the First Consonant Shift take place?
20. Give examples of how certain Indo-European sounds changed in Germanic languages according to Grimm's Law.
21. How does Grimm's Law explain the relationship between words like Latin *pater* and English *father*?
22. Why is Grimm's Law about sound change and not spelling change?
23. What evidence shows that Grimm's Law sound changes had already happened before the Germanic tribes borrowed Latin words?
24. Why did Karl Verner deal with Grimm's Law? What did he find out?
25. How does the example of the words *exist* and *exit* illustrate Verner's Law?
26. What three alphabets did the Germanic tribes use to record their languages?
27. Which alphabet is the oldest among the Germanic writing systems?
28. What materials were runes typically carved into and why?
29. What was the original meaning of the word "rune"?
30. Who could usually read or write runes in early Germanic societies?
31. Besides being letters, what symbolic role did runes play?
32. Where have runic inscriptions been mainly found in Western Europe?



SECTION 2

ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING

ETYMOLOGY

THE EVOLUTION OF “OK”: From Satire to Global Standard

The word **OK** originated on March 23, 1839, as a linguistic joke in the *Boston Morning Post*. During this era, urban writers engaged in a fad of “comical abbreviations”, intentionally misspelling phrases to create catchy acronyms. **OK** stood for “**Oll Korrect**”, a play on “All Correct”. While contemporaries like **OW** (“Oll Wright”) and **KY** (“Know Yuse”) vanished, **OK** was bolstered by the 1840 presidential campaign of Martin Van Buren. His supporters used his hometown nickname, “**Old Kinderhook**,” to turn the slang into a political slogan, forming “**OK Clubs**” nationwide.

The transition from slang to technical standard occurred with the rise of the **telegraph**. Operators favoured “**OK**” because the two letters were exceptionally distinct in **Morse Code** (--- --). This made it an unmistakable confirmation signal that a message was received and the line was clear.

Debunking the “Zero Killed” Theory: A common **folk etymology** – a plausible but historically inaccurate origin story – claims that “**OK**” comes from military casualty reports signifying “**0 Killed**”. Proponents often cite the American Civil War or WWI as the source. However, historical evidence contradicts this: written records of “**OK**” appear in print over 20 years before the Civil War began. Furthermore, military logs from the 1860s show no record of “**K**” being used as shorthand for *killed*. If they had zero deaths, they would simply write *no casualties* or *none*. The “0 Killed” theory likely emerged later as a way to give the word a more solemn or heroic backstory than its true, satirical origins.

Many people are fascinated by words, and by the often surprising stories hidden in their meanings. But fascination sometimes turns into misinformation. *Popular etymology (or folk etymology)* is full of tales that are entertaining but quite wrong. One that still does the rounds is the claim that the word *news* is an acronym of *north, east, west, south* – as if the word had been invented to cover every direction from which information might come. It wasn’t. *News* is simply the plural of *new*, in the sense of “new things reported.”

Such myths are hard to shift. They appeal to the imagination, and a good story will often outlast the facts. But the genuine history of words is usually interesting enough in its own right. New words enter a language because speakers need them. They may be created from scratch (*googling*), borrowed from another tongue (*sushi*), or adapted from existing items by a shift in meaning.

Sometimes a change depends on place. In Australia, for instance, *thong* refers to the sort of footwear called *flip-flops* in Britain – not to the skimpy underwear that North Americans would imagine. And in American English, *chips* are thin, crisp slices of potato, whereas in British English they are what Americans call *fries*. Same word, different landscapes of meaning.

Sometimes a change depends on time. A word may mean one thing in one century and something quite different in another. Take *decimate*. In Roman times, it meant a brutal punishment: killing one soldier in ten. Today it usually means simply “destroy a lot of.” Purists sometimes complain about such developments, but language is under no obligation to preserve older meanings once usage has moved on.

And then there are words whose meanings are delightfully vague. Take *brilliant*. A child who comes home from school with a good test score may be praised as “brilliant.” A fireworks display might be “brilliant.” So might a clever joke or a dazzling performance. None of these has anything to do with the literal sense of “shining with light,” but all radiate approval. Meaning has broadened, and subjectivity has taken over.

So we don’t really need to invent tall tales about words. Their real histories are remarkable enough – and a good deal more reliable than the idea that *news* comes from the four points of the compass.

Etymological fallacy. Many people, even those who are otherwise reasonably well-informed about language, tend to assume that the meaning of a word today is what it has always meant (or, ideally, what it originally meant if that could be discovered). This



THE “BREAD-WARDEN”: The Lord and the Lady

Early social authority in Old English was closely tied to material provision, especially food, rather than abstract hereditary nobility.

The word **Lord** comes from the OE compound *hlāf-weard*.

- *Hlāf* (Loaf) + *weard* (Warden/Guard).
- Literally: “**The Keeper of the Loaf**”. The Lord was the one responsible for providing food to his dependents.

The word **Lady** comes from *hlæfdige*.

- *Hlāf* (Loaf) + *dige* (Kneader).
- Literally: “**The Loaf-Kneader**”. Over centuries, the literal connection to baking disappeared (a process called **bleaching**), and the words shifted to signify high social rank.

assumption is particularly common with loanwords, where it is often thought that the meaning in our language should match the meaning of the word in its source language. But this assumption is mistaken.

Etymology examines the origin of individual words, their relationships to other words, and how their form and meaning have evolved over time to arrive at their present



ALOOF: THE PIRATE'S MANEUVER

Many words in English have “hidden” origins in the Golden Age of Sail. The word **aloof** (meaning distant or uninvolved) sounds like an abstract personality trait, but it began as a physical steering command on a ship.

- **Origin:** It comes from the word **luff** (the forward edge of a sail).
- **The Maneuver:** To go “a-loof” meant to turn the head of the ship into the wind to steer away from the shore or another vessel.

If a ship stayed “aloof”, it kept its distance from others to avoid a collision or a battle. By the 1600s, people began using the term metaphorically to describe people who deliberately keep their distance in social or emotional contexts.

usage. Changes in meaning (known as semantic change) can, and frequently do, render the original sense obsolete. While etymological study can illuminate how a modern meaning arose or shed light on aspects of human cognition, it does not tell us what a word “actually” means today.

The following examples illustrate what is called the etymological fallacy: the belief that a word’s earlier meaning, or its original sense, is its “true” meaning. References to a word’s origin can sometimes skew arguments. In a debate about science education (whether teaching should emphasize content knowledge or the processes of scientific inquiry) one participant insisted that the “real” meaning of science is ‘investigation’ or ‘systematic enquiry,’ because this was implied by the Latin

scientia from which the term is derived. This is a clear case of etymological fallacy.

Another example comes from medicine. When early doctors were debating the diagnosis of “migraine,” some argued that it should refer only to a one-sided headache, because the term comes from Greek *hemikrania*, literally “half skull.” Insisting that a modern, generalized understanding of *migraine* is incorrect because of its origin is also an etymological fallacy.

Some writers, eager to display their learning, have argued that words are misused if they depart from their etymological roots. For instance, one commentator claimed that *lunatic*, because of its ultimate derivation from Latin *luna* ‘moon,’ should refer only to people affected by lunar cycles. This is etymological fallacy. If we took such logic seriously, we would also have to argue that *construct* could only refer to building with wood (Latin *construere*), that *manual* should only apply to hands (Latin *manus*), or that only males could be called *virtuous*, since *virtue* derives from Latin *virtus* ‘manliness.’

The fallacy becomes even clearer when we recognize that most everyday words have undergone multiple shifts in meaning over their history.

Meanings are not fixed. These examples demonstrate that words do not have fixed meanings. Meanings are fluid, often drifting far from the hints suggested by etymology.

Etymology has a special appeal for the general public: people are naturally curious about where words come from and often enjoy debating their origins at length. Why, for example, is the game domino called *domino*? How could *villain* once have meant ‘farmhand’, or *jealous* be related to *zealous*?

Domino. Contrary to popular speculation, the name of the game has nothing to do with masks or costumes. The word *domino* comes from French, where it referred to one of the pieces in the game. This piece was likely named after a type of black-and-white hood or cape worn by priests, which resembled the contrasting colours of the game pieces.

Villain. The term originally referred simply to a farm worker or someone bound to the land. It entered English from Old French *vilain*, from Latin *villanus*, meaning ‘inhabitant of a villa’ (a country estate). Over time, the meaning shifted to imply coarse or morally dubious behaviour, but the etymology itself tells us nothing about its modern sense.



THE ANCIENT “DEER”: When a Beast Becomes a Species

In Old English, the word **dēor** did not mean a specific animal with antlers. It simply meant “**any wild animal**” or “**beast**”. You can still see this original meaning in the German cognate *Tier* (which means “animal”).

In English, however, the word underwent semantic specialization: as other animals acquired more specific names – many influenced by Norman French hunting vocabulary – *deer* gradually narrowed to denote only cervine animals.

Jealous. This word traces back to the same root as *zealous*, from Greek *zelos*, meaning ardour or enthusiasm. *Jealous* came into English via Old French *jalous*, acquiring first the sense of being vigilant or watchful in matters of affection, and later narrowing to the familiar feeling of envy. Their shared ancestry shows how words with a common origin can diverge dramatically in meaning.

These examples illustrate how knowing a word's history can fascinate us, but it does not determine its present-day meaning. Words evolve in unexpected ways, and their current sense often bears little relation to their origins.

Words are living things. As the examples of *villain*, *jealous*, and *domino* show, tracing a word's origin is fascinating, but it only tells part of the story. Words rarely stay fixed in meaning; they are constantly shaped by speakers, contexts, and cultural pressures. To understand why meanings shift, linguists study the mechanisms of semantic change (narrowing, generalisation, metaphorisation, metonymy, pejoration and amelioration, specialisation and semantic drift) the processes by which words expand, contract, or transform over time.

Narrowing occurs when a word's meaning becomes more specific than it originally was. For instance, *meat* once meant any kind of food in English, but today it refers specifically to the flesh of animals. Similarly, *hound* originally meant any dog, but now often implies a particular breed used for hunting. Narrowing sharpens a word's focus, carving out a precise sense from a broader original meaning.

Generalisation, by contrast, broadens a word's meaning. *Holiday*, for example, originally meant only a religious festival or "holy day," but now refers to any day of leisure or vacation. Likewise, *thing* once referred to a public assembly or gathering in Old English, but it has become a catch-all term for objects, concepts, and even events. Generalisation allows words to adapt to new situations and encompass a wider range of reference.

Metaphorisation gives words meanings that are figuratively related to their original sense. *Foot*, for instance, can refer to the base of a mountain or the bottom of a page, drawing on the image of the human foot. *Grasp* moved from a literal act of holding to the figurative sense of understanding. Metaphorisation exploits human imagination, connecting abstract concepts to concrete experiences.

Metonymy shifts meaning through association rather than similarity. A classic example is *crown*, which can refer not only to the physical headwear but to monarchy itself. *Hollywood* can mean the entire American film industry, not just the district in Los Angeles. Metonymy relies on contiguity - the close link between related concepts.

Pejoration and **amelioration** show how social attitudes affect meaning. *Silly* once meant 'happy' or 'blessed', but gradually acquired a negative sense of 'foolish'. Conversely, *knight* originally simply meant a servant or young man, yet its connotations

improved over time to imply honour and chivalry. Words carry the moral and cultural values of their speakers.

Specialisation and semantic drift

often combine several mechanisms. *Broadcast* originally referred to scattering seeds by hand, but it now applies to the transmission of radio or television signals - a mix of metaphorisation and generalisation.

By examining these mechanisms, we see that words are not static symbols frozen in time. They are flexible tools, constantly reshaped by human experience, creativity, and social interaction. Etymology tells us where a word came from; semantic change explains how it arrived where it is today. Understanding these processes allows us to read language not as a set of fixed meanings, but as a dynamic, evolving system.

THE FOREST IN THE LIBRARY: Book and Beech

One of the enduring debates in Germanic philology is the relationship between the words **book** and **beech**. We cannot prove the connection with absolute certainty, but the linguistic "fingerprints" suggest a shared history.

In Old English, the word for book was *bōc* and the word for beech tree was *bēce*. Both are believed to descend from the same Proto-Germanic root, *bōks*. Linguists call this an etymological relationship - they are "cousins", though not identical words.

It is a traditional scholarly theory that early Germanic tribes used smooth slats of beech wood to scratch or "incise" runes.

The verb **write** (OE *wītan*) originally meant "to scratch" or "to tear".

Archaeological evidence is mixed. While we have found runes carved into stone, bone, and various types of wood, few beechwood samples survive. However, the linguistic link between the tree and the text is very consistent across Germanic languages.

Contrary to a common misconception, *bōc* was not coined as a translation of Latin *liber*. Instead, it reflects a native Germanic term associated with carving or inscribing, which was later extended to denote parchment books introduced through Christian literacy.

History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 2)

1. What is the difference between popular (folk) etymology and the genuine history of words?
2. How can place and time influence the meaning of words? Provide two examples.
3. What does the term “etymological fallacy” mean? Give examples.
4. Define the following mechanisms of semantic change, using examples from the text:
5. Narrowing
6. Generalisation
7. Metaphorisation
8. Metonymy
9. Pejoration
10. Amelioration
11. How can an overemphasis on etymology mislead people about the meaning of modern words?
12. Why is understanding both etymology and semantic change important for translation?
13. What story stands behind “Ok”?
14. How are *book* and *beech* related?
15. How has the meaning of *deer* evolved?

SECTION 3

Old English



THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The story of the English language begins not with English at all, but with the Celtic-speaking peoples of the modern British Isles. At the time, the inhabitants were the



Bede 673-735

Britons – tribes with deep Celtic roots. We catch a vivid glimpse of their plight in a powerful appeal quoted by the Anglo-Saxon historian, the Venerable Bede⁴: “To Aetius, thrice consul the groans of the Britons.” It’s a line from a letter to a Roman official, written by those who had managed to survive repeated raids from the Scots and Picts in the early fifth century. Their desperation is clear: “The barbarians drive us to the sea. The sea drives us back towards the barbarians. Between them we are exposed to two sorts of death: we are either slain or drowned.”

It’s a dramatic and tragic picture. No help came. Rome, once the guarantor of relative peace, had its hands full, embroiled in wars with the Huns under Bledla and the more infamous Attila. So, the Britons, left to fend for themselves, had to look for alternative allies. As Bede explains, they held counsel: what could be done, and who might be willing to help repel these relentless northern raids?⁵ The solution they settled on would change the history of the island, and the English language, forever.

King Vortigern, acting on the advice of his nobles, invited over a people from across the sea: the Saxons⁵. According to Bede, this took place in the year 449. Three ships

⁴ Bede (c. 673–735), known as the *Venerable Bede*, spent almost his entire life at the twin monasteries of Wearmouth – Jarrow in Northumbria. Despite this physical immobility, he became the most influential historian of early Anglo-Saxon England through his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which remains the principal source for much of early English history. Bede was among the first to conceptualize the *gens Anglorum* (“the English people”) as a collective entity. An encyclopaedic scholar, he wrote on history, grammar, biblical exegesis, astronomy, and computus, and played a major role in popularizing the BC/AD dating system in Western Europe. He was widely revered during his lifetime, later receiving the title *Venerable* and ultimately being declared a Doctor of the Church. Later tradition holds that he died while dictating a vernacular (Old English) translation of the Gospel of John, symbolically linking him to the early English literary tradition.

⁵ Hengist and Horsa were legendary brothers, traditionally said to have led the first group of Saxon warriors invited by King Vortigern to Britain in 449. According to later sources building on Bede and earlier traditions, they served initially as mercenaries but eventually established a foothold in eastern England, symbolizing the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon presence in Britain.

arrived, bringing warriors who were given land in the island's east. Ostensibly, they were there to fight for Britain. In reality, they had very different intentions: conquest. The initial skirmishes were successful. The newcomers pushed back the invaders from the north. News of both victory and opportunity (the island's rich land and its poorly defended people) soon spread, which was known as the country's fertility, and the Britons' cowardice. A larger fleet was soon on its way, carrying even more men. With this second wave joining the first, the Saxons were no longer just a hired force. They had become, in Bede's words, an invincible army.

The conflict between the newcomers and the native Britons continued for decades. But despite the ongoing fighting, the outcome was never really in question. Over the course of a century, more waves of Germanic settlers made their way across the sea, gradually establishing themselves across most of the country – except, notably, in the more mountainous regions of the west and north.

Bede⁶ identifies the newcomers as belonging to three major Germanic groups: the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes: divisions that would later live on in the names Essex, Wessex, and Sussex. The name Middlesex, too, hints at the presence of a group called the Middle Saxons. These are the peoples who brought with them the tongue, which in time would evolve into Old English, and eventually, the language we speak today. Linguistically, we know the invaders spoke distinct varieties of a Germanic



Richard Verstegan's depiction of Hengist and Horsa landing in Britain for the first time.

⁶ Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c. 731) draws on the earlier *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (c. 540) by Gildas, a moralizing 6th-century sermon. Gildas described the Saxon arrival dramatically: "then all the councilors, together with that proud tyrant Gurthrigern [Vortigern], the British king, were so blinded, that, as a protection to their country, they sealed its doom by inviting in among them (like wolves into the sheep-fold), the fierce and impious Saxons...A multitude of whelps came forth...in three ships of war...for it was foretold...that they should occupy the country...three hundred years, and half of that time...plunder and despoil the same." Bede transformed these vivid, moralizing accounts into a systematic history, adding names, dates (notably 449), and chronological structure, making the Saxon arrival a foundation of English historical narrative.

language, but the differences between them are hard to pin down. The Old English dialects that later emerged clearly reflect where these groups settled, but the textual evidence is too limited to allow detailed comparisons.

By the close of the 5th century, the groundwork had been laid. The seeds had been planted for what, in time, would become the English language.

THE NAME OF THE LANGUAGE

The Germanic settlers were not especially sensitive when it came to naming the people they displaced. They referred to the native Celts as *wealas*, meaning “foreigners” – a word that would eventually give us the modern term *Welsh*. Ironically, “foreigners” were the Celts who were the original inhabitants. The Celts, for their part, used the term *Saxons* for all the newcomers, regardless of whether they were actually Saxons, Angles, or Jutes. Early Latin writers followed this same convention.

But over time, terminology shifted. By the end of the 6th century, we find the term *Angli* (or “Angles”) appearing more frequently. A clear example comes from the year 601, when a king of Kent is referred to in Latin as *rex Anglorum*, or “King of the Angles.” In the 7th century, *Angli* for the people and *Anglia* for the land became the standard Latin terms. The Old English word *Engle* reflects this same development, and the language itself is consistently referred to as *Englisc* in early texts (with *sc* representing the *sh* sound). The name of the country *Englaland* (or “land of the Angles”) doesn’t appear in writing until around the year 1000, but it’s from this that we get the modern word *England*.

And what do we know about the speech of the people who lived in Britain before the Anglo-Saxons? For centuries, the British Isles were home to a variety of Celtic languages, brought by people who began settling the islands in the middle of the first millennium BC. Later, in 43 BC, the Romans invaded and brought Latin with them. Roman rule lasted nearly 400 years, but by 410 AD the legions had been recalled to defend the crumbling Empire on the continent.

So, after roughly a thousand years of Celtic-speaking settlement, and almost half a millennium of Latin influence, what traces did these earlier languages leave on the speech

of the incoming Anglo-Saxons? The short answer: remarkably few. Despite the length of time both Celtic and Latin were spoken in Britain before the Anglo-Saxon arrival, the impact on Old English vocabulary was minimal. And that tells us something important about how thoroughly and violently the newcomers established not just political control but also linguistic dominance.

CORPUS OF OLD ENGLISH

There's a period of "silence" between the Anglo-Saxons' arrival and the appearance of the first written records in Old English. We do have a few scattered inscriptions from the 5th and 6th centuries, carved in runes, the writing system the Germanic settlers brought with them. However, these early fragments tell us very little about the nature of the language at the time.

The real story of written Old English begins later, with the arrival of the Roman missionaries under Augustine in AD 597. Their presence sparked the rapid development of monastic centers, which in turn led to a flourishing of manuscript production, mostly in Latin, and mostly religious in nature, such as copies of the Bible and other ecclesiastical texts. It was in this growing literary environment that Old English writing began to emerge – remarkably, earlier than in most other vernacular traditions in northern Europe.



THE FRAGILE RECORD: The Old English Corpus

Why so little remains? Catastrophes of History

The Old English manuscripts we study today are survivors of a "linguistic lottery". Their destruction was rarely the result of a single event, but rather a series of cultural and physical catastrophes.

1. **Institutional Collapse:** While the **Viking raids** (beginning with Lindisfarne in 793) famously burned individual libraries, their greater impact was the disruption of manuscript production. As monasteries collapsed, the "infrastructure" of literacy was broken for decades.
2. **The Great Dispersal:** During the **Dissolution of the Monasteries (1530s)**, centuries of Anglo-Saxon heritage were treated as trash. Manuscripts were recycled as "binding waste" to stiffen the covers of newer books, used for cleaning, or sold for the value of the parchment itself.
3. **The Cotton Library Fire (1731):** Even the manuscripts that were "saved" by collectors remained at risk. A fire at **Ashburnham House** severely damaged the *Cotton MS Vitellius A.xv*—the sole surviving manuscript witness of *Beowulf*.



THE DEAD COW IN THE LIBRARY: Parchment and Vellum

The word *paper* comes from the Egyptian *papyrus*, but Old English texts were almost exclusively written on **parchment** (from the Greek city *Pergamon*) or **vellum** (from the Old French *veau*, meaning ‘calf’).

Writing a book in the Anglo-Saxon period was an immense industrial undertaking. Scribes did not use plant-based paper; they used the processed skins of sheep, goats, or calves. The skin was soaked in lime, scraped clean of hair, and stretched tight on a wooden frame to dry into a smooth, durable surface.

- To produce a single large Bible, a monastery might require the skins of roughly **300–500 animals**.
- Because of this, a book wasn’t just a collection of ideas – it was a significant investment of physical capital and agricultural labour.

Because parchment was so expensive and labour-intensive to produce, scribes were highly conscious of “page real estate”. This led to several specific manuscript features:

- **Abbreviations:** Scribes used extensive shorthand systems (like the **7** for *and* or a bar over a vowel for a missing *m* or *n*). This was not a change to the English language itself, but a convention inherited from Latin manuscript culture to save time and space.
- **Dense Scripts:** Letters were often packed tightly together, and margins were kept small to ensure every inch of the precious skin was utilized.
- **Recycling (Palimpsests):** If a text was no longer needed, the parchment was often scraped clean and written over again.

The high cost of materials did not dictate the “conciseness” of Old English grammar – which remained complex and descriptive – but it did dictate the transmission of the language: the physical medium for preserving the thoughts was a rare and costly luxury.

The earliest examples, from around the year 700, include glossaries that translate Latin words into Old English, along with a handful of inscriptions and short poems. Unfortunately, not much survives from this early phase. Many manuscripts were likely destroyed during the Viking raids of the 8th century.

The standout literary achievement of this period is *Beowulf*, a heroic poem that survives in only a single manuscript, copied around the year 1000, possibly two and a half centuries after it was first composed (though the exact date remains hotly debated). There are also a number of shorter poems, again preserved almost entirely in much later copies. More than half are religious in theme: stories of saints, biblical passages, and devotional reflections. Others are more secular, drawing on the Germanic tradition and touching on war, travel, loyalty, and celebration.

Even so, the overall body of Old English literature is very small. The University of Toronto's *Corpus of Old English* (a comprehensive collection of surviving texts, though it doesn't include every version of each manuscript) contains only about 3.5 million words. That's roughly the length of 30 average modern novels. Of this, only about 5 percent (some 30,000 lines) is poetry.

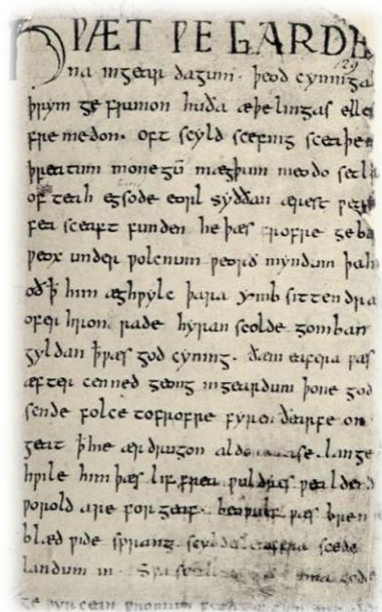
The Old English corpus covers almost everything that survives from the period, and the texts fall into several broad categories. The largest group is religious and didactic works: homilies, sermons, biblical translations such as those by Bede and Ælfric, along with saints' lives and prayers. This dominance shows just how central the Church was to literacy in Anglo-Saxon England. Poetry comes next, from epic and heroic works like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* to elegiac and gnomic poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, not to mention liturgical and devotional verse – often preserved in codices alongside prose. Legal and administrative texts, including the law codes of King Ine and King Alfred, charters, wills, and land grants, give us a glimpse into social structure, governance, and even the language people used for official purposes. There are also scientific, medical, and technical writings – medical recipes, charms, astronomical tables, and instructions for calculating Easter (*computus*) – which show how Latin learning was practically adapted into Old English. Letters and historical narratives, like Bede's works or correspondence from kings and missionaries, help us date events, follow political history, and study formal registers. Finally, glosses and marginal notes – Latin texts with Old English translations or annotations – reveal vocabulary, bilingual skills, and the ways Anglo-Saxons actually read and wrote. Taken together, the corpus offers an almost complete picture of the literary and intellectual life of early England.

EDITING OLD ENGLISH

When it comes to Old English, just like with modern foreign languages, there's rarely a consensus on the "right" way to translate a text – and even less so when it comes to editing. Editors tend to fall into two broad camps: those who aim to mirror the original manuscript as faithfully as possible, and those who offer a more modernised, readable

version. But one thing is clear: editing is essential. Reproducing an Old English manuscript in facsimile form might look authentic, but it would be virtually incomprehensible to anyone but the most seasoned specialist.

The need for editorial guidance is considerable. Medieval scribes weren't exactly known for consistency – capital letters might appear unpredictably, punctuation and word spacing could be whimsical. Paragraphing? Rare. In some cases, like *Beowulf*, even the poetic line breaks we take for granted were never marked in the original. These have to be added later by the editor, who must make dozens of decisions to bring order to the chaos.



	Hwæt! We Gardena	in geardagum,
	þeodcýninga,	þrym gefrunon,
	hu ða æþelingas	ellen fremedon.
	Oft Scyld Scefing	sceaþena þreatum,
5	monegum mægþum,	meodosetla ofteah,
	egsode eorlas.	Syððan ærest wearð
	feasceaf funden,	he þæs frofre gebad,
	weox under wolcnum,	weorðmyndum þah,
	oðþæt him æghwylc	þara ymbsittendra
10	ofer hronrade	hyran scolde,
	gomban gylðan.	þæt wæs god cýning!
	Ðæm eafera wæs	æfter cenned,
	geong in geardum,	þone god sende
	folce to frofre;	fyrendearfe ongeat
15	þe hie ær drugon	aldorlease
	lange hwile.	Him þæs liffrea,
	wuldres wealdend,	worldare forgeaf;
	Beowulf wæs breme	(blæd wide sprang),
	Scyldes eafera	Scedelandum in.
20	Swa sceal geong guma	gode gewyrcean,
	fromum feohgifum	on fæder bearme,
	þæt hine on ylde	eft gewunigen
	wilgesipas,	þonne wig cume,
	leode gelæsten;	lofdædum sceal

Beowulf: original manuscript page (left) compared with the edited edition (right), showing normalized spelling and editorial interventions.

Still, editors disagree on how far to go. Some quietly fix obvious mistakes made by scribes; others prefer to flag them up with parentheses or symbols. Torn or burned corners of manuscripts – which often claim a few unlucky letters – might be restored with educated guesses, or left marked as gaps. Some editions throw in modern features like vowel length indicators. Others update archaic letters into their modern counterparts. It's a balancing act: preserving history, while also making the language visible to today's reader.

OLD ENGLISH LETTERS

Old English letters. There are plenty of similarities between Old and Modern English, but let's be honest – it's the differences that hit us first. The moment you open an edited Anglo-Saxon text, the sense of strangeness is hard to miss. Editors have done their best to lend a helping hand: adding familiar punctuation, spaces between words, capital letters, even modern line breaks – all things the original manuscripts lacked. But some aspects of the original spelling are usually left untouched, and it's precisely these that make Old English feel like a foreign language.

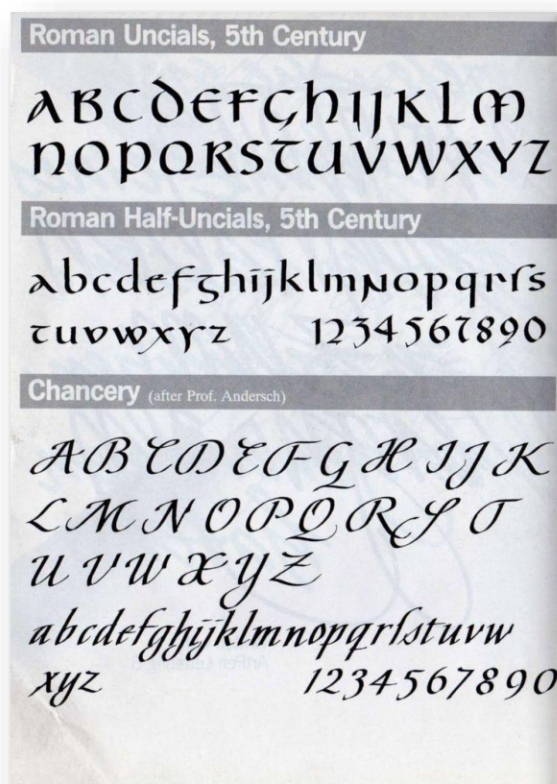
So, the first real challenge? Learning to read the unfamiliar characters. This is where things start to feel exciting (or overwhelming, depending on your mood).

Old English texts weren't typed, obviously – they were written on parchment or vellum by hand. The earliest manuscripts used a version of the Roman alphabet, written in a script known as *half-uncial* calligraphy, introduced by Irish missionaries. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is a classic example. Over time, the letterforms evolved into what's known as *insular script*, more angular and quicker to write – the typical handwriting of English scribes up until the 11th century.

The alphabet itself wasn't far off from what we know today. But to a modern eye, the lack of capital letters stands out immediately – they just weren't in use the way we expect.

A few things to get used to:

➤ Some letters looked different. The letter *s*, for example, had a longer, more stretched-out shape. The letter *g* showed up as *3*, a character later called *yogh* (yes,



Medieval writing styles

really – pronounced “yōg” or “yōkh”). Other letters like *e*, *f*, and *r* might also look a bit odd at first glance.

➤ Some letters we now use were missing entirely. *J* wasn’t there – its job was usually done by a *3*. *V* often looked like an *f*, and letters like *q*, *x*, and *z* barely made an appearance. As for *w*, it hadn’t been invented yet – instead, scribes used a runic letter called *wynn* (p), which you’ll still spot in older editions. Later versions sometimes tried *uu* or *u* before *w* finally won the day.

➤ *Æ* (called *ash*) came from the runic alphabet but looked like a Latin hybrid. It stood for a sound somewhere between *a* and *e*, and became a standard part of the script by the 8th century.

➤ Then there’s *Þ*, called *thorn*, another rune borrowed for convenience. It stood for the *th* sound – as in “thin” or “this”. And to complicate matters, it was often swapped freely with *ð*, known as *eth* (or *that* in Old English times). You might find both in a single sentence, depending on the scribe’s mood. Over time, *thorn* took over.

➤ Numbers? Only Roman numerals. Those handy Arabic digits (1, 2, 3) didn’t arrive until much later.

So, if Old English seems hard to read at first glance, that’s because it *is*. But once you get past the unfamiliar alphabet, you start to see the family resemblance and that’s when the fun really begins.

So what did the Old English alphabet actually look like? The standard version had 24 letters:

a, æ, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, k, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, t, þ, ð, u, w, y.

Some of these may seem comfortingly familiar, others, decidedly not. You’ll notice a few surprises, like *þ* (thorn) and *ð* (eth), which did the job of sounds we now write with digraphs like *th*. Speaking of which, Old English also relied on combinations of letters – digraphs – to represent single sounds, just as we do today with *ch*, *sh*, and the like.

But if you’re looking for consistent spelling across texts (or even within a single text)... good luck. Spelling in Old English was famously variable. This wasn’t because they didn’t care about accuracy – quite the opposite. Much of the variation came from scribes trying to record sounds as precisely as they could, often influenced by regional

accents and local pronunciation. Add to that the personal quirks and preferences of individual scribes, and you end up with a striking variety of forms.

Even within one manuscript (Beowulf, for instance) you'll find the same word spelled in different ways, sometimes just a few lines apart. There was a brief moment of calm toward the end of the 10th century, when spelling became more regular. But it didn't last.

Why? Because change was coming. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, English writing came under the influence of new Continental scribal traditions, and with them, a major shake-up of the writing system. The alphabet would never be quite the same again.

OLD ENGLISH SOUNDS

So, how do we actually *know* what Old English sounded like? The short answer (and not a very satisfying one) is that we don't. Unlike later periods, where we can turn to helpful descriptions from contemporary writers (some of whom loved to comment on people's accents!), Old English gives us no such luxury. The Anglo-Saxons weren't in the habit of having pronunciation guides.

THE SCRIBAL SHORTCUT: A History of And

In our modern world of “u” for *you* and “v good” for *very good*, we tend to think of abbreviations as a modern invention born of texting and internet chat. However, the Anglo-Saxons were the original “texters”.

The “7” of the Anglo-Saxons

Long before the modern ampersand (&) became standard in England, Old English scribes used a symbol known as the **Tironian *et***.

It looks remarkably like the modern number 7, but with the vertical stroke descending below the line. In the ancient glossaries of the 8th century, the word *and* (originally spelled *ond*) was written out, but as scribes began copying long chronicles and legal wills, they needed a shortcut. In many Old English documents, you can see these “7s” scattered all over the page, linking strings of words and even beginning new sentences.

While the British Isles favoured the “7”, the rest of Europe used a different shortcut. The modern & is a decorative combination of two letters: It is historically a collapsed version of the Latin word *et* (*and*).

- The bottom circle is what remains of the letter *e*.
- The rising tail on the right is what remains of the letter *t*.

The word *ampersand* is itself a “collapsed” form of a phrase. In 19th-century schoolrooms, children reciting the alphabet would conclude with the symbol &. Since it wasn't a letter, they would say: “X, Y, Z, *and per se and*”.

The Latin phrase *per se* means “by itself”. They were essentially saying: “The symbol ‘&’ by itself means ‘and’”. Over years of fast reciting, “*and-per-se-and*” slurred together to become the word we use today: **ampersand**.

What we *can* do, though, is make a series of educated guesses. And these aren't shots in the dark – they're based on a whole toolkit of linguistic evidence: spelling patterns, later developments in the language, rhymes, comparisons with related Germanic languages, and more. Scholars have been working on this puzzle for a long time, and although it's not an exact science, we now have a pretty good idea of how most of the sounds were pronounced.

In fact, if an Anglo-Saxon speaker suddenly turned up in the 21st century, we'd probably be able to understand each other – with a bit of effort. We'd need to tune our ears to the differences, much like someone adjusting to a foreigner's accent today. Communication would be slow, but possible.

It's also worth remembering that just like now, there was likely a wide range of accents and regional speech varieties in Anglo-Saxon England. There's no reason to assume pronunciation was neatly uniform. So, when we look at those ancient letters and symbols, we need to avoid being too rigid in how we interpret them. The sounds they represent probably varied quite a bit – just as they do in modern English.

So what evidence do we actually have for how Old English sounded?

Well, we might not have recordings (sadly), but we *do* have some very useful clues. In fact, there are four main types of evidence that linguists rely on when trying to work out the sound values of Old English letters.

1. Alphabet

We begin with the alphabet itself. When the Roman missionaries brought their writing system to Anglo-Saxon England, they weren't starting from scratch. They already knew how the Latin alphabet worked, and it's safe to assume they tried to apply it in a consistent and sensible way. So if the Latin *m* stood for the sound [m], it would naturally do the same in Old English. Where they needed extra help – say, for a sound not found in Latin – they invented or borrowed a new symbol, like *æ*.

Spelling can tell us a lot, too. Old English scribes often tried to write down words the way they were spoken. There were no hard-and-fast rules about “correct” spelling, though some abbeys had stricter traditions, and certainly no silent letters. When they wrote *writan* (ancestor of *write*), the *w* was actually pronounced. That makes Old English far more “phonetic” than today's spelling system.

2. Reconstruction

Another trick is to work backwards. By comparing Old English with later stages of the language, especially dialect forms, we can make educated guesses about what things used to sound like. Many Modern English consonants probably haven't changed all that much, so it's the vowels that give us the most trouble. They tend to shift more over time, and their precise qualities are harder to pin down.

3. Sound change

Then there's what we know about how languages change. Linguists have long studied the ways that sounds tend to evolve. Take the Old English word *hit*, – the earlier version of *it*. If we say the *h* was originally pronounced (as most believe), then we need to explain how and why it disappeared. But that's easy: dropping *h* in unstressed words is a common process. Just think of how people say *I saw 'im* today. The same sort of thing was likely happening back then too.

4. Poetry

And let's not forget the poets! Old English verse is full of rhymes, alliteration, and regular rhythmic patterns, all of which can give us subtle but powerful clues about how words were pronounced.

So, even without a time machine or voice recording, we've got a remarkably strong set of tools to help us reconstruct the sounds of Old English. And while it'll never be 100% certain, the results are good enough that, if you spoke to an Anglo-Saxon today, slowly and clearly, you just might be understood.

READING RULES: CONSONANTS

Let's take a closer look at a few tricky ones: *s*, *f*, and the famous *þ/ð* pair (yes, those are actual letters – more on that in a moment).

S

This letter behaves a lot like it does today.

- At the beginning or end of a word, or next to an unvoiced consonant (like *t* or *p*), it's pronounced as a clear /s/ – like the *s* in *sip* or *cats*.

- But if it shows up between vowels or next to a voiced consonant (like *b*, *d*, *g*), it softens into a /z/ sound – like the *s* in *rose* or *houses*.

f

The story here is almost identical.

- At the start or end of a word, or next to an unvoiced consonant, it's pronounced like /f/ – the same as in *fox* or *laugh*.
- But placed between vowels or beside a voiced consonant, it turns into a /v/ sound – like the *f* in *of*.

þ and **ð** (thorn and eth)

These two symbols might look exotic, but they're just two ways of writing the same sound – what we now spell as *th*.

- At the start or end of a word, or next to an unvoiced consonant, the sound is unvoiced /θ/, as in *thin* or *path*.
- Placed between vowels or near a voiced consonant, it becomes the voiced /ð/ – as in *that* or *mother*.

But don't stress about whether the scribe used þ or ð – it was mostly a stylistic choice. They both stood for the same “th” sound and followed the same rules.

h

The letter h is pronounced just like Modern English /h/ if it occurs at the beginning of a word.

- If it occurs after a vowel, it is pronounced as a kind of rough breathing, with the tongue tense and pressed towards, but not touching, the roof of the mouth. The actual sound depends on what kind of a vowel it comes after.
- If it is after a front vowel (that is pronounced at the front of the mouth, for example, /i/ or /e/), it is also pronounced at the front of the mouth, and sounds like the consonant you hear in the German word “*ich*”.
- If the h is after a back vowel (that is pronounced at the back of the mouth, for example, /o/ or /a/), it is pronounced at the back of the mouth, and sounds like the Scots pronunciation of last consonant sound in the word *loch*.

C

The letter *c* in Old English doesn't stick to just one sound. Much like in Modern English (*cat* vs *cent*), its pronunciation depends on the neighbouring sounds, especially the vowels.

- Before back vowels (like *a* or *o*), or before another consonant *c* is hard, just like the *k* in *king* or *cold*. So, in a word like *cyning* (king), if the *c* is followed by a back vowel (*o*, *a*, *u*) or a consonant, expect a good, solid [k] sound.
- Before front vowels (like *i* or *e*), or at the end of a word after a front vowel *c* softens. In these positions, it's pronounced like *ch* in Modern English (as in *church* or *cheek*). So *cēosan* 'to choose' or *līc* 'body' would have sounded more like /*chēosan*/ and /*lēech*/, not /*keosan*/ or /*leek*/.

g

Old English *g* is another letter that pulls double duty, depending (once again!) on what surrounds it. It shifts between a hard, familiar *g* and a much softer sound, depending on the vowel that follows (or precedes).

- Before back vowels (like *a* or *o*), or before another consonant *g* stays firm and solid – it's pronounced like the *g* in *give* or *grape*. So a word like *gold* (yes, it meant the same thing then too) would have had a hard /*g*/ at the start.
- Before front vowels (like *i* or *e*), or at the end of a word after a front vowel *g* transforms. Instead of the hard *g* sound, it slips into the *y* sound you hear in *yes* or *yellow*. So *giefu* 'gift' would have sounded more like /*yiefu*/, and *dæg* 'day' would have ended with a soft /*y*-like glide.

In Old English, consonants in a cluster were generally all pronounced. That means a word like *cniht* (the ancestor of *knight*) began with a clear /*k*/ followed by /*n*/, so yes, you really did say both sounds, no silent letters hiding away like in Modern English. But there are two important exceptions, where combinations of letters represent a single sound – a practice not unfamiliar in English spelling today.

- *sc* was pronounced like Modern English *sh* /*ʃ*/. So a word like *scip* 'ship' would have sounded just like its modern descendant: *ship*, not *skip*. The *s* and *c* don't keep their separate values here; together, they form a single, smooth sound.

- **cg** was pronounced like *dg* in *judge*, that is, the voiced affricate /dʒ/. So *ecg*, ‘edge’ (as in the edge of a sword), sounded very close to its modern equivalent.

I-MUTATION (UMLAUT) IN OLD ENGLISH

As Encyclopedia puts it, the accent of the Anglo-Saxons changed after they arrived in Britain. And quite dramatically. Scholars know this because the words that emerged in Old English, derived from the Germanic spoken on the Continent, look and sound noticeably different from what we find in early German. So, something must have happened in the early centuries after the migration.

Another clue comes from Latin. Some Latin words borrowed into Old English kept their original vowels; others didn’t. Take *caseus*, which turned into *cyse* ‘cheese’: here the *a* vowel clearly shifted. But *castellum* became *castel* ‘fort, stronghold’, and the vowel remained stable. Why the inconsistency?

The answer lies in a well-studied sound change known as i-mutation (also called i-umlaut, borrowing the term from German linguistics). This was a systematic change in vowel quality that occurred between the time when the Anglo-Saxons left the Continent and the point when Old English was first recorded, – during that “period of “silence” I referred earlier to. Linguists have pieced together the pattern by analysing hundreds of examples.

Here’s how it works: in early Germanic, many words featured a stressed vowel followed by an *i* or a *j* (a “y”-like sound) in the following syllable. Take the plural of *fōt* ‘foot’, which is thought to have been *fōtiz*. For reasons we’re still trying to fully explain, that high front vowel (/i/) triggered a change in the preceding vowel (/ō/): it nudged it forward in the mouth, altering its quality. In this case, *ō* mutated to *ē*, which later came to be pronounced /i:/, just like in *feet*.

As this vowel shift clearly marked the plural, the *-iz* ending eventually dropped off as it had become redundant. And so, *fōt* gave rise to the plural *fēt*, a form that looks irregular today, but in fact was part of a completely regular and far-reaching sound process. I-mutation affected hundreds of words.

This sound change likely took place in the 7th century, and there’s no evidence it continued much beyond that. It was, in essence, a kind of vowel harmony, a natural

THE TONGUE'S SHORTCUT: i-mutation (Umlaut)

If you have ever wondered why the plural of *goose* is *geese*, or why *blood* is related to *bleed*, you are looking at the 1,500-year-old “fingerprints” of a process called **i-mutation**.

When a speaker produced a word like the ancestor of *goose* (gōsi), their tongue was at the **back** of the mouth for the main vowel but had to move to the **front** for the ending. To make the word easier to say, the brain “anticipated” the front sound, causing the back vowel to be **fronted**.

The process happened in distinct stages. By the time Old English was actually written down, the /i/ that caused the change had already disappeared, leaving only the changed vowel behind as a “marker” of the plural.

Stage	"Goose" (Plural)	"Mouse" (Plural)
1. Initial form	*gōsi	*mūsi
2. After i-mutation	gēsi	mȳsi
3. Old English (ending lost)	gēs	mȳs
4. Modern English	geese	mice

While *i-mutation* is a Germanic phenomenon, the principle of **regressive assimilation** – where a following sound influences the one before it – is familiar to Ukrainian speakers. Think of how consonants “soften” (palatalization) in Ukrainian. For example, in the word *coli* /sol'i/, the /l/ is softened because of /i/ sound following it.

Modern English no longer “uses” i-mutation to create new words; it is no longer a productive rule. Instead, we preserve **fossilized results** of this ancient shift in related word pairs:

- *food* (Noun) → *feed* (Verb)
- *blood* (Noun) → *bleed* (Verb)
- *gold* (Noun) → *gild* (Verb)

linguistic phenomenon found in many languages, where one vowel influences another nearby to make them more alike. In this case, back vowels in stressed syllables moved forward in anticipation of a following *i* or *j*. Short front vowels and diphthongs were pulled slightly further forward and higher (with the exception of [i] itself, which was already as front and high as vowels can get).

The effects were enormous. I-mutation left its mark on the most common and frequently used word classes, particularly where endings carried those triggering /i/ or /j/ sounds. That’s why we now have pairs like: *food* and *feed*, *strong* and *strength*, *goose* – *geese*, *doom* – *deem*, *fall* – *fell*, *hale* – *health*, *tooth* – *teeth*, *man* – *men*, *full* – *fill*, *whole* – *heal*, *blood* – *bleed*, *mouse* – *mice*, *foul* – *filth*⁷, *long* – *length*, *old* – *elder*. Not all of these pairs reflect i-mutation alone; in several cases, the

⁷ This pair goes back to an early Germanic adjective meaning “unclean, impure.” The noun *filth* contains an original *-i-* in the following syllable (**fīlithi*), which triggered i-mutation of the stem vowel (*ū* → fronted vowel). Over time, additional sound changes – shortening, consonant simplification, and vowel lowering – obscured the relationship between the two forms. As a result, *foul* and *filth* no longer look transparently related in Modern English, even though their divergence ultimately reflects the same i-mutation process seen in clearer pairs like *full* – *fill*.

modern forms result from i-mutation interacting with later sound changes or older morphological formations.

But i-mutation didn't affect everything. Not all forms with a following *i* changed. Certain environments, such as some *-ing* formations, did not trigger mutation – possibly because intervening consonants blocked the effect. We don't fully understand what triggered this change in the first place. Why did 7th-century speakers begin shifting their vowels forward? And why did the process stop? It remains one of the great phonological detective stories of English.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 3):

1. Who were the original inhabitants of the British Isles at the time the story of the English language begins? What historical source gives us a vivid account of the Britons' desperation in the early fifth century?
2. Why did the Britons appeal to the Romans, and what was the result?
3. What solution did King Vortigern and his nobles come up with to defend against northern raids?
4. What year does Bede associate with the arrival of the Saxons, and what were their supposed and actual motivations?
5. How did the arrival of additional Germanic settlers affect the military and political situation in Britain?
6. Which three main Germanic groups does Bede identify as the newcomers to Britain? What modern English place names reflect early Saxon regional divisions?
7. How did the word *wealas* reflect the settlers' attitude toward the native Celts, and what modern word derives from it?
8. How did terminology shift from "Saxons" to "Angles" over time in Latin and Old English texts?
9. What does the term *Englisc* refer to, and how is it connected to the name *England*?
10. Which languages were spoken in Britain before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons?
11. How long did the Romans occupy Britain, and what language did they bring with them?

12. Why is it surprising that Celtic and Latin had so little influence on Old English vocabulary? What does this limited influence suggest about how the Germanic settlers established control?
13. What writing system did the Germanic settlers bring with them in the 5th and 6th centuries?
14. What kinds of texts were first produced in Old English, and how much of this early material survives?
15. Roughly how large is the surviving Old English corpus, and what percentage of it is poetry?
16. Why is editing necessary when working with Old English manuscripts?
17. What are some of the choices editors face when presenting a modern edition of a manuscript?
18. Which letters did Old English use that are unfamiliar or missing in Modern English?
19. What sounds were represented by thorn (þ) and eth (ð), and how were they used?
20. Why is it difficult to know exactly how Old English sounded?
21. What four sources of evidence do linguists use to reconstruct Old English pronunciation?
22. How did poetic evidence help reveal information about pronunciation?
23. When was the letter s pronounced as /s/ and when as /z/?
24. How did the pronunciation of “f” vary depending on its position in a word?
25. How were “þ” and “ð” pronounced, and did their spelling affect pronunciation?
26. What was the rule for pronouncing “h” in different contexts?
27. What sounds did “c” and “g” make before front and back vowels?
28. How were clusters like “sc” and “cg” pronounced?
29. What is i-mutation and what triggered it?
30. When did i-mutation occur, and why is it important for understanding English plurals?

OLD ENGLISH GRAMMAR

As David Crystal observes, to modern eyes and ears, Old English grammar provides a fascinating mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The word order is much more varied than it would be in Modern English, but there are several places where it is strikingly similar. Adjectives usually go before their nouns, as do prepositions, articles, and other grammatical words, just as they do today. Sometimes, whole sentences are identical in the order of words, or nearly so. The main syntactic differences affect the placing of the verb, which quite often appears before the subject, and also at the very end of the clause. In Modern English, word order is relatively fixed. The reason Old English order could vary so much is that the relationships between the parts of the sentence were signalled by other means. Like other Germanic languages, Old English was inflected: the job a word did in the sentence was signalled by the kind of ending it had. Today, most of these inflections have died away, leaving the modern reader with the major task of getting used to the word endings, in order to understand the Old English texts.

Old English prose provides the clearest way into analysing the grammar of the language.

Pa hie swa gedon hæfdon, þa com <an> ren; & swiþe Mauritanīæ
when they so done had then came a rain & greatly Mauritanians
wæron mid þæm gewergade, for þon þe hiera sceldas wæron betogen mid
were with that exhausted because their shields were covered with
elpenda hydum, þæt hie heora feawa <for><þam> <wætan> ahebban mehton, &
elephant skins so that they their few because of the moisture to raise could &
for þæm gefliemde wurdon, for þon þe elpendes hyd wile drincan wætan, gelice
because of that driven away were because elephant's skin wants to absorb moisture like
& spynges deð.
& sponge does

This is a King Alfred's adaptation of *Historiarum adversus paganos libri VII* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*) by Paulus Orosius, a 5th-century Christian historian. The work is an example of historical prose written in the West Saxon dialect of Old English.

The Verb “to be”

The verb *to be* in the past tense has remained remarkably stable since the Old English period, with the main difference being that it no longer carries its old plural ending.

wæs	wæron
wære	wæron
wæs	wæron

The present tense is a different story, showing quite a few changes. For a start, Old English actually used two separate verb systems to express the idea of *being*: one based on *wesan*, which corresponds to Latin *esse*, and another based on *beon*, which mirrors Latin *fui*.

	<i>wesan</i>		<i>beon</i>
eom	sind(on)	beo	beoð
eart	sind(on)	bist	beoð
is	sind(on)	bið	beoð

Both verb systems came complete with their own subjunctive, imperative, and participial forms. There’s evidence suggesting they weren’t used in exactly the same way, though the details are frustratingly elusive – there simply isn’t enough data to pin down firm rules. In Old English the simple past indicative almost always comes from *wesan*, while *beon* is mainly used in present, subjunctive, or periphrastic forms relating to habitual or future meaning.

A clear example of the difference between *beon* and *wesan* occurs in the Old English *Phoenix*, where the speaker



Phoenix (British Library Royal MS 12 C XIX, fol. 49v), English bestiary, early 13th century (c. 1200–1210).

describes the bird’s habitual, recurrent state, which carries a sense of continuity and future implication, using forms of *beon*. In contrast, the bird’s past, completed state is expressed with a form of *wesan*. This distinction reflects the way Old English verbs “to be” differentiated ongoing, habitual existence from specific (past) conditions.

<i>þonne on sceade weaxeð, þæt he ærest bið swylce earnes brid, fæger fugeltimber; ðonne furþor gin wridað on wynnnum, þæt he bið wæstmum gelic ealdum earne, and æfter þon feþrum gefrætwad, swylc he æt frymðe wæs, beorht geblowen.</i>	Then in the shade he grows so that he becomes at first like an eagle’s chick, a fair young fowl, than he further still flourishes in bliss until he is alike in form to an old eagle, and after then he is adorned with feathers, as he was at the beginning – brightly blossomed.
---	--

This contrast between *wesan* and *beon* perfectly matches the Phoenix myth of death and rebirth: a completed past life (*wæs*) and an ongoing, habitual renewal (*bið*).

Old English Pronouns

Old English had a richer set of personal pronouns than Modern English does. But it’s worth remembering that their use wasn’t quite the same, largely because gender was grammatical rather than just natural. For example, *sunne* ‘sun’ is feminine, so it would be referred to as *heo* ‘she’, whereas *wīf* ‘woman’ is neuter, and would take the pronoun *hit* ‘it’. This kind of gender assignment might seem surprising today but was perfectly normal in Old English.

Old English also retained traces of a dual pronoun system, but only in the first- and second-person personal pronouns; no third-person dual forms survived (marked in italics in the table above). This meant there were special forms to refer specifically to ‘we two’ and ‘you two.’ For example, the first-person dual nominative was *wit*, with *unc* for accusative and dative, and *uncer* for genitive. The second-person dual nominative was *ȝit* (pronounced like ‘yeet’), with *inc* as accusative/dative and *incer* as genitive. However, these dual forms gradually fell out of use and had vanished by the 13th century.

Personal pronouns (nom. case)	
ic “I”	wē “we” / <i>wit</i>
þū “you”	3ē “you” / <i>3it</i>
hē, hēō, hit “he, she, it”	hi, hēō “they”
Personal pronouns (gen. case)	
min “mine”	ūre “ours” / <i>uncer</i>
þin “yours”	ēower “yours” / <i>incer</i>
his, hire, his “his, her, its”	hira “theirs”
Personal pronouns (acc./dat. case)	
mē “me”	ūs “us” / <i>unc</i>
þē “you”	ēow “you” / <i>inc</i>
hine (acc.)/him(dat.) “him/(to) him”, hi (acc.)/hire (dat.) “her/(to) her”, hit (acc.)/him (dat.) “it/(to) it”	nom (acc.) “them” him (dat.) “(to) them”

Old English Articles

Old English nouns were assigned grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, or neuter) that didn’t always match the natural sex of what they referred to. The definite articles followed the same pattern. Both nouns and articles changed their forms according to their role in the sentence, appearing in nominative, accusative, dative, or genitive cases, for example:

<i>Donne is sum ealand on oære Readan Sæ, pær is moncynn pæt is mid us Donestre genemned, pa syndon geweaxene swa frihterasfram ðanheafdeoð ðonenafelan, & se oðer dæl byð mannes gelic.</i>	Donne is an island in the Red Sea, where there is a people called the Donestre by us. They have grown like soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part like a human body.
--	--

In this sentence, the article *se* clearly demonstrates the Old English definite article system, which, unlike Modern English, is fully inflected for gender, number, and case. Here, *se* functions as the definite article, marking the masculine singular nominative form, agreeing with the *dælc* 'part', which is masculine singular nominative.

This is an excerpt from the legend of the Donestres, a monstrous race found in the 10th-century *Wonders of the East*. They were polyglots who spoke all the languages of the world and knew everything about any stranger they met. Using deceit, they gained people's trust and then ate them (except for their heads). When they were finished, they would weep over the heads of their victims.



Donestre (Donestres), a monstrous race described in the Old English "Wonders of the East". Illustrated manuscript tradition.

Old English Nouns

One of the most distinctive features of Old English is the morphological complexity of its noun system. Unlike Modern English, where nouns are largely uninflected – typically marked only for number (*book/books*) and possession (*Europe's*) – Old English nouns carried a considerable grammatical load. Each noun varied in form according to case, number, and grammatical gender, resulting in a system that resembles modern Ukrainian far more than contemporary English.

Old English distinguished four grammatical cases:

- Nominative (subject),
- Accusative (direct object),

- Genitive (possessive or relational),
- Dative (indirect object).

Additionally, Old English nouns inflected for number (singular and plural) and were classified according to grammatical gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. This gender was not always semantically motivated, gender was determined by declension class and historical morphology, rather than meaning. For example:

nama “name” (masculine, weak declension)

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>nama</i>	<i>naman</i>
Accusative	<i>naman</i>	<i>naman</i>
Genitive	<i>naman</i>	<i>namena</i>
Dative	<i>naman</i>	<i>namum</i>

giefu “gift” (feminine, strong declension)

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>giefu</i>	<i>giefa</i>
Accusative	<i>giefe</i>	<i>giefa</i>
Genitive	<i>giefe</i>	<i>giefa</i>
Dative	<i>giefe</i>	<i>giefum</i>

ċild “child” (neuter, strong declension)

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>ċild</i>	<i>ċildru</i>
Accusative	<i>ċild</i>	<i>ċildru</i>
Genitive	<i>ċildes</i>	<i>ċildra</i>
Dative	<i>ċilde</i>	<i>ċildum</i>

The terms “strong declension” and “weak declension” in Old English (and in other Germanic languages like German and Gothic) refer to different patterns of noun and adjective inflection, inherited from Proto-Germanic. These patterns affect how nouns decline for case, number, and gender.

The labels *strong* and *weak* are not about meaning, they don’t mean “powerful” or “feeble” in a literal sense, nor can they be equated with the definite/indefinite article distinction in Modern English. Instead, they refer to historical inflectional types. The distinction was first used by 19th-century German philologists to classify declensions based on the presence or absence of a nasal ending (typically *-n*) in Proto-Germanic and later stages of the language.

- Weak declension: derives from n-stem nouns in Proto-Germanic, which often have a prominent *-n-* in most of their forms.
- Strong declension: includes nouns from a variety of Proto-Germanic stem classes (a-stems, *ō*-stems, u-stems, etc.) that do not consistently have this *-n-* in their endings.

Old English Verb

Modern English verbs fall into three main categories, all of which go back to Old English roots.

1. First, there are verbs that form their past tense by simply adding *-ed* to the present tense stem, like *jump* becoming *jumped*. These are known as “weak” verbs in Old English grammar, and even today, most English verbs belong to this group.
2. Then there are verbs that change the vowel in their stem to form the past tense, such as *see* and *saw*. These are called “strong” verbs or vocalic verbs in Old English, and the vowel changes they show follow a pattern known as ablaut or vowel gradation.
3. Finally, there are the wholly irregular verbs like *can*, *will*, and *be* that don’t fit neatly into either group.

On ða wisan he <i>forgeaf</i> þone gylt þam wife, þæt heo syððan <i>sceolde</i> wið swylc þing hy <i>gehealdan</i>, for ðan þe ælc man <i>bið</i>, þe <i>geandet</i> his synna, and þæt ylce eft <i>deð</i> his Drihtne on teonan, þam hunde gelic, þe <i>geet</i> his spiweðan, and ðam swine gelic, þe hit <i>besylað</i> eft æfter his þweale, and bið his ende wyrse þonne his angin <i>wære</i>.	In this way, he forgave the wife her guilt, so that she should thereafter keep herself from such things. For every man who confesses his sins and then does the same thing again does wrong to his Lord, like a dog who eats his own vomit, and like a pig who soils itself again after washing – and his end will be worse than his beginning.
--	--

Sceolde; bið; deð; wære – irregular verbs;

Geandet, besylað – weak verbs;

Forgeaf, geet – strong verbs

Gehealdan – infinitive

When it comes to verb endings, modern English uses very few. The past tense for regular verbs is marked by *-ed* across all persons, and in the present tense, only the third person singular adds an *-s*. Old English, by contrast, had a much richer system of endings, as you can see in the following paradigm.

Present tense

<i>ic lufie</i> “I love”	<i>wē lufiað</i> “we love”
<i>þū lufast</i> “you love”	<i>3ē lufiað</i> “you love”
<i>hē, hēō, hit lufað</i> “he, she, it loves”	<i>hi lufiað</i> “they love”

Past tense

<i>ic lufode</i> “I loved”	<i>wē lufodon</i> “we loved”
<i>þū lufodest</i> “you loved”	<i>3ē lufodon</i> “you loved”
<i>hē, hēō, hit lufode</i> “he, she, it loved”	<i>hi lufodon</i> “they loved”

As *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* explains, some of the present tense endings weakened and disappeared soon after the Anglo-Saxon period. However, the 2nd and 3rd person singular forms stayed on, developing into the -est and -eth forms of Middle English (*makest, maketh*).

Some other distinctive inflectional features of the Old English verb included: **The infinitive:** -an or -ian was added to the root. Examples are *singan* ‘to sing’ and *nealecan* ‘(to) approach’. The infinitive of ‘love’ was *lufian*. The use of a suffix to mark the infinitive was lost after the Old English period, and the particle *to* came to be used instead. You can see the use of an Old English infinitive in the following excerpt from a 10th-century riddle describing a wind or a storm:

<i>Ne behwylfan mæg heofon and eorðe his wuldres word, widdra and siddra þonne befæðman mæge foldan sceattas, eorðan ymbhwyrft and uprodor, garsecges gin and þeos geomre lyft.</i>	Heaven and earth cannot <i>contain</i> the word of His glory, wider and broader than the vault that can <i>embrace</i> the treasures of the earth, the world’s circumference and the sky above, the ocean’s expanse, and this gloomy air.
---	--

The -ing form: the equivalent form was -end(e). Examples are *gongende* ‘going’ and *sprecende* ‘speaking’. This form hardly survives the beginning of the Middle English period, being replaced by the -ing(e) ending which in Old English had been restricted to nouns. You can see the use of present participle in the following excerpt from a 10th-century riddle describing a whale:

<i>Is þæs hiw gelic hreofum stane, swylce worie bi wædes ofre, sondbeorgum ymbseald, særyrica mæst, swa þæt wenap wæglipende þæt hy on ealond sum eagum witen, ond þonne gehydað</i>	It is like a cliff with rocky stones, like a spit over the water, surrounded by sandbanks, the greatest of sea kingdoms, so that those <i>traveling</i> by wave expect to see it with their eyes on some island, but then they lose sight of it.
--	---

Past participle: this shows the same kind of vowel changes and endings we see today, but it also had a special prefix, *ȝe-* (as in all other West Germanic Languages the form is well represented in the *Cædmon* text, being a past narrative like *ȝeseted* ‘settled’, *geleornode* ‘learned’, etc. For example, in the 10th-century parable of a foolish builder (Gospel of Luke):

<i>He ys gelic timbriendum men his hus se dealf deopne & hys grundweall ofer þæne stan asette; Soðlice gewordenum flode hit fleow into þam huse, & hyt ne mihte þæt hus astirian, hit wæs ofer þæne stan getrymed.</i>	He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid its foundation upon the rock. Truly, when a flood came, it struck that house, but it could not shake it, for it was <i>founded</i> upon the rock.
--	--

The subjunctive: unlike in Modern English, this mood was systematically used, but it had far fewer endings than the indicative. It can be seen especially in subordinate clauses expressing a subjective attitude. Plural forms in both present and past tenses have a distinctive *-en* ending. An example is *sceolden* ‘should’.

<i>Gif ðu bearn hæbbe, lær þa cræftes, þæt hie mægen be þon libban... Cræft bið bætera þonne æht.</i>	If you <i>have</i> children, teach them skills, so that they <i>may</i> live by them... Skill is better than property.
---	--

OLD ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Many people mistakenly believe that their language can be “pure”, untouched by foreign influences, and that borrowing words from other languages corrupts its true nature. In English, this myth focuses on its supposed purely Anglo-Saxon or Germanic roots. Figures like John Cheke in the 16th century and William Barnes in the 19th century tried to “purify” English by replacing Latin or Greek borrowings with Germanic

equivalents⁸. Even George Orwell criticized the use of Latinate words as pretentious. However, the idea of linguistic purity is a myth. No language has ever been entirely pure – languages naturally mix through contact with other cultures. English is a prime example: even during the Anglo-Saxon period, it was already influenced by Latin due to centuries of interaction between Germanic and Roman communities on the continent. From the very start, English was a blend.

Coming to Old English vocabulary for the first time can be both reassuring and puzzling. On the one hand, much of it looks surprisingly familiar. Words such as *for*, *from*, *in*, *æt* (which means *at*), *he*, *him*, *his*, – they’re not so different from what we use today. The spelling may be quirky, and the endings a little unexpected, but the overall shape of the sentence can feel oddly modern, especially when we translate it into Ukrainian, not Modern English. But just as one could get comfortable, one runs into completely unfamiliar words – those that have vanished from everyday English. And that’s where Old English starts to look like a foreign language even for the English native speakers.

Anglo-Saxons loved building words out of smaller parts to create compounds. Take a look at *endebyrdnesse*, for example. It may look daunting at first glance, but break it down and it begins to make sense: *ende* ‘end’ + *byrd* ‘birth’ or ‘rank’ + *-ness*. Put that together and you get something like “ordered state” or “sequence” – in the context, it’s about people taking their turn. Then there’s *gebeorscipe*. Nothing about it hints at “banquet” until you realise that it’s really just *beer* + *-ship*. But beware: not everything that looks familiar means what you think. These are the so-called “false friends”. A *wīf* was simply a woman, whether or not she was married. A *fugol* ‘fowl’ referred to any bird, not just chickens and geese. *Sōna*, which looks like *soon*, meant *immediately*, not *in a while*. *Won* (which has become *wan*) meant *dark*, not *pale*. And *fæst* meant *firm*, *fixed*, not *fast-moving*. These little traps are easy to fall into, but they also give us a fascinating glimpse of how meanings shift across centuries.

⁸ Writers have tried to purge the language of “alien” elements. In the 16th century, the purists objected to the use of what he called “inkhorn terms” (Latinate or Greek borrowings that he thought unnecessary) and suggested that they be replaced by words with Old English roots. Here is the list of some of them: *centurion*, *hundreder*, *resurrection*, *gainrising*, *lunatic*, *moond*, *apostle*, *frosent*, *crucified*, *crossed*, *parables*, *biwordes*, *philosophy*, *wisdomlore*, *reason*, *Witcraft*.

Celtic borrowings

You might expect the Celtic languages to have left a strong imprint on Old English, given that the Anglo-Saxons settled in a land where Celtic speakers had lived for centuries. But surprisingly – or perhaps not, when we consider the brutal nature of the Anglo-Saxon conquest – that influence is remarkably small.

The lack of Celtic influence on Old English vocabulary and grammar remains one of the most intriguing linguistic mysteries in the history of the English language. The issue presents a puzzle. First, when the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, they did so in relatively small numbers compared to the native Celtic population. In such circumstances, it would be reasonable to expect that the newcomers might adopt the local language through settlement, intermarriage, and cultural exchange. This is precisely what occurred in other historical settings: for example, Scandinavian invaders in Normandy eventually adopted French, and the Norman conquerors of England after 1066 came to speak English. Yet in contrast, the Anglo-Saxons retained their Germanic language and did not shift to the Celtic languages of Britain. Old English shows only a handful of Celtic borrowings – far fewer than might be expected given the long and direct contact between the Anglo-Saxons and the Brittonic-speaking peoples.

Scholars have identified only a small number of probable Celtic loanwords in Old English. These include common nouns like *bannoc* ('bit of bread'), *broc* ('badger'), *crag* ('rock'), *cammoc* (a plant name), *dunn* ('brown-grey'), and *wan* ('dark'). Some words found in the north, such as *bratt* ('cloak'), *carr* ('rock'), and *luh* ('lake'), suggest a lingering Celtic presence in those regions. A few religious terms (e.g. *ancor* 'anchorite hermit', *clucge* 'bell', *dry*) were introduced via Irish missionaries. Other words such as *bin* 'receptacle' (compare early British word *benna*; Welsh *ben* 'wagon'; Latin *benna*), *assen* 'ass' (compare an Old British word *assen* or from Latin *asinus*) have been proposed as Celtic in origin, but etymological uncertainty clouds these claims; they might have entered English via Latin or share roots with Germanic cognates. Even if all potential Celtic-origin words are counted, the total does not exceed a few dozen.

This linguistic minimalism contrasts with the visible Celtic presence in place-names, particularly in river names (e.g. *Thames*, *Avon*, *Exe*, *Usk*, *Wye*) and towns (*Dover* ('water'), *Eccles* ('church'), *London* (tribal name)).

Curiously, despite the limited lexical borrowing, several Anglo-Saxon elites bore Celtic personal names. Figures like *Cædwalla*, *Ceadda*, *Ceawlin*, and *Cerdic* (all associated with royal or noble families) carried names of clearly Brittonic origin. This suggests some level of cultural prestige or social integration between the Germanic and Brittonic upper classes, possibly through intermarriage or political alliance. Naming practices are culturally sensitive and significant, so the adoption of Celtic names by Anglo-Saxon aristocrats points to more nuanced interactions than a simple narrative of conquest and expulsion. One particularly interesting case is that of *Cædmon*, considered the first Christian English poet. Although little is known of his background, his Welsh name suggests either a mixed heritage or a broader cultural acceptance of some Brittonic traditions.

Latin loans

Latin has been one of the most persistent and important influences on English, and it started making its mark surprisingly early as the Romans (who refused to help the Britons against their invaders) spoke Latin.

When we trace the journey of Latin into English, it's not a single, straightforward story but rather a series of interwoven threads. Latin words could have reached English through multiple routes. To begin with, there's the influence of Latin on the Brittonic Celtic languages during the Roman occupation of Britain. It's quite possible that some Latin terms remained in everyday use even after the Romans withdrew in the early 5th century, and that these words, lingering in the speech of local Britons, were eventually picked up by the incoming Anglo-Saxons. What's especially curious is that Latin, despite being the official language of the Roman Empire, didn't really survive in Britain after the legions left. On the Continent, Vulgar Latin evolved into French, Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages, but not in Britain. For some reason, it just didn't take root here

in the same way. The native Celtic and incoming Germanic tongues pushed it aside, but not without leaving behind a few memorable words that have been with English ever since.

Another possibility is that the use of Latin persisted among the Romano-British aristocracy as a kind of elite lingua franca, a marker of education and refinement. If so, it stands to reason that Latin words would have filtered into common usage, especially among those in regular contact with this upper class. Alternatively, many Latin words may have arrived not via the Britons at all, but with the Anglo-Saxons themselves – borrowed during earlier contact on the Continent, in places like Gaul where Roman influence had long been felt. Trade, too, remained a continuous channel: commercial exchanges between Britain and the European mainland would have introduced yet more Latin terms into Anglo-Saxon speech over time.

Then came a major turning point: the arrival of St Augustine and his missionaries in 597. Latin, already associated with Roman culture and administration, now became the language of Christian ritual, scripture, and scholarship. As monastic communities took root and learning spread, Latinisms increasingly appeared in everyday English – a kind of holy lexis drip-fed into the vernacular by scribes, clerics, and teachers.

Roughly half of these early borrowings were for things you'd find in the home or kitchen. Words like *pise* (pea), *plante* (plant), *win* (wine), *cyse* (cheese), *catte* (cat), *cetel* (kettle), *disc* (dish), and *candet* (candle) all have Latin roots. Others introduced new vocabulary for clothing (*belt*, *cernis* 'shirt', *sutere* 'shoemaker'), buildings and settlements (*tigle* 'tile', *weall* 'wall', *ceaster* 'city'), and for the world of law, war, trade, and religion: *wic* (camp), *diht* (command), and *scrifan* (decree), *mangian* (to trade), *ceapian* (to buy), and *pund* (pound), and of course *munuc* (monk) and *mynster* (minster).

Whether the Anglo-Saxons picked up some of these words while still on the Continent, or borrowed them once they arrived in Britain, isn't always easy to tell, though linguists can often work it out by looking closely at the sound change. Even so, the number of Latin words in use at the very start of the Old English period is quite modest: fewer than 200 in total.

As the Old English period progressed, Latin continued to make its mark on the English language but the nature of the borrowing began to shift. Earlier Latin words had

slipped into English largely through everyday speech: trade, contact, and interaction. But with the growing influence of the Church, especially after the Benedictine revival in the late 10th century, Latin arrived increasingly via the written word. The new Latin borrowings now reflected the world of scholarship and religion: abstract, learned, and technical vocabulary (*abudesse* ‘abbess’; *alter* ‘altar’; *apostol* ‘apostle’; *cylpe* ‘fault’; *mæsse* ‘mass’; *none* ‘monk’; *offrian* ‘sacrifice’; *predician* ‘preach’; *scol* ‘school’).

A few homely items still found their way in (*rose* from *rosa*, *bete* (beetroot) from *beta*, and *cama* (bridle) from *camus*) but the majority of borrowings were now tied to theology, ecclesiastical organization, and religious teaching. This makes perfect sense, of course: new religious ideas needed new words.

Importantly, however, Latin loanwords weren’t the missionaries’ only tool. More often, they looked inward, taking existing Germanic words and broadening or shifting their meanings to express Christian concepts. For example, *rod* (once a plain old pole) became the ‘cross’, and *gast* (originally an evil spirit) came to mean ‘soul’ or ‘Holy Ghost’. Another strategy was calquing – translating Latin words part by part into native compounds: *liber evangelii* became *godspellboc* (‘gospel book’), and *trinitas* became *þriness* (‘threeness’, i.e. Trinity).

Scandinavian influence

The second major linguistic wave to shape the English language came from the Vikings. Beginning in AD 787, Norse raids on Britain continued intermittently for some two centuries, with full-scale settlement starting around the mid-9th century. Within just a few years, the Danes controlled much of eastern England. Their advance was halted in 878, after their defeat at Ethandun, and a peace was negotiated in the Treaty of Wedmore (886). By this treaty, the Danes agreed to restrict their settlement to the north-eastern third of England (east of a line roughly from Chester to London) an area soon known as the Danelaw because it operated under Danish legal custom.

Further invasions followed. In 991, the Danes scored a series of victories and ultimately seized the English throne, forcing King Æthelred into exile. For the next 25

years, England remained under Danish rule. What did this long and often intense contact between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians do to the English language? The answer is: quite a lot.

The influence was threefold: place-names: Danish settlement left behind hundreds of place-names, many still in use today; personal names: Scandinavian first names became increasingly common; everyday vocabulary. These include *landing*, *score*, *beck*, *fellow*, *take*, *busting*, and *steersman*, alongside many that disappeared from later usage. The bulk of these borrowings, however, did not show up until the early 12th century, and many still survive in Modern English.

Some of the most immediately recognisable Norse contributions are words featuring the /sk/ sound (characteristic of Old Norse but not of Old English) like *skirt*, *sky*, and *skin*. But it wasn't just nouns. Norse words touched some of the most basic elements of the language. Everyday terms like *both*, *same*, *get*, and *give* all come from Old Norse. Even the personal pronoun system was reshaped: instead of native Old English forms, we now say *they*, *them*, and *their* – all Norse borrowings. And perhaps most strikingly, Norse influenced the very verb “to be”. The old form *sindon* gave way to the now-familiar *are* and the widespread -s ending in verbs (*she walks*, *he sings*) owes much to Scandinavian usage.

The borrowing continued beyond core grammar. A wealth of vivid, practical vocabulary entered English during and after the Danelaw period. Consider: *again*, *anger*, *awkward*, *bag*, *band*, *bank*, *birth*, *brink*, *bull*, *cake*, *call*, *clip*, *crawl*, *crook*, *die*, *dirt*, *dregs*, *egg*, *flat*, *fog*, *freckle*, *gap*, *gasp*, *get*, *guess*, *happy*, *husband*, *ill*, *keel*, *kid*, *knife*, *law*, *leg*, *loan*, *low*, *muggy*, *neck*, *odd*, *outlaw*, *race*, *raise*, *ransack*, *reindeer*, *rid*, *root*, *rugged*, *scant*, *scare*, *scowl*, *scrap*, *seat*, *seem*, *silver*, *sister*, *skill*, *skirt*, *sly*, *smile*, *snub*, *sprint*, *steak*, *take*, *thrift*, *Thursday*, *tight*, *trust*, *want*, *weak*, *window* – a veritable dictionary of Norse legacy.

Survival of the Fittest: Norse vs English

When two languages meet and intermingle for over two centuries, duplicate words for the same object or idea inevitably appear. Sometimes one version wins, sometimes

the other, and sometimes both survive (but with different meanings). English shows all three outcomes.

1. Norse survives, English fades. In several cases, the Scandinavian word replaced the native English one: *egg* replaced *ey*; *sister* displaced *sweostor*; *silver* took over from *seolfor*

2. English survives, Norse fades. In other cases, the native form persisted: *path* survived over *reike*; *sorrow* over *site*; *swell* over *bolnen*

3. Both survive – with different meanings. Some word pairs coexisted by developing distinct senses:

Old Norse	Old English
<i>dike</i> (tends to mean a raised embankment or water-defence (e.g. sea dike))	<i>ditch</i> (is more commonly a sunken trench for drainage or boundaries)
<i>hale</i> (healthy, robust, and is now archaic or regional (e.g. hale and hearty))	<i>whole</i> (originally meant uninjured, complete and has become the standard form.)
<i>raise</i> (transitive – to raise something)	<i>rise</i> (intransitive – something rises)
<i>scrub</i> (low, rough vegetation or to clean vigorously)	<i>shrub</i> (a small bushy plant)
<i>sick</i> (unwell or diseased and is now more informal or American)	<i>ill</i> (more formal or British, and can imply seriousness)
<i>skill</i> (ability or expertise, especially in learned or technical areas)	<i>craft</i> (originally meant power or cunning, later shifting to manual or artistic ability)
<i>skin</i> (the outer layer of the body, used commonly for humans and animals)	<i>hide</i> (animal skin, especially when treated or used as leather)
<i>skirt</i> (originally meant edge or border, now a garment worn from the waist down)	<i>shirt</i> (was a tunic-like upper garment, ancestor of the modern shirt)

Regional variation also preserved both forms. Often, one version became standard, while the other remained in dialectal use:

Norse	English
<i>garth</i> (still used in northern dialects)	<i>yard</i>
<i>kirk</i> (still widely used in Scotland)	<i>church</i>
<i>laup</i> (used in Scotland and some northern dialects)	<i>leap</i>
<i>nay</i> (till used in Northern English and Scotland, especially in formal voting or traditional speech (<i>aye and nay</i>))	<i>no</i>

The Vikings came with swords, but they left behind a rich and lasting contribution to English vocabulary and grammar.

Word-building

One of the most fascinating aspects of Old English vocabulary is how it expands through systematic derivation, especially via prefixation and compounding. If you take a single strong verb like *bindan* ‘to bind’, you can trace its lexical productivity across a wide range of meanings and word forms.

The Base Form: *bindan* ‘to bind’ – infinitive, strong verb. The principal parts:

bindan (inf.),

band (past sing.: I, he, she, it ‘bound’),

bundon (past pl.: we, you, they ‘bound’),

gebunden (past participle with prefix *ge-*, indicating completed action: ‘bound’)

Compounding: The base *bindan* frequently appears as a second or final element in compounds. These compounds often encode figurative or role-based meanings:

frumbindere (*frum-* ‘first’ + *bindere* ‘binder’) – ‘creator’, one who initiates or establishes

lēasbindend (*lēas* ‘false’ + *bindend* ‘binder’) – ‘deceiver’, one who binds deceitfully

sibbinder (*sibb* ‘peace’ + *binder*) – ‘peacemaker’, one who establishes peace or a ‘relative’, depending on context

heafdbinder (*heafod* ‘head’ + *binder*) – ‘chief enforcer’ or possibly ‘crown-bearer’, depending on context

In these forms, we observe common derivational suffixes as well: *-end* for present participial agents, and *-ere* for nominal agents (compare Modern English *-er* in *teacher*, *fighter*, etc.), both widely productive in Old English.

Prefixation

The prefix system in Old English adjusts the semantics of *bindan* in subtle but consistent ways. Each prefix contributes a spatial, aspectual, or modal nuance:

ābindan (*ā-* ‘away, off’ + *bindan*) – ‘unbind’, with a sense of releasing a previous binding

forbindan (*for-* ‘ahead, beforehand’ + *bindan*) – ‘to prohibit, forbid’, originally implying a preventive binding

onbindan (*on-* ‘on, upon’ + *bindan*) – ‘to untie, unbind’, typically from something

tōbindan (*tō-* ‘together, toward’ + *bindan*) – ‘tie together’, to bring into unity

begebindan (*be-* ‘around’ + *ge-* + *bindan*) – ‘to encircle, wrap around’, a more intensive or enclosing action

oferbindan (*ofer-* ‘over’ + *bindan*) – ‘to overwhelm, overbind’, often metaphorical

Note the use of *ge-* in many forms to mark perfective or completed aspect. While *ge-* is no longer productive in Modern English, its traces survive in fossilized forms like archaic *yclept* ‘called’ (as in “a lady yclept Eleanora”), and dialectal forms.

Many of these affixes have faded from Modern English. Prefixes like *ā-*, *on-*, and *ge-* are no longer used in live derivation. Meanwhile, others like *un-* and *be-* continue to be highly productive (*unbind*, *befriend*, *belittle*), showing how Old English prefixation shaped patterns that Modern English still follows, albeit with less morphological transparency.

Self-explaining compounds

(also called self-interpreting compounds or transparent compounds)

A self-explaining compound in Old English is a compound word where both elements are usually native (typically Germanic) and the compound meaning is semantically transparent, that is, the meaning of the whole can be easily inferred from its parts. They show the linguistic inventiveness and imaginative metaphor of Old English. These were not dry grammatical constructions: they reflected how people saw the world, – poetically, practically, and often quite vividly. A “sky candle” (*heofoncandel*) for the sun isn’t just accurate – it’s beautiful.

dægred ← *dæg* ‘day’ + *red* ‘red’: “dawn”

dōmdæg ← *dōm* ‘judgement’ + *dæg* ‘day’: “Judgement Day”

eorþcræft ← *eorþ* ‘earth’ + *cræft* ‘craft’: “geometry”

frumweorc ← *frum* ‘beginning’ + *weorc* ‘work’: “creation”

gārberend ← *gār* ‘spear’ + *berend* ‘bearer’: “warrior”

gōdspel ← *gōd* ‘good’ + *spel* ‘message/tidings’: “gospel”

lēoðwrece ← *lēoð* ‘song’ + *wrece* ‘weaver/creator’: “poet”

lēōhtfæt ← *lēoht* ‘light’ + *fæt* ‘vessel’: “lamp”

mynstermann ← *mynster* ‘monastery’ + *mann* ‘man’: “monk”

rōdfæstnian ← *rōd* ‘cross’ + *fæstnian* ‘fasten’: “crucify”

stæfcræft ← *stæf* ‘letter’ + *cræft* ‘craft’: “grammar”

stānscūr ← *stān* ‘stone’ + *scūr* ‘shower’: “hailstorm”

sunnandæg ← *sunnan* ‘sun’s’ (genitive) + *dæg* ‘day’: “Sunday”

īdymbwlātend ← *īd* ‘time’ + *ymb* ‘about’ + *wlātend* ‘gazer’: “astronomer”

dægred ← *dæg* ‘day’ + *red* ‘red’: “dawn”

Old English had a vocabulary of about 24,000 words, or so scholars estimate. But this was a very different kind of lexicon from the one we know today. For a start, the vast majority of Old English words (roughly 85%) have simply vanished from modern use.

And unlike present-day English, which has borrowed generously from other languages, Old English kept things much closer to home. Only about 3% of its words came from outside sources. Compare that with the modern figure: over 70% of current English vocabulary has been borrowed, mainly from Latin and French.

The shift came in the Middle English period, when wave after wave of loanwords flooded into the language, especially following the Norman Conquest. Latin contributed heavily too, especially in scholarly and religious contexts. As a result, today's English is a linguistic melting pot, rich in etymological diversity. Old English, by contrast, was strikingly Germanic: more self-contained, more uniform, and far more consistent in its word-building patterns. Modern English may be flexible and global, but Old English had its own, rather beautiful, internal coherence.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 4):

1. How does Old English word order differ from that of Modern English?
2. Why was Old English word order more flexible than in Modern English? What features of Old English syntax allowed such flexibility in sentence structure?
3. What are two common positions where verbs appear in Old English clauses?
4. What role do inflections play in identifying grammatical relationships in Old English?
5. What are the two different Old English verbs used to express “to be”, and how do they differ in usage?
6. In what contexts is *beon* preferred over *wesan*?
7. How many grammatical cases does Old English distinguish, and what are they?
8. What grammatical categories affected the form of a noun in Old English?
9. What do the terms “strong” and “weak” declension refer to in Old English grammar?
10. How are personal pronouns in Old English different from those in Modern English?
11. How does grammatical gender affect the choice of pronouns in Old English?

12. Provide examples of dual forms in the first and second person (nominative, accusative/dative, genitive).
13. How do gender, number, and case influence article usage in Old English?
14. Who are Donestres?
15. What are the three main verb types in Old English and how do they form the past tense?
16. Define “weak” and “strong” verbs in Old English. Give examples of each.
17. What is *ablaut* or vowel gradation, and how does it apply to strong verbs?
18. Identify the verb types (strong, weak, irregular) in this sentence: *He ys gelic timbriendum men...*
19. What is the infinitive suffix in Old English?
20. What was the Old English equivalent of the *-ing* participle? Provide an example.
21. Why do some Old English words look familiar to Modern English speakers?
22. What are some examples of false friends in Old English (words that look familiar but mean something different)?
23. How did compound word formation work in Old English? Give examples.
24. What does the word *endebyrdnesse* literally mean, and how is it formed?
25. Explain the cultural or linguistic significance of the word *gebeorscipe*.
26. Why is the Celtic influence on Old English vocabulary minimal?
27. Despite the limited vocabulary borrowing, where do we see evidence of Celtic influence in other areas?
28. Compare the linguistic impact of Latin and Celtic on Old English during the Anglo-Saxon period.
29. What is meant by linguistic purity and what do you think about it?
30. What does the case of Old English suggest about language contact, conquest, and borrowing in general?

TRANSLATING OLD ENGLISH TEXTS

Translating from Old English into Ukrainian, like any act of translation, involves a sequence of fundamental decisions. How closely should one follow the original phrasing? To what extent should the translator's own style mirror the tone and register of the source? These are familiar questions for anyone working across languages. But Old English brings additional complexities, shaped above all by the sheer historical and cultural gap between its speakers and the modern Ukrainian reader. How can we hope to capture the worldview, habits, and daily realities of people who lived more than a thousand years ago?

This distance sharpens one of the translator's oldest dilemmas: fidelity versus readability. Should a translation smooth over unfamiliar ideas to aid comprehension, or preserve the distinctive cultural and linguistic textures of the original, even if it risks puzzling the reader? With Old English, every choice – lexical, syntactic, stylistic – becomes a balancing act between clarity and authenticity. Most translators, quite sensibly, steer a middle course, adjusting their approach to suit the context, the purpose of the translation, and the needs of their audience.

Dictionaries and online translators

To navigate the rich and sometimes challenging world of Old English, having the right tools at your disposal is essential. Dictionaries and reliable translators serve as invaluable guides, helping you unlock the meanings and cultural context of this ancient language. Below is a selection of trustworthy resources, each offering unique strengths, that will support you as you explore Old English texts and craft your own translations.

1. Dictionary of Old English Corpus (partially available; currently under reconstruction; requires registration; 20 free logins per year):

<https://doe.artsci.utoronto.ca/?p=87>

2. Bosworth-Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary (online):

<https://bosworthtoller.com/>

3. Old English Dictionary by Mary Lynch Johnson:

<https://old-engli.sh/dictionary.php>

4. Old English to Modern English Translator:

<https://www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk/>

I don't want you to think of Old English as something incomprehensible. Old English isn't some cryptic code only a handful of experts can crack. It's just another stage in the story of the English language: different, yes, but perfectly learnable. Once you begin to recognize familiar roots, patterns, and grammar, it starts to make sense. With a good dictionary and a curious mind, you will be able to bring even the earliest texts to life.

False Friends

It's important to remember that translation is never simply a matter of swapping one word for another. Even the most basic concepts can pose difficulties. Occasionally, Old English offers vocabulary that maps quite neatly onto familiar terms in Modern English, and by extension, into Ukrainian. Words like *stan* ('stone'), *sunu* ('son'), and *foet* ('foot') refer to tangible objects or relationships that still exist today, and in Ukrainian they can usually be rendered without much trouble as *камінь*, *син*, or *нога*.

But such clear one-to-one correspondences are the exception rather than the rule, especially when translating between languages as different as Old English and Ukrainian, which come from distinct language families with different cultural and historical developments. The further one moves from the concrete and the universal, the more subtle and demanding the act of translation becomes.

What do you think the following words mean? Use the dictionaries to check your guesses: *modor*, *fæder*, *wif*, *cild*, *treow*, *hus*, *brōþor*, *sweostor*, *eorþe*, *wæter*.

More often than not, translators come across words that look deceptively familiar or that have shifted dramatically in meaning over time. Take the Old English *wōd*, for example. At first glance, one might be tempted to link it with *wood* (perhaps thinking of *ліс* ('wood') or *дерев'яний* ('wooden') in Ukrainian) purely based on form. But its actual

meaning is quite different: it refers to a state of madness or fury. False friends like this are a frequent trap for a newbie.

Even more intricate are terms with wide or context-dependent meanings. The word

UA **INFLECTIONS:**
Ukrainians have a natural advantage.

Modern English speakers often struggle to translate Old English because they aren't used to **Cases** (Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, Dative). They rely on word order (Subject-Verb-Object) to understand a sentence.

However, a **Ukrainians** have a natural "translation advantage".

Just like in Ukrainian, Old English was a **synthetic language**. The meaning of a sentence didn't depend on where the words were placed, but on their endings.

When translating Old English, you don't look at the *position* of the word; you look at the *ending*. In this way, Old English grammar feels much more "Slavic" than Modern English grammar!

dōm is a good example. It can mean 'judgment', 'verdict', or 'fate', and it's the ancestor of the Modern English *doom*, with all its dramatic overtones. In Ukrainian, depending on the context, it might be translated as *суд*, *вирок*, *доля*, or *приречення*. Each of these choices brings out a different nuance of the original, and each one can subtly shift the tone or interpretive direction of a passage.

Such cases remind us that translation is never purely mechanical. It always involves interpretation. Dictionaries and glossaries are invaluable tools, but they rarely offer final answers. Sometimes, a word that is less "precise" in a technical sense may better capture the emotional weight, poetic texture, or rhetorical force of the original. So, while *приречення* may not be the most literal rendering of *dōm*, in a literary or poetic context it might convey just the right sense of gravity and finality.

What do you think the following words mean? Use the dictionaries to check your guesses: *scin*, *bliss*, *hæleþ*, *wyrd*, *geboht*, *fiĕond*, *wyrm*.

In the end, translating from Old English into Ukrainian calls for both linguistic sensitivity and cultural imagination. The translator is always balancing competing demands: historical accuracy against present-day readability, lexical precision against poetic or stylistic effect. The challenge is not simply to say what the original says, but to capture how it says it – and to make that meaning resonate for a modern audience. It is a task that blends scholarship with artistry, requiring careful judgment at every turn.

Why the Target Language Matters

The challenges posed by Old English “false friends” and semi-familiar words differ greatly depending on the target language, and Ukrainian brings its own distinct set of complications. But beyond the traps of misleading similarity, translators often face an even more difficult problem: words in Old English for which there are simply no direct equivalents in modern languages.

A good example is *þegn* – a term used in early English society to describe a retainer or warrior who served a lord, bound by loyalty and martial duty. Translating *þegn* into Ukrainian is not straightforward. While *воїн* (‘warrior’) or *слуга* (‘servant’) might capture part of the meaning, neither conveys the full weight of the social role. The word *дружинник*, drawn from the context of Kyivan Rus’, might seem closer in function, but it carries its own historical and cultural associations that could distort the original meaning.

Old English	Modern English Definition	Possible Ukrainian Translations	Translation Challenges
<i>dryhten</i>	Lord, leader, sometimes divine ruler	господар, пан, володар, (у реліг. контексті – Господь)	Can imply both secular and divine authority
<i>eorl</i>	nobleman, warrior aristocrat	вельможа, боярин, дружинник	Similar to “earl”, which later acquires a different status
<i>ceorl</i>	free peasant or commoner	селянин, хлібороб, простолюдин	Hard to express social status precisely
<i>wic</i>	settlement, village, trading post	поселення, торжище, селище	May vary by context – commercial vs. domestic setting
<i>scop</i>	Poet, bard, singer of heroic tales	співець, бард	Cultural role of a <i>scop</i> is unique and hard to localize, but one cannot render it with Ukrainian <i>кобзар</i>

Moreover, many Old English terms have evolved into modern English words, creating misleading associations. A translator might be tempted to equate *þegn* with *thane* or even *noble*, but these carry feudal or chivalric connotations that developed much later and do not correspond precisely to the early medieval reality. Modern readers might associate such terms with knights in armor or courtly ideals – images deeply anachronistic when applied to pre-Norman England and even more so when transferred into the Ukrainian historical imagination. In the absence of a perfect match, Ukrainian translators must decide whether to preserve the original term, find a partial equivalent, or opt for a broader word like *чоловік*, supplemented by contextual cues or explanatory phrases.

Beyond vocabulary, the prosodic structure of a language – its patterns of rhythm and sound – can vary significantly, and this becomes especially important in verse translation. The choice of translation strategy may therefore need to adapt to the target language, such as Modern English or Ukrainian. Research based on clothing inscriptions (many of which rhymed) suggests that English examples tend to rely on alliteration nearly twice as often as their Ukrainian counterparts (Striuk, 2023). Ukrainian inscriptions, by contrast, favour assonance to a much greater degree. In fact, the combination of these sound devices is more typical of Ukrainian than of English, giving Ukrainian verse a distinctive musical texture. This suggests that if a translator aims to make Old English verse sound natural in the target language, they might do well to lean more heavily on alliteration in English and on assonance – or a blend of assonance and alliteration – in Ukrainian. In each case, the goal is to echo the poetic texture of the original in a way that aligns with the stylistic tendencies of the receiving language.

Semantic Range of a Word

Choosing the “right” word for a culturally specific and historically remote concept is one of the most intellectually engaging, and at times exasperating tasks in translating from Old English. Even specialists often disagree about the full semantic range of certain terms. Consider *aglæca*, a word that, depending on context, can refer to a terrifying monster or a heroic warrior. For a Ukrainian translator, this presents a challenge: should

it be rendered as *потвора*, *воїн*, or perhaps more neutrally as *ворог* or *супротивник*? Each choice carries its own connotations and subtly shifts how the modern reader perceives the scene.

This kind of ambiguity can be fruitful – it opens up space for interpretative creativity. But it also brings with it a certain responsibility. Drawing too heavily on modern analogies, especially those rooted in unrelated warrior traditions or ideologically charged imagery, risks distorting the original. It is all too easy, sometimes unconsciously, to impose contemporary militaristic, nationalist, or romanticised frameworks onto the early English world. In doing so, a translator may inadvertently reinforce cultural stereotypes, or worse, veer into cultural appropriation. Sensitivity to such risks is not only advisable; it is essential for ethical and thoughtful translation.

Old English Poetic Devices

In addition to lexical challenges, Old English presents rich poetic devices that resist straightforward translation. One example is the frequent use of kennings – compound expressions that combine metaphor with description. A term like *seġl-rād*, literally meaning “sail-road”, is a poetic synonym for ‘sea’. To translate it simply as *море* would capture the denotative meaning but erase the metaphorical texture. Rendering it as *шлях вимпун* preserves the poetic image but might confuse readers or require annotation. A similar issue arises with words like *æsc* (literally ‘ash’), used metonymically for ‘spear’, or *ecg* (‘edge’), meaning ‘sword’. Ukrainian translators must choose between the literal image and the functional term – *спус* or *меч* – while considering the literary tone and rhythm of the text.

There is no single “correct” way to translate Old English. The variety of approaches visible across different translations reflects the underlying tensions involved. One translator may aim for clarity and accessibility, choosing to modernise or simplify imagery. Another might retain archaisms, poetic compounds, or deliberate ambiguities in order to preserve the texture of the original. Each translation charts a different path

through the same direction; and every lexical, syntactic, or stylistic choice subtly shapes how the reader engages with the distant world of early English.

For students beginning their work with Old English, one of the most rewarding exercises is to mind these differences. If a single Old English phrase becomes a twenty-word sentence in Ukrainian, or if a pattern of repetition disappears, these are signs that the translation process is challenging and it is worth exploring. Even a short detour into a dictionary, glossary, or scholarly note can reveal unexpected layers of meaning, cultural

allusion, or poetic technique. And it's through this kind of close attention that both translation and interpretation truly come alive.

HWÆT: How to Begin a Story?

The most famous word in Old English translation is the very first word of *Beowulf*: **Hwæt!** For over a century, translators have fought over how to render this single syllable into Modern English. It was a "call to attention" used by oral poets in mead halls.

- **The 19th Century:** "Lo!" or "Hark!"
- **The 20th Century:** "Listen!" or "Attend!"
- **The 21st Century (Seamus Heaney):** "So."
- **The "Internet" Translation:** "Yo!" or "Listen up!"

Translation is never just about swapping words. It is about capturing a **tone**. When you translate the "Hwæt", you aren't just translating a word – you are deciding how to wake up your audience.

Prose and Verse in Old English Translation

One of the most fundamental choices a translator of Old English must make is whether to render the text in prose or in verse. While the original was composed in verse, there are many valid reasons for presenting it in prose when translating into a modern language. For those aiming to stay as close as possible to the literal meaning and phrasing of the source (particularly useful for students and language learners) prose offers far greater flexibility. Modern languages tend to require longer, more elaborate constructions, and trying to squeeze these into a regular metrical

pattern can lead to distortion or clumsy phrasing. Prose, by contrast, frees the translator to tackle difficult words or syntactic structures without the added pressure of form.

But the decision to use prose is not always just about practicality. It may also reflect a deeper awareness that no modern poetic form can truly replicate the effect of reading

Old English verse. Just as certain culturally embedded terms resist direct translation, the original metrical system resists easy imitation. Still, a well-written prose version can be both elegant and evocative. It may lack the alliterative drive of the original, but it can express tone, clarity, and emotional nuance in its own right.

In the end, much depends on the translator's priorities. Some feel that a poetic source deserves a poetic response. Others give greater weight to semantic precision and readability. Both approaches are legitimate, and each reveals different facets of the Old English world to the modern reader.

Old English Poetic Structure

Before understanding how verse translations might function, it's helpful to grasp the basic features of Old English poetic structure. While scholarly debates continue about the finer points of Old English metre, the core principles are relatively clear. Unlike many later poetic traditions based on syllable count or rhyme, Old English verse is based on stress and alliteration. Each line typically contains two half-lines, separated by a caesura (a natural pause), and each half-line contains two stressed syllables, making four major stresses in total per line. What matters here is not syllable count, but rhythmic emphasis. The half-line on the left is known as the a-verse or on-verse, the half-line on the right – as the b-verse or off-verse.

Importantly, these stresses aren't based on word-level syllabic emphasis (as in a dictionary), but on the rhythm of the whole phrase or sentence. For example, when someone says, "The waves broke loudly," the main stresses likely fall on "waves" and "loud-." Old English verse follows similar patterns: content words (like nouns, verbs, and adjectives) carry the main beats, while function words (such as prepositions and articles) are usually left unstressed.

At the heart of the system is alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds. In a well-formed line, at least two of the four major stresses will alliterate – one from each half-line – thus binding the line together both rhythmically and thematically. This system

served both a mnemonic and aesthetic function for early audiences, who often experienced poetry through oral performance.

In modern printed editions, on- and off-verses are separated graphically by a gap of three or four spaces or by a vertical line, as in the following except from *Cædmon's Hymn*:

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
meotodes meahte, ond his modgeþanc,
weorc wuldorfæder – swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten, or onstealde!

Nu sculon herigean | heofonrices weard,
meotodes meahte | ond his modgeþanc,
weorc wuldorfæder | swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten | or onstealde!

Нині належить нам Небесному Отцю хвалу співати,
Могутності Мірила усього і його мудрим помислам,
Ділам Дивотворця – як дива всякі він,
Вічний Владика, витворив з нічого!

It's worth noting that Old English poetic manuscripts, such as *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*, do not lay out verse in the way modern readers might expect. Rather than being arranged in clearly marked poetic lines, the text is written continuously across the page, more like prose than poetry. For example, in a manuscript folio containing *The Battle of Brunanburh*, the lines appear unbroken, with no visible spacing, punctuation, or line divisions to signal the underlying poetic structure. And yet, the poem still follows a strict metrical and alliterative pattern. The form is there, but it must be heard or felt, not simply seen.

The now-familiar practice of dividing Old English poetry into two half-lines, separated by a visible caesura, is a modern editorial invention. It was introduced in the nineteenth century, when scholars (perhaps inspired by the appearance of Middle

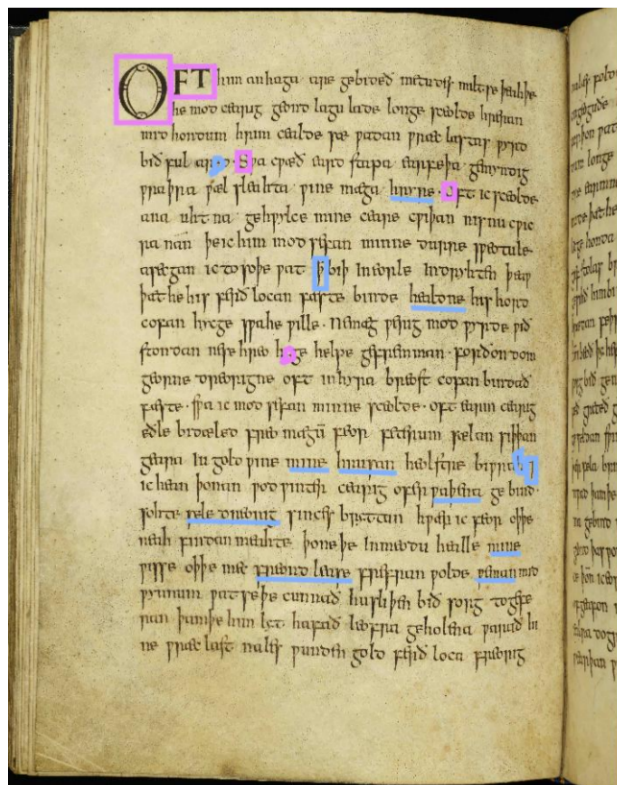
English alliterative verse) chose to present Old English texts in a way that better reflected their internal rhythm. This layout drew attention to one of the defining features of Old English verse: the four-beat line, governed not by syllable count or rhyme, but by stress and alliteration.

The format brings out the poem's drum-like rhythm, in which stressed syllables are spaced by a flexible number of unstressed ones. It's a different kind of musicality – less regular on the surface, but no less deliberate.

For modern translators working into Ukrainian, preserving the structural patterns of Old English verse presents a particular set of challenges. Ukrainian poetic traditions are typically based on syllabic-accentual metre and rhyme – very different from the stress-and-alliteration system of Old English. Aligning these two frameworks requires a degree of creative adaptation, and translators must ask themselves a series of fundamental questions:

- Should I try to imitate the Old English form as closely as possible?
- Should I adapt the text to match Ukrainian metrical conventions?
- Or should I set aside verse entirely and present the translation in prose?

Each of these approaches involves trade-offs. A verse translation may capture something of the energy, rhythm, and formal cohesion of the original, but it often comes at a cost: meanings may need to be adjusted or simplified to fit the metre. A prose translation, by contrast, may lose the poetic texture, but offers greater freedom to explore nuance, explain ambiguities, and preserve the integrity of difficult terms, something especially valuable for students and first-time readers of Old English.



*Facsimile page of the Exeter Book,
containing **The Wanderer**
(late 10th century).*

That said, the ideal translation – the *supreme* version, so to speak – would be one that manages to preserve both the poetic form and the linguistic precision. This is no easy task, but it remains a compelling goal for those seeking to carry the spirit and substance of Old English poetry into Ukrainian.

Advice on Translating Old English into Ukrainian⁹

➤ Pay close attention to sound patterns, but don't be afraid to adapt them to Ukrainian norms if the result would otherwise sound clumsy. Alliteration is central to Old English poetry, but in Ukrainian it can easily feel overdone. Instead, consider using assonance, consonance, or even internal rhyme to achieve a similar poetic effect. The combination of these devices is more natural in Ukrainian and can preserve musicality without distorting the language.

➤ Use contemporary Ukrainian unless the context demands archaism. Avoid unnecessary archaisms or Church Slavonic-sounding constructions unless they serve a clear purpose or are culturally appropriate.

➤ Choose words that evoke the right tone, even if they aren't literal equivalents. Where direct matches don't exist, opt for words that preserve emotional tone, connotation, and stylistic function. Don't aim for one-to-one equivalence, aim for resonance.

➤ Respect Ukrainian syntactic flow. Use stylistic devices like delayed subjects or appositions sparingly and intentionally to echo the original structure, not to obscure it.

➤ Handle epithets and synonyms with care. Old English often uses multiple terms for the same referent (especially for “God” or “king”). Try to preserve this variety where possible, using Ukrainian equivalents like *Господь*, *Владика*, *Творець*, or *Всевишній*. This lexical diversity adds texture and reflects the elevated register of the original.

➤ When faced with a choice between words, opt for a cognate if possible.

➤ Translate kennings compactly and poetically. Ukrainian is rich in metaphor and imagery – use that to your advantage. When translating kennings, aim for concise, vivid

⁹ None of these guidelines are absolute; they can be set aside if the line demands it.

phrases. Genitive constructions like “світло єдинорога” or “кров землі” can work well. Avoid turning each kenning into a footnote – leave room for the reader’s interpretation.

➤ If you struggle with preserving the melody of the Old English line because it may not sound melodic in Ukrainian, let your line breaks follow Ukrainian rhythm, not Old English meter. Focus on the natural cadence of your translation. Use line breaks to highlight emotional shifts, rhetorical emphasis, or thematic contrast, not simply to mimic the original structure.

➤ Choose between prose and verse based on purpose. For didactic or scholarly use, prose may offer greater clarity and precision. But for public or literary presentation, verse can evoke the solemnity and grandeur of the original, provided intelligibility and tone are prioritized over rigid formal imitation.

➤ Be interpretive, but not intrusive. Old English texts are full of ambiguity, layered meanings, and cultural references. You’ll need to make interpretive choices, but avoid over-explaining or editorialising. Let the poetry breathe, and give readers space to engage with the strangeness and depth of the text.

➤ Don’t be afraid to make it a bit strange. Old English verse often feels austere, mysterious, and emotionally weighty. Embrace that strangeness. Don’t flatten the text into bland familiarity. Use unexpected but expressive words, creative phrasing, and even a touch of linguistic playfulness, where it suits the tone.

Here is the fragment of the letter, written in the 890s by king Alfred during his educational and ecclesiastical reforms, aimed at restoring learning after the disruptions caused by Viking invasions. Using the glossary below, find out what king Alfred wrote about in his letter. Modern English is used as a pivot language here:

*Ðā ġemunde ic hū sīo æ wæs ærest on
Ebreiscġeðode funden, ond eft, ðā hīe Crēacas
ġeliornodon, ðā wendon hīe hīe on hiora āgen
ġeðode ealle, ond ēac ealle oðre bēc. Ond eft*



*King Alfred the Great
(c. 849 – 26 October 899)*

Lædenware swæ same, siððan hīe hīe ġeliornodon, hīe hīe wendon ealla ðurh wīse wealhstōdas on hiora āgen ġeðode. Ond ēac ealla ōðra Cristna ðīoda sumne dæġ hiora on hiora āgen ġeðode wendon. For ðy mē ðyncð betre, ġif īow swæ ðyncð, ðæt wē ēac suma bēc, ðā ðe nīedbeðearfosta sīen eallum monnum tō wiotonne, ðæt wē ðā on ðæt ġeðode wenden ðe wē ealle ġecnāwan mæġen... Ðā ic ðā ġemunde hū sīo lār Lædenġeðodes ær ðissum āfeallen wæs ġiond Angelcynn, ond ðēah moniġe cūðon Englisc ġewrit ārædan, ðā ongan ic onġemang ōðrum mislicum ond maniġfealdum bisgum ðisses kynerīces ðā bōc wendan on Englisc ðe is ġenemned on Læden Pastoralis ond on Englisc Hierdebōc, hwīlum word be worde, hwīlum andġit of andġiete, swæ swæ ic hīe ġeliornode æt Pleġmunde mīnum ærcebiscope ond æt Assere mīnum biscope ond æt Grimbolde mīnum mæsseprīoste ond æt Iohanne mīnum mæsseprēoste. Siððan ic hīe ðā ġeliornod hæfde, swæ swæ ic hīe forstōd, ond swæ ic hīe andġitfullicost āreccēan meahte, ic hīe on Englisc āwende...

Ðā – then

ġemunde – remembered

ic – I

hū – how

sīo – the (feminine demonstrative pronoun; referring to "law")

æ – law

wæs – was

ærest – first

on – in

Ebreiscġeðode – Hebrew-language

funden – found (past participle of findan, "to find")

ond – and

eft – afterwards / again

ðā – when / then

hīe – they

Crēacas - Greeks

ġeliornodon - learned (past plural of leornian)

ðā - then

wendon - translated / turned (past plural of wendan)

hīe - they

hīe - it (referring to the law or scripture)

on - into

hiora - their

āgen - own

ġeðode - language

ealle - all

ond - and

ēac - also

ealle - all

ōðre - other

bēc - books (plural of bōc)

Ond - and

eft - afterwards / again

Lædenware - Latin-speakers (i.e., Romans)

swæ - so / likewise

same - same / likewise

siððan - after

hīe - they

hīe - it / them

ġeliornodon - learned

hīe - they

hīe - it / them

wendon - translated

ealla - all

ðurh - through

wīse - wise

wealhstōdas - interpreters / translators (literally “foreign-speech-standers”)

on - into

hiora - their

āgen - own

ġeðode - language

Ond - and

ēac - also

ealla - all

ōðra - other

Cristna - Christian

ðoda - peoples / nations

sumne - some

dæġ - part

hiora - of them / of it

on - into

hiora - their

āgen - own

ġeðode - language

wendon - translated

For ðy - therefore

mē - to me

ðynð - seems

betre - better

ġif - if

īow - to you (plural)

swæ - so / likewise

ðynð - seems

ðæt - that

wē - we

ēac - also

suma - some

bēc - books

ðā - those (which)

ðe - that / which

nīedbeðearfosta - most necessary / urgently needed

sīen - may be / are (present subjunctive plural of *wesan*)

eallum - to all

monnum - people / men

tō - to

wiotonne - to understand / to know (infinitive of *witan*)

ðæt - that

wē - we

ðā - them / those (books)

on - into

ðæt - the

ġeðode - language

wenden - translate (infinitive)

ðe - which

wē - we

ealle - all

ġecnāwan - understand / know (infinitive)

mæġen - can / may (present plural of *magan*)

Ðā - Then

īc - I

ðā - [then again] (repeating for emphasis)

ġemunde - remembered

hū - how

sīo - the (feminine demonstrative pronoun)

lār - learning / teaching

Lǣdenġeðīodes - of the Latin language

ǣr - before

ðissum - this (time)

āfeallen - fallen / decayed (past participle of āfeallan)

wæs - was

ġiond - throughout

Angelcynn - the English people / the Anglo-Saxon nation

ond - and

ðēah - though / although

moniġe - many

cūðon - knew / could (past plural of cunnan)

Englisc ġewrit - English writing / text

āīrǣdan - read / interpret (infinitive)

ðā - then

ongan - began (past singular of onginnan)

īc - I

onġemang - among

ōðrum - other

mislicum - various / manifold

ond - and

maniġfealdum - manifold / manyfold

bisgum - cares / concerns / affairs (plural of bisgu)

ðisses - of this

kynenīces - kingdom

ðā - the (accusative plural “those”)

bōc - book (accusative singular, object of wendan)

wendan – to translate / turn (infinitive)
on – into
Englisc – English
ðe – which
is – is
ġenemned – named / called (past participle of *nemnan*)
on Lǣden – in Latin
Pastoralis – [The Pastoral Care] (Latin title)
ond – and
on Englisc – in English
Hierdebōc – Shepherd’s Book
hwīlum – sometimes
word be worde – word by word
hwīlum – sometimes
andġit of andġiete – meaning from meaning / sense for sense
swǣ swǣ – just as / in the way that
ic – I
hīe – it (referring to the book)
ġeliornode – learned (past singular of *leornian*)
æt – from
Pleġmunde – Plegmund
mīnum ærċebiscope – my archbishop
ond æt Assere – and from Asser
mīnum biscope – my bishop
ond æt Grimbolde – and from Grimbold
mīnum mæsseprīoste – my mass-priest
ond æt Iohanne – and from John
mīnum mæsseprēoste – my mass-priest
Siððan – After

īc - I

hīe - it

ðā - then

ġeliornod hæfde - had learned

swæ swæ - just as

īc - I

hīe - it

forstōd - understood

ond - and

swæ - as

īc - I

hīe - it

andġitfullicost - most intelligibly / most understandably

āreċcean - to relate / express / explain (infinitive)

meahte - could / was able (past of magan)

īc - I

hīe - it

on Englisc - into English

āwende - translated / turned (past singular of awendan)

In the following passage from Ælfric's *Preface to Genesis* (c. 990–995), Ælfric reflects on the principles of functional, audience-aware translation. Translate the passage by first producing a glossed translation.

Nū ys sēo foresæde bōc on manegum stōwum swīðe nearolīce gesett, and þēah swīðe dēoplice on þām ġāstlicum andgite, and hēo is swā geendebyrd swā swā God silf hig gedihhte þām wītere Moise, and wē durren nā māre āwītan on Englisc þonne þæt Lēden hæfð, nē þā endebirdnisse āwenden būton þām ānum, þæt þæt Lēden and þæt Englisc nabbað nā āne wīsan on þære spræce fandunge. Æfre sē þe āwent oððe sē þe tæcð of Lēdene on Englisc, æfre hē sceal gefadian hit swā þæt þæt Englisc hæbbe his āgene wīsan, elles hit bið swīðe gedwolsum tō rædenne þām þe þæs Lēdenes wīsan ne can.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 5):

1. What are two major dilemmas that translators of Old English face when working into Ukrainian?
2. What is meant by a "false friend" in translation, and can you give an Old English example?
3. Why might the word *wod* be misleading for modern readers? What does it actually mean? How do seemingly familiar words like *dom* complicate the translator's task?
4. Why is it sometimes acceptable to choose a "less accurate" translation if it captures emotional tone?
5. How can overreliance on modern cultural analogies distort Old English translation?
6. What is a kenning, and why is it difficult to translate?
7. How do metonymic terms like *æsc* or *ecg* pose problems for translation into Ukrainian?
8. What are the advantages of using prose instead of verse for Old English translations?
9. Why might verse translation lead to distortion of meaning?
10. How do Ukrainian poetic conventions differ from those of Old English verse?
11. What are the benefits of attempting a verse translation despite the difficulties?
12. What is the basic metrical structure of an Old English poetic line?
13. How many stresses are typically found in a full line of Old English poetry?
14. What is the function of the caesura in Old English verse?
15. What role does alliteration play in Old English poetry?
16. How can understanding poetic devices (like alliteration or rhythm) inform translation choices?
17. Why is translation from Old English into modern Ukrainian not a neutral or automatic process?
18. What responsibilities does a translator have when dealing with culturally distant or ideologically loaded material?

19. In what ways can a translator's own cultural background affect their interpretation of an Old English text?
20. Why might translating a term like *þegn* as *лицар* or *герой* be ethically problematic?
21. Can drawing parallels between Old English warriors and historical Ukrainian figures (e.g. *козаки*, *дружинники*) be helpful? When might it become misleading?
22. What role do footnotes, annotations, or dual translations (literal + literary) play in ethical translation?

SECTION 4

Middle English



THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Language doesn't exist in a vacuum: history leaves deep marks on it. One of the most striking examples in the English story is the Norman Conquest depicted in The Bayeux Tapestry¹⁰. When William arrived in 1066, he didn't just bring an army; he brought a new social order, and with it, a new linguistic influence that would gradually reshape English.

But the shift wasn't immediate. Although we often use 1066 as a convenient dividing line, it's not the moment when Old English disappears and Middle English appears. Far from it. Old English continued in use, particularly in the familiar West Saxon form cultivated since Alfred's time, well into the next century. Change, as usual, took time.



A scene from the Bayeux Tapestry

Middle English is generally placed between the early 1100s and the mid-1400s. It's a fascinating and frustrating period to study. Why? Because it sits between two much clearer phases: the heavily inflected, Germanic Old English and the more standardized Modern English. Manuscripts from the time reveal a real linguistic ferment: spellings vary wildly, dialects jostle for space, and no single variety dominates.

¹⁰ The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered linen cloth measuring almost 70 metres in length and about 50 centimetres in height, which narrates the events leading to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, from the succession crisis to the Battle of Hastings between William, Duke of Normandy, and Harold II of England. The textile is arranged into 58 sequential scenes, most accompanied by Latin inscriptions, and executed in coloured wool threads. Generally dated to the 11th century, within a few years of the battle, it is now widely accepted that the tapestry was produced in England, probably during the 1070s. It is commonly believed to have been commissioned by Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and William's maternal half-brother, possibly as a gift for William. The narrative consistently reflects the Norman perspective, and the work has been preserved in Normandy for centuries.

What adds to the complexity is the cultural mix. Anglo-Saxon literary traditions were fading, while French and Latin were rising fast in influence. The result? A transitional era with blurred boundaries. It's only when Chaucer arrives, around 1400, that we get a sense of focus. Yet even he is often viewed not as the great finisher of Middle English but as the first step into the modern.

Of all the influences on English during this period, the most far-reaching was, unsurprisingly, French, more precisely, Norman French, the variety brought over by William the Conqueror and his followers. Once William secured the throne, French quickly made its way into the heart of English power. French-speaking nobles were granted lands and titles, bringing with them entire households fluent in the new ruling tongue.

The Church was no exception. French-speaking abbots and bishops were soon installed, and one of the earliest and most notable appointments was Lanfranc, a Norman abbot from Caen, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070. Within just two decades of the invasion, almost all English monasteries had French superiors, and some new ones were founded entirely under French leadership.

Commerce followed the same path. Merchants and skilled workers crossed the Channel in large numbers, drawn by the new regime's opportunities. The English aristocracy maintained close ties with Normandy, often retaining lands on both sides, further strengthening the cultural and linguistic bridge.

It's easy to imagine that bilingualism began to emerge fairly quickly: English people learning French to gain favour and opportunity, and Norman households picking up English as part of their interaction with local populations. But it's equally clear that English remained absent from the upper echelons of power. For well over a century after the conquest, the language of the elite was French, and English had little place at the table.

Most of the Anglo-Norman kings couldn't speak English at all – though some are said to have picked up just enough for cursing. But by the end of the 14th century, that situation had shifted significantly.

During the 12th century, English began to gain more ground among the upper classes, especially as intermarriage between Normans and English people became increasingly common. While the royal court still mainly spoke French, this wasn't true for the rest of the

country. By 1177, Richard Fitz Neal observed in his *Dialogue of the Exchequer* that the two communities had become so intertwined through marriage and daily life that it was nearly impossible to distinguish between Norman and English free men.

By the end of that century, there's evidence suggesting that some children from noble families grew up speaking English as their first language and actually had to learn French later in school. French remained the language of government, law, and public affairs, but English translations became more common, and more French-language handbooks were produced to support language learning.

A major turning point came in 1204, when King John lost Normandy to the French king Philip. This broke the strong ties between the English nobility and their French estates. Tensions between England and France escalated, eventually leading to the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). As English national identity began to solidify, French lost some of its prestige – a shift that was especially noticeable during the Barons' War (1264-65).

In 1362, English was officially used for the first time to open Parliament. By the early 15th century (around 1425) English had firmly reestablished itself as a widespread language, both spoken and written.

How did English manage to survive the Norman invasion? After all, the Celtic languages had largely disappeared from much of England following the Anglo-Saxon invasions five centuries earlier. The answer lies in the strength and entrenchment of English by the 11th century. Unlike the Celts, the English had a firmly rooted language, supported by both a significant body of written literature and a vibrant oral tradition. Replacing it would have required centuries of large-scale immigration but the close ties

HENRY IV: THE FIRST ENGLISH SPEECH

It took over **300 years** after the Conquest for an English King to use English in a formal, political setting.

In **1399**, **Henry IV** did something revolutionary: he made his speech claiming the throne in **English**.

Why was this a big deal? By using the “language of the people” to claim the crown, Henry was sending a political message. He was telling the nobles and the commoners alike: *“I am one of you. I am not a foreign occupier; I am an English King”*. This marked the end of the “Anglo-Norman” era and the beginning of English as the true language of the State.

between England and France lasted only about 150 years. Some historians even suggest that the Normans made up as little as 2% of the total population.

Even so, those 150 years are often seen as a kind of linguistic “dark age.” Very little English writing has survived from the period, which leaves us uncertain about how the language was evolving. What we do know is that French dominated official life (government, law, administration, literature, and the Church) while Latin remained strong in education, worship, and record-keeping.

English begins to reappear more visibly in the 13th century, especially in religious texts like sermons and prayers, and in popular forms like romances and songs. By the 14th century, English had clearly regained its footing; and some of its greatest literary achievements, including the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, were now being written in Middle English.

THE DECAY OF INFLECTIONS

One of the most significant structural changes in the history of English took place during the 11th and 12th centuries: a shift so major that it has no real precedent before or parallel since. If we ask how we express grammatical relationships in English today, the answer is usually: through word order. But in Old English, grammar was shaped primarily through inflectional endings.

This transformation – from a language of endings to a language of structure – has fascinated linguists for generations. There’s one thing we can say with confidence: the breakdown of the inflectional system was already underway during the Old English period. The change appears to have begun in the north of England and then gradually moved southwards. Even in texts from the 12th century, like the *Peterborough Chronicle*, some of the old endings remain, but they’re used inconsistently and no longer seem central to meaning.

Why did Old English lose its inflectional endings? The simplest explanation is that they became harder to hear. This was largely due to how stress patterns evolved in Germanic languages. The ancestor of Germanic languages, Indo-European, had a flexible system where stress could fall on different syllables according to complex rules.

But in Germanic, stress shifted almost entirely to the first syllable of words — a feature that Old English inherited.

There were exceptions, like the prefix *ʒe-*, which was never stressed. But placing the main stress at the beginning of a word made it more difficult to hear the endings clearly, especially since many of these endings, such as *-en*, *-on*, and *-an*, sounded very similar. When spoken quickly, it was easy for speakers to confuse or drop them altogether.

This kind of sound blending, called neutralization, still happens in Modern English. For example, endings like *-ible* and *-able* (as in *visible* and *washable*) are often pronounced the same, and many people don't distinguish between *Belgian* and *Belgium*. It's clear that this process contributed significantly to the weakening of Old English's inflectional system.

But auditory confusion alone could hardly have been the only reason. Other Germanic languages, like German, also have strong initial stress, yet they kept their inflections intact. So why did English change so much more?

Many scholars point to the Viking settlements in England (the period known as the Danelaw) as a crucial factor. Here, Old English speakers and Scandinavian settlers came into frequent contact, likely developing a simplified, pidgin-like speech to communicate. Pidgins typically lose complex word endings and rely heavily on word order. This new way of speaking would have spread throughout the East Midlands – the very region from which Standard English later emerged.

At the very least, this contact with Scandinavian accelerated the decline of inflections, and may have even started it. Because many English and Scandinavian words shared common roots, communication was easier; the Icelandic sagas even tell of Vikings and English understanding one another.

Surviving Middle English texts show that the Danelaw area was linguistically more progressive than other parts of England, with changes that eventually spread southwards.

Here is a list of the key endings found in Old English regular nouns and verbs illustrated with a typical example. During the Middle English period, all endings made up of a vowel or a vowel + a nasal sound gradually disappeared. The endings that survived were those with stronger emphasis. These included the high-pitched *-s* endings (as in *kings*, *king's*, *levest*), the *-th* endings (like *loveth*, which was eventually replaced by *-s*), and the distinctive *-ende* ending used for participles and past tense forms.

Nouns

(*cyning* ‘king’, *glof* ‘glove’)

-e, -n (acc. sg.) *glofe*, *guman*

-**es**, -e, -n (gen. sg) *cyninges*, *glofe*,
guman

-e, -n (dat. sg.) *cyninge*, *guman*

-**as**, -u, -a (nom. pl;) *cyningas*, *glofa*

-n, -**as**, -u, -a (acc.: pl.) *cyningas*, *glofa*

-a, -ena, (gen. pl.) *cyninga*, *glofa*,

-um (dat. pl.) *cyningum*, *glofum*,

Verbs

(*fremman* ‘perform’, *lufian* ‘love’)

-e (1 sg.pres. ind.) *fremme*, *lufie*,

-**est**, -ast, -st(2 sg.pres.ind.) *fremest*, *lufast*,

-ed, -ad, -d (3 sg. pres. Ind.) *fremed*, *lufad*

-ad (1 – 3 pl.pres. ind.) *fremmad*, *lufiad*

-e(1 – 3 sg.pres. subj;) *fremme*, *lufle*

-en (1 – 3pl. pres. subj.) *fremmen*, *lufieh*

-de (1 & 3 sg. past ind.) *fremede*, *lufode*

-**dest** (2sg. past ind;) *fremedest*, *lufodest*

-don (1 – 3 pl. past ind.) *fremedon*, *fufodon*

-de (1 – 3 sg. past subj.) *fremede*, *lufode*

-den (1 – 3 pl. past subj.) *fremeden*, *lufoden*

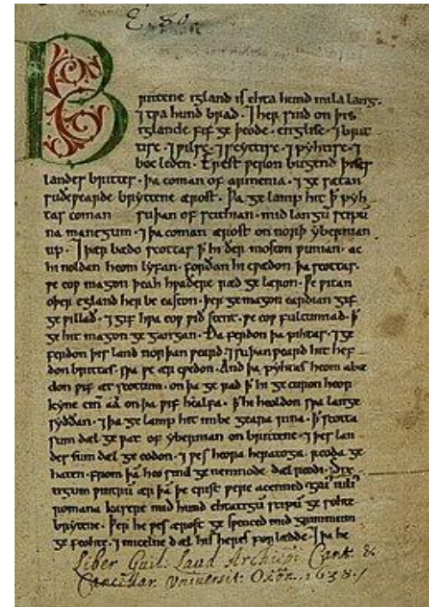
-**ende** (pres. part;) *fremmende*, *lufiende*

THE PETERBOROUGH CRONICLE

The *Peterborough Chronicle* is a unique version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, shaped by tragedy and transition. After a disastrous fire in 1116 destroyed the monastery’s library, scribes had to reconstruct their history by copying from other sources, mainly the Winchester Chronicle. For the 11th century, the Peterborough text shows signs of a blend of influences, possibly from a lost, regionally focused chronicle. But it’s after 1122 that the Chronicle truly takes on its own identity, divided into two “continuations” that reveal much about both history and language.

The first continuation (1122–1131) marks a critical stage in the development of English. Here, the language is visibly shifting away from Old English’s complex grammar and vocabulary, blending in Middle English features with simpler sentence structures and increased French influence. This linguistic transition mirrors social upheavals and offers rare insights into the lives of ordinary people.

The second continuation (1132–1154) continues this linguistic evolution during the chaos of King Stephen’s reign. Written in a single, compelling voice, it presents Middle English in a more mature form, reflecting the language’s adaptation to new political and cultural realities. Throughout the Chronicle, we witness the gradual loss of Old English grammatical gender: a clear sign of English moving toward the more analytic, word-order based system we recognize today. The Peterborough Chronicle thus stands not only as a vital historical record but also as a remarkable document chronicling the English language’s transformation during a pivotal century. Compare:



The opening page of
The Peterborough

Early 12th century

(after the 1116 fire):

On þāem yðe ðe we ær sædon, wæs þāer micel fyr on þāem mynstre þe man Peterboroug gehāteð, and þæt mynster ābrann. Þæt wæs on fīgedæge, seofonþene niht of August, þæt wæs þāere wucan on 1116. Þā wæs micel gedrefednes on eallum þām lande.

‘At the time we mentioned earlier, there was a great fire in the monastery called Peterborough, and the monastery burned down. It happened on Friday, the seventeenth night of August, which was the week of 1116. Then there was great distress throughout all the land’.

After 1154

(final section):

William is abbot nu, and þæt gewrit awriten wæs on his dagum. He het þæt mynster gebrate and þa munecas togeanes Godes gebete. Ðæt wæs rihtwis abbot and full of godcundnesse.

‘William is abbot now, and the writing was completed in his days. He ordered the monastery rebuilt and the monks restored in their devotion to God. He was a righteous abbot and full of godliness’.

Most of the language in the later section of the Peterborough Chronicle sounds much closer to Modern English than to its Old English roots, aside from a few lingering archaic words. This one and the same continuous text stands at a fascinating crossroads: looking back to Old English but already stepping forward into Middle English. Scholars have long debated how to classify it: some highlight its old-fashioned features, linking it to the West Saxon dialect of Old English; others emphasize the fresh differences, seeing it as the earliest example of Middle English. The Chronicle perfectly captures the tricky reality that language change is a gradual process: it's rarely possible to draw a neat line between one stage and the next.

CORPUS OF MIDDLE ENGLISH

THE LINGUISTIC "REVOLUTION" OF 1362

For nearly 300 years, the "official" records of England were kept in Latin or French. But the Middle English corpus shows a dramatic "pivot" in the mid-14th century.

- **1362: The Statute of Pleading.** This law dictated that all court cases must be conducted in **English** because "French is too little known".

- **1380s: The Wycliffe Bible.** The first complete translation of the Bible into English. This was a radical act – previously, the "Word of God" was only allowed in Latin.

The Middle English corpus isn't just a list of books; it is a record of **Reclamation**. It shows a language that had been "demoted" to the peasant class slowly fighting its way back into the law courts, the churches, and the universities.

There's far more written material from the Middle English period than we find from Old English times. After the Norman Conquest, England's new political landscape brought sweeping administrative changes. The centralized monarchy began issuing official surveys (starting with the famous Domesday Book) and soon public life was generating a steady stream of documents: royal commands, legal contracts, tax records, charters, and more.

But there's a catch. Most of these early records were written not in English, but in Latin or French – the languages of power at the time. That means they're of limited use to historians of the English language, apart from the occasional reference to English place or personal names.

Another major shift was the disappearance of English historical writing. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* had kept a continuous record of events in the native tongue, but Latin soon took over this role and English wouldn't return as a language of history until the 15th century.

Still, English writing didn't vanish entirely. In the 13th century, it began to trickle back, mainly through religious texts: sermons, saints' lives, devotional tracts. By the 14th century, that trickle became a stream. Translations from French and Latin were increasingly common, alongside handbooks for learning those languages. We also start seeing a wide variety of new genres: guild records, legal notices, proverbs, letters, allegories, dialogues, – all showing English in a range of new functions and styles.

Then, in the 1430s, something big happens: a huge volume of written English begins to flow from the royal Chancery in London. These government scribes played a major role in shaping what would become the written standard of English.

Against this backdrop of regional, generic, and linguistic diversity that characterizes the Middle English corpus, the works of Geoffrey Chaucer represent a decisive moment of consolidation. Commonly referred to as *the Chaucerian achievement*, this phase marks the emergence of Middle English as a fully adequate medium for complex literary expression.

What really stands out in Chaucer's writing is the sheer range of his language. He moves effortlessly from the elegance of formal, rhetorical style to the down-to-earth ease of everyday conversation. No writer before him had demonstrated such linguistic breadth. And that's what makes his work, apart from its literary brilliance, so valuable for the history of English. Chaucer gives us a unique window into how grammar, vocabulary, and even pronunciation were developing in the late Middle English period.

His most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, isn't a record of everyday speech, of course. It's a carefully composed piece of written English, with all the shaping that poetic rhythm and meter require. Word order, for example, often shifts to fit the verse

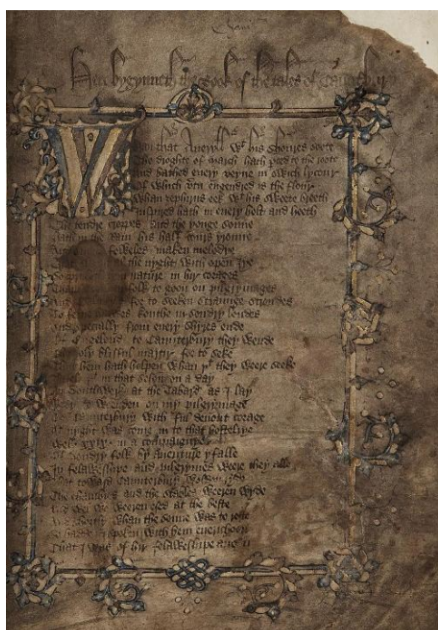


Geoffrey Chaucer
c. 1343–1400

Ʒ Geoffrey Chaucer

structure, and literary references and clever phrasing can make it a challenge to read. But that's what's so impressive: despite all the constraints of rhyme and meter, Chaucer still manages to bring his characters vividly to life. His portraits are full of personality, and their voices sound strikingly natural regardless of all their idioms.

One of the trickiest things about reading Chaucer's poetry aloud in its original pronunciation is knowing what to do with all those final *-es*. They are everywhere: in words



*Title page of Geoffrey Chaucer's
Canterbury Tales c. 1400.*

like *soote*, *droghte*, *roote*, *sweete*, *melodye*, but should we pronounce them? Most of the time, yes, we should. These endings usually count as an extra syllable, especially in poetry. But it's not quite that simple.

In Chaucer's time, final *-e* was on its way out. A few generations later, it would vanish altogether. But while Chaucer was writing, things were still in flux. Older speakers may have held on to it, younger ones probably dropped it. It might have survived in more formal or careful speech (perhaps when

reciting poetry) but dropped in casual conversation. So, even in Chaucer's day, pronunciation likely varied depending on age, region, or setting.

MIDDLE ENGLISH SPELLING

And then there's the issue of spelling. Middle English spelling is famously chaotic, even more so than in Old English. Students often find themselves diving into glossaries to figure out whether *naure*, *næure*, *ner*, or *neure* are all versions of the same word (they are!). Some words appear in over a dozen different forms. Why? It's not just random.

Several forces were at play: the ongoing sound changes that had begun back in Anglo-Saxon times, the influence of French after the Norman Conquest, and the rapid population growth and movement across the country, especially in the southeast. All of

this stirred up the language, and with no standard spelling system in place, people wrote what they heard, or what felt right.

If you ever want proof of just how messy Middle English spelling could be, just look at the word *might*. In one standard collection of early texts, you'll find a whole crowd of spellings, – each a clue to the chaos and creativity of the time.

Some of these differences are straightforward enough. There are grammatical forms, like *mightest* for the second-person singular (*thou mightest*), which explain the *-est* endings. Others seem to be slips of the pen (scribes weren't perfect, after all) like *mayht*, which may just be a muddled version.

Then come the dialects. Take *nicht*, for instance. That one points us north-east, where you'll still hear *nicht* for *night* in Scots.

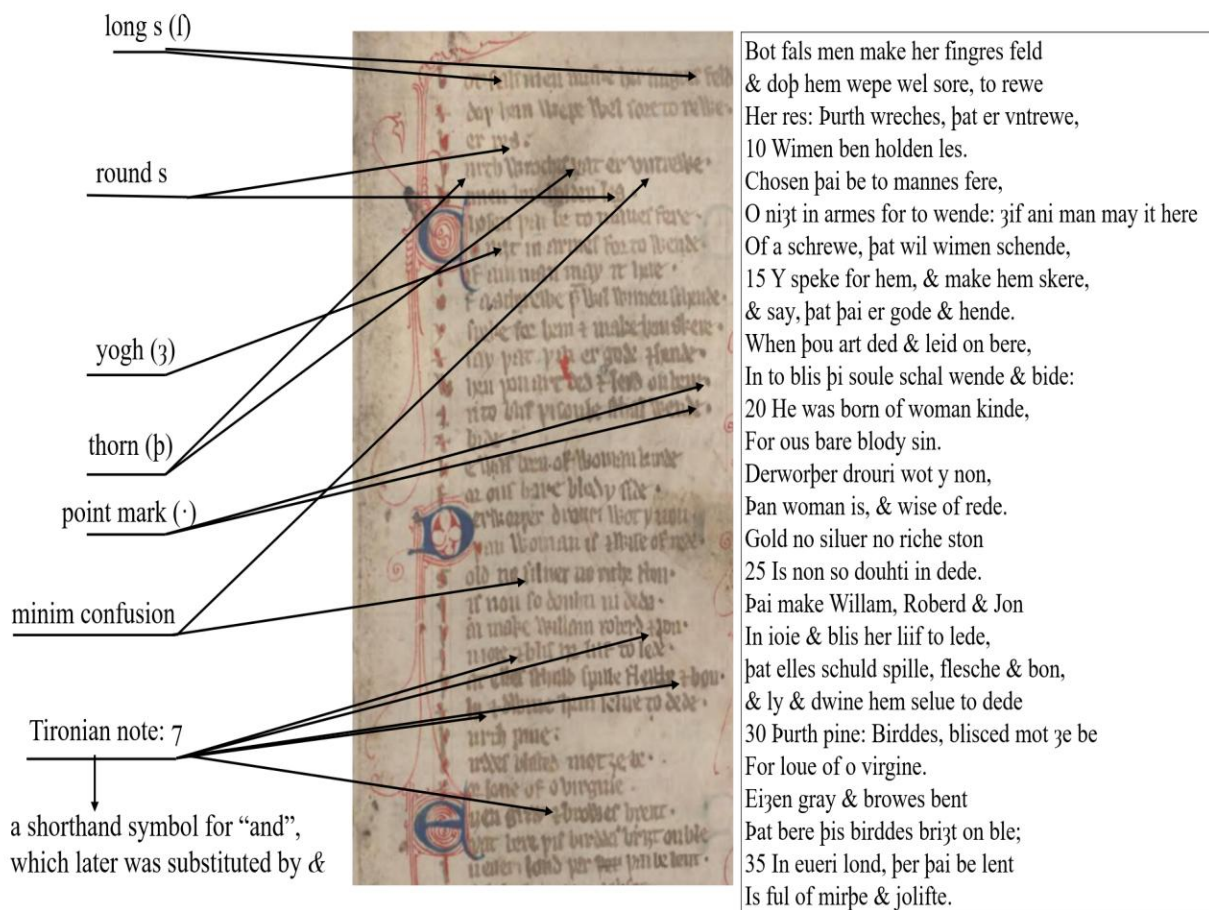
But by the late 15th century, when William Caxton used England's first printing press, much of this variation was fading away. Caxton chose the *myght* spelling and that version stuck. His decision helped shape the modern form of the word we all use today. It's a small but perfect example of how printers, more than poets, helped to standardize English.

MIDDLE ENGLISH MANUSCRIPT FEATURES

The manuscript culture of the 14th century offers a rich tapestry of linguistic and visual habits, many of them surprising to the modern reader. The next fragment is an affectionate passage from “*Alphabetical Praise of Women*”, preserved in the *Auchinleck Manuscript*.

One of the more visually striking features of this manuscript is its use of two distinct forms of the letter “s”: the long s (ſ) and the round s (s) – a distinction that was typical of formal Middle English scripts and persisted into early modern printing.

We can see this difference quite clearly in lines 6, 8 and 10:



In line 6, we find the words: *Her fals...fingres*. Here, the final letter is a long s (ſ), which resembles a modern “f” without the crossbar. The long “s” was customarily used in initial or medial positions within words. In this case, the scribe has used it at the end of the word, which is slightly unusual and may reflect either a scribal inconsistency or a lingering conservative habit. In lines 8 and 10, by contrast, we find: *Wimen ben holden les*. The final letter *s* here is a round “s”, which is precisely what we would expect in a word-final position.

One of the most immediately striking features is the presence of thorn (þ), representing the ‘th’ sound. In line 9, “*Purth wreches, þat er vntrewe*”, we see þurth for *through* and þat for *that*. Thorn, by this point, is beginning to disappear from standard usage, often replaced by the digraph *th*. Its survival here signals both conservatism and stylistic preference.

Another letter that makes an appearance is yogh (ȝ), seen in “*nȝt*” in line 12 (“*O nȝt in armes for to wende*”), where ȝ likely stands for the *gh* or *y* sound depending on context. In Middle English, ȝ was a versatile character fading from orthographic favour

as French influence grew. We also find ligatures – letters joined together for economy or aesthetics in combinations like “*blisced*” (line 31, a variant of *blessed*).

But even more fascinating – and arguably more surprising to a modern eye – is the Tironian note used throughout the poem. In line 29, for instance, we find: & *ly & dwine hem selue to dede*. That ampersand is not an ampersand at all. It’s a Tironian note: 7 – a shorthand symbol for “and” that dates all the way back to Roman times. It was originally part of a Roman shorthand system, attributed to Cicero’s scribe Tiro, and in medieval manuscripts, it continued to serve a very practical purpose: saving space and speeding up writing.

Punctuation is minimal and inconsistent. There are some point marks (·) that appear at the ends of lines or clauses, though their function is more rhythmical than syntactical: They are likely to indicate a pause or end of unit for oral reading.

Minim problem

One of the more intriguing challenges faced by readers of medieval manuscripts is something palaeographers refer to as minim confusion. The term may sound niche, but it captures a very real and very frustrating reading difficulty that emerges in script traditions of the 13th and 14th centuries – as we can see in the Auchinleck Manuscript, which we’re examining here.

A minim is the basic vertical stroke that forms the foundation of several letters in Gothic script – specifically *i*, *u*, *n*, *m*, and occasionally *v*. The issue arises when these letters appear in sequence, without any additional visual differentiation. Scribes did not yet make regular use of dotting the *i* (though there is one in the line 24 in the



The Latin phrase (possibly a tongue-twister) mimi numinum niuium minimi munium nimium uini muniminum imminui uiui minimum uolunt ‘the smallest mimes of the gods of snow do not wish at all in their life that the great duty of the defences of the wine be diminished’ in Gothic handwriting

word *siluer* ‘silver’), and spacing between letters was minimal at best. As a result, a group of four, five, or even six consecutive minims could yield multiple possible readings.

We see this phenomenon clearly in line 2 of our manuscript excerpt, in the word "vntrewe" (*untrue*). The first few letters – *v*, *n*, and *u* – are all formed from minims, resulting in what appears visually as an undifferentiated set of vertical strokes. The word could easily be misread as *nniuewe*, *inurewe*, or any number of plausible variants, depending on the reader’s expectations and familiarity with the text.

In response to this issue, scribes eventually began to adopt certain graphic strategies to enhance legibility. One such solution, imported from Carolingian script traditions and favoured by Norman scribes, was the substitution of *u* with *o* following sequences of minims. Thus, we begin to see spellings like *love*, *come*, *one*, and *son* – not reflective of any change in pronunciation, but rather a purely visual intervention intended to reduce ambiguity.

This strategy reflects a broader principle in the history of writing: that orthographic conventions often evolve as much for the eye as for the ear. Features we take for granted today – like the dotted *i*, the curved forms of *m* and *n*, or even interword spacing – developed not to record changes in speech, but to support legibility.

NORMAN INFLUENCE

As time went on, English spelling began to shift. Quite dramatically, in fact. One of the major reasons for this was the arrival of Norman scribes, who brought with them not only a different language (French) but also a different way of writing. Faced with the unfamiliar sounds of English, these scribes began to adapt them using the spelling patterns they already knew from French. So, for example, the Old English *cw* became *qu*, giving us *quill* instead of *cwill*. They also introduced *gh* where earlier English had used a simple *h*. So instead of *liht*, we get *light*; instead of *poht*, we get *thought*. *Gh* didn’t really add anything phonetically; it just looked more “proper” to Norman-trained eyes.

Ch also replaced *c* in some words, so that *cheese*, once *cēse*, took on a more French-influenced appearance. And where Old English had used *u*, the scribes began writing *ou*, so *hus* became *house* and *loud* was used instead of *lūd*.

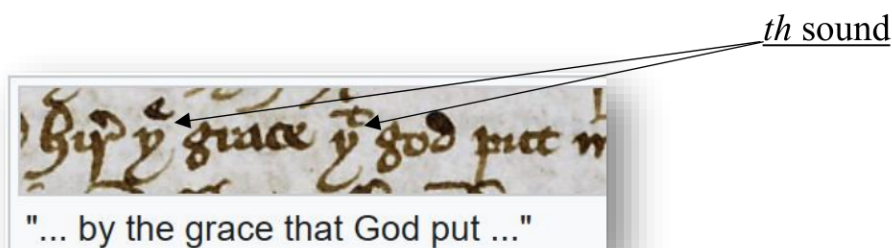
Other letters began to take on new roles, too. *K* became more visible: *knot*, *knife*, *kneel*. *Z* started to find its place, especially in words borrowed from elsewhere. And *j*, which began as a stylistic variation of *i*, started appearing in words like *jester* and *jest*, simply because it stood out better on the page.

Even *u* and *v* began to behave differently: *v* was preferred at the start of words (*vile*, *vain*), and *u* in the middle (*have*, *value*), – regardless of whether it was acting as a consonant or vowel.

By the early 1400s, English spelling had become a fascinating hybrid: part Old English, part French, part invention. The result? A system that still puzzles learners of English to this day. What began as scribes trying to make things clearer has left us with one of the most idiosyncratic spelling systems in the modern world.

YE

One of the most persistent quirks in modern mock-archaic English is the word “ye”, as in *Ye Olde Bookshoppe* or *Ye Ancient Bakery*. It looks quaint. It sounds old.



But here's the twist: it was never pronounced “yee”. Below, you can see how the words *the* and *that* are written with their final letters (*e* and *t*, respectively) placed above them to distinguish between the two.

The story goes back to Old English, which used a few letters we no longer see today, like *eth* (ð) and *thorn* (þ), which represented the *th* sound in words like *the*, *that*, and *thou*. Of those, *thorn* was the survivor, continuing well into the Middle English period. But over time, scribal handwriting began to evolve. The letter *þ*, especially in quick or cursive script, began to resemble a modern *y* (look at the words *say*, *þat* in line 16 of the

“Alphabetical Praise of Women” manuscript (p.106)). In fact, some scribes even put a dot over it, like a dotted *i*, just to distinguish it from the growing confusion.



*The first Philadelphia mint
(around 1908)*

This newly *y*-shaped thorn was especially common in function words: *the, that, thou, this*. And scribes, always keen to save time and ink, often abbreviated them: *þe* for *the*, *þat* for *that*, *þou* as *þu*, and so on.

In manuscripts, *þe* might appear dozens of times per page. But by the 17th and 18th centuries, most readers no longer recognized this old letter shape.

They saw what looked like a *y*, and naturally assumed it should be read as such. So *þe* became *ye* – not just in print, but in pronunciation as well. A completely modern misunderstanding, but one that stuck.



The spelling lingered, too. You’ll still find it in anachronistic sign with names of pubs – *Ye Olde Red Lion, Ye Golden Goat* – or used for humorous effect in faux-medieval dialogue. But no one in the Middle Ages would have said “yee”. They would simply have said “the.”

MIDDLE ENGLISH SOUNDS

What we see in this period is a kind of tug-of-war between speech and writing, with no clear winner. Scribes were introducing fresh spelling conventions, influenced by French, but at the same time, the spoken language was on the move. Sounds were changing reflecting the writing system.

One of the clearest examples involves consonant spelling. Many English consonants started to be spelled differently: *sugar* used to be *sucre*, *gesture* was once *gestour* – a clear

case of French influence reshaping the written word, while the spoken form continued to evolve along its own path.

And then there's the question of short vowels. English found itself needing a way to show the difference between a short vowel and a long one, especially in cases where the meaning might shift. The solution? Double the consonant after a short vowel. So, we write *dinner* (short *i*) with two *ns*, but *diner* (long *i*) with just one. Likewise *bedding* versus *biding*, or *holly* versus *holy*.

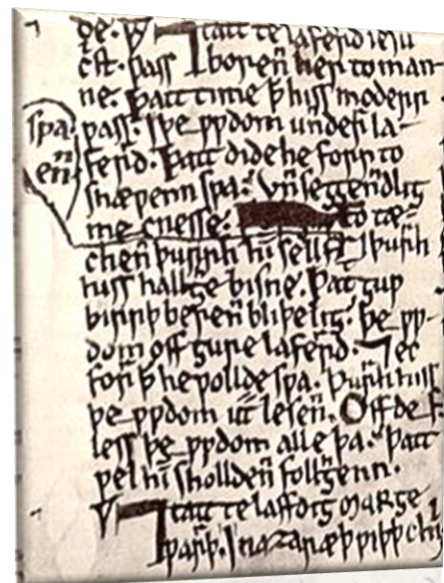
This trick – consonant doubling to mark vowel length – wasn't available in Old English, because back then, consonants themselves could be long. A word like *sunne* had a genuinely long *n* in speech. But by early Middle English, these long consonants were mostly gone. And once that phonetic feature disappeared, the doubled letters were free to take on a new job: marking short vowels instead.

It's a clever shift, but also one that leaves a lot of loose ends. Because sound and spelling were now following different logics, English ended up with a writing system that's as full of inconsistency. And the effects are still with us today: every time we wonder why *sitting* has two *ts*, but *siting* doesn't.

This solution is seen clearly in texts of the period, and no manuscript illustrates these spelling innovations better than the *Ormulum*.



The interior of the church of Bourne abbey, where the Ormulum was composed



A page from the Ormulum

What makes the *Ormulum* stand out from other works of its time is that it is neither anonymous nor untitled. The author boldly identifies himself right at the start:

*Piss boc iss nemmedd Orrmulum,
forrþi þatt Orrm itt wrohhte.*

This book is called *Ormulum* because Orm wrote it.

The *Ormulum* is a collection of homilies, sermons meant to be read aloud, and over 10,000 lines survive to this day. Orm's work is not famous for its poetic flair or even its theological content. What makes it truly significant is its unique spelling system, especially his method of consonant doubling. Orm was determined to create a foolproof guide to help his readers pronounce the text correctly when reading aloud. His key rule was to double a consonant after a short vowel, – a simple but effective strategy.

*Forrþi þatt Sannt Johanness word
Sprang wide & side o lande,
Forr þatt he wass u tnumenn mann
I laress & i dedess,
& forr þatt he bigann himm sellf,
Pær pær he wass i wesste,
To fullhtnenn baldeliȝ þe follc
Þatt nass næfrær bigunnenn...*

Because the word of Saint John
spread far and wide across the land,
because he was an outstanding man
in teaching and in deeds,
and because he himself began,
there where he was in the wilderness,
boldly to baptize the people
in a way that had never been done before ...

Orm was clearly conscious of his efforts and proud of his work. In the Dedication, he even warns future scribes to be careful to preserve his double-letter system accurately. It's no surprise some have dubbed him the very first English spelling reformer.

New contrasts and pronunciation shift

As *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* explains, in a few cases, new contrastive units emerged. The [v] sound became much more significant due to its

role in French loanwords, beginning to distinguish word pairs as it does today (consider *vine* versus *fine*). Although both [f] and [v] were present in Old English, the language didn't use them to set words apart. Similarly, French influence led to [s] and [z] becoming contrastive sounds (as in *seize* versus *cease*). The [ŋ] sound at the end of words also started to differentiate meaning around this time (compare *sing* and *sin*). In Old English, this nasal was always followed by a [g] – take *long* ([lɔŋg]) as an example. But by the end of the Old English period, that [g] dropped away, leaving just [ŋ] to mark the difference.

The study of Middle English phonology becomes increasingly complex (and fascinating) because of the diverse dialects involved. For instance, a letter might have different pronunciations depending on the region: the letter *i* was pronounced with a more fronted vowel in the south and a slightly more centralized vowel in the north. Conversely, a single sound might be spelled differently across dialects: the Old English [x] sound was spelled as *gh* in the south but as *ch* in the north (compare *laugh* and *lach*). And finally, we must be cautious because spelling wasn't standardized, adding yet another layer of challenge to our analysis.

Thanks to Orm's meticulous system, linguists today gain invaluable insights into vowel length in early Middle English. He also introduced innovations like using three different symbols for <g> to represent its various Old English sounds, adopting <wh> for OE <hw>, and <sh> for OE <sc>. The last two spellings have survived into Modern English. While Orm wasn't solely responsible for these changes, the *Ormulum* captures the spirit of spelling reforms taking place among English writers of the time, though less systematically elsewhere.

An interesting shift occurred with the [h] sound. In Old English, [h] appeared before consonants at the start of many words, like *hlaf* 'loaf' and *hnutu* 'nut'. This sound disappeared early in the Middle English period – marking the beginning of the 'aitch-dropping' process that continues today. Middle English manuscripts provide numerous instances of *h* being missing where it should be – such as *olde* instead of *holde* (held), or *ote* instead of *hote* (hot) – and also *h* appearing where it wasn't originally present, like *ham* for *am* or *hous* for *ous* (us).

THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

Why does the sound system of Chaucer's day feel so different from that of Shakespeare's? And why is Chaucer's English so much trickier to read than the English found in Caxton's printed texts just a few decades later? The answer to both questions lies in a major pronunciation revolution that swept through the language right at the close of the Middle English period. Chaucer probably caught the very beginning of this shift, but it wasn't fully underway until the early 15th century. Because this change reshaped the vowel system at a fundamental level, linguists have called it the Great Vowel Shift.

This Great Vowel Shift is the key dividing line between Middle English and Modern English. It was a dramatic reshaping of long vowel sounds during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, where vowels began to be pronounced higher and further forward in the mouth. Meanwhile, short vowels stayed mostly the same.

One can actually feel this change pronouncing the vowel [a] and then slowly moving one's tongue forward in one's mouth. One will notice that [a] gradually changes into /ai/ – just like the Great Vowel Shift in action.

The impact of the Great Vowel Shift is perhaps most obvious when we look at how we pronounce the names of the letters in the English alphabet today. Letters like A, B, C, and D are said as /eɪ/, /bi:/, /si:/, and [di:], but in modern French – the source of these names – they sound quite different: /a/, /be/, /se/, and /de/. The French forms have preserved the older vowel sounds, the ones English had before the Great Vowel Shift reshaped them. On the other hand, letters such as F, L, M, N, and S are pronounced with short vowels – /ɛf/, /ɛl/, /ɛm/, /ɛn/, and /ɛs/ – and these pronunciations have stayed remarkably stable in both languages because short vowels were largely untouched by the Shift.

What does this mean in practice? The vowel in *late* was pronounced /a:/ in Middle English, somewhat like the vowel in the modern (non-rhotic) *calm*. *Meat* had the vowel /e:/, similar to modern *head* and *house* was pronounced with /u:/, like modern *who*.

The Great Vowel Shift involved a series of changes in the pronunciation of long vowels and diphthongs. For instance, the Middle English long /i:/ gradually

diphthongised to /ɪi/, then to /əɪ/, and finally became the Modern English /aɪ/ sound we hear in words like *time*. Similarly, Middle English /e:/ was raised to Modern English /i:/, as in *meat*. The vowel /ɛ:/ in Middle English shifted up first to /e:/, then to /i:/, producing the vowel sound in *steal*.

The long /a:/ of Middle English moved forward to /æ:/, then raised through /ɛ:/ and /e:/, and in many dialects eventually diphthongised to /eɪ/, as in *face*.

Other vowels followed similar paths. Middle English [u:] diphthongised into /ʊu/, then shifted to /əʊ/, and by the eighteenth century became the Modern English /aʊ/, as in *house*. Meanwhile, Middle English /o:/ raised to Modern English /u:/ and /ɔ:/ was raised to /o:/, later becoming the diphthong /oʊ/ or /əʊ/, as heard in *road*.

It's important to remember, though, that the Great Vowel Shift affected only long vowels and diphthongs. Changes involving short vowels, such as the shift from /ʊ/ to /ʌ/ (think *cut* pronounced /kʊt/ changing to /kʌt/) that began in the mid-17th century, are not part of this vowel shift.

Middle English (c. 1400)	Early Modern English (c. 1600)	Modern English Example	Phonetic Process
/i:/	/əɪ/ → /aɪ/	<i>time</i> / <i>bite</i>	Diphthongization
/e:/	/i:/	<i>see</i> / <i>meet</i>	Raising (high-mid to high)
/ɛ:/	/e:/ (later /i:/)	<i>meat</i> / <i>clean</i>	Raising (low-mid to high-mid)
/a:/	/ɛ:/ → /eɪ/	<i>name</i> / <i>cake</i>	Raising & fronting
/u:/	/əʊ/ → /aʊ/	<i>house</i> / <i>now</i>	Diphthongization
/o:/	/u:/	<i>moon</i> / <i>goose</i>	Raising (high-mid to high)
/ɔ:/	/o:/ → /oʊ/	<i>stone</i> / <i>coat</i>	Raising (low-mid to high-mid)

For more than a century, linguists have attempted to explain why English underwent this series of dramatic vowel changes. Despite extensive research, no single, agreed-upon cause has been identified. What scholars can describe with confidence is

how the shift unfolded and under what conditions it took place, rather than why it began in precisely the way it did.

Social and historical circumstances form an important part of the background against which the shift occurred. In the aftermath of the Black Death, England experienced significant population movement and increased dialect contact, particularly in and around London. Such conditions are known to heighten phonological variability and may have contributed to the destabilization of existing vowel contrasts. There have also been suggestions, though without firm evidence, that speakers consciously altered their pronunciation for social or political reasons. Explanations appealing to deliberate avoidance of French pronunciation or to linguistic nationalism are generally regarded as speculative and lack empirical support.

The vowels involved did not change in isolation. Linguists have long debated whether the process should be understood as a *pull chain*, with the highest vowels leading the way, or as a *push chain*, in which changes lower in the system crowded those above them. Increasingly, however, these models are seen not as rival explanations but as complementary ways of describing different regional patterns within what was a long, uneven, and complex process.

The Great Vowel Shift was not a single event with a single cause, but a gradual, regionally varied development unfolding over several centuries.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 6):

1. How did the Norman Conquest influence the English language?
2. Why is 1066 often used as a dividing line in English history, and why is this misleading?
3. What characterizes the Middle English period linguistically and culturally?
4. How did Geoffrey Chaucer contribute to the development of English?
5. Why was Norman French so influential in England after 1066?
6. How did the Norman Conquest affect the English Church?
7. In what ways did commerce and the aristocracy maintain French-English bilingualism?

8. Why did English remain largely absent from the upper classes for over a century after the conquest?
9. How did the English kings' use of language change from the 12th to the 14th century?
10. What social factors contributed to the growing use of English among the nobility in the 12th century?
11. What was the significance of the year 1204 in the history of the English language?
12. How did the Hundred Years' War affect the prestige of French in England?
13. When was English first officially used to open Parliament?
14. Why did English survive the Norman invasion?
15. How did the dominance of French and Latin affect English writing during the Norman period?
16. How did stress patterns in Germanic languages contribute to the loss of Old English inflections?
17. How did contact with Scandinavian settlers accelerate the loss of inflections in English?
18. What makes the Peterborough Chronicle an important source for studying the transition from Old English to Middle English?
19. Why are most official documents from the Norman period not useful for studying Middle English?
20. How did English historical writing change after the Norman Conquest?
21. How does Chaucer's use of language differ from previous writers?
22. Why is Middle English spelling considered chaotic?
23. What factors influenced the variations in spelling during the Middle English period?
24. What is the significance of the thorn (þ) and yogh (ȝ) letters in Middle English manuscripts?
25. What is the "minim problem" in reading medieval manuscripts?
26. How did scribes address minim confusion?

27. What is the Tironian note and how was it used in manuscripts?
28. How did Norman scribes influence English spelling conventions?
29. How did the letters “u” and “v” develop different uses in Middle English?
30. What is the origin of the word “ye” in phrases like “Ye Olde Bookshoppe”?
31. Why was the letter thorn (þ) mistaken for a “y” by later readers?
32. How did consonant spelling change in Middle English due to French influence?
33. What role did consonant doubling play in Middle English spelling?
34. What is the significance of the Ormulum in understanding Middle English pronunciation?
35. What changes happened to the /h/ sound during the Middle English period?
36. What was the Great Vowel Shift and when did it occur?
37. How did the Great Vowel Shift affect the pronunciation of long vowels?
38. Which vowels were mostly unaffected by the Great Vowel Shift?

MIDDLE ENGLISH GRAMMAR

With the gradual erosion of the Old English inflectional system, English grammar underwent a number of structural adjustments. Chief among these was the emergence of relatively stable word-order patterns, serving to indicate the relationships between the elements of a clause. Yet it must be emphasised that, as with most processes of linguistic change, the decline of inflection was neither abrupt nor universally synchronised. Its progress can be traced across the entirety of the Middle English period, affecting different regions at different times, and with some local varieties retaining certain endings well after they had disappeared elsewhere.

The transition from a predominantly synthetic grammar, in which relationships were marked morphologically, to a predominantly analytic grammar, in which such relationships were indicated by word order and function words, represents only one dimension of the change.

In the discussion that follows, each part of speech will be examined in turn.

The Middle English noun

The Middle English noun underwent substantial restructuring as the Old English inflectional system declined. Inflectional endings were reduced to a small set – chiefly -e, -es, -en, and -ene – with -es emerging as the principal marker both for the genitive singular of most nouns and for the plural in all cases. The accusative form became virtually indistinguishable from the nominative, and the distinctive dative ending was lost altogether. Grammatical gender gave way to natural gender, aligning noun classification with biological or perceived sex rather than morphological category. Nouns typically formed plurals by adding -s (*wodes* ‘woods’, *horses* ‘horses’) or -n (*eyen* ‘eyes’, *oxen* ‘oxen’). The -en plural, once widespread (*hand/handen*, *tree/treen*), had almost entirely vanished by the close of the Middle English period, replaced by the -s ending of French origin. Only a few relic forms survive into Modern English (*children*, *brethren*, *oxen*).

Most nouns follow the basic paradigm of *bok*:

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>bok</i>	<i>bokes</i>
Accusative	<i>bok</i>	<i>bokes</i>
Genitive	<i>bokes</i>	<i>bokes</i>
Dative	<i>bok(e)</i>	<i>bokes</i>

The only remaining noun case was the genitive, marked in writing with 's or s', which remained a source of orthographic variation in subsequent centuries.

With the erosion of case endings, prepositions assumed greater importance in signalling grammatical relationships. Old English could rely solely on inflection to mark a role: *landes* (genitive singular) 'of the land' or *scipum* (dative plural) 'to/for ships'. In Middle English, these functions were increasingly expressed by prepositional phrases: *of the lond*, *to the shippes*. The preposition carried the grammatical meaning, while the noun took the regular plural or genitive marker.

The Middle English verb

The Middle English verb system retained more of its Old English heritage than did the noun, though notable changes reshaped its structure. Two developments were particularly significant: a reduction and levelling of inflectional endings and the transfer of many strong verbs into the weak paradigm.

Verbs in Middle English functioned in either finite or non-finite forms. Finite verbs were marked with suffixes to indicate mood (indicative, subjunctive, imperative), tense (present, past), number (singular, plural), and person (first, second, third). Non-finite forms, the infinitive, participles and the gerund, lacked these specific markings. By the late fourteenth century, a key convergence had occurred: the present participle and the verbal noun (gerund) regularly shared the ending *-ing*. This formal similarity didn't erase their functional distinction, however. The gerund and infinitive continued to behave syntactically as nouns (e.g., *to speken* 'to speak', *writinge* 'to write'), while participles maintained their role as adjectives (e.g., *gladynghe hertes* 'rejoicing hearts').

The strong-weak contrast, a defining feature of Old English, still existed but the balance shifted decisively. A great many verbs that were once strong (changing their internal vowel to form the past tense), like Old English *helpan* with its past tense *healp*, gradually adopted the weak pattern, becoming *helped*. This shift dramatically reduced the number of strong verbs. Middle English weak verbs are the immediate source of modern regular verbs.

A small, highly irregular group of verbs, however, resisted this trend. For convenience, these are often gathered into a third class - sometimes termed **MAD** verbs - an acronym for the mixed, anomalous, and defective types. This group includes common forms such as *been* ('to be'), *goon* ('to go'), and *wilnen* ('to wish').

The third of the aforementioned groups consists of verbs that display a high degree of irregularity and, according to Fisiak (1968: 99), may be further subdivided as follows:

➤ Mixed, whose past inflections are partly strong and partly weak, represented by only one verb: *dōn* 'do'.

➤ Anomalous, undergoing suppletion, that is the replacement of one stem with another one, when forming the past and, in some cases, the present tense forms, eg. *gōn* 'go', *bēn* 'be'.

➤ Defective, whose chosen principal categories are lacking or extremely rare. None of them, for instance, has the present participle and many lack the infinitive. *Can/con* 'I can', *dar* 'I dare' can be quoted as the examples of such verbs. Defective verbs from Middle English are the direct source of our modern modal verbs. When talking about the future, making conditional statements, or for other moods, modal verbs are used as auxiliary verbs: *I shal singe, thou mightest come, we sholde goon* 'I will sing, you might come, we should go'.

The levelling of endings is especially clear when comparing paradigms. An Old English strong verb like *drīfan* ('to drive') showed a complex array of distinct forms for nearly every person and number. Its Middle English descendant, *dryven*, exhibited far fewer contrasts:

- *thou dryvest* (second person singular)
- *he dryveth/dryves* (third person singular)
- *we/ye/they dryven* (plural)

This simplification of endings is one of the most prominent features of the transition from Old to Middle English.

The Middle English infinitive

In Old English, the infinitive was typically marked by an inflectional ending *-(i)an*. As this ending gradually disappeared, the particle *to* began to assume the role of infinitive marker. Originally a preposition expressing purpose - that is, meaning ‘in order to’ - *to* eventually lost its independent semantic content and functioned solely as a grammatical sign of the infinitive.

Alongside this development, early Middle English saw the rise of the *for to* construction, which also began with a clear purposive meaning. Over time, however, *for to* too lost this force and persisted mainly as a metrical alternative, especially in poetry. For example, in early versions of the Wycliffite Bible, both forms are attested:

<i>Comaunde thou to riche men.. for to 3yue, for to comune, for to tresoure to hem silf a good foundement into tyme to comynge</i>	Command you to rich men... to give, to share, to treasure to themselves a good foundation into time to come.
--	--

Once *to* was established as the infinitive marker, it frequently became separated from the verb it governed. By the 14th century, it was common for adverbs and pronouns to intervene. For instance, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, we find:

<i>To take þe toruayle to my-self to trwluf expoun & towche þe temez of tyxt & talez of armez To yow þat.. weldez more slyzt Of þat art.. or a hundreth of seche As I am.. Hit were a fole fele-folde.</i>	It would be a great foolishness for me to take it upon myself to truly explain and discuss the themes of text and tales of arms to you, who possess more skill in that art than a hundred people like me.
--	---

These and many other examples demonstrate that the splitting of the infinitive is far from a modern innovation; it has a long history in English, firmly rooted in the medieval period.

The Middle English auxiliaries “be” and “have”

The Middle English period laid the groundwork for the development of several key grammatical constructions that would become central in later stages of English. Most notably, the continuous form became increasingly common, especially in northern dialects towards the end of the Middle English era.

Meanwhile, *have* and *be* competed to express the perfect aspect. For example, in *Piers Plowman* one finds both *haue y-wroght* ‘have wrought’ and *be y-wroghten* ‘be wrought’, each conveying past actions. This overlap created potential confusion, since *be* was also used for passive constructions. The ambiguity was eventually resolved as *have* settled as the marker of the perfect, while *be* became associated more narrowly with the passive and continuous aspects.

Simultaneously, the verb *do* developed its role as an auxiliary in questions and negation, as in *Doth he understand?* and *I ne did not go*, serving as a grammatical ‘support’ without independent lexical meaning.

Additionally, the modal verbs (*will*, *shall*, *may*, *might*, *can*, and others) expanded their semantic scope. Their meanings had already begun to overlap with the subjunctive mood in late Old English, but with the loss of verb endings, modals became the primary means to express notions of possibility, necessity, and obligation.

The Middle English pronoun

Pronouns in Middle English resemble their Modern English descendants in many ways, though there are some notable differences.

Demonstrative Pronouns

One significant change from Old English to Middle English was the loss of inflection for gender and case in demonstratives. At the same time, the indeclinable definite article *the* (spelled *þe* in Middle English) emerged as a fixed form. The main demonstratives can be summarised as follows:

Number	Singular	Plural
Demonstrative	<i>þis</i>	<i>þise, þese</i>
	<i>þat</i>	<i>þas, þos</i>

Personal Pronoun Inflections

Though Middle English pronouns underwent some phonological shifts, they generally preserved the Old English distinctions of case, number, and gender. The first-person singular pronoun – *ich* or *I* – appears in a variety of spellings (*ich*, *ih*, *i*) and was capitalised as *I* from around 1250 onward.

Case	Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>ich, I</i>	<i>we</i>
Accusative	<i>me</i>	<i>us</i>
Genitive	<i>min(e), mi</i>	<i>ure, our</i>

During the Middle English period, the entire system of third-person plural pronouns underwent significant replacement through contact with Scandinavian dialects. Old English forms, which began mostly with *h-* (e.g. *hie*, *hira*), gave way gradually to Scandinavian forms beginning with *þ-* (e.g. *þei*, *þer*, *þem*). These new forms emerged first in northern dialects before spreading southwards. Different parts of the system changed at different rates: nominative forms generally shifted first, followed by genitive forms.

By the fourteenth century, *þei* had reached London and was adopted widely, appearing frequently in Chaucer's works alongside genitive forms *her(e)* or *hir(e)* and objective forms *hem*. By the 15th century, *their* had become standard as the genitive pronoun, with *them* following in use as the objective by the early sixteenth century.

The Middle English adjective

The transition from Old English to Middle English brought significant changes to the system of adjectives. Most notably, all inflections indicating gender and case, including the genitive, were lost. Additionally, the clear distinction between strong and weak adjective forms largely disappeared, with one important exception: monosyllabic adjectives ending in a consonant (such as *blind*, *god*, and *long*) often retained different strong and weak forms.

Take, for example, the adjective *god* 'good':

Form	Strong	Weak
Singular	<i>god</i>	<i>gode</i>
Plural	<i>gode</i>	<i>gode</i>

In Middle English, adjectives generally functioned much as they do in Modern English: they typically preceded the noun they modified.

The Middle English word order

During the Middle English period, the language's word order was far from fixed and showed considerable variation. By examining texts such as the late twelfth-century *Ormulum*, scholars have been able to trace how English gradually shifted toward the strict Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order that characterises Modern English.

The analysis of nearly 1,700 clauses from this period reveals that while SVO was the predominant pattern, a significant number of clauses displayed verb-subject (VS)

inversion, especially in main clauses. Subordinate clauses, by contrast, overwhelmingly retained the canonical SV order.

Certain syntactic environments made VS order more likely. For example, when a negative verb or an indirect object appeared at the beginning of a sentence, VS inversion was practically obligatory. Similarly, clauses starting with adverbs frequently featured verb-first order, with over half of such inverted clauses including an initial adverb preceding the verb.

When it comes to objects, their position relative to the verb depended on their type. Pronoun objects were flexible, appearing almost equally often before or after the verb. Full noun phrase objects, however, typically followed the verb, with pre-verbal placement being rare.

These patterns demonstrate a gradual tightening of word order conventions during Middle English, as English moved away from the freer, more flexible syntax of Old English toward the more rigid word order that we recognise today.

Despite all the data collected, we are still only beginning to understand what drives these word order changes. Why do certain adverbs trigger verb-subject (VS) inversion? It seems that adverbs expressing time, place, and negation exert particular influence. And why do some parts of a sentence reorder more rapidly than others?

The transition from object-verb (OV) to verb-object (VO) order took place fairly early in the language's history. However, verb-subject (VS) inversion persisted in certain environments well into the Early Modern English era, before subject-verb (SV) order became the standard nearly everywhere.

These questions remain central to Middle English research. Some inverted constructions survive in Modern English today. For example, narrative expressions like *Then came she* endure, as do negative adverbial inversions such as *Scarcely had they arrived* and *Seldom do we see such skill*. Poetry also preserves older word order forms, seen in lines like *Here will I stay* or *Nevermore shall we part*.

Postmodifying Genitive in the Middle English

This construction replaces the Old English genitive case ending with the preposition *of* in noun phrases. While the *of* construction was rarely found in late Old English, by

the close of the Middle English period it made up more than 80% of genitive forms. The similar French construction using *de* likely helped speed up this change.

The traditional genitive ending lasted longer in poetry, where it provided a useful metrical alternative. As in today's English, the inflectional genitive remained common with personal nouns, such as in *the girl's song*.

Around the same time, the "group genitive" began to appear, exemplified by phrases like *the Earl of Warwick's castle*. This form gradually replaced earlier, more segmented expressions such as *the Earl's castle, of Warwick*. Like many linguistic shifts during this period, it spread gradually, affecting certain phrase types before others.

Negation in the Middle English

One striking feature of Middle English is the persistence of the Old English practice of using multiple negatives. Early English texts demonstrate a simple principle: adding extra negative words intensifies the negation. For example, a fragment from the first of the Ten Commandments reads:

Ne haue þou no god... | You shall not have any god...

The Old English double negative construction, typically *ne ... naht*, was common in the early Middle English period. However, by its close, negation was generally expressed by a single negative particle such as *nat* or *not*, with *ne* gradually disappearing before other negative words. Nevertheless, the emphatic use of multiple negatives survived in many nonstandard dialects and continues to be found in some varieties of English today.

MIDDLE ENGLISH VOCABULARY

The "richness" of English vocabulary isn't just about having more words; it's about having choices. Because of the Middle English period, a writer can choose to be "direct and gritty" (Germanic) or "elegant and distant" (French). This dual nature allowed

Middle English to become a world-class literary language, capable of the earthy humour of the *Canterbury Tales* and the refined courtly love of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Borrowings from French and Latin

The influence of French became increasingly pronounced in English manuscripts during the 13th century. It is estimated that around 10,000 French words entered English at this time. These borrowings were primarily related to law and administration, but also extended into areas like medicine, art, and fashion. A significant number of these new terms were everyday words, with over 70% classified as nouns. Many were abstract nouns formed with French affixes such as *con-*, *trans-*, *pre-*, *-ana*, *-tion*, and *-ment*. Remarkably, about three-quarters of these French loanwords remain in use in Modern English.

When these new words entered the language, they often duplicated existing Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. This led to two common outcomes. In many cases, the French term replaced the Old English equivalent – for example, *leod* was supplanted by *people*, *wlitig* by *beautiful*, and *stow* by *place*. This process resulted in the loss of hundreds of Old English words.

However, in other instances, both the Old English and French words survived side by side, developing distinct meanings or connotations. This phenomenon is especially evident in culinary vocabulary, with pairs often attributed to Sir Walter Scott:

Old English	French
<i>ox</i>	<i>beef</i>
<i>sheep</i>	<i>mutton</i>
<i>calf</i>	<i>veal</i>
<i>deer</i>	<i>venison</i>
<i>pig, swine</i>	<i>pork</i>

As early as the mid-thirteenth century, bilingual word lists were being compiled to facilitate communication and mutual understanding between English and French

speakers. These glossaries served as practical tools to bridge the linguistic gap and aid intelligibility.

Numerous examples of such word lists survive, illustrating the close contact between the two languages and the efforts made to navigate their differences.

<i>begin</i>	<i>commence</i>
<i>child</i>	<i>infant</i>
<i>doom</i>	<i>judgment</i>
<i>freedom</i>	<i>liberty</i>
<i>happiness</i>	<i>felicity</i>
<i>hearty</i>	<i>cordial</i>
<i>help</i>	<i>aid</i>
<i>hide</i>	<i>conceal</i>
<i>holy</i>	<i>saintly</i>
<i>love</i>	<i>charity</i>
<i>meal</i>	<i>repast</i>
<i>stench</i>	<i>aroma</i>
<i>wedding</i>	<i>marriage</i>
<i>wish</i>	<i>desire</i>

French was the single most pervasive influence on the vocabulary of Middle English, but Latin remained an important source, especially in the professional and intellectual life of the 14th and 15th centuries. Latin borrowings of this period entered through sermons, legal records, medical treatises, and scholarly works, and were often used to elevate style or to display learning. In many cases, an Old English word, a French loan, and a Latin loan would coexist, each carrying its own stylistic weight. The native term tended to be the most common in everyday use; the French equivalent was preferred in literary or administrative contexts; the Latin form carried a formal, scholarly, or ecclesiastical flavour. The result was a vocabulary rich in nuanced alternatives, as in the triplets *ask/demand/interrogate* or *holy/sacred/consecrated*, all attested in Middle

English manuscripts. A selection of such sets is shown below, illustrating the layered texture of English during this period.

One of the most intriguing features of English, particularly in the Middle and Early Modern periods, is the occurrence of hybrid phrases – expressions which represent a bridge between the Germanic tongue of the common people and the Romance vocabulary of the ruling elite, which sometimes was the interplay between semantic precision and linguistic prestige. Consider a courtroom circa 1300. A judge delivers rulings in Anglo-Norman French, a clerk records the proceedings in Latin, and the defendant comprehends only Middle English. In such a context, language had to perform a precise mediating function. If you were a baker or a farmer in 1300, you knew what a *will* was. If you were a high-court judge, you called it a *testament*. By putting them together as *will and testament*, the language created a document that was legally binding for the rich and perfectly understandable for the poor. It is in this environment that the “hybrid” phrase emerges¹¹.

Take the well-known expression *peace and quiet*. Both *peace* (from Old French *pais*) and *quiet* (from Latin *quietem*, via French *quiete*) ultimately derive from Latin, yet in the usage of the period, each carried distinct connotations. *Peace* often invoked the formal and social order of the state, whereas *quiet* emphasized personal or inner calm. The pairing of the two terms did not constitute mere redundancy; rather, it ensured semantic comprehensiveness, permitting the concept to be apprehended consistently across multiple linguistic and social strata.

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in legal discourse. For example, in the phrase *cease and desist*, *cease* (French *cesser*) conveys the immediate, practical command, while *desist* (Latin *desistere*, via French) imparts formal, legal authority.

¹¹ Many of these hybrid phrases continue to survive in modern English, and their enduring appeal lies in the subtle distinctions they preserve. In *null and void* combines *null*, meaning legally invalid, with *void*, denoting something lacking effect, so that together the phrase expresses complete legal annulment. In *cease and desist*, *cease* instructs the immediate stopping of an action, while *desist* reinforces the idea of refraining from continuing. *Law and equity* distinguishes codified legal rules from fairness or moral justice. In matters of inheritance, *heir and legatee* differentiates between one who inherits by law and one specifically named in a will. The phrase *will and testament* preserves the distinction between personal intention and the formal legal document enshrining that intention. Similarly, *claim and demand* separates the assertion of a right from a formal request for its enforcement. In idiomatic or formal expressions such as *rest and repose*, *rest* indicates physical relaxation, while *repose* conveys calm, dignified stillness; likewise, *cease and refrain* distinguishes the act of stopping from the conscious effort to avoid repeating an action. Across these examples, the elements of different origin work together to maintain semantic nuance, ensuring that the meaning is both precise and layered.

Together, they function as a form of semantic reinforcement: if one word fails to communicate the point, the second one certainly will.

Far from indicating linguistic deficiency, these hybrid expressions demonstrate a high degree of semantic sophistication. English did not merely replace older lexical items with newer borrowings; it frequently retained both, side by side, functioning as a careful strategy to preserve meaning across diverse audiences. Contemporary idiomatic and legal English continues to bear witness to this historical practice, suggesting that these phrases are enduring relics of a period in which the language was actively negotiating the demands of multilingual communication.

Borrowings from other languages

During this time, English borrowed a modest but interesting range of words from several other languages, though many did not persist. Contact with the Low Countries brought words like *skipper* (ship's captain), *rook* (to steal), *boss* (master), and *to bouse* (to drink deeply), reflecting the strong trade and maritime ties with Dutch speakers. From elsewhere in Europe came loans such as *cigar* (Spanish), *marmalade* (Portuguese), *galley* (Italian), and *whiskey* (Irish).

Many of these terms arrived in English after traveling through other tongues, often via French. A good example is the vocabulary of chess - including *check*, *mate*, *bishop*, and *pawn* - which came through French but ultimately has roots in Persian.

This wave of borrowing reshaped the English lexicon considerably. While early Middle English vocabulary was over 90% native, by the close of the period native words accounted for only about 75%, showing the profound influence of contact and exchange.

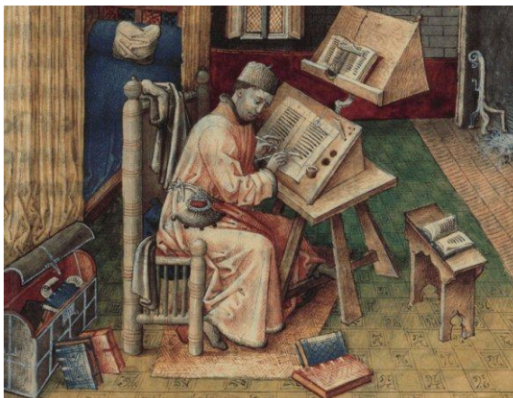
The origins of standard English

The most crucial factor was the rise of London as the political and commercial heart of England. Particularly influential were the administrative offices of the London Exchequer, whose practices became increasingly important after around 1430. A huge

volume of manuscript copying occurred within this hub, where scribes developed consistent standards and conventions. These methods gradually spread beyond official circles, shaping the work of countless private scribes. Over time, this influence extended across a wide range of texts, including literary works, thereby helping to standardize English writing.

Chancery Standard

Some of the royal administrative records, written on parchment sheets sewn together and rolled into rolls, provide key evidence of early record-keeping. The systematic maintenance of these documents was central to the monarchy's efforts in the twelfth century to create more effective government. Initially, the royal clerks travelled with the king, producing official papers on the move; but by the thirteenth century they had become a permanent fixture at Westminster.



The Chancery scribe

The significance of this office lies in its role in promoting the standardization of English – in handwriting, spelling, and grammar. The distinctive *Chancery hand*, which originated in Italy during the thirteenth century and passed through France to England, was adopted by scribes in London. From about 1430, the Chancery churned out a vast quantity of documents. Careful study of these manuscripts, such as the *Early Chancery Proceedings*, reveals how clerks brought order to the many competing spellings of the day, and their preferences largely shaped the spellings that later became standard.

In fact, the roots of Modern Standard English trace more directly to the Chancery than to literary giants like Chaucer. Although various regional dialects had begun to develop some standard features, the sheer volume of official material from the Chancery soon eclipsed them. By the time William Caxton set up his printing press in Westminster in 1476, the so-called *Chancery Standard* had already achieved widespread prestige.

An example of the Chancery's influence is its consistent use of *which* rather than earlier variants like *whiche*, *whiche*, or *wich*. Similarly, modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, *shall*, and *should* appear in forms very close to those we recognize today. Distinctions between the Chancery's preferences and those of literary figures are clear: for example, the Chancery used *not* rather than *nat*, and *gave* instead of *ȝaf*.



Some of the royal Chancery records, kept on skins of parchment, which were then sewn together and rolled up

Importantly, the Chancery Standard did not derive from the language of prominent writers like Chaucer or Gower. Instead, it represents a distinct variety, shaped by Central and East Midland dialects combined with the London linguistic milieu. This blend reflects the significant migration from the Midlands to London in the fifteenth century, granting the Midland dialects a more influential role in the development of Standard English than previously assumed.

The final piece in the puzzle was the advent of printing, which facilitated the spread of a more uniform written standard across England. While absolute uniformity was never achieved, by the close of the fifteenth century the foundations of Standard English were firmly in place.

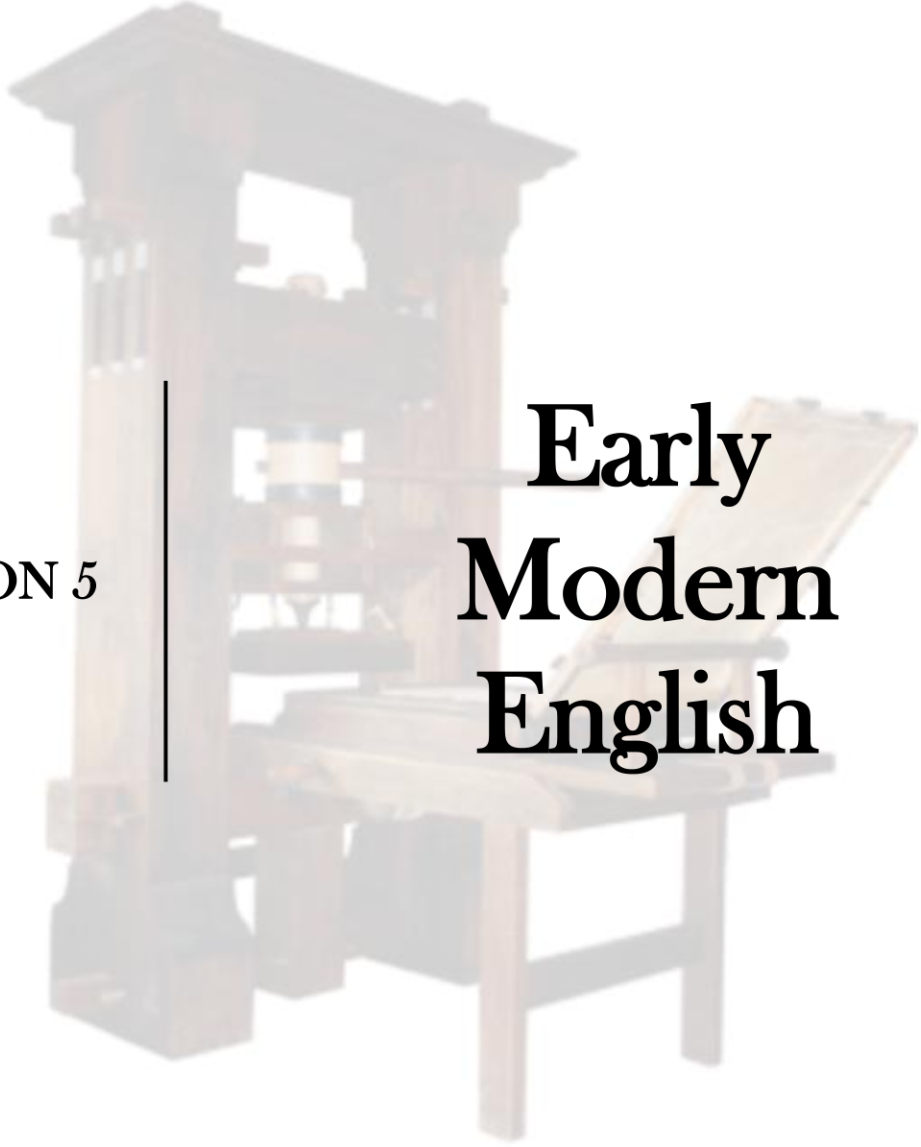


History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 7):

1. What major grammatical shift occurred in English as a result of the erosion of the Old English inflectional system?
2. How did the decline of inflections affect word order during the Middle English period?
3. Was the decline of Old English inflections uniform across regions and dialects? Explain.
4. What is the difference between a synthetic and an analytic grammar, and how does this relate to Middle English?
5. What were the main inflectional endings retained by Middle English nouns?

6. Explain the shift from grammatical gender to natural gender in Middle English nouns.
7. How did prepositions replace inflectional endings in marking grammatical relationships in Middle English? Give examples.
8. Which plural endings survived into Modern English as relic forms?
9. What were the two significant developments in the Middle English verb system?
11. What are “MAD verbs”? Provide examples and explain their significance.
12. Compare the verb paradigms of Old English and Middle English with an example verb. What simplifications are evident?
13. How did the marking of the infinitive change from Old English to Middle English? What is a split infinitive?
14. What major change affected demonstrative pronouns from Old English to Middle English?
15. What happened to adjective inflections indicating gender and case in Middle English?
16. What did analyses of texts like the *Ormulum* reveal about word order in Middle English?
17. What types of adverbs were most likely to trigger VS inversion?
18. Name some examples of VS inversion surviving in Modern English.
19. What role did French influence play in the adoption of the “of” genitive?
20. What is the “group genitive” and how did it differ from earlier constructions?
21. Why did the traditional genitive ending last longer in poetry?
22. How did the use of negation particles change over the Middle English period?
23. Approximately how many French words entered English in the 13th century, and what fields did they mostly pertain to?
24. What happened when French loanwords duplicated existing Old English words? Give examples.
25. How did Latin borrowings in the 14th and 15th centuries differ in use and style from French and Old English words?
26. From which fields did most Latin borrowings enter Middle English?

27. Name some words borrowed into English from the Low Countries and their origins.
28. How did the proportion of native English words in the lexicon change over the Middle English period?
29. Why was London important in the development of Standard English?
30. Was complete uniformity achieved in English by the end of the fifteenth century? Explain.
31. What is the function of the phrase *will and testament* in bridging social and linguistic differences? Provide more examples of the kind.



SECTION 5

Early Modern English

THE EARLY MODERN ENGLISH PERIOD

There is little doubt that we must acknowledge an Early Modern English phase within the history of English. Without it, the leap from Middle English to Modern



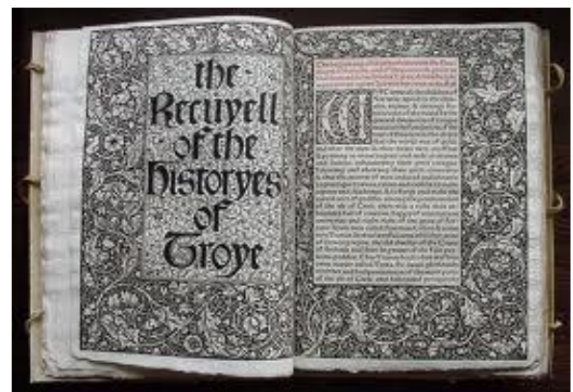
William Caxton
c. 1422 – c. 1491

English would be far too abrupt. Spanning roughly from Chaucer's era to that of Samuel Johnson, say 1400 to 1800, the language underwent a series of quite noticeable changes, showing many differences from what we consider modern usage. By the late 18th century, though, these differences had largely diminished. For instance, reading Daniel Defoe today requires far less effort or explanatory notes than trying to understand Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

When exactly this Early Modern English period begins is a matter of debate. Some scholars prefer an earlier starting point, around 1400–1450, just after Chaucer and coinciding with the onset of the great pronunciation changes that mark a clear barrier between Middle and Modern English in terms of understandability. Others favour a slightly later date, near 1500, once the influence of the printing press had taken firm hold on the language.

Many see the arrival of printing as the decisive turning point, so this account begins in 1476, the year William Caxton established his press at Westminster. This new technology gave an extraordinary boost to the development of a standard form of English and to the study of how the language worked.

Beyond encouraging greater uniformity in spelling and punctuation, printing offered far more people the chance to write – and ensured their words travelled much further than ever before. Consequently, a greater number of works from this period have survived. In the century and a half that followed, it is thought that close to 20,000 books were produced.



*The first book printed in English:
The Recuyell of the Historyes of*

From the 16th century onwards, the history of English becomes more tangible, with abundant evidence of change not only in the surviving texts but also in the growing body of commentary on grammar, vocabulary, the writing system, and literary style. It was a time when scholars began to talk seriously and systematically about their language.

Caxton's first major venture was his 700-page translation of *The Histories of Troy* – the first book ever printed in English. In 1476, he set up his wooden press in a shop within the grounds of Westminster Abbey, close to the royal court. How long it took him to translate and print a given work is uncertain, as we know little about how his methods evolved while he and his assistants gained experience¹².



The earliest known representation of a printing office (1499) with death coming to take wicked printers away.

CAXTON'S PROBLEM

Caxton was first and foremost a merchant – not a linguist or literary expert. When he faced the challenge of translation, he encountered several significant dilemmas. If Caxton wanted his books to sell, the language inside them had to be understood across the whole country. But, as he complained, how could he satisfy everyone?

In the latter part of 1490, William Caxton prepared an English version of the *Eneydos* for Prince Arthur, the eldest son of Henry VII. The work was translated not directly from Latin but from a French prose adaptation (*Le Liure des Eneydes*, 1483), itself derived from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Caxton is explicit about this chain of transmission,

¹² The earliest known representation of a printing workshop (c. 1499) in which Death appears to carry off “wicked printers” should be understood in the context of the late medieval *Danse Macabre*, a genre that systematically represented death's encounter with a wide range of social roles – kings, priests, merchants, craftsmen – without exception. The inclusion of a printing office indicates that, by the end of the fifteenth century, printing had become established enough to count as a recognisable social practice, subject to the same ethical scrutiny as other forms of textual labour. The figure of the “wicked printer” reflects contemporary concern with the ethical responsibilities of those involved in the production and dissemination of texts – especially with regard to accuracy, doctrinal reliability, and commercial motivation.

noting in his colophon that the text was rendered “oute of latyne in to frenshe, and oute of frenshe reduced in to Englysshe,” and that the translation was completed on 22 June 1490, in the fifth year of Henry VII’s reign. The prologue that precedes the text is one of the most revealing documents of the early English printing period, combining a practical account of translation with a perceptive commentary on linguistic change, regional variation, and the problem of choosing an appropriate written English. Note the unusual spellings and phrasing typical of the late 15th century. The passage is readable without a dictionary.

After dyuerse werkes made translated and achieued, hauing noo werke in hande, I, sitting in my studye where as laye many dyuerse paunftlettis and bookys, happened that to my hande came a lytyl booke in frenshe, whiche booke is named Eneydos made in latyn by that noble poete and grete clerke Vyrgyle.

And whan I had aduysed me in this sayd boke, I delybered and concluded to translate it in-to englysshe, And forthwyth toke a penne and ynke, and wrote a leefe or twyne whyche I ouersawe agayn to corecte it. And whan I sawe the fayr and straunge termes therin, I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylmen whiche late blamed me, syeing that in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes whiche coude not be vnderstande of comyn people and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons. And fayn wolde I satysfye euery man; and so to doo, toke an olde boke and redde therin and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele understand it ... And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne ... And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse, for to haue sayled ouer the see into Selande, and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte Forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them; And one of theym named Sheffielde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete; and specyally he axed after eggys; and the goode wyf answerde, that she coude speke no frenshe, And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no frenshe, but wolde haue hadde ‘egges’ and she vnderstode hym not. And theene at laste another sayd that

he wolde haue ‘eyren’ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel. Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, ‘egges’ or ‘eyren’?

Certainly it is harde to palyse euery man by cause of dyuersite and chaunge of langage. And som honest and great clerkes haue ben wyth me, and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde. And thus between playn, rude and curyous, I stande abashed, but in my judgemente the comyn termes that be dayli vsed, ben lyghter to be vnderstonde than the old and auncyent englysshe. And for as moche as this present Booke is not for a rude vplondyssh man to laboure therein ne rede it, but onely for a clerke and a noble gentylman that feleth and vnderstondeth in faytes of armes, in loue, and in noble chyualrye, therefor in a meane bytwene bothe I haue reduced and translated this sayd booke in to our englysshe, not ouer rude ne curyous, but in suche termes as shall be vnderstanden, by goddys grace, accordynge to my cople.

William Caxton, 1490

THE ELIZABETHAN ERA OF ENGLISH

The Renaissance brought a fresh surge of innovation to English vocabulary, sparked by a renewed interest in classical learning. This period in England, spanning the 16th and early 17th centuries, is known as the English Renaissance. This time is often referred to as the “Elizabethan Era” or the “Age of Shakespeare,” named after the reigning queen and the era’s most celebrated playwright, whose influence shaped English culture profoundly.

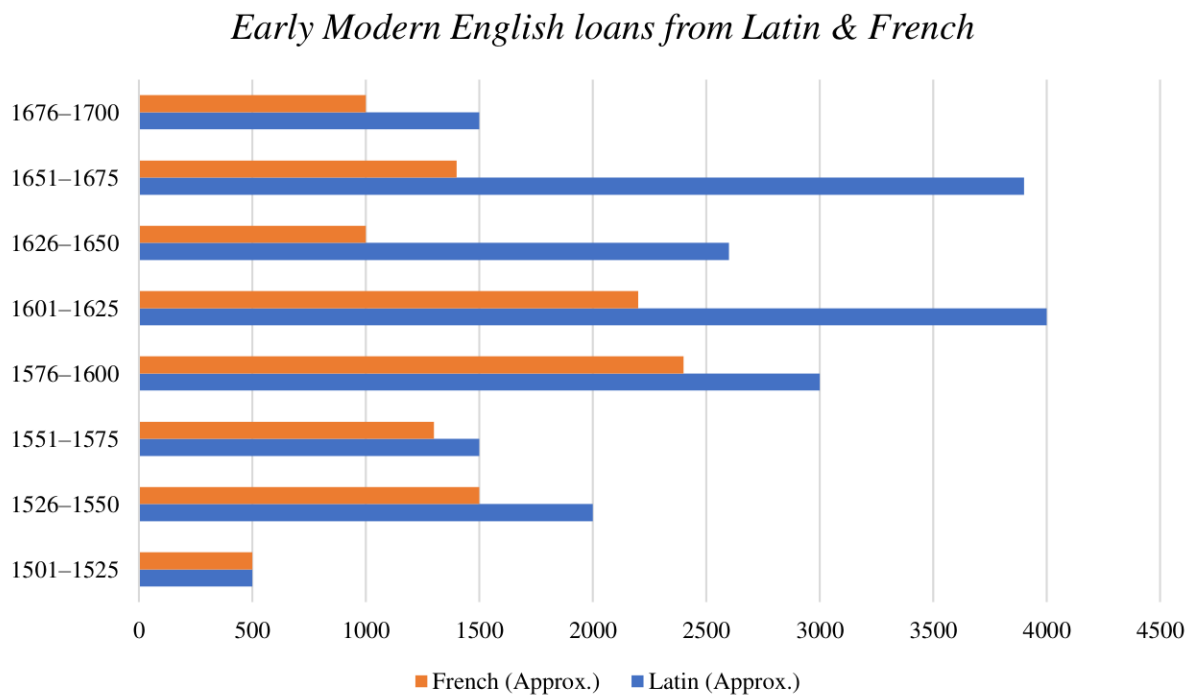
The 16th century saw an explosion of English publications, fueled by a revived enthusiasm for classical languages and literature, alongside rapid advances in science, medicine, and the arts. This era - from Caxton’s time up to around 1650 - later became known as the ‘Renaissance’. It encompassed major events like the Reformation, Copernicus’s groundbreaking discoveries, and



Elizabeth I (1533–1603)



European voyages exploring Africa and the Americas. These new ideas had an immediate and wide-reaching impact on English, sparking lively debate. The main area affected was vocabulary: English simply lacked the words to describe many of these novel concepts and inventions.



So, writers turned to borrowing, primarily from Latin, but also from Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. The diagram illustrates the influx of Early Modern English loanwords from Latin and French during key years of this period.

As global exploration gathered momentum, English began to absorb words from more than fifty different languages, including many indigenous tongues from North America, Africa, and Asia.

SHAKESPEARE'S INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH

All histories of *English* agree that during the final decades of the Renaissance, two influences stand out above the rest: the works of William Shakespeare and the 1611 King James Bible. When we talk about their influence, we're not just referring to their beauty or memorability. For instance, famous lines like "To be or not to be" are well known, but they don't really shed light on how English grammar or vocabulary evolved.

What matters more are Shakespeare's many lexical "firsts" – words he introduced into English such as *eyeball*, *bedroom*, *lonely*, *majestic*, *elbow*, *swagger*, *critic*, *addiction*, *excitement*, and *gloomy*. These aren't necessarily memorable quotes, but they mark the first recorded uses of these words in English. Shakespeare's greatest impact was on the lexicon, yet his plays and poems also offer countless examples of English's ongoing development at the time, making his work essential for understanding contemporary pronunciation, word formation, syntax, and usage.



William Shakespeare
(1564- 1616)

William Shakespeare

Multiple hyphenation patterns

Any study of Shakespeare's vocabulary would be incomplete without noting his inventive use of hyphenated compounds¹³. Many of these, like *hugger-mugger*, are uniquely his and occupy a curious middle ground between neologisms that survived into modern English and those that vanished. As David Crystal (2019) observes, Shakespeare frequently utilized hyphenated compounds to achieve metrical precision and descriptive depth. A striking example of this occurs in *King John*, where he employs a series of twenty unique compounds – such as *canker-sorrow*, *arch-heretique*, and *widow-comfort* – that appear nowhere else in his entire canon.

¹³ Shakespeare used hyphenation as a sophisticated linguistic tool, allowing him to play with meaning and meter simultaneously. This operated in three main ways. First, it satisfied rhythmic necessity: by collapsing extended phrases into compact adjectival compounds – e.g., *widow-comfort* 'a woman comforted by her status as a widow' – he could maintain the strict ten-syllable iambic pentameter. Second, it helped to achieve a high degree of semantic density: hyphenated compounds functioned as "single units of thought," generating multi-layered metaphors; for example, *canker-sorrow* conveys not merely grief but a consuming, corrosive sadness, like a canker worm devouring from within. Third, it enhanced rhetorical characterization: such compounds frequently served as pre-packaged epithets or insults – e.g., *arch-heretique* – enabling characters to label one another with concise, official-sounding descriptors, thereby intensifying the political and personal caustic language of the drama.

Compound	Meaning	Context
Character Descriptions & Insults		
<i>arch-heretique</i>	“Chief” or extreme heretic	Used by Cardinal Pandulph to describe King John; a sharp, official-sounding insult
<i>basilisco-like</i>	Braggart, boastful, but cowardly	Derived from classical/mythical imagery; applied to empty boasting behavior
<i>smooth-fac’d</i>	Smooth or flattering appearance; deceitful, “two-faced”	Often conveys duplicity in character
<i>pale-visag’d</i>	Pale-faced; suggesting fear, illness, or intense emotion	Can also imply social or moral fragility
Emotional & Abstract Concepts		
<i>canker-sorrow</i>	Grief that corrodes the soul, like a canker worm	A dense, metaphorical compound
<i>widow-comfort</i>	Bittersweet “comfort” of a widow’s grief	Combines literal and figurative meaning
<i>sinne-conceiuing</i>	Something that gives rise to sin	Highlights moral or spiritual causation
<i>heauen-mouing</i>	So powerful or sincere as to influence heaven	Often hyperbolic; poetic effect
Physical States & Actions		
<i>bare-pickt</i>	Picked clean; meager, scavenged	Describes objects or situations lacking substance
<i>halfe-blowne</i>	Half-blossomed; partially opened	Often used metaphorically for incomplete development
<i>thin-bestained</i>	Lightly or thinly stained or spotted	Visual description, sometimes moralized
<i>pell-mell</i>	Headlong, chaotic, in a confused mass	One of the few terms surviving in modern English

Compound	Meaning	Context
Situational Descriptors		
<i>breake-vow</i>	To break a solemn promise or oath	Common in moral and legal contexts
<i>faire-play</i>	Equitable or impartial treatment	Popularized by Shakespeare; often literal or metaphorical
<i>giant-world</i>	A world appearing overwhelmingly large or dominated by powerful forces	Metaphorical; rarely literal
<i>vile-concluded</i>	Ending in a foul, wicked, or “vile” manner	Often used in narrative or moral evaluation

Shakespearian idiomatic expressions

The jump from quotation to everyday idiom is sometimes not great, as the following examples illustrate. Many of the phrases we use in everyday conversation were either coined or popularized by Shakespeare. These idiomatic expressions demonstrate how Shakespearean drama has fundamentally shaped the DNA of the English language.

Idiom	Modern Meaning
<i>A foregone conclusion</i>	A result that can be predicted with certainty (Othello (III.iii))
<i>All that glisters¹⁴ is not gold</i>	Appearances can be deceiving (The Merchant of Venice (II.vii))
<i>Break the ice</i>	To do or say something to relieve tension (The Taming of the Shrew (I.ii))
<i>Cold comfort</i>	Little or no comfort (King John (V.vii))
<i>Dance attendance</i>	To do one's utmost to please someone (Henry VIII (V.ii))
<i>Good riddance</i>	Relief at someone's departure (The Merchant of Venice (II.vii))
<i>Heart of gold</i>	A kind and generous nature (Henry V (IV.i))

¹⁴ While modern speakers commonly say “all that glitters is not gold”, the original Shakespearean phrasing in *The Merchant of Venice* (II.vii) uses *glisters*. *Glister* was the standard Elizabethan term. The shift to *glitters* in common usage occurred during the 17th and 18th centuries, yet the logic of the idiom remains identical.

<i>Hoist with his own petard</i> ¹⁵	Being the victim of one's own schemes (Hamlet (III.iv))
<i>In a pickle</i> ¹⁶	In a difficult or "muddled" situation (The Tempest (V.i))
<i>It's Greek to me</i>	I can't understand it at all (Julius Caesar (I.ii))
<i>Laughing stock</i>	A person subjected to ridicule (The Merry Wives of Windsor (III.i))
<i>Love is blind</i>	Affection prevents us from seeing flaws (The Merchant of Venice (II.vi))
<i>Make a virtue of necessity</i>	To do an unpleasant task with a show of grace (Two Gentlemen of Verona (IV.i))
<i>Play fast and loose</i>	To behave irresponsibly or immorally (Antony and Cleopatra (IV.xii))
<i>Salad days</i>	A period of youth and inexperience (Antony and Cleopatra (I.v))
<i>Seen better days</i>	Past one's prime or in poor condition (As You Like It (II.vii))
<i>Send him packing</i>	To dismiss someone abruptly (Henry IV, Part 1 (II.iv))
<i>Too much of a good thing</i>	An excess can be harmful (As You Like It (IV.i))
<i>Vanish into thin air</i>	To disappear completely (Othello (III.iii))
<i>Wear one's heart on one's sleeve</i> ¹⁷	To show one's feelings openly (Othello (I.i))
<i>Wear out one's welcome</i>	To overstay one's visit (The Comedy of Errors (I.i))
<i>Wild-geese chase</i> ¹⁸	A futile or hopeless pursuit (Romeo and Juliet (II.iv))

¹⁵ A *petard* was a bell-shaped metal engine filled with gunpowder used to blow open city gates or walls during a siege. A *petardier* (the engineer) had to run up to the gate, fix the bomb, light the fuse, and run away. If the fuse was too short or the bomb faulty, the engineer would be hoist (blown up) by his own device. It shifted from a literal workplace hazard for soldiers to a metaphor for any scheme that backfires on the person who created it.

¹⁶ While we now use this to mean being in a "tough spot" or a difficult situation, the origin is surprisingly culinary. In Shakespeare's time, a *pickle* was almost exclusively a preservative liquid (brine or vinegar). In *The Tempest* (V.i), King Alonso asks the jester Trinculo, "How camest thou in this pickle?" Trinculo, who is drunk and has been chased through a muddy pond, replies that he has been in a "pickle" that will keep the flies off him. Shakespeare used the word to describe being "preserved" in a state of drunkenness or filth. Over time, the "messy" physical state evolved into our modern meaning of a "messy" or difficult situation.

¹⁷ This is perhaps one of Shakespeare's most visually evocative metaphors, but its origin is actually quite dark, as it is spoken by a villain. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, knights would often tie a lady's favour (like a scarf or ribbon) around the sleeve of their armour during a jousting tournament. This was a literal way of showing their devotion. In *Othello* (I.i), the villainous Iago says that if his outward actions ever truly reflected his inner thoughts, he would be "wearing his heart upon his sleeve for daws [birds] to peck at". Today, we use it as a positive trait (being honest and open). However, Iago meant it as a warning; he believed that showing your true feelings made you vulnerable and weak – as easy for a bird to attack as a piece of meat on a sleeve.

¹⁸ This one doesn't refer to catching a physical goose, it's origin has to do with a follow-the-leader horse race. In a "Wild-Goose Chase" race, a lead rider would perform difficult maneuvers, and the following riders had to mimic them exactly. It was named after the flight patterns of wild geese, who fly in a strict V-formation following a lead bird. When Mercutio uses it in *Romeo and Juliet*, he is talking about a battle of wits that is moving so fast and erratically he can't keep up. It eventually came to mean a pursuit that is not just difficult, but completely pointless or doomed to fail.

Shakespearean conversion

One of the consequences of the falling away of inflectional endings in English was a marked growth in the process of grammatical conversion – the use of one word-class with the function of another. Shakespeare made copious use of it, and was especially fond of making verbs from nouns. This technique allowed him to bypass the need for clunky suffixes, creating a leaner, more “active” syntax that was essential for the fast-paced delivery of his plays.

*To **grace** in captive bonds his chariot wheels?... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*To **wrong** the dead, to **wrong** myself and you... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*The **deep** of night is crept upon our talk... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*It shall **advantage** more than do us wrong... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*That I do fawn on men... / And after **scandal** them... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*Judge me, you gods; **wrong** I mine enemies?/And if not so, how should I **wrong** a brother... (from *Julius Caesar*)*

*Time's office is **to fine** the hate of foes... (from *The Rape of Lucrece*)*

*For mirth doth search the bottom of **annoy**... (from *The Rape of Lucrece*)*

***Mud not** the fountain that gave drink to thee... (from *The Rape of Lucrece*)*

*The aim of all is but to **nurse** the life/ With honour, wealth, and ease in waning age... (from *The Rape of Lucrece*)*

THE BIBLICAL LEGACY:

IDIOMS OF THE 1611 AUTHORIZED VERSION

In 1611, the year Shakespeare retired from writing for the stage, the King James Bible (KJB) was published. The King James Bible, also known as the Authorized Version (AV), is perhaps the only book in history that can rival the works of Shakespeare for its influence on the English language. Published in 1611, it arrived at a “golden moment” when English was at its most flexible, poetic, and expressive.

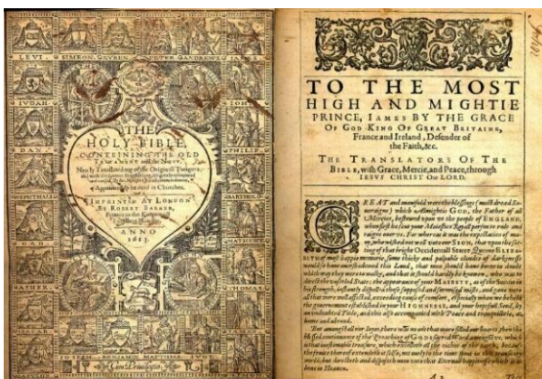


The King James Bible

When King James I took the throne in 1603, the English church was divided. The Puritans used the Geneva Bible (which had radical, anti-monarchy footnotes), while the established Church of England used the Bishops' Bible (which was unpopular and clunky). James wanted a single version to unify his people and reinforce the authority of the Church and the King. He commissioned 47 scholars,

divided into six “companies”, to translate the text from the original Hebrew and Greek.

Unlike modern translations that prioritize ease of reading, the KJB scholars prioritized majesty and aurality (how it sounds when read aloud). Interestingly, the KJB was slightly old-fashioned even in 1611. The translators used “thou” and “-eth” endings (like *goeth*), which were already starting to fade from common speech. This gave the text a sense of timeless, ancient authority. The translators tried to preserve the parallelism of Hebrew poetry (repeating ideas in slightly different ways). This created a rhythmic, driving pulse that makes the text easy to memorize. Many of these phrases sound poetic



The initial pages of the KJB

because the KJB translators kept the Hebrew idioms literally. For example, *skin of my teeth* is a literal translation of a Hebrew metaphor that doesn't quite make sense in English logic (teeth don't have skin), but the sheer power of the image made it stick. The King James Bible is responsible for an incredible number of metaphors that we use today without even

realizing we are quoting scripture. Because it was translated by a committee focused on “sacred elocution”, the phrases are often rhythmic, balanced, and highly visual.

Here is a list of some of the most famous phrases that originated in or were popularized by the 1611 translation:

Phrase	Modern Meaning
<i>A house divided</i>	A group that is split by internal disagreement cannot survive (Matthew 12:25)
<i>A leopard cannot change its spots</i>	People cannot change their basic nature (Jeremiah 13:23)
<i>Blind leading the blind</i>	Uninformed people following an uninformed leader (Matthew 15:13)
<i>By the skin of my teeth</i>	To escape something by a very narrow margin (Job 19:20)
<i>Cast the first stone</i>	To be the first to criticize (when you are not perfect yourself) (John 8:7)
<i>Fight the good fight</i>	To struggle for what is right or morally sound (Timothy 6:12)
<i>Fly in the ointment</i>	A small defect that spoils something valuable (Ecclesiastes 10:1)
<i>Go the extra mile</i>	To do more than what is required (Matthew 5:41)
<i>Labor of love</i>	Work done for interest or affection rather than money (Thessalonians 1:3)
<i>Letter of the law</i>	Following the literal words of a rule, rather than the spirit (Corinthians 3:6)
<i>My brother's keeper</i>	A sense of responsibility for the well-being of others (Genesis 4:9)
<i>Pride goes before a fall</i>	Being overconfident often leads to failure (Proverbs 16:18)
<i>The root of all evil</i>	The fundamental cause of corruption (usually money) (Timothy 6:10)
<i>The signs of the times</i>	The current trends or signals of future change (Matthew 16:3)
<i>Under the sun</i>	Everything that happens on Earth or in human life (Ecclesiastes 1:9)
<i>Wolf in sheep's clothing</i>	A dangerous person pretending to be harmless (Matthew 7:15)

Despite its name, it was never formally authorized by Parliament; however, its title page declared that it was appointed for reading in churches throughout the kingdom.

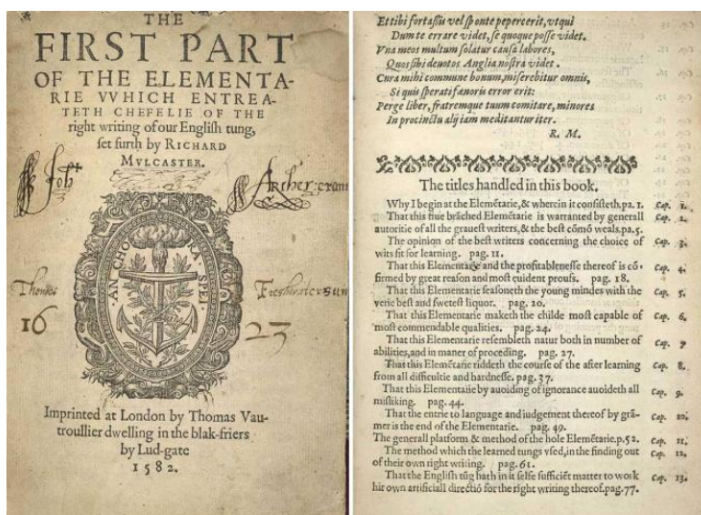
Spelling Reforms



Richard Mulcaster
(c 1531–1611)

As David Crystal notes, even a generation after Caxton, English spelling remained highly inconsistent. Uniformity in spelling and punctuation was still far from established. Differences appeared not only between printed and handwritten texts, or between the practices of different printers, but often within the work of a single printer or author. For example, the word *through* could appear as *thorough*, *throughe*, *throggh*, or *throghe*. Similarly, *friend* might be rendered as *fiend*, *freind*, or *frende*.

This chaotic state prompted teacher and scholar Richard Mulcaster, in the first part of his *Elementarie* (1582), to attempt “to find out the right writings of ours.” Critics frequently complained about the disorder in the writing system, and printers were particularly singled out. Many



The initial pages of Mulcaster's

primers (the elementary textbooks used to teach reading) were blamed for contributing to the problem. Many printers were foreigners who applied the spelling conventions of their native languages and were unsure of English orthography. Proofreading was often done by uneducated workers, allowing errors to spread. Limited type led to arbitrary spellings, and

printers (the elementary textbooks used to teach reading) were blamed for contributing to the problem. Many printers were foreigners who applied the spelling conventions of their native languages and were unsure of English orthography. Proofreading was often done by uneducated workers, allowing errors to spread. Limited type led to arbitrary spellings, and

Mulcaster's ideas played a major role in accelerating the move toward spelling regularization at the end of the 16th century. His *Elementarie* included a table recommending spellings for nearly 9,000 words, influencing a generation of orthoepists (teachers of pronunciation) and grammarians. Other works of the period also addressed the many problems posed by English orthography, creating a climate that encouraged standardization.

Several conventions became more widely adopted: the double-vowel system (as in *meet* or *boot*) or the use of a silent *-e* (as in *name* or *hope*) to indicate vowel length; and doubled consonants within words (as in *running* or *sitting*) to signal a preceding short vowel, although uncertainty remained at word endings (*rid* and *mad* versus *pass* and *glasse*).

In the 1630s, one of the most visible medieval spelling variations - the interchangeable use of *u* and *v* - was standardized. Initially used without distinction, these letters came to follow positional rules: *v* at the beginning of a word, *u* medially, before eventually adopting fixed phonetic values with *v* as a consonant and *u* as a vowel, in line with Continental practice. A similar process affected *j*, formerly a variant of *i*.

During the 17th century, the growing publication of spelling guides further shaped printing practice. Children's schoolbooks began including lists of homophones (such as *pair* and *pare* or *son* and *sun*) and irregular spellings, which had to be memorized.

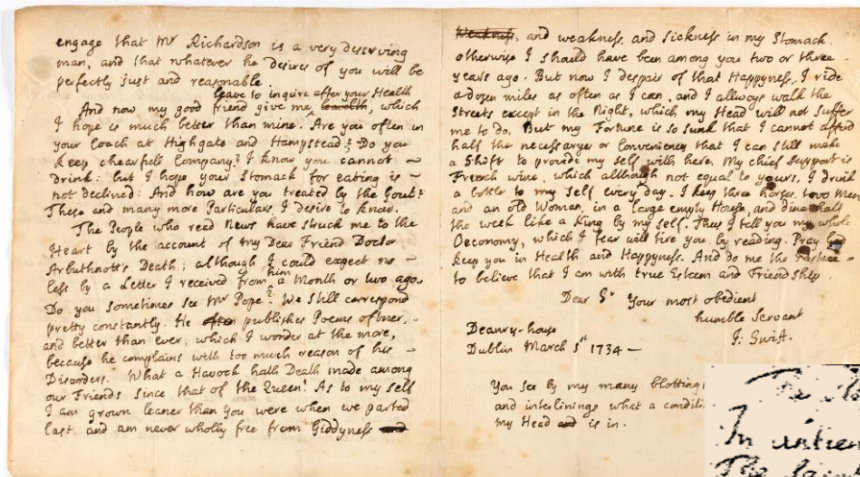
Capitalization issue

John Hart advised his readers to capitalize the first letter of every sentence, proper name, and important common noun. By the early 17th century, this convention had expanded to include titles (*Sir*, *Lady*), forms of address (*Father*, *Mistress*), and personified nouns (*Nature*, *Fate*). Words or phrases intended for emphasis were also often capitalized, for example: "*The Courage of Man is often rewarded by Fortune*" or "*Love and Honour must guide our Actions.*"

By the start of the 18th century, Continental influences had encouraged even wider capitalization, for instance, in the names of fields of knowledge: *Philosophy*, *Mathematicks*, *Poetry*. Some writers went further, capitalizing any noun they considered

important, such as *Truth, Virtue, Justice, or Vice*. Certain books even capitalized almost all nouns, similar to modern German, perhaps for aesthetic reasons, or because printers were uncertain which nouns required capitals. Manuscripts from Butler, Traherne, Swift, and Pope are full of such initial capitals, e.g.:

- “*The Mind of Man is a Temple of Knowledge and Honour.*”
- “*Patience and Perseverance overcome all Obstacles.*”
- “*Let Nature, Fortune, and Time decide our Fates.*”

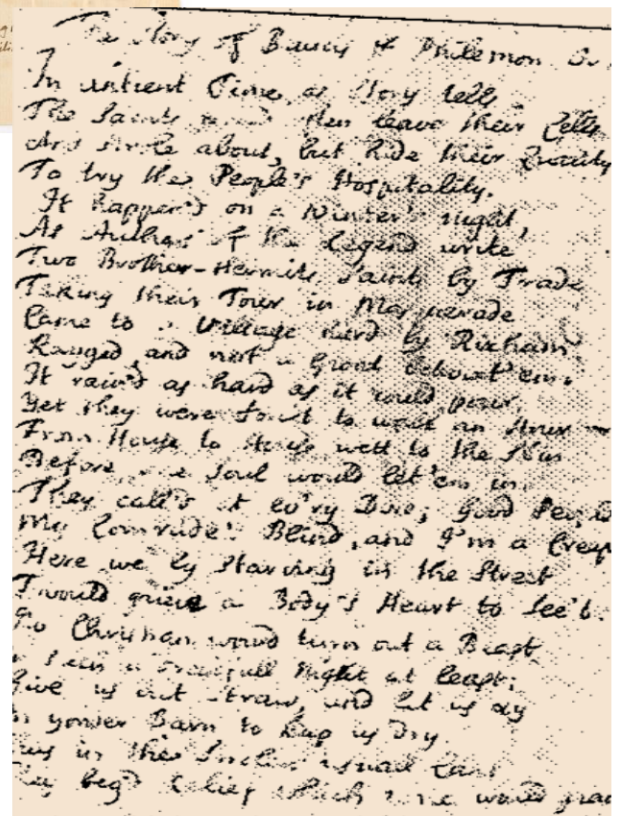


Extracts from Jonathan Swift's letters, showing almost every noun capitalized

Later 18th-century grammarians, however, criticized this proliferation of capitals as unnecessary and confusing, arguing it obscured useful distinctions. Their rules sharply limited which nouns could take an initial capital, helping to bring English closer to the system we use today.

Early Modern English Punctuation

In early English printing, punctuation conventions differed markedly from those of the present day. In William Caxton's texts, three principal marks predominated: the virgule (/), the period (.), and the colon (:). The virgule (used in both short and long forms) could serve the function of a modern comma, full stop, or semi-colon. By the sixteenth century it had largely disappeared, replaced by



the comma. The period was often employed in positions where a present-day writer would use a comma, while the colon served a wide range of rhetorical purposes, signalling shifts in thought or emphasis rather than merely introducing a list or summary.

John Hart offered one of the earliest systematic discussions of punctuation, which he termed “pointing,” addressing both its rhetorical and grammatical roles. He assigned distinctive labels to each symbol: the period as “point,” the colon as “joint,” the comma as “comma,” the question mark as “asker,” the exclamation mark as “wonderer,” the parentheses as “dozer,” square brackets as “notes,” the apostrophe as “turner,” the hyphen as “joiner,” and capital letters as “greats.” Hart’s classificatory approach had considerable influence on contemporary grammarians and printers, encouraging greater regularity in punctuation practice.

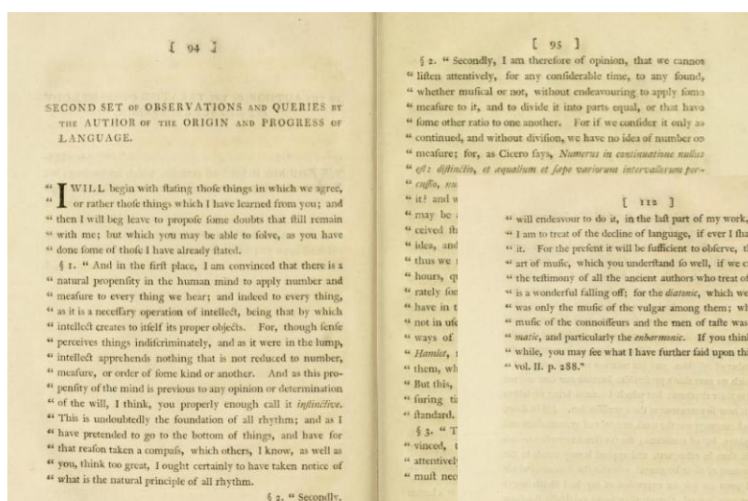
The English Renaissance also witnessed the introduction of new symbols. The semicolon, variously known as the comma-colon, half-colon, or sub-colon, entered English printing in the sixteenth century, initially functioning interchangeably with the colon. Quotation marks (then called “turned double commas”) were introduced to indicate the beginning of direct speech, with closing marks appearing somewhat later. Meanwhile, established symbols acquired new uses: the apostrophe, once employed primarily to indicate elision, came in the eighteenth century to mark the possessive case, first for singular nouns and subsequently for plurals.

By the end of the Early Modern English period, the modern punctuation system was, in most respects, established. This development was not the result of a single coordinated reform, but rather of gradual changes shaped by typographical innovation, linguistic theory, and the aesthetic preferences of printers.

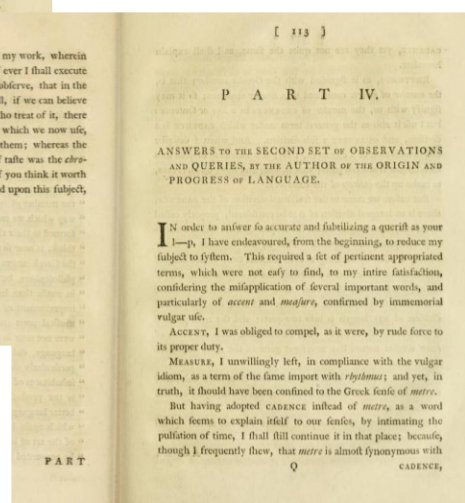
In his *Treatise on the Melody and Measure of Speech* (1775), Joshua Steele appended a letter, treating the entire text as a quotation by framing it within double inverted commas. Following 18th-century conventions, each new line of the letter begins with a fresh set of opening quotation marks, and only a single pair of raised commas closes the final line. Notably, Steele includes the letter’s date within the quotation itself.

This practice parallels broader typographical norms of the time. Commonplace markers (typographically similar to quotation marks) were employed from the 16th to

the 18th centuries to highlight memorable or noteworthy passages, sometimes inserted by the author or printer and occasionally by readers in the margins. These marks often co-existed with early quotation marks, which initially appeared only at the start of quoted passages and sometimes repeated at the beginning of each line – a convention that persisted through the 17th century.



A letter as an Appendix to Steel's treatise on The Melody and Measure of Speech (1775)



Each new line of the 18 pages long letter begins with a fresh set of opening quotation marks, and only a single pair of raised commas closes the final line.

Changes in Pronunciation

It was in this period that some of the most familiar clues to present-day regional and social accents began to take shape. Take the modern Received Pronunciation (RP) contrast between *cut*, *son*, *run* on the one hand, and *put*, *pull*, *wolf* on the other. In the 17th century, no such contrast existed: both sets had the same high, back, rounded vowel /u/, rather like the vowel in today's *put*. Over time, in most contexts, this vowel moved forward and opened, losing its rounding to become /ʌ/. But after labial consonants, as in *full*, *wolf*, *put*, it stayed the same. Not everyone followed the change. Many Northern English speakers held on to the older /u/ in all cases – a pronunciation feature still instantly recognisable today.

The /r/ of the time was also different from RP today. It was still sounded wherever spelling showed it: before consonants and at the end of words, in *jar*, *corn*, *fire*, and so on. RP began dropping it during the 18th century, but that wasn't the universal pattern. Across Britain and America, most regional accents kept the /r/, and the mismatch between spelling and sound became a favourite target for purists.

And there was movement in the consonant system, too. The velar nasal /ŋ/ was nothing new: Middle English had it in *sing*, but it was always followed by /g/ or /k/ (*sing*, *sink*), and so never functioned as a phoneme in its own right. By the early 1600s, though, RP speakers had stopped pronouncing that final /g/, allowing /ŋ/ to emerge as an independent sound.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 8):

1. Why is it necessary to identify an Early Modern English stage between Middle and Modern English?
2. What time span does Early Modern English roughly cover, and which two authors are used to mark its limits?
3. Why might reading Defoe be easier for a modern reader than reading Chaucer?
4. What are the two main scholarly views on when the Early Modern English period begins?
5. Which technological development is linked with the later start date of Early Modern English?
6. In what year did William Caxton set up his printing press in Westminster?
7. How did printing influence spelling, punctuation, and access to books? Approximately how many books were produced in the 150 years after printing began in England?
8. What was Caxton's first major publication, and why was it significant?
9. What was Caxton's main challenge when translating works into English? Give an example of a word Caxton noted as problematic for mutual understanding across dialects.
10. Which languages were the main sources for loanwords during the Renaissance?

11. Give three examples of words first recorded in Shakespeare's works.
12. What is grammatical conversion, and how did Shakespeare use it?
13. Provide two examples of idiomatic expressions first recorded in Shakespeare that are still in use today.
14. In what year was the King James Bible published, and how did it gain such wide influence despite not being formally authorized?
15. Who was Richard Mulcaster, and what was his contribution to English spelling?
16. How did the letters *u* and *v* become standardized in the 17th century?
17. How did capitalization practices in the early 17th century differ from those of today?
18. Why did some 18th-century grammarians object to the widespread capitalization of nouns?
19. What were the three main punctuation marks used in Caxton's texts, and how did they function?
20. How did the pronunciation of words like *cut* and *put* differ in the 17th century compared to today's Received Pronunciation?
21. How was the pronunciation of *r* different in Early Modern English compared to modern RP?
22. What change happened to the pronunciation of the velar nasal /ŋ/ in the early 1600s?
23. In *The Tempest*, why is Trinculo said to be "in a pickle," and how does this literal sense support the modern figurative meaning?
24. Provide examples of five to ten Shakespearean idioms and explain their modern meanings.
25. Provide examples of five to ten idioms from the King James Bible and explain their modern meanings.

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH GRAMMAR

By the Renaissance, the most radical structural changes to English grammar had already taken place. Nevertheless, texts from the period reveal that a number of noteworthy developments were still underway, albeit on a more limited scale. Sentence structure, in particular, was undergoing important stylistic evolution.

In the prose of Caxton and Malory, sentences are typically linear and loosely connected, often built from sequences of clauses linked by *and* or *then*, with comparatively little subordination, usually introduced by *which* or *that*. To modern readers, such prose may seem awkward or uncertain. In reality, these features reflect a period of experimentation, in which writers were beginning to explore the expressive possibilities of more complex syntactic patterns. The gradual standardization of punctuation played a crucial role in enabling this shift.

Lexical and syntactic innovation was also evident in the emergence of new conjunctions. The conjunction *because* appears as early as Chaucer, but until the early 17th century, *for that* remained the dominant means of expressing causal relations. Participial constructions became increasingly frequent, contributing to a marked increase in sentence length; in the more ambitious prose of the time, a single sentence might extend for twenty lines or more.

Early Renaissance long sentences can appear incomplete or ill-formed to contemporary readers, occasionally sounding clumsy or containing unattached subordinate clauses. However, such variability was not regarded as a fault at the time. By the seventeenth century, the language of skilled authors such as John Lyly, Philip Sidney, and John Milton demonstrates a mature prose style: highly sophisticated, carefully balanced, and often modelled on the syntactic elegance of Latin rhetoric.

Among the more striking syntactic innovations of the period was the rise of *do* as an auxiliary verb. The contrast with modern English is clear if we look at forms like *Knows he the answer?* or *Trust them not* – where today we would almost instinctively insert a *do*-form: *Does he know the answer?*, *Do not trust them*. By the time of Shakespeare, *do* could certainly be used in such sentences, but it was by no means

obligatory. *Do* starts to be found in affirmative statements without any added emphasis – for instance, *they do honour the king*, meaning no more than ‘they honour the king’. Over the century, the pattern shifted: *do*-forms came to dominate in questions and negatives, but dropped out of plain affirmative clauses (except when emphasis was intended). One quantitative survey shows the change in sharp relief: around 1500, roughly 20% of interrogatives had *do*-forms; by 1700, the figure was over 90%. The accompanying graph traces this upward curve in one of these environments – the question (*Do you hear me?*, *Did they return?*).

THE *THOU/YOU* PROBLEM

➤ The system of second-person pronouns in Renaissance English has attracted considerable attention, not merely because it differs so noticeably from Modern English, but also because it plays a key role in expressing social relationships, making it especially important for the study of contemporary drama. Knowing how Early Modern English used *thou* (and its related forms *thee*, *thine*, *thy*, *thyself*) and *you* (with *ye*, *yours*, *your*, *yourself*) is essential for understanding both the emotional nuances of characters and the shifting attitudes they display toward one another in a play. The main developments in this system can be summarized as follows:

➤ In Old English, *thou* and its forms were used when addressing a single person, while *ye* and its forms were used for more than one. Within these categories, *thou* and *ye* served as subjects, and *thee* and *you* as objects.

➤ In Middle English, *ye/you* began to appear as a polite singular alongside *thou/thee*, likely influenced by the French distinction between *vous* and *tu*.

➤ By the Early Modern English period, the subject–object distinction for *ye* and *you* faded, and *you* became standard in all grammatical roles and social situations. *Ye* persisted, but by the late sixteenth century it was largely confined to archaic, religious, or literary usage. By 1700, the *thou* forms had similarly become mostly restricted to these contexts.

As *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* explains, by the time of Shakespeare, *you* had developed the number ambiguity it retains today, being used for either singular or plural, but in the singular it also had a role as an alternative to *thou/thee*. It was used by people of lower rank or status to those above them (such as ordinary people to nobles, children to parents, servants to masters, nobles to the monarch), and was also the standard way for the upper classes to talk to each other. By contrast, *thou/thee* were used by people of higher rank to those beneath them, and by the lower classes to each other, also, in elevated poetic style: in addressing God, and in talking to witches, ghosts, and other supernatural beings. There were also some special cases: for example, a husband might address his wife as *thou*, and she reply with *you*.

Of particular interest are those cases where an extra emotional element entered the situation, and the use of *thou* or *you* broke the expected conventions. *Thou* commonly expressed special intimacy or affection; *you*, formality, politeness, and distance. *Thou* could also be used, even by an inferior to a superior, to express such feelings as anger and contempt. The use of *thou* to a person of equal rank could thus easily count as an insult. Likewise, the use of *you* when *thou* was expected (such as from master to servant) would also require special explanation.

One might have expected God to be addressed as *You* in Early Modern English, given titles like “king,” “father,” or “most high.” Yet, during this period, the divine is consistently addressed as *Thou*. This may reflect a consciously archaic usage, recalling the early Middle English stage when *Thou* was the only singular option. Alternatively, it may reflect the influence of the first Bible translators, who were following languages that distinguished singular and plural second-person pronouns (as in Latin *tu* vs *vos*). In these languages, God would naturally be referred to with the singular pronoun, a practice that may have shaped the choice of *Thou* in English, even when singular *you* was available.

By the mid-seventeenth century, *thou* was disappearing from standard English, but it survived among the Society of Friends, or Quakers – a Christian movement founded by George Fox around 1650 and devoted to peaceful principles. The Quakers rejected the growing social etiquette surrounding singular *you*, preferring *thou* for everyone. This form was thought to be closer to the language of Christ and his disciples, to avoid

unnecessary social distinctions, and to be grammatically precise – a “particular, single, pure proper unto one”. Singular *you*, by contrast, was seen as a corrupt, worldly form, a vehicle of empty social prestige. Richard Farnsworth expressed this view forcefully in *The Pure Language of the Spirit of Truth* (1655):

“That which cannot bear thee and thou, to a single person, what sort so ever, is exalted proud flesh, and is accursed.”

The new form of address was supposed to be accompanied by taking off the hat, which Friends refused to do for their own reasons:

“Moreover, when the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small..... But oh, the rage that then was in the priests, magistrates, professors, and people of all sorts, but especially in priests and



Religious Society of Friends, a Christian movement founded by George Fox c.1650

professors! For, though ‘thou’ to a single person was according to their own learning, their accidence and grammar rules, and according to the Bible, yet they could not bear to hear it; and the hat-honour, because I could not put off my hat to them, set them all into a rage.”

Using *thou* could provoke strong reactions, especially from those in authority. George Fox recalls in his *Journal* that Friends were “in danger many times of our lives, and often beaten, for using those words to some proud men, who would say, ‘Thou’st ‘thou’ me thou ill-bred clown,’ as though their breeding lay in saying ‘you’ to a singular.”

Using *thou* often provoked strong reactions, especially from authority. George Fox recalls in his *Journal*: “in danger many times of our lives, and often beaten, for using those words to some proud men, who would say, ‘Thou’st ‘thou’ me thou ill-bred clown,’ as though their breeding lay in saying ‘you’ to a singular.”

He further notes the social consequences for Quakers:

“But at the first convincement, when Friends could not put off their hats to people nor say ‘you’ to a particular, but ‘thee’ and ‘thou’; and could not bow nor use the world’s salutations, nor fashions, nor customs, many Friends, being tradesmen of several sorts lost their custom at the first; for the people would not trade with them nor trust them, and for a time Friends that were tradesmen could hardly get enough money to buy bread.”

“And a great rage there was amongst professors and priests, for they said, ‘They, thee and thou all people without respect, and will not doff their hats to one nor bow the knee to any man.’ And this troubled them fearfully.”

“And Lieutenant Foster and Lieutenant Dove and Captain Watkinson were turned out of the army for owning Truth, and several other officers and soldiers, and because they would not put off their hats to them and said ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ to them.”

JOHNSON’S DICTIONARY

English lexicography did not receive its first truly authoritative treatment until Samuel Johnson published *A Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755, which now can be found online (<https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/>). It was a massive turning point in the history of English. Before Johnson, English was seen as chaotic and unrefined compared to French or Latin. Johnson set out to “fix” the language, creating a work that remained the undisputed standard for 150 years until the *Oxford English Dictionary* was completed.

Over seven years, he compiled definitions for some 40,000 words, illustrating each with quotations drawn from the best authors since the Elizabethan period, though he deliberately left out his contemporaries. According to his biographer Boswell, the dictionary “conferred stability” on the language; in terms of spelling, where



Samuel Johnson (1709 – 1784)

Sam. Johnson

many of Johnson's choices have endured, this is clearly the case. The work also shaped ideas about correct usage, providing guidance on how words ought to be used (e.g. **FRIEND**. *n.s.* [*vriend*, Dutch; *freond*, Saxon.] This word, with its derivatives, is pronounced *frend*, *frendly*: the *I* totally neglected.) or expressing his criticism (e.g. **FINE'SSE**. *n.s.* [French.] Artifice; stratagem: an unnecessary word which is creeping into the language.). While not the final word on English, Johnson's dictionary set a standard against which later dictionaries (and writers themselves) would measure the language.

Johnson's *Dictionary* contains only a few truly idiosyncratic definitions, yet some of these have become famous.

LEXICO'GRAPHER. *n.s.* [λεξικὸν and γράφω; *lexicographe*, French.] A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.



Johnson's Dictionary

EXCISE. *n.s.* [*accijs*, Dutch; *excisum*, Latin.] A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

OATS. *n.s.* [*aten*, Saxon.] A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.‡It is of the grass leaved tribe; the flowers have no petals, and are disposed in a loose panicle: the grain is eatable. The meal makes tolerable good bread. *Miller*. The *oats* have eaten the horses. *Shakespeare*.

PEN'SION. *n.s.* [*pension*, Fr.] An allowance made to any one without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.

DULL. *adj.* [*dwl*, Welsh; *dole*, Saxon; *dol*, mad, Dutch.] 8. Not exhilarating; not delightful; as, *to make dictionaries is dull work*.

Johnson's definitions sometimes caused a stir. Yet for all its flaws, his *Dictionary* was the first truly systematic attempt to record English. It showed the complexity of the language and reflected its usage more accurately than anything that had come before¹⁹.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 9):

1. What was characteristic of sentence structure in the prose of Caxton and Malory?
2. How did the gradual standardization of punctuation influence sentence complexity in the Renaissance?
3. How did the use of *do* in affirmative statements change over the 16th and 17th centuries?
4. What was the original distinction between *thou* and *ye/you* in Old English?
5. How did the usage of *ye/you* change during Middle English?
6. By the Early Modern English period, what happened to the subject-object distinction for *ye/you*?
7. How was *you* typically used by people of lower rank compared to higher-ranking individuals?
8. How could the use of *thou* or *you* convey emotional nuances beyond social rank?
9. Why was God addressed as *thou* rather than *you* in Early Modern English?
10. How did the Quakers' use of *thou* reflect their beliefs and social principles?
11. What were some social consequences faced by Quakers for using *thou* in everyday interactions?

¹⁹ The compilation of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) was achieved through sustained individual labour. At a time, The French Academy employing some 40 scholars, took forty years to produce its dictionary; Johnson, who famously described himself as a "harmless drudge", produced his in nine, assisted only by 6 copyists, 5 of them Scottish, whose role was entirely mechanical: they copied, Johnson decided.

Johnson's method was radical in its simplicity. He did not begin with a pre-existing word list, but with reading. For several years he immersed himself in what he regarded as the major monuments of English prose and poetry: Shakespeare, Milton, Bacon, Dryden, Pope. When a passage seemed to exemplify a word's meaning particularly well, he marked it in pencil, indicating the beginning and end of the quotation and writing the initial letter of the target word in the margin. His assistants then transcribed the passage onto individual slips of paper. These slips, thousands of them, formed the physical substance of the dictionary.

The strain of the enterprise was severe. Over the nine years of compilation, Johnson endured poverty, recurring depression, and the death of his wife. When the final pages were at last delivered to the printer, the publisher reportedly wrote, "I am very glad to be done with you". Johnson's reply was "I am glad that you are glad".

12. What was the significance of Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) for English?
13. How did Johnson illustrate definitions in his dictionary, and why did he exclude contemporary authors?
14. What influence did Johnson's dictionary have on spelling and correct usage?
15. Compare the approaches of Johnson, Lowth, and Worcester in standardizing English. How did each contribute to the stability or evolution of the language?

SECTION 6

Modern English

ENGLISH - THE GLOBAL LANGUAGE

MODERN ENGLISH

The period between 1750 and 1800 witnessed the publication of over two hundred works devoted to grammar and rhetoric. Foremost among these was Bishop Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), which served as the model for Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* (1794) – a text that achieved even wider circulation. Both works underwent multiple editions in the years following their release and exerted considerable influence on pedagogical practice, particularly within the United States.

The opening decades of the 19th century stand out for the sheer volume of dictionaries produced on both sides of the Atlantic. In the preface to his 1860 edition, Joseph Worcester lists the English dictionaries then available, all of them general in scope. Alongside these, over two hundred specialized dictionaries and glossaries had been published, together with more than thirty encyclopedias. The proliferation reflects the pressure on compilers to keep pace with the expanding body of knowledge and the swelling tide of terminology generated by the Industrial Revolution, advances in science and medicine, and new currents in philological thought.

A DECADE OF DICTIONARIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS

1840

J. S. Henslow, *A Dictionary of Botanical Terms*

William Humble, *Dictionary of Geology and Mineralogy*

Samuel Maunders, *Scientific and Literary Treasury*

B. H. Smart, *Smart's Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*

1841

R. H. Dana, Jr., *Dictionary of Sea Terms*

Walter F. Hook, *Church Dictionary*

Edward Scudamore, *A Dictionary of Terms in Use in the Arts and Sciences*

Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (new edition)

LATINATE ENGLISH VS. MODERN ANGLICISMS

In the 18th century, English writers became obsessed with “improving” the language by flooding it with Latin and Greek roots. They believed that native Germanic (Old English) words were too common, harsh, or vulgar for serious thought.

Today, many Ukrainians integrate anglicisms into their speech not because the Ukrainian language lacks an equivalent, but to signal a specific identity: professional, “tech-savvy”, or “pro-Western”: *Попри наш френдлі вайб, після насиченого воркінгу та постійних мітапів, я відчуваю повний бернаут.* This is a perfect modern mirror of how 18th-century “Gentlemen” used Latin.

The “Inkhorn” Controversy

During the Renaissance and Enlightenment, critics complained bitterly about “**Inkhorn terms**” – words so long and Latin-heavy they looked like they had been dipped in a scholar’s inkhorn. Critics argued these words were “pretentious” and made the language inaccessible to the common person.

This is identical to the current debate in Ukraine regarding terms like *аб'юз* (abuse) or *інсайт* (insight). While useful, their frequent use is often a way for the “creative class” to distinguish themselves from those they consider “less globalized”.

Why We Do It: The “Halo Effect”

Linguistically, a foreign word often carries a “**Halo Effect**” – it feels more significant simply because of its origin.

- A *challenge* (Latin/French) sounds more professional than a *problem* (Greek) or a *hinder* (Germanic).
- A *collaborative session* sounds more intellectual than *working together*.

In the 1700s, Latin was the language of the “Big World” (Science, Law, Diplomacy). Today, English holds that crown. In both cases, the speaker “borrows” the authority of the dominant culture to make their own ideas seem more valid and modern.

Using “intellectual” Latin loans in the 1700s served the same social function as using “cool” Anglicisms in Ukraine today. It is a tool for social signalling. It tells the listener: “I am educated, I am part of the elite, and I belong to the global conversation”. **But is it really so or is it merely a shallow way to hide a lack of substance behind a ‘posh’ mask?**

1842

John Y. Akerman, *A*

Glossary of Provincial Words in Use in Wiltshire

William Brande, *A*

Dictionary of Science, Literature, and Art

William Carpenter, *A*

Comprehensive Dictionary of English Synonyms

(3rd edition)

G. Francis, *The Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, and Manufactures*

John C. Loudon,

Encyclopaedia of Trees and Shrubs

Gibbons Merle, *The*

Domestic Dictionary and Housekeeper’s Manual

Macaulay Napier,

Encyclopaedia Britannica (7th edition)

1843

John Bouvier, *A Law*

Dictionary; adapted to the Constitution and Laws of the United States, and of the several States

William Goodhough and

William C. Taylor, *The Pictorial Dictionary of the Holy Bible*

William Waterston, *A Cyclopaedia of Commerce*

1844

E. S. N. Campbell, *A Dictionary of Military Science*

Joseph Gwilt, *An Encyclopaedia of Architecture*

Richard D. Hoblyn, *A Dictionary of the Terms used in Medicine and the Collateral Sciences*

Cuthbert W. Johnson, *The Farmer's Encyclopaedia of Rural Affairs*

John Kitto, *A Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature*

Alexander Reid, *A Dictionary of the English Language*

Thomas Webster, *An Encyclopaedia of Domestic Economy*

1845

William Bowles, *An Explanatory and Phonographic Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*

Shirley Palmer, *A Pentaglot Dictionary of Anatomy, Physiology, Pathology, Practical Medicine, Surgery, &c.*

John Platts, *A Dictionary of English Synonymes*

Noah Webster, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (university abridged edition)

1846

William Bowles, *A Phonographic Pronouncing Dictionary* (abridged)

John T. Brockett, *A Glossary of North Country Words*

Robert Eden, *Churchman's Theological Dictionary* (2nd edition)

J. E. Worcester, *A Universal and Critical Dictionary of the English Language*

H. Fox Talbot, *English Etymologies*

1847

Robert Sullivan, *A Dictionary of the English Language*

1848

John R. Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms*

John Boag, *The Imperial Lexicon of the English Language*

Arthur B. Evans, *Leicestershire Words*

Samuel Maunder, *Treasury of Natural History, or Popular Dictionary of Animated Nature*

1849

Anonymous, *A Glossary of Words used in Teesdale, Durham*

J. R. Beard, *The People's Dictionary of the Bible*

John Craig, *A New, Universal, Etymological, Technological, and Pronouncing Dictionary of the English Language*

John Eadie, *Biblical Cyclopaedia*

1850

Alexander Burrill, *A Law Dictionary and Glossary*

COLONIALISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH

British colonial expansion had its first stirrings as far back as the sixteenth century. But it was between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries that it really gathered its pace. At the close of the 16th century, the community of native English speakers was small by modern standards: perhaps five to seven million people, almost all of them in the British Isles. Over the next three and a half centuries, that number multiplied nearly fifty times, and by then about four out of every five lived far from Britain itself.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British Empire governed close to a quarter of the world's land surface – a sweep that took in Canada, Australia, India, the Caribbean, Egypt, South Africa, and Singapore. The prevailing attitude in Britain was that carrying English language and culture to what were seen as “undeveloped” regions of Africa and Asia was a mark of progress. Economic gain was certainly high on the list of motivations, but it would be wrong to overlook a measure of idealism – the belief that order, political unity, and a shared tongue could bring stability to diverse and often divided territories.

But colonialism was never a one-way street. Britain might have carried its language abroad, but it also brought plenty back. Contacts with what, at the time, were seen as exotic lands meant that English began to absorb a fresh cargo of loanwords. Some were tied closely to their place of origin. From Australia came *wallaby*, *wombat*, and *billabong* – words that, unless you are an Australian or a fan of its wildlife and landscapes, rarely

pop up in daily conversation. From India, by contrast, came an astonishing number of terms that slipped effortlessly into everyday English: *veranda*, *curry*, *bungalow*, *chutney*, *pundit*, *bazaar*, *bandana*, *pyjamas*, and *juggernaut*, among others. Each of these carries, in its own way, a trace of the colonial encounter, a linguistic souvenir of Britain's two-way dealings with the wider world.

English settlers who crossed the Atlantic were not simply prospectors in search of gold or traders chasing a quick profit, but people intent on building new lives – cultivating the land, maintaining their customs, and holding fast to their religion and language. This determination was a decisive factor in the survival and growth of English in North America. Much later, the German “Iron Chancellor,” Otto von Bismarck, would remark with some prescience that “the most significant event of the 20th century will be the fact that the North Americans speak English.”

By the 19th century, American English was developing a vocabulary of its own, drawn from a rich mixture of sources. Spanish and Native American languages were especially influential. Some Native American borrowings (*moccasin*, *papoose*, *powwow*, *tomahawk*, *wigwam*) entered as early as the 17th century, during the first encounters between settlers and indigenous peoples.

Linguists sometimes talk about “colonial lag” – the tendency for certain English forms to remain in use in America long after they have changed or disappeared in Britain. In some respects, American English today is closer to Shakespeare's English than its modern British counterpart. The survival of *gotten*, long obsolete in Britain but common in the United States, is perhaps the best-known example (though *forgotten* remains familiar to both).

In the present day, some 4,000 words differ in use between American and British English – *apartment* vs *flat*, *candy* vs *sweets*, *diaper* vs *nappy*, *trunk* vs *boot*, and many more. Increasingly, American usage influences British usage, with *truck* replacing *lorry*, *soccer* overtaking *football* in informal contexts, and so on. American spellings are also more frequently seen in Britain: *center* for *centre*, *check* for *cheque*, *defense* for *defence*. Some of these changes, though, are older than we might think – *program* and

catalog once carried British spellings with extra letters, as early dictionaries show, even if other forms, like *colour*, *humour*, and *honour*, resisted the simplification.

In 1917, Daniel Jones introduced the term Received Pronunciation or RP (sometimes referred to as the Queen's English, BBC English, or Public School English) to describe the variety of Standard English used by educated speakers, regardless of their regional origins. RP wasn't just about pronunciation; it was a social signal, marking the speaker as belonging to the middle or upper classes.

MODERN ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Vocabulary has always been the chief marker of a language's identity. Anyone who has tried to learn a foreign language knows that pronunciation and basic grammar can be picked up fairly quickly, yet the acquisition of words seems never-ending. Indeed, vocabulary is the Everest of language – a peak that must be climbed to achieve fluency.

In English, this challenge is heightened by the sheer breadth and diversity of its lexicon, a reflection of the colourful political and cultural history of English-speaking peoples over the centuries. English has, over centuries, absorbed, borrowed, and adapted words from countless sources, resulting in a vocabulary of unparalleled richness and variety, one that allows speakers to convey the most delicate nuances of meaning. Consider the everyday synonyms for *happy* (*content, pleased, cheerful, joyful, delighted, ecstatic, elated, overjoyed, jubilant, blissful, glad, satisfied, thrilled, upbeat, buoyant*): few languages offer such a range of options to express the same idea.

Thanks to its global travels, propelled by soldiers, sailors, traders, and civil servants, several hundred languages have left their imprint on English vocabulary. Astonishingly, around 80 per cent of English words are non-Germanic in origin.

English boasts an extraordinarily large vocabulary, larger than that of many other languages, thanks to its historical contacts, global spread, and the sheer multiplicity of contexts in which it is used. Moreover, the stock of English words is never static: it is constantly growing, as new words are coined, borrowed, and rediscovered across the world.

English continues to change, develop, and expand at remarkable speed, constantly incorporating new jargons, slangs, technologies, toys, foods, and gadgets. In today's digital age, the language is experiencing yet another surge in word creation – a peak comparable to those of Shakespeare's time, the Industrial Revolution, and the height of the British Empire. Recent estimates suggest that English is growing by over 8,500 words each year (though some figures are considerably higher), a dramatic increase from roughly 1,000 new words annually at the start of the twentieth century. Over the past century, the language has nearly doubled in size, with neologisms continually entering everyday usage.

Words that have no apparent etymological roots

Words are continually entering and enriching the English language, often through processes that are well-documented yet endlessly fascinating. While the majority of vocabulary has a clear historical lineage, a small but notable number of words emerge with uncertain or debated origins. Examples include *whimsy*, whose etymology is not fully settled, and *furlough*, which came into English from Dutch but quickly took on a life of its own. Many of English most vivid and expressive words arrive through identifiable linguistic mechanisms. For instance, *plunk*, *blurt*, *flap*, *splat*, and *zing* are onomatopoeic, where the sound reflects the meaning, while others, such as *zigzag*, are borrowings from other languages. Words also often move from regional dialects into mainstream usage, influenced by literature, media, or wider social trends. Terms like *scamper* and *drizzle*, both with long-standing roots, saw a surge in popular usage in the 19th century, illustrating how English revitalizes its vocabulary by bringing once-less-common words into everyday speech.

Borrowings

Sometimes words enter English by a rather circuitous path. Take, for instance, *curry*, which originated from the Tamil word *kari*, passed into Portuguese as *caril*, and eventually entered English in its modern form.

Word formation

English is remarkably flexible thanks to its ability to attach affixes – prefixes such as *anti-*, *auto-*, *dis-*, *mis-*, *over-*, *post-*, *re-*, *sub-*, *trans-*, *un-*, and suffixes like *-hood*, *-ism*, *-ist*, *-ity*, *-ment*, *-ness*, *-ship*, *-ology*, *-ate*, *-ify*, *-able*, *-ful*, *-ous*, *-ive*, *-ly*, *-y*, among many others. This process, often called agglutination, allows speakers to subtly alter meanings, create new parts of speech (for example, forming verbs from nouns or adjectives from adverbs), or coin entirely new words from fresh roots. There are few restrictions: Germanic affixes can attach to Latin or Greek roots, or vice versa. A striking example is *unquestionably*, based on the root *quest* (from Latin *quaerere*, “to seek”) with four affixes: *un-* (not), *-ion* (act), *-able* (capable), and *-ly* (in a manner). This shows how English can expand a simple root into highly precise and nuanced forms.

Clipping

Some English words arise simply by shortening longer forms. Common examples include *ad*, *memo*, *lab*, *taxi*, *fridge*, *gym*, *exam*, *demo*, and *photo*. Less obvious are words like *farewell*, originally a contraction of *fare well*, or *aloha*, adapted into English from Hawaiian as a greeting meaning “be well.”

Older or historical compressions also survive: for example, *evening* from *evening tide*, *goodbye* from *God be with ye*, *blessing* from *bless + ing* (originally “a marking with blood”), and *midday* from *mid day*.

Compounding

English, like many languages, readily forms compound words by joining shorter words together. Examples include *toothpaste*, *raincoat*, *sandbox*, *wristband*, *skylight*, *footpath*, and *notebook*. The sequence of the elements can change the meaning: compare *bookshop* with *shopbook*, or *sunflower* with *flowerbed*.

In addition to whole-word compounds, English often blends parts of words or sounds to create “portmanteau words,” which combine meanings or produce something in between the originals. Modern examples include *hangry* (hungry + angry), *spork* (spoon + fork), *infomercial* (information + commercial), *blog* (web + log), and *smize* (smile + eyes).

Semantic change

The meanings of words often shift over time, sometimes through processes like catachresis, where words are misused either deliberately or by accident. Estimates suggest that over half of the Latin-derived words in English have undergone some semantic change, often quite dramatic.

Some words have become more specific than they once were. For example, *starve* originally meant simply “to die,” but now refers specifically to dying of hunger; *forest* once denoted any land set aside for hunting, whether wooded or not; *deer* originally applied to any animal; *girl* once referred to a young person of either sex; and *meat* once meant all kinds of food, as in the phrase “meat and drink.”

Other words have shifted toward almost the opposite of their original meaning. *Counterfeit* once meant a legitimate copy; *brave* initially suggested cowardice; *crafty* was originally praiseworthy; *cute* meant bow-legged; *enthusiasm* and *zeal* were once used disparagingly; *manufacture* originally meant to make by hand; and *awful* once meant “worthy of awe.”

Words created by errors

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there are at least 350 English words – most thankfully quite obscure – that owe their existence purely to typographical errors or printing mistakes. Beyond print, many words have entered the language through mishearing or folk reinterpretation. For instance, *cocktail* may have evolved from *cocktailings*, *curfew* from *couvre-feu* (literally “cover fire”), *sparrowgrass* from *asparagus*, and *jerkwater* from mishearing *railwater*.

Transfer of proper names

A striking number of English words have entered the language through the transformation of proper names into general vocabulary. These are known as eponyms. For example, the word *saxophone* comes from the Belgian instrument maker Adolphe Sax; *sandwich* from the fourth Earl of Sandwich; *silhouette* from the French finance minister Étienne de Silhouette; and *boycott* from Charles Boycott, the Irish land agent.



History of English: Comprehension Questions (Set 10):

1. When did British colonial expansion begin, and when did it gain significant momentum?
2. How did colonialism affect the English language?
3. Give examples of English words borrowed from Australia and India.
4. What is “colonial lag,” and how does it affect the relationship between American and British English?
5. How has American English influenced British usage and spelling in modern times?
6. What did RP signify about the speaker’s social status?
7. How extensive is the influence of non-Germanic languages on English vocabulary?
8. How has the digital age affected the growth of English vocabulary?
9. Approximately how many new words enter English each year today, and how does this compare to the early 20th century?
10. What is onomatopoeia, and provide examples from English.
11. How are compound and portmanteau words formed? Give examples of each.
12. How can the meaning of existing words shift over time? Give at least two examples.
13. How can errors contribute to the creation of new words? Give examples.
14. What are eponyms, and provide examples of words derived from proper nouns.
15. How did British colonial expansion and global contact shape the richness and diversity of English vocabulary?

SELF-ASSESSMENT TEST

1. The earliest known residents of the British Isles were people who spoke... .
 - a) Celtic
 - b) English
 - c) German
 - d) Latin
2. The earliest time when we can say that English was spoken was in the...century.
 - a) 3 d
 - b) 4 th
 - c) 5 th
 - d) 6 th
3. What have linguists been doing with the Indo-European language?
 - a) speak it
 - b) study its manuscripts
 - c) reconstruct it
 - d) look for its native speakers
4. Cognates are:
 - a) similar words in different languages
 - b) different words in similar languages
 - c) languages of the same genetic origin
 - d) the same words in different dialects
5. What linguistic phenomenon is illustrated by the following examples: *is* in English, *est* in Latin, *esti* in Greek, *ist* in Gothic, *asti* in Sanskrit?
 - a) i-mutation
 - b) cognates
 - c) Verner's law
 - d) Grimm's law

6. When comparing different languages for genetic relatedness what principle has been particularly important to linguists?
- a) the regularity of sound change
 - b) the uniqueness of separate words
 - c) geographic closeness of the languages
 - d) the complexity of grammatical constructions
7. English is a language.
- a) East Germanic
 - b) South Germanic
 - c) North Germanic
 - d) West Germanic
8. The oldest surviving literary text of any Germanic language is in....
- a) Latin
 - b) Gothic
 - c) Old Frisian
 - d) Old Dutch
9. Which alphabet wasn't used by Germanic tribes?
- a) Runic
 - b) Gothic
 - c) Latin
 - d) Greek
10. The Gothic alphabet is believed to have been invented by... .
- a) the bishop Ulfila
 - b) Venerable Bede
 - c) Gothic people
 - d) an unknown author
11. When we talk about Grimm's Law we find correspondences between ...
- a) Indo-European non-Germanic and Germanic consonants
 - b) Indo-European non-Germanic and Germanic vowels
 - c) non-Indo-European and Indo-European consonants
 - d) non-Indo-European and Indo-European vowels

12. The latter change **z > r** is termed

- a) ablaut
- b) mutation
- c) rhotacism
- d) umlaut

13. OE lexemes *god* and *gōd* were

- a) synonyms
- b) antonyms
- c) one and the same word
- d) neither

14. A spontaneous, positionally independent alteration of vowels represented by the example *kiusan kaus kusum kusans* “to choose” is called...

- a) ablaut
- b) umlaut
- c) mutation
- d) rhotacism

15. is a form of assimilation, the process by which one speech sound is altered to make it more like another adjacent sound like in the following example: pre-O E

**mūsi *mȳsi mȳs mīs ME mice.*

- a) ablaut
- b) mutation
- c) rhotacism
- d) cognate

16. The difference between OE strong and weak verbs lies in the way they formed...

- a) past tense
- b) future tense
- c) continuous tenses
- d) perfect tenses

17. Are Old English and the Anglo-Saxon language the same?

- a) Yes, they are two names for the same language
- b) No, Anglo-Saxon developed from Old English

- c) No, Old English developed from Anglo-Saxon
- d) No, they are unrelated languages

18. The first OE texts, dating from around 700, are ...

- a) glossaries of Latin words, translated into Old English, and a few early inscriptions and poems
- b) glossaries of Old English words, translated into Latin
- c) the OE translation of the Bible
- d) Beowulf

19. The number of words in the corpus of Old English is

- a) the equivalent of about 10 medium-sized modern novels
- b) the equivalent of about 200 medium-sized modern novels
- c) the equivalent of about 30 medium-sized modern novels
- d) the equivalent of about 450 medium-sized modern novels

20. Which of the following modern orthographic conventions was NOT systematically used to mark the beginning of every sentence in early OE manuscripts?

- a) capital letters
- b) letters *a* and *d*
- c) lines
- d) runes

21. The letter *ƿ* was called

- a) that
- b) ash
- c) thorn
- d) yogh

22. As a result of i-mutation, the plural of **fōt* 'foot', which is thought to have been **fōtiz*, changed into...

- a) *fēt*
- b) *fāt*
- c) *fūt*
- d) *fīt*

23. The modern result of the i-mutation process is the following word pair:
- a) tooth - teeth
 - b) go-went
 - c) father-paternal
 - d) can-could
24. The OE forms *wæs*, *wære*, *wæron* are ...
- a) the past forms of the verb “to be”
 - b) the present forms of the verb “to be”
 - c) the past forms of the verb “to do”
 - d) the present forms of the verb “to do”
25. The gender of OE *mægden* 'girl' was
- a) feminine
 - b) masculine
 - c) neuter
 - d) none
26. In OE personal pronouns had... .
- a) no number
 - b) singular and dual number
 - c) singular and plural number
 - d) singular, plural and dual number
27. The ending are the distinctive inflectional features of the Old English infinitive.
- a) *-an* or *-ian*
 - b) *-end(e)*
 - c) *-en*
 - d) *ed*
28. An Anglo Saxon *wīf* originally meant
- a) a married woman
 - b) a single woman
 - c) any woman, married or not
 - d) a widow

29.OE *sōna* 'soon' originally meant

- a) earlier
- b) immediately
- c) in a little while
- d) never

30.An OE compound *ʒebeorscipe* (*ʒe+beor+scipe*) originally meant... .

- a) arrangement
- b) banquet
- c) beer
- d) ship

31.Such lexemes as *eorþcræft* < *eorþ* 'earth' + *cræft* 'craft': "geometry"; *dægred* < *dæg* 'day' + *red* 'red': "dawn"; *īdymbwlātend* < *īd* 'time' + *ymb* 'about' + *wlātend* 'gaze': "astronomer" are the examples of

- a) prefixation
- b) self-explaining compounds
- c) semantic derivation
- d) suffixation

32.The vocabulary which was mainly to do with the Church and its services, theology, and learning came into OE from... .

- a) French
- b) Greek
- c) Latin
- d) Scandinavian

33.The main influence on English was.... .

- a) Celtic
- b) German
- c) Norman French
- d) Scandinavian

34.Most of the Anglo-Norman kings.... .

- a) were unable to communicate in English
- b) knew English very well

- c) taught English
- d) used English in poetry

35. The Middle English period starts with the

- a) Norman invasion
- b) Viking raids on Britain
- c) the arrival of Germanic tribes to Britain
- d) British colonization

36. The inflectional system started to decay during

- a) the Old English period
- b) the Middle English period
- c) the pre-English period
- d) the early Modern English period

37. The Peterborough Chronicle illustrates

- a) the climax of Middle English
- b) the climax of Old English
- c) the period of change from OE to Middle English
- d) the period of change from pre-English period to Old English

38. The spelling in Middle English was... .

- a) highly regularized
- b) diverse
- c) the same as in French
- d) unknown

39. A minim confusion is a problem connected with... .

- a) a sequence of several vertical strokes in adjacent position
- b) very small letters
- c) misunderstanding while speaking
- d) minimal texts

40. The letter *o* in such modern words as *come*, *love*, *one*, *son* etc. substituted the letter ... as a result of the introduction of Carolingian convention to avoid minim confusion.

- a) a
- b) e

c) u

d) y

41. The lexeme *ye* in the inscription *Ye Olde Coffee Shoppe* represents the word....

a) the

b) your

c) yes

d) this

42. The words *Piss boc iss nemnedd*....are taken from

a) Ormulum

b) The Canterbury Tales

c) The Lay Folk's Mass Book

d) The Peterborough Chronicle

43. Orm's basic rule is

a) to double a consonant after a long vowel

b) to double a consonant after a short vowel

c) to omit long vowels

d) to omit short vowels

44. The Great Vowel Shift took place

a) at the very beginning of the Middle English period

b) at the very beginning of the Old English period

c) at the very end of the Middle English period

d) at the very end of the Old English period

45. The Great Vowel Shift is a radical change in pronunciation as a result of which.... .

a) long vowel sounds began to be made higher and further forward in the mouth

b) long vowel sounds began to be made higher in the mouth

c) long vowel sounds began to be made further forward in the mouth

d) long vowel sounds began to be made lower in the mouth

46. A move from grammatical gender to natural gender took place during the ...

a) Old English period

b) Middle English period

- c) Early Modern English period
- d) New English period

47. The change in the phrase OE *þœm scipum* into Middle English *to the shippes* demonstrates... .

- a) change in word order
- b) the increasing role of prepositions
- c) the elimination of genitive case in Middle English
- d) the development of plural forms of nouns

48. During the Middle English period there took place

- a) the shift of most strong verbs to the weak paradigm
- b) the shift of most weak verbs to the strong paradigm
- c) the decay of strong verbs
- d) the decay of weak verbs

49. How many tenses were there in Middle English?

- a) two (present and future)
- b) three (past, present and future)
- c) two (past and present)
- d) four (past, present, future, future-in-the-past)

50. Weak verbs formed their past forms and participle...

- a) by changing the stem vowel
- b) by adding a dental suffix
- c) by adding prefixes
- d) by split of the stem

51. Middle English weak verbs are the immediate source of modern verbs

- a) auxiliary
- b) irregular
- c) modal
- d) regular

52. In the Middle English phrases *I shal singe; thou mightest come; we sholde goon*, the action is referred to... .
- a) the future
 - b) the present
 - c) the past
 - d) no time
53. To mark the infinitive in Middle English its speakers used... .
- a) a construction with *for to*
 - b) constructions either with *to* or *for to*
 - c) ending *-ian*
 - d) only particle *to*
54. The foundations for continuous and perfect forms were laid during... .
- a) Early Modern English period
 - b) Middle English period
 - c) Old English period
 - d) pre-English period
55. Initially the auxiliary verb for a perfect form was... .
- a) either *be* or *have*
 - b) only *be*
 - c) only *have*
 - d) *shall*
56. The first person pronoun singular “I”
- a) hadn’t been capitalized before the 19th century
 - b) has always been capitalized
 - c) has never been capitalized
 - d) is found capitalized since 1250
57. In the Middle English period, the entire third person plural pronoun system is gradually replaced byforms.
- a) Celtic
 - b) German

- c) Latin
- d) Scandinavian

58. The Old English third person plural pronoun system used forms beginning with ..., while the Scandinavian forms began with

- a) *c, h*
- b) *h, þ*
- c) *k, l*
- d) *w, q*

59. What kind of genitive emerged during Middle English?

- a) a construction where the two noun phrases were separated (*the Duke's hat, of York*)
- b) only the "group genitive" (*the Duke of York's hat*)
- c) only the *of*-genitive (*the hat of Duke*)
- d) both the "group genitive" and the *of*-genitive

60. "Double" or "triple" negation in Middle English... .

- a) couldn't be used
- b) didn't convey any function
- c) increased the emphasis, making the negative meaning stronger
- d) made a statement positive

61. Such word pairs as *pig* and *pork*; *wedding* and *marriage* demonstrate

- a) different origin (OE and French)
- b) different origin (Latin and German)
- c) the Great vowel shift
- d) the stylistic opposition in Middle English

62. The simultaneous borrowing of French and Latin words created sets of three items all expressing the same notion but differing slightly in meaning or style, such as *rise* / *mount* / *ascend*. The Old English word is usually..... one, with the French word....., and the Latin word..... .

- a) more popular, more literary, more learned
- b) obsolete, more popular, more learned

- c) more learned, more literary, more popular
- d) obsolete, bookish, more popular

63. The genealogy of modern Standard English goes back to

- a) Beowulf
- b) Chaucer
- c) London Chancery
- d) Shakespeare

64. The first book printed in English was... .

- a) The Canterbury Tales
- b) The Hystories of Troye
- c) The Lay Folk's Mass Book
- d) The Peterborough Chronicle

65. William Caxton was

- a) a linguist
- b) a literary scholar
- c) a merchant
- d) a poet

66. The famous “Egg Story” demonstrates misunderstanding caused by

- a) different words denoting one and the same referent
- b) one word denoting different referents
- c) words *egges* and *eyren* being synonyms
- d) words *egges* and *eyren* being antonyms

67. Shakespeare is known for his

- a) grammatical “firsts”
- b) lexical “firsts”
- c) phonetic “firsts”
- d) stylistic “firsts”

68. What linguistic phenomenon do the following Shakespeare’s lines demonstrate:

“Season your admiration for a while...It out-herods Herod... Grace me no grace, no uncle me no uncle...”?

- a) decay of inflections

- b) elaborate, high style of the sentences
- c) grammatical conversion
- d) neologisms

69. The following quotations which became everyday idioms (*it's Greek to me; salad days; love is blind; play fast and loose* etc.) belong to... .

- a) King James
- b) Queen Elizabeth
- c) Shakespeare
- d) William Caxton

70. Richard Mulcaster, in the first part of his *Elementarie* (1582), tried “*to find out the rightof ours*”

- a) listening
- b) readings
- c) speaking
- d) writings

71. Which symbols were at first interchangeable, then positionally distinguished, later followed Continental practice and adopted fixed phonetic values?

- a) *u* and *w*
- b) *u* and *y*
- c) *v* and *u*
- d) *v* and *y*

72. In the 17th and 18th centuries some writers usedfor any noun that they felt to be important.

- a) a capital letter
- b) an exclamation mark
- c) special writing style
- d) underlining

73. In Caxton, the virgule (/) initially had the function of a

- a) modern comma
- b) modern comma, period, or semi-colon

- c) modern period
- d) modern semi-colon

74. *Wonderer, dozer, joiner, asker* are...

- a) functions of auxiliaries
- b) punctuation terms used by John Hart
- c) synonyms
- d) words which had nothing to do with the use of Early Modern English

75. Which conjunction, first found in Chaucer replaced *for (that)*?

- a) *and*
- b) *because*
- c) *then*
- d) *which*

76. By the 17th century sentences tended to be

- a) highly sophisticated and carefully crafted
- b) incorrect
- c) short
- d) stylistically primitive

77. By Shakespeare's time the auxiliary *do* was

- a) archaic
- b) never used
- c) obligatory
- d) possible

78. *Thou/thee* was used by people

- a) in official speeches
- b) of higher class while speaking to each other
- c) of higher rank or status to those beneath them
- d) of lower rank or status to those above them

79. *Society of Friends*, or *Quakers* disapproved of the way singularhad come to be part of social etiquette

- a) *he*
- b) *she*

- c) *thou*
- d) *you*

80. The first attempt at a truly principled lexicography is considered to have been

- a) *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson
- b) *Elementarie* by Mulcaster
- c) *The Melody and Measure of Speech* by Joshua Steele
- d) *The Pure Language of the Spirit of Truth* by Richard Farnsworth

81.works on grammar and rhetoric appeared between 1750 and 1800.

- a) about 10
- b) about 100
- c) over 200
- d) over 50

82. The first half of the 19th century was remarkable for the number ofwhich appeared on both sides of the Atlantic.

- a) dictionaries
- b) glossaries
- c) grammars
- d) manuscripts

83. Such words in English as *boomerang, kangaroo, budgerigar, pyjamas, thug, bungalow, cot, jungle, loot, shampoo, candy, tank* etc. are

- a) Latin borrowings
- b) Shakespeare's neologisms
- c) the result of British colonialism
- d) The result of the development of Old English words

84. The modern idiom *hoist with one's own petard* originally referred to:

- a) a military engineer who was blown up by a faulty explosive
- b) a drunken person in a messy situation
- c) a knight showing devotion during a jousting tournament
- d) a pointless pursuit in a horse race

KEY TO THE SELF-ASSESSMENT TEST

- | | |
|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 43. b |
| 2. c | 44. c |
| 3. c | 45. a |
| 4. a | 46. b |
| 5. b | 47. b |
| 6. a | 48. a |
| 7. d | 49. c |
| 8. b | 50. b |
| 9. d | 51. d |
| 10. a | 52. a |
| 11. a | 53. b |
| 12. c | 54. b |
| 13. d | 55. a |
| 14. a | 56. d |
| 15. b | 57. d |
| 16. a | 58. b |
| 17. a | 59. d |
| 18. a | 60. c |
| 19. c | 61. a |
| 20. a | 62. a |
| 21. c | 63. c |
| 22. a | 64. b |
| 23. a | 65. c |
| 24. a | 66. a |
| 25. c | 67. b |
| 26. d | 68. c |
| 27. a | 69. c |
| 28. c | 70. d |
| 29. b | 71. c |
| 30. b | 72. a |
| 31. b | 73. b |
| 32. c | 74. b |
| 33. c | 75. b |
| 34. a | 76. a |
| 35. a | 77. d |
| 36. b | 78. c |
| 37. c | 79. d |
| 38. b | 80. a |
| 39. a | 81. c |
| 40. c | 82. a |
| 41. a | 83. c |
| 42. a | 84. a |

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

1. Верба, Л. Г. (2012). *Історія англійської мови* (3-тє випр. вид.; за ред. Е. Ф. Рікко). Вінниця: Нова Книга.
2. Оленяк, М. Я. (2024). *Образне порівняння у давньоанглійській мові: Дихотомія універсального та індивідуального* [Докторська дисертація, Львівський національний університет імені Івана Франка].
<https://lnu.edu.ua/thesis/oleniak-mar-iana-yaroslavivna/>
3. Baugh, A. C., & Cable, T. (2013). *A history of the English language* (6th ed.). Routledge.
4. Blake, N. (1996). *A history of the English language*. Macmillan.
5. Campbell, A. (1959). *Old English grammar*. Oxford University Press.
6. Caxton, W. (1490). *Eneydos* (Prologue, pp. 2–3). Westminster: Printed by William Caxton.
7. Crystal, D. (2003). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
8. Crystal, D. (2019). *The stories of English*. Penguin.
9. Farnworth, R. (1656). *The pure language of the Spirit of Truth*. For Giles Calvert
10. Fischer, O., van Kemenade, A., Koopman, W., & van der Wurff, W. (2000). *The syntax of early English*. Cambridge University Press.
11. Fisiak, J. (1968). *A short grammar of Middle English*. Polish Scientific Publishers.
12. Hogg, R. M. (Ed.). (1992). *The Cambridge history of the English language: Vol. 1. The beginnings to 1066*. Cambridge University Press.
13. Hogg, R. M., & Denison, D. (Eds.). (2006). *A history of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.
14. Johnson's Dictionary Online. (n.d.). *A dictionary of the English language*.
<https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>
15. Millward, C. M., & Hayes, M. (2012). *A biography of the English language* (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.
16. Mulcaster, R. (1970). *The first part of the Elementary, 1582*. Menston: Scolar Press.

17. Steele, J. (1775). *An essay towards establishing the melody and measure of speech to be expressed and perpetuated by peculiar symbols*. Printed by W. Bowyer & J. Nichols for J. Almon.
18. Toronto Dictionary of Old English Corpus. (n.d.). *Dictionary of Old English: A corpus of texts from Old English*. University of Toronto.
19. Trask, R. L. (1996). *Historical linguistics*. Arnold.
20. Trask, R. L., & Stockwell, P. (2007). *Language and linguistics: The key concepts* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
21. White, R. M. (1852). *The Ormulum*. Oxford: University Press.

Навчальне видання

ОЛЕНЯК Мар'яна Ярославівна

Історія англійської мови: ще одна історія

Навчальний посібник

Друкується за авторською редакцією

Технічний редактор *В. І. Філіпченко*

Оригінал-макет виготовлено ВПЦ "Київський університет"



Формат 60x84^{1/16}. Обл.-вид. арк. 12,2. Ум. друк. арк. 11,4. Зам. № 225-11713.

Гарнітура Times New Roman. Електронне видання.

Підписано до друку 22.06.26

Видавець і виготовлювач

ВПЦ "Київський університет"

Б-р Тараса Шевченка, 14, м. Київ, 01601, Україна

☎ (38044) 239 32 22; (38044) 239 31 58; (38044) 239 31 28

e-mail: vpc@knu.ua

<http://vpc.knu.ua>

Свідоцтво суб'єкта видавничої справи ДК № 1103 від 31.10.02