

The History of English

The reconstruction of proto-forms is an attempt to determine what a language must have been like before any written records. However, even when we have written records from an older period of a language such as English, they may not bear any resemblance to the written form of the language found today. The version of the Lord's Prayer quoted at the beginning of this chapter provides a good illustration of this point. Even some of the letters seem quite alien. The older letters þ (called "thorn") and ð ("eth") were both replaced by "th" (as in $\theta\theta u \rightarrow$ thou, eorðan \rightarrow earth), and æ ("ash") simply became "a" (as in to dæg \rightarrow today). To see how one language has undergone substantial changes through time, we can take a brief look at the history of English, which is traditionally divided into **four** periods: **Old English: before 1100** **Middle English: 1100 to 1500** **Early Modern English: 1500 to 1700** **Modern English: after 1700**

Old English

The primary sources for what developed as the English language were the Germanic languages spoken by tribes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes from northern Europe who moved into the British Isles in the fifth century. In one early account, these tribes were described as "God's wrath toward Britain." It is from the names of the first two that we have the term Anglo-Saxons to describe these people, and from the first tribe that we get the word for their language Englisc and their new home Engla-land. From this early version of Englisc, now called Old English, we have many of the most basic terms in the language: mann ("man"), wīf ("woman"), cild ("child"), hūs ("house"), mete ("food"), etan ("eat"), drincan ("drink") and feohtan ("fight"). These pagan invaders did not remain pagan for long. From the sixth to the eighth century, there was a period during which these Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity and a number of terms from Latin (the language of the religion) came into English at that time. The origins of the contemporary English words angel, bishop, candle, church, martyr, priest and school all date from this period. From the eighth century through the ninth and tenth centuries, another group of northern Europeans came first to plunder and then to settle in parts of the coastal regions of Britain. They were the Vikings and it is from their language, Old Norse, that the original forms of give, law, leg, skin, sky, take and they were adopted, along with the weekdays Tiw's day and Thor's day. It is from their winter festival jól that we have Yule as a term for the Christmas season.

Middle English

The event that marks the end of the Old English period, and the beginning of the Middle English period, is the arrival of the Norman French in England, after their victory at Hastings under William the Conqueror in 1066. These French-speaking invaders became the ruling class, so that the language of the nobility, government, law and civilized life in England for the next two hundred years was French. It is the source of words like army, court, defense, faith, prison and tax. Yet the language of the peasants remained English. The peasants worked on the land and reared sheep, cows and swine (words from Old English) while the upper classes talked about mutton, beef and pork (words of French origin). Hence the different terms in Modern English to refer to these creatures "on the hoof" as opposed to "on the plate." Throughout this period, French (or, more accurately, an English

version of French) was the prestige language and Chaucer tells us that one of his Canterbury pilgrims could speak it. She was cleped Madame Eglentyne Ful wel she song the service dyvyne, Entuned in her nose ful semely, And Frenche she spak ful faire and fetisly. This is an example of Middle English from the late fourteenth century. It had changed substantially from Old English, but other changes were yet to take place. Most significantly, the vowel sounds of Chaucer's time were very different from those we hear in similar words today. Chaucer lived in a "hoos," with his "weef," and "hay" might drink a bottle of "weena" with "heer" by the light of the "mona." In the two hundred years, from 1400 to 1600, that separated Chaucer and Shakespeare, the sounds of English underwent a substantial change known as the "Great Vowel Shift." The effects of this general raising of long vowel sounds (such as long [o] moving up to long [u], as in mōna → moon) made the pronunciation of Early Modern English, beginning around 1500, significantly different from earlier periods. The introduction of printing in 1476 brought about significant changes, but because the printers tended to standardize existing pronunciations in the spelling of words (e.g. knee, gnaw), later pronunciation changes are often not reflected in the way Modern English (after 1700) is written. Those changes reflecting influences from the outside (borrowed words from Norman French or Old Norse) are examples of external change. Other changes (especially sound changes) are the result of processes of internal change.

Sound Changes In a number of changes from Middle to Modern English, some sounds disappeared from the pronunciation of certain words, in a process simply described as sound loss. The initial [h] of many Old English words was lost, as in hlud → loud and hlaford → lord. Some words lost sounds, but kept the spelling, resulting in the "silent letters" of contemporary written English. Word-initial velar stops [k] and [g] are no longer pronounced before nasals [n], but we still write the words knee and gnaw with the remnants of earlier pronunciations. Another example is a velar fricative [x] that was used in the pronunciation of the older form niht as [nixt] (closer to the modern German pronunciation of Nacht), but is absent in the contemporary form night, pronounced as [naɪt]. A remnant of this type of sound is still present in some dialects, as at the end of the Scottish word loch, but it is no longer a consonant in most dialects of Modern English.

Metathesis The sound change known as metathesis involves a reversal in position of two sounds in a word. This type of reversal is illustrated in the changed versions of these words from their earlier forms. acsian → ask

frist → first

brinnan → beornan (burn)

bridd → bird

hros → horse

wæps → wasp

The cowboy who pronounces the expression pretty good as something close to purty good is producing a similar example of metathesis as a dialect variant within Modern English. In some American English dialects, the form aks, as in I aksed him already, can still be heard instead of ask. The reversal of position in metathesis can sometimes occur between nonadjoining sounds. The

Spanish word *palabra* is derived from the Latin *parabola* through the reversal in position of the [l] and [r] sounds. The pattern is exemplified in the following set. Latin *miraculum* → Spanish *milagro* (“miracle”) *parabola* → *palabra* (“word”) *periculum* → *peligro* (“danger”)

Epenthesis Another type of sound change, known as epenthesis, involves the addition of a sound to the middle of a word.

æmtig → empty

spinel → spindle

timr → timber

The addition of a [p] sound after the nasal [m], as in *empty*, can also be heard in some speakers’ pronunciation of something as “sumpthing.” Anyone who pronounces the word *film* as if it were “filum,” or *arithmetic* as “arithametic,” is producing examples of epenthesis in Modern English.

Prothesis

One other type of sound change worth noting, though not found in English, involves the addition of a sound to the beginning of a word and is called prothesis. It is a common feature in the evolution of some forms from Latin to Spanish. *schola* → *escuela* (“school”) *scribere* → *escribir* (“to write”) *spiritus* → *espíritu* (“spirit”) *sperare* → *esperar* (“to hope”) Spanish speakers who are starting to learn English as a second language will sometimes put a prothetic vowel at the beginning of some English words, with the result that words like *strange* and *story* may sound like “estrange” and “estory.”