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The Roots of Phonics and Spelling

Where Did English Come From?

Paula Tilker
Education Specialist
Region 9 ESC

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We Spell By...

Letters/letter combinations mapped to corresponding sounds (phonology)
/b/ /a/ /t/ = bat

Meaning (morphology)
laugh ... laughed

Position of a sound in a word (phonics)
Final /k/ is spelled ck after a short vowel in a one-syllable word.
Example: check

Where words came from (etymology)
choir ... chef ... chief

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Good Readers and Spellers

• Are sensitive to word parts (morphology)

• Use morphemes to help categorize words into a mental dictionary (audi = to hear)
  audio ⇒ auditorium ⇒ audition ⇒ audience

• Benefit from morphemes when trying to remember differences in homophones or similar-sounding words
  air – heir conscious - conscience
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English is relatively regular in spelling and pronunciation when etymology understood

- At least 20 phonemes have grapheme spellings that are more than 90% predictable
- At least 10 other phonemes are predictable more than 80% of the time

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In the Beginning

- 30,000 years ago, Homo sapiens sapiens spread northward into Europe
- Larynx dropped lower into throat, making speech (and choking) possible
- Language developed

The hyoid bone is in the right position to work with the larynx and tongue to enable speech. Without it, we’d sound like chimpanzees, bawling.

Other mammals can breathe and swallow simultaneously.

But other mammals can’t talk.

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Indo-European

Early Indo-Europeans lived several thousand years before Christ. Their language was the ancestor of these, which developed as groups migrated to different areas and new dialects emerged that eventually became new languages.

These people had words for horse, bear, goat, ox, hare, and probably were herdsmen, not farmers.
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**The Story Starts**

About 4000 years BCE, people move from the continent to the island now called England. This includes the Picts, who are farmers, and then later the Beaker Folk, who build the original Stonehenge. Then about 800 BCE come the Celts, blue-eyed redheads who farm, drink mead, and like to wear red. For battle, they strip naked and paint themselves blue. About 43 AD, the Romans invade. Celts adopt Roman ways but still speak Celtic. Latin is used in monasteries and churches. As their empire splinters, the Romans withdraw, in 410.

**The Celts**

The Celtic language survives in the form of Scots Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, and Breton. It lives on in river names (Avon, Severn, Thames) and in town names (Bryn Mawr, Carlisle, London). The word Britain comes from a Celtic group, the Brythons.

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**The Anglo-Saxons**

Romans leave Britain by 410 CE and pagan Germanic tribes invade, starting about 450. They find Christians who speak Celtic with a little Latin thrown in. Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians attack in waves, murdering and pillaging. Eventually they settle most of the countryside.

The groups are functionally illiterate and speak different dialects. These dialects evolve into Old English, most similar to Frisian today.

First recorded sentence in A/S in Britain: “gaeogogae maegae medu” “This she-wolf is a reward to my kinsman.” (Runic inscription on gold medallion)
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**Add in the Vikings**

The Germanic tribes form several kingdoms. Christianity is re-established, and monasteries flourish.

Then Vikings (the Danes) invade from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

King Alfred the Great eventually pushes the Danes back up north.

The Danes speak a Northern Germanic language, similar to the Germanic-based Anglo-Saxon language. The languages mingle.

The Danelaw is established (part of the country where Danish laws are observed).

About 770-886

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**Kissing Cousins**

**Norse place names**

- Derby (-by = village)
- Billingsgate (gate = street)
- Crossthwaite (thwaite = clearing)
- Scarfell (fell = hill)
- Troutbeck (beck = stream)
- Lowestoft (loft = piece of land)

The Norse Vikings counted by 12s instead of by 10s. This is why British currency eventually had 12 pence and why we buy eggs by the dozen (12s).

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**Also from the Norse**

**Verbs ending in -en**

- happen
- liken
- weaken

**Some verbs ending in -le**

- dangle
- dazzle
- drizzle
- kindle

**Words beginning with /sk/**

- scab
- scold
- score
- scrap
- skulk
- sky
- freckle
- leg
- lift
- meek
- dangle
- dazzle
- drizzle
- kindle

**they\/them\/their (syntax borrowing)**

- TUESDAY -- Tiew’s day
- WEDNESDAY -- Woden’s day
- THURSDAY -- Thor’s day
- FRIDAY -- Fria’s day

- egg
- cake
- fellow
- ugly
- take
- husband
- die
- window = wind eye
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**Alfred the Great establishes English as an important language**

- Writes the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a history of the English people in their own language
- Translates works from Latin into the local English language
- Known as the Father of English Prose

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**OLD ENGLISH**

- Anglo-Saxons modify the Roman alphabet to their language. (Monks are doing the writing, adapting Latin to A/S).
- Different phonological systems mean adding new characters to represent A/S sounds (such as for /th/, which Latin doesn’t have) plus using some of the runic symbols.

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**OLD ENGLISH**

- Nouns, articles, pronouns, and adjectives highly inflected, so word order not important grammatically
- Verbs are divided into strong or weak. Strong verbs show tense change by vowel sound, weak by adding an ending. (e.g., take – took; love – loved; drink – drank; talk – talked)
- Use only one vowel at a time in the ending
- Compound words common. Sometimes made by putting prepositions in front of verbs and nouns:
  - Inside (inside), outlaw (outlaw), foresee (foresee)
  - Sometimes by joining other words:
    - Shepherd from ‘sheep’ (sheep herd)
    - Answer from ‘and swears’ (and swear)
    - Lady from ‘loaf-kneader’ (hlafdige)
**OLD ENGLISH**

**CLIMB TOLD**

Short vowel sounds eventually lengthen when in front of some consonant clusters:
-ld -mb -nd -ng -rd
-tl -ml -nl -rl -rn -rs -rth

10 vowel characters, each with two sounds, short and long. Vowel length is phonemic, meaning duration of sound held. In written OE, long sound sometimes indicated by doubling vowel (aa). “god” vs. “god” a e i o u y ea eo ie æ 

**OLD ENGLISH**

Consonant sounds in OE closer to ours today than the vowel sounds

f between voiced sounds is pronounced /v/.
loaf-loaves

Language is phonetically regular. Letters correspond with sounds. why = hwy where = hwær raven = hraefn.

**CLUES TO OLD ENGLISH**

- Di/trigraphs:
  - ch: church, cheap
  - sh: shop, wish
  - th: this, that
  - wh: which, why (originally hw)
  - -ck, -tch, -dge: duck, patch, edge

- Doubled consonants in the middle: rabbit, ladder (tells reader first vowel short)
- Floss Rule words: bluff, hill, moss

Guest and guess used to be spelled ghest and ghess. In Dutch, hard /g/ is spelled gh. The g became inverted and made into a h.
OLD ENGLISH RECAP

- 450 CE – 1066 CE
- Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians invade Britain, pushing the Celts to the fringes of the island
- Their language forms the foundation of English, influenced by Old Norse
- About 20-25% of Modern English words are Anglo-Saxon, or Old English

hates his foes draws a breath
blood, sweat, and tears
looks to heaven loves his wife

Here Come the Normans

Normans are Vikings turned French. (Norman = corruption of 'Norseman')

Battle of Hastings in October 1066.
William the Conqueror wins and is crowned king.
He speaks no English.
No English king for the next 300 years will speak in conversation.

Old English becomes bilingual, with Old English spoken by the masses and French by the rulers. Writing is in Latin. Eventually the Saxons and Normans intermarry.

Children born to Saxon mothers and raised by Saxon nursemaids have to go to school to learn French.

Here Come the Normans

For the next 250 years, French mingles with Old English and evolves into what is known as Middle English. Syntax simplifies, especially with verbs.

When England and France split, and with the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), English becomes the preferred language of the upper classes, orally and in writing.

The English language continues to develop. Why? Sheer numbers (more English than Normans), intermarriage, the Black Plague, and the eventual loss of France. Literature in English flourishes with writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer.
From 1066 until about 1558, more than 10,000 new words from Norman French enter the English language. About \( \frac{3}{4} \) are still used today. Latin and French are used in law, with Latin eventually edging out the French words.

**Vocabulary Bonus**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mutton} & \quad /\text{sheep}/ \\
\text{venison} & \quad /\text{deer}/ \\
\text{power} & \quad /\text{might}/ \\
\text{justice} & \quad /\text{fairness}/ \\
\text{antique} & \quad /\text{old}/ \\
\text{boutique} & \quad /\text{shop}/ \\
\text{saute} & \quad /\text{fry}/ \\
\text{novice} & \quad /\text{new}/ \\
\text{chamber} & \quad /\text{room}/ \\
\end{align*}
\]

**Doublets, legal and otherwise**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OE</th>
<th>French</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>acknowledge and confess</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breaking and entering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fit and proper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>give and grant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>had and received</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pardon and forgive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrack and ruin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peace and quiet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OE verb ending of –eth becomes –s
giveth = gives taketh = takes

-\text{en} plurals change to –s or –es
except for oxen and children

**Middle English**

This period of language development, from the Norman invasion until about 1500, becomes Middle English.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{/v/} & \quad /\text{zh/}/ \\
\text{/oy/} & \quad /\text{royal}/ \\
\end{align*}
\]

New sounds were added with new French words.

OE French

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{shut} & \quad /\text{close}/ \\
\text{answer} & \quad /\text{reply}/ \\
\text{smell} & \quad /\text{odor}/ \\
\text{yearly} & \quad /\text{annual}/ \\
\text{ask} & \quad /\text{demand}/ \\
\text{room} & \quad /\text{chamber}/ \\
\text{wish} & \quad /\text{desire}/ \\
\text{might} & \quad /\text{power}/ \\
\text{wrath} & \quad /\text{ire}/ \\
\end{align*}
\]

Mostly 1 syllable

Mostly 2 syllables

furniture – furniture  peintre – painter  tailleur – tailor
Geoffrey Chaucer writes *The Canterbury Tales* in English. He uses about 8,000 words, about half of which are of French or Latin origin.

In the later part of this period, an interest in scholarly pursuits arises. Think Renaissance. Latin is the language of learning. It isn’t used much in speech, but people read it.

Many words from Latin have prefixes and suffixes tied to root elements. About 60% of English words are from Latin, either directly or through French. This is academic language.

In the later part of this period, an interest in scholarly pursuits arises. Think Renaissance. Latin is the language of learning. It isn’t used much in speech, but people read it.

Age of Dialects

No national spelling standard, and orthographies vary

day: dai, daye, daeai, dey, dei, dawe
knight: knighht, knyght, knyghte, knyht, knyhte, knith, knict, kincth, cnipte, cniht
church: churche, cherche, churc, chirche, cherch, chyrche, kirke, kirk, kyrk

"That comyn englyssse that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother." – Caxton

Eventually the London-Oxford-Cambridge dialect becomes the standard and is reflected in spellings.

Printing Press Influence

Spelling conventions develops.
Foreign typesetters (mostly Dutch) affect spellings.
English still has only 24 letters in the alphabet. (i-j and u-v are used interchangeably).
Punctuation starts to be used for reading.

igland gets a silent s because it is incorrectly traced to French isle
French delite has gh added to conform with light

First book printed in English: 1471

Norman scribes replace cg with kn (knight instead of cnith)
cw is replaced with qu (queen instead of cresce)
Æ disappears, replaced by a
With the Normans
This mixing of Norman French with Old English results in language simplification.
• Inflectional endings are dropped
• Nouns become free of gender
• Case endings disappear except for pronouns, which is why we still have I/me and who/whom
• Plurals are indicated by -s or -es, instead of through vowel change (man-men)
• With verbs, -ed used regularly to show past tense instead of through vowel change
• Some exceptions continue: was/were, go/went, do/did, see/saw

Think of them as 'linguistic carbon-dating'

Word order matters; adjective in front of noun

When OE y stands for a long vowel, French scribes write the long /u/ as ui.
So, OE fyr becomes ME fuir.
Now in Modern English, it is fire.

The Great Vowel Shift
1350-1500
Major linguistic rearrangement changes the pronunciation of vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chaucer Rhymes</th>
<th>Modern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>heeth, breeth</td>
<td>heath, breath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>goot, hoot</td>
<td>goat, hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maid, saide</td>
<td>maid, said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>two, so</td>
<td>two, so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wyn, Latyn</td>
<td>wine, Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lound, koud</td>
<td>loud, could</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

heeth, breeth: We don’t know which word had the long vowel sound and which the short in ME.

The Great Vowel Shift (1450-1700)

Where did ‘silent e’ come from? OE inflections become dropped or reduced, leaving an unaccented neutral vowel at the ends of words.
Sometimes a final e also is added for the sake of appearance (OE breyd becomes bried).

OE stones
ME stones
Enter Greek

When Latin can’t provide a needed word, Greek words are used, changed to fit the language. The Latin language already includes many adapted Greek words.

Greek kybernan (to steer or rule) to Latin gubernare to French gouverner to English govern

Specialized words in math and science:
- amphibious, biology, atmosphere, psychology, symposium, hippocampus, ecological

Words in literature, drama, and music, which the Church didn’t approve of and so had no words for:
- character, chorus, autobiography, psalm, amphithater

Words for religion, mythology:
- Heist, Christ, pantheism

Classical Influences

Scholars try to make language rules from Latin and Greek fit English.

perfet to perfect with the c silent at first, eventually sounded (ME parfit, Latin perfectus)
dette to debt because of debitum
doute to doubt because of dubitare

Other ME Influences

About 1,700 of Shakespeare’s coined words survive:
- barefaced
- hint
- countless
- dislocate
- majestic
- excellent
- obscene

Some phrases:
- In the mind’s eye
- Parting is such sweet sorrow
- A rose by any other name
- Killing frost
- Too much of a good thing
- Give the devil his due

Let there be light
Oh ye of little faith
Seek and ye shall find
A twofold sword

Straight and narrow: Light the good fight
Turn the other cheek: Wednes in sheep’s clothing
The blind lead the blind: A cross to bear
By the sweat of your brow: The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak
**OTHER ME INFLUENCES**

Dr. Samuel Johnson writes a dictionary that takes 9 years to compile. It becomes the model for all future dictionaries. It has the history and grammar of the English language, a listing of words, and their definitions.

- From the French:
  - bizarre
  - chocolate
  - colonel
  - comrade
  - entrance

- From the Italians:
  - ballot
  - opera
  - macaroni
  - rocket
  - solo
  - violin

- From Native Americans:
  - moose
  - opossum
  - tomahawk
  - moccasin

- From other countries:
  - coffee
  - caravan
  - bungalow
  - cot
  - curry
  - bamboo

Sometimes words come in and change because of pronunciation:

- Mouscheron in French (meaning ‘moss’) morphs into ‘mushroom’ in English.

**MIDDLE ENGLISH RECAP**

- 1066 CE – 1500 CE
- The Normans invade Britain, subduing the Anglo-Saxons
- The country becomes bilingual
- Eventually the two languages mingle
- The French language, along with direct importation of Latin and Greek words, create a vocabulary explosion in English
  - drawing – portrait – picture – photograph

**MODERN ENGLISH: 1500 TO PRESENT**

- Middle English gradually changes into what we hear today.
- Change is continuous.
- Exploration and colonization continue to bring in many new words.

- Chaucer: 
  - hose
- Shakespeare: 
  - house
- 20th Century:
  - house with /ou/

The truth is that if borrowing foreign words could destroy a language, English would be dead (borrowed from Old Norse), deceased (from French), defunct (from Latin), and kaput (from German). When it comes to borrowing, English excels (from Latin), surpasses (from French), and eclipses (from Greek) any other tongue, past or present.
American and British vocabulary and accents differ in many cases. Noah Webster purposefully tries to simplify spellings in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828). He changes *musick* to *music* and *honour* to *honor*, *centre* to *center*, *catalogue* to *catalog*, *elevator* to *lift*, *truck* to *lorry*, *package* to *parcel*, *mailman* to *postman*, *color* to *colour*, *theater* to *theatre*, *check* to *cheque*, *canceled* to *cancelled*.

Number of English words: about 1,013,913. Estimate by the Global Language Monitor on Jan. 1, 2012. Millionth Word: controversial 'Web 2.0'. Currently there is a new word created every 98 minutes, or about 14.7 words per day.

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It All Began with Writing

Earliest punctuation marks (dots separating verses, at bottom, middle, top of line) used to identify rhythmical units of speech for speakers to pause to take a breath because reading isn’t done silently, only orally.

- Period: longest pause for speech
- Colon: next longest
- Comma: shortest pause

Gradually punctuation marks are formally inserted in writing between speech units as are spaces between words. Not done uniformly until invention of printing press. Use of punctuation marks in English writing rare through 15th century.

By 1740-1770, modern system is about developed. Writing becomes aimed at the eye as well as the ear. Grammarians come up with rules.

Semicolon: Developed first in Latin, relatively rarely used in English
Hyphen: First used for words divided at the end of a line as well as for compound words
Question mark: First used in English about 1520; inverted and hovering over a dot; always a question marker
Apostrophe: Indicated missing letter, then refined to show possession by late 17th century
Parenthesis: Originally used for verbatim sentences and emphasis; now for side comments
Exclamation mark: Originated in England, start of 17th century, to show admiration
Quotation marks: Originally to call attention to important passages; by 18th century, for verbatim passages
For the Classroom

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See Rudyard Kipling’s Just So Story, How the Alphabet Was Made for a whimsical tale.
Some Final Thoughts

- Children speak Old English
  - (Dolch 100)
  - Used most in everyday conversation
  - Words of emotion
- Each of the four layers of English has its own spelling pattern and meaning subtleties of meaning in vocabulary words
- Teach students that context + morphemes = meaning
- Teach students to look inside words for meaningful word parts
- Teach most common prefixes and roots/combining forms to students
  - It's part of the TEKS
**Useful Websites**

- [http://www.krysstal.com/english.html](http://www.krysstal.com/english.html)
- [http://www.childrenofthecode.org/Tour/c5b/index.htm](http://www.childrenofthecode.org/Tour/c5b/index.htm)

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**Resources**

- *English Isn’t Crazy!* by Diana Hanbury King
- *Mother Tongue* by Bill Bryson
- *Word Detective* by Suzanne Carreker
- *Unlocking Literacy* by Dr. Marcia Henry
- *The Stories of English* by David Crystal
- *The Roots of Phonics* by Miriam Balmuth

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**Resources**

- *Our Marvelous Native Tongue* by Robert Clailborne
- *A History of the English Language* by Albert Baugh and Thomas Cable
- *The Story of English* by Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil
- *Inventing English* by Seth Lerer