

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**REGARDING ENGLISH  
(Sound Education Conference)**

**Presented by Kevin W. Stroud**

## THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST BONUS EPISODE: REGARDING ENGLISH (Sound Education Conference)

I'm Kevin Stroud, and I am the creator and host of the History of English Podcast. Today, I want to speak to you about the history of English. I only have a few minutes, so I'm not going to cover the whole history, but I do want to hit some of the highlights. I'm going to zoom through about 5000 years of linguistic history, and in doing so, I'm going to show how this history altered and shaped a very old word – a word which is one of the oldest reconstructed words among European languages.

That word is *\*wer*, and it meant 'to perceive or guard' or 'watch out for something.' I said that it's a reconstructed word because it existed at a time before languages were written down. Modern scholars have determined that almost all of the languages of Europe and several languages of South Asia were all descended from a common language spoken somewhere in the vicinity of the Black Sea several thousand years ago. Those scholars have examined modern languages, as well as the written version of some older languages like Latin and Sanskrit. By identifying certain sound changes that have taken place within those languages over time, and by reversing of those changes, they have been able to reverse-engineer and reconstruct a large portion of that ancient language. This language is called the Proto-Indo-European language by modern scholars.

For many years, experts have debated when and where that old language was spoken, but the emerging consensus over the past few decades is that it was spoken by nomadic herders who lived in the Eurasian steppe region between 4000 and 6000 years ago. The homeland was probably in the region north of the Black Sea and Caspian Sea – in modern day Ukraine and southern Russia.

The reconstructed vocabulary of this ancient language reveals a lot about the culture of the people who spoke the language. It provides insight into their social structure, the way they defined kinship, the animals and vegetation they encountered, and the tools they used. This information has also helped scholars to track down the people who spoke this language.

These people are generally known today as the Indo-Europeans, and as I noted, it is believed that they were nomads who maintained flocks of domesticated animals on the Eurasian steppe. It appears that one of their words was that word I mentioned earlier – *\*wer*. It meant 'to perceive or guard' or 'watch out for something.' It makes sense that nomadic herders would have that word. In a dry and arid region like the steppes, nomads would have been on the constant look out for water. They would have searched the horizon for animals and other prey to sustain their diet. And they would have been on the constant look out for enemies or other threats. They would have also kept a close eye on their family and their tribe to make sure that everyone was safe and protected in the harsh and cold environment of the steppe region. One can imagine that these people would have regularly found the need to use this word *\*wer*.

Over time, the language of these people expanded outward from the Eurasian steppe. It spread eastward into parts of China and southward into India and other parts of South Asia. And it spread westward into Europe. There is still some debate as to whether this was an expansion of people or just an expansion of language. Modern DNA studies seem to confirm that it was, at least in part, an actual expansion of people. But whatever the mechanism, the language spread outward, and it

evolved and changed as the various speakers became isolated from each other. Some of those speakers ended up in Greece where the earliest form of Greek emerged. Others found their way to the Italian peninsula where Latin emerged. The Slavic languages, the Celtic languages and the Germanic languages also developed as the various Indo-European speakers spread throughout Europe. This means that most of the languages of western Europe are all related – and all descended from this same common ancestor.

Now the Germanic languages of northern Europe are important to this story because they are the source of English. The Germanic languages were spoken by a variety of tribal groups that lived in Scandinavia and adjacent parts of northern Europe. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, some of these Germanic tribes crossed the North Sea and the English Channel to make their way to southern Britain. Scholars still debate whether this was a large-scale migration, or an invasion, or some combination of both. The people who came to Britain spoke the Germanic dialects of their home regions in northern Europe – basically modern-day Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. These people were probably a combination of various Germanic-speaking tribes, but the two largest groups were the Angles and the Saxons. Since these were the two dominant groups, their British descendants became known as the Anglo-Saxons, and their language is known today as Anglo-Saxon or Old English. This was in fact the earliest form of English, but it was a very different language, largely unintelligible to Modern English speakers.

This early English language retained a significant number of words from the original Indo-European vocabulary even though the words had evolved over the centuries. Words for numbers were retained, as were words for body parts, and close family members. Other words were also retained, including that old word *\*wer* meaning ‘to perceive or guard’ or ‘watch out for something.’

Though many centuries had passed, the word still retained much of its original meaning within Old English. And it still survives in several words we use today that are native to English. It survives in the word *aware* meaning ‘watchful or vigilant.’ It survives in the word *beware* meaning ‘to be cautious or on guard against a threat.’ And it survives in the word *wary* meaning ‘a state of caution or being on the look out for a threat.’

The word was also used when people kept watch over their valuables or commodities. They guarded and protected those items. And along the way, these types of goods or commodities became known as *wares* from this same root word. The word was usually applied in the context of trade as merchants peddled their wares around England. The place where wares were stored became known as a *warehouse*, which is another term we still use today.

Over time, certain wares used around the home like tools, utensils, and fittings became known as *hardware* from the same root. And in the modern era, *hardware* produced the contrasting term *software*, which is an essential part of the modern computer age. And since this is a conference about podcasting, it is important to note that most of us couldn’t record a podcast with a combination of hardware and software. We use hardware like microphones and mixers, and we use software to record and edit and post the audio. So this old root word is even a part of modern podcasting.

Even if you're not a podcaster, that word *ware* meaning 'to protect or guard' is probably a part of your daily life if you use computers. There are constant threats to your computer when you're online. Those threats come in the form of *malware*, *spyware*, and *adware*. We have to be *aware* of those threats, and protect our devices with special anti-virus *software*. All of those common words evolved out of the Old English version of our Indo-European root word *\*wer*.

Now during the Old English period, the Anglo-Saxons also used their version of this root word to refer to the person who actually 'kept watch' and 'looked out for threats.' This person was called a *ward* – or *weard* in Old English. And it was an extremely common word at the time.

This was an era when writing and literacy were still relatively rare. Most stories passed in the oral tradition, usually in the form of song and poetry. The Anglo-Saxons used a traditional form of Germanic poetry which relied upon alliteration. It required the poet to use words with repeating sounds, and that meant that poets had to be creative to come up with terms that fit the required pattern.

To make words fit within the strict formula of that poetry, poets often used poetic compound words called kennings – like 'bone-house' for body, and 'whale road' for the ocean. The word *ward* or *weard* was often pulled into service to make these compounds. It was part of a common stock phrase that poets used when they needed to express an idea in a figurative way.

The most famous Old English poem is probably Beowulf. In the poem, Beowulf describes himself as 'folces weard,' which was the 'folk's ward' or the 'guardian of the people'. The poem also features a Danish king named Hrothgar, and he is described as the 'rices weard' – the 'kingdom's ward or kingdom's guardian.' That was a very traditional term for a king.

Now Beowulf is a very old epic poem, but the oldest surviving poem in Old English is called Caemon's Hymn. It's a religious poem composed in the 600s. And Caedmon extended this same stock phrase to the Christian God which he described as 'hefaen-ricaeas uard' – literally the 'Heavenly Kingdom's Guardian.' That was the first time in English literature that this traditional term for a king was applied in a Christian context. And given that we are gathered today at Harvard Divinity School, it is important to note that this wasn't the only religious term formed from this common root word. Our same root word also gave us the word *lord*.

The original version of *lord* was a much longer compound word, and it didn't have anything to do with the Church. It began as *hlaf-weard* – literally the 'loaf ward' or 'loaf guardian.' *Hlaf* or *loaf* was the Old English word for bread, and bread was a staple of the Anglo-Saxon diet. It was important to protect and secure the bread once it was baked. So the 'loaf guardian' was a common term for the head of the household – usually the husband or father. And if that sounds kind of crazy, think about the modern term 'breadwinner' which is a more modern term based on a similar idea.

Over time, the term *hlaf-weard* was shortened and condensed into the word *lord*. The secular sense of the word was extended to Christianity where it continued to have that sense of a guardian or protector. So *lord* was actually derived from a much longer compound term – 'loaf ward.'

Old English also used that word *ward* in other contexts. We know the word *sty* as in a ‘pig sty.’ It means a pen. It’s another Old English word. And the person in charge of a sty or pen was a *stigward*, which became *steward* in Modern English. It later produced the surname *Stuart*.

And speaking of names, the Old English word *ward* was also used to form several common Anglo-Saxon personal names. One of those names was *Edward*. It is one of the few Anglo-Saxon names that survived into the modern era. It combined the Old English word *ead* meaning ‘blessed’ with *weard* meaning ‘guardian.’ So Edward meant ‘blessed guardian.’ And part of the reason why that name survived the centuries is because it was the name of several Anglo-Saxon kings. The most well-known of those kings was the one who died in the year 1066. His name was Edward the Confessor, and he died without any surviving children or immediate heirs.

This created a scramble as various people stepped forward to claim the English throne. One of those people was the ruler of Normandy on the other side of the English Channel. His name was William. Even though Normandy was technically part of the French kingdom, it was a very fractured kingdom, and Normandy was a semi-independent territory that conducted its own foreign policy. And William of Normandy claimed the English throne. His claim was partly based on the fact that he was a cousin of the deceased English king, Edward the Confessor. William’s grandfather and Edward’s mother had been siblings. So he used that family connection to assert his claim to the English throne, and in October of the year 1066, William’s forces invaded England and defeated the native English forces at the Battle of Hastings.

This is one of the most famous events in English history, and in the history of the English language, because it fundamentally altered almost every aspect of English society. It changed the government, the law, the social structure, and it changed the language because the Norman ruling class spoke French – not English. They looked down on English as a peasant language. When French became the language of the ruling class, it also became the language of high culture, literature and government. Along the way, French words began to flow into English, and many of those words replaced the native Old English words.

French was a Romance language which evolved from Latin. And as we’ve seen, Latin was another branch of the Indo-European language family. So even though French and English were distinct languages, they ultimately shared the same origin on the Eurasian steppe. And through this common connection, many French words are actually related to native English words.

A good example of this relationship can be found in our same root word *\*wer* meaning ‘to perceive or guard’ or ‘watch out for something.’ In the same way that this word passed into Old English, it also passed into Latin and then into French. So French and English had their own versions of this root word. But as Latin evolved into French, some of the sounds of Latin changed to new sounds. One of those changes involved the ‘w’ sound at the beginning of many words like our root word *\*wer*. This ‘w’ sound either disappeared or shifted to other sounds in Late Latin and early French. In many words, this ‘w’ sound shifted to a ‘v’ sound. That helps to explain the connection between words like *wine* and *vine* or *vineyard*. Those Latin and French words were borrowed into English at different times. *Wine* came in before the initial sound changed, so we still have it as *wine* with

a ‘w’ sound. And *vine* and *vineyard* were borrowed after that initial sound changed, so we have those words with an initial ‘v’ sound. But they are all variations of the same word.

Well, the same thing happened with our root word *\*wer*. As the word passed through Late Latin and French, it acquired a ‘v’ sound from *wer* to *ver*. And French gave us that word as part of the term *revere*. The word *revere* reflects that original sense of viewing or perceiving something. Specifically, it refers to a feeling of respect or admiration which you might have when you view something. If you respect or admire someone, you *revere* them. And in an age when the Church influenced almost every aspect of daily life, members of the clergy were revered. And that helps to explain the origin of the word *reverend*. A reverend was revered by the laity.

So our same root word gave us the word *reverend* via French, and earlier, we saw that it gave us the word *lord* via Old English. Both words are derived from our Indo-European root word meaning ‘to perceive or guard.’ And given the fact that we find ourselves at Harvard Divinity School, perhaps it’s fitting that we can discover the link between words like *reverend* and *lord*.

So we’ve seen that English has native words that were acquired from the ancient Indo-European language of the Eurasian steppe. And English has borrowed a lot of words from French and Latin which also have the same origin. And sometimes we have words from both language families that are connected through this common origin.

But language sometimes works in mysterious and unexpected ways. In some cases, English borrowed words from French which were actually Germanic words – not Latin words. So how did that happen? Well, the answer lies in the history of France and the French language itself.

The nation-state that we know as France really has its origins in a Germanic-speaking tribe called the Franks. In fact, that’s where the name *France* comes from. The Franks lived in the Germanic regions of northern Europe east of the Rhine. That were neighbors of the original Angles and Saxons, and they spoke a closely-related Germanic dialect.

And around the time the Anglo-Saxons were migrating across the Channel to Britain, the Franks moved westward across the Rhine into the region we know today as France. The kingdom they founded there eventually became the Frankish kingdom, and in later centuries, it became the country of France. So in its earliest days, France was governed by a Germanic speaking elite, but most of the actual population spoke a Latin dialect. Over time, the modern French language emerged from this linguistic mix, and French inherited a large number of those Germanic words used by the Frankish elite. To this day, French still has a larger percentage of Germanic words than any other Romance language.

Now as we saw earlier, William of Normandy conquered England in 1066, and with that conquest, a lot of those French words began to pour into English, and some of those French words had their origin with the Franks. So they were really Germanic words even though they came in via French. And as you might have guessed, this borrowing process included our old root word *\*wer* meaning ‘to perceive, or watch over, or guard.’

The Frankish version of that root word passed into English as *warden*. But the French speakers around Paris still had a problem with that initial ‘w’ sound. In the same way that it became a ‘v’ sound in a lot of Latin words, it became a ‘g’ sound in a lot of these Frankish words. So whereas the Normans of northern France pronounced those words with their original ‘w’ sound, the French speakers further south around Paris pronounced them with a ‘g’ sound. And very often, English borrowed both forms of the words.

So English not only borrowed the word *warden* from northern France, it also borrowed the word again as *guardian* from central France. *Warden* and *guardian* are ultimately the same word. Each one comes from a different dialect of French. And just as English borrowed the word *guardian*, it also borrowed the word *guard*. So *warden*, *guardian* and *guard* are all variations of our same Indo-European root word meaning ‘to keep watch or observe.’

Not only did this process give us *warden* and *guardian* from the same root word, it also gave us another word pair – the words *reward* and *regard*. Believe or not, those two words are not only closely related, they actually had the same meaning within early English. *Regard* had much of its modern meaning. If we *regard* something, we take notice of it. We might inspect it or perceive it or oversee it. So it retains much of the meaning of the original Indo-European root word. And at one time, *reward* was just the northern French version of that word with the ‘w’ sound instead of the ‘g’ sound. But over time, English speakers started to distinguish the two words. *Reward* came to refer to the consequences that flow from an inspection or evaluation. A bad evaluation often led to punishment in the sense of a wrongdoer getting his ‘just rewards.’ And a good evaluation or judgment often led to a positive result. And that created the more typical sense of *reward* as a type of honor or benefit, so you might be *rewarded* for a good performance or for good behavior.

So we can see how this Indo-European root word entered English from multiple directions – from Old English, from Latin via French, and from the Frankish language via French. That French influence was a consequence of the Norman Conquest, and that Conquest contributed greatly to the evolution of English. English evolved from more or less ‘pure’ Germanic language beforehand, to a language with tremendous Latin and French influences today. So much of the language we speak today flows from the consequences of the Norman Conquest, but that Conquest did meet with some fierce resistance early on.

We know that William of Normandy became known to history as William the Conqueror, but soon after his victory at Hastings, the north of England rose in rebellion. William was able to put down the rebellion in a brutal campaign known as the Harrying of the North. The word *harry* is an Old English word that meant ‘to lay waste with an army,’ and it based on another Old English word – *here* – which meant army.

That word *here* was sometimes combined with our old root word *ward* meaning ‘protector or guardian.’ And together, those words produced the term *here-ward*. It literally meant ‘army guardian,’ but it was soon adopted by an Anglo-Saxon rebel in the north of England who led the last lines of English resistance against Norman rule. His name was Hereward the Wake. And he became a legendary outlaw and folk hero in the process. We’re told by contemporary writers that the English

people sang songs about him, and he is widely believed to have been an early inspiration for the later tales of Robin Hood which also began as folk songs.

So Hereward's name also bore our root word meaning guardian or protector. But there's another reason I wanted to mention Hereward in concluding this presentation. That's because the name Hereward lived at a time when surnames were starting to be adopted throughout England. And within a century of his death, the name Hereward first appeared as a surname in the official records of England. It was recorded as a surname for the first time around the year 1154. And over the next few centuries, the pronunciation of that surname continued to evolve. And by the Elizabethan period, it had evolved from 'Hereward' to 'Harvard.' And shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth, a English minister named John Harvard migrated to North America. At his death a few year's later, he left a large portion of his estate to a new college that was being planned here in Massachusetts. That institution of higher learning was soon named after him, and it is of course the institution where we find ourselves today.

So I hope you can see that Modern English is the product of a long and fascinating history. And the words we use every day reflect that history, but that history never ends. Our language is constantly changing and evolving, and new words are routinely being coined from old words. So even though we may not realize it, we're contributing that ongoing story of English every day – every time we speak and write – and every time we find new ways to use the English language.

Thank you.