THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 6:
INDO-EUROPEAN WORDS

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 6: INDO-EUROPEAN WORDS

Welcome to the History of English podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language.

First, let me thank all of you who have been kind enough to leave feedback and ratings for this podcast on iTunes. As I have said before, the feedback is very helpful and I continue to welcome your comments there. Now, as we look at this week's episode, I want to continue to look at the original Indo-European language and the connections of that language to Modern English.

In the last episode, I looked at a specific sound change which has occurred throughout the history of the Indo-European languages. That was the shift from the 'k' sound to the 's' sound – the process called assibilation. And we looked at how that sound change has marked the history of the Modern English letter C. We also looked at how this sound change helped early linguists to classify the early Indo-European languages.

In this episode, I want to look at that original Indo-European language more closely. Remember that this is the ancestor of English and almost all of the languages of Europe. Not surprisingly, we can see traces of English in this ancient language. Chronologically, this is as far back as we can go in the history of English. This is where English begins as far as our history is concerned. Of course, languages were spoken before the Indo-European language, and the Indo-European language has an even older ancestor, but we may never really know the nature of that language. But given what we can know – based upon the linguistic research, historical records and archaeological evidence – this is the oldest ancestor of English which we can recreate – at least in part.

We have already looked at how linguists have reconstructed part of this language. So in this episode, we're going to look at some of the words in that language which have been identified by linguists. And you may be surprised at how many of these words are found in Modern English is some form.

One thing to keep in mind as we look at these words is that they are some of the oldest words in the English language with roots dating back to between 4000 BC to 2000 BC. These words existed long before the English language itself existed, and most of these words did not sound like their modern-day English version. However, some of these words may have actually sounded very similar to the words we have today.

In an earlier episode, I mentioned words we have in modern English like *oxen*, *bear*, and *apple*, and the fact that those words were probably pronounced by the original Indo-Europeans in a way that was very similar to the way the words are pronounced today. So that a word like **oxen** was probably pronounced something like /uks-en/. The word **bear** was probably pronounced something like /behr/. And the word **apple** was probably pronounced something like /abel/. But again, the actual pronunciation of these original Indo-European words is not known for certain. These are reconstructed words with pronunciations based on reasonable assumptions. So in this podcast episode, I'm not really going to focus on the actual pronunciation of these words.

When we look at all of the reconstructed words from the original Indo-European language, we get a picture of our linguistic ancestors just before they began to spread into Europe and Central Asia around 2000 BC. Thus this original Indo-European language – in its original form – has been an extinct language for over 4,000 years. Once the initial speakers of the language began to split up and speak separate dialects, we no longer have the original 'proto' Indo-European language. We now have evolved, modified versions of the original language. So the 'proto' or first language is just that – the language which was spoken initially before it began to fragment and divide into separate languages and dialects.

But who were these Indo-Europeans? Where did they live? When did they live? How did they live? When the Indo-European language was first identified and it started to be reconstructed, linguists had some general ideas and guesses, but no one really knew for certain. In the earlier podcast episodes, we discussed some of those assumptions. For example, I discussed the assumption made by Sir William Jones that the original Indo-Europeans were the 'Aryans' of Central Asia. But as the language began to be reconstructed, many aspects of those early Indo-Europeans began to be revealed. Based upon the words which they used, linguists could begin to identify what type of plants and animals they encountered, what type of geography they observed, whether they practiced agriculture, and many other aspects of their culture. This evidence was then compared with other historical and archaeological evidence to determine when and where these people lived. In an upcoming episode of the podcast, we will look at how historians put these pieces together to determine exactly who these people were and when and where they lived.

But first things first. Lets look at the reconstructed Indo-European language. And let's start with the vocabulary – the words.

There are somewhere between 1,300 and 2,000 reconstructed Indo-European root words which result in about 13,000 English words. So I said between 1,300 and 2,000. Why is there such a broad range in the number of reconstructed words?

Well, remember that the process of reconstruction involves tracing words back through the various languages families to recreate a common root word. Some of these reconstructed words are determined from only a couple of language families. Others are reconstructed though several language families. Obviously, the more languages families we use, the better and more certain the reconstructed word is. So some of the reconstructed words are more generally accepted than others. Consequently, linguists don't entirely agree on the total number of accepted reconstructed words. In this episode, I am going to focus on some of the words which are generally accepted by all Indo-European linguists.

Now, as we look at these words, keep in mind that some of these words are the earliest versions of many of the words we have in Modern English. Even though they are relatively few in number, they represent a disproportionately large percentage of our everyday speech. Much like a child who learns a few basic words as a child, and then adds more words to his or her vocabulary throughout life, the English language has its own similar history. Over time the language has grown, and it has added words. The original Indo-European words are the oldest and most basic. By the Old English period the language had grown, but was still very small compared to the

language today. And it continues to grow today just like a person who add new words as he or she gets older.

Remember the analogy to the oak tree which I have used before. English is like an oak tree. The most basic words which we learn first as children and use everyday – the core of our vocabulary – is represented by the roots and the trunk of the tree. These are the oldest words – the oldest parts of the tree – and they rarely change because we learn them as children and they are the core of the vocabulary which we all share. Then added to that core vocabulary are all of the other words which we use to express more than basic thoughts and ideas. The words which give color and context and subtlety and expression to the language. There are lots and lots of these words. These are the limbs and branches and leaves of the oak tree. Many of these words have been borrowed in over time and they come from many different sources. They also have more of a tendency to change over time. Some of these words come into the language and sometimes they disappear from the language due to lack of use. Some of these words are rarely used. These are the words that fill up a dictionary.

The core vocabulary though – the roots and the truck of the tree – tend to be the oldest words in our vocabulary. They are basic words, many of which we learn as children, and therefore we keep them and pass them on to our children pretty much unchanged. Many of these words date back to Old English, and for the same reasons, many of these words have roots in the original Indo-European language. They have passed through countless generations for over 4,000 years and are still in the language today, albeit in modified forms.

So let's look at the words these ancient Indo-Europeans used – their vocabulary. As I go though these words, I want you to try to form a mental picture of these people based upon the words in their language. Also keep in mind that I am giving you the Modern English verison of the word. In many of these cases, the Indo-European words I am going to mention can be reconstructed through English. And by that I mean, the word can be traced from Modern English, back to Middle English, back to Old English, back to the original Germanic languages, and back from there to the ancient Indo-European source word. So that means the Modern English word is directly descended from the Indo-European word. And in some other cases, the word comes into English from another source like Latin or Greek, and it can be traced back from that language to the Indo-European source.

So in all of those cases, the word we use today evolved directly from the Indo-European source word. However, in a few cases, the Modern English word we use today did not come from the Indo-European source word at all. It came into English at some point later and is not related to the original Indo-European word. And I will try to make a specific note of those cases when we get there.

Let's start with the some of the animal names which are contained within the original Indo-European language. Within that language, there were words for *otter*, *beaver*, *wolf*, *lynx*, *elk*, *red deer*, and also a word for *horse*. Now let me mention something about the word for *horse*. It's not clear at this point whether the word for *horse* in the Indo-European language referred to wild horses or domesticated horses. And this actually becomes very important in terms of trying to

figure out when these people lived. But again, more about that in an upcoming episode. The other thing is that the word *horse* which we have in Modern English actually comes from Old English but it's really unknown prior to then. So even though the original Indo-Europeans had a word for 'horse,' it was not the word *horse* which we have today. The source word in the original Indo-European language is actually the source of the word *equine* which we have in English today. So when we use terms like *equestrian*, that word is actually derived from the original Indo-European word. But again, the word *horse* comes along much later during the Old English period. And again, we don't really know where that particular word came from.

Other words for animal in the original Indo-European language included *mouse*, *hare*, *louse*, and a word which meant *bedbug* or *moth*. So basically we're talking about personal insects or pests when we think about *lice* and *bedbugs*. And they did in fact have words for those animals in their language.

They also had words for *wasp*, *hornet* and *bee*. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about bees in a second. Bees are actually very important. In addition to *bee*, they also had words for *honey* and *mead*, which was an alcoholic drink that was made from honey.

Just in these dozen or so words, we have major clues about who these original Indo-Europeans were. All of these animals are found in temperate climates. It should be noted that we don't see any animals associated with the arctic or the tropics. We don't see penguins or camels or elephants or crocodiles. One of the most intriguing clues here as we will see later is the word for *bee*. As we will see in a minute, we also have the source word for *honey* in the original Indo-European language. This means that these speakers were not only in contact with bees, but honeybees, because that is the only natural source of honey. And during the period in which these speakers lived, honeybees did not exist east of the Ural mountains which is the mountain range that divides Europe from Asia. This fact alone disqualified Siberia and much of northeastern Eurasia from consideration as the home of the original Indo-Europeans. Since they had honey in their language, they had to live where honeybees lived, and that means somewhere west of the Ural Mountains. But again, we will look at all of the clues in more detail in an upcoming episode.

Let's look at some other words for animals in the original Indo-European language. Let's look at birds. They had words for *goose*, *crane*, *starling*, *swallow* and *duck*. But the Modern English word *duck* does not come directly from the original Indo-European source word. It came into English sometime during the Old English period, and we don't exactly know where it came from. It does appear that the word *duck* is associated with and probably came from the verb meaning 'to duck or dive.' So it appears that the animal name came from the action that a duck makes when it tries to catch fish in the water. But again, that word comes into English later. The original Indo-European word is not related to *duck*, but it refers to the same animal.

If we turn and look at domesticated animals, we have words in the original language for *cow*, *bull*, *steer*, *sheep* and *lamb*, as well as *wool*, *weave* and *sew*. The word *sheep* actually goes back to Old English, but it is not an Indo-European word. The Indo-European root word is actually the source of the English word *ewe*. But again, even though the English word is not directly derived

from the Indo-European word, the Indo-Europeans did have a word for the same animal. And again, they had those words for *wool*, *weave* and *sew*. So that's telling us a little bit more. They not only encountered sheep, they knew how to weave and shave them and use their wool to make textiles. So that becomes very important.

They also had a word for *goat*, and also words for *swine* and *sow*. Both of those words – *swine* and *sow* – come from the same Indo-European root word. The English word *pig* comes from Old English. And again, we don't exactly know the origin of the word *pig*. It does not come from the original Indo-European word. But we do have those words for *swine* and *sow*. So we know that they did have the same animal.

We also have in the original Indo-European language the word for *dog*. But their word is the source of our word *hound*. And in fact, *dog* is one of those great mysteries for historians of English. It is an extremely common word and can be found in many expressions like 'dog days of summer' and 'to go to the dogs.' But *dog* is a surprisingly new word for such a common pet and to be found in such a large number of English expressions. The word *dog* does not appear in English until around the 1500s. Prior to that time the word was *hound*, or *hund* in Old English. So *hound* is the word derived from the original Indo-European source word. The Indo-European source word was **kwon*. It is also the root of the word *canine* in Latin from which English has also borrowed the term. If you remember back to Grimm's Law for a second, the 'k' sound at the beginning of **kwon* would have shifted to an 'h' sound in the Germanic languages. So that's how we end up with *hound*. But again, it's the same source word as *canine* which comes into English from Latin. So both of those words come from the same root word.

Now *ox* and *oxen* were also found in the original Indo-European language. This particular word has been retained into Old English, and all the way into Modern English, in pretty much its original form. This helps to explain why the plural form of *ox* is *oxen*, but the plural form of *fox* is *foxes*. At some point after Old English, English adopted the modern rules for making words plural. That included the general rule that the way to make a singular word plural is to add an 's' or 'es' at the end. Pretty much all newer nouns follow this rule. But extremely old nouns which already had their own rules for plurality like *oxen* retained those rules. That is why *oxen* does not follow the general rules for how to make nouns plural in English. It simply pre-dates those English rules and has retained its own rules. You might also think about words like *child*-*children*, *man*-*men*, and *woman*-*women*. These older root words have simply retained their own ancient internal rules for making them plural. People kept saying 'oxen' instead of 'oxes' because that was the way you always pronounced the multiple form of ox – *oxen*.

If we turn from animals and look at trees which the Indo-Europeans encountered, these words were found in the original Indo-European language. We had the word for *elm*, the word for *hazel*, and also *beech* trees. Beech trees were an ancient food source for agricultural animals. In prehistoric times, the beech tree was not found in any areas east of a line from around the Lithuanian coastline on the Baltic Sea down to the Crimean Peninsula, north of the Black Sea. This is yet another clue to the location of the original Indo-European speakers. And this is consistent with the location where honeybees lived. But the words for *beech* in the Germanic and Italic languages literally mean beech tree. But in Greek, Iranian, and Slavic languages the

words which derive from the Indo-European root word for *beech* can refer to different kinds of trees including oak, elm and elder. This is probably because the speakers of the early Greek, Iranian and Slavic languages – in other words those Indo-Europeans who first migrated into the areas where those languages are spoken today – they arrived in areas where there were no beech trees so they just called the new trees they found 'beech trees' – ie, *beech* became a more generic term for tree in those regions. But the Germanic and Italic speakers remained in areas where beeches existed so they kept the distinction between beeches and other trees and only used the term *beech* for beech trees. And that's why we still use that term in English to refer to a very specific type of tree.

The Indo-Europeans also had a word for *apple*. In its original meaning, including as late as the 1600s, *apple* was a generic word for fruit including all kinds of fruit other than berries. It has only taken on its more limited use for a specific type of fruit in the past few centuries. You're probably familiar with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from Genesis in the Bible. In many paintings based on the story, Eve is often depicted as picking an apple from the 'tree of forbidden fruit.' But Genesis does not say it was an apple. It just says fruit. So it is probably correct linguistically to say that Eve ate an 'apple' in its original generic meaning as 'fruit.' But it is probably artistic license to actually depict an apple on a painting of the scene.

It is also interesting to note that there are no words for *olive*, *pear*, or *grape* in the original Indo-European language. The roots of those words were adopted from non-Indo-European words being used by natives in the Mediterranean when Indo-European-speaking people arrived there. So again, we're getting more clues that the original Indo-Europeans did not live in the Mediterranean.

Let's shift from vegetation for a second, and look at some other terms. The Indo-Europeans did have some aquatic terms. They had a word for *fish*. That also had a word which meant 'sea.' But it's not the source of the Modern English word *sea*. The word which we got in English from the original Indo-European word was *mere*. That was the word in English for 'sea' or 'ocean' all the way through the Old English period. And the word *sea* actually comes in a bit later. We do still see remnants of that word *mere* in Modern English. We see it in the word *mermaid*. We also see it in the word *marine* which actually derives from that same source word. And it's probably also the source of the words *moor* and *marsh*. But the point I want to make is that that word has kind of died out except for a few remnants here and there. And we've kind of replaced it with the Modern English word *sea*.

We also have many agricultural terms in the original Indo-European language. This is important because this suggests that these people had already adopted farming and agriculture. Again, these are all clues which we are going to put together in an upcoming episode in order to identify exactly when and where these people lived. They had a word for *furrow* which is the trench created by a plow. They had a word for *meal* meaning ground grain. They had a word for *sow* meaning to scatter seed around. They also had a word for *sickle* meaning a hook-shaped tool. All of these words were found in the original Indo-European language.

They also had words for certain grains. They had a word for *barley* and also *corn*. *Corn* is an interesting term as well. It's very similar to that term *apple* which I mentioned earlier, because originally it meant any grain with the seed still in it. So think of a word like *barleycorn* which is used in a more generic sense. Also, think about the word *peppercorn* where again the term in used in a more generic sense as grain. After Europeans discovered the New World, they discovered the grain which the Native Americans called *maize*. They began to call this particular grain *Indian corn* in America ,and then later the term was shortened to *corn*. The word *corn* which we use today in Modern English is associated with this particular type of grain. What the Native Americans called *maize*. But the word *corn* is still used in the more general sense of grain or other specific types of grain like wheat or rye in certain parts of Europe. So I just wanted to mention that it still has some variability in the way that it is used.

We also found in the original Indo-European language a word for *yoke,* which is the wooden beam usually worn by a pair of oxen when they are pulling a plow, and the word for **thill** which is the pole to which animals were yoked when they were pulling the plow. So again, this is telling us more about their lifestyle and the fact that they did in fact practice agriculture.

They also had the word meaning *to grow*. The Indo-European root word for 'grow' also produced the word *grass* and *green*. And if you think about it for a second, the connections start to become obvious. As grass grows, it becomes green. So all of these words are cognate. They all came from the same original Indo-European word.

The Indo-Europeans also had a word which has come down to us in Modern English form as *acre*. It previously meant any enclosed piece of land**.** It is the same root word that led to *agros* in Greek. And that word *agros* is the basis of the English word *agriculture*, as well as *agronomy* and *agrarian*. So all of these words are interconnected. They are all cognate. This is also an example of Grimm's Law. In fact, I mentioned this in the episode on Grimm's Law. Remember that under Grimm's Law, the 'g' sound shifted to a 'k' sound in the Germanic languages. So the Modern English word *acre* and the Greek word *agros*, as well as the Latin word *ager*, are all cognate. The original Indo-European 'g' sound shifted to a 'k' sound to produce the word *acre* in Modern English. This original Indo-European word is also the source of the word *acorn* which originally mean 'fruit of the open land or fields,' but which eventually came to be limited to the fruit of an oak tree in English. So *acre*, *acorn*, *agriculture*, *agrarian*, *agonomy* – all of these words came from the same original Indo-European source word.

This is a good point to make a quick digression related to the spelling of certain words. That word *acre* is spelled A-C-R-E. *Acre* is like many words found in modern British English where the pronunciation is /er/ but the spelling is 'R-E.' Think about words like *fibre*, *centre* and *theatre* which are all spelled with an 'R-E' in British English. But these spellings started to change in the America in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. The primary source of this change was Noah Webster who published the first dictionary of American English. He made these changes in the 1804 edition of his speller, and especially the 1806 dictionary which he published. Webster had been a patriot during the American Revolutionary War and, in the aftermath of the war, and the creation of the United States, he felt that America needed its own dictionary to reflect American English. He also felt British English spelling rules were

antiquated and unnecessarily complex. So he made changes to the spelling of certain words to reflect their actual pronunciation. This included dropping in the 'U' in words like **colour**, **honour** and **favour**, and switching the 'R' and 'E' in words like *fibre*, *centre* and *theatre*.

Remember that a lot of these words had come into English from original French sources. And in French these words are spelled with an 'R-E' at the end. But they had become Anglicized, and the pronunciation had shifted in English to more of an 'er' sound. But again, they were still retaining their original French spellings.

Despite the fact that Webster changed the spelling of these words in his American dictionary, the words were not changed in Britain. In fact, they had the authority of Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary which had been printed in London. And this became a point of national pride on both sides of the Atlantic. The British kept the spelling that they had which was reflected in Johnson's dictionary. And Americans tended to change the spelling to reflect Webster's dictionary. But despite Webster's efforts, the 'R-E' was retained in certain other words even in American English. So the word *acre* retained the 'R-E' spelling as did a word like *ogre*. In fact, the 'R-E' spelling was generally retained in words where the 'R-E' was preceded by a C or a G. Interestingly, Webster insisted to the end of his days that *acre* ought to be spelled 'A-K-E-R.' And in fact, that was the way it was printed in editions of the dictionary during his lifetime. But eventually, the spelling 'A-C-R-E' won out. So it is interesting to show the way words can be spelled differently in different English dialects. Of course, if you think about the word *theatre*, we do still find it in American English spelled 'T-H-E-A-T-R-E,'but it's usually used to convey a touch of class or sophistication. So we do in fact find both spellings in both dialects of English if we look for them.

Also, one last note about animals and plants before we move on to some other words. It is interesting to note that there are a relatively large number of words for animals in the original Indo-European language – both domesticated and wild animals. But there are relatively few words for grains and vegetables. And this tends to suggest that the original Indo-Europeans relied much more on animals, animal domestication and husbandry than they did on agricultural farming. So again, we're looking at more and more clues as to their lifestyle, and therefore who these ancient Indo-Europeans were given the time period in which they lived.

So let's turn for a second and look at a couple of other words in the original Indo-European language. As I mentioned, the original Indo-Europeans had a word for honey. Honey was the only source of sugar and sweetness in this period. And they also had the original word for *mead*, which was ***medhu***. And this confirms that the original Indo-Europeans knew how to get drunk because mead was an alcoholic beverage made from honey. And of course, it also confirms that they were in contact with honey bees because that was the only source of honey. Now the word for *mead* also appears throughout the Indo-European languages. In fact, the word not only occurs in English, but we also find it in Dutch, Icelandic, Danish, Swedish, German, Irish, Lithuanian, Russian, Greek, Sanskrit and even modern Persian. So this is a word that was clearly there in the original Indo-European language. And it continues to be found throughout the Indo-European languages today.

The original Indo-Europeans also had words for certain types of transportation. Again, these are giving us more and more clues. They had a word which was the source of the word *wheel*, and that word appears to have been derived from a verb meaning 'to go round and round.'

They also had a word which meant *axel*, and it happens to be the same source word as *axis* in Latin, which also came into English. And they even had the word for *wagon*, which also appears to have come from a verb which meant 'to go or transport by vehicle.'

As I mentioned earlier, they also had a word for *yoke* which was the object which was worn by oxen when pulling a wagon. And they had a word for *thill* which was the pole to which animals were yoked. So what we're starting to see here with words like *yoke*, *thill*, *wagon*, *wheel* and *axel*, is that they did in fact have wagons, and those wagons were typically pulled by oxen or other large animals. So this is another big clue because we can look historically using archaeological evidence to try to determine when the wagon appeared in the general region where we think these people lived. And it starts to give us more clues as to the time frame in which these people lived. So again, I'm just putting that out there for now. We'll deal with that in more detail in an upcoming episode.

So let's take a second and look at words which the original Indo-Europeans had for building and construction. They had a word for *timber* which suggests that they used wood for construction. And they also had words for *house* and *door*.

Now interestingly, *house* is a Germanic word of obscure origin which came into Old English and may have come from an original Indo-European root word which meant 'hide' as in 'to conceal oneself,' and it appears to be directly connected to the word *hide* as in an animal hide or an animal covering. So we think that the word *house* came from that sense of covering oneself or concealing oneself. But the original Indo-European word for house was **domo* and **domu*. And that word came into English from Latin in words like *domicile*, *domestic* and *domesticate*. So that is the original Indo-European source word for house. The actual English word *house* arrived later in Old English from unknown sources.

We also have many words for natural phenomena in the original Indo-European language. We have words for *fire*, *night*, *star*, *wind*, *air*, *sun*, *moon*, *snow* and *winter*. And this is interesting because we have reconstructed words for *snow* and *winter*. This suggests that they could not have lived too far south. So once again, we're seeing more and more evidence that these people lived in at least temperate or colder climates of Europe.

And lastly in this episode, I want to look at words which the Indo-Europeans had for body parts. This included words for *heart*, *lung*, *head*, *foot*, *tooth*, *ear*, *nose*, *lip*, *mouth*, *brow*, *jaw*, *tongue*, *neck*, *brain*, *spleen*, *liver* and *uterus*. With respect to *nose*, the original Indo-European word was **nas*, and that eventually ends up in Latin as *nasus*. And it eventually came into English as *nasal*. So *nose* and *nasal* are in fact cognate. Again, we have one source coming from the Germanic languages (*nose*), and *nasal* comes to us via Latin. And we see the same type of thing going on with *tooth* which I mentioned earlier. In Latin, the word was *dent* or *dentis*. Latin had a lot of suffixes, so if you remove the Latin suffix, it's basically just *dent*. And it's the source of

the words *dental*, *dentistry* and *dentist*. But under Grimm's Law, the 'd' sound had shifted to a 't' sound in the Germanic languages, and it produced the word *tooth* in English. But again, all of those words are cognate – coming from the original Indo-European source word.

Up to this point, we have looked at physical objects which exist in the Indo-European language. I'm going to stop here, and I'll finish looking at the original Indo-European vocabulary in the next episode. I'm also going to look at social terms contained in the language to get a sense of how these people lived and what their culture looked like. And after a bit more vocabulary and etymology, we'll then take a minute or two and look at a little bit at Indo-European grammar, which may not sound all that interesting, but it will serve as an introduction to Old English grammar since Old English actually inherited much of its grammar from the original Indo-Europeans.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.