THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 8:
INDO-EUROPEAN GRAMMAR
(WHERE HAVE ALL THE INFLECTIONS GONE?)

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

So far in this podcast, we've looked at the oldest ancestor of English – the ancient Indo-European language. And in the last couple of episodes, I looked at some of the words which have been reconstructed in that language. Remember that the original Indo-European language was not written down. It existed long before the alphabet and there is no evidence of a written form of the original language. So pretty much everything we know about that language comes from reconstructed elements of the language – like the words that we've looked at previously. In this episode, I want to look at one other aspect of that original language – the way in which the Indo-Europeans used those words. In other words, I want to explore a few aspects of their grammar.

This may not seem as interesting as the words which have come down to us in modern English, but this original Indo-European grammar is very important to our understanding of how Old English grammar worked because much of Old English grammar was inherited from this original language.

One other quick note before we get started. In the next episode, I am going to try to pinpoint exactly who these original Indo-Europeans were. This has been the subject of much debate and controversy for over two centuries. But a general consensus has emerged over the past few decades. And this view is based on the accumulation of lots of pieces of evidence like the words which these people used. I mentioned a few of these clues in the earlier episodes of this podcast. So next time, I will put all of these pieces together. It is almost like an episode of CSI. We're going to try to solve this ancient mystery. And then, once we have identified who these people were and where they lived, I am going to explore how and why they migrated to the various places where the later Indo-European languages emerged. After that, I am going to spend a episode or two on the early Indo-European Greeks, then an episode or two on the early Indo-European Latin-speakers – the Romans, and probably one episode on the early Celts. And then I'll spend a little time talking about the early Germanic tribes from which the Anglo-Saxons emerged. And that will conclude our look at pre-English – what I am calling Volume 1 of this podcast. And after that, we will start Volume 2 of the podcast by looking specifically at the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the development of Old English. So if you were curious about where we're headed, now you know.

So let's look at the grammar of these original Indo-Europeans – or at least a couple of aspects which relate to the history of English.

If you are a native English speaker, and you've ever tried to learn another European language, one of the first things you probably discovered, much to your chagrin, was that all nouns are either masculine or feminine or in some languages neutral. This is the idea that every noun is either a boy or a girl, or neither. This fact tends to drive English-speakers crazy because English is somewhat unique among European languages in that it does not make such distinctions. A noun is a noun is a noun in English. But other European languages make this distinction, and

they make it because the original Indo-European language also made the same distinction. But English abandoned the distinction between masculine and feminine nouns a long time ago.

So let's explore this a little bit further.

In English, most nouns are preceded by either *a* or *the* in a sentence. These are called articles, and we use them regardless of whether the noun is singular or plural and without regard to whether the thing is masculine or feminine. So in the case of *the*, we have 'the girl' and 'the boy' (so no distinction is made for masculine or feminine), and we say 'the girls' and 'the boys' (again no distinction for the fact that the nouns are plural). The *the* is always 'the'.   But in French, you have to use either *le* or *la* or *les* (for masculine singular, feminine singular or plural). In Spanish, you have to use either *el* or *la* or *las* or *los* (so there is a masculine singular version, a feminine singular version, a masculine plural version and a feminine plural version). And every noun has to be classified in this manner. So a French 'house' is feminine – *la masion*. But a French 'hat' is masculine – *le chapeau*. Again, in English it is just 'the' house and 'the' hat.

The same rule applies for the article *a*. In English, it is always *a* – 'a house,' 'a car,' 'a girl,' 'a boy.' In French, it is either *un* or *une*. In Spanish, it is either *un* or *una*.

Well, at least French and Spanish only use two versions – masculine and feminine.   Modern German most closely resembles the original Indo-European language in that it has three genders – masculine, feminine and neutral or neuter. So all of this stuff which tends to drive English speakers crazy comes directly from the original Indo-European language. Because the original Indo-European speakers did the same thing. They made the same distinction.

The reason why English dropped the distinctions between masculine and feminine has to do with issues which we will address in a future episode. But is was basically a way to simplify the language to facilitate communication between different speakers in Britain. But other Indo-European languages have retained these distinctions.

Now even though I used the articles *a* and *the* to illustrate the distinctions between masculine and feminine, the fact is the original Indo-European language did not use articles at all. There was no *a* or *the* before a noun in the original Indo-European language. An original Indo-European speaker would say something like 'horse is fast' rather than 'the horse is fast.' But Indo-European-speakers would put a specific ending on the word 'horse' to indicate that it was the subject of the sentence. In fact, these endings were found throughout the language to indicate gender, tense, number, case, and so on. And this is probably the most important point that I want to make in this episode because I am introducing a concept that is essential to understanding the original Indo-European language, and for that matter essential to understanding Old English, Latin and most of the other languages that we will be discussing. It is the concept of inflections.

In earlier episodes, I casually mentioned that Latin had a lot of endings – endings like the 'u-m' in *Centum* which was eventually dropped in French when the word just became C-E-N-T, and the 'i-s' in *dentis* which was dropped and the word eventually became D-E-N-T – meaning tooth. These endings were inflections. Latin had them, Old English had them, the ancient Indo-

European language them. And many modern European languages, like German, still have them – lots of them. In fact, one of the things that makes the study of German so difficult is the need to learn and master all of those inflections.

These endings – or inflections – are one of the most important features of Indo-European grammar. An inflection is basically a modification of a word to indicate something specific about the word in the sentence. For example, to indicate whether the sentence is describing something which is happening right now (present tense) or something which happened yesterday (past tense) or something which will happen tomorrow (future tense). It might also tell you which noun is the subject of the sentence and which is the object. In other words, which noun is doing the action, and which noun is receiving the action.

Now as I said, all Indo-European languages have some inflections because the original Indo-European language used lots of them. And today some have lots more than others. Latin has lots of them, and as I said modern German still has lots of them, as does modern Russian. These languages are therefore called 'highly inflexive languages.' But English is at the other end of the spectrum of European languages. It has gotten rid of most, but not all, of its inflections. But when we look at certain non-Indo-European languages, like Chinese for example, they do not have any inflections at all. So Chinese is called a non-inflexive language or sometimes called an isolating language. This means that the noun and verb forms do not change based on number, gender, past tense, future tense, etc. That is why it can be written in characters rather than letters. Letters allow you to modify the spelling of a word depending on how it is used – like the words *be* and *being* and *been*. In Chinese, the word itself does not change, so you can always use the same character. New words are added to indicate things like past tense and future tense. And when we add a new word, that's not an inflection. An inflection occurs when we actually change the word itself to give this information, usually by adding something to the end, but sometimes changing the middle or some other part of the word. So for example, the words *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*, *been*, *being* – those are all inflections of the modern English word *be*. It is a very old word, so it has retained a lot of its original inflexive versions, albeit in modified forms. And words like *jump*, *jumping* and *jumped* are also inflections because each is a modified version of that original word *jump*. Now the funny thing is, in modern English, we can often express the same idea – or at least a very similar idea – with either an inflection or without an inflection. The inflexive verison can usually be traced back to Old English, and the non-inflexive verison is typically a later development.

So if we want to express past tense, we can say "The horse jumped the fence." That uses an inflection. I modified the word *jump* by adding an 'ed' at the end to let you know that it happened in the past. But I could have said essentially the same thing without an inflection, in other words without changing the verb – the word *jump* – at all. For example, "The horse did jump the fence." This also expresses past tense, but I didn't change the word *jump* at all. Instead, I added a new word – the word *did*. So *did jump* is not inflexive because the word *jump* stays the same. But *jumped* is inflexive because the word is modified by adding an 'ed' at the end.

Of course, in modern English, there is no inflection for future tense. We can only express future tense without an inflection. For example, "The horse will jump the fence." Or, "The horse is going to jump the fence." I can use 'e-d' for past tense ('the horse jumped'), and I can use an 's' for present tense ('the horse jumps'), but there is not an ending for future tense. I can only express that tense by adding some other words like "The horse <u>will</u> jump," or "The horse <u>is going</u> to jump." But other European languages do have an ending – called an inflection – to express future tense. So if we think about this in historical terms, English has lost its inflection for future tense, and because of that we have replaced the inflection with new, non-inflexive ways of expressing the same idea. So this is just one example of the many ways in which English has lost many of its inflections.

Now as I have said, the original Indo-European had a lot more verb inflections than Modern English. So let's just focus on present tense for a second. And let's do some very simple elementary conjugation. Sounds like fun, huh? Well, stick with me. Let's conjugate the same basic action verb *jump* in Modern English. In order to do that in what is called the present indicative tense (sounds fancy, but it's basically just present tense), you can conjugate that verb as follows:

<div align="center">

I jump   We jump

You jump   You jump

He jump**s**   They jump

</div>

Did you notice a similarity there? Of course, they are all the same with one exception – the third person singular. He, she or it 'jump<u>s</u>' with an '-s' on the end. But otherwise, Modern English does not change the verb to express first person, second person, third person, plural or singular. It is always just *jump*. 'I jump.' 'You jump' (being the singular version). 'We jump.' 'You jump' (being the plural version). And 'they jump.' It's always *jump*.

Again, modern English has simplified verb conjugation because in the original Indo-European language, and many modern European languages, each of the examples I just gave would have had a different ending. And if that wasn't enough to keep track of, in addition to singular and plural, the original Indo-European language had a completely separate dual tense for actions taken by two things. This dual tense had altogether separate inflexive endings. And you think conjugation is difficult in English. But again, this is how English has actually become more simplified through the years as it has dropped or simplified its inflexive endings.

Now, many of these different endings in the original Indo-European language survived into Old English, and a few even survived into early Modern English. And you are probably familiar with some of those stragglers if you've read Shakespeare or the King James Bible.

Take a word like the verb *bear* as in 'to withstand something.' In early Modern English, it was conjugated:

I bear
Thou bear**est**
He bear**eth**

These are probably familiar to you as a form of older English. And sometimes we mimic these endings if we want to pretend that we are speaking Shakespearian. But what we are seeing there are some of these lingering inflections from Old English but which have since disappeared like lots of even older inflections.

Now to emphasize the point, *bear*, *bearest*, and *beareth* – those are all just the present tense versions. If you wanted to indicate something happened in past tense or future tense, you would have used a completely different set of endings or inflections.

As I have said, all of the original Indo-European distinctions of tense and aspect were lost in the verb in English except present and past tenses – like 'He walks' with an -S, and 'He walked' with an -ED. And this much is true throughout all of the Germanic languages. As I said earlier, we can express present tense and past tense with inflections – the -S or the -ED. But no Germanic languages have anything comparable to those of the Latin for future, perfect, pluperfect and future perfect forms. All of these must be rendered in English and the other Germanic languages in some way other than a simple single inflection stuck on the end of the word like an -S or an -ED. In other words we have to use a verb phrase. We have to add other words. So in English we have to come up with a different form like:

I shall jump
I have jumped
I had jumped
I shall have jumped

Another vestige of the original Indo-European language in Modern English is the conjugation of the verb 'to be' which I mentioned earlier. Notice how irregular the forms of the verb are in Modern English (*be*, *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were*). This verb is called highly irregular because the variations of *be* have no obvious correlation to each other. Unlike *sing-sang-sung*, or *drink-drank-drunk*, or even *jump-jump*s-*jumped*, the variations of *be* don't follow any recognizable pattern – *be*, *am*, *is*, *are* ,*was*, *were*. Each version is a completely different word seemingly unrelated to the next. But each of these modern English variations of *be* derived from original Indo-European roots. And they were also highly irregular. So the variations of *be* that we have in Modern English didn't evolve at some later point. They originated in the original Indo-European language itself. And we don't know why the original Indo-European language had such variable forms for *be*, but it may have been an inheritance from an even older language. Regardless, English – like other European languages – still has lots of variations of this basic verb.

So far I've talked about verbs, and especially how English has simplified verbs and verb endings by getting rid of a lot of the inflections which Old English and the original Indo-European language had. But Indo-European inflections didn't just exist with verbs. Nouns had them too. Inflections were everywhere in the older versions of the language. So even when you used nouns,

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there were different versions of the noun depending on how it was used in the sentence. So let's look at this a little closer. And let's start by looking at a situation where English has retained an inflection for use with nouns.

We sometimes use an inflection to show possession in Modern English. There are actually two ways to show possession in Modern English. One way uses an inflection and one does not. In other words, one way we modify the noun to show ownership and the other way we use a phrase.

The way to show possession with an inflection is with an 'apostrophe S' (-'s). For example, 'Jane's car.' We stick the (-'s) on the end to indicate that the car belongs to Jane. This inflection goes back to Old English and was the most common way to show ownership or possession in Old English.

The other way to show possession in Modern English is with a phrase – technically a prepositional phrase – with the use of '*of*' or '*of the*.' So if I want to indicate a car's price tag, I can say the 'price of the car.' That is not an inflection. I didn't change any of the words themselves. So 'the car's price' is an inflection. 'The price of the car' is not. 'The world's population' – that's an inflection. But 'the population of the world' is not.

The use of (-'s) dominated in Old English, even though there wasn't actually an apostrophe (') at that time. But during the Middle English period, the use of the '*of*' became much more common. That is largely because French used the equivalent of '*of*' or '*of the*' – which is '*de le*' or '*de la*' – to show possession. It does not use an English inflection like (-'s). So during the period in which French dominated after the Norman Invasion and during the period of Middle English, the French '*of the*' became much more common. The increased use of '*of the*' and decreased use of (-'s) is yet another example of the tendency of English to get rid of inflections. And today, we can use both. But usually context will dictate the use of one or the other. For example, we would say 'Jane's car' with the (-'s) inflection, but we wouldn't really say 'the car of Jane' without the inflection. But in many cases, we have a choice.

There is one more aspect of noun inflections that I want to mention. In Modern English, the noun usually takes a different form when used as a singular noun or as a plural noun. So for example, we have 'one car,' but 'two car**s**' with an '-s' on the end. Or 'one house' or 'two hous**es**' with an 'es' on the end. And that is about it for English nouns. Otherwise the nouns don't really change in a modern English sentence whether singular or plural.

But when we look at the original Indo-European language, things are much more complicated. The original Indo-European language not only had different noun forms for singular and plural, but it also had a third tense for duality or a pair of something. So duality or pairs of things had a special place in Indo-European grammar, and therefore probably in Indo-European culture.

In addition to number, Indo-European nouns had eight separate cases depending on **how** it was used in the sentence, in other words, depending on what case it was in. And this is really fascinating and really complicated. Some of this is still present in Modern German. In English,

we generally indicate the subject or object of the sentence by where we place the word in the sentence.

For example, "John sees the policeman." We know John was the one looking because he came before the verb *see*. So John is the subject. And we know the policeman was the one being seen because he came after the verb. So he was the object of the sentence. But what if reverse the order? The new sentence is now, "The policeman sees John." These are the exact same words, but in reverse order. Now we know that the policeman is the one looking because he comes first. And we know John is the one under surveillance because he comes after the verb. In Modern English, it is all – or at least mostly – about word order.

But in the original Indo-European language, as well as Old English and even modern languages like Modern German, word order is far less important. A subject can appear in various places in the sentence. The same with the object. The way you tell which one is the subject or the object is which inflection or which ending it has. Again, this drives English speakers crazy as they learn German. But it is a feature inherited directly from the original Indo-European language.

There is a somewhat famous quote about this from Mark Twain who spent some time studying German and wrote a not very flattering account of the language and the difficulty he had making any sense out of it. This particular quote was the following:

> "The Germans have an inhuman way of cutting up their verbs. Now a verb has a hard time enough of it in this world when it's all together. It's downright inhuman to split it up. But that's just what those Germans do. They take part of a verb and put it down here, like a stake, and they take the other part of it and put it away over yonder like another stake, and between these two limits they just shovel in German."

Well, what Mark Twain is getting at there is the fact that modern German is still highly inflexive. It doesn't really rely on word order like English. It lets all those little endings – those inflections – do all the work to tell you which noun is the subject, the object, etc. So word order isn't nearly as important as Modern English. But Old English was much like Modern German in this regard. This reflects the Germanic origins of English. And again, this was all inherited from the original Indo-European language.

So let's see how the original Indo-European language handled this. Lets look at the original Indo-European word for *horse*, which I have used throughout this episode, and let's look at how the form of that word completely changes depending on how it was used in a sentence. The original Indo-European language has eight separate cases, and thus eight separate endings, for the word *horse* depending on how the word *horse* was being used. First, remember from Episode 6 that the original Indo-European language had a word for horse which is actually the original version of the modern English word *equine* which English borrowed from Latin. It is also the root of the word *equestrian*. And that's the Indo-European root I'll use here.

So if the word *horse* was the subject of the sentence, like "Horses ran across the field," the word for horse was *ekwos* with an '-os' ending. This is called the nomitive case.

But if the word *horse* was being addressed in the sentence, like "Horses, come here!", the word for horse was *ekwe*. This is called the vocative case.

But if the word *horse* was the object of the sentence, like "I saw horses," the word was *ekwom*. And this was called the accusative case.

But if we wanted to show that the horse owned something or to show possession by the horse in the sentence, like "The horse's pasture was green," then the word was *ekwosyo*. And this is called the genitive case.

If we wanted to show that the horse was the indirect object of the sentence, like "Give the horses some food," the word was *ekwoy*. And this is called the dative case.

If we wanted to show that the horses were separated from something, like "He ran from the horses," the word would have been *ekwod*. And this is called the ablative case.

If we wanted to talk about the horses in relation to a certain place, like "The saddles were on the horses," the word was *ekwoy*. And this is called the locative case.

And lastly, if we wanted to talk about the horses as some means or an instrument to do something, like "She rode the horses to town," the word was *ekwo*. And this is called the instrumental case.

So, as you can see, there were lots of different versions of the word horse depending on exactly how you were using that word in the sentence – *ekwos*, *ekwe*, *ekwom*, *ekwosyo*, *ekwoy*, *ekwod*, *ekwoy*, *ekwo*. So you can see how the inflections or endings tell you almost everything you need to know about the word *horse*, and therefore the exact location of the word in the sentence is not as important.

Some of these cases I just looked at also existed in Latin. For example, in Shakespeare, we see the use of the Latin vocative case when a dying Caesar exclaims 'Et tu, Brute.' Note that he didn't say, 'Et tu, Brutus.' which was his actual name. That's because *Brute* is the vocative case of *Brutus*.

But having gone through that exercise of the various forms of the word *horse* in the original Indo-European language, notice that in each of the examples I read in English, the word *horse*s did not change. Every time it was *horses*. "Horses ran across the field." "Horses, come here!" "I saw horses." "The horses pasture was green." But in the original Indo-European language, the noun for horses would have been different in each sentence – *ekwos*, *ekwe*, *ekwom*, *ekwosyo*, and so on.

And again, note that English has replaced these inflections with a specific word order. Subjects and objects are no longer distinguished by endings or inflections. We use word order to do all of the work. This change actually occurred during the Old English period when invading Vikings and their Danish relatives settled in a large portion of Britain which became known as the

Danelaw. These Old Norse speakers lived with, traded with and sometimes married with Anglo-Saxons who spoke a different Germanic language with different inflections. To simplify and facilitate communication between these speakers, the inflections were gradually dropped altogether and a specific word order was adopted to do the work of the inflections. And we will look at this process in much more detail when we get to the period of Old English.

The basic point here is that English has lost most of its inflections and, as a result, has become a much simpler and more flexible language. A single word can now be used in many different contexts. Take the word *love*. It can be used as a noun, a verb or an adjective, and the form of the word stays the same in all three instances. So, for example, as a noun, I can say, "Love is patient." "Love is a battlefield." "Love is a many-splendoured thing." And as a verb, I can say, "I love you." And as an adjective, I can refer to a "love song," or a "love poem" or a "love potion." Notice that no matter how I use it though, the word *love* stays the same.

This illustrates the flexibility of words in modern English. The exact same word can be used in a variety of ways and as different parts of speech without any modification. But in Old English and in earlier Indo-European languages, the word *love* would have been different in each instance, specifically, *lufa*, or *lufie*, or *lufe*, respectively.

So there you have it. An introduction to inflections and a general sense of how the original Indo-European language worked. This basic knowledge will come in handy as we move forward.

But the next step in our story is to determine who the original Indo-Europeans were and to figure out how they migrated from their homeland to the various places where specific Indo-European languages are spoken today. We will begin looking at that issue in the next episode. We will look at the how the mystery was solved using detective work – sort of like an episode of CSI.

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