THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 21: EARLY GERMANIC WORDS

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 21: EARLY GERMANIC WORDS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – A Podcast About the History of English Language. This is Episode 21: Early Germanic Words. In this episode, we're going to look at the first evidence of Germanic writing, and we're going to begin looking at the original Germanic language by focusing on the vocabulary which they used.

But before I begin, let me remind you that the History of the Alphabet series or audiobook is still available. In fact, it is now available through iTunes, Amazon.com and some other online retailers as well. I should note that those retailers have also made the series available as individual chapters also. So if you just want to buy a particular chapter you can do that now. Most of those retailers are charging 99 cents per chapter, but they set their own price for the entire series. So the price at iTunes is $9.99 for the entire series. And Amazon I believe is $8.99. Again, those are their prices. But if you find that those sites are more compatible with your particular media device, then that's an option. Otherwise, you can still get the series through my website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. The series is $6.00 through my site. So those are some options for you if you are interested in that series, or if you're just interested in supporting the podcast. So, with that out of the way, let's turn to this episode.

Last time, we looked at the emergence of the first Germanic-speaking tribes in northern Europe. We tried to establish some of the links between those tribes and the original Indo-European tribes of the Black Sea region. And we looked at the expansion of those tribes from their Scandinavian homeland into the heart of central Europe where they gradually replaced the native Celtic tribes in that region. Eventually, these tribes met the Roman Empire which was expanding northward from the Mediterranean. And ultimately – the Rhine and the Danube rivers became the de facto border between the Germanic tribes to the north and east and the Romans to the south and west. The time frame for most of these events was between around 600 BC and the first century AD.

And during this same time frame, it is believed that these Germanic tribes spoke a common language. There were likely regional and tribal dialects, but overall these peoples would have been able to communicate with each other without any difficulty in a more or less common tongue. This was the original Germanic language which linguists call proto-Germanic. It was the immediate ancestor of Old English – and it was also the ancestor of modern German, modern Dutch and the modern languages of Scandinavia.

So this original Germanic language is analogous in many respects to Latin. It was spoken around the same time as early Latin. And just as Latin fractured and gave birth to the modern Romance languages, this Germanic language fractured and gave birth to many of the modern languages of northern Europe. So rather than the many different languages of western Europe that we have today, things were much simpler during this earlier period.

Latin was the common lingua franca in the south and west, and this original Germanic language was the dominant language to the east and the north. And since this language was the immediate ancestor of English, it's important to take a closer look at that language. So let's do that.

And again the time frame we are looking at is the period from the time the Germanic tribes were still in and around Scandinavia until around the time they met the Romans around the Rhine and the Danube. It is important to keep in mind that these early Germanic tribes were illiterate at this point. They didn't have a written language. So that means that we don't have texts to review. And also keep in mind that the illiterate Celtic tribes initially occupied central Europe between the Germanic tribes to the north and the literate Romans and Greeks to the south. So among those people who could read and write, like the Romans and Greeks, there was little direct contact with these people of Scandinavia.

So no one can say for sure when this original Germanic language first emerged, but it was sometime before around 500 BC, because by that date (500 BC) the language was almost certainly being spoken in Scandinavia. And this would have been shortly before the southern migrations began, so these people were still confined to this region of northern Europe. And this language probably began to fracture into distinct dialects around the first century AD. So for our purposes, the period of the original Germanic language was sometime prior to 500 BC until around the first century AD. Again this is a very general time frame, but it at least gives us some tangible dates to work with. And again, this period roughly corresponds to the period I covered in the last episode.

Now I mentioned that the original Germanic language was not written down, and therefore there are no texts written in that language. So you may wonder how we know very much about it. Well, the answer is the same way we know about the original Indo-European language – through reconstruction. But linguists know even more about this original Germanic language because they have lots of texts written in the various Germanic languages shortly after the original language began to fracture. For example, they can look at the early Gothic translation of the Bible from the fourth century AD. They also have lots of Old English texts which began around the seventh century AD. And after that, they have texts from Scandinavia written in Old Norse. And they start to have various other texts in other Germanic languages. So they primarily rely on these sources to reconstruct the earlier common version of the language. And these various Germanic languages like Gothic, Old English and Old Norse, they were still very, very similar at this early date. So it's relatively easy to compare those languages and to identify the similarities and common features between those languages. And from those sources, linguists can reconstruct a lot of the original vocabulary and grammar of that earlier common Germanic language.

Linguists also have a few inscriptions from these early Germanic tribes which were written down during the period of that original common language. Again these were just inscriptions – not full texts – so their usefulness is limited. But they do provide some additional insight into the language and culture of these early tribes.

So let's begin our look at the beginning – the earliest known writing which has been discovered in the original Germanic language. And, of course, we don't have texts to look at, but we do have an early inscription.

A couple of centuries ago, in the year 1811, twenty-three bronze helmets were unearthed in modern-day Slovenia, just south of Austria and east of northern Italy. The helmets were Etruscan-style helmets which were probably created in the fourth or fifth century BC. This would have been a time when the Etruscans were still a dominant power in northern Italy before the Romans took over there. But one of those helmets contained an inscription which had been engraved on it apparently at some later date. The inscription dated from the second century BC, and it was written in an early version of the Germanic language. So this time frame – the second century BC – would have been a time in which Germanic tribes were advancing southward from northern Europe. In fact, that time frame would have corresponded to the time when the Romans were in charge of northern Italy and the Teutones and the Cimbri were migrating southward and were threatening the Romans.

Now the key here is that this inscription is very short, but it contains a clearly Germanic name. That makes it the first known writing in a Germanic language. This would have been about a century before the Romans invaded Gaul and set their sights on western Europe. So this would have been a period when Europe north of Italy was still primarily Celtic. But more and more Germanic tribes were advancing southward into the region. So that may have been the source of the inscription. But no one really knows for certain. All they know is that this inscription contains a Germanic name and an inscription in the early Germanic language.

So what did that inscription say? Well, that's actually a difficult question to answer. The inscription actually contains only 16 letters. The first 8 letters spell a Germanic name – 'Harigast' spelled H-A-R-I-G-A-S-T. The rest of the inscription is I-T-E-I-V-A, followed by a few markings, and then the letters I and P.

As I said, the first part of that inscription contains the word ***Harigast***, which has been interpreted as a Germanic name. There seems to be a general consensus among scholars that this is in fact a Germanic name, but the rest continues to be the subject of debate. Some think ***Harigast*** is the name of a god, and the inscription reads "[dedicated] to the god Harigast." Others think the name refers to the owner of the helmet, and it means "[dedicated] to the god Teiva by Harigast." There are still others who think ***Harigast*** means 'Army-Guest' or 'Army-Host.'

Anyway, regardless of the actual meaning of the inscription, it does appear to be the first documented Germanic writing. Since the inscription is so short, it doesn't provide any significant insight into the language itself. But it is notable given its timing and location. It confirms that the original Germanic language had reached parts of southern Europe by the second century BC.

But the inscription is also significant because of the way it was written. As I've noted, these original Germanic speakers didn't have a written language. So there was no Germanic alphabet or script at this early date. Now these Germanic tribes did develop an alphabetic script using runic symbols, but that runic writing wasn't in use among the Germanic tribes until a couple of centuries after this inscription would have been written.

Now initially, scholars thought the writing on the helmet was a very early form of the later Germanic runic symbols. But it turns out the symbols were an alphabetic script used by the Etruscans. In the years after the helmet was discovered, scholars began to learn much more about the Etruscan language and its alphabetic script, which remember was borrowed from the Greeks and was later borrowed by the Romans. But after the Romans borrowed it around 600 BC, the Etruscan script continued to evolve within the Etruscan language, so the Etruscan script and the Roman script became more and more distinct from each other. This was just like the Greek alphabet which continued to evolve within Greece after it was borrowed by the Etruscans. So the later Etruscan script of the second century BC was different from the verison which had been borrowed by the Romans about 400 years earlier. And so later scholars have concluded that this writing wasn't an early form of runic writing. It was just the later Etruscan writing.

But this is still an important point because scholars believe that the runic symbols used by the later Germanic tribes originated with the Etruscan script of northern Italy. They know that the early Germanic tribes who migrated southward actively traded with the Etruscans in and around northern Italy and the areas north of Italy. And in the process, it is believed that the early Germans encountered the Etruscan alphabet. And the discovery of this helmet in Slovenia seems to confirm that. We have a Germanic inscription on a helmet found in Slovenia, which is just east of northern Italy, but it is written in the Etruscan script. So that all seems to make sense.

It is believed that over time this Etruscan script traveled northward among the Germanic tribes and was modified along the way, so that it eventually produced the runic symbols which were in common use by the Germanic tribes in the second and third centuries AD.

Now since runic writing wasn't in common use among the Germanic tribes for a couple more centuries, I am not going to discuss it in detail here. I will save it for the next episode when we begin to look at the period after the first century when the original Germanic language began to fracture into various regional and tribal languages. And it was really at that point that we start to see runic inscriptions popping up in these regions. But at this earlier date, during the period of the original Germanic language, we don't really have runic symbols yet. But again, we are starting to see some possible links between the Etruscan script and the Germanic language. So we'll leave the topic of the runes there for now.

So back to the original Germanic language itself. As we've established, archaeology can help determine the overall spread of the language, but it doesn't help us very much with the language itself. Again, most of what is known about the original common Germanic language comes from reconstructions based on later writings in the various languages which developed from that original language. And those reconstructions reveal quite a bit is known about the vocabulary and the grammar and the syntax of that original language. So let's take a look at the vocabulary – or words – of these early Germanic tribes.

And as we begin our look at Germanic words, I should note that you probably know more about the original Germanic language than you might realize, especially if you've listened to the earlier episodes of the podcast. You probably remember the earlier discussions about Jacob Grimm and the specific sound changes which he identified.

If you recall, he noted that the sounds of specific consonants changed between the time of the original Indo-European language and the first Germanic languages. This is what we call Grimm's Law today, and I went through all of those changes back in Episode 4. Well since these changes are common throughout the Germanic languages, it means that they occurred very early on, and they are a feature of the original Germanic language. So at some point while these early Germanic tribes were still in Scandinavia, or perhaps before while they were still migrating into that region, the sound shifts that we know as Grimm's Law occurred. So by the time we get to the original Germanic language, the Indo-European 'p' sound was being pronounced as an 'f' sound, and the Indo-European 'k' sound was being pronounced as an 'h' sound. And all of the other sounds were being pronounced in the manner I discussed back in Episode 4.

Now let me explore that a little bit further before we move on. When I looked at all of those sound changes back in Episode 4, they probably seemed very random. But linguists who study these types of things will note that the changes were actually very orderly.

First, all of the original Indo-European sound which changed fall into a class of sounds which linguists call 'stops.' This basically refers to sounds which occur when your breath is briefly stopped, then it is released to create the sound. So 'stops' include sounds like the 'b' sound (/b/), the 'd' sound (/d/), and the 'g' sound (/g/). These three sounds also involve the vocal chords when the breath is released, so linguists call these three sounds 'voiced stops.' And these were three of the sounds which changed under Grimm's Law.

And those same three sounds which are voiced – with the vocal chords – have corresponding sounds which are made the same way without the vocal chords. These are called 'voiceless stops.' The voiceless version of the 'b' sound is the 'p' sound (/p/). And the voiceless version of the 'd' sound is the 't' sound (/t/). And the voiceless version of the 'g' sound is the 'k' sound (/k/). And if you have a really good memory, you will notice a connection there. All three of the voiced stops – B, D and G – shifted to the voiceless stops – P, T and K. So, in other words, for some reason the early Germanic tribes stopped using their vocal chords when they pronounced those three voiced sounds – /b/, /d/ and /g/ – and as a result, without the vocal chords, the sounds became /p/, /t/ and /k/. And that may be a little tough to hear because I actually have to use my vocal chords to pronounce those later unvoiced sounds so you can hear them on the podcast. But the point here is that this was actually a very subtle change which was made, but is had a significant impact on the language.

Now what about those three voiceless sounds which were created – the 'p', and the 't', and the 'k' sounds? Well, those were the other three sounds that shifted between the Indo-European period and the early Germanic period. And I discussed those three changes back in Episode 4 as well. Remember the 'p' sound became an 'f' sound, the 't' sound became a 'th' sound, and the 'k' sound became an 'h' sound. Well those three new sounds – the 'f' sound, the 'th' sound and the 'h' sound – those are all called fricatives. And unlike stops, where the breath is interrupted briefly before the sound is produced, a fricative flows smoothly without interruption. So /ffffff/, or /thhhhhhh/, or /hhhh/ – those sounds flow without stopping. So again, for some reason, these early Germanic speakers stopped 'stopping' those three specific voiceless stops, and they converted them into sounds which are called voiceless fricatives.

Now that's a lot of technical stuff which you don't really need to know. But I mention it because I want you to see that these changes were not completely random. As is often the case, these sound changes reflect different patterns of pronunciation. Over time, people tend to slur certain sounds, or they make subtle changes in the way certain sounds are pronounced. And this has a ripple effect. These subtle changes sometime affect a single sound, both often they affect a series of related sounds. In this case all of the sounds which changed under Grimm's Law were sounds called 'stops,' where there is a brief interruption in the breath like I said. And for some reason, the Germanic tribes has issues with these sounds and they started to pronounce them in slightly different ways. And those pronunciation changes are still reflected in all of the modern Germanic languages, including English. And in fact, those changes are part of what distinguishes the Germanic languages from the other Indo-European languages. And it all goes back to these original Germanic speaking tribes in and around Scandinavia who started pronouncing those sounds differently.

So that covers six specific sounds changes identified by Jacob Grimm. And those were the six that I focused on back in Episode 4 because those are the sounds which we still have in modern English. But you might remember from that episode that there were actually three other sounds which shifted under Grimm's Law during this period. And I only mentioned them briefly in that episode, but they're actually important for this episode. So let's look at those three other sound shifts now.

These were the three very aspirated or 'breathy' sounds which existed in the original Indo-European language, but which lost their aspiration or 'breathy-ness' in the early Germanic languages.

So there was originally a very aspirated 'b' sound (/bh/) which became just a regular 'b' sound (/b/).

And there was originally a very aspirated 'd' sound (/dh/) which became just a regular 'd' sound (/d/).

And there was a very aspirated 'g' sound (/gh/) which became just a regular 'g' sound (/g/).

So again, these change were very subtle. They basically remained the same, but they just lost the aspiration or breathy-ness. But notice those three sounds again – the 'b' sound, the 'd' sound, the 'g' sound. These are same three voiced stops that eventually shifted to the voiceless stops – 'p', 't' and 'k'. So again, we're looking at the same group of basic sounds here. Again, there was a very subtle change here where the early Germanic tribes had inherited aspirated versions of these three sounds, but for some reason they simply got rid of the aspiration. They just started pronouncing these sounds as we do today without all that air or breath involved.

So you may be saying, "Fine. What's the big deal about that?" Well, the big deal is that these three aspirated sounds changed very subtly in the Germanic languages, but they changed much more radically in other Indo-European languages. And this makes for some great etymology.

So again, let's go back to the first six sounds I discussed – the 'b' sound, the 'd' sound, the 'g' sound, the 'p' sound, the 't' sound and the 'k' sound. As we know, all of those sounds changed to new sounds among those early Germanic-speaking tribes. But these sounds didn't really change in Latin or Greek. And that's why I was able to use Latin and Greek words to illustrate those changes back in Episode 4. Since Latin and Greek retained the original Indo-European sounds, I could simply put an English word up against a Latin or Greek word, and you could see how the sound had shifted.

But in these last three sounds I just mentioned – the aspirated sounds – the tables are reversed. Other than losing their aspiration, they remained basically the same in the Germanic languages. But the sounds shifted in Greek and Latin. So let's look at a few examples.

Remember that among the early Germanic speakers, the aspirated 'b' sound (/bh/) became a regular 'b' sound (/b/). But within Latin, that aspirated 'b' sound became an 'f' sound in many contexts. So the original Indo-European word ***bhrater*** led to the modern English word ***brother***, but it also created the Latin word ***frater***. And ***frater*** is the root of Latin-derived words like ***fraternal*** and ***fraternity***. Both of those terms mean 'brotherly' or 'brotherhood' in modern English, and they are both cognate with the word ***brother*** thanks to that Latin sound shift.

And among the early Germanic speakers, the aspirated 'd' sound (/dh/) became a regular 'd' sound (/d/). But within Latin, that aspirated 'd' sound also became an 'f' sound in many contexts. So an original Indo-European word like ***dhwer*** led to the modern English word ***door***. But within Latin, that aspirated 'd' sound became an 'f' sound and produced the Latin word ***foris***, which also originally meant 'door,' but came to mean 'outside of the door' or simply 'outside.' And that word ***foris*** gave us words like ***forum***, originally referring to the Roman marketplace which was outside in the open. And I've mentioned in earlier episodes that the word ***forum*** also gave us words like ***forensic***. And that same Latin word ***foris*** also gave us the word ***foreign*** meaning 'not domestic or inside the house' but 'beyond the door from far away.' It also gave us the word ***forest*** which originally meant 'trees outside of the house.' And it even gave us the word ***foreclose*** which basically means 'to shut the door' or 'to shut someone outside of the house so they can't get in.' So ***forum***, ***forensic***, ***foreign***, ***forest***, and ***foreclose*** are all cognate with the English word ***door*** thanks to that early Latin sound shift.

And lastly, among the early Germanic speakers, the aspirated 'g' sound (/gh/) became a regular 'g' sound (/g/). But within Latin, that aspirated 'g' sound became an 'h' sound in many contexts. Since the 'h' sound is basically just a breathy sound or an aspirated sound, the Latin speakers dropped the 'g' part of the sound and held on to the 'h' part of the sound – or the aspirated part of the sound. The net result of this change is that when we look at very old English words and very old Latin words, we should expect to see a 'G' in the English words where an 'H' appears in the Latin words. And that is in fact what we often see.

I mentioned in an earlier episode about Indo-European words that the original Indo-European word ***ghosti*** produced both the words ***guest*** and ***host*** in Modern English. Well, this was how that happened.

Within the Germanic language, the aspirated ‘g’ became a normal ‘g’. So the word ***guest*** comes from the Germanic speakers. Specifically, it came into English as a borrowing from Old Norse – the language of the Vikings, and a related Germanic language. But ***host*** comes into English via Latin. The Indo-European word ***ghosti*** became ***hostis*** in Latin. And that produced later words like ***host***, ***hostile***, ***hotel*** and ***hospital***. So we see that Latin sound shift there.

Another good example of this same sound shift occurs in certain words related to gardens. The original Indo-European language had a word which was something like ***ghordho***. In the Germanic language, this aspirated ‘g became a regular ‘g’, and it produced the original Germanic word ***gardaz***. That word produced the word ***gardo*** among the Germanic Frankish tribes. The Franks later conquered Gaul, and their Germanic language became mixed with Old French. So that Frankish word ***gardo*** passed through Old North French, and then later into English as ***garden***. The same original Germanic word passed into the modern German language as ***Garten*** as in ***kindergarten***, which literally means ‘child’s garden.’ That same original Germanic word passed into Old English as ***geard***, but another sound shift in Old English converted the initial ‘g’ sound to a ‘y’ sound in many Old English words. So the word eventually came to be pronounced ‘yard.’ So the modern English word ***yard*** comes from the same Germanic root as ***garden***.

But what about Latin? Well, remember the aspirated ‘g’ sound shifted to an ‘h’ sound in Latin. And in Latin, that original Indo-European word ***ghordho*** became ***hortus***. And of course, that word gave us the modern English word ***horticulture***. So ***garden***, ***yard*** and ***horticulture*** are all cognate thanks to those sound shifts within Latin and Old English.

The major point to all of this is two-fold. First, sound shifts were not unique to the Germanic speakers. Sounds also shifted in the other Indo-European languages. And remember that the process of reconstructing the original Indo-European language involves identifying these specific sound changes within each language family, and applying those sound shift rules in reverse to create an original form of the word in the common Indo-European language. So hopefully, you already knew that.

The other point is that some sounds shifted in the Germanic languages while they remained the same in other languages. But the reverse also happened. Sometimes the Germanic languages held on to the original Indo-European sounds – or at least very similar versions of those sounds – while other languages shifted those sounds around and created new sounds. But the bottom line here is that we can identify the specific sound changes which occurred among the original Germanic tribes.

Now everything I just discussed, and everything I discussed with respect to Grimm’s Law back in episode 4, only applies to words which passed from the original Indo-European language into the original Germanic language. But this brings us to the next major point which is that only a portion of the original Germanic vocabulary was inherited from the Indo-Europeans. In fact, a very large portion of the core vocabulary of the original Germanic language wasn’t Indo-European at all. So let’s consider that very important fact.

In one of the early episode of the podcast, I talked about the core vocabulary of Modern English. I noted that there are relatively few Germanic words overall in Modern English in comparison to Latin, Greek and other borrowed words. But even though there are relatively few Germanic words, they dominate our core vocabulary.

49 of the 50 most commonly used words in English are Germanic. And 183 out of the 200 most commonly used words are also Germanic. These Germanic words tend to be the first words children learn, and they're the words we still tend to use the most often. So our numbers, our body parts, our basic verbs and pronouns, and our close family relations – like ***mother***, ***father***, ***brother***, ***sister***, ***child***, ***husband***, ***wife*** – all of these ultimately come from Old English.

I used the oak tree analogy and pointed out that there are the roots and trunk of the English oak tree. They are our core vocabulary, so they're very old words and they don't change much over time.

Now I mention all of this because we should expect that the core vocabulary of Modern English can be traced back to Middle English, and back from there to Old English, and back from there to the original Germanic language. And, in fact, that is generally the case. We can do that.

But by the same token, we should be able to trace those same words back to the original Indo-European language. After all, it is our core vocabulary. But that's where things start to fall apart. While there are many words that we can trace back to that original Indo-European language, there are a lot of these words that can't be traced back to that original language. Back in the episodes where I discussed some of the words of the original Indo-European language, I noted that many of the words we use in Modern English don't come from the original Indo-European language – remember that?

For example, a word like ***horse*** goes back to the original Germanic language, but it can't be definitively traced back further than that. The Indo-European word for ***horse*** was the word that ultimately gives us ***equine*** and ***equestrian***. But the early Germanic tribes apparently got the original version of the word ***horse*** from somewhere else.

The same is true for the word ***pig***. It goes back to the original Germanic language, but there is no evidence of it prior to that. The Indo-European word ultimately gave us the work ***pork*** via Latin. But ***pig*** is not cognate with ***pork***. The early Germans got the word ***pig*** from somewhere else.

Sheep is another example. The word originated within the original Germanic tribes, but the Indo-European word for the same animal gave us the word ***ewe*** – E-W-E. So again, the early Germans borrowed the word ***sheep*** from somewhere else.

I also noted the word ***house*** back in those episodes. Now that's a very basic word. And it's the type of word that we would expect to have very strong Indo-European roots. But it doesn't. Again, it can clearly be traced back to the original Germanic language, but no one knows where they got that basic word from. Again, there is no evidence of it in the original Indo-European

language. The original Indo-European word gives us the words ***domicile*** and ***domestic*** via Latin. But again, the Germanic tribes got the word ***house*** from somewhere else.

We can also add the word ***sea*** – S-E-A – meaning 'ocean.' Again, it has very strong Germanic roots, but it doesn't have any roots within the original Indo-European language. The Indo-European word gave use ***mere*** as in ***mermaid***. Again, we would expect a basic word like ***sea*** to have even deeper roots in the Indo-European language, but it doesn't.

Now there are a ton of these words, but let me just mention a few others that I haven't mentioned before – at least I don't think I have. For example, body parts like ***blood, bone, hand, leg, shoulder, womb*** – those all go back to the original Germanic language, but they're not Indo-European. Even the word ***body*** can be traced back to that original Germanic language, but really not beyond that.

The same is true for certain close family relations – words like ***child, wife*** and ***bride***. Again, very common words which are part of our core vocabulary, but we can't trace them beyond the Germanic tribes. And here are just a few others – basic words like ***all, back, drink, drive, eel, fowl, game, gate, ground, hold, leap, like, meat, near, rain, rat, rise, ship, sick, theft*** – again these are incredibly common words, but we can't trace them beyond the early Germanic tribes. They're Germanic words. They come from the original Germanic language. But again, there is not evidence of the words beyond that point. And again, this is just a tiny sampling of very common, core words that the early Germanic tribes apparently got from somewhere other than their Indo-European ancestors. So what happened here?

Well, no one knows for certain. It is certainly possible that some of these words do in fact have Indo-European origins. No one really believes that the entire original Indo-European language has been reconstructed. So it is possible that some of these words passed from the original Indo-European language to the early Germans, but for some reason those words died out in all of the other Indo-European languages. And therefore, these words can't be reconstructed back to the original Indo-European language since we don't have existing cognates in the other Indo-European languages

Now again, this could account for a few words here and there, but most of the words I mentioned appear to have originated elsewhere.

It is possible that the Germanic tribes simply made up some words, but again, historical linguists note that completely made-up words are actually pretty rare. People will borrow words – and combine them – and split them up – and change them around, but they don't tend to just make up words from nothing. And again, when they do, it doesn't tend to be part of the core vocabulary.

So most modern linguists assume that the early Germanic tribes borrowed these core words from other people who they encountered in Scandinavia, or perhaps at earlier points during their migrations from the Indo-European homeland to the Germanic homeland in Scandinavia. Last time I mentioned the Corded Ware people who occupied northern Europe at a time when the

Indo-Europeans were moving northward. So perhaps these words came from some of these Corded Ware people.

But the more accepted theory is that these words came from the native people who occupied Scandinavia before the Indo-Europeans settled there. This is partly because these words are unique to the Germanic languages. So that suggests that these words were borrowed later after the Germanic tribes were in place in northern Europe. But the big clue is the nature of these words. Again, these words are part of the core vocabulary of the original Germanic language. And in fact, they are still part of our core vocabulary in Modern English over 2500 years later.

That suggests that these words were not casually borrowed from some other existing non-Indo-European language. It is more likely that what we have is a blending of languages – or at least of blending of vocabularies. One popular theory is that a dominant Indo-European tribal culture settled in Scandinavia. They encountered native peoples who they ruled over and who eventually they began to marry. And they produced children who spoke both languages and were familiar with the core words of both languages. And over time, the core vocabulary of the Indo-European language began to mix with the core vocabulary of the native peoples. The result was the language which we know today as the original Germanic language.

This theory has some support when we look at other events in history. For example, in the midst of the Viking invasions of Britain, a large number of these Scandinavian invaders conquered and settled in a large portion of central and northern England which was called the Danelaw. Over time, these Old Norse speakers began to interact with and began to marry Old English speakers. And over the next few generations, Old English began to adopt a large number of these Old Norse words.

But unlike what happened when the Norman French invaded a little later, the Old Norse words actually became part of the core vocabulary of English. French really didn't do that – at least not as much. French gave English an incredible number of words, but they tended to supplement the core vocabulary – not replace it. For example, English kept Germanic words like ***pig*** and ***cow*** and ***chicken***, and they supplemented the language with French words like ***pork***, and ***beef*** and ***poultry***. The words referring to the cooked versions came from French, but the words for the animals themselves remained the original Germanic words. French was imposed from the top down.

But the interaction with the Norse speakers was different. Old Norse and Old English were really just different versions of a common language, and they were on a more equal footing at this point and time. And Old Norse words actually began to replace Old English words within the core vocabulary itself. So basic pronouns like ***they***, ***them*** and ***their*** came from Old Norse. And even basic pronoun like ***she*** came form Old Norse. It's not Old English. Those are basic words. People don't just wake up one day and decide to start using completely different pronouns. That type of borrowing comes from a mixing of languages where both versions of the word exist side-by-side for a while, and then one version of the word eventually wins out over time.

And so, as we go back to the original Germanic language, a large number of non-Indo-European words in the core vocabulary of that original Germanic language suggests that there was this same mixing of peoples in and around Scandinavia. Over time, the native non-Indo-Europeans were assimilated into the Germanic tribes. And the Germanic vocabulary which resulted was really a mixture of these two languages, or maybe more than two languages. At least that's a theory. But if it's true, it means that a very large percentage of the basic words which we use everyday came from these native Scandinavians, whoever they were.

I'm going to conclude my look at the original Germanic vocabulary on that note. Next time, I'm going to focus a bit on the grammar of the original Indo-European language. And I'm also going to look at the early division of the language into basic northern, eastern and western dialects. And then I'm going to look in more detail at the early runic writing which developed within these early Germanic tribes.

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