

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 22:
EARLY GERMANIC GRAMMAR**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – A Podcast About the History of English Language. This is Episode 22: Early Germanic Grammar. In this episode, we’re going to continue our look at the earliest Germanic language. Specifically, we’re going to focus on the grammar of the early Germanic tribes.

But before I begin, let me thank all of you who have purchased the History of the Alphabet series. That series is still available through iTunes, Amazon.com, and my website, historyofenglishpodcast.com. And, I also wanted to thank all of you who have sent me emails regarding the alphabet series or this podcast. You can reach me at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I also wanted to thank all of you who have left reviews and ratings on iTunes. I haven’t mentioned that lately, but I also appreciate the feedback from all of you who have taken the time to do that. So let’s turn our attention to this episode.

Now last time, we looked at some of the vocabulary of the early Germanic tribes at a time when there was a common Germanic language which was the ancestor of English, German and the Scandinavian languages, among others. But how did they use those words? In other words, what was their grammar like?

A good place to start is with the original Indo-European language. The Germanic languages evolved from that original Indo-European language, so the Germanic tribes inherited their grammar from the first Indo-Europeans. And so you might consider going back and listening to Episode 8 of the podcast where I took a look at the Indo-European grammar because this episode will focus on how that original language began to change in the hands – and the mouths – of the early Germans.

And the key to understanding all of this is that concept of inflections which I discussed back in Episode 8. The overall theme here is that the original Indo-European language had lots of those inflections. But over the centuries, English has lost most of them, but not all of them. And this process of losing inflections began with the early Germanic speakers. And some of the basic changes within the early Germanic language is still reflected in Modern English.

So let’s begin by reviewing the concept of inflections. Inflections are basically changes or variations of a word to indicate something specific about the word. And the important thing to understand here is that language allows us to express basic concepts and ideas, but it also allows us to express subtle variations in those concepts.

So let’s take a basic sentence like “*The horse jumps the fence.*” The idea that is being conveyed is very simple.

But I can create subtle variations like “*The horses jump the fences.*” So instead of one horse and one fence, I am now referring to many horses and many fences. Or how about the this sentence, “*The horse jumped the fence.*” I am now expressing the same idea, but I put it in the past. So I am using past tense.

The point here is that language allows us to make very slight changes to words to alter the meaning of words. So when I put an ‘-s’ or an ‘-es’ on the end of a noun like *horse* or *fence*, that’s my way of telling you that there was more than one. And that may seem incredibly obvious, but not all languages do that.

In Chinese, for example, the word for horse doesn’t change. So if I want to indicate multiple horses, I have to insert an extra word to indicate that. So I would say something like “*Two horse jump the fence.*” Or “*Many horse jump the fence.*” Or “*Several horse jumps the fence.*”

But in English, I don’t have to add an extra word. I can simply tweak or modify the word *horse* by adding an ‘-es’ to the end. That little suffix – ‘-es’ – is an inflection. And English can make that subtle change to indicate plurality because it is an Indo-European language. This is a feature of all Indo-European languages. Rather than having to insert extra words, Indo-European languages tend use little variations of the words themselves. This is why Chinese can be written in characters, but English can’t. The Chinese words stay the same. But English words have these little variations and can only be fully represented with an alphabet.

Again these little variations are inflections.

The same rules basically apply for past tense. In English, I can distinguish something happening now from something which happened yesterday by simply adding a little ‘-ed’ at the end of the word. So to change “*The horse jumps the fence*” from present tense to past tense, I just change *jump* to *jumped* with an ‘-ed.’

Again, this little suffix is an inflection. But Chinese doesn’t use inflections. So you would have to say something like, “*Yesterday, the horse jump the fence.*” Or “*Last week, the horse jump the fence.*” Again, in English, we can just modify the word *jump* by putting an ending on it like ‘-ed’ and that does the same trick.

So these little endings – or inflections – are still a feature of Modern English. But English has relatively few of them today compared to Old English. And the earlier forms of the language, like Germanic and Indo-European, had even more of those inflections. Those people basically communicated with each other by constantly modifying and changing basic words to indicate time, and case, and almost every aspect and variation of the basic sentence.

But as I have said, we use relatively few inflections today compared to earlier versions of the language, and the process of losing inflections began with the early Germanic tribes who spoke that common Germanic language. And this process is best represented in verbs where the Germanic tribes got rid of infections in most cases.

In fact, these Germanic speakers got rid of inflections for verbs in all tenses except present tense and past tense. This is still the case in Modern English, and it’s still the case in all modern Germanic languages, like German, Swedish, Norwegian and Dutch. So let’s look at that more closely.

Let's begin with present tense. "*The horse jumps the fence.*" Like all Germanic languages, we can indicate present tense with an inflection. In the case of English, it is the '-s' at the end of the word **jump**, and that indicates that the action is happening right now.

Now let's take a look at past tense. "*The horse jumped the fence.*" Again, we usually use that little ending '-ed'.

But what about the future? What if I want to indicate that something is going to happen at a later date? You will notice that there is no ending I can put on the word **jump** to indicate that the horse will do it at a later time. And that's because English has lost the ending or inflection which used to do that. So I can say, '*The horse will jump the fence*' or "*The horse is going to jump the fence,*" but I have to add new words rather than just changing the word **jump**. The word **jump** actually stays the same.

But the original Indo-European language had an ending for future tense. And it still exists in most other European languages. And if you've studied other Indo-European languages, you'll know all of the different verb tenses that you had to learn.

Like, for example, the conditional tense. "*The horse could jump the fence*" or "*The horse would jump the fence.*" Many other European languages can just stick a different ending on the word **jump** to indicate that. But the original Germanic language lost that ending. Now we have to use words like **could** or **would** to indicate that tense.

And then there is the subjunctive tense. "*The horse may jump the fence.*" Again, other European languages can stick a specific ending on the word **jump** to express that idea. But the original Germanic language lost it, and now we have to use the word **may**.

And there is the imperfect indicative tense. "*The horse was jumping the fence.*" Again, the original Indo-European language had a specific ending to indicate that tense. But the original Germanic language lost it. And now we have to use the phrase '*was jumping.*'

So all of these verb inflections – or endings – were lost within the original Germanic language. The only endings which were retained were the ones used for present tense (like '*jumps*') and past tense (like '*jumped*'). For all other verb tenses, we have to add new words to express the idea. In other words, we have to use a verb phrase.

But the major point here is that this is common throughout all Germanic languages, so it was something that happened very early on among the original Germanic speakers.

And this is something that distinguished the original Germanic language from Latin. Latin retained most of those endings. And that is why modern Romance languages like French and Spanish still have all of those different verb forms. And it is why English speakers have so much fun learning how to pronounce and spell those verbs in the future tense, perfect tense, pluperfect tense, conditional tense, and so on.

But English largely avoids all of that complication thanks to those early Germanic tribes in northern and central Europe. They simplified the verb forms considerably. And this marks one of the first major steps in simplifying that original Indo-European inflectional system.

So the early Germans got rid of different verb forms except as I mentioned in present and past tense. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they had all of the ways of expressing tense that we have in Modern English. For example, '**will** jump,' '**is going to** jump,' '**could** jump,' '**would** jump,' '**may** jump,' '**was jumping**.' Most of these specific verb phrases developed during later phases of English. The original Germanic language did use some basic verb phrases to express these ideas, but they were used much more rarely. Instead, they relied on the basic present and past tenses to do most of the work. Thus, the present tense of the verb could also be used to express a future meaning. But the context would indicate exactly how the verb was being used. So it would have been somewhat awkward early on, but over time the various Germanic languages developed more sophisticated verb phrases to replace those lost inflections. But again, the transition from verb inflections to verb phrases began with the early Germanic tribes.

Now before we move on from talking about Germanic verbs, I want to mention one other thing about past tense verbs. During the period of the original Indo-European language, the verbs tended to be very irregular. In other words, the verbs changed significantly in various tenses, and it was really the vowels or internal structure of the verb that tended to change. And we still see that in some of the very old basic verbs which have survived into Modern English. A classic example is the verb 'to be' in Modern English appears as *am, is, are, was, were, been* and *being*. The different versions of these words seem random and not related to each other in any obvious way. We also see it to a lesser extent in a verb like 'to go.' The past tense of *go* is *went*. We also see it in words like *sing* which appears as *sing, sang* and *sung*. And a word like *bite* which appears as *bite, bit* and *bitten*. All of these variations are also inflections. But you will notice that the verbs tended to change internally. *Blow, blew, blown. Catch, Caught. Drive, drove, driven*. In Modern English, we call these 'strong verbs' because they each have their own internal rules as they change tense. You just have to learn them.

But during the very early Germanic period, as the early Germans were starting to get rid of those Indo-European inflections, they developed a new class of verbs. These are what we know today as 'weak verbs.'

These tended to be newer verbs. For these verbs, a general rule was adopted. The internal structure of the verb would stay the same. But past tense would be indicated by adding a 't' or a 'd' sound at the end. You might remember that these sounds are closely related. The 't' and 'd' sounds are both stops, and the 't' sound is the unvoiced version of the 'd' sound. And this is actually still the general rule for verbs in Modern English. The past tense of *jump* is *jumped*. The past tense of *sleep* is *slept*. The past tense of *weep* is *wept*. The past tense of *push* is *pushed*. I noted that the original Germanic language retained an inflexive for past tense. But this specific inflection – the 'd' or 't' sound at the end – was unique to the Germanic languages. And again, this occurred very early on while there was still a common Germanic language because these features exist throughout the Germanic languages today.

So the ‘generic’ ‘-ed’ suffix that we use today to indicate past tense goes back to these same original Germanic tribes.

So why did these Germanic tribes create this ‘-ed’ or ‘-t’ ending for past tense verbs? Well, no one knows for sure. One theory is that it came from the verb ‘to do’ so that *walk* in past tense became something akin to *walk-did* (or how we might say today ‘*did walk*’). The ‘*walk-did*’ became ‘*walked*.’ But this is just a theory, and one that is not accepted by all linguists. It is also believed that most of the initial weak verbs that used this ‘-ed’ or ‘-t’ ending were words that began as other parts of speech and therefore didn’t have an established conjugation under the traditional Indo-European verb system. So *walk* was initially a noun as in ‘*take a walk*,’ but eventually it began to be used as a verb. And the generic /t/ or a /d/ suffix was used to indicate past tense. Again, this is a theory.

By the way, I talked about Jacob Grimm in the last episode, and we’ve looked at his sound changes in some detail. Well it was Jacob Grimm who coined the terms ‘strong verb’ and ‘weak verb’ to describes these different types of verbs. And that has become the standard terminology which we still use today. All new verbs are weak verbs because the ‘-ed’ ending is the only way to make those verbs past tense. And again, this specific ‘-ed’ – or sometimes ‘-t’ – ending is unique to the Germanic languages.

So we’ve looked at verbs in the original Germanic language, now lets look at nouns.

The first thing I should note is that the original Germanic language continued to have masculine and feminine nouns. So this goes back to Episode 8 about the original Indo-European grammar. You may remember that the original Indo-Europeans classified all nouns as either masculine, feminine or neutral. And most modern European languages still make these distinctions – at least into masculine and feminine. Modern German still uses the neutral version as well. Again, the original Germanic tribes didn’t change that. Modern English is somewhat unique among Indo-European languages in that it no longer makes those distinctions, but that change came much later during the period of Old English.

Now I noted earlier that we still use inflections for nouns to indicate plurality. But other than that, we no longer use inflections for nouns. So we have one ‘car’ and several ‘cars’ with an ‘-s’. That’s an inflection. And we have one ‘ox’ and several ‘oxen’ – just like we have one ‘child’ and several ‘children.’ Again these are all inflections because the noun itself changes. In other words, the noun is pronounced differently to indicate that there is more than one of something.

Well, the original Germanic language basically did the same thing. It also had certain inflections to distinguish one of something from several of something.

But again, the Germanic language was much more inflexive than Modern English. So unlike today, the Germanic language used lots of other inflections with nouns. So for example, they continued to put little endings on nouns to indicate whether a nouns was the subject of the sentence or the object of the sentence. I covered all of this back in Episode 8 with respect to the

Indo-Europeans. And the early Germans basically continued this aspect of the original Indo-European language.

So for example: “*The dog chased the cat.*” Or “*The cat chased the dog.*” The exact same 5 words appear in both sentences. The only difference is the order in which they appear. But the order is essential in Modern English. When the word **dog** appears before the verb **chased**, we know the dog is the one doing the chasing. In other words, we know it is the subject. But when the word **dog** appears after the verb, we know it was the one being chased. In other words, it is the object of the sentence. Now there are occasional exceptions to this strict rule, but the point here is that we rely on word order today to determine these things today.

But during the time of the Germanic tribes – much like the earlier Indo-Europeans – word order wasn’t really all that important because the little endings which they placed on the end of the nouns told you which was the subject and which was the object. So you may recall from back in Episode 8 that the Indo-European word for **horse** was the root of the Modern English word **equine** and **equestrian**. (You’ve probably figured out by now that I like to use the same examples.) Well, when that word for horse was used as the subject of the sentence – like “*The horse jumped the fence*” – the word was **ekwos** with an /os/ ending. But when the horse was the object of the sentence – like “*I saw the horse*” – the word was pronounced **ekwom** with an /om/ ending. So the ending – or inflection – told you whether the word was the subject or the object of the sentence. And so it didn’t really matter where you put the word in the sentence.

So word order was much looser and more flexible in the original Indo-European language, and it was still the same way in the original Germanic language. And it is still the case in Modern German as well. And, in fact, it was the case in Old English. It wasn’t until the late Old English and early Middle English period that English finally lost these noun inflections or endings.

So that’s nouns. What about pronouns? Well, **I, me, us, you, he, it, they** and **them** all derived from earlier versions within the original Germanic language. As I mentioned in the last episode, the pronouns **they** and **them** were borrowed from the Old Norse speakers, but they originated within the earlier Germanic tribes.

And **she** came into English around the time of early Middle English. In the last episode, I stated that **she** also came from Old Norse – and nobody called me out on that – but that may actually have been a misstatement. The etymology of **she** is still disputed. In fact, some argue that it has Celtic origins because the Celtic word was very similar. But regardless of its specific origins, we do know that it didn’t appear in English until after the Old English period.

And let’s keep in mind that the Germanic and Old English pronouns were also highly inflexive. So just like nouns, the actual pronoun that you used depended on how it was being used in the sentence. But let’s assume the third person pronoun – **he, she** or **it** – was being used as the subject of the sentence.

In Old English, the masculine version was ‘H-E’ just like today, but it was pronounced more like /hey/. The neutral version was ‘H-I-T’ – pronounced /heet/. But over time, the ‘h’ fell away at

the beginning, and it just became ‘I-T’ – eventually pronounced as ‘it.’ This loss of the ‘h’ sound was quite common. We see it the modern pronunciation of words like *hour* – H-O-U-R – and *honor*. The ‘h’ sound in those words has long since disappeared, but the spelling still reflects the original pronunciation. By the way, I discuss the loss of the ‘h’ sound in the alphabet series. So check that out if you want to learn more about that. But anyway, /heet/ eventually became pronounced as ‘it’ in Modern English without the ‘h’ sound at the beginning.

When used as the subject, the feminine version was *hio*. So /hey/, /heet/ and /hio/ had that initial ‘h’ sound. And we still see that is *him* and *her* – and *his* and *hers*. All of which retained the ‘h’ sound. But as I noted, the feminine version *hio* was eventually replaced by *she* in early Middle English. And no one knows for sure why that happened. But the main point of this discussion about *he*, *she* and *it* is to help you to see the connections between those pronouns. During the earlier Germanic period, these various third person pronouns were much more similar to each other than they are today.

By the way, those are the third person pronouns. But with respect to the first and second person pronouns, the original Germanic speakers had a singular and plural version like today, but they also retained a dual version from the original Indo-Europeans which referred to a pair of something. So they not only had a version of *I* and *us*, they also had a pronoun which meant ‘we two’ or ‘the two of us.’ And they not only had a version of *you* singular and *you* plural (like ‘you all’), but they also a version which meant ‘you two’ or the ‘two of you.’

So again, this goes back to the original Indo-Europeans, and the early Germans retained it. And in fact, those dual pronouns passed into early Gothic and Old Norse. So the eastern and northern dialects retained it for a while. But the western dialects dropped the dual version early on. So Old English never really had a dual version.

So I’ve discussed verbs, nouns and pronouns. Let me mention something about adjectives. Like everything else, adjectives also used lots of inflections or endings to convey specific meanings. And we still have a few of those in Modern English. For example, we still use inflections to indicate the comparative or superlative cases. Now that sounds very fancy, but it is the difference between *large*, *larger*, *largest*. Those are really perfect examples of inflections. Those little endings convey essential meanings. And again, we get them from the original Germanic language.

I also wanted to note another sound shift which occurred within the early Germanic language. I discussed the sound changes associated with Grimm’s Law in the last episode. Well, in addition to those changes, there was another subtle sound change that occurred during this early period.

The early Germanic language had a sound that was somewhere between an ‘s’ or ‘z’ sound and an ‘r’ sound. It was a unique sound that we don’t really have in Modern English. But it was the product of a sound shift. There was an earlier ‘z’ sound which eventually shifted to an ‘r’ sound. And this sound was right in the middle of that change during the early Germanic period. And we can still see relics of that sound shift in Modern English. We can see it in *was* vs *were* and *most* vs *more*. One version retains the original sibilant sound – the ‘s’ or ‘z’ sound. And the other

reflects the newer ‘r’ sound which developed within the later Germanic languages. And these differences developed largely due to different stresses in the syllables of words. Differences in stress led to certain shifts in the sound. In fact, this particular sound shift is very common across many different languages. In fact, it has its own name in linguistics. It’s called ‘rhotacism.’ But the point here is that this particular sound shift was still in process of change during the early Germanic period.

Now I should note that linguists who have studied Gothic have discovered that Gothic apparently didn’t have this particular sound shift to the ‘r’ sound. So linguists use this as evidence to indicate that those Gothic tribes began their eastward migration very early on, and this ‘r’ sound change occurred shortly thereafter. If that is the case, that means that this sound shift was not part of the original common Germanic language. It must have developed slightly later after the Goths split off. But that is kind of a technical point because this sound shift is common throughout the other Germanic languages, including all of the modern Germanic languages.

So that brings me to the final point which I wanted to discuss in regard to Germanic grammar. And interestingly, it is one of the easiest aspects of Germanic grammar to understand, but it may have had the most far-reaching implications as far as Modern English is concerned.

And this particular aspect of the original Germanic language was the way multi-syllable words were stressed when they were pronounced. And surprisingly enough, this is actually very simple. In the original Germanic language, the stress was almost always placed on the first syllable of the word.

Now some words had prefixes, and in those cases the prefixes were not stressed. So to be a little more accurate, we can say that the ‘base’ syllable was stressed.

Now in modern English, there is no general rule for stress. Stress can appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end. And this is actually much like the original Indo-European language where the stress could appear at various locations.

Now part of the reason why the stress varies a lot in Modern English is because English has so many borrowed words. And many of those words had the stress in the middle or at the end when they were borrowed. But despite the lack of consistency in Modern English, we can still say that there is a default tendency to emphasize the first syllable in Modern English. And that is also true of modern German, by the way.

So let’s look at this default tendency by comparing Modern English words to French words where the tendency is to emphasize the final syllable.

So in English, we have a word like *Paris*, but in French it’s *Paris*. In English, we have a word like *mansion*, but in French it’s *maison*. In English, we have *voyage*. In French, you have *voyage*. In English, we have *difference*. In French, it’s *différence*, as in “Viva la *différence*.”

So English still has this tendency – to put the emphasis on the first syllable. But it is really just a tendency today. One of my favorite examples of this is American ‘*aluminum*’ versus British ‘*aluminium*.’ Each dialect puts the emphasis in a different place, but neither puts its on the ‘A’ at the beginning.

But again, if you go through lots of multi-syllable words in English, you’ll find that the English tends to put the stress on the first syllable more often than not.

Now modern English is actually much like the original Indo-European language in this respect. As I noted earlier, the original Indo-European language also put the stress on different syllables in different words. So there doesn’t appear to be a consistent rule in the original language.

But by the time we get to the Germanic period, the emphasis was consistently put on the first syllable. And that is part of the reason why we still have that tendency in Modern English.

But again, this wasn’t a tendency in the original Germanic language. It was a pretty-much universal rule with very limited exceptions – like prefixes which I mentioned earlier. And linguists have even determined that this shift of emphasis to the first syllable occurred after the sound changes associated with Grimm’s Law. And the reason for that conclusion is because sound shifts are actually closely tied to the way syllables are stressed. And in fact, the reason why some of those consonants shifted in some words and didn’t in other words is because of the way syllables in the words were stressed. You might remember that Jacob Grimm never called the rules he formulated ‘laws.’ Because there were lots of exceptions which he couldn’t explain.

Well later linguists like Karl Verner explained those exceptions largely based on the way syllables were stressed. So sometimes a consonant didn’t shift to a new sound because the immediately preceding syllable was stressed. Anyway, based on all of that research, later linguists concluded that there was more variation in the way words were stressed early on. But by the later period of the original Germanic language, the stress had shifted to the first syllable.

So ‘big deal’ you say. Why is that stress on the first syllable so important? Well, the answer has to do with what happens when you emphasize the first part of a word. You tend to de-emphasize the end of the word. Take the word *syllable*. We don’t normally enunciate every syllable in the word *syllable*. We don’t typically say /syl-a-BUL/. We just say ‘syllable.’ So the end of the word comes out sounding something like ‘bulh’ instead of ‘buh.’ In other words, we tend to slur or cut off the end of the word. And so, if the stress is always on the first syllable, then the end of words routinely get cut short or they’re slurred.

But think about where all of those inflections that I’ve talked about are located. They were typically placed on the end of the words. So now – within the original Germanic language – many of those inflections were being de-emphasized, and they were often being lost in common speech.

Now many linguists believe that this may have been part of the reason why the early Germanic language began to lose some of its inflections altogether. So all those verb inflections in the Indo-European language were reduced to just two situations in the Germanic languages – present tense and past tense. Otherwise, the Germanic language required a verb phrase. In other words, it required additional words to be added into the sentence. And the Indo-European language had 8 separate cases for nouns which I discussed back in Episode 8. But now, the Germanic tribes got rid of at least two of those and rarely used a couple of others.

Of course, some of those various inflections were retained into later version of the language like Old English and German. But some of those lost inflections were likely the result of this syllable stress pattern.

So anyway, I hope you've found this episode interesting. My goal here was to illustrate how the early Germanic language was beginning to change in certain fundamental ways from the earlier Indo-European language. Not only were old words being pronounced differently – and new words being adopted from other peoples – but the early Germans were beginning to use those words in new and unique ways. So this was a transitional period for the language.

Next time, I'm going to return to the actual history of the Germanic tribes. We will look at the state of the tribes around the first century AD or common era. This was the time of the Roman historian Tacitus, and he gives us the first detailed written account of these people. And we'll look at certain cultural aspects of these tribes which are reflected in words from this period which are still found in modern English.

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