THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 51: NORSE WORDS AND A NEW ENGLISH

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 51: Norse Words and A New English. In this episode, we're going to look at how the Norse language of the Vikings began to change the English language of the Anglo-Saxons. This was a gradual process, and in previous episodes, I've spoken about these changes in general terms. But over the next few episodes, we're going to look much more closely at what was happening to the language. In many ways, the changes which we're going to explore are the first steps in the transition from Old English to Middle English. The Normans get most of the credit – or blame – for Middle English. But the Normans really completed a process which was already underway in certain parts of England. So this time, we'll focus on those changes. And specifically, we'll focus on the Viking vocabulary which was entering and changing English.

But before we begin, let me remind that the Beowulf Deconstructed audiobook is still available through the website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. It's also available through iTunes and Amazon.com.

Also, one other quick note. Since I began the podcast, I have received requests from time-to-time for transcripts of the episodes. And I haven't really made those available because I have been working on a written version of the podcast. The problem is that I haven't made much progress on that written version. So I have decided to go ahead and make the transcripts available for those of you who like all the details and don't want to take notes. They're not on the website yet, but I'm going to be adding them over the next few days. But here's the catch. I am going to charge a very hefty fee of 50 cents per transcript. That modest fee will help to offset some of the podcast expenses. And I will probably bundle some of the older transcripts together – probably in groups of ten or so. Anyway, it you're interested in those, just keep a look out for the 'Transcripts' page at historyofenglishpodcast.com.

So with that piece of business out of the way, let's turn to this episode, and let's explore the new form of English which was emerging in the former Danelaw region.

I want to begin by noting that, at this point in our story in the 900s, there was a clear contrast in Britain between what was happening politically and what was happening linguistically. Politically, the Anglo-Saxons were finally unified under a single monarch, but linguistically, they were actually becoming more divided. And this is really a very important point in the overall transition from Old English to Middle English. Technically, we're not at the period of Middle English yet. That won't happen until the Normans arrive in 1066. But English was already undergoing significant changes before the Norman Conquest. And much of that change was caused by the interaction of Old English and Old Norse. When Norman French arrived, it just accelerated the changes which were already underway.

So we have to keep in mind that English wasn't the fixed, stable language that we have today. During the late Anglo-Saxon period, it was much more fluid and variable. So Old English was already a bruised and battered language when the Norman arrived and delivered the knock-out blow to the original form of the language.

But there was another aspect of the Viking conquest which contributed to the later French influence. And that was the geographical divide which developed with English. The changes caused by the interaction of Old English and Old Norse were not uniform throughout the England. The changes were concentrated in the North and East in the former Danelaw where the Vikings had settled.

As we know, there had always been regional dialects of Old English. The Angles had generally settled north of the Thames and the Saxons had generally settled south of the Thames. And that had created a north-south divide from the very beginning. But when the Vikings arrived and basically settled among the Angles in the north and east, that north-south divide grew even larger. And in many ways, that new form of English being spoken in the north was the beginning of the form of English which we speak today. Norse words were starting to pour in – words which we still use today. And the grammar was changing in a direction toward Modern English. Those Old English inflections were stating to disappear. The Norse pronouns which we use today like ***they***, ***them*** and ***their*** began to replace the older Old English forms.

These changes are fascinating, but unfortunately, they're not very well documented. As we know, literacy had largely disappeared in the Danelaw region under Viking rule. The Anglo-Saxons of Wessex were literate, but they wrote in their own local dialect – a dialect which was largely unaffected by all of that Norse influence in the north and east. Even though the contemporary written evidence is slim, the changes in the north were reflected in later manuscripts. The first extensive documents written in the local vernacular of northern England after the Viking conquest appear in the 1100s and 1200s. And those documents reveal that the traditional differences between the north and south had become much more pronounced since the Vikings had arrived.

In fact, by the time of those later manuscripts, there is evidence that traders and travelers from the south couldn't understand the English which was being spoken in parts of the north. And that regional division continued into the early Norman period. And this north-south divide was another key factor in the later influence of French. Under Norman rule, English was initially relegated to a local dialect used for local trade and communication, but French served as the official national language. So in some ways, French actually facilitated communication throughout the country since local dialects had become so distinct in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

We'll explore this process in much more detail when we get to the Norman Conquest, but I wanted to make the point here that the Vikings created a situation on the ground which allowed the French influence to flourish in later years.

As you may know, the north-south divide in English dialects continues to this day. And I think its fair to say that some English speakers in the south of England still find it a challenge to understand some of those dialects spoken in the north. Some of those northern dialects show more distinct Norse influences than others. So for example, modern northern dialects like the Cumbrian dialect and the Yorkshire dialects have very distinct Norse influences.

In order to illustrate some of these modern differences, I want to play a short clip for you. Back in the 1980s, PBS ran a series about the history of English called 'The Story of English.' It was hosted by Jim Lerher, and it's available on YouTube if you want to check it out. Episode 2 focuses on the ancient history of the language. And the clip I'm going to play for you now addresses some of the Norse influences in the Yorkshire dialect:

[CLIP]

So as you can hear, the Yorkshire dialect – or dialects – are quite distinct from what is known as Received Pronunciation – the standard dialect of English associated with the south of England.

Now that clip focused on the Yorkshire dialect. That's the dialect spoken the region around York. And as we know, York was the center of Viking settlement in the northern Danelaw. And York is going to become very important over the next few episodes of the podcast. As we know, Alfred's son Edward had conquered much of the Danelaw except York. And his son Aethelstan had completed that process by actually conquering York, at least for a while. But the people of York were not particularly happy at the prospect of being ruled by Wessex kings from the south.

Historically, York was part of Northumbia. And Northumbria had always been distinct, and it valued its independence from the southern kingdoms. And that independent spirit had not faded. If anything, it had actually grown stronger. Not only were the language differences becoming more pronounced, there was also a growing cultural divide.

York was a key part of the Viking trading network which extended from Scandinavia to the Norse bases in Ireland. The city was a fundamental stop along that route. So it was basically a trading crossroads. North-south trade in Britain went through York, and east-west Viking trade across the North Atlantic also went through York. And that is part of the reason why the Danes wanted to control it. And it was also why the Norse Vikings from Dublin had invaded and conquered it. And now the Wessex king Aethelstan had conquered it. And being located in the north, York was located next door to the Celtic-speaking kingdom of the Scots, as well as Strathclyde. So York had actually become something of a melting-pot. It was culturally and linguistically much more diverse than the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms further south.

And as we'll see over the next few episodes, that diversity in York created all kinds of problems for the Wessex kingdom in the south. Control of York would continue to pass between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings.

But for now, it was under the control of Aethelstan of Wessex. As we saw last time, Aethelstan is the first king who we can call the King of a unified England. And he probably realized how fragile that kingdom was because he took several steps to better unify the Anglo-Saxons. Building on the tradition of his grandfather Alfred the Great, Aethelstan issued a new set of laws which applied to all of the people under his rule.

Aethelstan's laws were actually much more advanced than the harsh tribal laws which had been issued previously. The prior laws had been based on Germanic concepts like wergild and

Christian principles from the Old Testament like an eye-for-an-eye. But Aethelstan's laws showed a bit more nuance and sophistication. For the first time, his laws directed that children under the age of 12 should not be put to death for committing certain crimes. His code was one the first codes to encourage imprisonment as a punishment. Up to this point, an accused was typically imprisoned until a trial could take place. But after the trial, the person was punished if he was found guilty. He might be put to death, or fined, or banished. But under Aethelstan, criminals could actually be imprisoned after conviction as a punishment, so they could reflect on their misdeeds and learn from their mistakes. This was actually a step forward from tribal justice to a slightly more modern criminal justice system.

Aethelstan's laws also outlawed Sunday trading for the first time.

His laws also regulated the quality of tools used in warfare. Some shield-makers made shields from lower quality wood and then covered them with sheepskin. So the sheepskin hid the lower quality of the shield. So Aethelstan decreed in Old English:

"þæt nan scyldwyrhta ne lecge nan scepes fel on scyld
(that no shield-worker lay any sheepskin on a shield)

and gif he do gilde xxx scillinga"
(and if he does, he is to yield or pay thirty shillings)

But perhaps the most significant laws introduced by Aethelstan concerned coins. In order to centralize the administration of his kingdom, and in order to better unify his people, he issued laws to control the production and quality of the coinage.

The first thing he did was to require a single currency throughout the kingdom. You might remember from the prior episode about King Offa and his coins, that coins were minted by local moneyers. They might pay a fee to the crown for a right to mint coins, but the coins themselves weren't necessarily controlled by the king. But now, Aethelstan decreed that 'there could only be one coinage and all coins had to be minted in a town,' presumably so that local officials could keep an eye on the process. This created a standardized coinage.

The law actually read:

"an mynet sy ofer eall ðæs cynges onweald and nan mon ne mynetige buton on port"

(a mint is to be completely under the king's jurisdiction, and no man is to mint but in a port or town)

So this effectively brought the minting of coins under the control of a royal official. All dies were cut in a central workshop and distributed to the local moneyers. This standardized the currency. But it was also important to ensure that the coins were of a consistent quality.
If a moneyer produced coins that were base or lacked the required amount of silver, his hand could be cut off. Here is the text of the actual law:

“and gif se mynetere ful wurðe. Slea mon of þa hond . . . and sette up on ða mynet smiððan”
(and if the minter becomes corrupt, let his hand be struck off . . . and displayed at the mint.)

So the penalty for debasing the currency was severe.

But these laws ensured a steady increase in the number of mints throughout the 900s. And this suggests that a unified England – and peace with the Danes in the south – provided a degree of stability. And that stability facilitated trade – both domestic and international. And that increased trade meant there was an increase in the demand for coins.

The coinage also provides archaeological evidence that town life was growing during this period. In the southern part of the Danelaw, so East Anglia and eastern Mercia, the people came to accept the rule of Wessex. Shires were organized there on the Wessex model. This was the beginning of a period of general peace and prosperity – at least in the southern part of England.

But the situation in the north around York was far more complicated. In the north, not only were the Danes an issue, but now there was also a significant migration of Norwegian Vikings from northern Britain and Ireland. And even the native Anglo-Saxons there resisted southern rule.. So Northumbria would continue to be a challenge.

And the linguistic changes in the north likely contributed to that north-south divide. As I noted earlier, all of that Viking influence on the ground was fundamentally changing the language there.

So I want to use the remainder of this episode to explore how the vocabulary of English was starting to change in that region.

In prior episodes, I explored quite a few Viking words which entered English, but those words really just scratch the surface. As we examine the Viking words which have survived into Modern English, we have to keep in mind that these are merely some of the words which still exist in the language. Some scholars estimate that Modern English has about 600 words from Norse origin. Others put the number closer to 900. As we’ll see, it sometimes difficult to determine if a word is from English or Norse because the languages were so similar. But for all the Norse words which still exist, a lot have actually disappeared over the centuries. In fact, about 85% of the Old English vocabulary has disappeared, and that 85% includes a lot of Norse words which were once there.

So if we were to go back in time and survey the language of York around the end of the Old English period, we would probably find a very high percentage of Norse words.

And we also have to keep in mind that the entire vocabulary of Old English was much smaller than it is today. It was probably about 1/10 the size of our modern vocabulary. So all of those Norse words would have represented a much larger percentage of the overall vocabulary at the time.

As I've noted, English literacy was basically non-existent in those northern regions. So we can't see the Norse influence at the time. The West Saxon scribes in the south and west weren't really exposed to those words, so only a few snuck through into the manuscripts which were being produced there.

Linguists have studied the surviving Old English manuscripts written in the West Saxon dialect before the year 1016. And that research reveals that only about thirty Old Norse words survive in those texts. Some of those words have disappeared from English, but those which have survived include some of the words we have explored in prior episodes – words like ***law***, ***outlaw***, ***husband***, and ***wrong***. It also includes the word ***fellow*** and ***call***. So those words had actually spread into other parts of the island and were prominent enough for the local scribes to use them.

But modern language historians are convinced that the situation was quite different on the ground in the former Danelaw, especially in the north. A small handful of texts from shortly after the Norman Conquest show that Norse influence, and they show all of those new Viking words. But those texts only show what had already happened to the language. Without earlier texts, its difficult to trace the exact progress of that Norse influence. So linguists have to rely upon a variety of other techniques to piece together some of that earlier history.

Some Norse words can be identified by comparing English texts to later Norse texts in Scandinavia. There are some surviving runic inscription from earlier centuries. But around the tenth century, so basically where we currently are in the overall history of English, some Old Norse documents started to be written down. The best source of these documents is actually Iceland. Large collections of poems and epics started to be composed and maintained there around this time, and especially over the next couple of centuries. So linguists can compare those early Old Norse writings to English texts to identify words of Norse origin.

But the identification of Norse words can be tricky because the English and Norse were so similar at the time. In fact, sometimes both languages had the exact same word. Other times, they had similar versions of a common Germanic root word.

One technique which linguists use to distinguish English words from Norse words is the technique which I discussed at the end of the last episode. As I noted last time, linguists know that certain sound changes occurred during the Old English period, and we've explored many of those sound changes in earlier episodes of the podcast. So where the modern word reflects those sound changes, they know that the word passed through Old English, and is therefore a native English word. But where the word lacks evidence of those changes, it probably represents a borrowed word which came in after those earlier sound changes had occurred.

As I noted last time, a word like ***give*** was very similar in Old English and Old Norse. But in Old English, the 'G' sound shifted to a 'Y' sound before the front vowels – E and I. And so the word eventually became ***yive*** (/yee-veh/) in the southern parts of England. But Old Norse didn't have that sound change, so the modern word ***give*** with its original hard 'G' sound indicates that it came with the Vikings and ultimately replaced the English version ***yive***.

So applying that same analysis, linguists look for the Germanic words in late Old English and early Middle English which retained that 'hard G' sound before the E and I. So for example, in addition to ***give***, we have the very common English word ***get*** - G-E-T. Old English also had a version of that word, but the Old English verison was ultimately replaced by the Norse version. So ***give*** and ***get*** both come from the Vikings. And while we're at it, the word ***take*** also comes from the Vikings. So the phrase 'give and take' wouldn't exist without the Norse influence.

Another Norse word which is actually derived from the same root as ***get*** is the word ***guess***. So ***get*** and ***guess*** are cognate. The word ***get*** meant to obtain or acquire something, but it also had a sense of taking aim at something – like 'I'm going to get you.' And from that sense of the word, it produced the word ***guess*** as in taking aim at the right answer. Of course, today there's big difference between 'guessing' the right answer and 'getting' the right answer, but both words come from the same root, and both also come from the Vikings.

Another Norse word with a hard 'G' is the word ***gill*** – as in the 'gills of a fish.' And ***girth*** also shows Norse influence.

The word ***gear*** (G-E-A-R) is another Norse word. It originally meant clothing or apparel or equipment. So when we say "Get your gear on," that's the original meaning of the word. It didn't come to mean a part of a machine until the 1500s.

The word ***guild*** (G-U-I-L-D) is also a Norse borrowing. Old English had the word as well. But in Old English, it became ***yield*** as in a 'stock yield' or 'crop yield.' The Norse version ***guild*** retained its hard G and also passed into English. It was most commonly used in the sense of trade guild. So ***yield*** and ***guild*** are the English and Norse versions of the same Germanic word.

Along the same lines, we have English ***yawn*** and Norse ***gap*** and ***gape***. The vowel changes obscure the history a little bit here, but the vowel sound after the G was originally a front vowel. The Germanic word was something like ***gin*** (/geen/). The original meaning was to yawn or open. Of course, to yawn is to open the mouth. The 'hard G' shifted to a 'Y' in English and produced ***yawn***, but the Vikings kept the 'hard G' and gave us ***gap*** and ***gape***.

Another word related to ***gap*** and ***gape*** is the word ***gasp*** – again a word borrowed from the Vikings. And in ***gasp*** we really see the link with the word ***yawn*** since both involve opening the mouth. And is seems appropriate that the native English word ***yawn*** has a sense or normalcy, familiarity and boredom, but the Viking version ***gasp*** has a sense of surprise, shock and fear.

Now as we saw in an earlier episode, the 'G' sound change also underwent certain regular changes at the end of a word, but at the end of a word, the new sound was usually either a 'W' sound or a 'J' sound. So for those English words, we should expect to find a few Viking words with that original 'hard G' at the end. And that is actually what we have.

In that earlier episode about sound changes in Old English, which was Episode 34, I gave the example of the word ***edge***. It originally meant a corner or point, and it was pronounced 'ecg' (/ayg/) before the sound shifted at the end and it became ***edge***. But the Norse version of that

word came in with its 'hard G' at the end. And it gave us the word ***egg*** – originally meaning to prod or poke someone as in 'to egg someone on.' So ***edge*** and ***egg*** is an English-Norse pair which still exists in Modern English.

Of course, the word ***egg*** as in the breakfast food was also borrowed from the Vikings. That was actually a different word with essentially the same pronunciation as the verb ***egg*** which we just looked at. English had its own version of that word which was ***æg*** (/æ-y/). But the Norse word ***egg*** with its 'hard G' replaced the English pronunciation. By the way, the success of those Norse words didn't happen overnight. It often took many centuries. At some point, English speakers didn't know the ultimate origins of those words. They just knew that there were two different ways to say the same word, and one just won out over time. And ***egg*** is a good example of that. The original English verison without the G at the end survived well into the 1500s.

Some other Norse words which we've seen before which still have a 'hard G' at the end include ***wing***, ***leg*** and ***wrong***. We can also add in words like ***fog***, ***rig***, ***bag*** and ***gang*** – all of which came from Old Norse. And again, we can imagine how the Vikings might have brought those words with them. ***Fog*** has an association with the foggy waters of the North Atlantic. ***Rig*** is a nautical term. ***Bag*** is something you can use to put valuables in while plundering. And ***gang*** was also an Old English word, but in English it meant a passage as in ***gangway***. But that sense of the word was replaced by the Viking sense of the word – which was a group of men who travel together. And that gave us the modern word ***gang***, which still has a negative connotation in many usages.

As I noted, the 'hard G' at the end of some Old English words shifted to a 'W' sound instead of a 'J' sound. In an earlier episode, I gave the example of the Germanic word ***sago*** which meant a cutting tool. It became ***sawe*** in English, and then later was shortened to ***saw***. So that sound change can also be used to identify English and Norse pairs in Modern English. I should note that the final 'W' sound in a lot of these words is essentially silent today, but the spelling reflects an older pronunciation.

So the original Germanic language had a word which was something like ***gnagan*** which meant 'to bite or chew.' Within Old English and early Middle English, the 'G' sound near the end evolved into a 'W' sound, and it became ***gnowen***. And over time that awkward 'G' sound at the front disappeared, and it became simply ***gnaw***. Of course, we still spell it with that G at the beginning – G-N-A-W – because the initial G was once pronounced.

But the Vikings brought their own version of that Germanic word ***gnagan***. It was ***gnaga***. And since this was a Norse word, the 'G' sound at the end was retained. So whereas the native English word became ***gnaw***, the borrowed Viking word became ***nag***. Again, the initial 'G' sound disappeared over time. Now the connection between ***nag*** and ***gnaw*** has to do with the sense of something biting you or bothering you. So imagine a pesky mosquito or fly. And that sense still exists in the word ***nag*** when we say we have nagging aches and pains. So ***gnaw*** and ***nag*** are another English-Norse pair. By the way, the use of the word ***nag*** for a horse is a much later borrowing, possibly from Dutch.

Another possible English-Norse pair along the same lines is ***tow*** and ***tug***. The original Germanic root word had a 'G' sound at the end which became a 'W' sound in English and produced the word ***tow***. But Norse word retained that 'G' sound at the end, and it produced the word ***tug***. So a ***tugboat*** is literally a 'tow-boat' or a 'towing boat.' I should note that not all etymologies make the connection between ***tow*** and ***tug***, but the linguistic evidence has convinced many linguists.

Speaking of ***tow*** and ***tug***, we can find another English and Norse pair in the words ***draw*** and ***drag***. Again, ***draw*** is the native English word with the 'W' at the end, and ***drag*** is the Norse word with the 'hard G' at the end. The connection between ***draw*** and ***drag*** is much more obvious when we look at the earlier meaning of the word ***draw***. It initially meant to pull something. So think about phrases like 'draw and quarter,' 'draw closer,' and later 'draw a weapon' meaning to pull a weapon out of its holster. In very early Middle English, the term was applied to the process of pulling a quill across a piece of parchment. And that produced the modern sense of the word as in 'draw a picture.'

And speaking of ***draw*** and ***drag***, another variation of the root word developed in Old English which was the word ***draught*** (D-R-A-U-G-H-T) as in a 'draught animal' – an animal used to pull a plow or wagon. Again, that's an English word, and it has that same evolution of the 'G' sound at the end which we saw in words like ***laugh*** and ***cough*** which also retains that G-H spelling at the end despite their modern pronunciations.

With respect to the Norse verison of the word ***drag***, the Vikings used that word to refer to the sediment in a lake or river which is pulled to the bottom. That produced the Norse word ***dreg*** or ***dregs***. Again it still has its 'hard G' at the end. And ***dregs*** came mean to the worthless stuff that settles to the bottom of the river, lake or water container. So it's the dirty or worthless stuff at the bottom. And today we use the term in a similar sense to refer to the 'dregs of the Earth' or the 'dregs of humanity.'

In Scotland, another verison of the word developed, possibly under Norse influence. A boat which cleared the sediment at the bottom of a river or inlet was a 'dreg boat' which eventually just became just the word ***dredge***. So ***dredge*** developed that 'J' sound at the end which we looked at earlier. So ***draught***, ***dregs***, and ***dredge*** are all cognate with ***draw*** and ***drag***, and they all developed from that original sense of dragging or pulling something.

So I hope you can start to see how Norse words were borrowed, and often slid in beside native English words which had similar meanings. As a result, those new words enhanced the English vocabulary and gave English speakers new ways of expressing ideas.

So those are some Norse words which can be identified based upon the change of the 'G' sound in Old English. But as we know, there were other sounds changes as well. One sound which is very closely related to the 'G' sound is the 'K' sound. In fact, those two sounds are very similar. One is voiced and one in unvoiced, but otherwise, they're basically the same. So the 'K' sound also underwent changes in Old English.

As we know by now, the ‘K’ sound became a ‘CH’ sound when it appeared before a front vowel. So we have the modern word ***church*** with a ‘CH’ sound at the beginning and the end, but as we saw a couple of episodes back, the Vikings brought their version of the word with its original ‘K’ sound at the beginning and end. So their verison of the word ***church*** was ***kirk***. And that word survives in certain place names.

But that sound change also highlights and reveals other Norse words in English. So for a water container, Old English had ***cetel***, whereas Norse had ***kettle***. And of course, ***kettle*** survived over the native English word.

For the front part of a boat, Old English had the word ***ceol***. But the Vikings had ***keel*** which referred to the central beam along the bottom of the boat. Again, these were two different versions of the same word, but only the Norse word survives today.

A few episodes back I noted that the original version of the word ***cake*** in Old English was ***coecel*** with that Old English ‘CH’ at the end. But the Norse word was ***kaka***. And since the Modern English word ***cake*** still has that ‘K’ sound at the end, that’s a big clue that the Norse word replaced the native English word.

There are a few other Norse words which didn’t have a clear cognate in Old English, but those words can be identified in part by their Norse ‘K’ sound before the front vowels. That includes words like ***kid***, ***kick*** and ***kindle*** – as in to ‘kindle a flame’

Also, somewhat surprisingly, the word ***kilt*** which we associate with Scotland is actually a Norse word. That word originally meant to tuck a item of clothing, and it was later borrowed by the Scots for that particular piece of clothing.

And as we saw in the work ***church***, the ‘K’ sound often changed at both the beginning and at the end of words. So as we look at the ending of certain words, we also see English and Norse pairs.

We have English ***ditch*** and Norse ***dyke***.

We also have English ***watch*** and Norse ***wake***. ***Watch*** comes from Old English with its ‘CH’ sound at the end. But the noun forms of ***wake***, both in the sense of a vigil and in the sense of a track left by a moving ship, both show Norse influences with its ‘K’ sound at the end.

Another example of this type of English and Norse pair are the words ***bank*** and ***bench***. The original Germanic word meant a mound of dirt. The Norse version ***bank*** had its ‘K’ sound at the end. And it survives as ***bank*** as in a river bank. But the Old English word was ***benc***, which eventually became ***bench***. The evolution of the word may have been along the lines of a mound that you sit on, and then a man-made piece of furniture that you sit on. But ***bank*** and ***bench*** are cognate.

Another example of this is the word ***link*** as in a ‘link in a chain.’ It’s a Norse word with its Norse ‘K’ at the end. Old English had ***hlence*** which eventually disappeared.

So that's the 'K' sound, but some of the best examples of using a sound change to reveal Norse words occurs with the 'SK' sound (/sk/). As we've seen before, the early Anglo-Saxons didn't like that sound for some reason, and it generally shifted to an 'SH' sound. This change was so common that many linguists think the original 'SK' sound almost disappeared from English, but it still exists today because later English speakers borrowed lots of words with that sound. And the first source of those borrowed words were the Vikings. And for many people, the classic example of an English-Norse pair is the Old English word ***shirt*** with the 'SH' sound and the Norse word ***skirt*** with its Norse 'SK' sound. But there are actually many Norse words in Modern English which can be identified in part by this sound change.

And in order to explore some of these words, I want to take you back to the original Indo-European language. The 'SK' sound was a common feature of that language. And it also had several words which meant to cut, divide or separate. It seems that cutting was a common activity on the Eurasian steppes. Well, at least three of those Indo-European words for cutting or dividing began with the 'SK' sound. And those three root words produced a lot of words in Modern English – some with the English 'SH' sound and some with the earlier Indo-European and Viking 'SK' sound.

So that sense of something being separated or divided produced the English word ***shatter*** and the Norse word ***scatter***. That same root word also produced Old English words like ***ship***, ***shed***, ***sheath***, and ***shin***. We've seen the word ***ship*** before. I noted in an earlier episode that it may derive from a log which was cut or hollowed out to form the hull of the boat. ***Shed*** exists in the sense of something being separated and left behind, like when a snake sheds its skin or a person sheds tears from his or her eyes. ***Sheath*** is the item which holds a sword or cutting tool. And the sword actually slides into the middle of the ***sheath***, so a ***sheath*** was a holder that was divided in the middle so the sword could slide into it. Along the same lines, the ***shin*** is the bone in the middle of the leg, and it basically divides the leg down the middle. So those are all English words with the 'SH' sound.

But Old Norse gave us words with the 'SK' sound. So in addition to ***scatter***, the Norse version of the root word gave us ***ski***, and probably ***skid***. The connection to the original root word is along the lines of the English word ***ship***. It's based on a piece of cut wood. A ***ski*** was a stick or board which made it easier to travel or slide through snow.

Skid was originally a noun – not a verb. It was also a word which referred to a piece of wood. It was a beam or plank used to support something else. For example, it was the wooden planks used to support a ship as it was being constructed. The modern phrase 'hit the skids' is actually a twentieth century expression, but it harkens back to that original meaning of ***skid*** or ***skids*** which was the bottom of something. So if you 'hit the skids,' it meant you had reached the very bottom.

Well, if you had something very big which you needed to move over land, you could lay several logs side-by-side and roll the object over the logs. Those logs were a type of ***skids***, so when something slid over the top of those logs, it gave rise to the verb ***skid*** meaning 'to slide or glide or slip.' So ***skid*** and ***ski*** had similar origins. They both originally involved using wood to slide or

move something. So that's ***skid*** and ***ski*** – both Norse words. But you may be wondering about the word ***skate***. Well, ***skate*** actually comes from the same root, but it didn't come from the Vikings. It was the Frankish version of the same root word, and it passed into Dutch and then into English. But it has a similar history and construction, and it also came in with its original Germanic 'SK' sound.

By the way, that same Indo-European root word also passed through Greek and Latin, and it produced the word ***schedule*** – or /shed-ule/ – depending on where you're from. The original sense of that word was a piece of wood or scrap piece of papyrus used for making notes. It passed from Greek, to Latin, to French, and then to English. And for the past couple of hundred of years, English dialects in Britain and much of the Commonwealth have tended to pronounce the word as /shed-ule/. But American English uses /sked-ule/. And part of the reason why there is a discrepancy in that pronunciation is because the word is neither a native Old English word nor a Norse word. So it doesn't have a long-established pronunciation in English. It came in during the later Middle English period, and the pronunciation became confused over time.

So what happened? Well, this is a digression because it isn't really a Norse word, but ***schedule*** or /shed-ule/ was originally ***skhida*** (/skee-dah/) in ancient Greek, and it meant a ***splinter***. Latin borrowed the word, and it later passed into French as ***sedule***. And that's actually how it passed into Middle English. And if you were wondering who got it right, /sked-ule/ or /shed-ule/, the answer is neither. It was /sed-ule/ throughout Middle English and early Modern English. It was originally spelled S-E-D-U-L-E and sometimes C-E-D-U-L-E, but in the 1500s, Latin was such an important language in literary Europe that there was a trend towards re-establishing the original Latin spellings of words. And the spelling was changed at that point in the 1500s to its modern spelling with the S-C-H to reflect the way the word was spelled in Classical Latin. But it was still pronounced /sed-ule/.

Back in the bonus episode I did about the word ***buoy*** or /boy/, I mentioned that a couple of grammarians, John Walker and Benjamin Humphrey Smart, each published separate pronunciation guides in Britain in late 1700s and early 1800s. And those books are great sources because they actually tell us how words were being pronounced at that time. Walker came first, and he said the word should be pronounced as /sed-ule/ – the traditional pronunciation. But a later edition of his book said that /sked-ule/ with the 'SK' sound was an acceptable alternative. But he also noted that the word came into English from French, and French tended to pronounce the SCH letter combination as /sh/, so /shed-ule/ would theoretically be an acceptable pronunciation as well "if we follow the French." But he suggests that that was just a theoretical pronunciation. He doesn't state that people were actually pronouncing it that way at the time. And by the way, lest anyone think I am making this history up, I am taking this directly from the Oxford English Dictionary's history of the word.

Then Smart came along about 40 years later with his pronunciation guide. And he wrote that the only acceptable pronunciation was in fact /shed-ule/. So within that period of about 40 years, /shed-ule/ went from being a theoretical pronunciation based on French to being the actual accepted pronunciation of the word in Britain – at least according to Smart's guide.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Noah Webster's American dictionary and speller said the word should be pronounced as /sked-ule/. He said that the 'SK' sound reflected the original pronunciation of the Greeks and Romans. And other words which came from the Greeks and Romans with that spelling also had the 'SK' sound – words like ***school***, ***scholar*** and ***scheme***. And, as we've seen before, what Webster said was pretty much gospel in early American English. His dictionary and speller were standard issue across the United States. So American English took the pronunciation as /sked-ule/ according to Noah Webster. So the American pronunciation was influenced by the original Greeks and Romans, and the British pronunciation was influenced by the French. But neither pronunciation reflects the original Middle English pronunciation which was /sed-ule/.

But the main lesson to take from that digression is that cognates which came through Old English tend to have the 'SH' sound, cognates which came from Old Norse tend to have the 'SK' sound, but cognates which came from French or Latin have their own unique history and their own sets of rules. So thanks to Latin, that same root word which produced ***schedule*** also produced a word ***scissors*** with a completely different sound at the beginning. So you can see how sound changes are so important in identifying the source of modern English words.

So all of those words that I just mentioned come from one of those Indo-European root words which meant to cut or divide. Another one of those roots produced the Old English words ***shield*** and ***shelf*** – again both having a connection to boards or timber. A ***shield*** was a defensive tool originally made from a wood plank, and a ***shelf*** was another type of wood plank. That root also produced the Old English word ***shell***. A broken piece of shell was often used for cutting, and it could also be used for the tips of spears or other weapons. So that appears to be the connection to the original meaning of cut or divide.

But the Vikings took that same root word and gave us words like ***scale***, ***scalp***, ***skull*** and ***skill***. ***Scale*** is simply the Norse version of ***shell***. The Norse sense of the word was the type of scales you use to weigh something. That type of measuring device used a shell or dish on each side, and you placed the items being weighed onto those shells. By the way, the word ***scale***, as in the 'scales' of a fish, is a Frankish version of the same word which passed through French into English. So ***scales*** of a fish is Frankish, ***scales*** for weighing is Norse, and ***shells*** on a beach is Anglo-Saxon.

That same root word also produced ***scalp*** and ***skull***, and given the root of the word, those words have an inherent sense of something 'being cut off.' So if the head was connected to the body, it was a head. But when it was removed from the body, and it was reduced to bone, it was a skull. Again, this was a Viking word, and it replaced the Old English word ***brægnpanne*** which was literally 'brain-pan.'

That same root word which we've been examining also gave us the Norse word ***skill***. Again, the root word would suggest that ***skill*** had an original sense of a knife skill, or sword skill, or other type of cutting skill. But it later meant any type of talent or ability. That word ***skill*** entered English, and it continued alongside the word which the Anglo-Saxons had been using to mean talent or ability. That native word was ***craft*** as in 'witchcraft.' So today ***skill*** and

craft are synonyms. One is English, and one is Norse.

I should note here that the Latin form of that word gave English the words ***scalpel*** and ***sculpture***.

So that leaves the third Indo-European word which meant to cut or divide and which also began with that original 'SK' sound. That final word passed through Old English and produced the 'SH' sound words like ***sharp***, ***shear***, ***shred*** and ***shard***. ***Sharp*** is self-explanatory. ***Shear*** and ***shred*** are other types of cutting. And ***shard*** meant a sharp piece of something like a 'shard of glass.'

That root also produced the Old English word ***share***, which is what you get when you divide something. You break it into shares, so everybody gets a share. And that means they 'share' it. So all of those senses of the word ***share*** come from an original sense of cutting of dividing something.

That root also produced the English word ***shirt***, which was a piece of clothing that had been cut and was just worn on the top half of the body. Of course, when you cut something, it becomes ***short***, another English word form that same root. And short pants are called ***shorts*** today, so that makes ***shirt*** and ***shorts*** cognate.

But the Vikings arrived with their 'SK' version of those words. Instead of ***shirt***, they had ***skirt***, initially with the same meaning as the English word ***shirt***, but over time it was relegated to the bottom half of the body.

That same root also produced the Norse words ***scrape*** and ***scrap***. ***Scrape*** is something you do with a sharp tool like a knife. And when you cut something up, you often have ***scraps*** left over. So both of those words are Viking words. And some scholars think that ***scratch*** is another Viking word from that same root. By the way, ***scrub*** is another cognate word, but it was borrowed from Dutch.

If your body gets scratched or cut, it might leave a ***scar***, and that's another Viking word from that same root.

Sometimes the Vikings wanted to keep count of something like livestock or goods. So they would do that by making little scratches or marks. The Viking word for that is ***score***. And we still have that original sense of the word when we ***score*** a piece of meat or fish before cooking it. Of course, that original sense of the word has also evolved into the modern sense of 'keeping score,' and the 'score' of game.

It appears that after the Anglo-Saxons borrowed the word ***score*** from the Vikings, they continued to use those markings for counting and keeping track of large numbers of things. In fact, it appears that they often marked numbers in groups of twenty. Some have suggested that they borrowed that idea from the Celts. But wherever they got it from, by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, ***score*** had also come to mean 'a group of twenty.' And of course, that usage continued

until very recently. And it's probably most famous in American English from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, "Four score and seven years ago" meaning 87 years ago.

And I should note that that root word also passed into other European languages. For example, the Franks also had a version of that word which passed into English via French. Whereas English had ***shield*** from that root word, the Franks gave us the word ***screen***.

The word passed into Greek where it was used to describe an animal with a sharp and dangerous tail. That animal was a ***scorpion*** – again with the 'SK' sound at the beginning.

And the sense of the word as markings or engravings led to the Latin words ***scribe***, ***script***, ***scrivener***. And in later Italian, markings on a wall were called ***sgraffito***, which later became ***graffiti***. Again, all of those words from the same Indo-European root word.

But the main point was to show how many variations of the same basic three words entered English – especially via Old English and Old Norse. And just to recap, the English words were ***shatter***, ***shin***, ***shed***, ***sheath***, ***ship***, ***shelf***, ***shield***, ***shell***, ***share***, ***shear***, ***shirt***, ***short***, ***sharp*** and ***shred***. But Old Norse gave us ***scatter***, ***ski***, ***skid***, ***scale***, ***scalp***, ***skull***, ***skill***, ***score***, ***scar***, ***scrap*** and probably ***scratch***.

So you can see how Old Norse not only enhanced the English vocabulary, it also reintroduced a sound which had largely disappeared from the language.

So moving on from those three words which meant to cur or divide, let's look at a few other words with that same sound change. According to some etymologies, ***shriek*** and ***screech*** are another pair of English-Norse synonyms. And ***scream*** has an uncertain origin, but some scholars think it also may have Norse origins and may be related in some way to ***screech***.

Some other Norse borrowings with that 'SK' sound include ***scant***, ***scab***, ***skillet***, ***skip*** and ***skittish***. We can also add in the word ***skate*** as in the type of fish.

A few other Norse words with this 'SK' sound reflect the overall activity and perception of the Vikings in early England. That includes words like ***scorch***, ***scare*** and ***scowl***. We also have the Norse word ***scathe*** which is more common in its adjective form ***scathing***.

I noted a few episodes back that the word ***skin*** was also borrowed from the Vikings, largely replacing the English word ***hide***. So that's another 'SK' word.

And we've also seen that English borrowed the Viking word ***scot*** meaning a tax or payment, and that word still exists in the phrase 'scot-free.'

And the word ***sky*** was also borrowed from the Vikings. Old English used the word ***heaven*** or ***heavens***. In Old Norse, the word ***sky*** meant a 'cloud.' And the Anglo-Saxons borrowed that word and began to use it as a synonym for ***heaven***.

So as you can see, sound changes reveal that Modern English has a quite a few common words which were borrowed from the Vikings. I should note here that these are some of the common sound changes which we've explored before. There were other sound changes as well. Most of those other sound changes were more subtle and very situational, and many of them involved vowel shifts. So those other sound changes help to identify other words as well. And we're really only scratching the surface when it comes to Norse words.

We'll continue to look at the Viking vocabulary in the next episode, and then we'll look more closely at how Old Norse changed the grammar and syntax of English. But the major point to take from this episode is that all of this Norse influence was fundamentally changing the language. Up to this point, English had been very reluctant to borrow foreign words – outside of an occasional Latin borrowing from the Church. But now, it was starting to acquire that later English lust for new words. Those Norse words slipped right in, and they were so similar that they probably didn't seem all that foreign at the time.

But the other important point is that these changes were not universal. They were really restricted to the former Danelaw region, especially the north. The language of Wessex wasn't really being affected in the same way. So the north-south linguistic divide was becoming more pronounced (no pun intended). And this is going to be an important theme over the next few episodes.

So next time we'll continue to explore that theme, and we'll continue to look at the large number of Norse words which entered English. And we'll also look at the political developments in the north, as the Celtic and Vikings kingdoms there became united against Aethelstan, and as York passed back and forth between the English and the Vikings.

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