THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 53:
THE END OF ENDINGS

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 53: THE END OF ENDINGS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 53: The End of Endings. This time, we're going to explore how the language of the Vikings began to change the grammar of English in the north of England. Specifically, we'll look at how the language of the Vikings contributed to the loss of inflectional endings, and we'll examine how that impacted the ultimate history of the language. These changes eventually spread throughout Britain – and they mark the beginning of the transition from Old English grammar to Middle English grammar. As we'll see, this gradual transition was underway at least a century before the Normans arrived in 1066.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And my email address is kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com.

Also, I continue to work on the transcripts for the old episodes. I haven't posted them yet, but I hope to have them up shortly.

And I concluded the last episode by discussing the Old English word ***with*** which originally meant 'against.' Listener Candia contributed a very good example of a Modern English word which retains that original meaning – the word ***withdraw***. As we saw a few episodes back, ***draw*** originally meant 'to pull' and is cognate with the Norse word ***drag***. So the word ***withdraw*** literally meant to 'pull against,' and today it still has that sense of 'pulling out.' Another word with a similar construction is ***withstand***, which is another Old English word. It literally meant to 'stand against some force.' And it still retains much of that original meaning. And we can also add in the word ***withhold***, which still has a sense of 'hold against.' So those are all examples of ***with*** retaining its original meaning in Modern English.

One other quick note before we begin, I am releasing to this episode shortly before Thanksgiving in the US. So let me wish everyone a Happy Thanksgiving. Of course, we wouldn't have American Thanksgiving without the Pilgrims, and we wouldn't have the phrase 'Happy Thanksgiving' without the Vikings.

Thank is an Old English word, but the other parts – ***Happy*** and ***Giving*** – can both be traced back to Old Norse. We've seen ***give*** before. It was the Norse version of English ***yive*** with the 'Y' sound. So ***Thanksgiving*** is a blend of English and Norse.

But what about ***happy***. We'll again, it had Scandinavian origins. Now I've noted that Viking words often have a negative connotation. But not always. Last time, we saw that ***smile*** has Vikings origins. And here, we see ***happy*** has the same roots. But ***happy*** didn't originally mean 'happy.' The original root word was ***hap***, and it meant 'chance, fortune or fate.' In early Middle English, it acquired a sense of 'good fortune' or 'good fate.' And from that sense of 'good fortune,' we get the sense of someone being in a good mood. But that original sense of 'chance or fortune or fate' led to another common English – the word ***happen***. Your fate is basically what happens to you. And when something good 'happens,' you are probably 'happy.'

So as we've seen over the past few episodes, English has a lot of very common words which can be traced back to the Vikings. So we've established that the Vikings had a significant influence on the English vocabulary. But now we're going to shift focus and look at how the Vikings influenced English grammar.

Now up to this point in our story, English had changed relatively little since the Anglo-Saxons had arrived in Britain. There had been some specific sound changes, and the language had borrowed a few Latin words from the Church, but overall Old English was basically a pure Germanic language.

But during the tenth century, a lot of Viking words started to enter the dialects of northern England. And as we'll see in an upcoming episode, English also began to adopt a lot more Latin words as the Benedictine reforms led to a resurgence of monasteries in England. So the vocabulary of English was experiencing a significant growth and expansion. And the traditional resistence to foreign words was giving way.

But something else was also happening to the language in northern England. The traditional Germanic grammar of Old English was starting to break down under the heavy Norse influence.

Throughout the entire history of English, the only time the actual grammar changed significantly was in the wake of the Viking conquest. In fact, the entire structure of the language changed over the next three or four centuries. Of course, the Norman French arrived in 1066, and their French language reinforced and expanded some of these changes. But there is no doubt that some basic grammatical changes were underway well before the Normans arrived.

So what happened? Well, that question has a lot of answers. And depending on who you ask, you might get completely different answers. There is a general agreement among modern linguists that Old Norse was a factor in these grammatical changes, but there isn't agreement about the extent of that influence. Again, as we've seen before, we don't have many texts from this period in the north where most of these changes were taking place. So we can't really trace what happened with certainty. So in this episode, we'll just focus on the general developments. But we also have to acknowledge that the details are a matter of some debate.

We'll start with the interaction of the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons in the north of England in the 900s. And we'll focus on the fact that Old English and Old Norse were very similar in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Most scholars believe that the two groups could communicate with each other on some basic level. And increasingly, they were living together and trading with each other. In many parts of the north, there may have been roughly equal numbers of English and Norse speakers.

As the two groups tried to speak with each other, they were using two different versions of what had once been a common Germanic language. And in that environment, it was actually easy to blend the languages together. But despite the similarities in language, there were also fundamental differences. So the speakers tended to retain the features which the two languages had in common, and they tended to get rid of the features which were different.

In other words, the two languages were similar enough that the two groups could communicate with each other by simply stripping away some of the grammatical differences. What resulted was in many ways a simplified form of Old English.

That process brought about the fundamental change between Old English grammar and Modern English grammar. That change was the wide-spread loss of the various endings which Old English put on the end of words called inflections. And the consequences of that change are found in almost every sentence we speak today.

So let's take a moment and re-visit our old friend the inflection. I discussed inflections in the earlier episodes about Indo-European grammar and Proto-Germanic grammar. As we saw in those episodes, the original Indo-European language had lots of them. And even though the original Proto-Germanic language had dropped and simplified some of them, it also relied heavily on those endings. And that had carried over into Old English.

As you may recall, inflections were basically variations of a word which were used to indicate some specific meaning in a sentence. We typically think of inflections as specific word endings, but sometimes they occurred in the middle of a word.

So for example, in Modern English were still use inflections to indicate past tense. The '-E-D' at the end of a verb is an inflection which we use to indicate that something happened earlier. So ***jump*** is present tense, but ***jumped*** with an 'E-D' is past tense. But we also have irregular verbs like ***sing***. So in that case, we get ***sing-sang-sung***. Again, that's just a different type of inflection. It just happens to appear in the middle of the word. But the basic idea is that we change the form of the word itself in order to change its meaning in the sentence.

Now in the overall history of English, English speakers have tended to look for ways to say things without having to vary the form of the word. Historically speaking, we like to use a particular word without adding a bunch of different endings or changing the middle part of the word. We just like fixed word forms.

So in Modern English we have the sentence, "I sing." Now we can make this past tense by changing the word form from "I sing" to "I sang." That's an inflection. The form of the word changes. And that is the older, more traditional way of forming the past tense. That form goes back to Old English. But we can also say "I did sing." It has a slightly different meaning. We might use it to express emphasis, but it is just a different way of expressing past tense.

Notice that the form of the word ***sing*** doesn't change in this second sentence. It remains ***sing***. "I did sing." So that sentence does not use an inflection. It just uses an extra word – ***did***. And that sentence, "I did sing," was a later development in the language. And in a nutshell, that is the basic theme of English grammar throughout history. Rather than changing the form of a word, English has tended to find ways to use the same word form to express different ideas.

Another area where English still uses inflections is to show possession, specifically the 'apostrophe S.' So to indicate that the dog belongs to Sally, we just put that little inflection 'apostrophe S' on the end of her name, and we get 'Sally's dog.' As we'll see, this is another holdover from Old English. But once again, English has developed another way of expressing possession without that 'apostrophe S.' Today, we can also express possession with the preposition ***of***. So we have the 'population of the world' instead of the 'world's population.' And we have the 'winner of the game' instead of the 'game's winner.' Notice that when we use ***of***, we don't have to change the noun which has possession – 'of the world,' 'of the game.' The noun doesn't change. There no inflection or ending on it.

So again, we see that English has generally found ways to communicate without having to change the form of our words. We do it sometimes, but far less than any other European language.

Back when English relied much more inflections, word-borrowing was a little more complicated Anytime a word was borrowed, a complicated set of inflectional endings had to be assigned to it. Nouns were classified as masculine or feminine like other modern European languages. And that dictated the type of endings which were used.

So let's suppose it is my birthday, and you give me a present. In Modern English, I might say 'This large gift is very heavy.' Then I unwrap the gift and discover that it is a large rock. (Putting my disappointment aside, at least I know what you gave me.) Now that I know what it is, I can say, 'This large stone is very heavy.' So between "This large gift is very heavy" and "This large stone is very heavy," the only difference is the words ***gift*** and ***stone***. In Modern English, I can pop one out and stick the other right in. No problems.

But it didn't work that way in Old English. ***Gift*** was a feminine noun. And ***stone*** was a masculine noun. So they each had different endings. We know that ***gift*** was borrowed from Old Norse with its 'hard G,' but the English version was ***giefu*** with its original English /Y/ sound at the beginning. And that '-u' sound at the end was the inflection used when it was the subject of the sentence. If it was the object, it would have a different ending – '-e' – so it would be ***giefe***. But here it's the subject, so it was ***giefu***.

But when I take out ***gift*** and put in ***stone***, I have to make some adjustments because ***stone*** was a masculine noun. The word ***stone*** was ***stan*** in Old English. And in this context, as the subject of the sentence, it didn't take any ending at all. It was just ***stan***.

So when I took out ***gift*** and put in ***stone***, I had to remember not to put any ending on ***stone*** because it had no inflection in that context. So that's a lot to keep track of, but that's only the beginning.

Not only do I have to make sure I have the correct ending on the noun ***stone***, I also have to adjust the words which describe the noun, specifically the words ***this*** and ***large*** because descriptive words like that also had to match the form of the noun they were describing. So the endings of those words also had to be adjusted when I shifted from a feminine noun to a masculine noun.

Now you don't have to follow or understand all of those details. I just wanted you to understand that if you said a sentence one way with a masculine noun, you couldn't necessarily say it the same way with a feminine noun. You had to make several adjustments to express the same idea. In the example I gave, half the words in the sentence had to change. And remember, it wasn't just nouns that had specific endings. Verbs, adjectives, adverbs and articles also had them. So words were far less interchangeable back then.

So the loss of English inflections was a fundamental step in the evolution of English.

So how did that happen? And how did the arrival of the Vikings impact these changes? Well, the Vikings are only part of the story.

What really happened at this point in the history of English was a perfect storm. There were three different events which came together around the tenth century, and the combination of those events began to wear down those inflectional endings. So let's look at those events one-by-one.

First, English speakers had already started to simplify those endings. In fact, this was part of that long-term trend which went back to the Proto-Germanic language. As we saw in the example I gave earlier, ***stone*** didn't even have an inflectional ending when it was used as the subject of a sentence. One of the reasons given for this overall trend was the fact that Germanic languages almost always pronounced words with the stress on the first syllable. And that tended to reduce the emphasis on the last syllable, which is where the inflections were usually put. So it is believed that the inflectional endings started to become less distinct over time.

In the original Indo-European language, a noun could have eight different endings depending on how the word was used in the sentence. Those included endings like -os, -eh, -om, -oy, -od and -o. By the time of Old English, those inflections had evolved into endings like -es, -eh, -as, -u, -a, -um and -an. So depending on how a word like ***stone*** was used in a sentence – for example, whether it was the subject or object or indirect object or whether it was singular or plural – it could appear as ***stan***, ***stanes***, ***stanas***, ***stane***, ***stana*** or ***stanum***. So there were several different endings, but many were very similar, at least to modern ears.

And it is believed that people began to slur those endings enough that they often started to sound the same. And in fact, by the Old English period, the inflectional endings had already been reduced to a handful of forms which were often repeated and used in multiple situations. Whereas the original Germanic tribes had used separate and distinct endings, their Anglo-Saxons descendants were increasingly using some of the same endings over and over.

Take that word ***gift*** which we saw earlier. It could theoretically have four different endings when it was used as a singular noun, and four different endings when used as a plural noun. I said theoretically, because in reality, it only used two different endings for each. As we saw earlier, when it was used as a singular noun, and as the subject of the sentence, it was ***giefu***. But in all other singular cases, like when it was used as the direct object or indirect object, it was ***giefe***. And as a plural noun, it was ***giefum*** when used as an indirect object and ***giefa*** in all other cases.

So this is an example of how English speakers were already simplifying those endings and reducing them to a couple of forms which they just repeated in different cases.

So that was the first development which had taken place, but I said that there were three developments which converged around the tenth century. The second of those developments was an increasing tendency to use a specific word order in the language. So let me explain what I mean.

When we speak today, we generally put the subject of the sentence first. Then we put in the verb. Then the object. Of course, that's not always the case, but that's the general rule. So Modern English is considered a Subject-Verb-Object language. Now, not all languages use that order. There is actually quite a bit of variation around the world. Some languages tend to put the object before the verb. Some languages put the verb before the subject. And there are even a few languages which put the object first overall. If you're a movie fan, the best example of 'object first' speech is probably Yoda from Star Wars. He famously put his objects first with lines like, "Your father he is, but defeat him you must."

While some languages have a fixed word order which rarely changes, other languages have a much more fluid word order. Modern German, for example, has a lot of variation. And Old English was once the same way. Theoretically, the order of the words didn't really matter because those inflectional endings indicated the various parts of speech.

So let's go back to the word ***gift***. If I say, "This large gift is very heavy," ***gift*** is the subject of the sentence. So in terms of modern word order, ***gift*** comes before the verb ***is***. And I can't really reverse those unless I want to make it a question – "Is this gift heavy?" But as a statement, I need to put ***gift*** before ***is***. Even Yoda has to do that – "very large the gift is."

But in Old English, it didn't matter because in Old English, the word ***gift*** had a specific ending which told you that it was the subject of the sentence. That ending was '-u.' So when I said ***giefu***, you knew that was the subject, whether I put it before or after the verb.

But what if I wanted to say "He hid the gift"? Now ***gift*** is the object of the sentence. In that case, I had to use the object ending which was '-e.' So I would use the word ***giefe***. And that ending did all the work. It told you it was the object. So again it didn't really matter where I put it in the sentence.

So as you can see, those endings did the work that word order does today. But having said that, the Anglo-Saxons didn't just throw their words out there in some random word salad. Linguists have reviewed Old English texts, and they've have noticed certain patterns and tendencies.

In the earliest Old English texts, there was a slight tendency to put the verb at the end of the sentence – after the object. Again, this wasn't a rule, it was just a tendency. But by the time we get to Alfred's translations in the late ninth century, that tendency has changed, and the verb was being placed in the middle between the subject and object just as we do today. But again, this was just a tendency.

For example, just over half of the sentences in Alfred's translation of Pastoral Care put the verb before object the way we do today. So even though there was still no fixed word order, there was this increasingly tendency to use the subject, then the verb, then te object.

So that's the second piece of our puzzle. And that means that around the tenth century, we had simplified word endings, and we had this increasing tendency to use a specific word order, even though that order wasn't technically required.

And now we can add in the third piece of the puzzle – the Vikings.

In Northern England, the Danish and Norse Vikings had settled down among the Anglo-Saxons. And as we've seen, the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons were busy marrying each other and trading with each other. The two groups were in constant contact, and they were doing their best to try to communicate with each other.

Their overall vocabulary was very similar, as we've seen. They spoke different versions of a common Germanic language, but the big difference between Old English and Old Norse were those inflectional endings. Just as English had developed a unique set of endings over the centuries, the Scandinavians had developed their own unique endings. And that's really what tended to limit communication. Because those endings really were the key to the grammar.

Without a fixed word order like today, speakers relied upon those endings to convey all of the essential information in the sentence. As we've seen, they told you which nouns were the subject and which nouns were the object. And they told you which words the adjectives were describing. They told you if the action was in the present or the past. So even if the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons had much of the same basic vocabulary, they couldn't communicate very well without common inflections.

Imagine a sentence like this:

'wild fence chasing the brown while the deer jumped a horse white.'

You know all of those words, but the sentence makes no sense. There's no order to it. You don't know what the subject is or the object is. You don't know who's doing what. And you don't know which words the adjectives are describing. But if we re-arrange those same twelve words, we get this sentence:

'The brown horse jumped the white fence while chasing a wild deer.' Now it makes sense.

In Modern English, we really depend upon word order to give the sentence meaning. But imagine if we encountered people who spoke a language with the exact same words which we use, but they put them in a completely different order like the first sentence. We would understand the words, but we might not understand the meaning.

Well, that's sort of what happened when the Anglo-Saxons encountered the Vikings. When they met someone who used different inflectional endings, it was kind of like us meeting someone who uses the same words, but just puts them in a different order.

And this is where the big innovation came in – the innovation that changed the future of English. Rather than one side just adopting the inflections of the other, it appears that they chose instead to just drop them altogether. That left the basic word stems which they both had in common. So the common features of both languages were kept, and the distinctive features – the inflections – were reduced or eliminated.

And that process was probably aided by the fact that English was already simplifying its inflectional system as we saw earlier. English was already blurring a lot of those unique endings and using them in multiple situations . So they didn't rely upon them in the same way that their distant ancestors had.

But without those specific endings, they needed to find a new way to convey meaning. And the only other way to do that, was to put words in a specific order – the way we do today. And we just saw that, when you don't have inflections, the difference between a bunch of random words and a perfectly legible sentence is simply the order of the words in the sentence. And this is where that second piece of the puzzle comes in. English speakers were already tending to use subject-verb-object word order. So over time, that just became the rule. And once that order was adopted, that eliminated the need for most of the inflectional endings altogether.

So a situation had been put in place where English could shift from inflections to fixed word order. It just needed a reason to do it. And that motivating force was the Vikings and the need to reconcile the differences between Old English and Old Norse. Once those endings were dropped, and that subject-verb-object word order became standard, the two languages could be understood without any problems.

Now be aware that this process was gradual – very gradual. It started in the north around the time of early Viking settlements, and over the next few centuries, it gradually spread south.

And this is where the Norman Conquest probably comes back into play. Had it not been for the Normans, the loss of inflections and the fixed word order might have been confined to the north of England. But when the Normans arrived in the south and conquered the entire country, that added a new dimension. As a very general rule, French tended to use this same developing word order – subject-verb-object. And it also had it own inflectional endings – endings that were completely different from English endings. So that solution to the Norse problem in the north also provided a solution to the later French problem. And during the early Middle English period, the loss of inflections and the adoption of a fixed word order spread south.

A couple of centuries after Alfred, and about a century after the Norman Conquest, we have a another text called Ormulum. It was written in the 1100s and is one of the earliest Middle English texts. In that text, about two-thirds of the sentences use 'subject-verb-object' order. So

we went from about half the sentences in some of Alfred's translations, to around two-thirds of the sentences in Ormulum.

Another text from around the same period as Ormulum is a late version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle called the Peterborough Chronicle. It also relies almost exclusively on 'subject-verb-object' word order. The Peterborough Chronicle also captures the loss of inflectional endings during the early Middle English period. Each clause in the chronicle began with the phrase 'in this year.' In the year 1083, shortly after the Norman Conquest, the phrase is written as 'On þissum geare.' We have ***this*** rendered as ***thissum*** with its traditional '-um' inflection. And ***year*** is rendered as ***geare*** with the '-eh' ending. But 34 years later, the same phrase is written down as 'On þison geare.' The traditional ***thissum*** had devolved into ***thison***, which is a new non-standard ending. But eighteen years after that, the entry reads 'On þis geare.' So now the inflection is completely gone on ***this***, and we just have the word ***þis***. About twenty years later, the entry reads 'On þis gear.' Now ***year*** has also lost its inflection. So in just over sixty years, the Chronicle went from 'On þissum geare' to 'On þis gear' – almost identical to our Modern 'in this year.'

Both of these texts, the Peterborough Chronicle and Ormulum, were compiled in the former Danelaw region. Over time, these developments continued to spread southward. A couple of centuries later, Geoffrey Chaucer was writing down in London. He was the pre-eminent writer of the Middle English period. And he tended to use that same 'subject-verb-object' word order. But I say 'tended' because he used other orders as well. The patterns were still complicated and situational in Middle English.

But by the time we get to the end of the Middle English period around the year 1500, a firm word order had been established throughout England. And it was the order which we still use today. And by that point, speakers could rely upon that word order, so they didn't need those inflections anymore. So most of those inflectional endings which were still lingering around were finally dropped for good.

So that's the loss of Old English inflections in a nutshell, but note that I said English lost 'most' of its inflections. As we've already seen, a few inflections still linger in the language. One place where we still use them is in the distinction between singular and plural. So I want to spend the rest of this episode looking at how those inflections evolved from Old English into the forms we use today.

So let's consider how we make words plural in Modern English. I know what you're probably thinking – making a word plural is easy. You just stick an 'S' or 'ES' on the end. And that is the default rule. But of course, it's not always that easy. Some plural nouns end in '-E-N' like ***oxen***, ***children*** and ***brethren***. Some plurals rely on a vowel change in the middle like ***mouse*** and ***mice***, or ***tooth*** and ***teeth***, or ***man*** and ***men.*** Some take endings from Latin or Greek like ***cactus*** and ***cacti*** , and ***alumnus*** and ***alumni***. And of course, some words don't change at all. We have one ***deer*** and many ***deer***, one ***fish*** and a ***school of fish***. So there's a lot more going on than a simple 'S' or 'ES' on the end.

So why do we have all of those forms today? Well, part of the answer involves the erosion of the Old English inflectional system. Of course, we don't really need any of those specific endings. As I just noted, words like ***deer*** and ***fish*** don't use any endings at all. So they're not really essential. We could just say that we have 'two cat' instead of 'two cats.' And we could express degrees of plurality with phrases like 'many cat,' or 'some cat,' or 'no cat.' So those endings are not really essential to communication, but we have them anyway, and they're a holdover from Old English. So let's explore how these Modern English plurals developed.

As I noted earlier, Old English had a much more complicated set of endings to express plurality. When a masculine noun like ***stone*** became plural ***stones***, the form was generally ***stanas*** – at least when it was the subject or object of the sentence. When it was used as an indirect object, it had a different ending '-um,' so it became ***stanum***. So that's a masculine noun.

Now let's look at a feminine noun like ***gift***. Once again, the plural forms of ***gift*** were the same when used as a subject or direct object. In those cases, ***gifts*** was ***giefa***. But it was different when used as an indirect object. In that case, it was ***giefum***. The important point here is that Old English had already simplified the endings of plural nouns. The subject and direct object forms were often the same.

Now there was a whole different class of neutral nouns which had their own endings, and they were different for both the subject and object. But I won't bore you with those details here.

So we're still dealing with lots of endings. But by the 900s, we start to see evidence that this system was breaking down in parts of the former Danelaw. Those endings were starting to be confused. And more specifically, one particular ending was starting to emerge as the default ending. That '-as' ending used for masculine nouns was beginning to be used for all nouns. And that '-as' ending was the origin of our modern 'S' ending. So when the Anglo-Saxons referred to ***stones*** as ***stanas***, they were using the original form of our Modern 'S' and '-ES' endings.

Now as I've noted before, the written evidence during this period was mostly composed in the south in the standard dialect of Wessex. And that dialect shows very little Norse influence. So most of the surviving texts from this period fail to show these changes.

But if we look hard enough, we can find a few documents which do shed some light on these changes in the tenth century. And one such document is a Will which was written in the mid-900s, sometime between 946 and 951. This particular Will is one of the oldest surviving Wills from the Anglo-Saxon period, and that makes it one of the oldest Wills in the English language.

Let's go back to our overall historical narrative for a minute. Last time, we saw that Aethelstan was the first king of all of the Anglo-Saxons. When he died, his brother Edmund became king. He was the young prince who had fought with Aethelstan at Brunanburh, and when he succeeded his brother as king, he initially lost much of the Danelaw to the Vikings from York. But then he regained that lost territory before he died. Well, his wife was named Aethelflæd. And her father was a prominent noble named Ælfgar. And it's his Will that survives. In fact, Ælfgar's death is

recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 962. And he is described as the king's relative or kinsman.

Now we don't know exactly who wrote down the Will, but Anglo-Saxon Wills were not necessarily written by professional scribes, so they tended to be a bit less formal, and they tended to reflect common speech. This particular Will had Mercian and Northumbrian spelling forms – so it is believed that it may have written by a scribe from the north or more likely from the eastern Midlands. Another clue that the scribe was from the Danelaw region is the fact that he uses the Norse word ***kirke*** instead of the English word ***church***. So it appears likely that the scribe was from eastern Mercia or Northumbria.

The opening lines of the Will are 'Þis is Alfgares quide' – 'This is Ælfgar's quide.' ***Quide*** was the Old English word for a 'Will.' The word '***Will***' is an Old English word, but at that point, it's meaning was still limited to a more general sense of ***desire*** as in 'my will is very strong' or 'do as you will.' It later was used in the context of someone's desires when they passed away. And by the 1500s, it became common to refer to someone's 'last or final will.' And at that point, it started to be used in the sense of a 'Last Will and Testament.'

But in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period, an expression of one's final wishes was called a ***quide***. ***Quide*** literally meant a saying or speech or proverb. And it derives from the fact that Wills were once oral. But as literacy spread, they started to be written down. So ***quide*** meant a 'saying or statement.' If fact, the Old English translations of certain books of the Bible didn't used the Latin term ***Proverbs***. They used the term ***cwidboc*** instead, which was literally the 'book of sayings.'

Now ***quide*** has not completely disappeared from English. If your final written wishes were your ***quide***, then the process of leaving property to your heirs was to ***bequeath*** them. So ***quide*** still survives in the word ***bequeath***. And by extension, it also survives in ***bequest***. And that initial ***be*** is almost always a sign that the word is from Old English.

The word ***quide*** also survives in another English word which has almost disappeared. It is the word ***quoth***. The best example of this is Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven' – with its famous refrain – 'quoth the raven nevermore.' Well, ***quoth*** is an Old English expression which refers to something spoken or said.

Now I know what you're probably thinking, "Isn't ***quoth*** related to ***quote***? After all they mean basically the same thing, and they sound almost identical." Well, this may surprise you, but the answer is 'No, they are not related.' ***Quoth*** is Old English from that original word ***quide*** meaning 'a saying or speech.'

Quote is a Latin term which entered English after the Normans arrived. So you may be wondering if they're not related through some common Indo-European root word. And again the answer appears to be 'No.' The Latin word ***quote*** comes from the root word which gave us ***quota***. And originally, it had a sense of numbers or amounts. It was first used to describe the process of marking a book or document with chapter numbers, and then referred to making marginal references. It was later used when citing a book for authority. And it then acquired a

sense of someone's exact or literal words. So over many centuries, Latin ***quote*** acquired an association with someone's words. But English ***quoth*** always had that association. And this may be a good example of how linguistic confusion sometimes pushes out a native word in favor of a borrowed word with a similar sound and meaning.

So let's return to Aelfgar's ***quide*** – or 'Will.' After introducing his Will, Aelfgar makes the following statement:

ic an mine louerd tueye suerde fetelsade
I grant to my lord two swords with sheaths

and tueye bege, ayther of fifti mancusas goldes
and two arm rings, each worth fifty mancusas of gold (basically 60 pence)

He continues:
and þre stedes, and þre scheldes, and þre speren.
and three steeds (or horses), and three shields, and three spears.

For linguists, what is so interesting about this passage, is that we have lots of plurals – ***swords***, ***sheaths***, ***arm rings***, ***steeds***, ***shields*** and ***spears***. And here, we actually have a complete breakdown of the traditional Old English endings.

The scribe has abandoned endings like '-as' (A-S), and '-an' (A-N), which should have been used in some of these cases like ***stedan*** for ***steeds***, and ***scyldas*** for ***shields***. But here, it's ***stedes*** and ***scheldes***. Very close to our modern ***steeds*** and ***shields***.

In fact, this particular scribe reduced the plural endings to just a few basic forms – '-e' and 'es' and '-en.'

Now all of this should make sense to us today. We still use 'S' and 'ES' and 'EN' endings to indicate plurality. So in this Will, we can see that the transition from the old complicated system to our modern system was well underway in some places as early as the mid-900s. Over time, the 'E-S' and 'E-N' endings became the standard ways to indicate plurality. But as we've seen so often, a regional divide emerged. In the north, the preference was the 'E-S' ending, but in the south, speakers actually preferred the 'E-N' ending.

It was during the early Middle English period that words like ***children*** and ***brethren*** acquired their 'E-N' endings in the south. So those words didn't have an 'E-N' ending in Old English. But once they got that ending, they never lost it. There were actually two forms of ***brother*** in Middle English – ***brotheres*** and ***brethren***. Both have survived into Modern English – ***brothers*** being used as the plural form of ***brother***, and ***brethren*** acquiring a more general sense of 'kinsmen.'

So both 'E-N' and 'E-S' were once common. But then the Normans influence began to set in. French used an 'S' to make words plural, so all of those new French words were typically made plural with an 'S' ending. And the popularity of that 'S' ending forced out the 'E-N' ending over

time. So even in the south, the 'E-N' ending started sound old and antiquated. And maybe it sounded too Germanic.

By the end of the 1300s, the 'E-S' suffix had largely replaced the '-E-N' suffix even in the south. But note that it was still 'E-S' – that Old English remnant. So it was a distinct syllable on the end of the word. So ***stone*** would have been ***stones***. And ***gift*** would be ***giftes*** (/GIF-tes/ – or /YIF-tes/ depending on where you were). But by the time of Modern English, that ending had been slurred to just a 'S' in most cases. So ***stones*** had become ***stones***, and ***giftes'***(/GIF-tes/) had become ***gifts***. But in certain situations, that type of shortening was awkward. So words which end in 'S', or 'CH', or 'SH,' or the 'X' sound – those needed to retain that distinct syllable just to make the pronunciation clear and easier. It's hard to add an 'S' to words like 'bush' or 'witch' without putting a vowel in between. So we ended up with 'bushes' and 'witches' with that full 'E-S' on the end. But overall 'S' and 'E-S' represent the same ending. 'S' is just an abbreviated version.

As I noted, words like ***children*** and ***brethren*** have retained the 'E-N' ending which they acquired during Middle English. That was the ending which was once preferred in the south of England.

Oxen is another word which retained that ending. The ending of Oxen actually goes back to Old English – where it was ***oxan*** with an 'A-N' ending. But there was actually a time, in late Old English through the Middle English period, especially in the north, when it was sometimes rendered as ***oxes***. But for some reason, ***oxes*** died out, and English speakers preserved the older form ***oxen***.

But what about words like ***men*** and ***women***? Well, those fall into a different category of words – words which make their plural version with a vowel change in the middle. I discussed some of those words back in Episode 34. It includes words like ***foot*** and ***feet***, ***tooth*** and ***teeth***, and ***mouse*** and ***mice***. These forms were produced by a vowel change in the middle which occurred over time. But notice that modern English has retained a lot of those old forms. So why didn't those words become ***mans*** or ***foots*** or ***mouses***?

Well the answer may lie in the fact that those forms didn't rely upon inflectional endings to make the plural. So as English simplified those endings, and as they converted them to 'E-S' or 'E-N,' that process only affected the words which already had existing endings. This other group of word didn't have plural endings. They had their own internal system. So there was no particular reason to add an ending to them. They were fine as they were.

That also explains why the plural of ***mouse*** is ***mice***, but the plural of ***house*** is ***houses*** – not ***hice***. ***Mouse*** was a masculine noun with its mutated vowel in the middle. But ***house*** – or ***hus*** – was a neutral noun with a separate set of endings. Since ***house*** had a set of endings, those endings were ultimately reduced to 'S' through the process I described before. But ***mouse*** didn't have those endings, so it didn't need to change.

Now with respect to this group of nouns like ***mice*** and ***feet*** and ***teeth***, they could have been converted to regular nouns with an 'S' ending. And in fact, that did happen sometimes. Believe it or not, the plural of ***book*** was once ***bec***. But over time, it was converted to a regular noun with

an ‘S’ ending and became ***books***. But despite a few words which did get changed, many of those original forms survived because they worked just fine as they were.

The same rule basically applies to a different set of nouns – nouns which don’t change at all in their plural forms. This includes words like ***sheep***, ***swine*** and ***deer***. Those words existed in Old English, and just like today, the singular and plural forms were the same. ***Sheep*** did have a plural suffix very early on. Old Northumbrian recorded the plural word as ***scipo***. But for most of the Old English period, it was just ***sheep***.

During Old English, this group of words was actually quite small. And just like we saw with words like ***mice*** and ***teeth***, these fixed word forms have survived through the centuries without an ending. Once again, they didn’t have inflectional endings in Old English, so they weren’t really affected by the shift to the ‘E-S’ and ‘E-N’ endings. They were fine the way they were, so they remained the same.

What’s really interesting about words like ***sheep*** and ***deer*** which stay the same is that that group of nouns has actually grown over the centuries. We actually have quite a few of those words today. Words like ***elk***, ***moose***, ***fowl***, ***fish***, ***tuna***, ***flounder***, ***trout***, ***shrimp***, and many others. So why do we have so many of those today?

Well, the most common theory is that those plural forms developed out of a specific type of hunting speech in the Middle English period. To understand this theory, we have to start with the word ***deer***. In Old English, it didn’t mean a specific animal like Bambi. It was actually a generic term for all animals – especially a wild animal – the type you might hunt. And the word ***deer*** was one of those words which didn’t change when it was made plural. So apparently it became common to refer to the hunt for ***deer*** meaning ‘animals.’ Over time, the meaning of ***deer*** was restricted to one particular type of animal just as we know it today. And those animals were still referred to as simply ***deer***.

But it is believed that hunters continued to refer to the animals they hunted in their singular form by analogy to the word ***deer*** because they had always referred to hunted animals with a singular collective term. In fact, some of that sense still survives today. The plural of ***rabbit*** is ***rabbits***. But hunters might say that they’re hunting ***rabbit*** without an ‘S.’

Well, this process ultimately led to a situation where commonly-hunted animals were always referred to in the singular form. So almost all of the nouns which fit into this category today are animals which are hunted in some form. It includes words like ***fowl***, ***elk***, ***bison***, ***buffalo***, ***moose*** and others. And it includes sea food like ***fish***, ***shrimp***, and various types of fish like ***founder***, ***trout***, ***bass***, ***tuna*** and so on. Some of those words are newer words which acquired their forms by analogy in Modern English. But some of them are older words which once had specific plural endings. So words like ***fish***, ***fowl***, ***elk*** and ***shrimp*** all had an ‘ES’ ending in early Middle English. But that hunting jargon eventually pushed out those traditional endings. And today, they don’t change at all. At least they’re not supposed to. We still hear people refer to ***shrimps***, or ***elks*** or sleeping with the ***fishes***. And who knows what the accepted pronunciation will be a couple of centuries from now? Some of these words may eventually be coerced by that ‘S’ ending.

Before we leave the topic of plurals, there is one more group of nouns which we have to consider. And those are nouns which were borrowed from other languages with their own borrowed plural forms. Most of those come from Latin. And they include words like ***fungus*** and ***fungi***, ***syllabus*** and ***syllabi***, ***memorandum*** and ***memoranda***. Most of these words came in during the 1500s and 1600s which was a time when Latin scholarship was very prominent. And frankly, English scholars viewed Latin as a superior language. So there was a tendency to preserve the Latin forms when possible.

In fact, as we'll see when we get to that period in our story, Latin was held in such high regard that it was thought that English grammar should mimic Latin grammar. And that was the period when many of our modern rules of grammar were actually formulated. And so we got rules like 'no sentence should end in a preposition,' 'infinitives should not be split,' and 'double-negatives are a no-no.' But despite those rules, is was actually common for English speakers to do all of those things. But since you didn't do it Latin, it was decided English shouldn't do it either. And to this day, English speakers still don't follow those rules very well. And some scholars think that is because those rules aren't really organic. They were largely imposed from the outside. But we'll address those debates in a future episode.

For now, we just need to know that Latin grammar was once considered a model for English. And that caused some of those Latin plural forms to be preserved. But over time, English speakers have started to break down those Latin endings. Technically, the plural form of ***stadium*** is ***stadia***. But how many of you say that? At one time, people spoke of a single ***agendum*** and several ***agenda***. But today, ***agenda*** is used for the singular, and ***agendas*** is generally used for the plural.

But what about a word like ***octopus***? Some people over-correct and say ***octopi*** because it looks and sounds like a Latin word. But ***octopus*** is a combination of ***octo*** and ***pous*** – literally 'eight footed.' But ***pous*** is Greek - not Latin. So some linguists say that it shouldn't take that Latin ending. Technically, the plural of ***octopus*** is ***octopodes***. But how many of you actually say that? So over the years, English speakers have tended to just stick that 'E-S' on the end. And today, ***octopuses*** is considered a proper English construction. And ***octopi*** had gained enough acceptance to be listed as an alternative form in many dictionaries. The same issue comes into play with ***platypus***. Many dictionaries list ***platypuses*** and ***platypi*** as acceptable alternatives.

But the bigger point is that English speakers continue to struggle with some of these borrowed forms, and over time, they appear to be converting a lot of them into traditional English forms.

That 'ES' and 'E' ending has a strong gravitational pull in Modern English. From ***fishes*** to ***buffalos*** to ***octopuses*** and ***platypuses*** – we love to stick that 'S' on the end. But the history of that 'S' is really the history of the English language. We started with Old English, which had lots of different plural endings. Under the influence of the Old Norse, those endings were gradually reduced to just two – 'E-N' and 'E-S.' And then the Norman French arrived. And under French influence, those two forms were reduced to just 'E-S,' which later shorted to just 'S' in many cases. So in order to get to that simple little 'S,' we have to thank all of the various influences on the English language.

Next time, we'll continue to explore how the grammar of English changed in the aftermath of the Viking Conquest. We'll look at how the Modern English pronouns evolved under Norse influence. And we'll examine other part of speech to see how certain modern forms can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxons. After that, we'll return to the historical narrative and examine how certain monastic reforms led to a resurgence of Latin in England. Then, we'll turn our attention to the last great period of Viking invasions which culminated in the Norman Conquest. And then we'll finally start to transition fully into Middle English.

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