THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 54:
PRONOUN PROS AND CONS

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 54: PRONOUN PROS AND CONS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 54: Pronoun Pros and Cons. This time, we're going to talk about 'me' and 'you' and 'them.' In other words, we going to talk about pronouns. Our modern personal pronouns are part of our core vocabulary. Some of them have barely changed over the past 1500 years. But some of them have changed a lot. And interestingly, several of them were borrowed from the Vikings. A few old forms even linger with us today – words like *thou*, *thee*, and *thy*. So this time, we're going to explore the history of our modern personal pronouns. And we'll also examine why the proper use of those pronouns is sometimes a challenge for Modern English speakers.

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. And 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.

So let's turn to this episode about pronouns. This is the first time that I have dedicated an entire episode to one particular part of speech. I originally intended to discuss pronouns in the overall context of Norse influences on Modern English since several of our modern pronouns came from the Vikings. But pronouns are so common in our modern speech, and there is so much history to discuss, that I thought they deserves their own episode.

I think it is important to begin by pointing out how common pronouns are within our core vocabulary. They are among the most commonly used words in the English language. In one of the early episodes of the podcast, I mentioned some of those commonly used words. That particular list was taken from The Reading Teacher's Book of Lists, Fourth Edition. And if we look at the ten most commonly used words in the English language, half of them are pronouns – specifically *he, it, that, you* and the most frequently used word of all – the word *I*. In fact, fourteen of the top fifty words are pronouns. And if you were to scan the entire list of words, you would notice that these basic pronouns are concentrated near the top of the that list – meaning that they are among the most frequently used words in the language.

So all of that means that our pronouns are a fundamental part of our core vocabulary. They are some of the first words which children learn, and they're used over and over. As we've seen before, those basic words tend to be very conservative. They don't tend to change very much. But interestingly, many of our pronouns have changed quite a bit over the centuries. And we've actually borrowed pronouns from other languages, which is very unusual for a language to do. We've even developed new pronoun forms along the way.

And we've also gotten rid of a few forms. When we read Shakespeare, we see some of those older forms. We hear them in famous lines like:

Shall I compare **thee** to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Of course, religious texts have captured some of these older forms. Like 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done.'

So where did out modern pronouns come from, and why did some of them disappear?

As we consider the history of our modern pronouns, we have to keep in mind the background which we covered in the last episode. Specifically, the simplification and loss of Old English inflections. Now I noted last time that nouns had a variety of endings. The endings changed depending on whether the noun was being used as the subject, the direct object or the indirect object. The noun also had a specific ending to show possession – sort of like our modern 'apostrophe S.' And those endings varied depending on whether the noun was a masculine noun, feminine noun or neutral noun. And they could also vary depending on whether noun was singular or plural.

Now all of that seems very complicated to us today. Yet we employ that same basic system when it comes to our pronouns. And that's because our pronouns are basically a holdover from Old English. In fact, Modern English pronouns actually preserve much of the inflectional system of the Anglo-Saxons. With one notable exception, our personal pronoun forms vary depending on whether they're being used as the subject or the object, or if they're being used to show possession. They also vary between singular and plural forms. And in certain cases, they vary based on gender like the distinctions between 'he and she' and 'him and her.' So they still behave the way most words did on Old English. So in that respect they are a bit of a relic.

I say that they're a relic because we don't really need all of those forms. And the proof that we don't really need all of those forms is the one notable exception to all of those variable forms – the pronoun *you*. I'll discuss the evolution of the modern word *you* a little later in this episode, but if we think about that word *you*, it is remarkably versatile. It is really the exception to the rule because it really doesn't vary at all. And it proves that English can get by with one basic pronoun form.

Let me explain. And let me talk about myself. If I am referring to myself as the subject of the sentence, I use the form *I* as in "I see Mary." But if I am referring to myself as the object, the form changes to *me* as in "Mary sees me." Of course, that's singular. But the same thing happens with the plural version. Me and my friends, "We see Mary." *We* is the subject form. But "Mary sees us." *Us* is the object form. So between *I* and *me*, and *we* and *us*, the forms change depending on how I am using the word in the sentence. And that is how words behaved in Old English.

But let's compare those various first person forms with the generic second person form *you*. *You* doesn't change between subject and object. "You see Mary" and "Mary sees you." And it doesn't change between singular and plural forms. So if you are part of group, and I am addressing the entire group, I would still say "You see Mary" and "Mary sees you."

The evolution of *you* is a good example of how Modern English has simplified that Old English inflectional system. At one time, there were many different forms of *you*. It varied just like all of those first person pronouns – *I, me, we* and *us.* But today, all of those second person forms have collapsed into the single *you*. And that illustrates how English grammar has tried to simplify that Old English inflectional system.   But when it comes to pronouns, that process of simplification has produced mixed results. We have the very simple *you*, but otherwise, the modern pronouns have retained a lot of the variability of Old English.

So let's break it all down, and let's see how the current system developed. I think the best way to present the history of our pronouns is to begin with the first person pronouns, then the second person pronouns, and then the third person pronouns.

So let me start by talking about myself – in first person. This is a good place to start because our modern first person pronouns actually show the least amount of change over the centuries. As I noted earlier, the word *I* is considered the most commonly used word in the English language, at least according to the list which I referenced.

I is the subject form – sometimes called the nominative form. In Old English, it was spelled 'I-C' and was pronounced /each/ or /itch/. It actually shares the same Indo-European root as the Latin word *ego*. By the 900s, in part of the north of England, it was being written as 'I-H', and was probably pronounced something like /ee(ch)/.   But that guttural consonant sound disappeared from English over time. And when that consonant sound at the end disappeared, that just left the front part (/ee/) which was spelled with the letter *I*. And as we should know by now, the letter *I* represented the /ee/ sound in Old English and Middle English. But the Great Vowel Shift in the 1500s shifted the sound of the vowel from its original /ee/ sound to its modern long /eye/ sound. So as we look at the word *I*, the pronunciation has changed a little bit over the centuries, but we still use it today the way the Anglo-Saxons did over a thousand years ago.

So *I* is the subject form as in "I see Mary." And the object form is *me* as in "Mary sees me." Again, this word has changed very little since the Old English period. In fact, it was usually spelled 'M-E' in Old English just like we do today. The Anglo-Saxons pronounced it /may/, so the vowel shifts changed it to modern /me/.

I should also note that the form was basically the same for the direct object and the indirect object, and that was generally true for all pronouns in Old English, so there is no reason to make any distinction between object forms here. "So Mary saw me" is the direct object form. But an indirect object form would be "Mary gave a gift to me" or "Mary gave me a gift." Again, just like in Old English, the form doesn't change.

There was also a distinct possessive form called the genitive form in Old English. So if I wanted to show possession, I could say, "This is Kevin Stroud's podcast." But if I wanted to use a pronoun, I couldn't say "This is I's podcast" or "This is me's podcast." I had to use a distinct form. The word was *min* (/meen/). And of course, that word evolved over the centuries into the modern words *my* and *mine*. Some parts of Britain still pronounce *my* with its original pronunciation /me/.   So that gives us the distinct forms *I, me* and *my*, and we have those distinct

forms today because those forms came directly from Old English, and that was the way Old English worked. The form of most nouns and pronouns varied in that manner.

So those are the singular forms. What about the plural forms – *we, us* and *our*? Well, again, they came directly from the Old English. The subject form *we* was spelled exactly the same way in Old English, but it was pronounced /way/. Again, the later vowel shifts changed the pronunciation of all of these vowels. The object form is *us* as in "Mary saw us." And again, this form has remained basically unchanged since the time of the Anglo-Saxons. It was spelled the same way in Old English – 'U-S' – and was probably pronounced /oos/.

And the ancestor of the possessive form *our* was the Old English form *ure*. The form '*user*' (/oo-ser/) was also sometimes used.

So when it comes to our first person pronouns, English has been remarkably resilient. Other than a few vowel shifts, they're all basically the same as Old English.

So let me stop talking about myself, and start talking about 'you.' Let's shift from first person to second person. As we saw earlier, Modern English uses the ubiquitous *you*. The subject form, the object form, the singular form, the plural form – it's always *you*. The only exception is the possessive form which is *your*. But again, *your* is the same for singular and plural. So when I am referring to just you, it is *your*, and when I am referring to all of you, it's still *your*. So today, *you* and *your* do a lot of work. But in Old English, there were a lot of different forms.

The first thing to understand is that there were distinct singular and plural forms in Old English. The modern word *you* is actually derived from the original plural form. But let's start with the singular forms – the forms which I would have used if I just wanted to speak to you individually.

Now even though the Old English singular forms have largely disappeared from the language, they will probably seem very familiar to you. The subject form was *þu* (/thoo/), typically spelled with that Old English letter thorn which represented the 'T-H' sound. So it was 'thorn-U', but again it was pronounced /thoo/. So if I was speaking to you individually, that is the word I would have used.

Now I said that *þu* might seem familiar to you. That's because *þu* eventually became *thou* is Middle English. And that form survived into early Modern English. That was the word which Shakespeare and the King James Bible liked to use.

So the subject form *þu* became *thou*. What about the object form? Well, in Old English, that form was *þe* (/thay/) spelled 'thorn-E.' And in Middle English, *þu* became *thee* spelled T-H-E-E. And again, those forms should be very familiar to you from Shakespeare and the Bible.

We can see how Shakespeare used these subject and object forms in the famous opening lines of Sonnet 18 which I read earlier:

Shall I compare **thee** to a summer's day? (Object form)
Thou art more lovely and more temperate. (Subject form)

So the 'thees' and 'thous' of Shakespeare actually go back to the Anglo-Saxons. But what about the possessive form?

To show that you had possession of something, I would have said *thin* (/theen/) in Old English, which basically meant 'your.' And *thin* became '*thine* and *thy* in Middle English. And again, that very familiar *thy* was prominently used by Shakespeare and the King James Bible. So in the early Modern English translation of the Lord's Prayer, we get a line like "thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

So those are the singular forms which lasted until the late 1600s. But throughout the 1500s and 1600s, those singular forms were being pushed out in favor of the plural forms. I'll explain why that happened in a moment, but first let's look at the plural forms.

In Old English, if I was discussing all of you listening to this podcast, I would refer to you with the term '*ge*' (/yay/ or /yeh/). It was actually spelled 'G-E' in Old English, but we know that that G was often pronounced with a 'Y' sound. And that form *ge* was the subject form. But if all of you were the object of the sentence, I would refer to you as *eow* (/ay-ow/). And that is actually the original form of our modern *you*. Early on, it was only used when referring to multiple people as the object of a sentence. Over time, *eow* became *eu* (/ay-oo/), and *eu* shortened to just *you* by the end of the Middle English period.

Now remember that the subject form was *ge* (/yay/). So during the Middle English period, I said *ge* when I was discussing all of you as the subject, and I said *eu* when describing all of you as the object. And apparently *ge* and *eu* were close enough in pronunciation that they started to get mixed together. By the end of the Middle English period, the distinction between the subject and the object forms had been lost. And it was just *you*. So *you* had become a generic plural form used for both subject and object.

By the way, possessive form went from *eower* (/ay-oo-wer/) in Old English to *your* in Middle English utilizing the same basic sound changes.

So by the time we got to early Modern English – the time of Shakespeare – we had distinct singular forms *thou, thee, thy* and *thine*. And we had the plural forms *you* and *your*. But as we all know, *you* and *your* eventually overtook the singular forms. So why did that happen?

Well, the answer has to do with French. When the Normans arrived in 1066, they brought their French versions of those pronouns which were the singular *tu* and the plural *vous*. But as you may know, the plural form *vous* was not only used as a plural form to refer to multiple people, it was also the formal way to address an individual. So if you were speaking to a close friend, you would use the traditional singular form *tu*. But if you were addressing a stranger or a superior, you would use the more formal *vous* form.

Well, that French idea of using the plural form as a formal way of addressing a superior spread into English. And throughout the Middle English period, when French influence was at its greatest, it became commonplace to refer to use the plural *you* as a means of formal address. So I might refer to my close friend as *thou* or *thee*, but I would refer to a stranger or superior as *you* – the plural form.

But once this process was set in motion under French influence, there were no brakes. *You* became more and more common. During the Middle English period, the old feudal system began to break down. More people left the farms and moved to the city, especially large cities like London where the standard English dialect was evolving. And increasingly, the old social system where everybody knew where they stood relative to everyone else was becoming more blurred.

Traditional social distinctions were being lost. So in order to err on the side of politeness, many people just chose to use the more formal *you*, instead of the informal *thee* or *thou*. So *you* became the great equalizer. In the social uncertainty of the late Middle Ages, it allowed speakers to avoid making social distinctions which were becoming confused and outdated. So it just became commonplace to refer to everyone with that more formal means of address.

As a result of this process, the singular *thou* and *thee* was relegated to only the most friendly and intimate relationships. It was basically used with one's closest friends and family members. And those terms became so restricted, that they soon started to fall out of use altogether.

By the time of the early Modern English period in the early 1600s, the use of those traditional singular forms had become very limited. But they were still used by poets who often preferred those terms as an expression of intimacy. I mean, if you were a poet, would you rather say, "I love and adore you," or would you say, "I have formed an emotional bond with you." Well, most poets tended to go with intimacy. And Shakespeare certainly did. And Shakespeare was such an important poet, and his overall influence on the language has been so great, that those *thees* and *thous* are still known to us today as an older form of the pronoun.

But there was another situation where those traditional, intimate, singular forms were used. And that was in religious texts. Traditionally, these singular forms were the standard way to refer to God. Again, the idea was to convey a sense of intimacy and closeness to the divine. And this is actually common throughout many European languages. They often use the more informal pronoun when referring to God. So the authors of the King James Bible did the same thing. And those *thees* and *thous* and *thys* permeate that translation of the Bible.

Shakespeare's works and the King James Bible were composed in the early 1600s. And those works captured those singular pronoun forms right before they died out of standard English. But something else happened along the way. The Bible and Shakespeare were held in such high regard, that those *thees* and *thous* began to take on air of sophistication and reverence. That is especially true for all of those Biblical passages. In the process, what had once been very intimate, informal terms became the opposite. Today, many Modern English speakers think of those terms as being very formal. They have a sene of reverence and respect. But that wasn't

really the case at all when they were used in those Seventeenth Century works. Their original intent was to express intimacy and closeness.

During the early 1600s, those singular forms were hanging on, but by the end of that century, they were basically gone, except in a few regional dialects – especially in the north of England and parts of Scotland.

With the loss of those *thees* and *thous* and *thys*, that left English with its universal *you*. What had once been a strictly plural pronoun, was now used in all cases. And it was really a product of politeness – the desire of English-speakers to address each other with a formal term which didn't offend.

The net result of these changes is that Modern English now has to use the word *you* for both an individual and a large group of people. We no longer distinguish those uses. But almost as soon as this dilemma arose, English speakers started to come up with new ways to solve the problem.

Within a couple of centuries, new regional constructions like *you all* were popping up various texts – and that suggests that had been around even longer than that in some dialects. Today, we have regional terms like *you all*, *y'all*, *you guys*, *youse*, *you together*, *you lot*, *you people*, *you-ans*, *yins* and many others. Again, these new innovations were very organic. They popped up within regional dialects. But by this point in the Modern English period, the standard rules of English grammar had already been adopted. Since there was no universally accepted form to distinguish singular and plural, that left *you* as the only proper form for both in the grammar books. And English has never really solved that problem with a universal answer – if you consider it a problem at all.

It will be interesting to see if one of those various regional forms eventually emerges as a new standard plural form. Linguists have actually studied this trend in the United States. And they have found that *you all* is increasingly used outside of the South and *you guys* is increasingly used within the South. So as with most aspects of American culture, there appears to be some leveling going on as regional differences become less distinct. And if a new plural form does emerge at some point in American English, those are likely to be the prime contenders. But for now, *you* still does a lot of heavy lifting in English. And that's why it's second only to *I* as the most commonly used pronoun in English. And it ranks as the seventh most common word in English according to the list which I mentioned earlier.

So those are the second person pronouns. And that means I've talked about me and I've talked about you, now let's talk about everybody else – the third person pronouns. As we turn our attention to the third persons pronouns, we're going to see that the history is far more complicated here. Over the centuries, the pronouns which English speakers use to refer to other persons have changed a lot.

And this is really quite different from what we saw with the first person and second person pronouns. In those cases, the forms remained very consistent from Old English through Middle English and even into early Modern English. The pronunciations evolved over the centuries, but

that was about it. The big change as we saw occurred when plural *you* form pushed out the singular forms in early Modern English, but that was really just a case of one form replacing another form.

But in the case of the third person pronouns, English kept some, it changed the pronunciation of some, it got rid of some, it borrowed some from the Vikings, and it even made up a new one. So there was a lot more going on here. All of that change left us with modern forms like *he, she, it, him, her, his, hers, its, they, them* and *their*.   The first thing we notice is the various forms appear quite distinct. Some begin with an 'H' sound – *he, him, her, his* and *hers*. Some begin with a 'TH' sound – *they, them* and *their*. And some begin with an 'I' sound – *it* and *its*. And of course, the endings are distinct as well, but the key is really those beginnings.

If we were to travel back to Anglo-Saxon Britain in the middle of the Anglo-Saxon period, we would find that all of the third person pronouns would have started with the same 'H' sound, and they all sounded very similar at the time. And in fact, it is believed that that similarity is what led to the later distinctions which emerged between these various pronouns. They were so similar, that English speakers had a tough time discerning whether someone was talking about a boy or a girl, or one person or several people. Of course, as we just saw, we have some of that same problem today with the word *you*, which plays a lot of these same roles. But *you* is used as a direct form of address. So if I'm talking to *you*, you know whether you're a boy or a girl. And in most cases, you know whether you're one person or part of a larger group. So that universal *you* has survived because context resolves some of those ambiguities.

But when I'm referring to other people, it can be much more confusing if I'm using the same or similar pronoun forms. After all, I'm conveying information to you about someone else. It may be information you don't have. And you may not know who or what I am taking about. So it is much more important for me to use pronouns in these cases that are very distinct to avoid some of these confusions. And that's the basic theme in the history of these pronouns. When it comes to third persons, English has developed ways to make these pronouns very distinct and very clear.

So let's start with the Anglo-Saxons. As I noted, during the period of Old English, all of the third person pronouns began with an 'H' sound – all of them. The singular forms, the plural forms, the masculine forms, the feminine forms and the neutral forms. Today, the subject forms are *he*, *she*, *it* and *they* – all very distinct. But in Old English, the equivalent pronouns were *he* (/hay/), *heo* (/hay-oh/), *hit* (/heet/) and *hie* (/hee-eh/). They weren't identical, but they were much more similar than today.

Along the same lines, the modern direct object forms are *him*, *her*, *it* and *them*. Again, quite distinct. But the Old English equivalents were *hine* (/hee-neh/), *hie* (/hee-eh/), *hit* (/heet/) and *hie* (/hee-eh/).

The modern possessive forms are *his*, *her*, *its*, and *their*. The Old English equivalents were *his* (/hees/), *hiere* (/hee-eh-reh/), *his* (/hees/) and *hiera* (/hee-eh-rah/).

So as you can hear, the Old English forms were very similar. And in some cases, they were identical. The word *hie* could mean 'her,' 'they,' or 'them.' The word *his* could mean 'his' or 'its.' And the words for 'her' and 'their' were almost identical – *hiere* and *hiera*, respectively.

Now these similarities which existed in Old English became even more pronounced in Middle English. As we've seen before, there was a tendency of English speakers to slur certain sounds. And some of the differences which did exist between these pronouns early on began to be lost in late Old English and early Middle English.

This was really a problem when it came to the singular and plural forms. For example, the word for 'he' and 'they' became identical. They both became *he*. The words for 'him' and 'them' also almost became identical. 'Him' was *him*, and 'them' was *hem*. So *him* and *hem* were almost the same.

And these new similar forms were added to those older similar forms. And the result was a bit of mess. If you were talking about someone or something, it was really difficult to make yourself clear. So apparently, English speakers began to look for a solution.

As I turned out, there was actually an easy solution – at least in the north of England. And that solution was Old Norse. As we know, that Old Norse language had become mixed with the language of the Anglo-Saxons. People in the north tended to be more bilingual. So they had access to those Norse words, and quite conveniently, they had access to the Norse pronouns. And with respect to these third person pronouns, all of the plural forms in Old Norse began with a 'TH' sound, which was very distinct from the English 'H' sound. So plural *he* became Norse *they*. And plural *hem* became Norse *them*. And plural *here* became Norse *their* – T-H-E-I-R.

So thanks to the Vikings, and that Northern innovation, English got its modern 'TH' forms – *they, them* and *their*. But as we've seen before, it took a long time for those northern innovations to spread around the island. It took several centuries for those terms to be accepted throughout England.

By the time of Chaucer in the 1300s, he was using the subject form *they*, but he didn't use the object and possessive forms – *them* and *their*. Instead, he continued to use the Old English pronouns – *hem* and *here*. But one of the reasons why linguists are so fascinated with Chaucer, and especially the Canterbury Tales, is because he wrote in the voice of his characters, and he mimicked their unique dialects. So when he presented characters from the north of England, he would incorporate elements of Northern English into their manner of speech. So in the Reeve's Tale, which is part of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer tells about two students who visited a miller to have some wheat ground into flour. He says that the students were from the north. He writes of their home: "Fer in the north, I can not telle where" – 'Far in the north, I cannot tell where.'

The students ended up spending the night at the miller's house. After they went to bed, they couldn't sleep because the miller and the miller's wife were snoring so loudly. One student turned to the other and asked if he had ever heard such snoring. He said that the man and his wife

were singing an evening song. And he says: "A wilde fyr up-on thair bodyes falle!" – literally, 'a wild rash upon their bodies fall.'

But what's interesting about that passage is that Chaucer has the northern student using the phrase 'their bodies' to refer the Miller and his wife. Nowhere else does he use that Northern Norse pronoun *their*. He always uses the native English form *here*. But here, in the voice of the Northern student, he uses *their*. So he was emphasizing the fact that this was a feature of the northern dialect and that it was still largely confined to those regions. Chaucer's usage is consistent with other texts from the same period. *They* was used in the south, but *them* and *their* were still largely confined to the north.

But by the end of the Middle English period, *them* and *their* were in common use in the south as well. And the old 'H' forms gradually disappeared.

Around the same time that the Norse 'TH' forms – *they*, *them* and *their* – were replacing the Old English forms – *he*, *hem* and *here* – something else was also happening. Sometimes that Old English object form *hem* was being pronounced without its initial 'H' sound. It just became *em*. And this usage has actually survived into Modern English.

Sometimes, we say things like "go get 'em", "watch 'em run," or "give 'em a hard time." I think we assume that that is just a shortened version of *them*. But it originated as a shorted version of *hem* – the original English pronoun. It appears in many Middle English and early Modern English texts. Even Shakespeare liked to use it. And that shortening of *hem* to *em* is very indicative of something else that was happening during that period.

Many English speakers were dropping that initial 'H' sound in some of the other pronoun forms as well. Specifically, the singular neutral version. So that Old English pronoun *hit* became *it*. And *it*' (/eet/) became *it*. This loss of 'H' also occurs in the other pronoun forms even to this day. We still say things like "give 'em' a hand" instead of "give him a hand." "Go get 'er'" instead of "go get her." But these are considered non-standard forms. And it isn't entirely clear why Middle English speakers made it an accepted rule to always pronounce *hit* (/heet/) as *it*, but they did. Again, by making this pronunciation change a standard, consistent rule, it ensured that the neutral form *it* would be distinct from the other forms – *he* and *she*, and *him* and *her*. So whether or not it was intentional, there was an obvious benefit to using that shortened version *it*, so it stuck.

That leaves us with the other singular forms – *he* and *she*, *him* and *her*, *his* and *hers*. Notice that, with one exception, all of these forms retain their original 'H' at the beginning – *he*, *him*, *her* and *hers*. All of these forms have actually changed very little since Old English. But I noted that there is one exception – the word '*she*.' And this is the one pronoun which confounds some historical linguists because it doesn't have a clear origin.

Though there is disagreement about where it came from, most linguists agree about why it was created. It seems very clear that *she* emerged because of that same problem with these similar-sounding pronouns. And as we've seen, the way English speakers tended to deal with this

problem was by adopting or creating forms which changed that initial 'H' sound at the beginning.

In Middle English, '*he* and *she*' was actually '*he* and *heo*.' So you can hear the problem. And it's believed that the loss of word endings played a role here as well, thereby making female *heo* sometimes come out as /hay/ – just like the male version.

By the 1100s, right in the middle of the transition from Old English to Middle English, the word *scæ* appeared in writing for the first time, at least for the first time in the surviving texts. It appeared in that late version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle which I mentioned in the last episode called the Peterborough Chronicle. It appears in the entry for the year 1140. And that word *scæ* is the original version of *she*.

It quickly spread throughout England. Other forms like *sho* also appeared, especially in the north. Meanwhile, the prior female form *heo* disappeared. Of course, the object form *hire* survives as the word *her*.

So that leaves the million dollar question. Where did the word *she* come from? Some have suggested a possible Norse origin. Others have suggested that it simply evolved out of the original form *heo* – that for some reason, English speakers intentionally or unintentionally changed that first consonant from an 'H' sound to an 'S-H' sound, but that's not a normal sound change within English.

The most prominent theory is that *she* came from the word *seo* which was basically the Old English definite article used for feminine nouns. So it was basically the equivalent of modern *the* or *that*. But like everything else in Old English, its use was very situational. It was only used before feminine nouns and only when those nouns were serving as the subject of the sentence. So a feminine noun like *gift* was *giefu* – that was the subject form. So 'seo giefu' was literally 'that gift.'

Since *seo* generally preceded feminine nouns, it provided a shorthand way to refer to those nouns. Just like I can shorten 'that gift' to just 'that', Old English speakers could do the same thing. 'Seo giefu' could just become 'seo.' And those linguists think that *seo* eventually became /shay-oh/, and later became *scæ* (/shæ/) as we saw earlier. And *scæ* eventually became *she*. Again, this is one theory, but it is currently the most popular theory.

The major point here is that *she* emerged for the same reason *it* emerged as a distinct form and *they*, *them* and *their* emerged as distinct forms. They all developed unique sounds at the beginning to distinguish them from all of the earlier forms which began with the same 'H' sound.

So that's the basic history of our standard first person, second person and third person pronouns. I should note here that Old English not only had the singular and plural forms which I discussed, it also had a dual form. So these were pronouns which represented two of something. So these were forms I could use if I wanted to refer to myself and someone else, or you and someone else, or to two other people. These forms were inherited from the original Indo-European language.

But they died out during the Old English period, and they were largely gone by late 900s at our point in the overall story of English. So I didn't include them in this episode.

Now before we leave the subject of pronouns, I want to take a few minutes and consider how all of this history impacted Modern English grammar. Today, many speakers often struggle to find the correct pronouns in a sentence. We're often unsure if it's 'you and I' or 'you and me.' Or 'he and Mary' or 'Mary and him.'

Part of this confusion results from the history we've explored over the past couple of episodes. At one time, both nouns and pronouns had different subject and object forms. There was no fixed word order because the word forms conveyed all of the essential information. But as we saw last time, English has tended to shift to fixed word forms, and it now relies upon a specific word order to convey meaning.

So today, a car is a car, and a dog is a dog. It doesn't matter whether we use them as subjects or objects. They're always the same. "Mary saw the dog." "The dog saw Mary." "Mary hit the car." "The car hit Mary." But whereas nouns lost those particular inflections, the pronouns didn't. With a few minor exceptions, our personal pronouns are almost as complex today as they were in Old English. They still change for subject and object. So they are a bit of an anomaly.

But we don't really need those different forms in Modern English. As we've seen, words like *you* and *it* no longer change for the subject and the object. But the others do. "I and me," "we and us," "he and him," "she and her," and "they and them." So they retain that Old English system.

But in Modern English, we really rely upon word order to distinguish subjects and objects. And therein lies the problem. When we use these particular personal pronouns today, we actually have to utilize both methods at the same time. We have to put the pronoun in the right place in the sentence using the modern method, but we also have to select the correct form of the pronoun using the Old English method. So we're using elements of both Old English grammar and Modern English grammar at the same time.

For the most part, English speakers can rely upon instinct to choose the correct pronoun form. Outside of a few regional dialects, most speakers know that it's "I went to the store" – not "Me went to the store." And it's "Give the ball to her" – not "Give the ball to she." But for some reason, all of that gets confused when we pair that pronoun with another noun or pronoun. Is it "Bob and they went to the store" or "Bob and them went to the store?" Is it "Save a seat for me and Bob" or "Save a seat for Bob and I?" Of course, the modern rule is to drop that other noun altogether – so get rid of Bob – and the answer is revealed. "They went to the store." So "Bob and they went to the store." "Save a seat for me." So therefore, "Save a seat for me and Bob."

Now that's a handy rule, but it doesn't always work so easily. How about when the pronoun follows the word *between*? Is it "between you and I" or "between you and me." Since *between* implies two parts, it doesn't really make sense if we drop the other word. That just gives us "between I" or "between me." English majors tell us that the correct phrase should be "between you and me." *Between* is a preposition, and the pronoun is the object, so it should use the object

form. So that means "between you and me." But the phrase "between you and I" is incredibly common in Modern English. It sounds so nice and proper. And in fact, it goes all the way back to Shakespeare. In the Merchant of Venice, he uses the line, "All debts are cleared between you and I." So it may be wrong, but English speakers have a long tradition of using it.

Here's another example where Modern English often confuses these pronoun forms. If I ask you, "Whose there?", how would you respond? "It is I" or "It is me." Most of you would probably say, "It's me." That's our Old English instinct kicking in. *It* is the subject. *Is* is the verb. *Me* is the object. And we know that *me* is the object form.

But thanks to a quirky rule of Modern English, grammarians tell us that it should be "It is I." But why is that? *I* is the subject form, not the object form. Well, this is an exception to the rule. This is actually a very technical exception. And many scholars think this technical exception is the culprit for a lot of our modern pronoun problems. According to Modern English grammar, when a pronoun follows a verb like *is*, it has to take the subject form. So let me say that again, begin it seems to violate everything we know about these Old English pronouns.

When a pronoun follows a verb like *is* – called a linking verb – the pronoun has to take the subject form where the object form would normally be used. So that gives you subject form – verb – subject form. What? You're not supposed to do that.

As I said, this rule doesn't just apply to the verb *is*. It applies to all verbs which are classified as linking verbs, so *is*, *was*, *were*, *appear*, *become*, and *seem*. All of those are linking verbs, and they don't so much don't describe an action as much as a state of being. The logic here is that *is* means 'is'. It implies equivalency. So "I am I" not "I am me." "She is she" not "she is her." "They are they' not 'they are them." But using that logic, it means we should say, "It is I" not "It is me." And we should say, "I am he" not "I am him." And we should say, "We are they' not "We are them." But I now what you're thinking – 'What? Where did that rule come from?'

Well, this might not surprise you. It didn't come from Old English, and it didn't come from Middle English. It came from Latin in the Modern English period. This is another one of those Latin rules which got imposed on English by grammarians who thought Latin was just the 'bees knees' back in the 1500s and 1600s. In Latin, a linking verb was used to link two noun or pronoun phrases of the same case. And some other inflexive languages like German do this as well. But this particular rule entered English from Latin. It was not native. It was not organic. But for nearly 500 years, English speakers have been told not to say "It is me," but to say "It is I" instead.

Since this was a borrowed rule, essentially imposed from the top down, it contradicts all that we know about the use of Old English pronouns, and it has sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of many English speakers. Subliminally, we have started to think that *I* is the correct form after the verb. That *me* is somehow bad English in that position. Most English speakers couldn't tell you what a linking verb is if their life depended on it. So these fine distinctions created in the early Modern English period are lost on most Modern English speakers. All we know is that you

should say *me* after the verb, except when you're not supposed to. Which is sometimes. When it sounds right. And sometimes when it doesn't sound right. I mean .. (uugh)

Let me take this concept one step further to illustrate how complicated this has become in Modern English. In this episode, I have focused on personal pronouns, but there is another group of pronouns which I haven't discussed called interrogative pronouns – words like *who*, *whom*, *whose*, *what* and *why*. But here, I want to talk about *who* and *whom* because these forms create all kinds of problems.

Who is the subject form. *Whom* is the object form. And yes, both of these go back to Old English. So in the phrase, "Who came first?", *who* is the subject of the sentence, and *who* is the subject form. That's easy. But things start to fall apart when we get to *whom*. *Whom* is the object form. And as long as we keep *whom* at the end of the sentence, where objects normally appear, we're OK. "I should give the ball to whom?' That's correct, and it even sounds correct.

But here's the problem. We usually use words like *who* and *whom* when asking questions. And when we ask questions, we often change the word order in the sentence. And that sometimes puts the object in a different place. And we start to lose track of the correct form. Again, our Modern English tendency is to rely upon word order. And as long as we stick with a traditional word order, we can usually get the right pronoun form, but when we change that order around, we sometimes get lost.

So a pronoun like *whom* often gets shifted to the front of the sentence when we're asking a question. So instead of saying "I should give the ball to whom?," I would usually say "Whom should I give the ball to." Yes, that leaves a preposition on the end, but don't tell anyone. It'll be OK. "Whom should I give the ball to" is the correct form because *whom* is the object. It's just out of place at the front. But it's actually at the front, and our Modern English brains start to kick in and tell us that that is where the subject usually goes. And the subject form is *who*. So instinctively, we often shift that pronoun to *who*, and we say, "Who should I give the ball to." Again, that *who* should be *whom*, and we would see that if we moved *whom* back to the end where it was originally. But our brains are so wired to focus on word order, that we are often convert *whom* into *who* at the front of the sentence.

But guess what, let's throw in that Latin 'linking verb' rule which I mentioned earlier. Remember that rules says that when you're using a linking verb – like *is* – you have to use the subject form before and after the verb. That means that when we have a sentence which uses the word *is*, and we move that object forward, it has to be *who* – not *whom*. (Uuggh) Thanks Latin.

Actually, this little quirk makes sense, so I shouldn't complain too much. This little rule means that the proper form should be "Who is he?" not "Whom is he?" "Who are you?" not "Whom are you?" So "who is," "who are," "who were" – those are OK in many cases. But don't say "who did" as in "Who did you see?" *Did* is not a linking verb, it should be "Whom did you see?" (Uuggg)

By the way, these are just general rules, there are exceptions. And I certainly don't expect any of you to remember all of these rules. I just wanted you to see that our modern pronoun problems are largely a consequence of history. We are trying to use Old English forms with Modern English grammar, which is tricky in itself, but then Latin came in and gave some new rules. And those rules created exceptions to the general rules. And there are exception to those exceptions. But what we have today is layer upon layer of history that has built up to create these confusions.

Much of that confusion could be completely removed if English simply did what it previously did with words like *you* and *it*. Those pronouns no longer change for subject and object. So maybe one day, in the distant future, English will do the same thing for the other pronoun forms to resolve some of these problems. But until then, we'll just have to deal with those Old English pronoun forms in Modern English.

Next time, we'll continue to look at the history of English in the late 900s. I have a couple of additional aspects of English grammar which were impacted by the Vikings. So we'll look at those. And part of that discussion will include our verb 'to be' and all of its various forms – *am*, *is*, *are*, *was*, *were* and so on. And we'll also look at other historical developments on the ground.

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