THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 55:
TO BE OR NOT TO BE

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 55: To Be or Not To Be. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at Old English grammar. Specifically, we're going to focus on certain verb forms which survived into the Modern English period and which can be found in the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. These are forms like 'thou art' and 'he doth.' So this discussion will sort of piggy-back our last episode in which we explored Old English pronoun forms which survived until the time of Shakespeare.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And also, let me thank those of you who have been kind enough to make a donation to the podcast at the website. I always appreciate the support. And I sincerely thank those of you have made contributions.

So let's turn to this episode and the history of English verbs. Let me begin by noting that there were several aspects of verbs which I wanted to cover in this episode. But after preparing the episode, I realized that it was going to be over an hour in length. And some of the detail in this episode is a bit technical. So I was afraid it was a bit too much for one episode. As it turned out, the material divided very neatly into two parts. So I have decided to present it as two episodes. This episode will focus on some Old English verb forms which have died out, but which are still familiar to Modern English speakers. And I'm also going to explore the complicated history of the verb 'to be' which is the reason for the title. We'll also look at the history of our word ***not*** and how it makes verbs negative. The next episode will focus on the historical distinction between strong verbs and weak verbs and why those forms are so muddled in Modern English. The one thing that all of these grammar episodes have in common, besides grammar, is the fact that they all involve some aspect of Viking influence. And that is why I'm presenting them here in the overall story of English. So after this two-part look at verbs, we will pick back up with the historical narrative and continue on with the history of English, and we'll set the stage for the upcoming Norman Conquest.

So given the title of this episode, let's begin with a few lines from Shakespeare. And I want you to pay particular attention to the verb forms. "Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day." Here's another. "The lady doth protest too much." And this one. "He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor."

Note the verb forms: "he reeleth" not "he reels." "The lady doth" not "the lady does." "He hath" not "he has." "That doth" instead of "that does."

How about a line from the King James Bible: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up." So ***suffereth***, ***envieth***, ***vaunteth***.

When we hear that '-th' ending, we instantly associate it with an older form of English. But as we know, ***reeleth*** became ***reels***, and ***hath*** became ***has***, and ***envieth*** became ***envies***. So why did that change occur? Well, it was most likely because of the Vikings. Many modern linguists think that '-s' ending ultimately came from Old Norse.

In order to explore this little piece of English history, let's begin by looking at the modern present tense verb forms.

In Modern English, when we think of the present tense verbs, a clear pattern exists. Take the word ***jump***. 'I jump', 'you jump', 'he/she/it jumps', 'we jump', 'you (all) jump', and 'they jump'. In every case but one, the verb form is the same – ***jump***. This is a good illustration of how Modern English has gotten rid of Old English inflectional endings and relies upon fixed word forms.

But there is that one exception – ***jumps***. 'He/she/it jumps.' That third person singular form uses that '-s' on the end. But if we were to go back to Old English, we would find that things were a lot more complicated. So let's go back to the Anglo-Saxons and consider a verb like ***deem*** as in 'to deem something to be good or bad.' It's an Old English verb. In first person singular, the verb took an /eh/ ending. So 'I deem' was 'ic deme' (/itch dem-eh/).

The second person singular ending was '-est.' So 'you deem' was 'þu demest' (/thoo daym-est/).

The third person singular ending was '-eth'. That's the original version of the ending I quoted earlier. So 'he deems' was 'he demeth' (/hay dem-eth/).

All of the plural forms also took the /eth/ ending. So 'we deem,' you (all) deem,' and 'they deem' were all 'demeth' (/dem-eth/).

Now obviously, those Old English forms sound familiar to us today. Some of those Old English forms survived all the way into early Modern English. In fact, both the second person ***you*** and third-person ***he/she/it*** forms survived.

Let's begin with the second person 'you' form. As we saw in the last episode, English once distinguished singular ***thou*** and plural ***you***. But that plural ***you*** form was gradually applied to individuals. By the time of Shakespeare, it could be used both ways. And when Shakespeare referred to an individual, he used both forms – ***thou*** and ***you***. By that point, the plural verb forms no longer required an ending. So that '-th' ending which existed in Old English had been dropped for plural forms like ***we*** and ***you all*** and ***they***. So it was just 'we deem' and 'you deem' and 'they deem.' And even when ***you*** was used to refer to a single person, it still took that same form. So it was 'you deem,' even when addressing one person.

But what about that traditional single pronoun ***thou***? Well, ***thou*** was the old pronoun form inherited from the Anglo-Saxons. So when you used ***thou***, you had to use that older verb form as well. And as we just saw, in Old English that ending was '-est.' So it was 'þu demest' (/thoo dem-est/). And throughout Middle English, whenever you used ***thou***, you had to give the verb an

'-st' ending. So 'you deem,' but 'thou deemest.' 'You do' was 'thou dost.' 'You have' was 'thou hast.' Again, that '-st' ending was the second person singular ending, so it was almost always used with ***thou***.

As we look through the writings of Shakespeare, we find that he used 'thou seest' instead of 'you see.' 'Thou dost' instead of 'you do.' 'Thou might'st' instead of 'you might.' Sometimes that ending was shortened to just a 'T' sound. So we find 'thou shalt' instead of 'you shall.' But it was the same basic construction. And that very distinctive ending was inherited directly from Old English.

As we know, that specific '-st' or '-t' ending died out shortly after Shakespeare. And in fact, since it was usually used with ***thou***, they both died out together. In fact, I didn't mention it last time, but this actually has been offered as an additional theory for why the plural form ***you*** ultimately replaced the older singular form ***thou***. By the time of Shakespeare, ***you*** no longer required a verb ending. But ***thou*** still required that '-st' ending on the verb. So at a time when English was dropping those inflectional endings, the ***you*** form was preferred because when you used ***you***, you didn't have to put an ending on the verb.

The other theory which I presented last time was that ***you*** was preferred because it was socially neutral, and it allowed speakers to avoid making social distinctions. But these two theories are not mutually exclusive. They don't contradict each other. In fact, they actually reinforce each other. ***You*** was socially neutral, and it was also easier to use because it didn't require any specific verb endings. So a phrase like 'thou seest' were gradually replaced by 'you see.'

So that's the second person form. What about that third person form? Well again, Shakespeare and early Modern English initially retained that Old English form. As we saw, the Old English conjugation of 'he deems' was 'he demeth.' So a '-th' ending was required. So 'he has' was 'he hath.' 'She shows' was 'she showeth.'

We get a good example of this third person form in the first few lines of Psalm 23 from the King James Bible: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

So we can hear that older verb form at work. This was the standard third-person ending going back to the Anglo-Saxons. But there was another verb ending as well – the one which we use today – that '-s' ending. It had once been common in the north of England. And by the time of Shakespeare, it had spread southward and mixed in with that older '-th' ending. So instead of 'He maketh,' it was 'He makes.' And instead of 'He leadeth,' it was 'He leads.' And instead of 'He restoreth,' it was 'He restores.'

In fact Shakespeare used both forms. In fact, he sometimes used them interchangeably. Occasionally, the two forms even appear in the same line. For example, in Macbeth (1.3.79), Shakespeare writes, "The Earth hath bubbles, as the Water has." ***Hath*** is the older form ending

in '-th.' ***Has*** is the newer form ending in '-s.' And Shakespeare had no problem using both of them together.

In the Merchant of Venice, he writes, "It is twice blest, It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.' So he uses ***blesseth*** right beside ***gives*** and ***takes***. Again, he mixes those third person endings in the same line. Though he used both forms, there is no doubt that the older '-th' form was dying out by the time he wrote his poems and plays in the early 1600s.

So where did that '-s' ending come from? Well, as I noted earlier, many modern linguists think that it actually came from the Vikings. The location and timing suggest a Viking origin. This ending appeared in the north of England around the 900s. So this is when most of the other Norse influences came in. But in the Old Norse language of the Vikings, the third person verb form ended in an 'R' sound, not an 'S' sound. So that verb ***deem*** which was saw earlier was ***doemir*** in Old Norse. One theory is that linguistic confusion caused the Anglo-Saxons to shift the sound at the end from an 'R' sound to an 'S' sound. So this argument suggests that ***doemir*** became ***doemis***. And this common pronunciation eventually became a standard verb ending.

The British linguist and language historian, David Crystal, suggests a slightly different theory. In his book 'The Story of English,' he notes that Old Norse verbs sometimes had what is called a 'middle voice' in second and third persons. This caused verbs to end in a '-sk' sound in those situations. And Crystal argues that the Anglo-Saxons might have borrowed that '-sk' ending and shortened it to simply an 'S' sound.

Whatever the exact circumstances were, this 'S' ending entered northern English in the 900s, maybe even a little earlier. There is evidence of this change from around the year 970 in the Northern English translation of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The Old English word ***onsæce*** meant to exact something or deprive someone of something. But in this northern translation of the original Latin Gospels, it is rendered as 'he onsæces.' And this is one of the first instances of that third person '-s' ending in English.

By the time of the early Middle English period, the use of that '-s' ending was very common in the north of England, but its use was really limited to the north. So there was a general north-south divide. The north would say ***sings*** using the '-s' form, and the south would say ***singeth*** using the Old English '-th' form. But as so often happened, that northern innovation spread southward.

By the time of Shakespeare, that '-s' ending was well entrenched in the south as well. The two endings were somewhat interchangeable. And that's why Shakespeare could use both endings in the same line. But shortly after Shakespeare's time, the '-s' form had clearly emerged as the dominant form. Writers of the late 1600s noted that the older '-th' ending was basically just being used by writers and poets. It wasn't really being used in regular speech anymore. The Viking-influenced form had won out over the Anglo-Saxon form.

There isn't really a good explanation for why this particular form was so popular, and why it gradually replaced the Old English ending. In fact, not only did it beat out the older '-th' ending, it has actually survived as the only ending which we use in present tense. Today, all of the other verb endings are gone. 'I sing', 'you sing', 'we sing', 'you (all) sing', and 'they sing.' But 'she sings.' So for some reason, English speakers still love that Norse-influenced ending.

So we continue to see Norse influences in Modern English grammar, even though such influences are sometimes subtle. There is actually one other area where we can find Viking influence. And that is in our modern verb 'to be.' So let's turn from our general discussion of verbs, and let's focus on one specific verb – 'to be.'

In Modern English, 'to be' is both very complex and very common. When it is conjugated, we get ***am***, ***is***, ***are***, ***was***, ***were***, ***been*** and ***being***. Among those forms, ***is***, ***was***, ***are*** and ***be*** are among the twenty-five most commonly used words in the English language.

As far as the complexity of the verb, English is not really unique in this regard. It is also complex in other Indo-European languages. Modern French, Spanish and German all have highly variable forms of the verb 'to be.' In English, the infinitive is 'to be.' And ***been*** and ***being*** are clearly related to ***be***, but where did ***am***, ***is***, ***are***, ***was*** and ***were*** come from?

The answer is that they came from other verbs. Old English actually had three different verbs which meant 'to be' or which conveyed some aspect of 'being' or 'existing.' And those verbs could be conjugated for first person, second person and third person and for singular and plural. So there were lots of different variations of each of those three verbs. And over the course of many centuries, those various verb forms have been mixed together.

It is actually difficult to trace this history with any precision, because the way in which these verbs mixed together varied from region to region. But there are a few general statements we can make.

First, the modern past tense forms – ***was*** and ***were*** – came from a verb called ***wesan***. Again, it meant 'to be.' But the Anglo-Saxons always used this particular verb for past tense. It didn't really have a present tense form. And in fact, these verb forms have changed very little over the past thousand years.

In Old English, 'I was' was 'ic wæs.' 'You were' was 'þu wære.' 'He was' was 'he wæs.' 'She was' was 'heo wæs.' 'We were' was 'we wæron.' 'You all were' was 'ge wæron.' 'They were' was 'hie wæron.'

So other than some slight pronunciation changes, we use those past tense forms pretty much the same way as the Anglo-Saxons. Note here that in Modern English, there is a basic distinction between singular and plural uses of this verb. Singular tends to be ***was***. 'I was', 'he was', 'she was', 'it was.' But plural forms use ***were***. 'We were', 'you all were', 'they were.' Again this is the same way as Old English. The one exception is ***you*** when it is used as a singular pronoun.

So if I am just talking to you individually, I would say 'you were' not 'you was.' Well, believe it or not, this wasn't an established construction in English until the 1800s.

Prior to then, it was very common for people to say 'you was' when referring to one person and 'you were' when referring to multiple people. Even Noah Webster insisted that 'you was' was correct in singular usage. But grammarians insisted that 'you' is ultimately a plural pronoun as we saw in the last episode. And so ***you*** should always take the plural verb form ***were***, even when it is referring to one person. But there was also some authority for this view within Old English. Old English also distinguished the singular ***you*** from the other singular forms. They said ***wære*** for a singular you, and ***wæs*** for the other singular persons. So ultimately, 'you were' became the standard singular form. Along the way, 'you was' became relegated to non-standard speech.

So those are the past tense forms – all borrowed from the verb ***wesan***. But when we turn to present tense, things get a bit more complicated.

Let's begin with the second verb which meant 'to be' in Old English. And that was the verb ***beon***, which is actually the original form of the word ***be***. It also produced the words ***been*** and ***being***. Again, it could be used for all persons. ***I***, ***you***, ***he/she***, ***we***, ***you all***, and ***they***. Respectively, the forms were ***beo***, ***bist***, ***biþ***, and for all plural forms it was ***beoþ***.

Today, that verb survives as the infinitive 'to be.' And it survives in the participles ***been*** and ***being***. We also use them in verb phrases like 'have been,' 'am being,' was being,' and so on. But notice that we don't use them in our regular present tense forms.

We don't say – or at least we're not supposed to say – 'I be', 'you be', 'he be', or 'they be.' However, that verb was once used in those situations. It was quite common for an Anglo-Saxon to say 'ic beo' – the equivalent of 'I be.' And 'þu bist' – basically 'you be.' And they would say, 'he biþ' or 'heo biþ' – the equivalent of 'he be or she be.' And they used the form ***beoþ*** as a generic plural form, so the same as 'we be', 'you all be', or 'they be.'

But by the time of Middle English, these 'be' forms were dying out in most of those situations. The only situation where they really hung on was in the plural usages. English speakers were still saying 'we be' or 'they be' in the early Modern English period. In fact, we can find those uses in the King James Bible. For example, Matthew 15:14 reads, "They be blind leaders of the blind." Some of those uses are still considered standard today. A phrase like "the powers that be" is an old phrase which preserved that old usage. Note that it is not "the powers that are." It's "the powers that be."

But of course, that ***be*** has survived in regional and non-standard dialects. For example, it is a common feature of what is known as African American Vernacular English in the United States. 'He be' or 'they be' is still common there. But again, the Anglo-Saxons sometimes used ***be*** in a similar manner because ***be*** was a distinct verb back then which could be conjugated as a regular present tense verb.

But as I noted, the use of ***be*** in that way largely died out of standard English, except for the participles ***been*** and ***being*** and the infinitive ***to be***. During Middle English, other verb forms which meant 'to be' became the standard present tense verb forms that we have today.

Today, instead of 'I be,' 'you be' and so on, we say 'I am', 'you are', 'he/she is', and 'we, you or they are.' So we have ***am***, ***is*** and ***are***. These forms also go back to Old English where they were used as variations of the Old English verb ***sindon***. Again, this was another verb which meant 'to be.'

In actually, this verb ***sindon*** was itself a combination of two even older Indo-European verbs. One was ****es*** and the other was ****er***. But they had become mixed together by the time of Old English. So let's look a little closer at those ultimate roots.

The Indo-European root ****es*** did most of the heavy lifting. It also meant 'to be' or 'to exist,' and it ultimately gave us the words ***is*** and ***am***. It also had a plural version ***sind*** which was used in Old English. That Indo-European root ****es*** also passed into Latin. It is the basis of many, but not all, of the modern forms of ***be*** in French and Spanish. From Latin, it also gave us words like ***exist***, ***essence*** and ***essential***.

Within Old English, the Anglo-Saxons used a form of that word ***eom*** in first person singular. They would say 'ic eom,' which was the original version of 'I am.' And they would also use it in third person singular. They would say 'he is' or 'heo is,' which was the original verison of 'he is' or 'she is.' In fact, 'he is' was written the exact same way in Old English – 'H-E I-S.' So ***am*** and ***is*** came from this Indo-European root word ****es***. And during the period of Middle English, these forms pushed out that other verb ***be***. So both forms could actually be found in Britain during Middle English, depending on where you were. So you might hear 'I be' – or 'ic beo' – in one region and 'I am' somewhere else. And you might here 'he be' – or 'he biþ' – in one place and 'he is' in another.

But over time, ***am*** and ***is*** became standard. And the ***be*** form was dropped.

So that's first and third person singular. But what about second person singular – the singular ***you***? – what the Anglo-Saxons called ***þu*** and what Middle English called ***thou***. For this case, the Anglo-Saxons used that other Indo-European root ****er***. They would say 'þu eart,' which later became 'thou art.' Of course, 'thou art' was a very popular construction in Shakespeare's writings and the King James Bible. Again, this form pushed out 'you be' – or 'þu bist' – as a construction. But it didn't survive beyond the early Modern English period. 'Thou art' soon gave way to 'you are.'

So when it comes to our modern singular forms ***am***, ***is*** and ***are***, we use them today in much the same way they were used in Old English and Middle English. They had rivals in 'I be,' 'you be' and ' he or she be,' but those ***be***'s were pushed out.

So what about the plural forms? Well, this is where things changed. And once again, this is where we the Vikings played a role. Again, as I've noted, Old English and Middle English

sometimes used the ***be*** form here. So you could find 'we be,' 'you all be,' and 'they be.' Actually, the Anglo-Saxons used ***beoþ*** – a variation of ***be***. But it had become just ***be*** during Middle English. And as I noted earlier, this form even survived into early Modern English in a phrase like 'the powers that be.'

But early English also used that other verb form which gave us words like ***am*** and ***is. The*** plural version of that verb was ***sindon***. And if you've studied German, that form will look very familiar because it is cognate with the form used in German. So the Anglo-Saxons would sometimes say 'we sindon' for 'we are.' And 'ge sindon' for 'you are.' And 'he sindon' for 'they are.' Again that word ***sindon*** came from that Indo-European root word ****es***, which gave us ***am*** and ***is.*** But that word ***sindon*** began to die out in early Middle English.

The word ***sindon*** had a new rival in the north. And that rival came from the Vikings. In the Old Norse language of the Vikings, the plural forms were ***erum***, ***eruþ***, ***eru***. They were all derived from that other Indo-European root word ****er***, which gave us second person singular ***art*** as in 'thou art.' These Norse plural forms entered northern English and collapsed into a single plural form pronounced as ***aron*** or ***arn***.

We can actually date this entry based upon the surviving texts. Around the year 970, the Lindisfarne Gospels were translated from Latin to Old English in the north of England. And the translator used the form ***arun*** for the English form ***synd***. Within a couple of centuries, that verb form ***aron*** had spread throughout the north of England, but the south held on to that older form ***sindon***.

So in early Middle English, if you wanted to say 'we are,' you might say 'we sindon' in the south and 'we aron' in the north. And for 'you all are,' you might say 'ge sindon' in the south and 'ge aron' in the north.

But as I noted, that word ***sindon*** slowly died out as ***aron*** spread around the island. By the 1300s, ***sindon*** was pretty much gone. And ***aron*** evolved into our modern plural form ***are***.

So by the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, English had the singular form 'thou art' and the plural form 'you are.' Both ***art*** and ***are*** were derived from the same Indo-European and Germanic root word. But ***are*** was really the Viking form, and ***art*** was the Anglo-Saxon form. As ***thou*** died out of English, ***art*** disappeared with it. The two were fundamentally linked together. So as 'thou art' disappeared, the plural form 'you are' took over. And today, 'you are' survives as both the singular and plural forms. And again, that ***are*** form can be traced back to the Vikings.

And remember from the last episode that the word ***they*** also comes from the Vikings. So whenever we say 'they are,' that's entirely from Old Norse.

Again, the ***be*** form hung on as a rival for a while. So 'they are' and 'they be' could both be used, but ***are*** is the only standard form today. So that's how we got our very irregular verb 'to be.'

Before I conclude this episode, I wanted to briefly discuss another very irregular verb in Modern English. The verb 'to go.' Notice that we say ***go***, ***gone***, ***going***, but the past tense form is ***went***. And the reason why the verb 'to go' does that is for the same reason the verb 'to be' also changes its forms so much. The various forms of 'to go' are actually derived from two different older verbs.

The infinitive 'to go' is derived from the Old English word ***gan*** which meant 'to go.' In an earlier episode, I noted that a spider was sometimes called a ***gangle-wavre*** – a 'going weaver.' So we've seen ***gan*** before. So ***go***, ***gone*** and ***going*** are all derived from that Old English word.

But in Old English, the past tense form was ***eode***. This was derived from a completely different Indo-European word which meant 'to go.' And that old form actually lasted into Middle English. In fact, Chaucer used a slightly later version of that word ***yede***. But during the 1400s, that Old English word got a new rival – the verb ***wenden***.

Wenden also meant 'to go.' It is cognate with, and very closely related to, ***wander*** and ***wind*** – as in the 'long and winding road.' It's original form still exists in the expression to 'wend one's way.' Well this verb had a past tense form which was ***went***. So just as we have '***send*** and ***sent***,' we also had '***wend*** and ***went***.' And during the Middle English period, this word ***went*** became the standard word to use to describe someone going or traveling in the past. And it gradually replaced ***eode***. And ***went*** soon emerged as the standard past tense form of 'to go.' Of course, English also has the word ***gone*** which is derived from ***go***, but ***gone*** has been restricted to use as a past participle as in 'he has gone' or 'they have gone.'

The main point here is that highly irregular verbs like 'to be' and 'to go' result from the combination of two or more separate verbs at some point in the distant past.

So I've talked about 'to go' and 'to be.' And given the title of this episode, I guess I should talk about 'not' to be. In other words, I should discuss the word ***not*** and the most common way to make verbs negative in Modern English.

Not is a very important word in English. It allows us to turn our verbs negative – to make them mean the opposite of their normal meaning. And we do that today by putting the word ***not*** after the verb, or at least after the initial verb in a verb phrase. So 'I am not.' 'I cannot.' 'I do not.'

But Old English had the word ***ne***. And ***ne*** wasn't exactly 'not,' although there is a link which we'll see in moment. The word ***ne*** was the standard negative adverb in Old English, but it preceded the verb. So instead of 'I do not,' it was 'I ne did' – literally 'Ic ne dyde.' ***Ne*** came first.

And when the ***ne*** was followed by a verb which began with a vowel, the ***ne*** blended with that vowel and the result was a 'N' sound at the beginning of the verb. And that actually happened with the verb 'to be.' In Middle English, 'am not' was 'ne am,' and it was sometimes slurred together rendered as simply ***nam*** – N-A-M. So 'I nam' meant 'I am not.'

And ‘is not’ was ‘ne is,’ and it was sometimes slurred together and rendered as ***nis*** – N-I-S. So ‘he nis’ meant ‘he is not.’

So that word ***ne*** at the beginning often produced negative versions of words with an ‘N’ sound at the beginning. And that’s why so many of our modern negative terms begin with an ‘N.’

Never was originally ‘ne æfre’ – literally ‘not ever.’ But the two distinct words slurred together and produced ***never***.

None was originally ‘ne an’ – literally ‘not one.’ Again, ‘ne an’ slurred to ***nan*** and then became ***none***.

That earlier form ***nan*** combined with the word ***thing*** and produced ‘nan-thing’ or ***nothing*** today. But if we break it down, it is literally ‘not one thing.’

So ***never***, ***none***, and ***nothing*** all begin with an ‘N’ thanks to that Old English negative adverb ***ne***, which was usually placed first and often slurred into the word which followed it.

So ***nan thing*** was ‘nothing.’ But the Anglo-Saxons had an emphatic way of saying ‘nothing.’ It was ***ne-a-wiht*** – which literally meant ‘not ever anything.’ Initially, it just meant an emphatic ‘nothing.’ But it later evolved into our modern word ***naught*** – N-A-U-G-H-T – which still means ‘nothing.’ But a slight variation of that word in early Middle English produced the word ***not*** – N-O-T. So as you might have guessed, ***naught*** and ***not*** come from the same Old English root.

So our modern word ***not*** appeared in early Middle English still having a sense of ‘nothing.’ And it might have remained indistinct from ‘naught’ had it not been for the Normans.

The Normans arrived in 1066, and they brought their French language with them. And French made verbs negative with two words – ***ne*** and another element – usually ***pas***. And those words book-ended the verb – ***ne*** came before the verb and ***pas*** came after it. So in French, ‘I know’ is ‘Je sais.’ But ‘I do not know’ is ‘Je ne sais pas.’

Well, in early Middle English, this French idea of bookending verbs in this manner actually spread into English. In fact, that French ***ne*** in ‘***ne pas***’ and that English ***ne*** were not only spelled the same way, they were actually cognate. They both came from the original Indo-European language. And that’s why they behaved so similarly in French and English sentences. Both languages used that word before the verb to make the verb negative. But French put an element after the verb as well, usually ***pas***. So English speakers starting doing the same thing. Except instead of ***pas***, they used ***not***. So based on the French model, ***ne*** went before the verb just as it always had, and ***not*** was now added after the verb just like ***pas*** in French. So ‘I did’ could be made negative with the expression ‘I ne did not.’

So that word ‘***not***’ took its place after the verb where it still exists today. Of course, over time, as the French influence declined, this system broke down. At times, it was common to just use either ***ne*** before the verb or ***not*** after the verb. You didn’t always have to use both. But with the

decline of French, ***ne*** eventually disappeared from English altogether, and that left ***not*** behind the verb. So we went from Old English 'I ne did' to 'I ne did not' to 'I did not.'

And this 'ne not' construction could be used with any verb in Middle English. So 'Hit ne swelleth not' was literally 'it not swells not' – but it meant 'It swells not.' This type of speech was very common in Middle English. And it spread into early Modern English. And once again, we recognize those constructions from Shakespeare and the King James Bible.

The opening lines of Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice' are: "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad.' So 'I know not.' A few lines later, he writes, 'But fish not, with this melancholy bait.' So 'fish not.' In Henry VIII, he writes, "Corruption wins not more than honesty.' Followed a couple of lines later with, "Be just, and fear not." Of course, 'fear not' features prominently in the King James Bible as well.

But this construction which we associate with this older texts ultimately came from this French idea of '***ne pas***,' which became '***ne not***' in English. But by the 1500s and 1600s, that older construction of 'fear not' and 'know not' began to die out thanks to a new construction using the word ***do***. Those older phrases were gradually replaced with phrases like 'do not fear' and 'do not have,' and 'do not know.' Notice that ***not*** still takes its place behind the initial verb ***do***. And in other verb phrases it also follows the initial verb, so 'am not going,' 'is not here,' 'will not listen,' and so on.

Way back in the episode about the Celtic influences on English, I discussed John McWhorter's theories that the way English uses ***do*** today in this manner was a borrowing from the Celtic languages. I am not going to re-hash that argument here. I just want to note that ***do*** entered English grammar, and it largely broke down that old Middle English construction. Today, we don't really stick ***not*** behind any random verb. Instead, it's use had been largely limited to a position after the initial word in a verb phrase, so typically after words like ***do***, ***can***, ***will***, ***shall***, ***am***, ***is***, ***are***, ***have***, ***has*** and so on.

So have it in phrases like 'I do not see,' 'I can not go,' 'I have not been,' 'I am not there.' But we don't tend say things like 'go not,' or 'speak not,' and 'run not in the house.' But we might use those types of phrases if we want to speak in an old fashioned way. So in that context we might say, 'Fear not' or 'Worry not.' But otherwise, the use of ***not*** – or at least its position in the sentence – has become more limited over time.

Now, in the examples I just gave like 'I do not' or 'I cannot' or 'I have not,' notice what tends to happen to the sound at the end. In most of those cases, the constructions are so common, that English speakers have often slurred that ***not*** ending into a contraction at the end. So 'do not' became ***don't***, and 'cannot' became ***can't***. And 'have not' became ***haven't***. And so on. All of these contractions were in place by the 1600s by the time of Shakespeare.

Notice that this is the same thing that happened when that Old English negative form ***ne*** appeared before certain words. 'Ne ever' slurred into ***never***. And 'ne an' slurred into ***none***. So it doesn't matter where English puts these negative words, we always tend to slur them.

And we also slur them when they follow the verb 'to be.' 'Is not' became 'isn't.' And 'was not' became 'wasn't.' And 'were not' became 'weren't.' And 'are not' became 'aren't.' But what about 'am not' as in 'I am not.' We don't have ***amn't***. But there was once a contraction for that phrase which evolved around the same time as all of those other contractions. And I bet you know what it is. It was the notorious ***ain't***.

'Am not' evolved into ***an't*** and then to ***ain't***. And this was actually a common expression for a couple of centuries from around the time of Shakespear through the 1700s. But by the 1800s, the use of the ***ain't*** had extended to 'is not' and 'are not' as well. So it was common to hear someone say 'you ain't,' or 'he ain't,' or 'we ain't.' But originally, it was only used as a shortened version of the first person 'am not.' The major culprit here appears to be Cockney English in London. The expanded use of ***ain't*** was very prevalent in that dialect. And if you've ever read Charles Dickens, you'll know that he used it a lot in the voices of his characters.

And it was that expanding ***ain't*** that created the problem for grammarians. During the 1800s, when the use of 'ain't' was expanding to these other uses, grammarians began to fight back. Apparently, it had been acceptable to say 'I ain't' – since 'ain't' was really a contraction of 'am not.' But now, in the 1800s, people were using it the wrong way. They were saying 'he ain't' and 'she ain't' and 'they ain't' – crazy stuff like that. So grammarians began a full frontal assault on ***ain't***. And in the process, the word became stigmatized. So stigmatized in fact, that standard English dropped it altogether. Even the once acceptable, 'I ain't' became unacceptable. And that's why English doesn't have a negative contraction from 'am not' anymore. English once had it, but it ain't here any more.

Of course, some English speakers have tried to compensate for the loss of ***ain't*** by adopting ***aren't*** since it sounds kind of similar. And so you might hear a phrase like, 'I'm right, aren't I?' Even though we hear it in common speech, English majors tell us that is improper because ***are*** is a plural form. So the more appropriate construction should be 'I'm right, am I not?' The bottom line is that they're not gonna let us have our 'am not' contraction back. It's gone, and it 'aint' coming back.

Now I noted earlier that English adopted the French model of '***ne pas***' and created '***ne not***.' And the ***ne*** part was eventually dropped from the front of that combination. Well, the same thing sometimes happens in modern colloquial French. It is common for some French speakers to drop the ***ne*** part in '***ne pas***.' So instead of saying 'Je ne sais pas,' they would say, 'je sais pas.' And to the extent that that is happening in French, it sort of mirrors what happened several centuries ago in English.

But American linguist Mark Liberman has taken this development and applied it to Modern American English. He has argued that when there are two negative features in a sentence, the second one can become intensified to the point where the first one becomes unnecessary. We don't need that first feature anymore, because the second feature does all the work. So '***ne pas***' isn't really necessary because the ***pas*** part is sufficient to convey negativity. And I am not doing his entire argument justice here, but you get the idea.

But the most compelling part of Liberman's argument is that he applies it to the phrase, 'I could not care less.' Of course, it literally means that I can not care any less than I do right now. I have reached rock bottom on the 'care' scale.

But it has become quite common in American English for people to say 'I could care less.' And it drives English speakers in other parts of the world crazy. And maybe that's why Americans continue to say it. But it drives a lot of Americans crazy too. 'I could care less' means you actually care – at least a little bit – because you could care less that you do right now.

So where did this construction come from. Well, the exact origins are unknown. Both phrases are very modern. The first recorded instance of 'I could not care less' was in the Chicago Tribune in 1944. And the first recorded instance of 'I could care less' was just eleven years later in the Washington Post. So why did that later version, 'I could care less,' thrive in American English.

Liberman argues that it was the same basic process that sometimes results the loss of ***ne*** in '***ne pas***' in French. In the sentence, 'I could not care less,' there are two words which convey negativity – ***not*** and ***less***. And they bookend the verb ***care***. So they work kind of like ***ne pas*** in French or the way '***ne not***' once worked in English. And within American English, the second word ***less*** is a strong enough intensifier that it renders the initial ***not*** redundant and unnecessary. So 'I could not care less' becomes 'I could care less.' They express the same meaning. The same way that 'Je ne sais pas' becomes just 'Je sais pas.' And the same way 'I ne did not' just became 'I did not.' To the average speaker and listener, both versions mean the same thing because the second negative word does all of the work, and it expresses all of the negativity.

I should note that there are other theories about 'I could care less' including that it was originally a sarcastic statement based on the original, but I can't provide any definitive answers here, so the overall debate about that phrase will certainly rage on.

Now having discussed the possible redundancy of negative features in a sentence, I have to address the large elephant in the room. Those dreaded double-negatives. Now '***ne pas***' or '***ne not***' are not double negatives. Those two features complement and reinforce each other. A double negative occurs when the two negative features contradict each other.

They appear in many ways. 'I didn't get nothing.' 'I do not disagree.' Popular music is common culprit. The Rolling Stones gave us, 'I can't get no satisfaction.' Pink Floyd gave us, 'We don't need no education.' And Tom Jones gave us, 'It's not unusual.' If English was governed by strict logic, those negative terms would cancel each other out. 'It's not unusual' should just be 'It's usual,' but the song wouldn't sound the same. And 'we need education' sort of defeats the meaning of Roger Waters' lyric. And who knew, 'I can't get no satisfaction' actually means Mick Jagger was quite satisfied - thank you very much.

But even though we're told these are improper sentences, the fact is that English has always used double negatives. They were once very common in the language, and they were perfectly acceptable. They appear in Beowulf and in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. Old English sometimes used triple and quadruple negatives within the same sentence.

Even Shakespeare used them. In 'As You Like It,' he wrote: "I cannot goe no further." The idea that double-negatives were 'bad' was really a product of the Renaissance and the rise of logic and mathematical equations. In 1762, Robert Lowth wrote his 'Short Introduction to English Grammar.' It was a very important text in the formulation of English grammar rules. And he asserted that double negatives cancel each other just as in a mathematical equation. So he said that they should be avoided

Now, you can't really argue with his logic. The only problem is that language is not always logical. As we just saw with 'I could care less.' What people say, and what people mean, and not always the same thing. When we use more than one negative term in a sentence, we're often trying to emphasize the negativity. 'I can't get no satisfaction' is just more emphatic than 'I can't get satisfaction.'

And really 'I could not care less' is sort of the same idea. We could just say 'I do not care.' But we want to emphasize how much we don't care. So we 'could not care less.' We just creating emphasis. Of course, that sentence is logical. The problem is that some of them are not logical. Appropriately enough, 'we don't need no education' does in fact mean that you need some education.

So those double-negatives have been stigmatized and pushed to the side in Modern English. Logic has tried to overtake emotion. But emotion is tough to overcome. And those emotional English speakers keep fighting back. And those double negatives remain a common feature of Modern English.

And with that, I don't have nothing else to say, which really means that I have a lot more to say. So next time, I'll say it.

In the next episode, we'll continue our look at verbs. Specifically, we'll look at the traditional distinction between so-called strong verbs and weak verbs. This is a very Germanic distinction which still exists in the language. But it has created a lot of confusion over the centuries. So next time, we try to sort out some of that history.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.