**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

EPISODE 100:
DECODING ENGLISH

EPISODE 100: DECODING ENGLISH

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 100: Decoding English. So, this is Episode 100, and I thought this might be a good time to do a special episode to commemorate the accomplishment. When I first began the podcast, I had planned to do 100 episodes in total with about 25 dedicated to each period covered in the podcast – Pre-English, Old English, Middle English and Modern English. I actually maintained that plan for a while, but I abandoned that idea some time back. So rather than this being the culmination of the podcast, it is just an anniversary episode.

I thought this might be a good time to discuss the overall arch of the podcast – where we've been and where we're going. And I'm wedging this episode between the regular episodes, so hopefully you won't have to wait the full three weeks before the next episode.

For some time now, I've been wanting to discuss the way that sound changes provide clues about the origins of English words. If we go back and look at all the specific sound changes I've covered in the podcast and put them together, we can actually come up with a set of general rules that can help us identify where a particular word came from. These rules can help us figure out if a word is a native Old English word or a loanword from another language. So this time, I want to do a quick review of the basic sound changes we've covered over the past 100 episodes, and I want to point out how we can use those changes to decode the origin of English words.
But before I begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com and I'm on twitter @englishhistpod . And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com

Now let me begin by making a few general announcements about the podcast. First of all, I always mention at the beginning of each episode that you can support the podcast at Patreon. The direct link is Patreon.com/historyofenglish. You can also go to the main website and link from there. I want thank all of you who have signed up there. The response has been great, and I really appreciate that support. I don't mention Patreon as much as I probably should, but let me mention a couple of things about that option if you're not a member. First of all, everyone who signs up to support the podcast at $5 a month receives a short bonus episode in between each regular episode. By combining Patreon with the regular podcast, I try to provide new content on a regular basis. So every week or two, there is a new episode on one of the two feeds.

The bonus episodes at Patreon are a bit of a hodge-podge. Sometimes, the episodes explore some aspect of the most recent regular episode in more detail. Sometimes, I discuss issues completely unrelated to the narrative in the regular podcast. For example, I've put together a series of episode that explore how English has created new words over the centuries. And that is an ongoing theme.

I am also working on a series of episodes that will explore the history of language prior to original Indo-European language. I intend to explore how the Indo-European family relates to some of the other language families, especially those in Northern Europe and Asia. And I'll look at the arguments and evidence for an even older proto-language. I didn't cover that period in the regular

podcast because it involves a lot of speculation and unproven theories. But I thought it might be interesting to try to tackle that topic in those bonus episodes. So there is a lot of bonus content over at the Patreon site, and if you're concerned about long-term commitments, there aren't any. You can cancel your support at any time. But again, that Patreon support helps me to keep the podcast going on a regular basis – and it helps me to keep it ad-free.

Also, I get a lot of questions about the transcripts of the old episodes, and I continue to work on those when I have time. I have released some updates recently, and I should have some more in the near future. So you can go to the Transcripts page of the website for those. Again, the main site is historyofenglishpodcast.com.

I also get questions about putting the material in a more traditional book format. I noted in an earlier episode that I intend to do that. That's another project on the 'to do list,' but I want to update the transcripts first. So stay tuned, for more updates in the future about those projects.

And lastly, I wanted to make an announcement about the Voice Samples. About a year and half ago, I invited all of you to leave a voice sample at the website for use when I get to Modern English accents. Well I'm happy to report that I got a LOT of responses to that request. I have received over 200 voice samples from all over the world, and I am still working through them and categorizing them for future use. I recently updated the voice sample page of the website to include a list of sentences. And I made that change because those sentences help to highlight certain vowel sounds that tend to vary among English speakers. So I want to continue to invite all of you to leave a sample whether it be a personal story about funny words or phrases you have encountered or simply a reading of the sentences on the website page. And you can leave a new sample by reading the sentences even if you have left a sample before. As I said, my plan is to incorporate some of those samples into the podcast when I get to the development of Modern English. And again, that is the Voice Samples page at the main website – historyofenglishpodcast.com.

And this is probably a good point to discuss where we are in the overall story of English and where we are headed. We're currently in the early to mid 1200s, so we're still in the early Middle English period. You may have noticed that I have slowed down the narrative a bit as we explore this period. And I have done that on purpose because this is one of the most fascinating periods of English.

It was during this period from the late 1100s through the mid-1300s that English went from a very foreign-sounding Germanic language to a language that we can actually read and understand today. By the time we get to Chaucer in the late 1300s, we'll have a language that most modern speakers can understand. There will still be a lot of unusual words, and spellings will be much more fluid that Modern English. But it will clearly be an early form of English.

So if we want to understand how Old English became Modern English, I think we really need to focus on what was happening during this period – especially the period of the 1200s and early 1300s. That's why I want to take my time with this period, and I want to make sure we take a look at the few surviving major manuscripts from this period. Over the next few episodes, we'll continue to look at those texts, and we'll try to pinpoint how the language was changing.

Eventually we'll find our way to Chaucer in the late 1300s, and then we'll start to look at the Great Vowel Shift during the 1400s and 1500s. We'll then turn to Shakespeare and the early Modern English period. And that will take us to the expansion of English to North America and beyond. I've spent a lot of time looking at the history of England and the British Isles. And as we move into the Modern English period, I'll continue that approach, but I'll be focusing more on the history of North America, Australia and New Zealand, and the other regions where English spread. And as we get into this later period, we'll also look at the development of regional English accents and dialects. And that's where all of those voice samples will really come in handy. So that's the game plan going forward.

Now this time, I wanted to take this opportunity to review the sound changes we've explored since the beginning of the podcast series. This is one of my favorite topics because I think it really shows how various Indo-European languages are connected. It's amazing how a couple of basic sound changes can explain how various cognates are related. It also helps to see how the various Indo-European languages have evolved over time. So sound changes are a fundamental part of the story of English. And that's why I began the podcast with the sound changes identified by Jacob Grimm.

Unfortunately, the various sound changes have been spread out over the past 99 episodes, so it is probably difficult to keep track of all of the changes. I have been looking for a good place to review those changes to show how the pieces fit together, and I thought this would be a good time and place to do that. But rather than just listing all of those sound changes, I want to show you how those changes can help us to identify if a word is a native Old English word or a borrowed word from another language.

So let's start with Grimm's Law – the series of sound changes identified by Jacob Grimm. As we saw early on, these changes were the changes that took place within the original Germanic language as it evolved from Proto-Indo-European. So generally speaking, these changes apply to all of the Germanic languages, even though some of these sounds have continued to evolve within some of those languages.

Grimm actually identified nine specific early sound changes, but three of them didn't really have much affect on Old English so I didn't focus on them early on. But those three Indo-European sounds did change in some notable ways within early Latin, so they do play a role in our story. So let me being with those three sounds.

These were three very aspirated or breathy sounds, and within the Germanic languages, they just lost their aspiration or breathiness. There was an aspirated 'b' sound – /bhh/ – that just became a regular 'b' sound. And there was an aspirated 'd' sound that became a regular 'd' sound. So within the Germanic languages, these sound changes were very subtle.

But when those two sounds passed to Latin, they both produced an 'f' sound there. So this helps to explain why certain Old English words have a 'b' or 'd' sound where the related Latin words have an 'f' sound.

We see this distinction in Old English *brother* and Latin *fraternal* – both from the same root word. We also see it Germanic *bloom* and *blossom* and Latin *flower* – again from the same root. Also, Germanic *blaze* and Latin *flame*. Germanic *birth* and Latin *fertile*. *Rebut* comes from a Germanic root, and *refute* comes from a related Latin root. We have Germanic *break* and *breach* on the one hand and Latin *fracture* and *fragment* on the other hand. And if you like fava beans (with a nice chianti), the term *fava bean* shows this same distinction. *Fava* and *bean* are actually cognate. *Fava* is a Latin word for bean, and *bean* is the native Old English word. So that was the aspirated 'b' sound. It produced a Germanic 'b' sound and a Latin 'f' sound.

The same thing happened with the original aspirated 'd' sound. It became a regular 'd' in the Germanic languages and an 'f' sound in Latin. From an Indo-European word that meant doorway, it gave us the English word *door* and Latin words for things found outside of the door like *forest* and *foreign*. We also see the distinction in the Germanic word *dust* and the Latin word *fume*. And the English word *deed* and the Latin word *feat*. So that was the aspirated 'd' sound.

And the original Indo-European language also had an aspirated 'g' sound that became a regular 'g' sound in the Germanic languages, but it shifted to a variety of sounds with Latin, depending on the context. In many words, it shifted to an 'h' sound, which explains why English has the native word *guest*, but Latin gave us the words *host* and *hotel*, all from the same root. It also explains the link between the Germanic word *garden* and the Latin word *horticulture*.

So these three changes didn't directly impact Old English that much, but they do explain some links with Latin words. Then there were six other specific sound changes that did impact Old English. And these changes show how sound changes are often the result of a domino effect – where one sound changes, it often triggers a series of changes. So we just saw that the aspirated or breathy 'b', 'd' and 'g' sounds lost their aspiration, and they just became regular 'b', 'd' and 'g' sounds within the Germanic languages. But the original Indo-European language already had regular 'b', 'd' and 'g' sounds. So those existing sounds shifted to new sounds. The 'b' sound became a 'p' sound, 'd' became 't', and 'g' became 'k'. And I gave lots of examples of those changes back in the episode on Grimm's Law. But those three new sounds – 'p', 't' and 'k' – also existed in the original Indo-European language. So words that had those three sounds were also affected, and once again the domino effect pushed those sounds to new sounds. So the 'p' sound became an 'f' sound, 't' became 'th' and 'k' became 'h'. And that accounts for all nine changes identified by Jacob Grimm. And again, those changes were the result of a domino effect, and it produced that cascading series of sound changes. As we'll see when we get to the great vowel shift near the end of the Middle English period, the same thing happened with the long vowels in English. As one shifted, it pushed several others out of the way.

Now out of all of those changes identified by Jacob Grimm, there is one that can help us determine if a word is an Old English word. I noted that the 'b' sound shifted to the 'p' sound. Well, the original Indo-European language had very few words that began with a 'b' sound. So very few Germanic words acquired a new 'p' sound at the front. And almost all of the existing words that had a 'p' sound at the front were affected by one of the other rules – that shift from the 'p' sound to the 'f' sound which produced the English word *father* which exists beside the Latin word *paternal*. So thanks to those two changes under Grimm's Law, the 'p' sound virtually disappeared at the front of

Germanic words. And Old English had very few words that began with a 'p' sound. It had the word *pound*, and *pin* – as in a needle, and *pen* – as in a cow pen, and a few others that have disappeared over time. So, as a general rule, when we come across a Modern English word that begins with a 'p' sound, if its not *pound*, *pin* or *pen*, we can assume that it is not an Old English word. It was borrowed from somewhere else – mostly from Latin and French. So that's our first rule.

Now after exploring Grimm's Law and the Indo-European migrations, we turned to ancient Greece, and we looked at the Greek influence on English. And Greece also had three very aspirated sounds that lost their aspiration or breathiness over time. And we can see evidence of those sound changes in certain words borrowed from Greek. And by spotting those changes, we can identify those words as Greek loanwords, so they are not native Old English words.

The three Greek breathy sounds that changed over time were an aspirated 'p' sound, an aspirated 'c' or 'k' sound, and an aspirated 'r' sound. And the Romans borrowed a lot of words from the Greeks that had those Greek sounds. Now the Greeks had specific letters for those sounds, but the Romans didn't have those letters because those sounds didn't exist in Latin. So when the Romans borrowed Greek words with those sounds, they had to figure out how to represent those sounds.

Since these consonant sounds were breathy or aspirated, the Romans decided use the letter for the closest consonant sound in Latin, and they decided to add an H after the letter to reflect the fact that the Greeks pronounced them in a very breathy way. Keep in mind that the 'h' sound is really just a slight breathy sound. So the Romans thought that was a good way to indicate aspiration in those borrowed Greek words.

Using that new spelling technique, the Romans spelled words with the breathy 'p' sound with a PH letter combination. And words with the breathy 'r' sound were spelled with an RH letter combination. And words with a breathy 'c' or 'k' sound were spelled with CH – because you might remember that the Romans used the letter C for the 'k' sound.

Now that breathy 'p' sound – spelled as PH by the Romans – was in the process of shifting to an 'f' sound when the Romans borrowed those words. And within Latin, those Greek words were usually just pronounced with a straight-forward 'f' sound. But that PH spelling lingers as a marker of those Greek words that once had that breathy 'p' sound. So as a general rule, when we encounter a word where the 'f' sound is spelled with a PH, we are usually looking at a loanword from Greek. That includes words like *philosophy*, *phone*, *physics*, *pheasant*, *phonetics*, *elephant* and so on.

Now this rule works best when the PH appears at the beginning of a word. It doesn't work as well when the PH appears at the end of a word – especially in names like *Adolph*, *Rudolph*, *Randolph*, and so on. Those are actually Germanic names where the spelling has been revised under Greco-Roman influence. But if we stick with words that begin with PH, it's a pretty good rule. So again, words that begin with PH – pronounced as 'f' – are usually words borrowed from Greek, so they're not Old English words.

Now Greek also had that breathy 'r' sound which lost its aspiration or breathiness over time. Those words came to be pronounced with a regular 'r' sound, but the RH spelling remains as a marker of that original Greek sound. So again, when we encounter a word where the 'r' sound is spelled with an RH, we are usually looking a Greek loanword. That is true for words like *rhinoceros*, *rhyme*, *rhythm*, *rhetoric*, *rhapsody*, *rhubarb*, and so on.

Then Greek also had a breathy 'k' sound that the Romans represented with the letter combination CH. This was actually the first use of the CH letter combination which was later applied to other sounds. But originally since the letter C was used for the 'k' sound, the Romans used the CH to refer to a very breathy 'k 'sound – something like /x/ – not the /ch/ sound that we tend to use it for today. And this new CH letter combination was a common spelling in words borrowed from Greek. Now once again, that aspiration or breathiness disappeared over time. So within these words, the CH came to just represent a regular 'k 'sound. And many of those words were eventually borrowed into English.

So today, when we come across a word that begins with a CH, but the CH represents a 'k' sound – not a /ch/ sound – we are usually looking at a loanword from Greek. That includes words like *choir*, *chorus*, *chrome*, *chronic*, *character*, *chaos*, *chasm*, *chameleon* and so on. This also helps to explain why we sometimes use the CH letter combination for the 'k' sound.

So we now have four general rules that help us to pick out a loanword. If a word begins with a P, a PH, an RH, or a CH pronounced as 'k,' then we are almost always dealing with a loanword. Those are not usually native Old English words.

Now after we looked at the Greeks, we turned our attention to the Romans and the Latin language. And during the late Latin period, we saw that Latin itself experienced quite a few sound changes, and those changes continued as the various Romance languages emerged.

First of all, the 'h' sound started to disappear from Latin around the second and third centuries. And that left late Latin with a lot of silent H's – especially at the beginning of words. And those silent H's passed into French and then ultimately into English. So as a general rule, when we encounter a word with a silent H, we are usually looking at a French loanword.   That includes words like *honor*, *honest*, *hour*, *heir*, and the American pronunciation of H-E-R-B as /erb/. So this gives us another general rule. Whenever we encounter a silent H at the beginning of a word, we're usually looking at a loanword – not a native Old English word.

Now shortly after the 'h' sound began to disappear in Latin, the 'y' sound also started to change. You might remember that words like /yoo-lius/ and /yoo-piter/ became *Julius* and *Jupiter*. So the 'y' sound shifted to a 'j' sound. This 'j' sound was a unique sound at the time. It was a brand-new sound in Latin, and it was also uncommon in the Germanic languages. English was an exception because it did have a 'j' sound, but its use was very limited. It usually appeared at the end of words like *bridge* and *hedge* and *ridge*. So even English words didn't start with a 'j' sound.   That meant that this relatively new 'j' sound in Latin tended to distinguish English and Latin words. When that 'j' sound appeared at the front of a word, it usually indicated a Latin or French word and not a native Old English word. So words like *justice*, *jury*, *jetty*, *jeopardy*, *join*, *juice* and so on, they are all

loanwords. And when we come across a word that begins with a 'j' sound, we can generally assume that it is not from Old English.

So the 'y' sound shifted to a 'j' sound in Latin, and around the same time, the Latin 'w' sound shifted to a 'v' sound. This helps to explain the link between *wine* and *vine* or *vineyard*. They began as the same Latin word – *winum*. Old English borrowed the word from the Romans before the sound change. So Old English ended up with the word as *wine* with a 'w' sound. Meanwhile, the 'w' sound shifted to a 'v' sound in late Latin, and that produced the word *vine* from French which literally meant a grape vine or the plant that produces grapes. Old English had created the word *wine-geard* for the place where wine got its start, so the place where grapes were grown. And after the French word *vine* was introduced in the 1300s, English changed the term from *wine-geard* to *vineyard*.

Now again, this 'v' sound was similar to the 'j' sound in that it was new and little unusual at first. It was a brand new sound in Latin. And at the time, it was rare in the Germanic languages. Again, English was an exception because it did have a 'v' sound in very limited situations. As we've seen before, a word like *leaf* became *leaves* with a 'v' sound at the end when it was made plural. So English did have a 'v' sound, but it only occurred in certain limited situations where the 'f' sound became voiced and switched to a 'v.' This could happen in the middle of a word or at the end of a word, like when a word ending in F was made plural.

So *leaf* and *leaves*, *thief* and *thieves*, *knife* and *knives*, and so on. So Old English had a 'v' sound, but it didn't really appear at the beginning of a word. But as we just saw, the Latin 'w' sound switched to a 'v' sound, so Latin and French words started to come into English with a 'v' sound at the front. So when a word started with a 'v' sound, it was usually a loanword.

So during the Middle English period, words started to come into English with an initial 'j' sound or 'v' sound. And those were probably funny sounding words at first because Old English didn't start words with those sound. And today, we can use that fact to identify loanwords. Again words that begin with a J are usually loanwords, and words that being with a V also tend to be loanwords – usually from Latin or French. But sometimes from other languages like *vodka* from Russian and *veda* from Sanskrit.

Now as you may know, other Germanic languages also experienced that same shift from the 'w' sound to the 'v' sound, but that shift happened later in those language. And English has borrowed a few of those words as well. For example, we have *Viking* and *Valhalla* from the Scandinavian languages. But again, those are still loanwords.

Now there are a small number of exceptions where a native English word has a 'v' sound, and I actually mentioned this exception in the recent episode where I discussed the Owl and the Nightingale. I noted that people in the far south of England tended to pronounce their F's as V's. Mechanically, those are very similar sounds. The only difference is that the F is voiceless and the V is voiced. So speakers in the far south tended to voice that 'f' sound, thereby making it a V. In this far southern dialect, a word like *fox* was often pronounced as *vox*, and it ultimately gave us the word *vixen* for a female fox. It gave us *vane* – as in a weather-vane – from Old English *fana*. And it gave us *vat* – meaning a large tub – from the Old English word *fæt*. But other than those three

words, that dialect had very little effect on Modern English, and other than those exceptions, most words that begin with a V are loanwords.

Late Latin also had the 'z' or 'zed' sound which was not common in English. English did have the 'z' sound in certain limited situations. It was kind of like when the 'f' sound turned into a 'v' sound in certain situations – so when F became voiced. Well, S and Z worked the same way. S is a voiceless sound, but when it is voiced, it becomes a 'z' sound. Well, Old English has the 's' sound, and in certain limited situations it would become voiced and switch to a 'z' sound. But it was so rare, that Old English didn't even use a separate letter for that sound. So it didn't have a letter Z – or zed. It just used the S. And even though the S was sometimes pronounced as a Z, that never really happened at the front of a word, except again in the far south of England. And even when it did occur, those words were still spelled with an S. So today, when we come across a word spelled with a Z – especially words that begin with a Z – it is usually a loanword, not a native Old English word.

So we're still in the Late Latin period. And during that period, as the various modern Romance languages began to emerge, the 'k' sound and the hard 'g' sound both moved from the back to the throat to the front of the mouth when they appeared before the front vowels – E and I. This was that process I looked at early on in the podcast called assibilation or palatalization. This process actually affected most of the languages of Western Europe in different ways, but we're mainly concerned about its effects on Old English and early French because that's where many of our modern words come from. I'm going to deal with Old English in a minute, so let's focus on the French sound changes first.

As we saw early on, both Latin and English represented the 'k' sound with the letter C. And in early French, that 'k' sound moved forward in the mouth and became an 's' sound before E and I which were the front vowels. So C before A, O, U remained the same. It remained as a 'k' sound. But C before E and I, it became an 's' sound. So in French, the letter C came be used for the 's' sound in these situations. And even today, when we use the letter C for the 's' sound, we're really using a technique that originated in France. Other languages experienced a similar change. For example, Spanish also used the letter C in that way. But English borrowed much more heavily from French. So as a general rule today, when an English word uses a letter C for the 's' sound – especially at the beginning of a word – it is usually loanword. It's not a native Old English word. So *cemetery*, *cent*, *certify*, *cider*, *cigar*, *cinnamon*, *civil*, *city*, *circle* – they're all loanwords.

Now the hard 'g' sound in the back of the throat experienced a similar change in late Latin and early French. Keep in mind that the 'k' and 'g' sounds are very similar. K is voiceless and G is voiced, but otherwise they are mechanically the same sound. So it isn't surprising that they both experienced similar changes over time. And the 'g' sound also shifted forward in the mouth when it appeared before the front vowels. In very early French, it became a /j/ sound. So it was essentially the 'j' sound that we looked at earlier. But when this sound is represented by letter G, we usually just call it the 'soft G' sound. So the soft G in *giraffe* or *Germany* is really just the 'j' sound found in words like *Julius* and *Jupiter*. And thanks to those two distinct sound changes in late Latin and early French, English took in a lot words with that sound. In fact, English is the only Germanic language that routinely uses the /j/ sound. So again, words that begin with this sound are usually loanwords

whether spelled with a J or a soft G. So *gender*, *gem*, *general*, *generous*, *gentle*, *gigantic*, *ginger*, *giraffe*, *gist* – they're all loanwords.

So the hard 'g' and 'k' sounds softened before the front vowels – E and I. Then a little later, in Paris and the central part of France, the 'k' sound also started to soften before the 'a' sound – even though A is a back vowel. This is the sound change I discussed in the last episode – where the Parisian dialect has a lot of words that begin with CHA where Latin and other Romance dialects have those words with a traditional CA. Latin *cappa* became French *chapel*, and all that. Well, this sound didn't change before the letter A in Old English. A C before an A remained /ka/ in Old English. So as a general rule, when we come across words in English that begin with CHA, they're usually loanwords. *Chain*, *chapel*, *chalice*, *chance*, *chamber*, *chase*, *change*, *chart*, *charge* – they're all loanwords.

Then in later French, that CHA – or /cha/ – sound shifted to an SHA – /sha/ – sound. So we got words like *chapeau*, *chaperon*, *chateau*, *champagne* and so on. That gives us another general rule. When a word is spelled with CH – and that CH represents the /sh/ sound – it is almost always a loanword.

And around the same time, in later French, the traditional 'j' sound shifted to the modern French /zh/ sound as in *Jacques* and *bonjour*. This sound passed into English is words like *mirage*, *rouge*, and also words like *vision* and *treasure*. Words that have this /zh/ sound are almost always loanwords. So again, they're not Old English words.

And in French, the final consonant is often silent. And English has borrowed some words in recent centuries which still retain those silent letters at the end – especially a silent S or T. So words that have a silent S or T at the end are usually loanwords from French – words like *debris*, *buffet*, and *bouquet*.

I also noted in the most recent episode that French developed the /oy/ vowel sound – a diphthong, and that sound also passed into English. So words that have the /oy/ sound – spelled OI or OY – are usually loanwords. That includes words like *joy*, *voice*, *oil*, *ointment*, and so on. Words like *boy* and *toy* have uncertain origins, but they didn't appear until the Middle English period. So again, the /oy/ sound usually suggests a loanword or a word that came in after Old English.

Now before we turn to the sounds of Old English, let me stop here and summarize the rules I've just covered. These are all general rules that signify a loanword – a word borrowed from another language and generally came into English after the Old English period.

This includes words that begin with any of the following letters – a P, a V, a Z, a J, a soft G, or a silent H. Also words that begin with CHA. And words that begin with a letter C where it is pronounced as S – as in *civil* and *cease*.

Also, words that begin with a CH where the CH represents either the /sh/ sound or /k/ sound, those are usually loanwords. When they have the /sh/ sound, as in *chapeau* or *chateau*, they're usually from French. And when they have the /k/ sound, as in *choir* or *chemistry*, they're usually from Greek.

And words that have an RH spelling for the 'r' sound – like *rhinoceros*, or a PH spelling for the 'f' sound – like *philosophy*, those are also usually loanwords from Greek.

And words that have the /zh/ sound or the /oi/ sound are also usually loanwords. As are words then end in a silent S or a silent T.

So those are all good general rules to help you identify a loanword. There are occasional exceptions, but they work most of the time.

Now up to this point, we've looked at sound changes outside of English to help us identify loanwords. That means that we can exclude those words as Old English words. Now let's do the opposite. Let's turn to Old English and look for rules that'll help us pick out words that are actually native English words that have been around since the Anglo-Saxons.

Modern English has a few spellings that represent sounds that were once common in Old English, but have since disappeared or changed. But again, those spellings have lingered on. So when we encounter those spellings, we can usually assume that we are looking at a very old word that has been around since Old English. That includes words that begin with a KN like *knife*, *knight*, *knee*, *knit*, *knave*, *know* and so on. The K was originally pronounced, so those words originally began with a /kn/ sound, and the KN spelling reflects that history. By the way, the word *knife* may have been borrowed from Old Norse, but it is well attested in late Old English. And there are a few exceptions where the word came in from another Germanic language like *knob* and *knapsack*. But that KN usually indicates an Old English word.

Old English also had words that began with a GN or /gn/ sound. That sound is represented in the spelling of words like *gnat* and *gnaw*. But words like *gnarl* and *gnash* with their GN spellings came in later from uncertain origins. And *gnome* is a Latin and French word. So the GN spelling doesn't work as well when trying to identify Old English words.

We also know that Old English had the /x/ sound which has singe largely disappeared from the language. That sound was spelled with a G or an H in Old English, and it became GH in Middle English. In most cases, the GH is silent today, but in a few cases it represents an F sound as in *cough* and *laugh*. Either way, the GH spelling usually indicates an Old English word. Again, there are a few exceptions. *Ghoul* is actually an Arabic word. *Gingham* – with its GH in the middle – comes from Malaysian. And *gherkin* comes from Persian via Dutch. But these are really just a few exceptions to the general rule.

It was also common for Old English words to begin with an 'hw' sound – a slight 'h' or breathy sound before a W. Some English dialects still retain that pronunciation or a similar pronunciation, but for the most part the initial 'h' sound has disappeared from those words. So today, the initial

consonant is really just the 'w' sound. Now in Old English, most of those words had been spelled with an initial HW, but when the 'h' sound disappeared or declined, the letters were reversed to WH. So when we encounter words that begin with a WH like *what*, *why*, *when*, *where*, *white*, *wheat*, *wheel*, *whale*, and so on, we're usually dealing with an Old English word.

Again, there are a few exceptions – mostly from Old Norse. Those include Norse words like *whim*, *whirl*, and *whisk*. We also have the word *whiskey* from Gaelic. But again, those are just a few limited exceptions.

Now earlier, I talked abut the assibiliation of the 'k' and 'g' sounds in early French. Those sounds shifted forward and changed before the front vowels E and I. Well, Old English experienced similar changes, but the new sounds were different.

First, the 'hard G' sound shifted forward to a 'y' sound before the front vowels in Old English, and it produced words like *year* and *yard* and *yell*. So English got a lot of words with an initial 'y' sound which was somewhat unusual in the Germanic languages. Again, this initial 'y' sound in Old English evolved from a 'hard G' sound in most cases. And most other Germanic language retained that 'hard G' sound. So Germanic *gear* became Old English *year*, and *geard* became *yard*. And we can still hear that link in the Frankish word *garden* and the Old English word *yard*. And Germanic **gel* became Old English *yell*. The Germanic word **gel* meant 'to cry out or sing.' And we can still hear that original Germanic root at the end of the word *nightingale*. So thanks to this change in Old English, English was somewhat unique among Germanic languages in that it had a lot of words that began with a 'y' sound.

Now let's remember that Latin also once had a lot words that began with a 'y' sound like /yoo-lius/ and /yoo-piter/. But that sound had shifted to a 'j' sound in late Latin. So /yoo-lius/ and /yoo-piter/ became *Julius* and *Jupiter*. That meant that Old English had a lot words that began with a 'y' sound, but Latin and French didn't. All of that means that when we come across a word that begins with a 'y' sound, it is usually an Old English word. So *yellow*, *yield*, *yoke*, *yolk*, *young*, they're all Old English words. There are a few exceptions like the word *yacht* from Dutch and the word *yam* from West African languages. But generally speaking, that initial Y indicates a native English word.

So let's think about the evolution of that 'hard G' sound before the front vowels in Old English and French. As we've seen, it shifted to a 'y' sound in Old English, and it became a 'soft G' or /j/ sound in French. But that 'hard G' didn't really change before the front vowels in Old Norse. So when we come across a word spelled GE or GI where the G is pronounced as a 'hard G,' we are usually dealing with a Norse word because the 'g' sound changed in that environment in English and French. That includes words like *get*, *give*, *gift*, *gear*, *gill* and *girth*. We can also add in the word *geyser* from Icelandic. And there are a few exceptions like *gibbon*, *giblets* and *gizzard* from French. And *gecko* and *gingham* from Malaysian. And *girl*, *gig* and *giggle* all have uncertain origins. But the main point here is that a 'hard G' before an E or an I usually suggests a loanword – not a native Old English word. Native words switched that 'hard G' to a 'y' sound early on. And that accounts for most of our words that begin with a 'y' sound today.

11

The other consonant sound that changed before the front vowels was the 'k' sound represented by letter C. As we saw, this sound shifted forward to the 's' sound before E and I in French. But in Old English, it shifted froward to a 'ch' or /ch/ sound. And those words were later re-spelled in English with a CH. So we have Norse *kirk* and Old English *church*. We also have Spanish *queso* and Old English *cheese*. But over time, English has borrowed a lot of words with the CH sound and spelling. So I don't really have a good rule to help you to distinguish Old English words with that sound from borrowed words with that sound.

Another Old English sound change that we explored was the shift from the 'sk' or /sk/ sound to the 'sh' or /sh/ sound. I discussed that change in the context of the Viking invasions because Old Norse did not experience this change. And it gave English a lot of English and Norse word pairs or doublets where the native word has an SH sound and the Norse word has an SK sound. The classic example of this is Old English *shirt* and Old Norse *skirt*.

For our purposes, the important thing to take from this change is that Old English words don't tend to begin with an 'sk' or /sk/ sound. Again, that sound shifted in Old English. So when we find a word that begins with that sound – whether its spelled SK, SC or SCH – it is usually a loanword.

There is one remaining rule that you can use to spot an Old English word. I touched on this rule earlier. It concerns those words that end in an 'f' sound. When those words are made plural – and the F switches to a V in the plural form – those words are usually from Old English. This includes words like *leaf* and *leaves*. And *thief* and *thieves*. And *knife* and *knives*. Old English made that sound change in those situations. But other languages didn't. So after the Norman Conquest, English borrowed words that ended in an F, and those words didn't follow that traditional Old English pattern. And that provides a convenient shorthand to distinguish a native word from a borrowed word. If the F switches to V when a word is made plural, it is probably an Old English word. But if the F remains an 'f' sound – like *chef* and *chefs* and *chief* and *chiefs* – then it is probably a loanword.

So in summary, the following evidence suggests a native Old English word. Words that begin with a KN, or a Y, or a WH. Also words that begin with or otherwise have a GH. And words where the F at the end of a word switches to a 'v' sound when they're made plural.

So I hope you found that interesting. I know it's a lot of information, but I wanted to review the major sound changes that we've explored so far in the podcast. And I wanted to put them all in one place. So this episode may come in handy for future reference. And I also wanted to give you some general rules to help you spot an Old English word, and to help you identify a word as a loanword. I think a lot of these rules will be helpful as we go through the remainder of the story when loanwords started to flood into English.

I'm going to wrap up on that note. Next time, I'm going to continue to look at the evolution of English in the first half of the 1200s. So stay tuned for that, and until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.