

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 104:
PREFIX PREFERENCES**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 104: Prefix Preferences. In this episode, we’re going to look at an important development that took place within English during the 1200s. Not only did English start to borrow a large number of words from French and Latin, it also started to borrow a lot of the standard prefixes and suffixes used in those languages. And many of those new elements appeared for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse which was composed in the early 1200s. Those new prefixes and suffixes were embraced by English speakers, and soon those speakers were sticking them on the front or back of native English words. So over the next couple of episodes, we’ll focus on those new word elements, and we’ll explore their overall impact on English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish. And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com.

Let me begin with a quick correction from the last episode. Last time, we looked at an important early Middle English text called the Ancrene Wisse, and I noted that the words *journey* and *diet* were used for the first time in that text. And I also stated that the two words are cognate – having derived from the same root word meaning ‘day.’ Well both words were attested for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse, but they are not actually related to each other. The word *diet* as in ‘food’ is derived from a different root. Now you may be familiar with another version of the word *diet* – as in ‘an assembly.’ Well, that version of the word *diet* is the version that is cognate with *journey* and is based on a root word that meant ‘day.’ So I mixed up the two versions of the word *diet*. *Diet* as in ‘food’ appeared for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse, and *diet* as in ‘an assembly’ is cognate with *journey*. But the two versions of *diet* are otherwise unrelated. So with that correction out of the way, let’s turn to this episode and the changing role of prefixes and suffixes in the early 1200s.

Last time, as I explored the Ancrene Wisse, I noted that a quick review of that text reveals a language that ‘looks’ a lot more like Modern English than most earlier manuscripts. That’s partly because it contains fewer Old English words that have disappeared from the language, and it contains more loanwords that we still use in Modern English. It’s also because the syntax or word order is closer to Modern English. But one of the things that really stands out as you look over the text is that there are lots of words with familiar prefixes and suffixes.

Now at first glance, this may not seem like an important development, but if you look closely at a Modern English text, you’ll notice that a lot of words begin or end with the same elements.

According to some estimates, about one out of every five words in Modern English employs a prefix or suffix. And most of those prefixes and suffixes were borrowed from French, Latin or Greek. They came into English attached to various loanwords. And since the Ancrene Wisse has

a lot of loanwords that were used for the first time, that text also gives us the first widespread use of a lot of new prefixes and suffixes.

Now that's not to say that prefixes and suffixes were new. Old English had them too. And some of them were actually related to the ones used in Latin and French and Greek – having come from the same Indo-European roots. But during this period, a lot of those Old English prefixes and suffixes started to fall out of use. Some disappeared altogether. Some survived – but only as a part of older words that were already in place. They weren't used to create any more new words. And some lived on and are still actively used today.

So over the next couple of episodes, I want to explore those developments. This time, I'll focus on prefixes. And next time, I'll focus on suffixes.

As I noted, some of the prefixes and suffixes come Old English, but most of them come from elsewhere. And in Modern English, we are not limited to just one prefix or suffix. We can keep adding them to the beginning or end of words to create new words. Let me give you an example. I noted that a lot of these elements came in from French. And we saw in earlier episodes that the words *France* and *French* are derived from the name of the Franks who founded the Frankish kingdom which became modern-day France. Well, the name of the Franks also produced the adjective *frank* – which meant 'free' – since the Franks enjoyed certain freedoms within the Roman Empire.

Within French, that word *frank* meaning 'free' was converted into a noun by adding the suffix '*-ise*' to the end, producing the word *franchise*. A *franchise* was a specific freedom or legal privilege, and it entered English around the year 1300. Then in the 1500s, English converted *franchise* into a verb by adding the prefix '*en-*' to the front, producing the word *enfranchise* meaning 'to set free or grant a privilege.' Today, we tend to use it to refer to the privilege of voting. Then in the next century, the prefix '*dis-*' was added to the front to create the word *disenfranchise* meaning 'to take away a freedom or privilege' – again usually used to day to refer to the process of taking away a person's right to vote. Then in the 1700s, that verb was converted into a noun by adding the suffix '*-ment*' to the end creating the word *disenfranchisement*. So from *frank*, to *franchise*, to *enfranchise*, to *disenfranchise*, to *disenfranchisement*, we just keep adding on those word elements to create new words. And appropriately enough given that root word, all of those prefixes and suffixes were borrowed from French which shows how important that borrowed elements are to Modern English.

So let's begin our look at prefixes with some of the common prefixes that existed in Old English. As I noted earlier, some of these prefixes disappeared altogether, and some survive in older words, and some are still used to create new words.

So let's take them in that order and begin with one of the most common prefixes used in Old English which completely disappeared in the Middle English period. And that's the prefix *-ge* which was spelled G-E in Old English. Remember that the 'g' sound shifted to a 'y' sound in a lot of Old English words, so Old English 'g' is often pronounced as a 'y' – especially before the front vowels. And here, that very common G-E prefix was pronounced as /ye/.

This was a very common Germanic prefix, and it was found throughout the Germanic languages. It has disappeared in some of those languages like English, but it still survives in others – most notably German where it is still pronounced as /ge/.

In Old English, it had a variety of uses and meanings, and it was by far the most common prefix used in Old English. It's difficult to read a passage in Old English without encountering that prefix – often multiple times.

Take for example the word *sound* in its use as an adjective as in 'safe and sound.' In Old English, it was *gesund* with that *ge-* prefix. And it appeared in the exact same form in early German – pronounced as /ge-soond/. It meant 'healthy' or 'safe' in both languages. By the current point in our story in the early 1200s, the *ge-* prefix had already started to disappear in the word in English. I discussed the Ormulum and the Bestiary in earlier episodes, and they were both composed in the late 1100s or early 1200s. And the word *gesund* appears as simply *sund* in both of those documents. And after the Great Vowel Shift, the word *sund* became *sound* in Modern English.

Now the word also survived in German where it retained its prefix and continued to be pronounced as /ge-zund/. And in its sense as 'health,' it formed part of a common expression that people used to wish someone good health when they sneezed. Of course, that word was *gesundheit*, and it passed into English in the early 1900s. So *sound* is the English version without the prefix, and the 'gesund' part of *gesundheit* is the German version with the original prefix still in tact.

Now again, that *ge-* prefix was once very common in English, and it could be used in a variety of subtle ways. Sometimes it's difficult to discern the exact sense in which it was used in a particular word. It could be used to provide a sense of 'togetherness.' So to express the idea of several animals or other living creatures running together, Old English had the word *gerunnen*. To express the idea of dragging or drawing a group of things together, Old English had the word *gedræg*. It could refer to a group or an assembly. To express the idea of several people traveling or faring together, Old English had the word *gefera* which meant 'a companion.' Timber meant wood, and a bunch of timber could be put together to build a structure. So a building was sometimes called a *getimbru*.

The prefix could also be used to show a completed action. So you might inquire with the Old English word *ask*, but if you asked and got the answer, that was described as *geascian*. So it was used where the action was completed. I've noted before that the word *win* meant to 'fight or struggle' in Old English. But to complete a fight and emerge victorious was described as *gewinnan* since the fight was brought to completion. And that helps to explain how the word *win* evolved from an original sense of 'fight' to the modern sense of 'victory.' *Winnan* was 'to fight,' and *gewinnan* was 'to be victorious.' When the *ge-* prefix disappeared, *gewinnan* reverted back to just *winnan*, and was later shortened even further to modern *win* with its current meaning.

The sense of a completed action also contributed to another use of the *ge-* prefix. It could be used as an intensifier. So think about the word *tear*. We can *tear* a piece of paper. But if we keep tearing to the point that the paper is completely destroyed, we ‘tear up’ the paper. We use that *up* as an intensifier to mean ‘completely torn or destroyed.’ And if something burns to the point that it is completely destroyed, we might say that it has *burned up* or *burnt up*. Again, we use that *up* as an intensifier. Well in Old English, instead of putting *up* after the verb, you could express a similar idea by putting *ge* before the verb.

These were just a few of the ways in which *ge-* could be used in Old English, but as I noted, it started to disappear in early Middle English. In some words and dialects, it completely disappeared, which is how *gesund* became *sund* and then *sound*. Sometimes, it underwent a transition where it lost the ‘y’ sound at the front and just became /eh/ or /ee/. So the prefix is often rendered in Middle English documents with a simple I or Y. So for example, *gesund* was rendered as *isund* – I-S-U-N-D – in Layamon’s Brut. But by the end of the Middle English period, that shortened form /eh/ or /ee/ also stopped being used in most words. So today, this very common Old English prefix has essentially disappeared. But we do have some vestiges of it in a few words. You use these words all the time, and you probably never realized that they had an old prefix buried within them.

A good example of that old prefix hanging on in a modern word is the word *enough*. The ‘e’ at the front was originally this *ge-* prefix. As I noted, in Middle English, the prefix completely disappeared in some words, but other words just lost the ‘y’ sound at the front. That what happened here. The *ge-* simply became /eh/ or /ee/.

This word is also a good example of why Old English manuscripts are so difficult for modern readers and how the changes in Middle English made the texts much easier to read. In Old English, the word *enough* was spelled G-E-N-O-G. So it looked like it should have been pronounced /ge-nog/. But remember that the initial G-E was the prefix pronounced /ye/. And the G at the end represented that guttural /x/ sound. So the word was actually pronounced /ye-nox/. In Middle English, the /ye/ became /eh/ at the front, and the G at the end was re-spelled as GH. So we start to find the word spelled as I-N-O-G-H and E-N-O-G-H. So that spelling was very close to the modern spelling and much more recognizable to modern readers. And over time, as that /x/ sound disappeared from English, that GH at the end started to be pronounced as an ‘f’ sound like in the words *rough* and *tough* and *cough*. And that ultimately gave us the modern word *enough*. But again, that ‘e’ at the front was originally the *ge-* prefix.

That *ge-* prefix also survives at the front of the word *afford*. The ‘ford’ part of *afford* was originally *forð* as in ‘to go forth.’ And remember that you could use the *ge-* prefix if you wanted to express the idea of a completed action. So to indicate that something had moved forth to the point of completion, you could use the word *geforðian*. Again, it had a sense of something accomplished or completed. And over time, the *ge* prefix was reduced to just /uh/, thereby producing the word *afford*, but it still had a sense of something accomplished. Over time, it acquired an association with financial transactions. If you wanted to make a large purchase, you had to work to pull together the resources to make the purchase. If you were successful in amassing the resources, you could ‘complete’ the purchase, or *afford* the purchase in the original

sense of completing an action. From there, the word *afford* just came to mean the ability to complete a purchase. So today, when we say that we can ‘afford’ something, we are literally saying that we can ‘go forth’ with the transaction. And the ‘a’ in *afford* is derived from the original prefix *ge-*.

The same thing happened with the word *aware*. The ‘ware’ part of *aware* meant ‘to be watchful or vigilant.’ It’s related to the words *wary* and *warden* and *guardian*. The general sense of the root was ‘to watch out for.’ And in the word *gewær*, the *ge-* prefix was used in its sense as an intensifier to mean ‘watch closely’ or ‘be vigilant.’ Over time, the *ge-* prefix was reduced to ‘a’ (/uh/), and that gave us the word *aware*.

Another word where the *ge-* prefix has survived in an altered form is the word *handiwork*. The /ee/ part in the middle of *handiwork* was originally the *ge-* prefix. Now today, you probably think of the word *handiwork* as ‘handy work’ – work that is ‘handy.’ But if you think about it, that doesn’t really make sense. How can work be ‘handy?’ Well, it really isn’t. That’s just a modern interpretation of the word. *Handiwork* is literally ‘hand work’ – work done by hand. In fact, the word was sometimes rendered as *handweorc* in Old English. So where does that /ee/ in the middle of *handiwork* come from? Well, as I noted, it’s that old *ge-* prefix.

In most cases, the word *work* was rendered as *geweorc* with that *ge-* prefix to indicate work that was completed or finished. So that produced the Old English word *hand-geweorc*. But in Middle English, the *ge-* was reduced to just /ee/, and the word became *hand-iwerc*. But by the Modern English period, that prefix was largely gone, and people no longer recognized the word *iwerc*. They only recognized the word *work*. But they did have the word *handy* which was an adjective formed from the word *hand*. So when they heard the word *handiwork*, they just assumed that it was ‘handy work,’ when in actuality it was ‘hand-iwork’ or ‘hand work.’ Again the /ee/ was a relic of the original prefix which was attached to the front of *work*.

The same thing happened with another word, and this word actually appears for one of the first times in the Ancrene Wisse. That word is *everywhere*. And again, most people today assume that it is a combination of *every* and *where*. But it’s not. It’s actually a combination of *ever* and *where*. Once again, that /ee/ sound in the middle is a remnant of the prefix that was once attached to the front of *where*. So it was *gehwær*.

By the time the Ancrene Wisse was composed, that *ge-* prefix had been reduced to /ee/, and the Old English word *gehwær* has been reduced to *ihwer*. And in the Ancrene Wisse, the phrase ‘ever ihwer’ was used for one of the first times in English. This new word was also used in some of the related manuscripts in the ‘Katherine Group’ of documents that I mentioned last time from this same time period. So again, the word was ‘*ever ihwer*’ – often rendered as two distinct words. But when the two words were put together as *everywhere*, people just assumed that the word meant ‘every where’ rather than its original ‘*ever ihwer*.’ Again, that /ee/ sound in the middle of the word is a relic of the old *ge-* prefix.

So as we've seen, that old prefix mostly disappeared from English and only exists as an /eh/ or /ee/ sound in a small number of words today. But many other Old English prefixes survived in tact, even if they stopped being used to create new words.

One of those old prefixes that lives on in old words, but not new words, is *be-*. We have it in words like *become*, *before*, *begin*, *behalf*, *behave*, *belong*, *behind*, *behold* and so on. This was another common Old English prefix. In some ways it was similar to the *ge-* prefix in that it could be used in a variety of ways. In fact, it could be used in some of the same ways as *ge*. They could both be used as intensifiers. The *be-* prefix was derived from the preposition *by*, so *be-* could be used to indicate closeness or being surrounded by the action taking place. We can see that sense in words like *behold* and *befall*. It could also change the quality of a verb in a variety of other ways.

Now even though the *ge-* prefix was dying out in early Middle English, the *be-* prefix remained quite popular for a while. In fact, in some ways, *be-* took over some of the space left behind by the decline of *ge-*. Consider the word *believe*. The word can be traced back to Old English where it originally had the *ge-* prefix. In Old English, *believe* was *gelyfan*. The word is actually closely related to the word *love*, and it meant 'to love an idea' or 'hold it dear.' By the current point in our story in early Middle English, the *be-* prefix was already being used in place of the *ge-* prefix, and the word *gelyfan* was routinely being rendered as *believe*. In fact, Layamon's *Brut* uses both versions of the word, suggesting that they were somewhat interchangeable for a while before *believe* finally won out.

The continued popularity of the *be-* prefix can be illustrated in another way – another very important way. In Middle English, it actually became common to attach that Old English *be-* prefix to newly borrowed French words. And that is fascinating because it is more evidence of how English and French were starting to meld together. In an earlier episode, I noted that the French word *siege* got this prefix, and that produced the word *besiege*.

We also have specific evidence of this phenomenon in the *Ancrene Wisse*. The word *sample* is a French word. It's actually a variation of the word *example*. And the original sense of the word *sample* was much closer to *example*. It meant 'a fact or incident used to prove a larger point.' It could also describe a person's behavior as a model for other people to follow. So it was sort of like when we say to someone that they should set an example with their behavior. Well the words *sample* and *example* don't in appear in English documents in their current form until the 1300s. But the *Ancrene Wisse* does use a version of the word *sample*. It uses the word *bisampleth*, containing the English prefix *be-* with the French word *sample*. It was used in the sense of moralizing or setting an example with one's behavior.

So for a while, the *be-* prefix continued to be used to create new words, even in combination with French root words. Even as late as the 1500s, new words were being created in this manner, like *bejewel*, *bedazzle*, *bepuzzle*, *bespeckle* and so on. But that process didn't really continue beyond that point. For the most part, the *be-* prefix stopped being used to create new words in early Modern English. So when we come across words with that *be* prefix, they usually pre-date Modern English.

There were several other Old English prefixes that still survive in English even though they stopped being used to create new words several centuries ago. I noted earlier that the old *ge* prefix survives as ‘a’ in words like *afford* and *aware*. Well lots of other words have an ‘a’ prefix that goes back to the Old English preposition *on*. *On* was reduced to /uh/ – spelled with the letter ‘A’ in many of those words in Middle English. And that produced words like *aside*, *alive*, *aboard*, *ahead*, *above*, *asleep*, and so on. But again, this ‘a’ or /uh/ prefix stopped being used as a prefix for new words by the end of the Middle English period.

The Old English prefix *to* was common at one time, but it also fell out of use for new words. It survives in older words like *together*, *toward*, *today*, *tomorrow* and *tonight*.

The Old English prefix *for* also survives in a handful of words – *forgive*, *forget*, *forbid*, *forlorn*, *forgo*, *forbear*, *forsake* and *forswear*. Those words can all be traced back to Old English or very early Middle English. *For* was still being used to create some new words during the Middle English period – but those words were all short-lived. The word *forhang* meant ‘to put to death by hanging.’ The word *forcleave* meant ‘to cut to pieces.’ *For* was even added to some French words – like *forcover* and *forbar*. But again, the *for* prefix eventually became obsolete and is no longer used to create new words in English.

Now all of the Old English prefixes I’ve discussed so far are no longer being actively used to create new words. But some Old English prefixes survived and are still used in word formation. By far the most durable Old English prefix is *un-*, used to express negation or the opposite of something. Not only is it the most durable Old English prefix, it is actually the most used prefix in the English language today. In fact, of the five most common prefixes used in English, it is the only one that is native to English.

Even though the *un-* prefix is very common today, there is something very interesting about its history. It almost disappeared in early Middle English as older prefixes declined and newer prefixes from other languages came in. But in the 1500s, as Middle English gave way to Modern English, the *un-* prefix re-emerged stronger than ever. And it was routinely attached to both native and borrowed words.

Beyond the Old English prefix *un-*, a few other older prefixes are still used to create new words in Modern English, and most of those prefixes are prepositions used to express location. So we still routinely use Old English prefixes like *over*, *under*, *up*, *down*, *in*, *out* and so on. Of course, these prefixes also survive as distinct words in Modern English, and that may help to explain why they continue to be used as prefixes.

So consider the word *over*. It is an extremely common word in Modern English, and in Old English it was also used as both a distinct word and as a prefix. It produced Old English words like *overcome*, *overdone*, *overflow*, *oversee*, *overhead*, *overhear*, *overrun*, and many others. And it continued to be used in Middle English to create new words.

In fact, the Ancrene Wisse gives us the first recorded use of several new words using that prefix. We find the word *overtake* for the first time in the document. And *overturn* also appears for the first time in the text. The document also introduces the word *overcast* which originally had a sense that was similar to *overturn*. It also introduced the word *overforth* which meant ‘very far forward,’ but it didn’t survive for very long.

Of course, *over* is still used to create new words. Within the past century and a half, we have new words like *overexpose*, *overextend*, *oversimplify*, *overprotective*, and *overachiever*, as well as many others.

This is also true with the Old English prefix *under*. In the past century or so, it has given rise to words like *undercover*, *underdog*, *underwear*, and *underdeveloped*.

Other Old English prefixes that are still in active use include *up*, *down*, *in*, and *out*. Other prefixes like *before*, *after* and *through* are sometimes used in new constructions, but they’re pretty rare in Modern English. We find them in more recent words like *afterburner* and *throughput*, which is the number of items passing through a system.

Now there are two other Old English prefixes that I should mention – *mid* and *with*. I mentioned these words way back in Episode 52 when I was going through Old English. You might remember that the word *with* didn’t have the sense that it has today. Today it means ‘together or beside.’ But in Old English, it actually meant the opposite. It meant ‘against.’ And the word *with* was sometimes used as a prefix where it had that original sense of ‘against.’ For example, Old English had the word *withstand* which was literally ‘to stand against.’

So to express a sense of togetherness, the Anglo-Saxons didn’t use the word *with*. They used the word *mid* instead. And *mid* was also used as a prefix. It produced Old English words like *midnight*, *midday*, *midway*, and *midriff*.

Now in late Old English and early Middle English, the word *mid* started to decline in English and that sense of ‘togetherness’ was replaced with the word *with*. As I noted in that earlier episode, this change was partly due to the Vikings because they had a version of the word *with* in Old Norse, and it had more of a sense of ‘togetherness’ since conflict between two opposing sides usually implies a close proximity to each other. In fact, the Ancrene Wisse is one of the first documents to routinely use the word *with* instead of Old English *mid*. And it also continued to use the word *with* to create new words. The Ancrene Wisse gives us the first known use of the word *withdraw*, and one of the first uses of the word *withhold*.

As the Middle English period progressed, the word *with* largely replaced *mid* as a preposition when it was used as a distinct word by itself. So today, we say “I’ll go with you,” not “I’ll go mid you.” But when those words were used as prefixes, the opposite happened. *With* fell out of use as a prefix, but *mid* lived on with a sense of the center or middle of something. So within the last century and a half, English speakers have coined new words like *midlife*, *midfielder*, *midrange* and *midline*.

But again, no new words have been coined with the *with* prefix. And in fact, many older words that used *with* as a prefix have fallen out of use. Some of those older words have been replaced with words borrowed from French or Latin. *Withsay* – meaning ‘to say or speak against someone’ – was replaced with the French word *renounce*. *Withspeak* – which had a similar sense – was replaced with the Latin word *contradict*. *Withset* – which meant ‘to set against’ – was replaced with the French word *resist*.

And notice something interesting about those new words that were borrowed into English – *renounce*, *resist* and *contradict*. They have prefixes too. The French prefix *re-* was used in *renounce* and *resist*, and the Latin prefix *contra-* was used in *contradict*. And that is really the important thing to take from this discussion. As English evolved over the Middle Ages, lots of the Old English prefixes fell out of use or disappeared altogether, and they were largely replaced with new prefixes borrowed from across the Channel.

So let’s turn our attention from Old English prefixes to those that were borrowed from elsewhere. And let’s begin with that prefix *re-* as in *renounce* and *resist*. Of course, it means ‘again’ and it can be used to indicate a repeated action or a reversed action. It has its origins in Latin, and it was preserved in French. English borrowed the prefix from both languages. It made its first widespread appearance in English in the Ancrene Wisse. And today, it is the second most commonly used prefix in English trailing only the Old English prefix *un-*.

The *re-* prefix was essentially unknown in Old English. I say ‘essentially’ – because some religious manuscripts preserved some Latin words in more or less their original form. One such word was *reliquiae* (/REH-li-kwee/) – which was an early form of the word *relic*. It appears in a few religious documents written in Old English. But outside of some of these Latin terms used in religious documents, it appears that the *re-* prefix was essentially unknown in the common speech of the Anglo-Saxons.

It isn’t really found in regular use in English until the appearance of the Ancrene Wisse in the early 1200s. Several loanwords with that prefix are introduced in the text. That includes the first use of the word *relic* which is the modern version of that Latin word *reliquiae*. The Ancrene Wisse also contains the first recorded use of several other words with that prefix, specifically the words *recluse*, *recoil*, *record*, *remedy*, *remission* and *relief*. So the various versions of the Ancrene Wisse really introduced that second most common prefix into the English language.

Beyond the *re-* prefix, lots of other prefixes were also borrowed during this period as French and Latin words came into English. Those words came in with prefixes that were previously unknown, and initially they were just part of the words that were being borrowed. But over time, English speakers recognized these beginning elements as prefixes, as distinct parts of the words that were being borrowed with specific meanings. Eventually, English speakers adapted them to English and even used them to form new words.

Most of these new prefixes could be traced back to Latin and/or Greek. And very often, they had even older roots – going all the way back to the Indo-Europeans. And as you might expect, thanks to those Indo-European roots, many of those borrowed prefixes were related to native prefixes used in Old English. In other words, many of those French and Latin and Greek prefixes had cognates within English.

Consider the Old English prefix *ge-* that I mentioned earlier. Remember that it was spelled G-E – and was originally pronounced as /ge/ before the pronunciation changed to /ye/ in Old English. Well, that prefix can be traced back to the Indo-Europeans where it has been reconstructed as **kom*. Remember that the Indo-European ‘k’ sound shifted to a ‘g’ sound under Grimm’s Law. So the initial root word had a ‘k’ sound. And that root word **kom* meant ‘near or beside.’ That was the same sense that the *ge-* prefix had in a lot of Old English words.

Well, that root also passed into Latin where it created the prefix *com-*, which was also rendered as *con-* and sometimes simply as just *co-*. This accounts for lots of words that have a sense of togetherness, or more specifically, two of something. It produced words like *co-exist*, *co-dependent*, *coincide* and *companion*. In fact, I noted earlier that a fellow traveler was called a *gefera* in Old English using that *ge-* prefix. And Latin gave us the synonym *companion* with *com-* prefix. And again, both of those prefixes are ultimately derived from the same Indo-European root which meant ‘beside or near.’

This prefix was largely introduced in the Ancrene Wisse where it appears in the words *comfort*, *consent*, *convent* and *contemplation* – all used for the first time in English.

The English prefix *for-* also had cognates in Latin and Greek, and some of those prefixes can also be found in the Ancrene Wisse for the first time. *For-* was derived from an Indo-European root that has been reconstructed as **per*. Remember that the Indo-European ‘p’ sound became an ‘f’ sound in the Germanic languages. So Indo-European **per* produced English *for-*. The Indo-European root meant ‘forward,’ so it could be used to express the idea of moving forward. But by extension, it could also be used to express the idea of being in front or first, or in some cases simply ‘near’ or ‘beside.’

These various senses gave rise to the Latin and Greek prefixes *para-* which meant ‘beside, against, or protection against.’ And it produced words like *paragraph*, *parallel*, and *parachute*. A *parachute* used the sense of the prefix as ‘protection against.’ It was a device that provided protection against a fall. The same Indo-European root also gave rise to the Latin prefix *per-* meaning ‘through’ which gave rise to words like *perform* and *perpetual*. The sense of the root as ‘in front’ or ‘first’ gave rise to the prefix *pro-* from Latin and Greek and the prefix *pre-* from Latin. *Pro-* meant ‘before’ or ‘on behalf of,’ and it produced words like *produce*, *proceed* and *progress*. And in the Ancrene Wisse, it produced the word *profession* which appeared for the first time in English.

The prefix *pre-* produced words like *prefix* itself, as well as words like *preview* and *precede*. And in the Ancrene Wisse, the prefix *pre-* appears for one of the first times in English in the words *present* and *presumption*.

By the way, that same Indo-European root also produced the Greek prefix *proto-* meaning ‘first.’ It appears in a word like *prototype*, and more notably for our purposes, we know it as a linguistic prefix to mean ‘the first language’ – as in *Proto-Indo-European*, *Proto-Germanic*, and so on.

All of these new prefixes started to change the English language. They changed the way words looked as more and more words adopted these common prefixes. And they also gave English a variety of similar prefixes to choose from. That is especially true for prefixes that were used to express negation or the opposite of a given root word.

As I noted earlier, English already had the prefix *un-*, as in *undo*, *unkind*, *unhappy* and so on. And it remains the most commonly used prefix in English. But English ended up borrowing several new prefixes that could be used in the same way. And that helps to explain why English has so many prefixes today that basically serve the same function. According to most scholars, three of the six most common prefixes in English are used to express negation or the opposite of a given root word.

Among those three negative prefixes, *un-* is the most common, but is the only one native to English. The other two came from Latin. They are the prefix *in-*, as in *inactive*, *incompetent* and *insincere*, and *dis-*, as in *dissimilar*, *disfavor*, and *discontent*. And once again, the Ancrene Wisse provides some of the first uses of these newer prefixes.

Let’s start with the prefix *in-*. It is the third most common prefix in English – after *un-* and *re-*. As you might expect, Latin *in-* and English *un-* are related. They are both derived from the same Indo-European root word **ne* which also gave us the words *no* and *not*. So all of those words that we use to express negativity are related. In fact, the words *negate* and *negativity* are also derived from the same root.

The Indo-European root word **ne* acquired a vowel sound at the front very early on because it appears in a variety of Indo-European languages with a vowel sound at the front – including Old English *un-*, Latin *in-*, Greek *an-*, Old Irish *an-*, and Sanskrit *an-*, all of which were used as a prefix to mean ‘not.’

As I noted, the Greek version was *an-*, but it was sometimes shortened to just *a-*. And it was also borrowed into English. We find that Greek version in words like *anarchy*, *anemia*, *amoral* and *asexual*.

The Latin version came in as *in-*. But that *in-* prefix was sometimes altered depending on the initial consonant in the root word that followed the prefix. So in many words, it became *im-*. In the Ancrene Wisse, we find this new prefix in a brand new word borrowed from French – the word *impatience*.

This same process altered the prefix to *il-*, in words like *illogical* and *illegitimate*, and to *ir-*, in words like *irrational* and *irreconcilable*. Again, these are all just variations of the original Latin prefix *in-*.

So these new Latin prefixes entered English beside the native English prefix *un-*, and they could all be used to make a word negative or to indicate the opposite of the given word. And as these new prefixes became more acceptable, it probably isn't surprising that English speakers started to use them interchangeably. Take the root word *able*. It's a French word ultimately from Latin. So if we wanted to make that word negative, and if we wanted to be purists about it, it should have the Latin prefix *in-*, a Latin prefix with a Latin root word. And we do have that construction in the word *inability*. But notice what happens when we use it as an adjective. It becomes *unable* – not *inable*. We use the Old English prefix *un-* with the Latin and French root word. And part of the reason why we do that is because the two prefixes were once interchangeable. In fact, *inability* and *unability* were both considered to be acceptable until the 1700s, when *inability* won out.

So sometimes there is confusion over the proper prefix – *in-* or *un-*. But other times, we have to deal with a different type of confusion – a confusion over the precise meaning of the prefix that we're trying to use. And this also happens with the *in-* prefix. Obviously, the word *in* is a distinct word in English. By itself, the word *in* is an Old English word that meant the opposite of *out*. And we sometimes use that word as part of a compound with another word – as in *inside* or *indoors*. So in those cases, it resembles a prefix. But that word also has Indo-European roots, and the ultimate root produced a separate prefix in Latin which was also rendered as *in-*. And this other *in-* prefix in Latin meant 'in, into or upon.' So Latin gave English two different identical prefixes. One meant 'not' and the other meant 'in or upon'.

We have the latter in words like *inquire*, *inflict*, *infighting* and *inform*. And this other version of the *in-* prefix can also be found for one of the first times in English in the Ancrene Wisse. It appears in the word *intent* which is recorded for the first time in that document.

We also find this second version of the *in-* prefix in the word *inflamm*. In some cases, person's passions may be come inflamed – meaning that they have a burning passion inside. Or you might have a medical condition where a sore or blister becomes *inflamed*. It might lead to *inflammation*, another variation of that word. And something that is capable of burning up or exploding can be described as *inflammable*.

But here is where the confusion sets in. Remember that we also have that other Latin prefix *in-* which meant 'not.' So *inflammable* can also be interpreted as 'not flammable.' So which is it? Does *inflammable* mean that something is likely to burn or not likely to burn. That's a pretty big difference – especially if you're trying to prevent unwanted fires. At one time, this word created a lot of problems in English. If you marked a substance as *inflammable*, how would a user interpret that word? Would he or she be careful because the substance could explode, or would he or she assume that the substance was safe since it couldn't catch fire?

Now as I noted, the word *inflammable* was just an extension of words like *inflamm* and *inflammation*, so it meant that it was likely to catch fire. But people started to get confused by that prefix and thought it meant the opposite. Technically, if you wanted to say that something was ‘not capable of burning,’ you would say that it was *nonflammable*. So *inflammable* for things that burn – and *nonflammable* for things that don’t burn. But you can see how easy it was to get those prefixes mixed up – because they could both mean the same thing.

Eventually, English speakers tried to clear up this confusion by dropping the prefix altogether, thereby creating the word *flammable*. Without the confusing prefix, the word *flammable* could clearly indicate that something was capable of burning. This new word was first recorded in the 1800s, and it seemed to solve the problem.

In the 1920s, the National Fire Protection Association in the United States jumped on this bandwagon, and it called for using the word *flammable* instead of *inflammable* to avoid any confusion. The organization was soon joined by insurers and fire safety advocates who approved of this version of the word without the prefix. And in 1959, the British Standards Institution joined in. It issued the following statement on the matter: “In order to avoid any possible ambiguity, it is the Institution’s policy to encourage the use of the terms ‘flammable’ and ‘nonflammable’ rather than ‘inflammable’ and ‘nonflammable.’”

So as this anecdote shows, the multiple meanings of some prefixes can create confusion, and it sometimes requires English to coin new words to solve the problem. By the way, I got this anecdote about the word *inflammable* from Patricia T. O’Conner’s book, “The Origins of the Specious.” (p. 183) So I wanted to acknowledge that source.

Now we’ve looked at two different negative prefixes – Old English *un-* and Latin *in-*. The other negative prefix that I mentioned earlier was *dis-*, as in *dishonest* or *disallow*. It also came in from Latin, and we also have evidence that it was entering English in the early 1200s in the Ancrene Wisse. But in the text, it wasn’t generally used with the meaning of ‘not.’ It was used in a secondary sense as ‘apart or away,’ and it appears in the words *distinction* and *discord*, which both appear for the first time in English in that document. The text includes the word *disturb* which is also recorded for the first time.

I should note that English also started to borrow another negative prefix during this period from Latin and French, and it is actually very similar to *dis-*. It’s the prefix *de-*. We have it in words like *defrost* and *defuse*. It could also be used in the sense of ‘down’ or ‘away,’ which we have in words like *decline*, *debase* and *demean*. Now despite the similarities between *dis-* and *de-*, the two prefixes are not actually related even though they both came in from Latin and were sometimes used in similar ways.

Several words with this *de-* prefix appear for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse, including *delight*, *depart*, *desert*, *devout*, *devotion*, *demur*, *destroy* and *default*. In most of these words, the *de-* prefix was in the secondary sense of ‘down’ or ‘away.’

I should also mention that English has a lot of other negative prefixes in addition to *un-*, *in-*, *dis-* and *de-*, and their respective variations. English also uses *anti-* from Greek, *non-* from Latin, *mis-* from Old English, as in *mistake* or *misdeed*, and *mes-* from French loanwords which was usually re-spelled as *mis-* after those words entered English. That's what happened in the case of words like *mischievous*, *miscreant* and *misadventure*.

All of these negative prefixes give English lots of subtle ways to express negativity. For example, there is a subtle difference between *misinformation* and *disinformation*. And there's a difference between being *unfamous* and *infamous*. And there's a difference between having an *inability* and a *disability*. These subtle distinctions can be made today because we have preserved so many of these prefixes over the years.

Anyway, the main point of this episode is that early Middle English saw the introduction of lots of new prefixes from French, Latin and Greek. And they were quickly adopted by English speakers. But within English, most of those borrowed prefixes remained attached to borrowed words. They were not regularly attached to native Old English words. In early Modern English, that started to change, and some of these borrowed prefixes started to break free, and speakers began to use them with native English words. So we got words like *rewind*, *renew*, *disbelief*, *preheat*, *engrave*, and *nonstop* – all Old English words with borrowed prefixes. But make no mistake, for the most part, borrowed prefixes were mainly used with borrowed words – and that's still the case to this day.

But Old English prefixes were different. They retained their flexibility, and many of them were routinely attached to words without regard to their origin. We find Old English prefixes attached to Latin and French words all the time, as if they had always been there – words like *unpopular*, *unchanged*, *unplanned*, *understatement*, *underachiever*, *outnumber*, *outclass*, *overconfident*, *overextend*, *overview* and so on.

And speaking of *overview*, that's a general overview of the prefixes in early Middle English. Next time, in what is really the second part of this topic, I'm going to switch from word beginnings to word endings, and I'll look at suffixes. In many respects, the changes to suffixes over time have been even more substantial. So next time, we'll look at Middle English suffixes.

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