THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 113: A ZOUTHERN ACCENT

©2018 Seven Springs Enterprises, LLC

EPISODE 113: A ZOUTHERN ACCENT

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 113: A Zouthern Accent. In this episode, we're going to turn our attention to the south of England. Since we looked at the northern dialect of Middle English in the last episode, I thought it would be a good idea to contrast that dialect with the speech of southern England. This time, we'll look at some of the unique features of this old Southern dialect – and we'll see how developments in this region informed some of the modern differences between northern and southern speech in Britain.

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.

[CATHERINE: When I was visiting England in the 1980s, I was standing at Victoria Bus Station late at night. Three of use were waiting for a bus. Three strangers. One of them was from the north of England, I can't remember where, but I think it was Yorkshire somewhere. Another was from the south of England – I think somewhere around Kent. And there was me – the Australian. And, seriously, I was doing the interpretation between the northern person and the southern person because I had trouble understanding each other's dialect, I suppose.]

That was listener Catherine from Australia recounting her experience with the north-south linguistic divide in England. And as we've seen in the podcast, this divide has existed for centuries, and it certainly existed in the early Middle English period.

Last time, we explored the Middle English dialect of northern England. We saw that some of the features of that dialect survived into modern standard English, and some of them were lost over time. Meanwhile, in the south of England, people spoke a different dialect. And we know from Medieval writers that the dialects were so different at each end of the country that the respective speakers sometimes had trouble understanding each other. And as Catherine suggests, that can still happen today.

In this episode, I want to focus on the Middle English dialects spoken in the far south of England – generally speaking in the region south of the River Thames. I said "dialects" because there were really two distinct dialects in this region. The people in most of this region spoke a dialect which modern scholars call the Southern dialect of Middle English. This region roughly corresponds to the old Wessex region where the West Saxon dialect of Old English was spoken. As you may remember, this was the dominant dialect of Old English. It was where the Anglo-Saxon capital of Winchester was located, and from the time of Alfred the Great, it was the main dialect used for English documents up until the time of the Norman Conquest.

Since the English language changed so much after the Conquest, scholars don't use the term West Saxon to describe this dialect after that point. Once we get into the Middle English period, this dialect is simply known as the Southern dialect.

Now I said that there were two Middle English dialects in the far south of England. The other one was the dialect spoken in the far southeastern corner of England around Kent. This was also a distinct dialect in Old English called the Kentish dialect. And for the period after the Conquest, scholars refer to this dialect as either the Kentish dialect or the Southeastern dialect.

While there are some notable differences between these two southernmost dialects, they have a lot in common and share many of the same basic features. So for purposes of this episode, I'm mostly going to focus on the things they had in common, and I'll treat them as essentially one common dialect region.

Before I go any further, I should mention that there was a vast region in the middle of the country between the dialect regions of the far south and the far north. The region in the middle is known as the Midlands, but in the Anglo-Saxon period, it was called Mercia. So the Old English dialect of this region is called the Mercian dialect. But as we move into the Middle English period, scholars divide this middle region into two separate dialect areas called the West Midlands and the East Midlands. And that distinction arose because the eastern part of the Midlands had been part of the Danelaw, and the dialect of that region acquired more Norse features over time. These Midland dialects tended to have a blend of northern and southern features, but they also had some unique characteristics. I'm going to focus on the Midlands dialects in future episodes because many of the most well-known pieces of Middle English literature were composed in those dialects. That includes works like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Canterbury Tales. But for now, let's focus our attention further south in the Southern dialect region.

Last time, while discussing the Northern dialect, I outlined some basic differences between the northern and southern dialects. So let's take a moment and quickly review those differences. We saw that the Northern dialect tended to retain the hard 'K' sound which existed in many Germanic words – either native English words or borrowed Norse words. But in the South and the Midlands, that hard 'K' sound had shifted to a softer 'CH' sound. So we saw that the north had ***kirk*** where the south had ***church***.

We also saw that northerners made nouns plural by adding an 'S' or 'ES' to the end of a word like we do today. But in the south, people tended to make nouns plural by adding 'EN' to the word like ***children*** and ***brethren***.

And northerners added an 'S' or 'ES' to verbs in third person singular. So they would say, "He loves or she loves" like we do today. But further south, people added other endings. In the Midlands, people added 'EN,' so they would say, "He or she loven." And in the far south, people added 'ETH,' so they would say, "He or she loveth."

Northerners also used the Norse pronoun forms that began with a 'TH' sound – ***they***, ***them*** and ***their***. But in the south, people tended to use the more traditional Old English forms that began with an 'H' sound – ***he*** (/hay/), ***hem*** (/haym/), ***here*** (/heh-re/).

And last time, I also reminded you that northern speakers held on to the original long 'A' sound (/ah/) in many native English words. So in the north, a heavy rock was a ***stan*** (stahn/) instead of

a ***stone***. And a person's residence was a ***ham*** (/hahm/) instead of ***home***. Again those were the original Old English pronunciations. But in the south, that vowel sound had changed to /aw/ meaning those words became /stawn/ and /hawm/ – now spelled with an O. And that vowel sound would change again during the Great Vowel Shift – from /aw/ to /oh/ – producing ***stone*** and ***home***. The main point being that the vowel sound was much more conservative in the north. And as we'll see a little later in the episode, that's still the case with some other vowel sounds.

So those were some of the major differences between the dialects of the north and the dialects further south. But when we look to the far south – south of the Thames – to the Southern and Southeastern dialect regions, we find some unique features there that really distinguished those dialects, and some of those features still exist to this day.

One of the most notable traits of this dialect region was the tendency to pronounce the initial 'S' sound as a 'Z' – and the initial 'F' sound as a 'V.' I've mentioned this tendency before. Linguists would say that speakers in the far south voiced these otherwise voiceless sounds. So the county of Somerset in the southwest of England is sometimes pronounced as 'Zummerzet' by locals. Mechanically, the 'S' and 'Z' sounds are pretty much the same. The only difference is that the vocal chords are engaged when pronouncing the 'Z' sound, but they are silent when pronouncing the 'S' sound. The same thing applies to the 'V' and 'F' sounds. They are mechanically the same sound, except the V is voiced and the F is not. So when speakers in the far south pronounced their S's as Z's and their F's as V's, what they were really doing was voicing those initial sounds – which traditionally were voiceless.

Last time, I gave you a sample of northern speech by playing part of an interview with a farmer from the Durham region. Well, I want to do the same thing this time. In this case, I want to play an excerpt from an interview with a retired miner from Somerset which was conducted back in the 1950s. Once again, this comes from the British Library archives, and the speaker's name is Jim Steeds. He was born in 1872, so just like last time, this is an older version of the dialect. In this sample, you'll hear him describe a mining accident when the roof of the mine he was in collapsed and trapped him. You'll hear him pronounce ***twenty-six*** as /twenty-zix/, ***seven*** as /zeven/, ***somebody*** as /zomebody/, and ***supposed*** as /zupposed/. You'll also hear him pronounce ***from*** as /vrom/ and ***fourteen*** and /vorteen/.

[SOMERSET VOICE SAMPLE]

So that's an example of a traditional Somerset accent. In several parts, we heard Z's for S's and V's for F's. Those initial Z's and V's can still be heard in parts of the West Country today, but in early Middle English, they were common throughout the far south of England all the way to Kent in the southeast. And we know that because the surviving manuscripts from those regions often use Z's for S's and V's for F's.

In the last episode, I used a poem called the Cursor Mundi to illustrate the dialect of the north. Well, this time, I want to use a contemporary poem from the south to illustrate the Southern dialect. This poem is called The Fox and the Wolf. The exact date of the poem is unknown, but it

is thought that the poem was composed sometime between 1275 and 1300. The poet is also unknown, but he was probably a contemporary of the Cursor Mundi poet. The poem was apparently written at the priory in Worcestershire in the southern part of the West Midlands, but the poem itself uses a typically Southern dialect.

This is generally considered to the oldest beast fable composed in the English language, and by 'beast fable' I mean a short story that teaches a moral lesson and features animals with human characteristics. This was a very old type of literature going all the way back to Aesop's Fables. By the current point in our overall story – around the year 1300 – these types of fables were being written in Latin and French, but they weren't common in English. Now English poets had featured animals in their stories like the Owl and the Nightingale which we looked at in an earlier episode, but that poem was a debate poem. We don't really have an English fable featuring animals until now.

This particular poem was actually based on a popular set of fables that had been composed in French and featured a character called Reynard the Fox. This fable also features Reynard as the main character.

Now last time, I noted that the Northern dialect had a higher percentage of Norse words since it had once been part of the Danelaw. Southern dialects had fewer Norse words, and in fact, this poem – The Fox and the Wolf – doesn't have a single word which can be traced back to Old Norse. However, it does have a fair number of French words.

In the first two lines of the poem, we can hear the Southern features. In Modern English, those lines read:

Out of the woods a fox did go
So hungry that he was filled with woe

And here's the original Middle English version:

A vox gon out of þe wode go
Afingret so, þat him wes wo

One of the things you might notice is /gaw/ and /waw/ instead of ***go*** and ***woe***. The Old English versions were ***gan*** and ***wa*** – spelled with an A and using the traditional /ah/ sound. Remember that northern speakers held onto that vowel through most of the Middle English period, so those words would have still been ***gan*** and ***wa*** in the north. But in the south, the vowel had shifted to /aw/ on its way to becoming /oh/ after the Great Vowel Shift. So from Old English ***gan*** and ***wa***, here we have Middle English /gaw/ and /waw/, and after the 1400s, we will have ***go*** and ***woe***. We see that vowel changing in the South in this poem because both words were spelled with an O instead of the traditional letter A.

The other notable sound change in the first line is the pronunciation of ***fox*** as /vox/. The word is actually spelled V-O-X. There we see the voicing of that initial sound so that the F became a V. As we saw earlier, this was one of the common dialect features of the far south.

Now this southern pronunciation didn't have much influence on modern standard English, but I have noted in a couple of prior episodes that the southern pronunciation of fox did give us a word in Modern English. You might remember that a female fox is called a ***vixen*** – and the V in ***vixen*** comes from that southern pronunciation of ***fox*** as /vox/. The '-EN' suffix in ***vixen*** was a feminine ending inherited from Proto-Germanic. So Old English ***fyxen*** became ***vixen*** in the south of England, and that's the version that survived into Modern English. Of course, that word ***vixen*** has been extended over time to describe a type of woman – a 'foxy lady' if you will.

Other than ***vixen***, there are a couple of other words where this southern pronunciation has persisted into standard English. For example, the word ***vane*** (V-A-N-E) as in a ***weather vane*** or ***wind vane*** is derived from the southern pronunciation of the Old English word ***fana***. ***Fana*** meant a flag or banner, and we use the southern version of that word today in terms like ***weather vane*** and ***wind vane*** because those vanes were designed to be placed in the wind like flags or banners. And they sometimes resembled flags or banners.

Another southern pronunciation that has persisted into modern standard English is the word ***vat*** meaning a large tub. ***Vat*** is actually the southern pronunciation of the Old English word ***fæt*** which meant a vessel. But other than those specific examples – ***vixen***, ***vane*** and ***vat*** – the southern pronunciation of F as V has had very little impact on Modern English. In fact, outside of the far south, Old English speakers didn't use the 'V' sound at the beginning of words. So with the limited exceptions of ***vixen***, ***vane*** and ***vat***, all other common words in Modern English that begin with a 'V' sound are actually loanwords from other languages – mostly from French or Latin.

So let me take you through this poem, The Fox and the Wolf, so we can explore some more of the Southern dialect features. Here are the first 14 lines. I'll rotate my Modern English translation with the original Middle English text.

Out of the woods a fox did go
So hungry that he was filled with woe
He was never in any way
Half as hungry as he was that day

A vox gon out of þe wode go
Afingret so, þat him wes wo
He nes neuere in none wise
Afingret erour half so swiþe.

He did not travel by path or street
For he loathed the men who he might meet
He would rather meet a hen
Than half a hundred women

He ne hoeld nouþerwey ne strete,
For him wes loþ men to mete;
Him were leuere meten one hen,
Þen half an oundred wimmen

He struck out quickly overall
Such that he soon saw a wall.
Within the wall was a house
The fox was eager to check it out
For he thought his hunger to quench
Either with meat or with drink to drench.

He strok swiþe ouer-al,
So þat he ofsei ane wal;
Wiþinne þe walle wes on hous,
The wox wes þider swiþe wous;
For he þohute his hounger aquenche,
Oþer mid mete, oþer mid drunche.

So let me mention a few things about that passage. At the end we see the word ***drunche*** for ***drink***. This was a common Southern form with the 'CH' ending in place of the hard 'K'. This softer 'CH' ending still survives in the word ***drench*** – ***drink*** and ***drench*** ultimately being two different versions of the same root word.

Also note that the word appears here as ***drunche*** (D-R-U-N-C-H-E). So it has an 'E' at the end pronounced /eh/ – /drünch-eh/. I noted last time that this represents what remained of the various inflectional endings that had once existed in Old English. By this point, they had mostly collapsed into this generic 'E' at the end of many words. In this passage, ***wood*** appears as ***wod***e, ***wall*** as ***walle***, ***street*** as ***strete***, ***meet*** as ***mete***, ***quench*** as ***aquenche***, and again, ***drink*** as ***drunche***.

Last time I noted that this generic /eh/ sound at the end of many words had stopped being pronounced in the north, but it continued to be pronounced in the south. Since it didn't really serve any purpose anymore, that /eh/ sound at the end gradually fell silent in the south as well over the course of the 1300s, but the letter 'E' was retained at the end of many words, and it started to be used as a marker to indicate a long vowel sound. And that gave us the silent 'E' at the end of so many words in Modern English. Again, at this point, around the year 1300, it was still a pronounced letter in the south. By the time of Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 1300s, the pronunciation was variable, and by the mid-1400s, it was silent in almost all English words.

Now continuing with The Fox and the Wolf poem, the fox finds his way into a hen house. The passage reads:

A house there was, the door was open
Hens were therein creeping about
Five – that maketh a flock
And with them sat a cock
The cock flew about him on high
And two hens sat nearby

On hous þer wes, þe dore wes ope,
Hennen weren þerinne I-crope,
Fiue, þat makeþ anne flok,
And mid hem sat on kok.
Þe kok him wes flowen on hey,
And two hennen him seten ney.

Now again, this passage shows several Southern features. First of all, notice that the hens are referred to as ***hennen*** instead of ***hens***. So here we have that '-en' plural ending that was common in the south, and that still survives in words like ***children*** and ***brethren***.

We also have the verb ***makeþ*** with the '-eth' ending that was common in the South. As we saw last time, northern speakers would have said ***makes*** with the '-s' ending that we use today. But the speakers of the far south used '-eth.' Of course, '-eth' lingered into early Modern English. As you probably know, Shakespeare used both endings in his writings. And the King James Bible used that '-eth' verb ending extensively. But by the late 1600s, the '-eth' verb ending was largely gone, even though it still lingers in some poetic literature.

Also notice the pronoun form in the line "And with them sat a cock" – "And mid hem sat on kok." Here we have the traditional Old English 'H' form – ***hem*** – instead of the northern 'TH' form – ***them***. The poem also used ***hy*** for ***they*** and ***here*** for ***there***. So all of those plural pronouns are the traditional Southern forms. The Norse and Northern 'TH' forms – ***they***, ***them*** and ***their*** – were starting to invade the South. Interestingly, the subject form ***they*** came in first over the course of the 1300s. Then in the 1400s, ***them*** and ***their*** were finally adopted in the South. Geoffrey Chaucer – writing in the later 1300s – reflects this development. He occasionally used the word ***they***, but he only used ***them*** and ***their*** when he was trying to represent the speech of the North. His Northern characters used those words, but Chaucer didn't use them otherwise. But again, at the current point in our story around the year 1300, all of those 'TH' pronouns were rarely used in the south.

Now returning to the poem, the fox finds himself literally in the henhouse, and he kills and eats several hens. Then he becomes very thirsty and leaves to search for something to drink. He eventually finds a pit or well with water in it. In the well, he notices two buckets attached to a pulley system. When one was pulled up the other would go down. The poem reads:

Two buckets there he found,
That both went into the ground,
One came up when it was wound,
And at the same time, the other went down.
He understood none of the engine,
He took a bucket and leaped therein.
He hoped there was enough to drink.
As the bucket began to sink.
Too late, the fox was without thought
When down the pit he was brought
Far enough he thought he had gone
But help there was none
Down he went while he was therein
Caught in a trap – the deceitful engine.

Tuo boketes þer he founde,
Þat oþer wende to þe grounde,
Þat wen me shulde þat on opwinde
Þat oþer wolde adoun winde.
He ne hounderstod nout of þe ginne,
He nom þat boket, and lep þerinne;
For he hopede I-nou to drinke.
Þis boket biginneþ to sinke;
To late þe vox wes biþout,
Þo he wes in þe ginne I-brout.
I-nou he gon him bi-þenche,
Ac hit ne halp mid none wrenche;
Adoun he moste, he wes þerinne;
I-kaut he wes mid swikele ginne.

The fox is now trapped in the well, but at least there is water to quench his thirst. He begins to drink the water, but it stinks and doesn't taste good at all. He begins to cry and laments his situation. He says that his lust for food and water, and his thievery, have led him to this predicament.

Soon a wolf arrives at the same well looking for food. The wolf hears the fox crying in the well, so he approaches the well and asks who is inside. The fox recognizes the wolf's voice because they are old friends. And the fox quickly thinks of a plan that will allow him to make his escape from the well. He identifies himself as the wolf's friend, Reynard the Fox. And he says that he should have asked the wolf to come with him because he has found paradise at the bottom of the well. He has more than enough to eat and drink forever. He will never be hungry again and will never have to work. He will never again experience suffering or woe.

The wolf asks the fox if he has died and found heavenly bliss. The fox says yes, and that the wolf should join him in the well to share in his good fortune. The fox says that he would not even consider leaving to re-join his family or even for all the goods in the world. Now the wolf was very hungry, so he was tempted by the fox's description of paradise at the bottom of the well. The wolf asks the fox how he can join him, and the fox tells him to jump in the bucket. Of course, the fox was sitting in the other bucket at the bottom of the well, knowing full well that as the wolf went down in one bucket, the fox would rise in the other. Here's the passage that begins with the wolf's question:

Now tell me what I shall do,
So that I may come to you."
"Do?" said the fox. "I will you learn.
See that bucket hanging there?
There is an opening to heaven's bliss.
Leap therein, with certainty,
And you shall come to see me soon."
Said the wolf, "That is easily done."
He leaped in, and weighed a great deal
Something that the fox knew full well.
The wolf sank, and the fox did rise;
As the wolf descended, he was greatly surprised.
When he came to the middle of the pit,
The fox going upward he did meet.

Ac sei me wat I shal do,
And ou ich may comen þe to."
"Do?" quod þe vox. "Ich wille þe lere.
I-siist þou a boket hongi þere?
Þere is a bruche of heuene blisse,
Lep þerinne, mid I-wisse,
And þou shalt comen to me sone."
Quod the wolf, "þat is liȝt to done."
He lep in, and way sumdel;
Þat weste þe vox ful wel.
Þe wolf gon sinke, þe vox arise;
Þo gon þe wolf sore agrise.
Þo he com amidde þe putte,
Þe wolfe þene vox opward mette.

So through trickery and deception, the fox makes his escape, and now the wolf finds himself trapped in the well. The well is located next to a house where friars live. And soon a friar comes to gather some water because he is very thirsty. He pulls up the bucket which is very heavy. As the bucket draws near, the friar discovers the wolf inside the bucket. He cries out, "The Devil is in the pit!" and all the other friars come running to the well with sticks and spears, and they beat the wolf as he runs away. The passage reads:

The friar pulled with all his strength
for so long that the wolf he did see!
He saw the wolf who was in sight,
“The Devil is in the pit!” he cried
To the pit they all began to go,
All with pikes and staves and stones,

Þe frere mid al his maine tey
So longe þat he þene wolf I-sey!
For he sei þene wolf þer sitte,
He gradde, "Þe deuel is in þe putte!"
To þe putte hy gounnen gon,
Alle mid pikes and staues and ston,

Each man used what he had;
Woe was him that weapons lacked.
They came to the pit and drew up the wolf;
Then had the wretched enemy enough,
That were eager to render defeat
with great hounds, and to beat.
Well and angrily he was beaten and flung,
with staves and spears he was stung.
The fox tricked him for he found no bliss,
and from the blows he found no forgiveness.

Euch mon mid þat he hedde;
Wo wes him þat wepne nedde.
Hy comen to þe putte þene wolf opdrowe;
Þo hede þe wreche fomen I-nowe,
Þat weren egre him to slete
Mid grete houndes, and to bete.
Wel and wroþe he wes I-swonge,
Mid staues and speres he wes I-stounge.
Þe wox bicharde him, mid Iwisse,
For he ne fond nones kunnes blisse,
Ne hof duntes forȝeuenesse

So that’s the Fox and the Wolf – a poem composed around the year 1300 in the Southern dialect of Middle English.

Now I pointed out that the poet spelled a word like ***fox*** as V-O-X to indicate an initial ‘V’ sound. Other ‘F’ words were also re-spelled to reflect that pronunciation – words like ***find*** and ***frogs*** to /vind/ and /vroggen/.

But what about 'S' words like ***sit*** and ***say*** and ***sin*** – all of which were used in the poem? Did the poet spell them with a Z or zed to indicate how they were often pronounced in the south? Well, no. He didn't. And that's because the letter Z was still not a common letter in English. Let me explain.

The letter Z or zed has its origins in the Greek alphabet as the Greek letter zeta. But Latin didn't really have the 'Z' sound, so the Romans dropped the letter from their version of the alphabet. Eventually, the Romans started to borrow a lot of Greek words, and they needed to represent that Greek sound, so they added the letter Z back into the alphabet, and they put in at the end. But they only used it for Greek loanwords where they needed to represent that 'Z' sound.

Now if we jump forward to England during the Anglo-Saxon period, Old English had the 'Z' sound in the middle and at the end of words, but the letter Z was rarely used in Latin, so Old English scribes tended to follow the Latin practice. They occasionally used the letter in loanwords, but they rarely used it for native English words. They only used the letter S – the way we still do in a word like ***houses***. We use an S even though it has a 'Z' sound. And that was the common practice around the year 1300 when The Fox and the Wolf was written. So in the poem, the poet just used the letter S.

However, about four decades later, a religious text was composed in Kent in the far southeast corner of England called Ayenbite of Inwyt – literally the Remorse of Conscience. And in that text, the letter Z is routinely used to represent the initial 'Z' sound in many of those southern words. So for example, ***sin*** is spelled as ***zenne*** – Z-E-N-N-E. And from that point on, we find the letter Z being used more and more for native English words which had the 'Z' sound. So even though The Fox and the Wolf didn't use the letter Z, it was about to become much more common in English documents.

That Kentish spelling of ***sin*** as Z-E-N-N-E points to another important development in the southeast, and that was changing pronunciation of the vowel sound in that word. Notice that the Kentish version of the word ***sin*** was spelled with an E – not an I. So why was that? Well it has to do with something I mentioned last time – the changing nature of the sound represented by letter Y.

The word ***sin*** – S-I-N – was actually spelled with a Y in Old English. It was usually spelled S-Y-N-N. And last time, I noted that the letters I and Y had distinct sounds back them. The letter I represented the long /ee/ sound which we use today in a word like ***pizza***, and it also represented the short /ih/ sound found in a word like ***pit***. Meanwhile, the letter Y represented a similar sound but the lips were rounded when it was pronounced. So the sound was more like /ü/.

Now you might remember that the 'I' and 'Y' sounds merged in the north and east of England. People stopped rounding their lips for the 'Y' sound in those regions, so I and Y ended up sounding the same. And that meant that they could be used interchangeably. And since modern standard English emerged from the East Midlands region where this happened, we often find these two letters representing the same sounds today. So when the I and Y became

interchangeable, the word ***sin*** lost its original Y and it acquired its modern spelling with an I – S-I-N.

This is also what happened to words like ***king***, and ***kin*** (K-I-N), and ***pit***, and ***kind***, and ***mind***, and ***first***, and ***thirst***. All of those words originally had a Y – but they were eventually re-spelled with an I after the sounds of the two letters merged.

Again, that was the case in the north and east of England – which extended down to London where modern standard English emerged. But things were different in other parts of the country. In the southeast – in Kent – the /ü/ sound of Y shifted to an /eh/ sound, and scribes there started to spell those words with an E. That's why that poem from Kent spelled the word ***sin*** with an E – as Z-E-N-N-E. And that's also part of the reason why the dialect of Kent was considered a unique dialect.

Now the reason why I mention this specific change in the southeast – in Kent – is because it had an influence on Modern English. Kent was located just down river from London – so speakers from that region mixed with other speakers in and around London. And some of those Kentish pronunciations took root over time.

For example, the opposite of ***right*** was ***lyft*** in Old English. When the Y and I sounds merged in the north and east, it became ***lift***. So the opposite of your right hand was your 'lift' hand. But down in Kent – where the Y sound became /eh/ – the word was pronounced ***left*** – and spelled with an E – L-E-F-T. Of course, that Kentish version became standard over time. The same thing happened with ***knell*** – K-N-E-L-L – which meant the sound of a bell. We usually find it in the term 'death knell.' It's an Old English word, and in Old English, it had a Y sound and was spelled with the letter Y. But as the sound changed around the country, the Kentish version became ***knell*** – spelled with an E – K-N-E-L-L - and that's the version that survived. The same thing happened with ***merry*** – as in Merry Christmas. Again, it originally had a Y and a Y sound, but Modern English uses the Kentish version spelled with an E and an /eh/ sound.

Now I've told you that the Y sound merged with the I sound in the north and east of England. And in the far southeast, it became an /eh/ sound – spelled with an E. So what about the rest of the country – specifically the remainder of the south and west? Well, for much of the 1300s, most speakers in those regions kept the original sound of Y – that rounded /ü/ sound. But scribes in those regions did something very interesting. They began to spell those words with a U instead of a Y. It isn't entirely clear why they did that – but it was probably because the sounds of Y and U were similar. The Y sound was /ü/ and the U sound was /oo/. Both had rounded lips. And since the Y and I were becoming interchangeable in other parts of the country, it's possible that scribes in the south and west didn't want to create confusion by continuing to use the letter Y in those words. If they used a Y, it might suggest an I sound. So in many parts of the south and west, they started to use the letter U instead because they thought its /oo/ sound was close to the /ü/ sound of letter Y.

Now this was the case throughout The Fox and The Wolf poem – which I just discussed. Time and again, the poet spells words with a U instead of a Y. So for example, that word ***sin*** was used

by the poet, and he spelled it S-U-N-N-E. So like most of these words, ***sin*** was spelled with its modern I in the north and east, with an E in the southeast around Kent, and with a U in much of the south and the west. This reflected the difference in the various accents.

The poet also spelled the word ***kin*** meaning a relative with a U. He spelled it C-U-N-N-E. He repeatedly used the word ***pit*** to describe the well where the fox was trapped. And it was spelled P-U-T and P-U-T-T-E. I mentioned that word ***knell*** as in a death knell. Well, the poet also used that word, and he spelled it C-N-U-L. ***Thirst***, ***filth*** and ***mind*** were also all spelled with a U. Again, this was common throughout much of southern and western England, and these U spellings also had an influence on Modern English.

Take the word ***busy*** – B-U-S-Y. It seems like it should be spelled B-I-Z-Y. Well, as we saw earlier, scribes didn't tend to use the letter Z for native words, so ***busy*** has an S for the 'Z' sound. But what about that U. Well, the word ***busy*** was originally spelled with a Y, and it experienced the changes I just described in the various parts of the country. The word ***busy*** reflects a blend of these dialects.

It has the pronunciation that was common in the north and east of England where the 'Y' sound merged with the 'I' sound. That's why the vowel has a short 'I' sound. But the spelling is the version that was common in the south and west of England with the letter U. And that gave us the modern spelling – B-U-S-Y.

The word ***bury*** – B-U-R-Y – has a similar story. Notice that F-U-R-Y is ***fury***. And J-U-R-Y is ***jury***. But B-U-R-Y is not /bury/. It's /berry/. ***Fury*** and ***jury*** are French loanwords that came into English with the letter U representing a 'U' sound. But ***bury*** is a native English word which was originally spelled with a Y. The modern pronunciation with the /eh/ sound is the Kentish pronunciation, and the spelling with the letter U is the spelling from the south and west of England.

So I think the main thing to take from that discussion – and the discussion about the letters I, Y and J from the last episode – is that these regional accents complicated English spelling. And it's a small part of the reason why English spelling seems so random today. Letters that had once represented very specific sounds were now being used in different ways.

Sometimes they were used as a marker to indicate a specific vowel sound, like the use of I in the north or the soon-to-be-common use of silent E at the end of a word. These letters no longer represented a particular sound. They were just markers. We've also seen that in much of the country, the I and Y became interchangeable. Last time, we saw that the I sometimes got lost in a word because of the flowing script of the period. That was especially true when it appeared beside a U or an M or N or L or another I. So in those cases, it became common to replace the I with Y to help indicate the vowel sound. But as we've seen in this episode, sometimes the opposite took place. An original Y was replaced with an I. That often happened in the north and east because the two letters represented the same sound in those regions. Meanwhile, the far southeast developed a different pronunciation of that 'Y' sound, so scribes in that region used an E. In other parts of the south and west, scribes used a U when spelling the same words. And in

several recent episodes, we've seen that the original long 'A' sound – /ah/ – was changing in the south of England, and scribes there were now using a letter O for that sound. But scribes in the north continued to use letter A.

So you can start to see why Modern English spelling is such a mess. Letters were starting to be used in new ways, and regional accents required different spellings in each part of the country. And in fact, the summary I just gave you only covers some of the major changes that were taking place. There were others as well.

For example, just as scribes struggled with the letter I and tried to find ways to keep it from getting lost in a word, the same thing happened with the letter U. In fact, if you think about it, in a period before it was common to dot the I, a letter U actually looked like two I's when it was written in a cursive style script. When a U appeared beside an I, you couldn't tell if it was I-U, U-I or W. Two U's together could be read as I-I-U, U-I-I, or I-U-I. And when a U appeared beside an L or an M or an N – which also had straight lines – a similar problem arose, and it also made the word difficult to read. So French-trained scribes started to replace that U with an O in a lot of words.

Think about the word ***love***. In Old English, it was often pronounced /luvu/ – spelled with a U. We might say L-U-V-U, but remember that the letter V was not a distinct letter yet. U was still being used for the V sound. So the word /luvu/ was sometimes spelled L-U-U-U. After you wrote the L – which required a vertical stroke – you had to write out six more vertical strokes to indicate the three U's. So you ended up with the word ***luvu*** represented by seven vertical strokes that all looked the same. When someone looked at that word, they had to figure out what the heck was going on. So it became a common practice to replace that first U with an O. And that gave us the modern spelling L-O-V-E. But notice that the O actually represented a U sound.

The same thing happened with a word like ***some*** as in "give me some of that." It was S-U-M in Old English. But the U beside the M made the word hard to read in the flowing script of the period. So it became common to replace the U with an O – giving us the modern spelling S-O-M-E. This also helped to distinguish the word from the French word ***sum*** – S-U-M – meaning a mathematical total. That word was coming into English around the current point in our story in the late 1200s. So the Old English word got an O, and the new French word kept its U.

This also happened with ***son***. Old English had ***son*** meaning a male child and ***sun*** meaning the giant star in the sky. They were both spelled with U in Old English. But ***son*** meaning a male child was given an O in Middle English, in part because the U appeared beside an N and tended to get lost, and also because the scribes wanted to distinguish the child from the celestial object.

Word like ***tongue***, ***come***, ***monk***, and ***honey*** all got their modern O's through this process. And ***wolf*** also got an O. That's how ***wolf*** went from W-U-L-F as in ***Beowulf*** to the modern W-O-L-F. And by the time of The Fox and the Wolf poem, ***wolf*** was being spelled with its modern O.

That's why it is common in Modern English to represent the short U sound (/uh/) with either a U, as in ***cup***, ***tub*** or ***shut***, or with an O, as in ***love***, ***come*** or ***monk***. But here's the thing. That /uh/ sound in those words is actually a southern innovation. In the Old and Middle English periods, it was actually /oo/ as in ***look*** and ***book***. Think about the difference between ***putt*** (P-U-T-T) and ***put*** (P-U-T). At one time, the vowel sounds were identical like the /oo/ in ***put***. That was the short 'U' sound.

But a little later in our story, in the 1600s, that short 'U' sound started to change in southern England from /oo/ or /uh/ – from the vowel in ***put*** to the vowel in ***putt***. As I said, this happened in the south – including London, so at a time when modern standard English was emerging there, it became common throughout the language to pronounce that vowel as /uh/, including much of Wales, Scotland and even North America. But it didn't happen in the north of England. And even today, this is one of the major markers used to distinguish speakers in northern England from those in southern England. Northerners tend to pronounce the vowel the old way as /oo/, where most other English speakers use the newer /uh/. So southern ***cup*** is contrasted with northern /coop/. And southern ***love*** is contrasted with northern /loov/. Again, the northern pronunciation is actually the original pronunciation.

There was also another vowel shift in the south of England which provides an additional way of marking the modern north-south linguistic divide. During the 1700s, in the south of England, the flat /æ/ sound in words like ***bath***, ***path***, ***laugh***, and ***grass*** shifted to an /ah/ sound and became /bahth/, /pahth/, /lahf/ and /grahs/. In some parts of England today, this is considered a posh feature, but it is actually standard throughout southern England and is also a feature of standard British English known as Received Pronunciation. Since this change happened in the 1700s, it was too late to have an impact on American English. And the change also failed to occur in northern England. So the American pronunciation of those words is much closer to the pronunciation in northern England. Again the /æ/ sound of ***bath*** was the original sound, whereas the /ah/ sound of /bahth/ was a later development in the south.

I should also note that I will deal with all of these accent differences in more detail when I get to the Modern English period, but the details here are fascinating. This /æ/ to /ah/ sound change only affected certain words – not all words with the /æ/ sound. And the words that were affected varied from region to region. But to keep it simple for now, these two rules regarding the pronunciation of the short U sound and the short A sound are the two main ways to identify and distinguish northern accents from southern accents in England. And let me actually illustrate this for you.

Using some of the voice samples that I've received, I am going to take you on a quick tour of England to hear some of these differences. I am going to play you two sentences from each speaker. The first is, "Lucy accidentally stuck a pin in her palm while mending her dress." And the second is, "The goose took a bath in the mill pond." In this first group of Northern speakers, you're going to hear ***stuck*** pronounced as /stook/ and ***bath*** pronounced as /bæth/ – both in the northern fashion.

Let's begin in the northwest of England. First we have Andrew from Lancashire. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's listen to Sally from Lancashire. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move south just a bit to Manchester and listen to Richard. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move over to the northeast to Yorkshire – and listen to Jim. [VOICE SAMPLE]
And now let's head a little further south to Nottingham and listen to Hayley. [VOICE SAMPLE]

So as you can hear, all of these accents have these typically northern features. Let me conclude our look at the north with a quick anecdote from Alex who is originally from Lancashire.

Now remember, these two northern vowel pronunciations – /stook/ and /bæth/ – were the older and more traditional pronunciations. They shifted to /stuck/ and /bahth/ in the south in the early Modern English period. So let's listen to a few southern examples:

First we have James from Exeter in the far southwest. [VOICE SAMPLE] Now let's move to the southeast to London and listen to Matt. [VOICE SAMPLE] And let's conclude with a quick anecdote from Bettina who also speaks with a southern English accent and who encountered this /ae/ versus /ah/ issue when she moved to America. [VOICE SAMPLE]

I hope you found all of that interesting. I know a lot of you are looking forward to the part of the podcast where we explore the evolution of modern English accents. And I wanted to start that process here with the accents in Middle English. It's also great to finally be able to use some of the voice samples that I've been collecting over the past couple of years. By the way, I am still collecting those – especially if you speak with a regional or non-standard accent. You can always leave a sample on the Voice Samples page of the website. I have lots of standard accent samples, but if you have a regional accent or an accent that is a little different, that is kind that I'm still looking for. And as we eventually transition into the Modern English period, I'll use a lot more of those samples to help illustrate how modern English accents developed.

So with that, I'm going to conclude this look at the north-south linguistic divide in England. Next time, we'll return to etymology, and we'll see how a measurement revolution was taking place around Europe in the late 1200s and early 1300s. These changes were the product of several technological innovations, and we'll see how these developments shaped the English language. So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.