THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 1: INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to the first episode of the History of English podcast. My name if Kevin Stroud, your host for this series of podcasts which will explore the history of the English language.

In this introductory episode, I want to lay the groundwork for the series of podcasts which will follow. Let me begin by noting that this is ultimately a history podcast. The topic happens to be English.   But this is not a podcast about the technical aspects of English. It is not my goal or intention to teach anyone proper grammar or pronunciation.

Instead, this is a podcast about the HISTORY of the language – and you can't separate the history of the language from the history of those who spoke the language. So this is really the story of the English language from its earliest ancestor – the Indo-European language spoken in eastern Europe over 4,000 years ago – to its current status as the closest thing we have to a modern international language. And it is the story of the people, places and events which shaped the language into what it has become today. It is also the story of the words which we use today – and how those words came into our language.

And speaking of the language we have today, it is a language which emerged from an obscure Germanic dialect spoken in Northern Europe about 2,000 years ago to one of the most commonly spoken languages in the world.   Technically speaking, English ranks behind Chinese and Spanish in terms of the most commonly spoken native or "first" languages. But when second and other learned languages are taken into account, it rivals Chinese in terms of speakers and is undoubtedly the most commonly "learned" language in the world.

Some linguists estimate that nearly 1 billion people speak English today. Of the total number of English speakers, it is estimated that there are approximately three times as many non-native speakers of English as native speakers. This fact reflects the desire of people around the world to learn English as the de facto international language. English is routinely used an the common medium of communication among speakers of other languages. When German businessmen established a Volkswagen plant in China, the Germans and their Chinese counterparts used English to communicate with each other, even though it is not the native language of either group. A Russian airline pilot landing in Rome will communicate with the Italian air traffic controller in English – not Russian or Italian — because English is the official language for international aviation. It is very easy to see that English has emerged – and continues to emerge – as the predominant international lingua franca.

So why we should bother learning about the history of the English?

First, simply because it is interesting. It really is a fascinating story. But also because it helps to explain many of the peculiar aspects of English.

Why do we say "I could care less" when what we really mean is "I could not care less?"

Why do we have **houses** but not **mouses**? We have **mice**. Why do we have **boxes** and **foxes** but not **oxes**? We have **oxen**.

We can have a **man**, **woman** and **child**, but we don't have **mans**, **womans** and **childs**.

Why do we spell **knife** with a 'K' or **gnome** with a 'G'? And why is the 'f' sound sometimes spelled with a 'G-H' – as in **cough** and other times a 'P-H' like **phone**?

I could go on and on because the examples seem endless. But the answers to those questions lie in the history of the language.

I have heard some people express that English must have an unusually large number of these peculiarities compared to other languages. But that is not necessarily true. There are lots of languages and many of them are quite complicated and have lots of unusual or peculiar rules.

But one thing that English does have – that lots of other languages don't – is a massive vocabulary. It is generally agreed that no other language has the number of words that English has. And that should tell you something. Unlike some languages which reject outside influences, English has shown an incredible willingness and ability to adapt and evolve. To borrow elements from other languages - including words - and to adapt them to English.

About 1,000 years ago (in the year 1066 to be precise), an army led by William of Normandy invaded England from northern France. And many of you will know this story very well, because William of Normandy became known to history as William the Conqueror – the last foreign leader to invade and conquer England. The arrival of the Normans changed almost everything in England – socially, culturally, economically, legally and especially linguistically. The defeated Anglo-Saxon earls were wiped out and removed from power, and they were replaced by Norman French earls and knights who had fought with and supported William.

For the next three centuries, French became the official language of the English government, the courts, the aristocracy and the ruling class. In fact, it is not until the late 1300s – around the beginning of the so-called "War of the Roses" – that we have English monarch who spoke English exclusively again.

What we see happening here is a theme which will extend throughout the podcast. Language shift is not about numbers. It is about power. A relatively small number of powerful people speaking one language can make a much larger number of people learn their language. We see the same phenomenon in western Europe when a relatively small number of Latin-speaking Romans imposed their language on the Celtic peoples who they invaded in Western Europe. Today, almost everyone in Continental Europe west of Germany speaks a language which evolved from Latin – the so-called Romance languages. We also see it in the spread of English in the 20th and 21st Centuries. The total number of people who speak English as their first language is relatively small compared to the world at large. Yet people throughout the world seek to learn and communicate with each other in English.

It is this tendency for language to spread because of power – sometimes military or political power, sometimes economic power, sometimes social or cultural power – but it's this tendency for language to spread because of certain power associated with the speakers of the language that caused a major upheaval in the English language when the Norman French invaded in 1066. Afterwards, French was imposed by the Normans as the official language of England.

During this period English came very close to disappearing as a distinct language. It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that it almost became an Anglicized dialect of French. It absorbed a massive number of French words, but it did not become French. It remained English – albeit a highly modified version of English. It became a much larger language with an enhanced vocabulary. The language changed so much as a result of this experience that linguists mark this period as the transition from "Old English" or "Anglo-Saxon" to the period known as "Middle English." This is but one example of how English survived by assimilating outside influences rather than rejecting change and subsequently dying out.

The Norman invasion was just one event which changed the English language. But all languages are constantly evolving and changing. It's just that the changes are typically more gradual and subtle – not the sudden and dramatic change marked by the Norman invasion of England.

In fact, linguists employ a general rule to mark the natural evolution that most languages experience. That general rule is that most languages evolve over the course of 1,000 years to the point that a speaker at the beginning of that period would not be able to communicate with a speaker at the end of that period because of the natural language change. This general rule certainly applies to English.

As I mentioned before, there are earlier periods of English known as "Old English," and an intermediate period known as "Middle English." There is also a third period which represents the version of English which we speak today called "Modern English." So those are the three periods to keep in mind.

If I conducted a poll and told most people that there were three periods of English – Old English, Middle English and Modern English – and I asked them to tell me which period Shakespeare belonged to, I suspect that the overwhelming majority would answer either "Old English" or "Middle English." In fact, I would not be completely surprised if no one gave the correct answer which is "Modern English."

Shakespeare is considered a Modern English writer because we can read his words today without the need for a translation. Now I know some of you will say, "Hold it a minute. I need a translator to read Shakespeare." But there is a difference between not understanding Shakespeare's references – or the particular way in which he uses words for literary effect – and not understanding the language itself. There are certainly translations of Shakespeare's works into conversational contemporary English, and these translations can be helpful. But they are not necessary. If you're willing to spend the time and effort, you can read Hamlet or MacBeth today in the same words Shakespeare used and still understand the gist of the story.

Another literary work from the same time period is the King James' Bible. Once again, there are modern translations of the King James Bible to make it easier to read, but it is not necessary. If you're so inclined, you can read the King James Bible and understand it without a translation.

Now Shakespeare's works and the King James Bible were written in the late 1500s and early 1600s. So this was near the beginning of the Modern English period and that is part of the reason why there are noticeable differences between the English used in those works and contemporary English. But English has not evolved to an extent that we can no longer understand these 16th and 17th century works.

But - if we go back in time a little further, from the 1600s to the 1300s, we are now in the period known as "Middle English" – the period following the Norman invasion of England. And the big difference between this period and the Modern English period is the way words are pronounced – especially vowels. For some reason, around 1500, English speakers in the British Isles – primarily in England and even more specifically in the south of England in and around London – they began to change the way they pronounced their vowels. This is known as the "Great Vowel Shift." This shift – or pronunciation change – is one of the events which marks the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

So what did Middle English sound like? Well one of the benefits of a podcast is that I can actually illustrate how these older versions of the language sounded. But first - a disclaimer. I do not claim to be an expert in the pronunciation of Middle English or Old English. Again, my focus here is on the history – not so much the precise manner in which Old English vowels or consonants were enunciated. However, I hope that my pronunciation will give you at least a general sense of how the earlier versions of the language sounded.

So in order to illustrate the evolution of English, I want to read a passage from one of the most important pieces of literature composed during the period of Middle English – The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. It is very likely that you read The Canterbury Tales in school. But what you probably read was a modern English translation of the original text written by Chaucer in the 1300s. The book is a collection of tales told by a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The following passage occurs near the beginning of book as the author recalls his first impressions upon meeting the pilgrims – in this instance a Knight.

Canterbury Tales
A Knight there was, and he was a worthy man,
Who from the time that he first began
To ride out, he loved chivalry,
Truth and honor, freedom and courtesy.
He fought bravely in his lord's wars,
And in them had he ridden, no other man so far,
As well in Christendom as in heathen places,
And ever honored for his worthiness.

Here is the same passage as it was actually written by Chaucer and as it would have been read in the 1300s during the period of Middle English:

A Knight ther was, and that a worthy man
That fro the tyme that he first began
To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye.
Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
And therto hadde he riden (no man ferre)
As wel in Cristendom as hethenesse,
And ever honoured for his worthinesse.

This was the sound of Middle English. I think the most important thing to take from that passage is that it is not really that far from Modern English. The words and the grammar are very familiar. The biggest difference is pronunciation. Again, this was a time when certain words – and especially the vowels – were pronounced differently than today. There are three key components to language. The words that are spoken (the vocabulary), the way in which those words are put together (the grammar), and the way the words are spoken (the pronunciation). The first two are very similar to modern English. It is the third which marks the biggest difference.

Let me give you another example. I am going to use a passage which is often used for the purpose of illustrating the evolution of English – the Lord's Prayer. I am going to use this passage – not for any particular religious purposes - but simply because it is a passage which exists in many different historical languages – including Modern, Middle and Old English.

The Modern English version comes from the 1549 Book of Common Prayer. So this is shortly before Shakespeare's writings:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive them that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil.

Now in Middle English:

Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name;
thi kyndoom come to; be thi wille don in erthe as in heuene;
gyue to us this dai oure breed; and forgyue to us oure dettis,
as we forgyuen to oure gettouris; and lede us not in to temptacioun, but delyuere us from yuel.

So, as you can hear, Middle English is not the English we speak today, but it is close enough that we can recognize it as a form of English. But if we go back in time even further – to the period before Middle English – before the arrival of the Norman French in Britain – we see and hear a

language that is barely recognizable as a form of English at all. But it is. It is the earliest version of English which is known as Old English – or Anglo-Saxon.

You have probably heard English described as a Germanic language. But you may not know exactly what that means. Does that mean English came from German? No, not exactly. It means that English – like modern German, Dutch, Swedish and Norwegian – all evolved from an ancient ancestral language spoken in northern Europe called "Germanic" – or "Proto-Germanic" to be precise. English did not come from German. Nor did German come English. They each came from an even older shared language. So it should not be surprising that the further back in time we go, the more English looks and sounds like German. Because the further back in time we go, the more they have in common.

Old English was spoken by the Anglo-Saxons who were Germanic-speaking tribes from northern Germany and modern-day Denmark. They were only a small part of many Germanic tribes that dominated central Europe east of the Rhine. And when the Roman Empire began to collapse in the 4th and 5th centuries, the Germanic tribes poured into western Europe into the areas previously controlled by the Romans. This included southern Britain in the area we know today as England. What began as an invitation, became a migration, and eventually became an outright invasion. Beginning in the 5th century, these Germanic-speaking Anglo-Saxons defeated and displaced much of the native Celtic-speaking Britons and establish several independent Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which eventually coalesced in the face of Viking invasions beginning in the 8th century to become a unified nation. These were the same Anglo-Saxons who were defeated by the Norman French in 1066.

So what did this very early version of Anglo-Saxon English sound like. Fortunately, we have many sources from this period to document the language of the Anglo-Saxons. One of the most well known is the first known book which was written in English. You probably read it in English class in school. It is the epic poem "Beowulf." And it is a virtual certainty that when you read it, you read a Modern English translation. Because, as you will see and hear, Old English is so far removed from Modern English – and so much closer to the original Proto-Germanic language – that it is completely foreign to modern ears. Remember the general rule that languages evolve over the course of 1000 years to the point where they can no longer be mutually understood.

Let me read the first few lines from Beowulf in Modern English.

Beowulf
So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

Now here is the same passage in the original Old English:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena   in geār-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

As you can hear, there is very little in that which is recognizable to modern English ears.

Let's also listen to the Lord's Prayer in old English and compare it to the Middle English version I read earlier:

Lord's Prayer in Old English
Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurþe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Again, this is far removed from Modern English. It is difficult to discern much in that passage that is familiar as English.

As I said earlier, even though Modern English differs from Middle English in pronunciation, it shares a great deal of vocabulary and grammar. But when compared to Old English, it shares neither pronunciation nor grammar. And the vocabulary is so far removed from Modern English that we only see glimpses of words that will eventually become recognizable to us.

yfele	-	evil
Fæder	-	father
ure	-	our
heofonum	-	heaven
eorðan	-	earth
forgyf	-	forgive

So how we did we get from there to here? That's the question I am going to try to answer over the course of this podcast series.

I am going to take you back to the beginning – the very beginning. To the ancient language from English ultimately derived. The oldest known ancestor of English – the Indo-European language. Of course this is also the oldest known ancestor of almost all of the languages of Europe, as well many of the languages of Central Asia, including Sanskrit and Persian.

Over the next few episodes of the podcast, I am going to cover the period from the original Indo-European language to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. This is the story of pre-English. And it is very important to the overall story of English because English is a mutt language, combining elements of many different languages. But almost all of those major influences share a common Indo-European ancestry. The Germanic languages, Greek, Latin, French, the Celtic languages – they all came from this common source. So to fully understand the history of English, you have to understand this essential period.

I will then look at the period from the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in Britain to their defeat at the hands of the Norman French. This is the period of Old English.

After that we will cover the period from the Norman Invasion in 1066 to the time just before Shakespeare and the King James Bible. This is the period of Middle English.

And then the last portion of the podcast will cover the period from Shakespeare through the creation of the British Empire and the expansion of English to North America, the Indian subcontinent, Australia and beyond. This is the period of Modern English.

Collectively, this is the story of English.

In closing this introductory episode, I would like to make note of a few housekeeping matters. First, I would encourage you to check out the website for this podcast – historyofenglishpodcast.com. Each episode is available at the site and there is a specific page dedicated to each episode with a summary of the episode and maps and illustrations mentioned in the episode.

So, that concludes this introductory episode. In the next episode, we will look at the oldest known ancestor of English – the Indo-European language. Until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English.