THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 159: ELIZABETHAN VOICES

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Explanation of Transcription Symbols Used in This Transcript:
[A] - used to represent a letter of the alphabet as used in writing;
'a' - used when describing a sound by reference to the letter that represents that sound;
/a/ - used to represent a specific sound or word as pronounced and demonstrated in the podcast.

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 159: Elizabethan Voices. In this episode, we're going to turn our attention to the sound of Elizabethan English. Beginning in the late 1560s, several scholars in England attempted to describe the way words were pronounced in English. They even developed an early phonetic alphabet to represent the sounds of the language. Those works allow modern linguists to trace the evolution of English pronunciation in the early modern period. So this time, we'll explore what those sources tell us about the changing nature of the language in Elizabethan England.

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 and get bonus episodes at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

One other quick note before we begin. This episode is about sounds and sound changes within English. And we're going to be covering quite a bit of information. If you find these types of discussions to be a little overwhelming, I just wanted to remind you that a transcript of the episode is available on the website under Episode 159. So if you prefer, you can read along with the episode, or if you don't want to hear me talk, you can just read it at your own convenience. But I just wanted to let you know that you that that option is available.

Now last time, we looked at how the English government embraced the plantation concept as a way to expand its presence in Ireland and as a way to secure a foothold in the New World. And I noted that one of the early advocates of the plantation strategy was a spelling reformer named Sir Thomas Smith. Smith thought that English spellings needed an overhaul because they didn't reflect the way words were actually pronounced. Smith's spelling reforms were composed in Latin in 1568, but in the following year, another English scholar named John Hart composed an extensive work on spelling reform in English. His work was called 'An Orthographie,' and it is extremely important to historians of the language because much of the text was dedicated to English pronunciation.

Hart wrote about pronunciation because he shared Smith's goal of a phonetic writing system. He wanted words to be spelled the way they were actually pronounced, so that meant that he needed to describe English pronunciation in some detail. He wrote extensively about the sounds of English and the way the alphabet should be applied to those sounds. And his work was so advanced, and so sophisticated in its approach, that it is considered to be the first major work on English phonetics. He even devised a phonetic alphabet, which was really a precursor of the modern International Phonetic Alphabet that linguists use today. That's the alphabet that you see in dictionaries that shows you how to pronounce a particular word.

Again, Hart created his own version of that type of alphabet, and in the following decades, other scholars adopted the same general approach to describe the sounds of English. By putting all of these works together, modern scholars can actually trace the changing pronunciation of English from the late 1500s.

This development is especially important in light of that discussion about plantations and colonies in the last episode. That's because these detailed accounts of English pronunciation coincide with the England's expansion in Ireland and the New World. Over the next century of so, the English language would establish new footholds in those regions. But over time, the version of English that evolved in those regions became more and more distinct from the English spoken in Britain.

The English language was about to fracture into several major dialects that were geographically separated from each other. That means that the language described by John Hart is the ultimate source of most of those dialects.

In recent years, there has been quite a bit of research and scholarship dedicated to the pronunciation used during the time of William Shakespeare, which is of course essentially the same language that John Hart described – just delayed by a couple of decades. That Shakespearian pronunciation is sometimes called Original Pronunciation or OP for short. It refers to the Original Pronunciation that was used in Shakespeare's plays. There are even modern acting companies that present his plays using that Original Pronunciation.

One of the leading experts in Original Pronunciation is Ben Crystal – an actor and son of the British linguist David Crystal who was instrumental in reconstructing the sound of Shakespeare's plays. Ben teaches the OP accent to acting troops around the world, and here is an example of his recreation of the opening speech of Shakespeare's play Richard III:

[BEN CRYSTAL AUDIO CLIP]
Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front;
And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.

Now some people who hear that accent describe it as a blend of various modern English accents, including those of Ireland and North America, especially due to the prominent 'r' sound in that accent. And that description actually makes sense if we consider that Elizabethan English was the common ancestor of those various accents. So as we look more closely at that earlier form of speech, you will probably notice some familiar elements no matter which accent of English you happen to have.

Again, as I noted, much of our knowledge about Elizabethan pronunciation really begins with those early spelling reformers like Sir Thomas Smith and John Hart because they advocated a phonetic spelling system. Even though their spelling reforms were largely ignored, their description of the language is an extremely valuable resource for anyone interested in the historical pronunciation of English.

In this episode, I'm going to focus on the writings of John Hart because his work was very detailed, very thorough, very modern in its approach, and it was also composed in English. Hart's knowledge of the way sounds were made in the mouth was aided by the fact that he lived at a time when researchers were studying human anatomy in detail, including the vocal tract. In fact, the word ***larynx*** appeared for the first time in an English document around the current point in our story. Like a lot of medical terms, the word ***larynx*** was ultimately derived from Greek. And the larynx is actually important to our story – because it is the part of the vocal tract where sounds are actually voiced. In fact, it's sometimes called the 'voice box.'

The larynx is a cavity in the upper part of the wind-pipe that contains the vocal cords, or as they're more precisely known, the 'vocal folds' because they're not actually cords. The vocal folds are small, muscular flaps that can be left open to allow the air to flow through freely when you breathe. Or they can be constricted and brought together just enough so that they flutter or vibrate when the air travels through them. And that vibration or buzzing of the vocal folds is what creates the voicing sound when we speak. That's why the larynx is sometimes called the voice box.

Now when we speak, some of the sounds we make with our mouth are voiced in this way, but not all of them are. Some of them don't use the voice box at all. For example, if you make the 's' sound (/s/), you don't actually use your vocal folds. The sound just flows through the windpipe unrestricted, and the sound is actually made in the front part of your mouth. But notice what happens when we make that same /s/ sound, and then we constrict those vocal folds to make them vibrate. The sound goes from /s/ to /z/. It goes from a whisper to a buzz. So the sound switches from an 's' sound to 'z' or 'zed' sound. And I'll just say 'z' going forward since that's the term used in my dialect. But all of this is really important because activating the voice box causes the sound to switch from one sound to another.

The same thing happens with the 'ch' sound (/ch/). It's the sound we hear at the beginning and end of the word ***church***. It's a voiceless sound. So the vocal folds are open and silent when we make that sound. But if we constrict those vocal folds and make them vibrate, the sound switches from /ch/ to /j/. So it becomes the 'j' sound – sometimes called the 'soft g' sound like at the

beginning and end of the word ***judge***. Again, this /j/ sound is just the voiced version of the 'ch' sound (/ch/).

We actually have several pairs of sounds that work the same way in Modern English. And in this episode, we're going to explore those pairs in some detail.

Now you may be wondering why these voiced and voiceless pairs are so important. Well, it's partly because this issue of voicing is one of the main triggers for sound change over time. As we'll see, voiced sounds are attracted to each other, and voiceless sounds are also attracted to each other. When a voiceless sound is surrounded by voiced sounds, the voiceless sound in the middle tends to become voiced as well. The voice box will sometimes stay engaged all the way though and make all of those sounds voiced. And when that happens, the sound in the middle changes. Of course, the opposite can happen if a voiced sound is surrounded by two voiceless sounds. In that environment, the voicing in the middle can get turned off. In this episode, we're going to see how that linguistic phenomenon shaped English during and after the Elizabethan period.

The other reason why this issue of voicing is so important to our story is because that's how John Hart described the consonant sounds in his 1569 text called 'An Orthography.' Hart was one of the first English scholars to describe the voicing of consonant sounds in detail. And as he analyzed the sounds of English, he tended to deal with them as voiced and voiceless pairs. And I'm going to take the same approach in this episode so you can see how this very simple idea shapes so much of the language we speak today.

But before we go any further, let me note that I'm only going to focus on those voiced and voiceless pairs in this episode. All of the other consonant sounds and all of the vowel sounds are always voiced. So I'll deal with those other sounds in future episodes.

So let's begin our look at these voiced and voiceless pairs by focusing on some of the pairs where the contrast can be a little hard to hear. And let's start with the 'p' sound (/p/) and the 'b' sound (/b/). They are almost the same sound. Mechanically, we pronounce them in the exact same way, except for the fact that the vocal folds are left open and silent when we make the 'p' sound, but they are narrowed and activated when we make the 'b' sound. So /p/ is voiceless, and /b/ is voiced. ***Pet/bet***. ***Pad/bad***. ***Pit/bit***.

Now that may be hard to hear because those two consonant sounds are pronounced very quickly before the vowel sounds kick in, and remember that vowel sounds are always voiced. So it can be difficult for the ear to detect whether that sound at the beginning is voiced or not. But if you were to take this episode – this MP3 file – and you were slow it down in a media player so that the words were pronounced very slowly, you would probably notice the slightly delayed voicing in the words with the 'p' sound because the 'p' is voiceless. And if you were to put the audio in a digital editing program where you can actually see the audio as wave forms, you would notice that the wave forms show a slight delay in the voicing of those words with the 'p' sound. It only lasts for a few milliseconds, but it's there.

Well, John Hart had a very good ear, and he also understood that the ‘p’ and ‘b’ sounds were distinguished only by voicing of one of the sounds. So he discussed them together in his manuscript. But he didn’t really have much to say about them because both letters have been remarkably stable over time. For the most part, words that were pronounced with one of those sounds in the distant past are still pronounced with that sound today.

Now while that tends to be true for English, it isn’t necessarily true for French. As we saw back in Episode 153 called ‘Zombie Letters,’ a lot of Latin words were slurred and shortened as they passed through French, and they sometimes they lost a ‘p’ and ‘b’ sound along the way. And some of those words then passed into English, where a letter [P] or [B] was added back into the words to reflect their original Latin pronunciation. That gave English quite a few silent [P]’s and [B]’s like the [P] in ***receipt*** and the [B]’s in ***doubt*** and ***debt***. But John Hart hated those spellings. Remember that he wanted a phonetic spelling system where there were no silent letters. So he wanted English to get rid of those silent [P]’s and [B]’s. Of course, most of them are still there today, but some were dropped over time. For example, the word ***condemned*** was often spelled with a [P] at the time – ‘c-o-n-d-e-m-p-n-e-d.’ Hart said the [P] should be dropped in that word, and it was eventually lost over time.

Now there was one situation where a ‘b’ sound was once very common in English, but it has disappeared over time. And that was at the end of words like ***dumb***, ***lamb***, ***climb***, ***comb*** and ***womb***. Those are all Old English words that end in [MB]. And they end in [MB] because the ‘b’ sound was once pronounced – as /doomb/, /lamb/, /climbe/, /camb/, and /wamb/. English also inherited a lot of French words that were spelled in the same way, either because those words ended in a ‘b’ sound or had ended in a ‘b’ sound in the distant past. That included words like ***tomb***, ***bomb***, and ***succumb***. The problem with all of those words is that many Middle English speakers found it difficult to pronounce that [MB] combination at the end of a word. The ‘b’ sound was kind of awkward there. So they started to drop it. It appears that that ‘b’ sound was starting to disappear at the end of those words as early as the 1300s. And by the Elizabethan period, it is believed that that ‘b’ sound was mostly silent.

John Hart seems to confirm that with his phonetic spelling system. He spelled the words ***lamb*** and ***limb*** without a [B] at the end. So that seems to confirm that the [B] was no longer being pronounced in those words. But we also have the writings of that other spelling reformer, Sir Thomas Smith. And he included the [B] in his phonetic spelling of the word ***womb*** in his manuscript from around the same time as Hart’s. So some speakers may have held onto to that final [B] as a more traditional or conservative pronunciation. It was probably more common in formal speech. But by the early 1600s, phonetic transcriptions by other scholars drop the [B] altogether. And Shakespeare’s works also tended to drop the [B]. In his plays, words like ***climb***, and ***dumb***, and ***lamb*** were all spelled without a [B]. He also rhymed ***climb*** with ***time*** and ***crime***. And he rhymed ***dumb*** with ***come***. So it appears that that final ‘b’ sound in those words was largely gone during the Elizabethan period, though it might still have been heard among some very educated speakers in very formal situations.

So as we've seen the 'b' sound has disappeared at the end of certain words in English, and both the 'b' and 'p' sounds disappeared in some Latin words as they passed through French, but all in all, those sounds have been relatively stable throughout the history of English. So now let's turn our attention to another pair of sounds that are related by voicing, and have also been relatively stable over time. Those are the 't' and 'd' sounds. Again, they are essentially the same sound, except the 't' sound is voiceless and the 'd' sound is voiced. So we leave the vocal folds open when we say /t/, and we narrow and vibrate them when we say /d/. Again, those sounds tend to be pronounced very quickly before vowels, so it can be hard to hear the difference , but it's there. And again, John Hart also discussed those two sounds together.

Now back in that earlier episode where we looked at how silent letters were placed in some words to reflect their Latin and Greek roots, we saw that some words with a 't' sound got a new spelling through that process. In some words that came from Greek, the [T] was changed to [TH] to reflect a specific sound that had existed in ancient Greek. And over time, people started to pronounce those words like they were spelled. So the 't' sound in those words started to be pronounced as 'th' simply because of the revised spelling from /t/ to /th/. ***Teme*** became ***theme***, ***trone*** became ***throne***, ***Catarine*** became ***Catherine***, and so on. But sometimes, mistakes were made. In some cases, a Latin word received the same new spelling because it was mistaken for a Greek word. And the new [TH] spelling changed the pronunciation of the Latin word as well. That's how the Latin words ***autor*** and ***autority*** became ***author*** and ***authority***.

Well, John Hart's phonetic spellings indicate that those new pronunciations had not yet emerged in the late 1500s. For example, he spells ***Katherine*** with a single [T] as ***Katerin***. And he specifically says that ***author*** and ***authority*** should be spelled with a simple [T] because they were pronounced with a 't' sound. So he used the traditional pronunciation in those words. It's certainly possible that some people at the time were starting to pronounce those words with their modern 'th' sound, but many of those 'th' spellings were brand new in the 1500s, so there had not been enough time for the spellings to alter the pronunciations. But within a few decades, in the early 1600s, we can find scholars who were confirming the newer 'th' pronunciations. So Hart lived shortly before that change took place.

So spelling changes eventually caused the 't' sound to switch to a 'th' sound in a lot words, but there were also several situations where the 't' sound completely disappeared in a word. This phenomenon was especially common when the 't' sound appeared in the middle of a word – and was surrounded by other consonant sounds. In that situation, the 't' sound often got lost in the mix.

One scenario where that tended to happen was in words with two syllables where the first syllable ended in ST. That 't' sound was often lost in the transition from the first syllable to the second syllable. That's how 'Christ-mas' became ***Christmas***. In many dialects, 'post-man' became ***postman***, and 'waist-coat' became /weskit/. We also have a lot of other words where the T became silent after an S in the middle of a word. That includes words like ***apostle***, ***bristle***, ***castle***, ***hustle***, ***nestle***, ***thistle***, ***whistle***, ***wrestle***, ***fasten***, ***hasten***, ***listen*** and ***moisten***. Of course, all of those words are still spelled with a T, but it's almost always silent in standard English.

Among the words I just mentioned, John Hart only used the word ***castle***, but he spelled it phonetically as 'k-a-s-t-l,' so that indicates that the T was still being pronounced in some of those words in the Elizabethan period – at least in educated London speech. So he would have said /cast-el/ instead of /cassel/.

In most dialects, the 't' sound also disappeared in the middle of a word when it followed an 'f' sound – like in the words ***often*** (/offen/) and ***soften***. So again, those words are spelled with a T today, even though it is usually silent. The history of ***often*** is a little bit complicated. It began with the Old English word ***oft***, which later acquired the 'e-n' suffix. So it was presumably pronounced /off-ten/. By the Elizabethan period, some people pronounced the T and some people didn't. For example, John Hart included the T in his phonetic spelling of the word, but Queen Elizabeth usually dropped the T when she spelled the word in her various writings. So Hart apparently said /off-ten/, and Elizabeth said /off-en/. By the 1700s, most sources suggest that the T was completely silent, but in the last century or so, it has started to re-appear in the pronunciation. So today, you may hear the word pronounced as /off-ten/ – presumably because there is still a T in the spelling. But again, that T had largely become silent until the past century or so.

In contemporary English, that 't' sound has continued to be unstable in the middle of words. For example, some English dialects will drop the 't' sound altogether in the middle of a word when it comes before a sound like /-un/, or /-en/, or /-on/. So ***cotton*** becomes /coh-un/; ***button*** becomes /buh-on/, ***kitten*** becomes /kih-en/, ***Latin*** becomes /lah-en/, and so on. That is especially common in American English, and you may have noticed that I often use those pronunciations as well. Well, when we look at John Hart's writings, we can see that the [T] was routinely pronounced in words like that during the Elizabethan period. For example, he included the [T] in his phonetic spelling of the word ***Latin***.

Another development that is especially common in American English is the change of the 't' sound to a 'd' sound in the middle of a word, especially when it is followed by an 'r' sound or an 'l' sound. So ***letter*** becomes /ledder/. ***Little*** becomes /liddle/. ***Water*** becomes /wader/, and so on. Now I described that sound as a 'd' sound, but linguists who study this type of thing actually say that it's a tap. The tongue just briefly touches ridge behind the upper teeth, but they also believe that the sound evolved from an initial 't' sound, to a 'd' sound, and then to more of a 'tap' in contemporary English. So something like /letter/, to /ledder/, to /leder/.

Anyway, looking at John Hart's transcriptions, it seems pretty clear that he pronounced those words with their traditional 't' sound. He spelled words like ***letter***, ***little***, ***later***, ***water*** and ***writer*** all with [T]'s. Again, the common American pronunciation with a 'd' sound or a tap is generally considered to be a more recent development in the language, but there is some evidence that some people used the same type of pronunciation in Middle English. We can find the word ***bottom*** spelled 'b-o-d-d-o-m.' And we can also find the word ***water*** spelled 'w-a-d-e-r.' Now those examples are rare exceptions, but they suggest that that type of pronunciation could be heard in earlier periods of English as well.

But there is something very interesting about that type of pronunciation where the ‘t’ sound becomes a ‘d’ sound or a tap in the middle of a word. And it has to do with this larger issue of voicing. The ‘t’ sound is voiceless, so we don’t activate the vocal folds when we make that sound. We leave them open so that don’t vibrate. But when we pronounce the ‘d’ sound or that similar tap sound, it is voiced. We narrow the vocal folds a bit so that they vibrate and flutter when we make that sound. So when we think about that American pronunciation of ***letter*** as /ledder/, rather than thinking of it as a change from one letter to another, we can think of it as a switch from a voiceless sound to a voiced sound because that’s really what’s happening. So why would that sound in the middle become voiced?

Well, in those types of words, that ‘t’ sound in the middle has a vowel sound on each side. And vowel sounds are always voiced. So a word like ***later*** has a voiced /ay/ sound before the [T], and a voiced /eh/ sound after the [T]. So in order to pronounce that word that way, a speaker has to constrict and activate the vocal folds to make the /ay/ sound, then he or she has to relax them to make the voiceless ‘t’ sound, and then he or she has to constrict them again to make the ‘eh’ or ‘er’ sound at the end of the word. So it isn’t surprising that some speakers tend to cheat a little bit, and they just keep those vocal folds constricted and narrowed all the way through. When they do that, it means that all the sounds are voiced, and that automatically changes that ‘t’ sound in the middle of the word. So in that sense, the pronunciation of ***later*** as /lader/ can be seen as a natural development that occurs when all the sounds are voiced in that sequence.

Well, if you’ve listened to the earlier episodes of the podcast, that description may ring a bell because I described a very similar situation that occurred in the Old English period. That situation involved the ‘f’ sound at the end of words like ***leaf***, and ***thief*** and ***wife***. And it explained why that ‘f’ sound switches to a ‘v’ sound when those words are made plural, thereby becoming ***leaves***, ***thieves*** and ***wives***. That is a very old development in the language, and it happens because the ‘f’ and ‘v’ sounds are another one of those voiceless and voiced pairs. Again, they are essentially the same sound, except that the ‘f’ sound is voiceless, and the ‘v’ sound is voiced. And that’s why it’s easy for the ‘f’ sound to become a ‘v’ sound, and vice versa.

In the case of that specific change from ***wife*** to ***wives***, it occurred because of the specific plural suffixes that were used in Old English. Unlike the simple [-S] ending that we use today, the older plural suffixes were distinct syllables like ***-an***, and ***-um***, and ***-as***. So a word like ***wife*** – or /weef/ as it was pronounced then – became ***wifas***. And that meant that the voiceless ‘f’ sound was located between two vowels, which as we now know are always voiced. So you have voiced /ee/, followed by voiceless /f/, followed by voiced /ah/ – ***wifas***. So in that environment, it was natural to just let the vocal folds vibrate all the way through. That meant that the [F] became voiced from /f/ to /v/. And that produced the ‘v’ sound in those plural forms that we still have today.

Notice that words that were borrowed into English in later centuries don’t usually make that change in the plural form. The French word ***chef*** becomes ***chefs*** – not ‘cheves.’ And the Arabic word ***giraffe*** becomes ***giraffes*** – not ‘girraves.’ That further confirms that the ‘f’ to ‘v’ change took place during the Old English period when that plural suffix was still a distinct syllable and when it resulted in a vowel sound on both sides of the [F].

Now in the examples we just looked at, we saw how a plural suffix added to a noun caused the an 'f' sound to switch to a 'v' sound. Well, that same scenario also affected verbs because verbs also had distinct verbal suffixes in Old English. Now the details here aren't really essential. It's just important to know that the suffixes attached to verbs also tended to cause that final sound to be voiced, and in this case, caused the 'f' sound to switch to a 'v' sound. So you might have a ***belief*** with an 'f' sound at the end, but if you put that belief into action, you ***believe*** with a 'v' sound at the end. You might have a ***life*** with a 'f' sound, but if you put that life into action, you ***live*** with a 'v' sound. Other examples include ***strife*** and ***strive***, and ***thief*** and ***thieve***. French had a similar phenomenon, and many French words were borrowed into English that worked the same way – ***safe*** and ***save***, and ***proof*** and ***prove***.

So in summary, we have one ***thief***, but two ***thieves*** who go ***thieving***. Those plural suffixes and verbal suffixes were really the key to that sound change.

Now for the most past, English spelling has accounted for these old sound changes, and today we use the letter [V] today to show that change. And John Hart also confirms that these same changes were in place in the Elizabethan period. He distinguished the sounds in words like ***belief*** and ***believe***, and ***life*** and ***live***, and ***safe*** and ***save***. But I should note that those spelling distinctions were not always so clear. And that's because the Anglo-Saxons used the letter [F] for both sounds – both the /f/ sound and the /v/ sound. So they just thought of those two sounds as a single sound or two slightly different ways of rendering the same sound.

Now that may seem a little weird, but it shouldn't because we do the same thing today with the 'th' sound. As I've noted before, there are really two different 'th' sounds in Modern English, even though we spell them both the same way. Again, one is voiced and one is voiceless. It's the difference between ***thy*** as in "thy kingdom come" and ***thigh*** as in the muscle in the leg. Obviously, ***thy*** and ***thigh*** are distinct words with distinct pronunciations, but we spell both of them with a 'th,' and we tend to think of those initial sounds as the same sound or slight variations of the same sound. Well, that's how the Anglo-Saxons thought about the /f/ and /v/ sounds. So they spelled them both with the same letter [F].

Well, that old spelling convention still lingers into Modern English. Notice that the word ***of*** is spelled 'o-f,' not 'o-v.' That's the lingering influence of Old English. But interestingly, when we look at John Hart's transcriptions, we see that he spelled ***of*** both ways suggesting that there was some variation in the pronunciation. A close look at his spellings shows that he usually used the voiced version 'ov' when it appeared before words that began with a voiced sound. And he usually used the voiceless version 'of' when it appeared before words that began with a voiceless sound. So it seems that the pronunciation of the word ***of*** could vary in Elizabethan English as either /uf/ or /ov/, depending on the sound that followed it. But by the middle of the following century, the transcriptions used by scholars show that it was always pronounced /ov/ like today.

By the way, the pronunciation of ***of*** with a 'f' sound still survives in a way. It survives as the word ***off*** – 'o-f-f.' Believe it or not, ***of*** and ***off*** were once the same word, but ***off*** became distinct over the course of the Middle English period and has retained an older 'f' sound at the end.

Now a moment ago, I mentioned that we actually have two ‘th’ sounds in English, even though we don’t really distinguish them in spelling. The difference depends on whether we constrict those vocal folds and voice the sound. So we have /þ/ and /ð/. The first is the voiceless sound heard at the beginning of the word ***thank***. The second is the voiced sound heard at the beginning of the word ***them***. Again, that difference may be hard to hear at first, but you can clearly hear it if we reverse the two sounds, thereby giving us /ðank/ and /þem/.

Now even though we don’t clearly distinguish those ‘th’ sounds today when we spell them, scholars like John Hart thought that they should be distinguished. Again, he wanted a clearly phonetic spelling system. So he proposed bringing back the Old English letters thorn and eth to distinguish those two ‘th’ sounds. As an alternative, he suggested that English could use the Greek letters delta and theta. Of course, neither proposal was ever adopted in English, but Icelandic did adopt thorn and eth to distinguish the two sounds there.

At any rate, because Hart DID distinguish the two sounds in his phonetic spelling system, it sheds light on the way those two sounds were pronounced at the time. And that’s important because we normally can’t see the distinction with regular spelling where ‘th’ is used for both. So let’s look at what Hart’s spellings tell us about those two ‘th’ sounds.

The first thing to note is that the voiceless ‘th’ sound was common at the end of certain nouns – just like today – and just like that voiceless ‘f’ sound that we looked at a moment ago. So we had words like ***cloth***, and ***breath***, and ***bath*** and so on. And just like we saw with the ‘f’ sound, when those words were made plural, the voiceless /þ/ became voiced /ð/. Now this old distinction has been worn down over time, but John Hart’s phonetic spelling system confirms that it was still in place in the Elizabethan period.

So he shows us that the Elizabethans had one ***breath***, but several ‘bred-es’ or ‘breðes.’ He doesn’t really give us any other clear examples, but we know that the plural of ***cloth*** is ***clothes***, which shows the same distinction. By the way, it’s really difficult to pronounce that voiced ‘th’ sound before an [S] – /cloðes/. It’s very awkward. And that voiced ‘th’ sound tended to disappear in words like that. That why many people today wear /close/, not /cloðes/. They don’t pronounce that ‘th’ sound in the word. In fact, that ‘th’ sound largely disappeared from the word /cloðes/ or /close/, but thanks to the ‘th’ in the spelling, it has started to re-appear in English. So today, some people do pronounce that ‘th’ sound in that word, even though it’s kind of hard to do that.

Hart’s spellings suggest that the Elizabethans would have had one ***bath***, but several /baðes/. And they would have referred to one ***birth***, but several /birðes/. Again, it’s a little hard to say today because we stick a simple [-S] on the end, but in older forms of English, it would have been easier to say because the ending was a distinct syllable – /bað-es/, /birð-es/, and so on. But when that ending was reduced to a simple ‘s’ sound, it just became easier to say ***baths*** and ***births***. So that’s part of the reason why that voiced ending has worn down over time.

So again, we see how that plural suffix caused the sound at the end of those words to become voiced. But remember that the same thing happened to verbs because they also had voiced suffixes in older forms of English. So when we compare the noun and verb forms of these old

words, we see the same distinction that we saw earlier. The nouns end in a voiceless 'th' sound, and the verbs end in a voiced 'th' sound. We have ***breath*** and ***breathe***, ***cloth*** and ***clothe***, ***bath*** and ***bathe***. We can refer to a child's ***tooth***, or a child who is ***teething***. Again, these are old distinctions that pre-date John Hart, and still exist to this day.

Another pair of sounds that work basically the same way as those we have already looked at is the 's' sound and the 'z' sound. As I noted at the beginning of the episode, those two sounds are also distinguished only by their voicing. We can begin with a voiceless 's' sound (/s/). And when we constrict those vocal folds, they start to vibrate and /s/ becomes /z/. So the 'z' sound is just the voiced version of the 's' sound.

Again, historically those sounds were not clearly distinguished in English. The Anglo-Saxons just used the letter [S] for both sounds. And that approach was used well into the Elizabethan era. In fact, outside of scholars like John Hart who wanted to represent sounds phonetically, most people didn't even bother with the letter [Z] – or zed. (Both names were used for the letter at the time.) In fact, Shakespeare even alludes to this fact in his play King Lear. In the play, the Earl of Kent berates the servant of one of his enemies. He suggests that the servant is worthless, and he says "thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter." So even Shakespeare included a little joke about the limited use of the letter [Z] at the time.

Even today, the letter [Z] has a limited use in English. We still tend to use the letter [S] for both the voiced 'z' sound and the voiceless 's' sound. Think about words like ***as***, ***is***, ***was***, ***has*** and ***his***. They are some of the most common words in English. They are also very old words. And even though they're pronounced with a 'z' sound at the end, we spell them with an [S].

Interestingly, when we look at John Hart's transcriptions, we see more of a mixed bag. Words that have a consistent pronunciation today tend to vary in his writings. He spelled words like ***this*** and ***us*** with both an [S] and a [Z], suggesting that people sometimes pronounced them as /this/ and /us/, and sometimes pronounced them as /thiz/ and /uz/ (/ooz/). Words like ***as***, and ***is***, and ***was*** were also spelled both ways, suggesting that they were sometimes pronounced like today, and sometimes pronounced as /ass/, /iss/ and /wass/.

A closer look at his spellings shows that he tended to take the same approach that I described earlier in regard to the 'f' and 'v' sounds. He used the voiceless 's' before words that began with voiceless sounds, and he used the voiced 'z' before words that began with voiced sounds. If that was the way Elizabethan English worked, it has changed over time, because modern pronunciations don't tend to vary in that way. They are a bit more fixed.

But as we look at Modern English, we can see lots of examples where the letter [S] is pronounced with a 'z' sound when it is surrounded by vowels on each side like ***easy***, ***busy***, ***visit***, ***music***, ***reason***, ***dismal***, and ***cousin***. Again, we see how those vowels on each side tend to produce voicing all the way through the middle of the word.

Again, we also see how the final [-S] in some of these words became a voiced 'z' sound when a verbal suffix was added. So that gave us the distinction between ***choice*** and ***choose***, ***abuse*** and

abuse, ***use*** (/yoos/) and ***use*** (/yooz/), ***close*** (/clohs/) and ***close*** (/clohz/), ***refuse*** and ***refuse***, ***advice*** and ***advise***, ***peace*** and ***appease***. And here's one you may have never noticed before – ***grass*** and ***graze***. ***Graze*** is what animals do on ***grass***.

John Hart confirms that these distinct pronunciations also existed in Elizabethan English. He spells ***abuse*** (/abyoos/) and ***use*** (/yoos/) and ***close*** (/clohss/) with an [S], and ***abuse*** (/abyooz/) and ***use*** (/yooz/) and ***close*** (/clohz/) with a [Z]. But notice that we don't actually spell any of those words with a letter [Z] today. ***Choose***, ***abuse***, ***use***, ***close***, ***advise*** – they're all spelled with either an [S] or a [C]. We really limit the use of letter [Z] in English.

Even today, the verbal suffixes we use tend to be influenced by voicing. In spelling, we add an [-S] or [-ES] to a verb to indicate present tense in third person – "He jumps," "She walks," and so on. And we add an [-ED] to a verb to indicate past tense – "He jumped," and "She walked." But something very interesting happens when we pronounce those words with those endings. The pronunciations actually vary depending on the final sound in the verb. You may not have noticed it because the spelling tends to mask it, but standard English follows the voicing at the end of those words.

If the verb ends in a voiceless sound like the 'p' sound in ***jump***, then the suffix is also voiceless – either an 's' sound or a 't' sound. So we say "He jumps" with a 's' sound, and we say "He jumped" with a 't' sound at the end. I know we spell it [-ED], but it's not /jumpd/, it's /jumpt/ with a 't' sound. Just like ***skipped*** and ***helped*** and ***tapped***. Sometimes we even spell those forms with a [T] like ***slept***, and ***wept*** and ***kept***. Again, we pronounce them with a voiceless 't' sound because the verbs end a voiceless 'p' sound. The suffix matches the ending.

But notice what happens when we have a verb that ends in a voiced 'b' sound like ***rub***. We say "He rubs," and "He rubbed." Again, the pronunciations match the ending, but in this case, they're reversed. Since ***rub*** ends in a voiced 'b' sound, the past tense suffix ends with voiced 'd' sound – ***rubbed***. And in present tense, the suffix ends in a voiced 'z' sound – ***rubs***. We can also hear that 'z' sound at the end of other verbs that end in a voiced sound like ***robs***, ***reads***, ***loves***, ***gives***, and so on.

So did this same pattern exist during the Elizabethan period? Well, yes, to an extent. Scholars think the modern system developed over the course of the Middle English and early Modern English periods as the grammatical suffixes became more regular and the voicing became more consistent. Unfortunately, John Hart's writings only provide us with limited evidence. He does show the use of the 't' pronunciation in past tense after a voiceless sound. For example, he has ***toucht*** as the past tense of ***touch***. And he specifically says that the past tense of ***miss*** is ***mist*** with a [T] and the past tense of ***bless*** is ***blist*** with a [T]. So all of that is consistent with the modern pronunciation rules. But there are inconsistencies, especially when it comes to the [S] ending. His final manuscript in 1570 is actually the most consistent in the way the suffixes are represented. Most scholars think the modern pronunciation rules were largely in place during the Elizabethan period, but there was still some variation. However, by the middle of the following century, the transcriptions provided by scholars show that the modern system was fully in place.

I should note that we can still find some variation between the 's' sound and the 'z' sound in Modern English. If you eat a piece of pizza with a lot of pepperoni on it, you might describe it as greasy (/gree-see/) or as /gree-zee/. In American English, /gree-zee/ is more common in the South and the Midwest, but again, that pronunciation isn't surprising because /gree-see/ has a voiceless 's' sound between two voiced vowels – /e/-/s/-/e/. So in that environment, we would expect that some speakers would constrict and activate the vocal folds all the way through, thereby voicing the consonant in the middle. And in fact, that's exactly what we do with the word easy – 'e-a-s-y.' So here, some speakers do the same thing and convert /gree-see/ to /gree-zee/.

Now so far, we've explored several voiced and voiceless pairs, but there are still a few more to consider. As I noted earlier in the episode, we have the 'ch' sound at both ends of the word ***church***. It's a voiceless sound. But if we constrict those vocal folds and make them vibrate, we can voice that sound, thereby converting it from /ch/ to /j/. That's the 'j' sound. So we might not think of those sounds as being related, but they are.

In Modern English, we have two common ways of spelling that /j/ sound. We can use the letter [J] or the letter [G]. The word ***judge*** has the sound at each end – the first spelled with a [J] and the second with a [G]. But interestingly, the letter [J] didn't exist during the Elizabethan period. The letter [J] evolved out of the letter [I], and it emerged as a distinct letter in the 1600s and 1700s. We'll look at that development in a future episode, but for now, in the Elizabethan era, it was common to use the letter [I] to represent that sound. The spelling with letter [G] was borrowed from French. That's the so-called 'soft G.'

Well all of that posed a problem for John Hart who wanted a specific letter for each sound in the language. He didn't have a letter [J] yet, and the letter [I] was obviously used as a vowel letter. And of course, the letter [G] was also used for the 'hard G' sound /g/. So he needed a unique way to represent the /j/ sound. He came up with his own way to represent that sound, which is actually used by some linguists to this day. He used a [D] followed by that Old English letter 'yogh' which looked sort of like a cursive [Z]. But other than that unique spelling, Hart didn't really have much to say about that /j/ sound. I mainly mentioned it here because I want you to be aware that the letter [J] was still not in place yet.

So let's turn our attention to another sound – the voiceless sound /sh/. That's probably the most appropriate voiceless sound because it's the sound we make when we want someone to be quiet – /shhh/. Of course, we spell that sound with the letter combination [SH]. But notice what happens when we voice that sound. /sh/ become /ʒ/. That is the sound we hear in words like ***genre***, and ***beige***, and in the middle of words like ***vision*** and ***pleasure***. You'll notice that we don't have a specific letter for that sound, and that's because it is really a brand new sound in the English language. It isn't clearly documented until the 1600s. Some scholars think it developed within English because it provided balance to the language. It gave the voiceless /sh/ sound a voiced alternative. And as we've seen, voiceless sounds sometimes become voiced in certain situations, so it made sense for the language to have a /ʒ/ sound to complement the /sh/ sound.

We can actually trace the development of this /ʒ/sound within English. It came from two different sources. The first was a natural development within English itself, and the other source was French.

As I noted, there is no clear evidence of the /ʒ/ sound during the Elizabethan period, so John Hart did not mention it in his writings. We don't really have any solid evidence of the sound in English until the 1640s, so I'll save a detailed discussion about that development for a future episode. However, Hart does give us an indication that the sound was starting to develop in the language during his lifetime. So let's just take brief look at how this sound evolved.

It appears that the sound evolved out of what was originally an 's' sound in certain words, especially words that ended in [-SION] like ***derision***, and ***occasion***, and ***vision***. Originally, those words would have been pronounced like they were spelled – so /de-ree-see-on/, /oh-kah-see-on/, and /vee-see-on/. As we've seen, the 's' sound is voiceless, but at some point, the 's' sound in those words started to become voiced, so it became a 'z' sound. So /de-ree-zee-on/, /oh-kah-zee-on/, and /vee-zee-on/. And then in the 1600s, the sound continued to evolve into that voiced /ʒ/ sound – ***derision***, and ***occasion***, and ***vision***. The same basic development also occurred in the middle of some words like the word ***pleasure***, which evolved from /plesire/, to /pleziur/, to ***pleasure***. Now John Hart didn't show that final development to the /ʒ/ sound, but he did show that intermediate step with the 'z' sound (/z/). He spelled the words ***occasion*** and ***pleasure*** with a [Z], which reflects the first step in the change.

I should note that many other words ending in [-SION] actually experienced a separate, but parallel, development. They developed a voiceless /sh/ sound at the end like ***nation*** and ***impression***. And Hart spelled those words with a voiceless [S]. So Hart was already distinguishing those words with either a voiceless [S] or a voiced [Z], and again that voiceless [S] evolved into /-shun/ and the voiced [Z] evolved into /ʒun/.

Again, that /ʒ/ sound is clearly documented in the 1600s, and after then, French words were borrowed into English with the same sound like ***genre***, ***prestige***, ***camouflage***, ***entourage*** and ***sabotage***. Those words apparently retained that /ʒ/ sound in English because the same sound was being used in English by that point. Again, we'll look at those developments in more detail in a future episode.

Now we have one other voiced and voiceless pair of sounds that we need to consider in this episode, and those are the 'k' and 'g' sounds. Those are sounds that are made in the back of the mouth in the throat region. The 'k' sound (/k/) is voiceless. But if we constrict the vocal folds and make them vibrate, the sound becomes voiced, and it switches from /k/ to /g/.

John Hart doesn't have much to say about those sounds, but there was an interesting development concerning those sounds during the Elizabethan period, and Hart's writings shed some light on what was happening. That development concerned the pronunciation of those two sounds before the letter [N] at the beginning of words. We still see the [KN] spelling at the beginning of words like ***knife***, and ***knee***, and ***knight*** (like a knight in shining armor). The [K] was originally pronounced in those words. So they were pronounced more like /kneef/, /knay/,

and /kneeʒt/. We find the same thing in words that begin with [GN] like ***gnat*** and ***gnaw***. Again, that [G] was originally pronounced. Of course, the [K] and [G] in those words are silent today, so when did those initial sounds disappear?

Well, Hart didn't have any examples of words that begin with [GN], but he did have the words ***know*** and ***knowledge***. And when he transcribed those words, he included the [K] at the beginning. So that implies that the [K] was still being pronounced before the [N] at that time. Last time, I mentioned that other spelling reformer Sir Thomas Smith, and he also included the [K] in his phonetic spellings. Other scholars from the late 1500s and early 1600s also indicate that the 'k' and 'g' sounds were still being pronounced before the [N]. But William Shakespeare suggests the opposite in his works. He used a lot of puns where a word pronounced one way could have two meanings. And he made puns with words like ***night*** (as in the opposite of day) and ***knight*** (as in a knight in shining armor). He also made puns with ***knack*** and ***neck***, ***known*** and ***none***, and ***knot*** ('k-n-o-t') and ***not*** ('n-o-t'). So that suggests that the K and G in those words were already silent.

We can probably reconcile that conflicting evidence by noting that those types of changes tended to happen in common colloquial speech first, and then they spread to formal, educated speech which was the type of speech represented by people like John Hart. So it appears that those initial [K]'s and [G]'s were starting to disappear in the speech of the common people during the Elizabethan period, but they were retained in more formal speech. It also appears that where those sounds were retained, they were being pronounced more softly – as more an 'h' sound. Some writers of the period describe the sound as aspirated, so that was probably an intermediate step before the sound disappeared altogether. So from something like /kneef/, to /hneef/ to /nəife/ to ***knife***. At any rate, those initial 'k' and 'g' sounds were completely silent by the late 1600s and early 1700s, even in formal, educated speech.

Now I mentioned that those initial 'k' and 'g' sounds may have become more aspirated (as /x/) before they finally disappeared. Well, that would make sense because that /x/ sound in English was also disappearing during the Elizabethan period.

I noted in earlier episodes that English once had a lot of words that were pronounced with that aspirated /x/ sound. There were actually two slightly different sounds. One was pronounced in the back of the throat after back vowels like A, O and U. So it was like /thox/ – the original version of ***though***. And there was also a version that was pronounced higher towards the palate after front vowels like E and I. That's the sound we hear in a word like /lixt/ – the original version of ***light***. As we know, those sounds came to be spelled with the letter combination [GH] in the Middle English period. Of course, most of those [GH]'s are silent today, so when did those /x/ sounds disappear?

Well, as you might expect, it didn't happen overnight. Some of the earliest evidence for the disappearance of those sounds can be found in the 1400s. You might remember that I talked about the letters of the Paston family way back in Episode 138. They were written in the mid and late 1400s, so about a century before the Elizabethan period. And they contain some of the first evidence that the /x/ sound was starting to disappear. Several words in those letters were spelled

without their normal [GH] and without any other letter to represent that sound. The Pastons lived in Norfolk in the east of England, and some linguists think that the sound started to disappear there first, and then gradually spread westward and northward.

By the mid-1500s, the sound was still being pronounced in places like London, but it seems to have been softened perhaps to little more than a slight aspiration or 'h' sound. In the 1540s, a Welsh scholar named William Salesbury compared the English sound to the similar sound found in Welsh, as well in Scots and German. But he said the English sound was softer and lighter than those other sounds.

During the Elizabethan period, the sound was represented in the transcriptions of both of the well-known spelling reformers – Sir Thomas Smith and John Hart. But they did drop it in a few words. Smith did not include the sound in his version of the words ***fight*** and ***light*** and ***though***, suggesting that the /x/ sound had disappeared in those words. And Hart omitted the sound in his transcription of the word ***through***, but only in that word. In every other case, he indicated that the sound was still pronounced.

A couple of decades later, other English scholars reported that the sound was routinely dropped in words, especially when the sound appeared at the end of a words like ***though*** or ***through***. They also report that it was 'lightly sounded' when it was pronounced. And by the mid-1600s, it seems that the sound had completely disappeared, except in Scotland and parts of the north. So /lixt/ had become ***light***, and /nixt/ had become ***knight***. So based on all of that evidence, it seems that the sound was still common when Elizabeth became queen, but it seems to have largely disappeared over the course of her long reign, especially among the common people.

There was one other interesting development though. In some cases, the /x/ sound didn't disappear completely; it actually evolved into a new sound. Since that /x/ sound sometimes followed a vowel sound that was pronounced with rounded lips like /u/, or /o/ or /au/, that process of rounding the lips led some people to continue that motion and finish it off by letting the bottom lip touch the top teeth. And that produced an 'f' sound. And through that process, the /x/ sound evolved into a /f/ sound in some words. By the way, that's the same process that led some French speakers to pronounce ***lieu*** as /lieuf/, which produced an alternate pronunciation of ***lieutenant*** as /lieuftenant/, which became /lef-tenant/ in British English. So in much the same way in English, the /oox/ or /aux/ sounds became /oof/ or /auf/.

In fact, before spelling became completely standardized, it was common to find lots of words in English where [GH] was replaced with an [F], implying that the sound had changed to an 'f' sound in those words. For example, the word ***daughter*** is sometimes found with an [F] in the middle suggesting that some people pronounced it as /doff-ter/. The word ***through*** is also sometimes found with an [F] at the end, presumably pronounced as /thruf/. And the word ***dough*** can also be found with an [F] pronounced as /duff/. In fact, that pronunciation still survives in the name of a traditional English desert called 'plum duff,' which is literally 'plum dough.'

So there was a period when a lot of these words had many different pronunciations – one with the traditional /x/ sound, one with an /f/ sound, and one with no sound at all in that position.

Those various pronunciations were sorted out over time with some words like ***laugh***, ***cough***, ***tough*** and ***enough*** retaining that 'f' sound. But in most cases, the sound was lost altogether. Of course, by that point English spelling had become fixed, so we still have all of those [GH]'s today in spellings, most of which are silent.

Now I noted that John Hart represented the /x/ sound in his phonetic spelling system. He was probably a little bit conservative in his approach, representing the speech of the educated classes rather than the speech on the street.

Now you may be wondering how Hart represented that sound in his phonetic spelling system? After all, the letter [G] was used for the /g/ sound, so it didn't really make sense to use it with the [H] to represent this /x/ sound. So instead, he just used the letter [H]. But of course, the letter [H] also represented the normal 'h' sound (/h/). So why did he also use that letter for the /x/ sound? Well, presumably because he thought of them as the same basic sound. Maybe one was a little stronger or rougher, but they were still variations of the same sound. Remember that other writers of this period described the /x/ sound as being pronounced very lightly or softly. So it may have been little more than a heavy breath, and therefore, basically the same type of sound normally represented with letter [H].

And that takes us to the final sound that I wanted to discuss in this episode – the 'h' sound. As I've noted in prior episodes, the 'h' sound is one of the weakest sounds in the language. It's voiceless, and it's really little more than a slight breath. And throughout its history, it has had a tendency to become silent, especially at the beginning of a word. That was also true for Latin, where the 'h' sound largely disappeared during the Late Latin period, and it remained silent in the early Romance languages as well. So by the time French emerged as a distinct language, the letter [H] was still being used in spellings, but French speakers weren't pronouncing it. And of course, a lot of those French words poured into English after the Norman Conquest. That gave English a lot of words with silent [H]'s.

Meanwhile, English had its own words with the 'h' sound like ***head***, and ***house***, and ***heart***, and ***hundred***. And during the Middle English period, those native words became mixed in with all of those new French loanwords. So English became this jumble of words where the [H] was sometimes pronounced and was sometimes silent. And as people became more literate, they became even more confused by the spellings. They weren't sure if the [H] was supposed to be pronounced or not. So it became common for people to pronounce the [H] in some French words where it supposed to be silent, and to ignore the [H] in some English words where it was supposed to be pronounced. So that [H] became a real problem, and that was still the case during the Elizabethan period.

Even a very perceptive scholar like John Hart sometimes struggled with the sound in his phonetic spellings. For example, when he wrote the French word ***honor***, he generally left out the [H], suggesting that ***honor*** was pronounced much like today. But in a couple of passages, he spelled it with an [H] at the front. So that implies that the word was sometimes pronounced as /honor/. And sometimes he dropped the [H] in words that were normally pronounced with an 'h' sound like 'uffing' for ***huffing***, and 'umming' for ***humming***.

But in most cases, Hart showed that the [H] was pronounced in most words that began with a letter [H], and that reflects a trend that had started to emerge in Early Modern English. In general, people were becoming more literate, and spelling was becoming more fixed, and people were increasingly pronouncing words like they were spelled. And that meant that people were generally pronouncing the [H]'s at the front of almost all of those words that began with a letter [H]. And that's how the silent [H] in all of the French words came to be pronounced in Modern English like in ***host***, ***hospital***, ***history***, ***habit***, ***heritage***, and on and on. And Hart's transcriptions are generally consistent with that pattern. But there were a handful of stragglers where the [H] remained silent like ***honor***, ***honest***, ***hour*** ('h-o-u-r'), ***heir*** ('h-e-i-r') and, at least in American English, the word ***herb***. But that's about it. Otherwise, people starting pronouncing their [H]'s in most of those words.

Well, sort of. In the 1800s, it once again became common in England for people drop their H's. But that's a separate development that we'll explore in a future episode.

So why does that initial 'h' sound keep disappearing, not only in English, but in other languages as well? There may be an answer, and it may lie in this same issue of voiced and voiceless sounds that we've been exploring in this episode.

Here's the thing about that 'h' sound (/h/). As I said, it's really nothing more that a slight breath. It's voiceless, so the vocal folds are left open and silent. And the sound isn't really articulated in any specific part of the mouth. In fact, there's something really interesting about that sound. In Modern English, it always appears before a vowel sound. And linguists who study this sound note that when we pronounce it, we actually shape our tongue and mouth like the vowel that follows it. So if we want to say ***Hi***, we set our tongue to make the /ai/ sound, and just before we make that sound, we precede it with a slight breath. That's the 'h' sound. (/hai/) And if we want to say ***He***, we set our tongue to make the /ee/ sound, and again, we just precede that sound with a little breath. (/hee/)

Well, as we know by now, vowel sounds are always voiced. So some modern linguists think of the 'h' sound as essentially a voiceless vowel sound. That's actually how we pronounce it. We shape the vowel sound, and we precede it with a little voiceless breath.

Well, we've seen throughout this episode that a voiceless sound next to a voiced sound will sometimes become voiced. All we have to do is just activate those vocal folds a few milliseconds early, and the 'h' sound becomes voiced. But here's the thing, if that 'h' sound is nothing more that a voiceless vowel, then if we voice it, it literally becomes the vowel that follows it. That means that it disappears. So if we look at it from that perspective, the 'h' sound has a tendency to disappear at the front of words because it sometimes gets voiced, just like so many other sounds do in the course of normal speech.

So with that final note about voicing, you're probably getting tired of my voice by now. So I'll wrap up on that note. Next time, we'll continue our look at Elizabethan English by focusing on some of the remaining consonant sounds, and we'll see what John Hart's writings tell us about those sounds as well. After that, we'll check on the status of the Great Vowel Shift by looking at

how the vowel sounds were evolving during this period. And with that, we should have a good foundation for the state of English prior to the time of William Shakespeare, and prior to the spread of English around the world. And that will also allow us to trace how the language evolved in various regions between the Elizabethan period and today.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.