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LANGUAGE EVOLUTION**  
Supplement vol. 19



**A JOURNEY THROUGH  
THE HISTORY OF  
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA**

**Volume I**

# **The Continental Backgrounds of English and its Insular Development until 1154**

**Hans Frede Nielsen**

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1998**

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CONTENTS

**Preface** ..... xi

**Abbreviations** ..... xiii

**0. Introduction** ..... 1

    0.1. Quest for a Title ..... 1

    0.2. 'Fascination is our Theme' ..... 4

**1. The Importance of English Language History:**

**A Practical Demonstration** ..... 7

    1.1. Studying English Language History ..... 7

        1.1.1. Cultural history ..... 7

        1.1.2. Access to early literature ..... 8

        1.1.3. Marginal and competing forms ..... 8

        1.1.4. Linguistic affinities ..... 8

        1.1.5. 'Fascination is our theme'. An appetizer ..... 9

    1.2. Foreign Borrowings and Other New Words ..... 10

        1.2.1. Loan words ..... 10

        1.2.2. Other lexical innovations ..... 12

    1.3. Inherited Material ..... 13

        1.3.1. Words of Germanic origin ..... 13

        1.3.2. Morphological extension ..... 14

    1.4. Some Factors Involved in Language Change ..... 15

        1.4.1. Heritage and contact ..... 15

        1.4.2. Principle of least effort ..... 15

        1.4.3. Linguistic variation ..... 16

        1.4.4. Coining new words ..... 16

**2. The Continental Backgrounds of English** ..... 19

    2.1. The Emergence of Comparative and Historical Linguistics ..... 19

        2.1.1. The Tower of Babel ..... 19

        2.1.2. Bopp, Rask and Grimm ..... 20

## CONTENTS

2.1.3. Indo-European and Indo-Germanic .....	21
2.2. Indo-European and Beyond .....	22
2.2.1. The Indo-European language family .....	22
2.2.1.1. Indian .....	22
2.2.1.2. Iranian .....	23
2.2.1.3. Armenian .....	23
2.2.1.4. Hittite .....	23
2.2.1.5. Phrygian .....	24
2.2.1.6. Greek .....	24
2.2.1.7. Thracian .....	25
2.2.1.8. Illyrian .....	25
2.2.1.9. Albanian .....	25
2.2.1.10. Venetic .....	26
2.2.1.11. Italic .....	26
2.2.1.12. Celtic .....	26
2.2.1.13. Germanic .....	27
2.2.1.14. Baltic .....	28
2.2.1.15. Slavic .....	29
2.2.1.16. Tocharian .....	29
2.2.2. The affinities of Indo-European with other language families: Nostratic .....	29
2.2.3. The Indo-European homeland .....	32
2.2.4. The diversification of Indo-European and the position of Germanic .....	35
2.2.4.1. Tree diagram and wave theory .....	35
2.2.4.2. 'Old European' river names .....	38
2.2.4.3. The Germanic homeland .....	39
2.3. The Old Germanic Languages .....	42
2.3.1. Earliest attestation .....	42
2.3.2. Germanic diagnostic features .....	46
2.3.3. Early Germanic dialect geography .....	49
2.3.3.1. Early emigrant languages .....	49
2.3.3.2. Early dialect grouping: three models ..	50
2.3.3.3. The dialectal position of the early runic language .....	52
2.3.3.4. The West Germanic problem .....	54
2.3.3.5. The grouping of the Germanic languages illustrated .....	55

## CONTENTS

<b>3. The Anglo-Saxon Colonization of Britain .....</b>	<b>59</b>
3.1. The Languages of Britain prior to the Coming of the Anglo-Saxons .....	59
3.1.1. Pictish .....	59
3.1.2. Celtic .....	60
3.1.3. Latin .....	61
3.2. Evidence for Germanic Settlement in Britain .....	62
3.2.1. Written sources .....	62
3.2.2. Archaeological evidence .....	65
3.2.3. Place-names .....	67
3.2.3.1. Earliest Germanic place-name types in Britain .....	67
3.2.3.2. Place-names as evidence for Continental provenance .....	68
3.2.3.3. Celtic place-names and the Anglo-Saxon settlement .....	70
3.2.4. Linguistic evidence .....	72
3.2.4.1. Old English and the Continental Germanic languages .....	72
3.2.4.2. The Anglo-Saxon tribes and the Old English dialects .....	75
3.3. The Linguistic Situation in England prior to the Emergence of the First Old English Manuscripts .....	77
3.3.1. The language of the Anglo-Saxon settlers .....	77
3.3.2. Excursus: The origins of emigrant languages .....	80
3.3.3. The runic inscriptions of the early Anglo-Saxon era .....	83
<b>4. The Old English Period .....</b>	<b>87</b>
4.1. Periods in English Language History .....	87
4.1.1. Old, Middle and Modern English .....	87
4.1.2. Periodization within Old English .....	87
4.1.3. Anglo-Saxon and English .....	88
4.2. The Old English Dialects and the Development of an Old English Standard Language .....	89
4.2.1. Political background .....	89
4.2.2. Politics, scholarship and dialects .....	91

## CONTENTS

4.2.3. Textual evidence for Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon .....	92
4.2.4. The emergence of a standard language .....	94
4.2.5. Old English dialect features .....	95
4.2.5.1. Specimens of Old English dialects .....	95
4.2.5.2. A selection of Old English dialect criteria .....	97
4.3. Old English: A Linguistic Profile .....	99
4.3.1. Phonology .....	100
4.3.1.1. The development of the Old English vowel system .....	100
4.3.1.2. Vowels in unaccented syllables .....	104
4.3.1.3. The Old English consonants .....	106
4.3.2. Morphology .....	109
4.3.2.1. Nouns .....	109
4.3.2.2. Pronouns .....	113
4.3.2.3. Adjectives .....	115
4.3.2.4. Adverbs .....	117
4.3.2.5. Numerals .....	118
4.3.2.6. Verbs .....	120
4.3.3. Word-order .....	128
4.3.3.1. Indo-European and Modern English ....	128
4.3.3.2. Greenberg's syntactic types .....	128
4.3.3.3. Early Old English syntactic patterns ....	129
4.3.3.4. Further observations on early Old English syntax .....	131
4.3.4. Lexicon .....	133
4.3.4.1. Borrowed vocabulary .....	133
4.3.4.2. The lexical heritage of Old English .....	135
4.3.4.3. Word-formation .....	137
<b>5. The Latin Element in Old English .....</b>	<b>141</b>
5.1. The Extent of the Latin Influence on Old English .....	141
5.2. The Latin Loan Words of the Christian Era .....	142
5.2.1. Loans introduced before 900 .....	142
5.2.2. Loans introduced after 900 .....	143
5.3. Latin Loan Words Borrowed on the Continent .....	144



## CONTENTS

5.3.1. Periodization of the pre-Christian	
Latin loan words .....	144
5.3.2. <i>Germani</i> and Romans along the Rhine .....	145
5.3.3. A Roman trade zone and the spread of	
Latin loan words .....	145
5.3.4. Dating the early Latin loan words .....	147
5.3.5. The character and number of the early	
Latin borrowings .....	148
5.4. Pre-Christian Insular Borrowings .....	150
5.4.1. Dating the early insular loans .....	150
5.4.2. The insular transmission of Latin borrowings:	
some critical voices .....	151
5.5. Latin Influence on the Place-Names of England .....	154
5.5.1. Latin place-names and place-name elements ..	154
5.5.2. <i>campus</i> , <i>strāta</i> and <i>vallum</i> .....	156
5.5.3. <i>portus</i> and <i>vicus</i> .....	157
5.5.4. <i>castra</i> .....	158
5.5.5. Dating the Latin place-name elements:	
a new theory .....	159
5.5.6. <i>vicus</i> , <i>campus</i> , <i>portus</i> , <i>castra</i> and <i>strāta</i>	
'noch einmal' .....	161
5.6. Concluding Remarks .....	162
 <b>6. The Scandinavian Settlement in Britain and Its</b>	
<b>Linguistic Effects .....</b>	<b>165</b>
6.1. England during the Viking Age .....	165
6.1.1. The expansion of the Scandinavian Vikings ....	165
6.1.2. Viking raids and settlement .....	166
6.1.3. Political conquest .....	168
6.2. Historical Evidence .....	169
6.2.1. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle .....	169
6.2.2. <i>sochemanni</i> and <i>liberi homines</i> .....	170
6.3. Onomastic Evidence .....	172
6.3.1. <i>-by</i> , <i>-thorp</i> and the Grimston hybrids .....	172
6.3.2. A traditional interpretation and a radical one ....	173
6.3.3. A compromise solution .....	174
6.3.4. Recent research patterns .....	176
6.4. Lexical Evidence .....	177

## CONTENTS

6.4.1. Methodological problems .....	177
6.4.2. Scandinavian loans in Old English .....	178
6.4.3. Scandinavian loans in Middle English .....	179
6.4.4. Scandinavian loans in Modern English .....	181
6.4.5. Phonological and grammatical influence .....	182
6.4.6. The 'Great Scandinavian Belt' .....	184
6.4.7. Interpreting the Scandinavian loan words .....	186
6.5. The Number of Original Settlers: A Final Comment ...	187
 <b>7. The Norman Conquest and the Demise of Old English</b> .....	<b>189</b>
7.1. Political Developments in England until 1154 .....	189
7.1.1. Edward the Confessor and the succession to the English throne .....	189
7.1.2. The Norman Conquest .....	193
7.1.3. England under Norman rule .....	195
7.2. The Demise of Old English .....	196
7.2.1. The Peterborough Chronicle .....	197
7.2.2. The entry for 1137 .....	197
7.2.2.1. Phonology .....	199
7.2.2.2. Morphology .....	201
7.2.2.3. Syntax .....	203
7.2.2.4. Lexicon .....	204
7.2.3. The entry for 1085: A linguistic sketch .....	206
7.2.3.1. Phonology .....	207
7.2.3.2. Morphology .....	208
7.2.3.3. Syntax and lexicon .....	209
7.2.4. Old English or Middle English? .....	210
 <b>References</b> .....	<b>213</b>
 <b>Index</b> .....	<b>225</b>

## PREFACE

When in the autumn of 1995 I began writing a history of the English language designed for intermediate and advanced courses at university level, I had in mind only a one-volume enterprise with fourteen chapters. The present volume, which contains the first seven chapters projected at that time, was essentially finished by the end of July 1997. The bulk of the contents of the book appears here for the first time, but it should be mentioned that the volume incorporates material from lectures I have given on various occasions and, to a limited extent, (revised) passages from *The Germanic Languages* (Nielsen 1989).

Two events have made me deviate from my original plans: (a) since August 1997 I have been the holder of a research grant from the Danish Humanities Research Council (SHF), lasting until the end of 1999 and awarded for a project under the aegis of (what in Danish is called) 'Satsningsområdet *Dansk Sprog- og Stilhistorie*', a scheme sponsored by the Council; and (b) I was advised by two colleagues to make more out of the Modern English period, including Present-Day English, than first envisaged. I have therefore decided to enlarge the project and split it up into three volumes, each consisting of seven chapters. Vol. II will span the period from 1154 to 1776 and vol. III that from 1776 to the turn of the millennium. According to my revised schedule, vols. II and III should both be out within the next six or seven years.

It is my pleasant duty to thank Arne Juul (Copenhagen), T.A. Shippey (St. Louis) and Knud Sørensen (Århus) for their invaluable suggestions for improvement in earlier versions of the text. My thanks are due to my colleagues in the English Department and the Institute of Language and Communication at Odense University for their support and interest in my work over the years, especially to Erik W. Hansen and Fritz Larsen whose careful proof-reading of the entire manuscript has saved me from a fair number of embarrassing errors. I would also like to thank Helle Kit Rasmussen and Elsebeth Jensen (Humanistisk Skrivestue) for the efficiency with which they have prepared the book for publication, Britta Keller (Odense University

## PREFACE

Library) for providing me with precise bibliographical references whenever needed and Inger Bjerg Poulsen (History Department) for her skill in drawing the map represented here as Fig. 16 (p. 166). Last but not least, I wish to extend my thanks to Odense University Press for defraying the publication costs and to the Managing Director of the Press, Stefan Birkebjerg Andersen, for his flexibility and kind assistance in furthering this project in its final stages.

*Hans Frede Nielsen*  
*Sorø, August 1998*

## ABBREVIATIONS

a., acc.	accusative	L, Lat.	Latin
adj.	adjective	m., masc.	masculine
adv.	adverb	MDu.	Middle Dutch
AN	Anglo-Norman	ME	Middle English
Anm.	Anmerkung	Merc.	Mercian
arch.	archaic	MHG	Middle High German
bearb.	bearbeitet	MLG	Middle Low German
Bd.	Band	ModDu.	Modern Dutch
cent.	century	ModE	Modern English
ch.	chapter	ModF	Modern French
cl.	class	ModG	Modern German
conj.	conjunction	ModWFrīs.	Modern West Frisian
cons.	consonant	mut.	mutation
d., dat.	dative	n.	neuter, nominative
dem.	demonstrative	NF	Norman French
diph.	diphthongization	Nhm.	Northumbrian
Du.	Dutch	nom.	nominative
ed.; eds.	edition, editor; editors	nt.	neuter
et al.	et alii	num.	numeral
f., fem.	feminine	NWG(mc.)	North-West Germanic
fig.	figure	O	object
fn.	footnote	OE	Old English
g., gen.	genitive	OF	Old French
G	German	OFrīs.	Old Frisian
Gen.	Genesis	OHG	Old High German
Gmc.	Germanic	ON	Old Norse
Goth.	Gothic	OS	Old Saxon
Gr.	Greek	p.	plural
Hitt.	Hittite	pal.	palatal
IE	Indo-European	pers.	personal
imp.	imperative	PIE	Proto-Indo-European
ind.	indicative	pl., plur.	plural
inf.	infinitive	pp.	past participle
Jh.	Jahrhundert	prep.	preposition
Kt.	Kentish	pr., pres.	present

#### ABBREVIATIONS

pret.	preterite	sup.	superlative
pron.	pronoun	T	Tübingen
pt.	preterite	Toch.	Tocharian
ptc.	participle	Univ.	University, Universität
S	subject		
s., sg.	singular	V	verb
Skr.	Sanskrit	vb.	verb
str.	strong	WGmc.	West Germanic
subj.	subjunctive	wk.	weak
subst.	substantive	WS	West Saxon

Slashes (/ /) and brackets ([ ]) are used only when it is thought relevant to distinguish between phonemes and allophones. Angled brackets (< >) indicate graphemes.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

### 0.1. *Quest for a Title*

Why should anyone bother to write yet another work dealing with the history of the English language? The task is not only a laborious and time-consuming one, but there are so many books on this subject that just to find an appropriate title would create almost insurmountable difficulties. On my bookshelves at home I have five volumes entitled *The English Language* that all focus on English language history, and two of these were compiled by the same editor.<sup>1</sup> It would perhaps be a solution to call such a work *The History of the English Language*, but no, Emerson did this more than a hundred years ago,<sup>2</sup> and recently Burnley has used the same title.<sup>3</sup> It might add a magisterial flavour to the venture if the name of a famous university or a publisher (or both) is inserted in the title, but with *The Cambridge History of the English Language* Richard Hogg and his fellow editors have, of course, already availed themselves of this option for their multi-volume project.<sup>4</sup> Somewhat more unassuming names would be *History of the English Language*,<sup>5</sup> *A History of the English Language* or just *A History of*

- 
1. C.L. Wrenn, *The English Language* (London, 1949), W.F. Bolton (ed.), *The English Language. Essays by English & American Men of Letters 1490-1839* (Cambridge, 1966), W.F. Bolton (ed.), *The English Language* (London, 1975), R. Burchfield, *The English Language* (Oxford, 1986) and C. Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1993). Other scholars to have used the same title are: M. Schlauch, *The English Language in Modern Times (since 1400)* (Warszawa, 1959), W.N. Francis, *The English Language* (London, 1967), J.D. Gordon, *The English Language. An Historical Introduction* (New York, 1972), C.B. Martin & C.M. Rulon, *The English Language Yesterday and Today* (Boston, 1973), R.C. Bambas, *The English Language. Its Origin and History* (Norman, 1980), D. Crystal, *The English Language* (Harmondsworth, 1988) and S. Hussey, *The English Language: Structure and Development* (London, 1995).
  2. O.F. Emerson, *The History of the English Language* (New York, 1894).
  3. D. Burnley, *The History of the English Language. A Source Book* (London, 1992).
  4. (Cambridge, 1992-).
  5. T.R. Lounsbury, *History of the English Language* (New York, 1894), J.N. Hook, *History of the English Language* (New York, 1975) and R. Berndt, *History of the English Language* (Leipzig, 1982).

*English*, but all three titles have been turned to account already, the two last-mentioned ones designating some of the most successful books on the market.<sup>6</sup> It is of little use to be even more unpretentious and add the word 'short' to these names, for that has been done by Wyld and Kisbye.<sup>7</sup> Nor would 'introduction', 'outline(s)', 'aspects' or 'study' do in this context, seeing that these words have been employed, respectively, by Marquardt and Cook,<sup>8</sup> by Toller, Classen, Wood and Fisiak,<sup>9</sup> by McLaughlin<sup>10</sup> and by Jeremy Smith.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the early scholars writing on English language history showed more resourcefulness in their choice of title. I am thinking here of Henry Bradley's *The Making of English*<sup>12</sup> and especially of Otto Jespersen's *Growth and Structure of the English Language*,<sup>13</sup> which came out in nine editions and numerous reprints, and which was thus probably the most successful one-volume English language history ever to have been written. In 1939, another Copenhagen professor of English, N. Bøgholm, published *English Speech from an Historical*

- 
6. G.L. Brook, *A History of the English Language* (London, 1958), A.C. Baugh & T. Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 4th ed. (London, 1993); B.M.H. Strang, *A History of English* (London, 1970). *A History of the English Language* is the title also of two new books on the subject authored by, respectively, Geoffrey Hughes (Oxford, 1996) and N.F. Blake (London, 1996). In another new title, Jonathan Culpeper's *History of English* (London, 1997) the indefinite article has been left out.
  7. H.C. Wyld, *A Short History of English*, 2nd ed. (London, 1921) and T. Kisbye, *A Short History of the English Language* (Aarhus, 1992).
  8. A.H. Marckwardt, *Introduction to the English Language* (New York, 1942) and A.B. Cook, *Introduction to the English Language* (New York, 1969). M. Bloomfield & L. Newmark called their book *A Linguistic Introduction to the History of English* (New York, 1963), 'linguistic' being also an element of R.A. Peters, *A Linguistic History of English* (Boston, 1968), cf. above, fn. 6.
  9. T.N. Toller, *Outlines of the History of the English Language* (Cambridge, 1904), E. Classen, *Outlines of the History of the English Language* (New York, 1969 [1919]), F. Wood, *An Outline History of the English Language* (London, 1961) and J. Fisiak, *An Outline History of English. Vol. One: External History* (Poznan, 1993).
  10. J.C. McLaughlin, *Aspects of the History of the English Language* (New York, 1970).
  11. J. Smith, *An Historical Study of English. Function, Form and Change* (London, 1996).
  12. (London, 1904).
  13. (Leipzig, 1905; 9th ed. 1938). A book published by H.C. Wyld in 1907 was called *Growth of English*.



*Point of View*.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the appearance of the first volume of his *Origin and Development of the English Language* in 1972,<sup>15</sup> Knud Schibbye, my former teacher in Copenhagen University, did not realize – so the rumour had it – that in America Thomas Pyles had already written an English language history with more or less the same title.<sup>16</sup> A somewhat similar name was chosen by Williams for his book from 1975.<sup>17</sup> More ingenuity was shown by R. McCrum, W. Cran & R. MacNeil in *The Story of English*,<sup>18</sup> Roger Lass in *The Shape of English: Structure and History*<sup>19</sup> and especially by Martyn Wakelin in *The Archeology of English*.<sup>20</sup> Wakelin's book is based on first-hand source material, and this is what the title refers to. But it does not deal with archaeology proper, and the name can therefore be said to be slightly misleading (however inventive). In *A Biography of the English Language*,<sup>21</sup> Celia M. Millward has used the term *biography* in an unusual but creative manner; normally it refers to the story of a person's life, but taken at etymological face value, it says that the book is a written account (-graphy) of the life (bio-) or life story of English. A recent book by R.W. Bailey focusing on past opinions of the English language is called *Images of English. A Cultural History of the Language*,<sup>22</sup> which would seem to serve the contents of Bailey's book in an adequate way. Two

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14. After its appearance in 1939, Bøgholm's language history was used as a set book for undergraduate students of English in Copenhagen University; in spite of its indisputable philological qualities this course book was known in the student circles of those days by the unflattering name of 'The Old Curiosity Shop' owing to its failure to present the details of English language history in a clear and comprehensible manner. (See I. Kabell & H. Lauridsen, *Den belejrede humanisme* (Department of English, Copenhagen University, 1995), p. 61.) Knud Sørensen now informs me that in his student days in Copenhagen the book was referred to as 'The New Curiosity Shop'.
  15. K. Schibbye, *Origin and Development of the English Language*, I-III (København, 1972-7).
  16. T. Pyles, *Origins and Development of the English Language* (New York, 1964; 4th ed. (T. Pyles & J. Algeo), Fort Worth, 1993).
  17. J.M. Williams, *Origins of the English Language. A Social and Linguistic History* (New York, 1975).
  18. (New York, 1986).
  19. (London, 1987).
  20. (London, 1988).
  21. (New York, 1989).
  22. (Cambridge, 1992).

brand-new introductory surveys are Gerry Knowles's *A Cultural History of the English Language*<sup>23</sup> and Manfred Görlach's *The Linguistic History of English*.<sup>24</sup> Görlach employs identical Biblical passages from various periods for illustrating significant structural changes in English language history. A third epithet, 'Social', precedes D. Leith's 'History of English', and rightly so, for the author brings the insights of sociolinguistics to bear on his presentation of the subject.<sup>25</sup>

Our quest for an appropriate title might be facilitated by narrowing down our field of interest to one aspect of English language history. However, numerous scholars have done so already. We have Mary Serjeantson's *A History of Foreign Words in English*,<sup>26</sup> F.T. Visser's *An Historical Syntax of the English Language* (in three volumes),<sup>27</sup> D.G. Scragg's *A History of English Spelling*,<sup>28</sup> and Charles Jones's *A History of English Phonology*,<sup>29</sup> just to give a few examples. Recently, Geoffrey Hughes has linked the history of English words specifically to social change.<sup>30</sup> Or we might choose to deal with just one historical period as, e.g., Barber and Görlach have done in their books on early Modern English,<sup>31</sup> or with the history of only one variety of English as done by, e.g., Dillard in his recent book on the history of American English.<sup>32</sup>

## 0.2. 'Fascination is Our Theme'

I have made no attempt so far to include books on the history of the English language published in other languages. However, to draw works written in, e.g., German into the discussion, would be to open

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23. (London, 1997).

24. (London, 1997).

25. D. Leith, *A Social History of English*, 2nd ed. (London, 1997).

26. (London, 1935).

27. (Leiden, 1963-73).

28. (Manchester, 1974).

29. (London, 1989).

30. G. Hughes, *Words in Time. A Social History of English Vocabulary* (Oxford, 1988).

31. C. Barber, *Early Modern English* (London, 1976) and M. Görlach, *Introduction to Early Modern English* (Cambridge, 1991).

32. J.L. Dillard, *A History of American English* (London, 1992).

another Pandora's box of titles that would hardly bear out any point which has not been illustrated already. Availability or non-availability of title, my decision to write a history of English incorporating all periods of that language springs from a strong desire (cf. below) to give a comprehensive survey of what after many years of teaching and study I see as the most interesting aspects of the evolution of English from its embryonic stages to the language that we know today. Or instead of 'language' I should perhaps say 'language varieties', for my project takes into account American English as well as British English, the two present-day varieties of English most widely used.

My focus and emphasis differ on many points from the presentations of other books on the subject. Although very much dependent throughout on the work of others, my three-volume work reflects strong personal views and preferences in the material selected, especially in the present volume where most of my own research interests lie. I believe that only by trying to convey the fascinations of English language history as I perceive them, shall I be able to introduce my readers successfully to the long history of English. An old friend and former colleague of mine in the English Department of Odense University, who set himself up as an international tour operator many years ago, chose the slogan 'Fascination is our theme' for epitomizing the aim of his cultural tours. Fascination is also my justification for embarking on the present venture, and although I am no Mr Yorick, this explains why I have taken inspiration from Laurence Sterne in calling the project *A Journey through the History of the English Language in England and America*. Whether the journey will eventually turn out to have been a *sentimental* one (in Sterne's sense of the word), is for my readers to decide.



# 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY: A PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATION

## *1.1. Studying English Language History*

In view of the plethora of volumes written on the history of the English language, it was not so obvious, perhaps, why scholars should wish to write even more books on this topic, cf. the Introduction. But the numerous works published over the years are indicative of an incessant demand for new books in this field and also, I believe, of a genuine interest taken in the discipline. But what is the relevance of studying English language history?

### 1.1.1. Cultural history

In the first place, language history is a key to cultural history. Fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon colonizers from the Continent brought their Germanic idiom to Britain. When they were christianized, the Anglo-Saxons were confronted with Latin just as their ancestors had been on the Continent in their contacts with the Romans. Three or four centuries later, Scandinavian Vikings settled in northern and eastern England. The Anglo-Saxon state was brought to an end by the Norman invasion and victory in 1066, which inaugurated a French era in England. The Renaissance revived interest in art, scholarship and science, finding inspiration in the (Greco-Latin) learning of antiquity. Through the discovery of the New World and the establishment of English colonies in North America, English spread overseas, becoming ultimately the first language of the United States. To these events may be added the industrial revolution, the expansion of the educational system and other political and social developments. All the things summarized here were, somehow or other, significant for the development of the English language as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters and, on a smaller scale, on the basis of the extract given below in § 1.1.5.

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

### 1.1.2. Access to early literature

A good knowledge of English language history enables us to read literature in the original from even the earliest recorded language stages. Both the Old and (late) Middle English literary traditions are very important, and neither can be properly understood without the necessary philological training, especially not literary works written in Old English (8th to 11th cent.) which reads virtually like a foreign language. The late Middle English writings of, e.g., Chaucer (late 14th cent.) are somewhat easier to read because of the penetration of French linguistic borrowings and French orthographic influence in the wake of the Norman Conquest.

### 1.1.3. Marginal and competing forms

It is of considerable interest that English language history is capable of explaining marginal (residual) items such as the irregular nominal plurals *children, oxen; feet, geese, lice, men*, cf. the corresponding singular forms *child, ox; foot, goose, louse, man*. Similarly, it can account for the competing past tense systems of verbs, where, in the main, forms with the suffix *-ed* outnumber verbs whose preterites are expressed through change of root vowel: *come - came, fall - fell, ride - rode, sing - sang*.

In addition, a knowledge of language history can tell us why, e.g., spellings in <ou> can denote up to ten different vocalic pronunciations: *armoured, cough, double, house, scourge, soul, soup, thought, tour, would*.

### 1.1.4. Linguistic affinities

A further point is that historical language study can uncover the linguistic links English had or still has to other tongues. As a Germanic and Indo-European language (see Chapter 2) English is cognate with a large number of languages. Within the Germanic language group English is most closely related to the idioms of Frisia and northern Germany. This can be demonstrated by comparing Old English *ōper*

## 1.1. STUDYING ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

'other' to Old Frisian *ōther* and Old Saxon (Old Low German) *ōðar*. In contradistinction to Old High German *andar*, Old Norse *annarr* and Gothic *anþar*, OE *ōþer* (etc.) has lost a nasal before the voiceless fricative with rounding and compensatory lengthening of the accented vowel. Similarly, OE *hē* 'he' has counterparts in OFris. (*hī*) and OS (*hē*), where Old High German (*er*) and Gothic (*is*) have retained immediate reflexes of the inherited Germanic pronoun. The ON innovatory form *hann* exhibits an initial *h-* just like the forms recorded in Old English, Old Frisian and Old Saxon.

Features inherited from Germanic (and Indo-European) may thus represent not just evidence of membership of this language group but in some cases show specific affiliation with a subgroup of Germanic languages. But this is not to say that all parallels that a Germanic language shares with another Germanic idiom should be accounted for in terms of a common heritage. Later contact is, for instance, responsible for the presence of words like *take* and *window* in English (Scandinavian borrowings), cf. below. As we shall see later, English has borrowed words from several languages, cognate or non-cognate, with which it has been in contact.

### 1.1.5. 'Fascination is our theme'. An appetizer

It is the pious hope of the present writer that the knowledge imparted to the reader in this and the following chapters will make at least a few readers as enthusiastic about English language history as the author of these lines has been since his student days. In other words, I hope that English language history will be viewed by some of my audience as a primary object of study, pleasurable and worthwhile in itself.

In order to stimulate the appetites of my readers, I would like to submit a short, contemporary text for scrutiny and analysis from a historical linguistic viewpoint:

Time stopped while Ed Prescott took a tour around his very large office. Its darkened windows were of inch-deep armoured glass, turning the morning sunlight into afternoon. The double doors, closed against intruders, were of reinforced steel. Miami was enduring a season of home invasions, Strelski remembered. Teams of masked men held up everybody in the house, then helped themselves to whatever caught their eye. Strelski wondered ...

## 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

whether he would go back to his wife. When things got lousy, that was what he always wondered. Sometimes being away from her was like being out on parole. It wasn't freedom, and sometimes you seriously wondered whether  
10 it was any better than the alternative. He thought of Pat Flynn and wished he had Pat's composure. Pat took to being an outcast like other people take to fame and money. When they told Pat not to bother with coming into the office till this thing was cleared up, Pat thanked them, shook all their hands, had a bath and drank a bottle of Bushmills. This morning, still  
15 drunk, he had called Strelski to warn him of a new form of AIDS that was afflicting Miami. It was called Hearing Aids, Pat said, and came from listening to too many assholes from Washington.

John le Carré, *The Night Manager*,  
(London [Coronet ed.] 1994, pp. 645-6).

### 1.2. Foreign Borrowings and Other New Words

#### 1.2.1. Loan words

Like any other passage written in present-day English, the above extract from a recent novel exhibits inherited material as well as forms borrowed from other languages. For the layman it can be extremely difficult to know whether a word has been borrowed or whether it is a reflex of an indigenous English form. In our extract, the following items are of Scandinavian provenance: *take* - *took* (1), cf. Old Norse *taka* - *tók*; *window(s)* (2), cf. ON *vindauga* 'wind-eye'; *they*, *their*, *them* (12, 6, 13), cf. ON *þeir*, *þeir(r)a*, *þeim*; *got* (7), cf. ON *geta*; *call(ed)* (15), cf. ON *kalla*; and *(out)cast* (11), cf. ON *kasta* 'throw' vb.; see below, § 6.4.3-4. The text comprises also some Latin loans, which include both early items such as *inch* (2), Old English *ynce* (< Lat. *uncia*, cf. § 5.4.2) and *(after)noon* (3), OE *nōn* (< Lat. *nōna* (*hōra*) 'ninth (hour)', cf. § 5.2.1) and later borrowings, cf. *intrude(rs)*, *afflict(ing)*, *invasion(s)* and *alternative* (3, 16, 4, 10), the last two items being possibly of French extraction. The largest group of loan words in our text does in fact stem from French: *very* (1) (< Old French *ver(r)ai*, cf. ModF *vrai*), *large* (1), *office* (1), *endur(ing)* (4), *season* (4) (< OF *seson*), *remember(ed)* (5), *serious(ly)* (9), *money* (12) (< OF *moneie*), *bottle* (14) (< OF *botel*), *form* (15), *Aid(s)* (16) (< OF *aïde*), etc.



The circumstance that it is so difficult to identify these and other items as loan words, should be ascribed not only to their very general semantic character, but also to their adherence to the morphological, prosodic and orthographic rules of English. The plural forms of nouns end in *-s* just like regular English plurals of nouns: *windows* (2); *intruders* (3), *invasions* (4); *Aids* (16). Adjectives are turned into adverbs by suffixation of the indigenous ending *-ly* as in *seriously* (9). In the present participle of verbs, the suffix *-ing* is added: *enduring* (4), *afflicting* (16). And in the preterite and past participle, the regular ending *-ed* is added to the stem, cf. *called* (16); *armoured*, *closed*, *reinforced*, *remembered* and *cleared* (2, 3, 4, 5, 13). The irregular past forms *took* (1) and *got* (7) were irregular also in Old Norse and were retained as such, because they could be identified with similar patterns in English, cf. *shake - shook* (13) and *tread - trod* (Hansen & Nielsen 1986:212-13).

One characteristic feature that English inherited from its Germanic forbears (see Chapter 2) was the word accent placed on the first syllable. It is clear that early French loan words like *very*, *office* (1), *season* (4) and *bottle* (14) have adapted themselves completely to the English accentuation pattern, whereas a later French loan such as *parole* (9) (first attested in English in the eighteenth century), by retaining its accent on the second syllable, becomes a much more conspicuous loan element. The word *season* (4) was first recorded in English in the thirteenth century; in two other Germanic languages, German and Danish, the same word was borrowed much later as, respectively, *Saison* and *sæson* (< ModF *saison*) and is felt in each of these languages to be a non-native element because of the retention of the accent on the second syllable (and semi-French pronunciation), cf. also Dutch *seizoen*.

Orthographically, the loan words in our text do not diverge from the rules of English spelling with the possible exception of *tour* (1) (< French *tour* pronounced with /u:/), which must have been borrowed after /u:/ had become a diphthong in English, cf. below. Had it been borrowed prior to the diphthongization process, it would have been pronounced today with the same vowel as in *flour* (< OF *flour*), a word which was first recorded in the thirteenth century. In *large* (1) English reflects a pronunciation older than that exhibited by the equivalent Modern French word, where /dʒ/ has been simplified to /ʒ/.

However, there are other foreign elements in our text than those discussed so far. The spelling of the accented vowel in *people* (11) re-