

The Origins And Development Of The English Language

3rd EDITION

Thomas Pyles and John Algeo



Harcourt Brace Jovanovich International Edition

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE *Third Edition* ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, INC.

NEW YORK SAN DIEGO CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO ATLANTA
LONDON SYDNEY TORONTO

COVER: From British Museum Manuscript Cotton Julius E vii, folio 59.

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ISBN: 0-15-567608-3

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-86501

Printed in the United States of America

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OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

Third Edition

Preface

The Third Edition of *The Origins and Development of the English Language* was begun in collaboration with Thomas Pyles, but his death brought to an end a collaboration that was a source of great satisfaction to me. I have, however, tried to complete this revision as I think Thomas Pyles would have wanted it.

The changes in the Third Edition are considerably greater than those in the Second. Some material has been reordered, both within and among chapters. New material has been added as needed for fuller explanation or to bring a discussion up to date. Some old material has been reluctantly omitted to keep the book's length within reasonable bounds and to simplify the presentation for students, who often feel lost among the many factual details that make up the history of English. Parts of many chapters have undergone extensive rewriting, and new subheadings and tabular matter have been added to guide students in their reading. The use of footnotes has been radically abridged; references are generally made within the text by the author's name and the date of publication, with full information given in the Selected Bibliography at the back of the book. The suggested readings at the end of each chapter are also keyed to the bibliography.

An aim of this new edition is to make the text more accessible to students who have had no prior study of linguistics or of languages. As in earlier editions, the treatment is descriptive and traditional. Experience has shown that students find it difficult to learn both linguistic theory and the history of English simultaneously. Therefore, although this edition makes some references to work in current linguistics, it devotes less space to discussion of recent theoretical studies than does the Second Edition. The focus throughout remains on the internal history of English. Theoretical implications and purely external history, which are admirably treated in other books, are purposely kept to a minimum.

I have tried to preserve the emphasis that Thomas Pyles placed on the treatment of writing, on the similarities and differences between British and American English, on early Modern English, and on the vocabulary as both lexis and morphology. A somewhat fuller treatment of syntax has been added. The tone and style of the book, which were characteristic of everything Pyles wrote, have been preserved as much as possible, although changing times and sensibilities inevitably call for some adjustments.

The debts that Thomas Pyles acknowledged in the earlier editions are matters of record that are still owing. In the preparation of the Third Edition I am indebted to the extensive critiques made by Samuel C. Monson, Brigham Young University, and E. J. Murphy, California State University, Hayward. I am grateful also for suggestions, corrections, help, or encouragement from many persons, including Robert K. Barnhart of Clarence L. Barnhart, Inc.; William T. Burke, Winston-Salem State University; Thomas L. Clark and his students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, from whose reactions I have benefited at every turn; Virginia P. Clark, University of Vermont; Dušan Gabrovšek, University of Ljubljana; Ruth P. M. Lehmann, University of Texas at Austin; Jean Lorrah, Murray State University; Rupert Palmer, Vanderbilt University; Lee Pederson, Emory University; Ralph L. Ward, Hunter College; and Jacqueline de Weever, Brooklyn College. For their scholarly and personal example, I owe much to Harold B. Allen, Frederic G. Cassidy, Raven I. McDavid, Jr., James B. McMillan, and I. Willis Russell. My colleagues at the University of Georgia have been a continual source of stimulation. I am indebted to Edward A. Stephenson, Jared Klein (who also made a detailed critique of chapter 4), Charles C. Doyle, Jane Appleby, and Betty Jean Irwin for advice and conversation. For expert assistance in preparing the manuscript of this edition, I am grateful to Kathryn N. Howell and Katherine Postero. A special word of appreciation is due to Becky Pyles for her friendship and support. Finally and most important, my wife, Adele Algeo, has helped in every stage of the revision; without her it would not have been. After so much help and good counsel, whatever shortcomings remain are, as Thomas Pyles said about the Second Edition, my own unhappy responsibility.

J.A.

Contents

PREFACE v

1 *Language and Languages: An Introduction* 1

Why Study the History of English? 2

A Definition of Language 3

Language as System 4

Language Signs 7

Language as Speech 9

Language as Convention 12

Language as Human 17

Language as Communication 21

For Further Reading 23

2 *The Sounds and Spelling of Current English* 25

The Phoneme 26

The Organs of Speech 27

The Consonants of English 27

The Vowels of English 31

Stress 37

✓Kinds of Sound Change 37

✓Other Kinds of Transcription 41

✓For Further Reading 42

viii **3 Letters and Sounds: A Brief History of Writing 44**

Ideographic and Syllabic Writing	44
From Semitic Writing to Greek Alphabet	45
The Greek Vowel and Consonant Symbols	46
The Romans Adopt the Greek Alphabet	47
Later Developments of the Roman and Greek Alphabets	48
The Use of Digraphs	49
Additional Symbols	49
The Germanic Runes	50
The Earliest English Writing	51
Later History of English Writing	51
The Spelling of English Consonant Sounds	54
The Spelling of English Vowel Sounds	56
Spelling Pronunciations	60
Writing and History	63
For Further Reading	63

4 The Backgrounds of English 64

Language Typology and Language Families	65
The Non-Indo-European Languages	66
The Main Divisions of the Indo-European Group	69
Cognate Words in the Indo-European Languages	79
Inflection in the Indo-European Languages	80
Word Order in the Indo-European Languages	84
Indo-European Culture	85
The Indo-European Homeland	86
The Major Changes from Indo-European to Germanic	87
Grimm's Law	89
Verner's Law	93
West Germanic Languages	94
For Further Reading	96

5 The Old English Period (449-1100) 98

The History of the Anglo-Saxons	98
The Old English Dialects	104
The Pronunciation of Old English	105
The Vocabulary of Old English	109
Inflection in Old English	111
Nouns	112

Demonstratives	116
Adjectives	117
Adverbs	119
Personal Pronouns	119
Interrogative and Relative Pronouns	121
Verbs	122
Syntax	129
Old English Illustrated	132
The English Golden Age	134
For Further Reading	135

6 *The Middle English Period (1100-1500)* 136

The Background of the Norman Conquest	137
The Decline of French in England	138
The Linguistic Influence of the Conquest	138
Middle English Spelling	139
The Rise of a London Standard	142
Changes in Pronunciation	145
Changes in Grammar	153
The Inflection of Nouns	155
Pronouns	156
Adjectives: Comparative and Superlative Forms	159
Verbs	160
Word Order	163
Middle English Further Illustrated	165
For Further Reading	166

7 *The Modern English Period to 1800: Sounds and Spellings* 167

A Specimen of English in 1525	168
The Orthography of Early Modern English	169
The Great Vowel Shift	172
Other Vowels	175
The Early Modern English Consonants	177
Quantitative Changes	180
Stress	180
Evidence for Early Modern Pronunciation	180
A Sample of Early Modern Pronunciation	181
For Further Reading	182

x	8	<i>The Modern English Period to 1800: Forms and Syntax</i>	184
		Nouns	185
		Adjectives and Adverbs	188
		Pronouns	189
		Verbs	196
		Prepositions	206
		The Study of Language	207
		Early Modern English Illustrated	211
		For Further Reading	212
	9	<i>Recent British and American English</i>	213
		Conservatism and Innovation in American English	214
		National Differences in Word Choice	216
		American Infiltration of the British Word Stock	218
		Syntactical and Morphological Differences	220
		National Differences in Idiom	222
		British and American Purism	223
		National Differences in Pronunciation	225
		British and American Spelling	229
		Variation Within American English	231
		The Essential Oneness of All English	236
		For Further Reading	236
	10	<i>Words and Meanings</i>	238
		Semantics	239
		Why Meaning Varies	240
		Etymology and Meaning	241
		How Meaning Changes	242
		Generalization and Specialization	243
		Transfer of Meaning	244
		Pejoration and Amelioration	247
		Taboo and Euphemism	248
		The Fate of Intensifying Words	252
		Some Circumstances of Semantic Change	253
		Semantic Change Is Inevitable	258
		For Further Reading	259

11 *New Words from Old* 260

xi

- Creating Words 260
- Combining Words: Affixing 264
- Combining Words: Compounding 270
- Shortening Words 274
- Blending Words 279
- Shifting Words to New Uses 284
- Sources of New Words 288
- For Further Reading 290

12 *Foreign Elements in the English Word Stock* 292

- Latin Loanwords 293
- Greek Loanwords 297
- Celtic Loanwords 298
- Scandinavian Loanwords 299
- French Loanwords 301
- Spanish and Portuguese Loanwords 305
- Italian Loanwords 307
- German Loanwords 308
- Loanwords from the East 311
- Other Sources 314
- The Sources of Recent Loanwords 316
- English Remains English 316
- For Further Reading 317

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 318

INDEX OF MODERN ENGLISH WORDS, AFFIXES, AND PHRASES 345

SUBJECT INDEX 367

1 Language and Languages

An Introduction

Our language is inextricably bound up with our humanity. To be human is to use language, and to talk is to be a person. As biologist and author Lewis Thomas remarks in *The Lives of a Cell* (1974, p. 89):

The gift of language is the single human trait that marks us all genetically, setting us apart from the rest of life. Language is, like nest-building or hive-making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We engage in it communally, compulsively, and automatically. We cannot be human without it; if we were to be separated from it our minds would die, as surely as bees lost from the hive.

The contemporary scientific view of language as essential to our human nature agrees with the view expressed in the Book of Genesis, where the first action we see human beings engaged in is talking. In chapter 2 of that book it is said that God brought all the creatures of the earth before Adam to see

what he would call them, and whatever Adam called the creatures, so were they named. Those two statements—that of the modern biologist and that of the ancient prophet—however different they are in style and imagery, are saying the same thing: to be human is to have and use language.

The language that is innate in us is, of course, no particular form of speech and need not, in fact, even be **speech**, that is, sounds produced orally by which language is expressed. When we say “Bread is the staff of life,” we do not mean any particular kind of bread—whether whole wheat, rye, pumpernickel, French, matzo, pita, or whatever sort; rather we are talking about the kind of thing bread is, that which all bread has in common. So also, when we say that language is the basis of our humanity, we do not mean any particular kind of language—whether English, Spanish, Chinese, Swahili, Hopi, or Ameslan (the sign language of the deaf). Rather we mean the ability to learn and use such particular language systems, which is shared by all human beings. That ability is **language** in the abstract, as distinct from individual languages like those just named.

Why Study the History of English?

Language is an ability, inherent in us. Languages such as English are particular systems that are developments of that ability. We can know the underlying ability only through studying the actual languages that are its expressions. Thus one of the best reasons for studying languages is to find out about ourselves, about what makes us persons. And the best place to start such study is with our own language, the one that has nurtured our minds and formed our view of the world, although any language can be useful for the purpose. A good approach to studying languages is the historical one. To understand how things are, it is often helpful and sometimes essential to know how they got to be that way. If we are psychologists who want to understand a person's behavior, we must know something about that person's origins and development. The same is true of a language.

There are also other, more concrete reasons for studying about the history of English. One is that many of the irregularities of our language today are the remnants of earlier, quite regular patterns. For example, the highly irregular plurals of nouns like *man-men*, *mouse-mice*, *goose-geese*, and *ox-oxen* can be explained historically. So can the spelling of Modern English, which may seem chaotic, or at least unruly, to anyone who has had to struggle with it. The orthographic joke attributed to George Bernard Shaw, that in English *fish* might be spelled *ghoti* (*gh* as in *enough*, *o* as in *women*, and *ti* as in *nation*), has been repeated often, but the only way to understand the anomalies of our spelling is to study the history of our language. The fact that the present-day pronunciation and meaning of *cupboard* do not much suggest a board for cups is also something we need history to explain. Why

do we talk about *withstanding* a thing when we mean that we stand in opposition to it, rather than in company *with* it? If people are *unkempt*, can they also be *kempt*, and what does *kempt* mean? Is something wrong with the position of *secretly* in "She wanted to secretly finish writing her novel"? Is there any connection between *heal*, *whole*, *healthy*, *hale*, and *holy*? Knowing about the history of the language can help us to understand and to answer these and many similar questions. Knowledge of the history of English is no *nostrum* or *panacea* for curing all our linguistic ills (why do we call some medicines by those names?), but it can at least alleviate some of the symptoms.

Another reason for studying the history of English is that even a little knowledge about it can help to clarify the literature written in earlier periods, and some written rather recently. In "The Eve of St. Agnes," John Keats describes the sculptured effigies on the tombs of a chapel on a cold winter evening:

The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seemed to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails.

What image should Keats's description evoke with its reference to *rails*? Many a modern reader, taking a cue from the word *emprison'd*, has thought of the *rails* as railings or bars, perhaps a fence around the statues. But *rails* here is from an Old English word that meant 'garments' and refers to the shrouds or funeral garments in which the stone figures are clothed. Unless we are aware of such older usage, we are likely to be led badly astray in the picture we conjure up for these lines. In the General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, in describing an ideal knight, says: "His hors weren goode." Did the knight have one horse, or more than one? *Hors* seems to be singular, but the verb *weren* looks like a plural. The knight did indeed have several horses; in Chaucer's day *hors* was a word like *deer* or *sheep* that had a plural identical in form with its singular. It is a small point, but unless we know what a text means literally, we cannot appreciate it as literature.

A Definition of Language

For our purposes, a **language** will be defined as a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate. There are six important terms in this definition, each of which is examined in some detail in the remainder of this chapter. The terms are *system*, *signs*, *vocal*, *conventional*, *human*, and *communicate*. On the following pages we examine what these words mean and, often just as important, what they imply about the nature of language.

Perhaps the most important word in our definition is *system*. We speak in patterns. A language is not just a collection of words, such as we find in a dictionary. It is also the rules or patterns that relate the words to one another.

Every language has two levels to its system—a characteristic that is called **duality of patterning**. One of these levels consists of meaningful units—for example, the words and word parts *Adam*, *like*, *-d*, *apple*, and *-s* in the sentence “Adam liked apples.” The other level consists of units that have no meaning in themselves, although they serve as components of the meaningful units—for example, the sounds represented by the letters *a*, *d*, and *m* in the word *Adam*.

The distinction between a meaningful word (*Adam*) and its meaningless parts (*a*, *d*, and *m*) is important. Without that distinction, language as we know it would be impossible. If every meaning had to be represented by a unique, unanalyzable sound, only a few such meanings could be expressed. We have only about 35 basic sounds in English; we have hundreds of thousands of words. Duality of patterning lets people build an immensely large number of meaningful words out of only a handful of meaningless sounds. It is perhaps the chief characteristic that distinguishes true human language from the simpler communication systems of all nonhuman animals.

The meaningless components of a language make up its **sound system**, or **phonology**. The meaningful units are part of its **grammatical system**. Both have patterning. Thus, according to the sound system of Modern English, the consonant combination *mb* never occurs at the beginning or at the end of any word. As a matter of fact, it did occur in final position in earlier stages of our language, which is why it was necessary in the preceding statement to specify “Modern English.” Despite its complete absence in this position in the sound system of English for at least 600 years, we still insist—such is the conservatism of writing habits—that the *b* be written in *lamb*, *climb*, *tomb*, *dumb*, and a number of other words. But this same combination, which now occurs only medially in English (as in *tremble*), may well occur in final or even in initial position in the sound systems of other languages. Initial *mb* is indeed a part of the systems of certain African languages, as in Efik and Ibibio *mbakara* ‘white man,’ which in the speech of the Gullahs—black Americans living along the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina who have preserved a number of words and structural features that their ancestors brought from Africa—has become *buckra*. It is notable that the Gullahs have simplified the initial consonant combination of this African word to conform to the pattern of English speech.

The sounds of a language recur again and again according to a well-defined system, not haphazardly; for without system, communication would be impossible. The same is true of all linguistic features, not sound alone. Thus, according to the grammatical system of English, a very large number

of words take a suffix written *-s* to indicate plurality or possession (in which case it is a comparatively recent convention of writing to add an apostrophe). This suffix is variously pronounced. *Duck*, for instance, adds the sound that is usually indicated by *s*; *dog* adds the sound that is usually indicated by *z*; and *horse* adds a syllable consisting of a vowel sound plus the *z* sound.

Words that can be thus modified in form are nouns. They fit into certain definite patterns in English utterances. *Alcoholic*, for instance, fits into the system of English in the same way as *duck*, *dog*, and *horse*: “Alcoholics need understanding” (compare “Ducks need water”), “An alcoholic’s perceptions are faulty” (compare “A dog’s perceptions are keen”), and the like. But it may also modify a noun and be modified by an adverb: *an alcoholic drink*, *a somewhat alcoholic taste*, and the like; and words that operate in this way are called adjectives. *Alcoholic* is thus both adjective and noun, depending on the way it functions in the system of English. Such an utterance as “Alcoholic worries” is ambiguous because our system, like all linguistic systems, is not completely foolproof. It might be either a noun followed by a verb (as in a newspaper headline) or an adjective followed by a noun. To know which interpretation is correct, we need a context in which to place the expression. That is, we need to relate it to a larger system.

GRAMMATICAL SIGNALS

The grammatical system of any language has various techniques for relating words to one another and for signaling the structure of the sentences that words make up. Six kinds of signals are especially important.

1. Words can be put in various categories called **parts of speech**, of which there are four major ones in English: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Some words belong primarily or solely to one part of speech: *child* is a noun, *seek* is a verb, *tall* is an adjective, and *anymore* is an adverb. Other words can function as more than one part of speech; in various meanings, *fast* can be any of the four major parts. English speakers move words about pretty freely from one part of speech to another, as when we call a book that is enjoyable to read “a good read,” making a noun out of a verb. Part of knowing English is knowing how words can be shifted about in that way and what the limits are to such shifting.

2. A word’s part of speech is sometimes signaled by its form, specifically by the affixes—the beginnings or endings—used with it. The prefix *en-* at the beginning of a word, as in *encipher*, *enrage*, *enthrone*, *entomb*, *entwine*, and *enwrap*, marks the word as a verb. The suffix *-ist* at the end, as in *dentist*, *geologist*, *motorist*, and *violinist*, marks the word as a noun. English also has a small number of **inflectional suffixes** (endings that mark distinctions of number, case, person, tense, mood, and comparison). They include the plural *-s* and the possessive *’s* used with nouns (*girls*, *girl’s*); the third person singular present tense *-s*, the past tense and past participle *-ed*, and the present participle

-ing used with verbs (*aids, aided, aiding*); and the comparative *-er* and superlative *-est* used with some adjectives and adverbs (*slower, slowest*). **Inflection** (change in the form of a word to mark such distinctions) may also involve internal change, as in the singular and plural noun forms *man* and *men* or the present and past verb forms *sing* and *sang*. A language that depends heavily on the use of inflections, either internal or suffixed, is said to be **synthetic**; English used to be far more synthetic than it now is.

3. When a language uses inflections, they are often interconnected by **concord**, or **agreement**. Thus in “The bird sings” and “The birds sing” there is subject-verb concord (it being merely coincidental that the signal for plural in nouns happens to be identical in form with the signal for singular in third person present tense verbs). Similarly, in *this day* both words are singular, and in *these days* both are plural; some languages, such as Spanish, require that all modifiers agree with the nouns they modify in number, but in English only *this* and *that* change their form to show such agreement. Synthetic languages, such as Latin, usually have a great deal of concord; thus Latin adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in number (*bonus vir* ‘good man,’ *boni viri* ‘good men’), in gender (*bona femina* ‘good woman’), and in case (*bonae feminae* ‘good woman’s’). English used to have more such concord than it now does.

4. **Word order** is a grammatical signal in all languages, though some languages, like English, depend more heavily on it than do others. “The man finished the job” and “The job finished the man” are sharply different in meaning, as are “He died happily” and “Happily he died.”

5. Minor parts of speech, also called **function words** (for example, articles, auxiliaries, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and certain adverbial particles), are a kind of grammatical signal used with word order to serve some of the same functions as inflections. For example, in English the indirect object of a verb can be shown by either word order (“I gave *the dog* a bone”) or a function word (“I gave a bone *to the dog*”); in Latin it is shown by inflection (*canis* ‘the dog,’ *Canī os dedī*, literally ‘To-the-dog a-bone I gave’). A language like English whose grammar depends heavily on the use of word order and function words is said to be **analytic**.

6. **Prosodic signals**, such as pitch, stress, and tempo, can indicate grammatical meaning. The difference between the statement “He’s here” and the question “He’s here?” is the pitch used at the end of the sentence. The chief difference between the verb *conduct* and the noun *conduct* is that the verb has a stronger stress on its second syllable and the noun on its first syllable. The tempo of the last two words makes an important difference of meaning between “He died happily” and “He died, happily.”

All languages have these six kinds of grammatical signals available to them, but languages differ greatly in the use they make of the various signals. Even a single language may change its use over time, as English has done.