

THE MAKING OF
ENGLISH

HENRY BRADLEY

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BY

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PREFACE

THIS little work was announced as in preparation some years ago, but illness compelled me to lay it aside when only a few pages had been written, and since then my health has seldom permitted me to attempt any work in addition to my daily task as one of the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Some of the faults of this volume may be due to the desultory manner in which it has been composed ; but, on the other hand, the length of time that has elapsed since it was first planned has given me opportunity for more careful consideration of difficult points.

The object of the book is to give to educated readers unversed in philology some notion of the causes that have produced the excellences and defects of modern English as an instrument of expression. With the history of the language I have attempted to deal only so far as it bears on this special problem. The subject, even as thus restricted, is one which it is not easy to

treat briefly. I have, however, resisted the temptation to enlarge the volume beyond the limits originally intended, because I believe that for the purpose which I have in view a small book is more likely to be useful than a large one.

My thanks are due to my friends Professor Napier, Mr. W. A. Craigie, and Mr. C. T. Onions, for their kindness in reading the proofs, and suggesting valuable corrections and improvements.

HENRY BRADLEY.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
INTRODUCTORY	I
§ 1. THE LIKENESS OF GERMAN AND ENGLISH	I
§ 2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GERMAN AND ENGLISH	4
§ 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD ENGLISH	7
§ 4. OBJECT OF THIS BOOK	14

CHAPTER II.

THE MAKING OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR	16
§ 1. SIMPLIFICATION OF ACCIDENCE	17
§ 2. NEW GRAMMATICAL MATERIAL	53
§ 3. PROFIT AND LOSS	74

CHAPTER III.

WHAT ENGLISH OWES TO FOREIGN TONGUES	80
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CHAPTER IV.

	PAGE
WORD-MAKING IN ENGLISH	111
§ 1. COMPOSITION	111
§ 2. DERIVATION	128
§ 3. ROOT-CREATION	154

CHAPTER V.

CHANGES OF MEANING	160
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CHAPTER VI.

SOME MAKERS OF ENGLISH	215
INDEX	241

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

§ 1. The Likeness of German and English.

AN Englishman who begins to learn German cannot fail to be struck by the resemblance which that language presents to his native tongue. Of the words which occur in his first lessons because they are those most commonly used in every-day conversation, a very large proportion are recognisably identical, in spite of considerable differences of pronunciation, with their English synonyms. The following examples will suffice to illustrate the remarkable degree of similarity between the vocabularies of the two languages: *Vater* father, *Mutter* mother, *Bruder* brother, *Schwester* sister, *Haus* house, *Feld* field, *Gras* grass, *Korn* corn, *Land* land, *Stein* stone, *Kuh* cow, *Kalb* calf, *Ochse* ox, *singen* to sing, *hören* to hear, *haben* to have, *gehen* to go, *brechen* to break, *bringen* to bring.

gut good, *wohl* well, *grün* green, *hart* hard, *blind* blind, *ich* I, *wir* we, *selbst* self, *hier* here, *unter* under, *bei* by, *vor* be-fore. At a very early stage of his progress, the learner will find himself able to compile a list of some hundreds of German words which have an obvious likeness to the English words with which they agree in meaning.

In addition to these resemblances which lie on the surface, there are many others which can only be perceived by the help of a knowledge of the general laws of correspondence between German and English sounds. A few of these general laws may be mentioned by way of illustration. An English *t* is usually represented in German by *s*, *tz*, or *ss*; an English *th* by *d*; an English *p* by *pf* or *f*; an English *d* by *t*; and an English *v* in the middle of a word by *b*. There are similar laws, too complicated to be stated here, relating to the correspondence of the vowels. By the study of these laws, and of the facts that are known about the history of the two languages, scholars have been enabled to prove the fundamental identity of a vast number of English words with German words which are very different from them in sound and spelling, and often also in meaning. Thus, for example, *Baum*, a tree, is the same

word as the English 'beam'; *Zaun*, a hedge, is our 'town' (which originally meant a place surrounded by a hedge, a farm enclosure); *Zeit*, time, is our 'tide'; *drehen*, to turn, wind, is our 'throw,' and the derivative *Draht*, wire, is our 'thread'; *tragen*, to carry, is our 'draw'; and so on.

But it is not merely in their stock of words that English and German have a great deal in common. In their grammar, also, they resemble each other to a very remarkable extent. Our way of forming the genitive by adding *s* is paralleled in many German words: 'the king's house' is in German 'des Königs Haus.' The syllables *-er* and *-est* are used in both languages to form the comparatives and superlatives of adjectives. In the conjugation of the verbs the similarity is equally striking. 'I hear,' 'I heard,' 'I have heard' are in German *ich höre*, *ich hörte*, *ich habe gehört*; 'I see,' 'I saw,' 'I have seen' are *ich sehe*, *ich sah*, *ich habe gesehen*; 'I sing,' 'I sang,' 'I have sung' are *ich singe*, *ich sang*, *ich habe gesungen*; 'I bring,' 'I brought,' 'I have brought' are *ich bringe*, *ich brachte*, *ich habe gebracht*. Our 'thou singest' is in German *du singst*.

The explanation of these facts is not that English is derived from German or German

from English, but that both have descended, with gradual divergent changes, from a pre-historic language which scholars have called Primitive Germanic or Primitive Teutonic. Low German or Plattdeutsch, the dialect spoken (now only by the common people) in 'Low' or Northern Germany, is much more like English than literary High German is; and Dutch and Frisian resemble Low German. The Scandinavian languages, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic, are also of Germanic (or Teutonic) origin; and so is Gothic, a dead language known to us chiefly from a translation of portions of the Bible made in the fourth century.

§ 2. Differences between German and English.

But while modern English and modern German have so many conspicuous traces of their original kinship, the points of contrast between the two languages are equally striking and significant.

In the first place, the grammar, or rather the *accidence*, of German is enormously more complicated than that of English. The German noun has three genders, which in many instances have no relation to the sex of the object sig-

nified, or to the meaning or form of the word. *Kopf*, head, is masculine, though the synonymous *Haupt* is neuter; *Hand* is feminine, but *Fuss*, foot, is masculine, and *Bein*, leg, is neuter; *Weib*, woman, and *Mädchen*, girl, are neuter. The foreign student of English has no such difficulties to encounter. Properly speaking, we have no 'genders' at all: we say 'he,' 'she,' or 'it' according to the sex, or absence of sex, of the object to which we refer. English nouns have only one case-ending, the *s* of the genitive; and practically only one mode of forming the plural, as the few exceptions can be learned in half-an-hour. German nouns have four cases, and are divided into several declensions each with its own set of inflexions for case and number. The English adjective is not inflected at all; the one form *good* corresponds to the six German forms *gut*, *guter*, *gute*, *gutes*, *gutem*, *guten*, the choice of which depends partly on the gender, number, and case of the noun which is qualified, and partly on other grammatical relations. In conjugating an English verb, such as *sing*, we meet with only eight distinct forms, *sing*, *singest*, *sings*, *singeth*, *sang*, *sangest*, *singing*, *sung*; and even of these, three are practically obsolete. In the

conjugation of the German verb *singen* the number of distinct forms is sixteen.

In addition to these differences in the grammatical systems of the two languages, there are others no less noteworthy which relate to the character of their vocabulary.

We have already pointed out that of the English words which occur in familiar conversation, the great majority are found to exist also in German, with certain regular variations of form due to the difference in the sound-systems of the two languages. If, however, instead of confining our attention to that part of the language that serves the needs of everyday life, we were to examine the whole English vocabulary as it is exhibited in a dictionary, we should find that by far the greater number of the words have no formal equivalents in German, being for the most part derived from foreign languages, chiefly French, Latin, and Greek. It is true that many of these non-Germanic words are very rarely used; still, if we take at random a page from an English book which treats of history, politics, philosophy, or literary criticism, the majority of the nouns, adjectives, and verbs are usually of foreign etymology. An ordinary

page of German, on the other hand, contains very few words that are not derived from native roots. German, in fact, is, comparatively speaking, an unmixed language; modern English, so far as its vocabulary is concerned, is a mixed language, in which the native Germanic elements are outnumbered by those derived from foreign tongues.

§ 3. Characteristics of Old English.

The differences between German and English, *so far as they have been described above*,¹ are entirely due to the gradual changes that have taken place in English during the last thousand years. The ancient form of our language—the kind of English that was written by King Alfred in the ninth century—had every one of those general characteristics which we have mentioned as distinguishing modern German from modern English.

Before proceeding to the illustration of this statement, let us briefly explain the meaning of certain terms which we shall have to use. By

¹ This limitation is very important. It must not be imagined that German has not altered greatly during the last thousand years, or that English and German did not already differ widely from each other a thousand years ago.

'Old English' we mean the language (by some persons called 'Anglo-Saxon') spoken by Englishmen down to about 1150; 'Middle English' is the language spoken between about 1150 and about 1500; and 'Modern English' means the English of the last four centuries. The reader must not, however, suppose, as young learners sometimes do, that in 1150 or in 1500 one kind of English was superseded by another. The English language has been undergoing constant change ever since it was a language, and it is changing still. For purposes of study it has been found useful to divide its history into three periods; and if this is done at all, it is necessary to specify some approximate dates as the points of division. The dates 1150 and 1500 have been chosen because the one is the middle and the other the end of a century of the common reckoning; and they are also convenient, because about those years the process of change was going on somewhat more rapidly than usual, so that if we compare a book written a quarter of a century before the end of a period with one written a quarter of a century after it, we can see clearly that the language has entered on a new stage of development.

In considering the characteristics of Old

English, we will refer especially to the southern dialect as it was written by King Alfred just before 900. In the first place, Alfred's English had all the grammatical complexity which exists in modern German, and indeed a little more. It had the same irrational system of genders: *hand* was feminine, *fōt* (foot) was masculine, while *mægden* (maiden) and *wif* (wife, woman) were neuter. The Old English nouns had five cases, and the system of declensions was intricate to a degree which modern German does not nearly rival. Some nouns made their genitive singular in *-es*, others in *-e*, others in *-a*, and others in *-an*; and in a few nouns the genitive had the same form as the nominative. The endings which marked the nominative plural were *-as*, *-a*, *-u*, *-e*, *-an*; moreover, many plural nominatives coincided in form with the singular, and others were formed (like our modern *teeth* and *mice*) by change of vowel. The adjectives had an elaborate set of inflexions, which have now utterly disappeared, so that the solitary Modern English form *glad* represents eleven distinct forms in Old English: *glæd*, *glædre*, *glædne*, *glædra*, *gladu*, *glades*, *gladum*, *glade*, *gladena*, *glada*, *gladan*. In the conjugation of the verbs there were twice as many different

forms as there are in Modern English. The persons of the plural, for instance, differed in form from those of the singular: where we now say 'I *sing*, we *sing*, I *sang*, we *sang*,' the Old English forms were, 'ic *singe*, we *singath*, ic *sang*, we *sungon*.' The subjunctive mood, of which there are only a few traces left in modern English, occupied as prominent a place in Old English grammar as it does in Modern German.

Further, Old English differed from Modern English in being—like Modern German, but in a greater degree—comparatively free from words of foreign origin. It had, indeed, incorporated a certain number of Latin words, chiefly relating either to the institutions and ritual of the Church, or to things connected with Roman civilization. But these formed only a very small proportion of the entire vocabulary. Even for the technical terms of Christian theology, the Old English writers preferred, instead of adopting the Latin words that lay ready to their hand, to invent new equivalents, formed from native words by composition and derivation.

After what has been said, the reader will not be surprised to be told that a page, even of Old English prose, not to speak of the poetry, has