# OUR MAGNIFICENT BASTARD TONGUE

THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF ENGLISH

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GOTHAM BOOKS

# Contents

# Introduction

**W**as it really all just about words?

The Grand Old History of the English Language, I mean. The way it is traditionally told, the pathway from Old English to Modern English has been a matter of taking on a great big bunch of words. Oh, yeah: and shedding a bunch along the way.

You may well know the saga already. Germanic tribes called Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invade Britain in the fifth century. They bring along their Anglo-Saxon language, which we call Old English.

Then come the words. English gets new ones in three main rounds.

Round One is when Danish and Norwegian Vikings start invading in 787. They speak Old Norse, a close relative of Old English, and sprinkle around their versions

of words we already have, so that today we have both *skirts* and *shirts*, *dikes* and *ditches*. Plus lots of other words, like *happy* and *their* and *get*.

Round Two: more words from the Norman French after William (i.e., Guillaume) the Conqueror takes over "Englaland" in 1066. For the next three centuries, French is the language of government, the arts, and learning. Voilà, scads of new words, like *army*, *apparel*, and *logic*.

Then Round Three: Latin. When England falls into the Hundred Years' War with France, English becomes the ruling language once more, and English writers start grabbing up Latin terms from classical authors—*abrogate* and so on.

Too, there are some Dutch words here and there (*cookie*, *plug*), and a little passel from Arabic (*alcohol*, *algebra*). Plus today we have some from Spanish, Japanese, etc. But those usually refer to objects and concepts directly from the countries in question—*taco*, *sushi*—and so it's not precisely a surprise that we use the native words.

These lexical invasions did leave some cute wrinkles here and there. Because when French ruled the roost, it was the language of formality; in modern English, words from French are often formal versions of English ones considered lowly. We *commence* because of French; in a more mundane mood we just *start*, using an original English word. *Pork*, *très* culinary, is the French word; *pig*—

très beastly—is the English one. And then even cuter are the triplets, where the low-down word is English, the really ritzy one is Latin, and the French one hovers somewhere in between: Anglo-Saxon *ask* is humble; French-derived *question* is more buttoned up; Latinate *interrogate* is downright starchy.

But there's only so much of that sort of thing. Overall the Grand Old History is supposed to be interesting by virtue of the sheer volume of words English has taken on. We are to feel that it is a good, and perhaps somehow awesome, thing that English has been "open" to so many words.

Yet even that doesn't hold up as well as often implied. Throughout the world, languages have been exchanging words rampantly forever. Languages, as it were, like sex. Some languages resist it to an extent for certain periods of time depending on historical circumstances, but no language is immune. Over half of Japanese words are from Chinese, and never mind how eagerly the language now inhales English words. Almost half of Urdu's words are Persian and Arabic. Albanian is about 60 percent Greek, Latin, Romanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Macedonian, and yet it is not celebrated for being markedly "open" to new words. Rather, quite simply, Albanians have had a lot of close interaction with people speaking other languages, unsurprisingly their vocabulary reflects it,

and no one bats an eye. The same has been true with English—and Persian, Turkish, Vietnamese, practically every Aboriginal language in Australia, and . . . well, you get the point.

As such, the lesson that the difference between Old English and Modern English is a whole lot of new words is, for me, something of a thin gruel.

Don't get me wrong—words are nice. I like them. I am no more immune than the next person to taking pleasure in tasty etymologies such as that the word *tea* started way off in one dialect of Chinese, was taken up by Malays, and subsequently by the Dutch traders in their lands as *thee*, and was first pronounced "tay," coming to be pronounced "tee" only later, while that same *ea* spelling is still pronounced "ay" in names like *Reagan*.

Yet my impatience with the word fetish of typical popular treatments of The History of English is based in the fact that I happen to be a linguist. Etymology is, in fact, but one tiny corner of what modern linguistic science involves, and linguists are not formally trained in it. Any of us sought for public comment are familiar with the public's understandable expectation that to be a linguist is to carry thousands of etymologies in one's head, when in fact, on any given question as to where a word comes from, we usually have to go searching in a dictionary like anyone else.

Linguists are more interested in how the words are put together, and how the way they are put together now is different from how they were put together in the past, and why. That is, we are interested in what the layman often knows as "syntax," which we call grammar.

By grammar, we do not mean the grim little rules so familiar to everyone from school—i.e., "grammar school." We mean, for example, the conjugational endings on verbs in European languages (Spanish *hablo*, *hablas*, *habla*). We mean things like, in Japanese, word order is completely different from English, such that a sentence like *Craig met his wife in London* would come out *Craig London in his wife met*.

Think of it this way: you could cram your head full of every Russian word, and yet find that Russian six-year-olds were little Churchills compared to you walking around bursting with isolated words but unable to conjugate, mark nouns for case, use words in the proper order, or pull off any number of things fundamental to saying even the simplest things.

A Russian once told me sagely that it's better to be alone than to consort with just any person who happens into one's life: *Lučše byt' odnomu čem s kem popal*, which comes out literally as "Better to be alone than with who falls (i.e., "falls into one's orbit," "happens into the picture"). Uttering that meant that she knew to use a

particular form of the word for *better* rather than another one, to use a particular case form on the word for *one* to mean "alone" (*odnomu*), and to mark the word for *who* in the instrumental case (*kem*) which, in that word, comes out irregular. She knew to use a particular form of the word for *fall* that one uses when referring to a single occurrence of falling (the *-pal* part of *popal*) rather than to the extended process of falling (in which case it would be a different form, *-padaet*).

Words alone, then, were only the very beginning of what she did in uttering that sentence, and really, to linguists not even the fun part. The fun part was how she combined the words to make a sentence. She was not only uttering Russian words one by one—she was subjecting them to grammar.

Well, English has grammar, too. Thus my frustration with The History of English as a story about words comes from the fact that The History of English is also a story about grammar. To wit, the pathway from *Beowulf* to *The Economist* has involved as much transformation in grammar as in words, more so, in fact, than in any of English's close relatives. English is more peculiar among its relatives, and even the world's languages as a whole, in what has happened to its grammar than in what has happened to its vocabulary.

As such, the focus on words cannot help but bring to

mind someone who has fitted out their ranch house with a second floor, knocked out all of the nonsustaining walls, and added on a big new wing on both sides, and yet month after month, all any of their friends mention when they come over is two new throw rugs.

One might object that the typical Grand Old History is not quite as negligent of grammar, in the linguist's sense, as I am implying. To be sure, popular treatments will often give it to the reader in bits and pieces.

Regularly, for instance, the layman will learn that whereas Old English was a language with ample conjugational endings and markers for gender and case, like Latin, over time it lost almost all of these. So, *man* was *guma*, but *The woman saw a man* was *Cwēn geseah guman*, because *-n* was an object ending. (The word *cwēn* comes down to us as *queen*, by the way.) Old English also split its nouns between masculine, feminine, and neuter: *the man* was *se guma*, but *the woman* was *sēo cwēn*.

Or we learn that the use of the *-ing* progressive form to mark the present tense—*You are reading this Introduction*—is something that started to creep into the language in the Middle English period. In Old English, I would much more likely have put it as *You read this Introduction*, just as one does in other European languages.

Okay, so we learn that English lost a bit of this and gained a bit of that. But this misses a larger picture. What is missing is that, compared to how languages typically change over time, English lost a perplexingly *vast* amount of grammar. Moreover, the grammar that it took on, like the *-ing* usage, seems ordinary only because we speak English. If we pull the camera back, the things English took on seem strikingly peculiar compared to anything its relatives like German and Swedish were then taking on— or in a case or two, what any languages on earth were taking on!

Modern English grammar is, in a word, weird.

English is one of about a dozen languages that are all so basically similar in terms of words and grammar, and mostly spoken so close to one another, that they all obviously began as a single language (although English is very much a prodigal son). The languages besides English include German, Dutch, Yiddish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic, plus some less familiar languages, like Faroese and Frisian, and Afrikaans in South Africa, which stemmed from the transplantation of Dutch amid the colonization of that country.

The parent to all of these languages was spoken about twenty-five hundred years ago in what is now Denmark

(and a ways southward) and on the southerly ends of
Sweden and Norway. We will never know what the people
who spoke the language called it, but linguists call it
Proto-Germanic. One might ask how we can even know
that there was a language to give that name to. The answer
is that we can reconstruct a great many of that language's
words by comparing the words in today's Germanic lan-
guages and tracing back.

For example, English *daughter* is *Tochter* in German,
*dochter* in Dutch, *datter* in Norwegian, *dotter* in Swedish,
*dottir* in Icelandic. With techniques developed by linguists
in the nineteenth century and refined since, we can
deduce—with the help of now extinct Germanic lan-
guages preserved in ancient documents, like Gothic, in
which the word was *daúhtar*—that all of these words are
the spawn of a single original one, *daukhtrô*.

In all of the Germanic languages but English, their
descent from that same ancient language is clear first, it is
true, from their words. No Germanic language's vocab-
ulary happens to be as mixed as English's, and so the
others' vocabularies match up with one another more
than English's does with any of them. German's word for
*entrance* is *Eingang*, Dutch has *ingang*, Swedish *ingång*,
Yiddish *areingang*, Icelandic *innganga*. Before the Invasion
of the Words, Old English had *ingang*, but later, English
took *entrance* from French.

However, the other Germanic languages are also variations on a single pattern in terms of how their grammar works. One can tell immediately, linguist or not, that they all began as one thing, like Darwin's finches. For a Dutch person, learning Swedish is no picnic because learning a new language is always hard, but there are few surprises. Nothing comes off as maddeningly counterintuitive (as, say, nouns being boys and girls in so many languages seems to English speakers). The Germanic languages other than English are about as similar as French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese.

English, however, is another story.

To see that English is the oddball, take a look at a sentence in English and German, where all of the English sentence's words happen to be good old native ones, having come down from Old English. No Old Norse, French, or Latin:

Did she say to my daughter that my father has come alone and is feeling better?

*Sagte sie meiner Tochter, dass mein Vater allein gekommen ist und sich besser fühlt?*

The words, you see, are not a problem. Even if you have never taken German, you can match up the German

words pretty well with the English ones. *Sagte* is *said*, *Tochter* is *daughter*, *allein* is *alone*, and so on.

> *Sagte sie   meiner Tochter,*
> said   she to-my  daughter
>
> *dass mein Vater   allein gekommen ist*
> that my   father alone come        is
>
> *und  sich       besser  fühlt?*
> and himself better feels

Word for word, the German sentence is "Said she to my daughter that my father alone come is and himself better feels?" The way German puts the words together is a whole new world for an English speaker. English has *Did she say . . . ?* German has *Said she . . . ?* Why does English have that business with *Did she say . . . ?* Why *did*? "Did" what?

English has *to my daughter*; German bundles the "to-ness" onto the end of the word for *my*, *meiner*—i.e., German is a language with lots of case marking, like Latin. In English, case marking remains only in shards, such as the possessive *'s* and moribund oddities like *whom*. In English, one *has come*, but in German one *is come* (just as many will recall from French's grand old *passé composé*: *je*

*suis venu*). Then, German has its business of putting verbs last in subordinate clauses: *alone come* instead of *come alone*, *better feels* instead of *feels better*.

And even more: in German's *sich fühlt* for *feels*, the *sich*, the only word that does not have an English equivalent, means "himself"—in German you "feel yourself" better, you "remember yourself" rather than just remembering, and in general, you mark actions having to do with feeling and thinking as done "to yourself." Finally, where German has *fühlt* ("feels"), English has *feel*-ing. How come German can use just the simple form *feels*, while we have to mark it with -*ing*?

Every one of these things is an obstacle to the English speaker's mastery of German. They all seem, to us, to come out of nowhere, just like the fact that German nouns come in masculine, feminine, and neuter flavors (*meiner* in *meiner Tochter* is the *feminine* dative; if a son were in question, then it would be *meinem Sohn*). Mark Twain, in his essay "The Awful German Language," nicely summed up the experience of an Anglophone learner of German: "The inventor of the language seems to have taken pleasure in complicating it in every way that he could think of."

The crucial fact is that an English speaker might be moved to make a similar assessment of all of the other Germanic languages, for pretty much the same reasons.

For example, the Dutch version of the sentence is *Zei zij tegen mijn dochter dat mijn vader alleen gekomen is en zich beter voelt*? in which the words occur in the same order as in the German.

The question is why, indeed, *Said she to my daughter that my father alone come is and himself better feels?* is so silly in English alone. The Germanic languages, of course, have their differences, and not all of them parallel the German one quite as closely as Dutch does. To a Norwegian, for instance, a sentence with the words in the German order of *Said she to my daughter that my father alone come is and himself better feels?* would seem a little off, but still highly familiar. The Norwegian version is:

*Sa   hun til dattera    mi*
said she to daughter my

*at    faren   min er kommet alene*
that father my  is come    alone

*og   føler sig        bedre?*
and feels himself better

Here we have many of the same sorts of things that motivated Twain to say, "A person who has not studied German can form no idea of what a perplexing language

it is." The same *Said she . . . ?* (*Sa hun . . . ?*), *is come* (*er kommet*), and "feeling yourself" (*føler sig*), plus gender: the *my* for *my daughter* is **mi** but the *my* for *my father* is **min.**

That is, in a sense one "should" be able to say in English *Said she to my daughter that my father alone come is and himself better feels*? After all, you can say something similar in every other offshoot of Proto-Germanic but English. Only to English speakers does the sentence sound like something someone with brain damage would say. This shows that something was different about how Old English evolved.

English's Germanic relatives are like assorted varieties of deer—antelopes, springboks, kudu, and so on—antlered, fleet-footed, big-brown-eyed variations on a theme. English is some dolphin swooping around underwater, all but hairless, echolocating and holding its breath. Dolphins are mammals like deer: they give birth to live young and are warm-blooded. But clearly the dolphin has strayed from the basic mammalian game plan to an extent that no deer has.

Of course, dolphins are also different from deer in being blue or gray rather than brown. But that is the mere surface of the difference, just as English's foreign words are just the surface of its difference from German and the gang. English is different in its whole structural blueprint.

This is not an accident. There are reasons for it, which get lost in chronicles of English's history that are grounded primarily in lists of words, words, words.

In this book, I want to fill in a chapter of The History of English that has not been presented to the lay public, partly because it is a chapter even scholars of English's development have rarely engaged at length.

Why is English grammar so much less complicated than German's—or Norwegian's, Icelandic's, or any other Germanic language's? Because the Scandinavian Vikings did more than leave us with words like *skirt* and *get*. They also beat up the English language in the same way that we beat up foreign languages in classrooms—and twelve hundred years later we are still speaking their close-but-no-cigar rendition of Old English!

Why does English use *do* in questions like, say, *Why does English use* do *in questions*? The reader is vanishingly unlikely to have ever encountered another language where *do* is used the way it is in English, and that's because linguists barely have either, out of six thousand languages in the world. Or is it just an accident that English speakers have to say *He is feeling better* where almost all the other Germanic languages would say *He feels better*—as would most languages in the world? Well, Welsh and Cornish, spoken in Britain long before English, and spoken alongside it for more than fifteen hundred years, have both the *do* and the *-ing* usages. Most scholars of The

History of English insist that this is just a coincidence. I will show that it is not. While the Vikings were mangling English, Welsh and Cornish people were seasoning it. Their rendition of English mixed their native grammars with English grammar, and the result was a hybrid tongue. We speak it today.

I want to share this first because it makes The History of English more interesting than successive waves of words, decorated with sidebars as to how the grammar changed a bit here and there for no particular reason. Second, once we know the real history of English, we can understand that certain things we have been taught about our language and how we use it are hoaxes. It is not true that saying *Billy and me went to the store* or *Tell each student that they can hand in their exam on Tuesday* is "illogical." Nor is it true that the structure of people's native language reflects, in any way we would find interesting, how they think. We will also see further counterevidence to the idea that English is uniquely "open" to new words, in little-known secrets about English's vocabulary before it was even considered English.

It's not, then, all about words that just happened into our vocabulary. It's also about things speakers of other languages *did* to English *grammar*, and actions speak louder than words. The real story of English is about what happened when Old English was battered by Vikings and

bastardized by Celts. The real story of English shows us how English is *genuinely* weird—miscegenated, abbreviated. *Interesting.*

Let's go back to the middle of the fifth century A.D. in Britain, after the Romans left, and look a little more closely at the landscape than we are usually taught to.