

## The Story of English 4 – Old English

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Old English does not mean an *old* kind of English. Shakespeare’s English, for example, sounds a bit ‘old’ but we do not call it Old English. As we discussed, English evolved from the dialects spoken by a few Germanic tribes who invaded and occupied the British Islands. Old English is the earliest stage in the history of the language, roughly covering the time from 450 to 1150 AD. This was so much before other significant influences on the language that Old English is closer to modern German than to Modern English!

The story of English from 450 AD to the present is also the story of its journey from

being a very synthetic language to an analytic one. A synthetic language makes wide use of inflections or suffixes to show the relationships of words in a sentence. An analytic language makes much less use of inflections, and indicates the relationships of words in a sentence by means of word order, along with ‘grammatical words’ like prepositions and auxiliary verbs. Old English was a synthetic language, with its heavy use of inflexions (or inflections) or grammatical endings of words, just as most modern Indian languages are. Look at the verbs in the table below.

<b>Infinitive</b>	<b>Past Singular</b>	<b>Past Plural</b>	<b>Past Participle</b>
<i>cēosan</i> (choose)	<i>cēas</i>	<i>curon</i>	<i>coren</i>
<i>bindan</i> (bind)	<i>band</i>	<i>bundon</i>	<i>bunden</i>
<i>helpan</i> (help)	<i>healp</i>	<i>hulpon</i>	<i>holpen</i>

The Old English noun ‘stān’ (*stone*) could appear in all the following different forms, depending on number (singular or plural) and case - *stān*, *stānes*, *stāne*, *stānas*, *stāna*, and *stānum*, while in today’s English, the noun *stone* has just two forms - *stone* and *stones*. Old English grammar also had an elaborate gender system – every word had to be feminine, masculine or neuter – which often had nothing to do with natural gender. The words *moegden* (*girl*) and *wīf* (*wife*) were considered to have neutral gender, while *wīfmann* (*woman*) was masculine. The inflection system was influenced by

gender too, which means there could be different word endings to nouns depending on gender as well. Over the evolution of Old English, there was a marked weakening of inflections. As inflections weakened, the syntax or word order became less free, and today English has become largely analytic in nature.

Old English had ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ verbs, as we still do, though the two adjectives do not denote any inherent ‘weakness’ or ‘strength’ as such. Most of modern English verbs, interestingly, belong to the ‘weak’ category, which form the past tense by adding

an ‘-ed’ suffix – *talk-talked*. Strong verbs, on the other hand, show the tense change through a change in the root vowel – *teach-taught*. The three Old English verbs cited as examples earlier in the table are strong verbs. The tradition of strong verbs was passed on to English from Indo-European through Germanic. In the Germanic stage had begun the gradual replacement of these with weak verbs, and by the Old English period, there was already more weak than strong verbs in the language. It is a paradox that strong verbs, despite the historic primacy, are today called ‘irregular verbs’ while weak verbs, relative newcomers, enjoy the label ‘regular verbs’.

One often wonders why the plural of *mouse* is *mice* and not *mouses*, like other more docile rodents, and two *geese* should be so morphologically unlike two *mongooses*. This can easily be accounted for by understanding an interesting Old English sound change called *i-mutation* or *umlaut*. The plural of *mūs* (*mouse*) was indeed *mūsiz*, in the days when Old English was still more Germanic than English. Later on, the ‘i’ in the plural suffix (-iz) influenced the /ū/ in *mūsiz*, changing it to /ɜ/ (/ɜ/ is highly rounded Old English /ī/ sound). *Mūsiz* thus became *mɜsiz*. Over a few more stages, the ‘i’ and ‘z’ disappeared, leaving behind *mɜs*, which in later Old English became *mīs* (rounded /ɜ/ replaced by unrounded /i:/ sound). *Mīs* became *mice* (with the /i:/ sound replaced by /aI/) during the Great Vowel Shift, much later in the Modern English period. Same or similar are the stories

behind such words as *louse-lice*, *goose-geese*, *foot-feet*, *man-men* and *tooth-teeth*, all with unusual ways of forming the plural form. Umlaut also explains the etymological relationship between such word pairs as *whole-hale* (both related to ‘health’), *foul-filth*, *blood-bleed*, *strong-strength*, *old-elder*, and *long-length*. I-mutation or umlaut occurs when a back vowel is fronted or a front vowel is raised when the following syllable, often a suffix, contains /i/, /ī/ or /j/. It affected most of the Germanic languages including Anglo Saxon, or Old English, as we choose to call it.

The resourcefulness of Old English vocabulary is impressive. Even before the influx of Latin and French loan words, Old English had an immense and rich repertoire of words. Through the liberal use of suffixes and prefixes, and drawing on the Germanic talent for creating compound words, Old English was never at a loss for words, however abstract the idea that needed to be expressed. Much of this rich vocabulary has been forgotten and replaced in the centuries that followed, as English entered a tumultuous phase in its history, when it was nearly wiped out of the scene as a language of importance. This began with an event in 1066, which will be our topic in the next part in this series.

**[Editor’s Note: This is part of a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.]**