THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 34:
SOUNDS LIKE OLD ENGLISH

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 34: Sounds Like Old English. Last time, we looked at the arrival of Christian missionaries in Britain. And we saw that they not only brought their religion, they also brought their ability to write. Specifically, they brought the Roman alphabet. And that enabled those early missionaries to work with the King of Kent to produce the first known document in the English Language – the Laws of Aethelbert.

But that process of applying the Roman writing system to English wasn't as simple as you might think. The sounds of English were sometimes different from those of Latin. And the way in which the Roman alphabet was applied to English ultimately affected the way many words were spelled in English. So in this episode, we're going to explore the sounds of Old English, and next time we'll look more closely at how the Roman alphabet was applied to those sounds. And when we're done with these next couple of episodes, some of the strange spellings which we still have in Modern English will start to make a little more sense.

We'll start by focusing on the sounds of the language. And in this episode, I'm going to be talking a lot about sound shifts again. So if you liked those early episodes about Grimm's Law, I think you'll find this episode interesting as well.

And since I'm going to be talking about the alphabet over the next couple of episodes, let me begin by plugging the 'History of the Alphabet' audio book which I put together a few months back. It's still available at iTunes, Amazon.com, and CDBaby.com. You can also go to historyofenglishpodcast.com. I have links there to the various places where the audio book is available.

So let's begin our look at the sounds of Old English by returning to where we left off last time. As we saw in the last episode, Christianity arrived in Britain from two different directions. The Roman Church arrived with Augustine in Kent in the southeast of Britain, but the Irish monastic movement arrived from the north and west, and it gradually expanded southward. And while those two groups generally held the same views, there were some differences, and those differences extended to the way the Roman alphabet was applied to English.

Now as we know, theoretically, each letter of the alphabet represents a specific sound. Of course, the reality isn't quite that simple, I mean we can represent the 'k' sound in Modern English with several different letters – K, C, or Q. And sounds like /th/ and /ch/ don't have a specific letter. We have to use letter combinations – 'TH' and 'CH' respectively. But despite the occasional exceptions, the general idea of the alphabet is that it breaks language down to its basic sounds or phonemes, and it applies a letter or letter combination to each sound.

But in the seventh century, if we compare the sounds of Old English to the sounds of late Latin, we notice some distinct differences. Yes, they were both Indo-European languages, so they had a lot of sounds in common, but there were also sounds in English that didn't exist in Latin.

So let's begin by considering what English actually sounded like during this period in the seventh century when the language started to be written down. And the timing here is actually quite important because modern linguists have been able to reconstruct a large portion of the original vocabulary of the West Germanic languages – the languages which were spoken back in northern Germany and the surrounding areas. And when they compare those West Germanic languages back on the continent with the earliest texts written in Old English, they notice something very interesting – the language of the Anglo-Saxons had started to change very early on. And it wasn't so much the vocabulary or grammar that was changing, it was the actual sounds of the language – the phonemes which the Anglo-Saxons used when they spoke. Some old sounds were shifting to new sounds. And some of those new sounds were brand new sounds which hadn't really existed in the language before. So the Anglo-Saxons were beginning to speak a distinct language unique and separate from the languages spoken by their cousins back on the continent.

Perhaps the blending of dialects contributed to these differences, or perhaps it was just a natural evolution of the language, but whatever the reason, the sound changes were definitely there because the first texts were written down phonetically. So the changes were clearly documented.

One new sound that had emerged in the first century or so in Britain was the 'SH' sound (/sh/). This sound had previously been an 'SK' sound (/sk/) back on the continent. So a lot of words which had previously been pronounced was a /sk/ sound were now being pronounced with a /sh/ sound.

So the word *disc* derives from the Latin word *discus*. And that word had been borrowed by those early Germanic tribes back on the continent. But in the immediate aftermath of the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain, *disc* became *dish* in very early Old English. From *disc* to *dish*, we can hear that early English sound change.

Of course, we have both versions of the word in Modern English, but *disc* – spelled either D-I-S-C or D-I-S-K – represents a second borrowing of the word. When it was borrowed the second time around in the late Middle Ages, it came back in with its original 'SK' sound at the end. But of course, English already had the word in the language. It was just a modified form of the word – *dish*.

Another example of this difference between Old English and Latin can be seen in the Latin word *piscus*. You might remember that *piscus* was the Latin word for 'fish.' This was an example which I used in the episode about Grimm's Law. Remember that the 'P' sound shifted to the 'F' sound in the early Germanic languages. And Latin has a lot of words with a 'P' sound where English has those words with an 'F' sound.

So Latin has *piscus* where English has *fish*. Well that part at the beginning of the word isn't really new. What is new is the part at the end of the word. *Piscus* has the original 'SK' sound – /pis-kus/. And in the original Germanic language, the word was something like *fiskaz*. But now in very early Old English, it became *fish*. The 'SK' sound shifted to this new 'SH' sound.

And a West Germanic word like *wascan* (/wahs-kan/) became *wash*. And the West Germanic word *scearp* (/skay-arp/) became *sharp*.

And in fact, this change was so common in Old English that the 'SK' sound was rarely used in the language for a while. One place where it was retained was at the end of some words. For example, the Old English version of the word *tusk* was *tusc* (/toosk/). And the Old English version of the word *ask* was *asc* (/ahsk/). So that 'SK' sound survived in those words.

But interestingly, in many cases, the Anglo-Saxons began to reverse those consonant sounds at the end, so the 'SK' sound became a 'KS' sound. Linguists call this metathesis. So a word like *asc* (/ahsk/) became /ahks/. And some dialects of English still do that today. It is a very common feature of what linguists call African American Vernacular English or Black Vernacular English. In that English dialect, *ask* often becomes *ax* – as in "Let me ax you something." But before anyone ridicules it as 'bad' English, it is actually a pronunciation which goes all the way back to the original Anglo-Saxons. And it was apparently because the Anglo-Saxons didn't like the 'SK' sound. So it was gradually beginning to disappear.

But it started to make a comeback when the Vikings began to arrive a couple of centuries later. At that time, the Anglo-Saxons began to borrow a lot of words from the language of the Vikings – Old Norse. And after that, other Germanic words began to creep into English. So that 'SK' sound started to return to the language. And interestingly, it created some interesting pairs which we still have in Modern English.

So Old English had the word *shirt* which meant a short garment, but the Vikings brought their version of the word with the original 'SK' sound, and that word was *skirt*. So English ended up with two versions of the same word – the Anglo-Saxon *shirt* and the Old Norse *skirt*. Both words originally meant the same thing, but over time the words became distinct. *Shirt* eventually came to refer to a garment worn on the top half of the body, and *skirt* came to refer to a garment worn on the lower half of the body.

Another example of this is the Old English word *ship* with the 'SH' sound. Well, the original version of the word *ship* came back into the language in the late Middle Ages. From German via Italian and French we get *skiff* meaning a small boat. And from Dutch, we get the word *skipper*. Those other Germanic versions of the word retain the original 'SK' sound, but the native Old English word *ship* has that newer 'SH' sound.

Now if you think about that particular sound change, it wasn't just a sound change. It actually involved a physical change in the mouth. The original 'SK' sound (/sk/) is pronounced in the back of the throat, but the newer 'SH' sound (/sh/) is pronounced in the front of the mouth. So the sound shifted from the back of the throat to the front of the mouth. And this might ring a bell for you. If you go all the way back to Episode 5 where I talked about the letter C, you might remember that the 'K' sound also changed in Old English. When it came before a front vowel – the letters E or I – the sound shifted from the 'K' sound to the 'CH' sound (/ch/). Well, that 'CH' sound was another new sound in the language.

In prior episodes we've seen several examples of this specific change. The original Germanic word *kirika* became /chi-ree-che/. And that word eventually became *church*.

Another example of this was the Old English word for a trench or moat. The original Germanic word was *dic* (/deek/). But in Old English, the 'K' sound at the end shifted to a 'CH' sound, and the word became *ditch*. But once again, the Vikings arrived a couple of centuries later, and they brought that original Germanic word with them. So that word *dic* (/deek/) was reintroduced into English. And thanks to a later vowel shift, the word *dic* became *dyke*. So *ditch* is the Old English version of the word with a 'CH' sound, and *dyke* is the Old Norse version with original 'K' sound.

Another example of this is the original Germanic word *thak* (/thahk/) which meant a covering. Well much like the word *skipper* which I mentioned earlier, Middle English borrowed a lot of nautical terms from Dutch as English traders encountered Dutch traders around the North Sea. In Dutch, that original Germanic word *thak* had become *dek* (/deck/), and it's meaning had evolved from a generic covering to a ship covering. And that is how we got the word *deck*, originally meaning a ship covering.

Well the original Germanic version of that word – *thak* – had passed into Old English. And it was subject to that same sound shift from the 'K' sound to the 'CH' sound in very early Old English. So *thak* became *thatch*. And in Old English, *thatch* was a type of covering used on a building. So *thatch* and *deck* are cognate – both meaning a type of covering and both derived from the same original Germanic word.

Back in episode 5, I gave a couple of other examples of this same sound change. From the Germanic word *riki*, we got the Old English word *rice* (/ree-cheh/). And that produced the modern word *rich*.

And the Germanic word *cild* eventually became *child*. And we have that word today as *child*. Compare the modern German word *kindergarten* with the English translation 'child's garden.' German *Kinder* still has the original 'K' sound, while English *child* has the later 'CH' sound.

The Germanic word *kokina* borrowed from very early Latin became *cycene* (/kü-chay-neh/). And that word became *kitchen* in Modern English. So from *kokina* to *kitchen*, we can hear that sound change in the middle of the word.

So our modern English vocabulary still has many relics of that very early sound change from the 'K' sound to the 'CH' sound.

I have one more example of this which you might find interesting, especially of you like Mexican food. The Spanish word *queso* comes from the Latin word *caseus* (/kah-say-oos/). The early Germanic tribes on the continent borrowed that word from the Romans. And by the time of very early English, is was pronounced *cese* (/kay-seh/) – actually very similar to the modern Spanish *queso*. But then that early English sound change happened, and the 'K' sound shifted to a 'CH'

sound, and the word changed from *cese* (/kay-seh/) to *cese* (/chay-seh/). And we have that word today as *cheese*. So *queso* and *cheese* are in fact cognate.

Now if you remember back to Episode 5 about the letter C, the shift from the 'K' sound to the 'CH' sound didn't just happen randomly. It tended to happen when the 'K' sound appeared before a front vowel, and the front vowel sounds were /ay/ and /ee/, but Old English used the letters E and I for those sounds. So with apologies to all of those professional linguists who have a much more precise and academic way of saying it, the 'K' sound at the back of the throat moved forward to meet the vowels which was pronounced in the front of the mouth. So before the /ay/ and /ee/ sounds, the 'K' sound in the back of the throat became a /ch/ sound in the front of the mouth.

So let's go back to that first sound change which I mentioned earlier – the 'SK' sound (/sk/) which shifted to the 'SH' sound (/sh/). Do you notice the similarity? The 'SK' sound which is produced in the back of the throat moved forward to the front of the mouth and became an 'SH' sound (/sh/). You might remember that linguists call this process 'assibilation' – the process of shifting from one consonant sound to a new sibilant sound – like /ch/ or /sh/. Another linguistic term for this is 'palatalization.' And despite the fancy linguistic terms, the concept is actually quite simple. It's simply a matter of moving the sound from the back of the throat to the tip of the tongue and the teeth. And in a nutshell, that's what the early Anglo-Saxons were doing in the first century or so that they were in Britain.   They were converting those hard consonants in the back of the throat which we tend to associate with the Germanic languages to these new sounds in the front of the mouth. So English was starting to sound different from its Germanic siblings. It was starting to sound a little less German and a little more – well – English.

But those two sound changes which I've mentioned were not the only changes which fit this pattern. Another similar change occurred to the hard Germanic 'G' sound (/g/).   The 'G' sound is actually very closely related to the 'K' sound. It's another one of those sounds produced in the back of the throat. In fact, mechanically both sounds are produced pretty much the same way. The 'K' sound (/k/) is the unvoiced sound. And the hard 'G' sound (/g/) is the voiced sound. So it may not be surprising that the 'G' sound underwent changes which were very similar to the 'K' sound during this same time period.

In the same way that the 'K' sound shifted to a 'CH' sound, the 'G' sound also tended to shift forward and assibilate. But it didn't just shift to one particular new sound. It actually tended to shift to a variety of new sounds. One of the new sounds was the 'Y' sound (/y/). And I've actually mentioned that sound change in earlier episodes. You might remember how the Germanic word *garden* from the Franks became *yard* in Old English. And in the last episode, I mentioned how *guild* became *yield*.   But the 'y' sound wasn't a brand new sound. It was a sound that already existed in the language. It had been there since the original Germanic language. But now it was appearing in new words in new contexts. In other words, it was becoming more common.

Now the 'Y' sound is a sound in the back of the mouth, but another new sound was developing from that hard 'G' sound, and this other sound was another brand new sound in English. It was

also a sibilant like /sh/ and /ch/. In this case it was the 'J' sound (/j/). Interestingly, the same change was happening in Latin as well. That's how we got from *Germania* with a hard 'G' to *Germany* with a soft 'G.'

Well English was starting to make this same type of change. But unlike late Latin and early French where this new 'J' sound was popping up in all parts of words – at the front, in the middle and at the end – in Old English it mostly occurred just at the end of words. Words that had previously ended with a hard 'G' sound now were starting to end with a softer 'J' sound.

So the Saxon word *bruggia* meant a river crossing. It was likely *brycg* (/brü-g/) by the fifth or sixth century, but now in the seventh century in Old English, it became *brycg* (/brü-j/). And today we have it as *bridge* with that 'J' sound at the end.

Again, this was a brand new sound in English. And you might also remember that Late Latin and early French was converting the 'Y' sound into this same 'J' sound during this same time period. And that's how /yoo-piter/ became *Jupiter* and /yoo-lius/ became *Julius*. And many of these words came into English from Latin after 1066. So this new 'J' sound became more and more popular in English over the following centuries.

But even though this 'J' sound was becoming more common in English, the letter J didn't actually exist yet. In fact, the letter J is a very recent addition to the alphabet. So as we'll see next time, the early Anglo-Saxon scribes had to figure out what to do with this sound. In Latin, this 'J' sound had developed out of the 'Y' sound – from /yoo-piter/ to *Jupiter*. So Latin and French tended to use either the letter Y or letter I for the sound.

But in Old English, this new 'J' sound didn't really develop from the 'Y' sound. It had actually developed from that hard 'G' sound at the end of words. So the Old English scribes tended to represent this sound with the letter combination 'DG,' and they used this combination because the sound was derived from the 'G' sound. And in fact, there were probably some speakers who were still using that 'G' sound at the end of those words.

Again, we'll look at all of this a little more closely in the next episode, but that's how we got the Modern English spelling of 'DGE' at the end of words to represent the 'J' sound (/j/). So words like *edge*, *judge*, *bridge*, *ledge*, *budge* – we use the 'DGE' spelling today because that 'J' sound appears at the end of those words – and in Old English when the 'J' sound appeared at the end of a word, it was usually because the sound had shifted from an original hard 'G' sound. And that habit of representing the 'J' sound at the end of a word with 'DGE' is a habit which was maintained by later scribes even into the period of Middle English. So those spellings have their origin in this very early period at the beginning of Old English even though some of those words came into English at a later date. So let's look a little more closely at a couple of those examples.

As I noted, the word *edge* is an example of this early sound shift. We have the word today as *edge* with the 'J' sound and the 'DGE' spelling at the end. Well, originally the word was *egg*. And *egg* became *edge* very early on as the Anglo-Saxons were arriving in Britain. But a few centuries later, the word *egg* came back into English thanks to the Vikings. In fact, the word *egg*

- E-G-G - is an Old Norse word. Now if you have a hard time making the connection between *egg* and *edge*, you have to know that the word *egg* from the Vikings had two different meanings. Of course, one meaning was what you have for breakfast, but the other was a verb meaning 'to prod or poke someone' as in 'to egg someone on.' And it's that version of the word which is cognate with the Old English word *edge* which originally meant 'a point or tip' and came to mean 'a corner or boundary' in Old English. So if we 'egg someone on' to the point that we push them 'over the edge,' we are actually using both versions of the original Germanic word. The Old Norse *egg* has the original 'G' sound at the end, and the Old English *edge* has the newer 'J' sound at the end. And that 'J' sound is represented by that Old English spelling 'DGE.'

Now we have one word in English that perfectly illustrates how English developed different ways of representing the 'J' sound over time. And that word is *judge*. It actually has two 'J' sounds. One at the beginning and one at the end – *judge*. But notice that we spell the first 'J' sound with a J and the second 'J' sound with 'DGE.' And that's because the word was borrowed into English from Latin via French. And it came into English with those French 'J' sounds. The letter J at the beginning represents the influence of French and Middle English where the letter J developed over time. But Old English already had a traditional way of representing the J sound at the end of a word – 'DGE.' So the Middle English scribes used the Middle English J for the initial sound and the traditional Old English 'DGE' for the final sound. And this is a classic example of how Middle English started to mix together the Old English rules and the French rules. And the result was a hybrid. And that gave us multiple ways of spelling the same sound even sometimes within the same word – like *judge*.

Again, I'll focus more on the alphabet and spelling in the next episode, but I wanted to point out that particular spelling issue here because we'll see it again in future episodes.

So let's take a step back and consider where we are. We now know that the hard Germanic 'G' sound (/g/) was becoming less common over time, and the 'J' sound was becoming more and more common. And the softer 'Y' sound was also becoming more common.

The sound of English was becoming softer and smoother. Some would say that it was becoming lazier because if you've had a lot to drink, you tend to make some of these same sound changes. Instead of "Chugging another Guinness," you might end up 'shusjing another yuiness.' In other words, you might end speaking like an Anglo-Saxon. And in fact, there are some who theorize that when the first Anglo-Saxons got to Britain, they didn't have a lot to do other than fight and drink, so that may actually account for some of those changes. But that's really too easy. Sound changes happen naturally. And people are always looking for an easier way to say or do something. So it's natural to cheat a little and slur words and sounds together to make them easier to pronounce. And that is ultimately what was happening here in very early English.

Now I mentioned that the hard 'G' sound sometimes shifted to two different sounds in Old English – the 'Y' sound was more common at the beginning of words in words like *yard* and *year*, and the 'J' sound was more common at the end of words in words like *edge* and *bridge*. But another consonant also evolved out of the 'G' sound, and it ended up being a transitional sound because it eventually evolved into the 'W' sound in Middle English. This transitional

sound was another Germanic consonant produced in the back of the mouth. It's a sound that we've seen before in other Germanic languages. It's kind of a breathy 'G' or breathy 'K' sound, and it's similar to the sound that we sometimes make at the end of the word 'yuck.' But as I said, in later English, this sound eventually shifted to a 'W' sound in these particular words. And that 'W' sound is pronounced where? You guessed it – in the front of the mouth. So once again, this is an example of how English shifted sounds from the back of the throat to the front of the mouth. But even though this particular change began during this early period, it took several centuries to complete its transition.

So let's listen to a couple of examples of this change. I mentioned in an earlier episode that the name of the *Saxons* was derived from the Germanic word for sword or knife which was *sax*. Well, a slightly different version of the word developed to describe a knife or sword with teeth carved into it for cutting wood or heavier objects. That original Germanic word was *sago*. And in the North Sea dialects it was *sagu*. But then in early English that 'G' sound shifted to this Germanic breathy consonant in the back of the throat, and it became /sah-xoo/.' But remember that this was a transitional sound, and it eventually shifted forward and became a 'W' sound. So by the time of Middle English, it had become *sawe* (/sah-weh/). And eventually that word was shortened to a single syllable and became *saw*. So that W which we still have at the end of that word was originally a 'G' sound.

Another example of this is the word *follow*. It apparently started out as a compound word which meant 'full going.' The Old English version of the word was *fylgan* (/fül-gahn/). But again, that 'G' sound shifted to the breathy consonant in the back of the throat and it became (/fül-xahn/). But by the time of Middle English, that sound had evolved into a 'W' sound. And the word was *folwen* (/fohl-wen/). And today we have the word as *follow*. The 'W' sound at the end has really become silent over the years, but that letter 'W' still represents a sound that was once pronounced, and it was originally pronounced as a 'G' sound.

So in these examples, we see more examples of how English gradually shifted sounds from the back of the throat to the front of the mouth.

Now all of these sound changes which I'm discussing will become very important when we get to the scribes who had to figure out how to write down these sounds, but there is one more example of these Old English sound changes which I have to discuss before we get to the scribes. And this final set of sound changes may be the most complicated of all because it involves the vowels. You will have noticed by now that I generally avoid any specific discussion of vowel changes. And even if we go all the way back to Jacob Grimm, you might remember that he also avoided any discussion of vowel changes. Instead, he chose to focus solely on the consonant changes in the early Germanic languages.

Well part of the reason why I don't like to get into vowel changes is because it's very technical and very complicated. It's really a subject which is better addressed by a professional linguist – which I am not. And even if I was, it probably wouldn't make for a very interesting discussion on a podcast because the changes are so technical and situational.

Part of the problem with vowel changes is the inherent nature of vowels. They naturally flow into each other. Now consonants typically involve some type of friction in the mouth – either in the back of the throat or with the teeth or lips or tongue. So consonants are distinct sounds that don't tend to flow into each other. We can't really go directly from a 'B' sound to a 'T' sound – /b/ to /t/. We have to put a vowel in there and make it *but* or *bat* or *bit* or *bite*. Now there are a few exceptions to this rule, but vowels don't really require any friction in the mouth, so they can flow naturally into each other. In fact, you can say all of the names of the vowel letters in a single breath and barely move any part of your mouth in the process. AAA-EEE-III-OOO-UUU.

So you can see how the vowels can move around very easily. And even within modern English accents and dialects, most of the differences are in the vowels. The consonants are largely the same. But if you say 'tom-ay-to' and I say 'to-mah-to,' we're just using different vowels.

Well, modern linguists have studied these vowel changes, and they have actually been able to identify many of the rules which marked the changing sounds of vowels over the centuries. A lot of this early work was done in Germany, and the German word for these vowels changes is 'umlaut.' Some English linguists also use that term, but the more common term in English is 'mutation,' and since a lot of vowels shifted to a vowel sound represented by the letter I, this particular type of vowel shift is often called 'i-mutation.'

Again, I am not going to attempt to dissect umlaut or i-mutation here, but there is general rule from all of this research which we should take note of. And that rule is that vowels pronounced in the back of the mouth – specifically the sounds /ah/, /oh/, and /oo/ – tend to shift to vowels in the front of the mouth – the sounds /ee/, /ay/ and /ü/.

And this is important for our discussion for two reasons. First, as we've already seen, when some consonants pronounced in the back of the throat preceded one of these front vowels, it often had a tendency to shift forward in the mouth and it often resulted in a new sibilant sound. So /k/ before E or I became /ch/. So the difference between front vowels and back vowels was a trigger for some of the Old English sound changes.

But the other reason why this is important is because it wasn't just consonants which were being affected. The vowels themselves were sometimes make this same kind of shift. Once again, sounds produced in the back of the mouth were moving forward. Back vowels were becoming front vowels.

Again, the specific situations in which this occurred, and the specific manner in which these changes happened, all of that is the stuff for professional linguists. But it did result in a lot of words in Modern English where we have two or more versions of the same word – one with a back vowel and one with a front vowel. So in the last episode, I mentioned that the Old English word for 'law' was *doom*. It was a judgment. And I noted that it still exists in Modern English as the verb *deem* meaning to make a judgment about something. From *doom* to *deem*, we can hear that shift from the back vowel /oo/ to the front vowel /ee/.

We can also hear it in the word *whole* – W-H-O-L-E – and the word *heal* – H-E-A-L. So from the older word *whole* to the newer word *heal*, we can hear that shift from the back vowel to the front vowel.

We can also hear it in *sold* and *sell*, and *fall* and *fell*. One version – *sold* and *fall* – is the older version with the back vowels, and the other version – *sell* and *fell* – is the later version with the vowel shifted to the front.

Bought and *buy* is another example, but it's a little tougher to hear in that example because the vowels have continued to shift in English.

Also think about words like *long* and *length*. *Strong* and *strength*. Again the older versions are *long* and *strong* with the back vowels. The newer versions are *length* and *strength* with the front vowels.

We see the same evolution in *sit* and *set*. And in *lie* and *lay*.

Today if we want to describe the relative ages of something, we would say *old*, *older*, and *oldest*. But in Old English, it was actually *old, elder*, and *eldest*. The word *old* had the original back vowel, and *elder* and *eldest* had the mutated front vowel. And we still have both versions of the words in Modern English. We still have *older* and *elder*, but *elder* is typically used as a noun today – as in someone's 'elders.' And we still have *oldest* and *eldest*. But *elder* and *eldest* were actually the terms used in Old English because of that vowel shift. *Older* and *oldest* came later as simple variations of the word *old*.

But again, the basic idea here is that back vowels shifted to front vowels in a lot of words very early on. It didn't mean that English speakers stopped using the original version of the words, they just created a newer version with a front vowel. And over time, the two words became distinct and were used in specific contexts – for example, one for present tense and one for past tense like *sell* and *sold*. Or sometimes the variations were used for making comparisons like *old*, *elder* and *eldest*.

Another situation in which this type of vowel shift occurred was when singular words were made plural. And this type of change happened so often that it merits a special mention.

Here's what happened.   Late Germanic and very early English had single syllable nouns which had a back vowel – either /ah/, /oh/, or /oo/. So the Old English word for 'man' was *man* (/mahn/) with the /ah/ back vowel. And the Old English word for 'foot' was *fot* (/foat/) with the /oh/ back vowel. And the Old English word for 'mouse' was *mus* (/moos/) spelled M-U-S with the /oo/ back vowel.

Now in order to make all of those words plural, Old English used a suffix '-iz' – spelled 'I-Z.'

So the plural of *man* was *maniz*. And the plural of *foot* or *fot* (/foat/) was *fotiz* (/foat-iz/). And plural '*mouse*' or '*mus*' (/moos/) was *musiz* (/moos-iz/).

But here's the key to all of this. As English evolved very early on, in the first century or so the Anglo-Saxons were in Britain, the pronunciation of that first syllable started to change. It was the product of that natural laziness in the way people tend to speak. Those early speakers began to cheat a little. Instead of having to shift from the back vowel in the first syllable up to the front vowel in the second syllable – '-iz' – they cheated by converting that initial back vowel into a front vowel. That gave both syllables a front vowel, and it made it a little easier to pronounce those words.

So the plural version of *man* – *manniz* – became *menniz*. And over time that suffix '-iz' was dropped. And the result was *men*. And *men* was left as the plural version. So the process of going from singular *man* to plural *men* was a consequence of this early vowel shift thanks to that original plural ending '-iz.'

And this same process converted the plural version of *foot* – *foatiz* – to *feet*. That /ee/ sound of that plural suffix '-iz' became the primary vowel of the word *feet*.

And the same vowel change converted the plural version of *mouse* – *musiz* – to *meese* (or *mice* thanks to a later vowel shift in English).

And just as the plural of *mouse* became *mice*, the plural of the head insect *louse* became *lice*.

And this same process converted the singular *goose* into the plural *geese*. And the singular *tooth* into the plural *teeth*.

If we add *woman* and *women*, that actually includes most of the examples of plural words in modern English which are made plural by shifting the vowel in this manner. But there were a lot more of them in Old English. Over the centuries, English has dropped a lot of those plural nouns and converted them to traditional plural words with an 'S' on the end. So words like *book*, *goat*, and *friend* once had plural versions which were made with a mutated vowel, but today we just use the 'S' at the end.

Other examples of this vowel shift include *food* and *feed*, *blood* and *bleed*, *sought* and *seek*, *full* and *fill*, *foul* and *filth*, *broad* and *breadth*. We also see it in *rose* and *rise*, and *drove* and *drive*.

This particular vowel shift – the i-mutation – only occurred during this very early period, just as the Anglo-Saxons were arriving and settling in Britain. So this process actually helps modern linguists determine if a word was in the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary before they came to Britain. If the word shows signs of this vowel shift very early on, they know that the Anglo-Saxons brought the word with them.

So for example, I mentioned earlier that the word *cheese* has its ultimate origins in Latin. Well one of the reason why linguists know that this word was borrowed from the Romans before the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain is because it also has this same vowel shift or i-mutation. Remember that the original Latin version of the word was '*caseus*' (/kah-say-oos/) with an initial back vowel – /ah/. But in early English it was pronounced 'cese' (/kay-seh/), so the vowel had

shifted forward to 'ay' at the beginning. And of course it later shifted to 'ee' in *cheese*. So because of that vowel shift, linguists feel certain that that word was borrowed before the Anglo-Saxon migration, and thus before that vowel shift occurred.

Another example of this is the word *mint* which I discussed back in the episodes about the Romans. You might remember that that word began as *moneta* in Latin. That initial /oh/ was a back vowel. But in Old English it became *mynet* and *mint*. So the vowel had shifted forward.

And I have one more example of this same vowel shift, and its appropriate to save it for the very end because it's the word *English*. As we know, it came from the name of the *Angles* (ahn-guls). And from *Angle* to *Engle* (/angle/) to *English*, we can hear that shift from the back vowel /ah/ to the front vowel /ay/ and then in later English to /ee/.

Now as I've noted, this initial set of vowel shifts occurred very early on. Other Germanic languages have some evidence of it as well, but the way it which the change occurred was a little different in each language. And the English umlaut or i-mutation occurred once around the 7th century. Of course, English underwent additional vowel shifts in later centuries, but these particular shifts which I've been discussing only occurred during this early period in which the first English texts were beginning to appear.

So again, if we wanted to summarize all of these changes in very early English, we see a consistent pattern of sounds in the back of the mouth being shifted forward to sounds in the front of the mouth.

/sk/, /k/ and /g/ in the back of the mouth became /sh/, /ch/, and /j/ in the front of the mouth. /ah/, /æ/ and /oh/ in the back of the mouth became /ay/ in the front. And /ay/ in the front eventually moved even further to the front and became /ee/.

Now some of these trends were reversed in later years as Viking and other Germanic influences began to creep back in. But these early changes distinguished the sounds of English from the other Germanic language back on the continent.

And now that we know how the sounds of English were changing, we can focus on how the Roman alphabet was applied to those sounds. Next time, we'll return to the monks and the missionaries who were assigned that task. And we'll see how the first English alphabet came about. We'll also continue explore the early developments in Anglo-Saxon history which impacted the development of English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.