

TRANSCRIPT

Where did English come from? - Claire Bown

When we talk about English, we often think of it as a single language but what do the dialects spoken in dozens of countries around the world have in common with each other? Or with the writings of Chaucer? And how are any of them related to the strange words in Beowulf? The answer is that like most languages, English has evolved through generations of speakers, undergoing major changes over time. By undoing these changes, we can trace the language from the present day back to its ancient roots. While modern English shares many similar words with Latin-derived Romance languages like French and Spanish, most of those words were not originally part of it. Instead, they started coming into the language with the Norman invasion of England in 1066. When the French-speaking Normans conquered England and became its ruling class. They brought their speech with them, adding a massive amount of French and Latin vocabulary to the English language previously spoken there. Today, we call that language Old English. This is the language of Beowulf. Probably it doesn't look very familiar but it might be more recognizable if you know some German. That's because Old English belongs to the Germanic language family, first brought to the British Isles in the 5th and 6th centuries by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. The Germanic dialects they spoke would become known as Anglo-Saxon. Viking invaders in the 8th to 11th centuries added more borrowings from Old Norse into the mix. It may be hard to see the roots of modern English underneath all the words borrowed from French, Latin, Old Norse and other languages. But comparative linguistics can help us by focusing on grammatical structure, pattern of sounds changes and certain core vocabulary. For example after the 6th century, German words starting with P systematically shifted it to PF sound while their Old English counterparts kept the P unchanged. In another split, words that have SK sounds in Swedish developed an SH sound in

English. There are still some English words with SK, like skirts and skull, but they are direct borrowings from Old Norse that came after the SK to SH shift. These examples show us that just as the various Romance languages descended from Latin, English, Swedish, German, and many other languages descended from their own common ancestor known as Proto-Germanic spoken around 500 B.C.E. Because this historical language was never written down, we can only reconstruct it by comparing its descendants, which is possible thanks to the consistency of the changes. We can even use the same process to go back one step further, and trace the origins of Proto-Germanic to a language called Proto-Indo European, spoken in about 6000 years ago on the Pontic steppe in modern day Ukraine and Russia. This is the reconstructed ancestor of the Indo-European family that includes nearly all languages historically spoken in Europe, as well as large parts of Southern and Western Asia. And though it requires a bit more work, we can find the same systematic similarities, or correspondences, between related words in different Indo-European branches. Comparing English with Latin, we see that English has T where Latin has D, and F where Latin has P at the start of the words. Some of the English's more distant relatives include Hindi, Persian and the Celtic languages it displaced in what is now Britain. Proto-Indo-European itself descended from an even more ancient language, but unfortunately, this is far back as historical and archaeological evidence will allow us to go. Many mysteries remain just out of reach, such as whether there might be a link between Indo-European and other major language families, and the nature of the language spoken in Europe prior to its arrival. But the amazing fact remains that nearly 3 billion people around the world, many of whom cannot understand each other, are nevertheless speaking the same words shaped by 6000 years of history.