

The Birth of English: Exploring the Characteristics of Old English and the Role of Anglo-Saxon in Its Evolution

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Abstract:

English is a universal language that most countries use for international communication. English has had numerous impacts that have changed the old English, which has turned into the modern English we use now. In the beginning, English was influenced by Celtic, and then Germanic influences came with the colonization by three big clans: Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. In that case, the purpose of this research on Old English characteristics is to understand more about the history and evolution of the English language from the 5th to 11th centuries (Old English) and continuing until the 16th century (modern English). Thus, readers could effectively study and preserve the history of the birth of English. The method used in this research article is the qualitative method with phenomenon analyzation. This method is used to find out the changes in the English language from the characteristics, including pronunciation, present vocabulary, and grammar. Besides that, this research is also done to discover the influence of Anglo Saxons. Writers accomplished deeper research through trusted sources such as “History of the English Language 5th Edition” by Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable. After going through the research and further study, it could be said that English has experienced a significant evolution. Starting from structure and language patterns to usage case and inflection. The English language we know now has become more concise and organized. The English language (Modern English) has become simpler with only 34.000 words, and it is easier to learn as a second language.

Keywords: old English; characteristics; Anglo-Saxons; Germanic influence; language evolution

INTRODUCTION

Modern English, which is the language of international communication, has gone through so many changes. It has developed into a language that is spoken worldwide. To understand its form, it is essential to learn the origins back from the period of Old English which is 450 to 1100 AD. This period is when the Germanic tribes took roles in shaping the linguistics field of early England.

This article has a purpose of exploring the primary features of Old English and studying the influence of the Anglo-Saxons on the Evolution of the language. By analyzing

its phonological, grammatical, and lexical characteristics, this study explains how English developed from a synthetic to a more analytic language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English evolution has been extensively discussed by scholars like Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable. They explain that Old English was a heavily inflected language with complicated grammatical rules, and many of them have been erased in modern English. This was well-explained in their work entitled "A history of the English Language". The vocabulary was largely Germanic in its origin, though there are some Latin and Greek borrowings as a result of Roman occupation of Britain.

Another critical influence was Christianity. It brought Latin terms into the vernacular. Other languages that also contributed to the changing structure and vocabulary of English are Celtic, Norse, and Norman French. However, the biggest influence that laid the foundational structure of English syntax and basic vocabulary was the Anglo Saxons.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach with a focus on phenomenological analysis to examine how the English language has evolved over time. The study relies on secondary data drawn from scholarly sources such as academic journals and books on historical linguistics. The primary reference used is A History of the English Language (5th Edition) by Baugh and Cable, which offers a comprehensive overview of the historical developments and linguistic features of Old English. The analysis centers on four main aspects:

- Changes in pronunciation and phonological patterns
- The origins and development of vocabulary
- Shifts in grammatical rules and sentence construction
- Sociolinguistic influences, including migration and foreign invasions

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Origins of Old English

Old English began to take shape after the 5th and 6th centuries, following the migration of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to Britain. These Germanic tribes brought

with them a mix of West Germanic dialects that eventually merged, forming the early basis of the English language.

Characteristics of Old English

Phonology and Pronunciation

The sound system of Old English was quite distinct from what we hear in English today. It included sounds that no longer exist in modern speech, such as the "þ" (thorn) and "ð" (eth), which represented the 'th' sounds. Typically, stress was placed on the first syllable of a word.

Grammar

Old English was highly inflected, meaning that the form of words changed depending on their grammatical role. Nouns, pronouns, and adjectives showed variations based on case (nominative, accusative, genitive, dative), number, and gender. Verbs were also more complex, changing form based on tense, person, and number. Thanks to these inflections, word order was more flexible than it is today.

Vocabulary

Most of the vocabulary in Old English came from Germanic roots. Words like *cyning* (king), *scip* (ship), and *wīf* (wife) reflect this heritage. However, the influence of Latin began to grow after Christianity spread to England in the 7th century.

Anglo-Saxon Influence

The Anglo-Saxons played a central role in shaping Old English. Their societal norms, values, and storytelling traditions were woven into the language. They also left behind a rich literary legacy, with *Beowulf*—one of the earliest and most important works in English literature—standing out as a prime example of Old English poetry.

The Shift Toward Modern English

Several major historical events led to the transformation of Old English over time. The Viking invasions brought in Old Norse vocabulary and led to some simplification in grammar. Later, the Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced a wave of French vocabulary and further eroded the complex inflectional system. By the 15th and 16th centuries, English had evolved into a language with more fixed word order, simpler grammar, and growing consistency in usage. Despite these changes, many everyday

English words—such as man, house, eat, go, and come—still trace their roots back to the Anglo-Saxon period.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of Old English into Modern English represents a remarkable journey of linguistic evolution shaped by cultural exchanges and historical events. The Anglo-Saxons laid the essential groundwork for the language's core grammatical structures and foundational vocabulary. As centuries passed, English underwent significant simplifications and absorbed numerous external influences, particularly from Norse and French, which contributed to its adaptability and global reach. In the present day, Modern English is characterized by a standardized structure and a core vocabulary of approximately 34,000 commonly used words, making it more accessible for non-native speakers. A deeper understanding of Old English and its Anglo-Saxon roots allows us to appreciate the dynamic nature of language change and the enduring legacy of its earliest forms.

Moreover, studying Old English not only provides linguistic insights but also offers cultural and historical context that enriches our understanding of early English society, literature, and identity. Literary works such as *Beowulf* serve as invaluable sources for examining the worldview, traditions, and values of Anglo-Saxon England. Thus, preserving and studying Old English is not merely an academic pursuit but a way to connect with the roots of modern linguistic and cultural identity.

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