

A Historical Account of Some Alternating Patterns and Anomalies in Modern English

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There are many reasons why foreigners have difficulties learning English. In addition to the difference between English and the learner's grammar, the large number of irregularities found in English become another obstacle to learning English. Understanding the difference and the irregularities will help us not only have a good command of English but also teach English more effectively. Many irregular or alternating patterns, or even anomalies in Modern English are the results of historical changes. In this paper, I would like to focus on some of the irregular or alternating patterns found in different components of the grammar of English and to show how they can be accounted for historically. Through this study, I would like to show that the irregular patterns and anomalies in English were once regular and systematic, they have deviated from the regular patterns of the grammar as time has gone by, and they have survived in Modern English as irregular and alternating patterns. Many of the irregular or alternating patterns can be traced back by phonological, morphological and/or semantic changes in the history of English. Finally, by looking at language history, we can hold a more tolerant view on many anomalies present in English.

I. INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons why foreigners have difficulties in learning English. In addition to the difference between English and the learner's grammar, we can find a great number of irregularities or anomalies in English. Even after we have learned new regular patterns of English, we encounter a lot of irregular patterns or anomalies which can be another obstacle to learning English. However, a close look at many of the irregularities or anomalies in English shows that they are the results of the historical changes. The English language of today reflects many centuries of development. Some characteristics of earlier periods disappeared, while others have survived in Modern English. In the following, we will see that the historical residues were not irregular or exceptional from the beginning, but that they were once regular and systematic. Accordingly, understanding reasons for the irregularities will help us not only to have a good command of English, but also to teach English more effectively.

The purpose of this paper is not to present arguments or to analyze the data. Instead, I would like to introduce some cases of the irregular or alternating patterns and anomalies which are found in various components in the grammar: phonology, morphology, and loanwords. I would like to show how they can be historically accounted for in order to enhance pedagogical effects. The data in this paper are mainly from Millward (1989) and Pyles & Algeo (1992).

II. PHONOLOGICAL ALTERNATIONS

Many of the morphologically related words in English show the phonological alternations which are either vowel alternations or consonant

alternations. First, let us consider vowel alternations.

(1) Alternation of Vowel Length

- a. diner-dinner, biter-bitter
- b. i) five-fifty (OE *fitig*, ME *fifty*), fifteen (OE *fiftyne*, ME *fiftene*)
 - ii) hide-hid (OE *hydde*, ME *hidde*), keep-kept (OE *cēpte*, ME *kepte*)
sleep-slept (OE *slēpte*, ME *slepte*)
 - iii) wise-wisdom (OE *wis+dōm*, ME *wisdom*),
Christ-Christmas (ME *Christ*, *Christesmess*),
break-breakfast (ME *brēke*, *brekefast*)

The examples in (1) show alternating vowel length. The first member in the pairs has a long vowel while the second member has a short vowel. We can roughly generalize the words in (1a): The vowels before double consonants are short whereas the vowels before a single consonant are long. Double consonants, namely geminates, indicated the length of a consonant in Old English (OE) and were pronounced long. In Middle English (ME) period, they no longer represented the length of a consonant. Instead, they began to indicate that a preceding vowel was short. In other words, the double consonants in ME played a role of spelling convention. *Dinner* and *bitter* have retained this convention to the present day, contrasting with *diner* and *biter*, respectively.

Then, what brings about the alternation of vowel length in (1b)? The long and short vowel alternation goes back to the ME period. In ME, originally long vowels in syllables followed by consonant sequences were shortened. The consonant sequences were the result of adding inflectional or morphological endings or were the result of compounding. The effects of this shortening can be seen in the Modern English pairs as in (1b).

We can find another vowel alternation in etymologically related words. The pairs in (2) alternate between front and back vowels.

(2) Vowel Alternation: [front] vs. [back]

- a. full-fill, blood-bleed, food-feed, strong-strength

Pre-OE: ful+jan > fillan or fyllan 'to fill', blōd+jan > blēdan
'to bleed', fōd+jan > fēdan 'to feed', *strang+iðu >
strengǣu 'strength'¹⁾

- b. goose-geese, mouse-mice, foot-feet, tooth-teeth

Pre-OE: *gōs+iz > gēs 'geese', *mūs+iz > mīs, or mys 'mouse'
*fōt+iz > fet 'feet', *tōð+iz > tēð 'teeth'

The alternation in (2) goes back to the OE period. In this period, a phonological process, *i*-mutation in which *i* or *j* triggers the fronting of back vowels, and the raising of front vowels, was in operation. The verbs in the pairs in (2a) were derived from the first member of the pairs by adding a verb formative *-jan* which constituted class I of weak verbs in OE. The *j* triggered mutation and then was deleted.²⁾ The noun formative ending *-iðu* was added to the adjective *strang* 'strong' and it fronted the root vowel into *-e*.

The alternation between front and back vowels is also found in the pairs of singular and plural nouns as in (2b). The nouns in (2b) belonged to the same class of nouns in OE. In Pre-OE, the nominative and accusative plural forms in this class had *i* in their ending as in **gōs+iz*. The *i* triggered fronting of the root vowel and then lost in OE as in *gēs*.

Now, let us take a look at examples of consonant alternation.

(3) Alternation of Consonantal [voice]

- a. knife (OE cnif)-knives (OE cnifas), staff (OE stāf)-staves
(OE stafas) path (OE pæð)-paths (OE pæðas)
- b. house (OE hūs)-houses (OE hūsas) (noun), cf. house[z] (OE hūsan) (verb)

1) The star here represents the form following the star is an attested form.

2) Depending on the analysis and/or the syllable composition of the preceding root, the absence of *j* is explained as deletion or gemination. However, I am not going to discuss this further since it is beyond this paper.

In the examples in (3), the fricatives alternate between voiced and voiceless. At a glance, we can find a pattern in the pairs *knife-knives*, *house-houses* and *staff-staves*: When the fricatives are word-final, they are voiceless. On the other hand, they are voiced when they are in intervocalic position. In OE, the fricatives [v], [z], and [ð] were not phonemes. Rather, they were the allophones of their voiceless counterparts, [f], [s] and [θ]. The voiced fricatives occurred only between voiced sounds. The voiceless-voiced alternation is still reflected in the pronunciation of these words. Only looking at the forms of Modern English, we might wonder why the plural form of *path* is pronounced as [pæðz], not as [pæəs]. The fricative of the plural form of *path*, *paths*, does not seem to be in the voiced environment. However, its OE form, *pæðas* tells us why it is pronounced as [pæðz]. Like the other words in (3a), the plural form of *path* in OE was *pæðas* which had a fricative in the voiced environment and was pronounced as [pæðez]. Although the voiced environment was obliterated due to the loss of the vowel [ə] between the two fricatives, its original pronunciation has remained in Modern English.

The pronunciation of the verbal form of *house* is accounted for in the same way. Although *house* as a noun and *house* as a verb are spelled identically, the different pronunciations of the noun and verb are historically accounted for. The OE form of *house* as a verb was *hūsian* 'to house'. In OE, the *s* was pronounced as [z] because it was in the intervocalic position. After the loss of the final *n* and then the preceding vowels, the *s* stood in final position. Nevertheless, it retained its [z] pronunciation as contrasted with the singular noun *house* with a final voiceless -s.

III. MORPHOLOGICAL IRREGULARITIES

Many phonological alternations in Modern English are also examples of

historical residue. In this section, we are going to look at the modern survivals of case and number as well as the meaning of words in the component of morphology.

1. Irregular Nouns

In addition to the regular plural ending *-s*, Modern English has irregular plural forms as in (4).

- (4) a. ox-oxen, child-children
 b. goose-geese, tooth-teeth, mouse-mice, man-men

Why do we say *oxen* rather than *oxes* for the plural of *ox*? The history of English will give us an account. In OE, there was no specific device denoting only plurality. Depending on the case, plural forms had different endings. In addition, OE had several noun classes. The *-s* ending which denotes general plurality in Modern English was one of three endings of strong masculine nouns. The irregular plural nouns as in (4) were once major regular patterns which belonged to different classes. The plural ending *-n* rivaled *-s* as a typical plural ending in OE and ME. Due to the loss of word final *n* and the unstressed vowel [ə], almost all the words lost *n*-plural. This historical change caused the distinctions among the several noun classes to disappear. The OE masculine nominative/accusative *a*-stem plural *-as* ([əs]) has been generalized to all regular plurals in Modern English. *Children* has its *-n* by analogy. The only surviving word of OE original *n*-class is *ox-oxen*. *Brethren* and *kine* are post-OE developments. The OE class of mutated plurals was well preserved in ME. The surviving forms are given in (4b).

2. Historical Residues of Case

1) Uninflected Genitive

Some other OE inflectional endings have survived into Modern English, mostly in petrified forms. For example, we find such phrases as *sixty-mile drive*, and *six-foot man*, instead of *sixty-miles drive and six-feet man* although *feet* may more often occur in the latter construction. *Mile* and *foot* in such expressions are historically genitive plurals derived from the OE forms *mīla* and *fōta*, rather than the irregularities they now appear to be. In all declensions of OE, the genitive plural forms ended in *-a*. This ending survived as [ə] (written *-e*) in ME in the genitive of measure construction and its effect has continued in Modern English with the loss of [ə]. This is summarized in (5)

- (5) sixty-mile drive, six-foot man
 OE *mīla*, gen.pl. of *mīl* > ME *mīl(e)* > EModE *mile*
 OE *fōta*, gen.pl. of *fōt* > ME *fōt(e)* > EModE *foot*
 : OE gen.pl. ending [a] > ME [ə] > EModE ∅

In addition to OE genitive plurals, there are few reflexes of OE feminine genitives *-e*, including *Lady Day*, *Lady Chapel*, *ladybird* for *Our Lady's Day*, *Our Lady's Chapel*, *Our Lady's bird*. The OE feminine *ō*-stem genitive singular ending *-e* was completely lost in pronunciation by the end of the 14th century along with all the other final ending *-e*. However, its trace has survived in these phrases.

- (6) *Lady Day*, *Lady Chapel*, *ladybird*, *ladyfinger*, *lady slipper*
 OE *hlæfdige* gen.sg. of *hlæfdige* > ME *lade* > EModE *lady*
 : OE gen.sg. ending [e] > ME [ə] > EModE ∅

The traces of OE uninflected genitive remain for some kinship terms such as *mother tongue* and *fatherland*, too. In OE, the kinship terms such

as *fæder* 'father', *mōdor* 'mother', *sweoster* 'sister', and *brōðor* 'brother' belonged to a minor class of nouns, *r*-stem. The ending denoting genitive singular in this class were zero. In other words, the nominative and genitive forms were the same as *fæder*³⁾ and *mōdor*. As in the formerly feminine nouns, their traces are restricted to fixed expressions in which the genitive is not clearly perceived.

2) Adverbial Genitive

Now, let us consider other remnants of historical changes which bring about anomalies in Modern English.

(7) a. He worked nights.

e.g. OE *He hwearf dages ond nihtes*. 'He wandered (by) day and (by) night.

b. homewards (OE *hāmweards*) towards (OE *tōweards*)

What does the *-s* ending of *nights* in (7a) represent? And how can the word be used adverbially? These two questions are interrelated with each other and can be answered from a historical point of view. The *-s* looks like a plural ending in the sense of "He worked during several nights". It is right in one sense, although historically it is not. The *-s* is from the OE genitive singular ending *-es*. In OE, the genitive singular ending *-es* expressed not only possession, but it was also used adverbially. This is shown in the OE sentence given in (7a). In the sentence, *dages* and *nihtes* have the genitive singular ending *-es* which was used adverbially. This account is supported by the fact that the Modern English sentence "He worked nights" is sometimes understood analytically as "He worked of a night." The *-s* of *homewards* and *towards* is also from the genitive singular ending *-es* which was used adverbially.

3) In addition to zero ending, *fæder* had *es*-ending to indicate genitive singular.

IV. VOCABULARY

This section investigates other module of grammar, vocabulary. Many words of the earlier stages of English are identical or at least highly similar in both form and meaning to the corresponding Modern English. Others have changed drastically in meaning and/or in shape. Or others are totally obsolete. I would like to focus on some OE words whose meanings have been maintained in Modern English.

1. Modern Survivals of Old Meanings

First, let us consider a sentence such as "He withstood her attack." In the sentence the word *withstand* is not related to the preposition *with* 'together'. *He* and *she* in the sentence were not in good relationship. Why doesn't *withstand* carry the meaning of 'together' in spite of the presence of *with*? The reason for this dates back to the original sense of *with* in OE period which meant 'against' or 'in opposition to.' I put down an example of OE in (8) in which a slash indicates a different line. In the second line of the verse, *wiþ feondum* meant 'against the enemies', not 'together with the enemies'. The older meaning, 'against', survives in *withstand* which now means 'to resist' or 'to stand against'.

(8) *withstand, withhold* : OE *wið* 'in opposition to, against'

e.g. . . . and *pæt weorod healdan/ fæste wiþ feondum*. 'The troop hold securely against the enemies.' (The Battle of Maldon ll. 102-103)

The surviving meanings often appear only in disguised forms or in set expressions.

(9) a. *bridegroom*: OE *guma* 'man'

e.g. *þonne onwæcneð eftwincleās guma*, 'Then the friendless

man awakes again,' (The Wanderer, l. 45)

b. Time and *tide* wait for no man: OE *tīd* 'time'

e.g. . . . Wæs sēo tīd cumen/ þæt þær fāge menn feallen
scoldon. 'The time was come when the doomed men were
to perish there.' (The Battle of Maldon ll. 104-105)

c. *lich*-house, *lich* gate: OE *lic* 'body' (usually living body)

e.g. . . . lēofes mannes *lic*_eall forswearg. '(He) completely
swallowed up the dear man's body.' (Beowulf, l. 2080)

OE *guma* which meant 'man' survives in the compound *bridegroom*, literally meaning 'bride's man'. In this compound, *guma* has been remodeled under the influence of the unrelated word 'groom' which refers to a person who is in charge of feeding, cleaning and taking care of horses. *Tide*, when used in the proverb (9b), preserves an echo of its earlier sense, i.e. *time* not *tide*. Although we understand *tide* in this proverb as describing the rise and fall of the sea, which more humans cannot alter, *time* and *tide* were just synonyms in OE. Let us look at one more example, *lic*. The word, which meant 'body' usually 'living body', continues feebly in compounds like *lich-house* meaning mortuary, and *lich-gate*, roofed gate of a graveyard, where a corpse waits burial.

2. Loanwords

In the previous subsection, we have witnessed how the historical knowledge of English helps us understand the meaning of certain expressions. The historical knowledge of English also contributes to the understanding of loanwords. One of the aspects that make English lexicon immense may be loanwords from many other languages. By looking at the history of English, we can learn about the various aspects of loanwords. First, we can estimate the date of borrowing. Let us consider the examples in (10).

- (10) a. dish-disk Latin *discus*
 cf. shrine OE *scrine* Latin *scrinium*
 school OE *scōl* Latin *schola*
 b. scathe, scorch, score, scrape, scrub, skill, skirt, sky

Dish and *disk* have a common etymon: Both are from Latin word *discus*. Why have they developed into a different form? This is because they were borrowed at different time. Early OE [sk] written <sc>⁴⁾ changed into [ʃ]. *Disk* was borrowed when this sound change was no longer operative. Thus OE *scōl* 'school' is obviously a later borrowing than *scrin* 'shrine', which must have been adopted before the OE change of [sk] to [ʃ]. Had the word been borrowed earlier, we would have pronounced it as [ʃul] and spelled it as <shool>. The words in (10b) are from Scandinavian. The pronunciation of their initial consonant sequence indicates they entered English after the native OE sound change [sk] to [ʃ] had not operated.

In the same way, many French words had been borrowed at various periods in the history of English.

- (11) a. chief, chamber, champion, chance, change, chant, charge, check,
 choice <ch>[tʃ]
 b. chef, charnois, chauffeur, machine, chic, chiffon <ch> [ʃ]

If the spelling *ch* of French loans is pronounced as [tʃ] as in (11a), the words are early borrowings. On the other hand, if the same spelling is pronounced as [ʃ] given in (11b), the word with *ch* are later borrowings. So, in the words of French origin spelled with <ch>, the pronunciation is usually an indicative of the time of adoption: Thus, *chief*, *chamber*, *champion* and *change* were borrowed in OE or ME times, whereas *chef*,

4) In this paper, an angled bracket is used to represent spelling, while a square bracket pronunciation.

chamois, *chauffeur* and *chic* have been taken over in Modern English.

In addition to the pronunciation, the position of the stress is frequently evidence of the period of borrowing. Let us look at the examples in (12).

- (12) a. *cárriage*, *válor*, *véstige*, *cóurage*, *lánguage*, *sávage*, *village*
 b. *garáge*, *velóur*, *prestíge*

The early borrowings in (12a) have their primary stress in the first syllable according to the native English stress pattern. On the other hand, later borrowings in (12b) retain the original stress of the source form and have the primary stress in the second syllable.

The examples in (10) to (12) have shown that the different pronunciation or different position of stress provides a clue to the date of borrowing. The pronunciation of the loanwords sometimes lets us know what is the original dialect.

- (13) a. (i) *catch*, *cant*, *case*, *market*, *castle*, *canal*, *cattle*, *catch*, *car*
 <c, k> [k]
 (ii) *wage*, *warranty*, *wile*, *war*, *wage* [w]
 b. (i) *chase*, *chant*, *enchase*, *merchant*, *chateau*, *channel*, *chattels*,
 chase, *chariot* <ch> [tʃ]
 (ii) *gage*, *guarantee*, *guile*, *garrison*, *gauge* ([gw] >) [g]

French words had been loaned from two dialects of French, the Anglo-Norman French and the Central French. The former refers to a dialect of Norman French that developed in England whereas the latter was a dialect of Paris which became standard French later. We can frequently tell by the form of a word whether it is of Norman or of Central French. For example, Latin <c> which was pronounced as [k] before a vowel *a* developed into <ch> [tʃ] in the Central French, but remained in the Norman dialect. Accordingly, words in (13ai) are from the Anglo-Norman French, while those in (13bi) are from the Central French.

Similarly Old French <w> was retained in Anglo-Norman French, but elsewhere became [gw] and then [g]. This development is shown in (13aii) and (13bii), respectively.

V. CONCLUSION

This is a small study which aims to introduce some cases of the irregular or alternating patterns found in English and to show that they can be historically accounted for. Through the examples treated in this study, we have seen that the irregular or alternating patterns and anomalies in English were once regular, systematic patterns. As time has gone by, they have deviated from the regular patterns of the grammar little by little. However, they managed to survive in Modern English. Such historical knowledge on the irregularities in English will enhance not only our understanding of English but also pedagogical effects. Furthermore, the knowledge of past stages of English can liberate us from certain prejudices regarding linguistic norms in language use. Although I have presented a few examples in this paper, these examples suggest that language changes and forms satisfying grammatical rules today will become wrong tomorrow, and vice versa. I hope looking at language history helps us have a more tolerant view on the irregularities in English and makes our criticism become more reasonable. I would like to finish this paper by citing what Bloomfield and Newmark said:

"The man who does not know some history is a man who loses one of the major dimensions of his humanity. History has made man what he is today, and to understand him one must know something of his past."

(Bloomfield & Newmark 1963, p.19)

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