

OLD ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Preliminary Remarks

The full extent of the OE vocabulary is not known to present-day scholars. There is no doubt that many words have not been recorded in the extant texts at all. The evidence of the records has been supplemented from other sources: from the study of the words of closely related OG languages and from later, more extensive ME texts.

Modern estimates of the total vocabulary of OE range from about thirty thousand words to almost one hundred thousand, — the latter figure being probably too high and unrealistic. Even the lowest estimates show that OE had already developed about as many words as used by a present-day cultured English speaker. Despite the gaps in the accessible data, philological studies in the last centuries have given us a fairly complete outline of the OE vocabulary as regards its etymology, word structure, word-building and stylistic differentiation.

Etymological Survey of the Old English Vocabulary

The OE vocabulary was almost purely Germanic; except for a small number of borrowings, it consisted of native words inherited from PG or formed from native roots and affixes.

Native Words

Native OE words can be subdivided into a number of etymological layers coming from different historical periods. The three main layers in the native OE words are: a) common IE words, 2) common Germanic words, 3) specifically OE words.

Words belonging to the **common IE layer** constitute the oldest part of the OE vocabulary. They go back to the days of the IE parent-language before the appearance of the Germanic group. This layer embraced the following thematic groups:

1. The living world: Gods, people, animals;
2. Indo-European conceptions of wild animals and their names;
3. Animals of the Middle World;
4. Animals of the Upper World;
5. Animals of the Lower World;
6. Animals ritually close to man;
7. Animals ritually distant from humans;
8. Indo-European plant names;
9. Indo-European terms for heavenly bodies;
10. Geographical environment and climate;
11. Kinship terms;

12. Economic activity, material culture, crafts, transportation;
 13. Social organization,
 And so on.

Each thematic group comprises number of words:

e.g. **kinship terms** – mother, father, sister, brother, etc;

animals of the Middle World - wolf, bear, leopard and panther, lion, wild boar, deer, antelope, wild bull, etc;

animals of the Lower World – serpent, snake, worm, mouse, turtle, etc;

animals of the Upper World – bird and eagle, swan, goose, crane, woodpecker, etc;

animals ritually close to man – horse, donkey, bull, cow, cattle, sheep, lamb, goat, and so on.

This layer also includes personal and demonstrative pronouns and most numerals.

Let's look at some examples:

Mother

Sanskrit **mātār**; *Old Persian* **mātar**; *Old Irish* **màthir**; *OHG* **muoter**; *OE* **mōdor**; *Latvian* **māte**; *Prussian* **mūti, mothe**; *Old Slavic* **mati**.

Father

Sanskrit **pītār**; *Avestan* **pitar**; *Greek* **patēr**; *Latin* **pater**; *Old Irish* **athir**; *Gt* **fadar**; *OE* **fæder**; *OHG* **fater**.

Brother

Sanskrit **bhrātar**; *Old Persian* **brātar**; *Latin* **frāter**; *Old Irish* **brath(a)ir**; *Gt* **brōþar**; *ON* **broðir**; *OHG* **bruoder**; *OE* **brōþor**; *Prussian* **brāti**; *Lithuanian* **broterėlis**; *Old Slavic* **brat(r)ŭ**.

Sister

Sanskrit **svàsar**; *Latin* **soror**; *Old Irish* **siur**; *Gt* **swistar**; *ON* **syster**; *OE* **sweostor**; *OHG* **swester**; *Prussian* **swesto**; *Old Slavic* **sestra**.

Widow

Sanskrit **vidhāvā**; *Latin* **uidua** (a divorced or unmarried woman); *Gt* **widuwō**; *OE* **widuwe**; *OHG* **wituwa**; *Prussian* **widdewu**; *Old Slavic* **vŭdova** „ВДОВА”.

The second important layer, **Common Germanic Vocabulary** includes words which are shared by most Germanic languages, but do not occur outside the group. Being specifically Germanic these words **constitute an important distinctive feature of the Germanic languages at the lexical level**. This layer is smaller than Common Indo-European words, roughly 1 : 2. Common Germanic words originated in the Proto Germanic language, when the Germanic tribes lived close together. These words are

connected with nature, the sea and everyday life of Teutons.

Some of the words did not occur in all the Germanic languages, some words are attested only in West and North Germanic languages, some in North and East Germanic languages.

Let's look at some examples:

OE **bidden** (to ask, implore); OHG **bitten**; ON **biðja**; Gt **bidjan**.

OE **ʒe-byrd** (birth); OHG **Geburt**; ON **byrð, byrðr**; Gt **gabaurþs**.

OE **cicen** (chicken); Low German **küken (küchlein)**; ON **kiuklingr**.

OE **fyllan** (to fill); OHG **füllen**; ON **fylla**; Gt **fulljan**.

OE **findan** (to find); OHG **finten**; ON **finna**; Gt **finþan**.

OE **flæsk** (flesh); OHG **Flisch**; ON **flesk** (pork).

The third etymological layer of native words can be defined as **specifically Old English**, these are words which do not occur in other Germanic or non-Germanic languages. These words are few, e.g.: OE *clipian* 'call', OE *brid* (NE *bird*) and several others. However, they are far more numerous if we include in this layer OE compounds and derived words formed from Germanic roots. For instance, OE *wifman* or *wimman* (NE *woman*) consists of two roots which occurred as separate words in other OG languages, but formed a compound only in OE (cf. OHG *wib*, O Icel *vif*, NE *wife*; OE *man*, Gt *mann(a)*, NE *man*). Other well-known examples are – OE *hlāford*, originally made of *hlāf* (NE *loaf*) and *weard* 'keeper' (cf. Gt *wards*). This compound word was simplified and was ultimately shortened to NE *lord*.

Foreign Elements in the Old English Vocabulary

Borrowed words constituted only a small portion of the OE vocabulary; there were about six hundred borrowed words. The borrowings reflect the contacts of English with other tongues due to political, economic, social and cultural events in the early periods of British history. OE borrowings come from two sources: Celtic and Latin.

Borrowings from Celtic

There are very few Celtic loan-words in the OE vocabulary, due to little intermixture between the Germanic settlers and the Celtic tribes. Borrowings from Celtic are found mostly in place-names. The OE kingdoms *Kent*, *Deira* and *Bernicia* derive their names from the names of Celtic tribes. The name of *York* and perhaps *London* come from Celtic sources. Various Celtic designations of 'river' and 'water' were understood by the Germanic invaders as proper names: *Ouse*, *Avon*, *Evan* go back to Celtic *amhuin* 'river', *uisge* 'water'; *Thames*, *Stour*, *Dover* also come from Celtic.

Many place-names are hybrids; the Celtic component is combined with a Latin or Germanic component:

Celtic plus Latin

Man-chester

Win-chester

Celtic plus Germanic

York-shire

Devon-shire

Latin Influence on the Old English Vocabulary

The role of the Latin language in Old Britain was determined by such historical events as the Roman occupation of Britain, the influence of the Roman civilization and the introduction of Christianity. The Latin language influenced different aspects of English: the OE alphabet and literature.

Latin words entered the English language at different stages of OE history. Chronologically they can be divided into several layers.

The earliest layer comprises words which the West Germanic tribes brought from the continent when they came to settle in Britain. Contact with the Roman civilization began a long time before the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain.

Borrowing of Latin words continued in Britain after the invasion, since Britain had been under Roman occupation for almost 400 years.

Early OE borrowings from Latin indicate the new things and concepts which the Teutons had learnt from the Romans; they pertain to war, trade, agriculture, building and home life, units of measurement, words related to buildings and domestic life, military affairs, medicine, food *etc.*

A very important period of Latin influence on the OE vocabulary began with the introduction of Christianity in the late 6th c. and lasted to the end of OE.

Numerous Latin words which found their way into the English language during these five hundred years clearly fall into two main groups: (1) words pertaining to religion, (2) words connected with learning. The total number of Latin loan-words in OE exceeds five hundred.

The Latin impact on the OE vocabulary was not restricted to borrowing of words. There were also other aspects of influence. The most important of them is the appearance of the so-called 'translation- loans' – literal translations of Latin words, for example – names of the days of the week:

OE *Mōnan-dæȝ* (*Monday*) 'day of the moon', L *Lunae dies*;

Tiwes-dæȝ (*Tuesday*) 'day of Tiw' L *Martis dies* (Tiw – a Teutonic God corresponding to Roman Mars).

The procedure was to substitute the name of the corresponding Germanic god for the god of the Romans.

Etymological Layers of the Old English Vocabulary

Native Words				Borrowings
Common IE	Common Germanic	West Germanic	Specifically OE	Latin
				Celtic

WORD-FORMATION IN OLD ENGLISH

Word Structure

According to their morphological structure, OE words fell into three main types:

a) **simple words** ('root-words') or words with a simple stem, without derivational affixes, e.g. *land*, *sinʒan*, *ʒōd* (NE *land*, *sing*, *good*).

b) **derived words** consisting of one root-morpheme and one or more affixes, e.g. *be-ʒinnan*, *wearþ-ung*, *un-scyld-iʒ*, *ʒe-met-inʒ* (NE *begin*, *worthiness*, *innocent*, *meeting*).

c) **compound words**, whose stems were made up of more than one root-morpheme, e.g. *mann-cynn*, *norþe-weard*, *fēower-tiene*, (NE *mankind*, *northward*, *fourteen*).

Ways of Word-Formation

OE employed two ways of word-formation: derivation and word- composition.

Word-Derivation

Derived words in OE were built with the help of affixes: prefixes and suffixes; other means of derivation were sound interchanges and word stress. Shifting of word stress helped to differentiate between some parts of speech.

The verb had unaccented prefixes while the corresponding nouns had stressed prefixes, so that the position of stress served as an additional distinctive feature between them, e.g. *ond-'swarian* v – *'ond- swaru* n

Prefixation

Prefixation was a productive way of building new words in OE. Prefixes were most widely used with verbs. The most frequent, and probably the most productive, OE prefixes were: *a-*, *be-*, *for-*, *fore-*, *ʒe-*, *ofer-*.

The prefix modified the lexical meaning of the word.

A distinct semantic group was constituted by negative prefixes *un-*, *mis-* e.g. *wisdōm* – *unwisdōm* (NE *wisdom*, *folly*); *lician* – *mislician* (NE *like*, *displease*)

Some prefixes also had a grammatical meaning e.g.: verb prefix *ʒe-*, was often used as a marker of the Past Participle – *sittan* – *ʒe-sett*, *stelan* – *ʒe-stolen* (NE *sit*, *steal*).

Suffixation

Suffixation was by far the most productive means of word derivation in OE. Suffixes not only modified the lexical meaning of the word but could refer it to another part of speech. Suffixes were mostly applied in forming nouns and adjectives, seldom – in forming verbs.

In OE there were two large groups of suffixes: suffixes of nouns and suffixes of adjectives. Noun suffixes are divided into suffixes of 'agent nouns' and those of abstract nouns.

Among the suffixes of 'agent nouns' mention should be made of *-ere*, e.g. *scōlere*, *sutere* (NE *scholar*, *shoemaker*). OE agent nouns in *-ere* were derived from nouns and verbs: *bōcere*, *fiscere*, *leornere*, *bæcere*, etc. (NE *scribe*, *fisher*, *learner*, *baker*).

Among suffixes of abstract nouns we should mention *-nes*, *-nis*: *beorhtnes* (NE *brightness*), *blindnis* (NE *blindness*), *unrihtwisnes* (NE *injustice*). Another productive suffix, *-unƷ*, *-inƷ*, was used to build abstract nouns from verbs e.g. *bodian* – *bodunƷ* (NE *preach*, *preaching*), *earnian* – *earnunƷ* (NE *earn*, *earning*), *wilnian* – *wilnunƷ* (NE *desire* v, n).

Some suffixes were formed from root-morphemes. The second components of compound words turned into suffixes. To this group belong OE *-dōm*, *-hūd*, *-lāc*, *-scipe*. As compared with the same morphemes used as roots, the suffixes had a different – usually a more general – meaning. Thus, OE *dōm* as a noun meant 'judgement, choice', 'honour', while as a second affixal component it lost this lexical meaning to a varying extent, e.g.: *freodōm* 'free choice', 'freedom' (NE *freedom*), *wisdōm* 'wise judgement' (NE *wisdom*), *cristendōm* 'Christianity', *lēcedom* 'medicine'. Likewise OE *hād* 'title' yielded words like *cildhād* (NE *childhood*), the noun *lāc* 'gift' became a suffix in OE *wedlāc* (NE *wedlock*).

The most productive adjective-forming suffixes were *-iƷ*, and *-isc*: *mōdiƷ* 'proud' (from *mōd*, NE *mood*), *hāliƷ* (NE *holy*), *bysiƷ* (NE *busy*), *mennisc* 'human', *Englisc*, *Denisc* (NE *English*, *Danish*). The productive adjective suffix *-lic* originated from the noun *lic* 'body', but had evidently lost all semantic ties with the latter. It could derive adjectives from nouns and other adjectives: *sceandlic* 'disgraceful' (from *sceand* 'disgrace'), *woruldlic* 'worldly' (from *woruld*, NE *world*), *scearplic* 'sharp' (from the adjective *scearp*), *deadlic* (NE *deadly*), *frēondlic* (NE *friendly*), etc.

By adding another suffix *-e* the adjective was turned into an adverb: *freondlic* – *freondlice* 'friendly, in a friendly manner', *wundorlic* 'wonderful' – *wundorlice* 'wondrously'.

Word-Composition

Word composition was a highly productive way of developing the vocabulary in OE. Word-composition in OE was more productive in nominal parts of speech than in verbs.

Compound nouns contained various first components – stems of nouns, adjectives and verbs; their second components were nouns.

The pattern 'noun plus noun' was probably the most productive type of all: OE *mann-cynn* (NE *mankind*), *bōc-craeft* 'literature' (lit. 'book craft').

Compound nouns with adjective-stems as the first components were less productive, e.g. *wid-sæ* 'ocean' (lit. 'wide sea').

Compound nouns with verb and adverb-stems were rare: *bæc-hūs* 'baking house'.

Stylistic Stratification of the Old English Vocabulary

OE texts fall into a number of genres: poetic, religious, legal, and more or less neutral. Philologists subdivide OE words into three stylistically distinct groups: neutral words, learned words and poetic words.

1. **Neutral words** were most frequent. Most words of this group are of native origin.
2. **Learned words** are found in texts of religious, legal, philosophical or scientific character. Among learned words there were many borrowings from Latin. In later periods of history many OE learned words went out of use being replaced by new borrowings and native formations.
3. **Poetic words** in OE are of special interest. An important characteristic of OE poetry is its wealth of synonyms. In *BEOWULF*, for instance, there are thirty-seven words for the concept 'warrior', twelve for 'battle', seventeen for 'sea'. There are many metaphoric compounds called '**kennings**'. **Kennings** constitute a unique feature of OE poetry. For instance: *sweord-freca* 'sword-hero' denoted a warrior, *brēost-hord* 'treasure of the breast' denoted 'heart', 'thought'. Such compounds were used as stylistic devices – for ornament and expressive effect.