

# Understanding modern English by studying its history (2022年度文学部英文学科公開講義)

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# Understanding modern English by studying its history

Phillip Backley

## 1 Introduction

There is no doubt that learning a foreign language is difficult. Whether it is English, Korean, German, or some other language, it can take years to master even the basics of grammar, pronunciation, and the rest. But why is learning a second language, or L2, so challenging? Some students say, ‘there are too many words to learn’. And certainly, this is true for English: the vocabulary of English is much bigger than it needs to be. Other students complain, ‘there are too many rules to remember’. This is also a good point, although it’s probably not the main reason why learning an L2 is difficult. After all, every language has rules — by nature, languages are rule-based systems. In fact, if a language didn’t have rules then it would be impossible to learn.

Let’s consider these two points in relation to learning English. First, the question of rules — not only grammar rules but also rules of spelling and pronunciation. I will show that the rules themselves are not really the problem. Rather, the problem for L2 learners is that languages often break their own rules. That is, we find exceptions to the rules. We call these exceptions ‘irregularities’ because they do not follow regular patterns. Second, there is the question of vocabulary, or more precisely, the sheer size of the vocabulary of English. To be competent users of English, L2 learners must acquire a huge number of words, many of which have synonyms or near-synonyms.

These two characteristics of modern English — rule exceptions and an unnecessarily large vocabulary — make life difficult for L2 learners. And unfortunately, we cannot make these difficulties disappear; we have to accept that

this is just how English is. We can, however, try to understand *why* English is this way. Below I describe how certain changes and events in the history of English have shaped the language that we now speak in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, including its irregularities and its large vocabulary. After all, PDE (Present-Day English, i.e. 21<sup>st</sup> century English) is the outcome of the many changes to its grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary that have taken place throughout its long history.

## 2 Rules and irregularities

Irregularities are an inconvenience for L2 English students because each exception must be learnt separately. For example, you need to remember to say *I drank* and not *I \*drinked*. (Note: words marked with \* are ungrammatical.) Also, you have to say *two men*, *two feet* rather than *two \*mans*, *two \*foots*; and there are many more examples to add to this list. So, dealing with irregularities can be problematic. It is also unavoidable, because irregularities are part of the language, so we cannot ignore them or eliminate them. However, we can try to understand why they are there. Some irregularities can be explained by looking at the history of English. That is, they can be traced back to earlier periods of the language when words like *drank*, *men* and *feet* were completely regular — they followed the language rules of the time. The historical background to some modern English irregularities is described in section 3.

Before looking at words which break the language rules, let's be clear about the concepts of 'rule' and 'irregularity'. Here are some examples of basic rules in PDE. Put simply, a rule is a pattern which applies automatically to any relevant word.

### (1) Grammar rule (present tense -s)

pattern:

*you give, he gives*

*I mean, it means*

*we wish, she wishes*

irregular forms:

*I can, he can (he \*cans)*

*we have, she has (she \*haves)*

*I must, he must (he \*musts)*

(2) Vocabulary rule (negative *un-*)

pattern:	irregular forms:
<i>lucky, <u>un</u>lucky</i>	<i>active, inactive (*inactive)</i>
<i>able, <u>un</u>able</i>	<i>honest, dishonest (*unhonest)</i>
<i>grateful, <u>un</u>grateful</i>	<i>moral, amoral (*unmoral)</i>

(3) Pronunciation/spelling rule (*sh* ↔ /ʃ/)

pattern:	irregular forms:
<i><u>sh</u>oes /ʃu:z/</i>	<i>ma<u>ch</u>ine (*<u>ma</u>shine)</i>
<i>w<u>sh</u> /wɪʃ/</i>	<i>suga<u>r</u> (*<u>sh</u>ugar)</i>
<i>f<u>ash</u>ion /'fæʃən/</i>	<i>so<u>ci</u>al (*<u>so</u>shal)</i>

Irregularities such as *he must* (\**he musts*), *amoral* (\**unmoral*) and *machine* (\**maschine*) are troublesome for L2 learners because they are unpredictable, i.e. you cannot predict which words follow the rule and which words are irregular. For this reason, each irregularity needs to be learnt individually. Yet at the same time, irregularities are completely normal. That is, every language has irregularities or 'rule-breakers' (though as a native speaker, you are probably not aware of the irregularities in your own language).

The first question to ask is why irregularities should occur at all. After all, they require extra effort when learning the language, yet they bring no benefits. To answer this question, imagine that you are trying to create a new language from scratch (say, for a character in a science-fiction novel that you are writing). You would make sure that your new language had no irregularities — every word would follow the rules of your invented language. However, real languages are different: unlike a sci-fi language, natural languages have not been created, planned or designed. Instead, they evolve naturally by themselves. Over time, each generation of native speakers modifies their language by introducing small changes in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and spelling. Some of these modifications apply to the whole language, so they result in new pattern/rules. On the other hand, other modifications can affect some words but not all, in which case irregularities can emerge.

### 3 Irregularities and language history

What the previous paragraph tells us is that modern languages such as English and Japanese are a direct result of their own historical development. This means that some of the irregularities in these languages can be traced back to changes that took place in the past, often many centuries ago. In the case of English, linguistic changes were often caused by factors which were not really about language. For example, social factors (e.g. changes within English-speaking society) sometimes led to changes in the language. These social factors include human events such as wars and invasions.

The history of the English language begins in Britain, a place which was often targeted by invaders from Europe who wanted to control Britain's land and natural resources. When they arrived in Britain, the invaders brought their native language with them. This created a situation of language contact, in which the native speakers of one language (the home language) and the native speakers of another language (the invaders' language) live in the same society and must find a way of communicating with each other. Language contact can trigger linguistic changes in which the home language is influenced by the invading language, or could even be replaced by it. Below we will see how two invasions of Britain are partly responsible for the problems faced by L2 learners of English, as described in section 1: the Anglo-Saxon invasion (5<sup>th</sup> century) led to many grammar irregularities in modern English, while the Norman invasion (11<sup>th</sup> century) helped to enlarge the English vocabulary.

## 4 The Anglo-Saxon invasion

### 4.1 Background

Beginning in 449 AD, Britain was invaded by tribes from northern Europe who spoke an ancient language called Germanic (ゲルマン語). These 'Anglo-Saxon' invaders quickly took control of many areas of Britain, and in those areas the Britons — the original inhabitants of Britain, who spoke a different language called Celtic — soon adopted Germanic (the language of their invaders) as their new native language. This is the point where we begin using the

term ‘Old English’ (古英語) to refer to this new native language; the beginning of Old English marks the first time a Germanic language was spoken in Britain. (In Europe this language continued to be called Germanic.)

#### 4.2 PDE spelling and pronunciation

The pronunciation of Old English (OE) was quite different from that of PDE. How can we be sure about how OE was pronounced? Because OE pronunciation followed the OE spelling fairly closely. So, when you see the spelling of an OE word, you can guess how it was spoken in Old English times. Unfortunately, the same is not true in PDE. When you learn a new word in PDE, you need to memorize both its spelling *and* its pronunciation, because you can’t always predict one from the other. The examples in (3) have already shown how PDE spelling and pronunciation don’t always match.

But have you ever wondered why there is a mismatch? One reason is that English pronunciation has been changing constantly since the OE period (and is still changing, even now). But importantly, when a word’s pronunciation changes, its spelling often stays the same. Therefore, during the history of English the gap between pronunciation and spelling has been getting wider and wider. An example of this mismatch between sounds and spellings is the presence of ‘silent’ letters in PDE. As (4) shows, there are many words whose spelling contains letters that are not pronounced (silent letters underlined).

(4) spelling	British English pronunciation	
<u>k</u> now	/nəʊ/	(* /knəʊ/)
<u>w</u> rong	/rɒŋ/	(* /wrɒŋ/)
<u>c</u> limb	/klaɪm/	(* /klaɪmb/)
<u>w</u> hen	/wɛn/	(* /whɛn/)

When L2 learners see words such as these, they probably ask themselves the question, ‘Why does English spelling use letters which are not pronounced?’ And the simple answer is this: silent letters are there because many centuries ago those letters were pronounced. Since then, pronunciation has changed (e.g.

in the words in (4), some consonant sounds have disappeared) but spellings have mostly stayed the same. The reality is this: PDE speakers use 21<sup>st</sup> century pronunciations when they speak, but when they write they use spellings that, in some cases, date back to the time of Chaucer (14<sup>th</sup> century).

Why have sounds disappeared in some English words? One reason is that the rules for combining consonants have changed over time. In PDE we allow consonant combinations such as /pl/ (*please, reply*), /fr/ (*free, confront*) and /kj/ (*cute, accuse*). But in OE there were other combinations in addition to these, which have now become ungrammatical — they cannot be pronounced in PDE. The solution is to drop one of the two consonants and then pronounce the remaining one. As (5) shows, the dropped consonants appear in the spelling as silent letters.

(5)	OE		PDE	change		
	<i>cnih</i> t	/kn/	‘young man’	<i>kn</i> ight	/n/	/kn/ → /n/ (silent <i>k</i> )
	<i>writ</i> -	/wr/	‘to write’	<i>w</i> rite	/r/	/wr/ → /r/ (silent <i>w</i> )
	<i>climb</i> -	/mb/	‘to climb’	<i>climb</i>	/m/	/mb/ → /m/ (silent <i>b</i> )
	<i>gnag</i> -	/gn/	‘to gnaw’	<i>gnaw</i>	/n/	/gn/ → /n/ (silent <i>g</i> )

So, silent letters are a problem for L2 learners of English. However, the root of the problem lies not in PDE but in the history of English. Silent letters give us evidence about how the Anglo-Saxons pronounced English many centuries ago.

### 4.3 Irregular verbs in PDE

The Anglo-Saxons are also responsible for some aspects of PDE grammar which, like silent letters, create difficulties for L2 learners. One difficulty concerns the verb system of English, which appears to have many ‘irregular’ verbs. As mentioned in section 1, irregular forms don’t follow the same grammar patterns that control other (i.e. regular) verbs. Examples of regular and irregular verbs are given in (6) in (7). Notice how each group uses a different way of making the past tense.

(6) PDE regular verbs		(7) PDE irregular verbs	
Present	Past	Present	Past
<i>walk</i>	<i>walked</i>	<i>drink</i>	<i>drank</i>
<i>clean</i>	<i>cleaned</i>	<i>stand up</i>	<i>stood up</i>
<i>explain</i>	<i>explained</i>	<i>see</i>	<i>saw</i>
<i>believe</i>	<i>believed</i>	<i>get</i>	<i>got</i>
<i>hurry up</i>	<i>hurried up</i>	<i>think</i>	<i>thought</i>

The regular verbs in (6) make their past tense by adding the inflection *-ed*. This rule of adding *-ed* applies to thousands of regular verbs in English, including any new verbs which enter the language, e.g. *I texted him* ('I sent him a text (SNS) message'), *I googled it* ('I searched for it using Google'). Regular verbs are easy for L2 learners to use because there is nothing they need to memorize — creating a past tense form requires them only to add *-ed*.

Irregular verbs such as *drink*, *drank* are a different matter. In most cases, past tense forms have no inflection; instead, the present and past tense forms are distinguished by their different vowels (e.g. *dr*[ɪ]*nk*, *dr*[æ]*nk*). The problem for L2 learners is that the past tense vowel cannot be predicted from the vowel in the present tense. For instance, if the present tense has /i:/, there is no rule telling you which vowel to use in the past tense, e.g. *see*, *saw* has /ɔ:/, *feed*, *fed* has /ɛ/, *speak*, *spoke* has /əʊ/. For every irregular verb, therefore, learners must memorize two pronunciations, one for present tense and another for past tense. Again, learners should ask themselves, 'Why does English have irregular verbs?' After all, the system would be much simpler if all verbs followed the regular *-ed* pattern. As before, the answer points to the history of the language.

(8) OE weak verbs		(9) OE strong verbs	
Present	Past	Present	Past
<i>lufie</i>	<i>lufode</i> 'love, loved'	<i>flēoge</i>	<i>flēag</i> 'fly, flew'
<i>libbe</i>	<i>lifde</i> 'live, lived'	<i>write</i>	<i>wrāt</i> 'write, wrote'
<i>fremme</i>	<i>fremede</i> 'do, did'	<i>singe</i>	<i>sang</i> 'sing, sang'

*cwelle*            *cwealde* ‘kill, killed’            *ete*    *ǣt* ‘eat, ate’

OE had the two verb patterns shown in (8) and (9). The ‘weak’ group in (8) resembles the PDE regular verbs in (6) because just one inflection (*-de*) is used to mark all past tense forms. In other words, the past tense is predictable (excepting some minor changes in the verb stem, e.g. *libb* ~ *lif* ‘live’). Turning to the ‘strong’ group in (9), these resemble the PDE irregular verbs in (7) because differences in tense are marked by different vowels, e.g. *singe*, *sang*. In fact, we assume that most PDE regular verbs evolved from OE weak verbs, while PDE irregular evolved from OE strong. However, there is an important difference between (7) and (9). Remember that the PDE pattern in (7) is unpredictable, so students must learn the present tense vowel *and* the past tense vowel separately. But for OE speakers living in Anglo-Saxon England, the strong verb pattern in (9) was predictable: their native-speaker knowledge included rules such as those in (10), so they did not have to memorize the present/past tense of each verb individually.

(10)	rule ( <i>i</i> ~ <i>a</i> )	rule ( <i>a</i> ~ <i>ō</i> )
	<i>drince</i> , <i>dranc</i> ‘drink, drank’	<i>stande</i> , <i>stōd</i> ‘stand, stood’
	<i>singe</i> , <i>sang</i> ‘sing, sang’	<i>tace</i> , <i>tōc</i> ‘take, took’
	<i>climbe</i> , <i>clamb</i> ‘climb, climbed’	<i>bace</i> , <i>bōc</i> ‘bake, baked’
	:	:

OE had hundreds of strong verbs, so rules such as these were needed to make the language learnable. On the other hand, PDE has a much smaller number of irregular verbs, and these are not controlled by vowel-change rules such as those in (10). Without such rules, these PDE verbs are unpredictable — and therefore, troublesome for L2 learners. But like the silent letters described in section 4.2, they show how something problematic in PDE has come from something that was entirely regular in the history of the language.

## 5 The Norman invasion

### 5.1 Background

Centuries after the Anglo-Saxon invasion, Britain suffered another invasion which was also a major influence on the development of the English language. These invaders were the Normans, who spoke French (フランス語) and came from Normandy, a region that is now part of France. The Normans first came to Britain in 1066, bringing their native language with them and creating another situation of language contact (see section 3). This time, language contact brought changes to the vocabulary of English by adding thousands of French words to the English lexicon. It has been described as a vocabulary ‘explosion’ because of the huge number of loanwords which came into English at this time and also the speed at which this happened. The Norman invasion is partly responsible for why the vocabulary of English is now so large, and for why PDE has so many synonyms (words with similar or related meanings, e.g. *hard* and *difficult*, *tell* and *inform*, *pig* and *pork*).

### 5.2 The English lexicon

It is difficult to say how big the vocabulary of English really is. Most scholars believe that English has more than 100,000 distinct words (lexemes), while some estimate that the figure is closer to 500,000. To put these numbers into context, 3,000 words is probably enough to have an everyday conversation in English, while 5,000 words is usually enough to understand a TV news report or discuss a serious topic. So, why is the English lexicon so big (or large, or huge, or enormous, or massive, or extensive, or vast, or colossal, or immense)?

One reason is that the English lexicon has many synonyms or near-synonyms. And the presence of so many synonyms is partly due to the fact that many words were borrowed from French (the language of the invaders) into English (the home language) after the Norman invasion. Remember that borrowing tends to happen in situations of language contact, when the speakers of different native languages try to communicate. When a French loanword came into English (e.g. *require*, *liberty*), it was often the case that English already had

a word with a similar meaning (e.g. *need, freedom*). And after the French word had become accepted into English, these original native English words remained. This created word pairs such as *need, require* and *freedom, liberty*. But why were these pairs of words allowed to exist, if their meanings overlapped? In fact the two words were usually a little different, and this was a good enough reason to continue using both words. They could either have a slight difference in meaning, or otherwise a difference in the way they were used. For example, *need* tends to be used in conversations whereas *require* is usually found in writing.

When the Normans arrived in Britain they soon dominated every aspect of society: they were rich and educated, they owned land, they controlled politics and business, and they took the highest positions in the Church, the law and the army. And because the Normans had such high social status, their language (French) also gained similar status or 'prestige'. By contrast, the English language had a low social status because most of its speakers were farmers or labourers with no formal education. It was as though two completely different societies, French and English, were living in the same place.

This division within English society was reflected in English vocabulary, the words borrowed from French being different in style from native English words. Whereas native words were used to describe everyday things (*house, mother, knife*) and everyday actions (*eat, sleep, work*), French words were associated with written language, with educated topics, and with life in upper-class society. To see this difference, compare the native English words with the borrowed French words in (11).

(11)	Native (English) origin	Borrowed (French) origin
a.	<i>want, love, hate, be, understand</i>	<i>desire, adore, detest, exist, comprehend</i>
b.	<i>craft, stool, teacher, leader, fair</i>	<i>art, chair, professor, captain, just</i>
c.	<i>calf, cow, pig, deer, house</i>	<i>veal, beef, pork, venison, mansion</i>
d.	<i>daughter, son, mother, brother</i>	<i>aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew, niece</i>

In (11a), native words such as *want, love, understand* tend to be used in

casual situations and in spoken English, whereas their borrowed equivalents *desire, adore, comprehend* are more likely to be found in literature. In (11c), the native words *cow, pig, house* represent the vocabulary used by farmers and ordinary people (i.e. those from the native English parts of society), while the borrowed words *beef, venison, mansion* are associated with speakers from the rich upper classes (i.e. those from the French parts of society). And in (11d) there is a division between native words for describing close family members (*father, daughter*) and borrowed words for describing distant family relations such as *cousin, nephew*. At that time, these ‘extended’ family relations had a greater importance in wealthy society, whose speakers were concerned about whom you should marry or who should inherit your wealth after you had died.

## 6 Summary

Studying a foreign language is not easy; it involves learning a lot of vocabulary and also rules of spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. And to make the learning task even more difficult, learners have to deal with rule exceptions because English has plenty of irregularities which must be memorized. Students of English sometimes complain about irregularities and ask, ‘Why is English like that?’

As we have seen in the preceding pages, one of the answers to this question lies in the history of the language. By studying the history of English we can see that some irregularities are just relics of the past — words, spellings and pronunciations which used to be regular (e.g. in Old English or Middle English) and which did not change as other aspects of the language evolved. We have also seen that history can help to explain why English has such a large and challenging vocabulary. The language went through periods when it borrowed thousands of words from French, giving modern English users the ability to express themselves in a range of different styles and registers — from informal and spoken styles using native English vocabulary to formal and written styles using words borrowed from French. Like all modern languages, PDE is the result of its own historical development.