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THE OXFORD GUIDE TO  
**Etymology**

PHILIP DURKIN

# The Oxford Guide to Etymology

Philip Durkin

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# About this book

Etymologies appeal to people with a very wide variety of interests and intellectual backgrounds. A very few people, such as myself, spend most of their time researching etymologies. A slightly larger number do so very occasionally. Many, many more people look at etymologies, but have never researched any themselves. Some people will never even have thought of etymologies as things which need to be researched. Particularly when etymologies are encountered in the compressed form found in many dictionaries, they can seem to be a given, rather than the (often very tentative) results of extensive research.

This book is intended for anyone who has taken the important first step of realizing that etymologies are the result of research, and would like to discover something about the nature of that research, and the principles and methodologies which underlie it.

I have attempted to frame this book so that it is addressed most centrally to someone who has an interest in historical linguistics, the study of how languages change and develop over time. Etymology is a part of this wider field, and anyone's understanding of etymology will be greatly enriched by at least some acquaintance with the broader concerns of the discipline as a whole. Readers who are entirely new to this field may find that they get much more out of this book if they read it in conjunction with one of the many excellent general textbook introductions to historical linguistics, such as Schendl (2001) or, in slightly greater depth, Millar (2007, which is a revised edition of Trask 1996) or Campbell (2004); for an excellent introduction to a wide variety of linguistic topics focussing on the vocabulary of English see Katamba (2005).

When deciding what to cover in this book and in how much detail, I have tried to pay particular attention to those areas which are important for etymology but which receive relatively little attention in most introductory books on historical linguistics. Nonetheless, I have also endeavoured to ensure that the book provides a balanced account of all aspects of etymology, especially for readers who are prepared to follow up references to fuller discussions of any topics which may be new or unfamiliar.



Most of my examples will be drawn from English, since this is the one language that any reader of this book will necessarily have some knowledge of. However, my aim has been to assume no particular knowledge about the history of the English language, beyond the explanations and further references given in the text. Drawing examples from the history of English also brings the advantage that I have in many cases been able to make use of very recent research for the new edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* with which I have been involved personally.

There are no exercises, but at various points in the text I have listed further examples of the phenomena discussed, which readers can pursue if they wish in etymological dictionaries. Access to a good etymological dictionary of English would be of great benefit to anyone reading this book. In particular, access to the full *Oxford English Dictionary*, especially in its online version ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)), would be of especial benefit, so that many examples given here in summary form can be pursued in greater detail. (The dictionary can be accessed online via most institutional libraries and many public libraries.)

# 1

## Introduction

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### 1.1 What is etymology?

As we will see in this chapter, etymology can tell us that English *friar* was borrowed from Old French *frere* ‘brother’, which in turn developed from Latin *frāter* ‘brother’. It can also tell us, perhaps rather more surprisingly, that Latin *frāter* is ultimately related to English *brother*, and that English *foot* is related to Latin *pēs* ‘foot’ and Armenian *otn* ‘foot’. Just as surprisingly, it can tell us that, in spite of the resemblance in form, English *care* and Latin *cūra* ‘care’ are definitely not related to one another, nor are Latin *deus* ‘god’ and Greek *theós* ‘god’. Etymology can also trace dramatic changes in meaning: for instance, English *treat-  
cle* originally had the meaning ‘medicine’, and comes ultimately from a Greek word which originally meant ‘antidote against a venomous bite’; *sad* originally had the meaning ‘satisfied’. How we trace such developments, and what they tell us about linguistic history, will be the topic of this book.

Etymology is the investigation of word histories. It has traditionally been concerned most especially with those word histories in which the facts are not certain, and where a hypothesis has to be constructed to account either for a word’s origin or for a stage in its history. That might be a stage in its meaning history, or in its formal history, or in the history of its spread from

one language to another or from one group of speakers to another. The term is also used more broadly to describe the whole endeavour of attempting to provide a coherent account of a word's history (or pre-history). As we will see in the course of this book, many of the basic methodological assumptions made in etymological research are the same regardless of whether we are looking at well-documented periods of linguistic history or at periods earlier than our earliest documentary records. Indeed, even someone who is primarily concerned only with attempting to solve hitherto unresolved difficulties of word history can only do so by building on the knowledge of many other word histories which have been much more securely established. For this reason, very many of the illustrative examples in this book will come from word histories which are very secure and not in any doubt, since they often provide the surest foundation for further investigation. Nonetheless, we will also look at some rather more difficult cases along the way.

Etymology forms part of the wider field of historical linguistic research, that is to say of attempts to explain how and why languages have changed and developed in the ways that they have. However, it does not concern itself exclusively with a particular linguistic level, as does for instance historical phonology (the study of speech sounds and of their deployment in ways which convey distinct meaning), historical morphology (the study of word forms as used to convey grammatical relationships), historical semantics (the study of the meaning of words), or historical syntax (the study of the meaning relations between words within a sentence). This is not to suggest for a moment that historical phonologists, morphologists, semanticists, or syntacticians never pay any attention to anything other than phonology, morphology, semantics, or syntax respectively. However, etymology is rather different, in that an individual word history will almost never be explicable in terms of only one linguistic level. Typically, some arguments or at least tacit assumptions about word form, probably involving issues of both historical phonology and morphology, will be combined with some arguments or assumptions about word meaning. In fact, etymology can be defined as the application, at the level of an individual word, of methods and insights drawn from many different areas of historical linguistics, in order to produce a coherent account of that word's history. One of the most exciting aspects of etymology is that this sort of detailed work on individual word histories sometimes throws up interesting results which can have a much broader significance in tracing the history of a language (whether that be with regard to phonology, morphology, etc.), especially when we can find

parallels across a group of different word histories. Additionally, it is often crucial that questions of (non-linguistic) cultural and intellectual history are considered in tandem with questions of linguistic history.<sup>1</sup>

As well as using the word *etymology* as an abstract noun, we can also talk about *an etymology*, that is to say an account of a word's history. In the next section, we will look at two representative etymologies in some detail, as a practical way of introducing some basic concepts and at the same time some questions and issues which will concern us in much more detail later. The first example involves some very well-documented periods of linguistic history, while the second (which is rather more complex) will offer a first foray into historical reconstruction at a very considerable time depth. Concepts that we will explore include:

- tracing the linear history of a word
- change in word form
- change in word meaning
- borrowing
- genetic relationships between languages
- cognates
- comparative reconstruction
- sound change

## 1.2 Some basic concepts: two example etymologies

### 1.2.1 Example one: *friar*

The etymology of the English word *friar* can be sketched very crudely as follows:

Latin *frāter* 'brother'

*develops into*

Old French *frere* (modern French *frère*) 'brother', also 'member of a religious order of "brothers"'

*which is borrowed as*

Middle English *frere* 'friar'

*which develops into*

modern English *friar*

<sup>1</sup> For a short survey of previous definitions of the term 'etymology', accompanied by an adventurous attempt to formulate a fully adequate formal definition, see Alinei (1995).

The symbol ‘>’ is frequently used to stand for both ‘develops into’ and ‘is borrowed as’, and so we can represent the same development in a more ‘shorthand’ way as:

Latin *frāter* brother > Old French *frere* brother, also member of a religious order of ‘brothers’ > Middle English *frere* friar > modern English *friar*

Or we can reverse the arrows, and trace backwards from the modern English word. In fact, this is the style most frequently encountered in dictionaries and in most other scholarship:

modern English *friar* < Middle English *frere* friar < Old French *frere* brother, also member of a religious order of ‘brothers’ < Latin *frāter* brother<sup>2</sup>

The etymology of the Latin word could also be traced back a lot further than this, and can be linked ultimately with English *brother*, but this requires an acquaintance with some topics which we will investigate in section 1.2.4.

Obviously, this is a summary of a series of events in linguistic history. We will now examine each of those events in turn, and to do so we will require a little background at each stage. The Latin language is the direct antecedent of French. That is to say, French, like the other Romance languages (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, etc.), developed from Latin, albeit probably from a form of the language rather different from that reflected by the majority of our literary records. French also shows many borrowings and some structural influences from other languages, especially the Germanic language spoken by the Franks, but its basic line of descent is indisputably from Latin. In the vulgar Latin and proto-Romance varieties which eventually developed into French, the Latin word for ‘brother’, *frāter* (or more accurately its oblique case forms, such as the accusative singular *frātre*) underwent a number of (perfectly regular) changes in word form, resulting in Old French *frere*. Old French is the term used to denote the earliest recorded stage of the French language, up to the early fourteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Thus we have our first step:

Latin *frāter* > Old French *frere*

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars use the symbols ‘<’ and ‘>’ only to link forms related by direct phonetic descent, and use different symbols for processes such as borrowing or derivation, but in this book I will use them to link any two consecutive stages in an etymology.

<sup>3</sup> Unusually, in this particular case, an intermediate step in the formal development of the Old French word is recorded in the very early Old French form *fradre* preserved in the *Strasbourg Oaths*, a unique (and very short) document from the year 842 which records (partly in Latin, partly in French, and partly in German) the oaths taken by Louis the German, Charles the Bald, and their followers during a time of conflict.

*frere* remained the basic word in French for ‘brother’, but it also acquired a secondary meaning denoting the (metaphorical) ‘brothers’ who belonged to various religious orders. This usage in French followed similar use of *frater* in medieval Latin.<sup>4</sup> The word was then borrowed into English from French. This happened in the Middle English period, the stage of the English language from roughly 1150 to 1500. More accurately, the word was borrowed from the Anglo-French variety of Old French which was used in England in the centuries after the Norman Conquest.<sup>5</sup> The usual form in Middle English, *frere*, matches the French form exactly, and the pronunciation is likely to have been almost identical in Anglo-French and in Middle English. However, in Middle English the meaning is much narrower, showing only the religious sense and occasionally one or two other metaphorical uses. Thus we have our second step:

Old French *frere* brother, also member of a religious order of ‘brothers’ >  
Middle English *frere* friar

It is very common for a borrowed word to show only a very restricted and possibly rather peripheral portion of its meaning when it is borrowed into another language. In this particular instance, it is easy to see why (Anglo-)French *frere* was not borrowed into English with the much more basic meaning ‘brother’: the word *brother* (inherited from the Old English period, and from the Germanic antecedent of English before that) already had that meaning and was in common use, and even in the Middle English period, when very many words were borrowed from French into English, it is relatively uncommon for words with quite such basic meanings as this to be borrowed in place of native words. We will look at this issue in more detail in chapters 5 and 6. In fact English *brother* also had the meaning

<sup>4</sup> The macrons which indicate vowel length in forms like classical Latin *frāter* are not normally given when citing Latin forms from later than the classical period, although this does not necessarily indicate any change in the vowel length in particular words.

<sup>5</sup> In this book I use the term ‘Anglo-French’ to denote French as used in England (and elsewhere in Britain) in the centuries following the Norman Conquest. Scholarly practice is divided in this area: ‘Anglo-Norman’ is often used to denote this variety (as in the title of the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*), but increasingly the broader term ‘Anglo-French’ is used instead, in order to reflect better the varied inputs from different varieties of Continental French which occurred both immediately after the Norman Conquest and in the subsequent centuries: for a useful discussion and further references see Rothwell (2005). For convenience, where a form or meaning belonged to both Insular and Continental French I use the style (Anglo-)French.

‘(fellow) member of a religious order’ in the Old English period on the model of use in Latin, and this meaning continued in the Middle English period (as it does today), reinforced by the similar use in both Latin and French. When *frere* is first found in Middle English it duplicates this meaning, as well as showing the more specialized meaning ‘member of one of the mendicant orders (chiefly the Franciscans, Augustinians, Dominicans, and Carmelites, as opposed to the non-mendicant Benedictines, etc.)’. By the end of the Middle English period a process of semantic specialization took place, with *brother* used in the general sense ‘member of a religious order’ and *friar* in the narrower sense ‘member of one of the mendicant orders’. Thus we might say that the borrowing filled a lexical gap in the vocabulary of English, providing a word specifically for ‘a member of one of the mendicant orders’, although we should perhaps be slightly cautious about such assumptions, since the same gap remained unfilled by any single word in French, even though the two languages were being used in very similar societies. Indeed, Anglo-French and Middle English were being used in precisely the same society. (See section 5.6 for discussion of the different functions of each language.) As we will see later, we can often run into problems of this sort when we attempt to explain word histories in functional terms, although this does not necessarily mean that the attempt is not worthwhile.

In its development from Middle English to modern English the word did not show any further change in meaning, but it did show an unusual change in form. The usually expected modern (British standard) pronunciation of a word which had the Middle English form *frere* would be /fri:ə/ (compare *here*, *deer*) but instead we find /fraɪə/. The same development is found in a small number of other words such as *briar* and *choir*. It probably shows a sporadic phenomenon of vowel raising before a following /r/.

**Summary so far** We can trace the history of a word’s sound and form. In doing so we are looking for regularity, i.e. developments which are the same as those which happened to the same sounds or combinations of sounds in other words. Where something unexpected or irregular has happened, as with the development of /fraɪə/ rather than /fri:ə/, we will want to find parallels, such as *briar*, etc. Ideally we will want to find an explanation for this as well.

The meaning of the word can also be traced historically. We can see how the meaning broadened in Latin and French, but how the English

borrowing showed only a very narrow component of the donor word's meaning. We can also see how this borrowing fitted into a set of meaning relations with existing words in English (specifically *brother*). The meaning history of this word also shows the importance of factors from non-linguistic history: if we did not know something about the history of the religious orders in medieval Europe we would have considerable difficulty in explaining the historical development in the meaning of this word.

### 1.2.2 Example two: *sad* from modern English to proto-Germanic

For our next example we will start with the present day and work backwards. Modern English and Middle English *sad* show the reflex or linear historical development of Old English *sæd*. The symbol æ which occurs in the written form of this word and of many other Old English words (and some early Middle English ones) represents a front vowel phoneme /a/ (perhaps in fact [æ] rather than [a]) which in Old English was distinct from the back vowel /ɑ/, represented by *a*. (Its italic form *æ* is unfortunately very similar to that of the ligature œ, which can sometimes lead to confusion for the unwary.) We could represent this word history as Old English *sæd* > Middle English *sad* > modern English *sad*, but this would be rather artificial, since what we in fact have is a continuous history across all periods in the history of the language.

If we turn to the word's semantic history, a basic dictionary definition of the word *sad* as typically used in modern English is:

Of a person, or his or her feelings, disposition, etc.: feeling sorrow; sorrowful, mournful.

This meaning is first recorded *a*1300 (which stands for 'ante 1300', that is '1300 or a little earlier').<sup>6</sup> A similar basic dictionary definition for the word's earlier meanings would be:

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars use 'ante' in the more literal sense 'before', but most, including most dictionaries, use it in the generally more useful sense 'this date or a little earlier'. In this book the dates given for English words, forms, and senses are normally those provided by the *OED*. For words from other languages the data I give is generally drawn from the standard historical or etymological dictionaries of each language. Glosses and definitions of English words are normally based on those in either the *OED* or *The Oxford Dictionary of English* except where otherwise noted, although I have frequently shortened or otherwise adjusted them.



Having had one's fill; satisfied, sated; weary or tired (of something).

If we consider the likely historical development of these meanings, we can hypothesize that the meaning 'weary or tired (of something)' developed from 'satisfied, having had one's fill (of something)', hence showing a metaphorical, narrowed, negative meaning; compare the modern English idioms *to have had enough of something* or *to be fed up with something* for similar developments. Subsequently the sense 'weary or tired (of something)' broadened again (but still with an exclusively negative sense) to 'sorrowful, mournful' in general. Hence we can hypothesize that a meaning development occurred with two main steps:

satisfied, having had one's fill (of something)

[metaphorized and narrowed] > weary or tired (of something)

[broadened] > sorrowful, mournful

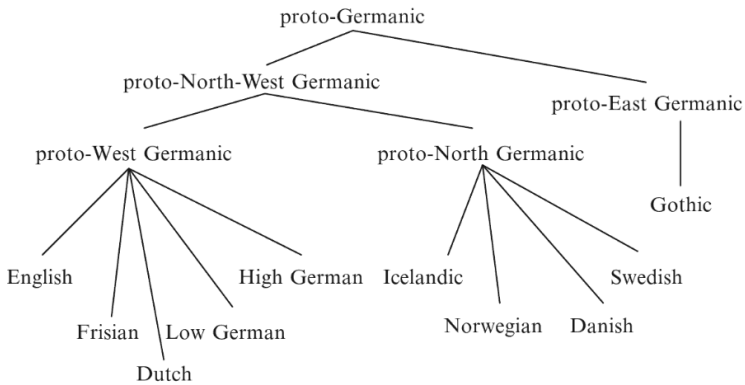
We get some further support for the last stage in this hypothesized development when we look at the meanings of the closest relatives of the Old English word, its cognates in the other Germanic languages. The next step back in the history of *sad* can be expressed as follows:

Old English *sæd* is cognate with Old Dutch *sat*, Old Saxon *sad*, Old High German *sat*, Old Icelandic *saðr*, Gothic *saps*, all of which have meanings broadly corresponding to the Old English one, 'having had one's fill; satisfied, sated; weary or tired (of something)'

However, the concept expressed by 'cognate with' needs some unpacking, and we will now look at this in more detail.

### 1.2.3 Cognates and language families

What does it mean to say that Old English *sæd* (English *sad*) is 'cognate with' the words from Old Dutch, Old Saxon, etc. listed at the end of the previous section? Just as the Romance languages all developed from (some form of) Latin (see section 1.2.2), so English and a number of other languages, which linguists call the Germanic languages, developed from a common antecedent called proto-Germanic. Unlike Latin, we have no historical records for proto-Germanic, but we can reconstruct a good deal of information about it from the evidence of the languages that developed

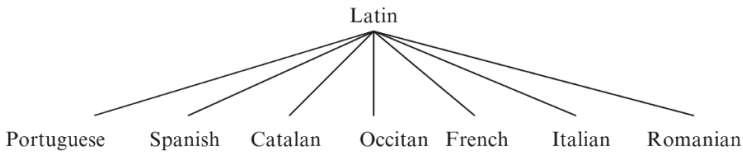


**Fig 1.1** The major Germanic languages

from it. The other Germanic languages include Dutch (and hence Afrikaans), German (and hence Yiddish), Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Icelandic, as well as others such as Frisian (the closest relative of English, but with very few speakers today) and the extinct language Gothic (which is the Germanic language for which we have the earliest extensive documentary records, in the form of a bible translation dating from the fourth century AD). The cognates of an English word are the words in these other Germanic languages which can be explained as having developed from the same (unrecorded) antecedent word in proto-Germanic.

In fact, we can also identify subdivisions within the larger group of Germanic languages, on the basis of shared innovations that allow us to group the Scandinavian languages together as descendants of a common North Germanic sub-branch and likewise (albeit with rather more rough edges) English, Frisian, Dutch, Saxon/Low German, and High German as descendants of a West Germanic sub-branch. In turn, many scholars would now group together West Germanic and North Germanic as being descended from a shared North-West Germanic sub-branch with shared differences from East Germanic.<sup>7</sup> Thus the relationships between the major Germanic languages can be represented schematically as in figure 1.1. We can reconstruct a similar tree structure for the major Romance languages, with the difference that in this instance the common ancestor, Latin, is of course attested (figure 1.2).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Ringe (2006) 213. For a useful introduction to the early Germanic languages, see Robinson (1992).



**Fig 1.2** The major Romance languages

It is as well to pause for a moment and consider in a little more detail what this concept of a reconstructed antecedent language implies, because it will be crucial to many arguments later in this book. From present-day English to Old English (back as far as the eighth century, or even earlier in runic inscriptions) we have a chain of documents which enable us to trace the history of the English language in reasonable detail. In fact, these documents reflect many different local varieties of the language, showing many divergent developments. Some of these are reflected in different varieties of English today, such as the English of Chicago, or London, or Cape Town. We may analyse these as forming part of larger varieties, such as US English (or perhaps North American English), British English, or South African English. Alternatively we may subdivide them further, by looking for instance at different geographical or administrative areas of London, or at the language of different social classes within the city, or of different age groups, etc. Such variation must have been present throughout the history of English, although in earlier periods the nature and amount of the surviving evidence mean that we can only reconstruct a very limited picture. Modern US English and British English have developed as distinct varieties in different geographical locations from roughly the same antecedent, English as spoken in Britain in the early modern period (usually defined as approximately 1500–1750), but the historical record, as well as the evidence of modern US and British English, shows us that this common antecedent showed considerable internal variation. Similarly English and all of the other Germanic languages developed from a common antecedent (as did French, Spanish, etc. from Latin), but there is no reason to doubt, and every reason to suspect, that Germanic already showed internal variation. (Even though our surviving records for classical Latin are mostly literary and reflect a highly homogeneous literary language, there is indeed some variation in our surviving Latin evidence, and the later evidence of the Romance languages suggests the existence of a good deal of further variation in Latin

which is not reflected in the surviving documentary evidence).<sup>8</sup> Over the course of time, groups of Germanic-speaking peoples developed distinct communities in different geographical locations (to some of which, like England, they had spread as part of the considerable movements of peoples which occurred in the later stages of the history of the Roman Empire and in the following centuries). As they did so, linguistic differences would have become more pronounced, as different variants from among the existing variation in Germanic came to predominate in different speech communities, and as new variation arose in each speech community.

At the time of our earliest substantial records for English, from several centuries after the Anglo-Saxons arrived in England, there are already important differences between English and its continental relatives, but these clearly took time to develop. We can also trace significant differences between different regional varieties of English in this early period, although the surviving documents leave very many questions unanswered.<sup>9</sup> The demarcation of the various national languages of modern Europe owes a great deal to geography and, especially, politics. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Scots was well on the way to developing a standard, 'official' form, distinct from the English of England, but subsequent political developments led to the adoption in official functions of a highly anglicized variety now usually referred to as Scottish English (although in recent decades as a result of the political process of devolution there have been some interesting developments in the use of Scots once again as an officially recognized variety in some functions). Today Dutch and German are well-defined national languages, sufficiently different from one another that monolingual speakers of either standard language have only an extremely limited degree of mutual intelligibility, but the situation is different among speakers of traditional dialects on or near the geographical boundaries between the two countries: such speakers can with a little effort understand the speech of their neighbours on the other side of the national border, even though one person is speaking something that is classified as a dialect of Dutch and the other something that is classified as a dialect of German. We can say that there is a dialect continuum which crosses the Dutch–German border. Another crosses the French–Italian border, and

<sup>8</sup> On the degree of regional variation shown by surviving Latin documents from antiquity see Adams (2008).

<sup>9</sup> For an introduction to the various issues involved see Hogg (2006).

similar cases can be found in many other parts of the world, essentially wherever languages have developed from a common source in adjacent territories.<sup>10</sup>

Such dialect continua lead us fairly directly to some limitations in the tree diagrams for the Romance and Germanic languages which I offered above. Diagrams of this type are a good way of representing where the most important shared innovations are found among various dialects in a group, but they have the disadvantage of making linguistic history appear artificially simple and neat. When two speech communities diverge, as represented by the branching on a tree, each takes with it a particular selection of features from the parent language. When further divergences occur subsequently, we may find that a particular feature is retained, quite by chance, in two languages or dialects which the weight of evidence places on completely different sides of the tree. In other cases the same innovation may occur independently in two different places, giving a false indication of inherited similarity. Additionally, where languages or dialects remain in contact, especially when they are spoken in geographically contiguous or overlapping territories, we can find that some features spread by diffusion (i.e. contact) from one variety to another, hence muddling the apparently clean branching shown by a tree. A better metaphor for such diffusion of features through language contact may be the spreading of a wave from a point of origin, rather than the branching of a tree.<sup>11</sup>

#### **1.2.4 Example two revisited: *sad* from proto-Germanic to proto-Indo-European**

If we return to our example of *sad*, we can push this particular word history back further than just to proto-Germanic. The Germanic languages themselves form one branch of a much larger language family which historical linguists call Indo-European, which has numerous other branches, sub-branches, and isolate languages including for example:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For an introductory account of these issues see Chambers and Trudgill (1998) 3–12. On the concept of a traditional dialect see especially Wells (1982) 4–8.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of this issue with reference to the Germanic languages see Trask (1996) 181–7 (also Millar (2007) 225–31) and, at a rather more advanced level, Lass (1997) 139–59. On more general issues to do with language trees see McMahon and McMahon (2005).

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of the Indo-European languages see Fortson (2004).

- the Celtic languages: Welsh, Irish, etc.
- the Italic languages: Latin (and hence the Romance languages), Oscan, Umbrian, etc.
- Greek
- the Balto-Slavonic languages, comprising the Slavonic languages (Russian, Polish, etc.) and the Baltic languages (Lithuanian, Latvian, etc.)
- Albanian
- Armenian
- the Indo-Iranian languages, comprising the Iranian languages (Persian, etc.) and the Indic languages (Sanskrit and hence modern Hindi, etc.)

All of these languages can be shown to have developed from a single parent, proto-Indo-European, although of course all of them show the effects of contact with other languages during their histories. The identification of a shared ancestor for all of these languages rests upon the evidence of regular correspondences of sounds between the various languages, which we will look at in more detail below, and also upon systematic grammatical similarities, which are largely outside the scope of this book.

Many people have attempted to link Indo-European with other language families, but all such attempts remain extremely controversial, and the general view is that no genetic relationship has been reliably established between Indo-European and any other language family.

Precisely when and where proto-Indo-European existed as a spoken language is the subject of a very great deal of debate. This is complicated by the fact that the earliest recorded Indo-European language, Hittite, the oldest documentation for which dates back approximately 4,000 years, belongs to a branch, Anatolian, which probably split from the rest of Indo-European very early. However, what is reasonably certain is that proto-Indo-European began to split into its various daughter languages very much earlier than the date of our earliest documentary records for those languages. It is therefore unsurprising that many of the cognate forms bear little if any superficial resemblance to one another, since we are working at such a great time depth, and centuries of linguistic change lie between proto-Indo-European and even our earliest documentary evidence.

In this section we will trace the history of the word *sad* from proto-Germanic back to proto-Indo-European, and we will examine some of the procedures by which etymologies can be established at this time depth.

In doing so, we will encounter some principles and procedures which are equally applicable to much more recent linguistic history, and which we will investigate mostly from the standpoint of rather more recent linguistic evidence in the remainder of this book. However, reconstruction of linguistic data at a very considerable time depth is one of the big attractions of etymological research for many people, and it is also true that many of the most important aspects of modern etymological research came to fruition in the context of research into proto-Indo-European in the second half of the nineteenth century. We will therefore begin our investigation of the relationship between sound change and etymology by taking a look at how the sound changes known as Grimm's Law and Verner's Law help explain the etymology of *sad*.

By comparing the forms found in the Germanic languages with one another and also with forms in other Indo-European languages, we can reconstruct the proto-Germanic ancestor of *sad* as *\*saða*.<sup>13</sup> An asterisk conventionally marks reconstructed forms, i.e. forms which are not actually recorded. *\*saða*- ends with a hyphen because it is a reconstructed word stem, i.e. the morphological stem to which inflectional endings were then added. In this book I will usually give reconstructions using IPA symbols, but without using square brackets [] implying that they are hypothetical phonetic transcriptions, nor // slashes implying that they necessarily have phonemic status. This is a traditional philological practice, which is useful for three main reasons: (i) we cannot always be certain about the precise phonetic quality of reconstructed sounds; (ii) any past historical sound system almost certainly showed considerable variation in the realization of sounds, which we cannot recover in detail from our historical evidence; (iii) we cannot always be sure whether certain distributions of sounds were phonemic or allophonic in a given historical period.<sup>14</sup> We will look at issues

<sup>13</sup> The exact phonetic quality and phonemic status of the consonant I have represented here as *\*ð* is in fact very uncertain. Many scholars choose to use *\*d* in reconstructions of proto-Germanic forms to represent any sound which may have been either a voiced plosive /d/ or a voiced fricative /ð/. In many modern etymological dictionaries the proto-Germanic form of this particular word is hence represented as *\*sada*-. However, since the sound in this instance was almost certainly a voiced fricative at an early stage in proto-Germanic, I have used the reconstruction *\*saða*-, which has the advantage of making the changes from proto-Indo-European to proto-Germanic easier to follow.

<sup>14</sup> For a recent detailed argument for this position see Lass and Laing (2007) §§2.4.2, 8.3.2.

to do with variation and change in any linguistic system in more detail in chapters 3 and 7.

The reconstruction *\*saða-* depends upon the evidence of the various Germanic languages, and also upon the evidence of forms in other Indo-European languages which can plausibly be referred to the same root form. Most crucially, it depends upon:

- (a) regular sound correspondences between the various languages
- (b) sound changes which can be posited to explain apparent irregularities

To get from proto-Germanic *\*saða-* to the recorded words Old English *sæd*, Old Dutch *sat*, Old Saxon *sad*, Old High German *sat*, Old Icelandic *saðr*, Gothic *saps* requires just a couple of small steps:

- In West Germanic, proto-Germanic *\*ð* regularly became the voiced plosive /d/, as in our Old English form *sæd* /sad/ or Old Saxon *sad*. Old Dutch *sat* and Old High German *sat* show subsequent devoicing of this plosive (compare section 2.1.1.3).
- Old English *sæd* additionally shows Old English (and Old Frisian) fronting of West Germanic *\*a* to /æ/.

These are regular, predictable sound changes in a word of this phonological shape in these languages.

This reconstructed proto-Germanic form *\*saða-* itself shows the reflex of an earlier Indo-European form *\*səto-*. (The symbol *\*ə* in this reconstruction represents a sound which was realized as a vowel when it occurred in this position, hence giving rise to vowels in the daughter languages, but which is now generally believed to have resulted from the vocalic realization of one of a series of so-called laryngeal sounds which are hypothesized for proto-Indo-European. They are called laryngeals for historical reasons, although no one in fact knows exactly what their phonetic quality was. This particular laryngeal is sometimes represented as *ə<sub>2</sub>* or as *h<sub>2</sub>* or as *H<sub>2</sub>*, depending on which transcription conventions are being followed. We will return to this topic in sections 1.3.1 and 4.4.1.)

Related words in other Indo-European languages include:

- classical Latin *sat*, *satis* ‘enough’, *satur* ‘satisfied, full’
- Lithuanian *sotus* ‘filling, full, satisfied, substantial’
- ancient Greek *áatos* ‘insatiate’ (showing a negative prefix)



We can see that the meanings of these words help support our hypothesis about the meaning development in the Germanic languages from ‘satisfied, having had one’s fill (of something)’ to ‘weary or tired (of something)’. It is difficult to be certain about the precise relationships between these words. They probably reflect two different variants, *\*sǫ-* and *\*sā-*, of a single Indo-European root for which the approximate meanings ‘fill up, (make) replete’ can be reconstructed. In our surviving cognates various different suffixes, *\*-to-*, *\*-ti-*, and *\*-tu-*, have been added to this root. The cognates thus do not represent the reflexes of a single word form, but rather the survivors of an extended word family, derived in various different ways from a common root.<sup>15</sup> The Germanic words probably show what was originally a suffix which formed verbal adjectives, proto-Indo-European *\*-to-*. The same suffix is probably found in *old* (< proto-Germanic *\*al-da-*) and *cold* (< proto-Germanic *\*kal-da-*; compare Latin *gelidus*), and in many Latin words ending in *-tus*. (On roots and their meanings see further sections 4.4.1 and 8.7.3.)

The assumption made in the last paragraph that proto-Germanic *\*saða-* is likely to have developed from proto-Indo-European *\*sǫto-* may seem rather startling to anyone who does not have a prior acquaintance with Indo-European linguistics. On the face of it only the initial consonant *\*s* is common to both forms. However, the development of the vowels is easily dealt with, by the principle of regular sound correspondences. Proto-Indo-European *\*ǫ* (with the caveats given above) and (short) *\*o* both regularly develop to *\*a* in proto-Germanic, thus *\*sǫto-* > *\*saða-*. A sound change of this sort is called a merger: the phonetic development of *\*ǫ*, *\*o*, and *\*a* in proto-Germanic led to loss of the distinction between the three separate proto-Indo-European phonemes and merger as the single phoneme *\*a* in proto-Germanic. Compare Latin *hostis* ‘stranger, enemy’ with its cognate Gothic *gasts* ‘guest’, or Latin *hortus* ‘garden’ with its cognate Gothic *gards* ‘garden’. (Latin *h* and Gothic *g* in these words show the regular development in Latin and in proto-Germanic of proto-Indo-European *\*g<sup>h</sup>*; we will look further at the Germanic side of this in the next paragraph. The modern English cognates of these words are respectively *guest* and *yard*, showing the result of a number of sound changes during the history of English.)

<sup>15</sup> For a specialist readership, the best recent detailed account of the Germanic component of this etymology is provided (in German) by Heidermanns (1993) 458–9; on the Indo-European component see especially Szemerényi (1979).

Probably, on the basis of the evidence of other Indo-European languages, in proto-Germanic the reflexes of proto-Indo-European  $*\bar{a}$  and  $*a$  merged first as  $*a$ , with which  $*o$  then also merged. Conversely, the proto-Indo-European long vowels  $*\bar{o}$  and  $*\bar{a}$  merge as  $*\bar{o}$  in proto-Germanic.

The explanation for the medial consonant in proto-Germanic  $*sada-$  is a little more complicated, and involves two reconstructed sound changes. Comparison among the Indo-European languages excluding Germanic leads to the reconstruction of three sets of stop consonants: voiceless stops ( $*p$ ,  $*t$ ,  $*k$ ,  $*k^w$ ), voiced stops ( $*b$ ,  $*d$ ,  $*g$ ,  $*g^w$ ), and breathy-voiced stops ( $*b^h$ ,  $*d^h$ ,  $*g^h$ ,  $*g^{hw}$ ). Comparison with the forms in the Germanic languages leads to the conclusion that a series of sound shifts occurred in proto-Germanic:

- $*p > *f$
- $*t > \theta$  (represented in traditional philological notation as  $*\beta$ )
- $*k > *h$
- $*k^w > *hw$
- $*b > *p$
- $*d > *t$
- $*g > *k$
- $*g^w > *kw$
- $*b^h > *β$  (in some environments  $> *b$ )
- $*d^h > *ð$  (in some environments  $> *d$ )
- $*g^h > *γ$  (in some environments  $> *g$ )
- $*g^{hw} > *yw$  (in some environments  $> *gw$ )

Thus the voiceless stops became voiceless fricatives, the voiced stops became voiceless stops, and the breathy-voiced stops lost their breathy-voice and probably became fricatives before becoming voiced stops in many environments. Experts in fact differ on many details of this process, especially as regards the proto-Indo-European breathy-voiced stops and also the proto-Indo-European voiced stop  $*b$  (which was very rare, and some argue did not exist at all), but this is not of importance for our present purposes.<sup>16</sup> This sound change (or series of changes) is known as Grimm's Law, after the German philologist Jakob Grimm (1785–1863), who compiled with his brother Wilhelm both the celebrated fairy tale collection and the early

<sup>16</sup> The literature on Grimm's Law, and Verner's Law, is vast. For a recent detailed account of the changes see Ringe (2006) 93–116; for particularly useful analyses see also Bynon (1977) 83–6, Collinge (1985) 63–76. See also the discussion in section 7.1 below.

fascicles of the major historical dictionary of the German language. Grimm produced an important early formulation of this sound change, although it had in fact been described earlier by other scholars. An alternative name for this sound change is the Germanic Consonant Shift.

We can illustrate the changes in the proto-Indo-European voiceless stops with the following examples:

$*p > *f$

I-E root *\*ped-* ‘foot’: ancient Greek *poús* (stem *pod-*), Latin *pēs* (stem *ped-*); Gothic *fōtus*, English *foot*

$*t > *θ$

I-E *\*tū* ‘you (singular)’: Latin *tū*, Old Irish *tū*; Gothic *þū*, English *thou*

$*k > *h$

I-E root *\*kerd-* ‘heart’: ancient Greek *kardia*, Latin *cor* (stem *cord-*); Gothic *hairtō*, English *heart*

$*k^w > *hw$

I-E *\*k<sup>w</sup>ōs* ‘who’: Sanskrit *kás* ‘who’, Lithuanian *kàs* ‘who, what’; Gothic *hwas* ‘who’, English *who*

In the first example here, ‘foot’, Grimm’s Law explains not only the shift of the initial consonant from *\*p* to *\*f* but also the shift of the final consonant of the stem from *\*d* to *\*t*. However, it will be obvious at a glance that there are other differences between the cognates apart from those explained by Grimm’s Law, even though I have attempted to select forms which have an unusually close mutual resemblance (another of the cognates of English *foot* is in fact Armenian *otn*). In the case of ‘foot’, the Greek, Latin, and Germanic words all have different stem vowels. In this instance the difference is not due to sound changes which have occurred in the daughter languages, but to slightly different etymons in proto-Indo-European: the Greek stem form *pod-* is from proto-Indo-European *\*pod-*, the Latin stem form *ped-* is from proto-Indo-European *\*ped-*, and the Germanic forms are from proto-Indo-European *\*pōd-*. These different etymons are all derived from the root *\*ped-* by a process known as ablaut which we will look at in section 4.4.1. This also explains the variation between *\*s<sub>ǵ</sub>-* and *\*sā-* which we encountered above in the etymology of *sad*.

The operation of Grimm’s Law thus explains why proto-Germanic *\*saða-* < proto-Indo-European *\*s<sub>ǵ</sub>to-* does not show medial *\*t*, but it does not explain why it shows *\*ð* rather than the expected *\*θ*. This is explained by another sound change known as Verner’s Law, after the Danish philologist

Karl Verner (1846–96), by which the proto-Germanic voiceless fricatives became voiced whenever the accent did not fall on the immediately preceding syllable. (For an analogous situation in modern English, compare *ex'ert* /ɛg'zə:t/ with *'exercise* /'ɛksəsaɪz/.) In the ancestor of *sad* the suffix, not the root, was stressed, and hence Verner's Law applied, giving voiced \*ð. Later, the accent shifted to the first syllable in all words in proto-Germanic, thus giving the pattern which we find reflected in all of the recorded Germanic languages. Hence, finally, we can explain how proto-Indo-European \*s<sub>ǵ</sub>'to would give rise to proto-Germanic \*'saða, via the following stages: \*s<sub>ǵ</sub>'to > \*sa'ta > \*sa'ta > \*sa'ta > \*'saða. We will not do so here, but pre-histories can similarly be reconstructed for classical Latin *sat*, *satis*, *satur*, Lithuanian *sotus*, and also ancient Greek *átos*, and it is this (rather than vague resemblance in form and meaning) which gives substance to the hypothesis that all of these forms are ultimately cognate.

We will return to Grimm's Law and Verner's Law in a little more detail at the beginning of chapter 7, but for the time being there are one or two very important general observations which arise from this example. Note that in the preceding paragraph I said that proto-Indo-European \*s<sub>ǵ</sub>to- 'would give rise to' proto-Germanic \*'saða-, and not 'could give rise to'. The merger of \*ǵ, \*o, and \*a as \*a in proto-Germanic, and the Grimm's Law and Verner's Law changes, are all regular processes, which apply in all cases (where not excluded by specific phonetic environments, which simply involve more precise statement of what the sound change was and in which environments it applied). The standard methodology of comparative linguistics does not permit us to say 'perhaps in this particular instance the merger simply did not happen' or 'perhaps Grimm's Law did not apply to this word' or 'perhaps in this instance an entirely unparalleled change of \*ð to \*m occurred'. As I have formulated it here, this is an oversimplification, but not a huge one. In chapter 7 we will look at the reasoning behind this in much more detail, and at some important qualifications, but for present purposes it is sufficient to be aware that comparative reconstruction depends upon the regularity of the correspondences and sound changes which are posited: this (as well as general phonetic plausibility, and the existence of parallels in the documented history of languages) is what gives a solid foundation to comparative etymological research.

A useful illustration of this principle is shown by the histories of the words *mother*, *father*, and *brother*. All three words show a voiced fricative /ð/ in modern English. However, in Old English the situation was

rather different: *brōðor* ‘brother’ showed a voiced fricative /ð/, but *mōdor* ‘mother’ and *fæder* ‘father’ both showed a voiced plosive /d/. In proto-Indo-European all three words in fact showed the same termination, \*-tēr- (in the nominative case), which seems typical of terms for family kinship: \*mātēr ‘mother’, \*pātēr ‘father’, and \*bhrātēr ‘brother’;<sup>17</sup> compare Latin *māter* ‘mother’, *pater* ‘father’, *frāter* ‘brother’ (proto-Indo-European \*b<sup>h</sup> > f in word-initial position in Latin; compare also Sanskrit *bhrātar-*). The explanation for the different outcomes in Old English is the regular operation of Verner’s Law. In the case of *mother* and *father* the stress in proto-Germanic fell on the second syllable, while in the case of *brother* it fell on the first syllable. Thus Verner’s Law applied in the case of *mother* and *father*, but not in the case of *brother*, and so we find that proto-Germanic \*brōþēr, with voiceless fricative \*θ, corresponds to Latin *frāter*, but that proto-Germanic \*mōðēr and \*faðēr, with voiced fricative \*ð, correspond to Latin *māter* and *pater*. In *mother* and *father* the proto-Germanic voiced fricative subsequently became a plosive in West Germanic, just as in the case of *sad*, hence Old English *mōder* (or in fact more commonly *mōdor*, showing variation in the unstressed vowel of the second syllable) and *fæder*. In the case of *brother*, the medial voiceless fricative of proto-Germanic \*brōþēr became voiced in intervocalic position in Old English, hence Old English *brōðer* (again in fact more commonly *brōðor*). Subsequently, in late Middle English, by another sound change, the voiced plosive of *moder* and *fader* developed into a fricative before either /ər/ or syllabic /r/, resulting from reduction or loss of the vowel in the endings -or, -er. Thus, *mother* and *father* came to have the same voiced fricative as *brother*. So we can see that *mother*, *father*, and *brother* provide a very rare example of how subsequent sound changes can, very occasionally and entirely fortuitously, restore a formal resemblance which had been obscured by a much earlier sound change (figure 1.3). We have also now seen how *brother* and *friar*, discussed in section 1.2.1, are in fact cognate, both being ultimately from proto-Indo-European \*bhrātēr. In the latter case the development was: *friar* < Old French *frere* < Latin *frāter* < proto-Indo-European \*bhrātēr.

<sup>17</sup> In the reconstructions \*mātēr and \*bhrātēr the \*ā in the first syllable shows what is now generally considered to have been the output of earlier \*eh<sub>2</sub>, i.e. the vowel \*e followed by a laryngeal which caused colouring and lengthening of the vowel. For a fuller explanation of this see section 4.4.1.

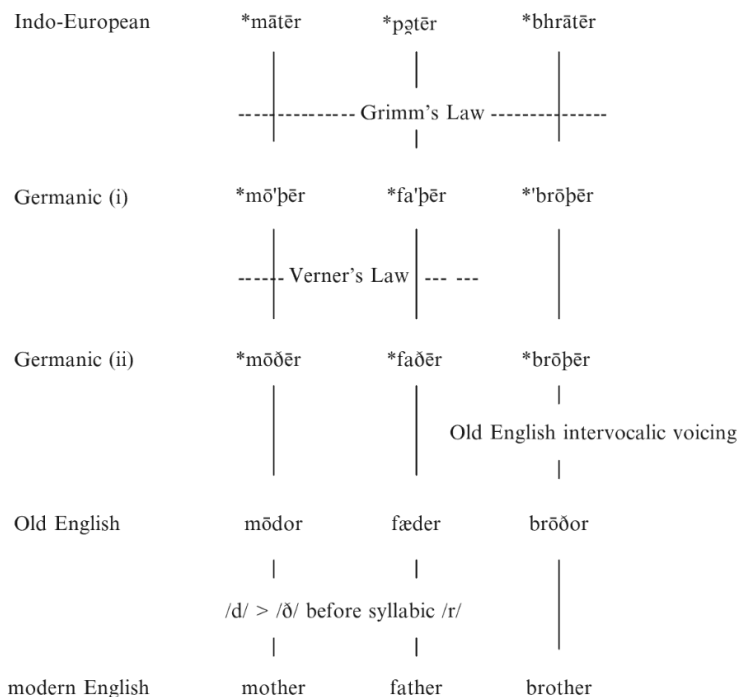


Fig 1.3 *mother*, *father*, and *brother* from proto-Indo-European to modern English

### 1.2.5 Summary

Our initial supposition about the meaning development of *sad* within English was supported by comparison with the meanings of its cognates in other Germanic languages, and ultimately also by the meanings of its cognates elsewhere in Indo-European.

In tracing the word's cognates at a great time depth we have seen the importance of regular sound correspondences and of regular sound changes in accounting for apparent discrepancies. We will return to this topic in more detail in chapter 7.

In the etymologies of both *friar* and *sad*, there is little or no connection between the processes of formal development and the processes of meaning development that we have examined. This is often the case, although there are also cases where form history and meaning history are very closely intertwined, and we will look closely at a number of such cases in chapters 7 and 8.

### 1.3 Why study etymology?

#### 1.3.1 Etymology, historical and comparative grammars, and dictionaries

Etymology is an essential tool in reconstructing the history of a language, since a corpus of word histories provides a necessary basis for many other aspects of historical linguistic work. Conversely, each individual word history depends for its plausibility on the work that has been done in various subfields of historical linguistics. For instance, someone interested in historical semantics will want to look at the meaning histories of individual words which have been traced through the application of etymology, just as an etymologist will want to draw on the general observations about a whole body of meaning changes and their likely motivations which have been identified by specialists in historical semantics. Each activity informs and enriches the other in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Traditionally, etymology has been associated most closely with the construction of historical and comparative grammars. A historical grammar traces the developments in word forms which are found in the history of a language, often also extending into its pre-history. A comparative grammar relates the developments found in one language to those found in cognate languages, to explain the development of two or more languages from a common source using the technique of comparative reconstruction.

We have seen in the case of *friar* an example of how etymology interacts with the functions of a historical grammar:

- Etymological investigation suggests that *friar* shows the continuation of Middle English *frere*.
- A historical grammar identifies parallels such as *briar* and *choir* (themselves the result of other etymological investigations). Ideally, it will also supply an explanation for the unusual form history shown by such groups of words.

Our investigation of *sad* gave an insight into the world of comparative etymology and comparative reconstruction. The identification of regular sound correspondences depends at first upon the investigation of large numbers of potential etymological connections. This may make it possible to identify the regular processes of sound change. If so, our corpus of etymologies can be refined, and some at first apparently attractive connections can be discarded, at least until we can find a new explanation to account for them.

The best illustration of this may be to look at an example of how a sound method may enable us to identify a case of chance resemblance. If we start out, from an entirely uninformed perspective, by looking simply for words which are similar in form and meaning, English *care* and Latin *cūra* ‘care’ might seem attractive candidates for investigation: they overlap completely in their core meaning, and the consonants at least are the same. There is thus more resemblance in both form and meaning than there is between English *sad* and Latin *satis* ‘enough’ or Lithuanian *sotus* ‘filling, full, satisfied, substantial’. However, English *care* is an inherited Germanic word, with a good set of cognates from all branches of Germanic which enable us to reconstruct a proto-Germanic form *\*karō-*. If we remember Grimm’s Law, we will see that proto-Germanic /k/ is not going to correspond to Latin /k/, and in fact proto-Germanic *\*karō-* is usually referred to a proto-Indo-European root *\*gar-* with the meaning ‘to call, cry’. This same root is probably reflected also by Latin *garrīre* ‘to chatter’ (ultimately the base of English *garrulous*). Latin *cūra* shows the regular development of an earlier form *\*koiṣā*, which can be reconstructed on the basis of forms in inscriptions and cognates from other Italic dialects; it has no generally accepted further etymology, but could not conceivably be connected with proto-Germanic *\*karō-*. In fact some doubts have been raised about the connection of proto-Germanic *\*karō-* with proto-Indo-European *\*gar-*.<sup>18</sup> Revised or contested hypotheses are very common in etymological work at this sort of time depth. However, the important point is that a connection with Latin *cūra* remains impossible, even if we have no viable etymology for *\*karō-*: we do not need to have an alternative explanation in order to reject an impossible etymology.

Latin *deus* ‘god’ and Greek *theós* ‘god’ are another pair of words which are synonymous and have a superficial resemblance in form, but which the methodology of comparative linguistics demonstrates have no etymological connection whatever: the first goes back to proto-Indo-European *\*deiwós* and the other probably to proto-Indo-European *\*dhesos*. We can thus make an important generalization: comparative reconstruction provides an essential tool for quickly eliminating very many cases of chance resemblance in form and meaning, just as it identifies many cognates which have little or no superficial resemblance in form or meaning.<sup>19</sup> It also leaves us with

<sup>18</sup> See for instance (in German) Rix (2001) 161.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent and much more detailed account of these and related issues see Campbell (2003).



very many rather doubtful cases, some examples of which we will examine later.

Sometimes ‘etymology’ has been seen as almost synonymous with ‘comparative reconstruction’, or at least it has been assumed that everything else which an etymologist has to consider is of secondary importance in comparison with the reconstruction of antecedent word forms and the identification of historical sound changes. This will not be entirely the approach adopted in this book, although it should not be forgotten that form history, as reflected in historical and comparative grammars, provides the backbone for nearly all etymological research: we will examine in detail in chapters 7 and 8 how and why it is that arguments based on word form usually provide by far the strongest foundation for etymologies.

Comparative reconstruction has a sister methodology known as internal reconstruction, in which reconstruction is based purely on the data provided by a single language. This is generally much more limited, and also less reliable, than comparative reconstruction, and it will not be a major topic in this book, although it should be noted that methods of internal reconstruction have contributed some important advances in knowledge even in areas such as Indo-European linguistics where the comparative data is relatively rich and plentiful. It tends to be most effective in tracing the origins of morphophonemic relationships, as between English *mouse* and *mice* (see section 7.2.4) or the contrast between voiceless and voiced consonants in German *Rad* and *Rades* (section 2.1.1.3), although even here comparative data is often much more conclusive.<sup>20</sup> One very important and justly famous success of internal reconstruction was Ferdinand de Saussure’s identification in the late nineteenth century of a series of hypothetical sounds in proto-Indo-European which he termed (in French) ‘coefficients sonantiques’. These are now generally recognized as a series of so-called laryngeal sounds (although their exact quality is in fact unknown and the subject of much dispute). Hittite documents which began to be deciphered and studied in detail in the early twentieth century, long after Saussure’s initial hypothesis based on internal reconstruction, provided crucial data which confirmed the reconstruction.<sup>21</sup> We will return to this topic, and to its implications for the sound represented by \* $\text{ə}$  in the proto-Indo-European reconstructed forms given here, in section 4.4.1.

<sup>20</sup> For thorough accounts of internal reconstruction see Fox (1995) or Ringe (2003).

<sup>21</sup> For short accounts of this see for example Fortson (2004) 75–6; also Hock (1991) 545–9, Clackson (2007) 53–61, or Millar (2007) 322–7.

Aside from historical and comparative grammars, etymology is also a crucial scholarly tool in historical lexicography. Historical dictionaries present in linear form the word histories which are treated thematically in grammars: in grammars we can see the connections between the developments shown by individual words, while in historical dictionaries we can see word histories whole and uninterrupted, together with the interplay between form history and meaning history, and at least some information on the influence of extralinguistic cultural and historical factors.

### 1.3.2 Historical relationships between words

A key function of etymology is that it illuminates the formal and semantic relationships between the words of a language. This is an area where a layman's interests may not be entirely dissimilar to those of a historical linguist, and thus it can be a very good entry point for people who are relatively new to the study of etymology. Indeed, this topic is of particular interest for speakers of a language like English which has seen a good deal of borrowing, and where the semantic relationship between for example *hand* and *manual* 'involving the hand, operated by hand, etc.' is obscured by the absence of any formal relationship between the two words. In this particular instance, the word *manual* is ultimately a derivative formation from a word meaning 'hand', but the word in question is Latin *manus* 'hand' (plus a Latin suffix *-ālis* which forms adjectives with the meaning 'connected with') rather than English *hand*. Latin *manuālis* was borrowed into English (via French) as *manual* in the fifteenth century. For a time it competed with a word with the same meaning which did have a transparent formal relationship with *hand*, namely *handy*. This word today only has the specialized meanings 'convenient to handle or use', 'ready to hand', 'skilful, good with his or her hands', but in early use it also had the meaning 'done by hand, manual'. It is formed from *hand* and the suffix *-y* (which has a function similar to Latin *-ālis*), although this is not the full story: *handy* probably originally arose as a result of reanalysis of the word *handiwork*, which was itself formed much earlier. *handiwork* is not (as we may at first assume) formed from *handy* and *work* but from *hand* and the obsolete noun *geweorc* 'work', which is a derivative of Old English *weorc* 'work' formed with a prefix *ge-* which had a collective meaning (thus 'work collectively') and which was pronounced with a palatal initial consonant /j/, thus /jeweærk/. In course of time phonetic reduction occurred in the unstressed medial syllable

of *handgeweorc*, giving the form *handiwork*, which was then reanalysed as showing *hand*, *-y*, and *work*.

This small example illustrates some very important tendencies in word histories, which etymologists must always bear in mind. There will often be a formal relationship between words which have a semantic connection with one another. Thus, a word which means ‘performed by hand’ will very likely be related in form to a word meaning ‘hand’: in English we can imagine compound formations such as *\*hand-done* (compare *handmade*) or derivative formations such as *\*handish*, *handly*, or indeed *handy*. The asterisk here indicates entirely hypothetical word forms, rather than reconstructed word forms as we saw before with *\*saða-* in section 1.2.4. The word *handly* has no asterisk because it is in fact recorded several times in Middle English, and with precisely the meaning ‘manual’. It was thus another synonym in competition with *manual* and *handy*.

This sort of relationship is called an iconic one: the word forms echo what seems to be the intuitive meaning relationship between the words. Such compound or derivative formations are called transparent when there is a clear form-and-meaning relationship between the complex word and its component parts. (We will look at transparency in more detail in chapter 2, and iconicity in chapter 4.)

Borrowing can disrupt these relationships, if, as typically happens, not all of the words in a related group are borrowed. In this particular instance so-called prestige borrowing of a relatively technical word has occurred, but the more basic word *hand* has not been replaced by a parallel borrowing of (Anglo-)French *main* or Latin *manus*. We will look at different sorts of borrowing situations, and their often unpredictable outcomes, in much more detail in chapters 5 and 6. For one example of the rather messy results of different borrowing processes compare the synonymous nouns *manual* and *handbook* in modern English. Both denote a book containing concise information readily to hand. *manual* shows borrowing from (Anglo-) French *manual*, which is itself from Latin *manuāle*. *handbook* was formed as a calque or loan translation (see section 5.1.2) on the model of Latin *manuāle*, although in modern use it owes its currency mostly to the influence of German *Handbuch* in the nineteenth century (which was also formed on the model of Latin *manuāle*).

*handiwork* shows another typical process, where the composition of a word has become obscured or opaque with the passage of time. Had Old English *geweorc* survived into Middle English it would have had the form

*\*iwork* (or more properly *\*iwerk*), and so it would have paralleled the formal changes shown by *handiwork*, but it did not survive, and *handiwork* became as it were an ‘orphan’, open to reinterpretation as showing *hand*, *-y*, and *work*. This reanalysis leads to the appearance of the adjective *handy*, and probably also to the remodelling of the word *handcraft* as *handicraft*. Thus, loss of other words in the linguistic system can lead to what were originally transparent relationships becoming opaque. Opacity can also result from many other factors, such as sound change. The great counter-force is analogy, in this case leading to reanalysis of *handiwork* and the formation of new words on the same pattern, thus setting up a new set of correspondences between form and meaning, albeit ones quite different from those found earlier in the word’s history. (We will look at the workings of analogy in detail in chapter 7.)

We see here that an example of how etymology can help us to understand oddities in the modern-day structure of the vocabulary of a language has also brought us back to the interconnection of etymology with many other aspects of historical linguistics. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of etymology: we can move quite swiftly from interesting information which helps inform our understanding of the historical relationships between words in everyday use, to data that helps us to understand processes of historical linguistic change. Indeed, very often the same information serves both functions at once.

### 1.3.3 The etymological fallacy

It may seem odd to spend part of this chapter discussing what etymology is not for, but the misconceptions are very widespread, and colour many popular ideas about word histories. Additionally, of course, in examining what etymology is not about, we will uncover a good deal of what it really is about, and we will also see some further illustrations of how words change in both form and meaning over time.

The etymological fallacy is the idea that knowing about a word’s origin, and particularly its original meaning, gives us the key to understanding its present-day use. Very frequently, this is combined with an assertion about how a word ought to be used today: certain uses are privileged as ‘etymological’ and hence ‘valid’, while others are regarded as ‘unetymological’ and hence ‘invalid’ (or at least ‘less valid’). This attitude certainly has a venerable history: the word *etymology* is itself ultimately from ancient

Greek *etymología*, which is formed from *étimos* ‘true’ and *lógos* ‘word, speech’, hence denoting ‘the study of true meanings or forms’.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the assumptions lying behind the etymological fallacy is to look at some verbal controversies of the relatively recent past. Today use of the word *meticulous* in the sense ‘painstakingly careful’ is perfectly normal and does not invite any negative reaction, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it attracted a good deal of comment. The central ground of the objection was etymological. The word comes ultimately from Latin *metus* ‘fear’, and it first occurs in English (as also in French) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the sense ‘fearful’, for instance in the Older Scots writer William Stewart’s translation of Hector Boece’s *Chronicle of Scotland*, ‘Gif thow be . . . Meticulos, and dar nocht se blude drawin’ (‘if you are fearful, and do not dare see blood drawn’).<sup>23</sup> The word resurfaces in French in the early nineteenth century in the sense ‘overscrupulous’, with the connotation ‘fearful of making a mistake’, and it swiftly enters English in this sense, being found in 1827 in *Blackwood’s Magazine*: ‘He does many things which we ourselves, and we do not hold ourselves peculiarly meticulous, will not venture upon.’ However, the word subsequently developed more positive connotations in both French and English, as defined by the *OED*: ‘Subsequently usually in more positive sense: careful, punctilious, scrupulous, precise’. As we will see in chapter 8, this is a very far from unusual process of semantic change: the word’s meaning has first narrowed, and then it has developed more positive connotations or ameliorated – or in this particular instance, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that it has lost its negative connotations. But for many prescriptive commentators on English usage in the early twentieth century, this new sense was to be avoided, on the grounds that it was not sanctioned by the word’s history, and specifically by the meaning of the Latin word from which it was ultimately borrowed. (For a useful summary of such comment see *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989) 634.)

<sup>22</sup> On the early history of the word and the concept see the short sketch in Lass (2007) §8.1.1 and further references there, and also the discussion in the four chronological volumes of Lepschy (1994a), (1994b), (1998), and Morpurgo Davies (1998). On the study of the etymology of English words up to 1882, when the first fascicle of the *OED* appeared, see Görlach (2002b) 71–136. On etymology in the twentieth century see especially Malkiel (1993).

<sup>23</sup> See *OED3* at *meticulous* adj., as also for the quotation from *Blackwood’s Magazine* below.

Similarly, the word *obnoxious* comes ultimately from Latin *obnoxius*, which is formed from the preposition *ob* ‘in front of, in view of’ and the noun *noxa* ‘hurt, injury’ (compare modern English *noxious*, used frequently of harmful substances, especially gases). The Latin adjective had the meanings ‘exposed to harm, liable, answerable, submissive, subject to punishment’, and it is broadly these meanings which are commonest from the word’s first occurrence in English in the sixteenth century down to the nineteenth century. As late as 1902 we find in William James *Varieties of Religious Experience*: ‘The impulse . . . is . . . far too immediate and spontaneous an expression of self-despair and anxiety to be obnoxious to any such reproach.’<sup>24</sup> However, from the late seventeenth century onwards we find a sense which the *OED* defines as: ‘Offensive, objectionable, odious, highly disagreeable. Now esp. (of a person): giving offence, acting objectionably; extremely unpleasant, highly dislikeable.’ This results from association with *noxious*, and has become the usual sense in modern English (indeed it is the only one for which the *OED* records any examples later than 1902), but in the nineteenth century use in this sense was a matter of contention, and again the focus of debate was the word’s etymology. (For a summary see again *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* (1989) 676.)

These are both complex words, and their original meaning is to some extent guessable for people who know some Latin because the composition of each word is transparent. It is notable that in English attempts to determine usage by recourse to etymology very often involve words of Latin origin, and particularly words which remain reasonably close in form to their Latin etymons, so that the historical connection between the two is fairly obvious, as in the cases of *meticulous* or *obnoxious*. We can see an interesting cultural phenomenon in action here, where the authority of an ancient language is taken to be an effective arbiter of usage even in a quite different language some two thousand years later. However, so far as the scientific study of language is concerned, such assertions about the authority of ‘etymological meanings’ are quite irrelevant; or rather, if they are relevant to anyone, it is to people studying attitudes towards language use, rather than to etymologists. It is one of the linguistic facts of life that words change both in form and in meaning. Predicting exactly what those changes will be and when they will occur is normally impossible, although

<sup>24</sup> See *OED3* at *obnoxious* adj.

describing and explaining changes which have occurred in the past is a much more achievable goal, and forms the main focus of this book.

The changes in meaning shown by *meticulous* or *obnoxious* look very minor when compared with some much more dramatic changes in meaning which have occurred during the recorded history of English, but which tend to be noticed only by linguistic historians and by people reading texts from earlier periods.

To take a much cited example, the English word *deer* originally denoted any animal, as its cognates Dutch *dier* and German *Tier* still do today. However, in the course of the Middle English period the word came to be applied more and more often specifically to the deer, and in early modern English the broader sense ‘animal’ was lost completely, so that whenever the word occurred it had the narrowed sense ‘deer’. Explaining why this happened is much more difficult, and in spite of the popularity of this example in the literature, there is no generally accepted explanation.<sup>25</sup>

To take another example, the word *treacle* originally (from the fourteenth century) denoted a kind of medicine, as it did also in its donor language French and in the other Romance languages; in an extended figurative meaning it could denote anything with healing effects. Its transferred use to denote a type of sugar product dates only from the end of the seventeenth century, but now is the only one which remains in current use (except when this sense is itself used figuratively, especially of compliments or praise).

We will look in more detail at the mechanisms of meaning change in chapter 8, but we should already be able to put the etymological fallacy to one side if we consider how foolish it would be to assert that English *deer* should be used in the sense ‘animal’ (and another word be used in the meaning ‘deer’) because of its history and the modern meanings of its cognates Dutch *dier* and German *Tier*, or that *treacle* should revert to the meaning ‘medicine’ because of its history (its ultimate etymon in Greek in fact means an antidote against a venomous bite). Earlier in this chapter we

<sup>25</sup> For one attempt see Samuels (1972) 73–4, who examines the relationships between the terms *beast*, *hart*, and *deer* in Middle English, and suggests that the homophony between *hart* and *heart* may have blocked adoption of *hart* as a general term for the deer, while partial homophony between *deer* and the adjective *dear* may have been a pressure against continued use of *deer* to denote more ferocious wild animals. Such arguments based on what is often termed ‘dangerous homophony’ are controversial, especially in cases where, as in this instance, genuine ambiguity must rarely if ever have occurred. See further discussion of arguments of this type in section 3.8.

saw a similarly dramatic semantic development in the word *sad*: it would be absurd to suggest today that *sad* should be used only in the sense ‘satisfied’ because of its etymology.

#### 1.4 What an etymologist does

Our initial investigation of the comparative method has given a first illustration of the methodology of an etymologist. Various aspects of this methodology will take up most of the rest of this book. We will end this first chapter by considering some of the typical activities that characterize etymological research. In any (hypothetical) day of etymological research a lot of what happens will depend upon the particular circumstances of the language or period being studied, reflecting such factors as how much data is available, and what form that data takes. However, some things are almost certain to be true: there will be few, if any, blinding flashes of insight, and any that do occur will be the result of a good deal of painstaking work. Gathering data together (from important source texts, from corpora, from dictionaries, or from the work of previous researchers) is likely to figure largely, along with the careful analysis of this data. Frequently this analysis will involve approaching the same material time and again from different points of view, testing out one hypothesis after another, and probably discarding most of them as they run aground in insuperable difficulties. When real progress is made, it is most likely that it will emerge slowly, as the etymologist attempts to approach the same set of data with (yet) another hypothesis, to find that on this occasion the hypothesis does not collapse, but holds up against all of the challenges that one can think of to test it with. And then very probably one puts the hypothesis to one side for a little while and comes back to it another day, to see whether one had overlooked an obvious difficulty. Only then may one begin to feel that perhaps some real progress has been made.

Whenever we try to establish a link between two pieces of data, we must remember to check how plausible this link is from a variety of different perspectives. Is there any difficulty semantically? Can we find parallels for any changes in meaning that we assume? Is the connection acceptable phonologically? If phonological changes are posited, are they plausible, and do we have parallels for them? Are any morphological relationships which are posited plausible, and are they supported by parallels? Finally, is this



hypothesis demonstrably preferable to any others which have been proposed or which we can formulate?

More often than not, the word history which emerges from this process will reflect the work of more than one researcher. A lot of etymological research involves taking up the threads of past investigations, carefully going through the work of previous researchers (who perhaps worked generations ago), and seeing whether new data or new insights help reinforce and confirm a hypothesis suggested by earlier research, or instead challenge this hypothesis, or even suggest a new one. Fortunately, a lot of etymological work ages rather well. Of course, we must always be very careful when revisiting older scholarship to take note of any places where it rests on outdated assumptions, and to investigate it rigorously by applying modern methodologies and procedures. But so long as due caution is exercised, a great deal of scholarship dating from at least as far back as the late nineteenth century is still an excellent foundation for further work. There is, of course, a good reason for this: as we have already noted in discussing Verner's Law, many of the most important advances in the development of linguistic reconstruction and the comparative method belong to the late nineteenth century, and although there have been very important methodological advances since then, much of the scholarship of that period still does not appear to be in a completely alien scholarly 'language'.

Finally, words form part of a system, the lexis of a language, with numerous links to its grammar also. Any change in our understanding of one part of that system may have echoes or repercussions in another, possibly quite distantly removed, part of the same large system, and we must always be alert to such implications in our own or others' work. Sometimes, one changed etymology can open the way to a whole set of new solutions to old problems. One should bear in mind the adage of the great French comparative linguist and etymologist Antoine Meillet that a language is 'un système . . . où tout se tient', 'a system where everything is connected' (Meillet (1921) 16; also cited in similar form at many other points in Meillet's work: see Koerner (1999)). Some linguists would reformulate this as 'a system where many things are connected', but still we should be alert to the implications that one etymology may have for many other word histories. Additionally, we must never forget that words and languages are spoken by real people, living in a particular society at a particular point in history, and it is in the usage of individual speakers that changes in word form and word meaning arise and develop. In order to understand the words of the past we must

often immerse ourselves in its material and intellectual culture, in order to trace connections between words and concepts which may seem quite unrelated from a modern perspective. We should also give consideration to the many different registers and styles of language, and the specialist vocabularies of different groups and communities. When we take account of such issues, we are likely to produce much better etymologies, and we may also make some important discoveries about social and cultural history.

As we have seen, a lot of argumentation in etymology, whether it concerns form history or meaning history, works on the basis of establishing parallels, in order to identify regular patterns of language change which lend support to individual etymologies. However, if we also have a reasonable explanation for why a change may have occurred, this is inherently much more satisfying, and more productive for work in historical linguistics in general. Additionally, if we have a plausible explanation for why a change is likely to have happened in one case, we can assess whether similar circumstances are likely to have existed in a hypothetical parallel case.

The task of an etymologist is thus a very large one. It was described with characteristic boldness by one of the great etymologists of the twentieth century, Walther von Wartburg:

Today the task of etymology is no longer solely to look for the root of a word or group of words. It must follow the group in question throughout the whole period during which it belongs to the language, in all its ramifications and all its relations to other groups, constantly asking the questions appropriate to etymology in the strict sense of the word.

(von Wartburg, tr. Reid (1969) 121)<sup>26</sup>

We may not always be able to answer all of the questions that such an investigation poses, and sometimes there may be so little evidence that we can barely establish any trace even of a word's existence, but we should still not lose sight of this ultimate aim.

<sup>26</sup> Die Erforschung des Radix eines Wortes oder einer Wortgruppe ist heute nicht mehr die einzige Aufgabe der Etymologie. Sie hat die zu betrachtende Wortgruppe in ihrer Verästelung und mit all ihren Beziehungen zu anderen Gruppen während der ganzen Zeit, da sie einer Sprache angehört, zu verfolgen, ohne jemals die etymologisierende Fragestellung aufzugeben.

(von Wartburg (1962) 120–1)

# 2

## What is a word? Which words need etymologies?

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In chapter 1 we encountered some of the main characteristics of etymology, its aims, and some important features of its methodology. We considered some examples of change in word meaning and change in word form, and began to look at some of the mechanisms by which both of these occur. We will return to these topics in more detail later. In this chapter and the next we will take a closer look at the main objects of study in etymological research, words. In etymological dictionaries a ‘word’ stands at the head of each dictionary entry, and the status and selection of these words can seem to be a given. However, the identification of words as coherent entities for study raises a number of quite complex questions. Additionally, selection of which words to concentrate on is a far from trivial matter.

### **2.1 What are words?**

#### **2.1.1 Problems of definition**

So far in this book I have taken the term ‘word’ rather for granted, as being a self-evident one which any reader will readily understand. The concept is very familiar to a non-specialist, and the term forms part of general vocabulary and so does not have to be learnt by beginners in linguistics,

unlike phoneme, morpheme, etc. In literate societies lay conceptions of word boundaries (i.e. where one word ends and another begins) are often very much bound up with literacy and the rules of various writing systems, but there is also at least some evidence that non-literate speakers of languages with no written form also have intuitions about word boundaries, as do children who have not yet learned to read in literate societies.<sup>1</sup> However, it is also notoriously difficult to define a ‘word’ in a way which makes sense consistently at all levels of linguistic analysis. Specialists in morphology and also in phonology often grapple with this particular problem, and a full discussion would take up much more space than is available to us here. The discussion that follows will be brief, and will focus on those aspects which most affect etymological research.<sup>2</sup>

2.1.1.1 *Spelling* A non-specialist from most modern literate societies who is asked what a word is will probably say that the words in a sentence are the things written with a space on either side. This definition is unsatisfactory for linguists for various reasons. Firstly, not all languages have a written form, and even when they do they do not necessarily separate words. Certainly, the way that many languages are written tells us something about writers’ intuitions about what constitute words, but a definition on this basis runs the risk of circularity, and is also detached from any analysis of linguistic structure: by this criterion, words are the things that people write as separate words (i.e. with spaces between them) because they perceive them as separate words (whatever that may mean).

Written language also tends to be rather inconsistent in its treatment of certain kinds of units. Any survey even of published written English will show very considerable variation in whether some combinations of two nouns are written as a solid, or with a hyphen, or with a space between the two elements. Thus *lunchbox* can also appear as either *lunch box* or *lunch-box*, and even dictionaries do not agree on which to list as a preferred spelling. We would have to resort to some very odd reasoning to argue that *lunchbox* is one word but *lunch box* is two: both have the same meaning and behave the same way syntactically, as does *lunch-box*, and in the spoken language the pronunciation is the same for all three. This leads to the

<sup>1</sup> See further Bauer (2003) 57, Sapir (1921) 34–5.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed discussion of most of the points in this section see e.g. Bauer (2003), which I have largely followed here, or (with some slightly different perspectives) Adams (2001: 2–5), Booij (2007: 281–94), Plag (2003: 4–9).

fairly obvious conclusion that we are looking at three different spellings of precisely the same linguistic unit.

2.1.1.2 *Meaning* One useful and conventional way of thinking about words as linguistic units is that a word is a linguistic sign which has both form and meaning. (We will come to the very important concept of the arbitrariness of this linguistic sign in chapter 4.) Linguistic meaning is expressed by the combination of units in a sentence. This might seem to give us a shortcut to a definition of a word: words are minimal units of meaning in a sentence. However, a little reflection will present us with some major problems. It is not always possible to infer the established, conventional or institutionalized meaning of phrases from their constituent words: consider idioms like *it's raining cats and dogs* (and see further section 2.1.5 below). There is also ample evidence that people often analyse the morphological composition of unfamiliar complex words as and when they hear them in order to interpret their meaning, and that they do this as part of their general competence as speakers of a language. For instance, if someone knows the word *vinaceous* 'of the colour of red wine' they are unlikely to have any more difficulty in understanding the derivative formations *vinaceousness* or *vinaceously* than the phrase *very vinaceous*, although they will probably never have encountered these particular derivative words before. (Both words are extremely rare, and even a Google search shows only a couple of examples of each.)

2.1.1.3 *Phonological criteria* Phonological criteria can provide very useful evidence about word boundaries. In some languages, probably including proto-Germanic at one point in its history, stress regularly falls at the beginning of a word. (In proto-Germanic more accurately on the first syllable of a lexical root, rather than on prefixes.) In some other languages, such as modern English, each word has a particular syllable on which the main stress will normally fall if that word is stressed in a sentence (e.g. *'kindness*, *in'eptitude*, *incon'solable*); but this is not true of all languages.

Some phonological processes apply only at particular positions in a word. In the history of German a sound change occurred by which obstruents were devoiced when they occurred word-finally, but not when they occurred medially or initially, giving rise to a situation in modern German where e.g. *Rat* 'counsel' and *Rad* 'wheel' are homophonous in the nominative singular (both /ra:t/) but not in inflected case forms in which an inflectional ending