English II

Being a history of English spelling.

**From Viking Norse to Norman French.**

*Student: Where were we?*

Tutor: We were talking about etymology.

*Oh, yes. So we were.*

The history of words.

*Where words come from.*

That’s right.

*Where had we got to?*

I don’t remember.

*I think we had got to Alfred the Great.*

Oh yes. We had.

*He was king 1,000 years ago.*

He was.

*And he spoke Anglo-Saxon.*

He did.

*Old English.*

Pretty much everyone did by then.

*I suppose they did.*

The Romans were long gone.

*500 years before Alfred the Great lived.*

The Anglo-Saxons invaded right after the Romans left.

*So England became an Anglo-Saxon country.*

Pretty much.

*And had been for 500 years now.*

Yes.

*Then the Vikings invaded.*

That’s right.

*Where did they come from?*

Well, they came from the north.

*Yes, but where from?*

We call it Scandinavia now.

*Oh.*

Denmark. Norway. Sweden. You know.

*Oh yes.*

Anyway, the Vikings came from the north.

*In longboats.*

Longboats with square sails.

*Longboats filled with warriors.*

Blokes with beards.

*And huge swords.*

Iron helmets.

*Big, round shields.*

Speaking Old Norse.

*Scary!*

Come to conquer England.

*By force.*

Everybody was afraid of the Norsemen.

*Norsemen?*

That’s what they were called.

*Because they came from the north?*

And because they spoke Norse.

*They conquered England, didn’t they?*

About half.

*About half?*

The northern half.

*Oh.*

Alfred hung on to the southern half.

*And the Vikings spoke Norse.*

We call it Old Norse now.

*Old Norse?*

It’s not the same as modern Scandinavian languages.

*Oh?*

What the Vikings spoke was Old Norse.

*Did they leave much Old Norse behind them?*

Well, a lot of them settled down here.

*To live?*

Yes.

*So Old Norse settled here too, I suppose.*

Exactly.

*And mixed with Old English, I suppose?*

Yes.

*So we have words from both languages?*

We still use a lot of Norse words.

*Such as?*

Well, most of our pronouns come from Norse.

*Remind me what a pronoun is.*

A word which stands in for a noun.

*Oh yes. Words like?*

Like him, her, we, they, them, us.

*They’re Old Norse words, are they?*

Yes. Our weekdays are Old Norse, too.

*Oh?*

Some of them, anyway.

*Like?*

Well, Wednesday is really Woden’s day.

*From their god Woden, I suppose?*

A god of healing.

*And writing.*

And Thursday is really Thor’s day.

*And Thor was the god of thunder.*

Yes.

*So the Vikings became English?*

Lots of them did.

*Settled down.*

Mainly in the north.

*Did they go on speaking Norse?*

Well, there are lots of Norse words still used up there.

*Up north?*

Yes.

*Like?*

Well, they sometimes say ‘ken’ meaning ‘know’, for example.

*‘Ken’ is Norse, is it?*

Still used in Scandinavia.

*What else?*

‘Kirk’ for church.

*‘Kirk’ is Norse?*

Yes.

*Still used?*

Yes.

*What else?*

‘Beck’ for a small stream.

*I’ve heard that one.*

And ‘saga’, of course.

*Why “of course”?*

Well, the Vikings were big on sagas.

*Stories?*

Great big stories about their past.

*Battles and stuff?*

And journeys.

*Long, dangerous journeys.*

Yes.

*The Vikings made long journeys.*

They reached Iceland, Greenland, maybe even America.

*They got as far as Russia.*

Maybe even Turkey.

*Interesting.*

Sagas, or Norse words?

*Both, really.*

I think so.

*And then the Normans came.*

They did.

*In 1066.*

Another invasion.

*They came from France.*

Well, Normandy.

*But that’s part of France, right?*

Northern France. Yes.

*And they came over with a big army.*

To conquer England.

*Which they did.*

Yes. William the Conqueror and all that.

*And they beat the English army.*

At the battle of Hastings.

*So William became king.*

Absolutely. William I.

*After the battle of Hastings?*

Yes. When King Harold was beaten.

*Right.*

And killed, actually.

*Oh.*

Norman kings ruled England after that.

*And they all spoke French?*

The Normans?

*Yes*.

They did.

*So the king of England spoke French?*

That’s right.

*No English?*

Not a single king of England spoke English after 1066.

*What? Not one of them?*

Not one.

*For how long?*

For about 300 years.

*300 Years?*

300 years.

*None of them?*

Not one.

*That’s amazing.*

Well, it is really.

*The king speaking French.*

Well, all the posh people spoke French.

*All the posh people?*

Yes. The elite.

*The elite?*

Which is a French word, of course!

*The elite all spoke French?*

Yes.

*Only French?*

Well, French at court, and French at home.

*Always French?*

Well, some Latin. They heard Latin in church.

*No English?*

No English at all.

*What about the ordinary people?*

What about them?

*They can’t all have learned to speak French!*

No, they didn’t.

*Oh.*

Ordinary people still spoke Old English.

*So the elite spoke French, but the ordinary people spoke English?*

Old English.

*Weird!*

This was really good for the English language.

*Good for the English language?*

Very good.

*Why was that?*

Well, there were lots of complications in Old English.

*How do you mean?*

Well, there was some very complicated grammar.

*Right.*

But these complications slowly disappeared.

*English got more simple?*

Yes.

*Because only ordinary people were using it?*

And because all the elite were French-speaking.

*They didn’t want to speak English?*

That was the language of common people!

*And the elite wouldn’t speak it?*

You know how posh people are!

*Mmmm…*

So English developed in the mouths of ordinary folk.

*And that was good for it.*

Well, yes. It became more simple; more everyday. Less complicated.

*Nice.*

Very.

*A lot of French words must have come into English.*

Oh yes. They did.

*If it was spoken here for 300 years.*

Yes.

*Give us some examples.*

Well, words like royal.

*O.K.*

Office.

*Really?*

Lots of food words.

*Like*?

Like dinner, wine, sauce, beef, sausage.

*Some of our spellings look kind of French.*

Well, that’s because they are.

*Mmmm…*

About half the words we call ‘English’ come from somewhere else, really.

*Well, a lot of English words come from other languages.*

Yes.

*Mmmm…*

They’re called ‘loan words’.

*Words which come from other languages?*

Yes. Loan words.

*And lots of words are loan words.*

Yes. Almost half our words are.

*Interesting.*

It does make English spelling seem a bit whacky, sometimes.

*Well, sometimes it does seem odd.*

A lot of spelling which looks odd is really French, or Norse, or something.

*I guess lots of loan words come from French.*

Yes. Words like money, parliament, class, lesson.

*And?*

Mobile is French.

*Is it?*

Yes. Nation, station and relation all come from French.

*And some words even sound French, don’t they?*

Yes.

*Like elite.*

Some have very French spellings.

*Like elite!*

And queue.

*Queue! That’s impossible to spell!*

Unless you know it’s French!

*Mmmm…*

And all those words which end in ‘ a, g, e ’.

*Like manage.*

Yes.

*And sausage.*

Yes. And message or courage.

*All ending in –age.*

They’re all French.

*Or words ending in ‘ a, n, c, e ’.*

Mmmm?

*Like distance.*

Or entrance.

*Or chance.*

Or dance.

*Or France, come to that.*

Yes!

*I find some of them hard, but maybe they’re just French?*

A lot of them are.

*There are loads of words like that.*

Well, there you are.

*How do you mean?*

Well, it all helps, doesn’t it?

*Mmmmm...*

Makes it seem less difficult?

*A bit.*

Every little helps!

*I suppose it does.*

That’s etymology for you.

*Mmmm…*