

Old English Language

Introduction: Old English was spoken from about the year 450 to about 1100. It was the main language of the Anglo-Saxons. (Some Anglo-Saxons also knew Latin). Old English belongs to the Germanic family of languages; some other languages in that family are German, Dutch, and Danish. The English language has changed quite a bit over the centuries, so modern people have problems reading Old English.

1) A few English words were pretty much the same in Old English. Here some words that didn't change at all over the centuries; even the spelling has stayed the same:

and

finger

gold

ring

2) For some words, the spelling has changed since Old English times.

Question: Can you work out what the following words mean in modern English?

benc [here 'c' is pronounced 'tch']

bæc

blæc

broþor [þ is pronounced 'th']

dæg

ofer ['f' is here pronounced 'v']

wæg

[Answer: bench, black, brother, day, over, way]

3) For some words, the spelling hasn't changed, but the meaning has:

Old English 'dream' meant 'joy, happiness'

4) For most Old English words, the spelling has changed a bit to modern times, so you can sort of guess what they might mean.

Question: Can you guess what the following Old English words mean in modern English?

ban [clue: you have it in your body]

blod [clue: you have it in your body]

brun [clue: it's a colour]

cwen

deofol [clue: he's naughty]

forst

lufu [it's when you really like someone]

micel [the opposite of 'little']

oft

sæ

sunne [it's in the sky]

sweostor

treow [has leaves]

yfel

[Answer: bone, blood, brown, queen, devil, frost, love, much, often, sea, sun, sister, tree, evil]

5) Some of our modern English words go back to Old English, but you'd never guess it! Here some examples:

bagel	from Old English beag, meaning 'ring'
clip	from Old English clyppan, meaning 'to embrace'
cheap	from Old English ceap, meaning 'market', 'merchandise'
daisy	from Old English dæges eage, meaning 'day's eye'
doom	from Old English dom, meaning 'judgement, power, glory'
ent	from Old English ent, meaning 'giant'
lady	from Old English hlæfdige, meaning 'kneader of bread'
lord	from Old English hlaford, meaning 'guardian of bread'
middle earth	from Old English middangeard, meaning 'middle earth'
sibling	from Old English sibling, meaning 'kinsman'
werewolf	from Old English were ('man') + wulf ('wolf')
weird	from Old English wyrd, meaning 'fate'
woman	from Old English wifman, meaning 'woman person'

Question: Which ones do you find the weirdest?

Question: Why did the Anglo-Saxon call the daisy 'day's eye'?

[Answer: Because daisies close their petals in the evening and open them again in the morning, like an eye]

6) Our modern-day names for the days of the week haven't changed much since Old English times:

Sunday	Sunnandæg: day of the sun
Monday	Monandæg: day of the moon
Tuesday	Tiwesdæg: day of Tiw (god of war)
Wednesday	Wodnesdæg: day of Woden (messenger god, god of fury and poetry)
Thursday	Þunresdæg: day of Thunor (highest god, god of thunder)
Friday	Frigedæg: day of Frige (goddess of love)
Saturday	Saturnesdæg: day of Saturn (Roman god of time)

Question: Who are Tiw, Woden, Thunor, Frige and Saturn?

[**Answer:** they're gods. Saturn is a Roman god; the others are Anglo-Saxon gods].

Question: Why do we still call our weekdays after gods that we don't really know?

[**Answer:** People just got into the habit of calling the days those names, in Anglo-Saxon times, and because everyone uses those names now, we don't want to change them. It's just a habit! It's easier just to keep using the same names, even if we don't know any more what they used to mean.]