

## A Comparative Analysis of Old English and Modern English: Pronunciation, Noun Morphology, And Vocabulary

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Article History	Abstract
<b>Original Research Article</b>	<p><i>This research paper presents a diachronic and comparative analysis of Old English and Modern English, focusing on three essential linguistic components, including: <b>pronunciation, noun morphology, and vocabulary</b>. Old English, spoken in England between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, represents an early and structurally complex stage of the English language. By examining these three elements, the study aims to illustrate both the continuity and the significant transformations that have occurred throughout the historical development of English. The analysis begins with pronunciation, highlighting the systematic nature of Old English phonology, including vowel length distinctions, the presence of diphthongs, and the use of consonantal symbols, including <b>þ (thorn), ð (eth), and æ (ash)</b>, which are no longer part of Modern English orthography. These features are contrasted with the less phonologically transparent and more irregular pronunciation system of contemporary English. The paper further investigates noun morphology, emphasizing the inflectional richness of Old English nouns. Unlike Modern English, Old English nouns were marked for grammatical gender, number, and case, including <b>nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative forms</b>. Through examples of strong and weak declensions, the study demonstrates how grammatical relationships were encoded through morphological endings rather than word order. The gradual simplification of this system, particularly the loss of grammatical gender and case distinctions, is shown to be the defining characteristics of the transition from Old English to Modern English. Finally, the paper explores the vocabulary of Old English, which was predominantly Germanic in origin and relied heavily on internal word-formation processes, such as <b>compounding, prefixation, and suffixation</b>. This lexical system is compared with that of Modern English, whose vocabulary has been significantly expanded through extensive borrowing from French, Latin, and other languages. Despite these changes, the analysis reveals that a substantial portion of core Modern English vocabulary, especially terms related to everyday life, nature, and basic human experience, derives directly from Old English. Overall, this study demonstrates that while English has undergone profound phonological, grammatical, and lexical changes, Old English remains a fundamental element for the perfection of Modern English.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Old English, Modern English, Pronunciation, Noun Morphology, Vocabulary, Historical Linguistics, etc.</p>
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<p><b>Copyright © 2025 The Author(s):</b> This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p> <p><b>Citation:</b> Mirhat Aliu. (2026). A Comparative Analysis of Old English and Modern English: Pronunciation, Noun Morphology, And Vocabulary. UKR Journal of Education and Literature (UKRJEL), Volume 2(1), 5-8.</p>	

### Introduction

Language is what we use on a daily basis to connect with one another. English, as one of the most widely spoken and influential languages in the contemporary world, has undergone extensive historical development. Its current global status as an international language, contrasts with its

early form, known as Old English, which was spoken primarily in England between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Understanding the linguistic characteristics of Old English is essential for appreciating the historical foundations of Modern English, and the process that have shaped its

evolution. Old English emerged following the establishment of major Germanic settlements after the Roman legions withdrew from Britain in AD 410, while traditional accounts place the landing of Hengest and Horsa in Kent in the year 449. The Anglo-Saxons, or more accurately, the English came from the region that is known as Friesland in the northeast of the Netherlands, as well as in northwest Germany and Denmark. Even though that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century English became an International Language, 1500 years ago, English was different. There are plenty words that still remain same since the beginning of the Old English as a language. For example: *betwixt* – meaning *between*, *bookcraft* – meaning *literary skill*, *brainish* – meaning *smart*, etc. In India, Australia, and other countries a confident English was invented from people whom had been expelled from their mother countries. Charles Barber et.al (2009) – claim that: *“During the three or four centuries after Tacitus wrote his Germania, the Germanic peoples were in a state of flux and movement. We know little of their history in this turbulent period of migration and expansion, but we do know that, towards the end of these centuries of flux, Germanic people speaking settled in England”* (Barber et.al, 2009: 105). This paper focuses on three core linguistic elements of Old English, including: *pronunciation, noun morphology, and vocabulary* – by comparing them systematically with their counterparts in Modern English. These components are central to linguistic structure and provide valuable insight into how English has transformed over time. The analysis demonstrates that although Modern English differs significantly from Old English in phonology, grammatical complexity, and lexical composition, numerous features of Old English continue to influence present-day usage. Richard Hogg (2002) – states that: *“When studying Old English, the first thing that has to be done is to look at its spelling system or orthography. The reason for this will be immediately apparent, for Old English orthography is rather different from that in present day English”* (Hogg, 2002: 4). The Anglo-Saxons used essentially the same alphabet as we do, but there are some letters for the writing of Old English that are gone over time.

### Pronunciation in Old English and Modern English

One of the most striking differences between Old English and Modern English lies in pronunciation. Old English phonology was more regular and closely aligned with its spelling system, whereas Modern English pronunciation is characterized by inconsistency and extensive variation. What is important to be emphasized about the pronunciation of Old English, and comparing it with the contemporary English, it is the fact that there is a considerable difference in this regard. The pronunciation as it was in the Old English, has evolved and changed, even

though there are some words, expressions, or phrases that are still same. One important fact that why the pronunciation has changed, is the long period of time of the English as a language. In support of Robert W. Murray (2012) – who states: *“English phonology has been the subject of scientific investigation for over 100 years. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, an informal group of linguists and philologists based in Leipzig and known as the “neogrammarians” constituted the dominant force in linguistic science”* (p. 1). The primary interest was the study of language change, especially sound change in light of the budding science of phonetics and a significant amount of their scholarly attention was directed at the investigation of the earliest stages of the Germanic languages (Murray, 2012: 1). Since English began to be mastered as a language in the world, many researchers have given their effort and contribution that through the special pronunciation, communication, and writing, this language to serve as the light of science. And it is actually interesting when we think about the English as a language. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, English is the international language and one of the most spoken languages in the world. Barber et.al (2009) – they argue that: *Old English script used the six vowel symbols: a, e, i, o, u, and y, and a seventh one, æ, called ash. All of these could represent both long and short vowels”* (p. 114). In today’s English there are six vowels, and there is no *æ* which was called ash. The sixteen consonant symbols that are typically used in Old English script are represented as: *b, c, d, f, g, h, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, þ, ð, and w* – in modern versions (Barber et.al, 2009: 116). These consonant symbols that are represented in Old English are easy to understand, but however, even though some symbols are easy to understand, again, a review of these symbols is needed, so that they are clearer. Albert C. Baugh et.al (2009) – declare that: *“Old made use of two characters to represent the sound of th: þ and ð, thorn and eth, respectively, as in the word wiþ (with) or ðā (then), which we no longer employ”* (p. 49). In the written or printed text, certain words that were most likely spoken by King Alfred, exactly as we do, appear odd. Examples include some of these words: *ecg (edge), scip (ship), bæc (back), benc (bench), þorn (thorn), pæt (that)*, etc. It is very important to keep in mind that the spelling and the pronunciation variations that dominate one’s initial perception of Old English are actually not essential (Baugh et.al, 2009: 49). Pure vowels were diphthongized in prehistoric Old English due to certain combinative alterations, which frequently produced outcomes in various dialects. For example, one change called: *‘breaking’ or ‘fracture’* affected from vowels before *l* plus the consonant *R*. West Saxon and Kentish have the forms: *ceald ‘cold’, earm ‘arm’, eahta ‘eight’* – compared with Gothic, for example: *kalds ‘arms – ahtau’*. The English dialects, have

unbroken vowels in many positions, for example as in: *cald* ‘cold’, and *æhta* ‘eight’. Another prehistoric change was the diphthongization of some front vowels after initial *J* and palatalized *K* – as in West Saxon: *geaf* ‘he gave’, *giefan* ‘to give’, *gear* ‘year’, and many other examples (Barber et.al, 2009: 122 – 123). Citing again Richard Hogg (2002) – he states that: “Diphthongs were present in all dialects of Old English. Diphthongs were written with digraphs composed of two vowel letters and were pronounced by gliding from one vowel quality to another within a single syllable” (Hogg, 2002: 10). Diphthongs were represented by the two primary spellings, such as: *ea*, and *eo*, and the pronunciation with the vowels such as: *yee*, for example: *employee* – was not used in the Old English. Although it is impossible to capture every aspect of Old English pronunciation through comparison with Modern English, such analysis remains valuable. It reveals that pronunciation changes occurred gradually over centuries and were shaped by social, cultural, and linguistic factors. While Modern English pronunciation has diverged considerably from its Old English roots, traces of earlier phonological patterns remain embedded in the language.

### Noun Morphology in Old English and Modern English

The noun system of Old English was considerably more complex than that of Modern English. While both stages of the language distinguish between singular and plural forms, Old English nouns had two numbers, same as in today’s English, singular and plural, denoted by distinct ends in addition to gender. In every declension, they were properly distinguished. Out of all the nominal categories, numbers turned out to be the most stable. Nouns in Old and today’s English are very important because they refer to a person, thing, concept, or place. Because it dictated the proper forms of adjectives and referring pronouns, while the gender of nouns played a significant role in Old English grammar. Referring to Albert C. Baugh et.al (2002) – they claim that: “*The Old English noun has only four cases: nominative (the subject), accusative (the direct object), genitive (the possessive), and dative (the indirect object). The endings of these cases vary with different nouns, but they fall into certain broad categories or declensions*” (Baugh, et.al, 2002: 50). While Teuta Agaj (2016) – states that: “*The noun preserved the formal distinction of two numbers through all historical periods. Old English nouns also had a system of endings referred to as cases. Even though the instrumental and dative in nouns had the same form, some books do not recognize the instrumental and a separate case*” (Agaj, 2016: 355). Nonetheless, the collection of known adjective endings and the masculine and neuter definite article forms each have a unique instrumental case. Samuel Moore et.al (1972) – claim that: “*Old English system of declension was based on a number*

*of distinctions: the stem-suffix, the gender of nouns, the phonetic structure of a word, and the phonetic changes. The declension labels: ā-stem, ō-stem, and n-stem – come from the field of Germanic philology*” (p. 20). Their nature might be gathered from two examples of the strong declension and one of the weak, such as: *stān* (stone) – *a masculine ā-stem*, *giefu* (gift) – *a feminine stem*, and *hunta* (hunter) – *a masculine consonant stem* (Moore et.al, 1972: 20). Old English nouns are classified into three primary groups: *minor, weak, and strong*. Based on the noun’s stem and the ends it takes in various grammatical situations. Fernand Mossé (1968) – emphasizes that: “*Specific changes in the noun system included a reduction in the number of case endings with a resulting loss in the distinction of grammatical gender. What follows are paradigms for: stōn ‘stone’ – former masculine ā-stem, trē ‘tree’ – former neuter ā-stem, soule ‘soul’- former feminine ō-stem, Old English form sāwol and nāme ‘name’ – former n-stem, Old English form: nama*” (Mossé, 1968: 47). Many words, exactly nouns of Modern English and Late Modern English are derived from the Old English. For example, nouns for the natural world such as: *earth, water, fire* etc, – nouns for people: *man, woman, child* etc, nouns for the parts of the body: *hand, finger, mouth* etc, and other basic concepts for nouns, such as: *food, friend, drink* – are Old English words/nouns. For example, the noun word: *bēor* ‘beer’ – Old English word, refer to alcoholic drink (Smith, 2009: 59). There are many words that disappeared or replaced. This is due to the fact that some words were forgotten, while replaced with synonyms. Old Norse and Norman French words brought about many of these modifications, while natural evolution caused others to disappear. For example, the word *nāme* disappeared and merged with the *soule*. Later, the word *soule* merged with the *ston* of declension by eliminating the final *e* – by the end of the Middle English period, other than a few exceptions, there was a single type of declension: *stōn (nominative, dative, accusative), stōn (e)s (genitive), and stōn (e)s (plural)* (Mossé, 1968: 47).

### Vocabulary Development from Old English to Modern English

The vocabulary of Old English differed significantly from that of Modern English, both in size and composition. Baugh et.al. (2002) – emphasizes that: “*To one unfamiliar with Old English it might seem that a language which lacked the large number of words borrowed from Latin and French that now form so important a part of our vocabulary would be somewhat limited in resources*” (p. 48). The vocabulary of Old English language that has survived is somewhat limited. Approximately one-quarter of today’s English vocabulary is Germanic, Old English, Scandinavian, Dutch, and two-third is Italic or Romance, particularly Latin, French, Spanish and Italian. Additionally, there are significant borrowings from more than 300 other languages, including Greek – which is



becoming more and more significant in the field of science and technology. Between 7.000 and 10.000 French words can be found in the English language. The Thesaurus of Old English contains almost 34.000 words, whereas a contemporary desk dictionary might have 80.000 words. Some of these words are polysemous, they have multiple meanings. The total number of meanings in Today's English is just over 50.000 from the Old English. The pronunciation of the Old English is similar with the Modern English, for example the word: **edge** – is a word of multiple meaning or polysemy. It denotes **edge** as well as **blade** – which is the portion of an object with a sharp **edge** and **sword**, which is an object that is identified by having a **sharp edge** or **blade** (Baugh et.al, 2002: 50). Barber et.al (2009) – argue that: “*To enlarge its vocabulary, Old English depended more on its own resources than on borrowings from other languages. From Proto Indo-European, the Germanic languages had inherited many ways of forming new words, especially by the use of prefixes and suffixes*” (Barber, et.al, 2009: 128). In Old English – **adjectives** could be formed from **nouns** by means of such suffixes as: **ig, lēas, ful** – and formulated these words: **blōdig, frēondlēas, þancful**. Conversely, some **nouns** could be formed from **adjectives** through these suffixes as: **ipō** – from Germanic, **ipa** – Old English prehistoric, which with these suffixes added to adjectives to form abstract **nouns**, such as: **fūlipa** – this is a word formed from the prehistoric Old English. Modern English words like: **merry – mirth, slow – sloth, strong – strength, true – truth**, are the result of similar formations. **Adverbs** were frequently formed from **adjectives** using suffixes like: **e, lice**. From the adjectives, like: **fæst, irm** – can be created these words as: **fæste, irmly**, and from the word form: **blind** was formed the word **blindlice** – meaning **blindly**. Regarding the prefixes – there were numerous, several of which may be added to verbs (Baugh et.al, 2002: 128). Although many Old English words disappeared or were replaced by loanwords, a substantial portion of the core vocabulary remains intact. This continuity underscores the enduring influence of Old English on Modern English and highlights the importance of historical linguistics in understanding contemporary language use.

## Conclusion

The comparison of Old English and Modern English across pronunciation, noun morphology, and vocabulary reveals a language shaped by both continuity and transformation. Old English possessed a systematic phonological structure, a rich inflected noun system, and a vocabulary formed primarily through internal linguistic processes. Over time, English underwent significant changes due to sound shifts, grammatical simplification, and extensive borrowing from other languages. Despite these developments, Modern English retains a foundational core inherited from Old

English. Common words, basic grammatical concepts, and underlying phonological patterns continue to reflect their historical origins. By examining Old English in relation to Modern English, this research paper demonstrates that linguistic change is neither abrupt nor arbitrary, but rather the result of gradual adaptation to social, cultural, and communicative needs. The evolution of English illustrates how languages respond to internal developments and external influences while maintaining structural continuity. This process of change highlights the dynamic nature of language as both a system and a social practice. Understanding Old English not only enriches knowledge of English history but also deepens appreciation for the complexity and resilience of language itself. Moreover, such historical linguistic analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how modern linguistic forms emerge from earlier stages, reinforcing the importance of diachronic study in linguistic research. Through this perspective, Old English is revealed not as a distant or obsolete form, but as a crucial foundation upon which Modern English continues to develop.

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