A Comparative Study of West Germanic Language Histories: Varying Degrees of Inflectional Syncretism in English and German

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Faculty Introduction

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Watley addresses the shared history and differential development of two closely related West Germanic languages: English and German. Both developed from Proto-Germanic (a branch of Proto-Indo-European). They share much, perhaps most obviously in their lexicons. However, the grammatical similarities between English and German can be demonstrated best by a comparison of Old English and today's German. Using a comparative methodology, Watley shows how the morphological development of English and German took different typological directions: English changed from a moderately inflectional language into a more analytic one while German retained much of its morphological richness. Watley provides a readable overview of established research on West Germanic, followed by examples that illustrate the key difference between these two closely related languages today. Watley's introduction to issues of the history of Germanic offers a valuable asset to anyone interested in learning more about these topics. It also exemplifies a central methodology of historical and comparative linguistics.

Abstract

In this paper, I explore the relationship between two languages within the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European (IE) language family: English and German. I begin with an overview of each language's history, with special focus on Old High German (OHG) and Old English (OE), Middle High German (MHG) and Middle English (ME), and Modern German (MG) and Present-Day English, in order to address the increased inflectional syncretism exhibited in English as compared to the relatively conservative inflectional preservation of Modern German. The Lord's Prayer will be used to illustrate the case syncretism exhibited in English and the contrastive preservation of the case system in German. I will focus on changes in morphology, but will also discuss phonological changes as they relate to inflectional syncretism throughout the history of these languages. I will also explore the syntactic repercussions of these changes and relevant factors which have contributed to the conservation of many inflectional aspects in German no longer active in the English language.

While modern English has lost much of the inflections and morphological aspects characteristic of Old English, German has preserved its morphological complexity. This trend of inflectional syncretism is not uncommon—as time progresses and language changes, inflectional systems may disintegrate and syncretize because of both internal and external motivations, and notably, as languages come into contact with one another (McMahon, 1994). The process of disintegration and syncretism is much more pronounced in English language history, as compared to German language history, which accounts for the relative inflectional simplicity in English and the consequential complexity retained by German today.

For the purpose of this paper, I focus on the Germanic branch of the Proto-Indo-European language tree, through which English and German are related. The Germanic branch is diverged into three groups: North Germanic (modern-day Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish), West Germanic (modern-day English, Frisian, Flemish, Dutch, Afrikaans, German, Yiddish), and East Germanic (all extinct). In addition to the modern-day languages represented within the West Germanic language group, the extinct languages of Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), Old Frisian, Old Dutch, Middle Dutch, Old Low German, Middle Low German, Old High German (OHG), and Middle High German (MHG) belong to this branch the of Indo-European language tree and are the predecessors of today's varieties. A majority of historical texts from periods so long ago are primarily religious or canonical in nature; the Lord's Prayer, for this reason, serves as an effective tool of comparison and illustration when discussing morphological change over time.

Literature Review

Finegan (1990) provides an inclusive, concise overview of the English language, opening with an explanation on the current status of this global language before guiding readers through a brief linguistic and social history, touching on the highly influential events that have attributed to the current standing English holds today. Finegan's topics of discussion include the English affinity for loanwords and compounding, evidential syncretism, relatively simplistic word structure, and dialectal and regional variations. Finegan's article serves as an appropriate preface for future study of other Germanic languages, creating a foundation to which one can return as the evident relationships are traced between languages, specifically between English and German.

Hawkins (1990a) provides a succinct yet detailed overview of the German language, discussing topics that include the history of the German language as it relates to other languages—English, Dutch, and Frisian—encompassed within the West Germanic branch of Proto-Indo-European. The historical evolution of High German is laid out, as it is divided into the following four stages: Old High German, Middle High German, Early New High German, and New High German. Hawkins (1990a) then goes on to explicate the keystone features of German phonology, morphology, and syntax throughout each of these assigned time periods.

In another article, Hawkins (1990b) discusses the two major groups into which extant Germanic languages are divided (North Germanic and West Germanic), and explicates the factors attributed to the stemming of Germanic languages as descendants of Proto-Germanic and, further back, Proto-Indo-European. Hawkins (1990b) also provides a brief look into influential linguistic changes, specifically The First (Germanic) Sound Shift, which is responsible for many of the characteristic consonantal qualities of Germanic languages today. Also discussed are the migration patterns of Germanic people groups and their consequential effect on the development of different language groups.

Miller (2012) explains what is known of the Celtic, Roman, and Germanic influence on the English language, with special attention paid to the evidence of Celtic influence and the elusiveness encountered when attempts are made to pin down specific details related to this influence. Providing historical accounts of the various inhabitants of the pre-Celts British Isles, Celts, Romans, and the West Germanic tribes, from circa 600/400 BC to 600 AD, Miller (2012) uses a chronologic timeline to serve as a reference alongside the hypotheses for specific instances of the various Celtic, Roman, and Germanic influences. Miller (2012) goes on to credit the Saxon enslavement of Celtic women, and the Celtic women's consequential imperfect acquisition of the Saxons' language, as a major substratal influence of Celtic on English. Also mentioned as a simplification caused by contact with Celtic is the loss of the Germanic reflexive, instead producing the later English—*self* reflexive. Overall, Miller (2012) provides insight into the early influences on English and how these influences could have spurred change, which may explain certain differences exhibited by English as compared to German.

Hawkins (2015) draws together the key differences and, consequentially, the similarities between English and German as entire languages, speaking from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives. An admittedly

cumbersome feat, Hawkins (2015) does, of course, gloss over numerous "contrastive generalizations," but the succinct generalizations that he is careful to explicate upon in this work support his argument "that the phonological changes that destroyed the case system in the history of English were the ultimate trigger that set in motion the syntactic changes leading to the present contrasts" between English and German (p. 37). He asserts that his research provides an additional, complementary resource in the future study of and, ideally, the formation of universal generalizations of cross-linguistic variation. Hawkins (2015) attributes his interest in this particular area of study to three main reasons:

> [F]irst, it is not commonly appreciated how precise [the contrasts between English and German] are… Second, despite the relatively recent time depth that separates English and German from their common West Germanic ancestor, the contrasts between them do not involve small changes in limited grammatical areas, but profound readjustments across all the major areas of grammar… [And] third, [there is] evidence that there is a descriptive generalization which unites these major areas of contrast. (p. 4)

Waterman (1966) presents a comprehensive, chronological history of the German language with the English student in mind. He provides a detailed discussion of the finer aspects of German history that may not be previously known to the English student as it would be for the traditional German student. Beginning with a discussion of German's place within the Indo-European language family, the work goes on to recount what scholars theorize about the early Indo-European people and, later, explicates what is known of the Germanic tribes and their culture, language, and proposed migration patterns.

As Waterman (1966) progresses chronologically through the comprehensive history of the German language, he draws attention to such important topics as phonological changes explained by Grimm's Law and Verner's Law and traces the key differences separating Low German (*Plattdeutsch*) and High German. The final chapter of the book provides a brief review of the sounds of German, in which the reader is reminded of the fundamentals of articulatory phonetics. The extensive historical background on the German language and the wealth of information on the various stages of German given by Waterman (1966) facilitate comparison between English and German as the two languages have developed and changed over time.

McMahon's study (1994), designed for both undergraduate and graduate

students of historical linguistics, offers a comprehensive discussion of both synchronic and diachronic study of language change at multiple levels—sound, morphology, syntax, semantics, and lexicon. In addition, McMahon (1994) dedicates the second portion of the book to a discussion of other relevant topics surrounding the phenomenon of language change, such as language contact, linguistic variation, and language death.

A Common Ancestor: Proto-Indo-European

English and German belong to the West Germanic language branch of the Indo-European language family. According to Waterman (1966), there are twelve branches in total that make up the Indo-European family: Indo-Iranian, Armenian, Illyrian, Albanian, Tocharian, Anatolian, Hellenic, Italic, Celtic, Germanic, Baltic, and Slavonic.[1] Proto-Indo-European, the common language source which these language groups share, was a highly inflectional language spoken circa 5,000-3,000 BC and the geographical origin of its speakers remains rather elusive. Scholars may at this point only speculate and theorize as to the precise geographical origin of the Proto-Indo-European people, estimating the origin to be Central, Eastern, or Northern Europe, or possibly the Russian Steppes (Waterman, 1966, p. 16-18). From Proto-Indo-European develops Proto-Germanic, circa 100 BC, and from Proto-Germanic springs forth branching languages classified as East, North, and West Germanic, with English and German both belonging to the West Germanic branch (Hawkins, 1990b).

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The Birth of the English Language

Scholars assign the date of 449 AD to the birth of the English language. As Bede's *Historica ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ("Ecclesiastical History of the English People") and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle attest, it was during this time that certain Germanic tribes–the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians–began to arrive at the landmass referred to today as the British Isles. The four tribes arrived at the request of Celtic King Vortigern, who believed the famed Germanic warriors could assist in restoring peace and order to the military vacuum left after the retreatment of Roman troops

[1] Millward and Hayes (2012) give only 10 branches because of the varying principles on how to count the PIE branches.

at the beginning of the fifth century.

Similarities between Modern German and Old English

Grown out of Proto-Germanic, both Old English and Old High German have a highly complex inflectional morphology and a four-case system (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive), as German continues to exhibit today. Several similarities can be observed upon a simple comparison between texts from both languages and, additionally, between Old English and Modern German today. To highlight a few of the easily observable surface structures, the Lord's Prayer is given below, first in Modern German, followed by an Old English translation:

> *Modern German*
>
> Vater unser, du bist da im Himmel. Geheiligt werde Dein Name. Dein Reich komme. Dein Wille geschehe, wie er im Himmel geschieht, so geschehe er auf Erden. Unser tägliches Brot gib uns heute. Und vergib uns unsere Sünden, wie wir unseren Schuldigern vergeben. Und du mögest uns nicht in Versuchung führen, sondern erlöse uns von Bösem. (Hawkins, 1990b, p. 118)
>
> *Old English*
>
> Fæder ūre þū þe eart on heofonum. Sī þīn nama ġehālgod. Tōbecume þīn rīċe, ġewurþe þīn willa, on eorðan swā swā on heofonum. Ūre ġedæġhwāmlīcan hlāf syle ūs tō dæġ, and forġyf ūs ūre gyltas, swā swā wē forġyfað ūrum gyltendum. And ne ġelæd þū ūs on costnunge, ac ālȳs ūs of yfele. Sōþlīċe. (*The Lord's Prayer in Old English – Anglo Saxon)*

To the untrained eye, the texts above may hardly seem similar, but upon closer inspection, numerous key similarities may be observed. For example, compare the Old English *gehalgod* to the Modern German *geheiligt*, both corresponding to the Present-Day English *hallowed*. Present-Day English no longer exhibits the *ge-* inflectional morpheme attached to various forms of verbs (and even some nouns), as was the practice in Old English. Instead, speakers of English today know that for regular verbs, the morpheme *-ed* is used to denote the past-tense as well as past-participle forms, with certain strong verbs proving to be exceptions to this rule. Modern German retains the *ge-* inflectional morpheme, and Modern German verbs more rigidly preserve such morphology across the board.

Hawkins (2015) discusses the inflectional system of English and German,

notably pointing out the similarities between the Old English inflectional system as it more closely resembles the Modern German inflectional system. Examples are provided that outline the prolific use of inflectional morphemes the German language has so conservatively preserved, as opposed to the rampant inflectional syncretism evidenced in the English language, whose one lexical morpheme may suffice for expressing a single meaning, where German might have multiple inflected forms to express. Hawkins (2015) gives the example of the conjugations of the English verb *say* and the German equivalent, *sagen*: "the English stem *say*… does service for all of the following forms in German: *sage*, *sagst*, *sagen*, *sagt*, *sag*, *sagen Sie*" (p. 11).

Language Contact: Middle English (1100–500), Middle High German (1050–1350)

The transition from Old English to Middle English brought about many changes over a period of 600 years, a prominent aspect being a morphological simplification. Language changes tend to stem from the want or need to become more regularized or simplified. For example, contact between two distinct yet similar languages produces a basic need to communicate for trading and other common purposes. The inflectional endings, in these particular interactions, become superfluous to the task at hand. Rather than attempt to learn the respective language's unique inflectional system, two speakers of different languages can instead opt to learn the foreign word absent of its appropriate inflectional morphology.

Though the transition from Old High German to Middle High German did not see a similar process of morphological simplification, there are two notable changes undergone in both transitionary periods, those changes being "the spread of mutation (umlaut), and… the weakening of the vowels of unstressed syllables, especially when in the word-final position" (Waterman, 1966, p. 85). During the transitional period, both languages experienced a significant amount of French influence. In English history, this influence began with the Norman Conquest. The invasion by William the Conqueror in 1066, and the consequential Anglo-Saxon defeat at the Battle of Hastings led to the ascension of Norman-French aristocracy. As a result, the French language made its way into the British Isles and became the language of the

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government and courts of law. English, meanwhile, became the language of the common people.

French influence on the German language and its people, however, occurred not as a result of conquest, but rather admiration. Waterman (1966) notes that even before the Middle High German period, "the prestige of French learning and culture had… been firmly established in Germany" (p. 89). In fact, by the time of the Middle High German period,

> it was not at all uncommon for the German knights to visit in France, or even to seek service at one of the French courts. Nor was it unusual to find Frenchmen engaged as tutors to the children of German nobles. Thus, in a relatively brief space of time, the German language of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries took on many French words, expressions, and turns of speech. (p. 89)

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Consequences of Inflectional Syncretism: Present-Day English (1800-Present) vs. New High German (1650-Present)

German, having largely preserved its complex grammatical morphology and four-case system, retains a "'tighter-fit' between surface form and semantic representation" (Hawkins, 2015, p. 122). Contrastingly, English, having undergone a robust history of inflectional syncretism and today using only two cases of what was a four-case system, no longer exhibits the semantic precision evident in German. Instead, English grammar allows room for greater interpretation because of the ambiguity and vagueness fostered by the less complex inflectional system and grammatical morphology. English, therefore, relies more heavily on pragmatic factors and inferences when deriving meaning from a sentence; whereas German, because of its retention of morphological complexity, is able to wield a more syntactically precise meaning, leaving less room for interpretation.

This difference in semantic precision is well illustrated in the comparison

of the English sentence *The woman gave the boy a hat. / The woman gave a hat to the boy* and the German equivalent, *Die Frau gibt dem Jungen einen Hut. / Die Frau gibt einen Hut dem Jungen. / Dem Jungen gibt die Frau einen Hut.* In English, the direct and indirect objects are denoted by word order; inflectional morphemes are not added to *hat* and *boy* to express their grammatical function in the sentence. In German, however, the direct and indirect objects are denoted by inflectional morphemes in conjunction with the accusative and dative cases. Nominative *der Junge* becomes *dem Jungen* in the dative case to express its grammatical function as the indirect object of the sentence, while *ein Hut* becomes *einen Hut* in the accusative case to express its grammatical function as the direct object of the sentence. The German language is able to exhibit increased word order freedom as compared to the English language because of German's use of inflectional morphemes to denote grammatical function in a sentence; the various inflectional morphemes signal the object's role in the sentence, rather than solely relying on word order to express the relationship.

Conclusion and Summary

Two languages, stemming from a common source, today exhibit numerous disparities. Serving as a basis for comparison of the varying degrees of inflectional syncretism evidenced by the two languages, the Lord's Prayer effectively illustrates the numerous examples of German's tendency for preservation and English's contrastive habit of morphological simplification. Within a relatively concise four lines, an enlightening plethora of inflectional morphology and examples of case syncretism exhibited by English contrasted with German's preservation of the case system, and the respective time periods of Modern German and Old English is available for observation, study, and comparison. The extensive accounts and overviews of German and English language histories provided by Waterman (1966), Miller (2015), and Finegan (1990) provide readers with excellent and sufficient knowledge necessary to form a foundation from which the aims of this paper are able to root. Hawkins' (2015) contributions to creating generalizations of key differences between the two languages and McMahon's (1994) explanation of language change further assist in the aims of this paper.

Using the long-understood and well-established knowledge available on the subject of inflectional syncretism, language change, and English and German language histories, I have intended to illustrate the varying degrees of inflectional syncretism throughout the two languages' histories by way of comparing two versions of the Lord's Prayer. This comparison

illustrates that Old English and Modern German were much more similar, as opposed to Modern German and Present-Day English. I believe that using this comparative approach to language study can prove especially helpful to beginning students in the field of Comparative and Historical Linguistics, as this approach allows students to gain an introductory understanding of language change through approachable texts that concisely capture languages' characteristics and habits during a particular past or present time period. ■

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Student Biography

Danielle Watley is a summer 2018 SHSU graduate earning a Bachelor of Arts in English with minors in German and General Business. During her time at SHSU, Danielle has been an active member of the Elliott T. Bowers Honors College, where she served as a Student Ambassador and a co-chair for the Undergraduate Research Symposium. Under the advisement of Dr. Helena Halmari, professor in the Department of English, Danielle began researching the histories of West Germanic languages, with specific interest in the similarities between Old English and Modern German. After graduation, Danielle plans to attend Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, where she will pursue a master's degree in Speech-Language Pathology.