

Scandinavian Influence on the English Language

As a result of the contacts with the Vikings, the Old English language underwent influence of Scandinavian towards the end of the Old English period. Originally, on the continent the Anglo-Saxons and the Scandinavians were intimately related in a common racial and linguistic bond. This explains why the first English epic *Beowulf*, had for its setting one of the Scandinavian countries; even the main characters in the poem are Scandinavian. But when the Vikings began to attack and plunder England, the relationship between the Germanic races worsened. Ultimately, many Scandinavians settled down in different parts of England, and as a result of this co-existence, the language of the Anglo-Saxons was considerably influenced by the language of the invaders. Since the two peoples lived very intimately, it is very difficult to identify the Scandinavian words in English. Some words, however, can be identified as of Scandinavian origin. The reason is that phonologically their form is different from what could be expected in a native English word.

Thus the word 'awe' is certainly of Scandinavian origin; the Old English form is 'ege'. Another word where Old English had a palatal g and Scandinavian a velar g was the word for 'egg', which was Old English *æg* and Scandinavian *egg*. Obviously, therefore, the modern word, *egg* comes from Scandinavian. Similarly Old English sometimes had palatal c where Scandinavian retained the velar k. That is why *church* is English and *kirk* is Scandinavian. Again Germanic *sk* did not become palatalized in Scandinavian as it did in Old English. Thus *Shirt* is English and *skirt*, Scandinavian.

Among the vowels, the main difference is that proto-Germanic *ai* becomes *ei* in Scandinavian, but *a* in Old English as can be seen in the pair *nei-na*, the first giving modern English *nay* and the second *no*.

Often, a word of Scandinavian origin can be identified by the fact that it does not occur in Old English, but does occur in Scandinavian. An example is the verb, "to take", which is Scandinavian *taka*. This is not found in Old English, which uses the verb *niman*.

Many of the Scandinavian words have since died out from the English language, but quite a number remains. We find the legal and administrative terms, such as the words—*thrall*, *law*, *by-law*, *crave* and *riding*.

The largest single group of these words is such as would be associated with a sea-roving people, words like *barda* (beaked ship), *ceanerr* (small warship), *lip* (fleet), *dreng* (warrior), *orrest* (battle) and *ran* (robbery).

Among the most notable evidences of Scandinavian settlement in England is the large number of places that bear Scandinavian names. We find more than six hundred of places like *Whitby*, *Derby*, *Rugby* (–by, a Danish word meaning ‘farm’ or ‘town’), three hundred names like *Althorp* and *Linthorp* (Scan. ‘thorp’ meaning ‘village’), almost equal number of names like *Braithwate*, (Scan. *thwate*, meaning “an isolated piece of land”, about a hundred places like *Brimtoft*, *Nortoft* (Scan. –toft a piece of ground).

A similar high percentage of Scandinavian personal names is found in English. Names ending in –son, like *Stevenson* or *Johnson*, conform to a characteristic Scandinavian custom.

The English and the Scandinavian were accustomed to much the same kind of rural life, and the fusion of the two peoples was a very close one. Many of the words taken over in consequence were homely and everyday ones. Thus the word *sister* is taken from Scandinavian. So are the names of parts of the body— *leg* and *neck*. Other common names include *window*, *sky*, *knife*, *skin*, *dirt*, *skill*, *bag*, *cake* and *fellow*.

Everyday adjectives include *wrong*, *low*, *loose*, *odd*, *flat* and *ugly*. Among the everyday verbs are *get*, *give*, *call*, *want*, *take*, *drag*, *smile*, *thrive*, *die* etc. the conjunction *though* is also from Scandinavian.

So are more remarkably the pronouns *they*, *them* and *their*. As Jespersen pointed out, such words are rarely borrowed by one language from another. All this only go to show that the distinguished Scandinavian philologist is right when he says: “An Englishman cannot thrive or be ill or die without Scandinavian words; they are to the language what bread and eggs are to the daily fare.”