

English as a Germanic Language

Prior to and during the Middle Ages, changes occurred in the way Germanic words were pronounced. These changes came about in two major waves called “sound shifts.” The shifts in pronunciation originated in the southernmost parts of the Germanic language areas (present-day Bavaria and Austria) and moved gradually to the north and west. However, the progress of these changed sounds (in German called *Lautverschiebungen*) eventually faltered in present-day northern Germany, so the changes never reached as far as England. Germanic words taken to England by tribes such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes represent even older language forms than do their counterparts in today’s standard German. This is also why North German dialects, as well as Dutch and Frisian, contain many words that closely resemble English.

The sound shifts provide predictable consonant variables between modern English and modern German:

- An initial **p** became **pf** as did **p** at the end of a syllable. Since this change never extended as far as England, German today has the words **Pfund** and **Apfel** while English has **pound** and **apple**.
- The **p** sound located between two vowels or at the end of a word became an **f** sound. Thus, German has Schiff and Pfeffer while English has **ship** and **pepper**.
- The **d** sound became **t**. Since the change never reached England, German has **tot** while English has **dead**.
- An initial or final **th** became **d**. German contains the words **Dorn** and **Herd** while English has **thorn** and **hearth**.
- The **v** sound shifted to a **b** sound, but again, this change did not affect English. Therefore, German has the word **eben** while English has **even**.
- Similarly, the **y** became a **g**. Today German contains the word **sagen**, while the English cognate is **say**.
- Initial or final **z** shifted to a **t**. This explains German **zu** and **Herz** vs. English **to** and **heart**.

What Are Cognates?

Cognates are words in two different languages that show evidence of a common origin. They may no longer have the same meaning, but if the two words sprang from the same root, they are cognates.

[TAKE THE COGNATE QUIZ!](#)