INTRODUCTION
Subject and Aims of the History of English

§ 1. This outline history covers the main events in the historical development of the English language: the history of its phonetic structure and spelling, the evolution of its grammatical system, the growth of its vocabulary, and also the changing historical conditions of English-speaking communities relevant to language history.

A language can be considered from different angles. In studying Modern English (Mod E) we regard the language as fixed in time and describe each linguistic level — phonetics, grammar or lexis — synchronically, taking no account of the origin of present-day features or their tendencies to change. The synchronic approach can be contrasted to the diachronic. When considered diachronically, every linguistic fact is interpreted as a stage or step in the never-ending evolution of language. In practice, however, the contrast between diachronic and synchronic study is not so marked as in theory: we commonly resort to history to explain current phenomena in Mod E. Likewise in describing the evolution of language we can present it as a series of synchronic cross-sections, e.g. the English language of the age of Shakespeare (16th-17th c.) or the age of Chaucer (14th c.).

§ 2. Through learning the history of the English language the student achieves a variety of aims, both theoretical and practical.

The history of the language is of considerable interest to all students of English, since the English language of today reflects many centuries of development. "Substance and form of one's own
language, however, become intelligible only when its origin and gradual evolution are traced, and this cannot be done without taking into account, first, its own extinct forms, and secondly, cognate languages, both living and dead".

This is no less true of a foreign language. Therefore one of the aims of this course is to provide the student with a knowledge of linguistic history sufficient to account for the principal features of present-day English. A few illustrations given below show how modern linguistic features can be explained by resorting to history.

§ 3. Any student of English is well aware of the difficulties of reading and spelling English. The written form of the English word is conventional rather than phonetic. The values of Latin letters as used in English differ greatly from their respective values in other languages, e.g. French, German or Latin. Cf.:

bit — [bɪt]
three letters — three sounds

full correspondence between Latin letters and English sounds

bite — [baɪt]
four letters — three sounds

no correspondence between the vowels and their graphic representation: the final *e* is not pro-

nounced, but conventionally serves to show that the preceding letter *i* has its English alphabetic value which is [aɪ], not [ɪ] as in other languages

knight — [naɪt]
six letters — three sounds

the letters *k* and *gh* do not stand for any sounds but *gh* evidently shows that *i* stands for [aɪ]

The history of English sounds and spelling accounts for these and similar peculiarities. Without going into details it will suffice to say that at the time when Latin characters were first used in Britain (7th c.) writing was phonetic: the letters stood, roughly, for the same sounds as in Latin. Later, especially after the introduction of printing in the 15th c., the written form of the word became fixed, while the sounds continued to change. This resulted in a growing discrepancy between letter and sound and in the modern peculiar use of Latin letters in English. Many modern spellings show how the words were pronounced some four or five hundred years ago, e.g. in the 14th c. *knight* sounded as [knix't], *root* as [ro:t], *tale* as ['ta:lə].

§ 4. Another illustration may be drawn from the vocabulary. Since English belongs to the Germanic group of languages, it would be natural to expect that it has many words or roots in common with cognate Germanic languages: German, Swedish, Danish and others. Instead, we find many more words in Mod E having exact parallels in the Romance languages: French, Latin, Spanish. Cf.:

English	Other Germanic languages	Romance languages
give	G *geben*	
	Sw *giva*	—
peace	G *Frieden*	Fr *paix*
(OE *friŏ*[1])	Sw *fred*	L *pace*
	Dutch *vrede*	It *pace*
		Sp *paz*
army	G *Heer*	Fr *armée*
(OE *here*[1])	Sw *här*	It *armata*

The first word — *give* — is of native, Germanic origin, which is confirmed by the parallels from other Germanic tongues; the other words — *peace* and *army* — are borrowings from Romance languages (note that in OE the respective words were Germanic.) In present-day English the proportion of Romance roots is higher than that of native roots. The history of English will say when and how these borrowings were made and will thus account for the composition of the modern vocabulary.

§ 5. As far as grammar is concerned, it can only be noted at this stage that the history of the language will supply explanations both

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[1] Old English (OE) is the name given to the English language between c. 450 and 1100 A.D.

for the general, regular features of the grammatical structure and for its specific peculiarities and exceptions. It will explain why English has so few inflections; how its "analytical" structure arose — with an abundance of compound forms and a fixed word order; why modal verbs, unlike other verbs, take no ending -s in the 3rd p.sg.; why some nouns add -en or change the root-vowel in the plural instead of adding -s (e.g. oxen, feet) and so on and so forth.

§ 6. Another important aim of this course is of a more theoretical nature. While tracing the evolution of the English language through time, the student will be confronted with a number of theoretical questions such as the relationship between statics and dynamics in language, the role of linguistic and extralinguistic factors, the interdependence of different processes in language history. These problems may be considered on a theoretical plane within the scope of general linguistics. In describing the evolution of English, they will be discussed in respect of concrete linguistic facts, which will ensure a better understanding of these facts and will demonstrate the application of general principles to language material.

§ 7. One more aim of this course is to provide the student of English with a wider philological outlook. The history of the English language shows the place of English in the linguistic world; it reveals its ties and contacts with other related and unrelated tongues.

Sources of Language History

§ 8. Every living language changes through time. It is natural that no records of linguistic changes have ever been kept, as most changes pass unnoticed by contemporaries.

The history of the English language has been reconstructed on the basis of written records of different periods. The earliest extant written texts in English are dated in the 7th c.; the earliest records in other Germanic languages go back to the 3rd or 4th c. A. D.

The development of English, however, began a long time before it was first recorded. In order to say where the English language came from, to what languages it is related, when and how it has acquired its specific features, one must get acquainted with some facts of the pre-written history of the Germanic group.

Certain information about the early stages of English and Germanic history is to be found in the works of ancient historians and geographers, especially Roman. They contain descriptions of Germanic tribes, personal names and place-names. Some data are also provided by early borrowings from Germanic made by other languages, e.g. the Finnish and the Baltic languages. But the bulk of our knowledge comes from scientific study of extant texts.

§ 9. The pre-written history of English and cognate languages was first studied by methods of comparative linguistics evolved in the 19th c. By applying these methods linguists discovered the kinship of what is now known as the Indo-European (IE) family of languages and grouped them into Germanic, Slavonic, Romance, Celtic, and others. It is one of the intentions of this course to show how comparison of existing and reconstructed forms can demonstrate differences and

similarities in languages, and how reconstructed forms help to understand later developments.

§ 10. Modern linguistics has improved on the methods of comparative linguistic research applied in the 19th c. In addition to external reconstruction which was based on comparing different languages, the recently formulated method of internal reconstruction studies history from internal sources alone. This method is based on the assumption that every language is a well organised and well balanced structure of elements. Hence, if among the productive systems of the language there occur some smaller, non-productive systems one can surmise that they are relics of preceding stages of development. When traced into the past, these systems often appear more numerous and more productive, e. g. modern plural forms like *oxen*, *teeth*, isolated now, were found in larger groups of nouns at an earlier period. It follows that the past history of a language can also be reconstructed by considering its dialectal varieties, since the dialects often preserve forms, words or pronunciations which have become obsolete in the literary standard.