The Vocabulary of Old English
Handout
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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.

In Old English, **adjectives** could be formed from nouns by means of such suffixes as -*ig, -lēas* and *-ful*, giving words like *blōdig 'bloody', frēondlēas 'friendless'* and *ancful 'thankful'*.

Conversely, **nouns** could be formed from adjectives: for example, there was a Proto-Germanic suffix **-i.ō* (prehistoric OE *-i.a) which could be added to adjectives to form abstract nouns: on the stem of the adjective *fūl 'foul, dirty'* was formed the prehistoric OE noun **fūli.a;* the *i* caused front-mutation and was later lost, leading to the recorded OE form *f%l. 'impurity, filth'*. Similar formations have led to such Modern English pairs as *merry* and *mirth, slow* and *sloth, strong* and *strength, true* and *truth*.

Adverbs were commonly formed from adjectives by means of suffixes such as -*e* and -*līce:* so from the adjective *fæst 'firm'* was formed *fæste 'firmly'*, and from blind was formed *blindlīce 'blindly'*.

As for **verbs**, one of the very common verbal prefix is *ge-*, which often has a perfective force, signifying the achievement or the completion of the action. So *sceran* means *'to cut'*, and *gesceran 'to cut right through'; rīdan* means '*to ride'*, and *gerīdan 'to ride up to, conquer, occupy'*.

As well as using **affixation**, Old English formed new words by **compounding**. The difference is that an affix is a bound morpheme, whereas a compound word is formed by the joining of two or more free morphemes. So, for example, *literature, arithmetic, grammar* and *astronomy* were called *bōccræft, rīmcræft, stæfcræft* and *tungolcræft,* that is, *book-skill, number-skill, letter-skill* and *star-skill*.

Old English did however borrow a number of words from other languages, especially for the concepts and institutions of Christianity. OE *cirice* or *cyrce 'church'* is derived from the Greek *kuriakón*, meaning *'(house) of the Lord'*, and was probably borrowed by pre-Christian Germanic-speaking groups; similar forms are found in all the Germanic languages, whereas the Romance languages have words derived from the Latin *ecclesia*, like French *église*. Most of the words connected with Christianity, however, date from after the conversion, and are from

Latin (though Latin itself had borrowed many of them from Greek). They include OE *apostol 'apostle', biscop 'bishop'* (Latin *episcopus*), *munuc 'monk'* (Latin *monachus*), *mynster 'monastery, church'* (Latin *monastērium*), as well as words for *abbot, disciple, nun, pilgrim, pope* and *school.*

But even in this field Old English made considerable use of its native language material. Sometimes existing words were simply transferred to Christian use, as with *Easter, hell* and *holy*. Sometimes new words were coined from native elements: thus Latin *evangelium* was rendered as *gōdspell 'good message'*, which has become Modern English gospel, and *trinitas 'trinity'* was rendered as *rīnes 'threeness'*.

Study guide

1. What word-formation processes were used predominantly in forming OE words? Give examples.
2. Explain the formation of adjectives in OE and give examples.
3. Describe the process of creating OE abstract nouns from OE abstract adjectives. Give examples.
4. Explain how OE adverbs were formed from OE adjectives. Give examples.
5. Explain the function of the prefix *"ge"* in the OE verb treatment.
6. What is the difference between affixation and compounding?
7. Explain and comment on creating OE compounds. Give examples.
8. Give 3 examples of borrowings from other languages denoting institutions of Christianity. Specify the the country a word was borrowed from and give an example.
9. The concept of Christianity was also rich in native vocabulary. Give two examples of words related to Christianity which are native and were not borrowed from other languages.
10. Give an example of a borrowing from Latin.