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'English is a Germanic Language.' What does this mean, and how true is it?

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In order to answer this question some clarification is needed: for the purposes of this essay 'English' will be taken to mean Modern English (ModE) — as used in spoken and written communication in English speaking countries. 'Germanic' (Gmc) is the group of languages including modern German, Dutch and English which developed from Proto-Germanic — which in itself developed from Proto-Indo-European (PIE).[1] Terry Hoad lists five significant features which demarcate Germanic languages from other Indo-European languages: the distinction between strong and weak verbs, the distinction between strong and weak adjectives, the existence of only two basic verbal tenses, evidence that the consonants have been shifted in the 'First Consonant Shift' and the use of a stress on the first syllable of most words.[2] The extent to which ModE conforms to these characteristics is central to the examination of the issue at hand, as is the non-Gmc features of vocabulary and syntax in ModE. The use of natural gender in ModE — as opposed to the use of grammatical gender in other Gmc languages — will not be discussed because ModE is the only major European language of which this is a feature; this quality is, therefore, linguistically anomalous rather than specifically non-Gmc.[3] This analysis will demonstrate that ModE — although some of its characteristics would suggest otherwise — is a Gmc language; the non-Gmc elements found in ModE have been incorporated into the language over its development from Old English to Middle, Early Modern and Modern English, and therefore the secondary focus of the essay will be on how and why these features have entered the language over the course of its evolution. Two modern texts will be analysed in this context — one constructed written piece and one transcript of spontaneous spoken language — in order to examine the validity of the argument when applied to both written and spoken forms of ModE as a form of communication (see Appendices I and II).

Baugh and Cable suggest that the great number of borrowings present mean that, in terms of its vocabulary at least, ModE looks almost non-Gmc.[4] English, in fact, has 'an unusual capacity for assimilating outside elements' which results in borrowings from an extremely wide selection of languages being present in ModE, most of which for historical reasons are non-Gmc.[5] More than half of English vocabulary is derived from Latin, either directly or indirectly, much of which can be attributed to the contact between the English and French settlers after the Norman invasion of 1066.[6] Baugh and Cable note the three levels of synonymy in ModE by tentatively suggesting that words derived from Gmc, French and Latin represent popular, literary and learned levels respectively; this reflects the historic prestigious

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[1] Albert C.Baugh, Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), p.28.
[2] Terry Hoad, 'Preliminaries: Before English', *The Oxford History of English*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.7-31 (pp.17-20).
[3] Baugh and Cable, p.11.
[4] Baugh and Cable, p.98.
[5] Ibid., p.10.
[6] Ibid.

position of French and Latin, which in the Middle English period had ‘an established association with social power, elevated social status and learning’, as opposed to the vernacular English.[7] By looking at the spoken text in Appendix I we can see the presence of Latin derivations (*cross*, l.14 and *concept*, l.18), French derivations (*cousin*, l.4, *ammunition, l.8, bullet*, l.16, and *outrageous*, l.18) as well as words derived from Latin via French (*couple*, l.9 and *absolutely* l.18).[8] The usage of Romance derived vocabulary, however, is much more prevalent in the literary text shown in Appendix II: the words *strange*, *exhausted, feverish*, *party, suffered, grotesque* and *realised* all appear in the first four lines, and so we can see the higher concentration of non-Gmc terms in a constructed text which is of a higher register.[9] It is interesting to note the presence of the non-Gmc term *dum-dum* in Appendix I: the provenance of the term is a ‘name of a town and arsenal near Kolkata, where [dum-dum bullets] were first produced’, which shows the readiness of the language to adopt foreign terms when a need for new vocabulary arises — this differs from the Gmc method which is normally to combine existing words.[10] This limited examination of vocabulary in both written and spoken English shows the extensive influence of the Romance languages on ModE’s lexicon, although it also suggests that spontaneous non-literary language predominantly contains words of Gmc origin. On the basis of this initial overview it is, therefore, arguable that the vocabulary of ‘English’, when taken as an applied concept comprising both spoken and written language, owes both the Gmc and Romance languages equal credit in terms of the source of its lexicon.

Baugh and Cable claim that ‘the Germanic sound-shift is the most distinctive feature marking off the Germanic languages from the languages to which they are related.’[11] The fact that English exhibits the consequences of the ‘First Germanic Consonant Shift’ — as described by ‘Grimm’s Law’ and refined by ‘Verner’s Law’ — is, therefore, highly important in establishing its classification as a Gmc language. We can see examples of words that show the results of the shifted consonants in our two test texts: Appendix II includes the word *mother* (l.35) which — unlike its Latin unshifted counterpart *mater* (which has the voiceless plosive [t] medial consonant) — has developed a voiced fricative [ð] medial consonant during its progression from its PIE origins.[12] Furthermore, Appendix I shows use of the word *three* (l.16), which has experienced a similar shift to an unvoiced fricative initial consonant [θ], unlike the Lithuanian *trýs*.[13] Both texts happen to mention the number thirty-eight (l.4 in Appendix I, l.29 in Appendix II), which is interesting because the medial consonant of *eight* has shifted from a voiceless plosive [k] found in PIE, which remains in Latin *octo* or Greek *ὀκτώ,* to the [x] found in Old English *æhte* from which ModE *eight* originates.[14] The development of these characteristically Gmc sounds has occurred in ModE’s evolution and, since this is seen to be one of the key qualities of Gmc language, represents a significant aspect of why ModE is considered a Gmc language.

The second phonetic feature of ModE which aligns it as a Gmc language is the tendency to use a strong stress on the root syllable of a word; we can see that this is the case

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[7] Ibid., pp.173-4; Ishtla Singh, *The History of English: A Student’s Guide* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), p.66-7.

[8] *couple* comes from Latin via Old French, and *absolutely* from Latin through Anglo-Norman/ Middle French. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2010) <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 27 December 2010]. NB: this list of Romance derived words from Appendix I is not exhaustive.

[9] OED, *strange* (l.1), *party* (l.3), *grotesque* (l.4) and *realised* (l.4) (“realise, v.”) derive from French; *suffered* (l.3), from Anglo-Norman/ Old French; *exhausted* (l.2) (“exhaust, n.”), from Latin; *feverish* (l.2) (“fever, n.”), from Latin via Old English.

[10] OED, “dum-dum, n.”.

[11] Baugh and Cable, p.19.

[12] Singh, p.48.

[13] OED, “three, adj. and n.”: *treies* is listed as Indo-European for *three*, which is possibly deduced from the Latin *trēs*, *tria* and Lithuanian *trýs*, to which the entry also refers.

[14] OED, “eight, adj. and n.”; Singh notes that PIE [k] changed to Gmc [x], later [h] in the consonant shift, p.48.

with Gmc derived words found in the test texts such as *mórning, stúmbled* (Appendix II: l.4, l.9) *márshes* and *pláying* (Appendix I: l.9, l.13). If we instead examine some of the words of non-Gmc origin in the texts — previously identified on pages 2-3 — we can see that this is not the case for *exháusted, grotésque, outrágeous* and *ammunítion*; however, the words *párty, féverish, búllet and cóusin* have adopted the native stress pattern.[15] ModE therefore, exceptions aside, mainly holds a chief stress on the root syllable of words, especially on words of Gmc origin; this is highly important to the issue at hand, both because it is a characteristically Gmc feature of language, and also because the widely held opinion is that this stress pattern was a key factor in the decay of the use of inflections to denote the grammatical function of words.[16] It is easy to speculate that the unstressed final syllable caused by this pattern could cause a reduction in the reliance on inflectional endings to encode meaning into language: in a pragmatic sense, in terms of spoken language, the lack of emphasis on the part of the word that indicates grammatical function means it would be hard to hear, and so a move towards analytic language would be inevitable.

Gmc languages were historically inflectional.[17] But ModE — amongst others such as Swedish and Danish — is mainly uninflected; the progression of English to its modern mostly analytical form does not directly affect its status as a Gmc language, but this transition is pertinent to this analysis because of the consequent impact that the decay of inflections had on other characteristically Gmc features of ModE.[18] Some elements of inflected language are still present in ModE — though listing all these features is not critical to the issue at hand. What is critical, however, is the fact that the levelling of inflections (caused by the stress on the first syllable of most words) underpins some critical grammatical features of ModE which distinguish it from other Gmc languages.

Owing to inflectional levelling adjectives were simplified in the Middle English period: they no longer had to agree with the noun which they modified and the distinction between strong and weak adjectival forms only existed as an archaic survival by the end of the Middle English period.[19] Ishtla Singh notes that in Early ModE, as is the case today, adjectives only alter in their forms as comparatives and superlatives: the addition of an *–er* or *-est* suffix, or when altering a polysyllabic adjective the words *more* or *most* can be prefixed to some adjectives, indicate the comparative and superlative respectively.[20] Two examples of this can be found in Appendix I: *the most natural thing in the world* (l.19-20) and *the youngest in the room* (l.32). This is, however, not the case with ModE adjectives: they do not have to agree with the noun they modify in case, gender and number and, more significantly in terms of their Gmc characteristic, are not split into strong and weak forms.[21] In Old English an adjective preceded by a definite article would adopt a weak form since it was unnecessary to repeat the syntactic information; an adjective not preceded by a definite article would adopt a strong form, which was noticeably different.[22] Appendix II shows that this is no longer the case in ModE: in the noun phrase *First day* (l.1) the adjective *first* is not preceded by anything, whereas in *for the first time* (l.4-5) the same adjective is preceded by the definite article yet it adopts the same form. The two forms of adjectives found in Old English, German and other Gmc languages are therefore lost in ModE; since this is seen as

[15] For line references to these examples in the Appendices please see earlier references to them on pages 2-3.
[16] Baugh and Cable, p.46; Singh, p.117; Mugglestone, p.20.
[17] Baugh and Cable, p.340.
[18] Baugh and Cable, p.340.
[19] Ibid., p.149.
[20] Singh, p.157; The *–er* and *–est* suffixes remain as a descendant of OE *–ra* and *–ost/-est* suffixes, Singh, p.84.
[21] *This* and *that*, when used as adjectives, agree with the noun in terms of number (*those* and *these*), and so are an exception to this rule, as are possessive adjectives.
[22] Singh, p.83; p.157.

one of the key characteristics of Gmc languages, it is clear that its absence in ModE marks one of the significant grammatical divergences from the Gmc roots of the language.

The move towards an analytic language also had a consequent effect on another Gmc feature of English: without inflections to denote the grammatical functions of words English — most extensively from the Middle English period onwards — instead uses prepositions, auxiliary verbs and word order.[23] Singh points out indications that Early Old English, like other Gmc languages and their ancestors, was a mainly OV language; there was some freedom in this due to the presence of inflections, as discussed above, and from the late twelfth century onwards VO had become the norm with OV only being used in subordinate clauses, as is the case in other modern Gmc languages.[24] The occasional use of OV structures in subordinate clauses was present until the Middle English period, but by the EModE period, continuing to the ModE period, this had disappeared almost entirely.[25] The predominant use of the VO structure can be seen in both the test texts. This example clearly shows us multiple (S)VO clauses which run into each other:

	S	V	O
Clause 1:	Brian Beddingfields	knew	his dad had some ammunition from the war
	and		
Clause 2:	he	found	it
	and		
Clause 3:	they	were	38s
	so		
Clause 4:	we erm	took	it

Appendix I (l.7-9)

Here we can see total compliance with the VO model. Appendix II, as a more complex and literary text, contains much more complicated syntax than the simplistic formations found in the spoken text yet, even in subordinate clauses (as shown in Example 2 below), uses VO syntax.

Example 1:

	S	V	O
Clause 1:	I	stepped off	the path
	and		
Clause 2:	Something	hindered	me.

(l.6-7)

[23] Singh, p.32.
[24] Singh, p.32; Mugglestone, pp.46-7; V= verb, O= object, S= subject.
[25] Singh, p.123; p.161.

Example 2:

	S V1 V2
Main Clause:	I just sat down and began to write,
	S V O
Subordinate Clause:	as if it was the most natural thing in the world

(l.18-20)

These examples show that the VO word order is used in both main and subordinate clauses in ModE and — though deviations such as the V(S)O order used in questions exist — the almost exclusive use of VO word order means that ModE diverges from the typically Gmc use of OV syntactic formations even in subordinate clauses.[26] This non-Gmc feature of syntax, coupled with the loss of differentiation between strong and weak adjective forms, represent the two most significant breaks with Gmc characteristics in terms of grammar.

The use of distinct strong and weak forms of verbs, as noted in the introduction as a key feature of Gmc language, is present in some ModE verbs, though they are now commonly referred to as irregular and regular verbs respectively; these verbs are identified by how they are modified to indicate the past (preterite) tense since strong verbs change their root vowel and weak verbs add a dental suffix.[27] Evidence of Gmc based strong and weak verb formations can be seen in the test texts: Appendix II shows the weak verb *to seem* in both its present tense form *seem* (l.29) and its past tense form, as indicated with a simple *-ed* dental suffix, *seemed* (l.8). Appendix I shows the strong verb *to know* in both its present form *know* (l.14) and its past form, as indicated by the root vowel change seen in *knew* (l.7). We can see then that ModE currently shares this feature with other Gmc languages, though it is noted that while Old English contained about 300 strong verbs more than half of these have now died out.[28] We see an example of this if we examine the past form of *to step* shown in Appendix II. We can see that *stepped* (l.6) is a weak verb as its form as a past tense verb is indicated by the dental *–ed* suffix; the Old English form of the verb *steppan* is strong, so it is evident that ModE has lost a historically strong verb form.[29] Hoad notes that new verbs which enter the language have almost always adopted weak forms, and this is still the case in ModE as shown by examining verbs which have been recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary, such as *to Google* and *to blog*, both of which adopt weak forms.[30] It is arguable that — though ModE contains characteristically Gmc distinctions between strong and weak verbs at present — the fact that both new verbs mostly adopt weak forms and that strong verbs become weak over time suggests that this is potentially subject to change in the future.

In addition to the continued use of strong and weak verbs, ModE has two other characteristically Gmc grammatical qualities: it has only four cases, as opposed to the eight found in Indo-European, and its verbs only have two non-compound tenses.[31] Old English uses the nominative, accusative, genitive and dative cases; these four cases are typical of a Gmc language and — although they are now not as obvious as in Old English — still exist in ModE.[32] Pronouns alter according to case: they have different forms depending on whether they are the subject (nominative case) or object of a sentence (e.g. Appendix I: *we*, l.9, *us,* l.12). Pronouns also have a distinct form to indicate the genitive case (e.g. Appendix II: *my*

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[26] Singh, p.32.
[27] Baugh and Cable,p.54.
[28] Ibid.; p.151.
[29] *steppan* is a class VI strong verb. Richard Marsden, *The Cambridge Old Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008),p.489.
[30] Mugglestone, p.18; OED, "Google, v.²", "blog, v.".
[31] Baugh and Cable, p.9; The instrumental case has died out since the Old English Period.
[32] Singh, p.81.

inveterate string bag) and, as a relic of Old English morphology, nouns are still inflected in the genitive case with a *–‘s* suffix (e.g. Appendix I: *Rick Holman’s shed* l.11). The accusative and dative case, though they lack distinct forms, are still present in ModE as shown in Appendix II: *I will not give them that satisfaction* (l.13-14). In this clause *I* is in the nominative case, *that satisfaction* is in the accusative and *them* is the dative form of the personal pronoun (which is indistinct from the accusative form). In addition to the typically Gmc four cases, ModE also inherited only two non-compound verbal tense forms from Old English: the present and the past.[33] Appendix I shows an example of the word *will* being used in an abbreviated sense as an auxiliary verb to indicate the future tense (*we’ll put a cross in it*, l.14) and Appendix II shows the complex tense construction (*What it might have made me do,* l.24-5), which also relies on auxiliary verbs to form the tense. The continuation of the historically Gmc four cases and two verbal tenses found in ModE, in addition to the continued use of Gmc strong and weak verbs, are three fundamental grammatical features which indicate ModE’s status as a Gmc language.

Elements of Modern English which most notably show similarities or differences to standard Germanic languages have, in this evaluation, been analysed with reference to critical thought on the subject and compared against modern texts to determine the accuracy of the statement ‘English is a Germanic language.’ The conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis, however, are limited by the fact that the discussion is not comprehensive. The aim of examining both written and spoken texts was to compare the hypotheses to a representative sample of Modern English though — without studying a much greater number of texts from varied sources around the world — it is hard to describe such a study as conclusive. This analysis has, by favouring a technical approach, aimed to provide a focused study of the language but by doing so has had insufficient scope to discuss the social and historical reasons for the evolution of the language; language does not exist autonomously and as such a study of it should adequately involve the people behind it. Similarly under-represented has been the extent to which English contains other features of Gmc language such as the i-mutated plural, the use of a specifically singular second person pronoun or the use of the indefinite pronoun. I have, however, discussed the features I consider most important in English’s classification as a Germanic language.

I have argued that, although much of the lexicon of English originates from the Romance languages, the extent to which the language, when applied in practice, relies on Germanic derivations should not be discounted. I have shown that Modern English demonstrates the consequences of the ‘First Germanic Consonant Shift’ and that it utilises a strong stress on the root syllable of most words; it does, therefore, exhibit two critical attributes of a Germanic language in terms of sound. I have explored how the decay of inflections caused by the Germanic stress pattern has moved the language away from distinctions between adjective forms and the use of OV syntactic structure in subordinate clauses, both of which are typically Germanic. I have, lastly, argued that by maintaining the distinction between the two types of verbs, the four grammatical cases and the two verbal tense forms English has retained some of the most crucially Germanic grammatical elements. I conclude, therefore, that though Modern English observes some noticeable behaviours and features which differ from others in its linguistic category it adheres to the most significant rules of its group and thus justifies its classification as a Germanic language.

[33] Baugh and Cable, p.53.

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Appendix I

From: Ronald Carter, Michael McCarthy, *Exploring Spoken English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.24. (Transcript)

1	<S01>	Anyway
2	<S02>	So anyway
3	<S01>	So anyway
4	<S03>	So anyway erm my cousin Mervin that was in the REME er got me a 38
5	<S01>	Gun
6	<S03>	Wesson, Smith and Wesson special and Benny's, no it wasn't it was
7		Rick Holman's shed and Benny, Brian Beddingfields knew his dad had
8		some ammunition from the war and he found it and they were 38s
9		so we erm took it over the marshes and shot a couple of rounds off
10		that was great and then one day we were in, up Prospect Road near
11		the scout hut in a shed in a pre, erm Rick Holman's shed so there was
12		four of us in this sort of [<S01 > mm] eight by six shed ... and
13		we were playing about with the thing and and we messed about with
14		it and did the usu, you know and sort of said oh we'll put a cross in it
15		make a dum-dum of it and fired it in the shed at at the bit of wood
16		[<S02> [laughs]] and this bullet went round the shed about three
17		times and we all just froze this bullet went round and round and
18		round [laughs] was absolutely outrageous we had no concept of
19		what could have happened
20	<S04>	Yeah
21	<S01>	God
22	<S02>	Dear God

Appendix II

From: John Banville, *The Untouchable* (London: Picador, 1997), p.3.

1 First day of the new life. Very strange. Feeling almost
2 skittish all day. Exhausted now yet feverish also, like a child at
3 the end of a party. Like a child, yes: as if I had suffered a
4 grotesque form of rebirth. Yet this morning I realized for the
5 first time that I am an old man. I was crossing Gower Street,
6 my former stamping ground. I stepped off the path and
7 something hindered me. Odd sensation, as if the air at my
8 ankles had developed a flaw, seemed to turn – what is the
9 word: viscid? – and resisted me, and I almost stumbled. Bus
10 thundering past with a grinning blackamoor at the wheel. What
11 did he see? Sandals, mac, my inveterate string bag, old rheumy
12 eye wild with fright. If I had been run over, they would have
13 said it was suicide, with relief all round. But I will not give
14 them that satisfaction. I shall be seventy-two this year. Imposs-
15 ible to believe. Inside, an eternal twenty-two. I suppose that is
16 how it is for everybody old. Brr.

17 Never kept a journal before. Fear of incrimination. Leave
18 nothing in writing, Boy always said. Why have I started now? I
19 just sat down and began to write, as if it was the most natural
20 thing in the world, which of course it is not. My last testament.
21 It is twilight , everything very still and poignant. The trees in the
22 square are dripping. Tiny sound of birdsong. April. I do not like
23 the spring, its antics and agitations; I fear that anguished
24 seething in the heart, what it might make me do. What it might
25 *have made* me do: one has to be scrupulous with tenses, at my
26 age. I miss my children. Goodness, where did that come from?
27 They are hardly what you could call children any more. Julian
28 must be - well, he must be forty this year, which makes
29 Blanche thirty-eight, is it? Compared to them I seem to myself
30 hardly grown-up at all. Auden wrote somewhere that no matter
31 what the age of the company, he was always convinced he was
32 the youngest in the room; me, too. All the same, I thought they
33 might have called. *Sorry to hear about your treachery, Daddums*.
34 Yet I am not at all sure I would want to hear Blanche sniffling
35 and Julian tightening his lips at me down the line. His mother's
36 son. I suppose all fathers say that.