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**Anatomy of “Shirt”**

The current accepted meaning of the word “shirt, n.” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) is, “an undergarment for the upper part of the body made of linen, calico, flannel, silk or other washable material. Originally worn next to the skin.” Due to the fundamental and ubiquitous use of this generic type of garment, the etymology of the word “shirt” begins in quite a different place than where it now resides in Modern English.

**Old English**

Germanic in origin, the word in Old English “scyrte,” is defined as an apron or short garment (*OED*, shirt, n.). The “weak feminine” (*OED*, shirt, n.) word first appears in 1000 in the *Boulogne Glosses*, “Scyrte prætexta, tunecan togæ.” There are two significant issues with the Old English word “scyrte.” First, the *Boulongne Glosses* is the one and only time the word appears in Old English. The *OED* has no other examples of the word between the years 450-1150. Second, “the meaning of the word in Old English is obscure[d]” because “the Latin word [in the above gloss] was probably not understood” (*OED*, shirt, n). Thus, we only have one use in Old English and the Latin definition of the word is misunderstood in that single example.

The voicing of the Old English, “scyrte,” is affected by the arrival of the Anglo Saxons in the mid-5th century. The rounded [sc] sounds more like a [ʃk]. The “y” sounds more like the rounded [u] found in French and German. This rounded sound is not found in Modern English. The “e” vowel at the end of the word is pronounced [a] and comes from the dative case of the noun found in Old English. This derives from the synthetic practice in Old English of using case to indicate subject (van Gelderen 27).

**Middle English**

As Old English shifted from a synthetic language with a reliance on ending and inflections to an analytic language with a dependence on the grammatical, the word “shirt” followed that change (van Gelderen 27).

The fronted palatalization affecting the [ʃk] consonant sounds gradually changes to the softer [ʃ] sound and spelling. As early as 1200, *Trinity Cambridge Manuscript* shows the orthography change to represent the [ʃ] sound, “He turnde ut of þe burh into wilderne..and ches..stiue here to shurte and gret sac to curtle” (*OED*, shirt, n.). Except for two instances, 1275 Layamon’s *Brut* “Warp he an his rugge..ænne cheisil scurte [*c*1300 Otho seorte] & ænne pallene curtel” and 1340 Laurent du Bois, *Ayenbite’s of inwyt* “He yaf ofte his kertel and his sserte to þe poure uor god,” the two consonants “sh” spelling and [ʃ] pronunciation remain present throughout history. This shift is present in 1386 in Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*, “Where been thane the gaye Robes and the smale shetes and the softe shertes?” (*OED*, shirt, n.).

**Early Modern English**

“Shirt” encounters another transformation in the Early Modern English, between the years 1509-1520. The word encounters the Great Vowel Shift in a gradual way during this period. The transition of voicing the high back vowel sound of the [u] in “scyurte” slowly moves through to Early Modern English (van Gelderen 22). Gradually, the sound transitions into the [e] sound as found in Henry VII’s Act of Parliament (1509-10), “And that no manne undre the degree of a Knyght were any garded or pynshed Sherte” (*OED*, shirt, n*.*) and *The Chronicle of England* in 1520, “Hercules..was betrayed by a sherte that Deyanira his wyfe sent hym empoisoned” (*OED*, shirt, n.).

The singular “e” and “es” ending of the word remain throughout Early Modern English until 1530. Although the use of the “e” ending is only orthographic in nature and not recognized as dative or genitive by this stage, “This change towards a loss of endings has been argued to be the result of the shift in stress on words” (van Gelderen 125). The pronunciation of the “e” ending sounds like [a] and is heard at the end of the word. By 1604, the modern form of “shirt” appears to be accepted in usage, spelling, and pronunciation. The “e” is now dropped in pronunciation and spelling. This is evident in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where he writes, “[p]ale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,..he comes before me” (*OED*, shirt, n.).

**Modern English**

By 1705 “shirt” is pronounced in the modern form [ʃərt] as seen in Joseph Addison’s *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy*, “We here saw several Persons, that in the midst of December had nothing over their Shoulders but their Shirts” (*OED*, shirt, n.).

As the usage remains the same, writers specifically address the varying uses of the word “shirt” in the context of clothing and the need to clarify mistaken “impropriety.” Hugh Mitchell’s 1799 *Scotticisms, vulgar Anglicisms, and grammatical improprieties corrected, with reasons for the corrections* finds it vital to explain the various definitions, “A shirt is a man's under garment; a shift is a woman’s. Many of the Scotch use shirt for both” (*OED, shirt, n.*).

**Conclusion**

Because the word “shirt” does not emerge until the latter phase of the Old English period, its transformation occurred primarily in the Middle English and Early Modern English periods. The modern spelling and pronunciation first appears in 1530 (John Palsgrave, *Lesclarcissement de la langue francoyse*) and by 1604 this final version appears to be accepted in usage, spelling, and pronunciation. During this same period the use and application of “shirt” expands with the application of modifiers to provide greater specificity in meaning. Descriptive words are added to denote the material used to make the garment. “Shirt of hair” is found in John Skelton’s 1592 poem “Image Ipocrysy” from The Poetical Works,*“*shurtes of heres” (*OED, shirt, n.*) and “shirts of mail” **is found in** J Stowe’s Annales, “400 harquebuts in shirts of maile with morins” (*OED, shirt, n.*). Symbolic modifiers are also added to appropriate the concept of the physical shirt, as exemplified by the extreme use, “[l]ike a pale martyr in his shirt of fire” in Alexander Smith’s *A Life Drama and Other Poems,* (*OED, shirt, n.*), where fire surrounding the person is described as a figurative shirt, adding poetic emphasis to the death of a martyr being burned alive.

The word “shirt” acquired meaning through use, and while the anatomy of the word may not be difficult to decipher in the English language, its adaptation through palatalization, orthography and usage allows the scholar to trace the English language throughout time.

**Works Cited**

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