

It may be in the past but it still matters how you say it

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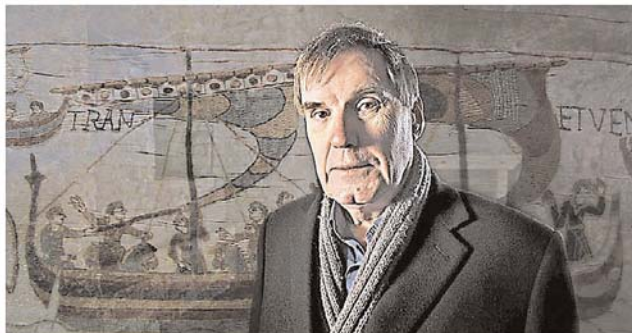
All languages work by analogy. If they didn't, we wouldn't be able to learn them. Once small children have learnt that the plural of boot is boots and the plural of shoot is shoots, then by analogy they can work out that the plural of root is roots – and so on.

Occasionally this gives them the wrong result, since the plural of foot is not foote. But languages can only tolerate a certain amount of that kind of irregularity or they would be unlearnable.

Sometimes when languages change, they change as a result of analogy. The past tense of the verb to snow in the Norfolk dialect isn't snowed, as it used to be, but "snew". This is an innovation we developed through analogy with blow-blew and know-knew.

And this is probably the same thing that has happened with Professor Robert Bartlett's pronunciation of words like thrown, mown and known. Correspondents to the EDP who have watched his BBC TV programme The Plantagenets have wondered why he says "thrown", "mowen" and "knowen".

One correspondent's suggestion was



■ Robert Bartlett used old pronunciation in his BBC TV programme.

that Robert was speaking Middle English. Middle English was the form of our language spoken from about 1150 to 1500, and if Robert had been clever enough to speak fluent Middle English, we would have had a very hard job understanding him. If you've ever heard somebody read Chaucer in the original 15th-century pronunciation, you will know what I mean. (If you haven't, there are plenty of linguistic scientists about who would be glad to demonstrate. And there are recordings on the internet, though unfortunately they weren't actually made by Chaucer.)

So, no, Robert Bartlett wasn't doing that, though it is true that the past participle of know in Middle English could be

"knowen". Some dialects of English which have this pronunciation may therefore, possibly, have preserved it from earlier stages of the language – some Norfolk speakers say "knowen". But the "knowen, thrown" pronunciation is very common in modern Australia and New Zealand English; and I think the most likely reason is that this is once again an innovation that is due to analogy. If people have started saying "knowen" and "thrown", this is as a result of drawing an analogy with words like given, chosen, and ridden.

If the past participle of fall is fallen, and the past participle of rise is risen, why shouldn't the past participle of mow be "mowen"?