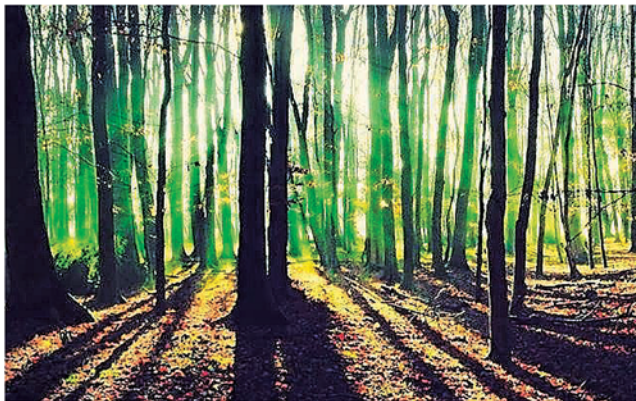


Can't see the wood for the baum, boom and tre?

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■ There are so many ways old words for wood and trees have entered our language.

One of the most fascinating things about languages is that they change. This is an inherent characteristic of human language: all languages change through time. Speakers change their languages – but they don't know they are doing it, and they certainly don't do it on purpose. It just happens. We don't really know why.

One way in which languages change is in the meanings of words. This happens gradually, and changes are usually subtle to start with.

You can see rather clearly how this happens by comparing English with the languages it is related to – in the sense that they have all descended from a single common Germanic ancestor over the last 2,000 years.

The Norwegian word 'kinn' has the same origin as our word chin – but it means cheek. Swedish 'ben' is the same as our bone, but it refers to the leg.

Danish 'sky' doesn't mean sky but cloud. German 'Zeit' comes from the same root as English tide, but it means time. Dutch 'bos' is related to English bush, but it means wood or forest.

In fact, Germanic words for wood are very interesting generally. The German word for tree is 'baum'; the Dutch word is

'boom' – these have the same source as English beam: a beam is, after all, made of a tree. English tree corresponds to Norwegian 'tre', but in that language 'tre' also refers to wood as a material, as if we were to say "this desk is made out of tree". The corresponding German word for wood as a material is 'holz', which is the same word as the name of our Norfolk town, Holt, where it meant a small wood.

Our word wood corresponds to Norwegian 'ved' – but that means firewood. If you want to refer to a wood or forest in Norwegian you have to say 'skog'.

We don't have this word in English – except that in our region we actually do. The Sco in Sco Ruston, earlier Scouriston, comes from the Old Norse word skogr, meaning wood or forest in the language of the Viking settlers.

And Haddiscoe was originally Hadd's wood, with the -scoe part again coming from that Old Norse word.

We have no idea who Hadd was, but his name lives on in Norfolk – as do all these different Germanic words for wood, albeit with their meanings subtly changed in different ways in the different languages.