The emergence of Middle English

The digraph <th> replaces <ð> to represent [θ], though <Þ> is still used by some scribes to represent this phoneme, particularly in Early Middle English, e.g. OE ðrinȝan (to press) becomes in ME thringen.

1. <qu> replaces <cw> to represent [kw], e.g. OE cwen (queen) becomes ME queen;

2. The digrapg <ch> replaces OE <c> to represent the phoneme [tʃ], e.g. OE cīld (child) becomes ME child;

3. The phoneme [ʃ] is now represented by the digraph <sh> as opposed to the OE <sc>, e.g. OE sceran (to shear) becomes ME sheren.

<ch> and <sh>: <h> indicated that the pronunciation of the previous <c> and <s> was different from that which these letters normally indicated (/k/ and /s/ or /z/: **c**andel, hū**s**, rī**s**en).

<h> was acting as a **diacritic: an indicator of a different pronunciation.** It indicated here that the digraphs represented and **affricate** (as in church) and a **fricative sound** (as in sure), respectively.

However, in several instances Middle English scribes misunderstood the significance of <h>. For instance, in PDE such words as 'where' and 'when' which begin with the digraph <wh>, began in OE with <hw>: hwǣr and hwanne. But by the Middle English period these words were being spelled with initial <wh>: whēr and whanne:

hwǣr → whēr → where
hwanne → whanne → when

The reason is that Middle English scribes assumed that in cases like these <h> was working like a diacritic to indicate a fricative pronunciation of <w>, like the final consonant sound of PDE loch. This was not the case and yet the graphs <h> and <w> were reversed in a **misperceived attempt at regularization**.

MIDDLE ENGLISH	SOUNDS LIKE MODERN…
y, **i** "myne, sight"	"m**ee**t"
e, **ee** "me, meet" [close 'e']	"m**a**te"
e "begge, rede" [open 'e']	"b**a**g"
a, **aa** "mate, maat"	"f**a**ther"
u, **ou** "hus, hous"	"b**oo**t"
o, **oo** "bote, boot" [close 'o']	"**oa**k"
o "lof" [open 'o']	"b**ough**t"

For the most part, consonants are pronounced as they are in PDE. Some exceptions concern the following graphemes:

1. <c> retains the pronunciation [k] but no longer has the pronunciation [tʃ] ([tʃ] is represented by the French digraph <ch>);

2. <c> also now has the pronunciation [s] in French loan words such as **protestacioun**.

3. <gh> and <ȝ> are pronounced [x] (similar to the final consonant sound in PDE **loch**) when in the middle of a word;

4. <ȝ> is pronounced [j] especially when it occurs as the initial letter of a word.

The older endings -an (infinitives and most of the oblique, or non-nominative, forms of n-stem nouns), -on (indicative preterit plurals), and -en (subjunctive preterit plurals and past participles of strong verbs) all fell together as -en.

Old English	Middle English	Modern
findan (inf.)	fīnde(n)	find
fundon (pret. pl.)	founde(n)	found
funden (past part.)	founde(n)	found

With the later loss of final inflectional -n in some of these forms, only -e [ə] was left, and in time this was also to go. This loss accounts for endingless infinitives, preterit plurals, and some past participles of strong verbs in Modern English.

	Singular	**Plural**
First Person		
Nom.	ich, I, ik	wē
Obj.	mē	us
Gen.	mī; mīn	our(e); oures
Second Person		
Nom.	thou	yē
Obj.	thee	you
Gen.	thī; thīn	your(e); youres
Third Person (masculine)		
Nom.	hē	hī, they, thai
Obj.	him, hine	hem, heom, them, thaim, theim
Gen.	his	her(e), their(e); heres, theirs
Third Person (feminine)		
Nom.	shē, hō, hyō, hyē, hī, schō, chō, hē	
Obj.	hir(e), her(e), hī	
Gen.	hir(e), her(e); hires	
Third Person (neuter)		
Nom.	hit, it	
Obj.	hit, it	
Gen.	his	

As unstressed vowels fell together, some of the distinctions in personal endings disappeared, with a resulting simplification in verb conjugation. With fī̄nden 'to find' (strong) and thanken 'to thank' (weak) as models, the indicative forms were as follows in the Midland dialects:

Present

ich	finde	thanke
thou	findest	thankest
hē/shē	findeth, findes	thanketh, thankes
wē/yē/they	finde(n), findes	thanke(n), thankes

Preterit

ich	fǭnd	thanked(e)
thou	founde	thankedest
hē/shē	fǭnd	thanked(e)
wē/yē/they	founde(n)	thanked(e(n))

The verbs 'been', 'to be' (OE 'bēon'), 'doon', 'to do' (OE dōn), 'willen', 'to want', 'will' (OE 'willan'), and 'gǫǫn', 'to go' (OE 'gān') remained highly irregular in Middle English.

Typical Midland indicative forms of 'been' and 'willen' follow:

Present

ich	am	wil(le), wol(le)*
thou	art, beest	wilt, wolt
hē/shē	is, beeth	wil(le), wol(le)
wē/yē/they	bee(n), beeth, sinden	wilen, wol(n)

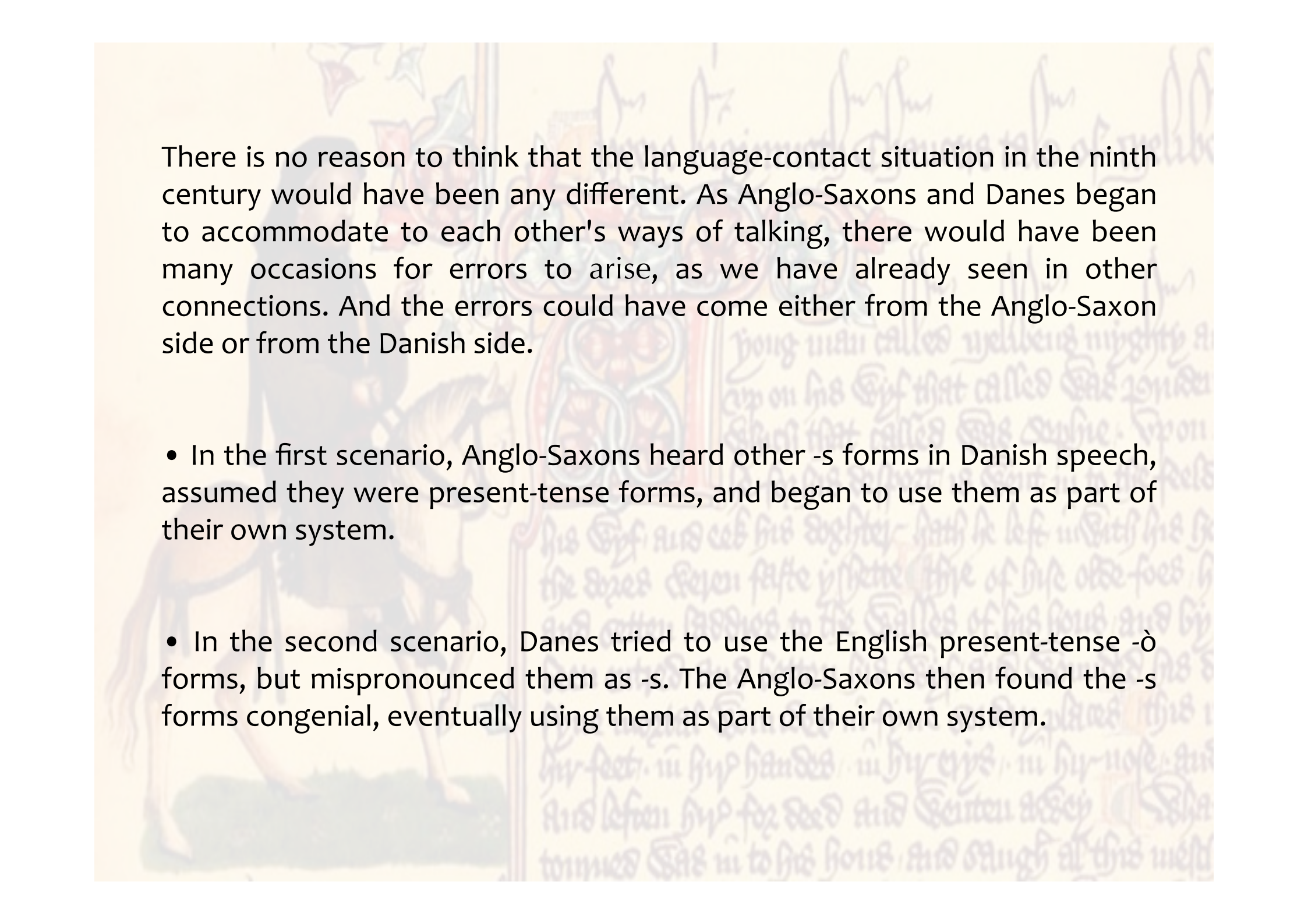*This forms survives in won't, that is, wol not.

Preterit

ich	was	wolde
thou	wast, wēre	woldest
hē/shē	was	wolde
wē/yē/they	wēre(n)	wolde(n)

These were the most common endings for the present tense of Old English verbs, using tellan 'count' (later, 'teli') as an illustration:

first-p. singular	-e	ic celle	I count
second-p. singular	-est, -ast, -st	Þu tellest	thou countest
third-p. singular	-eð, -að, -ð	he/heo/hit telleò	he/she/it counts
first-p. plural	-að,-ð	we tellað	we count
second-p. plural	-að,-ð	ge tellað	you count
third-p. plural	-að, -ð	hi tellað	they count

However, in the north, during the 8oos, a new system was evolving alongside this one. Northumbrian texts of the late ninth century illustrate a simpler set of endings: an -s form is used for every person apart from the first person singular.
For tellan, that system would probably have looked like this:

ic telle
Þu tellas
he/heo/hit tellas
we tellas
ge tellas
hi tellas

There is no reason to think that the language-contact situation in the ninth century would have been any different. As Anglo-Saxons and Danes began to accommodate to each other's ways of talking, there would have been many occasions for errors to arise, as we have already seen in other connections. And the errors could have come either from the Anglo-Saxon side or from the Danish side.

• In the first scenario, Anglo-Saxons heard other -s forms in Danish speech, assumed they were present-tense forms, and began to use them as part of their own system.

• In the second scenario, Danes tried to use the English present-tense -ò forms, but mispronounced them as -s. The Anglo-Saxons then found the -s forms congenial, eventually using them as part of their own system.

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories in a frame story, between 1387 and 1400. It is the story of a group of thirty people who travel as pilgrims to Canterbury (England). The pilgrims, who come from all layers of society, tell stories to each other to kill time while they travel to Canterbury.

Thomas Becket was born in around 1120, the son of a prosperous London merchant. He was well educated and quickly became an agent to Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, who sent him on several missions to Rome. Becket's talents were noticed by Henry II, who made him his chancellor and the two became close friends. When Theobald died in 1161, Henry made Becket archbishop. Becket transformed himself from a pleasure-loving courtier into a serious, simply-dressed cleric. The king and his archbishop's friendship was put under strain when it became clear that Becket would now stand up for the church in its disagreements with the king. In 1164, realizing the extent of Henry's displeasure, Becket fled into exile in France, and remained in exile for several years. He returned in 1170. On the 29 December 1170, four knights, believing the king wanted Becket out of the way, confronted and murdered Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. Becket was made a saint in 1173 and his shrine in Canterbury Cathedral became an important focus for pilgrimage.

Chaucer's final -*e*

The rhythm of Chaucer's verse is dependent on this final -*e*. In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer customarily writes a five-stress, ten-syllable line, alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (what would later be called **iambic pentameter**):

> The dróghte of Márch hath pérced tó the róte.
> [θ ə dru:xt ɔf martʃ ha θ pɛ:səd to: θ ə ro:tə]

The word *perced* must have two syllables (rather than the one it has in modern "pierced"). Note that the final -*e* on *droghte* is not pronounced; this is because a vowel follows. **Final -*e* is not pronounced when the following word begins with a vowel (or often *h*- and *w*-).** Incidentally, the final -*e* on *rote* at the end of the line is pronounced but not counted as metrical (that is, stands aside from the ten syllables ordinarily required).

It is as important to omit the final -e when a vowel, *h-*, or *w-* follows as it is to pronounce it in other contexts:

> Why artow angry with my <u>tale</u> now?
> Tell**e** of a somonour swich a <u>tal**e**</u> or two

In the first example, *tale* has <u>two syllables</u>; in the second a vowel follows *tale* and the -e is elided.

Likewise the meter is ruined if one fails to pronounce the <u>inflectional endings</u> (*ed, -en,* and *-es*):

> But if I telle tales two or thre
> Save unto yow thus muche I tellen shal
> Ye sholde han warned me, er I had gon,

Final -e is always pronounced unless a vowel (or *h-* or *w-*) follows, and inflectional e in *-ed, -es, -en* is always pronounced.

Words of <u>three syllables and more</u> are frequently slurred in pronunciation, as often happens in modern English. We almost never pronounce the word "every" with three full syllables (we say "evry"). Chaucer did the same:

Inspíred háth in évery hólt and héeth
[inspi:rəd ha θ in ɛvri hɔlt and hɛ: θ]

1 Whán that Áprill wíth his shóur<u>es</u> sóot<u>e</u>
2 The drógt*(e)* of Márch hath pérc<u>ed</u> tó the róot<u>e</u>,
3 And báth<u>ed</u> év*(e)*ry véyn*(e)* in swích licóur
4 Of whích vertú engéndr<u>ed</u> ís the flóur;
5 Whan Zéphirús ée k wíth his swéet<u>e</u> bréeth
6 Inspír<u>ed</u> háth in év*(e)*ry hólt and heath
7 The téndr<u>e</u> crópp<u>es</u>, ánd the yónge sónn*(e)*
8 Hath ín the Rám his hálf cours yrónn*(e)*,
9 And smál<u>e</u> fów*(e)*l<u>es</u> mák<u>en</u> mélodý<u>e</u>,
10 That slép<u>en</u> ál the nýght with ópen ý<u>e</u>
11 (So prík<u>eth</u> hem Natúr*(e)* in hír corág<u>es</u>),
12 Thanne lóng<u>en</u> fólk to góon on pílgrimág<u>es</u>,
13 And pálm*(e)*r<u>es</u> fór to sék<u>en</u> stráunge strónd<u>es</u>,
14 To férn<u>e</u> hálw<u>es</u>, kówth*(e)* in sóndry lónd<u>es</u>;
15 And spéciallý from évery shír<u>es</u> énd*(e)*
16 Of Éngelónd to Cáunterb*(u)*rý they wénd*(e)*,
17 The hóoly blísful mártir fór to sék<u>e</u>,
18 That hém háth hólp<u>en</u> whán that théy were séek<u>e</u>.

1 [hwan θ at a:pril wi θ his ʃʊ:res so:tə]
2 [θ ə dru:xt ɔf martʃ ha θ pɛ:səd to: θ ə ro:tə]
3 [and ba:ðəd ɛvri vɛin in switʃ liku:r]
4 [ɔf hwitʃ vɛrtiʊ ɛndʒɛndrəd is θ ə flu:r]
5 [hwan zefirʊs e:k wi θ his swe:tə brɛ: θ]
6 [inspi:rəd ha θ in ɛvri hɔlt and hɛ: θ]
7 [θ ə tɛndrə krɔppəs and θ ə jʊngə sʊnnə]
8 [ha θ in θ ə ram his halve cu:rs irʊnnə]
9 [and sma:lə fu:ləs ma:kən mɛlodi:ə]
10 [θ at sle:pən al θ ə nixt wi θ ɔ:pən i:ə]
11 [sɔ: prikɛ θ hɛm na:tiʊr in hir kʊra:dʒəs]
12 [θ an lɔŋən fɔlk to: gɔ:n ɔn pilgrima:dʒəs]
13 [and pa:lmɛrs fɔr to: se:ken straʊndʒə strɔndəs]
14 [to: fɛrnə halwəs, ku: θ in sʊndri lɔndəs]
15 [and spɛsiali frɔm ɛvri ʃi:rəs ɛndə]
16 [ɔf ɛŋgəlond to: kaʊntərbri: θ ɛi wɛndə]
17 [θ ə hɔ:li blisfʊl martir fɔr to: se:kə]
18 [θ at hɛm ha θ hɔlpən hwan θ at θ ɛi wɛ:r se:kə]

https://archive.org/details/P_CHA_GEO_01

1 Whán that Áprill wíth his shóur<u>es</u> sóot<u>e</u>
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Heere bigynneth Chaucers tale of Melibe[us]

A yong man called Melibeus myghty a[nd] ... vp on his wyf that called was Prude[nce] ... ghter that called was Sophie. Vpon ... he for his desport is went in to the feld[es] ... his wyf and eek his doghter hath he left inwith his h[ous] ... the dores weren faste yshette. Thre of hise olde foes h[an] ... and setten laddres to the walles of his hous and by ... ben entred and beten his wyf and wounded his d[oghter] ... fyue mortal woundes in fyue sondry places this i[s to seyn] ... hir feet in hir handes in hir eyes in hir nose ... And leften hir for deed And wenten awey ... tourned was in to his hous And saugh al this mesch[ief]