Etymologies of English Function words

a, an: unstressed forms of ‘one’ < PIE *oino-. Cf. Latin unus. The reduction to ‘a’ before consonants began by 12thC.
about: < OE on-būtan ‘on the outside (of)’ thus ‘around’. Cf. ‘on’. būtan < be ūtan ‘by out(side)’. Cf. ‘by’ and ‘out’.

after: orig. an adjective meaning ‘further away’ < *ap-tero-. Cf. ‘of’ and ‘off’.
all: pan-Germanic, but origin beyond that totally obscure.
also: see under ‘as’ for source. Sense has shifted from ‘wholly so’ to just ‘too’.
along: < OE andlong ‘extending opposite’ < and (see below) + long < PIE *dhlongho-.
and: probably from old preposition *facing, opposite’; cf. Greek anti-, Latin ante. But not undisputed, since shift to use as conjunction not entirely clear.
another: < ‘an+other’. ‘other’ < PIE *antero-. Cf. German ander and Skt. antara-.
any: < OE ænig (cf. German einig) < ān ‘one’ + adj. suffix seen in ‘mood-y’ and ‘stony’.
are: originally only dialectal OE; < PIE root *h1er- ‘arise’ seen also in ‘(thou) art’. Cf. ‘be’ and ‘is’.
as: unstressed form of ‘also’ < all swā ‘all so’ used relatively. No clear source beyond Germanic for ‘all’; ‘so’ contains old PIE pronominal stem seen also in ‘such’.
at: < PIE *ad ‘at, to’. Cf. Latin ad ‘at, to’ as in ‘adjunct’ etc.
be, been: < PIE *bhuh- ‘be(come), grow’. Cf. Greek phusis ‘growth’ whence ‘physical’ etc. and Latin fīturus ‘what is to be’. Cf. ‘are’ and ‘is’.
but: < OE b(e)-ūtan, orig. ‘outside’, i.e. ‘by out’. See ‘by’ and ‘out’.
by: related to Greek amphi and Latin ambi- ‘around, on both sides of’.
can: orig. ‘to know (how to)’ < PIE *ĝneh3- ‘to know’. Cf. Latin (g)nōscō ‘know’ in English borrowings like ‘reco-gnize’, ‘co-gnition’, etc.
could: past tense of ‘can’ < PIE root *ĝneh3- ‘to know’ (hence ‘know how’ thus ‘be able’). Same root as English ‘know’, Latin gnōscō (‘recognize, cognition’ etc.) and Greek gnosīs ‘knowledge’ (‘prognosis’, ‘agnostic’ etc.).
down: < OE dūne < aphaerized adūne < of dūne ‘off the hill’. OE dūne is inherited word, but ‘dune’ is later borrowing < Dutch, and ‘town’ is borrowing from Celtic.
each: mixture of OE ēlec < Gmc. aiwo galīkaz ‘ever alike’ and OE ilca < Gmc. *is-līk ‘same’ (no source for root *līk ‘body, shape’ beyond Germanic)
few: < OE fēawē < PIE *pau- ‘few’ (cf. Latin paucus, whence ‘paucity’)
for: variant of ‘fore’ (= ‘before, in front’); to same PIE root as Latin prō ‘for’ and ‘in front of’, but precise preform of Germanic is unclear.
has, had: forms of ‘have’ with irregular loss of v before consonant due to frequent weak stress. < PIE *kap- ‘grasp’. Cf. Latin capiō ‘take’ as in ‘capture, captive, accept’ etc.
he, his: < OE hē, his masc. nominative and genitive singular of third person pronoun. To PIE demonstrative stem *ke/o- ‘this’. Cf. ‘it’.
here: pan-Germanic adverb < PIE *kēi- ‘this, near speaker’ (cf. ‘hither’ and ‘he’) + obscure ending -r. Cf. ‘there’ and ‘where’.
if: OE gif. Plenty of related forms in Germanic, but exact PIE source unclear. Root is *(e)i- seen in Latin is ‘he’.
in: < PIE *en. Cf. Greek en, Latin in, etc.
is: < PIE *h₁ésti ‘is’. Cf. Latin est, Greek esti, Sanskrit ásti, Hittite ēszi, etc.
it: < PIE demonstrative stem *k₁- ‘this’. Cf. Latin cis- ‘on this side’. The ending -t is the same as in ‘that’. OE ‘hit’ with expected h- still survives in some dialects of English.
many: < Germanic *managa-. Further connections unclear.
me, my: ‘me’ < PIE *mé. Cf. Latin mē. ‘my’ orig. is reduced form of ‘mine’ before consonant (cf. ‘a, an’). ‘mine’ is from Gmc. possessive adj. built on *me-.
might: formal past tense to ‘may’ < PIE *magh- ‘be able’. Related words in German, Lithuanian, Russian, etc. with meaning ‘can, be able’ or ‘like, be fond of’.
most: Germanic superlative form *mais-to-. For root see ‘more’.
no, none: ‘no’ is orig. reduced form of ‘none’ before consonant (cf. ‘a, an’). ‘none’ is PIE negation *ne+oino- ‘one’ taken through Gmc. sound changes.
not: < original *ne aught ‘not (any)thing’. *ne is the PIE negation. aught is from a root meaning ‘own, possess’. Cf. German nicht.
of: unstressed form of ‘off’, both meaning ‘from’. Cf. Greek apo ‘from’ and Latin ab- ‘from, away’ as in ‘absent, abstract, absolute’ etc.
on: < PIE *an(a) ‘at, on, up against’. Cf. Greek ana- as in ‘analogy, analyze’, etc.
one, once: < ‘one’ < PIE *ōino-. Cf. Latin ūnus. ‘once’ is remodeled from *enes after ‘one’. *enes is an old instrumental case form as adverb remade with adverbial -s from the genitive case.
only: orig. adjective ‘single’ < ‘one’ + suffix -ly of ‘manly’ (< *-liko ‘-like’), etc. (cf. ‘a, an’)
other: < OE ōther < PIE *an-tero- ‘the farther one of two’
out: < PIE *ud. Cf. Sanskrit ud ‘up’.
over: < PIE *(s)uper+. Cf. Greek huper- (i.e. ‘hyper-’) and Latin super.
self: < Gmc. *selbo(n)-. Derivative of PIE *s(w)e- ‘self’. Cf. ‘suicide’ borr. from Latin.
shall/should: OE sceal/sc(e)olde < Gmc. *skel- ‘be obligated’. Root limited to Germanic and Baltic.
so: < OE swā < PIE *swo ‘so, such’.
some: to PIE root *se/om ‘one, together’. For indefinite sense cf. impersonal use of ‘one’ in ‘One never knows’. English ‘same’ is to different form of same root!
that: neuter nom.-acc. singular of OE demonstrative. Use as subordinating conjunction (“complementizer”) already OE! < PIE demonstrative stem *to-. Cf. Latin is-tud.
the: unstressed form of OE demonstrative sē, sēo, þæt. Already reduced to invariant þe by late MiddEng. Voicing of fricative in unstressed word in early ModEng.
there: pan-Germanic adverb < demons. stem *to- ‘that’ + obscure ending -r. Cf. ‘here’ and ‘where’. But vowel of ‘there’ is very problematic.
\star their, they: borrowed from OldNorse; ultimately to PIE demonstrative stem *to- seen also in demonstrative ‘that’ and article ‘the’.
this: = Germanic demonstrative formed by adding element -si to demonstrative stem seen in ‘the’ and ‘that’. The original OE plural þās got reassigned to be the plural ‘those’ of ‘that’, and ‘these’ was created in MiddEng as the plural of ‘this’.

through: OE þurh. Unstressed form of ‘thorough’ that underwent metathesis. PIE root *terH- ‘cross over’ + *kʷ-e ‘also, and’ seen in Latin -que.

to: OE tō; cf. German zu. < PIE *dō-. Cf. Latin dō-nec ‘until’.

two: < *PIE dwo ‘two’.

up: < older upp; despite formal problems related to Greek hupo ‘under’, Latin sub ‘under’, as well as Hittite ūpp- ‘rise (of the sun). Original sense ‘up from below’.

was/were: < PIE *h₂wes- ‘to exist, live’. Cf. Hittite hweš- ‘live’. In Gmc. *wós+ > OE wæs, but *wēs- > *wēz- > OE wēr- (“Verner’s Law”).

we: < Gmc. *wīz < PIE *weyes, prob. also in Hittite wēš.

when: < OE hwenne < PIE interrogative *kʷe/o- (but ending less than clear).


who/what: < PIE *kʷ-o-, interrogative and relative stem seen also in Latin quo- (e.g. quod erat demonstrandum = QED ‘what was to be demonstrated’).

will/would: < PIE *wel- ‘wish, want’. Cf. Latin uolō ‘want’ in ‘volition, voluntary’ etc.

with: orig. sense ‘next to’ but also ‘against’ (cf. ‘with-stand’ and Germ. wider). Reduced from wither < *wi-tero- ‘apart’.

yes, yea, yeah: ‘yeah’ is American (1st citation 1905!) casual pronunciation of ‘yes’. ‘yes’ is uniquely English reinforced form of ‘yea’, which is pan-Germanic. Source unknown.

you, your: ‘you’ is orig. dat.-acc. of 2pl pronoun (‘ye’ was subject form). Related forms in Gmc. Use for sg. from 13-14th centuries. Orig. non-subject stem for 2pl pronoun in PIE. ‘your’ is Gmc. adj. form (cf. German euer ‘your (pl.)’).