

**24.900: Introduction to Linguistics**  
**Monday, April 25, 2005**

**Language Change and Variation**

Squib project due: Wednesday, May 4, 2004, 9am.

1. For this week's classes read Chapter 11: "Language Change: The Syllables of Time" pps. 499-534.
2. A word about the extra-credit Prat project on the pset.

Goals for this unit of study:

- How and why languages change over time
- How and why sound changes occur
- What kinds of change occur in morphology and syntax
- Ways in which words change
- How linguists can reconstruct languages spoken in earlier times, based on the existing languages that are descended from them.

- I. *Many men sayn that in sweveninges  
Ther nys but fables and lesynges;  
But men may some swevenes sene  
Whiche hardedly that false ne bene,  
But afterwarde ben apparaunt.*  
(CHAUCER, *The Romance of the Rose* (c.1370))

(from *Contemporary Linguistics 7<sup>th</sup> Edition: Chapter 7*).

Many men say in dreams  
There is nothing but talk and lies;  
But men may see some dreams  
Which are scarcely false;  
But afterward come true.

- II. **Historical linguistics** is concerned with both the description and the explanation of language change. All languages change through time. But how they change, what drives these changes, and what kinds of changes we can expect are not obvious. By making comparisons between and among languages and even within a single language, the history of a group of languages can be discovered. We can make hypotheses about the form and sound of a language long dead.

Historical linguistics considers the ways languages change through time and some of the factors that influence those changes. (*Language Files p. 307. 1998*)

**1. GOALS OF HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS:**

- a. All living languages are in a state of constant change albeit very slowly and in most cases imperceptibly.
- b. English has a written history of only about 1000 years.

449-1066 Old English	449 6 <sup>th</sup> century 8 <sup>th</sup> century 1066	Saxons invade Britain Religious literature <i>Beowulf</i> Norman Conquest
1066-1500 Middle English	1387 1476 1500	<i>Canterbury Tales</i> Caxton's printing press Great Vowel Shift
1500-Modern English	1564	Birth of Shakespeare

**i. Old English (450- 1100) *Beowulf***

*Wolde guman findan Þone Þe him on sweofote sare geteode.*  
 “He wanted to find the man who harmed him while he slept.

The following is from a translation of Bede’s Latin history of England. (The letter <þ> called ‘thorn’ represented the phoneme /θ/ in Old English. Below the symbol – marks a long vowel in the orthography.)

And Seaxan þa sige geslogan.  
 And Saxons the victory won  
 ‘And the Saxons won the victory.’

þa sendan hi ham ærenddracan.  
 Then sent they home a messenger  
 ‘Then they sent home a messenger.’

**ii. These Old English sentences differ from their modern English counterparts in many respects:**

1. In terms of pronunciation: the word *ham* (home) became [hɔ:m] in Middle English and then [howm] in Modern English.
2. In terms of morphology, Old English differed significantly from Modern English. The suffix *-an* on the Old English word for ‘sent’ indicates both past tense and plurality of the subject (*hi* they).

3. In terms of syntax, in Old English the verb followed both the subject and direct object (SOV) in the first sentence and in the second, VSO.
4. In terms of the lexicon, some Old English words have disappeared from use such as the unfamiliar *ærenddracan* ‘messenger’ and *sige* ‘victory’ indicate.
5. Other words have been maintained but with a change in meaning. For example, the OE word *geslogan* ‘won’ is the past tense of the verb *slean* the OE predecessor of our modern English word *slay*. Although the Modern English meaning of this word in normal usage is restricted to the act of killing, the OE verb could also mean to ‘strike, beat, coin (money) and forge (weapons).

» **These examples suggest that all components of the grammar from semantics to phonology are subject to change.**

**Another example:**

Traditionally: *A chess set comprises thirty-two pieces.*  
 Currently: *Thirty-two pieces comprise a chess set.*

**Middle English** (500 years later 1100 to 1500AD] Chaucer *Canterbury Tales*  
*Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote*  
*The droght of March hath perced to the roote....*  
 “When April with its sweet showers  
 The drought of March has pierced to the root...

**Early Modern English** (~1700) Shakespeare *Hamlet*  
*A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that*  
*hath fed of that worm.*

- c. Changes in a language are changes in the grammars of those that speak the language.
- d. Linguists in this area of study investigate how languages change through time; this study may also focus on how languages are historically related to each other. **The construction of Proto-X.**
- e. **Synchronic analysis:** The study of the current “state” of a language.
- f. **Diachronic analysis:** The study of the development of a language through time. (Historical analysis).

- g. **Resistance to change:** Jonathan Swift’s prescriptive rules for English using Latin from 1BC as the perfect, model language, since it did not change (it died).

France’s “Language guardians.”

- h. **Sound change is the most widely studied aspect of language change.**

### III. Systematicity of Language Change

- a. A striking fact about language change in general is its regularity and systematicity.
- b. For example, the development of a fixed subject-verb-direct object (SVO) word order did not affect just a few verbs; all verbs in Modern English appear before rather than after the direct object.
- c. Similarly, the changes affecting the vowel in the word *ham* did not occur in that word only; they represent the regular development of the OE vowel *a* ([ɑ:]) as illustrated below:

<i>Old English</i>	<i>Middle English</i>	<i>Modern English</i>
[ba:t]	[bo:t]	[bowt] ‘boat’
[ɑ:θ]	[o:θ]	[owθ] ‘oath’
[sta:n]	[stɔ:n]	[stɔwn] ‘stone’

(From *Contemporary Linguistics 7<sup>th</sup> Edition* , p. 247)

### IV. Causes of Language Change

- a. The inevitability of language change is guaranteed by the way in which language is passed on from one generation to another.
- b. Children do not begin with an intact grammar of a specific language but must construct the grammar on the basis of the available linguistic data.
- c. In such a situation it is hardly surprising that differences will arise, even if only subtle ones, from one generation to another.
- d. In addition, since all children use the same physiological and cognitive endowment in learning language, it is to be expected that the same patterns of change will be consistently and repeatedly manifested in all languages.
- e. **Principal causes of change:** (some of this has already emerged in our discussions concerning phonetic variation within languages).

#### 1. Articulatory simplification:

Most sound changes have a physiological basis. Articulatory simplification is itself difficult to define precisely. Nonetheless, we

can identify cases of articulatory simplification in our everyday speech such as the deletion of a consonant in a complex cluster or in some dialects, the insertion of a vowel to break up a complex cluster.

<b><i>Simplification of complex clusters</i></b>		
<i>Deletion of a consonant</i>		
[fɪfθs]	[fɪfs]	‘fifths’
<i>Insertion of a vowel</i>		
[æθlit]	[æθəlɪt]	‘athlete’

## 2. Analogy and Reanalysis

- These cognitive factors play a role in change in all components of the grammar.
- Analogy reflects the preference of speakers for regular patterns over irregular ones. It typically involves the extension or generalization of a regularity on the basis of the inference that if elements are alike in some respects, they should be alike in others as well. Both phonological and semantic characteristics can serve as a basis for analogy.

*Sting/stung, swing/swung bring/\*brung*

*\*goed, \*knowed*

- Reanalysis is particularly common in morphological change. It typically involves an attempt to attribute a compound or root + affix structure to a word that was not formerly broken down. We discussed many of these examples when we focused on morphology.

*Hamburger fishburger chickenburger*

*Yogurt gogurt*

## 3. Language contact

- This refers to the situation where speakers of a language frequently interact with the speakers of another language or dialect.
- As a consequence, **borrowing** can occur particularly where there are significant numbers of bilinguals and multilinguals.

- Although borrowing can affect all components of the grammar, the lexicon is typically most affected.

Native American words into English: *Mississippi, moccasin, totem, tomahawk, Chinook, moose, skunk*

- Borrowing can affect the phonology as well. New phonemes can be introduced as well as new allophones or changes in the distribution of each.

For example, some English speakers pronounce the name of the classical composer *Bach* with the final velar fricative [x] found in German pronunciation. If there is a significant number of borrowings from another language, the borrowed foreign segment can eventually become a new phoneme.

In the early Middle English period, the London dialect had [f] but not [v] in word initial position. The [v] was later introduced as a result of contact with other English dialects and with French, in which it did occur word initially.

This contact was likely a factor in the development of a contrast between /f/ and /v/ word initially as found in the words *file* and *vile*.

#### 4. Hypercorrection

Language as well as dialect contact also results in another minor but nevertheless important source of language change. Hypercorrection occurs when a speaker who is attempting to speak another dialect or language overgeneralizes particular rules.

For example, many American English speakers hypercorrect with the use of *I* in constructions such as *He saw John and I; just between you and I*.

Some speakers have inferred that all coordinate phrases containing *me* (such as *John and me*) are incorrect even when they serve as direct objects. Note that such a person who says *He saw John and me* would not say *He saw I*.

## V. Phonological Change in English

### a. The Great Vowel shift

- A major change in English that resulted in new phonemic representations of words and morphemes took place between 1400 and 1600.
- The seven long, or tense, vowels of Middle English underwent the following change: (*An Introduction to Language* p. 504-505)

Basically, the long vowels shifted upwards; that is, a vowel that used to be pronounced in one place in the mouth would be pronounced in a different place, higher up in the mouth. The Great Vowel Shift has had long term implications for, among other things, orthography, the teaching of reading, and the understanding of any English-language text written before or during the shift.

Our current spelling system reflects the ways words were pronounced before the Great vowel shift.