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Linguistics 203

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Lecture 11
From Latin to French and beyond

English has borrowed words from both **Latin** and its descendant **French**.
Since many **changes** took place **between** French and Latin, a loanword's form may depend on **what stage** of Latin or French it's borrowed from.
Thus, knowing some of those changes can help us see connections between English words that were **borrowed at different times**.

Latin is part of the **Italic** subfamily of Indo-European.
In ancient times, there were **many Italic languages** spoken in Italy, but Latin is the **only one with living descendants** today.

The **standard dialect** of the Roman Empire is what we call **Classical Latin**.
Even as the **spoken** dialects changed, the Classical form of Latin remained influential as a **written** language due to its distinguished literature.
This continued role of Classical Latin after it was **no longer spoken** gave rise to **Ecclesiastical Latin**—the language of the **Catholic Church**.
The role of Latin as a **literary** language and **ecclesiastical** language made it the **lingua franca of European scholarship** for many centuries.

Dialects of Latin spoken **by the common people** were known as **Vulgar Latin**—these were the **non-standard** dialects, not used in formal writing.
(*Vulgus* is Latin for 'the common people'.)
Vulgar Latin **spread across the Empire** as Italians **colonized** the provinces—to what is now France, Spain, Portugal, Romania, etc., as well as Italy.
Like all languages, **spoken Latin** was **constantly changing**, and since it was spoken in such far-flung geographical regions, it **evolved differently** in the different parts of the Empire.

Thus the different **regional dialects** of Vulgar Latin each separately evolved into the **Romance Languages**—Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, and many others (e.g., Sardinian, Rhaeto-Romance, Catalan, Occitan).
For a long time the Romance languages **weren't written**—
Classical/Ecclesiastical Latin remained the standard written language.
(Indeed, some Romance languages **still** have no standard written form.)

The Romance languages went through **historical stages** just as English did—
e.g., **Old French**, from the 9th to 14th centuries,
Middle French from the 14th to 16th,
and **Modern French** thereafter.
As with English, these are **rough** boundaries in a **continuous** evolution.
(Note that the historical periods are **not the same** as those of English!—
e.g., the "**Old French**" period overlaps more with Middle English than Old English.)

English has borrowed from Latin and its descendants at **all periods**—
from **contemporary** Latin or Romance languages that it was in contact with.
Thus **Proto-Germanic** borrowed from **Classical** and early **Vulgar Latin**;
Prehistoric and Old English borrowed from Ecclesiastical Latin;
Middle English borrowed from Old French, especially the Norman dialect;
and so on, up to present-day English borrowing from present-day French.

But at the same time, **all** eras of English have borrowed from **Classical Latin**—
it remained the **prestigious lingua franca** of scholarship and law,
so it was still available for "**learned borrowings**" alongside its descendants.
These borrowings come from a stage **before** French sound changes took place,
but the way English handles them often reflects French changes anyway—
because French influenced the way English speakers pronounced Latin.
French itself **also** often borrows from Latin—its own ancestor.
English often **imitates French** in how it treats Latin loanwords.

Latin morphemes are **often no longer recognizable** in French words,
due to the amount if sound change that took place in between.
Also, **Vulgar Latin** used some different morphemes than Classical Latin did—
e.g., in Classical Latin 'horse' is *equus*; in Vulgar Latin it's *caballus*.
But knowing some of the major French sound changes can make some of the
morphemes easier to spot.

Note also that the **meanings** of words also changed between Latin and French!

Changes from Latin to French

Though **sound change is regular**, changes from Latin to French often **look irregular**.
This is because French **borrowed directly from Latin** at all stages of its history—
such words **missed out** on the sound changes that occurred **before** they were borrowed.

1

Latin **word-final syllables** were usually **greatly simplified** or **lost** in French;
these usually included **inflectional endings**.
E.g;

- Latin *ripari-um* 'riverbank' > French *rivière* (borrowed as English *river*)
- Latin *cant-um* 'song' > French *chant* (→ English *chant*)
- Latin *dignitat-em* 'dignity' > French *dignité* (→ English *dignity*)

French simplified/borrowed Latin, English followed French.

Like English, this means French **lost noun case**.
This is why English **often drops case endings** when borrowing from Latin—
it's **following the model of French**.
French nouns are generally ultimately derived from Latin **accusative case** forms,
but this usually doesn't make a difference, since the case endings are lost anyway.

2

This process also substantially affected the **derivational morphology** of French;
that's why, even when borrowing words **directly from Latin**,
the **last** morpheme usually appears in its French form.
E.g., the Latin derivational suffix *-tat-* almost always appears as *-ty* in English.

Changes before front vowels

Often, **velar** or **alveolar** stops become fricatives or affricates near **front** vowels.
They also often **change their place of articulation** as part of this process,
to something nearer to the **center of the mouth**.
This type of sound change occurred within the history of English as well as French!
The English sound [tʃ] (*ch*) is originally derived from Proto-Germanic **k* near front vowels.
Compare *cool*, with a back vowel, to *chill*, with a front vowel.

One of the **earliest** changes in the history of French was of this type:
the **velar stops** *c*, *g* became [s] and [dʒ] before **front vowels** *i* and *e*.
This is reflected **very reliably** in English—
c is pronounced [s] and *g* [dʒ] before *i* and *e* in loanwords,
whether they're borrowed from French, Latin, or even (usually) Greek.

Latin *t* **also** often became [s] in French when followed by *i* (plus another vowel);
in some words, it even ended up being **spelled** as *c*.
This shows up most obviously in nouns that ended in *-tia* in Latin,
such as nouns based on **present participles** (e.g., *agentia* → *agency*),
and others like *democratia* → *democracy* and *justitia* → *justice*.
Another example: words derived from Latin *pretium* 'price':
price, *preci-ous*, *ap-preci-ate*, *de-preci-ate*: all show *c* for Latin *t*.
The result of this same change is spelled as *s* instead of *c* in some words:
e.g., *lesson* (from *lectiōn-em* 'reading') and *comparison* (*comparatiōn-em*).

This French [s], from Latin *t* and *c*, often became [ʃ] via later changes in English.
We see this [ʃ] pronunciation in e.g. *precious*, *patient*, *social*, *crucial*, and the suffix *-tion*.

A major change distinguishing French from other Romance languages
is that ***c* becomes *ch*** (old French [tʃ]) **before *a***.
(The vowel *a* was a **low front** vowel in Old French.)
This appears in many words borrowed into English from Old French:
chant (Latin *cantus* 'song'), *chief* (*caput* 'head'), *chance* (*cadentia* 'fall').
English **never** applies this retroactively to words borrowed from Latin—
it appears only in words that underwent it **within French**.

In **modern French**, [tʃ] has become a **fricative** [ʃ] (still spelled *ch*);
words borrowed from modern French in modern times reflect that.
This means we can tell **roughly when** a *ch* word was borrowed from French:
compare medieval *chief* ([tʃ]) to modern *chef* ([ʃ]).

There are many sources of Old French [dʒ] (spelled *g* or sometimes *j*);
an somewhat frequent one is unstressed Latin *dic* and *tic* (in some contexts).
Examples: *revindic-ō* → *revenge*; *jūdic-em* → *juge* (English *judge*);
late Vulgar Latin derivational suffix *-atic-* → *-age* (*language*, *voyage*, etc.).
Like [tʃ] becoming [ʃ], Old French [dʒ] (from this source and others) becomes modern French [ʒ];
this is also reflected in more recent loanwords, such as *rouge* and *beige*.)

Lenition

A common type of sound change is called **lenition**:
consonants become **weaker** in their articulation—
This generally involves changing the consonant's **manner of articulation**
from one that takes **more effort** to pronounce to one that takes **less effort**:

stop → affricate → fricative → approximant → vowel

Lenition changes do not necessarily pass through **all the steps** in this scale—
a stop **doesn't have to become an affricate** before becoming a fricative.
But **many** consonants move **rightward one or more steps** on this scale.
Voiceless consonants becoming **voiced** is also often involved in lenition.

The examples above of *t* and *c* becoming [s], [tʃ], [ʃ] etc. before front vowels are all cases of lenition; but there are **many more types** of lenition, affecting a wider **variety of consonants** in a wider variety of environments.

Latin ***p* and *b*** in mid-word often become the **voiced fricative *v*** in French.
When a **stop becomes a fricative**, the process is called **spirantization**.
Examples: *riparium* → *river*; *recipio* → *receive*; *delibero* → *deliver*;
caput → *chief* is the same phenomenon, though it ends up with voiceless *f*.

Latin ***c, g*** in mid-word often become the **vowel *i*** or **semivowel *y***
(when they don't become fricatives or affricates as on the previous page);
sometimes word-medial ***c, g, t, d*** just get **deleted altogether**.
Examples: *conductum* → *conduit*; *fructum* → *fruit*; *focarium* → *foyer*; *regalis* → *royal*;
religo → *rely*; *-fico* → *-fy*; *frater* → *friar*; *cadentia* → *chance*; *rotundum* → *round*.
Latin *l* in mid-word often becomes the vowel *u*:
bellitas → *beauty*; *colloco* → *couch*

Vowels between French and Latin experienced a **great variety** of changes.
Diphthongization was quite common:
manu teneo → *maintain*; *clamo* → *claim*; *regnum* → *reign*; *recipio* → *receive*;
dubita → *doubt*; *computo* → *count*
…but many other vowel changes happened as well.

Since English has borrowed from French at **almost all historical periods**,
and French has borrowed from Latin as well,
any given loanword may exhibit **some, all, or none** of these changes.

In a few cases, English has borrowed a word from French but **altered the spelling** to resemble the Latin word it originated from.
E.g., English *doubt* and *receipt* are from Old French *doute* and *receite*;
the *b* and *p* are **added back into the spelling** (but not the pronunciation!) to match Latin *dubita* and *receptum*, from which the French words originate.