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Linguistics 203

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Lecture 2
The history of the English language

Language is **always changing**.
E.g., the way English is spoken today is different from how it was spoken 50 years ago, 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago.
Most changes in language are **slow** enough that you **don't notice them** going on; but over **long periods of time** they can add up to **drastic differences**.

English from 1200 years ago ("Old English") is **basically unintelligible** to the modern speaker—cf. this quote from *Beowulf*:

ða com of more under misthleoþum *Grendel gongan, godes yrre bær;* *mynte se manscaða manna cynnes* *sumne besyrwan in sele ðam hean.*	'Then Grendel came walking off the moor under misty hills, bearing God's wrath; the evildoer was planning to ensnare a certain member of the human race in the high hall.

If you **know what it means** and that it's English, you can spot a few words—*godes* 'God's'; *com* 'came'; *under* 'under'; *bær* 'bore'; *more* 'moor'—
but for all practical purposes it's a completely different language.

Many people think (or at least **act as if** they think) that language change is "decay" from some imaginary earlier ideal or stable form of the language.
But language change is always ongoing, and at any point in time a language suits the needs of the people who speak it; there's no such thing as "decay".

Just as **Old English** developed into **modern English** over centuries of change, **Latin** developed into the modern **Romance languages**: French, Spanish, etc.
Different **regional varieties** of Latin **diverged** into separate languages.
When that happens, the result is a **family** of **related languages**.

English is a member of a language family as well: the **Germanic languages**.
Other Germanic languages are Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian.
These all descend from different regional varieties of a language that we call **Proto-Germanic**, spoken about 2000 years ago in north-central Europe.
(Etymologies in the OED refer to it as "Old Germanic".)
So the history of English as a **separate language** begins in **England**—
but the **ancestors** of English **weren't always** spoken in England.

The languages spoken in **Britain** 2000 years ago were in the **Celtic** family—
such as the ancestor of modern **Welsh**, and languages related to it.
(Other modern Celtic languages include Irish, Scots Gaelic, and Breton.)
The Roman Empire conquered Britain in the mid–first century—
bringing **Latin** to Britain long before the ancestor of English was there.
However, Celtic languages **remained the main languages of the population**,
unlike in other parts of the Roman Empire where the local population
eventually switched to Latin (giving rise to the Romance languages).

The Roman Empire and ancient Germany

Ancient Germany—where Proto-Germanic was spoken—**bordered** the Empire,
but was (mostly) never conquered by it.
Because of their **proximity**, Proto-Germanic **borrowed words** from Latin—
including the Proto-Germanic ancestors of the following English words:

wine (from Latin *vīnum*)	*street* (Latin *strāta*)
mile (Latin *mīlia*)	*chalk* (Latin *calx*)
cheese (Latin *cāseus*)	*kitchen* (Latin *coquīna*)

changed meaning / pronunciation while borrowing

Not all these words entered Germanic with the **same meaning** they had in Latin:
e.g., Latin *calx* just means 'pebble', not 'chalk' specifically.
And most have **changed pronunciation drastically** over the past 2000 years:
e.g., Latin *cāseus* → Proto-Germanic *kasius* becomes *cheese* in modern English.

These words were **loanwords** into Proto-Germanic **before English split off**,
so we can think of them as **native** words in English itself—
they've been part of English since before English was a separate language.

Germanic split into **three sub-families**, in three regions Germanic-speakers lived:
East Germanic: now extinct, its most well-known language was **Gothic**.
North Germanic: the **Old Norse** language spoken by the Vikings,
which developed into Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.
West Germanic: this subset includes German, Yiddish, Dutch, and English.

1 **Prehistoric English**: 400–700.

The Roman Empire retreated from Britain in the early 5th century;
Germanic tribes—the **Angles, Saxons, and Jutes**—invaded soon after,
conquering most of southern Britain, which came to be called **England**.
The language they spoke is the earliest form of English as a distinct language—
we'll call it **Prehistoric English**, since few written records of it remain.
English became the principal language of England;
Celtic languages remained in areas the Germanic tribes didn't conquer (yet),
such as Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland.
But although Celtic languages had been previously spoken in England,
English borrowed **almost no loanwords** from Celtic.
During this period, England was converted to **Christianity**;
some words were borrowed from Latin at this time because Latin was the
language of the Church (e.g., *candle*, *priest*, *school*).

2 **Old English**: 700–1100.

Around 700 English began to be written in a version of the Latin alphabet;
this period of the language is called **Old English** (or **Anglo-Saxon**).
The greatest surviving work of OE literature is the epic poem *Beowulf*.

OE is the **direct ancestor** of modern English, but its **grammar** was **very different**:
it made much more use of **inflection** than modern English.

Inflection is a how a language marks words to fit their **grammatical function**—
e.g., modern English **inflects** nouns for the plural vs. singular **number**
by adding the suffix *-s* (as in *dog-s*) or occasionally other endings (*child-ren*).
Old English inflected nouns and adjectives not only for **number**
but also for **grammatical gender** and **case**.

Gender: nouns are arbitrarily classified as **masculine**, **feminine**, or **neuter**;
adjectives and articles have to **inflect** to **agree** with the corresponding noun.
E.g., note how the form of 'the' changes to match the gender of the noun:

	masculine	feminine	neuter
OE	*se stān*	*sēo faru*	*þæt scip*
	'the stone'	'the journey'	'the ship'

(The letter *þ* is called "thorn" and indicates the sounds represented by *th* in modern English.)

In modern English, nouns and adjectives no longer have grammatical gender;
the only trace remaining is in the pronouns *he*, *she*, *it*.

Case: OE marked nouns to indicate their **role in the grammar of the sentence**; nouns could have different forms depending on whether they were the **subject** of the sentence, **object**, **indirect object**, or **possessive**.

Like gender, modern English mainly only retains case marking on **pronouns** (and doesn't even distinguish direct and indirect objects anymore):

subject (**nominative** case):	***I** like dogs.*
object (**accusative** case):	*Dogs like **me**.*
possessive (**genitive** case**):**	*That's **my** dog.*
indirect object (**dative** case):	*Give **me** the dog.*

OE did this for **all nouns**, not just pronouns. e.g.:

	masculine	feminine	neuter
nominative:	*se stān*	*sēo faru*	*þæt scip*
accusative:	*þone stān*	*þā fære*	*þæt scip*
genitive:	*þæs stānes*	*þære fære*	*þæs scipes*
dative:	*þæm stāne*	*þære fære*	*þæm scipe*
	'the stone'	'the journey'	'the ship'
nom. plural:	*þā stānas*	*þā fara*	*þā scipu*
acc. plural:	*þā stānas*	*þā fara*	*þā scipu*
gen. plural:	*þāra stāna*	*þāra fara*	*þāra scipa*
dat. plural:	*þæm stānum*	*þæm farum*	*þæm scipum*
	'the stones'	'the journeys'	'the ships'

Verb agreement: OE inflected **verbs** to **agree** with the subject; modern English only retains an ending for **third-person singular** subjects:

	OE	modern English
1st singular:	*ic bærne*	*I burn*
2d singular:	*þū bærnst*	*you burn*
3d singular:	*hē bærnþ*	*he burns*
plural:	*hīe bærnaþ*	*they burn*

These grammatical features may be familiar from other languages you know; English used to have them too, but lost them over the course of 1000 years.

In the 9th–11th centuries, England was frequently invaded by **Vikings**, who settled in northern and eastern England and spoke the **Norse** language.

OE acquired loanwords from Norse in this period—some very important, such as the pronoun *they*!

Since Norse is also a Germanic language, some of the loanwords from Norse had the **same origin** as existing English words—e.g., native English *shirt* and Norse loanword *skirt* go back to the **same word** in Proto-Germanic!

(Pairs of words like this in a single language are called **doublets**.)

(3) **Middle English**: 1100–1500 Norman Conquest

In 1066, England was conquered by Duke **William of Normandy**, who became the King of England and known as **William the Conqueror**.
The conquest marks a turning point in the history of English **language** as well; it is often used as the boundary between the **Old** and **Middle English** stages.

The Normans were a Germanic group themselves originally, but they spoke **French** and made French their language of government, while English continued to be spoken by the common people.
As a result, English lost much of its formal and scholarly vocabulary; and later, when English began to be used for literary purposes again, **French loanwords** were the best source for additional vocabulary.

Geoffrey Chaucer (died 1400) is often thought of as the greatest ME writer; his most famous work, the *Canterbury Tales*, has fairly high French influence:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote	When April, with its sweet showers
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote,	has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,	and bathed every vein in such moisture
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;	by virtue of which the flower is engendered;
Whan Zephirus eek with his swete breeth	when Zephirus too, with his sweet breath,
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth	has breathed in every holt and heath
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne	upon the tender crops, and the young sun
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours y-ronne,	has run half its course in the Ram,
And smale fowles maken melodye,	and small birds make melodies,
That slepen al the night with open ye,	who sleep all night with open eyes
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages):	(as nature spurs them to do in their hearts),
Than longen folk to goon on pilgrimages.	then folk long to go on pilgrimages.

The first 12 lines of the *Canterbury Tales*; Norman French loanwords are underlined.

Note how much easier ME is for a modern reader to understand than OE!
Canterbury Tales is at least 400 years closer to us than *Beowulf* is.

Modern English: 1500–present.

(4)

The **Early Modern English** period is considered to have started around 1500—when the **Renaissance** brought a flowering of learning and literature.
Scholarship brought in a huge flood of words from Latin and Greek, and the rise of England as a colonial power brought further language contact.
The works of **Shakespeare** and the **King James Bible** translation, around 1600, had great influence on English style.

A famous line from Shakespeare showing off fancy Latin loanwords:
This my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.

(5)

In the period after 1800, **Present-Day English** developed: the **globalization** of the language brought in loanwords from around the globe, as well as ever-increasing Latin- and Greek-based scientific and technical vocabulary.

The Great Vowel Shift

One very notable change between Middle and Early Modern English was a change in **pronunciation of vowels** called the **Great Vowel Shift**.

In Old and Middle English there was a contrast between **short** and **long** vowels: long vowel sounds were literally pronounced for a longer amount of time.

Many of the vowels that were **short** in Old and Middle English are pronounced basically **the same now** as they were then:

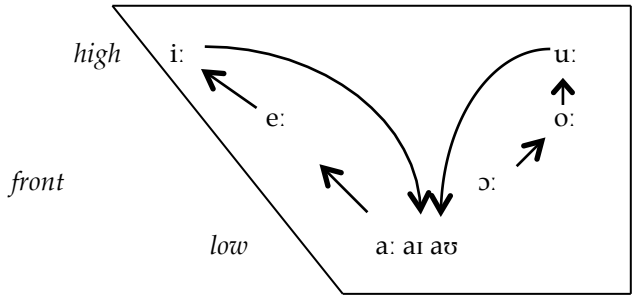
word	ME vowel pronunciation	modern vowel
ship	/ɪ/	/ɪ/
bed	/ɛ/	/ɛ/
fat	/a/	/æ/

The **long** vowels, however, have almost all undergone **major changes** since ME:

word	ME vowel pronunciation	modern vowel
wise	/i:/	/aɪ/
queen	/e:/	/i:/
name	/a:/	/e:/

(A colon : is used to represent lengthening of a vowel sound.)

Phoneticians describe vowels in terms of the position of the tongue in the mouth: how **high or low** is it, and how far **front or back**?
(We'll talk about this more later in the term.)
In the **Great Vowel Shift**, the **long vowels** all **rose up higher** in the mouth; the ones that were already high "**fell off the top**" to become diphthongs.



i:, u: swing down to *ai* and *au*, respectively.
e: moves up to *i*
o: moves up to *u*
ɔ: moves up to *o*
a: moves up to *e*

This is why vowels in English are **spelled differently** than in many languages: the vowel in English *name* would be spelled "e", not "a", in French, German, etc.
It's because in English, the **pronunciation changed, but the spelling didn't**: *name* **used to have** the same vowel sound spelled "a" in other languages.

The Great Vowel Shift certainly **didn't happen all at once**— it was **gradual**, beginning in late ME and extending into the Early Modern period— but it makes a good landmark for defining the boundary between the two eras.