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Linguistics 203

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Lecture 1
Introduction: The wealth of English

This class is about **English words**—
where they come from,
how they're constructed,
how their meanings change over time,
and more.

What's so special about English?

It's the most **widely spoken** language in the world today, in terms of **total number** of people who speak it, natively or non-natively.
It functions as an **international** language, and as a common language for communication between people of **different language backgrounds**.
(A language that has this function is called a ***lingua franca***.)
But **why** does English have this worldwide prominence?
Does it have **special properties** that make it well-suited for this role?

Probably not.

The main reasons for the status of English are **political** and **historical**—
it was the language of the **British Empire** and then the **United States**,
the leading economic and cultural powers of the past 300 years or so.
So it's likely that English would have achieved this status **whatever** it was like—
English-speaking countries exerted the strongest influence on the world,
and that gave people all over the world incentive to learn English.
If a different country had been the world's leading power at the right time,
its language might have become the international *lingua franca*.

However, English does have a notable feature particularly relevant to this class:
its **very large vocabulary**.
The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists some 500,000 words; the largest dictionaries of French have about 150,000; German 200,000; Russian 130,000.

This is in part because of another key feature of English:
its willingess to **borrow** words from other languages—
i.e., to add words from other languages to its own vocabulary.
According to some estimates, as much as **70%** of the vocabulary of English (though a smaller percentage of the **most frequently used** words) consists of **loanwords**—i.e., words that were **borrowed** into the language.

Often loanwords enter a language because of **need**—
to refer to some **new** concept or entity that it doesn't **already** have a word for.
This is how e.g. *karaoke* entered English (from Japanese, in the 1970s),
as well as *skunk* (from Abenaki, in the 1600s) and *pizza* (Italian, 1800s).

But English can also borrow words even when other English words already express substantially the same meaning—
Paternal was borrowed (French, 1400s) even though *fatherly* already existed;
angst was borrowed (German, 1940s) even though *anxiety* already existed.
Loanwords may often end up taking on **slightly different shades of meaning** than synonymous native words; but many other languages do perfectly well with a single word for these concepts.

Loanwords often have their **pronunciation and/or meaning changed** somewhat as part of the borrowing process; but they still count as loanwords!

Why is English so open to loanwords?

Partly because English is fairly flexible in terms of **what a word can sound like**:
English allows long **sequences of consonants** (*strength*) or vowels (*Iowa*),
very short words (*egg*) or very long ones (*abracadabra*),
words that begin or end with consonants or vowels, etc.
So often foreign words **don't have to change very much** to sound like possible English words.

Part of the willingness of English to borrow words is due to its **history**:
England was invaded by Vikings and then by French-speaking Normans,
so English was put into **close contact** with Norse and French.
These intimate **language contact** situations made borrowing more likely,
and the density of Norse and French loanwords may have made English **more open** to borrowing from other languages later on down the line.

In some languages, borrowing is **frowned on** to some degree—
borrowing is considered to corrupt the "purity" of the vocabulary,
the most admired writers stick most strictly to native words.
In France, there is an official "**language academy**" that makes rulings on what words are officially considered part of French.
English has never had such an institution,
and seems to celebrate writers who use a **great variety** of words.

Language is **always in the process of changing**—
over time, pronunciations of words change, grammatical rules change, etc.
One of the ways a language changes is by **expanding its vocabulary** by **borrowing** words from other languages, or by **creating new words** out of elements that already exist in the language.
This will be the main focus of this class, though we will touch upon other types of change also.

Latin and Greek vocabulary elements

Latin and Greek are the most important sources of loanwords that make up the **technical and scholarly** vocabulary of English;
it's those that this class will primarily focus on.

Why does English have such a large Latin and Greek component?

- Latin was the ***lingua franca*** of European scholarship long after the fall of the Roman Empire.
- When English began to be used for scholarship, it was in Latin that the technical vocabulary **already existed**, so English writers borrowed Latin terms that they knew would be understood in scholarly work.
- The Romans had borrowed a lot of scholarly words **from Greek** in ancient times for the same reason, so they were part of the intellectual vocabulary.
- English had a large component of **French** loanwords already; French is historically derived from Latin, so there was already a model of how to fit Latinate words into English.

It's not just Greek and Latin **words** that are borrowed into English—
it's mainly the **smaller elements that make up words**.
These smaller elements are called **morphemes**;
each has its own meaning and they can be combined to create new words, even words that never existed in Greek or Latin proper.

For instance, take the word *supraluminal*, which means 'faster than light'.
It's built up out of the Latin **morphemes** *supra-* 'above' and *lumin-* 'light'.
But it was **never a Latin word itself**—it wasn't borrowed **from** Latin at all.
It was **created in English** out of morphemes that already existed in English, but **those morphemes** were originally borrowed from Latin.

So learning the Latinate vocabulary of English isn't a matter of just memorizing hundreds of thousands of **separate words**;
instead, we can memorize a smaller number of **Latin and Greek morphemes**, and **how they combine with each other** to create longer words.

If so much of the English vocabulary is from Latin,
why can't we all just **understand Latin** already?

- Because there's more to a language than just its **vocabulary**:
  although English borrowed a lot of **words** and **morphemes** from Latin, it borrowed very little of its **grammar**.
  Knowing **vocabulary** isn't enough to be able to understand a language!
- Many of the borrowed words in English **don't have quite the same meanings** as they did in Latin.
- Knowing the **meaning of a morpheme** doesn't **necessarily** mean you know the meanings of all words **built** on that morpheme.

Loanwords may be constrasted with **native** words—
i.e., words that were never borrowed, but have **always** been part of English
(or at least, have been part of English as far back as it's possible to tell),
or are built out of morphemes that have always been part of English.

English often has native words with **roughly the same meaning** as Greek or Latin loanwords, but that **doesn't make them interchangeable**.

A simple set of examples:

native	Latin
fatherly	*paternal*
motherly	*maternal*
brotherly	*fraternal*

The native and Latin words have about **the same basic meanings**, or **denotation,** but they differ in **more subtle aspects of meaning**, or **connotation**,
as well as the contexts in which they're more likely to be used.
The Latin words are more **abstract, technical, and legalistic** (e.g. *paternal rights)*;
the native words sound more **informal** and **personal** (e.g., *fatherly hugs*).

native	Latin
leave	*depart*
speed	*velocity*
rot	*decay*
light	*illumination*
end	*terminate*
bury	*inter*
hurt	*injure*
lie	*prevaricate*

The native words again seem **more direct**, **less formal**, and **less fancy**;
they are also often **shorter** and **less complex**.
By "less complex", I mean they have **fewer morphemes**—
i.e., fewer **meaningful structural elements** that can be separated out.

E.g., the word *end* is made up of three **sounds** ("e", "n", and "d"),
but no **meaningful components** smaller than the entire word.
But *terminate* can be analyzed into *termin-* and *-ate*, each of which can be **found in other words** performing similar (if not identical) **functions**:
termin-al, *termin-us*, *de-termine*, *co-termin-ous*; *simul-ate*, *rot-ate*, *activ-ate*, etc.
This ability of Greek and Latin morphemes to **recombine with each other**
is what makes them such a **productive source** of new English words.

The meaning associated with a morpheme is often **approximate**;
when morphemes are combined, the meaning of the derived word **might not be exactly predictable** from the meanings of the individual parts.
But the meanings still usually have a **recognizable relationship**:

- *phil-* means 'liking', as in *Anglo-phile* 'someone who likes England'.
- *anthrop-* means 'human', as in *anthrop-o-log-y* 'the study of humankind'.
- *phil-anthrop-y* therefore **looks** like it should mean just 'liking humankind'; but it **actually** means 'donating money to charitable causes'— which is a **specific way** of expressing liking for humankind.

A given morpheme **may not be pronounced the same** in all words it appears in:
e.g., the morpheme *iatr-* 'healing, medicine' appears in:

- *psych-iatr-y* ('medical treatment for the mind')
- *iatr-ogenic* ('caused by medical treatment')
- *ped-iatr-ician* ('medical provider for children')

and the same morpheme is pronounced differently in all three words.

Similarly, a morpheme **may be spelled differently** in different words—
e.g., the morpheme *phil-* appears as *phile* in *Anglophile*.

Later in this course, we'll talk about more extreme ways the form of a morpheme can differ between words, and the patterns and causes behind the alternation.

In this class, you're responsible for learning the Greek and Latin morphemes listed at the end of each chapter of the Denning et al. textbook.
You should know the **forms** a morpheme can take, and its basic **meaning**, so that when you encounter words containing the morpheme you can infer what the words probably mean.
It may be useful to learn examples of words **containing** the morpheme, as mnemonics for the meanings of those and other morphemes—
e.g., if you remember that *psych-* means 'mind' in the word *psychiatry*, you may be more likely to remember that *iatr-* means 'medicine'.