

Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

**“Language and society in Myanmar and beyond”**

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Mo, We, Fr 2pm - 3pm (Myanmar time)

## **Lesson 6: Language use and language change - general**

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**Today's English is not the same as it was in the past:**

**Beowulf (10th century)**

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geārdagum  
þēodcyninga þrym gefrūnon,  
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

What! We of Spear-Danes in yore-days  
People's-kings glory have heard,  
How the nobles heroic-deeds did.

## Chaucer (14th century)

Ye knowe ek, that in forme of speche  
is chaunge  
Withinne a thousand yeer,  
and wordes tho  
That hadden pris, now wonder  
nyce and straunge  
Us thinketh hem,  
and yet thei spake hem so,  
And spedde as wel in love  
as men now do.

You know also that in speech's form  
(there) is change  
Within a thousand years,  
and words then  
That had value, now wondrously  
foolish and strange  
To us seem them,  
and yet they spoke them so,  
And fared as well in love  
as men now do.

## Shakespeare (16th century)

So shaken as we are, so wan with care,  
Find we a time for frightened peace to pant  
And breathe short-winded accents of new broils  
To be commenced in strands afar remote.

(Despite how shaken and pale with worry we are, let's take advantage of this moment of peace to catch our breath, and as we pant, we'll speak about the battles we'll soon fight in foreign lands.)

**Why do languages change?**

## Where does (spoken) language exist?

- Language is not a concrete object.
- Language exists only in the heads of its speakers.
- Language depends on being used by speakers in order to exist.
- If no one uses a language, it disappears.
- Language depends on successful transmission of ideas and their interpretation (the hearer knows what the speaker wants to say).

## What about language speakers?

- Speakers are individuals with individual differences.
- The language spoken by individual speakers of the same community is never completely uniform.
- No speaker or hearer is perfect. Misunderstandings may always occur.
- Speakers want to make themselves understood, and hearers want to understand.
- Both speakers and hearers are lazy, that is, they want to use as little effort in speaking and understanding as possible.

**This makes language unstable in time and space and causes changes.**

## Abbreviation of words - speakers are lazy

Words that we use frequently and that everyone knows well are often shortened:

*university* → *uni*

*kilogram* → *kilo*

*United States* → *US*

*telephone* → *phone*

The more shared background the speakers share, the more easily words can be shortened.

If uncommon words are shortened or words are shortened too much, the hearer may not understand the speaker anymore.

## **Speaking any language takes a lot of energy in producing sounds**

Again, speakers are lazy, so they try to make speaking less tiring.

This can lead to sounds being pronounced differently when they are used frequently.

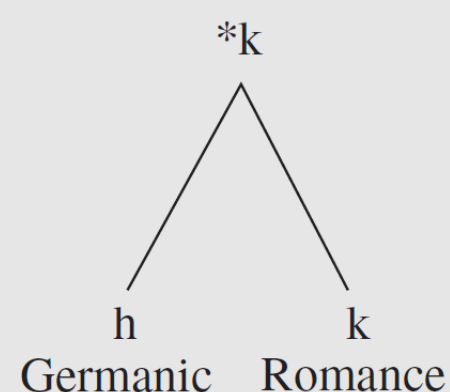
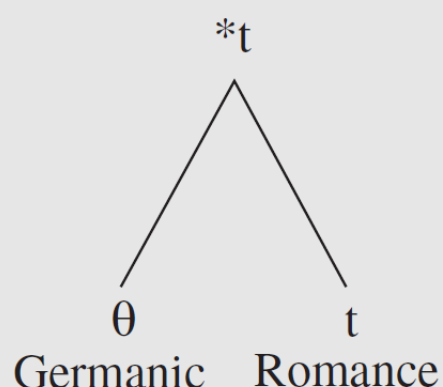
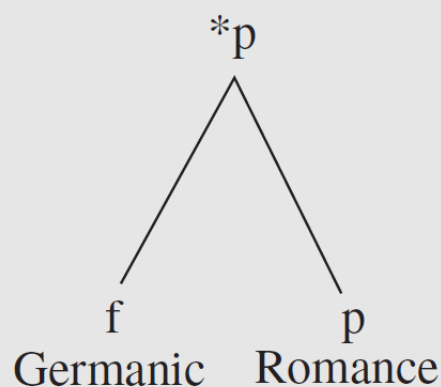
If these “lazy” pronunciations become established in one group’s speech but not in another’s, the language may split into different varieties.

This kind of “sound change” happens in all societies at all times.



## Some sound changes leading to English

STOP SOUNDS became FRICATIVES in all Germanic languages (less energy-consuming):



### Germanic

*English*

**f**ish

**th**ree

**h**eart

*Latin*

**p**iscis

**t**res

**c**or

### Romance

*French*

**p**oisson

**t**rois

**c**œur

*Spanish*

**p**ez

**t**res

**c**orazón

## Reduction of spoken forms

Comparing Old Chinese to modern Mandarin, we can see how the pronunciation is simplified:

Old Chinese	Middle Chinese	Mandarin	gloss
*gip	*ǰjəp	<i>shí</i>	‘ten’
*gip	*ǰjəp	<i>shí</i>	‘gather’
*dak	*ǰjäk	<i>shí</i>	‘stone’
*dək	*ǰjək	<i>shí</i>	‘really’
*mlək	*dǰjək	<i>shí</i>	‘eat’
*mlak	*dǰjäk	<i>shí</i>	‘shoot with an arrow’
*mdit	*dǰjet	<i>shí</i>	‘this’
*mlit	*dǰjet	<i>shí</i>	‘fruit’
*stək	*śjik	<i>shí</i>	‘knowledge’

## Common sound changes

<b>Deletion</b>	Latin <i>generalis</i>	→	Port <i>geral</i>	‘general’
	Old Eng <i>nixt</i>	→	Eng <i>night</i>	‘night’
<b>Insertion</b>	Latin <i>schola</i>	→	Sp <i>escuela</i>	‘school’
	Eng <i>sport</i>	→	Thai <i>səpò:t</i>	‘sport’
	Eng <i>Swiss</i>	→	Thai <i>səwít</i>	‘Swiss’
<b>Substitution</b>	Latin <i>capra</i>	→	Fr <i>chèvre</i>	‘goat’
	Eng <i>phone</i>	→	Burm <i>p<sup>h</sup>òun</i>	‘phone’
<b>Assimilation</b>	Latin <i>octo</i>	→	It <i>otto</i>	‘eight’
	Latin <i>lectus</i>	→	It <i>letto</i>	‘bed’
<b>Dissimilation</b>	Latin <i>arbor</i>	→	It <i>albore</i>	‘tree’

## **Too much weakening of forms**

If speakers are lazy and want to use as little effort as possible, the expected result would be that all linguistic expressions are reduced to almost nothing.

This obviously does not happen. Why?

What happens if a word is weakened too much?

# Morphological leveling - getting rid of too many and complicated forms

## Old English

	MASCULINE 'FOX'	FEMININE 'LEARNING'	NEUTER 'ANIMAL'	MASCULINE 'FOOT'
<hr/>				
<b>SINGULAR</b>				
<i>Nominative</i>	fox	lār	dēor	fōt
<i>Accusative</i>	fox	lār-e	dēor	fōt
<i>Genitive</i>	fox-es	lār-e	dēor-es	fōt-es
<i>Dative</i>	fox-e	lār-e	dēor-e	fēt
<b>PLURAL</b>				
<i>Nom./Acc.</i>	fox-as	lār-a	dēor	fēt
<i>Genitive</i>	fox-a	lār-a	dēor-a	fōt-a
<i>Dative</i>	fox-um	lār-um	dēor-um	fōt-um
<hr/>				

## PRESENT TENSE

### Singular

*first person*

dēm-e

*second person*

dēm-st (or dēm-est)

*third person*

dēm-þ (or dēm-eþ)

### Plural

*first, second, and third*

dēm-aþ

## PAST TENSE

### Singular

*first person*

dēm-d-e

*second person*

dēm-d-est

*third person*

dēm-d-e

### Plural

*first, second, and third*

dēm-d-on

## GERUND

tō dēm-enne (or dēm-anne)

## PRESENT PARTICIPLE

## PAST PARTICIPLE

dēm-ed

**Words that are used frequently tend to get shortened.**

**On the other hand, words that are used frequently also tend to retain irregular morphology:**

*have/has - had - had*

*be/am/are/is - was/were - been*

*do/does - did - done*

*man - men*

*child - children*

**but less frequent words tend to become morphologically regular:**

*show/shows - showed - shown*

→ *show - showed - showed*

*thrive/thrives - throve - thriven*

→ *thrive - thrived - thrived*

*fo - fon*

→ *foe - foes*

*cow - cy/cyne*

→ *cow - cows*

## Reanalysis in the lexicon

A word or part of a word is 'misunderstood' and used in a new sense

*Hamburger*

→ *ham-burger*

→ *burger* as a kind of sandwich

→ cheeseburger, fishburger, etc.

*Omnibus* (Latin *omni-bus* 'for all')

→ *bus* 'big vehicle for all people to ride'

→ *autobus* 'motorized big vehicle for transporting people'

→ *minibus* 'small bus'

→ *Airbus* French airplane producer (→ kind of airplane)



## Reanalysis in the grammar - grammaticalization

**An expression is interpreted in a new way and acquires grammatical function.**

I'm going to the market.

→ I'm going to buy food at the market.

→ I'm going to buy food.

→ I'm gonna buy food.

(\*I'm gonna the market.)

He is at the office.

→ He is at work.

→ He is at working.

→ He is aworking.

→ He is working.

## Reanalysis in syntax

The grouping of pieces in an expression is changed, and a new syntactic structure arises.

*I know that: He is coming.*

→ *I know [that he is coming].*

→ *That he is coming is no surprise.*

***That* originally is only a demonstrative pronoun.**

**By rearranging the groups of words, *that* becomes a subordinator.**

## Semantic change

Some words change their meaning over time (sometimes due to taboo)

### Early English meanings of common words

*will*      'want'                      →              'FUTURE'

*nice*      'stupid'                      →              'lovely, pretty'

*like*      'body, form'                      →              'similar'                      (→ *-ly* in *lovely* etc.)

*true*      'faithful'                      →              'consistent with facts'

*play*      'exercise'                      →              'do for fun'

*deer*      'animal'                      →              'deer, kind of wild animal'

## Changes in negation

**Middle High German**

*en-weiss*

‘don’t know’

*en-weiss wicht*

*en-weiss ne-wicht*

*(en-)weiss nicht*

**Modern High German**

*weiss nicht*

## English:

*ic ne dom (ān wuht)* 'I do not (do anything)'

*ne-ān-wuht* 'not-one-thing' → *nozt* → *not* → *do not* → *don't*  
→ *-n't*

## French:

*il **ne** va* 'he does not go'

→ *il **ne va pas*** (lit. 'he does not go a step')

→ *il va **pas***

## **Spoken and written language**

Human language has been spoken for several hundred thousand years but written for only some 5000 years. Audio recordings have been possible for only over 100 years.

Most languages are still not written regularly.

The spoken language is very unstable, it disappears the moment the utterance is finished.

The memory of the speaker and hearer is not perfect.

Recording spoken language helps conserve the language to some extent.

## Compare spoken and written English with German:

<i>eight</i>	/eit/	<i>acht</i>
<i>ate</i>	/eit/	<i>ass</i>
<i>night</i>	/nait/	<i>Nacht</i>
<i>sight</i>	/sait/	<i>Sicht</i>
<i>fight</i>	/fait/	<i>fechten</i>
<i>enough</i>	/inʌf/	<i>genug</i>
<i>through</i>	/θru:/	<i>durch</i>
<i>though</i>	/ðou/	<i>doch</i>

In earlier stages of English, there was a sound /x/ that was later lost, but retained in the written language as <gh>. In German, the same sound is still present, written <ch> (sometimes <g>) and pronounced /x/.

Writing a language can slow down the process of change, but it cannot stop it.

If the spoken language changes much more than the written form, the orthography should be changed as well, or the two forms of the language become too different.

If the spoken and written form of the language drift too much apart, learning to write can become too difficult and alternative unofficial spellings may arise in informal contexts (e.g. US English *nite*, *lite* for *night*, *light*).



**In the next lesson, we'll have a look how Burmese changed over time  
(and keeps changing)**