# Unit 1. Introduction

## History of the English Language (G5061322)

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1.1. Why study the history of English?

1.2. External and internal history
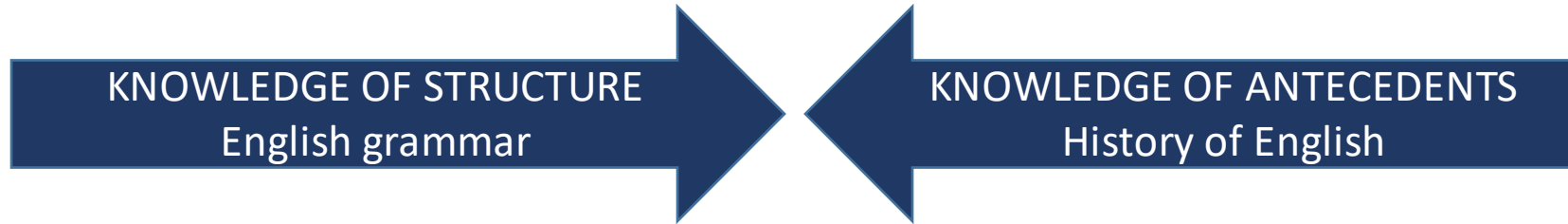
1.3. Periodization

1.4. Language change

# 1.1. Why study the history of English?

1.2. External and internal history

1.3. Periodization

1.4. Language change

# Why study the history of English?

| KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURE | KNOWLEDGE OF ANTECEDENTS |
|---|---|
| English grammar | History of English |

To understand how things are, it is often helpful and sometimes essential to know how they got to be that way. If we are psychologists who want to understand a person's behavior, we must know something about that person's **origins and development**. The same is true of a language. (Pyles & Algeo 2010: 2)

Historically evolved systems are not continually made afresh; they contain **remnants of earlier stages**, sometimes fully functional [...] sometimes just marginal. Understanding a system involves knowing where these things come from and what they used to do, how their current functions (if any) relate to their old ones. (Lass 1994: 9)

[T]he history of English informs our **understanding** of the language's **current state**; modern spelling and pronunciation, for example, result from historical developments, and irregularities (as well as regularities) can be explained by reference to the language's past. (Brinton & Arnovik 2006: 3)

# Why study the history of English?

**Examples:**

- *knee* /niː/

- *oxen* vs. *\*oxes*

- *Never before had I heard such a stupid idea.*

  se cyning meteð þone biscop 'the king meets the bishop'

  þone biscop meteð se cyning 'the king meets the bishop' (literally, *the bishop meets the king*) → the inflections identify the syntactic function of the elements in the clause

# Why study the history of English?

**Here is a version of the Lord's Prayer in different versions, from OE up to LModE. What differences can you spot by looking at the different versions?**

## Old English

Uren Fader þat art in heofnas
Sic gehalᵹed þin noma
To cymeð þin ric
Sic þin willa sue is in heofnas and
    in earðas
Uren hlaf ofer wirðe sel us to
    daeᵹ
And forgef us scylda urna
Sue we forgefan sculdᵹun urum
And no inleade urich in costung
Als ᵹefrig urich fro ifle

## Middle English

Our Fadir that art in heuenes
Halewid be thi name
Thi Kingdom comme to
Bi Thi wille done as in heuen
    so in erthe
Gyve to us this dai oure breed
    ouer other substance
And forgyve to us oure dettis
As we forgyven to oure
    dettouris
And leede us not in to
    temptacioun
But delyvere us fro yvel

## Early Modern English

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our dayly
    bread,
And forgyve us our trespasses,
Even as we forgyve those who
    trespass against us.
And lead us not into
    temptation
But delivere us from evil

## Late Modern English

Our father who are in heaven,
Blessed be your name.
May your kingdom come,
May your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
    bread
And forgive us our sins,
Even as we forgive those who
    sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

# Why study the history of English?

The branch of linguistics which studies the development of language and languages over time is called **historical** or **diachronic linguistics**.

[t]he historical linguist seeks to explain *why* languages change, and *how* these changes spread in space and time. (Schendl 2001: 9)

diachrony (historical viewpoint)
———————————————————————————————> time axis
| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
synchronic 'slices' (points in time)

(often the present as in *A synchronic study of the English verb*)

1.1. Why study the history of English?

**1.2. External and internal history**

1.3. Periodization

1.4. Language change

# External history

**External history:** socio-historical events that have happened to the speakers of a language and which have led to changes in the language itself.

**External changes are unpredictable**.

The history of a language is intimately related to the **history of the community** of its speakers, so neither can be studied without considering the other. The external history of a language is the history of its speakers as their history affects the language they use. It includes such factors as the topography of the land where they live, their migrations, their wars, their conquests of and by others, their government, their arts and sciences, their economics and technology, their religions and philosophies, their trade and commerce, their marriage customs and family patterns, their architecture, their sports and recreations, and indeed every aspect of their lives.

**Language is so basic to human activity that there is nothing human beings do that does not influence and, in turn, is not influenced by the language they speak**. (Algeo 2001:1)

# External history

**What kind of changes?**

- **Cultural events**, e.g. introduction of the printing press (ultimately due to a technological advance)

   → increase in reading public

   → diffusion of learning and culture

   → standardization

- **Changes in ideology**, e.g. the introduction of Christianity

   → introduction of the Latin alphabet

   → introduction of borrowings related to Christian religion

   e.g. the spread of the ideas of the Renaissance

   → introduction of learned borrowings

   → English follows the model of classical languages, also in syntax

# External history

**What kind of changes?**

- **Economic/social changes**, e.g. industrialization, other economically motivated social movements

    → changes in society → changes in status of certain social classes

    e.g. migrations may change the makeup of a society

    → changes in the prestige of certain social groups may trigger the selection of certain linguistic variants

    → migratory movements may bring about influences between languages/dialects

- **Political changes**, like invasions, colonization and wars

    → language contact, borrowing

- **Scientific changes** → vocabulary expansion; semantic change

# Internal history

**Internal history** is the record of the linguistic developments of a language over time, how its vocabulary, grammar and phonology have changed.

loss or addition of a linguistic element

e.g. loss of [ç, x] in the Middle Ages (*night*)

the emergence of the *get*-passive in the 18th century

the recategorization of a given word

e.g. a noun which develops into a conjunction

OE *hwil* (noun, 'a length of time') > PDE *while* (conjunction)

> (noun) *We were waiting for a while.*

# Internal history

Changes at one level (e.g. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics) may have an **impact on another level**

> e.g. the weakening of unstressed vowels eventually leads to the loss of nominal inflections, which in turn triggered the rigidification of clausal word order

Internal changes are **more predictable** than external changes, because language is a system. Change crops up where the system presents weaknesses or irregularities.

> e.g. *oxen / children* vs *\*oxes / \*childs*
>
> *agendum-agenda, agenda-s / curriculum-curricula, curriculum-s*
>
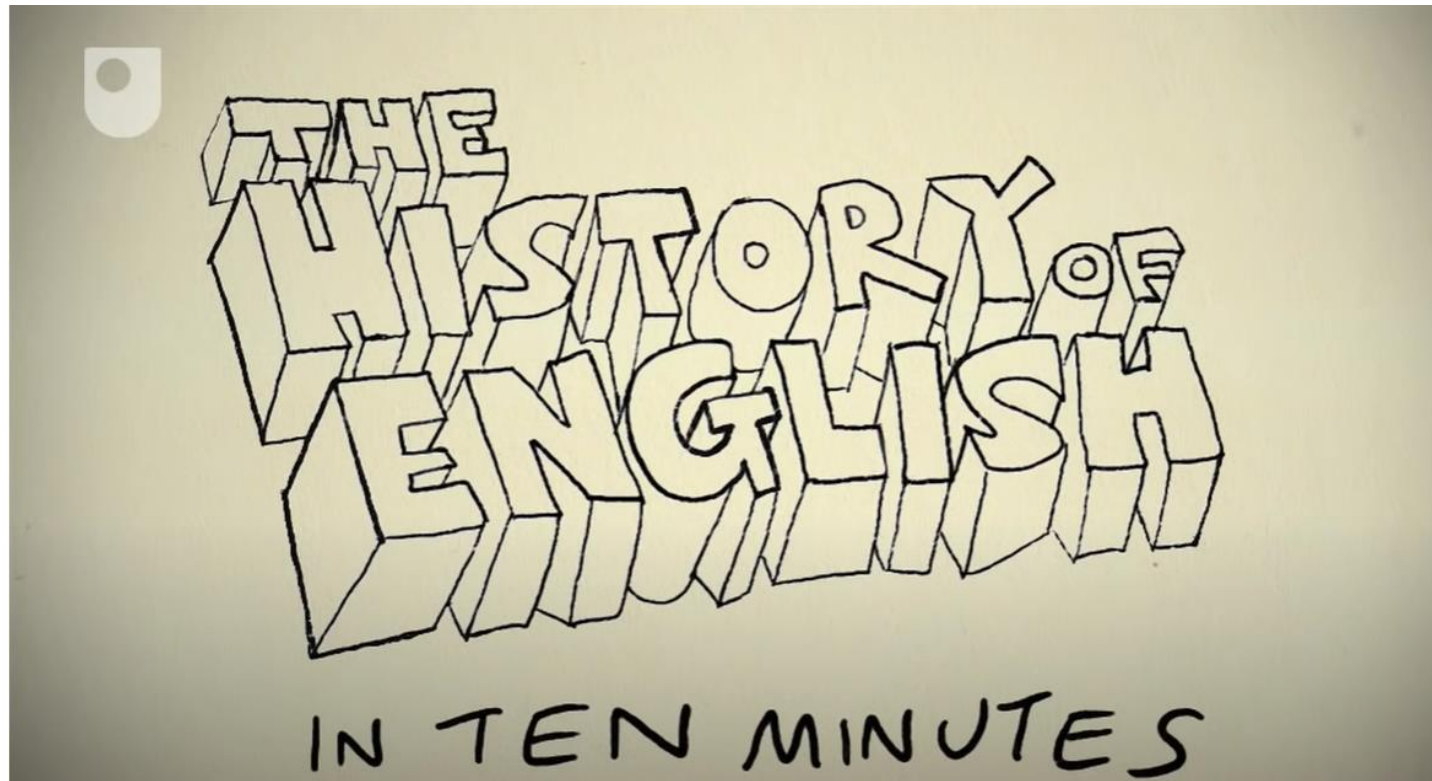> *octopus-octopodes, octupus-es/octop-i*

1.1. Why study the history of English?

1.2. External and internal history

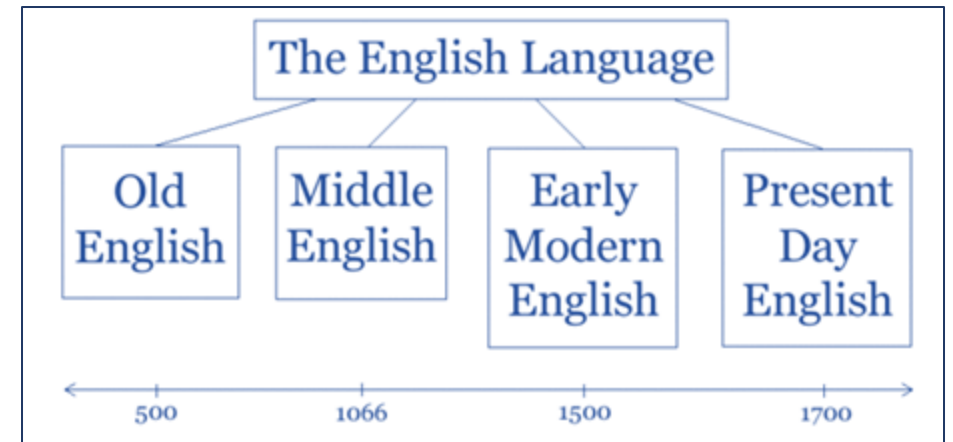# 1.3. Periodization

1.4. Language change

# Periodization

# Periodization

Periods in the history of a language are **conventional** and **arbitrary** to a certain extent because the development of a language is gradual.

To try to define the point of succession between successive periods of a language, such as Old and Middle English, is rather like trying to distinguish where night succeeds day. No-one will deny that for practical purposes they are different; but there is **no natural demarcation**, they shade into one another, and it is left to arbitrary choice by the public authorities to set the time of civil twilight at which lamps are lit. (Kitson 1992: 27)

# Periodization

The history of English is divided into four or five periods, which coincide with well-known and influential historical and social events (e.g. the Norman Conquest, the introduction of the printing press, etc.) → **extralinguistic** (or external) **criteria**.



TIMELINE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
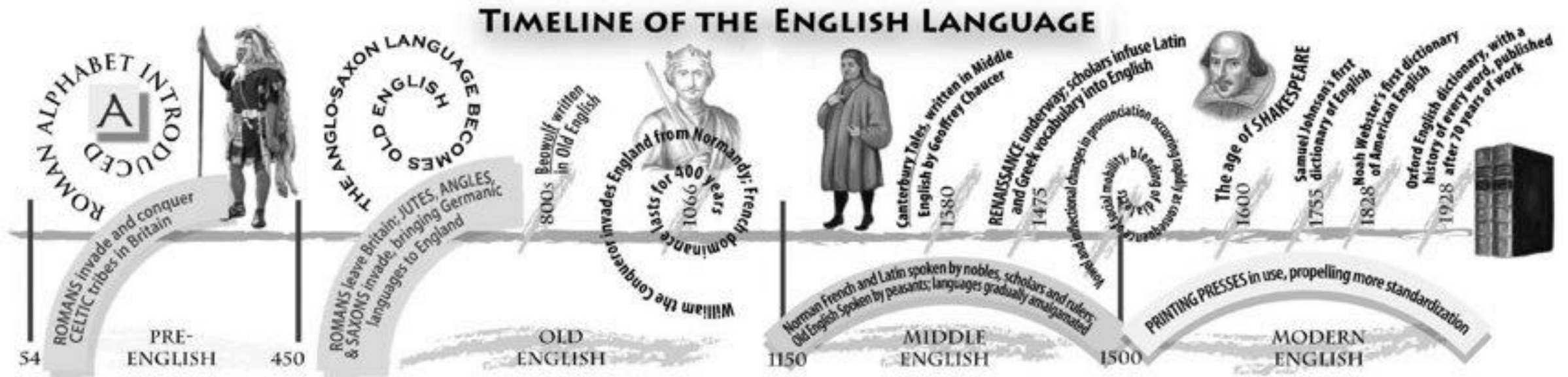
# Periodization

The history of English is divided into four or five periods, which coincide with well-known and influential historical and social events (e.g. the Norman Conquest, the introduction of the printing press, etc.) → **extralinguistic** (or external) **criteria**.

Periods can also be identified by paying attention to **intralinguistic** (or internal) **criteria** (e.g. the attestation of sound changes, changes in morphology, etc.).

I propose, therefore, to start with the main divisions of Old, Middle and Modern, based mainly on the **inflectional characteristics** of each stage. Old English is the period of full inflections; Middle English of levelled inflections, and Modern English of lost inflections. (Sweet 1873-74: 620)

# Periodization

**Criteria for periodization**. Problems:

(a) To establish different periods in the history of a language according to **extralinguistic** criteria is totally **arbitrary**.

(b) Since languages **change slowly but continuously**, one should not think about periods or give dates at all.

> Changes in the language cannot be dated so specifically that we can use them to provide precise dates for the end of one period and the beginning of another. The levelling of inflections has been dated anywhere between 900 and 1200. It all **depends on what data are used and which texts are selected** to provide the evidence. There is also the further problem of **what particular feature** should be chosen to provide the framework for dating the periods. Sweet chose the development of inflections, but other scholars have chosen other phenomena. Various features in the language undergo changes at different times and at different rates, and it is difficult to justify choosing one feature to the exclusion of others. (Blake 1996: 7)

# Periodization

**Criteria for periodization**. Problems:

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(b) Since languages **change slowly but continuously**, one should not think about periods or give dates at all.

> Both types of criteria are important because language internal and language external events are intimately related, and external events "are known to have caused or accelerated a number of linguistic changes" (Fisiak 1994: 53)

# Periodization

Periodization in the history of a language may be only **approximate and conventional**, but it is **necessary and useful** for practical purposes.

| Old English (OE) | Middle English (ME) | Modern English (ModE) |
|---|---|---|
| 450-1150 Germanic invasions Earliest written records go back to around 700 Norman Conquest (1066) | 1150-1500 Norman Conquest Tudor dynasty (1485) Printing press (1476, Westminster) | 1500-present |

# Periodization

Within each of these major periods, **subperiods** are usually established:

| Old English (OE) | Middle English (ME) | Modern English (ModE) |
|---|---|---|
| Early OE (450-900) | Early ME (1150-1350*)<br>*the date of the birth of Chaucer | Early ModE (1500-1700) |
| Late OE (900-1150) | Late ME (1350-1500) | Late ModE (1700-1900) |
| | | Present-Day English (PDE) (1900→) |

# Periodization

Late ModE (1700-1900)

- Starts when?
  - 1700? 1755 (Dr Johnson's Dictionary)?
  - 1776 (North American Declaration of Independence)?

- Ends when?
  - 1900?
  - 1914? 1945?

(Traugott & Trousdale 2013: 43)

Modern English (1500-1970)        Present-Day English (1970-present)

Early Modern English (1500-1700)

Late Modern English (1700-1970)

Contemporary English, 21st century English...

1.1. Why study the history of English?

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# 1.4. Language change

# Languages are always changing

Languages are in a **constant state of flux**, today just as in the past – even though we might not always notice it. (Burridge & Bergs 2016: 4)

CHALLENGE

1

*Can you think of cases of recent language change in your own language?*

# Languages are always changing

Linguistic change may affect the **different levels of language**:

- **Lexical and semantic change** affects the vocabulary of a language and the semantics of vocabulary items.

  OE *eagþyrel* 'window' replaced by ON *vindauga* > PDE *window* (borrowing)

  New words out of old words, e.g. *to text* (word formation, conversion), *mouse*

  OE *hund* 'dog' > PDE *hound* 'a dog used for hunting' (semantic change, specialization)

- **Pragmatic change**, i.e. changes of meaning in context. E.g. in the medieval period the use of religious terms (*God! Jesus!*) was very strong; no longer now. Nowadays racial terms are very offensive (*n*-word), while the word was originally neuter (just indicating a dark-skinned person).

# Languages are always changing

Linguistic change may affect the **different levels of language**:

- **Phonological and spelling changes**, i.e. those affecting the phonemes and allophones of a language, changes in stress, changes in the orthographical representation of sounds.

    OE *stān* /staːn/ > ME *stone* /stɔːn/

    OE *brōhte* [ˈbroːxte] > ME *brouȝte* /ˈbrouxtə/ > PDE *brought* /brɔːt/
          <h>                              <ȝ>                              <gh>         for /x/

    *Caribbean* /ˌkærɪˈbiːən/ vs. /kəˈrɪbiən/

    OE *c̲ild* > ME *c̲h̲ild*
        <c>  and  <ch>    for /tʃ/

# Languages are always changing

Linguistic change may affect the **different levels of language**:

- **Morphological change**, affecting the words and morphemes of a language.

    OE 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronouns *hie* 'they', *here* 'their', *heom* 'them' were replaced in ME times by *they*, *their*, *them*.

    Verb inflections have changed over time: OE *he singeþ* vs. PDE *he sings*

- **Syntactic change**, i.e. change affecting the rules regulating the combinatory possibilities of words.

    Grammaticalization: *I am going to visit my aunt* (lexical, 'movement')

    *I am going to read a novel* (grammaticalized, 'future')

# Languages are always changing

*Do you find anything weird (from the point of view of PDE) in these two sentences?*

Why look you so upon me? (Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 3.5.69, c. 1600)

The King's statue is making by the Mercers Company (Pepys, *Diary*, 1660)

# Languages are always changing

Linguistic change may affect the **different levels of language**:

- **Lexical and semantic change**

- **Pragmatic change**

- **Phonological and spelling changes**

- **Morphological change**

- **Syntactic change**

*In which of these levels is language change most conspicuous? Why?*

# Languages are always changing

**Why are languages always changing?**

→ (see further Trask, L. 2010. Why do languages change? Cambridge: C.U.P.)

There are **external** (or extralinguistic) **and internal** (or intralinguistic) **motivations** for language change:

**external factors** have to do with aspects of the lives of the speakers

**internal factors** have to do with the ways in which languages work

# Motivations for language change

**Extralinguistic factors**:

- **Changes in the world**, esp. vocabulary

  technological development (e.g. *selfie*, Word of the Year 2013, *vax*, Word of the Year 2021)

  global world! (*cappuccino*, *sushi*, *döner kebab*, *paella*)

  **The vocabulary of a language as a mirror of the society**

- **Least effort?**

  words are shortened (clippings) → *CD* for *compact disc*; Sp. *finde* for *fin de semana*

  ease of articulation leads to assimilations, omissions… → loss of intervocalic /d/ in participles in Spanish *comido > comío* ; AmE pronunciation of *water*,

# Motivations for language change

**Extralinguistic factors**:

- **Emphasis and clarity**

    *mail* becomes *regular mail* (or *snail mail*) now that we have *email*

    OE *lætan* 'permit, allow', *lettan* 'hinder, obstruct' > both /let/ > 'obstruct' nuance disappeared

    **This factor goes against the preceding one.**

- **Politeness and taboo**

    lexical replacement and semantic change in taboo areas → euphemisms (e.g. *ass* replaced by *donkey*; *cock* replaced by *rooster*)

    Loss of the original 2nd p. sg. pronoun *thou* in favour of *you* (originally only plural) in the 18th century

# Motivations for language change

**Extralinguistic factors**:

- **Misunderstanding**

  *telling one's beads* (OE *bead* 'prayer')

  folk etymology, e.g. *bridegroom*

- **Prestige**

  French borrowings into English (in ME, e.g. *face, glory, marriage*…; but also in ModE, e.g. *picnic, cigarette, garage, ballet*…); English borrowings into other languages (*so cool!!*)

  the pronunciation of influential social classes is imitated (e.g. Great Vowel Shift, RP)

  **Overt prestige** (influential classes) vs. **covert prestige** (group identity)

# Motivations for language change

**Intralinguistic factors**:

- **Structural reasons**: languages are systems and tend to symmetry. Some changes restore the symmetry:

  emergence of phoneme /ð/ (originally the voiced allophone of /θ/)

  reorganization of semantic fields, e.g. colour terms in Basque (*urdin* 'blue, green, grey' > 'blue')

- **Analogy:** speakers tend to look for similarities and patterns:

  What's the plural of *ziff*, *zo* and *zax*?

  OE *scip-u* vs. PDE *ships*; OE *nam-an* vs. PDE *names*

  *I dive, I dived*? *I dove*?

# Motivations for language change

Instances of language change usually involve **both extra- and intralinguistic factors:**

the Norman Conquest (**external**) brought about the introduction of many French loanwords (**internal**), which competed with native words.

This competition sometimes led to lexical loss (**internal**):

OE *ea* was replaced by French *river*

or semantic change (**internal**):

OE *dēor* 'animal' > 'deer' when French *animal* and *beast* were introduced in the language

# Attitudes towards change

**(a) Language change seen as decay:**

> Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to **degeneration**. (1755. S. Johnson. Preface to his dictionary)

> Given the inevitability of linguistic change, attested to by the records of all know languages, why is this concept of **deterioration** so prevalent? One reason is our sense of **nostalgia**: we resist change of every kind, especially in a world that seems out of our control. [...] A second reason is a concern for **linguistic purity**. Language may be the most overt indicator of our ethnic and national identity[.] A third reason is **social class prejudice.** Standard English is the social dialect of the educated middle and upper-middle classes. To belong to these classes and to advance socially, one must speak this dialect. (Brinton & Arnovik 2006: 20-21).

# Attitudes towards change

**(a) Language change seen as decay:**

In a famous sociolinguistic study, Milroy and Milroy (1999) have identified a so-called **complaint tradition**. This tradition seems to reach back centuries, and it comprises two different aspects, or complaint types. **Type 1** complaints are rather "**legalistic**" and concerned with correctness. They "attack 'mis-use' of specific parts of the phonology, grammar, vocabulary" (1999: 31). **Type 2** complaints are rather "moralistic" and "recommend clarity in writing and attack what appear to be abuses of language that may mislead and confuse the public" (ibid.). Both types of course interact and can feed into each other. What concerns us here is the fact that linguistic variation and change often lie at the heart of complaints of both types. [...] Many **linguistic changes** are perceived as **decay**, as **loss of standards**, **norms and values**. According to Milroy and Milroy (1999) this kind of decay is usually seen in tandem with a perceived (though maybe nonfactual) decline of culture and tradition. (Burridge & Bergs 2016: 21-22)

# Attitudes towards change

(b) **Language change seen as evolution:**

Language is seen as an **evolving organism.** E.g. Otto Jespersen in his *Growth and structure of the English language* (1905) suggested that the move towards analyticity shown by English is a simplification and therefore an improvement.

(c) **Language change: neither progress nor decay**

"[L]anguage change represents the **status quo**, neither progress nor decay, where every simplification is balanced by some new complexity". (Brinton & Arnovik 2006: 21)

**This is the prevalent view of modern historical linguistics.**

Needless to say, the job of linguists is not to be prescriptive in any sense; i.e. we do not evaluate whether particular changes are good or bad. Rather, linguists work **descriptively** and simply **document** whatever is happening in the language **without evaluating** this from a "right or wrong" perspective. For linguists, language is a natural (even if social) phenomenon, something that evolves and adapts and can be studied objectively. (Burridge & Bergs 2016: 22)

# Is change inevitable?

- **Prescriptive** and **proscriptive grammars** as an attempt to establish and maintain a standard of correctness and to legislate use.

Creation of language academies: *Accademia della Crusca* (1582), *Académie Française* (1635), *Real Academia Española* (1713), que "Limpia, fija y da esplendor"

> Su propósito fue el de «fijar las voces y vocablos de la lengua castellana en su mayor propiedad, elegancia y pureza». Se representó tal finalidad con un emblema formado por un crisol en el fuego con la leyenda Limpia, fija y da esplendor, obediente al propósito enunciado de combatir cuanto alterara la elegancia y pureza del idioma, y de fijarlo en el estado de plenitud alcanzado en el siglo XVI. (http://www.rae.es/rae.html)

# Is change inevitable?

- **Prescriptive** and **proscriptive grammars** as an attempt to establish and maintain a standard of correctness and to legislate use.



La Fundación del Español Urgente —FundéuRAE— es una institución sin ánimo de lucro que tiene como principal objetivo impulsar el buen uso del español en los medios de comunicación. (https://www.fundeu.es/)



Foto: ©Archivo Efe/Jerome Favre

La grafía recomendada para el nombre abreviado del 'síndrome respiratorio agudo producido por un coronavirus' es *el/la COVID-19*, con mayúsculas, que proviene de la sigla inglesa de *coronavirus disease*, 'enfermedad del coronavirus', como se indica en el *Diccionario de la lengua española*.

Sin embargo, en los medios de comunicación se puede ver escrita de diversas maneras: «Corea no registra nuevos casos de COVID-19», «El Covid-19 podría extenderse a 50 países» o «El Covid 19 sumó seis nuevas víctimas».

# Is change inevitable?

- **Prescriptive** and **proscriptive grammars** as an attempt to establish and maintain a standard of correctness and to legislate use.

  In England, codification was mainly carried out by influential individuals (e.g. Samuel Johnson, Jonathan Swift, Bishop Lowth) (we'll study this in unit 6).

- **Governmental institutions**

  Attempts to promote German words instead of established foreign words in Nazi Germany (*Fernsprecher* 'distant speaker' instead of *Telephon*)

  Measures against the use of Franglais (*le weekend, le shopping*) in France. An official committee was commissioned that task.

# Is change inevitable?

- **Politically correct language**

    ### Race

    *Chinkie taboo.* A very offensive word for a Chinese person.

    *Dago* a very offensive word for someone from Spain, Italy or Portugal. Do not use this word.

    *Nigger* a very offensive word for a black person. Do not use this word.

    *Paki British English taboo.* A very offensive word for someone from Pakistan or India. Do not use this word.

    (from LDOCE5)

# Is change inevitable?

- **Politically correct language**

    ### Gender

    Introduction of *Ms* to apply equally to married and unmarried women (just as *Mr* applies to married and unmarried men)

    Use of neutral terms, e.g. *spokesperson / chairperson* vs. *spokesman / chairman*

    *he or she, s/he*… cf. also use of 'singular they' (the Word of the Year 2015, according to the American Dialect Society) to avoid the use of he/she.

    > The aim throughout was to **mirror the language and attitudes of our present society**. This included taking into account the increasing tendency to counter the sexism present in our language by inventing new neutral terms. These, and female equivalents such as 'spokeswoman', have been added to their male counterparts. (Lloyd 1982: viii, quoted in Bauer 1994: 147)

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