Language Change

History of the English language

Old English
- Angles, Saxons, Jutes
- Latin alphabet adopted
- Considerable body of literature: e.g. *Beowulf*
- Received Pronunciation: 19th/ 20th centuries

Middle English
- French speaking power base. English spoken by populace.
- 1066: Norman invasions.
- Old English inflections being lost. Beginning of Great Vowel Shift.
- Literature: Chaucer

Early Modern English
- 1476: William Caxton, printing press.
- Move towards standardisation. Stabilisation of pronunciation.
- Influx of new vocabulary: new concepts, exploration. Literature: Shakespeare

18th & 19th centuries
- Search for pure, standard form. Prescriptive. Non-standard seen as inferior.
- Latin upheld as ideal.
- 1755: Samuel Johnson's *English Dictionary*. 1762: Robert Lowth's *Introduction to English Grammar*.

English today
- Borrowings from languages across the world continue.
- Drift towards more casual colloquial use of language reflects major social change.

English as a global language
- 300-400 million native speakers of English. Approx. 1.5 billion speakers worldwide.
- Now a truly global language: link language of trade and international affairs. Spoken on all 5 continents.
- Worldwide varieties of English: American English, BEV, Australian English etc.

English tomorrow
- ***Pessimistic linguistic approach***
  - Debate: Worldwide political, cultural and technological developments bringing nations closer rather than separating them.
  - Will English become nothing more than a series of overlapping and mutually incomprehensible dialects?
- ***Optimistic linguistic approach***
  - Suggested that World English is developing a form of its own, free of geographical markers. Standard International English e.g. language of air traffic control, international traders, international police liaison.
  - Will stabilising factors, such as multimedia technology and the printed word, prevent dramatic linguistic change and preserve intelligibility?
  - **Debate**: Benefits of diversity. Does linguistic flexibility enrich UK standard?

Framework for approaching language change

Phonology
- The Great Vowel Shift
- Accent styles fluctuate in popularity

Graphology/ orthography
- Haphazard development of fonts, case, punctuation
- Handwriting/ print Conventions

Pragmatics/ attitudes/ style
- Language reflects social and cultural developments
- Political correctness/ taboo language
- Increased tolerance of informality/ colloquialisms, reflective of less formal conetexts.

Semantic change
- Narrowing
- Broadening
- Amelioration
- Perjoration

Lexical change
- Register drift
- Globalisation/ regional identity
- Loans
- Invasions

Grammar
- Expansion of verb tenses and modal verbs
- Pronouns alterations including distinctive verb endings
- Inflections to word order

Studying language change

Approaches
- Descriptive
  - Modern changes include intransitive 'Enjoy!', present perfect tense for narrative (sports commentary).
  - Language develops naturally; potential for change at any given moment; language manuals out of date as soon as they are written; 'bottom-up' approach to standards of correctness; more relevant to deal with 'appropriateness' of language rather than 'correctness'.
- **Late 20th c. shift**
- **Approach at height during 18th/ 19th C**
  - Prescriptive
  - Decay
  - Standards should be maintained; change represents decline; manuals and dictionaries = correct, deviation from these = incorrect; slang, taboo, bad grammar represent decline in speech standards.

Atttiudes
- Progress
- Natural development

Study
- Synchronic Variation
  - Variety that exists in language at any given moment in time
  - Snapshots allow comparative study over time
- Diachronic Variation
  - Changes that affect languages over time
  - Origins of words
  - Compounds and derivations
  - Dated quotations illustrating meanings

Etymology: OED as a comprehensive record of the English language. Lexicographer = dictionary writer.
- Entry for every known general use English word
- Definitions: current & historic
- Pronunciations & spellings

Roots of English

Indo-European
- **Indo-European,** originated 8-10 million years ago. Earliest known source of English and many other European languages.
- Indo-European was never written down: existence deduced by piecing together remnants left in existing languages.
- English belongs to the **Germanic branch** of Indo-European languages.

Before English
- **Debate**: belief that humans have an innate capacity for language production.
- Ultimate origins of the 'first' language remain unknown. One area? A number of areas? One time? Numerous times?

Causes of language change

Sociolinguistic explanations
- Organic process, difficult to artificially control: changes that prove adaptive will survive. Language change is therefore a 'democratic' process.
- Language as an indicator of personal and social identity
- Influence of social groups
- attitudes
- New technologies

Linguistic/systemic explanations
- Regularisation
- Intellectual activities
- Social trends
- Social activities
- Increased efficiency

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