Language Change: History of the English Language

Origins

The story of the English Language begins before England was a country, but the body of land was Britain. The language spoken in Britain was Celtic, and remained so until the 5th and 6th centuries AD when Britain was invaded by Germanic tribes: the Jutes, Saxons and Angles. Settling in England, they formed kingdoms in England and drove the Celts out to the edges, who later formed Celtic languages like Irish, Scottish, Welsh and Cornish.

The Angles settled in East Anglia, the Saxons in Essex (East Saxon) and Sussex (South Saxon), and the Jutes in Kent. Their germanic tongue formed the basis for English, now known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, and developed independently to the German tongue it originated from. The three groups each spoke with a different dialect and accent, and these came to form the three different accents seen today in English. They are why we have "bath" with a short "a" and "bath" with a long "aah" vowel sound.

Though you won't ever have to look at language from so far back, it's useful to know that almost half the modern language comes from Old English, especially names of basic processes and everyday objects. Some common Old English suffixes include: -bury, -church, -ham, -ley, -stone and -ton.

By the end of the 8th century, the language of England was under a new 'threat'...from the invasions of the Vikings. During the 9th century, their raids became more common, and they conquered northern parts of England, setting York as their capital city.

These Viking invaders' language was similar to the Germanic tongue of Old English, but it did bring about some changes. As people strained to understand each other, it helped to 'erode' the inflections of Old English, and brought new lexis to various fields. Many words with a "sc" sound are from Viking origin, such as "school". The Anglo-Saxon for "skirt" was "shirt", but the Vikings changed it to the form we use today.

Middle English

In the 11th century, the country was finally united under one King, when in 1066, William the Conqueror of Normandy won the Battle of Hastings. Winchester became the most important city in the country, rather than York.

William spoke Norman French, and from this, the language of England was divided. The upper layer of society - professionals, academics, lawyers - spoke in French, while the peasants continued to speak English.

At this point, if England had remained under Norman rule, we might have eventually all been reading French right now, rather than English. However, in the 13th century, the King of Normandy grew annoyed that a mere duke of Normandy was the King of England. The Normans in England had a choice: return to Normandy or remain in England, separate to Normandy. Those who remained in England adopted the surviving English of the peasants and in 1362, English became the official language. It was then that the first English Literature was written; Chaucer, for example.

Still, 300 years under French rule had its effect on the English language. More inflections vanished from the language, and French terms entered the language for legal language. Lexis such as "constitution", "parliament", and "representative" are all examples of French borrowings.

A number of new affixes entered the language at this period from the French, such as the suffix "-tion" (shifting a verb to a noun, as in delare-->declation).

The Normans also began to change the spellings of words using French rules. As the native speakers were illiterate, they couldn't complain, and by the 15th century, spelling contained a mix of original Old English and French spellings. "Fox" for example is the Old English spelling, but "vixen" is the French spelling.

Towards the end of the Middle English period, in the 1400s, the 'Great Vowel Shift' occurred. No one can quite understand why it happened, but many common vowel sounds changed. For example, a word that sounded like 'time' became 'team'; 'arm' became 'aim'; 'say' to 'see'. If you ever look at a poem with a rhyme scheme, but two words that don't work, it may be that the pronunciation has changed.

Early Modern English

Middle English lasted until the Tudors came to the throne in 1485. England then moved into a period called the Renaissance, which means "rebirth" ("re", as we all know from out vast understanding of etymology, means "again").

Towards the end of the 15th century, the long journey towards standardisation was embarked upon with the invention of the printing press. This revolutionised printing as written text could now be printed much more quickly (relatively, still!) and at a larger bulk. As writing could now reach a much larger audience, it was important to find a 'standard' for everyone to understand, and there came the first idea of S.E. -- Standard English.

At the same time, the first two universities, Oxford and Cambridge, were set up near London. There was a greater interest in learning, and the first grammar schools for boys were also established around the country, such as dear Thomas Rotherham Grammar school in 1485 - the forerunner for my home, Thomas Rotherham College.

The East Midlands, the 'centre' of England's political and commercial centre, would eventually be the accent of R.P.

Standardisation is a slow process, however; texts still had spelling inconsistencies by the 18th century.

Many prefixes (such as un-, fore-, non-, sub-) and suffixes (such as -ness, -er, -ment, -able, -ally) were developed in this period.

In terms of lexis, the Renaissance saw an explosion in neologisms. As new discoveries were made - such as Copernicus' discovery of the true nature of the solar system - new words were needed to describe the things seen. The interest in education brought about a renewed interest in Latin and Greek, and a number of new words entered the language such as "autograph" and "vacuum" from these origins.

Spellings were sometimes changed to look more Latinate like "det" to "debt". As in earlier times, though, sometimes spelling changes reflected pronunciation change. Others endure today unchanged, like "knight", "castle" and "wrong".

In 1492, Columbus 'discovered' America, and the British Empire steadily grew over the Renaissance. Colonisers borrowed words from many languages; ones close to home like France ("bizarre", "chocolate", "entrance") and Italy ("balcony", "giraffe", "carnival") and others farther away like Persia ("caravan") and Turkey (the ever important "coffee"). By the 16th and 17th centuries, England had borrowed from over fifty languages.

Shakespeare's creativity also had a large impact on lexical expansion. Words first recorded in his Works include: "accommodation", "bubble", "obscene", "lack-luster" and "premeditated".

Not everyone agreed with where the English Language seemed to be headed. Poet Edward Spencer didn't like the changes to words and suggested the Old English originals should be used instead such as "algate" for "always".

The King James Bible, first published in 1611, also slowed progress. It used already 'old' irregular forms like "diggen" (dug), "spake" (spoke) and "holpen" (helped), old word order like "follow thou me", the -eth for pluralising -s, old pronouns like "ye", and "his" rather than the neutral "its". The -eth suffix, for example, endured into the 18th century, due to the Bible.

Modern English

This begins around 1760, as industry grew. By the 19th century, Britain was a leading industrial and trading nation. More rapid expansions in scientific and social changes led to changes to the language. New lexis surrounding the fields of science entered the language, such as: "sodium", "caffeine", "chloroform", "centigrade", "chromosome", "hemophilia" and "claustrophobia".

Standardisation of spelling was finally completed during this period, with Johnson' s 'Dictionary of the English Language' being printed in 1755. Grammar, too, was standardised, as Robert Lowth's 'Short Introduction to English Grammar' was published in 1762. In 1870, education became compulsory for all and in 1884, a project began to compile a 'New English Dictionary' and this eventually became the Oxford English Dictionary.

Moving closer to present day, the first BBC broadcast was in 1922.

The electronic revolution began in 1972, with the sending of the very first email. By 1991, the Internet became a tool for home use, and this move towards globalisation of the English Language has had many knock on effects. You should already be familiar with Language and IT from last year's ENB2 - how the medium's transient nature has led to an emphasis on speed and a lowering of register, and less necessity for language to be "correct".

Why does Language change?

The simplest way to explain language change has already been touched upon in the History section: society is ever changing, and language needs to change with it, in order to be able to express it. If change doesn't occur, a lovely quote from Brian Friel's Translations sums up what would happen, "a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistical contour that no longer matches the landscape of fact".

Lexis

•Words can simply die when they are no longer needed, such as "galantine" and "stomacher".

•New words enter the lexicon. These can be pure neologisms, or borrowed from other languages, like 'risotto' and 'curry' (known as loan words). They can also be coined using word formation processes: ◦Compounding: "lap" + "top" = laptop.

◦Blending: where parts of words are used to make new ones, such as "smoke"+"fog"="smog".

◦Abbreviating: "telephone" becomes "phone".

◦Back-formation: "porn" from "pornography" where the end of the word is lost. (Also known as clipping.)

◦Affixation: the process of adding a suffix or prefix to a previously existing word. "un"+"friendly"="unfriendly".

•Existing words take on new meanings. ◦Broadening: where the meaning of a word is extended, like "butcher" - it was once a seller of goats; it now means a seller of meat.

◦Narrowing: where a word's meaning gets narrower, like "doctor" - it once meant a teacher or a learned man; this meaning only remains in 'Doctor of English'.

When looking at the words in a text, we might also find amelioration, where a word's meaning gains more positive connotations, and pejoration, where a word's meaning gains more negative connotations. If we consider "bitch", this word has been through both amelioration and pejoration. It was pejorated from its original meaning of a female dog, to an insult for a woman. At one point, however, it ameliorated as women began to use it for one another as a friendly insult. Now its meaning seems again to have pejorated.

If the meaning of a word completely shifts, we call it a semantic shift. The original meaning may or may not remain. Many IT-related words are examples of semantic shifts, like "mouse" and "window".

If a word moves from one word class to another, we call it a function shift (also known as a grammatical conversion). The proper noun "Google" came into the language in 1999, and has since function shifted to a verb, "I googled him yesterday."

In more modern language, you might see words change due to social pressures like political correctness. An ever controversial topic, that we saw in Language and Gender, P.C. is attempting to remove marked terms from the language like "actress" and "waitress" to the gender neutral "actor" and "waiter". It has a point, if you ask me, for why should women be marked out in a role? Of course, it stretches beyond just gender, to race, to disability, and can be taken nonsensically to coin new phrases like "vertically challenged"

Orthography

Remember, orthography is from 'graph' which means write and 'ortho-' meaning correct, so the correct way to write... the spellings.

As we've seen in our brief history, spelling took a long time to standardise, not complete until around the 18th century. Before then there might be a word repeated in a text, but spelled a different way. There are a few general trends that you might point out:

•Inflections left over, most commonly "e".

•Certain letters are interchangeable: ◦"i" can be "j" or vice versa

◦"v" can be "u"

◦before "w" was developed, "uu" was used; literally 'double u'.

•Double and single letters may differ depending on line spacing for printing: before standardisation, a word with a double letter might have lost a letter in order to fit on the line.

Hyphens have a curious story. Words commonly collocated are often, over time, conflated (brought together). "Tonight" is an example of this. Originally, it was written as the preposition and the noun: "to night". As it was so common, people started to hyphenate it to "to-night". Eventually, the transient hyphen was lost to get the present "tonight".

Syntax

The most drastic grammatical changes came before the end of the Middle Age, with the loss of inflections and fixed word order. You won't have to analyse anything as old as that, but there will still be plenty of things to comment on (though a good understanding of modern grammar is necessary!)

•Verb inflections (like "pleaseth", "gotten", "think'st").

•Unusual past tense formations ("my life is run its course") ◦often because modals and auxiliaries may be absent; "do", for example, did not become standard until the 17th century.

•Pronouns have changed: ◦personal pronouns like "thou", "ye" and "thee" are now archaic

◦relative pronouns like "Our Father which art in Heaven..."

•Formation of negation, due to the lack of auxiliaries, such as, "I see not."

•Interrogatives, too, due to the lack of auxiliaries, "Seest thou?"

•Formation of plural based upon the Anglo-Saxon, "shoe/shoon".

•Sentence structure is often much longer and more complex, filled with subordinating and coordinating clauses, and semicolons.

•Conjunctions are acceptable at the beginning of a formal sentence, and the ampersand "&" may be used rather than "and".

Political Correctness has had an effect upon pronoun usage, too. A number of strong feminists have attempted to create a gender neutral pronoun, but unsuccessfully - it's a lot harder to create the 'glue words' than ordinary nouns. It has lead to the default "he" of the past being replaced with alternatives like "he/she" "s/he" "he or she", though. People often use "they" as a neutral alternative. Although grammar freaks may wince and complain that this can only be used collectively, perhaps in the future it might become acceptable?

Register

Register is curious. On looking at an older text and seeing the long sentences and difficult, archaic language, one might be inclined to say that it has a high register. But we should always consider the context.

In today's language use, we have a variety of different registers, from the very high legalese, to the spiel of politicians, to colloquial adverts. The much lower registers found today are relatively new, only coming into existence during the 19th century. Before then, language seemed only to have one register.

So, are older texts really using a high register? Or just the standard register of the time? We can only say they use a 'high' register in comparison to today's language. An 18th century advert will have a high register in comparison to a 21st century advert, despite the genre and purpose being similar; still, for its time, the register wouldn't have been seen as high.

Other Frameworks

While we think about the frameworks, we can always talk about graphology: modern texts will use a lot more graphological features, mainly because they can, as printing has come a long way from the first printing presses.

You might also see the ſ, the 'long s', which means "s". No one is quite sure why the ſ was used rather than s, for there are no clear patterns to its use. All we can say iſ that it waſ a printing convention of the time.

While we should never forget graphology, you'll score lots more marks by focusing on those more 'difficult' frameworks.

Phonology may come into things if you're presented with a poem that has a clear rhyme scheme, but two words that don't seem to fit. The words may reflect phonological changes. Also, Chaucer was a great cheat when it came to rhyme: if he was stuck, he would inflect the two words to make them rhyme, as the 'e' was always pronounced!

Pragmatics might be something else to look out for. If you see something that you recognise as a Biblical reference, it will be from a time when a writer's natural assumption was that everyone would recognise it. Anything about "apples" is usually related to the Garden of Eden in Literature of the past, for example. There was an assumed Christian knowledge. Similarly, there might have been an assumed knowledge about Greek mythology...

Attitudes to Language Change

Coinciding with the idea of studying language as a science, first seen in the 18th century, is a pervasive idea that Language Change is somehow a "bad" thing.

It has been seen as a corruption, an erosion, a decay, a pollution.

The Queen's English Society campaigns, quite seriously, that we go back to the "better" language of the past. People say we should return to Shakespearean English. There are many apostrophe protection societies.

But really, change is an essential part of language.

The Gaelic language, for example, was almost destroyed by the English during the 18th and 19th century. In recent years, there has been an effort to revive it, and the efforts have proved very difficult. Without being used and so changing with society, many modern words were missing from its vocabulary, that needed to be artificially borrowed from other languages. Without change, a language would eventually become a "dead" one, like Latin and Greek.

So, Language Change is important, and we should embrace it. Even if...it means the destruction of the apostrophe in a few years time...*sob*

Where is the English Language headed in the future? There are two main theories. The first is, that with globalisation, English will eventually become a "universal" language that everyone speaks, with smaller languages fading from existence. Another theory, one that David Crystal suggested, is that English will follow a similar trend to Latin. Once a "universal" language itself, it was changed so by the variety of people speaking it that eventually the different dialects became incomprehensible and it broke down into separate languages. Still, with globalisation, this doesn't seem that likely.

We won't see the future, for Language Change is a long, slow process. Curious to think that if the Internet lasts as it is, one day English speakers might see this page and not understand it...