

Overview of topics

1. What is Historical Linguistics
2. Development of English
3. Kinds of Language Change
4. Language Families
5. Attitudes Towards Language Change
6. Sound Change
7. Comparative reconstruction

1 What is Historical Linguistics?

Historical linguistics studies:

- how languages *change* over time
- how languages are *related*.
- the history and development of particular languages.

Main theses:

- All languages change over time.
- there are patterns and regularities to the way languages change; they do not change randomly.
- The accumulation of small changes over long periods of time can lead to a language overall changing drastically.

Note: Because devices for the audio recording of sounds have only been around for about a century, the vast majority of data used for historical linguistics derives from written texts (inscriptions, manuscripts, letters, literature, etc.). This is only a matter of circumstance, however – as discussed before, the *spoken* language is primary; we only analyze the *written* language if we have no other options.

2 English development

1. Old English (OE, 450-1100)
2. Middle English (MidE, 1100-1450)
3. Early Modern English (1450-1700)
4. Modern English (ModE, 1700-present)

Major changes

1. Old English to Middle English
 - (a) Loss of /x/ (velar fricative; the *gh* in spelling is a remnant of that, German preserved it)
English: *right* [raɪt] *night* [naɪt] *neighbor* [neɪbər]
German: *rechts* [rexts] *nacht* [naxt] *nachbar* [naxbər]
 - (b) Some allophones became distinct phonemes
[f]/[v], [ð]/[θ], etc.
 - (c) Loss of many final vowels → loss of case endings
 - (d) Word order became more rigid
 - (e) England under Norman (French) rule → about 10K French borrowings
 - (f) etc.
2. Middle English to Early Modern English
 - (a) The Great vowel shift – only [ɪ] and [ɛ] unaffected.
One vowel “pushed” another to a different place in the vowel chart.
e.g. ɔ → o → u → au → ɔ
[ur] → [aʊr] *our*, [namə] → [neɪm] *name*, [wid] → [waɪd] *wide*, etc.
 - (b) Simplification of some initial consonant clusters:
[kn] → [n] (*know, knee, knight*), [hr] → [r] (*hring* → *ring*), [wr] → [r] (*write, wrist*)

3 Kinds of Language Change

Languages undergo changes at all linguistic levels: phonetic, phonemic, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic.

1. Phonetic:
Old English had [y] (as [i] but rounded) and [x], Modern English has none of them
[y] was replaced by [ɪ] or [aɪ]: [pyt] → [pɪt] *pit*, [my:s] → [mɪs] → [maɪs] *mice*.
2. Phonemic:
In OE, [v] and [f] were allophones (variants) of one phoneme. In ModE, they are two distinct phonemes.

3. Morphological:
In OE, nouns had case endings (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative)
4. Syntactic:
In OE, all questions could be formed by inverting the subject and the verb.
In ModE, inversion possible only with auxiliaries, other verbs use *do*.
5. Semantic & lexical:
In OE, *girl* referred to young men and women and *nice* meant ignorant.

- (1) Shakespeare's time: *What thinkest thou?*
Modern English: *What do you think?*
- syntactic change – no auxiliary *do*
 - morphological change – verb endings
 - lexical change – *thou* is now obsolete.

4 Why Do Languages Change?

Languages change for a variety of reasons:

- **Language split** – A language may split into two or more languages if the speakers become separated into two or more groups with little or no contact.
Latin → French, Provençal, Spanish, Catalan, Portuguese, Rumanian.
English → British, American, Indian, South African, Australian, ...
- **Borrowing** between language in contact (because of trade, etc.)
Mostly vocabulary. Less frequently in phonetics, phonology; sometimes also syntax, morphology and semantics.
English has borrowed words from many languages, e.g. French (*design, court, table*), Latin (*deficit, sponsor*), Scandinavian lgs. (*they, law*), German (*kindergarten, noodle*), Spanish (*canyon, tornado*), Italian (*isolate*), Greek (*comedy, theater*), Native American lgs. (*chipmunk, kayak*), South Asian (*sandal*), Dutch (*cruise*), Arabic (*algorithm, giraffe*), Chinese (*tea*), Russian (*czar*), Czech (*robot, howitzer, pilsner*).

5 Attitudes Towards Language Change

People have complained about the deterioration of language forever.

There were many attempts to resist language change, defending it against:

- “invasion of barbaric” terms from other languages

- preventing “vulgar speech from corrupting” the language as a whole.

Many countries have/had language academies – institutions organized to attempt to regulate, stop, or even reverse language change.

Academies & government

- can force newspapers and book publishers to conform to specific guidelines,
- but they cannot control how people speak, and that’s where the language change originates.

You cannot prevent language change with any amount of force – it is an inherent part of every living human language.

6 Language families

We can classify languages by their origin into a tree similar to family trees.

Most of the European and some Asian languages evolved from a common ancestor called Proto-Indo-European.

Some of the subfamilies of **Indo-European** languages.

- Italic languages – Latin and its descendants (Romance languages)
Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, Romanian, etc.
- Germanic languages
English, German, Dutch, Afrikaans, Yiddish, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, etc.
- Slavic
Russian, Polish, Czech, Croatian, Bulgarian, etc.
- Celtic
Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh
- Indo-Iranian
Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, Romany (Gypsy), Pashto
- Hellenic
Greek

Besides Indo-European there are many other language families, for example:

- Sino-Tibetan languages
Mandarin (Chinese), Cantonese (Chinese), Tibetan, Thai
- Uralic languages
Hungarian, Finnish
- Afro-asiatic
Semitic languages (Arabic, Hebrew, Maltese), Somali, Egyptian (Ancient Egypt), etc.

There are about 7000 languages today, originating probably from a small number of proto-languages.

For detailed classifications:

- <http://www.ethnologue.com>
- <http://www.krysstal.com/langfams.html>

7 Sound Change

A Sound Change is a phonological process which has been accepted by all speakers of a language (or dialect).

Sound changes tend to spread from speaker to speaker gradually in a wave-like pattern until they are uniformly used by all speakers in a linguistics community. They do not spontaneously occur everywhere in a language.

When:

1. **Conditioned** – the change happens only in certain phonetic environment
e.g. all [s] in front of a vowel change into [ʃ]
2. **Unconditioned** – the change happens regardless of the phonetic environment
e.g. all [s] change into [ʃ]

What:

1. **Assimilation:** Two sounds become more like each other when they are near or touching.
e.g. [wulfas] → [wulvas] ([f] is voiceless, both [l] & [v] are voiced)
2. **Dissimilation:** Two sounds become less like each other when near or touching.
e.g. [fifθ] → [fift] *fifth* (both [f] & [θ] are fricatives, [t] is a stop)
3. **Deletion:** Sounds are deleted in certain environments.
e.g. MidE [knixt] → ModE [nart] *knight* ([k] and [x] deleted)
4. **Insertion:** Sounds are inserted in certain environments.
e.g. [æθlit] → [æθəlɪt] *athlete*
5. **Monophthongization:** Diphthongs become monophthongs.
e.g. MidE [rɪvələ] → ModE [rul] *rule*
6. **Diphthongization:** Monophthongs become diphthongs
e.g. MidE [u] → ModE [aʊ]: [hus] → [haus] *house*, [maʊs] *mouse*
7. **Metathesis:** The order of sounds change.
e.g. *ask* → *aks*

8. **Raising/Lowering:** The position of the tongue becomes either higher or lower when producing certain sounds.
e.g. [metə] → [mit] *meat*
9. **Backing/Fronting:** The position of the tongue becomes either more forward or more back.
e.g. [pɑθ] → [pæθ] *path*

Note: Always look at pronunciation not spelling:

- Pronunciation can change without spelling changing
(e.g. English *name* used to be pronounced [nɑ:mə] but spelling did not change.)
- Spelling can change without pronunciation changing
Turkish switched its whole alphabet in 1928 without changing pronunciation
Russian modified its spelling in 1917 without changing the pronunciation

8 Comparative reconstruction

How do we know about supposed mother languages if there are usually no speakers of these languages and frequently no texts?

We **reconstruct** vanished languages by **comparing** their descendant languages.