LING 110 || Summer 2011, Class 1

McFetridge: Chapter 1

We're here to ask — and answer — some questions about where English words come from.

To pursue this end, we have to ask questions like these …

1. what processes are involved in word creation?

2. how can we best describe these processes?

3. what problems do we have figuring out a word's origin (or "provenance")?

All of this is part of a bigger agenda that's concerned with why languages change and how these changes affect particular languages, e.g., English.

So why does any of the foregoing matter?

Well, in part at least, because language is one of the things that makes us human.

> We have a unique communication system that plays a crucial role in cognition. This is reason enough for studying language.
>
> Consider, too, language **pathologies**. We'd like to know more about how these work in order to alleviate the incalculable misery they inflict on many sufferers.
>
> And language informs us about culture and religion; fraught subjects that require deep understanding.
>
> Word choice can obviously have **semiotic** value, too: think about the contrast in word pairs like underwear : lingerie or excuse : justification.

We don't have to get fancy here; even a mundane but commercially important thing like naming a company or product requires a refined linguistic sense.

Thus Chinese companies such as "Junk Chemicals" and "Pansy Men's Clothing" find that these names don't travel well.

> Nor are you likely to find the Finnish lock de-icer "Super Piss" or the Polish chocolate bar "Fart" in your stores any time soon.

Consider a successful name (and a very successful company): Oracle.

> In one sense it means an infallible authority on something. It comes from the Latin "oraculum" and ultimately the verb "orare" meaning to speak. Simple and memorable.

COURSE THEMES

Three themes in this course …

1. language change. All languages change all the time. New words are born and old ones die. When is the last time you heard anybody say that something is "swell"?

The shape of words change, too. The CE (Contemporary English) word "fish" derives from the L (Latin) "pisces", but that's not obvious.

2. **structure**. Clear enough in big words like the famous

anti dis establish ment arian ism

Clear enough, too, in a word like "blockhead".

But much less apparent in a word like "nest" that actually derives from a word "ni" meaning "down" and a word "st" meaning "sit".

We can also think about structure in terms of categorizing words by language of origin. What languages do the following come from?

— apostrophe

— hat

— impossible

— détente

Or we can think about words in terms of their age. Compare "song" and "psychedelic".

3. **representation**. This theme focuses on how we talk about structure and change.

> Is English a good representation system? Hmm. Different letters can mean different sounds.
>
> A representation system may be good for one purpose, but not another. Have you ever tried multiplying with Roman numerals? It ain't easy! In fact, it's impossible because there is no zero.

The preceding three themes tie this course together. More specifically, however, chapters one through seven of the text introduce basic concepts and provide background and context for the later chapters. In these later chapters we analyze English vocabulary.

We will be doing **etymology**: the study of word origins and meaning change. For starters, note that this word derives from the Greek "etymon" meaning "true form" and "logy" meaning "study".

> This isn't just a matter of historical interest; as you may have gathered already, it's very relevant to many current issues.

And with that, we complete Chapter 1!

McFetridge: Chapter 2

The chapter opens with a passage from Ælfric who lived from 955 CE to 1010 CE. This passage is in Old English [OE], which is often dated from 450 CE to 1100 CE. Why 450? Come to the lecture!

Suffice it to say that this passage is pretty late OE. Let's examine a small portion of it:

þās gelæhte se dēma

The **gloss** on page 5 says "those seized the judge", but the actual **translation** is "the judge seized them". How so?

— that little "a" at the end of "dēma" indicates that it is the **subject** of the sentence.

So what do we see that's different between OE and CE?

1. different word order

2. different word structure

3. different written characters

Let's go one step further and examine a Middle English [ME] text. ME is conventionally dated from 1100 CE - 1500 CE. Picky people would say 1066 CE - 1476 CE.

Your text states that this bit of Chaucer is from the 15th century, but actually it's from his work "House of Fame" written in 1379-1380.

Soune ys noght but eyre ybroken

And every spech that ys yspoken,

Lowde or pryvee, foule or faire,

In his substaunce ys but aire

Sound is nought but air broken

And every speech that is spoken,

Loud or private, foul or fair,

In its substance is but air

What has changed from OE to ME to CE?

The big change is in **orthography** "orthos(s)" meaning "straight" or "correct" and "graphia" meaning "writing". The word is Greek.

But orthography is merely representation, not language itself.

After all, there are different kinds of orthography, e.g., **syllabaries**, **ideographs** …

We see a loss of certain characters present in OE including ash [æ] and thorn [þ]. The sounds still existed in ME, but after the adoption of Norman French there was no need for them.

> With the arrival of the printing press in the late 15th century, printers found it easier to use "old" French forms rather than create new type for the English characters.
>
> Kind of too bad because OE orthography was actually a good guide to its pronunciation.

All of this brings up **phonetics**, the science of speech sounds. Here we find the **International Phonetic Alphabet** [IPA] that assigns a single symbol to every speech sound (although sometimes we have to add a little bit extra called a "diacritic" like the nasalization symbol over, let us say, the [ã] sound.

Speech sounds are produced by creating a column of air that is altered by the shape of the channel through which it flows.

For vowels, which we'll consider first, the position of the tongue is particularly important.

		Front	Middle	Back
High	Tense	[i] beet		[u] boot
	Lax	[ɪ] bit		[ʊ] book
Mid	Tense	[e] bait	[ə] **a**bout	[o] boat
	Lax	ɛ [bet]		[ɔ] board
Low		[æ] bat		[a] bought

First observation. The OE character "e" represented the sound [e].

Consider the OE word "dēma" meaning "judge".

— that word doesn't exist in CE, but we retain the corresponding verb, viz., "deem" meaning "to judge".

— note that the OE vowel is long mid front tense …

— but the CE vowel is high front tense

Is this just a fluke or is it part of a bigger pattern? Look at this:

Vowel Change

Old English	Contemporary English
bēte	beet
sēcan	seek
mētan	meet
cēpan	keep

Looks like a pattern: long mid tense vowels change to high tense vowels.

— The CE spelling system sometimes represents these vowels as "ee", symbolically using two characters

— these vowels aren't long anymore, but the spelling system recognizes that they once were

Take note: the difference between the vowel sound in "bet" and that in "beet" is NOT that the first is short and the second is long.

— the first is a mid front lax vowel

— the second is a high front tense vowel

— but in OE, the difference was indeed one of length and some aspects of CE spelling represent OE phonetics.

So one change from OE to CE can be represented as follows:

$$\bar{e} \rightarrow i$$

This reads "long [e] changed to [i]". This is a phonological rule.

So, if long mid front tense vowels raise to high vowels, what happens to **back** vowels? We can predict that they should raise to … ?

Old English	Contemporary English
rōt	root
hrōf	roof
mōd	mood

So another change from OE to CE was ō → u.

We can now make a **generalization**: Part of the change from Old English to Contemporary English was that long mid vowels raised to high tense vowels.

A **new observation**:

In Chaucer's day, we see the words ybroken and yspoken. These are **past participle** forms that now appear without the "y". This comes about because the way in which words are formed has changed.

> This is an issue of **morphology** ("morphe" = "shape", "logos" = "study"). Remember "Morpheus" in "The Matrix"? We see this root, too, in the drug name "morphine".

A past participle is an inflected form of a verb. Other verb inflections are shown in the chart on p.14 of your text. **Inflection** changes the grammatical function, e.g., tense, of a verb but not its meaning.

> CE has little inflection; OE had a lot as did Latin and so do other modern languages such as Russian, Finish, Hungarian.

The **lexicon** is the set of words that make up the vocabulary of a language.

— the lexicon is sensitive to environment and so words come and words go. We lose "dēma" but gain "judge".

Syntax is about how words fit together to form phrases and sentences.

— Old English had quite free word order because its nouns *inflected* to show who did what to whom.

— Contemporary English requires strict word order.

Words and sentences obviously have meaning and these meanings can change over time. This is the field of **semantics**.

— word meaning can narrow or expand, e.g., "corn" used to mean any kind of grain; "quarantine" used to mean to isolate for forty days.

We can often see quite easily how new words are created, but the structure of old words is sometimes concealed by changes in pronunciation or by obscure morphological processes.

> — for example, it's not readily apparent how the word "tribute" is based on the Latin root "tri" meaning "three".

Anyway, to recap, the components of language we've considered here include:

1. **phonetics** (and **phonology**) - the sounds of a language and the ways that they interact
2. **morphology** - how words are created
3. **lexicon** - the list of words in a language and their properties
4. **syntax** - how phrases and sentences are put together with words
5. **semantics** - meaning

So why do languages change?

Consider dialects (from "dia" meaning "through" + "leg" meaning "speak".

— a dialect is a particular form of a language that's specific to a geographical region or social group. Dialects arise from the accumulation of small changes over time that differentiate one group from another.

— dialects are not always mutually intelligible (e.g., Glaswegian English and Canadian English); conversely, discrete languages ARE sometimes mutually intelligible (e.g., German and Danish).

— is there a feature of Canadian English that distinguishes it from, say, American English?

Languages change to enhance **group cohesion**. We don't want to sound the same as everybody else. But we expect to be able to recognize friends and loved ones in part by how they speak.

We can hear dialectal differences in BC's lower mainland …

— McFetridge notes differences in the pronunciation of "Capilano" and "Kitsilano" among older Vancouverites depending on where they went to high school.

— You can often detect a non-Vancouver person by the way s/he says "Granville" or "Malkin" as in "Malkin Bowl".

Not only do dialects indicate where we were raised, they're **hard to fake** on a consistent basis.

So if unique dialects are so useful in defining group membership, why should they change?

> — for the same reason that you should change your computer passwords every so often: they get easier to fake. And besides, who wants to sound like old people?
>
> — also, the bigger the social group, the more **subgroups** arise.

Dialects can differ in more than just pronunciation (phonetics):

— lexicons can be different, e.g., "elevator" vs "lift"

— semantics can be different; consider the meaning of "chesterfield"

Interestingly, small geographical areas and small populations can have an enormous number of dialects. Thus there are more than 350 Fijian dialects in a population of only 400,000.

> — dialects are village-based and it's important to know which village someone is from as this will define people's relationships.

Canada is huge geographically, but has little dialectal variation.

So who is the biggest force behind language change? Adolescents. Thus most of you are already past your language-changing days. Ha!

Exercise 1

For next week, investigate the following words using the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. For each, state whether it is a native English word, or, if borrowed, from what language is it borrowed?

1. meme
2. sinter
3. gimcrack
4. bazaar
5. thwart
6. star
7. people
8. pig
9. pork
10. star
11. knock
12. philtrum

Also for next week, read as much of Chapter 3 in the text as possible.