Language Variation & Change

Language variation is a prerequisite for change

There is always language variation within a community or society
for many different (social) reasons:

- differing needs (occupation, leisure, interests, etc.)
- differing social standing (sociolects)
- differing contacts with other communities, e.g. with differing regional varieties (dialects) & languages

But even one and the same person shows a tendency to speak (and write) differently in different social contexts/constellations

Variation is facilitated by the relative ease of geographical and social mobility (mobility isn’t a new phenomenon!)

Change as a Social Phenomenon

Language change is most often described in linguistic terms, yet language and language change is essentially a SOCIAL phenomenon. Both language and language change arise through communication.

- People tend to adjust their language to become more like each other (accommodation)
- Accommodating to others can operate across phonology (accent), lexis (vocabulary), grammar (morphology & syntax) and discourse (discursive features)
- Also at a societal level, the more social upheaval, the more linguistic change
Categories of Change

Distinction often made between:

- Internal change – including the normal "drift of language"
- External change – due to language contact

Aspects of Language Subject to Change

- Phonology
- Lexis (vocabulary)
- Morphology
- Syntax

Grammar

Conditioned Phonological Change 1

Assimilation – adjacent sounds become more alike

- e.g. OE blīðs/blīps : bliss, OE gödspell ‘good news’ : gospel
- Palatalisation of velar consonants before front vowels:
  - e.g. cheese OE. cēse = OS. kāsi, Du. kaas G. Kāse ), yellow OE. geolu = OS. gelo, Du. gel, G. gelb
- Modern distinction in past tense /d/ : /t/ : /l/d/
- Tendency for intervocalic consonants to become voiced (vowels are always voiced)

Internal Change: Phonology

- A speaker tends not to make more effort than is necessary
- This can lead for example to co-articulation effects becoming permanent.

Therefore a distinction can be made between:

- conditioned (or combinatorial) change, e.g. through co-articulation effects
- unconditioned (or spontaneous) change
**Conditioned Phonological Change 2**

**Simplification of consonant clusters** (elision)

OE : ModE
- hlæf : loaf
- hlũd : loud
- hnecca : neck
- hniţu : nit
- hríng : ring
- hrõf : roof
- hlæfdige : lady

But note that question words retained breathiness longer: what, when, where

- cnëo(w) : knee
- cnotta : knot
- gnætt : gnat
- camb, comb : comb
- wamb, womb : womb

Modern example: yod-dropping, e.g. suit, lute

**Conditioned Phonological Change 3**

**Other phoneme losses**

- Reduction & loss of final unstressed vowels
  - OE sunu : son
  - OE sunne : sun
  - OE mõna : moon
  - OE steorra : star

  - includes vowels in plurals e.g. OE dagas : days

  - with vowel reduction (weakening) first to -e and then -ə and then lost

**Unconditioned Phonological Change 1**

**Metathesis** – reversal of two (mostly) adjoining phonemes

- e.g. OE ăcsian : ask
- OE brid(d) : bird,
- OE wæps (variation in OE too: wæsp) : wasp
- hros (cf. OE hors, ON hross, Sw russ) : horse

Modern example: pretty (good) – ‘purty’ (good)

**Unconditioned Phonological Change 2**

**Epenthesis** – addition of a phoneme in the middle of a word

- e.g. OE æmtig : empty
  - Sêo eorpe wæs æmtig (from Genesis)
- OE spin(e)l : spindle,
- OE þunor : thunder

Modern examples:
- glottal stop [ʔ]: something [samʔθɪŋ],
- epenthetic vowel [ə]: in ScE/IrE film [fɪləm]
Unconditioned Phonological Change 3

Sound shifts
- Sound “laws” whereby the same phoneme changes in all words (under the same conditions – stress, position, etc.)
- Tendency to preserve symmetry of phonological system – to optimise the phonological space

Unconditioned Phonological Change 4

Chain shifts
- Push (to avoid merging) or pull effects (to mergers)

Northern Cities Chain Shift
- \[ \varepsilon / \varepsilon \]
- \[ \varepsilon / \varepsilon \]
- \[ \varepsilon / \varepsilon \]
- \[ \varepsilon / \varepsilon \]
- \[ \varepsilon / \varepsilon \]

Unconditioned Phonological Change 5

Mergers of phonemes
- Front close vowels /i/ : /y/ (unrounding)
  - OE lytel : little
  - OE ytel : evil
  - OE synn : sin
- Great vowel shift included one merger
  - Compare: *speak* [spɛ:k] and *feed* [fe:d] in ME
- Disadvantages of mergers: more homonyms arise = potential detriment to communication
  - e.g. *to : two : too; their : there; son (OE sunu) : sun (sunne)

Internal Change: Lexis 1

Reasons for lexical change
- New ideas and innovations give rise to new words
- Through polysemy – words have different or multiple meanings, e.g. common words like *get, go*
  - Over time one or more meanings may fall out of use and new meanings develop
- By association with other words, e.g. metaphors, metonymy
- To avoid taboo, negative, offensive words or those that are too direct - euphemisms
Reasons for lexical change 1

**Metaphors** - association by similarity

*toast* [LME] There is a connection between the toast you eat and the toast you make with a raised glass. Toast is based on Latin *torrere* ‘to parch, scorch, dry up’, the source also of *torrid* [E17th], and *torrent* [LME] a rushing or ‘boiling’ flow of water. ‘To parch’ was the earliest meaning of the English word, and before long it was used to describe browning bread in front of a fire. Drinking toasts goes back to the late 17th century, and originated in the practice whereby a drinker would name a lady and request that all the people present drink her health. The idea was that the lady’s name flavoured the drink like the pieces of spiced toast that people sometimes added to wine in those days. *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*

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Reasons for lexical change 2

**Metonymy** - association by contiguity, e.g. cause & effect, concrete & abstract

*eavesdrop* [OE] In Old English *eaves*, then spelled *efes*, was a singular word, but the -s at the end made people think it was a plural, which is how we treat it today. If you eavesdrop you secretly listen to a conversation. The word was formed in the early 17th century from the old word *eavesdropper* [LME], ‘a person who listens from under the eaves’. Eavesdropper came from the noun *eavesdrip* or *eavesdrop*, ‘the ground on to which water drips from the eaves’. This was a concept in an ancient law which banned building closer than two feet from the boundary of your land, in case you damaged your neighbour’s land by ‘eavesdrop’. *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*

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Reasons for lexical change 3

**Euphemism** - (the use of) a mild, comforting, or evasive expression that takes the place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive, or too direct: *Gosh* God, *terminate* kill, *sleep with* have sex with, *pass water*, *relieve oneself* urinate.

**WORD COMMON EUPHEMISMS**

lavatory bog (slang), comfort station, convenience, little boys’ room, little house, loo, restroom (AmE), washroom (AmE), water closet (WC)
die depart this life, give up the ghost, kick the bucket (slang), pass away, pass on

*Pocket Fowler’s Modern English Usage*

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Internal Change: Lexis 2

**Patterns of lexical change**

- Broadening of meaning – refers to a wider range of meanings (referents)
- Narrowing of meaning
- Amelioration
- Deterioration
Patterns of lexical change 1

Broadening of meaning 1

food [OE] Recorded since the beginning of the 11th century, food is related to fodder [OE] and foster [OE], originally found in the sense 'feed, nourish'. It can refer to mental as well as physical nourishment—the expression food for thought to indicate something that deserves serious consideration has been in use since the early 19th century. Cannon fodder for soldiers regarded as expendable dates from the First World War.

Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

food what is taken to support life. Late OE. fōda :- *fōðan-, a unique formation, the synon. words in other Gmc. langs. being f. *fōðjan FEED, viz. ON. fæði, fæða

Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 2

Broadening of meaning 2

small [OE] A word recorded since around AD 700. In Old English it could refer to something slender or narrow as well as something more generally of less than usual size. From the 16th century small beer was a term for weaker beer, the sort that people drank for breakfast when water supplies were unsafe. In Macbeth Iago dismisses women as fit only to 'chronicle small beer', and from this sort of use developed the sense of something insignificant.

Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

small (dial.) slender, thin: †narrow; of limited size or extent; of fine texture OE.; of low strength or power XII. OE. smæl = OS. (Du.), OHG. smal (G. schmal), ON. smair.

Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 3

Narrowing of meaning 1

In Anglo-Saxon times starve simply meant 'to die', especially a lingering death from hunger, cold, disease, or grief. People continued to use the word in this way for many centuries, and in northern English dialect starve can still mean 'to die of cold'.

Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

starve †die OE.; die of hunger; cause to die of hunger, cold, etc. XVI. OE. str. vb. steorfan = OS. sterban (Du. sterven), OHG. sterban (G. sterben) :- WGmc. *sterban, perh orig. 'be rigid' and thus rel. to ON. stjarf tetanus, stírfinn obstinate, starf effort; outside Gmc., cf. Olr. ussarb (: - *udsterbhā) death; extension of the base *ster- be rigid (cf. STARE). The orig. str. forms of the pt. became obs. XV. of the pp. XVI. Hence starvation XVIII.

Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 4

Narrowing of meaning 2

[ME] A poison does not necessarily need to be in liquid form, but in early use the word meant a drink or medicine, specifically a potion with a harmful or dangerous ingredient. The source was Old French poison 'magic potion', from Latin potio, also the source of potion [ME]. The saying one man's meat is another man's poison has been around for centuries and was being described as long ago as 1604 as 'that old moth-eaten proverb'.

Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

poison †(deadly) potion XIII; substance introduced into an organism that destroys life or injures health XIV. ME. puison, poison — OF. puison, (also mod.) poison (in OF. magic potion) :- L. potiō, -ōn-. Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology
Amelioration 1

nice [ME] In medieval English nice meant 'foolish, silly, ignorant', from its Latin source nescius 'ignorant'. It developed a range of largely negative senses, from 'dissolute', 'ostentatious, showy', 'unmanly, cowardly', and 'delicate, fragile' to 'strange, rare', and 'coy, reserved'. [...] The word was first used in the more positive sense 'fine or subtle' (as in a nice distinction) in the 16th century, and the current main meanings, 'pleasant' and 'kind', seem to have been in common use from the mid 18th century. [...] Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

pretty [OE] In his diary entry for 11 May 1660, Samuel Pepys mentions 'Dr Clerke, who I found to be a very pretty man and very knowing'. Pepys meant that the doctor was admirable, 'a fine fellow'. This is merely one of the many senses that pretty, a word that comes from a root meaning 'trick', has had over the centuries. The first was 'cunning, crafty', which was followed by 'clever, skilful', 'brave', and 'admirable, pleasing' before the main modern sense, 'attractive' appeared in the 15th century [...] Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 5

Deterioration 1

gossip [OE] In Old English godsibb or gossip was the word for a godparent. It literally meant 'a person related to one in God' and came from god 'God' and sibb 'a relative', the latter word found in sibling [OE]. Gossip came to be applied to a close friend, especially a female friend invited to be present at a birth. From this developed the idea of a person who enjoys indulging in idle talk, and by the 19th century idle talk or tittle-tattle itself. Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

gossip [t]sponsor at baptism OE.; [t]familiar acquaintance XIV; idle talker, tatterer XVI; (from the vb.) tittle-tattle, easy talk XIX. Late OE. godsibb, [...] comp. of GOD and SIB denoting the spiritual affinity of the baptized and their sponsors. Hence gossip vb. be or act as gossip XVI; talk idly XVII. Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 6

Amelioration 2

pretty [OE] In his diary entry for 11 May 1660, Samuel Pepys mentions 'Dr Clerke, who I found to be a very pretty man and very knowing'. Pepys meant that the doctor was admirable, 'a fine fellow'. This is merely one of the many senses that pretty, a word that comes from a root meaning 'trick', has had over the centuries. The first was ‘cunning, crafty’, which was followed by ‘clever, skilful’, ‘brave’, and ‘admirable, pleasing’ before the main modern sense, ‘attractive’ appeared in the 15th century [...] Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

hussy [LME] 'You brazen hussy!' is now the sort of thing someone might call a female friend as a joke, but until the mid 20th century hussy was a serious term for an immoral woman. The original hussy was far more respectable, though—she was a housewife. Hussy developed in the mid 16th century from housewife [ME], which was the word's first meaning. Some hundred years later it became a rude or playful way of addressing a woman, and also a derogatory term implying a lack of morals. Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins

Patterns of lexical change 7

Deterioration 2

hussy, huzzy [housewife XVI; bold, shameless, or [t]light woman or girl XVII. Reduction of hūsif, HOUSEWIFE. Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology

Patterns of lexical change 8
Two main categories of grammatical change:

- Morphological change e.g. s/he goeth → goes  
  thou hast → you have

- Syntactic change e.g. word order
  Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'the Tiger.
  But in a sieve I'll thither sail […]
  (Macbeth I.iii.7-8)

Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine […]
  (Macbeth I.iii.22-23)

Morphological change

- Word formation
  Loss of unstressed OE derivational prefixes in ModE:
    ge- with resultative meaning
e.g. winnan 'fight' vs. gewinnan 'win';
  fēran 'go, travel' vs. gefēran 'reach'
  be- to change intransitive into transitive verbs
e.g. sittan 'sit' vs. besittan 'inhabit'
    weep vs. beweep 'weep over' (ME)
  fall vs. befall (ModE)

Morphological change 2

- Levelling through analogy – new forms are based on other existing ones
  Levelling of plurals
  Compare OE (nominative) …
  masculine feminine neuter
  sing. stān cwēn scip
  plural stānas cwēna scipu
  … and ModE
  plural stones queens ships

Morphological & syntactic change

There can, however, be problems drawing a sharp distinction between morphological & syntactic change because they often go hand in hand, e.g. case endings and word order.

- Compare OE
  Sēo cwēn geseah þone guman. Se guma geseah þa cwēn.
  subj verb obj subj verb obj = SVO
  Þone guman geseah sēo cwēn. Þā cwēn geseah se guma.
  obj verb subj obj verb subj = OVS

- and ModE
  The woman saw the man. The man saw the woman. = SVO
Internal Change: Grammar 5

By Middle English (late 12th century) one study (Palmatier 1969) showed dominance of SVO, but also other word orders:

In ModE the SVO word order is now the default one.

The question is which development came first: the loss of case endings or more fixed word order?

Internal Change: Grammar 6

Grammaticalisation – words (esp. nouns & verbs) are transformed into grammatical objects.

This process typically involves:
- semantic bleaching – loss of lexical meaning
- phonetic erosion (reduction) – loss of phonetic segments
- morphological reduction – loss of morphological elements
- obligatorification – becomes increasingly more obligatory

e.g. (be) + going to \(\rightarrow\) be + gonna

by the side of \(\rightarrow\) the preposition beside

External Change

- Waves of different settlers in Britain: Celts; Romans; Angles, Saxons and Jutes; Vikings; Normans; Immigration esp. from former colonies.
- Sometimes very profound effect, e.g. creolisation, but also fairly superficial (assimilation of loan words)

Creolisation

- Pidgins usually arise when people speaking mutually unintelligible languages come into contact
- Pidgin is no-one’s 1st language
- Superstrate borrowing (mostly lexis from the superordinate lang.) but adapted to 1st lang (substrate = subordinate lang.) \(\rightarrow\) imperfect learning of superstrate language, which in turn has an impact on a potential developing creole
- Creole arises when a pidgin becomes someone’s 1st language

External Change: Phonology 1

Influence of Welsh on Welsh English

Received Pronunciation | Welsh English Pronunciation
--- | ---
[ʌ] | rubber, love [o]
[a] | [a] it’s not just the young people it’s my mum my grandmother as well …
[a] | [a] everyone

Language Contact – Welsh lacks RP’s [ʌ]. Instead Welsh English has adopted a similar vowel from Welsh [a].

- e.g. [a] ysgol ‘school’, ysbty ‘hospital’
External Change: Phonology 2

- In OE the unvoiced/voiced variants of these consonants were allophones:
  - [f] : [v]
  - [θ] : [ð]
  - [s] : [z]
  - with unvoiced forms initial and final, but voiceless forms medial

- OE þē of: ModE thief : thieves
- OE mūþ of: ModE mouth : mouths
- OE hūs : hūsian ModE house : to house

- But these allophones then became separate phonemes, probably under the influence of large-scale borrowing of Norman French loanwords into ME, giving rise to minimal pairs:
  - feel : veal;
  - seal : zeal

- but also certain native English words:
  - thigh : thy

External Change: Lexis 1

The history of English vocabulary is characterised by many waves of borrowings (loanwords).
- A Germanic language (< Angles, Saxons & Jutes)
- Latin (church & learning) e.g. mass, master, school
- Norse (typically everyday language) e.g. take, get, sky, same
- (Norman) French (government, law & administration, but also everyday language) e.g. parliament, judge, age

Early Middle English (beginning of 12th century) about 90% words of English origin

by end of Middle English period (mid 15th century) about 75%.

External Change: Lexis 2

- Most of the borrowings into English belong to open word classes, e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives
- Closed word class borrowings are usually rare, but note the following pronoun:
  - From ON they, them, their OE hīe, him, hiera/heora

- This could have been facilitated by internal sound changes leading more easily to confusion with the singular pronouns:
  - he, him: OE hē, him
  - she/her, her: OE hēo, hire (possessive pronoun)
External Change: Morphology 1

- Contact between Old English & Old Norse could have led to a pidgin-like variety and even a creole (as a lingua franca)
- Typically pidgins lose complex inflectional endings and they become more reliant upon word order
- Vowels of endings in unstressed syllables converged, e.g. -en, -on, -an > [en]
- During the Middle English period all endings with a vowel or vowel + nasal disappeared

External Change: Morphology 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nouns: ‘dog (hound)’</th>
<th>‘ship’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>OE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nom. hund</td>
<td>hundr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acc. hund</td>
<td>hund</td>
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<td>Dat. hunde</td>
<td>hundi</td>
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<td>Gen. hundes</td>
<td>hunds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nom. hundas</td>
<td>hundar</td>
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<td>Acc. hundas</td>
<td>hunda</td>
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<td>Dat. hundum</td>
<td>hundum</td>
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<td>Gen. hunda</td>
<td>hunda</td>
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External Change: Morphology 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs:</th>
<th>‘be’, ‘live’</th>
<th>‘be’, ‘live’</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sing.</td>
<td>OE</td>
<td>ON</td>
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<tr>
<td>beōn</td>
<td>libban</td>
<td>vera</td>
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<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>eom</td>
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<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>hē</td>
<td>is</td>
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<td>plural</td>
<td>wē</td>
<td>sindon libbaþ</td>
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<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>þē</td>
<td>þēr</td>
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<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>þēr</td>
<td>þēir</td>
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