Professor Anne Curzan is Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of English at the University of Michigan. She also has faculty appointments in the Department of Linguistics and the School of Education. She received her B.A. in Linguistics with honors from Yale University and both her M.A. and Ph.D. in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan.

In 2007, Professor Curzan received the University of Michigan’s Henry Russel Award, one of the highest honors for midcareer faculty; she also has been honored at Michigan with a Faculty Recognition Award and the John Dewey Award.

Professor Curzan has published on a wide range of topics, including the history of English, language and gender, corpus linguistics, historical sociolinguistics, pedagogy, and lexicography. She is the author of *Gender Shifts in the History of English* and coauthor, with Michael Adams, of the textbook *How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction*, now in its third edition. She also coauthored, with Lisa Damour, *First Day to Final Grade: A Graduate Student’s Guide to Teaching*, also now in its third edition. Professor Curzan’s other Great Course is *How Conversation Works: 6 Lessons for Better Communication*.

Professor Curzan served as coeditor of the *Journal of English Linguistics* for eight years and is now a senior consulting editor for the journal. She has been a member of the Usage Panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* since 2006 and is currently a member of the American Dialect Society Executive Committee. Professor Curzan shares her insights on language in short videos on the website of Michigan University’s College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and on Michigan Radio’s weekly segment “That’s What They Say.” In her spare time, she is an avid runner and triathlete.
# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION
- Professor Biography ............................................................................ i
- Typographical Conventions ............................................................... vi
- Course Scope ..................................................................................... 1

## LECTURE GUIDES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LECTURE</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Winning Words, Banished Words</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Life of a Word, from Birth to Death</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Human Hands behind Dictionaries</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Treasure Houses, Theft, and Traps</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yarn and Clues—New Word Meanings</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Smog, Mob, Bling—New Words</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>“Often” versus “Offen”—Pronunciation</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Fighting over Zippers</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Opening the Early English Word-Hoard</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Table of Contents

**LECTURE 10**  
Safe and Sound—The French Invasion .................................................62

**LECTURE 11**  
Magnifical Dexterity—Latin and Learning .............................................68

**LECTURE 12**  
Chutzpah to Pajamas—World Borrowings ..............................................74

**LECTURE 13**  
The Pop/Soda/Coke Divide .................................................................82

**LECTURE 14**  
Maths, Wombats, and *Les Bluejeans* .................................................90

**LECTURE 15**  
Foot and Pedestrian—Word Cousins .....................................................98

**LECTURE 16**  
Desultory Somersaults—Latin Roots ....................................................106

**LECTURE 17**  
Analogous Prologues—Greek Roots ......................................................113

**LECTURE 18**  
The Tough Stuff of English Spelling ................................................121

**LECTURE 19**  
The *b* in *Debt*—Meddling in Spelling ...........................................126

**LECTURE 20**  
Of Mice, Men, and Y’All .................................................................133

**LECTURE 21**  
I’m Good … Or Am I Well? ...............................................................141

**LECTURE 22**  
How *Snuck* Sneaked In .................................................................149
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LECTURE 23</th>
<th>Um, Well, Like, You Know</th>
<th>156</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 24</td>
<td>Wicked Cool—The Irreverence of Slang</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 25</td>
<td>Boy Toys and Bad Eggs—Slangy Wordplay</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 26</td>
<td>Spinster, Bachelor, Guy, Dude</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 27</td>
<td>Firefighters and Freshpersons</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 28</td>
<td>A Slam Dunk—The Language of Sports</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 29</td>
<td>Fooling Around—The Language of Love</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 30</td>
<td>Gung Ho—The Language of War</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 31</td>
<td>Filibustering—The Language of Politics</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 32</td>
<td>LOL—The Language of the Internet</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 33</td>
<td>#$@%!—Forbidden Words</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 34</td>
<td>Couldn’t (or Could) Care Less</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 35</td>
<td>Musquirt and Other Lexical Gaps</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Table of Contents

## LECTURE 36
Playing Fast and Loose with Words ..............................................251

## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL
Bibliography ....................................................................................258
Typographical Conventions

This guidebook uses the following typographical conventions:

- Italics are used for words cited as words (rather than used functionally; e.g., The word *ginormous* is a combination of *gigantic* and *enormous*) and foreign-language words.

- Single quotation marks are used for meanings of words (e.g., *Wife* meant ‘woman’ in Old English).

- Double quotation marks are used for pronunciations of words (e.g., “often” versus “offen”) and words used in a special sense (e.g., The “secret lives” of words are fascinating).

- Slashes are used to indicate sounds (e.g., /b/).

- An asterisk is used to designate proto-language forms (e.g., The Indo-European root *mn-ti*, ‘to think,’ gives us the Latin borrowing *mental*).
The Secret Life of Words:  
English Words and Their Origins

Scope:

Words have fascinating stories to tell—about the history and culture of their speakers, about the human mind and human creativity, and about the power of language. This course explores the history of English words, tracing back a number of common and uncommon words and phrases through history to get to their origins. The course moves from learned, classical words on standardized tests, such as erinaceous, to the sports metaphors that permeate everyday talk, such as you’re off base. It explores words that have been the source of public concern, from Internet acronyms, such as LOL, to the curse words we write with symbols: #$@%!

The word omnivorous is a Latin borrowing whose parts mean ‘all devouring,’ and it is a word often used to describe the capacious English vocabulary. This course takes us around the world to explore the words that English has acquired from Arabic to Yiddish, from pajamas to pickle. In these words, we’ll see the history of imperialism and colonization, as well as immigration and assimilation. We’ll also journey around the United States to learn why some folks in the South say “might could,” who calls a poached egg a “dropped egg,” and what you do when you make a “Michigan left.” The course considers whether such forces as television or the Internet threaten this rich lexical diversity in English.

We’ll travel back in time to the invasions by the Vikings and the Normans to explore words from sky to story, which are so familiar they hardly seem borrowed at all. Then, we’ll immerse ourselves in the classical revival of the Renaissance, which gave English related sets of Latinate words, including omnivorous, carnivorous, piscivorous, and voracious. Up to this day, the language of science and medicine is permeated with Latin and Greek; exploring classical roots opens up this technical vocabulary for the nonspecialist.
From the learned language of Latin, we will then dive into the playfulness of slang. This ephemeral language phenomenon, so hard to pin down yet so delightful to study, stretches the lexical boundaries, turning such words as wicked on their heads to make them good, making rhyme rebellious with chill pill, and making bad eggs through metaphor. Words help establish who we are, as slang makes eminently clear.

As we’ll see, the English lexicon is oddly uneven in spots. The positions of governor and governess are no longer parallel, nor are a bachelor and a spinster equally eligible. The proliferation of words meaning ‘drunk’ stands in contrast to the language’s odd lexical gaps, such as the fact that we have only one word for ‘spicy hot.’ Why do we have so many words for some things and no words for others?

We will also explore the language of love and war, of politics and political correctness. Does it matter that we talk about dating as a game and about treating disease as a war? Does it change the world to talk about firefighters instead of firemen? We’ll learn how English speakers continue to create new words to handle the globalizing, technologically complex world in which we live.

Have you ever wondered why colonel is spelled with an l but pronounced with an r; about the fact that foot and pedestrian are historically related words, even though they now have different consonants; or whether it matters if you say “I am good” or “I am well”? Answers to all these questions and more await. If you’ve ever pondered where such a word as erinaceous comes from (and what it means), or if you just want to enjoy language more, this course will provide hours of enlightening pleasure.
One of the many wonderful things about studying English words is that we make new ones all the time. For example, do you know any flexitarians? This is a relatively new word, formed from flexible + vegetarian and meaning a vegetarian who eats meat when it’s convenient. Flexitarian introduces a key theme of the course that we’ll discuss in this lecture: the mixed/borrowed bag of English words. Other themes we’ll touch on include the power of words, the ever-changing nature of words and language, and the challenges that the study of words presents to our assumptions about how language works.

The Human Element in Language

• As speakers of any language, we must take words for granted, but the “secret lives” of words can be fascinating when we pause and consider where they came from, how they work, and what they tell us about our language and ourselves.

• Those who study the English language are struck by its vibrancy and by our creativity with it, as we exploit the riches of English vocabulary, create new additions to vocabulary, or change or abandon words that are present in the vocabulary.

• Language makes us human (no other species has this capacity), and it is a human impulse to play with language.

• There is also a human impulse to lament some of the changes that occur in a language or to worry that young people are ruining the language. Many people believe that there was some earlier moment when the language was in better shape than it is in today.

• In this course, we’ll look in great detail at how words work and change in order to gain perspective on this concern about decay and
insight into the fascinating things happening in the human brain and in human culture that we see reflected in the history of words.

A Reason to Celebrate

- There is much to celebrate and to study in the unlimited human capacity to create new words and new utterances.

- Each year, a vote is taken at the annual meeting of the American Dialect Society (ADS), a gathering of linguists and lexicographers, to choose the Word of the Year.
  - This vote, which celebrates language change and lexical creativity, happens often just a week after Lake Superior State has put out its list of banished words for the year—words that have become tiresome often exactly because they have been so successful. For 2012, this list of banished words included *ginormous*, *blowback*, *man cave*, and *occupy*.

  - In the recent past, some of the winners for Word of the Year and other categories at the ADS meeting have included *occupy*, *app*, *tweet*, *e-, Y2K*, *bailout*, *chad*, *9-11*, and *metrosexual*. This list captures some of the many topics we can learn about by looking at words: technology (*app*, *tweet*, *e-*), history (*occupy*, *9-11*, *bailout*, *chad*), and culture (*metrosexual*, *flexitarian*).

  - These are all relatively new words that can tell us about our current cultural moment, but we’ll also spend time looking at where more established words come from and learning from the stories they have to tell.

- In the year 2000, the members of ADS voted on the Word of the Millennium.
  - There was much debate about the criteria to be used in choosing such a word. Should the selection be based on a word as a word or a word as a concept? Should it be a borrowed term from French, Latin, or Greek or a longstanding Germanic word that took on new meaning or prominence?
In the end, the word *she* was chosen because it was new to the millennium, may reflect language contact (with Old Norse), represented change at the very core of English, and captured gains made by women over the course of the millennium.

**Themes of the Course**

- As we explore English vocabulary in this course, we will return to a few themes. The first of these is the idea that English words are a mixed linguistic bag. They come from many languages in addition to the native Germanic words, giving our language a rich, multilayered vocabulary.
- As long as there has been English, there have been borrowed words in English, and by looking at these words, we can learn about encounters with speakers of other languages.
- English words reflect a history of extensive language contact—in Britain, in the Americas, and around the world through imperialism and colonization, and today, through globalization and World Englishes.
- English stands out among languages in terms of just how many words it has borrowed.
- In this borrowing, we can see how different kinds of words cluster in different areas of the lexicon, for example, Greek and Latin in medicine.

- Our second theme is that words are powerful.
  - The childhood saying “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me” is simply not true, and we know this. Some words are so powerful that we won’t even say them.
  - We know the power in being able to manipulate words to express what we want to say and how we want to say it. Examples here include “I love you” and “mistakes were made.”
Language is a significant part of our identity. The words we choose tell people much about us and the communities with which we identify.

We also know that words sometimes fail us, perhaps when we attempt to express sympathy after a death.

- A third theme is that words change all the time. English, as a living language, is ever-changing.
  - The human mind is a creative entity, and through our creativity, we change the language.
  - It’s important to note that change is a natural part of language, not in any way a destructive force. There is no endpoint or destination in language.
  - Looking at change in the past, we can learn a lot about our history—and we need to recognize and become comfortable with the idea that the changes around us are more interesting than worrisome.
  - It may seem like common sense to think about change as error, but in this course, we will frame change more often as creativity. This is how linguists think about change, as opposed to how writers of usage guides view it.

- This relates to a fourth theme, which is that studying English words asks you to rethink some very common notions about language.
  - As speakers of English, we all bring a good deal of knowledge to the table, and along with that can come some pretty strong beliefs about how language works and what is correct or incorrect, many of which have been learned or reinforced in school or popular usage guides.
  - Who is to say, however, whether a certain word is a “real word”? If we all know what ain’t means, why do many language authorities say that it is “incorrect”?
These are important and challenging questions about our everyday experience with words and about the resources we rely on to tell us about words.

Our challenge will be to move away from such words as “right” and “wrong” and to think in more nuanced ways about the competing forces of language change and the benefits of a standard variety, as well as the ways we all negotiate these forces every day, choosing different words in different contexts.

As we explore these themes, we will learn many wonderful linguistic facts, such as why colonel is spelled the way it is, why dive has two past tenses, and what pattern applies to such words as governor/governess.

The Scope of the English Vocabulary

How big is the English vocabulary? The answer depends on who you ask.

The most recent unabridged edition of Webster’s, the Third New International Dictionary, has 450,000 words. This edition omits all words considered obsolete by 1755, except those found in well-known works.

Most college dictionaries have 50,000 to 180,000 words.

A recent study using Google Books estimated that the English lexicon in 2000 was a little more than 1 million words, compared with 544,000 words in 1900.

English vocabulary reflects extensive language contact—in Britain, in the Americas, and around the world through imperialism, colonization, and globalization.
The lexicographer Allen Walker Read put the number at 4 million: 700,000 in Merriam-Webster files, 1 million scientific terms, plus regional expressions, foreign borrowings, trade names, and new slang words not yet recorded.

- This raises another important question: How many words does the “average speaker” know?
  - A college-educated speaker’s receptive vocabulary is about 20,000 to 50,000 words, a much smaller number than that in the average dictionary.
  - Note that there is also a difference between active vocabulary (the words you use on a regular basis) and passive or receptive vocabulary (words you recognize but don’t use regularly).

- What counts as “English”?
  - Scientific vocabulary is arguably the most rapidly growing part of the lexicon. Some say, for example, that there are 200,000 medical terms. Do these count as “English”?
  - Dictionaries are filled with highly specialized terms, some borrowed and some not.
  - English has a remarkable history of borrowing: More than 80 percent of the most common 1,000 words are native English, but more than 60 percent of the next most common 1,000 words are borrowed. When does a borrowed word, such as *sushi*, become English?
  - It’s also important to realize that as English spreads around the world, it is developing new varieties, many of which have words specific to that region in the same way that American English has words specific to North America, such as *moose* and *squash*.

- In this course, we’ll focus mostly on long-established varieties of English, especially American English, along with British, Canadian,
and Australian English. But we’ll also talk about the many varieties of English, both standard and nonstandard, that are encompassed under the heading “English.”

**Topics to Come**

- In thinking about the lives of words—how they work and where they came from—we’ll be thinking about the past, present, and future of English and its speakers.

- Through words, we’ll talk about history and culture, language systems and language irregularities, and the wonders of the creative human brain.

- In the next lecture, we’ll talk about exactly what a word is; after all, if we’re going to ask how big the English vocabulary is, we should come to some kind of agreement about what counts as a word in the first place. We’ll also talk about the lifespan of a word, asking two key questions: When is a word born? And when does it die?

---

**American Dialect Society Word-of-the-Year Categories and Recent Winners**

Most Useful: *dot, google, blog, fail* (as a noun)

Most Creative: *googleganger, Dracula sneeze, recombobulation area, multi-slacking*

Most Unnecessary: *bi-winning, refudiate*

Most Euphemistic: *job creator, artisanal, regime alteration*

Most Likely to Succeed: *cloud, telework, trend* (as a verb)

Suggested Reading

Editors of the *American Heritage Dictionaries, Word Histories and Mysteries.*

Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent.*

McWhorter, *Word on the Street.*

Pinker, *The Language Instinct.*

Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the concerns you have (or hear) about how the English language is changing? How justified do you think these concerns are?

2. How would you describe the power of language?
If you don’t know the word *wittol*, you are not alone. It refers to a man who is aware of and condones his wife being unfaithful. The word dates back to the 15th century but was recently removed by some major dictionaries—essentially declared dead—to make room for new words, such as *ginormous*. This word seems so new that we may think we were present to witness its birth, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the first usage of *ginormous* in 1948. In this lecture, we’ll discuss how a word gets born and when it dies; we’ll also look at what constitutes a word and how we all agree on what a word means.

**The Birth of a Word**

- Some words have been in English as long as there has been English; such words include *heart, head, man, sun*, and the pronoun *I*. They were part of the Germanic dialects from which English derives and part of proto-Indo-European before it split off into Germanic. Some of these words go so far back that we can only hypothesize about speakers creating them thousands of years ago.

- Other words have been borrowed from other languages into English. We can often pinpoint the first time such a word was written down in an English document; we assume that it was used in speech earlier but perhaps not too much earlier. We could say that this approximate moment is when the word is “born” in English. Of course, the word was alive in another language, but this is the moment when it was adopted into English.

- Other words are actually born in the language; such words appeared in English for the first time in recorded history when English speakers created them, using the resources at their disposal.
When a speaker took the prefix *multi-* and attached it to *slacking*, the word *multi-slacking* was born; when other speakers picked it up, its life was extended.

This is how most new words are born. We take prefixes and suffixes and attach them in new ways or create new compounds.

Of course, it is hard to know exactly who created a new word first, but we usually can come up with an approximate date.

Occasionally, someone makes up a word in a more conscious, strategic way, as happened with *googol* \(10^{100}\); in this case, we can pinpoint the birth more precisely than we can with most other words.

The bottom line here is that we can sometimes pinpoint a word’s birth, but more often with these types of questions, we are guesstimating.

**The Death of a Word**

When does a word die? The most obvious answer to this question is: whenever people stop using it. If no one says *fremian* anymore, which was an Old English verb meaning ‘do, perform,’ then we can say that it is dead. If no one says *wittol* and almost no one knows what it means, then it is probably dead. But the highly literate world in which we live, with extensive written records, has complicated that question.

Consider the word *betimes*, which meant ‘in a short time, in good time, at an early hour.’ We no longer use this word, but we encounter it in Shakespeare, Milton, and elsewhere. This word seems to be dead, but it is also well preserved and, thus, at some level, still part of the lexicon (at least the passive lexicon) of some readers.

Dictionaries often indicate this status with the label “archaic,” but it is difficult to decide when an archaic word should be declared dead, if it ever should be.
Part of making that decision is whether the archaic word appears in a text that is otherwise fairly comprehensible to us and still commonly read; thus, words that appear in Shakespeare, such as *betimes, alack,* or *hugger-mugger,* tend to be called archaic. After all, we still read Shakespeare in the original and go to performances.

But words that appear in *Beowulf* that we no longer use tend to be called dead rather than archaic. After all, very few people still read *Beowulf* in the original. The language of *Beowulf* is so unfamiliar now that it is hard for us even to recognize the words that have survived, and the ones that have not, we think of as dead. A short passage from *Beowulf* about the monster Grendel illustrates this loss of Old English words.

- It is a natural part of a living lexicon that words are born and die on a regular basis. In future lectures, we’ll look at where English words come from, including native words, borrowings, and creations.

**What Is a Word?**

- What counts as a word? This is a trickier question than it at first appears.

- Let’s consider a straightforward example of something we all can probably agree is a word in English: *cat.* This word passes tests we could establish for what a word would be: It has meaning, is freestanding, and is “one thing.”

- With some words, however, it is harder to pinpoint exactly what they mean. For example, it’s harder to pin down exactly what *the* means. Its meaning is very much dependent on the noun that follows it, and in actual language, it doesn’t occur by itself.

- Still other words, we might not think of as “one thing.” For example, we have compounds. Are these one word or two? *Ice* and *cream* are two separate words, but when they come together in a compound, they function more like one word: *ice cream.*
- Some people might say that *ice cream* is two words because it is typically spelled with a space in the middle, but why not spell it without the space and have it look like one word?

- The meaning of *ice cream* is separate from the meaning of either of its parts. We could argue that it really functions like a compound word.

- What about the word *gonna*? Is that a word? If we didn’t have standardized spelling, it would be spelled as one word, but when we write it down on the page, it’s two words: *going to*. We don’t pronounce it as two words, and it means something different from the verb *go*; it expresses the future.

- Compare the phrase “I’m gonna buy groceries” with “I’m going to buy groceries.” The second phrase seems to imply some movement—driving or biking to buy groceries. The first seems to be a commitment to buy groceries at some time in the future.

- Because we write *going to* in both sentences, we are tempted to think the expression uses the same words in both, but it doesn’t. In the second, the expression uses two words, but in the first, it is arguably now one word expressing the future.

- Here, we see the effects of our writing system on our thinking about language.
• Now, let’s consider the prefix *e-* and whether it should count as a word.
  o Linguists typically wouldn’t call this a word because it is not freestanding; they would call it a morpheme. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning in a language. It is indivisible; it can be freestanding or not. *E-* is called a bound morpheme because it can’t be a freestanding word.

  o Many words are single morphemes. For example, we can return to *cat*, which is a word but also a single morpheme. *Return*, however, is two morphemes, and *returnability* is four morphemes.

  o A prefix such as *e-* is a morpheme. It means ‘electronic’ and appears in such words as *e-mail*, *e-ticket*, *e-commerce*, and *e-zine*.

The Meaning of Words

• Here’s another basic yet complicated question about words: How do words mean? How do we all come to shared understandings of words? The answer to this question is far from obvious, and it moves us quite quickly into philosophical territory.

• Consider again the word *cat*. Remarkably, we have all come to some mutual understanding of the concept of “cat” without ever having discussed it, such that we can have a conversation about cats.
  o When each of us learned the word *cat*, we encountered different cats, yet we have arrived at some shared concept of “catness.”

  o It’s important to note that the meaning of *cat* is really more of a concept or category than a concrete thing. One way to think about the concept of cat is that we have each developed a prototype at the core of the category “cat” (four legs, fur, pointy ears, whiskers, long tail, and so on). We then use this prototype to organize the category, and we can recognize a tailless cat or a hairless cat even though it is not prototypical.
• We learned what *cat* means as children when we heard people referring to cats, saw real cats and pictures of cats, and so on. We also learned the meaning of, say, *love* by listening to the way adults used the word. We weren’t able to infer anything about the meaning of *cat* or *love* by the sounds of the words.
  o This is a fundamental point about words: The relationship between the word form and the word’s meaning is arbitrary.
  
  o Meaning is, therefore, conventional—agreed upon by a speech community.

• There are some exceptions to this idea that meaning is conventional, such as words that fall into the category of sound symbolism or onomatopoeia: *bang, pow, meow, moo, woof*. But if we look across languages, we can see that even this is not precise.

• Then there is the interesting question of whether some sounds carry meaning. Consider, for example, *-sh* for the sound of water or rushing air (*splash, splosh, swish, whoosh*) or *gr-* for a growling sound (*grumble, grouch, grouse*).

**Defining *Word***

• In this lecture, we’ve talked about the lifespan of a word, what a word is, and how it means. As we’ve seen, even defining *word* is harder than it seems, and we didn’t even get into its use as a verb or exclamation.

• In this course, we will talk about words, the morphemes that make up words, and the idiomatic phrases that words constitute because they can mean things bigger than their parts. (For example, “lay an egg” isn’t always about eggs!)

• To talk about words, where they come from, and how they mean, it helps to be generous or expansive with how we’re using *word* to include things bigger and smaller than what we might first imagine.
In the next lecture, we’ll grapple with the kinds of questions that dictionary makers face every day: How do they decide when to include or remove a word in the dictionary, and how do they pin down meaning?

Suggested Reading


Jeffries, *Meaning in English*.

Metcalf, *Predicting New Words*.

Questions to Consider

1. At what point do you think a word should be called archaic or declared dead?

2. How much power does any one of us have to add words to the English vocabulary? What would enhance that power?
Dictionaries seem to hold a revered place in our culture. They are often displayed on pedestals in libraries, and when we have a question about a word, we say, “Look it up in the dictionary.” Of course, we know that human hands are behind dictionaries, but we typically can’t name the editor of a dictionary. Our trust is in the institution, not in the specific people behind it. In this lecture, we’ll talk about our curious relationship with dictionaries—the primary resource for capturing the English vocabulary—and about the very human decisions that go into creating them.

What We Expect of Dictionaries

- Modern dictionary makers are in something of a bind, given the authority we lend to their work.
  - Lexicographers see their task as a descriptive one; they examine evidence to capture the meaning of words.
  - Language is always changing, and the job of the lexicographer is to try to keep up with tracking and recording how language is used.

- However, we often turn to dictionaries to see not how we use a word but how we should use a word or what it “really” means—that is, what it has traditionally meant.
  - We don’t always trust ourselves to use words correctly, or we look to the dictionary to tell us whether a change in the meaning or usage of a word is good.
  - In other words, we see the dictionary as a prescriptive resource, too.

- The distinction between prescriptive and descriptive is a fundamental one in linguistics. A prescriptive approach tells people
how they should use language; a descriptive approach describes how people actually use language.

- Linguists see their job as fundamentally descriptive; they’re interested in language as a human phenomenon and in understanding how language works. Modern lexicographers take the same approach to their job. But at least some dictionaries also try to help users know about usage that may be judged; thus, they include usage labels and notes.

- We shouldn’t dismiss prescriptivism as something unnatural to the use of language.
  - As the linguist Deborah Cameron argues, as soon as a community of speakers comes into being, there will be some speakers telling other speakers how to talk better or “right.” In other words, prescriptivism is not unnatural to language communities. Prescriptivism is also important in maintaining a standard version of a language.

  - But as we’ll see throughout these lectures, prescriptivism can also make people feel anxious or inferior about their language in ways that are not helpful or justified.

  - Our approach will be to study prescriptivism and try to understand how it works in the same way that we study other language phenomena.

**Usage Labels**

- As we said, the assumption that dictionaries are at least partly prescriptive rather than descriptive puts dictionary makers in a bind. They try to track what we do and include it in the dictionary, but sometimes people get upset that dictionaries include “illegitimate” words, that is, words that some speakers understand but don’t like or respect.
• Lexicographers often label certain words as “slang” or “colloquial” to describe how they are used; we may then read that as a judgment of the word rather than a description.

• Many dictionaries rely on such labels as “nonstandard,” “colloquial,” “slang,” and “offensive.” When Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged* eliminated most usage labels, it was slammed as overly permissive and accelerating the deterioration of the English language.

• Such comments reveal many people’s expectations that dictionaries will not just record the language but also exercise judgment.

**Introducing New Words**

• The *OED* added the term *yada yada* in 2006, labeling it as colloquial and citing *blah blah blah* as synonymous. You might associate *yada yada* with the television show *Seinfeld*, but the *OED* tracks it back to 1967 and Lenny Bruce. Why was it not included in the late 1960s? The answer is that the editors needed to see if the term would stick.

• This brings us to a key question about how dictionaries are made: How do new words get into the dictionary, and how do lexicographers determine what they mean?

• Lexicographers track the language by reading and, these days, using online databases. They watch to see how a new word
moves through the lexicon. Sometimes, new words start in more specialized registers—such as in scientific fields or as slang—and they then move to wider usage. Sometimes, specialized terms get in, but often lexicographers will wait to see if a word moves from a more specialized part of the lexicon into broader use.

- Traditionally, lexicographers read printed material, underline and catalogue new words, and wait to see if usage will take hold. Today, lexicographers also use databases to track language, such as the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA).

- A basic principle lexicographers apply in defining words is to avoid circularity. That is, a word cannot be defined by itself or by its own family of words unless the related word is defined independently. For example, beautiful could not be defined as ‘full of beauty’ while beauty was defined as ‘the state of being beautiful.’ Further, all the words in the definition should appear in the dictionary.

- The editorial process in making a dictionary is multilayered, but in the end, definitions rest on usage. Lexicographers look at the context to see what such a word as bling, for example, means.

**The Usage Panel**

- Given that definitions rest on usage, words that are undergoing change, such as peruse, may present problems. This word used to mean ‘read carefully’ but is now often used to mean ‘skim, browse, look over casually.’

- In such cases, the dictionary editors may survey a usage panel that includes well-known critics, writers, and scholars. The panel addresses questions of pronunciation, meaning, and of course, usage. In some cases, a new form may “win,” but students and others may still be judged for using the form.
• The descriptive linguist brings a crucial perspective to such a panel: the understanding that language is always changing, along with knowledge of the history of language criticism.

• American Heritage was a pioneer in creating usage notes, partly in response to the uproar over *ain’t* in Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary*. The editors sensed that people wanted guidance. Usage notes allow American Heritage to handle language change and tricky usage questions, such as whether or not *gay* is seen as offensive in reference to the gay community.

• In the front matter of their dictionary, the editors at American Heritage point out that the usage panel should not be considered the ultimate authority to rule on all disputed questions of language. Still, speakers continue to look for people and resources to tell us what is correct or incorrect—not just historical use or standard use but “correct” use.

**The Role of Users**

• We have the responsibility to be thoughtful users of dictionaries, to recognize the goals and challenges of these sources, and to recognize our own authority in knowing what words mean and balance that with the information we find in dictionaries. After all, lexicographers rely on us to tell them what words mean.

• Dictionaries are incredibly useful and important resources but very human in their creation, trying to capture an ever-changing human language. They give us guidance but encourage us to use our own judgment, too.

• There are times, too, when people question dictionaries or think they’ve gotten it wrong.
  
  o The word *irregardless* is labeled “nonstandard” in many dictionaries, but it is a word—one that people use when they’re trying to be formal. Indeed, the word may someday become standard.
The label here tries to capture the judgment, not anything inherent in the word. It’s important to note that not all words in a language are logical, and many words no longer mean what they used to mean.

- In the next lecture, we’ll continue our discussion of dictionaries with a brief look at how the English dictionary came into being and the stunning accomplishment of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the massive resource on which we rely for many of the stories of words.

### Suggested Reading

Landau, *Dictionaries*.

Lynch, *The Lexicographer’s Dilemma*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Are there words you have heard that you think should not be considered “real words”? Why or why not?

2. How could dictionaries better keep up with changes in the language? And should they ever judge these changes?
Checking a dictionary has become a standard part of the writing process for many of us, but one of the greatest writers in the English language—William Shakespeare—didn’t have an English dictionary. And although Shakespeare is the most cited author in the *OED*, this 12-volume work that tells the history of hundreds of thousands of words in English would have been inconceivable in Shakespeare’s time. When he was writing, English was just coming into its own as a language scholars deemed worthy of respect—and worthy of a dictionary. This lecture tells the story of the coming of age of English and the reward of its own dictionaries.

The Early History of Dictionaries

- Today, we assume that dictionaries contain most of the words in a language and will provide detailed definitions, etymologies, and keys to pronunciation, but this has not always been the case.

- At the end of the 16th century, when Shakespeare was writing, dictionaries were bilingual glossaries (say, of Latin or French) that were used as references or teaching aids. The second half of the 16th century was a turning point for English, when it began to emerge from the shadow of Latin and French to be worthy of a dictionary.

- The first English dictionary (in English, with English words) was Robert Cawdrey’s *A Table Alphabeticall*, which appeared in 1604.
  - The motivation behind the production of the dictionary was massive borrowing by English of Latinate words.
  - It contained about 3,000 entries and short definitions of “hard words” and introduced the practice of putting words in loose alphabetical order.
  - The work was heavily dependent on other sources, and in fact, in the centuries since its publication, the history of dictionaries
has been one of successful theft and plagiarism. Most dictionaries we encounter today started with other dictionaries.

- For the next 100 years after Cawdrey’s work appeared, dictionaries continued to focus on hard words, and dictionary rivalries began.
  - In 1623, Henry Cockeram, in *The English Dictionarie: or, an Interpreter of Hard English Words*, noted his reliance on earlier dictionaries: “What any before me in this kinde have begun, I have not onely fully finished, but thoroughly perfected.”
  - In 1656, Thomas Blount produced the first hard-word dictionary to attempt etymologies. Two years later, Edward Phillips produced *The New World of English Words*. This infuriated Blount, who was sure that Phillips had plagiarized his work. In response, he published *A World of Errors Discovered in the New World of English Words* (1673).

- By the 18th century, the hard-word tradition gave way to the philosophy of producing more comprehensive dictionaries, spurred at least in part by the publication of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* (1694).

- Perhaps the most famous dictionary from this time is Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).
  - Johnson employed six men for help in compiling the dictionary. He gleaned his words (more than 43,000 headwords) from literature from the previous 150 years and used more than 100,000 quotations to illustrate usage.
Johnson’s dictionary is known for the personality revealed in some of its definitions. A lexicographer, for example, is defined as: “a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.” The definition of dull is: “not exhilarating [sic]; not delightful; as, to make dictionaries is dull work.”

Quirky definitions continue to this day and are often telling of the age in which they were written. For example, in its second edition, the *OED* defines gender as: “a feminist euphemism for sex.” The definition has since been revised.

- In 1828, Noah Webster published *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.
  - Webster first became famous for his “blue-backed speller,” *The American Spelling Book* (1783). By 1850, when the U.S. population was at 23 million, this book sold 1 million copies annually!
  - Webster’s 1828 dictionary had 70,000 headwords and used American spellings for such words as theater, honor, defense, and realize.

**The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)**

- The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* is probably the most remarkable accomplishment in the history of English lexicography.
  - When first published, it was described by the *New York Times* as “a treasure-house for scholars” and “a source of instruction and delight for the ordinary reader.”
  - The *OED* is now available online and is a go-to resource for all who study the history of language or literature or who simply enjoy words.

- In November 1857, Richard Chevenix Trench gave a paper entitled “On Some Deficiencies in Our English Dictionaries” before the Philological Society in London.
He proposed a dictionary to surpass all dictionaries. It would be a biography of the language, a history of meaning.

Although the idea was enthusiastically received, the project essentially languished for the next 20 years.

In 1879, James A. H. Murray became the editor and reissued the call for volunteer readers to send in material.

The compilation of the first edition took more than 40 years, saw three chief editors, and was all performed by hand.

The slips sent in by readers were checked for accuracy and sorted alphabetically and by part of speech. The accompanying quotes were then sorted chronologically, and a subeditor would try to write definitions. Murray inserted the etymology and pronunciation, picked the best quotations, and finalized the definition.

The OED was finally published in 10 volumes, with more than 400,000 headwords and 1.8 million quotations.

Simon Winchester’s The Professor and the Madman tells the story of the biggest contributor to the OED, an American in an insane asylum in Britain.

Of course, even the OED contains errors and problems, which is why there have been supplements and revisions.

- The OED is now being edited for the third edition; revised entries are available online in batches as they become ready.

- The OED also continues to appear in the newspaper, reflecting our fascination with what “counts” as a word and our assumption that dictionaries have the authority to make that decision.

  For example, the OED made headlines in March 2011 when it included a new set of acronyms, such as LOL (‘laughing out
loud’), FYI (‘for your information’), OMG (‘oh my God’), and BFF (‘best friends forever’), along with heart (as a verb, meaning ‘to love’), muffin top, and couch surf:

- One website asked the OED to stay “boring and respectable” and not include such words, but the editors would argue that part of the respect for the OED comes from its comprehensiveness, which includes slang and colloquialisms.

- The press coverage shows our fascination with language change, along with our anxiety about it and our desire to have some authority we can consult.

**Dictionaries in the 20th Century and Beyond**

- The 20th century saw a proliferation of dictionaries, especially college dictionaries, which were profitable for publishers. Many high school graduates received college dictionaries as gifts when they headed off to institutions of higher learning. Now, however, print dictionaries are being supplanted by online dictionaries.

- An increasingly democratic process is also taking place on some websites, where anyone can contribute a word or a meaning. Still, creating an authoritative dictionary—one that includes concise yet informative definitions and provides other expected information—is an art.

- We don’t know exactly what is in store for the future of dictionaries now that they don’t face the same space limitations, can be updated constantly, and can rely on vast electronic databases for evidence of usage.

- The names of dictionary editors do not typically appear on the cover of a dictionary, and it may be that the dictionary benefits from the authority that arises from its distance from the human hands that created it.

- But we as dictionary users would do well to remember that dictionaries are very human creations.
We should also remember what dictionary makers believe they are trying to accomplish: keeping up with us as we forever change the language.

- In the next lecture, we’ll turn to the kinds of changes in meaning that words can undergo, which are captured in the *OED*. As we go through the definitions and quotations that the editors of the *OED* so meticulously created, we can form the narrative that it was not their job to create: how a word got from one meaning to the next.

**Suggested Reading**

Mugglestone, *Lost for Words*.

Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. As a thought experiment, consider what writing would be like without a dictionary. To what extent might this enhance lexical creativity or lexical chaos?

2. What do you think is the future of print and online dictionaries?
In the past couple of lectures, we’ve talked about the fact that dictionary makers see their job as keeping up with us as we change the language. Implicit in that statement is the assumption that we are changing language all the time, and one of the major kinds of change is shifts in the meanings of words. These shifts can be dramatic (for example, slang taking over *bad* and *sick* and making them mean ‘good’) or more subtle (for example, *unique* coming to mean ‘very unusual’). Linguists call these changes in meaning “semantic shifts.” In this lecture, we’ll focus on five major kinds of semantic shifts of words already in the language.

**Semantic Stability and Change**

- Some words have remained remarkably stable in meaning throughout the history of English.
  - Some stable words include those for body parts, such as *heart*, *head*, *hand*, and *foot*; words for family, such as *father*, *mother*, and *child*; and adjectives, such as *good* and *evil*.
  - It is tempting to think that all the small function words in the language have remained stable, and some of them certainly have. The pronouns *I*, *me*, *we*, *us*, and others have always meant what they mean now, and such prepositions as *in* have also been stable.

For a long time, the word *mouse* meant only the rodent, but it now also refers to a computer device; this metaphorical extension of *mouse* is quite new.
o But there are numerous exceptions here, too. The pronoun you used to be only plural but is now also singular; with used to mean ‘against,’ but now it means ‘accompanying, next to, having possession of,’ except in an expression such as fight with.

• Despite this stability, many words have changed and continue to do so. When we notice changes in such words as unique or peruse, it can be tempting to think of the new meaning as wrong. We think that the word should mean—or does mean—what it used to mean.

o Linguists refer to a strong version of this belief as the “etymological fallacy,” that is, the idea that a word’s etymology is necessarily relevant to its current meaning.

o Let’s imagine a speaker who says that decimate can’t mean ‘destroy almost entirely’ because it originally (or “really”) means ‘destroy one in every ten.’ If you didn’t know the Latin root of decimate, that argument may seem quaint to you or, perhaps, completely unreasonable.

o But people make the same argument about unique. It comes from the Latin word unicus, meaning ‘single, sole, alone of its kind,’ and that comes from the Latin unus, meaning ‘one.’ Thus, people argue that it isn’t logical for unique ever to mean something other than ‘one of a kind.’

o But semantic change doesn’t obey logic. Decimate now means destroying much more than one-tenth, and for many speakers, unique clearly means something is very unusual but may not be one of a kind.

• People seem to have different attitudes about change in the past and change in the present. Change happening around us can cause anxiety and bring out the response that new meanings are wrong or somehow degrading of the language. But when we look at semantic change in retrospect, it’s often interesting and fun to learn about.
Categories of Semantic Change

- Linguists have created categories to talk about semantic change (although it’s not such a neat process as the categories might imply); these categories include generalization, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and metaphorical extension.

- The category of semantic generalization encompasses words that get broader in meaning over time.
  - The word aroma is a textbook example of generalization. It used to mean ‘the smell of spices’ but has now come to mean a smell in general and usually a good smell.
  - Escape has always meant the same thing in English since it appeared in the 14th century: ‘to get free from detention,’ but if we go back to Latin, it comes from *excappāre (ex, meaning ‘out,’ + cappa, ‘cloak’) and would mean something like ‘to uncloak oneself.’ We can see how the word has generalized from there.
  - Nepotism is historically related to nephew (Latin nepos); its earliest uses in Latin and in English in the 17th century are mostly in reference to the pope showing special favor or unfair preference to an illegitimate son. The word later generalized to mean favoritism for other family members or others in one’s close circle.

- The second category is the complement to generalization: semantic narrowing, encompassing words that get narrower in meaning over time.
  - Textbook examples include meat (which used to mean ‘solid food of any kind’) and wife (which meant ‘woman’ in Old English, a meaning preserved in old wives’ tale and midwife).
  - Starve used to mean ‘to die a lingering death,’ which could be of cold, hunger, grief, or some other cause; now, it refers only to dying of hunger. The word has experienced further
weakening when it’s used in the colloquial sense to mean ‘very hungry.’

- **Man** used to mean ‘person’ in general (Genesis) but then became specified to ‘male person.’ (*Woman* comes from *wifmann*, ‘female person.’)

- **Girl** used to mean ‘child of either sex’ and now means ‘female child.’

- The third category is amelioration, that is, when a word’s meaning improves or becomes more positive.
  - **Pretty** meant ‘cunning, crafty’ in Old English. It then shifted to mean ‘clever, skillful,’ followed by ‘skillfully made, artful,’ and by the 15th century, ‘attractive,’ said of a woman or child.

  - **Nice** is another historical example. In the 14th century (borrowed from French), it meant ‘silly, foolish, simple.’ Its progress then went as follows: ‘dissolute, lascivious’ > ‘extravagant in dress’ / ‘finely dressed’ > of a person ‘finely dressed’ / also ‘precise about reputation’ / ‘refined in taste’ > ‘refined, cultured, associated with polite society’ > ‘respectable, virtuous.’

  - The word **geek** is another interesting case. At the end of the 19th century, it meant ‘a person who is regarded as foolish, offensive, worthless.’ By the mid-20th century, it meant ‘overly diligent student,’ and in the 1980s, it became a ‘person knowledgeable about computers.’

- The flip side of amelioration is pejoration—when a word’s meaning becomes more negative.
  - **Notorious** used to mean just ‘well known,’ often in a favorable sense. It now means ‘known or infamous for something reprehensible.’

  - **Awful**, which comes from ‘worthy of awe’ (as in “the awful majesty of God”), now means ‘terrible.’
o *Girl* has undergone some pejoration when it is used to refer to adult women, as well as prostitutes (e.g., “call girl”).

o *Wench* underwent similar pejoration as it changed from ‘child,’ to ‘girl child,’ to ‘servant,’ to ‘prostitute.’

o Many people don’t realize that *hussy* originally meant ‘housewife,’ then came to mean ‘rustic, rude woman’ and, later, ‘disreputable woman.’

o Notice the similar path of pejoration for many words for women. To *girl*, *wench*, and *hussy*, we could add *maid*, which used to refer to a young woman (or virgin) and is now a servant. Here, we see language reflecting the status of women for centuries and attitudes toward women.

- A fifth major process of semantic shift is metaphorical extension. Here, speakers extend a word’s meaning through a metaphorical comparison to something new.
  o We see metaphorical change with computer and Internet technology in such words as *windows*, *web*, *surf*, and *mouse*.

  o We refer to a page in a book as a *leaf* through a metaphor with the leaf on a tree.

  o The *crane* at a construction site is also the result of metaphorical extension with the bird of the same name.

  o Computers don’t sleep, but *sleep* now has that meaning metaphorically.

  o All of these metaphorical extensions are ones that we can re-create once we think about them as metaphors, so they’re still “live” in a sense.

  o But some metaphorical extensions have died; for example, *clue* originally meant ‘a ball of thread or yarn.’ The idea of a clue as
a ‘hint’ came at least in part through Greek mythology and the notion of threading one’s way through a maze.

**Metaphors and Human Cognition**
- Metaphor seems to be fundamental to the way in which we categorize the world and is deeply embedded in our language.

- In their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discuss the idea of a conceptual metaphor, that is, a more global metaphor that structures the way we talk about something.
  - One such conceptual metaphor is “Argument is war.” The ways we talk about argument support that metaphor: In an argument, we attack someone’s position, mount a defense (or call ideas indefensible), shoot down ideas, use ammunition, and win or lose.

  - This all seems natural to us, but we could also think of argument as a dance.

- Often, these conceptual metaphors let us talk about cognitive or conceptual processes through our physical experiences of the world.
  - Thus, the metaphor “Understanding is seeing” prompts such phrases as “That’s clear” and “transparent (or opaque) ideas.”

  - The metaphor “Ideas are food” results in “chew on that,” “swallow it,” “regurgitate it,” and “half-baked ideas.”

- We don’t even see these as metaphors anymore. They structure the way we talk, and there is a good probability that they influence the way we habitually think about things. This relationship of language and thought is a complicated question in linguistics.
Summing Up Semantic Change

- Semantic change also takes place through other minor processes, such as metonymy (*pigskin* for a football; *white collar* for a kind of job).

- There are also words whose meanings shift over time in ways that defy easy categorization, such as *fathom*. Around 1300, this word meant ‘to encircle with extended arms.’ Its progression has since gone as follows: ‘to encircle to measure the girth’ (*fathom* as a noun is a unit of measurement: 6 feet) > ‘to measure with a fathom-line’ > ‘to get to the bottom of, penetrate’ (metaphor).

- As we looked at these categories of change, you may have discovered some modern examples that you hadn’t noticed before. For example, you may not have been aware that *peruse* is coming to mean its opposite.
  - However, you may be aware that *literally* is doing the same thing (shifting to mean ‘figuratively’ rather than ‘word for word’), and it may well be one of your pet peeves.
  - This use of *literally* often creates amusing mental images (“her presentation literally blew me away”), and it’s also true that speakers may be judged for this usage.
  - But when we study the histories of words, we learn that they can certainly change in this way. In the 18th century, *literally* came to be used emphatically (in addition to meaning ‘word for word’), and once that happened, it could be reinterpreted. Someday, this may seem like a quaint fact about the history of English.

Suggested Reading

Lewis, *Studies in Words*.

Stockwell and Minkova, *English Words: History and Structure*. 
Questions to Consider

1. How do speakers navigate words that mean their opposites so that these words do not confuse people? What do you think will happen to the words *peruse, inflammable, and unpacked*?

2. Try to come up with specific words and phrases that exemplify these conceptual metaphors: “Life is a journey”; “Ideas are food”; “Important is big.”
In the last lecture, we looked at how a word’s meaning can change over time, which is one major way that the English lexicon changes. But we also regularly add new words to the lexicon, in some cases, borrowing and, more often, creating new words based on existing component parts, such as freestanding words, prefixes, and suffixes. These new words showcase rule-governed human creativity. In this lecture, we’ll look at the system underlying the creation of new words, from new slang words to terms for new Internet technology to new technical jargon.

Sources of New Words

- Sometimes, we make up new words to address a one-time occurrence or situation.
  - For example, you might advise another driver: “Oh, don’t take that road; it’s very traffic-lighty!” Both drivers know what is meant, but neither is likely to make the word traffic-lighty a regular part of his or her vocabulary.
  - Linguists call this a nonce word or nonce formation: a word made up for one occasion that does not live beyond that occasion.

- Of course, there are many made-up words that get picked up by others and become part of the English vocabulary, either in general or specialized usage. In most cases, we cannot trace these words back to the first user.

- Because English has many borrowed words, many people assume that borrowing accounts for most new words.
  - Certainly, borrowing was a major force in many historical periods and remains relevant.
• But in Modern English, more than 90 percent of new words are created from the parts that we already have in the language, as we combine, recombine, clip, and otherwise manipulate the language at our disposal.

• There are systematic processes at work that allow us to make new words, even though it may not feel as if we are using a system. The general processes we’ll cover include: combining (affixation and compounding), which accounts for 54 to 68 percent of new words; shortening, which accounts for 8 to 10 percent of new words; and functional shift, which accounts for 14 to 19 percent of new words.

**Affixation**

• The word *geek* gives us several examples of affixation: *geeky* (used as a description), *geekiness* (referring to the quality of being geeky), and *outgeek* (used as a verb to compare one person’s geekiness with another’s).

• Affixation involves combining one or more free morphemes (e.g., *geek*) with one or more bound morphemes. Some of the more productive bound morphemes for this purpose are: *pre-*, *re-*, *cyber-*, *e-*, *-ness*, *-y*, and *-ful*.

• What do we mean when we talk about the rules of these prefixes and suffixes?
  o One rule is that we know what they mean. For example, *re-* means ‘again.’
  
  o But we also know that *re-* can only attach to verbs (*re* + *write*, *re* + *open* but not *re* + *computer* or *re* + *sad)*.
  
  o The suffix *-y* typically attaches to nouns: *ice* > *icy*, *bump* > *bumpy*, *mouse* > *mousy*. Historically, it sometimes attaches to verbs: *cling* > *clingly*.

• The suffix *-ness* prefers adjectives: *happiness*, *darkness*, *bitterness*, *reclusiveness*, and *geekiness*. It can also sometimes hook onto
nouns: womanness or witness (an Old English compound of wit, ‘mind,’ + nes that meant ‘knowledge’ > ‘evidence or testimony, or one who gives evidence or testimony’).

- Prefixes and suffixes are most common, but we can also make a new word with an infix; all words now formed with infixes are taboo in English (e.g., fanfreakingtastic, absofreakinglylute).

Compounding

- Compounding involves making a combination of two or more free morphemes.

- The meaning of some compounds is clear; the word obviously refers to one of the parts (goldfish, steamboat).

- The meaning of others is idiomatic (hatchback, soap opera).

- The relationship of the components of compounds is not always consistent. Consider, for example, earthquake and crybaby or falling star and baking apple.

- In speech, we don’t always know whether a word is a compound or just two words that happen to be next to each other, although stress may provide a clue.

Shortening

- Affixation and compounding involve creating longer words, but we also create shorter words. Many speakers may think of shortening as a fad or not a real word formation process, but in fact, shortened words are “real words,” and sometimes people forget they are shortenings.

- There are two major kinds of shortening, the first of which is initialism.
Initialisms that are pronounced as words are called acronyms. Examples include *yuppie* (‘young urban professional’), *NASA*, and *AIDS* (‘acquired immune deficiency syndrome’).

In an alphabetism, each letter is pronounced. Examples include *FBI*, *FYI*, *TMI* (‘too much information’), and *BFF* (‘best friend forever’).

- The other type of shortening is clipping, in which parts of words are omitted. Words can be clipped from the front (*rents* [< *parents*], *do* [< *hairdo*], *blog* [< *weblog*]), from the back (*limo*, *rehab*, *mic* [< *microphone*], *mob* [< *mobile vulgus*], ‘fickle crowd’), and sometimes both (*fridge*).

- Some of these clippings feel slangy, but others no longer do: *flu*, *phone*, *deli*, *lab*, *dorm*, *mob*.

**Functional Shift**
- The third highly productive process in forming new words is functional shift, that is, a shift in the part of speech without a change in form.

- Most often, we create nouns from verbs: *hire*, *commute*, *update*, *cry* or *laugh*, *know* (as in “in the know”).

- Verbs created from nouns include *trash*, *network*, *google*, *video*, *privilege*, and *impact*. Verbs can also be created from adjectives: to *clean*.

- In thinking about words created by functional shift, it’s important to remember that what seems noticeable to us now will seem unremarkable later. Benjamin Franklin didn’t like *notice* as a verb, but now we don’t notice!

**Minor Word Formation Processes**
- Minor word formation processes include blends, back formation, and reduplication.
• Such words as smog, motel, guesstimate, netiquette (Internet + etiquette), bromance (brother [meaning ‘friend’] + romance), chillax (chill + relax), and adorkable (adorable + dorky) are blends.
  o In blends, sometimes one word maintains its form and sometimes neither does.
  
  o Lewis Carroll coined the term portmanteau words to describe his blends, such as slithy (lithe + slimy).
  
  o Some unremarkable blends include brunch and chortle.

• Back formation is the creation of a new word from an existing one. Examples include: beg < beggar, diagnose < diagnosis, televise < television, laze < lazy, and greed < greedy.

• In reduplication, words are formed through repetition: flip-flop, mish-mash, no-no, yadda yadda yadda, bling bling.

The verb verse, meaning ‘to compete against,’ is a new back-formation from the Latin preposition versus.
Why Do We Make New Words?

- Humans create new words because they express what we want to say better or differently than the words we already have. We also create new words because we need them. Technology, for example, has spawned many new words and retronyms, such as snail mail, landline, and desktop.

- We will talk a good deal about borrowing in lectures to come, but it is important to remember that most new words are the result of our own creativity, as we systematically put together components that are already available. This practice helps to ensure that our listeners will understand what we mean, because they recognize the parts and the process by which we put them together.

- Again, we need to remember that new words are, in fact, “real words,” even if they seem slangy. Some will prove to be short-lived, but many will remain and become unremarkable to later generations.

Suggested Reading

Bauer, *Introducing Linguistic Morphology*.


Questions to Consider

1. Listen for creative -y words around you. Do you hear the suffix attached more to nouns, verbs, or something else? For fun, try out a new -y form in a conversation to see if anyone notices or comments.

2. We often “verb” nouns, and *impact* is a good example. In what ways is *impact* a useful new verb? Why are some people concerned about this new verb?
In 1855, the author of a book called *Recollections of the Table-talk of Samuel Rogers* wrote, “The now fashionable pronunciation of several words is to me at least very offensive: *contemplate* is bad enough; but *balcony* makes me sick.” At the time, both words were witnessing a shift of stress to the first syllable, but is that enough to make anyone sick? It may seem petty to us to judge someone based on his or her pronunciation of *balcony*, yet there are pronunciations today that many people feel justified in judging. In this lecture, we’ll look at some ways in which the pronunciations of words change over time and discuss attitudes toward those changes.

**Metathesis**

- The pronunciation “aks” for *ask* is an example of metathesis, the reversal of two sounds in a word, and one of the most stigmatized pronunciations in American English.
  - Most people assume that the pronunciation shifted from “ask” to “aks,” but it is more likely that the shift was from “aks” to “ask.” Chaucer used both spellings (and, presumably, pronunciations), along with *axe*.
  - Thus, “aks” is the older pronunciation; it just isn’t the one that was standardized.

- Other examples of metathesis are not as stigmatized; for example, some people say “perscription” for *prescription* or “asteriks” for *asterisk*.

- Metathesis explains the relationship of *three* and *third*; *third* used to be “thrid.” Similarly, *bird* used to be “brid.”

- Occasionally, speakers of a language just seem to switch sounds within a word. The judgments of these transpositions are socially constructed, labeling some pronunciations as ignorant but not others.
Interestingly, equally distinctive changes are not judged equally. When people are judging language, they are almost always judging more than language—that is, speakers and groups of speakers.

Some people label the pronunciation “nuculer” as ignorant, yet we can easily explain how and why this pronunciation occurs and why it will probably win.

The Formation of Consonants and Vowels

- The way in which we physically make consonants and vowels is relevant to how words’ pronunciations change over time. The distinction between them is about impedance of airflow.

- To make consonants, we push air through the mouth or nose, impeding it in some way, stopping it or creating friction. With vowels, we don’t impede the airflow, but we change the shape of the mouth. Within consonants and vowels, we also make other distinctions.

  - For example, one of the ways we distinguish consonants is how we impede the airflow. We can stop it, as when we make a /b/ or /t/ sound, or we can create friction, as we do when we make an /f/ or a /z/ sound.

  - Consonants are also distinguished by where the tongue, lips, and other articulators are when the consonant is formed; /b/, for example is a bilabial sound because both lips are closed when it’s formed.

  - Another element involved in distinguishing consonants is voicing, which is, essentially, whether or not the vocal cords are moving when you make the sound. The /b/ sound, for example is voiced, but the /p/ sound is voiceless.
• The formation of vowels involves unimpeded airflow and the alteration of the shape of the mouth, as well as the height and frontness of the tongue. You can feel this if you go from /i/ to /ae/.

• Vowels change more frequently and radically than consonants.
  o Think of each vowel as a target in the vowel space of your mouth; each time you make that vowel sound, you are spraying that target—coming close but rarely saying the vowel in exactly the same way.

  o Over time, the center of that spraying—the target—can subtly shift toward another vowel, to the point where it merges with that vowel or it pushes that vowel to move in order to remain distinct.

How Pronunciations Change

• The pronunciations of words can change in several ways: through insertion of sounds, deletion of sounds, assimilation of sounds, and analogy.

• Insertion occurs when an extra sound is added to an existing word; for example, the word hamster is often pronounced with a /p/ in the middle: “hampster.”

  o In forming this word, the mouth has to move from /m/ (which is voiced) to /s/ (which is not); to do this, we have to turn off our vocal cords, so the end of the stop /m/ can sound like /p/.
The word *empty*, which now has a *p* in its spelling and pronunciation didn’t used to; it was spelled *emty* until the 1600s.

- **Deletion** occurs when speakers omit a sound in a word.
  - For example, in American English, the second syllable of *laboratory* is often deleted, but this is not true in British English because the stress is on the second syllable.
  - *Police* is pronounced “plis” in some varieties of English.
  - In some varieties of English, consonant clusters are reduced: *hand* > “han” or *desk* > “des.”
  - Some British and American dialects have lost /r/ and /h/: “pahk the cah in hahvahd yahd,” “istory” for “history.”
  - What about the /t/ in *often*? It’s tempting to think that the pronunciation “offen” is a deletion, and historically, it was, in the same way that /t/ was lost in *soften*. But now, the pronunciation “often” is an insertion; linguists sometimes call this a *spelling pronunciation*.

- **In assimilation**, sounds become like other sounds near them.
  - The word *sandwich* is a good example here. Many people delete the /d/ in pronouncing this word, and for some, the /n/ then becomes /m/. Because the /w/ is bilabial, the /n/ can become /m/, which is also bilabial.
  - We see the same thing happen with the prefix *in-* (‘not’) from Latin. Before bilabial sounds (/m/, /p/), “in-” becomes “im-”: *improbable, immobile* (v. *inarticulate, indecisive*).

- **Change occurring through analogy** can be seen when we change the pronunciation of a word to make it sound more like other words. A good example here is *height*, which many speakers pronounce “heighth” by analogy with *depth, breadth, width*, and *length*. 
Pronunciation of Vowels

- We seem to notice some differences in pronunciation of vowels around the United States more than others. For example, the merger of “pin” and “pen” is an indicator of being southern. The pronunciation “cot” versus “caught” is a merger that is spreading west from western Pennsylvania.

- In what’s known as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift, taking place in the Midwest, a whole set of vowels is moving: “bag” > “beg,” “bet” > “but,” “but” > “baught,” “block” > “black,” “oh my god” > “oh my gad.” This is a vowel change that a good number of people notice, but they often do not realize how widespread it is in the vowel system and how these changes may be related to each other.

- These vowel changes raise interesting questions for lexicographers, who have to decide how many alternate pronunciations to include for a word.
  - If we return to our example of “often,” we could ask whether it merits a usage note. The American Heritage Dictionary (AHD) includes one but with no judgment; the note simply states that many people now pronounce the word with /t/.
  
  - Similarly the AHD adds a usage note with dour: the word traditionally rhymes with “tour,” but the variant pronunciation (rhyming with sour) “must be considered acceptable” (even though only 33 percent of the panel preferred the variant).

  - The AHD does not include “axe” as a pronunciation of ask; it is a separate entry with a usage note that states it is often associated with African American Vernacular English.

  - The AHD notes that 90 percent of the usage panel disapproves of the new pronunciation of height, but this disapproval may not stop the new pronunciation. In 100 years, disapproval of “heighth” may seem as quaint as the disgust at “balcony” in the 19th century.
Subtle and Not-So-Subtle Changes

- Pronunciations of words change subtly and not so subtly all around us. Often, such changes involve vowels, but consonants can get in the game, too.

- Some of these changes, such as “perscription” for prescription, happen below the radar, while others, such as “aks” for ask, are judged.
  - But knowing what a long history “aks” has in the language can help remind us that there’s nothing inherently wrong with a nonstandard pronunciation.
  - It asks us to step back and pose the question: Why do people judge the pronunciation so severely? Who is being judged, and is it fair to judge based on the swapping of two consonants?

Suggested Reading

McMahon, An Introduction to English Phonology.

Stockwell and Minkova, English Words.

Questions to Consider

1. Listen for “often” and “offen.” Do you notice age differences between “often” and “offen” speakers? In a more formal context, which pronunciation do you hear more often?

2. Which pronunciation differences do you notice among varieties of English? Do you find that you ever judge speakers based on pronunciation differences, and if so, how?
What would it mean to own a word? It seems clearly impossible to own most words, such as the, go, beautiful, tree. But what about zipper? At one time, someone actually had a trademark on zipper but no longer. Now, it’s a regular word like any other. What about a trademarked term, such as Xerox? Can a company, in this case, the Xerox Corporation, stop everyday folks from making trademarked terms generic? They often try, and there are certainly court cases over trademarked terms. Why would a company want to stop that kind of usage? Wouldn’t it be good publicity for a trademarked term to be used everywhere? We’ll discuss these questions in this lecture.

The Use of Trademarked Terms
- The Xerox Corporation actively tries to police its trademarked name and uses zipper as an example of things gone wrong. In a recent advertisement, the company urges consumers to “Use Xerox only as an adjective to identify our products and services, such as Xerox copiers, not a verb, ‘to Xerox,’ or a noun, ‘Xeroxes.’”
- As speakers of a language, can’t we use words any way we want to? Is it our responsibility to help companies maintain their trademarks by not using their names generically? People play with language, including proper names and trademarks, all the time. What would it mean to stop them?
- The process of a trademarked term becoming a generic term, such as Xerox being used generically to mean ‘electronically copy,’ is called genericization, generification, or genericide (i.e., the death of a trademark through becoming generic). Google, Xerox, and Hoover have all fought genericization. B. F. Goodrich fought for zipper, too, but lost.
• Companies seek to remind people that certain terms are trademarked, even if we use them generically sometimes, and try to minimize their use in public and official documents.

Eponymy
• Eponymy is the use of a proper name as a “regular” word. The phenomenon long predates the invention of trademarks.

• One of the best known examples is sandwich, which is believed to be named for John Montagu, the fourth earl of Sandwich, who was a gambler. The story goes that he once spent 24 hours at the gaming table, and his only sustenance was meat between slices of bread. The word sandwich was first cited in the OED in 1762.

• Other words that come from their inventors include pasteurize (1881) from Louis Pasteur; ritzy (1920) from César Ritz, a Swiss hotelier who founded many upscale hotels; guillotine (1793) from Joseph Guillotin, a physician and member of the Assembly during the French Revolution, who suggested the use of this device for beheading in 1789; and galvanize.
  o Galvanism was borrowed into English from French in 1797, and it describes a chemically induced electricity. The word comes from the name of Luigi Galvani, an 18th-century physician who first noticed that electricity made muscles contract in studying the anatomy of frogs.
  o The verb galvanize was borrowed from French shortly thereafter to describe the act of applying galvanism, that is, stimulating with an electric current (and making one’s muscles twitch).
  o Within 50 years, there is evidence of the metaphorical transfer in English to being galvanized into life or back to life. Now, the word can mean more generally being spurred to action, with no electricity involved.

• Another interesting eponym has undergone a kind of metathesis (where the parts have reversed order), also obscuring its origins.
The original eponym is *Burnside*, from Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside, who served as a leader in the Union Army during the Civil War and later became governor of Rhode Island.

He was famous for the bushy whiskers he wore on the sides of his face, along with an almost equally bushy mustache.

These side whiskers and mustache—or just the side whiskers—came to be known as *burnsides* (1875).

From the description “side whiskers” you can see how *burnside* might have undergone metathesis, especially once people didn’t know who Major General Burnside was; thus, we now have *sideburns*.

Like *galvanize* and *sideburns*, many eponyms are now opaque, hiding below the radar in the language. For instance, did you know that *boycott* is an eponym?

The word comes from the name of Captain Charles C. Boycott, a land agent in Ireland, who was denied access to local labor when he refused to lower the rents of his tenants during a year of bad harvests.

The use of his last name as a verb spread like wildfire, appearing within just a few years in French, Russian, German, and Dutch, in addition to English.

**Genericization**

Some common words that were at one time trademarked terms include: *granola, aspirin, cellophane, linoleum, thermos, pogo stick, yo-yo, Frisbee, escalator, and dumpster*. Of these, only *Frisbee* seems to have retained its trademark status; both the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* and the *AHD* recognize the trademark in the definition.
• Dictionary makers are in a tricky spot with trademarks because they try to capture actual usage, but they may receive threatening letters from companies doing due diligence and policing their trademarks.

• Companies that don’t police their trademarks risk losing them, as King-Seeley did in 1963, when a circuit court determined that thermos had become generic and the company had not done due diligence to prevent that occurrence.

• Other trademarked terms that are used generically by many of us include Band-Aid, ChapStick, Jell-O, Post-it, Q-tip, vaseline, Rollerblade, Kleenex, Jacuzzi, and Tupperware. Sometimes, it’s hard to think of what to call these products if we can’t use the trademarked name—an adhesive strip for a Band-Aid and a cotton swab for a Q-tip?

• Microsoft recently filed a complaint against Apple’s application for a trademark on the term app store, and Apple has sued Amazon over the use of the compound, but so far, app store appears to be available as a generic term for companies other than Apple to use.

• Google has a history of policing dictionaries ever since Google became a word for the Internet search engine in 1998. The company needs dictionaries to record the trademark in order to show that it has done due diligence.
  o The AHD identifies Google as a trademarked noun, and Merriam-Webster sees the trademarked noun as the origin of the generic verb.
o The *OED* also mentions the trademark as the etymology.

o Google and similar companies can argue that generic use erodes the value of their brand names.

- McDonald’s complained about the definition of *McJob* in the 11th edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, released in 2003. This complaint wasn’t about the trademark but the meaning.
  o Merriam-Webster defined the term as “a low-paying job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement.”

  o The CEO of McDonald’s retorted that this was an “inaccurate description” and a “slap in the face” to workers in the restaurant industry more generally.

  o Interestingly, news articles in 2011 reported that McDonald’s had turned its attention from the dictionary definition to public perception of McDonald’s jobs after a survey proved that 80 percent of employees enjoyed their work.

- Merriam-Webster itself has been embroiled in disputes about its own trademark, *Webster’s*, and has lost. The term *Webster’s* no longer indicates that the dictionary was published by Merriam-Webster.
  o In 1889, the Merriam Company did not secure the exclusive right to use *Webster’s* as a trade name when the copyright expired.

  o Random House recognized the authority that came with the name *Webster’s* and, in 1991, changed the title of the *Random House College Dictionary* to the *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*.

  o Merriam-Webster sued, but in the end, it was decided that the combination of *Webster’s* with *College* did not violate any trademark.
• The response of a viewer to a YouTube video in which a woman mistakenly refers to generic plastic food containers as Tupperware reveals the extent to which people care about language change. Some believe that genericization represents a detrimental change to the language.

• Still, as such examples as zipper, thermos, dumpster, google, McJob, and McMansion remind us, human creativity with language cannot be easily regulated.

Suggested Reading

Butters and Westerhaus, “Linguistic Change in Words One Owns.”
Landau, Dictionaries.

Questions to Consider

1. At what point do you think we should be able to stop capitalizing an eponym or trademarked term (e.g., Google/google, Band-Aid/band-aid)?

2. Now that you know about the Xerox Corporation’s ad that asks us all not to misuse the trademarked term Xerox, will that have any effect on your use of the word Xerox? Why or why not?

3. For fun: If your name were to come to mean something more generic (e.g., to Curzan meaning ‘to study words’—“He took a linguistics course and decided to Curzan for his career”), what would you want your name to mean?
For the past few lectures, we have focused on some of the ways that English speakers change the language, including changing meanings, changing pronunciation, and making new words. But of course, English has also borrowed an enormous number of words from other languages. Over the next three lectures, we’ll unpack the layers of borrowing that have built up the English lexicon, century by century. We’ll also talk about the kinds of contact between English speakers and these other languages that allowed for different kinds of borrowing—and we’ll look at the repercussions of this language contact on the English vocabulary.

The Idea of Borrowing

- The multiple layers of borrowing in English, which are as old as English itself, should make us skeptical of any nostalgic complaints that the language is no longer “pure.”
  - If “pure” means free from contact with other languages, there has never been a moment in the history of English when the language was pure.
  - In fact, most speakers who lament recent changes in the language probably wouldn’t really want English to be pure because that would mean losing many words they love, including *nostalgia* and *complaint*.

- The word *borrowing* suggests giving back, the idea of a loan that is temporary in nature, but that is not the case with language borrowing. In this context, the word *sharing* might be more accurate.

- We will continue to use the terms *borrowing* and *loanword* but recognize that the words these terms refer to are now embedded in
English (and Englishified) so that they often sound less borrowed (e.g., *Detroit, genre, contemplate*).

**Core Words**

- Core words are the most common words in the language (those we rely on most and, hence, tend not to borrow). Core words also include function words, that is, those that hold up the structure of the language, such as pronouns or prepositions. Of course, many function words are also among the most common in the language.

- The 20 most common words in spoken British English are: *the, and, I, to, of, a, you, that, in, it, is, yes, was, this, but, on, well, he, have, and for*. Notice that these are almost entirely function words and all native.

- In the top 50 most common content words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs) are: *get, go, make, time, just, know, take, person, year, good, then, now, come, only, think, and work*. There are only 4 words on this list that are not native: *get* and *take* are from Old Norse, borrowed in the Old English period; *just* and *person* are from French, both borrowed right after the Norman Conquest.

- Another way to think about the “core” of a language’s vocabulary is the Swadesh list. The linguist Morris Swadesh developed this list of vocabulary with basic meanings (e.g., *man, woman, sun*) in the middle of the 20th century as a means for determining relationships among languages. The idea was that with this list of core meanings, linguists could look for cognates (related words) in different languages to determine how closely related the two languages are.
  - The use of the Swadesh list for comparative historical linguistics is controversial, but it gives us one way to think about “basic” words in a language.
  - The version of the list with 100 words includes words for people (*man, woman, person*), as well as pronouns (*I, we, you*); animals (*fish, bird, dog, louse*); body parts (*blood, bone, skin, nose, eye*); common verbs (*eat, drink, come, see, know, sleep*); and natural phenomena (*star, sun, rain, fire, night*).
For English, the vast majority of these 100 words are native; only a few are borrowed.

The Origins of English

- English has been in contact with other languages before it even became English. It is a West Germanic language brought to Britain in the 5th century.

  - Before the 5th century, speakers of this West Germanic dialect came into contact with Latin speakers on the European continent, often for the purposes of trade. Some early borrowings from Latin into West Germanic include *cheese, kettle, camp, wall, chalk, mile, pipe, street, wine*, and *pease*.

  - Thus, when speakers of the Germanic dialects that would become English arrived in Britain in the 5th century, there were already loanwords in the language.

- In Britain, these Germanic speakers encountered speakers of Celtic languages (who had also been in contact with Latin, given that the Roman Empire had extended into the British Isles). The traditional storyline is that the Germanic speakers slaughtered most of the Celtic speakers or drove them to the margins of the island, and thus, Celtic had almost no impact on English.

  - It is true that there are not many Celtic borrowings in the English lexicon. Some Celtic words can be found in place names; for example, *comb* (‘valley,’ e.g., Widdecomb) and *tor* (‘rock,’ Vixen Tor) are both Celtic. The names of the river Thames and the city of London are Celtic in origin. Other Celtic words include *loch* (‘lake’), *glen* (‘valley’), and *cross*.

  - But more recent scholarship has challenged the idea that Celtic had so little influence on English. There are fascinating proposals about the influence of Celtic on the rise of the progressive in English (e.g., *I am running*) and on the rise of *do* in negative and interrogative constructions (e.g., *I do not know, do you know*?).
In Old English, the word rood was used for ‘cross,’ hence the poem “The Dream of the Rood,” which is told from the point of view of the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

Old Norse

- Old Norse had a significant impact on English vocabulary and grammar, but it is rarely in the spotlight the way that French is. Many people know about the Norman Conquest in 1066 and the fact that it had a striking impact on the English lexicon. Fewer people know about the Viking raids of the 8th and 9th centuries and the many legacies in English that come from Old Norse, the language the Vikings spoke.

  o Starting around 787 A.D., Danes and Vikings (from Denmark and Norway) attacked the east coast of England.

  o These invaders launched a serious attack in the second half of the 9th century, and in 878, King Alfred (of Wessex) signed a treaty that established the Danelaw, a large area in the north of England where the Danes and Vikings were allowed to live peacefully.
From what we can tell, this led to the settlement of a large number of Old Norse speakers in the Danelaw, where they lived side by side and intermarried with Old English speakers. There was probably significant bilingualism in the area—the kind of close language contact that can lead to significant influence and borrowing, including in the core.

- English does have Old Norse borrowings at its core, including in the pronouns; the forms *they, them,* and *their* are borrowed from Old Norse. This kind of borrowing at the core of a language is highly unusual.

- Many other Old Norse borrowings are common, everyday words, such as *kid, get, both, anger, law, take, want, crawl, weak,* and *egg.*

- The closeness of pronunciation of Old Norse *eggs* and Old English *eyren* reflects the fact that Old Norse and Old English were both Germanic languages. This probably facilitated bilingualism in the Danelaw, and it means that Old Norse borrowings still feel very English—that is, not borrowed.

  - *Sk-* borrowings from Old Norse include *sky, skin, skill,* and *skirt.*

  - The words *skirt* (Old Norse) and *shirt* (native English) are related to each other. Old Norse had *sk-* where Old English had *sh.* Once English had both *shirt* and *skirt* in the lexicon to refer to a long, tunic-like garment, speakers could specify so that one now refers to the top half and one to the bottom half.

**Latin**

- In the same period that it was influenced by Old Norse, Old English also came into significant contact with Latin through religion.

- In 597, Saint Augustine arrived in Kent, sent there by Pope Gregory to convert the pagans in Britain. Augustine’s efforts met with some success, and with Christianity came the Latin terminology
for religious items, such as *abbot, altar, angel, candle, deacon, disciple, hymn, martyr, mass, nun, pope, priest, psalm,* and *shrine.*

- The word *god* is a native English word, but the meaning changed radically when it was adopted to refer to the Christian deity.

- Literacy in the medieval period was also closely related to churches and religious training; as a result, some basic English words related to literacy and education more generally come from Latin, including *school* and *scribe.*

- The word *school* nicely captures how entrenched many of these early borrowings are in the English language; for most of us, they do not feel borrowed at all.

### Suggested Reading

Crystal, *The Stories of English.*

Townend, “Contacts and Conflicts: Latin, Norse, and French.”

### Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think many people are less aware of the impact of Old Norse on the English language than of the impact of French and Latin?

2. When people today talk about protecting the “purity” of English, what are they really talking about, given that the English language has always borrowed from other languages?
In the previous lecture, we talked about the early borrowings in English from Latin, Celtic, and Old Norse, some of which are in the core of the lexicon, including such words as *they*, *them*, and *their* and such everyday terms as *mile*, *egg*, and *school*. In this lecture, we will turn our attention to all the French words that poured into the language after the Norman Conquest in 1066. With all of these language contact situations, the vocabulary of English was changed to the point where borrowed words pop up at almost every turn in a sentence.

The History of the English and the French

- The majority of French words that now appear in English entered the language after 1066, that is, after William the Conqueror and his Norman French troops defeated Harold and his English bands at the Battle of Hastings.
  - William was subsequently crowned king of England, and England and Normandy were united under one ruler.
  - For the next 200 years or so, England was governed by the Normans. The court in England spoke French, and the new nobility in England largely spoke French. The kings were sometimes bilingual in French and English, but some probably knew little to no English.

- A logical question to ask, given this description of the Normans ruling England, is why England did not become a French-speaking country. The answer probably lies in the demographics of the situation. It is estimated that no more than 2 percent of England’s population ever spoke French as their only language, and this 2 percent was largely concentrated in the nobility.
  - As a result, there was probably not as much bilingualism as there might have been in the Danelaw, where Old English
speakers and Old Norse speakers were farming together and intermarrying, raising children together.

- With French, certainly some English speakers chose to learn French as a vehicle for upward mobility, but it was never an everyday language for the majority of people in England.

- French was a language used especially in the government, judicial system, literature, and high-class pastimes, such as fashion, sports, education, home furnishings, food delicacies, and so on.

- Starting in 1204, when the king of England lost control of Normandy, the nobility who chose to stay in England probably started to identify more with England and English.
  - The Hundred Years’ War, beginning in 1337, only served to increase English nationalism and hostility toward French.

  - The Black Death, which swept Europe from 1348 to 1351, killed somewhere between one-third and one-half of the population in England, which led to widespread labor shortages and moved English speakers into higher positions with higher pay. The plague hit cities hard and, among other things, resulted in a dearth of French teachers, which probably contributed to the rise of English as a language of literature and even of biblical translations.

  - In 1362, Parliament not only opened for the
first time in English but it also enacted the Statute of Pleading, which meant that defendants could have arguments presented in criminal court in English rather than in Anglo-Norman.

- But 1066 to 1362 was a long time for French to be the language of the elite and of government in England, and the effects of that dominance are everywhere in the language.
  - In looking at the *OED*, 1250 appears to be a key date. In terms of the written record, many of the loanwords were first recorded after 1250, when the nobility would have largely been speaking English but supplementing it with French words.
  - That said, it is likely that a good number of French words, especially those that the lower classes would know, were in widespread use before 1250.

**The Language of Politics, the Law, the Economy, and More**

- French words have a healthy presence in the English vocabulary in politics, the law, the economy, war, and the church.

- In politics, general words for government that originated in French include *govern, parliament, administer, and court*. Although *king* is Germanic, many of the related words are French: *crown, realm, reign, royal,* and *subject*. Roles in the political hierarchy also come from French: *noble, duke, baron, peasant, servant* (and *oppress*).

- Although criminal court proceedings switched to English in 1362, French is still all around us in the courtroom, in words for the people involved (*attorney, judge, jury*), the proceedings (*summons, evidence, accuse, advocate, convict, plea, acquit, verdict*), and the punishment (*punish, prison, fine*).

- In the realm of the economy, French words include everything from *money, finance, revenue,* and *profit* to *property, estate tax,* and the *heirs* to whom the tax might be relevant.
• Perhaps unsurprisingly, given how French arrived in England, many words for war come from French, including war itself, as well as military, battle, defense, offense, troop, army, peace, and treaty.

• French also infiltrated the language of the church. In the post-Conquest period, English acquired such key terms as religion itself, as well as saint, prayer, preach, repent, miracle, devout, faith, piety, salvation, confession, clergy, and baptism.

• This period also witnessed borrowing of more common terms from French, including words for household furnishings (button, blanket, mitten, cushion), fashion (dress, boot, coat, jewel), sports (dance, chess, tennis, prize), and food (dinner, supper, bacon, oyster).

• An interesting pattern emerged in certain words for animals before and after they were put on the table to be eaten.
  o Cow, for example, is a native English word, while beef is a French borrowing. The same is true for pig and pork, calf and veal, sheep and mutton, deer and venison, and chicken and poultry.
  o The anecdotal explanation is that it was the English-speaking peasants who were taking care of these animals in the fields (or hunting deer), and it was the French-speaking nobility who were enjoying the animals as food.

Influences of Pronunciation
• Another kind of pairing also dates back to the influence of French after the Norman Conquest—double borrowings, that is, with one word from Anglo-Norman French and a similar word from Parisian or Central French.
  o There were some systematic pronunciation differences between Anglo-Norman French and Central French, and we can see the repercussions in English.
  o Where Anglo-Norman French had ca-, Central French had ch- (cattle/chattel, catch/chase).
Where Anglo-Norman French had \textit{w-}, Central French had \textit{gu-} (warranty/guarantee, warden/guardian).

- Some pronunciation features of Anglo-Norman French help explain why some French borrowings don’t sound the way they should to those who know French.
  - For example, English borrowed \textit{quit} and \textit{question} from French. If you speak French, you know that these start with /k/ in Standard French, but in Anglo-Norman French, they started with /kw/.
  
- Anglo-Norman French also had -\textit{arie} and -\textit{orie}, where Parisian French had -\textit{aire} and -\textit{oire}. Thus, English has \textit{salary} and \textit{victory}, while Standard French has \textit{salaire} and \textit{victoire}.

**Lasting Impact**

- Surprisingly, some French borrowings pushed out native English words at the core. For example, \textit{uncle} replaced \textit{eam}, and \textit{envy} and \textit{desire} won out over \textit{onde}.

- Old English had many words for nobles, including \textit{æþeling}, but that word died, and we now have \textit{nobles/noblemen, warriors, princes}, and \textit{barons} (all French). The Old English synonym that survives is \textit{lord}.

- Another legacy of French borrowing are sayings in which similar ideas are repeated: \textit{safe and sound} or \textit{give and grant}. These originated from the need to ensure understanding in both French and English.

- As we said in the last lecture, it makes no sense to talk about an earlier moment in English when the language was “pure,” which critics sometimes like to do when they are worrying about borrowings from Spanish or another language. The story of the English language is the story of English speakers coming into contact with speakers of other languages, as they continue to do today all over the world.
Suggested Reading

Baugh and Cable, *A History of the English Language*.

Crystal, *The Stories of English*.

Questions to Consider

1. Try this experiment for yourself: Choose a passage from any book, magazine, or other published source and determine (using a standard dictionary with concise etymologies) how many of the words in the passage are borrowed from French, Latin, and other languages.

2. Would it change your culinary experience if you were eating cow rather than beef, pig rather than pork, sheep rather than mutton? Consider the words *fish* and *chicken* as you think about this question.
This is the third of three lectures in which we are peeling back the onion of historical borrowing in English, up to the Renaissance. We looked first at the early borrowing in Old English, from Celtic, Old Norse, and Latin. We then focused on French influence after the Norman Conquest. We will now turn to the Renaissance and the effects of the revival of interest in classical languages, most notably Latin but also Greek. This revival gives us what we now sometimes think of as SAT words—the words that mark one as having attained a particular educational level. As we will see, although these words were always learned, they were not always loved.

The Borrowing of Learned Terms

- Why did English borrow so many learned terms during the period of the Renaissance? The answer is that English was just coming into its own as a language, coming to be seen as worthy compared with other languages. Up to this point, Latin and French had been the high languages, and Latin in particular had been the language of learning.

- During the Renaissance, several factors came together to influence the rise of English as a language into which high texts would be translated and written: the emergence of nationalism, the Reformation, the revival of interest in the classics, the rise of an English-speaking middle class, and the success of printing, which made books more accessible to more people and meant that many works originally written in French and Latin were translated into English.
  - The problem here was that English did not always have the vocabulary to handle translating highly learned works. In fact, until the second half of the 16th century, English was generally seen as rude and unworthy. It was mostly a spoken language, without a significant literary tradition and little tradition at all for use in learned discourse.
As attitudes changed in the late 16\textsuperscript{th} century and English started to be used in learned discourse, there were concerted efforts to improve English so that it was up to the task. And one of the easiest ways to improve the language was to borrow the words it needed; thus, there was a massive influx of words from Latin. The linguist David Crystal estimates that about two-thirds of the words entering the language during this period came from Latin, largely brought in through the written language.

• To list all the Latin words that came in during this period would take longer than all 36 of these lectures combined. If we just start with \textit{a}, we get: \textit{absurdity, acrostic, adapt, adjective, alphabet, ambiguous, anonymous, appropriate}, and \textit{armature}—to name just a few.

• Latin borrowings came in from numerous fields, including science (\textit{skeleton, species, genus, scientific}), technology (\textit{tangent, temperature, technical}), the arts (\textit{harmonica, rhythm}), education (\textit{education, encyclopedia}), and literature (\textit{elegy, irony, literary}). We cannot even name the categories of borrowings without using Latin borrowings, such as \textit{scientific} and \textit{literary}.

• \textit{Linguist} dates back to this period, as do many other familiar terms for talking about language (which can be traced back to Latin and Greek), such as \textit{comma, colon, adjective, and syntax}, not to mention the words \textit{vocabulary} and \textit{lexicon}.

• Of course, many less specialized words also flowed in from classical languages, from \textit{chaos, expensive, explain, and emotion} to \textit{fact, joke, crisis, and critic}.

The “Inkhorn Controversy”
• This massive inpouring of words did not go undisputed, and in fact, there was quite a lively debate, known as the “inkhorn controversy,” by the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century about whether all this borrowing was a good idea.
o The name comes from the inkpots scribes used as they wrote; these new borrowed words, which were often long, used up too much ink. The controversy reminds us that language change and borrowing caused anxiety in the past, just as it does in the present.

o Supporters of borrowing believed that English needed borrowed words in order to be worthy of scientific and literary discourse.

o Others believed that English writers could make do with the terms already at their disposal through such processes as compounding and affixation.

- The opponents of inkhorn terms came up with some wonderful suggestions for native English alternatives: fleshstrings for ‘muscles,’ saywhat for ‘definition,’ afterness for ‘posterity,’ five-square for ‘pentagon,’ outborn for ‘foreign,’ and onwriting for ‘inscription.’

- In The Arte of Rhetorique (1553), Thomas Wilson, a well-known critic of inkhorn terms, wrote: “Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe ....”

o Wilson then went on to quote a letter that he said included numerous ridiculous and unnecessary words (shown in italics): “Pondering, expending, and revoluting with my selfe, your ingent affabilitie, and ingenious capacity for mundaine affaires: I cannot but celebrate, & extol your magnifical dexteritie above all other.”

o About one-third of all the proposed borrowings before 1700 did not make it past 1700. In this letter, we see a few words that did not make it, including revolute (‘revolve’), ingent (‘immense’), and magnifical (‘exalted’). But expend, affability, ingenious, capacity, mundane, celebrate, extol, and dexterity no longer seem remarkable to us.
• The scholars who defended foreign borrowings noted that English needed them and that, even by the early Renaissance, it was almost impossible to write without them. The literary critic George Puttenham wrote: “…I cannot see how we may spare them, whatsoever fault wee finde with Ink-horne termes: for our speach wanteth wordes to such sence so well to be used.”

• The English of the Renaissance was also enriched by borrowings from other European languages; from French: explore, bizarre, entrance, probability; from Spanish/Portuguese: hurricane, banana, tobacco, potato; from Dutch: smuggle, cruise, easel, etch; and from Italian: violin, solo, giraffe, sonnet.

SAT Words
• As we’ve said, one of the legacies of the Renaissance is that the language of learning in English is largely borrowed, specifically from Latin and Greek. These borrowed terms are sometimes jokingly referred to as “SAT words.”

• A sample question from the official practice SAT for 2011–2012 reads as follows: “Physical exercise often has a ________ effect, releasing emotional tension and refreshing the spirit.” The possible answers and their origins are listed below:
  o pejorative (< Latin, 19th century): ‘a word or phrase with negative connotations’
  o debilitate (< Latin, 16th century): ‘tending to make worse’
  o cathartic (< Latin < Greek, 17th century): ‘purging, releasing emotional tension’ (the answer)
  o retentive (< French, 14th century): ‘retaining, not releasing’
  o tenacious (< Latin, 17th century): ‘holding persistently’
Many of us were advised to take Latin in high school in order to do well on the SAT, and here we see why. To know Latin roots is to have a grasp on a good percentage of learned vocabulary in English, whether borrowed directly from Latin or through French.

In a few lectures, we’ll return to these etymologies, to think about what knowing Latin (and Greek) can tell us about English and to see how words that we may not think of as very different, such as foot and pedestrian, are, in fact, historically related.

**Suggested Reading**

Barber, *Early Modern English*.

Lerer, *Inventing English*. 
1. Many people are surprised to discover that some of the Latinate borrowings that now appear, for example, on the SAT were disputed when they first appeared in English in the Renaissance. What important lexical nuances would Modern English lose if the Renaissance language purists had been more successful?

2. Why do standardized tests, such as the SAT and GRE, have a tradition of testing our knowledge of Latinate words?
There are more than 6,000 languages spoken around the world right now. English has not borrowed words from all of these languages, but it is startling how many languages have contributed to the English lexicon. These contributions have come in over the course of centuries of trade, colonization, imperialism, and immigration. In this lecture, we’ll see how pervasive loanwords are in English by going from A to Z in loaning languages and noting their effects on English.

A through G

- We begin with Arabic and the word algebra. The form of this word we use today is Italian, but it was borrowed from Arabic. Interestingly, algebra was also used in the 16th century to refer to the surgical treatment of fractures or bonesetting—its etymology is the reuniting of broken parts.
  - Magazine, which English borrowed from Middle French in the 16th century, ultimately goes back to an Arabic source, as do mattress (through Latin, Italian, and Anglo-Norman) and zero.
  - A more direct borrowing is hadj, ‘a pilgrimage to Mecca,’ brought in, according to the online OED, in 1704.
  - Recently revived in the United States is haboob, ‘a violent windstorm that brings swirling sand’ (1897).
- From Bengali, we get nilla, a kind of Indian silk (1614), as well as jalfreizi, a kind of meat/fish/vegetable dish cooked with fresh chilies, tomatoes, and onions (1979). Note that these terms are more specialized than the ones we get from Arabic.
  - The unleavened bread roti comes from Hindi but is cognate with the word in Bengali. (Hindi also gives English shampoo.)
- *Monkey business* is a calque that we can trace back to Bengali. A *calque* is a term for a loan translation; in other words, English or another language takes the meaning of the word but not the word itself. In Bengali, the word *badrami* means the equivalent of ‘monkey business’; English borrowed the idea for word with the compound *monkey business* (first cited in English in 1835).

- In addition to *ketchup*, Chinese gives us words for such foods as *chow mein* (*mian* in Mandarin Chinese) and *dim sum* (Cantonese).
- The plant *ginseng* and the game *mah-jong* also come from Chinese. The pronunciation of *mah-jong* with a “soft” /z/ shows an erroneous French influence; in Chinese, the word is pronounced with a hard /j/.

We can create quite a rich meal with food words borrowed from around the world—from hors d’oeuvres and aperitifs (French), to borsch (Russian) or gumbo (Bantu), to pasta (Italian) or curry (Tamil), to sherbet (Turkish) and cookies (probably Dutch).
- Chinese also probably gives us *yen*, ‘craving,’ and the World War II slogan *gung ho*, an adjective for ‘enthusiastic,’ comes from the Chinese for ‘work together.’

- The Dutch painters of the 17th century gave English *landscape* and *easel* (1634).
  - Dutch also gives us *aardvark pickle, foist, and quack* in the sense of a doctor who falsely claims skills (shortened from *quacksalver*, as early as 1638).
  - *Bumpkin* is probably Dutch, meaning someone with a short, stumpy figure (< ‘little tree’ or ‘little barrel’). It was originally spelled *bumkin*, with the *p* a later addition to the spelling, as we saw with *empty*.

  - *Apartheid* comes from Afrikaans, a descendant of Dutch.

- We can perhaps trace the word *April* to Etruscan, but it was borrowed into English from classical Latin and Anglo-Norman. The same is true of *ides*, as in the “ides of March”; it came into English from classical Latin but perhaps has an Etruscan etymology.

- Finnish most famously gives us *sauna* but not until 1881. If the name of a Finn counts as a Finnish loanword, then *Linux* (the open-source computer operating system modeled on Unix) also counts, because it is based on the name of the inventor, Linus Benedict Torvalds.

- We could turn to German or Greek next, but Gullah, an English-based creole spoken in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, is more of a challenge. Creoles are mixed languages that emerge in situations in which speakers of mutually unintelligible languages come into contact.
  - The term *juke*, as in *juke joint* (‘a cheap roadhouse or brothel’) and, later, *jukebox*, is from Gullah. It probably can be traced back to West African languages and a meaning of ‘disorderly, wicked.’
Mojo (meaning ‘magical power’ and now often used for power or force more generally) is of unknown origin, but it appears as moco in Gullah, which is used as evidence that it may be of African origins.

H through N

- Hungarian, which gives English goulash, paprika, and paprikash, also provides hussar (pronounced with a /z/), which refers to one of the light horsemen used in Hungarian army regiments. The word was later generalized to similar regiments in many European armies.

- From Inuit comes kayak (which is shared across varieties of Inuit and appeared in English as early as 1757); anorak (the weatherproof jacket, 1924) comes from Greenlandish Inuit.

- Japanese has given us some very recent borrowings, including karaoke (1979), anime (1985, a style of animated film/television, 1985), and sudoku (the word voted Most Likely to Succeed by the American Dialect Society in 2005).
  - Japanese also gives us such words as bonsai, bento, geisha, haiku, kimono, wasabi, and zen; these are perhaps recognizably Japanese because they refer to aspects of Japanese culture.
  - Futon may be less recognizably borrowed, as well as kudzu (from the kudzu vine, native to Japan and China, borrowed at the end of the 19th century), because it is now so strongly associated with the southern United States.
  - From Japanese martial arts, we get dojo (a room or padded mat for judo), judo, ju-jitsu, karate (‘empty hand’), and ninja.

- From Korean, we get another martial art, Tae Kwon Do, as well as the food kim chi, both still very much associated with Korean culture.

- As we’ve already seen, Latin terms are ubiquitous in English.
• The amok in “run amok” comes from Malay, in which the word is an adjective meaning ‘fighting furiously, attacking desperately but resolutely’; by 1849, amok was used in English to refer to a murderous frenzy or killing spree. The phrase run amok captures that sense of frenzy but is now often used in weakened form, along the lines of ‘go crazy.’ Other words from Malay include cockatoo, cootie, gecko, sarong, and gingham (although English borrowed this word from French).

• Surprisingly, Navajo gives us very few words, including hogan (a building of logs and earth) and the word Navajo itself.

O through U
• Ojibwa gives us place names, including Ottawa and Mackinaw. The latter word comes to English through Canadian French and is shortened from the last three syllables of the original place name, Michilimackinac. Ojibwa also gives us wigwam (1624). Great Spirit is a translation directly from Ojibwa for the supreme deity, as medicine man also probably is.

• Portuguese gives English monsoon, marmalade, molasses, and flamingo. Obviously, trade and other forms of cultural contact would bring these words into English.

• Quechua, is an indigenous language spoken in the central Andes. It is the source of some South American Spanish words that then entered English, such as paco for ‘alpaca’ and pampas for an extensive treeless plain. The direct borrowings from Quechua are very few and specialized, such as ichu (an Alpine grass that grows in the Andes).

• From Russian, English has many longstanding loans, such as tsar/czar (1555; the spelling tries to capture a sound that English doesn’t have: /tʃ/) and babushka (1834; in Russian, the word means ‘grandmother,’ but in the United States in the 1930s, it came to refer to the headscarves stereotypically worn by women like Russian grandmothers). Other Russian words include mammoth (1706) and
steppe (1670), as well as the newer glasnost, which goes back to the 1980s and refers to the opening up of news sources in the Soviet Union.

- Spanish words abound in English, from alligator (which is two words in Spanish: el or al lagarto, ‘the lizard’) to vigilante, guitar, hurricane, plaza, cafeteria, rodeo, and many more.

- Tagalog (spoken in the Philippines) gives English boondock (it means ‘mountain’ in Tagalog but ‘jungle or isolated region’ in English; 1944). Turkish provides macramé (1865), and Tamil gives English pariah (1818; here, the name of a tribe was extended to refer to someone of a low caste, which then came to mean someone to be avoided).

- Urdu gives us pajamas and pashmina, as well as khaki (1863), which originally referred to the dusty color and then to fabric of that color.

V through Z

- Vietnamese has given us surprisingly few words to date, but pho, the noodle soup, has become a fairly common food, especially on college campuses.

- Wolof, a West African language, has given us patas (the patas monkey). Wolof or a similar language is the source of nyam, ‘eat,’ in Jamaican Creole English (and yam ‘to eat greedily’). It is not the source of OK, despite some speculation to this effect, but it may well be the source of juke in Gullah, which was then borrowed into other varieties of American English.

- From the Bantu language Xhosa (/kozE), we get mamba (a kind of snake). In South African English, the use of homeboy to refer to a man or youth from one’s hometown is probably at least in part a translation from a similar word in Xhosa.
• Yiddish words are found throughout English: *chutzpah* (‘audacity’), *bupkis* (‘nothing,’ emphatically), *kibitz* (‘to offer unasked-for advice’), *kvetch* (‘complain’), *maven* (‘expert, know-it-all’), *meshuga* (‘crazy’), *mensch* (‘a good, upright man’), *nebbish* (‘insignificant person’), *nosh* (‘snack’), *schmatta* (‘rag, cheap clothes’), *shmendrik* or *schmegeggy* (‘fool’), and the widely known *schmooze*.

• Finally, Zulu gives us *muti* (a traditional practice of medicine among black Africans, mid-19th century) and *inkosi* (the title of a Zulu leader and a chief more generally, early 19th century). As with Xhosa, Zulu words have been borrowed more frequently into South African English than British or American English.

**A Whirlwind Tour**

• This A to Z whirlwind tour barely even scratches the surface of loanwords in English.
  
o As you undoubtedly noticed, some of these words still feel borrowed or are, at least, quickly recognizable as such given their continued associations with other cultures or countries.

  o Others, however, are so entrenched that they don’t seem borrowed at all. Such words come from a range of languages—think of *maven* from Yiddish, *mammoth* from Russian, and *molasses* from Portuguese.

  o And English will continue to incorporate loans from other languages as it continues to come into intensive contact with speakers of other languages.

• It is actually relatively easy for English to ingest words from other languages because we do not have grammatical gender or a grammatical system that depends on complex inflectional endings. (Nouns become plural by adding an -s, and verbs take -ed to become past tense.) The result is that English has been fairly omnivorous.
1. Which languages that have contributed words to English were most surprising to you? Why?

2. Some Yiddish words have become very “English” (e.g., maven, schmooze), and others are still identifiably Yiddish to many speakers (e.g., bupkis, chutzpah, mensch, schmatta). Do you find that you make assumptions about the background of speakers who use such words as bupkis or mensch? And would you consider the word kvetch to be still widely recognizable as a Yiddish borrowing?
Lecture 13: The Pop/Soda/Coke Divide

What do you call a carbonated beverage—*pop*, *soda*, *coke*, *soft drink*, or something else? As you travel around the United States, you encounter not just different accents but also different words, such as *cabinet* for a milkshake in Rhode Island or *bubbler* for a drinking fountain in Wisconsin. In this lecture, we’ll look at a sampling of regional differences in the lexicon around the United States to see how history has shaped American dialects and how linguists use words to draw dialect lines.

**Dialect Maps**

- Some massive linguistic atlas projects have taken place over the past century, seeking to gather and record the distinctive lexicon in different parts of the United States.
  - The American Dialect Society was founded in 1889, and its mission was to investigate American dialects.
  - The data for these projects were gathered from rural, “old-fashioned” speakers, as well as more “modern” speakers. Fieldworkers trained in phonetic transcription conducted lengthy interviews with speakers, trying to elicit specific forms for various objects and phenomena.
  - These methods were adopted by later dialect projects, including the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. 
These atlas projects continue; for example, the compilation of the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States is now a project at the University of Georgia.

To make linguistic maps, dialectologists map different word forms used according to where speakers live or are from. At least some of the time, boundaries tend to emerge between speakers who use one form versus another. Linguists call such a boundary an *isogloss*, a division between regions by distinctive linguistic features. When many isoglosses line up, it may indicate a dialect boundary.

For example, the isoglosses for *pail* and *darning needle* align very closely running east to west across north Pennsylvania. North of the line, people say *pail* rather than *bucket* and *darning needle* for what others would call a dragonfly. (In the South and elsewhere, there are other regional terms for this insect, including *mosquito hawk*, *snake doctor*, and *snake feeder*."

Another classic example can be seen in the forms *quarter of*, *quarter til*, and *quarter to* (to indicate 15 minutes before the hour) in various regions of the East Coast.

*The Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*, completed in 2012, is a stunning dictionary project and covers all of the United States.
Fred Cassidy at the University of Wisconsin, DARE’s original editor, created a lengthy questionnaire about everyday terms under such categories as wildlife, weather, home furnishings, religion, and health. In 1965, 80 fieldworkers headed out to carefully selected communities across the United States to complete the questionnaires with local speakers. The interviewers favored older speakers, who would know “folk words.”

Over the course of five years, fieldworkers talked to 2,777 people in 1,002 communities. They traveled in vans, sometimes called “Word Wagons,” and used reel-to-reel tape recorders.

DARE defines and maps terms to show their histories and regional distributions. A couple of sample maps show interesting distributions of such terms as dropped egg for ‘poached egg’ (although now probably archaic; New England), flannel cake for ‘pancake’ (Appalachia); and kitty-corner for ‘diagonally across from’ (the North, North Midland, and West), as opposed to catty-corner (South and Mid-Atlantic).

U.S. Dialects

- In studying dialects, the United States is traditionally divided into six regions: New England, Mid-Atlantic, North, Midland, South, and West.

- A more detailed map in the recent Atlas of North American English was compiled using pronunciation rather than lexicon. This project added more specialized areas within the traditional regions, such as the St. Louis corridor; the Inland North, connecting western New York and southern Michigan and Chicago; Texas South; and so on.

- In addition to regional dialects, there are also social dialects. The most studied social dialect is African American English (AAE); other social dialects include Chicano English and Standard English.
These dialects differ systematically in terms of pronunciation, lexicon, and grammar.

For example, Standard English uses an empty *there* in the construction “there are a lot of people here”; AAE uses an empty *it* in the same construction: “it’s a lot of people here.”

AAE systematically uses *hisself* where Standard English uses *himself*—and arguably *hisself* is more logical in the reflexive pronoun system.

**Regional Differences**

- Let’s look at a few better-known examples of regional differences.
  - You are probably aware of some of the regional distribution of words for referring to a group of people: *Y’all* is the southern form and is used in AAE; *you guys* is used throughout the non-southern United States; *yinz* and *you’uns* appear in Pittsburgh; and *yous* appears in urban areas in the Northeast.
  - A *sub* in much of the United States is called a *grinder* in parts of New England, a *hoagie* or a *hero* in much of the New York City area and New Jersey, and a *poor boy* in southern Louisiana.
  - *Yard sale* is a more East Coast term (including the Southeast); *garage sale* is a more Midwestern and Western form.
  - *Sneaker* for ‘gym shoes’ clusters in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, while *tennis shoe* appears throughout the Southeast, South, and Midwest, as well as on the West Coast.
  - *Firefly* shows up on the West Coast and in parts of the Midwest and Northeast; *lightning bug* is popular throughout the Midwest and South, as well as on the East Coast.

- Some less-well-known examples include the following:
In the Northeast, some people use *dust kittens* for ‘dust bunnies.’ In fact, according to *DARE*, there are more than 170 terms for balls of dust, including *gollywogs* and *fooskies*.

Some people, especially in the North Midlands, use *anymore* in a positive sense to mean ‘still’ or ‘nowadays’: “They sell PowerBars anymore.”

The omission of the verb *to be* can be seen in such phrases as “my car needs washed,” common in Pittsburgh and other parts of Pennsylvania and parts of the Midwest and West. The influence of Scots-Irish settlers, beginning in the late 17th century and through the 18th century, may be responsible for this construction.

- The Scots-Irish influence also shows up in distinctive words in Appalachia and elsewhere, including *redd up* for ‘clean up.’
  - The Scots-Irish influence may help to explain the use of double modals in the South—*might could*, *might should*, *useta could*—but this is not certain.

- Midland constructions, such as *wants in* and *needs in*, have also been traced back to Scots-Irish settlers.

- As the example of Scots-Irish makes clear, the history of immigration to the United States affects regional dialects. The other languages already being spoken in North America when English speakers arrived also make their mark.
  - Native American languages give English such common words as *squash*, *moose*, *raccoon*, *skunk*, and *caribou*, as well as hundreds of place names, from *Massachusetts* to *Iowa* to *Wyoming*.

- Louisiana French creole has had an effect on Louisiana English (or Cajun English), including calques (loan translations), such as “making groceries” and “getting down” out of a car (from *descendre* in French).
The Spanish influence in the Southwest and elsewhere can be seen in such words as canyon, mesa, Rio Grande, burro, and cafeteria.

Michigan English

- We could spend an entire course discussing the words and pronunciations specific to each state, but instead, let’s look at a sampling of Michigan English.
- There is a big distinction in Michigan (not always known to “outsiders”) between the Upper Peninsula (UP) and the rest of the state (the Lower Peninsula, sometimes referred to as the mitten). UP then leads to the name for the folks who live there: Yoopers. Yoopers, in defense of their part of the state, have a special term for folks from the Lower Peninsula—trolls—so-named because they live below the Mackinac Bridge, which connects the two parts of the state.

- Up north in Michigan is the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, not the UP.

- Fudgies are the tourists who go visit up north and buy lots of fudge while they’re there. They’re the equivalent of snowbirds in Florida.

- Pasties (pronounced to rhyme with /fast-y/) are a distinctive food in Michigan.

- Packzi (/poonch-key/) are jelly doughnuts served on Shrove Tuesday. This word reflects Polish settlement in Michigan.

- The strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street is a lawn extension; elsewhere, people might call this a boulevard, tree lawn, tree belt, tree terrace, tree plot, street lawn, parking, or devil strip.
o If they’re going out for drinks, people from Michigan say that they’re going to “the bar,” a generic term, similar to “the hospital.”

- As we travel or move, we become more aware of these differences among varieties of American English. They range from the regional to the very local, from broader social groups to local ones.
  o Language is part of what creates community and helps us identify ourselves and others as part of the same community.

  o There is no evidence that American dialects are dying or homogenizing. America is a young country, and our dialects are not as strong as they are in England, China, Germany, or elsewhere.

  o But dialect variations still distinguish one area and one social group from another, and they are vital to us in that way. We may control a standard variety of English, but we may not want to use that when we want to express other parts of our identities or show pride in the communities in which we live.

**Suggested Reading**

*Dialect Survey.*

*Dictionary of American Regional English.*


Wolfram and Ward, eds., *American Voices.*

**Questions to Consider**

1. What American regional terms have you noticed during your travels, and what words do you use that you think may be regionally specific? Have others ever commented on your regional vocabulary, and if so, what have they said?
2. How would you explain the fact that American regional and social dialects do not seem to be weakening, despite television, globalization, and other potentially homogenizing forces?
In July of 2011, Matthew Engel published a column in the online BBC News Magazine called “Why Do Some Americanisms Irritate People?” He expressed alarm at the arrival of Americanisms in Britain and listed “ugly and pointless usages,” including *elevator* for *lift*, *wrench* for *spanner*, and *rookie* for *newcomer*. His article spawned a wave of e-mail complaints about Americanisms, from *bangs* for *fringe* to *takeout* for *takeaway*. In fact, not all the expressions cited originated in the United States, but this online flurry represented a well-established tradition of complaining about Americanisms. In this lecture, we’ll look at lexical differences in American and British English, as well as other Englishes spoken around the world.

Americanisms and Other Englishes

- The term *Americanism* was coined in 1781 by John Witherspoon to refer to words and phrases unique to English spoken in the United States. As long as there have been Americanisms, there have been concerns about Americanisms, and of course, there have been Americanisms almost as long as English has been spoken in North America.

- When English speakers came to North America, they developed their own way of talking. A number of factors contributed to this development, including geographical separation from Britain, the mixing of British dialects in new ways, and encounters with new languages. Further, the sensibilities that came with being in a new place and establishing a new country guaranteed that a specifically American form of English would develop.

- As English has spread to other parts of the globe, new kinds of English have emerged, from Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and South African English to Indian, Singaporean, and Nigerian English and more.
Differences in British and American English

- Brits and Americans often enjoy comparing lexical differences across the Atlantic.
  - In Britain, you go to a cash point or cash machine versus going to the ATM or bank machine in the United States (and Canada).
  - In Britain, mathematics is shortened to maths, while in the United States, it’s math. If you make a mistake on your maths/math homework, you need a British rubber or a U.S. eraser.
  - There are many well-known car/truck differences, including petrol versus gas, bonnet versus hood, boot versus trunk, and lorry versus truck.
  - In both British and American English, you can say zero, nothing, null, and love; in the United States, you can also say zilch or zip; and in Britain, you can say nil or nought (or duck in cricket).

- We notice these lexical differences, and perhaps they sometimes cause a bit of confusion (or a laugh) but nothing a little further discussion can’t clarify.

- There are not always clear reasons why one word became associated with Britain and another with the United States, as is the case with apartment and flat.

World Englishes

- These days, linguists often talk about “World Englishes” to capture all the variation that now characterizes global English and the cultural distinctiveness of these variations.

- Varieties of English are inflected by the history of the part of the world where they are spoken and its relationship to English, for example, whether English arrived through colonialism and imperialism or as a language of technology or upward mobility.
• English is the first and primary language in the British Isles, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.
  o In other countries, English is an official language and a second language for many speakers (including a native language for some); these countries often were introduced to English through imperialism and colonialism. They include India, Nigeria, Singapore, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe.
  
  o In many countries, such as China, Japan, Germany, and most of Scandinavia, English is an important foreign language.
  
  o This distribution is sometimes described as the inner circle (where English is the first language), outer circle (where English is an official and second language), and expanding circle (where English is taught as a foreign language).

  o There are now more speakers of English as a second or foreign language than there are speakers of English as a first language. This has significant implications for the future of English.

**Inner- and Outer-Circle Englishes**

• If British English seems educated or fancy to many Americans, Australian English seems cool and adventurous. This view serves as evidence that linguistic difference does not necessarily lead to negative judgments, although this is not the case with judgments of Appalachian English or African American English.
  
  o England began sending convicts (mostly white-collar criminals) to Sydney Cove in 1788; some stayed after they were freed, alongside civil and military officers.

  o Loans from aboriginal languages to English include *boomerang*, *kangaroo*, *koala*, *wallaby*, *wombat*, and *dingo*.

  o Well-known Australian forms include “goodday”/“g’day” for *hello* and the now widely spread *outback*; less well-known is *barrack for* (to support in the realm of sports teams).
• Australian slang terms include *chunder* (‘vomit’), *drongo* (‘fool’), *sheila* (‘woman’), *to front up* (‘to show up/present oneself’), *grizzle* (‘complain’), *earbash* (‘talk nonstop’), and as is true of all varieties of English, slang words for drunk, including *shikkered*.

• Unique blends in Australian English include *jackaroo* (an inexperienced young colonist; a man newly arrived from England), *jillaroo* (a jocular formation based on *jackaroo*), and *squattocracy* (squatters—that is, settlers with no legal title to the land—as a class with social and political importance).

• British settlement of New Zealand began in the first half of the 19th century; the country became a separate British colony in 1841. Today, New Zealand English remains very similar to Australian English.

• Perhaps the most well-known word from New Zealand English is *kiwi* (a Maori word). Other interesting forms include *to skite* (‘to boast’), *to farewell* (‘to say goodbye’), and *to front* (‘to turn up, appear’).

• One Maori word in wide use in New Zealand is *mana* (‘power, honor’). We will see the integration of indigenous words in other varieties of English, as well.

• English has coexisted with many Indian languages since it was introduced in India in the 17th century through the East India Company. It is one of 22 official languages and is a second language for more than 100 million speakers in India. This makes India the country with the second largest population of English speakers in the world, behind the United States, at 280 million.

• We can hear systematic differences between Indian English and British or American English. One that people notice almost immediately is that Indian English is syllable timed, not stress timed. In spoken American English, the stresses come at fairly regular intervals, but in syllable-timed languages, each syllable receives equal weight.
Further, some uncountable nouns in British and American English are countable in Indian English (e.g., *fruits, furnitures*).

Borrowings from Indian languages into English include *sahib* (‘sir’) and *crore* (‘10 million’—often rupees).

Some English words are used in different ways in India. For example, a *hotel* can be a restaurant without any lodging.

- The government in Singapore has been concerned about the development of Singaporean English (sometimes called “Singlish,” incorporating Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and other languages). The “Good English” campaign was launched to encourage the use of a standard variety of English.
- But websites have sprung up in opposition, celebrating Singaporean English and its slang (*talking cock* in Singlish).
- One well-known feature of Singaporean English is *lah* as a pragmatic particle (from Malay), a word used at the end of a sentence for emphasis (e.g., “I don’t want to talk about her lah” or “Steady lah”).

**English-Based Creoles**

- In some parts of the world, the spread of English has meant the development of English-based creoles, such as Jamaican English.
- A creole can develop when two (or more) mutually unintelligible languages come into contact for extended periods of time. The speakers first develop a simplified pidgin, which later becomes a full-fledged creole language.
- In Jamaica, this contact took place between English and West African languages, resulting in Jamaican Creole English, which exhibits differences in the sound system, grammar, and lexicon from other varieties of English.
- As non-speakers of a creole, we tend to miss the underlying systems that govern these varieties of a language, but in fact,
such systems are present in all forms of English that have emerged around the world.

- The globalization of English is a new situation for its speakers. The world has perhaps never seen a moment when second- and foreign-language speakers outnumber native speakers. This is in part because we’ve never had technology that allows a language to spread the way English has.

- There are a growing number of “centers” of English around the world, with different varieties of English taking prominence and being pragmatically important in different parts of the world.

- And, of course, English is not always embraced in the places it spreads. In some countries, it is part of mandatory schooling, but some African writers, for example, resist writing in English, saying that the language cannot capture their lived experience.
The English Word \textit{OK}

- The English word that is perhaps most global is \textit{OK}, probably followed by \textit{hello}. This word is now owned by speakers around the world, no matter their first language.

- The first use of \textit{OK} cited in the \textit{OED} is on March 23, 1839, in the \textit{Boston Morning Post}; it was used as a humorous abbreviation for “all correct.”
  - It might have died, like many other abbreviations of the era, but it got picked up in the 1840 presidential campaign, in which Martin Van Buren was running for reelection. He was from Kinderhook, New York, and his new nickname became Old Kinderhook, or \textit{OK}. During the campaign, word play with \textit{OK} abounded (“out of kash,” “always candid”).
  - \textit{OK} went on to become ubiquitous in the language; today, it is used as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection, a signal of agreement, and an attention getter.

The British versus American English Debate Revisited

- Matthew Engel ended his online column about Americanisms in British English by encouraging readers to “[maintain] the integrity of our own gloriously nuanced, subtle and supple version—the original version—of the English language.”

- As we have seen, language always changes; thus, we should be wary of claims to the “original version” of any language.

- There has never been anything “pure” about the English vocabulary. It has always been infused by other languages, and this phenomenon will continue as English spreads around the world, coming into contact with new languages and being adapted to suit speakers’ needs.
Suggested Reading

McArthur, “English World-Wide in the Twentieth Century.”


Trudgill and Hannah, *International English.*

Questions to Consider

1. Many linguists use the phrase *World Englishes* to describe the many varieties of English that have developed and continue to develop around the globe. What do you see as the benefits and/or drawbacks of this phrase?

2. What social judgments, if any, do you think get attached to American English, British English, Australian English, Indian English, Jamaican English, and other world varieties of English?
Here is a linguistic riddle: How is the English word *foot* related to the Latin borrowing *pedestrian*? The roots of these two words, *foot* and *ped*, are, in fact, related, even though all the letters are different! In this lecture, we’ll go back into the past, before English even existed, to get into the heart of etymology. As we’ve seen, English has borrowed thousands of words from all over the world, and some of them are historically related to each other in fascinating ways. If we trace etymological roots, we can reveal now-secret relationships between words that no longer sound similar.

**Language Relationships**

- Cognates are two words related by descent from the same parent word in an ancestral language. That parent word is called the *etymon*, a word clearly related to *etymology*, which studies the relationship of words to their etymons.

- The definition of *etymology* highlights the fact that concepts from biology, such as parent and ancestor, have strongly influenced how linguists talk about the historical relationship of languages. In fact, linguists typically use family trees to talk about languages. This idea was developed in the 19th century, influenced by advances in evolutionary theory.

- To think about how two English words, such as *foot* and *pedestrian*, are related, it will help to step back and talk briefly about how languages are related more generally, focusing specifically on Indo-European languages, because this is the most relevant family of languages for understanding the English lexicon.

**The Family-Tree Model**

- Families of languages, such as Indo-European, are often represented with a family-tree model.
o At the top of the Indo-European tree is Proto-Indo-European, the parent language. It’s called “proto” because we have no attested forms from Indo-European; we have to reconstruct Indo-European based on evidence from living languages or dead languages for which we have written records.

o Then there are families within the broader family of Indo-European languages: Indo-Iranian, Balto-Slavic, Celtic, Italic, Germanic, and so on.

o Here, we will focus primarily on the Germanic family, because English belongs to this family, and Italic, because Latin and all its descendant languages are in this family.

o Note that Proto-Indo-European is not the ultimate source of language. We don’t actually know what the very first language was. Proto-Indo-European probably goes back 6,000 to 8,000 years. Language as a human phenomenon probably goes back 150,000 to 200,000 years.

• When and how does a language have children, so to speak? This is where the biological analogy breaks down.
  o Evolution is a helpful analogy in capturing the fact that languages, like species, show variation and selection and, through that process, change over time.

  o But there are problems with this analogy. First, it abstracts language away from speakers, as if languages develop all on their own.

  o Further, abstract languages are not biological entities. They don’t, for example, have children—the generational process is not nearly that dramatic. Languages change in a more continuous fashion (except for extreme examples of language contact). If that’s true, then how do we know when a new language is born?
The moment of birth is, in fact, typically a decision made by scholars long after the fact, when they determine that a language has changed enough from a parent language to call it a “daughter” language.

Let’s consider Latin. At some fundamental level, it might be correct to say that French is “Latin spoken in France.”

- Latin was brought to France, Spain, Portugal, and so on with the Roman conquests of these regions in the 1st century B.C.E.

- As Vulgar Latin continued to be spoken in these different parts of Europe, it changed in different ways in different regions.

- At some point, Vulgar Latin spoken in Italy was so different from Vulgar Latin spoken in France, which was so different from Vulgar Latin spoken in Spain, and so on, that these could be called different languages, as opposed to dialects of Vulgar Latin. Thus, French, Spanish, and Italian were born!

Should American English be called a daughter language of British English, or are the two dialects of a parent language called “English”? American English descends from the British English brought to North America by English settlers.

- It has changed in different ways owing to geographical separation, encounters with other languages, natural internal change, and so on.

- It is mutually comprehensible with varieties of British English. How, then, can we decide whether it is a dialect or a new language?

The distinction between a dialect and a language is blurrier than many people realize. By one general definition, dialects are varieties of a language that are mutually intelligible. Thus, Appalachian English and African American English are dialects of American
English. Languages, in contrast, are not mutually comprehensible, for example, French and English.

- There are notable exceptions to these definitions that sometimes highlight the politics of the distinction.

- Dialects of Chinese, for example, are not mutually intelligible but are united by being spoken in the same country and, hence, are considered the same language.

- Danish and Norwegian are mutually intelligible, but they are spoken in different countries and, therefore, considered different languages.

**Grimm’s Law**

- Another way in which language relationships are different from biological relationships is that interspecies breeding is much more feasible with languages.

- Languages from different families can come into contact when the speakers are brought into contact; then, one language can acquire words or other features from the contact language.

- As we saw, when Norman-French was brought to England, English started to acquire many French words, which were from another language family.

- These French words were then passed down to future English speakers, unlike acquired characteristics by biological species. We don’t pass down things we acquire, but language is passed down.

- This fact is key to understanding how cognates can end up in the same language.

- Let’s consider the Indo-European root \(^*k(vowel)rd\)\(,\) which meant ‘heart,’ from what we can reconstruct.
That root descended into the daughter languages and is still retained in many of them, including Latin, Greek, and English. In Latin, the root becomes *cor* or *cordis*. In Greek, it is *kardia*, and in English, it is *heart*.

Why is English so different from Latin and Greek in terms of the consonants? Latin and Greek retain the *k*_rd, but in English, the *k* is an *h* and the *d* is a *t*. Why?

This puzzle was taken up by 19th-century philologists—in particular, a group of German scholars called the Neogrammarians. Once they had a model of related languages and grouped them into families, they started to address the origins of systematic differences among families. Why do Indo-European words show up systematically with one consonant in one language family and another consonant in another family?

The answer they came up with was that some groups of languages had undergone a systematic sound change, such as, say, /k/ turning into /h/, while others had not.

- It was Jakob Grimm (of fairytale fame) who first solved the puzzle of how Germanic languages were related to their Latinate counterparts in terms of some of these consonant differences, and the sound change (or law) that he came up with is called “Grimm’s Law.”

The law explains what happened to nine Indo-European consonants in Germanic languages; the Indo-European consonants are often retained in Latin and Greek, which is how we can see the systematic correspondence today.

The Indo-European consonant /k/ became Germanic /h/, but it stayed /k/ in Latin and Greek. This explains the first consonant in *heart/cardiac*; it also explains how native English *horn* and the Latin borrowing *cornucopia* (‘horn of plenty’) are cognates, as is *cornet* (the brass instrument of the trumpet class).
Grimm’s Law also determined that Indo-European /d/ became Germanic /t/. This change explains the second part of heart/cardiac. It also explains how these words are related: domestic (Latin)/tame (native English) and edible (Latin)/eat (native English).

The change from Indo-European /p/ to Germanic /f/ explains the relationship between pedestrian and foot.

Verner’s Law
- The Neogrammarians believed that Grimm’s Law operated without exception, but then, they started to find exceptions.
  - For example, the Indo-European root *mn-ti, ‘to think,’ gives us the Latin borrowing mental. According to Grimm’s Law, that Indo-European /t/ should become a /th/ in Germanic.

  - But in English, it comes down to us as the word mind, that is, with a /d/ not a /th/. The /d/ in the English word loud also comes from an Indo-European /t/.

  - These exceptions to Grimm’s Law also seemed to follow a pattern; thus was born Verner’s Law, named after Karl Verner.

  - Philologists determined that Verner’s Law kicks in if the consonant in question in an Indo-European word is preceded by an unstressed vowel.

- One of the remarkable things about these sound laws is how systematic they are. Visual representations of Grimm’s and Verner’s laws look a bit like math equations, with one sound turning into another in a certain environment (that is, a certain position in a word).

- These laws also reveal otherwise hidden relationships between words that we know are in the same semantic field, such as tooth and dental, foot and pedestrian, heart and cardiac—but we may not have known that they were cousins, going back to the same Indo-European root.
• In almost all instances, one of these cognates is the fancy, sophisticated cousin from the city, and the other is the no-frills, sensible cousin.
  o A “cardiologist,” for example, sounds much more highly trained and educated than a “heart doctor.” The same can be said of a “podiatrist” and a “foot doctor.”

  o In linguistics, Latinate words are used to describe how consonants are articulated, perhaps at least partly because these words sound more scientific. Linguists talk about “labiodental” sounds, for example, which are “lip-tooth” sounds, formed by putting the upper teeth over the lower lip.

• Although it might seem like an esoteric exercise to reconstruct Proto-Indo-European and the sound changes it underwent to become the many Indo-European languages for which we have records, this reconstruction reveals the hidden relationships among English words that have been brought together in the English lexicon through centuries of borrowing.

A “hearty” (native English) welcome seems warmer than a “cordial” (Latin) welcome even though hearty and cordial go back to the same root.
Liberman, *Word Origins and How We Know Them*.

McMahon, *Understanding Language Change*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Would you describe American and British English as two dialects of one language or two different languages? What were the criteria for your decision?

2. What connotations do *hearty* and *cordial* have for you? Do *heart attack* and *cardiac arrest* have different connotations? (*Heart* is the only Germanic word of the four.)
In this lecture, we’ll focus exclusively on the rich Latin legacy in English. We’ll weave some webs of words from Latin roots that reveal how, for example, if you were to perspire while you were conspiring, you would be performing two verbs that are etymologically related, both going back to a Latin root related to breathing. As you can tell, these etymological relationships are now masked by centuries of language change, although we can, when we step back, see the similar root even now (spire). Here, we’ll explore the etymological play of figuring out how Latin roots play out in English words that mean very different things.

Language Ambiguities

- Language is filled with ambiguities, some more hazardous than others. For example, if something is inflammable, can we set it on fire or not? We have evidence that by the 1950s, at least some companies were worried about this ambiguity and consciously switched their labels to read “flammable” to avoid the problem.

- What causes the problem here is the Latin prefix in-. The word inflammable originally comes from the verb inflame. English borrowed inflame from French, ultimately derived from Latin, and the prefix in- is a Latin one, meaning roughly ‘in, into’; thus, the verb means ‘to cause to go into flames.’

- But in- has another common meaning in English that causes confusion: It often expresses negation in Latinate borrowings. For example, something that we cannot operate is inoperative. In theory, something that we could not light on fire could be inflammable, although that is not what the in- means originally in inflammable.

- Knowing that there are two different Latin in- prefixes circulating in English (along with an English in- prefix that also means ‘in, into’) can help disentangle the confusion. And given how much Latin
borrowing has occurred in the history of English, it’s no wonder that knowing Latin can reveal a lot about English vocabulary.

- There’s something else we should know about the secret life of *in*- prefixes. Have you ever wondered why something that isn’t legible is *illegible*, not *inlegible*? The answer is that in later Latin, *in*- would assimilate to the sound at the beginning of the word it attached to.
  - If the word begins with a bilabial sound (/m/, /p/, /b/), *in*- becomes *im*:- *impossible*, *immobile*, *imbalance*.
  - If the *in*- comes before /l/, it becomes *il*:- *illegible*, *illegitimate*.
  - If the *in*- comes before /r/, it becomes *ir*:- *irregular*, *irrelevant*.

**Word Webs**

- Knowing some Latin reveals word webs in English, that is, networks of words derived from one Latin base or “root form.”
  - The Latin base *firm-* means ‘strong, firm.’ It shows up in the English words *confirm* and *confirmation*; *affirm*, *affirmation*, and *affirmative*; *infirm*, *infirmity*, and *infirmary*; and *firmament*. Knowledge of prefixes and suffixes can help us unpack these derived forms in the *firm-* web.
  - *Con-* means ‘together with, in union,’ and *confirm* suggests a union with what is strong or firm in its meaning ‘to make firm.’
  - The prefix *ad-* means ‘movement toward, becoming’; this prefix becomes *af-* before /f/, and *affirm* suggests movement toward strength or firmness.
  - *Infirm* and *infirmity* go back to the negative meaning of *in*- here, ‘not strong.’ An *infirmary* is a place for the infirm; -*ary* captures the sense of ‘place for, thing connected with’ and shows up in *aviary*, *dictionary*, and *vocabulary*.  


- A firmament is something that strengthens, and once it was used in the Vulgate Bible’s translation of the Hebrew for ‘vault of the sky,’ it took on a more specialized meaning, which was borrowed into English.

- Another Latin base with a corresponding web of words is spir-, meaning ‘breathe.’ English doesn’t have a verb spire, but it has many other verbs based on this form: aspire, aspirate, conspire, expire, inspire, respire (more familiar in respirate and respiration), perspire, and transpire. Again, the prefixes can help us see how each of these verbs has come to mean what it does in relation to breathing.
  - The prefix of aspire comes from a form of ad- (‘to, toward’); thus, aspire means ‘breathe toward’ or ‘breathe desire toward.’

- In aspirate, the -ate is equivalent to the English participle -ed and means ‘possessing, being’; thus, aspirate(d) means ‘having breath toward, pronounced with breath.’ This term is used in linguistics to talk about a particular kind of consonant.

- Expire used to be spelled exspire in English, and the ex- means ‘out’; the verb originally meant ‘breathe out’ and then came to be used euphemistically for breathing out one’s last breath. Around the same time, it was extended to refer to the termination of things other than life, such as time periods.
Inspire has the *in-* meaning ‘into’; once we think about a meaning such as ‘breathe spirit or a thought/feeling into,’ we can see where the current meaning of *inspire* originates.

The *re-* in *respire* means ‘back’ or ‘again’ and shows how this verb refers to the act of breathing itself, inhaling and exhaling again and again. We now use the related verb *respirate* for artificial breathing, but earlier, it could refer to other kinds of ventilation. (The -*ate* here makes it mean ‘to cause to respire’ or ‘to cause to breathe in and out.’)

*Perspire* means ‘to breathe through,’ so we can see how it came to refer to substances passing through the pores.

*Transpire* also means ‘to breathe through,’ and when it was first borrowed into English, it carried meanings very similar to *perspire*. The *OED* attributes its current use to a misunderstanding; in the 18th century, the verb came to mean, as Samuel Johnson defined it, “to escape from secrecy, to notice” (what we might call “leak out’). Later, the verb was reinterpreted as meaning ‘occur, happen.’

**Language Puzzles**

- How are *aquifer, confer, prefer, offer, and refer* related?
  - The Latin base here is *fer-* , meaning ‘carry.’

- An *aquifer* carries water; here, we see two Latin bases combined.

- When we *confer*, we are brought together (now, the word typically means ‘to talk, take counsel’).

- What we *prefer*, we carry in front, hold to the highest esteem.

- What we *offer*, we carry toward or bring before (originally, to God).
And when we refer, we carry the conversation back to a previous point or turn back to a source or authority.

- How are resilient, desultory, insult, and somersault related?
  - The Latin base is sal-, salt-, or sult-, meaning ‘leap.’
  - Resilient means ‘springing back, rebounding.’
  - Desultory originally meant ‘of or belonging to a vaulter’ or ‘skipping about; irregularly shifting.’ From there, the word could come to mean ‘pursuing an irregular course of action’ and, from there, ‘disconnected’ or ‘straying from the main point.’ For some speakers, it now means ‘dull’ or ‘disappointing in terms of results.’
  - Insult means to ‘to leap on/at, assail.’
  - And somersault means ‘above leap’—when your feet go over your head.

- Knowing the meanings of bases can help us see the development of meanings, even those that have come fairly far from their origins.

**Latin Expressions**

- In everyday English, we have a few Latin expressions that still seem pretty Latin to us (and are often italicized in written English), yet we have done some surprising things with them.

- For example, ad hoc means ‘for a specific purpose, to fill a specific need’; it has been in the language since the 17th century, and then, in 1907, appears as “ad hocness.”

- Non sequitur, an inference or conclusion that does not follow (1564), can now take an English plural form (non sequiturs).
• *Status quo* and *per capita* are so common that people may not think of them as Latin phrases, although *status quo* wasn’t borrowed until the 19th century.

• *Et cetera* has been in English since the 1400s, and many people don’t know that *etc.* is the shortened form of this expression. You may also not know that *etc.* was used as a euphemism from the 16th through the 20th centuries for undergarments.

• The two expressions *i.e.* and *e.g.* are commonly confused, perhaps not only because they are Latin but also because they are almost always abbreviated. The first, *i.e.*, is an abbreviation for *id est*, ‘that is (to say)’ (1662); *e.g.* is an abbreviation for *exempli gratia*, ‘for the sake of example’ (1682).

**Hybrid Forms**

• The word *amoral* is a hybrid, a Greek prefix attached to a Latinate base to mean ‘without morals.’

• Another blend of Greek and Latin is *monolingual* (1879): *mon-*, ‘one’ (Greek) + *lingu-* (Latin). This word was formed on the model of *bilingual*, except that *bi-* is Latin and *mono-* is Greek!

• Other hybrids involve English elements with borrowed forms.
  o A common example here is *battle-ax* (1380), which is the French *battle* + English *ax*. For most of its history, this word really did refer to an ax; it was 1896 before it came to refer to a domineering woman in American English. It is hard not to relate this to the expression *ball and chain* to refer to a wife, two expressions that objectify women as heavy objects that restrain men.

  o The English prefix *un-* can attach to English bases (*unfair*, *unwise*), but it can also attach to French borrowings (*unsafe*, *uncomfortable*), Norse borrowings (*unhappy*), and Latin borrowings (*unresilient*).
- We have also lost, sadly, some native un- words, such as undeep and unglad.

- As mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, there is a native English prefix in- that also means ‘in, into.’ It used to attach more productively to English verbs, so we had income (for what is now ‘come in’), inwrite, insee, indwell, intake, and inbring.
  - You’ll notice that English now handles almost all of these with phrasal or prepositional verbs: come in, take in, bring in.
  - But there are noun and adjective leftovers: Income (‘salary’) derives from the verb sense in terms of the payment that comes in every month, and we still have the adjectival incoming even though we no longer have the verb income. We also have intake forms, despite the loss of the verb intake.
  - The nouns income and intake seem fancier than their verb counterparts but probably still wouldn’t appear on the SAT, whereas the Latin ingress, ‘act of entering,’ probably would, because that has remained a fairly technical, often legal term, as opposed to its etymologically related friend progress (< ‘move forward’).

### Suggested Reading

Ayers, *English Words from Latin and Greek Elements*.


### Questions to Consider

1. Do you see a problem with hybrid words, which combine, for example, Greek and Latin parts?

2. To what extent do you think such Latin phrases as status quo, per capita, and et cetera have become fully English? How could we make this decision in a more empirical way?
In an earlier lecture, we saw that the Latin base *ped-* refers to feet and appears in such words as *pedestrian*, *pedicure*, and *bipedal*. In Greek, though, *ped-* means ‘child’ and appears in English in *pediatric* and *pediatrician*. But what about other foot-related words in English that have *pod-* rather than *ped-*, such as *tripod* and *podiatrist*? These come from the Greek base *pod-* (‘foot’). In this lecture, we’ll focus on the influence of Greek on the English lexicon.

**Greek Words in the English Lexicon**
- The word *lexicon* is from Greek, while the less academic-sounding *vocabulary* is from Latin. This fact reveals a pattern in Greek words: They are often highly specialized and remain very learned.

- English has many fewer borrowings from Greek than from Latin, and they make their way into English in a couple of ways.
  - Some Greek words were borrowed into Latin and then made their way into English (e.g., *tripod*) or into other languages from which English then borrowed. These may feel a bit less learned but not always.
  - A whole set of Greek words was borrowed directly from Greek during the Renaissance (e.g., *lexicon*).
  - Greek influence also shows up in English in the embedding of Greek mythology in the English vocabulary and in the creation of Greek-like words that never existed in Greek, especially in such areas as medical and scientific terminology.

**Greek Word Webs**
- If we spin the lexical web out a bit from the word *lexicon*, we can see different ways that ultimately Greek words have come into English.
A set of directly related words, including *lexical* (1836) and *lexis* (1950, in linguistics, synonymous with *lexicon*), all come into English from Greek.

*Lexeme* is also used in linguistics to describe a unit of lexical meaning. *Lexicography* (referring to the creation and study of dictionaries) comes from *lexicon* + *-graphy* (also Greek) and appears as early as 1680.

- The Greek combining form *-graphy* (meaning ‘write, delineate’) is used in names of areas of scientific study; thus, in addition to *lexicography*, we get such words as *geography* and *bibliography*.
  - *Geography* is quite an old term in English—going back to the 16th century. We brought it in from French, and it goes back to Latin and then to Greek. The root is *ge-* meaning ‘earth’ in Greek; thus, we can think of *geography* as ‘delineating the earth.’
  - In *bibliography*, we find the Greek root *bibli-* for ‘book.’ The word originally meant ‘the writing of books’ and later became ‘the description and history of books.’

- The combining form *-graphy* also appears in words to describe writing, such as *stenography*, *calligraphy*, and *orthography*.
  - *Stenography* goes back to the Greek for ‘narrow writing,’ similar to modern shorthand.
  - *Calligraphy*, a Renaissance borrowing (1604), goes back to the Greek for ‘beautiful writing.’ The *OED* notes that this word may actually have come through Latin or French rather than directly from Greek.
  - *Orthography* (1460) came into English through Anglo-Norman and Middle French. It goes back to Greek for ‘correct writing’; hence, the use of *orthography* for ‘proper spelling.’
• The combining form ortho- also shows up in other places in English, most obviously, perhaps, in orthodox, which English borrowed from Latin (1454) to refer to what is right, correct, or true.
  o Since then, ortho- has been used to create scientific terminology, often with the meaning ‘straight, upright’ (but sometimes ‘correct’) as in orthodontia/-ics.
  o Orthopedics comes from the same ortho- but, in this case, through French; it originally referred to the (surgical) correction of physical deformities in children and was later generalized to all musculoskeletal conditions.

Layers of Borrowing
• Although English borrowed some words directly from Greek, there are often intervening languages in this borrowing, especially Latin and French.

• These layers of borrowing, sometimes from the original Greek and sometimes through other languages, allow English to have cognate words from the same Greek root.
  o For example, this kind of borrowing explains how treasure and thesaurus are related: They both go back to the same Greek root meaning ‘treasure.’
  o English borrowed treasure from French in the 12th century, and the French word can be traced back to the classical Latin thesaurus and then to the Greek.
  o English borrowed thesaurus (‘treasury of knowledge’) in the 18th century, and Peter Mark Roget used the word in 1852 to refer to a word treasury that was organized by sense to capture synonyms.

• The Greek root chron-, ‘time,’ serves as another example of one root coming into English through multiple paths. The root gives English chronicle (1440) and chronic (1601), chronology (1593), and much later, chronobiology (1969).
o The early date of *chronicle* (1440) is a signal that it probably came through French, which it did, but it can be traced back to Latin and then to Greek to refer to matters of time.

o *Chronic* also came in through French, from Latin, and it originally meant ‘of time’ but was used from the beginning in English to refer to medical conditions that last a long time.

o We borrowed *chronology* (‘the science of computing/recording time’) straight from Latin, but it can then be traced back to Greek.

o In contrast, *chronobiology* isn’t borrowed at all. Here, the Greek root *chron-* was used to create a new name, in English, for the study of periodic phenomena.

• One root that is a bit more buried in English words than *chron-* is *log-*, meaning ‘speech, word, reasoning.’

  o In rhetoric, Aristotle spoke of three types of appeals: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* (the appeal to a person’s character, to emotion, or to reason); here, the terms are borrowed straight from the Greek.

  o But *log-* shows up in many other places in English, such as *prologue* (‘the speech that comes before’) and *epilogue* (‘the speech that comes in addition’), both of which come from French and then from Latin.

  o *Apology* came into English through Latin. If we go back to the original meaning in Greek, we get ‘away’ + ‘speaking,’ originally meaning ‘to plead off or fend off a charge.’ It then came to mean ‘an explanation accompanied by an expression of regret.’

  o The root *log-* also appears in *analogy*, *logarithm*, *logistics*, and *logic*—and what we’ve been talking about here: *neologism*. 
Influences of Greek Mythology and History

• Some expressions from Greek mythology are fairly obvious.
  o For example, we call a weakness an *Achilles heel* (1840) because the mother of the young Achilles held him by his heel when she dipped him in the river Styx to make him invulnerable.
  
    o An *Adonis* (1571) is beautiful and strong because that’s how the Greek Adonis is described; *titanic* (1709) things are huge, as the Titans were; *Herculean* (1596) tasks require the strength of Hercules; and any long journey can become an *odyssey* (1886).

• The roots of some expressions are less obvious.
  o The labyrinth for which all other labyrinths (1611) are named was created by King Minos, in Crete, to contain the Minotaur.
  
    o Nemesis was the goddess of retribution, and Narcissus (who fell into the water admiring his own reflection) gives us the name of the flower and *narcissism* (1822) for ‘excessive self-admiration.’
  
    o The mythical punishment of Tantalus gives us the verb *tantalize* (1597). (He stood in water in Hades but could not drink or reach the fruit over his head.)
  
    o Proteus could continuously change shape, as can *protean* things (1594).

• Many of these mythological terms first appeared in English during the Renaissance, with its intense interest in classical literature and languages. In this period, English also gained a few other words whose meanings come from Greek history.
  o *Ostracism* (1588) refers to the practice in ancient Greece whereby a citizen who was considered dangerous was, through a vote, banished from the city for 10 years. It later came to mean ‘banishment by general consent.’ *Ostracism* goes back to the word for the potsherd used for voting in ancient Greece.
o The winding Meander River gave us the noun *meander* (1576), which came to be used as a verb, too, by 1613.

o *Solecism* (1577), which English borrowed from Latin, goes back to the Greek word, which referred to ‘speaking incorrectly.’ The story is that the colonial residents of Soli spoke Greek so badly that the name of their colony became synonymous for a grammatical mistake. By 1599, in English, the word meant any violation of etiquette.

**Technical Vocabulary**

- Greek words run rampant in English in technical vocabulary, especially in the sciences and medicine. For example, even a non-medical specialist can distinguish *dysostosis* from *dysarthria*.

- In *dysostosis*, the root *dys-* means ‘bad’ and *ost-* means ‘bone’ (it shows up in *osteoporosis*).

- In *dysarthria*, *arthr-* means ‘joint, articulation’; it shows up in *arthritis*, but here, it refers more to ‘disarticulation.’

- Thus, we get ‘defective formation of bone’ (*dysostosis*) versus ‘impairment of speech articulation’ (*dysarthria*). As we’ve seen, sometimes new English words are created from Greek parts, such as *electrocardiograph* (1910), the machine that records the electrical activity of the heart. *Psychology* is borrowed from Latin and goes back to Greek, but *psychiatry* is created from Greek parts: *psych-* meaning ‘mind, soul,’ and *-iatr,* meaning ‘medicine.’
We don’t necessarily need these technical terms, but the foreign terminology can help distinguish technical meanings from nontechnical ones, as for example, with aphasia and speechlessness. Technically, they mean the same thing, but aphasia is the medical term for when people lose control of parts of their speech abilities, and speechlessness is a much less formal term for when we lose words in our everyday experience.

Of course, not all Greek terms are technical, but some are all around us, even in the stars, so to speak.
  o If we know something about Greek etymology in English words, we can explain wonderful factoids, such as how asteroid is related to asterisk: aster-, ‘star,’ + -oid, ‘like,’ versus aster-, ‘star,’ + -isk (diminutive).
  o Incidentally, factoid is a hybrid form of the Latin-based fact (1545) and Greek -oid, coined in 1973 to refer to something like a fact or something that is supposed to be fact but is actually not. It seems to be used more currently for something like a ‘baby fact,’ or an insignificant fact—a factisk!
  o Thus, while some of English is Greek, we now are taking the Greek and making it fully English.

**Suggested Reading**

Ayers, *English Words from Latin and Greek Elements*.

Questions to Consider

1. Shibboleths are linguistic features (pronunciations, words, and so on) that, in revealing a speaker’s origins or community, can distinguish “insiders” from “outsiders.” What shibboleths have you encountered in your own life?

2. Donald Ayers uses the example of *aphasia* versus *speechlessness* to show that sometimes having scientific Greek terms can helpfully distinguish a technical meaning from a nontechnical one. Can you think of other examples?
People often comment on the chaos of English spelling. In this lecture and the next, we will unpack the many things that have happened to English words that have wreaked such havoc with spelling. As we will see, English spelling is, in many ways, a museum—of spelling practices by English and Norman French scribes, of earlier pronunciations, and of meddling, when grammarians and lexicographers have changed spellings for various reasons. In this first lecture, we’ll look at early spelling practices in English that continue to haunt Modern English spelling and subsequent shifts in pronunciation that have created idiosyncrasies of their own.

How Irregular Is English Spelling?

- Some linguists argue that English spelling is 80 to 90 percent predictable (e.g., at, bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, spat, splat, vat, but then, of course, we also have what).

- Some common rules don’t work; for example, ancient belies “i before e except after c.” A longer version of the rule—“i before e except after c or when sounds like a, as in neighbor and weigh”—explains beige and eight but not seize or leisure.

- Still, we know what words are and are not possible in English. Phit could be a word but not ckall.

- Some longstanding rules are at least somewhat reliable; for example, a final -e marks long vowels (and can be traced back to at least 1582), and a double consonant marks a short vowel (can be traced back to at least 1200). But what about gh? It’s pronounced /f/ in laugh; it’s silent in night; and it’s pronounced /g/ in ghost.

- History can help explain some of these spelling irregularities, including gh. When we look at the origins of the alphabet we
use today, changes that took place with the arrival of French, and pronunciation changes, we begin to find patterns in the chaos.

The History of English Writing

• The Latin alphabet came to England with Christianity in 597 A.D. The problem was that it had 23 letters for about 35 sounds. For this reason, some letters had to represent multiple sounds; for example, $c$ was used for /k/ and /ch/, as we can see in the spellings *cat* and *cild* (Old English for *child*; the spelling changed later). We also get the $c$ spelling in the cluster *sc* in Old English, which sounded like “ship”; in fact, in Old English, *ship* was spelled *scip*.

• But the Latin alphabet was also missing letters for some Old English sounds, and scribes used a few symbols adapted from the runic alphabet, such as the ash (æ), yogh (ȝ; used for the sounds /j/, /g/, and /x/), and thorn (þ).

• If you know these conventions, Old English spelling is reasonably predictable (e.g., *hlud* = loud, *knif* = knife, *nihtwacu* = night watch). It was the coming of the Norman French that introduced more irregularity.

• After 1066, Norman scribes replaced the unfamiliar runes and made other spelling changes.
  o They substituted $a$ for æ, represented ȝ with $gh$ when it stood for the sound /x/, and replaced þ with $th$.
  o The Normans also introduced the spelling $sh$ for /sh/ and $ch$ for /ch/.
  o Some of these substitutions were helpful, but by analogy, the Old English *hw* (in such a word as *hwal*) became *wh* (whale).
  o Other French spelling conventions included using the letter $c$ to sound like /s/ when it came before $i$ and $e$ (city, cell); introducing *gu* for /g/, as in guide; and using *qu* for /kw/.
• Thus, in Middle English, we see a mixture of native English and French spelling conventions. It is also worth noting that we generally see much more variability in spelling than we’re used to today.
  o There was a much clearer correspondence of sound and spelling, which resulted in variations around England.
  o Scribes followed local pronunciations and practices and were not always consistent within a document.

• Printing introduced more stability, allowing for more national standardization; spelling was not as dependent on local pronunciation or changes in pronunciation. But that very fact meant that printing itself is responsible for some of our inconsistencies.

Shifts in Pronunciation
• By the late 15th century through the 17th, spelling was becoming standardized, but some major shifts in pronunciation were taking place at the same time.

• Many letters became silent, such as the /k/ in /kn/ (knave), the /g/ in /gn/ (gnat), and the /gh/ in might.
  o Interestingly, efforts were then made to “tidy up” spelling and make things more consistent, which meant, for example, that a silent gh was added to the word delight. This word appears in Middle English as delit, borrowed from French.
  o The gh in ghost was also added (the spelling in Old English was gast), perhaps by William Caxton himself.
  o This period also witnessed the loss of the final /g/ after /ŋ/, that is, after what we’d think of as an /n/. This is the final -ng in a word such as king, which actually doesn’t have a /g/ on the end.
  o The medial /t/ was lost in s-clusters (castle, hasten) and f-clusters (soften, often).
This period saw the loss of /l/ after /a/, as in *palm* or *almond*, although the /l/ is being reintroduced for many speakers of English.

**The Great Vowel Shift**

- The Great Vowel Shift took place over a long period of time. Historically, it’s been said that long vowels “moved up.”
  - A mid vowel, such as /o/, became the high vowel /u/, resulting in changes in pronunciation of *boot* (earlier “bote”) and *goose* (earlier “gose”).
  - A high vowel, such as /u/, became a diphthong, that is, a vowel that starts as one vowel and ends as another, in this case, /au/. The result was pronunciation changes in *mouse* and *house* (earlier spelled *mus* and *hus*).

- One key to reciting Chaucer is to retain pre–Great Vowel Shift pronunciations.

- Vowels are among the most irregular parts of English spelling, partly because vowels shift in pronunciation quite a bit over time. This is happening right now in the Midwest with “block” > “black,” “bag” > “beg,” and “cup” > “cop.”

**From “English Is Tough Stuff”**

Face, but preface, not efface.
Phlegm, phlegmatic, ass, glass, bass.
Large, but target, gin, give, verging,
Ought, out, joust and scour, scourging.
Ear but earn, and wear and tear.
Do not rhyme with here but ere.
Seven is right, but so is even,
Hyphen, roughen, nephew Stephen,
Monkey, donkey, Turk and jerk,
Ask, grasp, wasp, and cork and work.

**The Museum of English Spelling**

- In this lecture, we’ve focused on some of the factors in older varieties of English, such as
scribal decisions and pronunciation changes, that are captured in the museum of English spelling.

- The important thing to note here is that these pronunciation changes were taking place just as spelling was getting standardized, so that the spelling captures, for example, the pronunciations of vowels before they went through the Great Vowel Shift.

- In the next lecture, we’ll go from the Renaissance through the present day to continue the explanation of how some English spellings became as irregular, if not downright bizarre, as they are today.

**Suggested Reading**

Millward and Hayes, *A Biography of the English Language*.

Pei, *The Story of the English Language*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Can you imagine writing in a time of variable spelling, where you could spell the same word different ways in the same document and sometimes on the same page? Why wasn’t that confusing for the scribes and/or readers of the documents? (Many of us have handwriting that mixes print and script letters, which could be a useful analogy.)

2. What word spellings tend to trip you up? Why?
One of the many mysteries of English is why *colonel* is spelled the way it is. Why in the world is there a “r” in the middle of that word when we say it, when there is no *r* to be found in the spelling? And then there are those odd silent letters that we don’t pronounce, such as the *b* in *debt*, the *c* in *indict*, and the *s* in *island*. We can answer many questions about these spelling quirks, but not all of them. In this second lecture on English spelling, we will explore the theme of conscious meddling—the efforts of various people to fix, or rationalize, or simplify English spelling and how this has affected the way we spell some English words today.

**English in the 16th Century**

- As you’ll recall, in the 16th century, printing was taking off as an industry, and with it, the written language, especially spelling, was becoming standardized.
  - At the same time, the language was undergoing some major changes to the sound system and the vocabulary.
  - In other words, just as spellings were becoming standardized, the pronunciation of some words was changing radically.
  - The result is that modern spelling is often a museum of earlier Renaissance pronunciations, because spelling was fossilized before the sound change was complete.

- The massive borrowing from classical languages, as well as French, Italian, and so on, during the Renaissance also created idiosyncrasies in English spelling. When English borrowed words from other languages, we acquired spellings that strike us as non-native.
  - For example, we acquired initial consonant clusters that are not pronounced the way the spelling indicates: *pn* in *pneumonia* and *mn* in *mnemonic* are both pronounced as /n/; these words were borrowed in the 17th century from Latin.
The initial cluster *rh* in *rhetoric* also reveals Latin influence. This word actually first appeared in English in the 14th century, borrowed from Anglo-Norman French and spelled with an initial *r*, as well as *rh*; however, in the 16th century, with the interest in Latin rhetorical traditions, the *rh* spelling became more standard.

Such a spelling as *bizarre* may also strike us as non-native, and that’s because it’s French, borrowed in the 17th century. Native English words do not end with *-arre*.

The 16th century also witnessed the borrowing of *tsar* from Russian, spelled with an initial *ts* or *cz* in an effort to capture the pronunciation in Russian.

The *ps* in *psalm* is surprisingly old: it can be traced all the way back to Old English, but it, too, is non-native, coming from Latin.

*Psych-* comes from Greek in such words as *psyche* (borrowed in the 17th century) and from post-classical Latin, originally from Greek, in such words as *psychology* (also borrowed in the 17th century).

**Meddling in the Renaissance**

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the interest in classical Greece and Rome led to efforts to change English spelling to conform to the original Latin source. Often, when English had borrowed a word from French, the pre-Renaissance spelling corresponded to the pronunciation. Then, in the Renaissance, the spelling was changed to reflect, for example, the original Latin source.

The word *deb* was borrowed from French in the 14th century and spelled *det* or *dette*. The word can be traced back to the Latin *debitum*, and in the 16th century, a revised spelling with the *b* reinserted came to be standardized.
The $b$ in *doubt* has a similar origin: The original borrowing from French was spelled *doute*, but this spelling was later changed based on the Latin word *dubitare*.

Similarly, *indict* was borrowed from Anglo-Norman French in the 13th century and spelled *endyte* or *endite*. The spelling was Latinized in the 17th century to reflect the Latin form *indictare*; hence, the silent $c$.

- Sometimes these interventions in spelling based on classical etymologies ended up changing the pronunciation of a word.
  - The word *perfect* was borrowed from French in the 14th century and spelled in various ways similar to *perfet* or *parfit*. In the Renaissance, the spelling was changed based on classical Latin *perfectus*, and speakers eventually came to pronounce the $c$.
  - Similarly, we came to pronounce the $d$ in *adventure*, which was originally borrowed from French as *aventure* in the 13th century. The Latin source is *adventura*.

- Every once in a while, in these efforts to have English spelling correspond with classical etymologies, mistakes were made. The $s$ in *island* is a mistake.
  - This is a native English word and, in Old English, was *igland* or *iland*, ‘watery land.’ According to the *OED*, in the 15th century, the first syllable of the word came to be associated with French *ile*, ‘island.’ (The word *ile* was borrowed into English from French in the 13th century.)
  - The word *ile* was respelled *isle* in the Renaissance, based on the Latin source *insula*, and the word *island* also came to be respelled with an $s$, on the false assumption that the native English word *island* is etymologically related to *insula*.

- How, then, do we explain *colonel*? Is this also meddling or a mistake? In fact, it is neither—exactly. But it is arguably a result of the massive borrowing during the Renaissance.
In the 16th century, we borrowed coronel from French. Around the same time, we also borrowed colonello from Italian. For at least 50 years, both of those pronunciations and spellings were in circulation.

By about 1650, the spelling from French, coronel, had dropped out, but the pronunciation clearly had not. We had standardized the Italian spelling, with the French pronunciation.

Given the state of English spelling by the end of the Renaissance, it’s no wonder that the Renaissance also witnessed the beginning of adamant calls to reform English spelling.

In the 16th century, a Brit named William Bullokar made the case for a new system that used doubled letters and diacritics over vowels to clarify spellings and pronunciations; he even wrote a grammar with this new system, A Bref Grammar of English (1586).

Some examples of Bullokar’s spelling include whoo for who, som tym for sometime, uzed for used, and genderz for genders.

Spelling in American English

In the United States, Benjamin Franklin was very concerned about English spelling. He wrote in a letter to a friend, when he was proposing a reformed alphabet: “If we go on as we have done a few Centuries longer, our words will gradually cease to express Sounds, they will only stand for things, as the written words do in the Chinese language.”

Franklin was also in correspondence with Noah Webster, who shared an interest in promoting logical spellings. Further, developing an American spelling system was a way to establish the independence of American English.

In fact, many of the spelling differences between British and American English can be traced back to the reformed spellings in Webster’s 1828 dictionary. For example, -our became -or
(honor, color); -re became -er (theater, center); -ence became -ense (defense, offense); a single l was adopted in inflected forms (traveled); and -ise became -ize when the word in question could be traced to Latin or Greek (realize, organize).

- Note that not all of Webster’s reforms were successful. He wanted porpoises spelled porpesses, and he proposed dropping the -e from determine and medicine. The spellings we use today were adopted by the U.S. Government Printing Office in the mid-19th century.

- Since Webster’s day, there have continued to be efforts to reform English spelling. In the late 19th century, the American Philological Reform Association produced lists of new spellings that should be adopted, including ar (are), giv (give), hav (have), infinit (infinite), definit (definite), tho (though), and wisht (wished).

- In 1906, the Simplified Spelling Board, established with $250,000 from Andrew Carnegie, published a list of 300 common words, pushing for simpler or more logical spellings. The board’s recommendations included altho, tho, catalog, surpriz, fantasy, mist (missed), and possesst (possessed).
  - President Theodore Roosevelt actually supported this list of changes, but the Government Printing Office and the media balked at the spellings.
  - The Simplified Spelling Board died shortly after Andrew Carnegie did.

Do We Want to Reform Spelling?

- For all the complaints we might hear about the chaos of English spelling, we are actually quite attached to its idiosyncrasies. We are accustomed to how words look on a page and can find it disconcerting to see them spelled otherwise (e.g., cigaret v. cigarette).

- More seriously, we would lose the historical relationship of some words that have come to be pronounced differently over time. For example south and southern now have different vowel sounds, but
the spelling shows us that they come from the same word. The same is true of *Christ/Christmas* and *holy/holiday*.

- Serious spelling reform also raises the question of whose pronunciation would form the basis of the reform. Consider, for example, the varying pronunciations of such words as *route*, *roof*, and *aunt*.

- With ongoing sound changes, reforms would quickly become out of date.

- It’s also worth noting that a few spellings are changing under our noses without much meddling; think of such words as *donut*, *lite*, *thru*, and *tho*. Some spellings we now consider standard (e.g., *fantasy*) have changed in only the last 100 years.

- Spelling is the part of written English where standardization has been most successful. This doesn’t mean that we never see changes
in spelling, but they are relatively few and far between because spelling is already divorced from pronunciation in many cases.

Suggested Reading

Pei, *The Story of the English Language*.

Venezsky, “Spelling.”

Questions to Consider

1. Are there specific words whose spelling you would like to see reformed? How do you feel about the reformed spellings *cigaret*, *thru*, *drive-thru*, *tho*, and *tonite*?

2. Are there other words in English that you would predict might start to acquire spelling pronunciations (i.e., might start to be pronounced more the way they are spelled)?
One of the ways in which English nouns are quirky is how they are made into plurals. An -s is often added to nouns to make them plural, but then there are many nouns that do not take -s, including nouns that are identical in singular and plural forms (sheep), nouns that are made plural through a vowel change (man/men), and nouns that add an -a or an -i (memoranda, syllabi). Many of these oddities can be explained by knowing the history of these nouns in English. In this lecture, we’ll talk about irregular plurals in two categories: foreign borrowings and native words. We’ll also look at some usage questions related to plurals.

Countable and Uncountable Nouns

- Linguistics textbooks make the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns; the idea here is that uncountable nouns can’t be made plural. Can you think of any uncountable noun that cannot become countable in context?

Weather might seem to be an uncountable noun, but in some places, people experience multiple weathers in a day.
The nouns for liquids, such as *water* or *beer*, become countable if we’re referring to the liquid in a bottle, can, or glass (“three beers”); the same is true of *milk*.

*Love* is uncountable as an abstract notion, but countable in terms of the “loves of my life.”

*Pride* seems uncountable, but we can imagine someone referring to his or her children in the sentence “And now my prides have all left home.”

*Laundry* seems uncountable, but when *laundry* refers to a Laundromat or loads of laundry, it could perhaps become countable.

- Some scholars argue that given the right context, any noun can be countable. This raises the question of whether countable/uncountable is a useful way to categorize nouns or whether we should think instead about how nouns behave in particular contexts.

**Irregular Plurals from Foreign Borrowings**

- Throughout these lectures, we’ve talked about the massive influx of borrowed words into English, and with these borrowings come foreign plurals.
  - Among the most interesting plurals are those for Latin borrowings that end in *-us*, such as *syllabus, focus, status,* and *corpus*.
  - Not all of these Latin *-us* words come from the same declension in Latin, so they have different plural formations in Latin, which further confuses the issue in English. There are also a few *-us* borrowings, such as *hippopotamus*, that aren’t from Latin at all.

For all of these words, the -\(i\) plural is still the most common in English, but some of them are starting to become Englishified. Students, for example, often refer to syllabuses.

Another set of these -\(i\) forms have already become Englishified. For example, we use crocuses, not croci; abacuses, not abaci; and uteruses, not uteri.

With alumnus, confusion is caused by the fact that the word has both masculine and feminine forms (alumnus/alumna) and, thus, masculine and feminine plural forms (alumni/alumnae). An easy solution has been found with alum/alums.

There are also -\(us\) borrowings from Latin that have no plurals in Latin; thus, the plural of apparatus is apparatus and that of status is status—if we stay true to Latin. But we haven’t, and many speakers use apparatuses and statuses.

A third set of -\(us\) words takes what looks to us like an irregular plural, such as corpus/corpora and genus/genera. The OED already includes genuses to make that plural more English but not yet corpuses.

We also have a set of words that people mistake for Latin borrowings. Many people don’t realize that hippopotami is not actually the plural of hippopotamus because hippopotamus is Greek, not Latin.

Many dictionaries recommend the -\(es\) ending but recognize that some people use -\(i\).

The same is true of octopus (octopuses, octopi), but chorus is always choruses.

Another borrowing, data, presents an ongoing usage issue.

Technically, data is plural, because it is plural in Latin; the singular is datum. But in English, data has been reinterpreted
as a singular mass noun. People write “the data shows,” as opposed “the data show” or “that data,” instead of “these data.”

- Both forms are now in common usage, with a preference for the singular in the spoken, although 23 percent of the *AHD* usage panel still rejects *data* as singular.

- Many of these borrowed plurals are becoming more English in form. Occasionally, one meaning will get an English form while a more technical meaning will keep the foreign plural (e.g., *antennae* [insects] v. *antennas* [TVs, cars]).

**Irregular Native Plurals**

- Other irregular plurals are native forms, and their irregularities tell us something about the history of the language.

- English used to have a few regular ways of making plurals, one of which was adding an *-an*, which later became *-en*. At one time, the language had many more of these *-en* plurals, but such words as *shoen* became *shoes* and *eyen* became *eyes*. All we are left with now are *children*, *oxen*, and *brethren*, although *oxen* may die and *brethren* is already specialized.

- Another regular way of making plurals in English was with a zero ending, which we still see in *sheep* and *deer*. Interestingly, this class has expanded over time (as opposed to *-en*), encompassing *fish* (which used to be *fishes*—and remains *fishes* when referring to multiple species) and *moose*.

- The vowel-change plurals reflect a very old stage of Germanic, when there was a plural ending that caused the vowel to change. That ending has long since fallen by the wayside, but its effects remain in *goose/geese*, *man/men*, and *mouse/mice*.

**Singular Nouns and Plural Verbs**

- One set of mass nouns, including *jury* and *media*, shows variation in verb agreement.
• Some of this variation is a British/American distinction. In Britain, these group nouns tend to take plural agreement (“the jury are”), and in the United States, they take singular agreement (“the jury is”).

• Whether *media* is singular or plural remains a contested usage question and depends on whether we’re talking about a mode of artistic expression or the press/broadcast networks.
  o For example, an artist might say, “I work in various media” (or mediums).

  o In reference to the press, however, we say both “The media is doing the country a service” or “The media is always looking for heroes” and “I think it’s important that the media are at town hall meetings” or “The media are eating it up.” The form of the verb used here may depend on whether we are emphasizing the unity or the varied nature of the media.

**The Generic Pronoun Problem**

• The generic pronoun problem is a highly contested usage question: What should we do when we’re talking about a person of unknown or unspecified gender? Do we use the phrase *he or she*, switch between *he* and *she*, or treat *they* as singular?

• To answer this question, we need to take a slight detour to look at the history of *you*.
  o English used to make a singular/plural distinction between *thou* and *you*.

  o Over time, this became a formality distinction rather than one of number. Shakespeare played with this as a way to show intimacy or to subtly put someone down. There was even a verb (*to thou*) for using *thou* to suggest familiarity or contempt.

  o By the end of the Renaissance, *thou* was becoming archaic. *You* took over both singular and plural functions, which it continues to do to this day in most standard varieties of English.
Notice that even in the singular, *you* continues to take plural verb agreement in standard varieties of English, including formal written prose (“you are,” no matter how many people one is talking to).

In many nonstandard varieties of English, speakers have created new plural forms (*y’all, yinz, vous*, and so on), as we discussed in the lecture on American dialects.

The key point here is that over time, *you* came to take on a singular function in addition to a plural function.

- The generic pronoun problem occurs in such sentences as the following: “A teacher should learn _____ students’ names as quickly as possible.”
  - Usage guides used to recommend *he* as generic, but feminist movements successfully challenged that in the 1970s and 1980s, and the prescription has changed.
  - Usage guides now tell us to use *his or her*, to rewrite the whole sentence as plural, or to switch between masculine and feminine pronouns. In speaking, however, most of us don’t say “his or her”; we say “they”: “A teacher should learn their students’ names as quickly as possible.”
  - Multiple studies confirm that this is the predominant choice in spoken American English (and other varieties), and it has a long history (this usage can be found in both Austen and Shakespeare). Still, some people argue that *they* is plural and can’t be singular.
  - As the story of *you* demonstrates, there is a precedent for a pronoun carrying both singular and plural meaning (in English and other languages).

Given these circumstances and the contention about *they*, people sometimes claim that English has no generic singular pronoun.
It can’t do the trick because it is restricted to inanimate things—and babies!
- Some people have tried to create artificial singular pronouns, such as *e, heshe, than*, and *ze*, and there is some interest now in using *ze* for people whose gender defies traditional male/female binaries.
- But in terms of a generic (unknown, unspecified) pronoun, we don’t need an artificial construct; speakers solved this problem hundreds of years ago. It is just a question of time before style guides accept *they* as singular, and in fact, we are already seeing this usage in newspapers and elsewhere.
- The *AHD* explicitly recognizes the conundrum, commenting on the convenience of using a singular *they* but noting that many people avoid it out of deference to traditional grammar.
- One solution in writing is to include a footnote so that readers know you have made a conscious decision to treat *they* as singular when necessary.

• In the end, what is wrong with the singular *they* is that someone has told us it is wrong. In fact, this usage solves a problem and is already common in speech. We have good grounds to challenge the idea that we should not use it in formal written prose.

**Suggested Reading**

Baron, *Grammar and Gender*.


**Questions to Consider**

1. What plural form do you use for the second-person pronoun *you*? Does it vary by context?
2. Do you still find it difficult to accept *they* as a singular generic pronoun? Why or why not?

3. Some scholars argue that given the right context, any noun can be countable. Can you think of possible exceptions?
I’m Good … Or Am I Well?
Lecture 21

It seems like such a simple question: How are you? And it is simple if we answer with one word: “fine,” “good,” “exhausted.” But if we say “I am _____,” many of us learned that “I am well” is correct, while “I am good” is not. In answering this question, you might be referring to your health, in which case, “I am well” seems fine, but you might also be answering more generally, referring to your state of being. In that case, “I am good” would seem to be acceptable. In fact, the prescription against “I am good” doesn’t hold up under scrutiny; it can be traced to confusion between adjectives and adverbs, the topic of this lecture.

Clarifying Adjectives and Adverbs

- Let’s begin by looking at the “good versus well” controversy.
  - The verb to be is a linking verb; it links the subject to the noun or adjective after the verb: “I am a professor”; “I am happy.” Other linking verbs include seem and appear.
  - In the answer “I am _____,” we expect an adjective (terrible, tired).
  - Well is both an adjective and an adverb, and here is where things get confusing. Well is the adverb form of good: “I am a good cook” means “I cook well.” But well is also an adjective in reference to health.
  - Good is generally an adjective: “The food is good”; “the good food.” But in some nonstandard varieties of English, it is also an adverb: “He runs good.” This is a fairly stigmatized construction.
  - It’s likely that concerns about good as an adverb have bled over to encourage a sense that there is something wrong with “I am
good,” but in that sentence, *good* is serving as an adjective, just as it is in “I feel good.” In fact, we can say either, depending on what we mean.

- Adjectives describe nouns and appear either right before a noun (“the happy camper”) or after a linking verb (“The camper seems happy”).

- Adverbs describe many things: verbs (“run quickly”), adjectives (“really happy”), other adverbs (“really quickly”), and full sentences (“Frankly, I didn’t like the restaurant at all”).

- One of the common markers of adverbs is the suffix -ly, which we can add to an adjective to make an adverb: *quick > quickly, beautiful > beautifully.*
  - There are also a few adjectives that have the -ly ending (*homely, comely, manly, friendly*). The historical source of the modern -ly had an adjective and adverb form (distinguished by a final -e), but that distinction has been lost over time. The suffix -ly has come to be used to form adverbs, which leaves such adjectives as *friendly* in an awkward position: What is the adverb form—friendlily, in a friendly way?
  - Many adverbs have no distinctive -ly marking, such as *soon, up, down, and fast.*
  - Some “flat adverbs,” such as *fast, early, late, and hard,* share the same form as the adjective: “I am a fast runner”; “I run fast.” And in some cases, speakers use adjectives as adverbs: “drive slow”; “drive safe.”

- Do you feel bad or badly about someone else’s misfortune?
  - You can write badly, or cook badly, or fail badly, using the adverb with all these verbs.
  - But *feel* can be confusing because it can be both a linking verb and a transitive verb; as a linking verb, it can be followed by an adjective, but as a transitive verb, it would take an adverb. There
is, technically, a meaning difference between “I feel badly” and “I feel bad.” If you feel badly, the idea is that you have a bad sense of touch; if you feel bad, you have a bad feeling.

- Thus, you should feel bad for someone else’s misfortune, although this construction sounds overly informal or even wrong to many speakers.

- With bad and badly, we can see that confusion has led to prescription and anxiety about what is correct so that we may even rethink what is technically correct.

The Sentence Adverb

- In the first couple of decades of the 20th century, the adverb hopefully started to be used to mean ‘I hope/we hope/it is hoped that…’ (in addition to ‘full of hope’). Speakers could say, “She smiled hopefully” and “Hopefully, it won’t rain tomorrow.”

- The sentence adverb use of hopefully gained in popularity, but in the 1960s, prescriptive commentators noticed this new use and condemned it, calling it overly ambiguous. Still, speakers have continued to use it prolifically as a sentence adverb, although this usage dropped in edited prose.

- Many other sentence adverbs, such as mercifully, fortunately, briefly, and frankly, are fully accepted.

- Given how common the sentence adverb use of hopefully is in speech, it seems that speakers can tolerate whatever ambiguity may be present with its use. In fact, in some cases, the ambiguity may be helpful. In the sentence “Hopefully, it won’t rain tomorrow,” the sense is that more than one person is hoping—there is a general hope in the air.
Intensifiers

- Adverbs used as intensifiers tend to change rapidly, but most of these are so slangy that they do not receive prescriptive attention; that is, it’s understood that they will not be used in formal writing.

- Intensifiers are adverbs that modify or intensify adjectives or adverbs. These are words that could appear before cool, as in “very cool,” “really cool,” “totally cool,” “mad cool,” and “wicked cool.”

- Sali Tagliamonte and Chris Roberts at the University of Toronto have done a study of intensifiers, showing their layered history, with new intensifiers coexisting with older ones and replacing them.
  - For example, the word well as an intensifier gave way to full, which then gave way to right (as in “right welcome”). We then see the introduction of pretty. By the 16th century, very was also in the mix, but it then started to get edged out by really, and now, so is starting to overtake really.

  - There are other new intensifiers in American English, such as hella (as in “hella cool”) and uber (“uber cool”). Some British English intensifiers overlap with those in American English (very, really, so, absolutely), but some are more slangy (flipping, chuffing, dead, bloody, blooming).

Comparatives and Superlatives

- In English, we have two options for forming comparatives and superlatives: the suffixes -er/-est and the modifiers more/most.
  - Typically, one-syllable adjectives take -er/-est (taller, shorter, thinnest, fattest, greener), and adjectives of three syllables or more take more/most (more beautiful, most fabulous).

  - Two-syllable adjectives show variation; speakers may use happiest or most happy.

- Given this pattern, the adjective fun should take -er/-est. Why doesn’t it?
The answer is that *fun* has become an adjective relatively recently. In fact, the *OED* has not yet recorded *fun* as an adjective; it has it as a noun.

Originally, the sentence “The party was fun” would have been similar to “The party was chaos,” because *fun* there was a noun. But we can see how *fun* could be reinterpreted as an adjective in the first sentence.

As a noun, *fun* takes *more*; you can have “more fun.” This is why right now, *fun* often still takes *more* even when it is an adjective. But when children encounter *fun* as an adjective, they logically try to make it behave like other adjectives, which means they say “funner” and “funnest.”

In the long run, it seems likely that *funner* and *funnest* will succeed, although in informal polling, speakers seem to have a much stronger negative reaction to *funner* than to *funnest*, so *funnest* may succeed first.

**Attributive versus Predicative Position**

- Another odd thing about some adjectives is that they mean different things depending on where they are in the sentence.

- For example, the adjective *fun* can modify a noun by coming before the noun (“the fun party”—what’s known as the attributive position) and after a linking verb (“The party was fun”—the predicative position).
• Most adjectives can appear in both positions and mean the same thing, but there are a few adjectives that typically, if not exclusively, appear only in the attributive or predicative position.
  o The adjectives *former* and *latter* appear only attributively: “the former point,” “the latter question.” We wouldn’t say, “The point is former.”
  o The adjectives *awake* and *asleep* typically appear only predicatively: “The student is asleep.” We wouldn’t ordinarily say, “the asleep student.”
  o But we can imagine contexts, especially where we are setting up a contrast, where such adjectives as *awake* and *asleep* could be used attributively: “Look at that student over there. No, not the awake one, the asleep one.”

• Another set of adjectives mean different things when they are used attributively and predicatively.
  o Consider the adjective *late* as an example: “His wife is late” versus “His late wife.”
  o The adjective *sheer* also changes: “The curtains are sheer” versus “That is sheer stupidity.”
  o In “sheer stupidity,” *sheer* is doing a kind of intensifying work, and there are a couple of other adjectives that can work similarly when they appear in attributive position. For example, someone can be perfect, but he or she can also be a perfect idiot. Of course, a perfect child probably is perfect; here again, we see an ambiguity in the language: *Perfect* can mean ‘without flaw’ and ‘corresponding to the prototype of.’
The Ambiguity of Language

- As mentioned earlier, human language is naturally ambiguous and ever-changing, and the changes that take place do not consistently aim to minimize ambiguity. In fact, as prescriptivists lament, *hopefully* as a sentence adverb may introduce new ambiguities.

- As we’ve seen, however, ambiguity does useful work for us as speakers, and in context, speakers can typically interpret ambiguous constructions without any confusion.

- There is good reason to try to minimize ambiguity in writing: There is less context, and we cannot make corrections in the same way we can if we see that our audience is confused when we are talking.

- One of the challenges of writing well is to locate the ambiguities in our utterances and minimize them, so that our writing can be understood with very little context and without any further explanation.

- This is one of the many ways that formal writing is not “the way we talk written down,” not only in terms of the words we choose (we are taught not to use such intensifiers as *wicked* or *uber* in formal prose) but also in the constructions we use to sound formal and to promote clarity across contexts.

Suggested Reading

Tagliamonte and Roberts, “So Weird; So Cool; So Innovative.”

Yagoda, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It.*
Questions to Consider

1. Do you think there is a semantic distinction between “I’m good” and “I’m well”? If so, what is the distinction? Do you think there is a formality distinction between the two?

2. Do you have concerns about the form funner? What about funnest? If so, how would you describe your concern?
English verbs have undergone a striking amount of change in the history of the language, and they continue to vary and shift all around us. One verb with multiple forms is *sneak*, which can be *sneaked* or *snuck* in the past tense. Rather than speakers enhancing regularity over time, this verb shows us that speakers also introduce irregularities. In this lecture, we’ll look at the broad system of regular and irregular verbs and the historical movement of verbs from one category to the other. We’ll also look at some of the auxiliary verbs in English and some of the prescriptive rules that focus on verbs.

**Regular and Irregular Verbs**
- In Modern English, regular verbs are defined by how they create the past tense and past participle (i.e., by adding *-ed*).

  - The verbs we think of as irregular form the past tense and past participle through an internal vowel change (*swim/swam/swum, ring/rang/rung, drink/drank/drunk*). As you can hear, there is some regularity in these verbs. In Old English, this was a second class of regular verbs, called strong verbs. The *-ed* verbs were called weak verbs.

  - Over time, most of these internal vowel-change verbs have started to take *-ed*. The past tense of *help* used to be *holp* but is now *helped*. *Melt* used to be *molte*. *Swell/swoll/swollen* is now *swell/swelled/swelled* or *swollen*. *Shine* is still undergoing the change from *shone* to *shined*. This pattern is typical; vowel-change verbs tend to become *-ed* verbs.

- But every once in a while, speakers make a historically regular verb irregular. The past tense of *dig* used to be *digged*, not *dug*, and historically, the past tense of *dive* is *dived*. (This is now changing
to *dove*, although *dived* is still the past tense for some and the past participle for most: *have dived*).

- Why would speakers create these irregularities? With *dive*, the answer is probably by analogy: *drive/drove, dive/dove*.

- The irregularity is harder to explain with *sneak* because there is no clear analogy. The closest is perhaps *stick/stuck*, but the verbs have different vowels (*stick, sneak*).

- There is another legacy in Modern English that we can trace back to weak and strong verbs. The strong verbs, the ones that took the vowel change, also often formed the past participle with -en: *strive/strived, know/knew/known*.

  - Historically, the verb *mow* was a strong verb—it took an internal vowel change to make the past tense—but now, the past tense is *mowed*. The past participle, though, can be *mowed* or *mown* (*have mowed, have mown*).

  - The verb *shave* similarly has two past participles (*have shaved, have shaven*) as it undergoes the transition to becoming regular.

  - *Prove* is actually a borrowed word, from French, and it was regular. But it later developed an irregular past participle, *proven*, probably through analogy with such past participles as *cloven*.
• Interestingly, with these verbs that have two past participles, neither past participle has been stigmatized as wrong or ignorant. This variation seems to fly below the radar of most people, and both forms are typically considered standard.
  o However, people do see as nonstandard such constructions as “she has drank.”
  o Here, people are making irregular verbs behave more regularly so that the past tense and past participle are the same. For example, with the regular verb talk, the past tense and past participle are the same (talked/talked). The way to make the irregular verb drink behave more regularly is to make the past participle the same as the past tense (thus, drank/drank as opposed to drank/drunk).
  o The same thing occurs with the verb go. Here, the past tense is went and the past participle is gone, but you sometimes hear “have went” rather than “have gone.”

• The distinction between strong and weak verbs helps explain the confusion between lay and lie.
  o In Old English, there were some intransitive strong verbs (i.e., those that didn’t take an object), such as lie, that had related -ed verbs that could be used transitively (or causatively).
  o In other words, there was a verb that took an internal vowel change but no object (lie/lay) and a transitive verb that took the past tense (lay), used that as its base form, and then added -ed to make the past tense (lay/laid). Lay (‘to lay something down’) is the transitive form of lie (‘to make something lie’).
  o You might hear “I lay myself down to sleep” because myself is the object.

• There are also a few irregular verbs that defy all neat categorization.
As in most languages, *to be* in English is highly irregular, and it is actually an amalgamation of three roots: a b-root (*be, been*), a w-root (*was, were*), and a vowel-root (*am, is*).

These verbs can be so highly irregular precisely because they are so common. Children learn them with all their irregularities readily and without trying to make them regular verbs.

**Auxiliary Verbs**

- The modal verbs, those that allow us to express possibility, obligation, necessity, and probability, have undergone significant changes. Traditionally these include *can, could, may, might, will, would, shall, should,* and *must.*

- Modal verbs don’t behave like main verbs in that they don’t carry person or tense (i.e., they don’t inflect depending on person; we say, “I can,” “you can,” “she can,” not “she cans,” the way we’d say, “she talks”), and they always appear with a main verb (“He can cook”). (The reason these verbs sometimes don’t seem to have a main verb is elision: “Will you go?” “I will.” “Can we do that?” “Yes we can.”)

- Two of these traditional modals are in serious decline. The first, not surprisingly, is *shall,* but the second is *must.* This verb has been in decline for much of the 20th century. Although this might surprise you initially, once you reflect on it, you may agree that *must* feels awfully strong. Instead of “I must turn out the lights before we leave,” we would typically say, “I hafta turn out the lights before we leave.”

- This example points to the rise of a new set of auxiliary verbs that is emerging—sometimes called semi-modals or emerging modals. These include *hafta* and *gonna.*

  - If we didn’t have standardized spelling, these verbs would be spelled *hafta* and *gonna* because that is how we say them. In fact, as mentioned earlier, *gonna* and *going to* now mean different things: “I’m gonna study” versus “I am going to study.”
These verbs are still recognized as informal, and we don’t write them in formal prose, but their rise in American English is dramatic.

Prescriptive Attitudes about Verbs

- A traditional rule holds that *may* is about permission and *can* is about possibility/ability. In fact, *can* has been used to express permission for almost 200 years, so these two verbs overlap (and we prefer *can’t* to *mayn’t*). *May* now feels more formal, but the *AHD* usage panel still overwhelmingly criticizes “Can I have two more weeks?”

- There is a much less well-known rule about *shall* and *will*. For those who know it, the idea is that one expresses future and one obligation, and the difference varies by person.
  - In the first person (I, we), *shall* expresses future and *will* expresses obligation. In the second and third person, *will* expresses future and *shall* expresses obligation.

  - As far as we know, this “rule” has never been true. It was imposed by prescriptivists trying to create a logical system where there has never been one.

  - For Americans, *shall* is more formal and is sometimes used to express official, legal obligation.

- There is one highly stigmatized auxiliary verb: *ain’t*. What’s wrong with it?
  - In the 18th century, a number of contractions were condemned: *shouldn’t*, *can’t*, *won’t*, and *ain’t*. All of these have redeemed themselves—they are sometimes seen as informal but not ignorant—except *ain’t*.

  - Some people believe that the problem is that *ain’t* is not transparent (it comes from *amn’t*). But *won’t* is equally nontransparent and is not condemned as ignorant.
What is striking about ain’t is that for all the condemnation, almost all speakers of American English use it. Some use it as a systematic part of the grammar; others use it for emphasis.

If you think about it, “ain’t I?” seems more systematic than “aren’t I?” Why do we accept “aren’t I?” as standard when we don’t accept “I aren’t”? This is just one of many examples in which what is considered standard is not necessarily more logical than other possibilities.

The rule about not ending a sentence with a preposition also falls, in some cases, into the category of prescriptions about verbs.

In the sentence “She is the friend I went to Hawaii with,” the word stranded at the end is a preposition, but there are other examples in which the word that is stranded is not technically a preposition.

In the sentence “That’s the word I looked up,” look up is considered a phrasal verb, or a multipart verb. Other examples include ask out, call up, pass down, call off, and catch up.

In these examples, the second part looks like a preposition, but grammatically, it doesn’t act like one; linguists sometimes call it a particle. We can see the difference between a phrasal verb and a prepositional phrase in the sentences “She looked up the word in the dictionary” (phrasal verb) and “She looked up the hill” (prepositional phrase).

Winston Churchill famously made fun of the rule about stranding prepositions by playing with a phrasal verb. He is quoted as saying: “This is the kind of pedantic nonsense up with which I will not put!”

There is no “right answer” about sentence-final prepositions. English has long stranded prepositions at the end of sentences, and it can sound pedantic sometimes to front the preposition (“with which,” “to whom”). But in formal writing, it can also
sometimes seem confusing to strand the preposition at the end of a sentence. We make different decisions in different contexts about how we want to present ourselves and our English in terms of formality.

Suggested Reading

Greenbaum, *Oxford English Grammar*.
Pinker, *Words and Rules*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is your past tense of the verb *sneak*? What is your past participle of the verb (e.g., in “He had _____ into the room”)? Did you notice the variation between *sneaked* and *snuck*, *dived* and *dove* before this lecture? What about *dragged* versus *drug*? How would you explain the verbs you noticed versus those you did not?

2. Were you surprised to learn that *must* is on the decline in British and American English? Listen to those around you to note whether and when they use *must*. 
In the sentence “So, while I was driving over here…,” the word *so* functions as a subtle linguistic signal that a narrative is coming. It asks for a more extended turn on the conversational floor and helps listeners know what to expect. Such “discourse markers,” including *now, well, uh, oh, and, but, like, you know,* and *I mean,* help organize conversation and manage listeners’ expectations. People sometimes disparage them as meaningless, but in fact, they do a great deal of work for us. Conversation is only partly about conveying information; it is equally about negotiating relationships with other people, and discourse markers help us do just that.

**How Conversation Works**

- All interactions involve negotiation—of relationships and of the conversational floor.
  - In negotiating relationships, we decide how to say things based on our understanding of our relationship with the people we’re talking to. For example, to students, a teacher might say, “Read that article for Monday”; to colleagues at a meeting, “Please be sure to read the article for Monday”; and to a superior, “Would you be able to read the article for Monday?”
  - In negotiating the floor, we adhere to a general structure. For example, we have routinized openings and closings.
  - Then, in the body of a conversation, we negotiate the floor, figuring out how to take turns, signaling that we want the floor or are ready to give over the floor. For example, a speaker who stops talking or whose hands suddenly settle down in conversation is signaling that he or she is ready to give up the floor. Adjacency pairs, such as questions and answers, are used to signal turn taking in discourse.
- Discourse markers help with these negotiations. For example, we can signal ending a turn (“I’m not sure what I think about that, so…”) or we can signal a “dispreferred response,” that is, something that someone else might not want to hear.

- Real conversation is complicated—it doesn’t look at all like a television script—and discourse markers help us navigate this territory.

Discourse Markers Defined
- Discourse markers are the seemingly meaningless elements that tend to occur in spoken language, “at the margins,” in other words, at the beginning or end of conversational turns.

- They are nonobligatory; that is, they do not change the truth-conditional meaning of what a person says. For example, the following sentences have the same meaning: “I think you’re right” and “You know, I think you’re right.”

- Discourse markers do pragmatic work rather than syntactic work. They help us and our interlocutors in terms of organizing the conversation and negotiating our relationships to one another.
  - They can be like signposts in a conversation, signaling listeners how to understand an utterance in relation to the utterances that precede and follow it. This is sometimes called “information management.”

One way we take turns in conversation is to “take” them—to interrupt and overlap each other; there is a surprising amount of simultaneous talk in real-world conversation.
Discourse markers also help us understand the utterance in the context of the relationship being negotiated between the speaker and the listener. We can use discourse markers, for example, to show that we’re trying to connect to other speakers or to minimize authority.

Functions of Discourse Markers

- Discourse markers can sometimes serve to signal that one utterance builds on another. For example, one speaker might say, “I thought the editorial missed the point”; the listener might then say, “And its tone seemed unnecessarily snarky.” The second speaker’s *and* signals that the utterance is part of a sequence.

- Discourse markers can also signal a topic shift, as when a professor says, “Now, let’s think about how this plays out in the real world.” *Now* and *so* can signal that an important point is coming: “Now, this raises a fundamental question….” Such markers are sometimes called “attention getters.”

- A move served by discourse markers that is somewhat organizational and largely relational is disagreement. This type of signal is fascinating because it is subtle, yet when you become aware of it, you realize how obvious it is. If one speaker says, “I thought it was a great movie,” and the other says, “Well…,” you can almost predict that a contradictory opinion is coming.

- This happens also with “dispreferred responses” in adjacency pairs, such as requests or offers. With a request, the preferred response is usually agreement, but we don’t always agree to what people ask of us. If one speaker asks, “Can you drive me to the airport tomorrow,” and the other says, “Well, …” or “Um, …,” the first should be prepared for a negative response.

- The part of speech that discourse markers belong to is a topic of debate. Linguists often call them a lexical class all by themselves; they sit on the margins of discourse, and they include what in other contexts would be conjunctions, adverbs, interjections, nouns, and clauses.
Examples of Discourse Markers

- *Oh* plays a role in information management: It focuses attention on various things.
  - *Oh* can preface a suddenly remembered question (“Oh, did you ask Mary about her sister?”) or preface an answer to a question or a statement correcting wrong information (“Oh, well, it wasn’t that…”).
  - *Oh* can also be used to initiate a self-repair, to locate and replace prior information: “I met her years ago in Tucson. Oh, you know, I think it was San Diego.”
  - It can preface a response to a dispreferred answer: “Oh, that’s okay—I’ll find another ride to the airport.”
  - *Oh* also signals recognition or remembering of old information. One speaker says, “I met you a few years ago in San Diego,” and the other says, “Oh, that’s right.”
  - This information may seem trivial, but in fact, it’s systematic—we all share knowledge of the work these little words do and we use them consistently. We would not use *oh* to signal, for example, a new topic in the conversation.

- *Now* is a focuser; it signals that an important piece of information or a new topic is coming. It functions almost like a paragraph marker.

- *So* is used to show effects or logical consequences (within one speaker’s turn or from turn to turn). It is also used to introduce summaries or rephrasings: “So, the main point here is…."
  - Within an extended narrative, *so* is used to indicate “parts of the story,” again, similar to paragraph breaks: “So I was in the elevator ….” *So* can also be used when the speaker is interrupted to signal the restart of the story: “So we were in the elevator….”
- You may have noticed that *so* is on the rise. It often occurs in response to an interview question as an other-centered way to begin (as opposed to *oh*, which suggests surprise at the question).

- As a way to trailing off, *so* passes the conclusion back to another speaker.

- *Well* is used to introduce a new topic, to introduce directly reported speech ("And she said, ‘well, as far as I’m concerned...’"), and to preface a response that expresses disagreement and/or is face-threatening ("Well, I can see what you’re saying, but...”).

- This last function of *well* hints at the importance of maintaining good relationships with others in conversation; *you know* and *I mean* also do some heavy lifting in terms of negotiating our relationships with others.

- *You know* concludes an argument ("That’s just the way I see it, you know"), signals a trailing off at the end of a conversational turn ("because I couldn’t figure it out. You know..."), and introduces a story ("You know, when I was a kid...").
  - Perhaps most important, *you know* is used to establish solidarity with the audience. “It’s a hard thing because, you know, it’s like, this is your kid.”

  - *You know* can seem as if it is inviting participation or, at least, serve as a listening noise. It may also seem as if it is inviting disagreement or agreement.

- *I mean* signals an upcoming adjustment: “I would never do that. *I mean*, I’m not saying that I wouldn’t think about it....”
  - This usage helps minimize the authority of the speaker, which speakers often choose to do to make their audiences feel more equal.

- *I mean* can also signal a turn-taking moment; it’s one of those ways that we trail off at the end of a turn.
• **Dude** is a relatively new discourse marker. It can be used to express surprise (“Dude, you’ve got to be kidding”), disgust (“Dude, really?”), warning (“Dude, be careful”), appreciation (“Dude, that was great”), or excitement (“Dude! That is so cool!”).

• Another new marker is *yeah-no*, which can be used to agree with a negative statement: “I don’t think you’re so stressed that you need to drop the class.” “Yeah, no, I don’t think I do.”
  o *Yeah-no* is also used to hedge disagreement (“Oh good, so there’s no group work.” “Yeah, no, there is group work”) or to express qualified agreement (“Yeah, no, I understand that, but I’m still confused about…”).

  o You might also hear “No, I know” as a kind of emphatic agreement. The *no* here seems to say, “You can stop now because I agree.”

• **Well, um, and like** are examples of fillers that we use to fill the pauses in speech, when we’re formulating what we plan to say next. There is no question that overuse of fillers can be distracting, but it’s important to note that we all use fillers sometimes, and they can help signal that we are not finished with the floor or that we’re going to answer a question.

**The Much-Maligned Like**

• *Like* is a much-maligned form in current spoken English—probably at least in part because it sees so much use. One of the reasons *like* can be used so much is that it covers multiple parts of speech: verb, noun, preposition, and subordinating conjunction.

• *Like* can serve as a quotative (i.e., to introduce reported or indirect speech: “And I was like, ‘You have got to be kidding me!’”), an approximate adverb (i.e., a hedge: “He is like six feet tall”), a focuser (i.e., to focus attention on a statement: “The movie *Avatar* is like completely mind-blowing”), and a filler (“So, like, she is kind of kooky, but like she’s super funny”).
• It’s not true that women use *like* more than men, that its use as a discourse marker is completely new, or that the quotative *like* is a feature of young people’s speech. Speakers seem to stop using the focuser and filler *like* as they age, but we hold on to the quotative *like*.

• You may well decide that *like* is not your cup of tea, but it is important to realize that young speakers who use *like* are not throwing it into their speech entirely willy-nilly. The filler use can appear almost anywhere, but the other uses of *like* are more systematic and meaningful.

### Suggested Reading

Dailey-O’Cain, “The Sociolinguistic Distribution of and Attitudes toward Focuser ‘Like’ and Quotative ‘Like.’”

D’Arey, “*Like* and Language Ideology.”

Erard, *Um…: Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Listen for *like*. In terms of quotative *like* (e.g., “I was like, ‘Do you want to go with me?’”), how old is the oldest speaker you hear using this form? In terms of filler *like* (e.g., “I don’t know, like, if he, like, is sick or what”), how old is the oldest speaker you hear using that?

2. Choose one discourse marker (e.g., *well*, *oh*, *you know*, *I mean*) and in your next conversation, listen to hear how your interlocutors use it.
Here’s the punchline, the low-down, the scoop: Slang is hard to define. Or we might say that it is wicked hard, mad hard, uber-hard, or mega-hard to define. All those terms would be slangy. But what does slang mean? Slang can be one of those “we know it when we see it” phenomena, although that’s not a very scientific definition. We should be able to do better, but for a long time, linguists didn’t pay much attention to slang. This is changing, though, with serious scholarly works on slang and its history, and this lecture will serve as an introduction to that work, as we talk about what slang is—and isn’t.

**Defining Slang**

- *Slang* is often used as a sweeping term to cover all informal language or all new language or all disapproved-of language.
  - In critiquing new developments in the language, people often criticize such words as *bootylicious* and *incentivize* as “slang.”
    - Although *bootylicious* (referring to an attractive woman) feels slangy, *incentivize* does not; it’s jargon.
  - What does it mean to “feel” slangy?

- Before we try to differentiate slang and jargon, let’s pose another question: Is the term *throw up* slang?
  - There is clearly a formal alternative—*vomit*—and more informal alternatives—*barf, puke*, and so on.
  - *Throw up* is clearly less formal than *vomit*, but its use would pass unnoticed in almost any context. Such distinctions help us narrow down a definition of *slang*. 
• Slang is often ephemeral, but there are plenty of exceptions to this rule. For instance, *knock off work* dates back to 1767, and *cram*, ‘to study at the last minute,’ has been in use since 1825.

• Here’s one definition of slang from Jonathan Lighter, one of the leading experts on American slang: “*Slang* denotes an informal, nonstandard, nontechnical vocabulary composed chiefly of novel-sounding synonyms (and near synonyms) for standard words and phrases; it is often associated with youthful, raffish, or undignified persons and groups; and it conveys often striking connotations of impertinence or irreverence, especially for established attitudes and values within the prevailing culture.”

• This definition captures a lot of information.
  o Slang is not just informal but often impertinent or irreverent (compare *senior moment* to *brain fart*).
  
  o It is not just nonstandard, but it actively challenges the standard. As Lighter put it in a 2003 interview: “[Slang] tends to be intentionally undignified, startling, or amusing.”
  
  o It comes from the margins—which doesn’t mean that it isn’t used for effect in the mainstream, but its origins are often groups on the margins with respect to established institutions of power; for these purposes, the young are on the margins.
  
  o Slang is a way for groups on the margins to critique the mainstream or “the establishment,” to establish an independent identity, to be linguistically revolutionary, to be distinctive, to be part of a community outside the mainstream, and perhaps, to snub the mainstream and create meaning that those in the mainstream do not have access to.
  
  o It is typically ephemeral for these reasons; to be unconventional and challenging, it must be new.
- It is playful (“novel-sounding”): It plays with sound (rhyming slang), metaphor, and various kinds of word-formation processes, such as clipping and blends.

- Michael Adams’s book *Slang: The People’s Poetry* picks up on a longstanding association between slang and poetry, dating back to at least Ralph Waldo Emerson, who celebrated slang as the poetry of language in action.

The Role of Slang in Defining Group Identities

- In his book, Adams points out an important feature of slang that Lighter’s definition misses: the role slang plays in defining group identities, although Lighter does discuss this elsewhere.
- Slang defines “insiderness” (or shared “outsiderness”): as Adams writes, slang meets our “complementary needs to fit in and to stand out.”

Part of being an adolescent is to critique authority; slang helps people be linguistically revolutionary and, at the same time, be part of a community.
Adams also emphasizes that slang is, as he puts it, “a necessary aspect of our linguistic well-being”; it is not aberrant, deviant, or thoughtless, and it is certainly not “unmeaning,” as Noah Webster defined it.

If we assume that (1) humans are social and belong to communities; (2) some of those communities are not in the mainstream; and (3) language is a key way that people identify with communities, then slang is part of a way of life, a way of navigating the social world. As we’ve discussed, creative play also seems to be part of being human (and perhaps part of acquiring language), and slang represents, in some ways, the ultimate play with language.

As linguist Connie Eble puts it, “The social potential inherent in language is actuated and intensified in the use of slang.” All the things that language can do socially, slang does with intensity: It makes people laugh and takes people aback, distinguishes us by what we say and makes us fit in with a group, differentiates us from another group, breaks the ice in a friendly way, establishes an informal atmosphere, and critiques what we don’t agree with.

- Eble has also written an excellent book on slang, called *Slang and Sociability*, which gives us insight into college slang.
  - The book also provides a look backwards to college slang dictionaries from the 19th and early 20th centuries, enabling us to see what is ephemeral and what is more durable.
  - For example, over the last 30 years, bad for ‘good’ has managed to last, as has bummer for ‘an unpleasant experience’.
  - Cool (which shows up in Eble’s study) has managed to remain slang for most of the 20th century and into the 21st; it was first cited in 1918, meaning ‘sophisticated, fashionable, up-to-date.’ The origins of cool meaning ‘excellent’ lie in African American
English; the first usage here is cited in the *OED* in 1933. The weakened meaning of ‘okay’ shows up by 1951.

- Of course, college students have lots of other ways to say ‘good,’ including words they have turned around from bad to good (*bad, sick, wicked, killer, gnarly, outrageous*), good words they have generalized (*sweet, candy, righteous*), and more neutral words that have ameliorated (*awesome, choice, tight, rad*).

**Interesting Slang Histories**
- A study conducted at the University of Michigan lists college slang from 1895 that has since died.
  - A *blug* was ‘one who is very stylish.’
  - An *ice wagon* was ‘someone who is slow’; an equivalent term now would be a *doofus* (1967).
  - A *grind* was ‘someone who studies too much’; now, of course, we say *geek or nerd*.
  - *Chiselly* meant ‘unpleasant.’
  - *Flim* meant ‘to cheat’; now, perhaps, we would say *scam* (1963).
  - A *fruit* was ‘a lenient teacher,’ perhaps, a *pushover*.
  - A *heathen* was ‘an unreasonable teacher.’
  - To *jump* or *bolt* meant ‘to absent oneself from class.’ *Skipping school* dates back to 1810, and *playing hooky* to 1848.
  - Around 1900, a *snap* was an easy class; now, it is a *slide, a blow-off, a joke, or a gut*. Later in the 20th century, students noted specific kinds of easy classes: *Astrogut* was the introductory
astronomy course; rocks for jocks was the introductory geology course; and clapping for credit was an easy music class.

- Again, the playful, irreverent nature of slang words help in establishing a community; slang is a shared language—in this case, shared by college students—offering a shared critique of particular things and practices.

- There are also words, such as fizzle, that we may not realize were at one point college slang. Fizzle shows up in English around 1600 (probably onomatopoetic in origin), meaning ‘to break wind without noise.’ It was picked up in college slang in the mid-19th century to mean ‘to fail an exam or come to a weak conclusion.’

- These examples capture Eble’s summary of what slang can do: (1) change the level of discourse in the direction of informality, (2) identify members of a group, and (3) oppose established authority.

- In doing all these things, slang can be funny (doing the naked pretzel, brain burp ['random thought'], beer goggles [the phenomenon of being drunk and finding someone more attractive than he or she might otherwise be]) or mean (butterface, a reference to someone who is attractive “but her face”).

- Occasionally, slang is troubling. For example, the word rape used to mean ‘defeat, annihilate’ (“I raped the test”) has been seen by some as trivializing the crime of rape.

- But this kind of hyperbole is common in slang (annihilated for ‘drunk’). We might oppose a specific usage, but we shouldn’t use that as an excuse to condemn slang entirely.

**The Work of Slang in Conversation**

- Slang has the ability to signal informality and can provide some of the oil for “cool,” informal conversation.

- Slang conversation openings include yo, what up?, sup?, what’s happening?, and what it is?.
• Slang can serve as an icebreaker for young people. Eble gives the example of a young man and woman in an elevator; he finally starts a conversation by saying, “This weather sucks.” In other words, instead of saying “hi,” he finds a way to use slang to start the conversation.

• Slang also provides conversational closings: *later* (from *check/catch you later*), *ciao*, *gotta go*, *I’m out*.

• There are slangy ways to back channel, that is, to make listening noises that tell others we are with them as they’re talking. Examples here include: *cool beans*, *no way*, *tell me about it*, *that bites*, *I hear you*, *as if*.

• Slang can help a speaker get out of a serious conversation or initiate a change in topic: *We’ll just roll with it*; *Well, ain’t that a non-boat floater?*

• Finally, it can help establish rapport. A teacher, for example, might use a slang phrase with students to make a connection with them and to signal that he or she respects the language they use.

The Relationship of Slang and Standard Language

• The relationship between slang and standard language is tricky. The traditional view is that if there is only one word for something, that is the standard or that a slang word is an alternative to a more conventional option.

• With *psychologist* and *shrink* (1966, from *head-shrinker* [1950]), we can easily identify which word is the standard and which is slang.

• But Michael Adams raises the question of *bedhead*, which seems intuitively slangy, but what would be a synonym? What about *cankle*, a term used for a woman’s legs that have no tapering from the calf to the ankle? It is irreverent, but it describes a phenomenon that no other word captures.
• In its use of irreverent words for irreverent topics, slang not only challenges standard language but also propriety at some level.

Suggested Reading

Adams, *Slang*.

Eble, *Slang and Sociability*.

Questions to Consider

1. Can you think of slang words that you would use and ones you wouldn’t? What is the difference between them?

2. How would you describe the social work that slang does, for both young people and older people?
In the previous lecture, we talked about the playful irreverence of slang, as well as how difficult it is to establish clear-cut boundaries around what slang is and what it isn’t. In this lecture, we’ll see some of the linguistic playfulness found in slang and then return to the issue of boundaries to talk about some of the things we know slang is not as a way of trying to narrow down what it is. As part of that discussion, we’ll address the question of whether ain’t should be considered slang.

**Linguistic Playfulness**

- Slang is morphologically playful, both in creating new words and in changing the meanings of existing words. It deploys the word formation processes we talked about in an earlier lecture, including affixation, compounding, clipping, and blending.

- Let’s consider such compounds as *boob tube* for ‘television’ (1966).
  - Part of the cleverness of this expression is in the rhyme, and rhyming slang has a long history in English. Cockney rhyming slang was a secret language of the underworld. Sample terms include *trouble and strife*, ‘wife’; *bacon and eggs*, ‘legs’; *apples and pears*, ‘stairs’; and *ducks and geese*, ‘police.’
  - These terms are not only linguistically playful but also opaque to outsiders; that quality contributes to the rebelliousness of slang and its ability to build community.
  - Such a term as *boob tube* is more widely shared yet still playful and irreverent.
  - *Boob* is a wonderfully evocative word for ‘idiot’ with its double /b/ (a plosive), and *tube* is a clever bit of metonymy, where a part stands for the whole.
o Other examples of slang that rhyme include bedhead, brain drain, big wig, fat cat, nit wit, boy toy, no show, hell’s bells, lovey dovey, tighty whities, chill pill, and float your boat.

o The bee’s knee started as a reference to something insignificant (1797, “as weak/big as a bee’s knee”), but in the 1920s, it came to refer to something excellent.

o Slang also exploits reduplication with a consonant or vowel change to create such expressions as fuddy duddy, hanky panky, chit chat, dilly dally, wishy washy (from chat, dally, and washy), ding dong (echoic), and mish mash (from mash, 15th century).

• Slang sometimes irreverently plays with the sounds of borrowed expressions. Eble gives us some of these examples: hasta manana > hasta banana; merci beaucoup > mercy buckets; au revoir > au reservoir; and adios amigos > adios amoebas.

• Some borrowed words are themselves incorporated into slang, including nada and cojones (1932). Both are from Spanish; the latter is equivalent to the English slang balls for ‘courage.’
  o In Yiddish, the slang for ‘courage’ would be chutzpah (1892), although the Yiddish word perhaps implies a bit more impudence than courage.

  o Perhaps because of the sounds of the words, Yiddish has contributed numerous slang words to English, although this characteristic may not be shared across all dialects of American English.

  o Yiddish slang words include kvetch, schlock (‘cheap goods, crap’), schlep, schmuck (‘a bad person’) and its derivative schmo, and schmaltzy (‘corny’).

  o Yiddish slang is also used for some taboo topics, including tochus (1913), schleng (1969, which can also be used
offensively in reference to a person), and shtup (1968, ‘to push,’ hence the sexual meaning).

- The prefix schm- from Yiddish, as Eble points out, has gotten generalized as a slangy way to reduplicate, hence, fancy schmancy and nice schmice.

- Slang can also create new words with original combining forms, such as -licious.
  - Examples here include bootylicious (1992), hunkalicious (1989), and groovalicious (2002). The suffix -alicious actually goes back to 1878, with sodalicious.
  - In a similar vein are such words as frattastic (said of behavior or appearance representative of a fraternity) and craptastic.

- In addition, the ending -o actually seems to mean ‘this is slang.’
  - In such words as weirdo, the -o serves to transform the adjective into a slangy noun.
  - Sometimes, the -o transforms a standard adjective into a slangy adjective: neato (1951), cheapo (1967).
  - The -o also shows up in shortened, informal words: combo (1929) and aggro (noun for ‘aggression,’ 1969); aggro is now an adjective, often used in gaming (a player “is aggro” or “gets aggro”).

**Slang Meanings**

- In addition to creating new words, slang gives new meanings to words that are already in the language. Transforming meanings from bad to good, as has occurred with bad, sick, and wicked, is an act of rebelliousness.

- Slang also exploits metonymy, a figure of speech in which one attribute of a thing is substituted for the whole. Thus, we have skirt, ‘young woman’ (mostly 20th century); suit, ‘businessman’ (1979);
flick, ‘movie’ (formed from flicker); and jock (1952, from jock-strap [1897], used to refer to athletes).

- Metaphor is everywhere in slang—it is a key part of the poetry of slang. Examples include paws or mitts, ‘hands’; piehole, ‘mouth’ (1983, replacing cakehole); pig (for an unpleasant, greedy person; can be tracked back to the 16th century); mouse, ‘timid person’ (19th century); grass, ‘marijuana’; rat race; and gravy, ‘unexpected bonus or profit’ (now meaning anything extra and good: “the rest is gravy”).

- As these examples hint, there are certain parts of the lexicon that invite slang, including physical sexuality; intoxication by liquor or drugs; sudden, energetic, or violent action; death; deception; weakness of mind or character; money; physical looks (both as insult and sexualized praise); and bodily functions.

**Slang versus Jargon**

- Michael Adams summarizes the distinction between slang and jargon nicely: “Slang is language of a group with a shared interest but not a shared purpose. It’s a language of being, not of vocation or avocation.”

- Jargon, in contrast, is the specialized language we use at work, in our hobbies, for some sports, and so on.
  - Jargon encompasses computer-speak (bitmap, macro), business-speak (incentivize, interface), football-speak (audible, blitz, dime coverage), and so on.
  - Jargon helps establish communities, similar to slang, but it but lacks the irreverence of slang; it also does not typically challenge the standard, nor is it especially informal in all circumstances.
Jargon, in contrast to slang, is the specialized language of a vocation or avocation; football-speak, with such terms as audible and blitz, fits into this category.

**Slang versus Nonstandard Dialects**

- Slang is not the same thing as a nonstandard dialect. One of the nonstandard dialects that is often colloquially referred to as slang is African American English (AAE).
  - AAE has slang (as does any dialect of English) but is not itself slang; it is a systematic dialect used for a range of purposes, some more formal and some less so.

  - Mainstream American English has borrowed liberally from AAE slang, given the cultural prestige of jazz, hip hop, and other aspects of African American culture.

  - AAE itself, however, has a systematic grammar—one that is different from Standard American English. The habitual be serves as an example here (e.g., “She be working at the hospital”). The be refers to a habitual action (i.e., she usually works at the hospital); it can’t just be thrown in anywhere, as some people do when imitating AAE.
AAE also systematically substitutes *it is* for *there is* (e.g., “It’s a lot of people here”).

In AAE, we don’t always see inversion after a *wh*-question or the word *how* (e.g., “How she is?” “What it is?”).

*Ain’t* is a systematic contraction in AAE and other nonstandard dialects; for speakers of these dialects, there is nothing slangy or irreverent about it (and it is usually not labeled as such in dictionaries). *Ain’t* is also used for colloquial emphasis in the standard dialect.

- The fact that some AAE slang has been borrowed into wider American slang has sometimes been seen as the mainstream language co-opting the language of a marginalized group and, in the process, robbing it of some of its power. Examples here include *dude; bad, cool, and righteous*, meaning ‘good,’ as well as *hip*, meaning ‘up-to-date on a trend’; *slide, truck, or split*, meaning ‘leave’; *jam; dis (< disrespect); homeboy/homey; word/word up; and fly*, ‘attractive.’

- Words that have entered the mainstream from African languages through AAE include *mojo; juke*, ‘dance’; and, some say *jive* for ‘banter,’ but the *OED* has the origins of this word as unknown.

- The current slang term *swag*, an example of shortening or clipping, comes from hip hop.
  - The term comes from *swagger* and has been used in hip hop since at least 2008, with the release of Soulja Boy’s “Turn My Swag On.”
  - To have swag is to have style, confidence, and sexual appeal. The word can also be used something like an interjection; that is, you can put *swag* at the end of an utterance.
Other Sources of Slang

• With *swag*, we see a popular cultural phenomenon (hip hop) influencing the language, and in this case, it is sometimes spreading the slang of AAE beyond the AAE-speaking community. Can popular movies or TV shows affect the language as much as music?
  o It’s difficult to do an exact comparison, but movies and TV shows certainly can also spread language fads.
  
  o As we saw previously, *yadda yadda yadda* predates *Seinfeld* but spread because of the show.
  
  o *D’oh!* comes from *The Simpsons*.
  
  o Valley girl–speak gained notoriety in 1982 with Frank Zappa’s song “Valley Girl” and spread after the 1983 film *Valley Girl*, bringing us such words and expressions as *awesome, airhead, geek, grody, totally, tubular, like* (as a discourse marker), and *gag me with a spoon*. These expressions resurfaced in 1995 with the film *Clueless*.

• Michael Adams, one of the experts on slang, has written an entire book on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* slang, including a lexicon. He credits Buffy with the popularity of -*y* (e.g., *angsty*) and the use of *much* to mean ‘often,’ as in “Walk much?” or “Having issues much?”

• Not all of us can use slang equally or in all circumstances. As a teacher or parent, your use of slang might make your students or children laugh. Yet with your close friends, especially those you have known for some time, you can use more slang, because you belong to a community of equals.

• We know the origins of many slang words and expressions, but sometimes the playfulness inherent in slang defies scholarly study.
In fact, the word *slang* itself is of uncertain origin. It may come from a Germanic root that’s also the parent of *sling*, or it may be a clipping of the phrase *beggars’ language* (“beggar’s slanguage,” > “slang”) or *rogues’ language*.

It’s important to note, however, that much of the playfulness of slang is patterned; it relies on the same kinds of word formation processes that we use to create other words.

**Suggested Reading**

Adams, *Slayer Slang*.


**Questions to Consider**

1. What are some areas of jargon with which you are familiar? Thinking about one area of jargon that you know well, are there some words that seem to you especially useful for the relevant context, and are there some that seem to you expendable?

2. Why might rhyming slang feel so playful?
We live in a culture that seems to be fascinated by differences between men and women. Even the fact that we often call men or women “the opposite sex” suggests polar opposition. Of course, men and women share much more than they don’t share, but we are often more interested in these differences than our commonalities. The idea that men and women are different and have different abilities has had real repercussions in our history and language; typically, the idea has been that women’s abilities are fewer. In this lecture and the next, we’ll focus on language and gender.

Sexism in Language

- One of the significant effects of a history of sexism is a pattern of asymmetrical word histories, in which words that were, at one point, more parallel have developed in different ways (e.g., governor/governess).

- The asymmetry is often caused through the pejoration of words for women; in other words, words for women often take on lower social status than their male counterpart words, and sometimes they pick up pejorative meanings. Further, words for women sometimes become sexualized, which is not surprising in a culture where women’s sexual status (their appearance, behavior, and availability) has long been important.

- It’s also not surprising that sexism is embedded in the English language. A culture cannot have a long history of treating women as inferior to men and sexualizing women without those factors showing up in the language. We shouldn’t blame men or anyone specifically for sexism in the language; in fact, we all participate in perpetuating some of the belief systems built into our language.
Gendered Asymmetries

• At the core of the language are many native terms for men and women, including *man* and *woman*.

• The word *man* was generic at one point in the history of English. There is, in fact, one translation of Genesis in which Adam and Eve are referred to as “two men.” But even in Old English, the word primarily specified male adults.
  o In some contexts, it is hard to know if *man* was intended to be generic or if the referent was simply assumed to be male.
  o Once we know that *man* used to be generic, the etymology of *woman* makes more sense; it came from *wifman*. *Wifman* often used to pair with *waepnedman*, ‘weaponed person,’ and *wif* (‘female’) paired with *wer* (‘male’).
  o The etymology of *wif* has been a difficult puzzle to solve. It has often been speculated that it comes from a word meaning ‘weaver,’ but a recent essay by Professor Anatoly Liberman convincingly argues that it comes from a term of societal organization, a people descended from the same woman or a woman of such a clan. From there, it came to mean ‘female.’
  o Given that *woman* is no longer transparently related to *wif*, there have been many false etymologies over the years, including ‘woe to man’ and ‘womb-man.’

• What about children? We see words for children being born, borrowed, and replaced—and a striking pattern when adults are referred to with words for children.
  o *Child* has been in English since the beginning, gradually replacing *bearn* (which is still in Scots as *bairn*).
  o In Old English, *wench* also meant ‘child’ generically; it then specified to ‘female child,’ from there to ‘female servant,’ and then to ‘woman of ill repute,’ sexualizing a low-status term for women.
When *girl* first appeared, it also meant ‘child’ generically, but it, too, specified to mean ‘girl child.’ Then it also underwent pejoration over time to mean ‘servant’ and, sometimes, prostitute (as in *call girl*). In other words, it refers to women in subservient positions.

The word *boy* had the early meaning ‘male servant,’ recorded before the meaning ‘male child.’ It, too, can be used pejoratively in reference to an adult because it implies subservience; this term has a history of racist use in reference to African American men.

- The history of words for children shows the close relationship between words for children and words for servants; typically, the path has been from referring to children to referring to servants.
  - We see this in *wench* and *girl*, as well as *knave*, which historically meant ‘boy’ and came to mean ‘servant.’
  - *Knight* used to refer to a servant, too, but it was actually raised in status, in stark contrast to *knave*, which came to mean ‘rascal.’
  - *Maid* has a similar history; it came from the Old English *maegden*, ‘female child,’ which later split into *maid* and *maiden*, both of which could be used to refer to female children, servants, and virgins in Middle English (note again the sexualizing of a female term). In another split, *maiden* remained positive, if archaic, while *maid* took on the servant meaning and eventually lost the reference to children.

**Asymmetrical Word Pairs**

- Just as words for children can pick up less positive meanings, so, too, can words for women, creating some highly asymmetrical word pairs. Consider, for example, *governor* and *governess*.
  - *Governor* was borrowed from French in the 14th century; *governess* appears at the end of the 15th century as ‘a woman who governs’; it then took on the specific meaning of ‘a
woman who governs a young person’ (because this is what women were allowed to govern). By the early 18th century, *governess* referred to a female instructor, especially in a private household; thus, a *governess* became a woman who works for someone else. We can see how women’s status in the social realm affected the terms used to talk about them.

- Another pair is *master* (from Latin, in Old English) and *mistress*. *Mistress* is a 14th-century French borrowing and originally referred to a woman in charge (of a child or a household). By the 15th century, a *mistress* had become a sweetheart, a woman courted by a man, losing some of her power. By the 17th century, a *mistress* was a married man’s lover.

- One of the more dramatic asymmetrical pairs is *bachelor* and *spinster*.
  - Both of these words now refer to unmarried people, but they have very different connotations—one is eligible (the *bachelor*) and one is not (the *spinster*).

A 13th-century meaning of *bachelor*, someone who had achieved the lowest degree at a university, is retained in the modern *bachelor of arts* and *bachelor of science.*
- **Spinster** appeared in the 14th century as ‘a woman who spins’; by the Renaissance, it was a legal term of occupation and, shortly thereafter, was used to refer to unmarried women. By the 18th century, the word had negative connotations, such as ‘an unattractive woman.’

- **Bachelor** appeared in the 13th century to refer to a young knight and then to someone who had achieved the lowest degree at a university. By Chaucer’s day, the word was already being used in reference to unmarried men and has remained a generally positive term.

- James Bond is an eligible bachelor, as is Hugh Hefner. Jane Marple (of Agatha Christie fame) was often referred to as a spinster, that is, not attractive as a potential spouse, whereas Jennifer Aniston is just single.

- **Spinster** is still used and, in it, are embedded judgments about the acceptability of women remaining unmarried, as well as the eligibility of unmarried women of a certain age.

- Use of the word *bachelorette* seems to be restricted to “bachelorette parties” and the television show *The Bachelorette*.

- This discussion of *bachelor* and *spinster* also suggests gaps in the English lexicon: What should we call an eligible single woman or a female of college age? Some college-age women feel more comfortable with *girl* than *woman*.

---

**Guy and Dude**

- Males in college do not have the same problem because they have the word *guy*. This used to be a generic term and can be traced back to the effigy of Guy Fawkes, a conspirator in a failed attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605. The meaning then extended from the effigy to any grotesque figure.
The general reference to a man is American in origin, dating back to the mid-19th century, but it doesn’t show up in most 19th-century dictionaries.

In current usage, *guy* carries at least two meanings. In third-person reference to people, it is male: “Three guys walking down the street.” In direct address and with second-person *you*, it has become, perhaps, completely generic: “You guys….”

*Guy* is also used to refer to inanimate objects; “this guy” or “that guy” is synonymous with “this one” or “that thing.”

Has *guy* undergone semantic bleaching in these contexts, or is this a sexist construction?

*Dude* is another term that has recently acquired new meanings that raise questions about how generic it is.

*Dude* first appeared in American English at the end of the 19th century as a term of ridicule, meaning something like ‘dandy.’ Around the same time, it started to refer to city folk who spent vacation time on a ranch (“dude ranch”).

By the early decades of the 20th century, the term was being used more generally for men who caught someone’s attention in some way and as a positive in-group term, especially among Mexican Americans and African Americans.

Through the popularity of African American music and culture, *dude* began to get picked up by younger people outside these communities in reference to men.

About 40 years ago, *dude* started to be used as a term of address (“Hey, dude” or “Dudes, …”); according to college slang guides, it has the potential to be generic.

Linguistics professor Scott Kiesling has written an article arguing that *dude* expresses cool solidarity among heterosexual
men; college students report that this usage is now so widespread that it may not be so restricted.

- In fact, as we discussed in an earlier lecture, *dude* has arguably become an exclamative and a discourse marker, expressing surprise, disgust, warning, a topic shift, remembered information, and so on.

- Comparing the histories of such words as *man* and *guy* is fascinating.
  - *Man* really was generic but then specified to ‘male adult’; at that point, it did not seem to carry a generic meaning.
  
  - But the word *guy*, which was generic, became male-specific, and now seems to have become generic again in some uses but not others. Is it possible for a word to carry a gender-specific meaning and a generic meaning at the same time?

  - It’s important to note that with *guy*, the generic meaning is syntactically restricted: It is only in *you guys* and as a term of address; thus, the two meanings are not in direct competition.

  - A similar question arises with such pairs as *actor/actress*; in theory, *actor* is the cover term (generic) and the male term. Such pairs have come under scrutiny in terms of whether they marginalize women. We’ll turn to that question in the next lecture.

**Suggested Reading**

Baron, *Grammar and Gender*.

Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. 
Questions to Consider

1. What do you think about asymmetrical word pairs, such as *bachelor* and *spinster*, *governor* and *governess*, and *master* and *mistress*?

2. Listen for *dude* in the conversations around you, on the radio, and on TV. When is it being used to refer to a person and when is it being used to do something else? What is that “something else”? 


In these lectures, we’ve seen that language change often takes place below our awareness. We’ve also looked at conscious attempts to regulate the language that have had little effect—for example, concerns 200 years ago that such words as reliable and colonize should not be allowed in the language. Are all conscious attempts to shape language use doomed to failure? In fact, they are not, and in this lecture, we’ll see some examples of efforts to shape the English language that have met with remarkable success. Specifically, we will look at attempts to make the language more equitable in terms of gender.

Bias against Women in English Vocabulary

- Beginning in the 1970s, some scholars in linguistics, influenced by second-wave feminism, began to target sexist forms in the language, such as the asymmetrical pairs we discussed in the last lecture.

- One early study, for example, found that there were more than 200 words to refer to women as prostitutes (slut, whore, tramp, hussy, and so on). It’s also true, however, that there are numerous insulting terms for men, too, but there is a difference.
  - A study by linguist Deborah James in 1998 suggested that derogatory terms for men focus on evaluating men by their accomplishments, particularly their competency in mental and physical abilities (‘stupid’: doofus, meathead, bonehead; ‘weak’: wimp, beanpole). A true insult to a heterosexual man is to call him a woman (sissy) or a homosexual man (such as the highly offensive term fag).
  - Derogatory terms for women often involve sexuality, focusing on women’s attractiveness to men, faithfulness, and availability (‘promiscuous’: whore, slut; ‘ugly’: dog, thunder-thighs; ‘unavailable’: ice queen, tease, priss).
In other words, men are evaluated more on competence; women, on looks and sexual behavior.

This may be changing to a degree. College students have terms that criticize men for sleeping around, such as *dog* and *manwhore*, as well as positive terms for men who sleep around (*stud, lothario, pimp, player*). We don’t seem to have positive terms for women who sleep around or negative terms for men based on their sexual availability. What we see here are cultural beliefs playing out in the language.

Women can also be evaluated on intelligence, with the lack of it specified by such terms as *airhead* and *bimbo*.

Both men and women can be judged by how they treat others, but often, men are judged in terms of how they treat everyone (*jerk, ass*), while women are judged by how they treat men (*ball buster, shrew, battle-ax*).

The ways in which women are sexualized in the language has also been studied in terms of conceptual metaphor.

The linguist Caitlin Hines published two studies about women as desserts and as small animals.

With terms that link women to desserts (*cookie, honey, cheesecake, cupcake, sweetie pie*), women are not only objectified but also made consumable and peripheral. They are something to be enjoyed, but they are not sustaining.

The animal terms used to refer to women (*bunny, kitten, chick, fox*) are animals that are hunted and/or possessed—animals that are controlled and often domesticated.

Men are referred to as animals, as well, as we see with *stud* and *stallion*, but the message is typically very different. These metaphors emphasize their strength and uncontrollability. We see something similar in the recent use of *cougar* for
empowered older women, although this term may also seem a bit predatory.

- None of this is to say that every time we use one of these words, we are being sexist; such words as *honey* are common terms of endearment. But when we step back and look at the patterns or systems of metaphor, we can see how beliefs and biases can get embedded in the language and how this language can empower and disempower people by the way we talk about them.

**Feminist Language Reform**
- As we said, in the 1970s, feminist scholarship asked us to think about how to make the language more equitable.

- One well-known feminist intervention was the endorsement of *Ms.* (a blend of *Mrs.* and *Miss*, pronounced to distinguish it from “Miss”).
  - The *OED* first cites the term in 1901, and in the 1970s, it was propagated as the term of choice, especially in business and formal settings, because it did not require identification of the marriage status of women.
  - The term has enjoyed significant success.

- Feminist language reform also targeted the so-called generics, especially the generic *he* and words ending in -*man*, such as *chairman*, *fireman*, and *policeman*.
  - The problem with these words is that they may cause people to think of these jobs as male, which places limits on women’s career options.
  - Solutions to the problem include creating male-specific and female-specific terms, such as *waiter/waitress*, or gender-neutral alternatives, such as *server*. 
The Results of Reform

- These attempts to reform the language have been remarkably successful, but it is important to note that not everyone thought they would be, including feminist scholars themselves.
  - Robin Lakoff, at Berkeley, is often credited with founding the modern field of language and gender research with her groundbreaking book *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975). But regarding the generic *he*, even this scholar stated, “…I feel in any case that an attempt to change pronominal usage will be futile.”

  - Of course, we now know, more than 35 years later, that the prescription on this pronoun could be changed. At this point, almost all style guides recommend not using the generic *he* but substituting *he or she* or recasting the sentence to avoid the issue.

- In many cases, reform has been equally successful with -*man* words. Academics, for example, no longer refer to the *chairman* of the department. Here, the solution was not to go to a -*person* word (*chairperson*) but to refer to the *chair* instead.

- To study whether language reform efforts have affected the use of such words as *policeman*, *fireman*, and *stewardess*, it is helpful to turn back to the online databases COHA and COCA.
  - COHA shows a significant decrease in the use of *policeman* since the 1990s and a corresponding increase in *police officer*. This change has affected both written and spoken language.
Much the same pattern appears with fireman and firefighter. Fireman began to decrease in the 1980s, and firefighter took off in the 2000s.

- Given these changes in usage, it’s surprising that some words, such as freshman, straw man, and manpower, have remained largely untouched.

- Why have these nonsexist language changes been so relatively successful, given that most conscious attempts to change language do not fare so well?
  - The answer can be found at least partially in the alignment of social and political movements with attempts to change language.
  - Language changes receive some clout as they become part of a broader call for social justice and equality.

- Another process that has involved conscious language change and has aligned language change with social movements is what linguists sometimes call reappropriation or linguistic reclamation.
  - This is the process whereby a negative term is taken back, or reappropriated, by a community for neutral or positive use.
  - The idea here is that if the community reappropriates the term, it cannot be used so harmfully by those outside the community.
  - One well-known example is the reappropriation of gay by the gay community. The word started to be used in reference to the gay community in the early 20th century and not always positively, but it started to be reappropriated in the 1960s and 1970s.
  - At this point, it has become fairly widely accepted as a neutral term, as we see in mainstream coverage of such issues as “gay marriage.”
But not all members of the community feel that *gay* can serve as an umbrella term; it is often used specifically to refer to homosexual men, marginalizing lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and others.

The African American community has similarly taken control of the name of the community, advocating for *black* rather than *Negro* and, later, for *African American*.

### Is Reform Oversensitive?

- Both linguists and non-linguists can be dismissive of conscious attempts to change the language. To linguists, this kind of change is seen as “unnatural” and largely unsuccessful. To non-linguists, such change is seen as meddling, oversensitive, politicizing language unnecessarily, and not addressing the real problem.

- Does conscious language reform amount to meddling or oversensitivity?
  - Non-sexist language reform tends to get lumped in with “politically correct” language generally, and politically correct language has gotten a bad name.
  - The fundamental idea of politically correct language is that it is language that respects all groups of speakers and respects what groups would like to be called; it also works from the premise that language matters.
  - One critique of those who dismiss conscious language reform is that some of the proposed changes are ridiculous (e.g., *personhole cover*), but in fact, no one is really proposing those changes.
  - Another argument against politically correct language is that language doesn’t really matter—it is just a medium. Deborah Cameron’s retort is that if it doesn’t really matter, then let’s make the change.
- Cameron also argues that what people are resisting is the politicizing of their language.

- There is also the idea that we are not dealing with the “real” issues if we focus on changing language, but no one is suggesting that we change only the language. The fact is that if we change how people talk, we can make them aware of attitudes that others deem unacceptable.

- The words we use do matter. As we’ve seen throughout this course, words are enormously powerful tools at our disposal, and they sometimes carry our cultural history with them. It is not always feasible to change language consciously, but some modern efforts prove that it is possible when social forces align with language reform efforts.

### Suggested Reading

Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*.


### Questions to Consider

1. To what extent has your usage of *-man* terms changed over your lifetime? Do you think there should be efforts to change the words *freshman, manpower,* and/or *straw man*?

2. How do you understand the dynamics of some groups telling other groups what they would like to be called? Why are there some words that can be used within a community but not outside it?
You don’t need to know the rules of American football or baseball to be immersed in the vocabulary of these sports. Some of the language of these sports has become so enmeshed in the everyday vocabulary of English speakers that we hardly notice it anymore. For example, in business, you can “strike out” or be “saved by the bell.” In this lecture, we’ll look at some of the terminology of specific sports to explain where some of the quirky phrases, from hat trick to Hail Mary come from, and we’ll spend time on the many idioms that move out of sports into everyday use.

Sports Analogies and Metaphors
- You may not be aware of how often we rely on sports analogies and metaphors in everyday conversation.
- For example, an investor might say, “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.” This expression only makes sense if you know something about these two types of races.
- You can follow a discussion “on the sidelines,” thus positioning the discussion itself as a sport and yourself as a participant who is not currently playing (but could at some point).
- English-speaking children in many different places now experience “timeouts,” periods when they are not allowed to play, even though they were not in any organized sport to begin with.

The Language of Baseball
- The language of baseball has the widest reach of almost any sport. The word baseball itself was in well-established use by the mid-19th century, and while baseman and baseman seem to have been tried out near the end of the 19th century, we opted instead for the wordier baseball player.
• Some common expressions from baseball include: *in the ballpark, ballpark figure, big league, bush league, cover all the bases, throw a curveball, extra innings, play hardball, heavy hitter*, and so on.

• The act of running the bases in baseball has resulted in some expressions that we now use outside of baseball: *getting to first base* (‘achieving the first step in a project’), *touching base*, and *off base*. The latter is now so common that most people probably don’t realize that it comes from baseball.

• If we get too far off base, we might end up in *left field*; the idea here is that left field is not an interesting place to be in the game—out of the center of the action. The journal *American Speech* records *left field*, meaning ‘disoriented, out of contact with reality,’ in 1961.

• By the early 20th century, *home run* could be used for any unqualified success. In recent media coverage, it is sometimes paired with other baseball jargon. One article, for example, asked if Sarah Palin had hit a home run or struck out with the American people.

• *Balk* is a more specialized term, referring to a situation in which the pitcher moves his foot or makes a misleading motion.
  - It is tempting to link this term to the verb *balk*, meaning ‘to stop abruptly, pull up,’ such as a horse does when it encounters an obstacle.
  - The baseball term *balk* is actually linked to the Old English meaning of the noun *balk*, a ridge or mound in the land, which came to refer to the ridge between two furrows of plowed land. From there, it was sometimes used to refer to a ridge that was accidentally missed in plowing, and from there, to a slip or mistake more generally. It was first used to refer to pitchers in baseball in 1845.

• Baseball is also relevant to the history of the word *jazz*, which has many meanings, from music, to pep, to a kind of dance, to such an expression as *all that jazz*. 
In 1912, the Portland Beavers pitcher Ben Henderson introduced the “jazz ball,” a wobbling pitch that threw off the batter.

The new word was picked up by other teams in the Pacific Coast League and caught the attention of reporters.

Banjoist Bert Kelly, who had also played baseball, later took the word to Chicago, referring to his “jazz band.”

**The Language of Boxing**
- The word *boxing* was used as early as the 16th century to refer to fighting with fists.

- Terms that come from boxing include *down (or out) for the count, knockout, floored, on the ropes, throw in the towel, in your corner,* and *hit below the belt.*

- From boxing, we also get a compound for men’s underwear: *boxer shorts* (1944).

**The Language of Football and Soccer**
- The first reference in the *OED* to *football* is from 1424. This word is used in most of the world to refer to the game officially known as “association football” and what Americans refer to as “soccer.” The word *soccer* comes from the official name, *association football,* shortened to *assoc.* (pronounced “a sock”). From there, the analogy with *rugger* as a reference to rugby gave us *soccer.*

- American football has given us the verb *punt,* meaning ‘pass the buck, avoid responsibility,’ because that is what teams do when they have run out of good options in a football drive.

- Football also gave us *Hail Mary* to describe a desperate play or move with little chance of success.

  This expression goes back to a 1975 playoff game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Minnesota Vikings. The Cowboys were down 14 to 10, with less than two minutes to play.
Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach got the ball at the Dallas 15 yard-line; in nine plays, he got to midfield, now with 24 seconds left in the game.

- Staubach threw what is usually called a desperation pass to wide receiver Drew Pearson, who ran in to score. The Cowboys won 17 to 14. After the game, Staubach told the press, “I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary”; thus, his move came to be known as the Hail Mary play or pass.

- This term has been generalized to other such football passes and can also be used for Wall Street strategies or congressional actions.

- A recent coinage that received some press in the early 2000s is soccer mom. The OED defines soccer mom as “a suburban American mother who spends much time transporting her children to athletic events, or otherwise supporting her children’s activities, 

The term hat trick comes not from hockey but cricket: A bowler who took three wickets with three successive balls was entitled, it is said, to be presented by his club with a new hat.
esp. any such woman viewed as a member of a particular (usually influential) class of voter, consumer, etc.”

The Language of Basketball

- So far, we’ve talked about home runs and knockouts as good things, from baseball and boxing, respectively; a close synonym comes to us from basketball: slam dunk.
  - This term was not recorded in the OED until 1976, although it is now widespread.

  - The verb dunk to refer to pushing the basketball down through the hoop is first cited in 1937. Slam dunk has quickly spread beyond basketball, so that any outcome that is a given can be called a slam dunk.

- The slang word balla (from baller), referring to a person who spends money freely and ostentatiously, especially a drug dealer, can also be traced to basketball.
  - The use of baller to refer to players of ball games has been around since the middle of the 19th century.

  - The OED traces the slang use, usually pronounced “balla,” to the early 1990s and African American slang. It comes from the perception that successful basketball players spend money ostentatiously and was generalized from there.

The Language of Tennis

- Tennis is the oldest sports word we’ll cover; it appeared in English as early as 1400. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Henry V, tennis was used figuratively to refer to the way in which the fortunes may play with us. The word came to refer specifically to lawn tennis by 1878.

- Tennis arm and tennis elbow were recognized as medical conditions by the late 19th century.
• *Tennis shirt* and *tennis shoe* have both generalized beyond the sport of tennis. Tennis shirts are also sometimes known by two other sports names: *polo shirts* or *golf shirts*.

• Why do tennis players shout “Let!” when a serve hits the net but is still in?
  o The use of *let* in tennis goes back to the Old English verb *let*, which meant ‘to hinder, obstruct.’ By Middle English, it had become a noun to refer to a hindrance or obstruction; here, we can start to see how the net could qualify as a “let” if one is playing tennis: It obstructs the path of the ball. The specific tennis use was first recorded in 1871.

  o Tennis players have been known to construct plausible folk etymologies for *let*; for example, a serve that doesn’t count is called a *let* because you are allowed, or “let,” to serve again. Such etymologies are constructed because the source meaning of *let* is now generally lost to the vagaries of language change.

**The Language of Surfing**

• By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we had the noun *surfboard*; the verbs *surfboard* and *surf* to refer to riding the surfboard appeared at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

• Surf culture has given us the surfer look and such slang words as *dude*, *gnarly*, and *wipeout*.

• The verb *surf* itself was transferred in the 1980s to the act of riding on top of moving vehicles, especially trains.

• At about the same time, we started using our remote controls to *channel-surf*, that is, to flip between television channels.

• Now, of course, we surf the Internet. This use was noted by the press in 1994, although tech-savvy people were using it a couple of years earlier. Many more of us now surf online than in any ocean.
The Sports Wrap-Up

- With much of the sports terminology we have adopted into our general vocabulary, we can usually see the metaphor or the source if we step back. We take timeouts, throw someone a curveball, or cover our bases, and we can see the sports reference if we try, but most of the time, we use these words and expressions without necessarily conjuring up an image of sports.

- It’s useful to remember that sports references vary by culture, depending on where English is being spoken. Much of this lecture has focused on American English, whose speakers may be less clear on why a sticky wicket is a difficult circumstance.

- Interestingly, we often talk about dating as a game or sport: one plays the field and, perhaps, scores. In the next lecture, we’ll look at more expressions about romantic encounters as we explore the language of love.

Suggested Reading

Littlefield, “Sports Analogies and War.”

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think it says about American culture that the language of sports is omnipresent in everyday American English?

2. What words or expressions have sports other than those discussed in the lecture (e.g., golf, track and field) contributed to American English or other varieties of English?
What does love mean? This is an age-old question that has occupied poets and playwrights, philosophers and songwriters, and many a lovelorn teenager and adult. One can only feel sorry for the lexicographer who must take on the task of defining this word, in all its nuances and manifestations. This lecture will concentrate on the language of love, focusing on the word love itself (as well as adore, cherish, and so on), exploring terms of endearment and nicknames and looking at how we talk about sex and dating. Throughout, we’ll discuss the power of words to express emotion, shape relationships, make us uncomfortable, and perhaps, shape how we think.

The Word Love

- As a noun, love is a disposition or feeling, from a feeling of deep attachment, to fondness, to benevolent attachment, to romantic attachment. It can also be an intense liking or predilection, an abstract notion, a passion, devotion, preoccupation, or sexual desire. One’s love, of course, can also be a person or a thing that is beloved and a term of address for a loved one.

- The verb love refers to feeling any of these emotions, from benevolent attachment, to devotion, to sexual desire—to simply taking pleasure in something.

- If we were to draw a map of the semantic field of caring, where would we put love in relation to adore, like, care for?
  - The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that words have meaning in relation to each other; thus, to understand such a word as love, we need to understand its relationship to other words within its semantic field. Think of the field as a chessboard, with the chess pieces carrying meaning in relation to other pieces and how they are allowed to move.
Although *love* is strong, for many people, *adore* might be even stronger, at least in some contexts. With *adore* come connotations of reverence, which can be traced back to its French source. When the word first entered English, it was used to refer to worship, as of a deity. By Shakespeare’s time, it was used more synonymously with love in non-religious senses.

The verb *like* is clearly weaker than love, expressing pleasure taken in something or someone. The verb *like* gives us a lot of wiggle room, given the range of feelings it can cover, from tepid to intense. You might sometimes hear a teenage girl asking a friend: “Do you like him or do you like like him?”

*Care for* typically takes us out of the realm of romance and into more nurturing situations, in which someone is providing for or looking after someone else; for some, it may have connotations of sympathy or benevolence.

*Being fond of* also seems like a weaker kind of love; it is certainly affectionate, and in some cases, it might be indulgent, but there is no passion in fondness.

*Love* itself may not be strong enough to capture the depth of intimacy of a marriage or relationship that lasts for decades.

There is some concern that Facebook has weakened the power of *like*; one can “like” almost anything with just the click of a button.
• The nuances of word meaning for these expressions are hard to pin down yet critically important; these nuances are part of the reason it is so hard to find true synonyms for love.

**Metaphors of Love**

• Metaphors for love picture it in different ways.
  o For example, we fall in love, which suggests that love has a vastness to it.

  o We can also stumble across love, find it, and lose it, which makes it sound much more human-sized, in our path somehow or something we can grasp; love seems less overwhelming this way.

  o We can be struck by love, which makes it a powerful force, like lightning. Or love can sneak up on us, giving it catlike feet.

  o We can be crossed in love, which seems to give love the power to betray.

• Note that it’s not unusual to have competing metaphors in language. For example, time is often related to money (spend time, waste time), and time is a moving object (time flies, the time has come).

**Terms of Endearment**

• Common (and generic) terms of endearment include: love/my love, honey, dear, sweetheart, and sweetheart.

• There is some crossover between terms used for children and those used for lovers, especially women, for example, munchkin and pumpkin.

• People sometimes use terms of endearment with very specific histories.
- There is some regional variation in terms of how intimate these expressions seem; for example, in the South, *sweetheart, honey*, and similar words may be used in much less intimate settings.

- But we recognize that there are boundaries, and it can be insulting when the boundaries are crossed. For example, for a man to call a woman “honey” in a professional setting assumes a level of intimacy that probably shouldn’t be present and demeans the woman, infantilizing her and treating her as a subordinate.

- These boundaries are perhaps especially pronounced with nicknames.
  - Not all our names allow for nicknames, but many of them do, often with diminutive endings, such as -y/-ie (Annie, Katie, Mikey, Susie), or shortenings (Rob, Alex, Meg).
  - As with *honey*, to use a nickname may presume intimacy that is unearned. It may also feel like a positioning of one person in a relationship as less powerful than the other.
  - Parents exploit this in the other direction, too, using children’s full names when the children are in trouble. We send many signals about our emotional states, and one key signal is the terms of address we use.

**Sexual Intimacy**

- Certainly, one taboo topic for speakers of English is sex. This doesn’t mean that we don’t talk about sex, but we have found ways to talk around it, euphemistically. Direct talk about sex is often seen as vulgar.

- To *have sex* or *have sexual intercourse* would be two of the more direct ways to reference the physical act. However, we often talk about *making love*, which was first used in the 16th century to refer to courting and is first cited in the *OED* with the meaning ‘to have sex’ in 1927. Many argue that this expression isn’t completely synonymous with having sex; it implies a loving relationship.
• Another euphemism for sexual intercourse is *sleeping together*, which can require reduplication to clarify. In other words, someone might ask, “Did you sleep together or sleep together sleep together?”

• Young adults have a set of terms to refer to degrees of physical intimacy, not necessarily including intercourse. These include: *making out, fooling around, messing around, hooking up,* and *necking.*

• Another way to distance ourselves from the physical act of sex is to use technical Latinate terms, such as *fornication* or *copulation.* These can sound clinical, as does *intercourse.* At the other end of the spectrum are terms for sex that focus graphically on the physical act, such as *bang, poke,* or *screw.* These verbs capture the act of sexual intercourse from the male perspective.

• How do dictionaries handle these terms? Squeamishly seems to be at least part of the answer.
  o Jesse Sheidlower, the North American editor of the *OED* and author of *The F-Word,* noted that in 1966, the *Random House Dictionary* decided not to include the f-word. The dictionary was reprimanded in the press for this decision because the f-word is one of the most common words in English.

  o We’ve made progress since 1966 in terms of inclusion, but Sheidlower argues that perhaps editors are still too squeamish to get the facts right.

  o Among the issues Sheidlower identifies in defining terms for various kinds of sex is the fact that many definitions of sexual acts do not account for what these acts mean with same-sex partners, as opposed to heterosexual partners.

  o Further, many dictionaries define the f-word in relation to sexual intercourse, but in fact, it has broader meaning than that, encompassing many other sexual acts.
The f-word and similar terms describe activities that are central to being human. It seems that if a dictionary includes these words, it should strive for accuracy in definition.

The “Sport” of Dating

- As mentioned at the end of the last lecture, we sometimes talk about the act of dating as a game or sport. This returns us to our earlier discussion of conceptual metaphors, that is, metaphors that structure how we talk about a topic (e.g., women as dessert).

- Research conducted by a student using nine dating advice guides found that the guides themselves frame dating as a game, and often, the books or authors are the coaches. They also frame men and women differently in the game, with men playing and women defining the rules, only to be caught in the end. The woman is the “trophy” (note that a man can have a *trophy wife*, but there is no *trophy husband*).

- These guides rely on practice metaphors, such as *getting in shape*, to help readers up their *batting average*. Of course, that metaphor suggests that the goal is scoring, which has sexual connotations.

- Sometimes, dating is framed as an obstacle course, implying that “good romance” must involve obstacles and the chase is part of the fun—the more challenging the better. The reward for women is a relationship, but for men, again, it’s “scoring.”

- Does the way we talk about dating truly affect how we think about it? It’s difficult to know for sure, but there are arguments that language can shape our perceptions and habituate us to seeing the world in particular ways.

Suggested Reading

Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

Sheidlower, “Can a Woman ‘Prong’ a Man?”
Questions to Consider

1. What are some of the most intimate words in your life? Does the identity of the speaker affect how intimate they feel to you?

2. Do you think it matters in terms of attitudes about romantic relationships that we talk about dating as a game? If so, what should we do about it?
The realities of war are horrifying—whether you might think a particular war is justified or not; to obscure those realities, we often use euphemistic language to talk about war. War also creates tightknit communities that develop their own jargon and slang, some of which seeps out of military contexts into wider discourse. In this lecture, we’ll look first at some of the jargon and slang of war itself, and then we’ll look at some of the words that have been developed in public discourse about war. Finally, at the end of the lecture, we’ll turn to the metaphor of war, which we use to discuss many other things, from sports to disease.

Modern Military Jargon and Slang

- Modern military jargon and slang has infiltrated the language more broadly; some of it dates back to the 19th century and some to World War I.
  - For example, *to shanghai* started as a nautical military term (first cited in 1871), referring to drugging someone and transporting him or her by vessel, from which the term generalized in military slang to ‘transferring forcibly, abducting, compelling.’ We can now shanghai people into doing something that has nothing to do with the military.
  - *Recon* for ‘reconnaissance’ dates back to World War I and is still used in military contexts (“recon mission”), but we can also now do recon online, such as reading restaurant reviews.
  - *Civvies* for ‘civilian clothes’ shows up in the *OED* in the late 19th century but seems to have come into more common use with World War I. It seems still to be used primarily in military contexts, but it can be found elsewhere, such as in reference to a player out of uniform.
• **AWOL** (‘absent without leave’) dates back to the late 19th century and moved beyond the military around the time of World War I.

• There are also some World War I terms that have remained primarily military, such as **POW** and **jarhead**. The latter term originally referred to a mule that hauled equipment in the army and, later, to a member of the Marine Corps more generally.

• World War II contributed a good number of slang terms to wider discourse.
  o For example, **snafu** is a World War II term, an acronym for ‘situation normal: all f-ed (fouled) up.’
  o **Fubar** is an acronym for ‘f-ed (fouled) up beyond all recognition,’ that is, bungled, ruined, or intoxicated. The use of taboo words and the irreverence of such acronyms seem to be mechanisms for handling the intensity of war.
  o **MIA** (‘missing in action’) dates back to World War II and is now used far from military contexts, whenever someone cannot be located.
  o To **red line** also comes from World War II. According to the **OED**, this term means, “to mark, circle, cross out in red, especially to single something out for attention.” The term later meant to ban in general and then to disqualify for a loan (1973). The meaning of ‘to operate equipment at maximum speed’ (1956) comes from a different red line (the one on a gauge marking safe speed).
  o **Gung ho**, borrowed from Chinese for ‘work together,’ entered the language in the World War II era, as well.

• From the Vietnam War come other terms now more widely in circulation, such as **newbie** (a person newer to Vietnam than the
Terms from all of these wars can make violent pieces of equipment and acts sound much less so. For example, _banana clip_ refers to the banana-shaped magazine typical of an AK-47; _rock ‘n’ roll_ means to put an M16-A1 rifle on full automatic fire; a _bird_ is any aircraft, especially a helicopter; and _fragging_ is assassination of an officer by his own troops.

This violence is an everyday state of affairs for soldiers at war, and it is not surprising that their language finds ways to play with the world in which they find themselves in.

Public Discourse about War

- In recent war coverage, observers have identified other euphemisms. Two at the top of the list are _friendly fire_ and _collateral damage_.
  - The use of _friendly_, as in “friendly bombing” or “friendly aircraft,” to describe one’s own troops or equipment dates back to 1925. In Vietnam, troops from the United States and its allies were called “friendlies.”

  - _Collateral damage_ seems perhaps even more harmful in its abstraction of human lives lost. In Britain, in 2003, Labour chairman John Reid announced that military spokespeople would no longer use the term.
A similar euphemism is *casualty* to refer to the loss of soldiers. This usage dates back to the 16th century, in reference to losses in the field generally, that is, “casualties on the field.” The *OED* has a citation as early as 1844 in which *casualty* was used in reference to an individual soldier’s death, exhibiting the same movement from general to specific as *troop*.

- In 2003, the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain ran a series explaining and critiquing war terms being used in the news.
  - One such term was *embedding*, used to describe journalists attached to a military unit in combat.
  - The expression *shock and awe* comes from the military strategist Harlan Ullman’s description of heavy aerial bombardment in Iraq. The phrase does not sound as violent as the bombing, especially given that *awe* is now often used in more positive contexts.
  - The expression *fixing* towns or cities meant sealing them off on the march to Baghdad to neutralize any remaining troops.

- Defining *war* is an issue at the highest levels. For example, when the U.S. administration decided to take military action in Libya in 2011, it issued a report explaining why the War Powers Resolution did not apply: The military action did not involve sustained fighting or active exchanges of fire, and it did not involve the presence of U.S. ground troops. Some worry that the war on terror skirts the line of a metaphorical war, because the enemy is not clearly defined; the term itself has the United States at war with an abstract concept.

### War as Metaphor

- Almost as long as the word *war* has been used in English to refer to armed conflict, it has also been used metaphorically (e.g., “war on drugs,” “war on poverty,” “war on cancer”).
  - An Old French borrowing, *war* appeared as early as the mid-12th century. By the 14th century, it was being used figuratively.
- We can now have a war of words, a war between the sexes, warring TV networks, and so on.

- We use not just the word *war* metaphorically but also the concept of war metaphorically. As we’ve seen, such conceptual metaphors structure the way we talk about a phenomenon. The linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson provided “Argument is war” as an example of a conceptual metaphor. We attack and defend positions, shoot down other people’s arguments, win and lose, and so on.

- Sports are sometimes linked with war. Basketball has the “run-and-gun” offense; tennis has “cannonball” serves; offenses in football and other sports have “heavy artillery.”
  - In fact, football television coverage used to glorify the game as a kind of war, but in 2009, Lee Carpenter wrote an article for the *Washington Post* noting a shift away from this terminology in the NFL; league officials are quoted as saying that it seemed inappropriate while the country was fighting two wars.
  
  - There are also some earlier efforts to reduce violent language around sports, including changing the name of the Washington Bullets to Wizards in 1997 and some sports magazines trying to minimize language about winning as killing.

  - Bill Littlefield, in a segment for the NPR show *Only a Game*, pointed out in 2003 that sports metaphors are also used for war, perhaps especially the idea of diplomacy as poker (including George W. Bush asking allies to “show their cards”).

- A powerful conceptual metaphor based on war equates treating illness with fighting a battle. This conceptual metaphor is so common that it has become highly naturalized for many if not most of us.
  - War-related terms in this realm include: *fighting* or *battling disease*, *building up defenses*, *shots*, *targeting diseases*, *killer T cells*, *painkillers*, *the body’s defenses*, *magic bullet*, and so on.
This conceptual metaphor can be beneficial; the urgency of war can help focus research and funding on serious diseases—and it has sometimes been successful in this way.

But doctors and scholars from various disciplines have pointed out that it may also have its downsides. It can almost erase the patient and concentrate the focus on the disease.

Others have pointed out that although some patients draw strength from the metaphor, others may find themselves positioned as losing should the disease prove too powerful.

It’s possible to think of other conceptual metaphors we might use with regard to illness. For example, disease might be an unwelcome guest (we “host” bacteria and viruses) or the treatment of disease might be similar to housecleaning (we might “sweep it out”).

As this lecture has demonstrated, the language of war surrounds us every day, from the war slang and jargon that has entered everyday parlance to the war metaphors that we use to talk about argument, illness, sports, and much more. The examples here should remind us of the power of language to release emotional stress, to help us cope with the almost unthinkable, to obscure with euphemism, and to shape entire conceptual systems through metaphor.

Suggested Reading

Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. 
Questions to Consider

1. How might the use of the word *troop* to refer to individual soldiers affect how we think about the casualties of war?

2. What do you think the implications are of talking about war in terms of sports and sports in terms of war?
We can learn a great deal about the conversations we have in American politics by looking at some of the key terms and the “frames” they create, which can make some positions seem better or more commonsense than others. In this lecture, we’ll look at the histories of some central political terms, from filibuster to gerrymandering to pork barrel. Then, we’ll look at some of the terms that have been central to debates over the past decade, to see how the terms themselves may shape the debates. As we’ve seen, language matters, and the stakes can be high, from the language of love in our interpersonal relationships to the language of politics, which determines the direction of nations.

“Defining the Frames”

- Near the end of 2004, the linguist George Lakoff published the book *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*, the aim of which was to show how American conservatives have successfully defined the frames—the terms—of many debates in American politics. Part of Lakoff’s point was that just using certain words can shape how people think about an issue.

- One of Lakoff’s examples was the use of the term tax relief, which came to prominence almost immediately after George W. Bush was elected in 2000.
  - This phrase creates a specific frame, as Lakoff points out: to have relief, there must be a problem or burden. If there is such a problem or burden, it is completely understandable that we would seek relief.
  - The phrase *tax relief* sets up taxes as the burden or affliction. Taxes are not, with this phrase, framed as a patriotic responsibility or a moral good—both of which are certainly possibilities if we choose to think about them this way.
If taxes are an affliction, anyone who supports tax relief is on the right side of the issue, and anyone opposing tax relief is on the wrong side. This is just common sense—and that is the power of conceptual frames and political language: They can shape what seems like common sense.

- It doesn’t matter which way you vote on such issues as taxes or government spending; the point is that whoever controls the terms has enormous power in shaping the debate.

**Central Political Terms**

- How did the *Right* become associated with conservative positions and the *Left* with liberal positions?
  
  o According to the *OED*, as an adjective, *right* first came to refer to conservative positions at the end of the 18th century, in reference to the French Assembly and those seated to the right of the chair.

  o The noun *Right* in the early 19th century referred to the conservative members seated to the right of the president at the European Continental Legislature and generalized fairly quickly to any political group with more conservative views.

  o In the mid-19th century, *right wing* came to be used to refer to the right; the term has its origins in the military to refer to the right flank.

  o The political meaning of *left* similarly stems from the seating patterns in the continental legislatures and has developed the noun forms *Left* and *left wing*.

- The term *liberal* has become what linguists would call a “dysphemism”; in other words, the word has taken on such negative connotations that some see it as an insult.
- *Liberal* was first borrowed into English from Anglo-Norman and Middle French near the end of the 14th century, and it meant ‘generous, free in giving.’

- By the 19th century, the term was being used in a political sense to refer to those supporting social reform and a degree of government intervention in economics and in promoting social justice.

- The *OED* provides a separate meaning for the use of *liberal*, beginning in the late 18th century, to refer to those supporting individual rights, civil liberties, and political reform to enhance individual freedom, with little state intervention.

- When the term was first used for the Liberal Democrats in England, it seems to have come from opponents of the Whig party, in an attempt to associate that party with revolutionary, anti-monarchist views in Europe.

- Although we may think that the pejorative use of *liberal* in the United States is relatively new, the word has actually been used by conservatives to mean ‘communist’ or ‘socialist’ since the mid-19th century. In the 20th century, President Ronald Reagan is often credited with promoting *liberal* as a negative term.

- We sometimes talk about Democrats and Republicans in terms of *red states* and *blue states*.
  - The use of these terms has generalized from a state that won or was predicted to be won by Republicans or Democrats in an election to a state that “is” Republican or Democrat more generally.

- The terms now have connotations as adjectives. For example, the *OED* quotes the *Washington Post*: “If you debate when to take your first buck in deer-hunting season, you are a red state” (2003).
• The term *purple states* is now used for “swing states” or “battleground states.”

**Specialized Political Terms**

- The word *filibuster*, used to refer to obstructionist activities in a legislative body, used to refer to a pirate or “freebooter.”
  - The word’s early history is complicated; it seems to have been borrowed into English multiple times at different points from Dutch, French, and Spanish.
  - Between 1850 and 1860, *filibuster* referred to bands of adventurers from the United States who violated international law by going to the Spanish West Indies or Central America to organize revolutionary activities.
  - By the end of the 19th century, it had generalized to anyone promoting unauthorized warfare in foreign states.
  - In 1889, the word was used to refer to a person obstructing legislation (“a single determined filibuster”), and by 1890, it was used for the activity itself.

- The origins of a *stump speech*, an Americanism, are much more obvious than *filibuster*; it stems from the practice of putting speakers on large stumps as platforms.

- *Mudslinging* refers to hurling insults at one’s opponents; the word goes back to...
1860, and the first references are all American, although the *OED* does not identify it as an American word.

- A *lobbyist*, too, is American in origin, referring to those who spent time in the lobbies of the House of Representatives, trying to influence legislators (1863).

- In the early 18th century, *pork barrel* was actually a barrel for storing pork, but it came to be used figuratively for a supply of money or a source of “rich pickings.”
  - The term was used in a political sense as early as 1873 to refer to a state’s central (or federal) funds to be used for regional expenditures—often seen as financing projects that would please the local electorate.
  - The term *pork* came to refer to the funds that were spent by politicians in this endeavor.

- *Gerrymander* is a long-standing eponym that can be traced back to Massachusetts governor (and, later, vice president) Elbridge Gerry, who was in power in 1812 when the Democratic legislature redrew the state’s districts to favor the Democrats in the state senate.

- The term *swing vote/voter* is also American in origins but much newer. One swing voter who has received a great deal of attention since the 1990s is the mom.
  - Celinda Lake, a Democratic political consultant, is often credited with coining the term *soccer mom* to refer to an important political constituency.
  - The *OED* shows the term as early as 1973 but not as a political demographic. By the 1990s, the idea was that women in this category constituted a powerful voting bloc and could be mobilized in support of President Clinton.
In 2004, *security mom* referred to a woman who was concerned with the security of her family and could be mobilized rhetorically through appeals related to security.

Sarah Palin used *hockey mom* in 2008, with, perhaps, connotations of being tougher than a soccer mom and more blue collar.

Abram Sauer, who studies branding, points out the ways in which these brands or labels create stereotypes that greatly simplify this demographic. The “mom” labels define women as mothers rather than professionals and ignore race, religion, and important factors.

**Political Labeling**

- One example of political labeling or framing can be found in the debate about abortion in the United States. In fact, the debate is rarely discussed in terms of abortion per se; the sides are labeled *pro-life* (1971) and *pro-choice* (1974).
  - Here, we see both sides trying to frame their positions in positive terms: as “pro” a moral good (life) or individual freedom and liberty (choice).
  - This framing makes both sides seem like sustainable, commonsense positions.

- A dramatic example of language control, which resulted in unexpected political consequences, is the introduction of the term *death tax*.
  - This term for the estate tax was coined in 1993 by Jim Martin, founder and president of the 60 Plus Association, which seeks to repeal the estate tax. This is a highly specialized tax, only applied to the wealthiest 2 percent of Americans on estates transferred to their heirs.
  - The tax is actually called the Federal Estate and Gift Tax and Generation-Skipping Transfer Tax. But Martin has come up
with other terms, including the *grave robber’s tax*, the *Grim Reaper tax*, and the *success tax*.

- GOP pollster Frank Luntz discovered that *death tax* sparked voter resentment more than *inheritance tax* or *estate tax*.

- President Bill Clinton rejected the repeal, calling it “a windfall for the wealthy,” and for a long time, the tax was seen as untouchable. But in the first decade of the 21st century, the percentage of the tax has been lowered significantly and the amount of the exemption was raised to $5 million in 2011.

- It is hard not to see this legislation as related to the shift in the terms of the debate. The terms *success tax* or *death tax* seem to overshadow the fact of taxing wealth.

- In 2010, a *New York Times/CBS News* poll about gays in the military revealed two things: (1) that most Americans support members of the gay community serving in the military, and (2) the wording of the poll question affects the results.
  - When the question to respondents was whether they favored or opposed “homosexuals” serving in the military, 59 percent favored and 29 percent opposed.
  - When the question to respondents was whether they favored or opposed “gay men and lesbians” serving in the military, 70 percent favored and 19 percent opposed. This 10 percent gain may be attributable to medical and negative connotations of the word *homosexual*.

- The striking difference in results shows us the power of language to shape response and, thereby, shape policy.
Suggested Reading

Green, “Meet Mr. Death.”

Lakoff, Don’t Think of an Elephant!

Questions to Consider

1. Such terms as *tax relief* and *death tax* can shape the debate about the political issue in question. What are additional examples, and how do they potentially shape debates?

2. How have you seen the terms *liberal* and *conservative*, *left wing* and *right wing* change over your lifetime?
Many people are concerned these days that the Internet and texting are ruining English. The combination of technological innovation and young people’s innovations with the language fuels fears that everyone will soon be speaking in acronyms and no one will know how to use an apostrophe or a comma. Although it’s true that the Internet has created a new register (a new kind of written English), this register can coexist with other registers we already have: formal written English, journalistic English, and so on. Of course, it’s also true that Internet English influences other forms of English, as we’ll see in this lecture.

The Scope of Electronic Communication

- It’s important to note that not everyone these days is communicating electronically; access to electronic communication is related to education and socioeconomics.

- But with cell phones, to which more than 4 billion people worldwide have access, electronic communication is more accessible than ever.

- People today are e-mailing, texting, instant messaging, BlackBerry messaging, Facebook wall posting, tweeting, blogging, and otherwise writing more prolifically than we have probably ever seen in the history of the world. Thus, electronic communication does not seem to herald the death of literacy.

Myths about Internet English

- Myth 1: Acronyms are everywhere in electronic communication.
  - In fact, they’re not. As David Crystal (one of the leading experts on Internet English) notes in his book *Txtng* (2008), no study of texting conversations has shown abbreviations in more than 20 percent of the messages being sent. Texters are not leaving out vowels every chance they get or turning everything into an acronym.
There certainly are some common acronyms, as we’ll discuss, but such forms as *gr8* (‘great,’ mixing letters and numbers) are relatively rare.

Most of the long, ridiculous acronyms critics sometimes cite, such as *iydkidkwd* (‘if you don’t know, I don’t know who does’) appear infrequently in real electronic messages.

**Myth 2: Misspellings and nontraditional spellings abound.**

If this myth were ever true, it is much less so now, because smart phones correct spelling automatically.

People also don’t use as many nonstandard spellings as critics seem to think they do. Consider, for example, all the function words that stay as they are in many sentences: *a, an, of, all, the, that, as, they, he, she,* and so on.

Nor do people make that many errors. A study by Naomi Baron found one “error” in every 12.8 transmissions in texting. The most frequent errors were missing apostrophes, followed by missing or added letters, reversal of letters, and homophone confusion.

Some of the confusions of homophones are not surprising; they are the same that many of us make in typing, such as *there/their/they’re* and *you’re/your*.

Although texters often leave out apostrophes—after all, they aren’t usually necessary for clarity (e.g., *isn’t* versus *isnt*)—in fact, they use them more often than we might expect.

**Myth 3: No one capitalizes.**

Again, it’s hard to know the extent of this practice because many phones and computer programs now capitalize letters for us.

To some extent, the lack of capitalization is stylistic, a way to seem informal or casual when typing.
Features of Internet English

- There is a remarkable amount of agreement among young people on the complex rules associated with electronic communication, such as what topics are acceptable for texting, when to use emoticons, and so on. What we’re calling Internet English is highly rule-governed writing, despite the fact that it’s informal.

- The set of common acronyms in electronic communication includes *JK* (‘just kidding’), *BTW* (‘by the way’), *BRB* (‘be right back’), *TTYL* (‘talk to you later’), and *cu* (‘see you’; also spelled *cyu*). *LOL* might be the most well-known acronym to come out of texting and instant messaging, and its meaning is evolving rapidly.
  o At first, *LOL* meant ‘laughing out loud.’ Now, *hahaha* means that (three *ha*’s is really laughing versus two, which is more neutral).
  o *LOL* has been bleached of its original strong meaning and can be used in a couple of novel ways. One is as a back channel—a listening noise to show that you are still reading or present.
  o *LOL* can also be put at the end of a message to do the equivalent of *JK*, that is, convey that the message is meant to be funny.
  o The term made news in the winter of 2011 when the *OED* included it in the third edition.

Among the texting acronyms that have made it into common use in the language are *OMG* (‘oh my God’) and *BFF* (‘best friends forever’).
Another way to convey that one is trying to be funny is the emoticon (emotion(al) + icon)—those smiley or winky faces one can add to a message.

- The use of emoticons is important because texting happens at such rapid speeds. Although it is written, it is like speech in that way, yet the context must often be created.

- Studies show that it is not just young people or women who use emoticons.

- Emoticons vary by country and language; Japanese emoticons, for example, are vertical rather than horizontal and use different symbols for the eyes and mouth.

Instant messaging and texting have developed a set of written back channels, including yeah, okay, haha, got it, uh huh, mmhm(mmm), and kk.

Users have also adapted the written language in other ways to accommodate the combination of writing with speedy interchange that is inherent in instant messaging and texting.

- For example, texting in all capital letters is used for emphasis or yelling; periods are used to show emphatic pronunciation (“Done. With. Grading.”); and the question mark or ellipses may be used as a shortcut to elicit a response.

- Users have also adapted punctuation to show a motion or narrate what they are doing; for example: *banging head against wall*.

As we know, Internet English also encompasses some common nonstandard spellings; indeed, some are so common that they have become standard nonstandard spellings: thru, tonite, u (‘you’), r (‘are’), thanx (thx), cos/cuz (‘because’), omigod.

- Other spellings are trying to capture spoken pronunciation, such as -in for -ing (to capture informal pronunciation), ya (‘you’), gonna, wanna, wotcha (‘what are you’).
Still other spellings capture slang forms, such as *sup* for ‘what’s up, wassup’.

Some nonstandard spellings can also be used affectively; for example, for a friendly goodbye, you can elongate the *byeееее*.

**Fundamental Language Changes**

- Electronic communication has perhaps had more fundamental effects on English than just changes in spelling or punctuation, in particular, in the destabilization of text and in notions of authorship.

- For those of us who are used to book culture, we’ve come to expect text that looks the same every time we open up the book. But now, when we visit a web page, it may look different than it did even the day before. This was also true before the advent of printing, in a manuscript culture.

- With electronic communication, we don’t always know who the author is of the text we’re reading. This, too, was true in a manuscript culture.

- Yet another fundamental change is captured in the title of Naomi Baron’s book *Always On* (2008). Electronic communication means that we are more available than we have ever been. The sheer volume of communication may sometimes be exhausting and, with it, comes the ability to screen, that is, to select with whom we wish to communicate.

  - Some people are concerned that all the time we spend in electronic communication is causing deterioration of our in-person conversational skills or that the sheer volume of writing we encounter may lead to not caring about writing.

  - However, colloquialization isn’t the same thing as not caring about the form. As we’ve seen, in texting, young people care a good deal about the form—it’s simply a more colloquial form.
Another important impact of electronic communication is that English is spreading around the world in ways that no language has ever spread before. It is coming into contact with many other languages and being adapted for many purposes. At the same time, it’s important to remember that more and more traffic on the Internet is in languages other than English.

These new technologies are key to understanding the future of English, but right now, it is hard to know what that future will be. Will the Internet be the marker of a new era in the history of English? It’s possible that future historians of English may identify this moment, with the Internet and other forms of electronic communication, as the transition from Modern English to some new period, in the same way that the invention of the printing press served as a dividing line between Middle English and the Renaissance.

Despite these unanswered questions, we can be confident that electronic communication will not bring about linguistic ruin. Speakers have always adapted the language to meet their communicative needs, as we are doing now with Internet English. We communicate in many ways and places other than the Internet and are adept at moving among different ways of using the language.

Suggested Reading

Baron, *Always On*.

Crystal, *Txting: The Gr8 Deb8*.

Questions to Consider

1. To what extent do you shift your written language when you e-mail, text message, and/or chat online? Do you see any of your online written language seeping into your offline written language?
2. Take a look at a text message conversation or online chat. How frequent are nonstandard spellings and abbreviations? Do both men and women use emoticons?
It tells us a lot about the power of language that there are some words that we see as so potent—so explosive, offensive, sacred, or otherwise taboo—that we try not to utter them. Or at least we think about them before we say them, recognizing their potential inappropriateness and ability to offend. Because taboo words are forbidden, just to say some words can feel like a transgression. But many if not most of us do say them, because they serve a real purpose in the language. Taboo words can powerfully express emotion, and that is one of the key things that language allows us to do. In this lecture, we focus on taboo language.

What Is Taboo Language?

• The word taboo comes from Tongan, an Austronesian language. In Tongan, the meaning applies only to religion: ‘restricted to use by the king, god, priests, chiefs, while prohibited for general use; forbidden.’ The word was borrowed into English at the end of the 18th century and quickly generalized to putting anything or anyone under prohibition.

• The question of what is taboo language is harder to answer than we might think. Some topics generate taboo language fairly consistently: religion, the body and bodily functions, sex and sexuality, disease, death, and culturally marginalized or disfavored groups of people and practices.

• We learn taboo words as children, and in fact, children have a strong sense of what words are taboo, even before they know what they mean.

• Taboo language is full of paradoxes: It can make us angry and make us laugh; it can hurt and offend, but it can also establish solidarity.
• In linguistics, we talk and write about taboo terms, and it is important that we do. Taboo words represent language at its most powerful. Even in this context, however, taboo language can make us uncomfortable.

• Taboo words can range in offensiveness, from the mild to the highly offensive, if not unspeakable for some. This range can differ from person to person. Offensiveness is also determined by context: who you are talking to (and how well you know that person) and where you are (in public versus private).

The Frequency and Work of Taboo Language
• Timothy Jay at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has done important work on the frequency of taboo language.
  o On average, studies show that swear words are 0.3 to 0.5 percent of the speech people use every day; that translates to 1 in every 200 to 300 words. For comparison purposes, Jay cites studies showing that we use first-person pronouns (I, we) 1 percent of the time (1 word in every 100).

  o The frequency with which an individual uses swear words depends on personality, gender, religiousness, and perhaps, rank or class in daily life. It’s important to remember that we are performing identities, and part of our performances involves how careful or standard we’re supposed to be with language. Women are supposed to be more standard/careful than men; working-class men are stereotyped as using more colloquial language; and so on.

• Profanity, obscenities, and vulgarities seem to be as old as language itself, and part of the reason may be that they perform a physiological function.
  o A fascinating study, published in 2009 in the journal *NeuroReport* by researchers at Keele University, demonstrated that swearing may not only express pain but help relieve it.
Many linguists have tried to explain this phenomenon, and part of the reason may be that expletives are stored in a different part of the brain (the right hemisphere) than the rest of language (in left hemisphere). Swear words may activate the amygdala, triggering the fight-or-flight response, which dulls pain.

- We also have physiological responses to obscenities; the heart rate increases and the hair on our arms stands on end when we hear swear words. This type of arousal may be mitigated for those who curse frequently or depending on how the word is used.

**Regulations about Taboo Language**
- Regulations about taboo language in public, especially on television and radio, rest on the idea that these words are harmful, especially to young people. Thus, the definition of what counts as taboo has landed in court, including the Supreme Court.

- Federal law prohibits the broadcast of obscene speech (defined as offensive in terms of depictions of sexual conduct) and restricts the broadcast of indecent and profane speech to the hours between 10 pm and 6 am. This regulation is viewed as creating a “safe haven” for young people.

- In 2004, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruled that fleeting expletives are indecent, resulting in the five-second delay on live broadcasts. This ruling was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2009 but later struck down by the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals; it returned to the Supreme Court in 2012.
• The court grappled with the question of what counts as indecent and what counts as art and noted the potential for capriciousness in FCC enforcement.

• Of course, television commercials about erectile dysfunction and bodily functions in the bathroom are permitted, perhaps in part because they tend to use Latinate words or euphemisms.

• We all know that it’s hard to precisely define instances of profanity, obscenity, and vulgarity, yet we have a strong sense that we know it when we hear it and we can avoid it if we don’t want to say it.

Changes in Standards
• What is considered obscene or vulgar changes over time. The word devil, for example, used to be a much stronger word, as did damn.

• Many epithets have come to be seen as even more profane and offensive than they once were. Piss, for example, was not always considered as coarse as it is now. In some cases, certain words were always offensive, but standards have changed about public acceptability, especially in the post–civil rights era.

• Some terms that used to be seen as vulgar are no longer vulgar, and it can seem quaint that 19th-century delicacy about body parts made these terms vulgar. For example, leg was seen as an impolite word, if not a bad one, in the 19th century; limb was the polite alternative.

• Of course, some obscenities have been taboo for a long time, including the f-word (cited back to the 16th century). There are many false etymologies of this word, but it probably originates from an Indo-European root meaning ‘strike’ and comes down into various languages as ‘copulate,’ ‘rub,’ or ‘hit quickly.’

Non-Swear Words
• Attempts to avoid profanity, specifically avoiding taking God’s name in vain, have given us the words gosh (1757) and golly (1775); avoiding the name Jesus Christ gives us gee (1885), jeez/
 geez (1923), and perhaps, crimin y (1681). More recently, OMG avoids the explicit reference to God.

- Taboo topics, such as death, generate numerous euphemistic expressions, including pass away, go to a better place, depart, and no longer with us, as well as irreverent ones, including pushing up daisies, kick the bucket, and cash out.

- Taboo terms themselves also generate alternatives, from sugar and shoot to sweet peaches in the biscuit batter.

Epithets

- Some fraught words, especially epithets, generate debate about whether they should be changed or removed—and who can say them.

- Epithets (that is, offensive terms for people based on race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and other personal characteristics) are fraught territory for all speakers, including those who record the language in dictionaries.

- The issue of whether to include epithets in dictionaries arose at the end of the 19th century with the highly offensive verb to jew, meaning ‘to cheat or haggle’ (1825). Most dictionary makers argue that such terms should be kept in and try to handle the taboo nature of the terms with usage labels, such as “offensive.”

- The word euphemistically known as the n-word has also been an object of significant debate.
  - This is perhaps the most explosive word in American English, and many speakers choose not to say it, even when talking about it in a linguistic or legal context. It is a word long associated with expressions of hatred.
  - The word came into English as a loan word, from the Latin word for ‘black’ and perhaps through another language in between. The OED first cites the word in 1574 as a neutral reference to people with dark skin from sub-Saharan Africa.
But by the 18th century, the term was being used in highly derogatory ways, and it remains racially offensive today, especially when used by whites in reference to blacks.

Some African Americans have reclaimed the word, usually in the modified form with a final -a, as a positive term within the African American community, a term that can reinforce solidarity. With this usage, the term is not meant to be available for use outside the African American community.

This reclamation is highly contested among African Americans. Maya Angelou has called the word “poison,” and in 2007, there were movements around the United States to bury the n-word.

Reclamation can be a way to counter the history of animosity and discrimination that can be carried in words. It is also a way to take control of the language by a group that has had the language used against its members.

Recently, attention has also been drawn to the use of the words retarded, lame, and gay to mean ‘stupid.’

In the past few years, an ad campaign called “Think B4 You Speak” has appeared on television, in which both famous and not famous people ask us not to use gay to mean ‘stupid.’

As we’ve seen, conscious language change doesn’t always work, but sometimes it does, and it raises consciousness about uses that may be seen as offensive to some groups.

Cultural Practices and Taboo Words

Consider some of the cultural practices we have developed around some taboo words. For example, there are the seven words that cannot be said on television, and if one of them is uttered, it is bleeped—but often not bleeped so much that you cannot tell what the word is.
• We don’t necessarily need to change that practice, but it is worth considering the words we bleep and the words we don’t, because the line is blurry at best. *Bitch* is now allowed on network television, a word that is arguably more demeaning than many other curse words. Why is this not an epithet about which people are careful?

• Taboo language can do a lot of different social work. For example, cursing can be offensive or funny; it can create distance or closeness—much depends on context. With identity terms, it is important to remember that respecting the lines that taboo language draws is part of respecting other people.

**Suggested Reading**

Allan and Burridge, *Forbidden Words*.

Battistella, *Bad Language*.

Sheidlower, *The F-Word*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. What words do you feel uncomfortable saying? Are there any contexts where you feel more comfortable saying any of them?

2. Some abridged dictionaries omit “bad” words, even very common ones. Why do you think editors have made this decision, and do you agree with it?
Isn’t it possible that the phrases I couldn’t care less and I could care less could mean the same thing? If we look at the syntax of these two expressions and parse them word by word, it’s clear that they don’t, but is that kind of examination valid? This question is central to the topic of this lecture: idioms. The kind of idiom we are concerned with is a phrase or group of words that, through usage, has taken on a specific, distinctive meaning that cannot be inferred solely from the meanings of the words in the expression. As we will see, idioms raise fundamental linguistic questions about how important phrases may serve as building blocks in language.

- Histories of well-known idioms remind us of the power of usage to defy the system of syntax. In other words, through usage, phrases can become fixed, at which point they take on a life of their own, beyond the grammar of their parts. Because they defy the logic of their parts, idioms can seem illogical, but their histories often reveal the human mind extending meanings through metaphor, generalization, and other processes.

- From poker, we get the expression ace in the hole. In five-card stud, a pair of aces can often take the pot, so if an ace is showing and a player is still betting, other players assume that the bettor has another ace face down—or in the hole. Pass the buck also comes from poker, to indicate whose turn it was to deal, and was extended in the early 20th century to other responsibilities.

- Leaving someone in the lurch comes from a game called “lurch,” similar to backgammon, that no longer exists. To be left in the lurch was to be left at a great disadvantage in the score—and, hence, in bad circumstances more generally.

- Horseracing gives English several colloquial expressions involving the wire as the finish line: down to the wire, under the wire, and
The expression on the nose for ‘perfectly on time’ may come from horseracing (winning by a nose) or from a hand signal used in radio to indicate a perfectly timed broadcast.

wire to wire. Under the wire seems to have specialized to mean that something has been completed right before the deadline; thus, the deadline becomes the finish line.

- Horseracing is also the source of the inside track, which is the most advantageous place to be on a track.

- If you bet on a horse and it races well, you got a good run for your money.

- A tip on a horse that comes from a trainer or jockey is fairly trustworthy, but it is even more trustworthy if the tip comes straight from the horse’s mouth.

- Sailing gives us a range of idioms that perhaps are more transparent to those who are experienced sailors, in other words, those who know the ropes.
Tacking, or zigzagging so that the wind is on one side and then the other of the sail, gives us *take the wrong tack* and *take another tack*.

*To give a wide berth* is to allow adequate space between ships in sailing or in the harbor. Again, this expression has been generalized; we now give people *a wide berth*.

Interestingly, *bitter end* also comes from sailing, a reference to the last length of cable. *Bitter* comes from a now obsolete term for a fire bucket, which also would have been on a rope.

- From farming, we get an expression for staying up late: *till the cows come home*. This doesn’t completely make sense, because cows typically come back to the barn for milking at a fairly reasonable hour. Robert Claiborne cites a quote from Jonathan Swift: “I warrant you lay abed till the cows came home.” We can imagine a transfer from sleeping late (and being irresponsible) to doing anything late.

- Farming also gives us two common expressions involving oats: *sowing wild oats* and *feeling one’s oats*.

- The wild oats are a grass species that can take over a field, yet its seeds are, apparently, hard to separate from the seeds of cereals that one would actually want to sow. Thus, sowing wild oats is a worthless thing to do and came to be applied to the frivolous behavior of young men.

- If you feed oats to horses, they can then *feel their oats*; that is, they feel lively from the oats’ energy. If you have no appetite, you can also be *off your oats*.

- As we can see, there are actually systems of metaphor and generalization at work with sets of idioms; they are not quite as illogical as they might seem at the outset.

- Food-related idioms include *to shell out*, which comes from shelling nuts and other seeds and makes some sense: To get the seed (what
is valuable), you have to remove it from the shell. The connection with money is obvious: To get your money, you have to remove it from your pocket or wallet.

- Another food-related idiom is *red herring*, the source of which has long been misunderstood.

- Red herrings are kipper that have been heavily smoked, which allowed them to be transported inland in the days before refrigeration, but they were also quite pungent. The false etymology is that a criminal being chased would drag a red herring across his trail, throwing off the dogs that were in hot pursuit.

- The more authoritative etymology relates to the training of horses in the 17th century. A dead cat or other animal (or red herring) would be dragged on the ground, creating a trail for the hounds to follow, and the horses would follow the hounds.

- In 1807, William Cobbett used the term in a political sense in an article critiquing the press for being distracted by false news of Napoleon’s defeat.

- Hunting and dogs in pursuit of game give us *barking up the wrong tree* and *beating around the bush*.

- Cats give us many wonderful idioms. For example, when a cat gets angry, it *gets its back up*, ready to fight. When you’re petting a cat, you can also *rub it the wrong way*. *Letting the fur fly* probably also comes from cats fighting.

- No one is quite sure why telling a secret is *letting the cat out of the bag*. This expression has often been linked to buying or selling a *pig in a poke* (*poke* meaning ‘bag’).

- As early as the 16th century, we find examples of advice to be careful when buying a pig in a poke; you might get something other than what you expect.
The story is that the something in the bag might be a cat, so that when you opened the bag, you would let the cat out. This explanation, however, seems unlikely.

- To be a *big wig* comes from a joke about the bigger wigs of important officials in the 18th century. *Mad as a hatter*, which goes back to the early 19th century, doesn’t come from a joke or from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. To make the popular felt hats of the time, hatters had to brush fur with mercury; as a result, they often suffered from mercury poisoning, which could cause brain damage.

**Idioms of Disputed Origin**

- Several common idioms are of disputed origin. For example, *to mind one’s P’s and Q’s* may be traced to an 18th-century way to refer to the alphabet (similar to *knowing your ABCs*) or to an earlier phrase, *to be on one’s P’s and Q’s*, meaning ‘to be on one’s best behavior.’

- *Rule of thumb*, which refers now to a rule derived from experience, probably comes from using the thumb as a measuring device; it is probably not from brewers measuring the temperature of fermenting alcohol or from a law about the width of the rod with which a man was allowed to beat his wife.

- *Dead as a doornail* goes back to the 14th century. Dismissing much other speculation, Claiborne believes this expression refers to a doornail hammered askew into a door and, thus, being useless.

**The Nature of Idioms**

- Idioms mean what they mean, and their meanings surpass the sum of their parts. We don’t need to think about whether they make sense or why they carry certain meanings in order to use them every day.

- As we know, people often use the expressions *I could care less* and *I couldn’t care less* synonymously. Some argue that *I could care less* comes from a sarcastic remark, but that seems unlikely. The
difference may lie in simple confusion, because the idiom means what it means, whether or not the *not* is present.

- Another idiom that may be getting reinterpreted such that it currently means two things is a *sight for sore eyes*. Originally, this expression meant a happy or good sight, one that makes sore eyes feel better. Now, it may mean a sight that creates sore eyes, that is, someone who looks bad.

- Remember that idioms don’t have to make sense at the level of each individual word. They themselves are meaningful units.

- Many linguists are coming to emphasize the importance of chunks of language or prefabricated units in our everyday language use (e.g., *what I mean* and *all it is*).
  - For example, the expression *the fact is* may have become a unit that can then serve as the subject of a sentence. This would explain the phenomenon of *is is*: “The fact is is….”
  
  - Such expressions do important work in discourse. Saying “the fact is” or “the point is” is the equivalent of saying, “Pay attention to what I’m going to say.”
  
  - *The fact is* and similar expressions have been on the rise since about the middle of the 19th century. This is language change happening right under our noses.

### Suggested Reading

Claiborne, *Loose Cannons, Red Herrings, and Other Lost Metaphors*.

Quinion, *World Wide Words*. 
Questions to Consider

1. Do you feel comfortable with people using *could care less* with the same meaning as *couldn’t care less*? Why or why not?

2. What are some other fixed expressions you are curious about? Michael Quinion’s website *World Wide Words* may be able to explain them for you.
With so many words in the English language, it’s hard to imagine that there are gaps in the lexicon, things for which we should have words but don’t. If these gaps exist, they couldn’t be for things we talk about every day, or could they? What about a word to distinguish hot in reference to temperature versus spiciness or a term to call a romantic partner who is over, say, the age of 35? It might be nice to have a more specialized vocabulary for different kinds of waiting—waiting in line, waiting for the rain to stop, and so on. In this lecture, we’ll look at “things” for which there clearly should be words but aren’t.

Foreign Borrowings for Lexical Gaps

- We can sometimes become aware of gaps in English when we study other languages (or earlier forms of English); in some cases, English may borrow words to fill gaps from other languages. When non–English speakers learn English, they may also be surprised by something English does not have a word for that their language does.
  - One obvious example here is Schadenfreude, the pleasure derived from the misfortune of others. At this point, the word appears in most standard English dictionaries, and there are more than 80 examples in COCA. It’s interesting to note that English doesn’t have a word for the pleasure derived from the success of others either.

  - Bildungsroman is another German borrowing, for a novel about a main character’s psychological, emotional, and moral growth or development.

- In some cases, however, we as English speakers just have to feel jealous that another language has such a good word, which English has yet to borrow.
French has a term for the perfect comeback, thought of too late: *l’espirit de l’escalier* (‘the wit of the staircase’).

The Chinese word *suibian* is translated as ‘convenient,’ but it means much more than that (e.g., ‘I’m happy to do whatever you want to do’ > I’m very *suibian*).

In Bengali, there is the word *abhiman*, which describes the feeling of anger when one is betrayed or upset by someone you love, such as a spouse or a child; in English, we would have to modify *anger*.

In Filipino, the word *ulam* refers to the food that accompanies the rice at a meal, be that meat or vegetables; there is no English equivalent, not even *main dish*.

**Sniglets**

- A *sniglet* is a word that should be a word and appear in a dictionary, but it’s not a word—yet. The creation of *sniglet* is usually credited to Rich Hall, a comedian who starred on the HBO series *Not Necessarily the News*. Hall’s sniglets and those of his fans were compiled into books, such as *Sniglets* (1984), *More Sniglets* (1985), *Unexplained Sniglets of the Universe* (1986), and so on.

- Here’s a brief tour of sniglets and a review of the word formation processes that created them.
  - *Mustgo* (compound): any item of food that has been sitting in the refrigerator so long that it has become a science project.
  - *Profanitype* (blend): the special symbols and stars used by cartoonists to replace swear words (#$/%@!).
  - *Doork* (blend of *door* + *dork*): a person who pushes on a door marked “pull” or tries to enter through a door clearly marked “exit.”
Lecture 35: Musquirt and Other Lexical Gaps

- **Toastaphobia** (combined form, -phobia): the fear of sticking a fork in a toaster even when it’s unplugged.

- **Musquirt** (blend): the water that comes out of the initial squirts of a squeeze mustard bottle.

- **Snackmosphere** (blend): the air that takes up 95 percent of the space inside bags of potato chips.

- **Sark** (blend): the marks left on one’s ankles after wearing tube socks all day.

- **Nurge** (possibly a blend of nudge + urge): to inch closer to a stoplight thinking that will cause it to change quicker.

- Notice how common blending is in these sniglets; this is a playful and relatively transparent processing for forming new words.

- With the invention of e-mail, sniglet e-mails started circulating from one person to another, and some have lived on for more than a decade. *The Washington Post*’s Mensa Invitational New Words Contest has yielded **intaxication** (the euphoria you experience at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize the money was yours to start with) and **bozone** (the substance surrounding stupid people that stops bright ideas from penetrating).
Filling Lexical Gaps

- Of course, we often fill lexical gaps as they arise. One way to do this is to make new words or change meanings of existing words.
  - For example, we find ways to talk about new technology and all things that come with it. Once we had the Internet, we needed the word *netiquette* to talk specifically about how we should behave online.
  - As we’ve discussed, we also use metaphors for activities and innovations related to technology, such as *surf, mouse, windows*, and *browse*.
  - *Cyber-* is now used as a combining form, shortened from *cybernetic* (1948). *Cyber-* is first cited in the *OED* in reference to computers in 1961 and is now used to refer specifically to the Internet (e.g., *cyber-attack, cyber age, cyber art, cyberspace, cybersquat*).
  - The prefix *e-*, shortened from *electronic*, is first cited in 1990 and gives us *e-mail, e-commerce, e-ticket, e-journal, e-text*, and *e-zine*.

- Sometimes borrowed words for cultural phenomena (other than food) come into English, and we name the concept as we borrow the word. Examples here include *siesta* for the nap after lunch (17th century) and *fēng shuí* (‘the balance of the spirits that determine the suitability of space’).

Proliferations of Words

- There are other concepts for which we have a proliferation of words. A prime example is ‘drunk.’
  - *Intoxicated* and *inebriated* are more formal ways to express this concept. The slang words include *smashed, trashed, wasted, sloshed, loaded, soused, plastered, hammered*, and on and on.
  - We also have such phrases as *three sheets to the wind, tied one on*, and *under the table*. 
We see here slang playing with many aspects of being drunk: how goofy or funny one can be when drunk (*muddled, loose, pickled*), how one might feel (*lit* [for the energy], *sloppy, sloshed*), the violence alcohol produces in the body or among people (*blitzed, bombed*), how useless or awful one can feel after drinking (*trashed, wasted*), and then just fun wordplay (*shwasted*).

There have long been a plentitude of words for drunk. Benjamin Franklin published 200 terms in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1737, including many familiar ones, as well as *addled, bowz’d, cracked, wamble crop’d, disguiz’d, fuddled, fuzl’d, globular, pungey, rocky*, and *swampt*. Franklin also listed such phrases as *in his cups, had a kick in the guts, loose in the hilts*, and *swallow’d a tavern token*.

All these words for ‘drunk’ challenge the idea that there aren’t true synonyms. There is clearly a difference between *intoxicated* and *wasted*, but what about *wasted* versus *trashed*?

Other concepts that generate numerous terms include sex and dying. Because these subjects are clearly taboo, speakers have played with ways to talk about the concepts that range from the very formal and euphemistic (*to pass away, go to a better place*) to the very irreverent (*kick the bucket, bite the dust*).

The many words for ‘drunk’ could also be attributed to the taboo. The rebelliousness that often accompanies drinking, especially for young people, inspires slang, which is rebellious language; drinking itself also inspires playfulness for many.

A proliferation of words can also allow us to see concepts with which a culture is fascinated or that are highly socially salient. For example, we have many words for women who are thought to be promiscuous but few synonyms for *virgin* and no word to describe someone who is no longer a virgin. And what is the word for a male mistress?
The Endpoint of English?

- For a language as lexically rich as English is, there are still numerous concepts for which we do not have a word, including some concepts that we talk about quite often.

- We sometimes hear the idea that language is designed to be maximally efficient; it certainly can be efficient, but we also tolerate circumlocutions to which we are obliged to resort.

- Further, the lexicon is not necessarily about efficiency or streamlining: after all, we could just say “drunk,” but we come up with hundreds of synonyms, many of them much longer and less transparent than \textit{drunk} but still playful and wonderful and capable of performing social work.

- When people think about the history of English or any other language, they often want to make it teleological; in other words, they want it to have an endpoint toward which all changes are heading.
  - Some think this is to some point of ultimate beauty or efficiency. Others may think it is to the point of decay or ruin.
  - But language doesn’t seem to have any specific endpoint. It is, of course, at the mercy of its speakers, and they use it and adapt it to talk about their worlds.
  - Whatever speakers need language to do, it will do, and if it can’t manage the task, speakers will borrow or make up words or extend meanings so that the language will work for them. In some cases, speakers will make do without a word, using a circumlocution and accepting ambiguity.

- Because we use such terms as Old English, Middle English, and Modern English, it can feel as if we have somehow arrived. But where we are now will be closer to the middle someday, when people look back 200 years from now. Those people will be looking back from Postmodern English, or Cyber-English, or whatever the next period will be called.
• If the past is any indicator of the future, as long as English is living—which means as long as English speakers are living—its speakers will find and fill lexical gaps in various ways; speakers will both smooth out idiosyncrasies to make things more systematic and introduce new idiosyncrasies into the system.

Suggested Reading

Hall and Friends, *Sniglets*.

Questions to Consider

1. What lexical gaps would you identify in the English language? Do you have proposals for words to fill those gaps?

2. There is a proliferation of words that mean ‘drunk.’ What other areas of the lexicon are overstocked—or least highly stocked?
In January 2010, there was a buzz in the blogosphere about an interview in which Sarah Palin used a new word: *mandation* (as in “government… mandation of health care…”). The word is not in most standard dictionaries, although it is listed with a different (obsolete) meaning in the *OED*. This raises the question that is the focus of this lecture: Can just anyone create a successful word? And if someone does create a word, do we know what will make the word successful? Finally, we will conclude the course by discussing the challenges presented by what we’ve learned about the secret lives of words to some of the widely circulating beliefs about how language does and should work.

**Sources of New Words**

- Most new words fail. We all make up new words all the time (e.g., *traffic-lighty*), but of those hundreds of thousands of lexical efforts, only a few catch on to become established words that might find their way into a standard dictionary. Thus, it’s remarkable when we know exactly who coined a new word.

- As you might image, if a literary work is successful, words it introduces might catch on, too.
  - The wonderful word *pooh-bah* comes from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885). The character Pooh-bah holds many high offices, in addition to Lord-High-Everything-Else. Neutrally, the word refers to a person who holds many offices or has great influence; less neutrally, it refers to a person who is self-important or pompous.

  - The term *catch-22* comes straight from Joseph Heller’s book by that name. The term has generalized to refer to any circular regulation or situation from which there is no escape—where one contingency is dependent on another, which is dependent on the first.
o Lewis Carroll consciously made up words in the poem “Jabberwocky.” Of these, chortle succeeded, along with galumph.

- When new scientific discoveries are made, new terms are coined to describe them. For example, quark is a scientific term coined by Murray Gell-Mann in 1963 to refer to subatomic particles. Interestingly, Gell-Mann changed his original coinage, quork, after he found the word quark in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake.

- New words can also come from word contests. For example, skycap was the winner of a word contest in 1940 to name the porters outside the airport in New York City.

- Another word that started with a contest is spam.
  - Spam began as a proprietary name for a canned meat but is now used to refer to unsolicited electronic mail, typically part of a mass mailing.
  - In 1970, the television show Monty Python’s Flying Circus aired a skit in which the word spam was repeated more than 100 times in about three minutes. This appears to have been a catalyst for spam coming to mean something that is annoyingly repeated.
  - The word was picked up by the early online community in reference to the act of inputting large amounts of data into a computer such that it might crash.
  - Sometime in the early 1990s, the meaning of the word shifted to flooding a newsgroup with inappropriate and/or unwanted messages.

- Sometimes, a single person or a single book, play, or movie can launch a word into being, but much more often, we have to talk in general terms with approximate dates for when a word was introduced and/or changed meaning. In part, this is because the
introduction of a new word happens repeatedly, by many people in many different contexts before it catches on.

The Extent of Shakespeare’s Creativity

• Shakespeare is the most cited author in the OED and bequeathed not only many words but also idioms that remain tightly woven into the fabric of Modern English.

• Many of Shakespeare’s new words were created from existing parts, which makes sense if we consider that a playwright would be unlikely to make up words that his or her audience would not understand. Thus, he wrote uncurse, undeaf, unspeak, and unsex, as well as bemonster, behowl, behore, and bemadding sorrow.

• Shakespeare coined about 1,700 words, although the editors of the new edition of the OED are predating some of the words that were originally first cited as Shakespearean, such as madcap, majestic, and metamorphize.
  o A few of his successful coinages are assassination, barefaced, countless, courtship, dwindle, and laughable.
  o Two unsuccessful ones are unplausive (‘not laudable’) and exsufflicate (an adjective meaning ‘puffed up, inflated’).

• The meaning of barefaced, along with such compounds as dog-weary, nimble-footed, false-hearted, and time-honoured, is fairly transparent. It would also have been easy enough for an audience to follow Shakespeare’s transformation of such nouns as tongue, lip, or brain into verbs.
  o Assassination is not transparent because it is a Latinate borrowing. But Shakespeare does not leave his audience helpless in the face of such a borrowing.
  o Here is the line from Macbeth: “If th’ Assassination Could trammell vp the Consequence, and catch With his surcease, Successe.”
• In sum, Shakespeare was inspiringly creative with the language, and he clearly had a wonderful ear, picking up the music of the spoken language being used all around him and capturing it in his plays.
  o He also used systematic word formation processes, which we all use to create new words, such as making the noun blog into a verb and then creating blogosphere.
  
  o Shakespeare deserves to be on a linguistic pedestal, but we might lower that pedestal just a bit so that the rest of us do not feel so hopelessly uncreative by comparison.

The Extent of Our Creativity

• We are all creative with the language each and every day. We may not make up new words, but we make up new phrases and sentences, and with each sentence, we shape the meaning of the words we use—ever so subtly, but this is change nonetheless.

• Let’s imagine a subtle example. Suppose a friend describes the way she feels after a long day of work and a hard workout by saying, “I was tipsy tired.” Now imagine that she keeps using that expression and others pick it up; eventually, people might stop saying the tired part so that tipsy, in addition to meaning ‘loopy due to alcohol,’ can also mean ‘loopy due to tiredness.’ These speakers have changed the language.

• Other new words or expressions your friend makes up might not catch on, but the point is that we shift words around all the time, and it makes sense that we don’t notice it. We are always trying to use words to communicate in meaningful ways, hoping our listeners or readers will understand.

• Allan Metcalf has written a book called Predicting New Words, and in it, he introduces the FUDGE factors as a way to help predict whether or not a word will be successful. These factors include: frequency of use, unobtrusiveness, diversity of users/situations, generation of other forms, and endurance of the concept.
Many of the most successful words come in fairly surreptitiously—a prefix here or there, a new compound, a borrowing coming in with a new thing we need to talk about, or a functional shift.

Such a word as *bling*, however, does not fall into that category. And *bling* is now growing in diversity of users and generation of forms (*very bling, blingy, blingness*).

As this course has highlighted, the English language is changing all around us, all the time, and we are all participants. Younger people may be the real movers and shakers of language, but we are all in it together, picking up new words, adapting others, and letting some fall by the wayside. This is the nature of human language and the creativity that makes human language the astounding communicative system that it is: with creativity comes change.

The Linguist’s Toolbox

This course has provided you with a new set of perspectives and tools to study the language change you see and hear, be it a new word you encounter on television or an old word you encounter in an 18th-century novel. We have talked, for example, many times about the *OED* and the riches of information it contains. We have also looked at online resources, such as COCA and COHA, that allow us to track more recent change.

These lectures should also have given you a perspective that will allow you to celebrate some of the changes happening today with as much enthusiasm as people so often celebrate the changes of, say, Shakespeare’s day.

There is poetry in everyday language, from slang, such as *struggle bus*; to rich metaphors, such as *surfing the web*; to the rhyming shorthand we have created for ‘wireless fidelity,’ *wi-fi*, after *hi-fi* and *sci-fi*.

As these lectures have captured, there are wonderful stories embedded in our words, from *werewolves* to *sideburns,*
colonels to somersaults. The more formal and technical words English has borrowed over the years have their stories to tell, but it is important to remember that the native Germanic words do, too. They all give texture to the English tongue.

- We can all celebrate language variation and change, study that variation and change, and master the conventions of standard edited English at the same time—in fact, this enlivens the field of language study at all levels.
  - There are good reasons to have a standard form of the language, but we should also feel empowered to make choices as speakers and writers. It’s not true that the standard is the “right English” and everything else is “wrong English”; the standard is the right choice for specific contexts, but other kinds of English may be the right choice in other contexts.
  - The more styles and varieties of English we control and the more words we understand, the more versatile we are as

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare “It’s Greek to me”, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; ... if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool’s paradise—why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare ….

speakers and writers. Studying language in school or out of school is about adding to the repertoire, not replacing what is already there.

- The study of language is about understanding the power of words and the play of words, both of which are fundamental to human language. It’s harnessing that power in new ways, as well as understanding the ways in which we already harness it every day.

- Let’s close with one more new word: FOMO, an acronym for ‘fear of missing out.’ We should all continue to listen attentively to the language that surrounds us, both spoken and written, so that we will not have to experience FOMO related to witnessing—or perhaps participating in—what English words will do next.

Suggested Reading

Crystal, *The Stories of English.*

Metcalf, *Predicting New Words.*

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think it takes more creativity to come up with a word from scratch or to put together already existing word parts in innovative ways? Does it change your view of Shakespeare’s lexical creativity to know that he did a lot of the latter?

2. If you had to make three predictions about the English lexicon in the next 100 years, what would they be?


Allan, Keith, and Kate Burridge. *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. A wide-ranging treatment of different kinds of taboo language in English, as well as individual and institutional efforts to censor such language.


Cameron, Deborah. 1995. Verbal Hygiene. London/New York: Routledge. An insightful scholarly study of how speakers attempt to regulate the speech of others, including a wonderful chapter on politically correct language.


Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1980. The classic text on conceptual metaphors, such as “Argument is war.”


*Language Log*. http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/. The leading language blog, devoted to intriguing linguistic puzzles and current news stories about language and updated daily by the expert contributing authors.


Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/micase. A searchable corpus of more than 1.8 million running words of spoken academic discourse, from lectures to office hours to study groups.


Indo-European roots and the words in which they appear in English and other Indo-European languages.


