

12. Modern English I

The History of English (Ling 390)

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Fall 2025

Activity!

- Take out a sheet of paper. On it, I want you to write down – in regular English spelling – the fifteen words you hear me say. Do this in a numbered list. You will hand this in.
- We'll discuss its results now, and return to it next week.

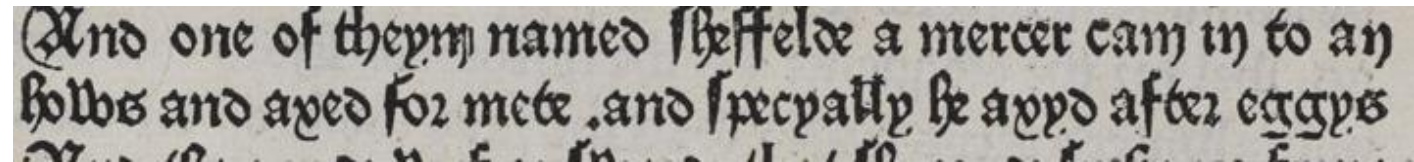
This is not a quiz!!!!

Descriptivism vs. Prescriptivism

- In linguistics, we are descriptivists, not prescriptivists.

- What does this mean?

- We are interested in accurately describing linguistic phenomena as they exist, not in dictating what is 'proper' or 'right.'



~~"Ask, not aks!"~~

~~"Ain't isn't a word!"~~

~~"Mary and I, not me and Mary!"~~

- Two caveats:
 1. Some things really are ungrammatical, e.g. "Cat the I saw" or "extraordinaryer."
 2. We can describe which features are part of certain registers, e.g. formal speech, and which are not.

American and British English

USA English speakers

approx. 299,270,000 English speakers

Canada English speakers

approx. 30,480,750 English speakers

UK English speakers

approx. 63,718,834
English speakers

Do you know some of the lexical differences
between North American and British English?

No dialect is a monolith

- What are some different US dialects?
- What are some different British dialects?



Listen for words that are different from those we use in our dialect.

Somerset accent – heard in the show This Country

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9PzLJJ73AU>



Posh (but over-the-top), London accents

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8xliaDUPwg>

American and British English

- How did English get from Great Britain to the Western Hemisphere?
- What was *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* (1588)?
- “English is unmistakably one language, with two major national varieties: British and American.” (183)
- This can be contrasted slightly by Spanish, which has far more internal diversity, and extremely by Arabic.



American and British English

- Neither American nor British English stood still from the time of colonization.
- “[...] the first English-speaking colonists in America continued to speak as they had in England. But the language gradually changed on both sides of the Atlantic, in England as well as in America. [...] The English now spoken in America has retained a good many characteristics of earlier English that have not survived in contemporary British English.” (183)

British English was rhotic until about the time of the Revolution.

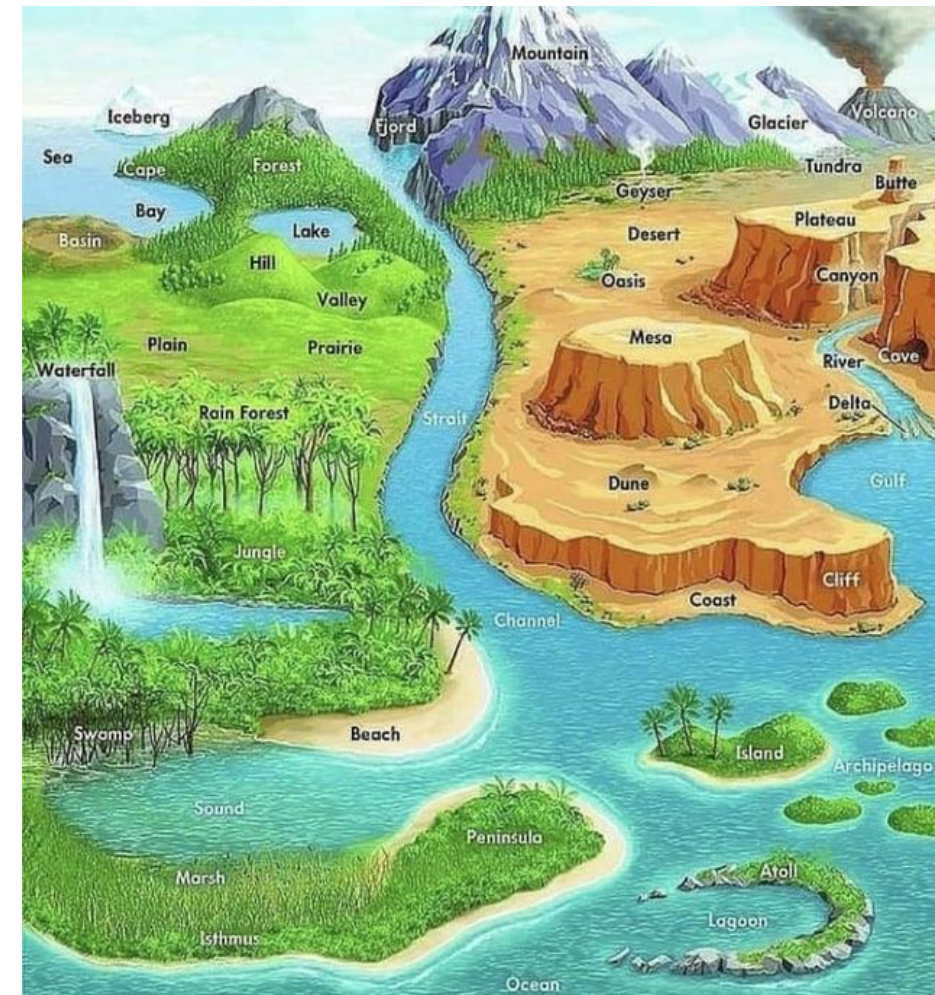
What’s this mean?

Are there non-rhotic American dialects?

Are there rhotic British dialects?

The lexicon of American English

- Why did Americans need new words? (We talked about this a bit during Early Modern English.)
- “On the whole, though, American English is a conservative descendant of the seventeenth-century English that also spawned present-day British. [...] American English resembles present standard British English more closely than it does any other British type of speech.” (185)
- What’s the story with Canadian English?



Americanisation

- Many American innovations now flow to British English.
- English parents lament their kids asking for ‘candy’ instead of ‘sweets.’
- “In recent years many other Americanisms have been introduced into British usage: *cafeteria*, *cocktail*, *egghead*, *electrocute* [...], *fan* ‘sports devotee,’ *filling station*, *highbrow*, and *lowbrow*. American *radio* has superseded British *wireless*, and *TV* has about crowded out the somewhat nurseryish *telly*.”(187)
- What’s Black Friday?

Time

- We've skipped through a lot of time today, jumping from the Early Modern English period basically to the present day.
- New Yorkers recorded in 1979:
https://youtu.be/2hYpoMPltTU?si=K66X13xk0s0M_CZ_&t=393
- And in the 1980s:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkDcymPl_Vo
- You're a New Yorker. Do you speak this way?
- How about 200 years ago?
- Dictionaries are extremely useful for this. "The most important and available sources for information about the facts of language are dictionaries." (189) (In some ways contestable, but OK enough for now.)

“I repeat this remark, that general and respectable usage in speaking is the genuine or legitimate language of a country to which the written language ought to be conformed. Language is that which is uttered by the tongue, and if men do not write the language as it is spoken by the great body of respectable people, they do not write the real language. Now, in colloquial usage, the subjunctive form of the verb, in conditional sentences, is rarely used, and perhaps never, except when the substantive verb is employed. Our students are taught in school the subjunctive form, if thou have, if he come, &c. and some of them continue, in after life, to write in that manner ; but in the course of more than forty years, I have not known three men who have ventured to use that form of the verb in conversation. We toil in school to learn a language which we dare not introduce into conversation, but which the force of custom compels us to abandon. In this respect, the present study of grammar is worse than useless.” (Noah Webster)

DIRECTIONS

FOR THE

PRONUNCIATION OF WORDS.

The principal sounds of the vowels are the first or long, and the second or short.

Examples of the first or long sound.	Examples of the second or short sound.
a in make, fate, grace.	a in mat, ban, grand.
e in me, mete, meter.	e in bet, men, send.
i in pine, kind, strife.	i in bit, pin, noise.
o in note, hobby, port.	o in not, boss, bond.
u in true, duty, rule.	u in dun, must, refund.
y in dry, defy, imply.	y in pity, cycle, synonym.

The principal things to be regarded in learning the pronunciation of English words, are the accent and the sound of the vowel of the accented syllable.

RULE I. This mark ' called an accent, designates the accented syllable.

II. The accent placed immediately after a vowel indicates the vowel to have its first or long sound, either at the end or in the middle of a syllable; as in sa'cred, pre'cept, ri'ot, po'et, mu'ic, cy'press; de'grade, rep'e'te, divi'de, explo'de, intru'de.

III. A horizontal mark or point over a vowel shows it to be long, and when no accent is found in the word, this mark designates the accented syllable; as in dis'course, ener'gic, bestow, em'ail, courser, suit'able.

IV. An accent placed immediately after a consonant, or combination of consonants in the same syllable, indicates that the vowel of that syllable, if unpointed, is short; as in habit, ten'et, con'flict, ul'cer, syn'bol; adapt', intend', predict', despond', abrupt'.

Exceptions.

1. A pointed vowel has the sound designated by the point or points; as in full'ness, alter'able, book'ish, convey'.
2. a before *ll*, *ld* and *lk*, in monosyllables or accented syllables, has its broad sound like *aw*; as in befall', ball'ness, walk'ing.
3. o before *ll* is long; as in enroll'.

V. An accent immediately after a diphthong, or after a syllable containing one, designates the accented syllable, but the diphthong has its proper sound; as in renew', devout', avow', appoint', annoy'.

VI. This mark ' called in Greek the grave accent, placed before a vowel, indicates that vowel to have its Italian sound, as in 'ask, 'far, 'father, 'us'ak. In words of two or more syllables, when no other accent is used, this designates the accented syllable; as in 'answer'able, 'argain.

VII. Two accents immediately before *e*, *t* or *s*, indicate that *e*, *t* or *s*, in pronunciation, coalesces with the following vowel, and form the sound of *sh* or *zh*, which closes the syllable, and of course the preceding vowel is short. Thus, vi'rious, amb'i'tion, are pronounced vish'us, ambish'on; vi'sion is pronounced vizh'ion.

VIII. *C* before *a*, *o* and *u*, and in some other situations, is a close articulation, like *k*, and in the vocabulary of this work, whenever it is equivalent to *k*, it is marked thus *C*.

Before *e*, *i* and *y*, *c* is precisely equivalent to *s*, in some, this; as in cedar, civil, cy'press, capacity.

IX. *E* final unaccented has the following purposes.

1. It indicates that the preceding vowel is long; as in hate, mete, sire, robe, lyre; abate, recede, invite, remate, intrude.
2. It indicates that *e* preceding has the sound of *s*, as in face, lance, and that *g* preceding has the sound of *j*, as in charge, page, challenge.
3. In proper English words, *e* final never forms a syllable, and in most words, in the terminating unaccented syllable, it is silent and useless. Thus, motive, genuine, examine, juvenile, reptile, granite, are pronounced motiv', genuin', examan', juvenil', reptil', granat'.

In a few words of foreign origin, *e* final is in syncope, simile. These are noted in their proper places.

X. *E* final is silent after *f* in the following terminations, ble, che, die, fle, gle, kle, ple, the, zle; as in able, muscle, cradle, ruffle, mangle, wrinkle, supple, rattle, puzzle, which are pronounced a'bl', man'sel', cra'dl', ruf'fl', man'gl', wri'n'kl', sup'pl', puz'z'l'.

XI. In the termination *ce*, *e* is usually silent; as in token, broken, pronounced to'kn', bro'kn'.

XII. The termination *ous* in adjectives and their derivatives is pronounced as *us*; as in gracious, pious, possessory.

XIII. The combinations *ce*, *ci*, *ci*, *ti*, before a vowel, have the sound of *sh*; as in cetaceous, gracious, motion, partial, ingratiated, pronounced ceta'sh'us, gra'sh'us, mo'shon, par'shal, ingra'sh'ate.

But *ti* after a consonant has the sound of *ch*; as in christian, bastion, mixture, pronounced chris'than, bas'shan, mix'ch'us. So in combustion, digestion.

So after an accented vowel are pronounced like *si*an, confusion, pronounced Epe'zhan, confu'zh'on.

When *ci* or *ti* precede similar combinations, a negotiation, they may be pronounced *ce*, instead a repetition of the latter syllable; as pronounced mun'sh'ash'on.

XIV. *Gh*, both in the middle and at the end of words caught, bought, fright, night, sigh; pronounced ni, si.

Exceptions. In the following words *gh* are cough, enough, enough, hough, laugh, tough, trough.

XV. When *wh* begin a word, the aspirate *h* precedes *w* as in what, whiff, whale, pronounced hwat, hwif, hwale, precisely the sound of *oo*, French *ou*.

In the following words, *w* is silent—*who*, *whom*, *whose*, *whoop*, *whole*, *whore*.

XVI. *H* after *r* has no sound nor use; as in rheum, rhye, pronounced reum, ryme.

XVII. *K* and *g* before *n* are silent; as in know, gnaw, pronounced no, naw.

XVIII. *H* before *r* is silent; as in wring, wreath, pronounced ring, reath.

XIX. *B* after *m* is silent; as in dumb, numb, pronounced dum, num.

XX. *L* before *k* is silent; as in baulk, walk, talk, pronounced bauk, wauk, tauk.

XXI. *Ph* have the sound of *f*; as in philosophy.

XXII. The combination *ng* has two sounds; one, as in sing, singer; the other, as in finger, linger, longer. The latter is the more close palatal sound; but the distinction can only be learned by the ear.

XXIII. The letters *cl*, answering to *kl*, are pronounced as if written *tl*; clear, clean, are pronounced tlear, tlean.

Gl are pronounced as *dl*; glory is pronounced dlory.

XXIV. *V* after *m*, and closing a syllable, is silent; as in mure, mure.

XXV. *P* before *s* and *t* is mute; as in psalm, pseudology, pronounced sim, sudiology, tarmigan.

The letter *y* unaccented and terminating words of more than one syllable, is pronounced like *i* in pity and ability. This letter, in the plural and in the third person singular of the present tense of verbs, is substituted and followed by *s*. The termination thus formed *iz*; as from vanity, is formed vanities, pronounced van'it'iz; as from pity, is formed pitites, pronounced pit'it'iz.

But when *y* in monosyllabic verbs, and accented *y* in other words, the termination *ies* in the third person is pronounced as if written *ies*; as from fly, defies from defy. So cries, both the verb and noun, is pronounced kri'iz.

S has two sounds; its proper sound as in see, and that of *z* as in his. It

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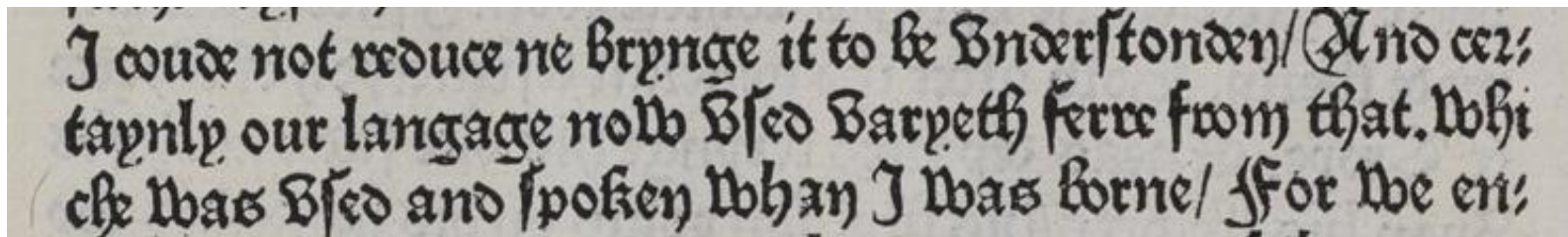
We'll read more from this in next week's class.

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Merry, marry, Mary merger

- We'll talk more about this next time, but you can observe language change in your own time.



I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonde/ And cer:
taynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that. whi
che was vsed and spoken whan I was borne/ For we en:

- Do you see any changes yet?

For December 8th:

- Read pp.193–202 in Algeo.