

“Why is English so weird?”

*Looking to History to Answer Tough
Learner Questions*



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Before we begin...

Tell me a little about you!

Where are you? What context do you teach in?

The questions students ask...

Why is there a "p" in receipt?

Why is "micro" pronounced differently in English than in French/Spanish/Italian?

Which is correct: color or colour?

I got a book by Shakespeare out of the library and didn't understand anything! Why?

Why are there so many words in English that mean the same thing?

My last teacher told me never to say "If I was rich I'd buy a house.", but I hear people say it all the time. What do I do?

The History of English can Explain

~~"That's just the way it is!"~~

~~"English is just like that!"~~

~~"Oh, um, that's just an exception."~~

~~"English is just the hardest language to learn!"~~

Today's Presentation

1) Looking to history of English to explain some of the perplexing aspects of modern English from the ELL's point of view

- NOT a comprehensive survey of the history of the language or debate over the nitty-gritty
- Short bibliography @ end of presentation

Today's Presentation

2) Sharing some classroom activities to raise students' language awareness surrounding the history of English and some basic sociolinguistic principles of language change and use

- Classroom activities presented in the slides and in a packet of handouts available for download

Talking about Language Change

Principles to Keep in Mind:

- Language is systematic and rule-governed.
- All languages change and evolve.
 - Language changes and evolves over time.
 - Language evolves differently in different places and contexts.
 - Spoken vs. written language are different phenomena.
 - Different social groups display different language traits.
- Description of language vs. prescription of language
 - Lots of people use English in ways that do not fit the definition of Standard English, but that doesn't mean it's "wrong".

In class:

- Can you think of some examples of historical language change in your L1? Do your grandparents speak differently than your children?
- Can you think of some examples of how different social groups use language in different ways?
- Can you think of any examples of how English is used differently in different contexts and by different groups?

Three Periods in English

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) (5-11th centuries)

- Germanic tribes in Britain
- Example:

Eft he axode, hu ðære ðeode nama wære þe hi of comon. Him wæs geandwyrð, þæt hi Angle genemnode wæron. Þa cwæð he, "Rihtlice hi sind Angle gehatene, for ðan ðe hi engla wite habbað, and swilcum gedafenað þæt hi on heofonum engla geferan beon.

In class:

Post the following text (and then translation) and ask students to contrast it with a modern English text in terms of characters, and also to find words they recognize.

ð and þ = “th” and æ = short “a”

Eft he axode, hu ðære ðeode nama wære þe hi of comon. Him wæs geandwyrð, þæt hi Angle genemnode wæron. Þa cwæð he, "Rihtlice hi sind Angle gehatene, for ðan ðe hi engla wite habbað, and swilcum gedafenað þæt hi on heofonum engla geferan beon."

Again he [St. Gregory] asked what might be the name of the people from which they came. It was answered to him that they were named Angles. Then he said, "Rightly are they called Angles because they have the beauty of angels, and it is fitting that such as they should be angels' companions in heaven."

Three Periods in English

Middle English (11th-15th centuries)

- Norman Conquest in 1066 led to influence of French on English
- Example (From *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, 14th century, Chapter 1, Verse 1):
- Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

In class:

Read the verse out loud and see if they can guess some of the words.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

“Translation”:

When that April with his showers sweet
The drought March hath pierced to the root,
And bathed every vein in such liquor
Of which virtue engendered is the flower;

Early Modern English (15-17th century)

- Many sound changes, including the great vowel shift
- People started to travel, so many loan words from Latin, Greek, German, Yiddish, Italian, etc. started to appear

Example: From Paradise Lost by John Milton, 1667:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,

In class: Ask students what they notice about the nouns in this excerpt. Answer: They're capitalized, a feature which has disappeared in Modern English except for headlines and titles.

Modern English (late 17th century to the present)

- Things still changing: influence of industrialization, colonization, movement of peoples, literature, dictionaries

Spelling

What a headache! 😊

In class:

Ask your students to pair up and name 5 English spelling that seem ridiculous to them.

Why is spelling so weird?

- English has no standard body to control spelling, unlike many languages.
- Spoken language changes, written language stays the same.
- The Great English vowel shift (1350-1700)

The Great English vowel shift (1350-1700)

[Watch a video on the vowel shift](#) or [read about it here](#) or [here](#).

Pronunciation of most long vowels in English changed. But the writing system did not, creating a mismatch.

Middle English	Modern English		Middle English	Modern English
[i:]	[aj]	Mine/myne	[mi:n]	[majn]
[e:]	[i:]	beet	[be:t]	[bi:t]
[o:]	[u:]	goose	[go:sə]	[gu:s]
[a:]	[e:]	name	[na:mə]	[ne:m]

In class:

Ask students how you would have pronounced the vowels in the following words before the shift?

name, bake, raven

feed, deep, me, be

ride, time

moon, food, do

Borrowed Words

- English is a language of borrowed words.
- Pronunciation and spelling often changes when words are borrowed.
- From French:
beef, batter, battle, count, government,
mountain

In class:

Have students guess the origin of the following words:

- Cheetah
- Trek
- pajama/pyjamas
- Orangutan
- Pork
- zombie
- Tofu
- Alcohol
- Algebra
- Apartment
- Glamour
- bandana

- Cheetah: Hindi/Urdu
- Trek: Afrikaans
- pajama/pyjamas: Persian/Farsi
- Orangutan: Malay
- Pork: French
- Zombie: Kikongo/Kimbundu (Central Africa)
- Tofu: Chinese
- Alcohol: Arabic
- Algebra: Arabic
- Apartment: Italian
- Glamour: Scots
- Bandana: Hindi/Urdu

In the 16th century, scholars wanted to make English seem closer to Latin and Greek.

- det became debt

In class:

Exercise #1 in handout: Asking student how they thought words might have been spelled before consonants were added.

Spelling reform: Noah Webster

(1758-1843. American lexicographer.)

Before Webster	Webster's Change
gaol	jail
mould	mold
travelled	traveled
honour	honor
centre	center
humour	humor
masque	mask
publick	Public
plough	plow

In Class: Handout Activity #2: Correct a text

In class:

Discussion:

Do you think English needs spelling reform?

Does it need a body to standardize the language?

What would be some challenges to putting something like this in place?

The Norman Conquest and its influence on register in English

- Many influences but one major one is vocabulary of Germanic origin (informal) vs. vocabulary of Latinate origin (formal)
 - Ex: Come in vs. enter

[In class: Handout: Activity #3: exercise](#)

Modern English in evolution

- Modern English is changing
- Many examples

In class: A Case Study: deductive exercise and discussion involving singular they

Interested in Learning More?

Bill Bryson - "The Mother Tongue"

David Crystal - "Encyclopedia of the English Language"

R.L. Trask - "Historical Linguistics"

[Twenty-five Maps that Explain English](#)

[History of English in 10 Minutes](#) (Open University)

[TheHistoryofEnglish.com](#)

[History of English Podcast](#)

References

- <http://www.merriam-webster.com/help/faq/history.htm>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_English_language#Middle_English_.E2.80.93_from_the_late_11th_to_the_late_15th_century
- <http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/spelling-reform.htm>
- <http://mentalfloss.com/article/53723/26-noah-webster%E2%80%99s-spelling-changes-didn%E2%80%99t-catch>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they
- <http://www.tedpower.co.uk/pha7.html>

Thank You!
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