

Why is English So Weird?



Jennifer MacDonald



- Does English sometimes seem confusing and senseless? Many of the strangest aspects of English can be explained by looking at its history.
- Today's plan:
 - This is not a lecture or a comprehensive survey
 - Focus on a few factors in the history of English whose effects are still apparent in modern English, and which cause annoyance or confusion for those who are learning English.

Talking about Language Change

- All languages change and evolve
 - Spoken vs. written language, different social groups and settings

- Can you think of some examples of language change?

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.

Eft he axode, hu ðære ðeode nama wære þe hi of comon. Him wæs geandwyrd, þæt hi Angle genemnode wæron. Pa cwæð he, "Rihtlice hi sind Angle gehatene, for ðan ðe hi engla wlite 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):
- 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;

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,

Modern English (late 17th century to the present)

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

Spelling

What a headache! 😊

With your partner name 5 English spelling that seem ridiculous to you.

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

How would you have pronounced the following before the shift?

name, bake, raven

feed, deep, me, be

ride, time, mice

moon, food, do

Predicting Pronunciation from Spelling Patterns

See Handout

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

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

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

Handout: Correct a text

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

Vocabulary of Germanic origin vs. vocabulary of Latinate origin

Handout: exercise

Some languages have more than one way to say “you”.

Why does this exist?

Does English have this?

From Early Middle English

		Nominative	Oblique	Genitive	Possessive
1st person	<i>singular</i>	I	me	my/mine	mine
	<i>plural</i>	we	us	our	ours
2nd person	<i>singular informal</i>	thou	thee	thy/thine	thine
	<i>plural or formal singular</i>	ye, you	you	your	yours
3rd person	<i>singular</i>	he/she/it	him/her/it	his/her/his (it)	his/hers/his
	<i>plural</i>	they	them	their	theirs

Language change in action

See handout

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