

**TUTORIAL**  
**5.21**

# Language Change

All languages are in a constant state of change. This tutorial looks at how languages change over time and why the changes occur.

## Introduction

All living languages are constantly in a gradual process of change. No doubt you have noticed this about your own language and can probably think of a few words that you once used, but would no longer say today. But it isn't just words that change in languages - change can affect many areas of language, such as:

- Semantic change (meaning change)
- Syntactic change (sentence structure change)
- Morphological change (change in the function of the smallest units of meaning)
- Phonological change (sound change)

We will be looking at each of these areas of change in more detail in this tutorial.

Why is it important to understand how languages change? Because understanding the ways languages change helps to give us a clearer understanding of how a region may have developed and how the people groups in an area may share a common history and therefore cultural similarities. In a geographical region where there are a number of related languages, it probably means that they once spoke a single language that has changed and diverged over time into separate languages and dialects.

Looking at the mechanics of language change can help us to answer questions like: What has changed? How did it change? Why did it change? How can we find out what earlier forms of a language were like? Also, for those involved in language development projects - translation, literacy development, or curriculum development - it is important to consider the fact that every language is in a process of change. As we develop materials in a language, we are not looking for some "pure form" of the language, but the most widely communicative form of the language at the time.

## Semantic change

Words can change meaning over time, and there are several different kinds of meaning change that are common. Word meanings can change in how wide the meaning is. For example, meanings can become narrower, like these words in English:

<u>Old English</u>		<u>Modern English</u>
<i>deor</i> 'animal'	→	<i>deer</i> 'a kind of animal'
<i>mete</i> 'food'	→	<i>meat</i> 'flesh food'
<i>hund</i> 'dog'	→	<i>hound</i> 'hunting dog'
<i>fugol</i> 'bird'	→	<i>fowl</i> 'domesticated bird'

The meanings of words can also become broader over time, for example:

<u>Old English</u>		<u>Modern English</u>
<i>bridde</i> 'baby bird in nest'	→	<i>bird</i> 'bird'
<i>dogge</i> 'a breed of dog'	→	<i>dog</i> 'dog'

Note the interesting switch with dog and hound – *dog* used to mean a particular kind of dog, while *hound* meant any kind of dog. Now they have changed meanings, as have *bird* and *fowl*.

Words can also change their meaning to a related but different meaning. We call this a *semantic shift*. For example:

[Middle English] <i>bede</i> 'prayer'	→	[Modern English] <i>bead</i>
[Old English] <i>bux</i> 'a kind of tree'	→	[Modern English] <i>box</i>

This kind of meaning change happens when a word develops a broader or additional meaning, then the original meaning disappears. About one hundred years ago *gay* only meant 'happy' or 'fun'. Then it developed the additional meaning of 'homosexual' as well as the original meaning of 'happy'. Then people gradually stopped using it to mean 'happy', and now it is only used to mean 'homosexual'.

Words mostly change meaning gradually, so there is a chain of small meaning shifts, often over a long period of time. These small shifts can add up to some major changes in meaning over time. The English word *black*, for instance, originally meant 'white', and is related to words like *blank*, *bleach* and *bald*. The original word, *bhleg* comes from the original Indo-European language, and meant 'white'. Then in the original Germanic language it changed to *blakaz* - 'to blaze'. This then changed to mean 'to have blazed', then 'to be burned', then 'black'.



Meaning change can also involve words changing to have a more positive meaning than they originally had. For example:

<u>Old or Middle English</u>		<u>Modern English</u>
<i>cniht</i> 'boy, youth'	→	<i>knight</i> 'high ranking armored man'
<i>nice</i> 'stupid'	→	<i>nice</i> 'pleasant'
<i>prætig</i> 'tricky, sly'	→	<i>pretty</i> 'attractive'

Words that have changed to have a more positive meaning more recently:

<i>terrific</i> 'terrifying'	→	<i>terrific</i> 'very good'
<i>wicked</i> 'evil'	→	<i>wicked</i> 'very good'

Words can also change to have a more negative meaning:

<u>Old or Middle English</u>		<u>Modern English</u>
<i>sely</i> 'blessed'	→	<i>silly</i> 'foolish'
<i>gebur</i> 'farmer'	→	<i>boor</i> 'boring person or thing'

Semantic change can also come about when the word for a part of something is used to refer to the whole thing - for example, saying *wheels* for 'car', or using *tongue* to mean 'language'.



Another reason meanings can change is because of word avoidance or word taboo. A community can decide they don't want to say a particular word, so they use another word as a replacement to mean the same thing. The new meaning of the replacement word becomes its standard meaning.

For example, the original Indo-European word for 'bear' was *rtko*. In northern Europe bears were common and very dangerous, and people were scared to even say the word for them, so in early Germanic the word was avoided and people referred instead to *beron* 'the brown one'. This word came down to Old English as *bera*, then to modern English as *bear*. It also came down to Swedish as *björn*, and German as *Bär*.

## Syntactic change

Grammatical structures can also change over time. Even basic word order involving subject, object and verb can shift. In Old English the basic word order was SOV (Subject Object Verb).

Hēo hine lærde.  
 'she him advised'  
 S O V

In Modern English the basic word order is SVO.

*She advised him.*

S V O

Sometimes the grammatical structure can change to make the sentence simpler:

I am going to go. → I'm gonna go.

I have got to go. → I've gotta go.

The argument structure of a language can also change. For example, in Middle English verbs to do with mental activities needed subjects in accusative case.

Now they need subjects in nominative case:

Me likes it. → I like it.

Me thinks... → I think...

## Morphological change

Remember that morphemes are the smallest units of meaning in a language, which can include things such as affixes and intonation - they are not necessarily words.

One way languages can change on the morphological level is by losing inflections. For example, Old English nouns belonged to one of three different genders or noun classes, and each gender had four case forms for each noun. So for the noun *hund* 'hound', there were six different forms - *hund*, *hunde*, *hundes*, *hundas*, *hundum*, *hunda* - depending on the gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) and case (nominative, accusative, dative or genitive). In Modern English all genders have disappeared and all case endings have disappeared except genitive (possessive), so we only have *hound*, *hound's* and *hounds*'.

The opposite also happens, when morphemes join together to become a single morpheme -

going to	→	gonna
got to	→	gotta
ought to	→	oughta
have to	→	hafta

Another type of morphological change is *reanalysis* - when speakers re-analyze part of a word as if it was a morpheme, when originally it had not been a separate morpheme in that word.

For example, *hamburg-er* was originally a 'kind of food from Hamburg'. Then various other forms such as *beefburger*, *cheeseburger*, *vegeburger*, etc.



were used. This created a new morpheme - *burger*.

Another example of reanalysis is the word ‘mugaccino’ - meaning a mug of cappuccino coffee. The noun *cappuccino* originated in the 1940s from the



Italian, and means coffee made with milk that has been frothed up with pressurized steam. It comes from the Italian word ‘Capuchin,’ because its color resembles that of a Capuchin's habit (a friar belonging to a branch of the Franciscan order). Speakers treated the word as if it was spelled *cypaccino*, with the first part being the morpheme *cup*. Then it was simply a matter of changing this morpheme to *mug*. Other recent new forms that use the new morpheme -*ccino* are *mochaccino* and *chococcino*. *Frappuccino* (trademarked by Starbucks in the 1990s) uses the word *frappé* (Greek ‘iced coffee’) with the morpheme -*ccino*.

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## Phonological change

The most important kind of change in language for understanding the way languages are related to each other is phonological (sound) change. Sound changes tend to apply consistently throughout a language, so they let us see sound correspondences between related languages. That helps us see how languages within a family group together into branches, or subgroups. There are many kinds of sound changes. We’ll look at a few of the most important ones:

### Lenition

Languages change to become more efficient. One way this happens is that sounds that take more effort to produce, change to sounds that require less effort. This is called *lenition*, or weakening. Voiceless sounds require more effort than voiced sounds, so one common form of lenition is for voiceless sounds to become voiced over time.

Also, the more that the mouth is closed when producing a consonant, the more effort is needed. The various manners of articulation can be listed from strong to weak (those that take more effort are first): stops, fricatives, nasals, laterals, approximants. The Uradhi language (Aboriginal, northern Queensland) shows lenition: [p] (a voiceless stop) in the ancestral language has changed to [w] (a voiced approximant) in the modern language.

pinta	→	winta ‘arm’
pilu	→	wilu ‘hip’
paṭa	→	waṭa ‘bite’

The fullest form of lenition is for a sound to weaken so much it disappears completely. In the Kara language (Austronesian, New Ireland, PNG), all vowels

at the end of a word have disappeared. Also, the [p] (a voiceless stop) has changed to [f] (a voiceless fricative):

tapine	→	tafin 'woman'
punti	→	fut 'banana'
topu	→	tuf 'sugarcane'

In Standard Fijian (Austronesian, Fiji), it is the final consonants that have been lost:

tangis	→	tangi 'cry'
ikan	→	ika 'fish'
bulan	→	vula 'moon'

Another form of weakening is when a cluster of consonants are simplified by one of the consonants disappearing. In English, word-final clusters like [mb] and [ŋg] were reduced by losing the final stop:

læmb 'lamb'	→	læm
hæŋg 'hang'	→	hæŋ

### Assimilation

Another very common kind of change occurs when a sound is affected by the other sounds around it. Sounds can become more like the sounds around them. This is called assimilation.

Complete assimilation involves a sound becoming exactly the same as a sound next to it.

<u>Original Germanic</u>		<u>Icelandic</u>
findan	→	finna
gulð	→	gull
unðan	→	unna

In partial assimilation, sounds change to become more like the sounds next to them in some way. One common kind of assimilation is *palatalisation*, where a consonant changes its place of articulation to become palatal when it's next to a front vowel. For example, in English [k] changed to [tʃ] before front vowels (like [i] and [e]).

<u>Old English</u>		<u>Modern English</u>
[kinn]	→	[tʃɪn] 'chin'
[kɛsi]	→	[tʃi:z] 'cheese'
[kirike]	→	[tʃɜ:tʃ] 'church'



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Language Change*

1. How does your language differ from your grandparents' language? Try to think of specific instances of language change that has taken place in the time since they were young.
2. What are some of the influences that have brought about these changes?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Language Change*

1. Do some further reading on the history and development of Australian English.
2. Search online for the words coffin, caravan, giant, and humor (use this American English spelling), to see where they originally came from and how they have changed in meaning and usage over the years. How do you think Australian English might change over the next ten years, and why?
3. Below are two Middle English recipes with Modern English spelling below. Consider each one and note the words you have never heard before, or any words that seem to be used differently to their modern sense.

### **Connynges in Cyrip (Rabbit served in a wine-currant sauce)**

Take connynges and seep hem wel in good broth. Take wyne greke and do þerto with a porcioun of vynegar and flour of canel, hoole clowes, quybibes hoole, and ooper gode spices, with raisouns coraunce and gyngyuer ypared and ymynced. Take vp the connynges and smyte hem on pecys and cast hem in to the siryppe, and seep hem a litel in fere, and serue it forth.

*Modern English Spelling:* Take conies and boil them well in good broth. Take Greek wine and do there-to with a portion of vinegar and flour of cinnamon, whole cloves, cubebes whole, and other good spices, with currants and ginger pared and minced. Take up the conies and cut them in pieces and cast them into the syrup, and boil them a little in the fire, and serve it forth.

### **Caudell (A frothy wine or ale-based drink)**

Take faire tryed yolkes of eyren, and cast in a potte; and take good ale, or elles good wyn, a quantite, and sette it ouer þe fire / And whan hit is at boyling, take it fro the fire, and caste þere-to saffron, salt, Sugur; and ceson hit vppe, and serue hit forth hote.



*Modern English Spelling:* Take fair tried yolks of eggs, and cast in a pot; and take good ale, or else good wine, a quantity, and set it over the fire / And when it is boiling, take it from the fire, and cast there-to saffron, salt, Sugar; and season it up, and serve it forth hot.

(Recipes from: <http://www.godecookery.com>)