Language Files
Materials for an Introduction to Language

§ 90: Language Change

When linguists describe the phonetics of a particular language, isolate that language's morphemes, or discover that language's syntactic rules, they analyze that language synchronically; that is, they analyze that language at a particular point in time. Languages, however, are not static; they are constantly changing entities. Linguists can study language development through time, providing diachronic analyses.

Historical linguistics is concerned with language change. It is interested in what kinds of changes occur (and why), and equally important, what kinds of changes don't occur (and why not). Historical linguists attempt to determine the changes that have occurred in a language's history, and the relationship of languages historically.

To see how English has changed over time, compare the following versions of the Lord's Prayer from the three major periods in the history of English. A conternporary version is also included. (Note: the symbol þ, called *thorn*, is an Old English symbol for the voiceless interdental fricative [θ], as in *three*; ð, called *eth*, is the symbol for the voiced interdental fricative [ð], as in *then*.)

Old English (c. 1000 A.D.)

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, si þin nama gehalgod. Tobecume þin rice. Gewurþe in willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum. Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us to dæg. And forgyf us ure gyltas, swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltedum. And en gelæd þu us on costnungen ac alys us of yfele. Soðlice.

Middle English (c. 1400 A.D.)

Oure fadir that art in hevenes halowid be thi name, thi kyngdom come to, be thi wille don in erthe es in hevene, geve to us this day oure bread & forgeve to us oure dettis, as we forgeven to oure dettouris, & lede us not in to temptacion: but delyver us from yvel, amen.

Early Modern English

Our father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdome come. Thy will be done, in earth, as it is in heaven. Giue us this day our dayly bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debters. And leade us not into temptation, but deliver us from evill: For thine is the kingdome, and the power, and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Contemporary English

Our Father, who is in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come into being. May your will be followed on earth, just as it is in heaven. Give us this day our food for the day. And forgive us our offenses, just as we forgive those who have offended us. And do not bring us to the test. But free us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

Languages change in all aspects of the grammar: the phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, as these passages illustrate. Subsequent sections will describe the various types of language change in detail.

Historical linguistics as we know it began in the late 18th century when Western European scholars began to notice that modern European languages shared similar linguistic characteristics with ancient languages, such as Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. These similarities led linguists to believe that today's European languages and those ancient languages must have evolved from a single ancestor (or "mother") language called **Proto-lndo-European** (PIE).

If these languages did in fact share a common ancestor, a reasonable question to ask is, what caused them to change into the different languages that they are today?

One of the causes for language change is geographical division. As groups of people spread out through Europe, they lost communication with each other, so that the language of each group went its own way, underwent its own changes, and thus came to differ from the others. Another cause for language change is language contact, with the effect that languages become more alike. English, for example, has borrowed many Spanish words from contact with Mexican and Cuban immigrants. Language contact, like any other explanation for language change, does not provide a complete explanation, only a partial one. At times, linguists cannot find any particular cause which would motivate a language to change in a particular direction. Language change, then, may simply just happen.

Often people view such change as a bad thing, so they try to resist it. Jonathan Swift, the late 17th century satirist who wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, felt that if the language changed, people would no longer be able to read his essays, so he supported the movement among English grammarians to stipulate prescriptive rules which would have the effect of regulating current language usage as well as change. These grammarians based their rules on Classical Latin from the first century B.C., viewing it as the perfect, model language since it did not change. Even today when we don't look to a language such as Latin as a model, some people consciously resist linguistic change. Despite these social views towards change, linguists regard change as neither good nor bad; it is simply a fact of life and a fact of language.

§ 92: Sound Change

Sound change is the most widely studied aspect of language change. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First, the study of how the sounds of languages change has a long tradition behind it, more so than any other area of linguistics. As a result we are more informed about this particular area of language change than others. Second, the study of sound change provides the basis for the study of language relationships and the reconstruction of parent (proto-) languages. Finally, sound change provides a very good introduction to the basic aims and goals of those who study language change to describe the types of changes possible in language systems and to determine the causes of those changes.

What is Sound Change?

Sound change is an alteration in the phonetic nature of a sound as a result of a phonological process. If a phonological process is introduced into a language where it did not formerly occur it may result in a sound change. For example, at an early period in the history of English the velar consonant [k] occurred before the front vowel [i] in words like 'chide' *cidan* [kidan]. Later in the Old English period the velar consonant [k] was palatalized to a [ch] before the front vowel [i]. The introduction of the phonological process of palatalization resulted in the sound change *k > ch* before [i] in Old English. The phonetic shape of [k] (the voiceless velar stop) was altered to [ch] (a palatal consonant) as a result of the phonological process of palatalization.

The Regularity of Sound Change

One of the most fascinating aspects of sound change is that if a particular sound

change is studied over a long enough period of time it will be completely regular, i.e., every instance of the sound in question will undergo the change. Thus, in our Old English example we would say that the sound change *k > ch* before [i] is regular because every Old English word which contained [k] before [i] changed to [ch]; the change was not isolated to the word 'chide'. Sound change does not affect all possible words instantaneously, nor does every speaker in a community pick up a sound change overnight. Sound change is a very gradual process, spreading from one word to the next, and from one speaker to the next until all possible words and speakers are affected.

Though sound change takes place gradually, the ultimate regularity of sound change can be verified quite easily. In Old English, for example, the ancestor of the Modern English word *house* was spelled *hus* and pronounced [hūs]. If we compare these two words, we observe a change in the quality of the vowel. In Old English, the vowel was the long vowel [ū] while in Modern English the vowel is a diphthong [au]. What is important is that this is not the only example of the sound change *ū > au* in the history of English. In fact we can find any number of Old Einglish words with [ū] which are pronounced with the diphthong [au] in Modern English, e.g., Old English *mus* [mūs]: Modern English *mouse* [maus]; Old English *lus* [lūs]: Modern English *louse* [laus]; Old English *ut* [ūt]: Modern English *out* [aut], etc.

Types of Sound Change

The development of Old English [ū] is what is known as **unconditioned sound change**. That is, every instance of [ū], no matter where it occurred in a word, or what sounds were next to it, bacame [au]. More often than not, it is the case that sounds are influenced by the sounds which occur around them. When a sound changes due to the influence of a neighboring sound the change is called a **conditioned sound change**. We have already considered a good example of a conditioned sound change from the history of English, namely the palatalization of [k] before the front vowel [i]. Notice that the only velar consonants which were palatalized were those occurring before the vowel [i]; all other velar consonants remain non-palatal. Evidence of this is Old English *ku* [kū] corresponding to Modern English *cow* [kau].

§ 98: Semantic Changes

The semantic system of a language, like all other aspects of its grammar, is subject to change through time. As a result, the meanings of words do not always remain constant from one period of the language to the next.

The motivating factors behind semantic change are not well understood. Such changes sometimes result from language contact or accompany technological innovations or migrations to new geographic regions. In each of these cases the introduction of a new object or concept into the culture may initiate a change in the meaning of a word for a related object or concept, though this does not always occur. It is, however, frequently the case that the sources of particular changes are not at all obvious; they appear to be spontaneous and unmotivated (though this may simply be due to our own lack of understanding).

Whatever the underlying source, only certain types of changes seem to occur with any frequency. Some of the most common types include:

1. extensions
2. reductions
3. elevations
4. degradations

Semantic Extensions

Extensions in meaning occur when the meaning of a word becomes more general. These are frequently the result of generalizing from the specific case to the class of which the specific case is a member. An example of this type would be the change in meaning undergone by the Old English (OE) word *docga*, modern day *dog*. In OE *docga* referred to a particular breed of dog, while in modern usage it refers to the class of dogs as a whole. Thus the set of contexts in which the word may be used has been extended from the specific case (a particular breed of dog) to the general class (all dogs, dogs in general). A similar type of change has affected modern English *bird*. Though it once referred to a particular species of bird, it now is used for the general class.

Semantic extensions are particularly common with proper names and brand names. Thus, the name of the fictional character Scrooge can be used to refer to anyone with miserly traits. Examples of the semantic extension of brand names are equally easy to find: *Kleenex* is often used for to refer to any facial tissue, , regardless of brand, and *Xerox* for photocopies. In some parts of the United States *Coke* can be used for any carbonated beverage, not just one particular brand. In each of these cases the meaning of the word has been generalized to include related items in its set of referents.

In the examples discussed thus far the relationship between the original meaning of

the word and the extended meaning of the word has been quite straightforward: the name of a particular type of photocopy has been generalized to any photocopy, and so on. This needn't always be the case, however. The meanings of words often become more general as a result of what is referred to as **metaphorical extension**. Thus, the meaning of a word is extended to include an object or concept that is like the original referent in some metaphorical sense rather than a literal sense. A classic example of this type is the word *broadcast*, which originally meant to scatter seed over a field. In its most common present-day usage, however, broadcast refers to the diffusion of radio waves through space —a metaphorical extension of its original sense. Another classic example of metaphorical extension is the application of pre-existing nautical terms (such as *ship*, *navigate*, *dock*, *hull*, *hatch*, *crew*, etc.) to the relatively new realm of space exploration. Again, notice that space exploration is not like ocean navigation in a literal sense, since very different actions and physical properties are involved. Rather, the comparison between the two realms is a metaphorical one.

Semantic Reductions

Reductions occur when the set of appropriate contexts or referents for a word decreases. Historically speaking this is relatively less common than extensions of meaning, though it still occurs fairly frequently. An example of a semantic reduction would be the OE word *hund*, modern day *hound*. While this word originally referred to dogs in general, its meaning has now been restricted, for the most part, to one particular breed of dog. Thus its usage has become less general over time.

Additional examples of this type of change include the modern English words *skyline* and *girl*. *Skyline* originally referred to the horizon in general. It has since been restricted to particular types of horizons —ones in which the outlines of hills, buildings or other structures appear. In Middle English the word corresponding to modern day *girl* referred to young people of either sex. A semantic reduction has resulted in its current, less general, meaning.

Semantic Elevations

Semantic elevations occur when a word takes on somewhat grander connotations over time. For example, the word *knight* (OE *cniht*) originally meant 'youth' or 'military follower': relatively powerless and unimportant people. The meaning of *knight* has since been elevated to refer to people of a somewhat more romantic and impressive status. Similarly, the word *chivalrous* was at one time synonymous with

warlike; it now refers to more refined properties such as 'fairness,' 'generosity,' and 'honor.' A particularly good example of this type is the shift in meaning undergone by the word *squire*. The Middle English (ME) equivalent of this word was used to refer to a knight's attendant, the person who held his shield and armor for him. In Modern English, however, a squire is a country gentleman or large landowner. Thus the meaning of squire has changed rather drastically over time, acquiring a socially more positive meaning.

Semantic Degradations

Semantic degradations are the opposite of semantic elevations; they occur when a word acquires a more pejorative meaning over time. The word *silly* is a particularly interesting example of semantic degradation because the social force of the word has almost completely reversed. Whereas in ME *silly* meant something akin to 'happy, blessed, innocent,' it now is more on a par with foolish, inane, absurd'. Thus the connotations of silly have gone from strongly positive to strongly negative in a matter of a few centuries.

Discussion

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that semantic changes in one word of a language are often accompanied by (or result in) semantic changes in another word. Note, for instance, the parallel changes undergone by OE *hund* and *docga*, discussed above. As *hund* became more specific in meaning, *docga* became more general. Thus, the semantic system as a whole remains in balance despite changes to individual elements within the system.

A somewhat more elaborate example of the same principle involves the OE words *mete*, *flæsc* and *foda*. In OE, *mete*, modern day *meat*, referred to food in general while *flæsc*, now *flesh*, referred to any type of animal tissue. Since then, the meaning of *meat* has been restricted to the flesh of animals and the meaning of *flesh* to human tissue. *Foda*, which was the OE word for 'animal fodder', became modern day *food*, and its meaning was generalized to include all forms of nourishment. Thus the semantic hole left by the change in referent for meal has been filled by the word *food*.