

## Learning Grammar through Studying Language Change

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In this presentation, I will talk about why I think it's so important to discuss language change with students. I'll talk about some of the things that I do in my classes, but I think these examples can be used in any class, with any age, in a variety of contexts. I consider various kinds of language change from different periods of English and compare them to variations—or look at them alongside—a Modern English dialect. This process is very successful in helping students see that neither language change nor language variation should be taken as language degradation; it also illustrates the patterned and systematic nature of both variation and change; and finally, it provides a good platform for discussing grammatical terminology and distinctions.

### I. First, give examples of language change

On some level, our students are all aware that English has changed. They need only look at an excerpt from *Beowulf* or Chaucer to see that. And though Shakespearean English is much easier to read and finally seems like our own language, footnotes are necessary here too. We have quite a lot of evidence that English has changed in its phonology, morphology, and syntax, and that the meanings of many words have changed as well. It's very important, however, to also provide students with evidence of language change in progress. Students need to have current examples of the language in flux, so they really understand that such changes are always ongoing. For example, it is now very rare to hear *whom* in spoken language—a morphological change. Another morphological change is the loss of various past participial forms such as *mown* in favor of *mowed*. I'll return to examples such as this one and what you might do with it in a classroom. A phonological change is the loss of the phoneme /w/ in American English. This change is not one that is restricted to a particular geographic region or class, but largely a generational distinction. That is, many (most?) people over, say, 50 still have the /w/; that is, they have a distinction between the words *which* and *witch*, while most speakers under 50 no longer have this distinction and do not have the phoneme /w/ at all in their consonant inventories. An example of syntactic change would be the increase in the use of *There is* or the more common *There's* with a plural, as in *There's five people in our family* rather than *There are five people in our family*.

Students may think of all of these examples as dialectal variations rather than change in progress and I think it is important to question what, in fact, the difference is between variation and change. It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish language variation from language change because we can't foresee what will happen. Basically, however, the majority rules. When a substantial number of speakers have adopted the variation as their own accepted pronunciation or grammatical form, then we say that the language has changed. Some changes are incorporated into the written language (mainly, morphological and syntactic changes), some are not (pronunciation changes).<sup>1</sup> Importantly, however the linguistic and social motivations for change are the same for language variation and language change. I'll return to some more examples of change in flux.

## II. And why is it that languages change?

It is useful for students to be reminded of why languages change in order to reduce our tendency to think of change as degradation. Because the acquisition of language is an innately-determined behavior, the same patterns of change will emerge in all languages. One of the primary motivations for sound change is ease of articulation; that is, phonetic and phonological changes come about as a result of making certain sequences of sounds easier to say. Some sound changes that took place before our spelling system was standardized are reflected in the spellings of the words. The prefix on words such as *impossible* and *illegal* used to be the regular prefix *in-* meaning 'not'. However, this *in-* changed in certain words in order to make the sound sequences easier to say. So *in + possible* → *impossible* or *in + legal* → *illegal*. This process of assimilation—making one sound more like a neighboring sound in some way—is one of the most common processes in language change and language variation.

Another common reason for language change is *regularization* or *analogy*. For example, in Old English, there used to be many different ways to form the plurals of nouns. Those words which we now think of as having “irregular” plurals (*oxen, geese, mice, women*), were members of larger groups of nouns that formed their plurals in the same way. Gradually, by analogy and because of the tendency to regularize, the *-s* plural became the dominant form and other kinds of plural endings dropped out (for the most part).

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<sup>1</sup> I like to consider the question of why pronunciation changes not incorporated into the written form of the language. Largely because our spelling system is not a reflection of our pronunciation anyway. There is not a one-to-one correspondence between our spelling symbols (alphabet) and our pronunciation.

Another major reason for language change is language contact—one community of speakers comes into contact with speakers of another language. This can result not only in borrowing of words (as in the huge number of words English borrowed from French following the Norman Invasion of England in 1066), but in changes to the phonology, morphology, and syntax of a language. For example, English acquired a phonemic /v/ due primarily to the influence from French (which had a phonemic /v/) after the Norman Invasion. And American English acquired the names for many plants and animals (such as *squash*, *raccoon*, *hickory*, *persimmon*, *moose*, *skunk*) from various Native American languages, primarily languages of the Algonquin (or Algonquian) families of the East Coast.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Today's language is just going down the tubes

Despite the naturalness of language change and its pervasiveness throughout the history of any language, change is generally regarded by those living through it as a bad thing, as language degradation. Some of the reasons for this attitude have to do with the standardization of English, with mass literacy, and simply with the notion of “otherness”. If we hear an unusual word or linguistic structure, we tend to think that it is “wrong” or “bad”; the way we have learned it and the way we see it in print must be the “better” and “right” way. However, looking again at the historical record can help put these attitudes in perspective, allowing us to see that our attitudes about language change are based on what is familiar, not what is “correct”. For example, if someone today says *bringed* instead of *brought*, it might be viewed as quite “incorrect” according to some standard form of English. However, in older English, up through the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the accepted past tense of *work* was *wrought*; this form was viewed as the more “standard” form of the word. Now, of course, it is more accepted to use the regularized *worked*, though one can imagine the parents and teachers of the day cringing when their children said *worked*, as some may do now when they hear *bringed*. What started out as a quite patterned example of language variation, likely viewed as language degradation at the time, eventually became accepted by the people in positions of power and thus became the so-called “standard” form.

### IV. Useful to view language change in three stages

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<sup>2</sup> The influence on English from Native American languages, however, was quite minimal—not surprisingly—and all of the borrowed words are nouns, indicating a lack of any true mingling of cultures. Place names, including the names of 28

1) change has taken place/been adopted by majority of speakers: *ring/rang/rung* (from *ring/ringed*)  
Students may be surprised to find out that the past tense of *ring* used to be *ringed*, by analogy with *sing/sang/sung* and now we have *rang* and *rung*, though at one time, these would have been nonstandard.

2) change in progress/been adopted by some speakers: *dived* and *dove*

The past tense of *dive* is currently in flux—one may hear both *dived* and *dove*. In informal polls in my classes, students prefer *dove* and find *dived* to be “nonstandard” or at least “informal” and are surprised that *dived* used to be the standard till *dove* began to gain favor by analogy with other minority patterned verbs that change a vowel rather than adding a suffix like *drive/drove* and *ride/rode*.

3) change beginning/been adopted only by a few speakers: *bringed* or *brang*

*bringed* rather than *brought* for the past tense of *bring*,

*bring, brang* (and the past participle *brung*). Sometimes we regularize to a common minority pattern.

So these are some of the basic strategies I use, but what’s so important to making them sink in is examples.

### **On to the examples**

I will give here some more examples of variation and change beginning with verb forms, primarily past tense and participles. To pair examples from current dialects with changes that have already taken place, resulting in language change, is really eye-opening for students. Seeing that the same kind of patterned changes that are currently stigmatized have already been adopted into the standard language in other cases makes students more open to current variation and change. Also, there are other benefits—like understanding grammatical distinctions—that come along for free and that I’ll mention as I go along.

#### *Past Tense and Past Participles*

When discussing past participial verb forms in my grammar classes, I find it very instructive to bring up historical changes to the past participle and ongoing changes and dialect variations of the past tense and the past participles of certain verbs. Students can then really see how the past tense and past participial forms are in flux, as they have been for centuries. It’s often difficult for students to identify past participles and to distinguish them from past tense precisely because there is so much overlap. So we may start with verbs like the following:

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states, are from Native American languages (including one from Inuit and one from Hawaiian).

- (1) a. talk            talked            (had) talked  
b. bounce            bounced            (had) bounced

But then by asking them for other verbs, we soon get other patterns:

- (2) a. eat            ate            (had) eaten  
b. see            saw            (had) seen  
c. grow            grew            (had) grown

The students soon suggest dialectal variations, noting that when someone says *I seen* that that is using the past participial form as the past tense.<sup>3</sup> We discuss why this might happen--because there is so much overlap, as the examples in (1) illustrate. We also consider examples that have participial forms that are in flux to see the variation/change in progress:

- (3) a. mow            mowed            (had) mowed/mown  
b. saw            sawed            (had) sawed/sawn  
c. shave            shaved            (had) shaved/shaven  
d. prove            proved            (had) proved/proven

On the other hand, the pattern of verbs in (2) has led to novel participial forms, which my students always bring up since such forms seem to be especially common in the Pacific Northwest (or maybe some of you can let me know if such forms are equally prevalent in your regions as well):

- (4) a. buy            bought            (had) boughten  
b. put            put            (had) putten

We seem torn right now (unconsciously, of course) about the past participle; either making a distinction where one's been lost (generalizing *-en* as a past participle affix and attaching it to the past tense form), or letting go of the distinction (using the same form of the verb for the past tense

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<sup>3</sup> Though it has been suggested as an alternative analysis that the form *I seen* is the past participial verb with the *had* deleted.

and the past participle). Discussing such examples illustrates well how the language that students usually see as quite fixed and standardized is indeed still changing and such changes can even come in to the standardized written language. (In my classes, we also look at examples in print of the participles and consider how dictionaries label them and list them.) This approach to past tense and past participles also results in making the discussion of past participles and verb forms much more interesting.

### *You was*

An additional example illustrates another kind of pattern regularization. Many dialects use the form *you was* rather than *you were*, and though this may not be the standard form anymore, *you was* used to be quite standard in speech and showed up frequently in literature until it was condemned by prescriptivists in the late 1700s. Showing students a chart like the one below illuminates how the use of *was* regularizes the pattern.

(5)

standard				nonstandard			
person		person		person		person	
(singular)	<i>to be</i>	(plural)	<i>to be</i>	(singular)	<i>to be</i>	(plural)	<i>to be</i>
I	<b>was</b>	we	were	I	<b>was</b>	we	were
you	<b>were</b>	you	were	you	<b>was</b>	you	were
he/she	<b>was</b>	they	were	he/she	<b>was</b>	they	were

Using *was* for the second person singular *you* regularizes the pattern, making all of the singular subjects take *was* and the plurals *were*. Though this is a logical pattern that serves to make the system more regular, it is now stigmatized and considered by most speakers to be nonstandard. For students to see how the stigmatized *you was* makes the paradigm into a regular patterned one is enlightening, as is the fact that *you was* used to be standard. They again see how their attitudes are socially conditioned and determined. Such a discussion can occur within the context of talking about the verb *to be*, verb paradigms, irregular verbs, etc.

### *Hisself/ theirselves*

A similar example is the nonstandard reflexive pronouns, *hisself* and *theirselves*, shown in the chart below alongside the standard pronouns.

(6)	<u>Standard</u>	<u>Nonstandard</u>
	<b>singular</b>	<b>plural</b>
<b>1st person</b>	I like <b>myself</b> .	I like <b>myself</b> .
<b>2nd person</b>	You like <b>yourself</b> .	You like <b>yourself</b> .
<b>3rd person(masc.)</b>	He likes <b>himself</b> .	He likes <b>hissself</b> .
<b>3rd person (fem.)</b>	She likes <b>herself</b> .	She likes <b>herself</b> .
<b>1st person</b>	We like <b>ourselves</b> .	We like <b>ourselves</b> .
<b>2nd person</b>	You like <b>yourselves</b> .	You like <b>yourselves</b> .
<b>3rd person</b>	They like <b>themselves</b> .	They like <b>theirselves</b> .

These data can provide a platform to discuss pronouns in general and the distinction between possessive pronouns and possessive determiners, a distinction that can be difficult for students, again because there is overlap. Have students take off the *-self* or *-selves* and use the pronoun in front of a noun—that's the determiner:

(7)	my book	our book
	your book	your book
	his book	their book
	her book	

So the nonstandard dialects consistently uses the possessive determiner form of the pronoun to form the reflexive, while the standard dialects mix up the possessive determiner and the possessive pronoun. Again, the nonstandard forms are more regularized, more systematic. Again, *hissself* and *theirselves* have been common for centuries and appear frequently in older literature. The discussion about reflexives might be appropriate when distinguishing the various types of pronouns and could help students do so. And again, such a discussion makes talking about pronouns more interesting and retaining information about pronouns more likely.

*Irregular Plurals/Plurals in flux*

I mentioned above how what we now think of as irregular noun plurals were once part of larger groups of words that formed their plurals in that way. Have students consider some of these plurals that are still in flux, still in the process of being standardized, still experiencing variation. They always bring up good examples themselves, but some to consider:

- (8) dice (as singular and plural), deer (singular)/deers (plural) , syllabuses/syllabi (and other Latinate plurals)

Some irregulars, however, seem in no danger of regularizing: *geese*, not *gooses*; *mice*, not *mouses*. Such resistance to regularization often correlates with word frequency.

Such examples illustrate well the language in flux and how our attitudes about what's "good" are so completely socially determined.

So far the changes and variations I've discussed have been morphological ones. Syntactic ones abound as well.

*A syntactic change: rent/let*

A good example of syntactic variation comes from Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998).

(9) a. The teacher learned me how to write.

b. The teacher taught me how to write.

(9a) is quite stigmatized. In standard dialect *learn* can take as its subject only the person who is the recipient of the knowledge, as in

(10) The students learned how to write (from the teacher).

However, though the reduction of *teach* and *learn* to just *learn* is quite stigmatized, a similar reduction has already occurred with *rent* and *let*. In current American English, one can say either of the following:

(11) a. The landlord rented an apartment to me.

b. I rented an apartment from the landlord.

*Rent* used to be used only with subjects indicating the recipient of the item of property, as in (11b).

*Let* had to be used when the subject indicated who was giving the item, as in the following:

(12) The landlord let the apartment to me.

and this is still the case with *rent* and *let* in British English. Now, of course, both (11a and b) are acceptable in American English.



## *Phonological changes*

It can also be useful to include some phonological change examples to illustrate that language change occurs in all aspects of the language. These are sometimes less stigmatized, as I mentioned earlier, since the representation on the page does not correlate very directly with pronunciation in the way that grammatical and morphological examples do. A change that can help students see how their attitudes about language are not necessarily rational is the pronunciation of words that have an “al” or “ol” followed by another consonant. For most of these words, the /l/ is not pronounced by most speakers: *half*, *calf*, *walk*, *salmon*. This /l/ before a consonant had disappeared across the board by Early Modern English (1500-1800). However, the /l/ has returned in some Modern English speakers’ pronunciation because of what we call a “spelling pronunciation,” an effect of seeing the /l/ in the word in print. (This has also happened with the /t/ of *often*, which used to not be pronounced, but now is for some speakers.) Some words with an *l* + consonant have two standard pronunciations, so you may hear *folk* or *palm* with or without the /l/, though other /l/s are not pronounced, as in *yolk*. And though most speakers do not pronounce the /l/ in *half* or *calf*, those same speakers might pronounce the /l/ in *wolf* and criticize those who do not have an /l/ in *wolf*. It is a useful exercise to have students consider other words that contain an /l/ before a consonant and discuss their own pronunciations and attitudes: *salve*, *calm*, *talk*, *golf*, *Rudolph*, *elf*, *shelf*, *myself*, for example.

Another example I like is the variation that exists in words with “or” in the spelling. In our part of the country, most people have /ɔr/ not /ar/ in words like *Florida* and *orange*, though the /ar/ pronunciation is more standard in many parts of the country. Again, people will often turn to spelling and point out that there is an “o” there, thus it should be pronounced as they say it: /ɔr/. However, there are other words that have not undergone this change. Most people in the U.S. say *sorry* as /sari/, and cringe at our Canadian neighbors saying *sorry* /sɔri/ and *tomorrow*.

### **Some remarks**

Perhaps it is just human nature to resist change and with language change that resistance is quite evident. However, acknowledging the naturalness and inevitability of language change, as well as its systematic and rule-governed nature, reminds us that the attitudes about language change (and

variation) come not in response to the language itself, but in response to society's attitudes towards the *speakers* of that language variety.<sup>4</sup>

So it would indeed be an oddity, if not an impossibility, for a language not to change. At least when we view language change from a distance (of either space or time), we seem to understand and accept that languages do affect and influence each other—no one would argue that French or Spanish should become Latin again—and such influence is not necessarily regarded negatively. However, when we are talking about our own language in the present, there is widespread resistance to change and to influence. Our language becomes part of our identity and so we resist any sort of change or variation.

So what I try to do in my own classes:

- integrate into discussions of grammar the idea that language is in a constant state of change
- that variation and change involve the same kinds of processes
- to provide examples that illustrate that our attitudes about language are completely socially determined
- to provide explanations for what motivates the variation and change in order to illustrate the systematicity involved (and how those same motivations have led to earlier changes and variations in the language)

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it's also human nature to seek out differences to give definition to one's clan/tribe/class, and language certainly provides an effective platform for this kind of societal behavior. This desire to belong to a group is why speakers of particular language varieties maintain their own way of speaking even when they know it is nonstandard and stigmatized by the social elite.

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