

Introduction to English Linguistics

6: Language Change



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Prescriptive Grammar vs Descriptive Grammar

Prescriptive Grammar

The rules of language as authorities believe they ought to be used, regardless of actual use.

Descriptive Grammar

The rules of language as inferred from actual language use.

Language Politics



Figure: *Arrêt* sign, Montreal (CC-BY-SA Tony Webster)

Traditional English-Language Prescriptivism

- ▶ “Do not end a sentence with a preposition.”
 - ▶ *Big cities are easy to get lost in.*
 - ▶ Cf. German *am Fluss entlang*, *dem Kiosk gegenüber*, *wir warten darauf*
- ▶ “Do not split an infinitive.”
 - ▶ *To boldly go*

Clear?

“

[R]acial and ethnic minority officials were three times more likely to face physical attacks compared to non-minority peers. *(The Guardian, 4 Dec 2024)*

Two Axes of Variation

Synchronic Variation

Variation between concurrent dialects.

Diachronic Variation

Variation over time.

Mechanisms of Change

Principle of Least Effort

The tendency for languages to move towards reduced energy drain.

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Assimilation

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Regressive Assimilation

Prior sounds adapting to later ones (anticipatory assimilation).

- ▶ *impress* (Latin *in* + *primere* > *imprimere*)
- ▶ *own goal* [əʊn̩'gəʊl]
- ▶ *use to* [ju:stu] vs *use* [ju:z]
- ▶ *assimilation* (Latin *ad* + *simulātiō* > *assimulātiō*)

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Progressive Assimilation (not as widespread)

Later sounds adapting to prior ones (lag assimilation).

- ▶ *it's* [ɪts] vs *she's* [ʃɪ:z]

Mechanisms of Change

Elision

The omission of one or more sounds from a word or utterance (to ease pronunciation).

Clipping

Elision at the start or end of a word.

- ▶ Finnish *tuoli* (cf. Old Norse *stóli*, German *Stuhl*)

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Syncope

The loss of an unstressed vowel from the interior of a word.

- ▶ Old English *heafod*, gen. *heafdes*
- ▶ Old Norse *himinn*, dat. *himni*
- ▶ German *Himmel* : *bimmlisch*

Mechanisms of Change

Haplogy

Elision of a syllable adjacent to a similar-sounding syllable.

- ▶ /'laɪbri/ for /'laɪbrəri/

Epenthesis

The addition of sounds to a word or utterance (to ease pronunciation).

- ▶ /'nju:kjʊlə/ (US /'nu:kjələr/) instead of /'nju:kliə/, US /'nu:kliər/

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Linking *r*

- ▶ /hɪərɪŋ'gøetɪŋən/ vs /hɪə/

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Linking *r*

- ▶ /hiər**ɪŋ**'gœtɪŋən/ vs /hiə/

Intrusive *r*

- ▶ /aɪ'sɔ:rɪt/
- ▶ after /ə ɪ ə a: ɔ:/ where the following word starts with a vowel

Mechanisms of Change

Metathesis

The reversal of two adjacent sounds.

- ▶ /'aɪərn/ (in rhotic dialects)
- ▶ *wasp* < OE *wæps*

Mechanisms of Change

Analogy

The extension of an observed regularity to new contexts.

- ▶ *faran, fōr, faren > fare, fared, fared*
- ▶ *hēawan, hēow, hēawen > hew, hewed, hewn/hewed*

Dialectology

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Idioglossia

An idiolect that differs greatly from its language context
(e.g. secret language).

Isogloss



Figure: *dat-das-isogloss* (CC-BY-SA WMC user)

Isogloss



Figure: *ik-ich*-isogloss (CC-BY-SA [WMC user](#))

Multilingualism

Code-Switching

Using different languages or dialects for different aspects of life.

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Diglossia

A multilingual community in which a language of lesser prestige is spoken at home and in informal settings while a more prestigious language is used in schools and business.

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Decreolization

The move to abandon a creole in favour of a socially favoured language or dialect.