

Lexical Change in English

2 December 2020

Ling 390

The College of Staten Island, CUNY

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Lexical Change in English

1. New words and changing meanings
2. Blog Post #6 (due next week)
3. Blog Post #5 (due tonight, 11:59pm)

Lexical Change in English

- “When speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning” (Algeo 2009: 207).

Lexical Change in English > Lexicogenesis

- “When speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning” (Algeo 2009: 207).
- Compounding: *boot camp flu* ‘a virus among military recruits’
- Affixation: *Russiagate* ‘political scandal associated with the Russian government’ (Zimmer et al. 2017: 357)
- Blending: *earmarxist* ‘a member of Congress who adds earmarks ... to legislation’
- Clipping: *bacn* ‘spamlike e-mail messages that the receiver has chosen to receive’
- Acronym: *NASA* ‘National Aeronautics and Space Administration’

Lexical Change in English > Borrowings

- “When speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning” (Algeo 2009: 207).
- English has a *ton* of borrowings. As we’ve seen, many of our Latinate words came via Anglo-Norman.
- Words are often borrowed along with the objects they refer to.
- This happens with food words a lot.

Lexical Change in English > Borrowings



Taco

Borrowed from Mexican Spanish
First cited in English in 1949 (OED)

American tacos often diverge significantly from Mexican tacos, but that doesn't mean the English word is misused or wrong. Words change!

“Change of meaning—semantic change—may, and frequently does, alter the so-called etymological sense, which may have become altogether obsolete.” (Algeo 2009: 209)

Lexical Change in English > Borrowings

Words borrowed from Algonquian languages:

- moccasin (1609)
- squash (1643)
- tomahawk (1612)
- wampum (1636)
- raccoon (1608)
- opossum (1610)
- moose (1614)
- skunk (1634)
- woodchuck (1670)
- totem (1791)



Why were these words borrowed?

Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

- “When speakers of a language have need for a new word, they can make one up, borrow one from some other language, or adapt one of the words they already use by changing its meaning.” (AP, 2000: 207)

- What is *meaning*? What things mean today is often not what they meant yesterday.
sense/der

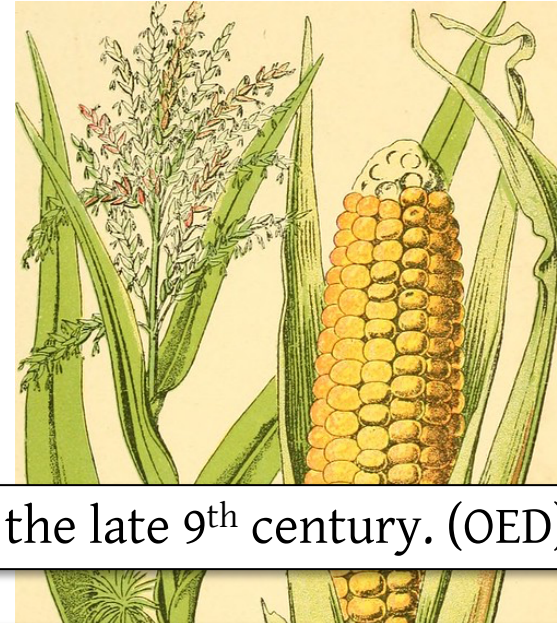
- Meaning changes over time, naturally and constantly. The notion that words ‘really’ mean what they originally meant is completely wrong.

Erroneous claim: What they meant yesterday is not more

- *dilapidated* can be as valid as *calculus* today. Latin *lapis* ‘stone’
- Only things with roots can be eradicated, because of Latin *radix* ‘root’
- Calculation can only pertain to pebbles, because of Latin *calx* ‘stone’
- Other examples in the reading (p. 209)

Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

- What does *corn* mean?



Corn 'the fruit of the cereals [...] grain' dates to the late 9th century. (OED)

CORN. (*Zea mays*.) Maize, throughout the United States, is called *Indian corn*, or simply *corn*.

In England the term *corn* is applied generically to wheat, barley, and other small grains. For this we use the term *grain*.

Bartlett (1859: 99)

Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

Specialization is when a term's meaning narrows, as happened with *corn* in North America.

- *Deer* (OE *dēor*) once meant simply *animal*.
- *Cattle* once meant *livestock*, and not just cows.

Generalization is when a term's meaning broadens.

- *Love* can be used for something that one merely likes.
- *Electrocute* once entailed death, but now often means simply to shock.

Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

Pejoration is when a once-neutral word becomes negative.

- *Vulgar* meant 'common' in Latin, as in *Vulgar Latin*, the everyday language of the Romans, and the precedent of the modern Romance languages. Now, it means obscene, as to be 'common' came to be regarded as bad.
- *Fine*, which once meant 'good' (and which still does in some contexts) is now often used to mean 'neutral' and connote something negative.



Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

Amelioration is when a once-neutral word becomes positive.

- *Knight* once meant servant, and later developed to mean someone who militarily supported their lord or campaigned in crusades. Today, a knight is someone who has been recognized in a positive way, often by a sovereign. (Ringo Starr and Paul McCartney are knights.)



Lexical Change in English > Adaptation

Intensifiers (words with meanings like ‘very’) are interesting.

- awful
- mad
- hella
- -ass “As the second element in compounds, forming adjectives with the sense ‘having or displaying the quality designated by the first element to an extreme or undesirable degree’, as broad-ass, snobby-ass, cheap-ass, sorry-ass, stupid-ass, long-ass, etc.” (OED)
- wicked (used in New England more than here)

Lexical Change in English

- What are some changes you've seen in English?
- Think in terms of sense/denotation as well as connotation.
- Lots of recent discussion of pronouns.
- Competing definitions of *racism*.
- Evolving definition of *violence*.
- What does 'all lives matter' mean as opposed to 'black lives matter'?
- 'thoughts and prayers'?



Blog Post #6

- Due by 11:59pm next Wednesday (9 December)
- Write about ways that you have seen English change over the course of your life. You might discuss new words you've encountered, changing meanings, words you heard as a child but don't find anymore, or similar phenomena. Please be as specific as you can about the contexts in which you've heard/read these words being used, and by whom. Out of consideration for your classmates, please avoid reference to slurs. (Curse words that are not slurs are fine.)
- 300 words minimum.

- Please complete course evaluations ASAP!!!!