

# 10. Language Change I

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# Language Change

- *All* languages change over time.
- Language change is driven by language variation: the fact that different populations speak a given language slightly differently than each other.
- A major question is: Can linguistic change be observed while it is actually occurring?

# Language Change

- First, we must understand what *change* is.
- There are phonological changes, including *phonemic coalescence*...

*meat* and *meet*

*horse* and *hoarse*

for many Americans, *merry*, *marry*, and *Mary* have coalesced

in the American south, *pin* and *pen* have coalesced

*wh* and *w* have coalesced for many, in words like *which* vs. *witch*

- And *phonemic split*.

*a house* and *to house* are pronounced differently, with an [s] and a [z] respectively

# Language Change

- There are also syntactic and morphological changes.

negative concord (the “double negative”) used to be standard, but isn’t anymore

verbs used to be conjugated for person and number, but now this is quite limited

the use of *whom* is dropping out of use

the use of *thou/thee/thy* has totally dropped out

forming negatives with *do* is weird: “I do not like apples” as opposed to “I like not apples.”

- These are all *internal changes*. They result from natural changes happening within a given language.

# Language Change

- These can be contrasted with *external changes*, which result from the influence of another language.
- Borrowing is a major external change. Words are frequently borrowed, often along with the items or concepts that they refer to.

*taco*: Mexican Spanish → English

*pizza*: Italian → English

*sushi*: Japanese → English

*beef*: French → English (from *bœuf* 'ox')

*beisubaru*: English → Japanese (from *baseball*)

*mátsis*: English → Kanien'kéha (from *matches*)

*takò:s*: Dutch → Kanien'kéha (from *de poes* 'cat')

*chocolate*:

Nahuatl *chocolātl* → Spanish *chocolate*

Spanish *chocolate* → English *chocolate*

Originally referred to a chocolate drink, not to the chocolate itself.

*anime*:

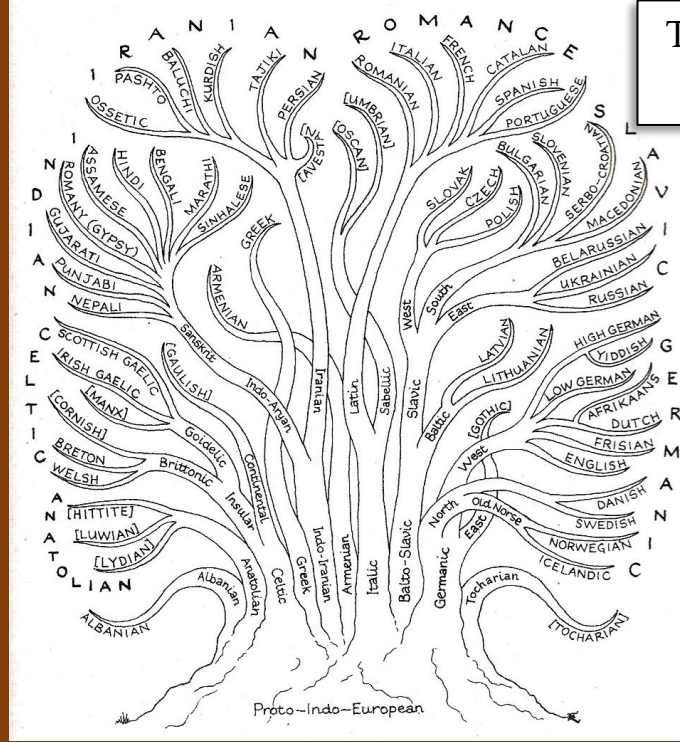
English *animation* → Japanese *animēshon* 'animation, a cartoon'

In Japanese, *animēshon* was abbreviated to *anime*

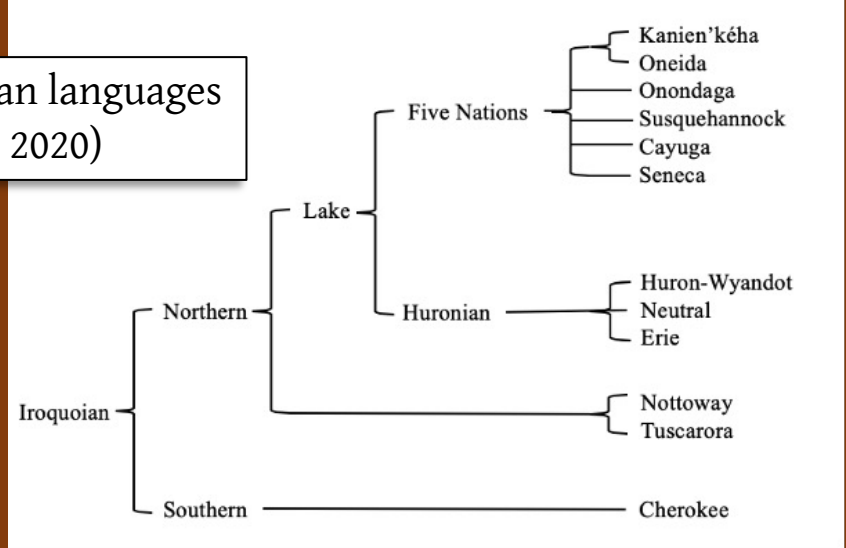
Japanese *anime* 'animation, a cartoon' → English *anime* 'Japanese animation'

# Language Change

- Traditionally, linguists have valued internal changes over external changes.
- Linguists have also generally opted for a 'family tree' model of language relationships.
- What are some possible problems with this sort of model?



The Iroquoian languages (Pentangelo 2020)





fayn wolde I satysfye euery man/ and so to doo toke an olde  
booke and redde therein/ and certaynly the englysshe was so ru  
de and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also  
my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shew to me late certa  
yn euidences wynton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to  
our englysshe now vsed/ And certaynly it was wroton in  
suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe  
I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonde/ And cer  
taynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that. Whi  
che was vsed and spoken whan I was borne/ For the en  
glysshe men/ then borne vnder the domynacyon of the moone.  
Whiche is neuer stedfaste/ but euer wauerynge/ weyrynge o  
ne season/ and waneth & dyscreaseth another season/ And  
that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth  
from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that  
certayn marchautes were in a ship in tanyse for to haue  
sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei  
taryed att the forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them  
And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an  
holow and asped for mete. and specially he asped after eggys  
And the good wyf answered. that she coude speke no fren  
she. And the marchaut was angry. for he also coude speke  
no frenshe. but wolde haue hadde eggys/ and she vnderstode  
hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde  
haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym  
wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thys dayes now wyrite. eg  
ges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by  
cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes  
euery man that is in ony reputacyon in his countre. wyll vt  
ter his comynycacyon and maters in such maners & ter  
mes/ that felow men shall vnderstonde theym/ And som ho



From the preface to *Eneydos*, Caxton's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, 1490.



fayn wolde I satysfye euery man/ and so to doo toke an olde booke and redde therein/ and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lord abbot of Westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn eydences wyrtton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to our englysshe now vsed/ And certaynly it was wyrtton in such wyse that it was more lyk to dutche than englysshe I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden/ And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that. Whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne/ For the englysshe men/ken borne vnder the domynacyon of the moone. Whiche is neuer stedfaste/ but euer wauerynge/ weyrynge o; ne season/ and waneth & dyscreaseth another season/ And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchautes were in a ship in tanyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them/ And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specyally he axyd after eggys/ And the goode wyf answerde. that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaüt was angry. for he also coude speke no frenshe. But wolde haue hadde egges/ and she understode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thys dayes now wryt. egges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man this is in ony reputacyon in his couñtre. wyll utter his comynycacyon and maters in suche maners & termes/ that fewe men shall vnderstonde theym/ And som ho;

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And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchautes were in a ship in tanyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them/ And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specyally he axyd after eggys/ And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaüt was angry. for he also coude speke no frenshe. But wolde haue hadde egges/ and she understode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thys dayes now wryt. egges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man this is in ony reputacyon in his couñtre. wyll utter his comynycacyon and maters in suche maners & termes that fewe men shall understone theym



From the preface to *Eneydos*, Caxton's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, 1490.



# Eggs or eyren?

- Old English had *æg*, plural *égru*.
- By Middle English, this had become *ey* and *eyren*.
- Vikings had conquered much of north and eastern England in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. They introduced a lot of new words, including Old Norse *egg*.
- Around 1490, some English speakers said *eggs*, while others said *eyren*. This is an example of **language variation**.
- Today, we say *eggs*. This is an example of **language change**.



# Eggs or eyren?

- Old English *ǣg* and Old Norse *egg* look and sound similar. In fact, these two languages are related.
- When two languages are related, it means that they came from a common ancestor, in this case Proto-Germanic.

Beware! Not all similar-sounding words are related. English *much* and Spanish *mucho* have different origins, even though they sound alike and have similar meanings.

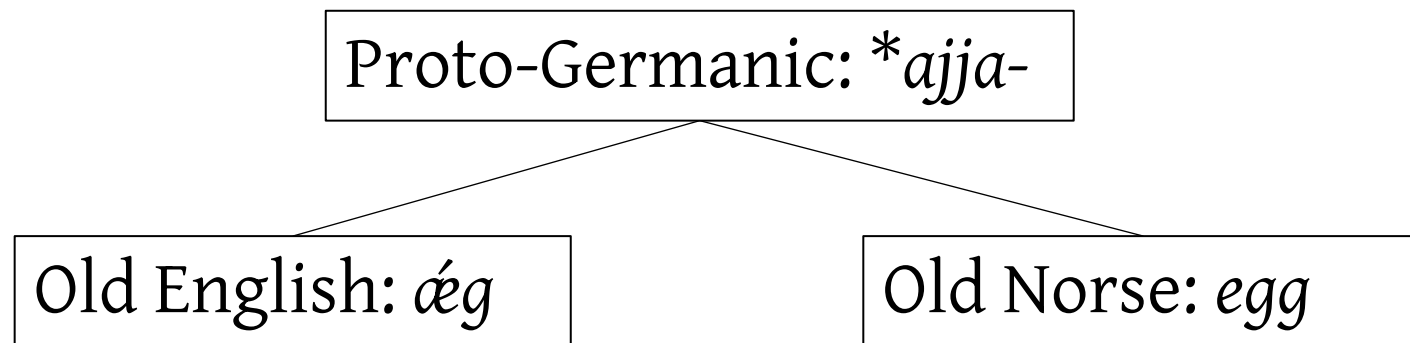
- Words that share a common ancestor are **cognates**.
- The Proto-Germanic word for 'egg' was *\*ajja-*

In historical linguistics, \* means it's a reconstruction, not that it's ungrammatical.



# Eggs or eyren?

- Based on what we know so far, we can make a tree to show how Proto-Germanic, Old English, and Old Norse are related.



- But... if the Modern English word *egg* comes from Old Norse, should we say that Modern English is descended from Old Norse? Or from Old English? Or a mix of both?



# *Eggs or eyren?*

- The traditional, mainstream view is that English is not descended from Old Norse. It is descended from Old English. It just happened to get a lot of loanwords from Old Norse.
- Language A having a lot of loanwords from Language B is not the same thing as Language A descending from Language B.
- Japanese has tons of loanwords from Chinese, but the two languages aren't related.
- Persian has a lot of loanwords from Arabic, but the two languages aren't related.





# Language Change

- If change is constantly happening – and it is – we should be able to observe it.
- But how do we know it when we see it?



# Language Change

- Variation is everywhere, and change is constant, but...
- Not all variation is change!
- We've seen plenty of linguistic variables in plenty of different dialects. Some of these variables are longstanding, and don't indicate any particular change. This is referred to as *long term stable variation*.

# Language Change

- Linguist Arnold Zwicky ([2005](#)) coined the *recency illusion*: “If you’ve noticed something only recently, you believe that it in fact originated recently.” This often applies to nonstandard linguistic variables.

singular *they*, as in “Someone left their coat here.”  
This sort of use dates back to Shakespeare’s (1594) time:  
*There’s not a man I meet but doth salute me  
As if I were their well-acquainted friend*

The pronunciation of *ask* as [æks] goes back at least to Middle English, as we saw in the excerpt from Caxton.

*really* as an intensifier (“really mad”) goes back centuries, too.

# Discussion

Let's say you wanted to study language change in progress.

- How would you control for the recency illusion?
- How would you make sure that you were discussing change, and not long term stable variation?



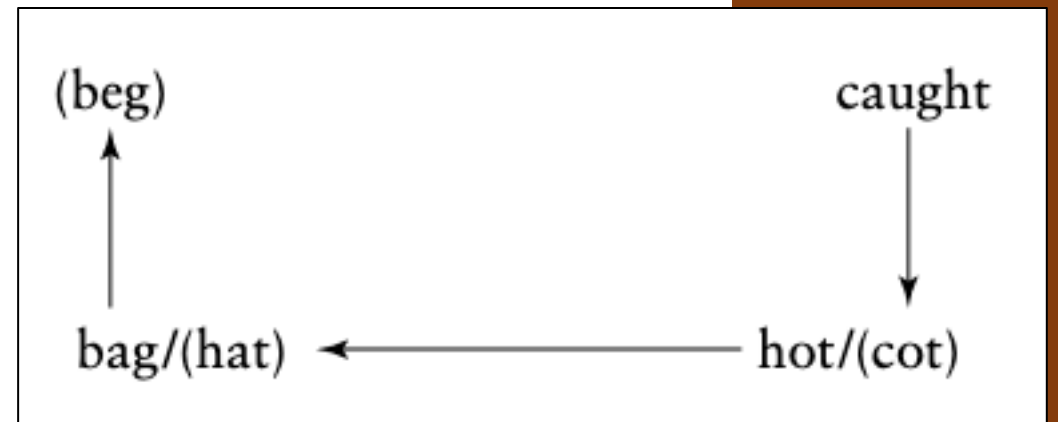
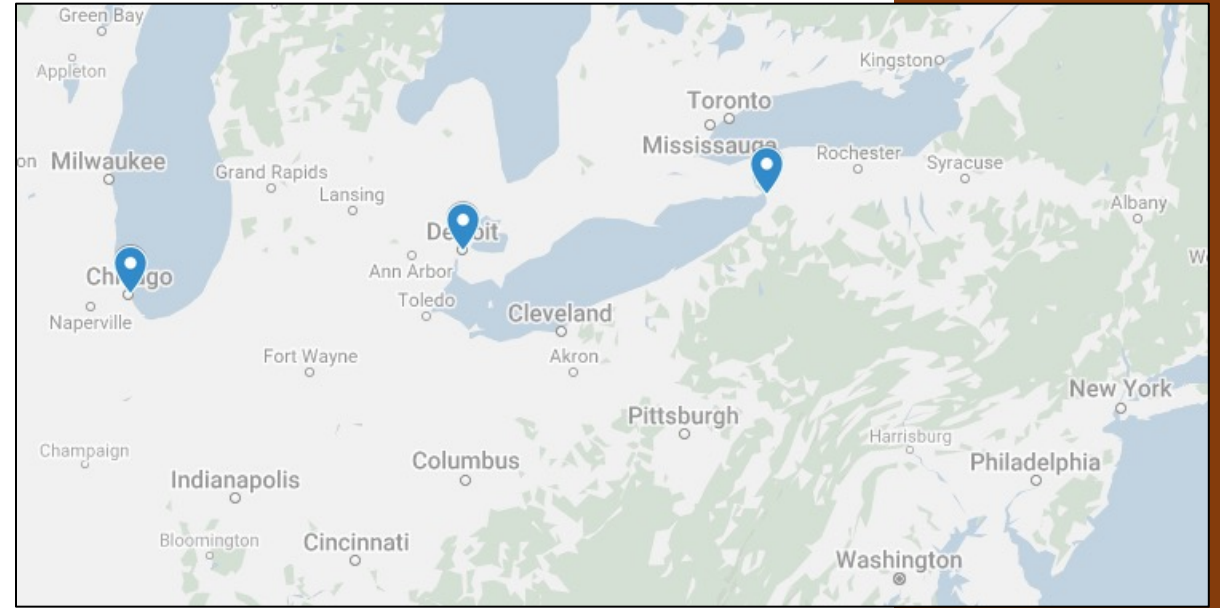
# Language Change

Change has a direction, being both progressive and linear.

- We can think of language change as being a lot like evolution. For example, there's a lot of variability in the patterns on dogs' fur – that's *variation*. If one pattern becomes predominant, or one pattern ceases to exist, that's *change*.

# Northern Cities Shift

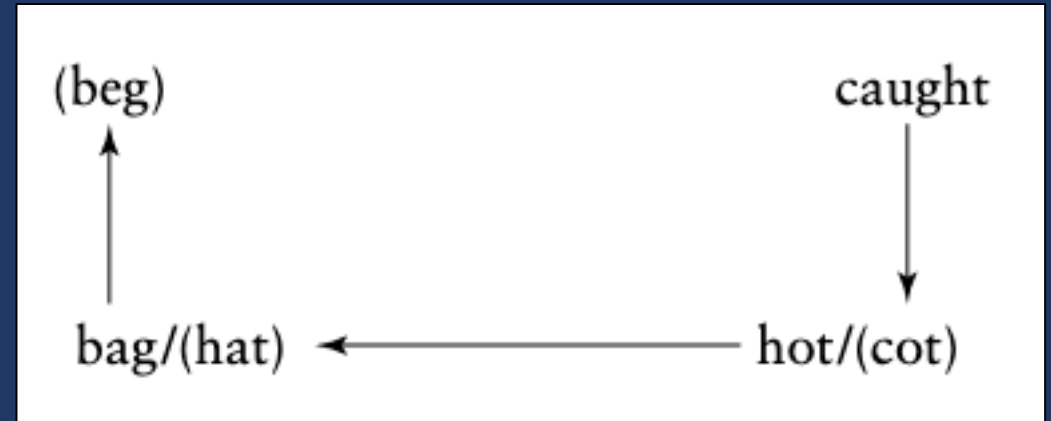
- One well-known change is the Northern Cities Shift (NCS), centered on US cities on the Great Lakes, like Buffalo, Detroit, and Chicago.
- This is a shift in pronunciation, especially of vowels.
- You can hear it for yourself here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UoJ1-ZGb1w>



# Discussion

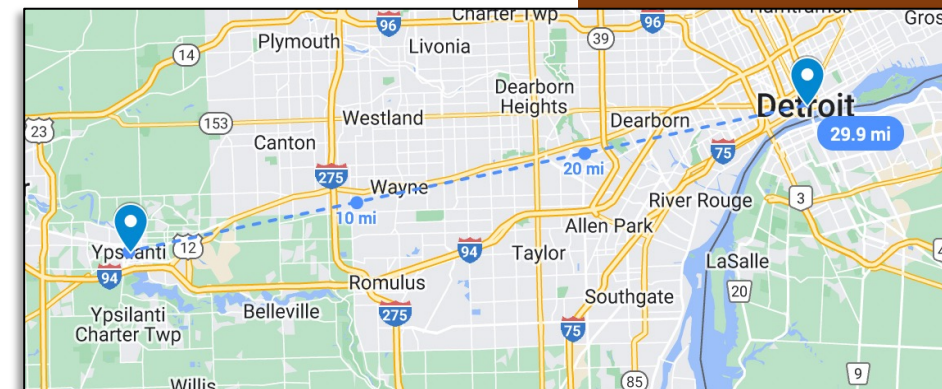
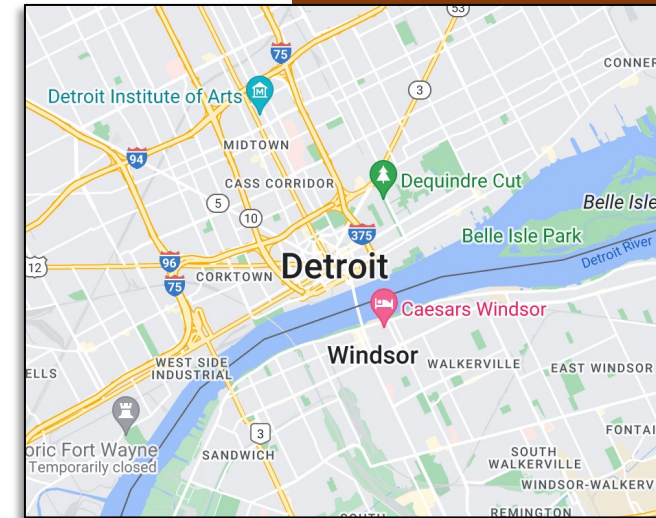
- How might someone from the Northern Cities pronounce the following words?

caught	hot	bag
sauce	topple	salad
lost	cot	battle
coughing	pontiff	lack
saw	bottle	have



# Northern Cities Shift

- The NCS is readily observable in the places it exists, but...
- In Windsor, Ontario – right across the river from Detroit – it does not exist.
- In Ypsilanti, Michigan, about 30 miles from Detroit, it's not found, either.
- What social forces might explain this?
- Since your textbook was written, there's been a lot of research showing something of a reversal of the NCS. Download today's in-class reading on our Readings page.





# Discussion

- D'Onofrio & Benheim (2019) find some social factors bearing upon the reversal of the NCS among a number of young Chicagoans, while several young Chicagoans maintain the NCS. What social factors do they identify as associated with this phenomenon? (Check out the Results section.)

# For next week...

- Writing Assignment #4:

Are you aware of any special pronunciations or other linguistic usages which seem to be 'creeping in' to the language? If you are, are they approved or disapproved? Does that approval (or disapproval) depend at all on who is using the linguistic item in question?

- Read pp.208–218 in the textbook.

- We'll do a regular class session on Language Change II for the first half of class, then have our final review during the second half.

# Course Evaluations

- They're in your cix inbox. Please do them for this class. Thank you. :)