

## theories of sound change – lecture 1

Introduction: basic concepts – language, change, language change

### illustration of language change

Old English, 11<sup>th</sup> c.

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum; Si þin nama gehalgod to becume þin rice gewurþe ðin willa on eorðan swa swa on heofonum. urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg and forgyf us ure gyltas swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Middle English, 14<sup>th</sup> c.

Oure Fader þat art in heuene, halewed be þi name. Þi kyngdom come to us. Þi wylle be don, as in heuene, & in erþe. Oure eche dayes breed ȝeue us to day & forȝeue us oure dettys, as we forȝeue oure dettourys. And ne lede us not in temptacyon, but delyuere us of yuel.

Early Modern English 16<sup>th</sup> c. (Book of Common Prayer 1559)

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. Amen.

20<sup>th</sup> c. English (Book of Common Prayer 1928)

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

(The New Testament in Modern English 1963)

Our Heavenly Father, may your name be honored; May your kingdom come, and your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day the bread we need, Forgive us what we owe to you, as we have also forgiven those who owe anything to us. Keep us clear of temptation, and save us from evil.

Between 11<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> c. English was spoken by approx. 40 generations – how on earth can a language be transformed so utterly, in such a relatively short time, while speakers go on speaking it without being disturbed by the changes and usually without even noticing them?

#### □ **Sound change and phonological change**

fæder – father

ure – our

nama – name

#### □ **Morphological change**

heofonum – heaven

we forgyfað – we forgive

urum gyltendum

#### □ **Syntactic change**

fæder ure – our father

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum (11<sup>th</sup> c.) → Oure Fader þat art in heuene (14<sup>th</sup> c.) → Our Father which art in heaven (16<sup>th</sup> c.) → Our Father, who art in heaven (20<sup>th</sup> c.)

#### □ **Semantic change**

half, syle us todæg,

#### □ **Lexical change**

words disappear – gewurþe, gedæghwamlican, costnunge, soþlice

words are borrowed – temptacyon, trespasses, deliver

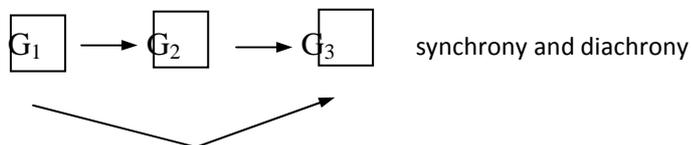
**Historical linguistics** as a discipline has existed for approx. the last 150 years → resulting in a well-developed sense of what types of change are attested in languages and what types are not. It also proposed the first theory of language change (cf. Neogrammarians). However, this theory was highly stipulative, as it didn't follow in any way form:

- (1) a conception of the **nature** of the object of study (i.e. language) and  
 (2) conception of the **principles (rules)** governing the change of that object over time.

(1) the nature of the object of study (as the object of scientific investigation)

two separate issues

- a) what is language as a 'synchronic' object (independent of its history).
- b) what does it mean to say that a language changes over time, what is the nature of change?

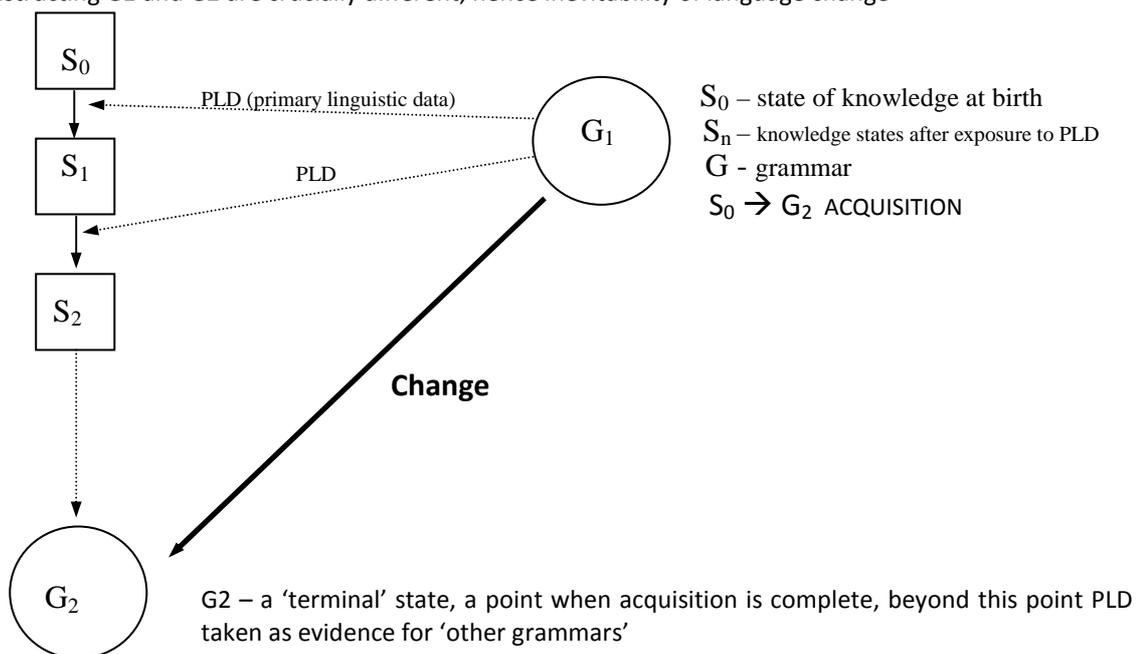


each box G<sub>1</sub>, G<sub>2</sub>, G<sub>3</sub>, represents a synchronic state of a language, diachronic linguistics concerns itself with the differences between these successive states.

What is the nature of the synchronic states G<sub>1</sub>, G<sub>2</sub>, G<sub>3</sub>?, i.e. what's the answer to question a) above. Quite often (as is the case with disciplines that deal with areas of human activity) the answer has proved difficult. For example,

- Language as a **socio-political notion** (notoriously problematic, e.g. are the different varieties of English - American, British, Australian - with all their similarities and differences the same or different languages?)
- For 19<sup>th</sup> c. linguists (when the focus of linguistics was on a relatively small set of dead languages) language was a **corpus**, i.e. a set of linguistic forms in the surviving records for a given period in a given linguistic tradition (e.g. Old English) (of limited use when applied to living languages)
- Chomsky (1986) distinguishes between **E-language** (externalised, sth. observable, out there in the world) and **I-language** (internalised, language as a knowledge state). As argued by Chomsky (1986), the proper object of empirical linguistic investigation must be I-language.

**THE NATURE OF CHANGE** (according to Hale 2007) ultimately rooted in acquisition, the data (PLD) used in constructing G<sub>1</sub> and G<sub>2</sub> are crucially different, hence inevitability of language change



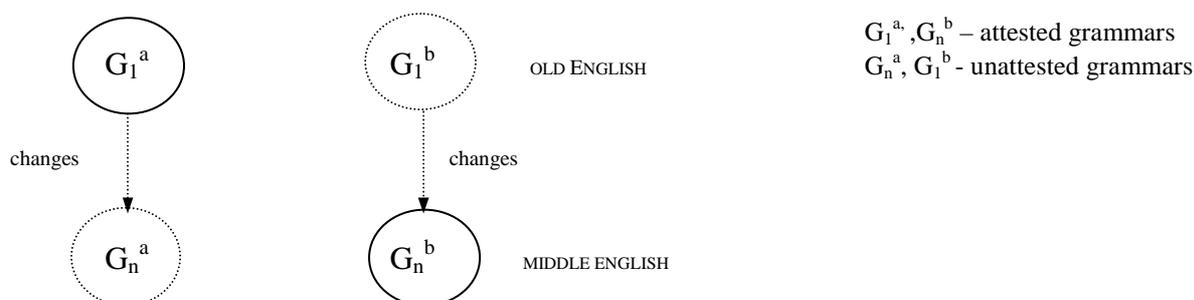
Change results when transmission is flawed with respect to some feature. When transmission is not flawed (diffusion=successful transmission) there is no change (Hale 2007). **A different view**, Joseph (2001): *Innovations, once they have spread, can be called 'real' changes, in that the behaviour of the speech community at large has been affected.*

Linguistic literature uses 'change' to refer to both the single-generation events of the type represented above and the multigeneration events of the type represented by the English examples. The word '**change**' is in fact used in three fundamentally distinct senses:

- 1) single generation change driven by aspects of PLD of the source grammar
- 2) multigeneration change driven by the effects of iterated type (1) processes (as depicted in the first diagram above- synchrony vs. diachrony)
- 3) diffusion of changes of type (1) through a speech community

Some of the most hotly debated issues in historical linguistics have arisen as a result of confusing these three distinct senses of change in the process of reasoning. Clearly, under the conception of change presented above statements like *GVS took place between 1450 and 1750* (chronologically extended change) or *observing sound change in progress* involve the socio-political conception of language.

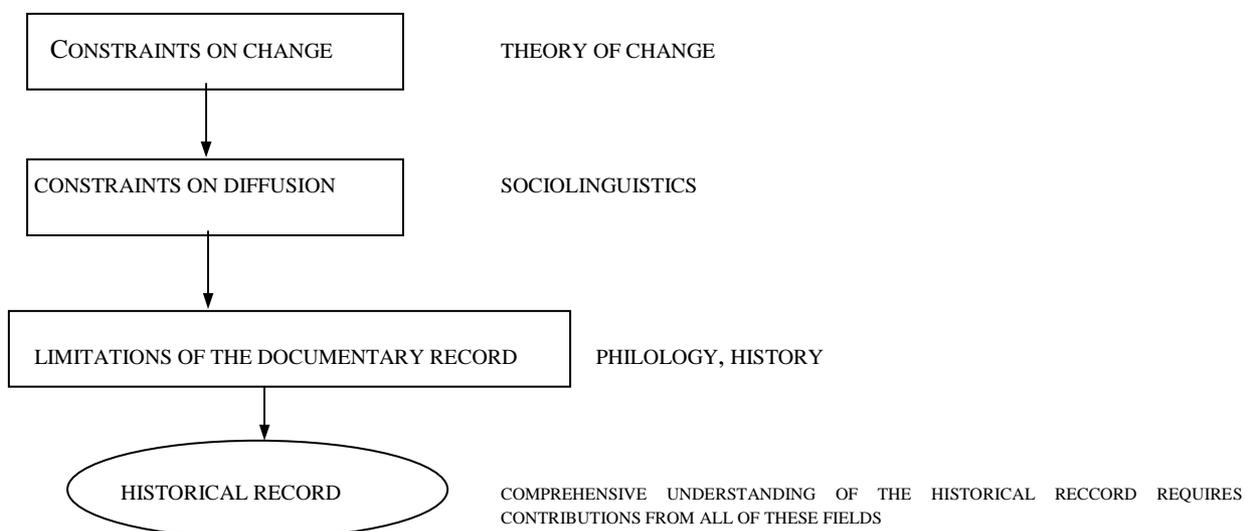
**FURTHER ISSUES HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS HAS TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM OF NONLINEAL DISCENT**



two procedures to deal with this problem

- to show that the features  $G_1^a$  which are relevant to the explanation of the changes to  $G_n^b$  are likely to have been shared by the unattested  $G_1^b$
- to show that the attested grammars are similar, hence related, and share a common ancestor, a Proto-G.

The historical record of an actual linguistic tradition involves several 'modules' (Hale 2003) whose understanding is necessary for the proper analysis of this record.



**The five classical problems** that any theory of change must solve (according to Weinreich et al. 1968, Labov 1982)

**1) the constraints problem**

What general constraints on change there are that determine the possible and impossible changes and directions of change? An interesting aspect of this problem is that it establishes a connection between synchronic and diachronic study of language since the problem of determining the possible and impossible changes reduces to the synchronic question of determining possible and impossible human languages. In a sense, the two pursuits are the same. CV → CVC → CCV

**2) the transition problem**

By what route languages change? How can language change from one state to another without interfering with communication among members of the speech community? For example, OE wē → MnE we, was it [e:] → [i:] directly or did [e:] have to change to sth. else on the way, e.g. [ej]

**3) the embedding problem**

How a given change is 'embedded' in the surrounding system of linguistic and social relations? What are the system-internal or external conditions that induce or inhibit change? E.g. OE A: → ME O: followed by A → A:, French influence on English

**4) the evaluation problem**

How members of a speech community evaluate change, and what the effect of this evaluation is on the change? This social dimension of language use seems crucial to understanding the spread of innovations. E.g. a recent Pol. celebryta/celebrytka

**5) the actuation problem**

Why a given linguistic change occurred at the particular time and place it did? If we understand the causes and conditions of change well enough we ought to be able to 'predict' the direction of change, e.g. why did OE [e:] become [i:] rather than [a] or something else.

Typically the following stages in the implementation of language change are distinguished:

**actuation** - the rule appears in the grammar of a language (initiation)

**actualisation** – the change manifests itself in some observable element of grammar

**transmission (diffusion)** - more and more speakers (different social groups), more and more registers (stylistic levels) (diffusion across the speech community)

**BUT** owing to confusion over the meaning of 'change' discussed above, linguists have different views on where true change lies:

One change in the grammar of an individual does not constitute what we think of as a change in a language (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 36). Labov (1972) argues that it is not meaningful to distinguish actuation from transmission, since an idiosyncratic speech habit or a slip of the tongue certainly introduce innovation but change is only initiated when a new variant is adopted by a group of speakers, becomes systematic and acquires some social significance. Therefore the origin of a change is its propagation. "Methodologically it is certainly preferable to recognize change only when it has spread from the individual to a group" (Hopper & Traugott 1993: 38). But the authors nowhere ground this methodological preference.

Still it seems that we cannot **predict** which instances of variation will lead to change. Labov sees this as a function of a social influence on language (i.e. sociolinguistic factors) claiming that the fate of an innovation will depend e.g. on the prestige of the social group first using the given form. His studies show that: a) women are more active in spreading prestigious

variants; b) upper working and lower middle classes are most active in initiating change as their linguistic insecurity causes within their groups.

On this view: speakers innovate → languages change

A different approach - a general theory of change **must** provide an account for any change (innovation), regardless of whether or not it diffuses (Hale 1998: 6).

### Why does language change?

Generally linguists have been more successful at describing *what* happened than *why* it happened. Some people claim (Lass 1980) that 'language change is simply not amenable to explanation.' Also Postal's (1968) position 'change is simply the result of the general tendency of human cultural products to undergo nonfunctional stylistic change' so there is nothing to bother about since there's nothing to explain. For Lass an explanation is a causal, universal law (like a physical law) which predicts that something will happen and how it will happen. But even in physics strongly predicative explanations may be a target rather than an achieved reality. Thus, while seeking grand, unified explanations for language change, we should not reject intermediate, partial explanations specific to particular phenomena.

Some attempts at explanation:

Recent literature commonly distinguishes between **internal** and **external** causes of change.

Four major kinds of factors can be distinguished: **psychological, physiological, systemic, and social.**

<b>internal</b> 'linguistic' psychological physiological systemic
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<b>external</b> 'social' (literacy, prescriptive grammars, language planning, language contact, negative social evaluation)
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#### □ **psychological**

**analogy** (reflects a mode of thinking in which a perception of sameness is made between two linguistic units). Example: English plurals in -s, book-books ☐ bōk - bēt☐

**language acquisition** - children change language: each generation has to create the rules of the language afresh. Children aim to produce the same sort of speech as their parents, but not necessarily using the same rules. Children's mistakes today are tomorrow's linguistic changes.

#### □ **physiological**

most cases of 'pure' sound change may be seen as physiological. Examples: loss of unstressed vowels, all sorts of assimilations (ease of articulation)

#### □ **systemic**

changes that involve aspects of a language as a system. Examples: English Great Vowel Shift – a *chain shift* involving whole systems of sounds moving rather than being a series of unrelated and isolated changes. Also **typological explanations** which view changes as movements towards unmarked types of language refer to systemic factors. For example, languages with symmetrical consonant systems are typologically unmarked

Old English                    f p t ☐ s ☐  
  b d

Present Day English        f p t ☐ s ☐  
  v b d ☐ z ☐

English has filled the gaps in its system partly through loans (words like *vote*, *zone* and *leisure*), partly by internal changes.

#### □ social

social factors provide the key mechanism for the spread of one set of competing forms throughout the speech community, largely through the attachment of prestige to one variant. An interesting example of social factors at play is **language contact** that can be the source of lexical innovation. In principle this does not differ from the contact between speakers of different dialects. Example: French influence on English. Different **external factors** can be subsumed here like loans and borrowings of sounds and constructions

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