

Language Change Is Inevitable

External Language Change: Happens through contact with other languages (colonization, military invasion, immigration, etc.).

Internal Language Change: Changes we ourselves affect, either in the way we speak or the way we write words down (e.g. changes to spelling, grammar, etc.).



Changes affecting the way English is spelled: First of all, note that writing things down slows the process of language change. That said, there was no spelling consistency in English until the 18th century, which meant that changes to spelling abounded for centuries. What is more, since early writers wrote words the way they sounded (the *phonemic spelling system* of both Old and Middle English), changes to spelling could result from differences in pronunciation from one area, dialect, writer, work ... to another. Changes to grammar could also affect the spelling of English. The process known as **efficiency or transparency**, for example, is behind the reduction of many inflectional endings in plural forms of Old English nouns (*giefu*, 'gifts,' *cyningas*, 'kings,' *scipu*, 'ships,' *cirican*, 'churches') to a simple final -s. We have simplified things a great deal.

Changes affecting the way English is spoken: 1. Ease of Articulation: By this the speaker exerts the least amount of effort in articulating sounds, leading to 'assimilation,' 'omission,' 'clipped forms,' etc. Taken to the extreme, this principle would reduce all speech to the sound schwa [ə]. This process is responsible for a great deal of language change in English speech.

1a. Assimilation: Through assimilation a sound becomes similar to an adjacent sound in voicing and manner of articulation (not to mention spelling). Many Latin verbs underwent this process before entering English: 'illuminate' (*illuminare*, from *in-* 'upon' + *lumen* 'light'); 'suffer' (*sufferre*, from *sub-* 'from below' + *ferre* 'to bear'); 'collapse' (*con* + *lapsus*, 'fall together'); 'differ' (*differre*, from *dis-* 'from, away' + *ferre* 'to bear'). In speech, consider the English example of 'often.'

1b. Omission: Loss of a sound for ease of articulation. E.g. 'about' becomes 'bout. Other examples include 'interest,' 'generally,' 'postman,' 'castle,' 'separate,' 'family' 'natural' 'jewel' 'camera' 'celery' 'salary' 'vegetable' 'general' 'comfortable.' Say these words aloud to yourself.

Caveat: Something called **Perceptual clarity** works against changes due to ease of articulation. Perceptual clarity may work to preserve the sense of the word (like 'think tank') or emphasize that word (e.g. the 't' in 'often' for emphasis). This may also be called **Spelling Pronunciation**, by which the speaker articulates the word as it is spelled.

2. Semantic change: An alteration in the lexical meaning of words. Word meaning is always flexible and fluid, despite our reliance on dictionaries. We think of dictionaries as the final stop for meaning, but there is no 'final stop.' Word meaning is ever changing and we cannot predict which words will change. Take the word, 'text' and think how its meaning has changed.

2a. Generalization: The widening in the scope of a word's meaning, allowing it to denote a greater variety of referents. 'Holiday' was once 'Holy Day.' Other examples include, 'Butcher' (one who slaughters goats); 'junk' (formerly worn out pieces of rope); 'crisis' (a turning point in a disease); 'bonfire' (a fire of bones); 'box' (a small container made specifically of boxwood).

2b. Specialization: Narrowing in the scope of the meaning of a word. 'Lust.' Consider also 'wife' (OE=any woman), now a married woman specifically; or 'stool,' which was once a seat for one person. Other examples include 'acorn' (wild fruit), 'sermon' (a speech of any kind), 'adder' (any kind of snake), 'adventure' (a happening of any kind), 'meat' (food), etc. The list goes on and on.

2c. Pejoration: The acquisition of a less favorable meaning. Both 'villain' and 'clown' once meant simply a person from the countryside. A 'hussy' was once a common word for 'house wife' (i.e. 'housy'). Other examples include, 'snob' (cobbler), 'poison' (potion or drink), 'smug' (neat), 'sly' (able to strike), 'surly' (masterful, lordly), 'corpse' (body dead or alive).

2d. Amelioration: The acquisition of a more favorable meaning. A 'marshal' (formerly a horse servant), 'success' (any outcome or result, good or bad), 'rapture' (used to mean 'abduction'), 'spill' (used to mean 'shed blood'), 'revolution' (once meant 'rolling over'), 'nice' (silly, simple).