

# Introduction to English Linguistics

## 6: Language Change

# 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*

## Sometimes, Language Matters



**Vsauce** 

@tweetsauce

Follow



This is ridiculous: "www" contains THREE TIMES more syllables than the phrase it is 'short' for, "world wide web."

12:45 AM - 13 Feb 2014

Figure: [twitter.com/tweetsauce/status/433748704940785664](https://twitter.com/tweetsauce/status/433748704940785664)

# 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.

# Mechanisms of Change

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## Regressive Assimilation

Prior sounds adapting to later ones (anticipatory assimilation).

- ▶ *own goal* [ˌəʊŋ'gəʊl]
- ▶ *use to* [ju:stʊ] vs *use* [ju:z]
- ▶ *impress* (Latin *in* + *primere* > *imprimere*)
- ▶ *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* [ʃi: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.

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## Syncope

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

- ▶ Old English *beafod*, gen. *beafdes*
- ▶ Old Norse *biminn*, dat. *bimni*
- ▶ German *Himmel* : *bimmlisch*

# Mechanisms of Change

## Haplology

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- ▶ /'laɪbrɪ/ for /'laɪbrərɪ/

## Epenthesis

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- ▶ /'nju:kjʊlə/ (US /'nu:kjələr/) instead of /'nju:klɪə/, US /'nu:klɪər/

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## Intrusive *r*

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

# Mechanisms of Change

## Metathesis

The reversal of two adjacent sounds.

- ▶ /'ɑɪərŋ/ (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*

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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)

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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.



P. S. Langeslag