Linguistics for Language Teachers

Lessons for Classroom Practice

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9 History of English

9.1 Introduction

All languages change over time. Because humans are the carriers of language—and humans and their behavior constantly change—so language does too. In Chapter 7 we talked about how languages vary across time and space, and in Chapter 8 we learned about the ways in which languages can change shape due to contact with other languages. Change is simply a natural characteristic of human language; in fact, the only time a language does not change is when all its speakers are deceased. Even languages that have official academies that regulate the vocabulary, grammar, and usage of the language still experience change over time. Of course, humans can influence the way that this change happens—pushing it in one way or the other—but these influences still cannot quell the natural progression of a language.

The English that we speak today is the result of a long history. It is a language that has changed through much contact with various European languages and has seen dynamic changes throughout its past. Contrary to what prescriptivists and other like-minded folks will have you believe, there is no such thing as "pure" English. In fact, if we were to look at the breakdown of the genealogy of English the way you would a dog, English would be considered a good old mutt. English has influence from German, French, Scandinavian languages, Latin, Arabic, Greek, Czech, Hebrew, and a host of other languages. Additionally, English has changed so much in the last few centuries that if we were to listen to a clip of Old English or Middle English, we would not be able to understand it at all.

Most linguists divide English into roughly four historical phases: Prehistory (to c. 450), **Old English** (c. 450–c. 1150), **Middle English** (c. 1150–c. 1450), and **Modern English** (c. 1450–present). This chapter shows the extensive phonological and grammatical changes English has undergone throughout its history, often as a result of contact with other languages such as Old Norse, French, and Latin. It also explains the role of the printing press in stabilizing English spelling.

9.2 Prehistory (to c. 450)

The languages spoken by the original inhabitants of the British Isles belonged to the Celtic (pronounced /kɛltɪk/) family. Modern-day examples of Celtic

languages include Gaelic (in Ireland), Welsh (in Wales), and Breton (in Northern France). The Celts had come to the islands around the middle of the first millennium BC and were, in turn, subjugated by the Romans, who arrived in 43 BC. While the Romans were initially reluctant to colonize this land, they did ultimately occupy Britain in a serious way, and introduced Christianity. The main Roman era spanned two centuries, from c. 200 to c. 400. As the Roman Empire came under increasing attack from the Goths and other tribes, however, the Romans retreated closer and closer to home, abandoning their more far-flung colonies. By 410, the Roman armies had left the British Isles to help defend their empire in Europe.

Neglected by the Romans, the British Celts turned to powerful Germanic tribes for protection. The Jutes, the first group to arrive, came from Jutland, in the northern part of modern-day Denmark, and settled in southern and southeastern Britain. Later, the Angles and the Saxons came from the south of the Danish peninsula and settled in Britain. While the Celts looked to these Germanic tribes to fight for them, the real intentions of the new settlers were to enslave the Celtic natives. The Germanic invaders savagely destroyed or pushed back the Celtic communities into areas like Cornwall, Wales, Cumbria, and the Scottish borders. Adding insult to injury, the German invaders even called the native Celts *wealas* ("foreigners"), from which the name Welsh is derived. The result of this turbulent period was that Britain became a predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture. Today, relatively few vestiges of Celtic culture survive.

The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes all spoke a Germanic tongue in different dialects. Because most people during this time lived in small, self-contained villages and traveled only short distances, dialects were numerous, and there were relatively few opportunities for speakers of one dialect to be influenced by speakers of another. However, we do ultimately see the development of a recognizable Old English language by the end of this period.

9.3 Old English (c. 450–c. 1150)

Old English was highly Germanic in vocabulary and syntax, and inflected. What does it mean for a language to be inflected? Whereas Modern English depends primarily on word order to clarify grammatical relations, Old English required different grammatical markers to show whether a given noun was, say, a subject or an object. For example, consider the following two sentences in Old English:

(1)	*Se*	*cyning*	*meteth*	*thone*	*biscop.*
	the	king	meets	the	bishop
	("The king meets the bishop".)				

(2)	*Thone*	*biscop*	*meteth*	*se*	*cyning.*
	the	bishop	meets	the	king
	("The king meets the bishop".)				

Notice that both (1) and (2) mean "The king meets the bishop". How is this possible? The answer lies in grammatical inflection. **Inflection** is a process of word formation, in which a word is modified to express different grammatical categories such as tense, case, voice, aspect, number, and gender. In (1) and (2), we know that the king is the subject of both sentences because it is preceded by a subject marker *se*. Similarly, we know that the bishop is the object of both (1) and (2) because it is preceded by an object marker *thone*. The reason Old English order could vary as in (1) and (2) is that the relationships between the different parts of the sentence were signaled by these inflections. Over time, however, inflection was lost, and word order became much more important (see 9.4 Middle English).

The history of Old English vocabulary is characterized by repeated invasions, with newcomers to the islands bringing their own languages with them and infusing their vocabulary into English. There were two major lexical invasions during this period—one from Latin and the other from Norse. Latin vocabulary was introduced mainly by Christian missionaries from Ireland and Rome, who brought with them words having to do with the Church, theology, and learning. Words like *altar, apostle, cross, paradise*, and *sabbath* were all borrowed into English from Latin. In addition to religious vocabulary, there were many words having to do with biology that came from Latin during this time such as *plant, organ, rose*, and *dolphin*.

The second major linguistic invasion came as a result of the Viking raids on the British Isles, which began in 787 and continued for some 200 years. As the Danes began to settle down, many places with Danish names appeared in eastern England. Place names that end in *-by* (the Old Norse word for "farm" or "town"), as in *Derby*, *Whitby*, and *Kerby*, as well as those that end in *-thorpe* ("village"), as in *Scunthorpe*, *Kettlethorpe*, and *Austhorp*, appeared. The Anglo-Saxons and the Danish settlers had close contact, leading to extensive borrowings. Some of the most common Modern English words were borrowed from Norse at this time, such as *want*, *take*, *trust*, *again*, and *get*. Norse also had a profound effect on the personal pronouns that English uses today (*they*, *them*, and *their* are all of Norse-origin and replaced the Old English *hī, hēō*, and *hira*). The verb *to be* is also of Norse-origin and replaced the earlier Old English forms.

The period we call Old English spans seven centuries, from c. 450 to c. 1150. Toward the end of this period, Britain was invaded yet again, this time by the Normans who came from modern-day France. The initial linguistic effect of the Norman invasion of 1066 was not that substantial. The Normans mostly kept to themselves as a ruling class, mixing little with their Anglo-Saxon subjects, who in turn had no incentive to learn the language of their rulers. In addition, few members of either group could read. This division between the rulers and the ruled remains very clear to this day, owing to the difference between Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French vocabulary groups in Modern English. For instance, we can think of such terms for animals as *swine, cow, calf, sheep, and deer*—all Anglo-Saxon names, reflecting the fact that the work of livestock-tending was done mostly by the Anglo-Saxons subjects. And we can think of

such food terms as *pork, beef, veal, mutton, and venison*—all Norman-French names, reflecting the fact that the Norman invaders led the high life. To the extent that there was any contact between these two groups at this early stage, those Old English speakers who wished to give themselves airs sprinkled their speech with French, as many English speakers do today.

9.4 Middle English (c. 1150–c. 1450)

The Norman invasion was a major event in the history of English. Without the Norman invasion, English would have retained most grammatical inflections and a predominantly Germanic vocabulary. English would have lacked the greatest part of French words that make it seem more like a Romance language today than a Germanic language. It has been estimated that some 10,000 French words came into English during the 13th century. The fact that English is a particularly synonym-rich language, with a vocabulary size twice that of French or Italian or German, owes itself to this massive borrowing. But how was this possible, given the initially minimal contact between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans? The answer is that when Normandy itself was invaded and taken over, the British Normans found themselves cut off from their home culture, and began assimilating to a greater degree. At the same time, burgeoning commerce was increasingly breaking down barriers between villages and bringing people together.

Britain had three languages that were used in different social domains during this time. French had the world of the court as its chief domain, whereas Latin was used in the Church and legal matters, and Old English was used in everyday speech. But French vocabulary and syntax had begun to exert an increasingly profound influence in these and other domains, and we see this as a defining characteristic of Middle English. French influence on English vocabulary can be seen in the following examples:

a. government—state, empire, statute, treasurer, governor, parliament
b. religion—theology, sermon, baptism, faith, temptation, immortality
c. law—bar, plea, suit, judge, jury, arrest, accuse, crime, trespass
d. colors—blue, vermilion, scarlet, rose
e. food—appetite, cream, dinner, fruit, gravy, salad, sugar, toast
f. home—chair, chamber, lamp, tower, pillar, chimney, cellar
g. the arts—art, beauty, dance, image, literature, music, poet, prose
h. the sciences—anatomy, medicine, plague, poison, stomach, sulphur
i. verbs—change, continue, advise, inform, marry, obey, move, pass, reply
j. adjectives—common, clear, gentle, natural, original, perfect, simple, usual
k. nouns—affection, age, courage, error, hour, mountain, people, river, season

In addition, Old English/French word pairs such as old/ancient, beseech/pray, house/mansion, and heal/cure show how English words and their French equivalents came to coexist with slightly different connotations.

We can also see traces of both French and Anglo-Saxon influences in plural formations. The *-s* ending of such words as *boy-s* and *girl-s* is characteristic of French while the *-en* ending of such words as *brether-en* and *ox-en* is typical of Anglo-Saxon. But the most important grammatical development during the Middle English period was the establishment of a fixed word order. There was already a tendency toward Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order in Old English, but this became more firmly established during the Middle English period. As mentioned earlier, Old English used inflections to signal grammatical relationships of words in a sentence. For example, the Old English noun *cyning* ("king") could have different noun endings (*-es*, *-a*, *-e*, and *-um*), as in *cyninges* ("of the king"), *cyninga* ("of the kings"), *cyninge* ("to the king"), or *cyningum* ("to the kings"). But as these word endings gradually disappeared, prepositions became much more important.

9.5 Modern English (c. 1450–Present)

Most linguists divide the Modern English period into Early Modern (c. 1450 to c. 1800) and Modern (c. 1800 to present). In the Early Modern period, English continues to change in significant ways, and there are many points of difference with modern usage. But by the end of the 18th century, the spelling, punctuation, and grammar are very close to what we have in English today. For instance, most people find reading a novel by Jane Austen (1775–1817) relatively straightforward. We can read for pages before encountering somewhat unfamiliar vocabulary and idiomatic expressions. But the same cannot be said about the works by William Shakespeare (1564–1616), which most certainly require us to consult a special edition or a commentary in order to understand the text.

The Early Modern English period begins with the advent of printing in 1476. The invention of the printing press played a key role in the formation of a standard language, which we will discuss in further detail in Section 9.6. For now, the important takeaway is that as a result of the printing press, during the 16th century, there was a flood of new publications in English, prompted by an increasing interest in the classical languages and literatures, science, medicine, and the arts. The period covering two centuries from the invention of the printing press is also called the "Renaissance", and it included the Reformation, the Copernican revolution, and the European colonization of Africa and the Americas.

How did English develop during the Renaissance? Since there weren't adequate words in the language to talk accurately about the new concepts and inventions that were coming out, writers began to borrow them from other languages. Most of the words that entered English at this time were taken from Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. And as the age of European colonialism got under way, words came into English from over 50 languages spoken in North America, Africa, and Asia. Some words came directly into English while others came indirectly from Latin or Italian or French. Pronouns underwent significant change, too. While *ye* was used as a subject and

you as an object in Middle English, *you* became the single form for both subject and object in Early Modern English.

In terms of grammar, constructions involving a double negative (*I cannot do no more*) or impersonal verbs (*me thinks she did*) were common in English during the Renaissance. But beginning in the 1700s, language purists proclaimed that the double negative, or negative concord, was illogical and improper in English (see Chapter 7 for more on negative concord). There were other major efforts to impose order on the language. For one, the completion of *A Dictionary of the English Language* by Samuel Johnson in 1755 had a stabilizing effect on how words were spelled. In addition, many spelling guides were published during the 17th century, which regularized orthography. While variant spellings tended to be socially tolerated during the Renaissance, more strict notions of correctness emerged by the end of the Early Modern English period, and poor spelling became stigmatized.

9.6 The Great Vowel Shift

One of the most profound changes in the history of English is the **Great Vowel Shift**, which occurred during the 14th through 17th century. The Great Vowel Shift was a massive sound change that marks the transition from Middle English to Early Modern English. Essentially, the vowels that had previously been pronounced in one part of the mouth shifted to a different—usually higher—part of the mouth. Before the Great Vowel Shift took place, English consisted of long vowels /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/. During the Great Vowel Shift, the following eight changes occurred:

Change 1: /i/ and /u/ became diphthongs /əi/ and /əu/, respectively
Change 2: Mid vowels /e/ and /o/ became /i/ and /u/, respectively
Change 3: Low back vowel /a/ became a low front vowel /æ/
Change 4: Mid lax vowels /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ became /e/ and /o/, respectively
Change 5: Low front vowel /æ/ moved up to /ɛ/
Change 6: /e/ moved up to /i/
Change 7: /ɛ/ moved up to /e/
Change 8: /əi/ and /əu/ became /ai/ and /au/, respectively

Figure 9.1 illustrates the changes that occurred in the Great Vowel Shift using the vowel chart.

Some examples from before and after the Great Vowel Shift can be seen in Table 9.1.

Although this historical phenomenon may seem like just some vowels moving around in the mouth, the Great Vowel Shift made English what it is today. There are three main reasons the Great Vowel Shift is deemed to be such a "great" phenomenon. One reason is the speed at which the Great Vowel Shift happened. The fact that this vowel shift occurred across about 400 years is quite unusual and relatively fast as far as language shifts go. Another notable

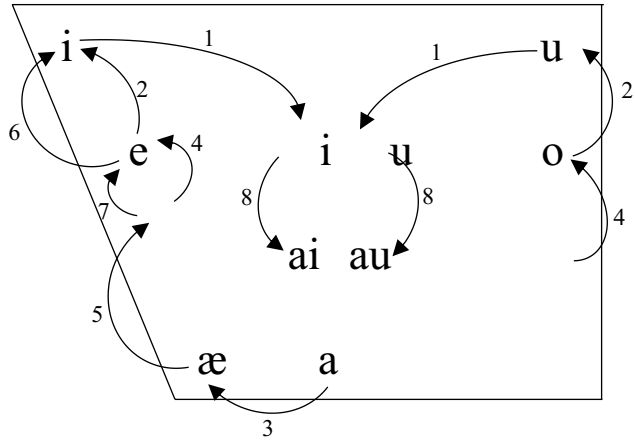

Figure 9.1 The Great Vowel Shift

characteristic is that the Great Vowel Shift did not just affect one vowel—a common occurrence for all languages—but rather it affected nearly *all* the vowels around the same time. Because every word in the English language contains a vowel sound, this means the Great Vowel Shift affected nearly every word in the English language. This was a profound transformation and a reason why Middle English is not mutually intelligible with Modern English. Finally, the Great Vowel Shift is particularly notable because some vowels went through more than one change during this relatively short span of time. For instance, the first example in Table 9.1 shows that the word *bite* was pronounced as /bitə/ in Middle English. During the Great Vowel Shift, the /i/ sound became /əi/ at first, so that /bitə/ became /bəit/ (the final /ə/ was dropped). This is described in Change 1. However, that newly minted /əi/ shifted again to /ai/, such that /bəit/ became /bait/, which is how we pronounce *bite* today. This multistage sound change adds to the complexity and significance of the Great Vowel Shift in the history of the English language.

What could cause such a profound shift in the language? While the exact cause is not known, some scholars have argued that the rapid migration of

Table 9.1 The Great Vowel Shift: Example Words

Gloss	*Before the Great Vowel Shift*	*After the Great Vowel Shift*
"bite"	/bitə/	/bait/
"beat"	/bɛtə/	/bit/
"meat"	/mɛt/	/mit/
"moon"	/mon/	/mun/
"house"	/hus/	/haus/

peoples from northern England to the southeast following the Black Death caused a mixing of accents that forced a change in the standard London vernacular. Others have argued that massive borrowing from French was a major factor in the shift. As we discussed in Chapter 8, the meeting of different languages and dialects usually causes language change, and scholars theorize that this might have been the catalyst for the Great Vowel Shift.

What does this have to do with teaching English? Many people are aware that there are significant inconsistencies between spoken English pronunciation and written English spelling. The same *oo* in flood, good, and moose is pronounced three different ways: /ʌ/, /ʊ/, and /u/ as in /flʌd/, /gʊd/, and /mus/. These kinds of inconsistencies between pronunciation and spelling make learning to read and write English challenging for even native speakers, and why spelling rules have so many exceptions. If you look up "English spelling" online, many of the search hits will deem the spelling system as broken, absurd, or insane. However, there is a reason behind the seemingly chaotic English spelling system, and this reason is directly linked to the Great Vowel Shift. In the 1400s, just as the Great Vowel Shift was starting to take its course, the printing press was invented, as we discussed earlier. Prior to this point in history, there was less consistency in English spelling because people spelled words the way they were pronounced. Thus, depending on the dialect of English you spoke, words were spelled differently. Once the printing press was invented, however, there was a need to make the spelling more consistent. Unfortunately, this stabilization happened just before English underwent the massive pronunciation shift we just talked about. For example, the printing press used double letters for the long vowels that are so characteristic of Middle English: words like *food* /fod/ was spelled with two *o*'s to represent the long vowel. However, with the Great Vowel Shift, the pronunciation of *food* /fod/ became /fud/, while the spelling, immortalized by the stabilizing printing press, remained *food*.

Although the invention of the printing press is partially responsible for this mismatch between written and spoken English, it also led to the rise of English literacy, an important characteristic of the Renaissance period. Since printed material could be more easily circulated and was easier to reproduce than handwritten documents, more people had access to writing. Literacy was no longer only reserved for religious purposes; writing was used for commerce, literature, and diplomacy. Perhaps more importantly, writing was accessible to everyone, not just the elite. It became more commonplace for middle class children to learn to read and write in school. Having the ability to print books and distribute them led to a wider base of readers and writers than English had ever known before. Thus, the advent of the printing press had significant impact on the culture and tradition of literacy in the English language.

9.7 Northern Cities Chain Shift

A more contemporary example of language change in English is the **Northern Cities Chain Shift**. **Chain shifts** are changes in historical phonology

in which one sound influences the change of another, forming a chain reaction. Like with the Great Vowel Shift example, vowels tend to undergo more changes because they are formed and differentiated by tiny changes in the tongue position. Consequently, these vowel changes make a bigger impact because the smallest change in tongue position can completely change the pronunciation of a word. The Northern Cities Chain Shift is a currently ongoing process that is affecting six vowels in the upper Midwest region of the United States, in cities along the Great Lakes. The cities whose speakers are affected by the shift include Buffalo, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Rochester, and Syracuse. The Northern Cities Chain Shift consists of the following six changes:

Change 1: /æ/ is raised to /eə/ or /ɪə/
Change 2: /ɑ/ is fronted to /æ/
Change 3: /ɔ/ is lowered to /ɑ/
Change 4: /ɛ/ is backed to /ʌ/
Change 5: /ʌ/ is backed to /ɔ/
Change 6: /ɪ/ is lowered to /ɛ/

These six changes can be seen on the vowel chart in Figure 9.2. Examples can be found in Table 9.2.

For example, a speaker who is affected by the Northern Cities Chain Shift may pronounce *bat* as more like *byat* or *hit* as more like *het*. Often, this dialect is characterized by non-Midwesterners as sounding "nasal"; technically, the vowels only sound that way to outsiders because of the raised and fronted changes (Changes 1 and 2). Change 3 is sometimes referred to as the *cot-caught* merger, where the words *cot* and *caught* or *bot* and *bought* are pronounced identically for some speakers.

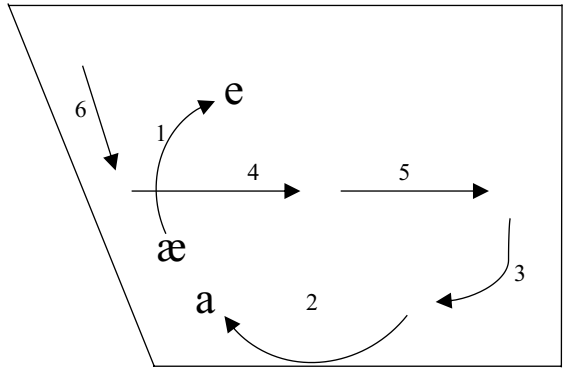

Figure 9.2 Northern Cities Chain Shift Vowel Chart

Table 9.2 Northern Cities Chain Shift: Example Words

Change	*Gloss*	*Other American English*	*Northern Cities Chain Shift*
1	"bat"	[bæt]	[beət] or [bɪət]
2	"lot"	[lɑt]	[læt]
3	"bought"	[bɔt]	[bɑt]
4	"set"	[set] or [sɛt]	[sʌt]
5	"but"	[bʌt]	[bɔt]
6	"hit"	[hɪt]	[hɛt]

It is important to keep in mind that unlike the Great Vowel Shift, which happened centuries ago, the changes in the Northern Cities Chain Shift are currently ongoing. This means that linguists are not certain whether the vowels affected by the Northern Cities Chain Shift will remain where they are or whether they will continue to change. If you encounter a speaker influenced by this chain shift, you might hear that the change is not as extreme as the examples in the rightmost column of Table 9.2, but that it is somewhere on the spectrum. It is also important to remember that the change is not uniform; not all speakers will exhibit all six changes. The Northern Cities Chain Shift, rather, is an overall description of the tendency that linguists are seeing across the region.

For language learners and teachers, this may seem initially problematic. How does one learn and teach English if it is constantly changing? This is another reason why it is helpful for language teachers to be linguists. Linguists know that with language, it is not always a strict dichotomy between correct and incorrect. It is not like math where two plus two really only has one answer. Rather, language comprises a spectrum of variation: pronouncing *bat* as [beət] will work, as will [bæt] and [bat]. Our role as language teachers is to guide learners toward what is typically acceptable for the current time period—it would not be particularly useful for ESL students to learn conversational Middle English, though it would be fun—and also what is typically acceptable for the language environment they are in. It actually does students a disservice if we only expose them to one variety and establish the illusion that English is uniform, unchanging, and rigid. As it has done and will always do, English will continue to change. No language academy, dictionary, or printing press can stop its natural progression.

Recommended Websites

Listen to Beowulf being read in Old English
www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturevideo/booksvideo/8135302/Beowulf-reading-in-Old-English-with-translation.html

Exercises

1. Following are several words from Middle English, the way they were pronounced prior to the Great Vowel Shift. Use the vowel chart in Figure 9.1 to determine the sound change(s) that occurred for each word during the Great Vowel Shift. Write the word in Modern English and the sound change(s) the vowels underwent. Hint: word final /ə/ was often dropped.

   a. [tid]
   b. [namə]
   c. [bot]
   d. [abutə]
   e. [bet]

2. Following is the Lord's Prayer in Modern English, Middle English, and Old English. In the table that follows, write the words that you can recognize in each version in the appropriate column. Look at the similarities and differences in the spellings and try to sound out the words in Middle and Old English to see how the language has evolved.

   a. Modern English

   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. Amen.

   b. Middle English

   Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name; thi kyngdoom come to; be thi wille don, in erthe as in heuene. Yyue to vs this dai oure breed ouer othir substaunce, and foryyue to vs oure dettis, as we foryyuen to oure dettouris; and lede vs not in to temptacioun, but delyuere vs fro yuel. Amen.

   c. Old English

   Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum, Si þin nama gehalgod; to becume þin rice; gewurþe ðin willa, on eorðan swa on heofonum. Urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg, and forgyf us ure gyltas swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum; and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge, ac alys us of yfele. Soþlice
   Note: Thorn <þ> and eth <ð> were alternative spellings for the sounds [θ] or [ð]. The symbol <æ> represented a pronunciation in Old English much like the vowel in *cat*.

Modern English	*Middle English*	*Old English*
father	fadir	fæder
heaven	heuenes	heofonum

3. All the following listed words have been borrowed into English from other languages. Make an educated guess as to the likely source language for each word. Then look up the etymology of each word in the dictionary to see if your guess was correct.

   a. entrepreneur
   b. renaissance
   c. macho
   d. plaza
   e. cigar
   f. guru
   g. mosquito
   h. lemon
   i. alma mater
   j. typhoon
   k. democracy

4. Following are several examples of English words in the Northern Cities dialect. Use the vowel chart in Figure 9.2 to determine the sound change(s) that occurred for each word during the Northern Cities Chain Shift. Write the word and the sound change(s) the vowels underwent.

   a. [beəg]
   b. [pæt]
   c. [lʌt]
   d. [bɛg]
   e. [pɑ]