ENG345 Linguistic Perspectives on English
(a.k.a. HEL: History of the English Language)
RSC 118  M/F 8:55-9:55 am + Online
4 credits

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RSC 118 / Hybrid
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Description
In this course, we learn the rudiments of language study, trace the history of English, and gain a rigorous appreciation for the power of words. We follow the English language from its origin in a warlike Germanic tribe to its present state as the dominant medium of international communication. We learn the historical reasons for our goofy spelling. We explore how war and colonization gave English the largest word-hoard of any modern language. We sample varieties of English across America and around the world. And we challenge common assumptions about nature of language and language change. Along the way, we tell Word Stories, learn to read basic Old and Middle English, recast Romeo and Juliet as a battle of Early Modern pronouns, and confront the devastation of the world’s linguistic ecology.

Objectives
After successfully completing this course, you will be able to:

1. Identify language sounds using IPA symbols and articulatory phonetics,
2. List subgroups of the Indo-European language family,
3. Explain the major processes involved in language change,
4. Characterize Old, Middle, and Modern English using linguistic terminology,
5. Research word etymologies using current linguistic reference works,
6. Evaluate the aptness of different metaphors for human language, and
7. Articulate informed opinions on contemporary issues involving language policy.
Due to the enormous expense (and sleep-inducing tendency) of many linguistics textbooks, I will not ask you to buy an expensive tome for this class. (I'll wait for the student loan folks to stop booing . . .) Instead, you need purchase only John McWhorter’s delightful Simpsons-quoting *Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. You will also need to access readings, charts, and assignments from our Blackboard course page.

**The Nature of HEL**

Although it has an ENG prefix, *History of the English Language* is really a course in the science of language. Facts and ideas will be flying at you from my lectures, McWhorter’s book, and your own Word Stories and Group Reports. To succeed in this environment, you must take careful notes and review our materials regularly. Some of the readings may seem challenging, especially those in Old and Middle English. Do not lose heart! I will explain what you should understand generally and what you need to learn specifically. It is crucial that you keep up with the assignments and master new material before coming to class. To encourage continual review, class begins with a short quiz on the previous lecture and the assigned reading or homework.

**Roll Call!**

Class begins promptly at 8:55. When I call your name, respond with Roll Call Word. You can pick any word you happen to like—*onomatopoeia, scurrilous, grout*—an interesting word you just learned—*tmesis, palimpsest, umami*—or a new coinage just entering the language—*fuhgeddaboudit, moobs, crunk*. Learn your word’s meaning and origin using the *Oxford English Dictionary* (available at [http://library.nwciowa.edu/databases](http://library.nwciowa.edu/databases)).
Hybrid

No, I’m not driving us around in a Prius all semester. Rather, in addition to our face-to-face meetings on Monday and Friday, some of the course will be conducted online. As part of a Mellon Foundation grant, we will be exploring and evaluating several Web 2.0 tools, including:

- VoiceThread [https://voicethread.com/](https://voicethread.com/)
- Prezi [https://prezi.com/overview/](https://prezi.com/overview/)
- Delicious [https://del.icio.us/](https://del.icio.us/)
- Swivl [https://www.swivl.com/](https://www.swivl.com/)

Our goal is to determine which of these tools improve class conversation, content delivery, and collaborative learning. You can expect to receive materials through several of these platforms, and to participate actively in at least one. There is no extra fee associated with these tools.

Attendance and Late Work

Serious illnesses, family emergencies, and official school functions constitute excused absences. Email me in advance about absences, and turn in missed assignments as soon as possible. After one freebie, each unexcused absence lowers your course grade by 1%. Unexcused late assignments lose 25% per day. Please inform me of upcoming absences, and let me know if personal difficulties are interfering with your schoolwork.

Word Story

Word Stories are short accounts of how a word, phrase, or word family arrived at its current form and meaning. DeWitt Library contains a rich array of resources, including etymological dictionaries, colloquial language guides, and the venerable OED (available in searchable format at [http://library.nwciowa.edu/databases](http://library.nwciowa.edu/databases)). I will provide you with several model Word Stories at the beginning of the semester, and you will contribute one of your own.
Group Report

With several classmates, you will present a Group Report on one of the following topics:

- **Team α (alpha):** The *OED*: History, Form, and Content of the Big Dictionary
- **Team β (beta):** Easy as ABC: The History of Our Alphabet
- **Team γ (gamma):** African-American Vernacular English
- **Team δ (delta):** He Said, She Said: Language and the Sexes
- **Team ε (epsilon):** @$%#&!: Profanity
- **Team ζ (zeta):** The Power of Babbling: Language Acquisition in Children
- **Team η (eta):** The Sun Never Sets on the English Language: World Englishes

Reports should last 15-20 minutes, followed by 5 minutes of Q&A.

Tests

Four unit tests contribute a significant portion of your final grade: Unit I (Our Goofy Language, Phonetics), Unit II (Indo-European), Unit III (Old English), and Unit IV (Middle and Early Modern English). Tests cover the linguistic principles, technical details, and historical information contained in our lectures, handouts, Word Stories, and Group Reports. Most tests consist of fill-in-the-blank sections, one-sentence answers, and paragraph responses. The final section asks you to explain and illustrate principles from *The Power of Babel*.

The Final Exam consists of four short take-home essays. Here you will apply your linguistic enlightenment to contemporary issues such as national language policy, xenophobia, translation, grammar and vocabulary pedagogy, and attitudes toward language change.

Special Accommodations

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Northwestern College will provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have a documented disability that may affect their ability to participate or to meet course requirements.
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