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HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS?

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Lecture Two:

What is Historical Linguistics About?

As already mentioned, historical linguistics deals with language change. **Historical linguistics is sometimes called *diachronic* linguistics (from Greek *dia-* 'through' + *chronos* 'time' +*-ic*),** since historical linguists are concerned with change in language or languages over time.

This is contrasted with ***synchronic* linguistics, which deals with a language at a single point in time.**

There are various ways to study language *diachronically*. For example, historical linguists may study changes in the history of a single language, for instance the changes from Old English to Modern English, or between Old French and Modern French, to mention just two examples. Modern English is very different from Old English.

Often the study of the history of a single language is called philology, for example English philology, French philology, Hispanic philology and so on. (The term philology has several other senses as well).

The historical linguist may also study changes revealed in the comparison of related languages, often called ***comparative linguistics***.

We say that languages are related to one another when they descend from (are derived from) a single original language, a common ancestor: **for example, the modern Romance languages (which include Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and others) descend from earlier Latin**

In the past, many had thought that the principal domain of historical linguistics was the study of 'how' languages change, believing that answers to the question of 'why' they change were too inaccessible.

However, since the 1960s or so, great strides have been achieved also in understanding 'why' languages change . Today, we can say that historical linguistics is dedicated to the study of 'how' and 'why' languages change, both to the methods of investigating linguistic change and to the theories designed to explain these changes.

Some people imagine that historical linguists mostly just study the history of individual words - and many people are fascinated by word histories, as shown by the number of popular books, newspaper columns and radio broadcasts dedicated to the topic, more properly called **etymology** (derived from Greek *etumon* 'true' (neuter form), that is, 'true or original meaning of a word').

The primary goal of historical linguistics is not etymologies, but accurate etymology is an important product of historical linguistic work.

Let us, for illustration's sake, consider a couple of examples and then see what the real role of etymology in historical linguistics is.

Glamour is a changed form of the word ***grammar***, originally in use in Scots English; it meant 'magic, enchantment, spell', found especially in the phrase 'to cast the glamour over one'.

It did not acquire its sense of 'a magical or fictitious beauty or alluring charm' until the mid-1800s.

Grammar has its own interesting history. It was borrowed from Old French *grammaire*, itself from Latin *grammatica*, ultimately derived from Greek *gramma* 'letter, written mark'.

In Classical Latin, *grammatica* meant the methodical study of literature broadly. In the Middle Ages, it came to mean chiefly the study of or knowledge of Latin and hence came also to be synonymous with learning in general, the knowledge peculiar to the learned class.

Since this was popularly believed to include also magic and astrology, French *grammaire* came to be used sometimes for the name of these occult 'sciences'.

English *Rramarye, grammar* means 'occult learning, magic, a word revived in literary usage by late *grammar, learning in general*; it is clearly archaic and related to the cases of vocabulary

What is of greater concern to historical linguists is not the **etymology** of these words per se, but the kinds of changes they have undergone and the techniques or methods we have at our disposal to recover this history.

Thus, in the history of the words **glamour** and **grammar** we notice various kinds of change: borrowing from Greek to Latin and ultimately from French (a descendant of Latin) to English, shifts in meaning, and the: sporadic change in sound (**r to l**) in the derived word **glamour**.

Changes of this sort are what historical linguistics is about, not just the individual word histories.

Goodbye as a second example. This everyday word has undergone several changes in its history. It began life in the late 1500s as **god be with you (or ye)**, spelled variously as **god be wy ye, god b 'uy**, and so on.

The first part changed to *good* either on analogy with such other greetings as *good day*, *good morning* and *good night*, or as a euphemistic deformation to avoid the blasphemy of saying *god* (taboo avoidance) - or due to a combination of the two.

The various independent words in *god be with you* were amalgamated into one, *goodbye*, and ultimately even this was shortened (clipped) *to bye*.

Historical linguists are concerned with all these things broadly and not merely with the history behind individual words.

For that reason, etymology is not the primary purpose of historical linguistics, but *rather the goal is to understand language change in general; and when we understand this, then etymology, one area of historical linguistics, is a by-product of that understanding..*

A MOMENT FOR REVIEW

- How would you differentiate between -- Historical Linguistics, Etymology/ Historical Linguistics & Comparative Linguistics?
- Trace the routes of change of the two mentioned words : grammar/glamour, Goodbye