

Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila  
Department of Letters & English Language

# HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS?

Dr. Mourad Touati / Master Two Studies

# Lecture Three

## Kinds of Linguistic Changes:

**An Example in English Language**

There are many kinds of linguistic change. Any aspect of a language structure can change, and therefore we are concerned with learning to apply accurately the techniques that have been developed for dealing with these kinds of changes, **with sound change, grammatical change, semantic change, borrowing, analogy** and so on, and with understanding and evaluating the basic assumptions upon which these historical linguistic methods are based.

We can begin to get an appreciation for the various sorts of changes that are possible in language by comparing a small sample from various instances of English. This exercise cited in (lyle Campbell.1999) compares *Matthew 27:73* from translations of the Bible at different time periods, starting with the present and working back to Old English.

This particular example was selected in part because it talks about language and in part because in translations of the Bible we have comparable texts from the various time periods which can reveal changes that have taken place:

◎ **1. Old English (The West-Saxon Gospels, c. 1050):**

I'a refter lytlum fyrste geneatreton I'a oe I'rer stodon,  
cwredon to petre. Soolice I'u eart of hym, I'yn sprrec I'e  
gesweotolao.

[Literally: then after little first approached they that  
there stood, said to Peter. Truly thou art of them, thy  
speech thee makes clear.]

◎ **2. Middle English (The Wycliff Bible, fourteenth  
century):**

And a litil aftir, thei that stoden camen, and seiden to  
Petir, treuli thou art of hem; for thi speche makith thee  
knowun.

◎ **3. Early Modern English (The King James Bible, 1611):**

And after a while came vnto him they that stood by, and saide to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them, for thy speech bewrayeth thee.

◎ **4. Modern English (The New English Bible, 1961):**

Shortly afterwards the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Surely you are another of them; your accent gives you away!'

In comparing the Modern English with the Early Modern English versions, we note several kinds of changes.

(1) **Lexical:** in Early Modern English *bewrayeth* we have an example of lexical replacement. This word was archaic already in the seventeenth century and has been replaced by other words.

It meant—**speak evil of, to expose (a deception)**'. In this context, it means that Peter's way of speaking, his accent, **gives him away**.



(2) *Grammatical* (syntactic and morphological) change: from *came vnto [unto] him they* to the Modern English equivalent, *they came to him*, there has been a syntactic change.

In earlier times, English, like other Germanic languages, had a rule which essentially inverted the subject and verb when preceded by other material (though this rule was not obligatory in English as it is in German), so that because *and after a while* comes first in the sentence, *they came* is inverted to *came they*. This rule has for the most part been lost in Modern English. Another grammatical change (syntactic and morphological) is seen in the difference between

*thou. .. Art* and *you are*. Formerly, *thou* was 'you (singular familiar)' and contrasted with *ye/you* 'you (plural or singular formal)' but this distinction was lost. The *-eth* of *bewrayeth* was the 'third person singular' verb agreement suffix; it was replaced in time by *-(e)s* (*giveth* > *gives*).

**(3) *Sound change***: early Modern English was not pronounced in exactly the same way as Modern English.

**(4) *Borrowing***: the word *accent* in Modern English is a loanword from Old French *accent* 'accent, pronunciation'.

# A MOMENT FOR REVIEW

- ⦿ Re -read the illustration introduced above and try to sort out :
- ⦿ - a grammatical change
- ⦿ -a lexical change