Stockholm University

Optional Linguistics Module:
History of the English Language
Spring 2025
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Module description

In this module, we explore variation and change in the English language from its earliest history until the beginnings of globalisation (c. 600–1900 CE). Starting with the origins of Old English, we move through Middle English and into modern English, focusing on the orthographical, phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical changes which have characterised English throughout the ages. Using representative authentic texts and digital tools, this module gives the student the ability to work with English texts from any historical period. We discuss major sound change events such as the First Germanic Sound Shift and the Great Vowel Shift, as well as the connection between the emergence of schwa and the loss of complex noun and verb inflection. We follow the language from a small, exotic dialect spoken at the outer edge of the known world, through the proliferation of distinctive dialects, to the establishment of national standard varieties, the beginning of language politics and the emergence of new Englishes across the planet. We consider how social and technological change affect linguistic change, and how influences from other cultures and languages form the complex and dynamic object of study that is the English language throughout history.

Intended learning outcomes

Upon completion of the module, the student is expected to be able to:

- account for the contents of the course literature;
- display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field;
- apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material;
- analyse language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field;
- motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field;
- demonstrate a good understanding of written English;
- express themselves in academic English.

Grading

The module adopts the 7-grade SU scale (A–E, Fx, F).
To receive a final grade, students must have completed all the examination assignments (not done all examination assignments=no grade).
To receive a passing grade (A to E), students must complete all the examination assignments, pass them, and thus demonstrate that they achieved all the learning outcomes at least at the minimum level (see “Module grading” below).

Module activities

The module consists of the following activities:

- Seminars (pre-seminar instructions for each seminar will be posted on Athena);
- Before each seminar, students are expected to finish the assigned reading and do any accompanying tasks. Students should be prepared to discuss the reading and tasks at the seminar;
- Students are expected to complete all the tasks assigned by the teacher.

Examination

Students are required to complete the following:

- Written assignment (A-F)
- Oral assignments (Pass/Fail)

Essay: (A-F)
An essay that discusses the concepts encountered in the module based on published research. The essay needs to be based on concepts discussed during the course of the module, and suggested essay topics are provided. The essay should be **1500 - 2000 words**.

Old English group activity: (Pass/Fail)
In groups, you will prepare a grammatical analysis of a piece of Old English text (translation into modern English provided). Individually, you will present part of your group's findings as part of seminar 4.

Middle English group activity: (Pass/Fail)
In groups, you will compare two versions of the same Middle English text for dialect features. Individually, you will present part of your group's findings as part of seminar 6.

Required reading

Coursebook:
Freeborn, Dennis. (2006). *From Old English to Standard English: A Course Book in Language Variations Across Time* 3rd ed. Ebook available through the library.

Additional Sources used in class**:**

McHugh, Jess. (2018). The Nationalist Roots of Merriam-Webster's Dictionary. *The Paris Review.* March 30, 2018. (Seminar 8)

Schneider, Edgar W. (2003). The Dynamics of New Englishes: From Identity Construction to Dialect Birth. *Language, 79*(3): 233–281. (Seminar 8)

Electronic reference material:

- Baker, Peter. Magic Sheet of Old English Inflections - https://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/resources/magic_A4.pdf
- Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online - bosworthtoller.com
- Middle English Compendium - quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary
- Oxford English Dictionary Online - OED.com
- Wiktionary: Free Dictionary – en.wiktionary.org

Additional materials in the form of reference sheets and exercises will also be provided in the seminars.

Schedule

Seminar	Theme	To do before the seminar
Seminar 1 25 March	*The History of English and the causes of language change*	Chapters 1 & 2
Seminar 2 31 March	*Old English Prose and Germanic Phonology*	Chapters 3 & 20 (to page 419)
Seminar 3 7 April	*Old English Verse and fusional language*	Chapter 4 - Activity 4.2
Seminar 4 14 April	*Early Middle English and the start of hybrid language*	Old English Group Activity -Pass/Fail Chapter 5 Section 7.3 Section 7.8
Seminar 5 28 April	*Middle English dialects and placing texts in their local contexts*	Section 8.1 - Activity 8.1 Sections 9.1, 9.2, 9.3 Sections 10.2, 10.3 Section 11.1
Seminar 6 5 May	*Late Middle English and the rise of the Chancery Standard*	Middle English Group Activity -Pass/Fail Sections 12.1, 12.4 - Activity 12.1 on text 77 Section 13.1, Section 14.1, 14.3, 14.5, 14.6
Seminar 7 12 May	*Early Modern English and Colonial expansion*	Sections 15.3, 15.4, 15.5, 15.6, Chapter 16, Section 17.1.
Seminar 8 26 May	*Late Modern English and the emergence of Pluricentricity*	Sections 19.1, 19.2, 19.3, 19.4, 19.6 Chapter 21, McHugh (2018) Schneider (2003)
Deadline for final essay assignment: 8 June , 23:59 **Resit deadline: 10 August, 23:59.**		

Module grading criteria

Written assignments grading criteria

Grade	Criteria
A: Excellent	The student shows excellent ability to: - account for the contents of the course literature; - display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods in the field; - apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material; - analyze language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field; - motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field; - demonstrate a good understanding of written English; - express themselves in academic English.
B: Very good	The student shows very good ability to: - account for the contents of the course literature; - display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods discussed; - apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material; - analyze language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field; - motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field; - demonstrate a good understanding of written English; - express themselves in academic English.
C: Good	The student shows good ability to: - account for the contents of the course literature; - display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods discussed; - apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material; - analyze language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field; - motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field; - demonstrate a good understanding of written English; - express themselves in academic English.
D: Satisfactory	The student shows adequate ability to: - account for the contents of the course literature; - display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods discussed; - apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material; - analyze language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field; - motivate their own analyses writing in a manner relevant to the field; - demonstrate a good understanding of written English; - express themselves in academic English.
E: Adequate	The student shows minimally adequate ability to: - account for the contents of the course literature; - display the ability to use basic theoretical concepts, analytical models and methods discussed; - apply these concepts to authentic texts or other language material;

	- analyze language material from a theoretical perspective applicable to the field; - motivate their own analyses in writing in a manner relevant to the field; - demonstrate a good understanding of written English; - express themselves in academic English.
Fx: Fail (Inadequate)	The student's work demonstrates some but not all of the required skills specified in the learning outcomes at an adequate level. Some more work is required to achieve a passing grade.
F: Fail (Totally inadequate)	The student's work does not demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes of the module. Much more work is required to achieve a passing grade.

Oral presentations grading criteria

Criteria	Pass	Fail
Content	The presentation introduces the topic of the presentation in a clear and concise manner demonstrating the student's understanding of the linguistic research issues discussed. Research aims, methods and results of the study under discussion are presented and discussed in a lucid manner.	In the presentation the student does not demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the linguistic issues under discussion. Research aims, methods and results of the study under discussion are not presented in an adequate manner.
Organisation and language	The presentation is well structured and easy to follow. The language used is academic and does not contain any severe mistakes.	The organisation of the presentation is poor, and the language used contains several mistakes.