Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• Principle of Evolution: "Isolation leads to variation"
  – thus, the distance between English speakers in England and America promoted a new linguistic “species”
    • new things, places, and customs will produce new words
    • also languages, when separated, naturally drift apart
      – often the colonists’ language retains traditional features which are later lost in their homeland
      – e.g., Icelandic preserves archaic features which subsequently disappeared in other Scandinavian languages
    • and also humans tend to misunderstand, forget or remember wrongly the language of their predecessors
      – especially in a “new world” full of exuberant non-conformists like the European settlers of America
the very name “America” is a good example of the type of misunderstanding which produces new words in new cultural environments

- the name “America” was coined by the map-maker Martin Waldseemüller, ca. 1500 CE
- Waldseemüller wrongly credited the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci with the discovery of the New World

- Vespucci never even set foot on continental North America!
- he had visited only South America and a few islands in the Caribbean
Latin and Greek Elements in English

• the “America” error was later corrected by Waldseemüller
  – but it was too late: the name "America" had caught on
• n.b. the name Amerigo is based on the Italian form of the German name Haimirich
  – Haimirich becomes “Henry” in English
  – so America is “Henry-land”!
the Pilgrims arrive at a crucial juncture in the development of the English language

- relatively new -s verb-ending, e.g. hath > has
- also, thee/thou > you/ye
• some Elizabethan expressions were lost in British English but preserved in American English
  • “fall” in the sense of autumn
  • “mad” in the sense of angry
  • the verb “to progress” (vs. the noun)
  • a “deck” of cards (vs. British a “pack” of cards)
  • “trash” in the sense of garbage
    – it is used in this sense by Shakespeare: “Who steals my purse, steals trash” (Iago, *Othello*, Act 3, scene 3)
  • gotten, platter, mayhem, chore, skillet, ragamuffin, I guess, maybe, rare meat (as in “underdone”)
Latin and Greek Elements in English

• many of these Elizabethan words and phrases were later re-introduced into British English from America after they had fallen into disuse in Britain
  – also, the pronunciation of the -r in words like “far” (vs. “fah”)
  – and the flat a- sound (as in “fast”) which was abandoned in British English only in the late 1700’s

• all in all, had the English settlers of North America come at any other time than when they did, these forms would most likely have been lost
In sum, American English is a combination of the languages of European settlers and those of American natives:

- many imports from Dutch, French and Spanish
- later also, German, Irish, Chinese and African languages
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• first, many borrowing from Native American languages
  – plants peculiar to North America
    • squash: < isquonterquashes
    • hickory: < pawcohiccora
    • also, tobacco, persimmon, pecan, tomato, maize, hominy
  – n.b. there is a notable improvement in the health of Europeans after the addition of American vegetables to their diet
    • native plant diversity was much greater in the New World than the Old
    • e.g., corn, lima beans, potatoes, yams
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• also, many words for animals come from Native American languages
  – e.g. raccoon, chipmunk, possum, skunk, moose
• as well as things and people associated with Native American culture
  – canoe, hammock, powwow, squaw, mocassin, wigwam, papoose, tomahawk
• but quite a few of these entered English through other (European-based) languages
  – especially Spanish (e.g. coyote)
Latin and Greek Elements in English

Native American names for tribes and places also produced new words in American English

- tribes: Manhattan, Chippewa, Iriquois
- but some Indian place-names were not practical
  - e.g., Lake Chargogagomanchaugagochaubunagungamaug
  - "You fish on that side, we'll fish on this side and nobody gets to fish in the middle"
- thus, many were simplified
  - e.g. Hoochinoo "tribe noted for homemade liquor"
  - > hooch
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• Contributions of non-English-speaking settlers
  – the importation of derivatives from other European languages in America is a continuation of the ongoing process of change in English
  • e.g., Norman invasions: Latinate vocabulary
  • so this is yet another way Latin words have entered English!
  – note that even when English speakers were the conquerors, not the conquered, the contact with foreigners still resulted in many new words
  • no sense of the "purity" of the English language in this age
  • vs. the French attempt to keep out foreign words
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• many Spanish words were imported into American English, often with little or no change, e.g.
  – rodeo, bronco, buffalo, avocado, mustang, burro, fiesta, canyon, mesquite, mosquito, ranch, corral, mesa, lasso, cinch, vigilante, bonanza

• however, some were changed, e.g.
  – vaquero > buckaroo
  – vamos > vamoose, mosey
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• many of these words are actually Mexican in origin
  – Mexican Spanish has a similar relationship to Iberian Spanish that American English has to British English
  – e.g. stampede, cafeteria
  – juzgado ("prison") > hoosegow

• n.b. many of these words go back to Latin via Spanish, e.g.
  – fiesta [from Lat. *festa*]
  – siesta [from Lat. *sexta*]
  – rodeo [from Lat. *rotare*]
Latin and Greek Elements in English

**American English**

- French words imported into American English, e.g.
  - French words made a greater impact in the northern part of America
    - vs. a greater impact from Spanish in the South
  - e.g. prairie, dime, caribou, tobaggon, bayou, levee, depo
    - *gaufre* ("waffle, honeycomb") > ____gopher____?
    - *chaudière* ("boiler, furnace") > ____chowder____?
  - also, several Native American words come into English as place names via French
    - Detroit, Illinois, Beloit, Sioux
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• words from African languages imported into American English, e.g.
  – gumbo, goober (peanut), voodoo, juju, bwana
  – jukebox
    • originally, jook-house (“roadhouse”)
    • orig., “brothel”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

- words from African languages imported into American English, e.g.
  - mumbo jumbo
    - originally *mama djambo* (Mandingo dialect), “medicine man who protects men and terrorizes women”
      - later, “a witch doctor who protects against any object of fear”
    - later, > “magical formula” > “nonsense”
    - in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, P.T. Barnum created the clip “jumbo” and used it as the name for a particularly huge elephant
      - hence, jumbo came to mean “huge”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

- Later impact of foreign languages on American English
  - immigration between 1670-1840: less than 1 million
  - immigration from 1840-1900: ca. 30 million(!)
    - mostly German, Irish (potato famine of 1845), Italian
  - by 1900, New York City has more German speakers than any city in the world except Berlin and Vienna
    - at this time there were more than 800 American newspapers published in German
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

- words of German origin imported into American English during this period
  - pretzel, cookbook, blizzard, kindergarden, spook, dumb, ouch

- words of Dutch origin
  - coleslaw, noodle, waffle, snoop, cookie
  - Yankee: ?from Jan Kees (“John Cheese”)
    - a common name, cf. John Doe
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• words of Irish origin, e.g.
  – lalapaloosa, shalaylee, shamrock
• words of eastern Asian origin, e.g.
  – Chinese: typhoon, yen, chow (food), kow-tow
  – even Tibetan: sherpa
    • originally, “a native guide who takes a mountain climber to a summit”
    • > “an assistant who prepares a leader for a summit meeting, e.g. an economic summit”
Latin and Greek Elements in English

• but there is a unique quality to some American words which is not traceable to any other language
  – especially those which were created and not borrowed
    • e.g. belittle: coined by Thomas Jefferson
    – also, compound animal names
      • bullfrog, turkey gobbler, copperhead, lightning bug, eggplant, grasshopper, catfish, mockingbird
• but there is a unique quality to some American words which is not traceable to any other language
  – and many others, often neologisms
    • log-rolling, commuter, striptease, gimmick, baby-sitter, teenager, telephone, radio, butt in, bawl out, bonehead, sidetrack, hangover, fudge, joyride, stunt, park, hindsight, scrawny, know-how, fill the bill, stay put, bank on, go-getter, dumbbell, boob, razz, raincheck, and even . . .
    • keep a stiff upper lip!
  – also, terms from American government
    • congressional, caucus, presidential, gubernatorial, state house, congressman
• early Americans were especially fond of colorful, exuberant expression
  – cf. Yosemite Sam’s wildcat-wrasslin’, hell-for-leather lip-flappin’ chitter-chat
  – e.g., hornswoggle, cattywampus, rambunctious, move like greased lightning, be in cahoots with, bodacious, face the music, bark up the wrong tree, saw wood (sleep)
  – cf. extinct expressions: monstracious, teetotaciously, helliferous, conbobberation, obfliscate
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• OK (okay, O.K.): arguably America's greatest linguistic invention and contribution
  – seen in many languages, incl. Serbo-Croatian, Talagog
  – used in many different ways, almost every part of speech
    • interjection: OK, here I am!
    • adjective: that's OK
      – from lukewarm praise (“it was OK.”)
      – to enthusiasm (“OK!”)
    • adverb: it went OK
    • noun: all this needs is your OK
    • verb: will you OK this?
    • Why not make it a conjunction, pronoun and preposition, too?
Latin and Greek Elements in English

What is the origin of “okay”?

- **acronym:**
  - Sac Indian chief “Old Keokuk”
  - shipping agent “Obadiah Kelly”
  - Martin Van Buren's nickname, “Old Kinderhook”
  - crackers “Orrins-Kendall”
    - OK was stamped on boxes to indicate quality

- **sound:**
  - Finnish *oikea*
  - Haitian *aux cayes* (indicated high-quality rum)
  - Choctaw *okeh*
What is the origin of “okay”?

- **contraction:**
  - “oll korrect” (an intentional misspelling)
    - a popular racist joke in the Boston area based on the accent of German immigrants
  - this is quite likely to be the actual origin
    - n.b. the oldest known use of “OK” in print is in the Boston Morning Post (March 23, 1839)
• American English versus British English
  – it’s impossible to trace how the change in accent developed
  – but this much is clear: the influence of American English on British English is much greater than the reverse
  • to the extreme distaste of the many British writers
  • e.g., Samuel Johnson called Americans “a race of convicts”
  – member of Parliament concerning American films:
    “The words and accent are perfectly disgusting, and there is no doubt that such films are an evil influence on our language.”
American English versus British English

– another member of Parliament:

“If there is a more hideous language on the face of the earth than the American form of English, I should like to know what it is.”

– yet the British use American expressions freely, even ones they don't know what mean

• look like a millions bucks (“pounds”?)
• step on the gas (“petrol”?)
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• but the differences in British and American English can cause some humorous misunderstandings, e.g.
  – homely = “like home”
  – presently = “in a little while”
  – post = “mail (a letter)”

• BUT British Royal Mail vs. US Postal Service
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

• but the differences in British and American English can cause some humorous misunderstandings, e.g.
  – knock up = “knock on someone's door”
  – keep your pecker up = “maintain your spirit”
  – be stuffed = “be pregnant”
  – bum = “buttocks”
  • cf. the uplifting 30’s movie Hallelujah! I'm a Bum
Latin and Greek Elements in English

What do the following British English words mean in American English?

courgette = zucchini
candy floss = cotton candy
berk = idiot
catapult = slingshot
braces = suspenders
pullover = sweater
sweater = sweatshirt
biscuit = cookie
What do the following British English words mean in American English?

- bonnet = hood (of car)
- wing = fender
- silencer = muffler
- joiner = carpenter
- number plate = licence plate
- underground = subway
- subway = pedestrian underpass
- flyover = vehicle overpass
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

What do the following British English words mean in American English?

fruit machine = one-armed bandit

dressing gown = bathrobe

smalls = ladies' underwear

torch = flashlight

to grizzle = to whine

adjustable spanner = monkeywrench

to hump = to carry a heavy load

geyser = waterheater
Latin and Greek Elements in English

American English

What do the following British English words mean in American English?

rubber = eraser

dustman = garbageman

nappy = diaper

lumber = discarded furniture

dual carriageway = divided highway