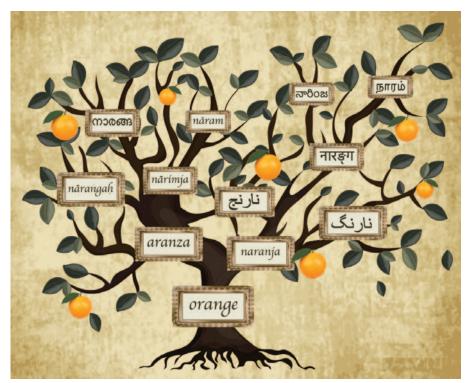# *What's in a* word?

Robin Meyer outlines how teachers can foster an understanding of the history and evolution of words as an aid to language learning

When you have been teaching languages for a while, it is almost inevitable that you will come across that one student who asks a question you did not anticipate, do not have an answer to, or simply cannot afford the time to answer in sufficient detail. It happens and one gets over it.

What, however, if it happens multiple times in a class? Worse yet, what if the question is 'why?' – 'Why do some French words, like *œuil* and *œuf*, have plurals with unpredictable pronunciations?' 'Why do some Ancient Greek verbs have a supposedly regular weak aorist tense but lack the tell-tale past marker, like ἔμεινα without -σ-?' 'Why is it 'orange' in English, *Orange* in German, *orange* in French, but *naranja* in Spanish?'

How do you engage with a student who wants not only to learn a language, but to understand how and why it works the way it does? As a language teacher and historical linguist, I recognise this need to know. A well-curated set of historical linguistic details of the language one studies can make learning and understanding some of its idiosyncrasies easier – or at least more memorable. Call it enrichment if you like.

Sceptical? Let me try to convince you. In a year-long, intensive language-learning setting at university, my approach was to differentiate between three categories of linguistic facts:
1 Those that make language learning easier
2 Those that contribute to general knowledge
3 Less important ones (from a language learning perspective), of interest only to a small number of students.

The first would always form a firm part of the lesson plan; the second would be included if time allowed; the latter I would share with individuals after class or by email.

Making learning easier

What do historical linguistic facts that make language learning easier look like, I can hear you ask. Let's consider a few examples. At the most basic level, this might involve telling students of French that the circumflex in many cases is the remnant of a historical 's' in the word: think of the French-English pairs *hôtel*/'hostel', *forêt*/'forest', *pâté*/'paste'.

Coming back to the Greek aorist tense, here the linguistically savvy learner saves time and energy by turning 'irregular' forms, which would have to be learnt by rote, into regular forms with a twist. That twist – a historical sound change – can be expressed as a simple rule: verbs whose stem ends in a nasal or liquid ('m', 'n', 'l', 'r') 'lose' the regular tense-marker -σ- and lengthen their stem vowel in compensation. So you have μένω-ἔμεινα ('I remain(ed)'), ἀγγέλλω-ἤγγειλα ('I announce(d)'), δέρω-ἔδειρα ('I flay(ed)').[1] Knowing about this, and similar historical sound changes for other classes of verb, saves you the trouble of learning a whole host of irregular verbs.

For a more modern, practical example, think about the (traditional) pronunciation of a few French word pairs: *œuf* (/œf/) and *œufs* (/ø/); *ours* (/uʁs/) and *ours* (/uʁ/); and *œil* (/œj/) and *yeux* (/jø/), meaning 'egg(s)', 'bear(s)' and 'eye(s)' respectively.[2] Here, the potentially confusing pronunciation of *œufs* as /ø/ is historically regular, since /f/ was lost before final /s/ in Old French (as were some other sounds). Thus we also get *bœufs* (/bø/) for 'cows' and *cerfs* (/sɛʁ/) for 'stags'.

Final /s/ was lost at roughly the same time. Accordingly, the plural *ours* (/uʁ/) is regular and it is, in fact, the singular form *ours* (/uʁs/) in which the pronunciation of final /s/ was reintroduced.[3] This kind of process aids disambiguation in many cases. After all, it is useful to know whether you are being chased by one or multiple bears.

We can observe a similar phenomenon in words like *plus*, which is pronounced with or without an /s/ depending on grammatical context, and *fils* (/fis/), which enables the word ('son') to be told apart clearly from *fille* (/fij/) and *fil* (/fil/), meaning 'daughter' and 'yarn/thread'.

Catering to all students

Talking about historical linguistics is important for two simple reasons: firstly, rules are 'boring' while quasi-magical explanations can enchant; and secondly, learners must realise earlier rather than later that languages are not immutable, monolithic abstracts and can vary significantly both across and at any one time.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the needs of all students, not just the keen linguists, must be taken into account. There is always the danger of losing a part of the class – those who are less interested in those aspects of language. Setting, personality and background knowledge will dictate how to approach this conundrum, and which facts – which helpful bits – to include. There isn't a 'one size fits all' approach.

Still, the charming and quaint nature of such explanations has proved useful on a regular basis in my experience. Its real impact transpired in a rather humorous turn of events one year. A group of students who had been learning Ancient Greek with me for nine

months decided to immortalise, on a T-shirt, the most important thing they had taken away from our classes: "The Greek θεός is not cognate with Latin *deus*."

They had remembered well and I was really pleased: θεός ('god') is more closely related to Latin *fēstus* ('solemn, festive') and *fēriae* ('holidays'). Latin *deus* ('god'), in turn, shares an origin with Greek Ζεύς ('Zeus'). What struck me most and reaffirmed my approach to teaching ancient languages was their choice, not of a lexical, grammatical, literary or historical detail as the epitome of our classes, but of a historical linguistic fact.

Sparking enthusiasm

Similarly, a pair of historians learning Ancient Greek could initially not believe that when a word for 'orange' (the fruit) entered Europe's languages it started with an 'n'. Only by two processes, called haplology and metanalysis, did the medieval Italian variant *una naranza* lose its initial 'n', turning first into something like *u'naranza* (loss of the repeated syllable 'na') and then *un' aranza*. Via French mediation, a similar form gave us 'orange'.[4]

Spanish, by contrast, has retained the original form in *naranja* which, via Arabic, came from Sanskrit *nāraṅga* (नारङ्ग; itself a borrowing from a Dravidian language). Such processes are not uncommon: think of 'adder' and German *Natter* (*a nadder* > 'an adder'). A nickname was originally an eke-name, meaning an additional name.

These latter bits of information are admittedly not crucial to any language learner's experience of the language. They do, however, show language change in action and might motivate learners less keen on literature, especially in or leading up to university courses. The key difficulty for us as teachers is the sparsity of tailor-made resources for this purpose, and often a lack of training. Yet with some zeal, and a decent historical or historically minded grammar and dictionary,[5] one can do a lot of good.

Not everyone wants to become an expert in the history of the language they teach. But where a few minutes' reading can potentially save our students some arduous rote learning, and might do much to wake their enthusiasm

for a language, it is well worth searching for the historical linguist in yourself.

Notes
1 In all of these words, the digraph <ει> is not a diphthong, as orthography might suggest, but represents a long close-mid front vowel /eː/
2 Modern pronunciation is, of course, variable and depends on a number of factors, such as age and origin of the speaker. These traditional pronunciations are suggested in the *Trésor de la langue française*; http://atilf.atilf.fr
3 The form with /s/ was likely never lost entirely, but persisted as a by-form used in specific phonotactic contexts and in dialects
4 The details of the historical processes involved are more complex, but the basic principles hold
5 Useful resources include the blog of Dr Matthew Scarborough (https://consulting philologist.wordpress.com); for French, the *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Le Robert, 2016); for German, *Kluge. Etymologsches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (De Gruyter, 2011); and for English, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OUP)

THE STUDENT VIEW

Bertina Ho, Classics at St Anne's College, Oxford
"We always had little nuggets of historical linguistics in our lessons. I might not have fully understood Grassmann's Law to begin with, but it did make declining θρίξ, τριχός ('hair') easy to remember – suddenly the irregularity made sense!"

Mary Curwen, Classics and Oriental Studies at St John's College, Oxford
"Beyond specific examples, I simply remember that my own personal 'need' to know why things are as they are was served and satisfied by the indulgence of all my questions – honestly, half of the things we were learning would not have made sense without those historical linguistic digressions; they contextualised what we were learning and explained the patterns. These tangents made sure that I have never forgotten these connections."