

Myth: English is getting worse

How could someone conclude this?

One would need to establish two things:

1. that English has changed over time
2. that by some criteria for 'goodness', earlier English was better than current English

Do languages change?

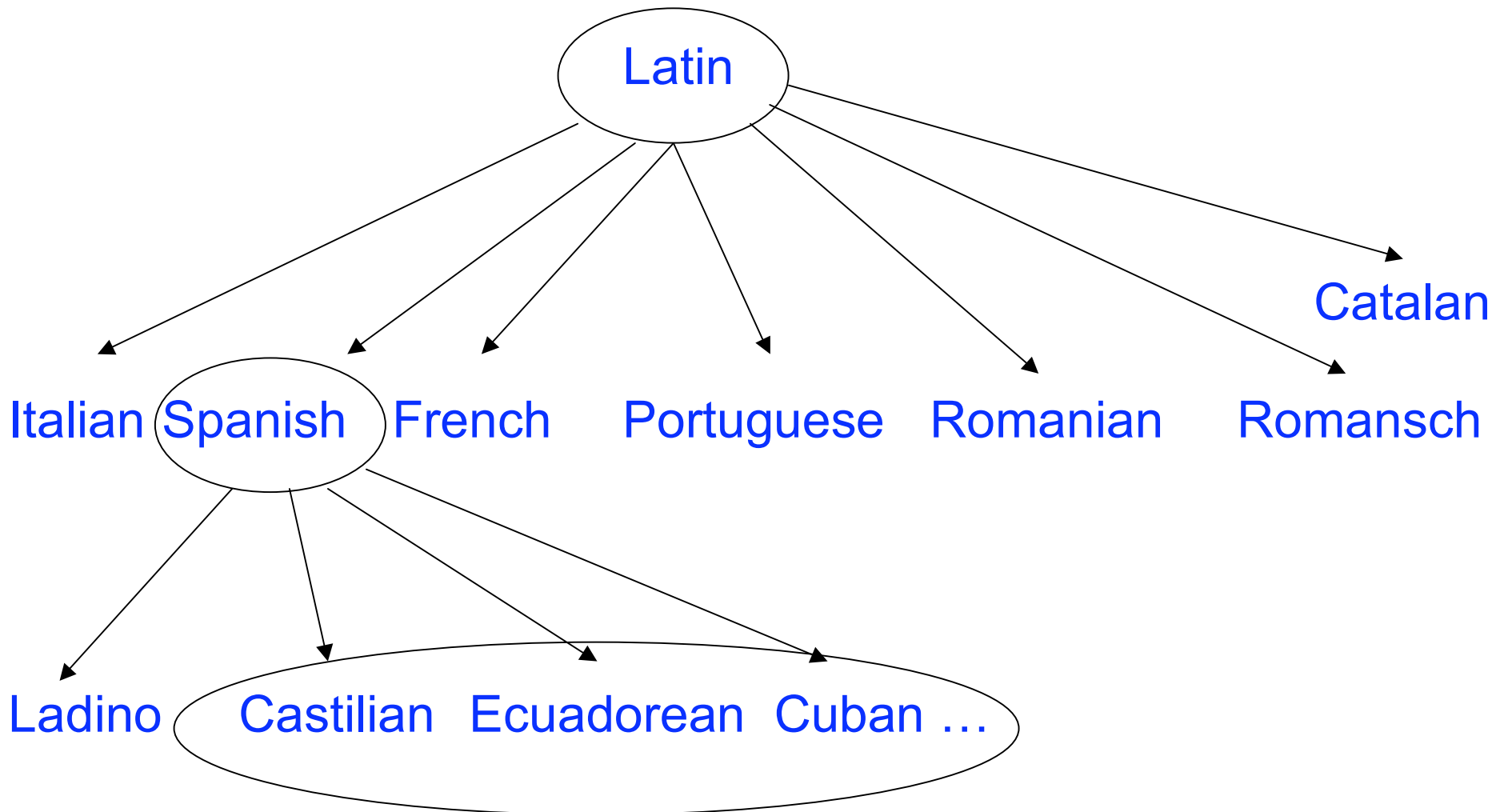
- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---------|
| 1. | Pater noster, qui es in caelis | Latin |
| 2. | Padre nostro, che sei nei cieli | Italian |
| 3. | Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo | Spanish |
| 4. | Notre Père, qui es aux cieux | French |
| 5. | Our father, who art in heaven | English |
| 6. | sanctificetur nomen tuum | Latin |
| 7. | sia santificato il tuo nome | Italian |
| 8. | santificado sea el tu nombre | Spanish |
| 9. | que ton nom soit sanctifié | French |
| 10. | hallowed be thy name | English |
| 11. | adveniat regnum tuum | Latin |
| 12. | venga il tuo regno | Italian |
| 13. | venga tu reino | Spanish |
| 14. | que ton règne vienne | French |
| 15. | thy kingdom come | English |

Do languages change?

16.	fiat voluntas tua	Latin
17.	sia fatta la tua volontà	Italian
18.	hágase tu voluntad	Spanish
19.	que ta volonté soit faite	French
20.	let your will be done	English
21.	Da nobis hodie	Latin
22.	Dacci oggi	Italian
23.	Danos hoy	Spanish
24.	Donne-nous aujourd'hui	French
25.	Give us today	English
...		
26.	et ne nos inducas in tentationem	Latin
27.	e non c'indurre in tentazione	Italian
28.	no nos dejes caer en la tentación	Spanish
29.	et ne nous soumetts pas à la tentation	French
30.	And lead us not into temptation	English

The Romance language family

Stammbaum [genealogical tree]:



Some common source: Indo-European

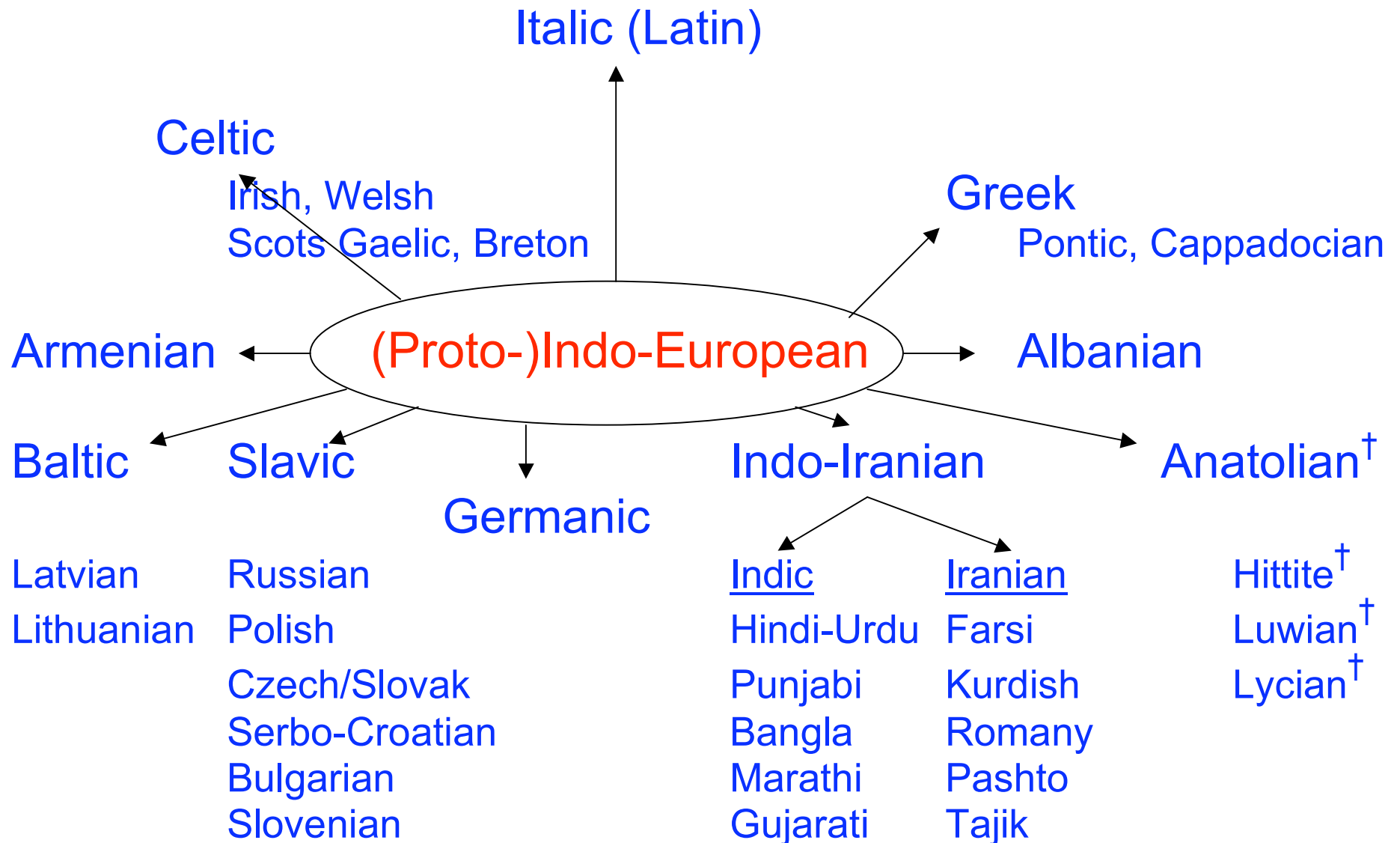
Sir William Jones, 1786:

“The Sanscrit language ... is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists”

Some common source: Indo-European



Some common source: Indo-European



Some common source: Indo-European



The tower of Babel

Two theories for language differentiation:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. .
And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose
top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we
be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

... And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have
all one language; and this they begin to do... Go to, let us go
down, and there confound their language, that they may not
understand one another's speech....

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did
there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did
the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

[Genesis 11:1-9]

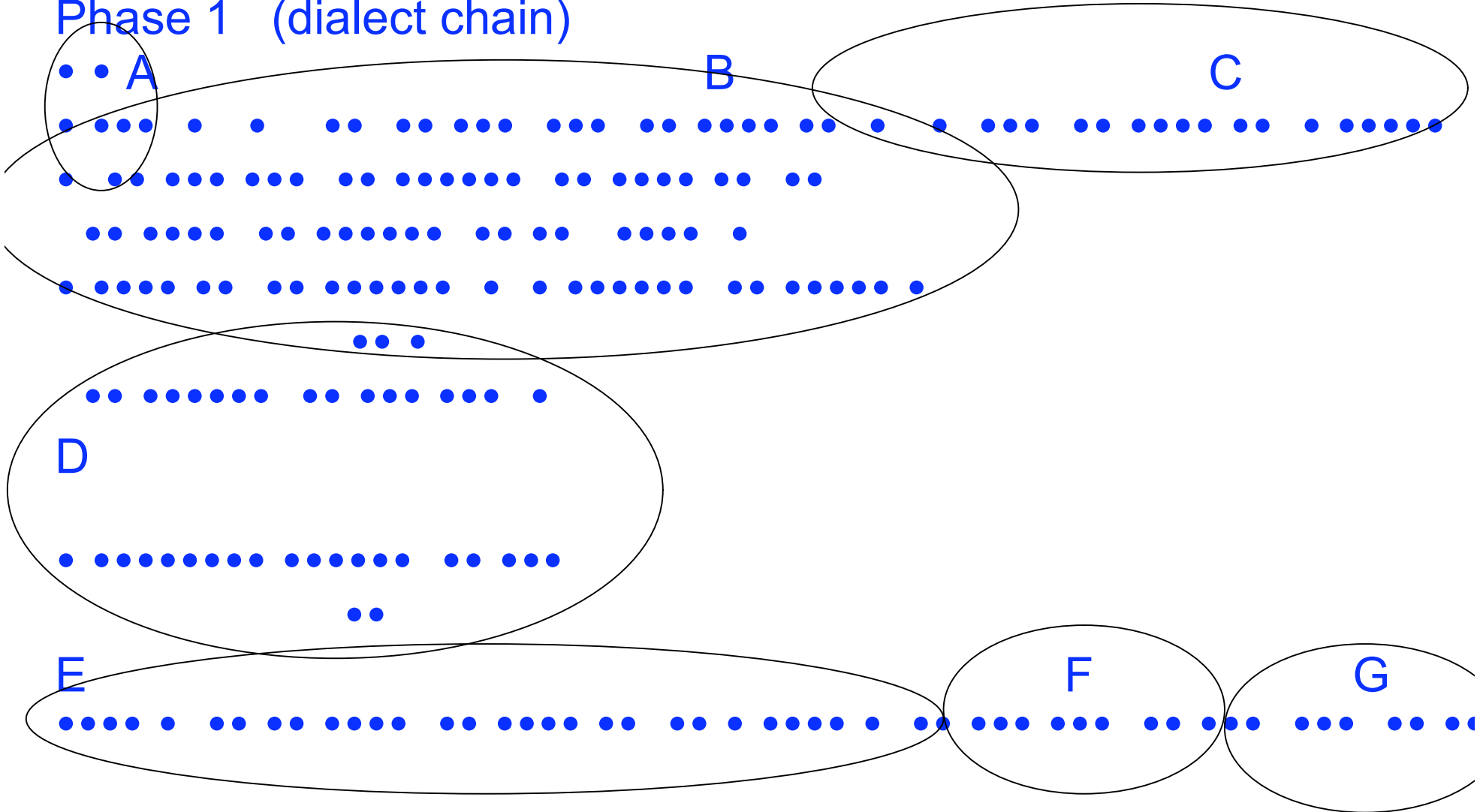
The tower of Babel

Two theories for language differentiation:

“the formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same” Charles Darwin

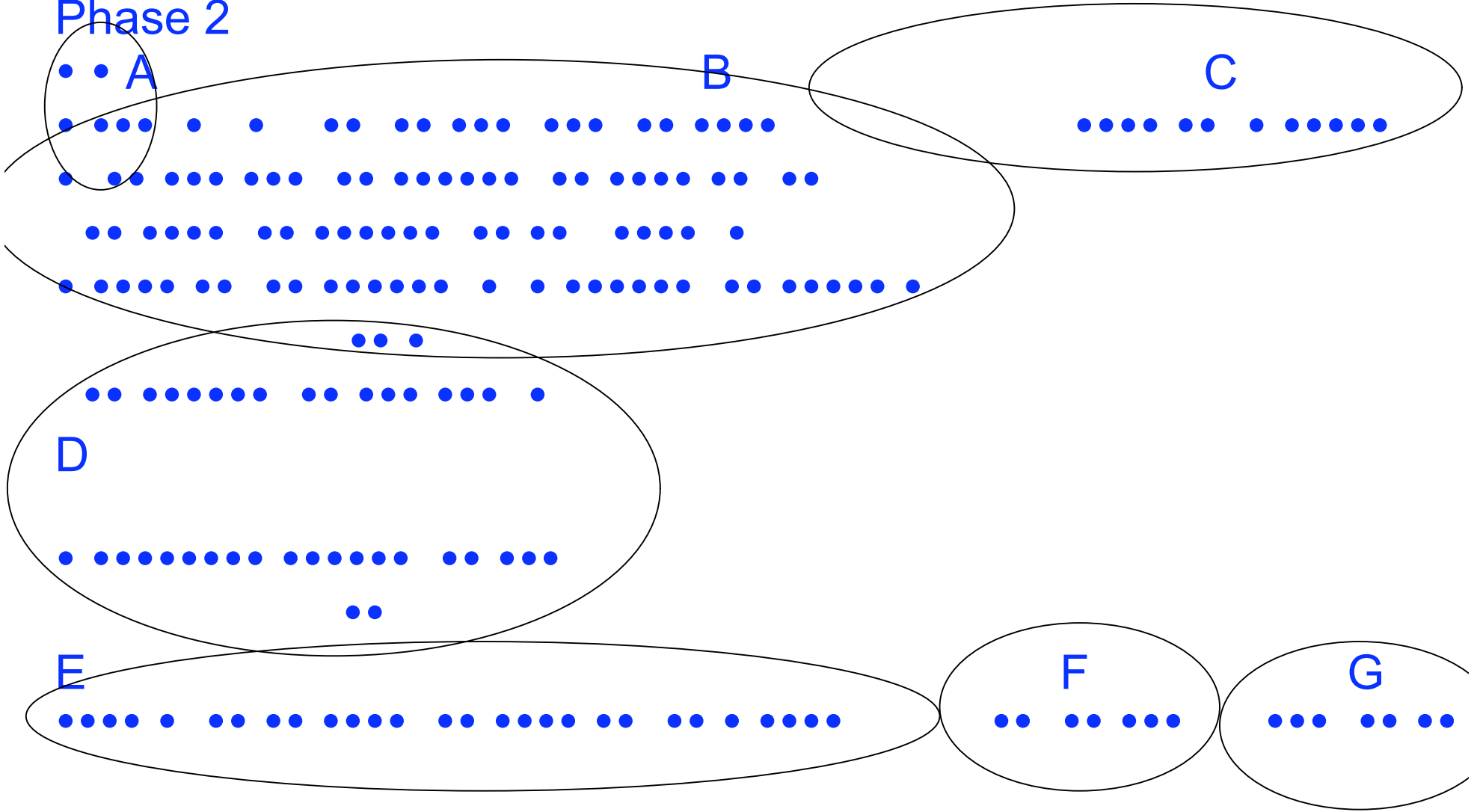
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 1 (dialect chain)



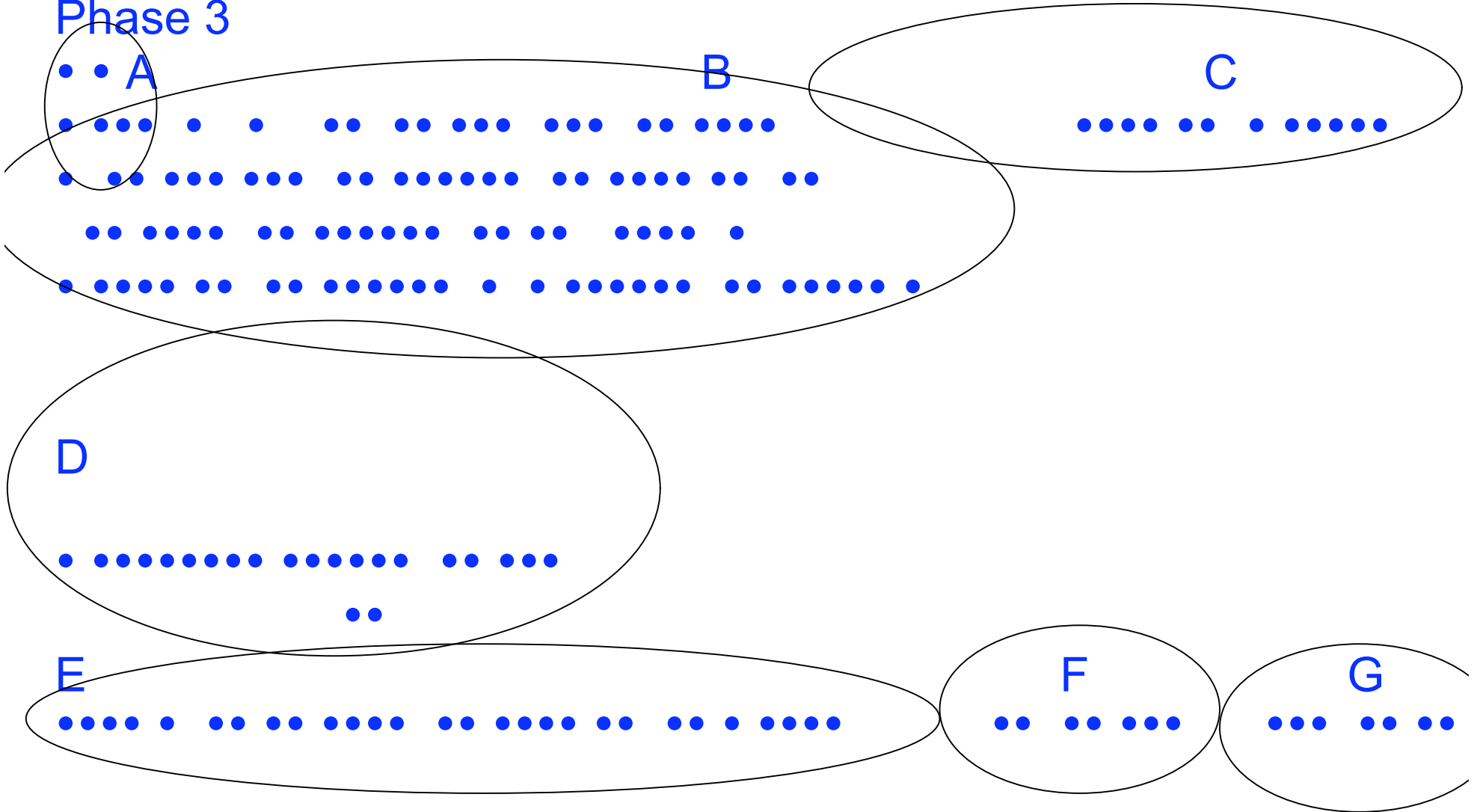
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 2



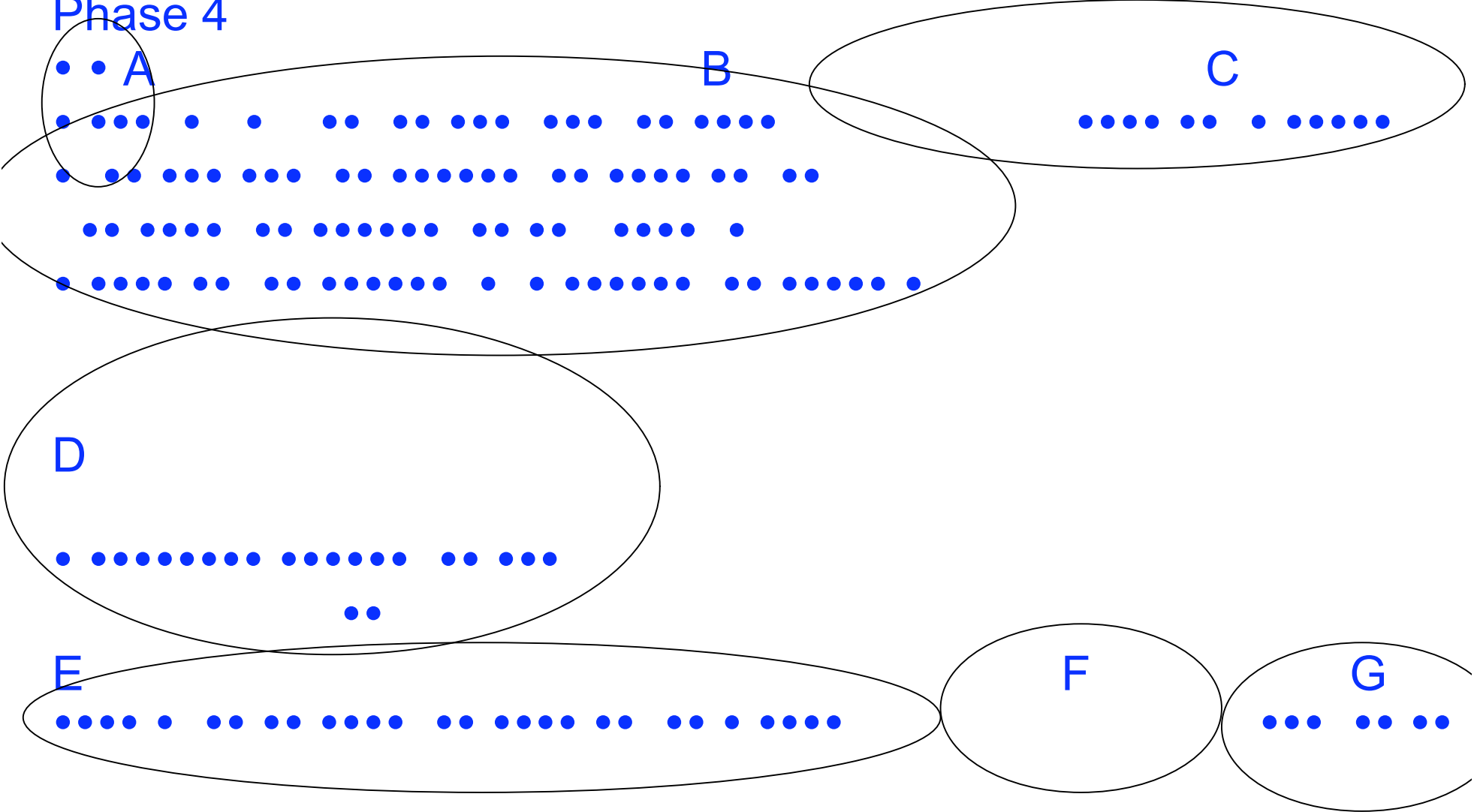
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 3



Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 4



Variation + separation → differentiation

Language family ≈ genus

Language ≈ species

Dialect ≈ variety, breed

Language differentiation ≈ speciation

Mutual intelligibility ≈ interbreedability

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Mutual intelligibility ≈ interbreedability

“Spanish”

Castilian Cuban Mexican Ecuadorean Argentinian

What language is this?

[mystery.language.wav](#)

What language is this?

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
Si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurpe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg

and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum

and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele sopleice

Father our thou that art in heavens
be thy name hallowed
come thy kingdom
be-done thy will
on earth as in heavens

our daily bread give us today
and forgive us our sins

as we forgive those-who-have-
sinned-against-us

and not lead thou us into temptation
but deliver us from evil. truly.

What language is this?

From a 13th century MS in the library of Caius college, Cambridge

Fader oure that art in heve, i-halgeed be thi nome, i-cume thi kinereiche,
y-worthe thi wylle also is in hevene so be an erthe, oure iche-dayes-bred
zif us today, and forzif us our gultes, also we forzifet oure gultare, and ne
led ows nowth into fendingge, auth ales ows of harme. So be it.

[Middle English version from: from Monumenta Ritualia Ecclesiae Anglicanae, William Maskell, M. A., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1882]

Kinds of change

PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE:

1. Changes in the inventory of sounds:

(a) loss of sounds: voiceless velar fricative [x] (**night**)

(b) addition of sounds:

[ʒ] in **treasure**, **garage**

[v]/[f] became separate phonemes (sound split): **live** vs. **life**

(c) sound shifts

The "Great Vowel Shift" (15th C.):

all the (seven) long vowels underwent changes

sound spelling in OE → spelling inconsistencies today

nama = [na:ma] in Old English vs. *name* [neɪm] now

Kinds of change

PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE:

2. Changes in the patterns of sounds in a word

(a) metathesis (sound reversal):

bridd → bird; hros → horse; ask → aks

(b) epenthesis (addition of a sound inside a word):

spinel → spindle; æmtig → empty

(c) syncope (dropping a sound) (also apocope, aphaeresis)

stanas → stones; droppèd → drop'd; sent → sen';
and → (a)n'; him/them → 'm, is/has → 's

Kinds of change

WORD MEANING CHANGE (Humpty Dumpty principle)

1. Broadening (or generalization):

dogge = specific breed of dog in OE (now, any dog)

2. Narrowing:

mete [meat] = any kind of food in OE

hund (hound) = dog in OE, now a breed

hlaf (loaf) = bread

3. Semantic shift:

(a) amelioration:

from a negative to a positive marker [- → +]

Gothic, Impressionism, Quakers

(b) pejoration:

from a positive to a negative marker [+ → -]

harlot (= maidservant); **lewd** (= layperson); **ivory tower**

Kinds of change

LEXICAL CHANGE:

1. Addition of words:

borrowing: direct vs. indirect (via another language)
 linguistic **alcohol**
 (bi)lingual (< Sp. alcohol, <Arabic al-kuhl)
 language
 (< Lat. *lingua*,
 French *langue*, *language*)

loan translation (borrowing of a phrase or idiom)
German **Fernseher** (lit. far-seer) from
 television (cf. Fernsprecher telephone)
 superman < German **Übermensch**

(by one count: 60% of words in English are borrowed, but 90% of the most common words are Anglo-Saxon)

Kinds of change

LEXICAL CHANGE:

2. Loss of words:

Kinds of change

SYNTACTIC CHANGE:

X Verb Subject Y → X Subject Verb Y

Old English (450-1100):

þæt hus hæfdon Romane to þæm anum tacne geworht
that building had R. with the one feature constructed
'Romans had built that building with the one feature'

Middle English (1100-1500):

Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes, And for to drynken strong wyn, reed as blood; Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood.	He loved well garlic, onions, and also leek And to drink strong wine, red as blood; Then he would talk and shout as if he were crazy.
And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn, Than wolde he speke no word but Latyn. A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre,	And when he'd drunk up the wine Then he wouldn't speak anything but Latyn Some phrases he had learned, two or three

Chaucer (d. 1400); General prologue, The Summoner

Kinds of change

SYNTACTIC CHANGE:

'Double' negatives

He **never** yet in al his lyf **ne** seyde 'He never yet in all his life said
No vileynie unto **no** maner wight . . . a mean word to any kind of being

(Chaucer, General Prologue, The Knight)

Viola says of her heart,

"Nor never none/Shall mistress of it be, save I alone."

(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night)

Change is bad?

'[McWhorter] warns that the near-total loss of formal expression in America is unprecedented in modern history and has reached a crisis point in our culture such that our very ability to convey ideas and arguments effectively is gravely threatened'

[Doing our own thing: The degradation of language and music and what we should, like, care (John McWhorter, 2003, Gotham), back cover]

Simon 1980:

“The trouble with grammatical errors [sic] ... is ... that they multiply and proliferate until all is error and confusion.”

“We must urgently stop *between you and I*. Otherwise, it will lead us to every kind of deleterious misunderstanding.”

Word pet peeves writ large

disinterested vs. uninterested

(disengaged/unengaged)

(amoral/immoral/unmoral/antimoral/dismoral)

who vs. whom

hopefully [subject-oriented: in a hopeful manner, cf. *intelligently*]
[speaker-oriented: I hope that ..., cf. *frankly*]

cf. the two uses of 'honestly':

- (1) Libby carefully and honestly signed his name.
- (2) Honestly, Libby is a liar.

Word pet peeves writ large

It is me is a 'vulgar, inferior form of' *It is I* (Simon 1980:20)

English:	It's me.	It's I.	I'm it.	I'm me. (??I'm I.)
French:	C'est moi.	*C'est je.	Je le suis.	Je suis moi.
German:	*Das ist mich.	*Das ist ich.	Ich bin's.	*Ich bin mich.
Latin:	*Me est.	*Ego est.	Ego sum.	*Me sum.

*It am I.

So: progress or decay, or just variation? or maybe criminal activity?

The knives come out

“Language, I think, belongs to two groups only: gifted individuals, who use it imaginatively; and the fellowship of men and women, whoever they are, who, without being particularly inventive, nevertheless endeavor to speak and write correctly” (Simon 1980:24)

“Language, for the most part, changes out of **ignorance**” (Simon 1980:18)

[Violating a prescriptive rule is] “**sinful**” (Simon 1980:24)

“The worst **crimes** against English are committed not by the underprivileged but by bureaucrats in academia, government and business” (‘Speech crimes’, Patricia T. O’Conner, New York Times, March 11, 2007)

The not-so-hidden subtext: maintaining sociological distinctions

Prescriptive grammar: Criteria for well-being'

1. Remember to never split an infinitive.
2. The passive voice should never be used.
3. Do not put statements in the negative form.
4. Verbs have to agree with their subjects.
5. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
6. A preposition is a terrible word to end a sentence with.
7. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more words, to their antecedents.
8. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
9. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
10. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular noun in their writing.
11. The adverb always follows the verb.

Shibboleth ('stream, torrent'):

After Gilead defeated Ephraim (around 1370–1070 BC), some Ephraimites tried to sneak into Gilead to escape the genocide.

“And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.” (Judges 12:5-6, KJV)

(‘Scheveningen’ supposedly used by Dutch in WWII to find German spies
‘Wayzata’ for non-Minnesotans)

Why does change occur?

From below?

laziness (the lower classes are lazy or stupid and don't bother to learn)

From above?

arms race (upper classes continually differentiate their speech, lower classes continually try to mimic it)

imperfect learning (adult → child transmission)

peer-to-peer homogenization (build, claim solidarity, friendship, intimacy)

prestige, influence

Antichange for aesthetic reasons

“I know in my heart that the English language is the finest instrument the human race has ever devised to express its thoughts and feelings”
(Bernard Lewis, quoted in McWhorter 2003:165).

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- There is no obvious metric by which modern English is ‘worse’ or ‘better’ than earlier forms of the language
- A standard spelling for a large language community (with typical amounts of variation) is useful
- Clear, forceful, cogent, accurate, precise expression (whether in writing or speech) is highly desirable—but completely unrelated to the standard shibboleths of the language mavens