IDENTIFYING THE CHANGE

**Orthography** is spelling and how words look – in old-fashioned texts this would include capital letters on nouns, the long s, the old f that looks like an s. Phonetic spelling is worth discussing (partly because originally all spelling was phonetic)

**Grammar** in really old texts will have different word order - Chaucer’s time was s-o-v. Grammar includes morphology/inflection, so old texts had a greater variety of endings marking that nouns were plural (-en, -i, -s, mostly regularised to –s). Use of auxiliary verbs. Regularisation; analogy. Pronouns have changed: thee/thou giving way to you/you. Many older texts will have longer sentences or paragraphs and more subordination, but REMEMBER that some modern texts are complicated too, and the fact that you don’t read those texts much doesn’t mean that they don’t exist.

**Lexis** will likely be easy to discuss; see neologisms section. Try to identify why any new words have come about (New social need? New object? New activity?) as well as where exactly they’ve come from (borrowing?) or how they’ve been formed

**Semantic change** includes register drift, pejoration/amelioration, semantic bleaching, and words taking on more metaphorical uses (“I’m on it”; “We’ll be covering this story”)

**Phonology** will show changes driven by erosion/efficiency/ease of articulation, but is sometimes tricky to analyse on written data (unless it’s a poem/song that’s clearly meant to rhyme). If change is evident, try to be specific about why it’s changed: is it unstressed syllables being omitted (‘lib’ry’), or terminal consonants being omitted or assimilated, or complicated consonant blends being simplified (‘hambag’, ‘texed’)?

**Synchronic/diachronic variation** needs to be separated out as best you can – refer to context a lot! Are the differences you’re seeing down to long-term changes in the language or are they specific to the context they’re produced in? Be tentative.

PROCESSES AT WORK

Is **efficiency** changing things? Is **expressiveness** creating new, longer expressions?

Is **semantic bleaching** happening? Is **ease of articulation** causing erosion or assimilation? Is **lexical competition** changing spelling, or creating more synchronic variety?

Are **social values** making certain ways of pronouncing words more or less popular (Labov and Martha’s Vineyard; Peter Trudgill in Norwich; “Cop of coffee” in New York)? Steven Pinker: “Language change is a game of broken telephone.”

THE CORE (see spectacular patented swirly language change diagram!)

How near the core of the language has change occurred? Is it just new concrete nouns appearing for new objects, or playful inflections on existing words (like “hogzilla”)? Are there deeper changes in more significant areas like morphology/inflection or word order? Are the changes in the area of content words, or have the function words changed? Are the light verbs the same? (Remember that the 100 most-used words in English today are all from Anglo-Saxon)

CARRYING THE LOAD

How much of the work of the language is being done by morphology/inflection and how much by syntax? Is there a difference between the texts you’re examining?

Steven Pinker: “all distinctions in English inflection have been declining for the past thousand years; syntax has been shouldering the load formerly borne by morphology.”

In Chaucer’s time there was a lot more inflection, so word order mattered less; now word order is more important (and auxiliaries help too). Latin depended heavily on inflection, and many early linguists studying English thought Latin was the best language, so English was criticised by prescriptivists for losing inflections (when really neither is better than the other).

NEOLOGISMS

Prefixation/suffixation; conversion; compounding; reduplication; clipping; acronyms; blends; coining; initialisms; cran-morphs
Theories

Wild speculation (fun to drop in):
Theories of the origins of language: Yo-he-ho theory, bow-wow theory, mama theory etc..
Bullseye theory of sound change (Charles Hockett’s “Theory of Random Deviation”)
Hermann Paul (1886) changes in speech come from random slips of the tongue or mishearing
Silly prescriptivist models – Aitchison calls them ‘crumbling castle’; ‘damp spoon’; ‘infectious disease’
August Schleicher – prehistorical growth and then decay
Lenneberg’s “Critical period hypothesis” people (mis)learn language young and that’s then fixed forever
Worth discussing:
Cultural change sounds vague but is a massive area and the exam texts seem to favour discussing it. Look for changes related to: technology; greater informality/equality; religion; social mobility; consumerism; more interactivity (in tech texts); lower entry barriers to publishing; more literacy.
Substratum theory (immigrants learn new language imperfectly and features persist)
The future: English disintegrating into separate languages (like Latin became French/Spanish/Italian)? English becoming a unified world standard (language death and dialect levelling support this idea)? Or bidialectism (people having both their local dialect of English and Standard English)?
Remember to always acknowledge the inadequacy of the small amount of data you’ve got – what other stuff would you like to see to be able to comment with more certainty? (remember in many old texts there would be variation in spelling EVEN WITHIN THE SAME TEXT) Can you tell whether/how far this is DIACHRONIC CHANGE or SYNCHRONIC VARIATION? What role is context playing? Remember that any time in history (and more so towards the present) will have different people and areas of life producing a wide variety of written styles. Because of this, you should always be cautious and tentative about identifying anything in modern texts as a permanent, long-term (diachronic) change.

Prescriptivist/Descriptivist
Is language change discussed as if it represents or reflects badly on the people that use it? Is there blame involved, or an idea of everything somehow getting worse? What is supposed to be at fault? Is it linked to MORAL DECAY? Is there an idea that people are/will be unable to communicate?
Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary was surprisingly descriptivist but grammar books like Lowth’s or Noah Webster’s or “The elements of style” dictate what they think people should use. Other prescriptivist ideas: Bishop John Wilkins (17C) tried to develop an alternative to English that would do away with all inconsistency and irregularity. George Bernard Shaw invented a new alphabet that was supposed to better match the sounds of English.
Some prescriptivists: John Honey; John Humphrys; Robert Lowth; Noah Webster; George Bernard Shaw. JG Becanus (16C) thought Adam and Eve spoke German in the Garden of Eden Charles V of Germany (16C) spoke (there are different accounts of this) French to men, Italian to women, Spanish to God and German to horses. Prescriptivists love to weigh in on texting at the moment. August Schleicher; idea of prehistorical language growth and then later decay. Jean Aitchison; “crumbling castle”, “damp spoon” and “infectious disease”
Some descriptivists: David Crystal; Steven Pinker; Peter Trudgill; Jean Aitchison; Betty Hart…and pretty much every Professor of Linguistics anywhere.

Some Dates
1362 English made official language of Parliament
1400ish The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer
1476 Caxton’s printing press starts up in London
1599 Shakespeare writes Hamlet and Julius Caesar
1611 King James Bible
15th and 16th centuries – debates about pure English and influx of new words (inkhorns)
1755 Johnson’s Dictionary
1762 Robert Lowth’s Short Introduction to English Grammar published
1828 Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language
1880 Education made compulsory
1888 First little bit of the OED published
1928 First full edition of the OED published