The history of English is rather like a forgotten steamer trunk, apparently once belonging to your half-mad great uncle Egbert, discovered in your attic as you are clearing out your remaining worldly goods following a house fire. There, half burnt and half sodden, lie a variety of inscrutable, and in many cases apparently indecipherable documents. The antique penmanship is elegant and beautiful, but the language doesn’t even look like English – or does it? Further investigation will be required.

In truth, what we call “Old English,” and what linguists refer to as “West Saxon,” was the language of only one of our mad uncles. There was also our mad Aunt Hérmione, whose trunk was mixed up with Uncle Egbert’s – and just as sure as there’s peanut butter in your chocolate, there’s a good bit of Norman French in your Anglo Saxon. This is due to the Norman Conquest of that famous year, 1066, in which a single skirmish, with the help of a fortuitous arrow shot through the eye-socket of the Saxon king Harald, led to the governance of England by two centuries’ worth of Norman kings and aristocrats. The aristocrats were few, however, and the peasants were revolting (aren’t they always?), and so eventually in the late fourteenth century, English emerged again as the language of King and court – but it was a changed language, with only a small share of the Saxon word-hoard to its name. This was the English of Chaucer, which is just barely readable, with some effort, today. From there, English carried on, borrowing a few cart-loads of Latin and Greek in the sixteenth century, coining quite a few words of its own along the way, and eventually, in the eras of the British and American empires, becoming what I like to call “the vacuum cleaner of all languages.” From Patagonia to the Antilles, from the boondocks of southeast Asia to the sod huts of old Ireland, English has grown, by borrowing, theft, and coinage, to be the world’s most capacious tongue, with millions of words to its name and thousands of varieties spoken and written around the globe, of which Modern US English (MUSE), our current purported ‘standard’ is only one, and only the latest. This course will trace this complex and variegated history through both analysis of change over time (including word (lexical), syntactical, and phonological (pronunciation) changes.

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

**WEEK I**

**WEEK II**

WEEK IV Monday: The Inkhorn Controversy. Tuesday: The earliest English grammars and dictionaries. Wednesday: English in the later 17th and 18th Centuries; Dr. Johnson (in-class video: “Ink and Incapacity”). Thursday: Duelling grammarians. Exercise II handed out.


Written Exercises

There will be three written exercises – a practice etymology (word history, not to be confused with entomology, which is the study of bugs), an analysis of a piece of historical prose, and a phonological (sound) analysis of a recording made sometime after Tom Edison recited “Mary Had a Little Lamb” into his cylinder recorder in 1877. There will also be an open-book final exam, but no final paper. Your course grade will be based on active class participation, the average of the three written exercises; and the exam, as follows: Participation, 20%; Exercise 1, 20%; Exercise 2, 20%; Exercise 3, 20%; Final Exam 20%.