The Secret Lives of Words Project:  
Word histories, mysteries, and etymologies

The Aims/Objectives/Goals

For this project you will be using words a medium through which to explore a topic that interest you by using the language and tools of an etymologist. Here are three questions that should frame your investigations:

1) How are the uses/meanings of specific words unique to your particular field?
2) How did these words come to acquire that specific use/meaning?
3) What can you learn about the history of your field of inquiry (i.e. neuroscience, narcotics, the circus, R&B) through an examination of its vocabulary (either technical (i.e. neuroscience, literary criticism), or words associated with a specific group (i.e. rap artists, Olympic curling--winter sport, not of the bicep variety)?

- This is a group project. You will be working in groups of 3-4 students. Your task is to examine a specific set of words that interest you.
- These words either belong to a specific academic discipline (chemistry, philology, rhetoric, linguistics, theater, neuroscience, environmental studies), a hobby (a specific sport, food (specific cuisine or the language of critique, a specific author’s works, art, music (specific genres/artists), a group of people living in a specific time or place, or the language of a specific register.
- You must examine a minimum of 12 words. You may also include idioms or phrases specific to your field of inquiry.

The Tasks

Task 1 (Friday, March 7): By 11.59 pm on Friday, March 7 please send me a possible field of inquiry (i.e. I want to examine the language of neuroscience, Angel Haze, football, Sean Combs, The Golden Compass, basketball, environmentalism, feminism). Please be as specific as possible.

Task 2 (Sunday, March 9): You will receive an email from me with your group members and your topic by Sunday, March 9, 11.59 pm. I will send this email to groups so that you will all have one another’s email address for communication outside of class (please email me on Friday if you do not want your email address shared).

Task 3 (Tuesday, March 11): You will have some time in class on Tuesday to begin compiling a list of words that you plan to investigate within your specific field of inquiry.

Task 4 (Thursday, March 13): By 11.59 pm, Thursday, March 13, please send a brief description of the visual/interactive component.

Task 5 (Monday, March 17): By 11.59 pm, Monday, March 17 please email six sources that you plan to use for this project. You must use at least one academic journal article/chapter from a book/book, one news article/blog, one website. You must use your skills of source discernment to determine the reliability of sources for your specific field of inquiry. For example, if you are examining the language of neuroscience, then you should not use urbandictionary.com, unless you are making a specific point that requires a discussion of a word’s meaning in a non-scientific context. However, other fields of inquiry, i.e. those pertaining to popular culture, will require that you consult urban dictionary. As you search for sources, be sure to think more generally about the culture of your specific field of inquiry, and how gender, race, politics, class, and social mobility play a role in shaping how words are used and perceived.

Task 6 (Thursday, March 20): Submit the handout by 8.30 am to me by email (one per group; I will make copies for you). Submit the paper to me by email by 6.59 pm. Make short (10 minutes) visual/interactive presentation of your material to the class. You must also include a handout (see below).
The Details (expectations/grades)

Project presentation (25% handout; 25% visual/interactive component): On Thursday, March 20 you will have 10 minutes to share the findings of your research with the class. You must include a handout that includes the list of words that you investigated and their etymologies (25%) and have a visual/interactive component to your presentation that incorporate both what you’ve learned and what conclusions you can draw (25%). I encourage you to be creative, i.e. map, graph, diagram, quote collection, game.

Written Component (50%): One set of responses per group must be submitted. You must address the following questions, and you must use at least five of the terms listed below in your response to the questions. Your paper should be 5-7 pages (spacing 1.5).

1) How did you select the words in your list? Why did you select these words?
2) What sources did you use? Why did you choose these sources?
3) What did you learn? (this is your opportunity to discuss what you’ve learned about specific words from your sources)
4) What conclusions can be drawn from your research?

Personal Pie Chart (to be submitted during class on March 20): Your own chart explaining who contributed. This is not part of your grade. It is meant to give me an idea of how much each of you contributed.

amelioration (Hughes 12; Durkin ‘Glossary’)
assimilation (Durkin ‘Glossary’)
borrowing (Durkin 44-46)
cognate (Durkin, ‘Glossary’)
coinage (Durkin 73-74)
cranberry morph (Durkin 56-58, ‘Glossary’)
deterioration (Hughes 12)
distortion (Hughes 14)
dysphemism (Hughes 15-16)
emotive intensification (Hughes 13)
euphemism (Hughes 14)
generalization (Hughes 10-11; see also broadening in Durkin ‘Glossary’)
homonymic clash (Durkin 88-88-93, ‘Glossary’)
homonymy/polysemy (Durkin 74-76, ‘Glossary’)
idiom (Durkin 42-43)
institutionalization (Durkin 49-56)
lexical change (Hughes 9)
lexicalization (Durkin 49-56)
mergers (Durkin 79-83, ‘Glossary’)
monomorphemic (Durkin 43-44, ‘Glossary’)
nonce formations (Durkin 49-56, ‘Glossary’)
productivity (Durkin 47-49)
reflex (Durkin, ‘Glossary’)
register (Hughes 9, 17; Durkin ‘Glossary’)
semantic field (Hughes 18-20; Durkin ‘Glossary’)
shift to opposite (Hughes 13)
specialization (Hughes 11; see also narrowing in Durkin, ‘Glossary’)
splits (Durkin 83-88)
suffix/prefix/affix/infix (Durkin, ‘Glossary’)
weakening (Hughes 14)

****Durkin’s ‘Glossary’ is posted under alia on the course website.