Secret Lives of Words: Final Paper

Due Date: May 17, 11.59 pm, PDF or word document.
Spacing: 1.5
Page length: 5-7

While the focus of the first half of the semester was word formation, the second half of this class focuses/will focus on semantic shifts, and seeks to better understand how etymology can be employed in a variety contexts; a word may have a ‘true’ origin, but changes in how the word is used reflect historical moments, gender dynamics, discourses of race and class, as well as political and cultural shifts. In short, words tell us stories as we trace their histories, from their origins to their current use. What do we learn by investigating the origins of a particular set of words from their roots to their modern use?

The first step is to pick a topic or ask a question. The question you ask should be vague. Once you've done your research you will be able to narrow your focus and identify the relevant data for your argument.

Here is a list of topics:

- legal language
- swear words/profanity, racial or gendered words
- beer
- military language
- psychology
- folk etymologies
- words borrowed from a non-European language
- the language and slang of sex

****You can, of course, choose a topic not on this list.

Keep in mind that you must employ etymology as a methodology in your paper.

Your paper must include the following:
1) An introduction with a clearly stated argument/thesis.
2) A sustained analysis (see below) that contributes to your argument/thesis.
3) A minimum of five primary sources (testimonia), five secondary sources, and ten words (feel free to use more). One of your sources must be Philip Durkin's Oxford Guide to Etymology (more chapters will be posted; Durkin counts as one of the five secondary sources).
4) Proper citations (you can use whatever format you would like).
5) A conclusion: Your paper must have a compelling conclusion that is not simply a summary of your introduction and/or a summary of the main points.
6) A works cited page.

WIP Session, May 1, 6, 8: On Thursday, May 1, Tuesday, May 6 and Thursday, May 8 you will present your research to the class as a work in progress. This is an opportunity for you to ask questions of the class and to receive some feedback. Please send me a handout (one page max) by Tuesday, April 29, Sunday, May 4 or Tuesday, May 6, 11.59 pm. Your handout should include your tentative argument, relevant data, and one question for the class. These handouts will be posted on the course website for consultation by your peers before class. You will each have 5 minutes to discuss your research with the class.
How to identify your thesis:
You will not be able to identify your thesis until you have conducted the necessary research. So do your research first. Next, consider what have you learned by exploring your research. What conclusions can you draw? Often you will find that your thesis has changed by the time you reach the end of your paper, when you finally draw some conclusions after analyzing your data. This is the moment when you will need to take elements of your conclusion and make them your introduction. Then you will need to revise your paper so that it is clear throughout how each point you make/paragraph you write contributes to your argument and flows with the logic of your paper. Then you can think again about how this argument is meaningful in your conclusion.

How to sustain your analysis:
As you are writing, keep in mind that writing a paper is like telling a story. Each point builds from the previous one in a logical sequence. Writing--even writing the 'truth'--is about telling a story. Just because you have identified a thesis and provided evidence does not mean that you have constructed an argument; a thesis plus evidence does not necessarily equal an argument. You have to explain how each paragraph builds off the previous one and creates an argument for the case that you are making.

You cannot assume that I will make the same connections that you do as you present the evidence. Therefore you must spend the time explaining how each quote, paragraph, and point contributes to your analysis. Your conclusion should identify what you have learned from writing this paper. If you feel that you need to restate your thesis in order to tie together your paper, then there's a good chance that you've lost track of your thesis as you were writing, and that the paragraphs that comprise the body of your paper do not explain how the evidence contributes to your thesis. Your conclusions should identify what you have learned from your analysis, and why your analysis is important.

General outline for grades:

****Please keep in mind that this outline is a 'general outline’ and cannot take into account the variable grading scenarios that one may encounter.

A: This paper will cover points 1-6 listed above, be well written, have no major factual or grammatical errors and possibly actually teach me something new.

A-: This paper does all of these things, but lacks a compelling conclusion.

B+: This paper understands the major concepts and is well researched, but the thesis is not clear, and lacks a compelling conclusion.

B: This paper understands the major concepts, but is perhaps not as well written and does not meet the minimum requirement for sources, and/or does not contribute any new insight into the material.

B-: This paper fails to show me that you did the necessary research or has a level of writing that seriously detracts from what you are saying.