

# ELang 495

## A Corpus-based Approach to the History of American English

Winter 2010

(T Th 12:05-1:20)

What's the history of these words and phrases? What do they tell us about changes in American culture and society?

pothole (1826)  
ranch (1830)  
Christmas tree (1837)  
tenderfoot (1849)  
blue jeans (1855)  
caboose (1861)  
showboat (1869)  
Chataqua (1873)  
bandwagon (1881)  
cold feet (1894)  
phony (1900)  
melting pot (1907)  
jazz (1913)  
T-shirt (1919)  
motel (1925)  
jalopy (1929)  
groovy (1937)  
teenager (1938)  
gizmo (1942)  
baby-sit (1947)  
Ms. (1952)  
brinksmanship (1956)  
carpool (1962)  
sexism (1969)  
couch potato (1975)  
geek (1978)  
yuppie (1984)  
virtual reality (1987)  
go postal (1994)  
Ebonics (1997)  
TEOTWAWKI (2000)  
tweetup (2008)

Use the two largest corpora of American English to study language change:

400 million word **Corpus of Historical American English** (COHA), 1810-2009 (new in 2010 – we'll use an early, partially-completed version)

400 million word **Corpus of Contemporary American English** (COCA), 1990-2009 (the most widely-used corpus of modern English)

We'll also use a 25 million word **Corpus of General Conference** talks (1850s-2000s), to look at changes in LDS discourse

Carry out projects that can be turned into ORCA grants, or research that can be presented at linguistics conferences

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We'll look at morphological, syntactic, and semantic change during the last 200 years of American English, answering many questions like the following:

(Morphology) Is the –ess feminine suffix (*stewardess, authoress*, etc) increasing or decreasing? Since when? And why?

(Grammar: prescriptive) What's happened with *who/whom*, *can/may*, split infinitives (*to boldly go*), and preposition stranding (*someone to talk to*) in the 1900s? When have the major changes occurred, and why?

(Syntax) When, how, and why have the following changed: *be like* (*he's like, I'm not going*), *so not ADJ* (*she's so not interested in him*), *complementation* (*began to notice / noticing*), *completives* (*he'll end up paying too much*)

(Semantics) When did the following words change meaning, and why: *lame, hot, gay, green, strike, web*

(Cultural shifts) How are we using the following in the last 30-40 years, compared to their use before that time: *woman, race, God, nature, science, mind, family*

