



Instructor: R. McLeod

~ randall.mcleod@utoronto.ca

Course Number: ENG266H5F

Course Title: English Vocabulary

Course description: The course focuses on *etymology*, the derivation of words. The class text, *Webster's New World Dictionary*, has extensive cross-referenced etymologies, and the open-book tests in most of our meetings will give practice in constructing family trees from them.

Nature, kind, pregnant, jaunty, genteel, and gonorrhoea are all members of one large family, and derive from a single root, which the dictionary gives as Indo-European “*gen-”. Indo-European is an extinct unwritten language, an ancestor of many languages that were distributed between China and Greenland before Columbus. (Slavic, Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Hellenic, Iranian, and Indic families are in this group.) These languages are related to each other through systematic phonetic shifts (of consonants, as in Grimm’s Law) and of vowels (as in the Great Vowel Shift), and it is through a knowledge of sound-shifts that Indo-European was reconstructed in the late 18th and especially the early 19th centuries.

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Students (even if all they speak is English) will gain confidence in linking the vocabularies of these languages in their historical layers, with dictionary help, through familiarity with these phonetic shifts. To understand phonetic shifts, the speech sounds of English and the dynamics of vocal sounds will need to be thoroughly studied and classified.

Required Text:

Webster's New World College Dictionary, fourth edition. (No other Webster’s dictionary is appropriate; the name “Webster’s” is out of copyright, and there are a variety of dictionaries that use this name. The open-book tests held in most every one of our meetings definitely won’t make sense with other dictionaries, and may not even with earlier editions of the assigned one.)

Method of Instruction: lecture/discussion

Method of Evaluation:

80%: 8 or more in-class, open-book tests

20%: essay