

“What Did They Mean?” How Language Changes Over Time

Background: Historians read what people in the past have written. But how can we know if they used the same words we would have in the same ways? Think of some words that have changed meaning over time. Ask people older than you or, who come from other parts of the world, to tell you about some words that can mean different things to different people.

Goal: Provide students with a simple introduction to historical thinking learning about the importance of contextualizing sources. Introduce domain-specific vocabulary (Common Core). Have some of the students read the sentences that changed the most. Discuss how this affects the understanding of a historic document or other written primary source. How can archaeology help with this problem?

Extension: Have students write sentences using the historical and contemporary meanings of the words they studied.

Adapted from: <http://teachinghistory.org/teaching-materials/lesson-plan-reviews/24682>

Procedure/Materials: Provide students with copies of an informational text from a period of history being studied in the classroom – either for individual or group work. Adjust length of piece to reading levels, time available and ease of reading.

Have students read over the document and follow the instructions below. You can either pre-select the words they will investigate or let them choose their own (2-5 words each).

For students: You have in front of you an historical record from the past. In it are some words you may be familiar with since we use them today. However, their meaning may be different now from what they meant way back then! I want you to read the document and write down in the box below what you think the word meant when this document was created. After you have completed that part, we will look and see what these words mean today and see what we find!

Words Used (place/date/event)	What do YOU think these words meant THEN?	What do they mean TODAY?

Example Lesson

“What Do You Mean?” How Language Changes Over Time

Grades 3-5

These are some words used in early accounts of settlers in western New York. What do you think they mean? Read the text and try to determine what was being said.

Words Used in Our Community in 1800s	What YOU Think They Mean	What They DID Mean Back Then!
turn		
game		
stores		
parties		
bees		
joiner		
rude		
articles		
chinked		
fowling piece		
wintered		
slashed		
hewed		
dear		
sash		

Procedure: Let students know that meanings of words change over time; some words used in the past are no longer in use today and words we use today would be unfamiliar to people from the past. Make a

3-column word wall that lists “old” words, “new” words and “old & new” words for students to uncover throughout the year as they read historical texts.

THE PIONEER'S CAMP—BUILDING HIS LOG HOUSE.



hasty meal is prepared, a few minutes are passed in conversation and many more in silent thought; after that, weariness and drowsiness overcome them and they know no more till they are awakened at dead of night by the snapping and snarling of wolves prowling about the outskirts of the opening. The fire has died down and its smouldering embers can be scarcely seen. It is the fire that has kept the wolves off till now. The man raises himself on his elbow and, lifting the corner of the canvas cover of the wagon, looks out. Presently one of the animals, more bold than his fellows, emerges from the timber and comes stealthily toward the half-startled horses.

night in their own house, even if it is unfurnished an incentive to extra exertion. The work goes on through the day. So many logs have been rolled notched together at the corners that, by night walls of the house are done. An opening has been made at one side for a door, and a smaller one opposite window. It is too late and the builders are too weary to do more than this to-night; so a couple of blankets stretched across one end of the structure to serve as a temporary roof, another is hung over the doorway and the house is ready for its first night's occupancy.

In the morning the work is resumed. Poles

I have lived on my farm forty-eight years. I have had four children. My youngest son, Benj. B. Tanner, was a Lieutenant in the 151st Regiment N. Y. Volunteers* and died in the service of his country in the war of the rebellion.

JOSIAS TANNER."

Ridgeway, April, 1864.

LUCIUS BARRETT.

"I was born in Fabius, N. Y., April 13th, 1807. I was son of Amos Barrett. My father removed with his family to Ridgeway, N. Y., in March, 1812, and settled on the Ridge Road, one mile west of Ridgeway Corners. We moved into the house of Jonathan Cobb, and resided with his family until my father got his house ready for his family. Mr. Cobb was an old neighbor of my father, and had moved to Ridgeway the year before we came.

I well remember the house my father first built with the help of the settlers in that vicinity. The walls were logs, the floor basswood logs split, and hewed, the roof covered with long shingles split from black ash, not a door about the premises, nor a board. A blanket hung at the entrance served as a door, and kept out the cold and wild beasts. The fireplace was some stones against the logs at one end of the house, and the chimney was a hole through the roof. This sheltered us from the rain, but the snow sifted in plentifully.

Farming has been my business. I bought the farm on which I have since resided, in 1831.

I was married to Electa B. Chase, of Clarkson, N. Y., April 23d, 1833.

I have lived to see the various changes through which this section of country has passed. I have known by experience the pinching pains of poverty, and I have enjoyed the comforts of competence. I

Sources: <http://www.nyheritage.org/collections/19th-century-monographs-history-wny> (19th Century monographs from WNY)

<http://www.archive.org/stream/cu31924025959531#page/n5/mode/2up> (Pioneer History of Orleans County, NY)