1. A language like English
Do you say *axe* or *ask*?

the story of *aks*:

when used for ‘ask,’ is it a signal of social or intellectual inferiority? a marker of race? a geographical variant?

metathesis: the switching of the order of two adjacent sounds: *bird* < *OE bridde*; (also: a *napron* > an *apron*  Ed > Ned  a *nadder* > an *adder*)

In Old English, *acsian* precedes 9th c. *ascian*;

both forms co-exist thru 19th c., in England and US (noted in N Engl)

by mid-20th c. [aks] had become marked as a southernism in US,

then as African Americans migrated north, [aks] became associated with AAVE/AAE

the two forms are *linguistically* equal and historically related; and curiously, the now-stigmatized form seems the earlier one.

What does this tell us about language change?
Relation of sound to meaning:

the sounds in /ask/ and /aks/ are arbitrarily associated with the word – there’s no intrinsic connection between sound and meaning

[but what about onomatopoeia?]
Words and the power to hurt:

name calling

naming taboos: when uttering a name exposes the person named to harm:

in the medieval romance tale, Percival can’t be named because it will give his enemies power over him

family name taboos: uncle X, auntie Y, grandma

when uttering a name exposes the speaker to harm:

the Scottish play
Voldemort
naming the deity / the devil
Bad Words: The King’s Speech video
George Washington disapproves of soldiers swearing.

On August 3, 1776, General Washington issued this order on profanity: "The General is sorry to be informed that the foolish, and wicked practice, of profane cursing and swearing (a Vice heretofore little known in an American Army) is growing into fashion; he hopes the officers will, by example, as well as influence, endeavour to check it, and that both they, and the men will reflect, that we can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our Arms, if we insult it by our impiety, and folly; added to this, it is a vice so mean and low, without any temptation, that every man of sense, and character, detests and despises it."
Here's the Ethicist's reply to that letter about *axe*:

Was your boss brusque? Yes. Uncouth? Perhaps. Unkempt? I can't say; I've never seen her. Racist? I can't say that either, and neither can you. There's not enough information. Using "ax" in place of "ask" is sometimes done in casual conversation by some African-Americans, but it is done by other groups as well. Since the job calls for chitchat with status-conscious clients, your boss might have been emphasizing the importance of finding someone -- of any ethnicity -- who speaks standard English with sufficient ease to cater to the tastes, reinforce the prejudices and stroke the vanity of your snobbish customers (perhaps someone named Jeeves). It is possible that your boss was making a coded allusion to race, but absent other indications of racism on her part, she deserves the benefit of the doubt.

UPDATE: The questioner was taken off the search for reasons unrelated to this conversation. The company hired "a girl from Queens," white, with a slight regional accent and no extraordinary verbal sophistication.
In the Ethicist column, Randy Cohen refers to “‘a girl from Queens,’ white, with a slight regional accent and no extraordinary verbal sophistication.” Does this “stereotype” mean anything to you?

What about “New York values”?

What is an accent? Who has one?

How much of accent is real, how much, perceived?

Rosina Lippi-Green calls language the back door to discrimination

Have you been discriminated against because of some aspect of your language?

We can’t change language like we can change our clothes, yet we (often unconsciously) adapt our language to the speech of those around us, a process called *accommodation*.
**language is a system:** a conventional system of signs that allows for the creative communication of meaning

conventional – we agree upon certain things (tacitly more often than overtly)

system – rule-governed

sign – a signifier with no inherent meaning + a signified, ‘referent’

**langue/parole; competence/performance:**

Saussure the relations among signs are systematic; langue, the abstract system of language, is the key to understanding this systematicity; parole, the actual production of words and utterances, the concrete form of language, often masks these systematic relationships

Chomsky morphed these concepts into *competence v. performance*; he adds the notion of the “ideal native speaker” – Chomsky and his school want to study the mental rules that comprise our competence, not the accidents of performance that are affected by too many nonlinguistic variables (mood, external noise, simple error)
Linguistic Creativity:

our ability to interpret sentences we’ve never heard or seen before; and to produce sentences that have never been produced before.

In addition, our ability to create an infinite number of utterances from a fixed set of grammatical rules. (recursion)
Grammar: an ambiguous word with at least two current meanings, the rules of usage (politeness conventions) and the linguistic competence that all speakers possess:

- all language constructions that conform to the systematic rules of a language and are, therefore, comprehensible to another speaker of the language.

The example of multiple negation: *I don’t got none of them.*

Instead of right and wrong in language, we prefer to think of grammaticality/acceptability.

An utterance may be grammatical but not acceptable. Examples?
Grammar, for linguists, means

- phonology: the sound structure of a language
- morphology: the structure of words
- syntax: the structure of utterances
- semantics: how utterances mean.
- pragmatics and discourse analysis: how we manage to communicate with language
- stylistics: usually, literary it but can include other language uses
- sociolinguistics (also dialectology): language in its social setting
Human and animal communication:

We learn grammar without direct instruction, as children acquiring our language; we learn usage rules in school, as well, but they are the equivalent of etiquette and change over time.

- Language is social, requiring input: humans acquire language in speech communities.
- Animals communicate in set responses to stimuli.
- Humans exhibit displacement: we can project forward and backward in time, and think abstractly.
- Humans also exhibit separation affect: distinguishing between emotional and factual content of messages.
- We understand that our language has combinable parts.
- Human language is ambiguous; animal communication is not.
- We can talk about how language works: metacognition (animals can’t distance themselves the way we can).
Language changes over time:

it used to be thought that some languages didn’t change – Greek, for example
and it’s frequently thought that languages *shouldn’t* change, or that change should be slow, principled, and directed

Old English and Modern English are *not* mutually intelligible

notion of language families: do languages “descend” from ancestors?

how are languages related to one another?

how does language change?
Is language change progress or decay?

some new terms that earlier “experts” objected to:

Ben Franklin didn’t like the new verbs *notice, advocate, progress*; Franklin wrote to Noah Webster to get the dictionary-maker to do something about these

Coleridge objected to *talented*, on the grounds that there is no verb, *to talent*.

Other “new” 19th-century terms that critics didn’t like: *ice cream, scientist, telegram*.

Ambrose Bierce hated *run a business* and *electrocute*

what about newer terms: *incentivize* or the still newer, *incent* as a verb?

Are there new words or phrases that you object to?
Choose your own pronoun:

Harvard University for the first time is allowing students to choose their preferred gender pronoun from a list including such gender-neutral identifiers as “ze, hir, and hirs,” a move the college said is aimed at increasing inclusion on the campus.

College administrators said the students can make their choices known during registration. According to researchers of gender and sexuality, some students who do not identify with the commonplace pronouns like “he” or “she” feel invalidated in social settings.

And the University of Tennessee Pride Office suggests using gender-neutral pronouns:

Braquet said if students and faculty cannot use pronouns such as ze, hir, hirs, xe, xem or xyr, they can also politely ask.

"Oh, nice to meet you ... What pronouns should I use?" is a perfectly fine question to ask," Braquet said.
Tennessee lawmakers react angrily to the gender-neutral pronoun:

Top state and federal lawmakers are reacting with outrage, and promises of action, after a post on the University of Tennessee Knoxville website got national attention for encouraging students to use gender-neutral pronouns.

Lt. Gov. Ron Ramsey said on Facebook that the post, written by the director of UT's Pride Center (http://diversity.utk.edu/2015/08/name-change-pride-center/), was "the clearest example of political correctness run amok that I have seen in quite some time." Ramsey, R-Blountville, said he expected the General Assembly to "weigh in on the issue" in January if UT doesn't "take quick action" first.

Meanwhile, state Sen. Bo Watson, R-Hixson, suggested in a statement that the Senate Education and Government Operations committees should "investigate and review" the issue.

In the post (http://diversity.utk.edu/tag/pride-center/), which originated in a column in a quarterly newsletter from UT's Office for Diversity and Inclusion (http://diversity.utk.edu/), Pride Center Director Donna Braquet said students and professors should ask each other what pronouns they use. Braquet wrote that students who do not identify as men or women might prefer gender-neutral pronouns like "ze" or "xe."

"I find it difficult to believe that such a ridiculous suggestion as gender-neutral pronouns would be published on a university website without leadership's approval," Watson said. "Tennessee taxpayers should not expect to be paying for this kind of stuff."
rates of language change vary:

after the Norman invasion, English changed rapidly through the absorption of French vocabulary (but still, this took a couple of hundred years to happen).

languages do not change toward some ultimate goal: they don’t become simpler – even when some part of the language seems to become more regular, other changes lead to greater complexity

some change is temporary—it doesn’t stick

are some changes better than others?
examples of ‘change’ and ‘variation’:

nucular for nuclear

De ’troit > ‘De troit

mouse (mus musculus) > mouse (computer input device) -- what’s the plural? mice/mouses?

gay (in ref to gender orientation) from neg. to pos.; what impact has this had on gay, ‘merry’?

burglar appears in the Renaissance, burgle dates from 19th c. explain

French fries > freedom fries

what’s the plural of syllabus? syllabi? syllabuses?
data?
media?
the notion of language death: did Latin die or did it simply morph into the romance languages?

What happens to Dura when its last speakers die?

attitudes toward change

language as adaptive and social: it enables humans to live in groups/results from humans living in groups

Is the essential function of language communication?

When do we use language with no intent to communicate?