

OLLI at DU West Syllabus – Spring 2024

A Brief History of Language

8 weeks – In Person

Facilitator: Carol Anthony

Note: Reading assignments for weeks 2-8 will be handed out at the first class.

Week 1 - What is language? How, where, and why did it begin? Why don't great apes speak? How and why do languages change? What are dialects and idiolects?

NOTE: reading assignment for week 1 - Atlas pp. 10-30 ("Introduction" and "Development and Spread of Languages" up to "Bilingualism and Multilingualism.") Please read this BEFORE class.

Week 2 - What are language families and how are they determined?

Week 3 - Focus on two language families: Indo-European and Semitic: How and where they developed. Other language families. What are isolates? Language extinction.

Week 4 - How English got there and where did it come from. Old English background and examples. A little Beowulf.

Week 5 - Outside influences on English: borrowings from Latin, Greek, Norse, French, etc. Vocabulary and pronunciation issues and those pesky spelling problems.

Week 6 - Middle English: How we got from O.E. to Middle E. A little Chaucer. Changes in grammar, pronunciation, and spelling. Low class English and High class Norman French.

Week 7 - Renaissance to Modern English. Shakespeare and beyond. American English.

Week 8 - English in the future: Why we are winning. Video on disappearing languages.