

ENGLISH TODAY

Two things must strike any contemporary observer of the English language as we approach the end of the 20th century. First, there is its remarkable range and variety, which in recent decades has increased in ways that were totally unpredictable a century ago. And secondly, there is the equally remarkable increase in the number of people who have become aware of this fact, and wish to study it. Their reasons vary greatly. Some are concerned to safeguard the language from the effects of too rapid change. Some are worried about their ability to keep pace with changing standards in their own usage. Some are concerned to develop their awareness of new language varieties because they frequently encounter them—at home (television talk), at work (computer jargon), or while travelling (dialect words). Some are, quite simply, fascinated by the language, and wish to learn more about it. But all, as a first step, need to have access to the facts of linguistic history, structure, and use.

Regional diversity

The modern situation is largely a consequence of the growth in the number of English-language speakers in all parts of the world, especially in areas where English is not a mother tongue. Statistics about English speakers are notoriously difficult to obtain and evaluate, but there is no doubt that, in most countries, we are more likely to encounter English than any other foreign language—whether in school, in the media, or through the use of scientific or technological loan-words. The latest country to recognize the importance of English in the modern world is China, where the BBC's 'Follow Me' series has been attracting audiences of millions since the late 1970s. The Chinese interest alone, if it is maintained, is likely to double the total number of English-language users by the late 1990s.

The chief result of the spread of English has been the growth of regional dialects on a world-wide scale. All languages develop dialects, of course, based on the geographical, social, ethnic, occupational, and other divisions within society; and when a language spreads across the world, the same thing happens. The *intranational* dialects of English which have existed for hundreds of

years—even in Anglo-Saxon times—continue to develop (though these days within cities, rather than within country areas); and they are now supplemented by the existence of major *international* dialects. Most notably, we find the thousands of variations in spelling, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary which distinguish American and British English: *color* (*colour*), *center* (*centre*), *snuck* (*sneaked*), *gotten* (*got*), *in back of* (*behind*), *fall* (*autumn*), *faucet* (*tap*), and so on. But there are many other major English-using parts of the world where standard regional varieties have developed: Wales, Scotland, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, several countries in West and East Africa—and not forgetting the dozens of pidgin and creole Englishes used in the West Indies, Africa, South America, and the Far East.

Standard and standards

At the same time as regional differentiation takes place, there is also increasing social differentiation, reflecting the various social roles which language users perform. In older times, the *class* background of the speaker was the main reason for distinctive language—upper-class vs lower-class, in particular—and this factor continues to be important in the guise of ‘educated’ vs ‘uneducated’ language use. The modern concept of ‘standard English’ primarily reflects a level of language use which is the result of schooling—instilling norms of spelling, punctuation, grammatical usage, and vocabulary. But standard English is difficult to define, for several reasons. The language continues to change, as it always has, and what is the nonstandard usage of one generation can become the standard usage of the next (or vice versa). The growth of regional dialects makes it more difficult to see a universal standard in use around the world. And standard English is itself composed of hundreds of varieties which differ in sometimes quite basic ways—notably occupational differences (such as the English of science, religion, the law, and the press) and the major contrast between formal and informal English.

This last point is central to an appreciation of the nature of English today. Many of the arguments about the nature of correct usage result from a failure to appreciate that, within the domain of standard English, there are

systematic variations in formality. At one extreme there is formal English, appropriate for careful, 'proper' occasions (such as job interviews); at the other extreme there is informal English for casual, everyday occasions (such as family conversation). It is sometimes thought that the formal style is somehow more 'correct' than the other, and should be used at all times—but this is no more reasonable than to assert that formal clothing should be used at all times. A varied wardrobe is usually considered to be an asset—and so it is, or should be, with our linguistic habits.

On the other hand, it has to be recognized that there are such things as our 'best clothes', for special occasions—and the same applies to language. For a mixture of historical and social reasons, certain accents, words, and grammatical usages of English are considered special by the community. All languages have *prestige* forms, which act as an important index of a person's social identity and role. In the case of English, the ability to spell, to speak carefully, to use formal grammar and vocabulary, and to follow the rules of grammatical usage as taught in schools over the past 200 years, is the most distinctive and widely-accepted sign that a person is educated. That is why there is always a concern, within a literate community, to maintain a tradition of formal mother-tongue language-teaching.

Language awareness

When formal grammar-teaching went out of fashion (notably in the UK and USA) in the 1950s and 1960s, the anxiety which many people felt was expressed as a concern over lost standards. As a result, grammar teaching is now resurfacing in several schools and syllabuses, but in a more dynamic and interesting form. In modern *language awareness* programmes, rules are not taught in isolation, to be learned off by heart as unchanging absolutes; rather, children are taught to discover the rules of language for themselves, and to develop a sense of language variation, so that they are in a better position to control and evaluate the use of linguistic forms. Just as they learn to develop their 'clothes sense', so, it is argued, they need to develop their 'language sense'.

The new approach, it is hoped, will help children to cope much more confidently with the varied and changing facts of their language. Instead of being told 'You

must speak/write like this because I say so' (where 'I' might be a teacher, a grammar book, or a usage guide), they are told, in effect, 'Here are the ways different kinds of people speak/write; if you identify the differences and grasp what their function is, you'll then be in a better position to make up your mind about how you yourself should speak/write, and to see why society expects you to speak/write in a certain way'. There is no abrogation of standards in this approach; rather it is a way of giving children a sharper sense of standards—a rationale for why standards are there at all. It also helps to develop a greater tolerance of language diversity—which in turn may help to promote tolerance in a broader social context.

The need for information

But the first, essential step in this process is to become aware of the differences—to realize that English does contain many variations, and that one's own way of using English is not always the same as that of others. It is then a moot point whether one should be tolerant of these differences or rail at them. But there is no gainsaying the fact that a rational approach to the English language requires, in the first instance, that one finds out what the differences are, and why they are there. And this, in turn, requires that one appreciates the fundamental role of language change.

There is only one way I know to develop an understanding of language change, and that is to reflect on the way it has taken place, and how it continues to take place. That is why the panels in this dictionary have the form they do. About a third of them draw attention to variations in usage, the result of language change; the remainder illustrate language change in action, by giving a sketch of the history of words and phrases. The focus is critical, especially for those who never received any kind of formal training in grammatical analysis or language awareness in school. For only by knowing about the factors which have influenced the language in the past can we appreciate what is happening to the language of the present, and, thus, be in a position to make useful recommendations about what should happen to it in the future.

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