Trying to keep up with English.

Talk for Lingua Franca, November 2003

The first edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* came out in 1995, and here we are, less than ten years on, with a second edition. Well that's a bit of a rush, you might be thinking? We've hardly had time to finish the first edition yet! And indeed, the request a year ago from the publisher, Cambridge University Press, to prepare a new edition took me a bit by surprise, I must admit. But having now done it, I have to agree: they were right.

To begin with, actually, I thought it might just be a question of updatng the phraseology. After all, we've just had a new millennium. So any reference in the text to 'the present century' or 'earlier this century' was immediately out of date! I had plenty of those references, and of course they all needed changing. But that problem would apply to *all* books published before 2000, and as Cambridge - as far as I knew - weren't proposing to do new editions of everything else in their catalogue, there had to be more to it than that. And of course, there was.

The thing is: so much has happened to the English language in the past decade. No, let me rewind. So much has happened to *language* in the past decade, with the English language affected more than most others. The 1990s, I happen to believe, was a turning-point in linguistic history. I think we've just lived through a major linguistic revolution, the consequences of which will take decades to work through. And some of the events which made up that revolution have had a major impact on English. Any book on the language written in the early 1990s was destined to fall out-of-date faster than any written during any other decade in the twentieth century. I wish I'd known. I could have saved myself an awful lot of trouble.

Known what, exactly? Well, chiefly, that we were about to enter an electronic era of communication. I started to write *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* in 1990, while the World Wide Web was still a gleam in its father's eye. The Web actually arrived the following year, but *I* never heard about it until the mid-decade. And it was in the mid-90s, too, that most people realized there was a thing called email. Then chatrooms came along. And then, towards the end of the decade, mobile phones - cellphones - arrived. Was there ever a period when we didn't have a mobile phone, an email address, and a World Wide Web site? Yes - he said gloomily - it was when I was writing the first edition of the encyclopedia.

We only have to engage in any one of those electronic practices today to sense the impact that the new medium has already had on English. Emails have brought a new level of informality to our expression - we can do things to punctuation, capitalization, and spelling that were never dreamed of in the days of traditional written English. Chatrooms have brought new styles of discourse interaction - a simple reflection of the fact that, when we're in a chatroom, we're paying attention to more people at the same time than was ever possible even in the most friendly of cocktail parties. Web pages have given us dozens of new visual styles, and introduced us to a brand-new routine feature of the written medium - moving text, whether this be a news headline appearing on the ABC Web page or a pop-up advertisement hitting us right between the eyes. And then - moving from the computer to the mobile phone - there's the remarkable phenomenon of text-messaging, with all its crazy abbreviations and symbols. With Textspeak, a whole new variety of the English language has grown up in a mere five years.

This explosion of linguistic novelty has sent linguists reeling, a bit. But one thing was clear to me: that anything claiming to be an encyclopedia of the English language, for the 2000s, and which didn't have a proper section on these electronic developments, would rightly be treated as a joke. In the first edition I had just one page hinting at the way things were going. Now it's a *ten*-page separate section. Doesn't sound much, but believe me, they were ten difficult pages to write - or perhaps I should say, illustrate. It actually isn't easy getting hold of electronic data to put into print, to illustrate what's going on. I asked several Websites whether I could reprint one of their pages, to show the sort of things that are happening to grammar, on the Internet. They all said no. It's not that they were worried about what I might say by way of criticism. These sites were full of images, and the site managers weren't sure whether they had the rights to let these images be used in another medium. There are all kinds of copyright complexities out there, it seems.

But I had trouble getting hold of email and chatroom data too. I wanted to illustrate some emails other than my own, so I asked people could I use theirs. Well, people get very uncomfortable, at that point. There's something rather private about an email, and people don't like the thought that it might be put to public use - even though you guarantee anonymity. Well, I can understand that. Would you let me use yours? But it didn't make the task of getting hold of the data any easier. In the end I pulled rank on my children - who duly obliged, though not without a certain sanitization of the content, I suspect!

Anyway, I managed to get the pages done in the end, but it took a lot longer than I was expecting. And, actually, that's the story of the book as a whole. It never ceases to amaze me how an apparently simple little point can take days to sort out. Here's an example. I remember when I was doing the first edition, and I was writing the section on first names - David, Jill, and so on. I mentioned the fact that many people, especially in the United States, have a name in which the middle bit is an initial - George W Bush, that sort of thing. I thought it would be obvious that every middle initial would be easily expanded into a full name. But then I came across the 33rd president of the United States, Harry S Truman. What did the S stand for, I wondered? I looked him up in the biographical encyclopedia I'd edited myself, and it didn't help. It just said 'S'. So I looked in some others. All the same. S. I went to the largest biographical encyclopedia I could find. S. I put his name into Web search engines. S. This was getting silly. I went down to my local public library, and got a friendly librarian to get me anything available on Harry S Truman. A few days later, a pile of books arrived, mainly biographies. And after a day's reading, I found the answer, in his daughter's biography of her father. It turns out that Truman's two grandfathers were called Solomon Young and Shippe - that's S H I P P E - Truman. Both the old men wanted the new baby to be named after them. Truman's dad, not wanting to upset either, decided that he would give the baby a middle name of S, without saying whether it stood for Solomon *or* Shippe. So the S in Harry S Truman stands for - well, nothing, really.

That anecdote makes an interesting linguistic story, but the point of bringing it into this talk is to illustrate just how long it takes to research a small point like that. It took me three days, more or less. And the result in the book takes up just 15 lines.

Fortunately, that particular story hasn't changed in any way between the first and second editions of the encyclopedia. But I was surprised, when I read through the book again recently - that's not a nice experience, by the way, reading letter-by-letter through a book you've written a decade ago. Apart from anything else, it reminds you of how much younger you were when you wrote it! But, as I say, I was surprised to find just how much change there'd been. The biggest thing, of course, was the way English has continued to make its global presence felt. In the past decade there's been no let-up in the way that English has continued to grow as a world language. Apart from a general increase in the number of speakers - now around one and a half billion - several countries, such as Spain and Algeria, have given English special status in their language teaching programmes, and in some parts of the world the increase has been truly phenomenal. I'm thinking especially of India, where a decade ago most people thought that only about 4 per cent of the population were able to carry on a conversation in English. That figure has been revised to over a third of the population today - that's over 350 million people, more than the combined English-speaking populations of Britain, America, Australia, and New Zealand.

There's a lot going on, and the Internet, of course, is helping to make it happen more quickly than ever before. Take new words. A decade ago the time it took for a new word to spread around the world, unless it happened to hit the headlines, was a matter of years. Today, with the Web, it can be a matter of days. In fact, in the first edition, I thought I'd do a little experiment, to see whether a book like that could have any effect at all on the spread of new words, and introduced a few new items - words which weren't in any dictionary - just to see what would happen. One of them was *fluddle* - describing the sort of wet patch you see on a road where the surface has collected the water together. It's bigger than a puddle but smaller than a flood. Fluddle. I'd heard this word used a few times, jocularly, and used it myself on occasion. I also thought it was the sort of 'obvious' word which might have been invented independently in several parts of the world. I hoped that, as people read the first edition, they'd let me know if they had heard it in use anywhere.

Well, with the World Wide Web, and only eight years on, I found myself able to answer the question much quicker than I dared hope. Search-engines are an excellent way of checking on the arrival of a new word in the language. So I searched for *fluddle*, and yes I found a handful of instances, in diverse

locations, and with no evidence of any mutual influence. One user was a character in the UK television soap, *Coronation Street*. Another was a member of a bird-watching group in America. And yes, there was one from Australia too - somebody describing a garden. The gardener felt she had to explain the word, but the bird-watcher used it in a report to other members of his group without giving any explanation. And what I found most interesting of all was when it turned up as a misspelling. You know the operatic work by Benjamin Britten, *Noyes' Fludde*? That word *fludde* is spelled F L U D D E - it's a medieval spelling. Well, on the Web, as you might expect, it's often mis-spelled. And what do people often take it to be? Fluddle. Noah's fluddle, they write. That suggests to me the word has really arrived!

So there we are. Plenty of change, and change speeding up. That's why there's been a new edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* so quickly, just 8 years after the first one. I hope the language leaves me alone for a while now, while I get my breath back. But I doubt it, somehow.