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Language developments in British English

Introduction

Languages do not change at a steady pace. They reflect the developments that take place in the culture of which they form a part. Some events in English history had immediate and dramatic linguistic consequences, such as the huge influence of French on English vocabulary and spelling after the Norman Conquest, or the even greater influx of loan words from European languages during the Renaissance, which virtually doubled the size of the English word stock. At other times, the pace of linguistic change was relatively slow, such as during the eighteenth century, where the desire for order and stability was reflected in the publication of the first major dictionaries, grammars and pronunciation manuals of the language. Today, we are experiencing a new period of rapid and widespread language change, but not for any one particular reason; rather, a range of social, economic and technological factors have combined to make the decades on either side of the millennium linguistically quite extraordinary.

Pronunciation

Of all aspects of spoken language, pronunciation is the most noticeable. Individual words and grammatical constructions are occasional in nature, whereas pronunciation is pervasive. We can say nothing without pronouncing it. As a result, we are particularly alert to changes that affect the way people articulate their vowels, consonants and syllables, or that alter the way they use stress, intonation, rhythm and tone of voice. In a word, we are sensitive to changes in *accent*.

The primary purpose of an accent is to identify where someone is from, geographically or socially. It is a badge of belonging – and its strength lies in the fact that it can be used in circumstances where other markers of identity fail. Badges are useless if the wearer is around the corner or in the dark. Accents transcend such limitations. There is also a naturalness about them that facilitates their function. People have to buy and display their badges and flags of identity. With accents, they only have to open their mouths.

Sensitivity about accents is everywhere, in all languages, but the situation in Britain has always attracted special interest. This is chiefly because there is more regional accent variation in Britain, relative to the size and population of the country, than in any other part of the English-speaking world – a natural result of 1,500 years of accent diversification in an environment which was both highly socially stratified and (through the Celtic languages) indigenously multilingual. George Bernard Shaw was exaggerating when he had phonetician Henry Higgins say (in *Pygmalion*) that he could 'place a man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets' – but only a little.

Two major changes have affected English accents in Britain over the past few decades. The attitude of people towards accents has altered in ways that were unpredictable thirty years ago; and some accents have changed their phonetic character very significantly over the same period.

The main change in attitude has affected the prestige accent in England, known as 'Received Pronunciation' (RP). This is an accent that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century, associated with the way upper-class and well-educated people spoke, especially in the 'golden triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge. It came to be the norm in the English public schools, and when the products of those schools left the country to run the British Empire, they took the accent with them, thus making RP the 'official' voice of Britain around the world. When the BBC was formed in the 1920s, Lord Reith opted for this accent as the one most likely to be nationally understood, and during the twentieth century RP became the uncontested prestige accent of Britain. For many it was the public auditory image of the country, still valued today for its associations with the Second World War years, with the royal family and with leading classical actors such as Laurence Olivier. In 1980, when the BBC made its first attempt to use a regionally

accented announcer on Radio 4, the decision aroused such virulent opposition that it was quickly reversed. Susan Rae, the Scots presenter in question, was withdrawn.

Twenty-five years on, and Susan Rae's voice was once again being heard on Radio 4. And in August 2005 the BBC devoted a whole week to a celebration of the accents and dialects of the British Isles. (*Accent* refers to pronunciation only; *dialect* to grammar and vocabulary as well.) The 'Voices' project, as it was called, was an attempt to take an auditory snapshot of the way Britain was sounding at the beginning of the new millennium. Every BBC regional radio station was invited to take part, and local presenters arranged recordings of the diversity within their area, as well as programmes that explored the history and nature of local accents and dialects. The impact of the project was considerable and can still be followed (through the website at www.bbc.co.uk/voices). It was institutional recognition of a fundamental change in attitudes to regional speech which had taken place in Britain. There is now a much greater readiness to value and celebrate linguistic diversity than there was a generation ago.

As far as broadcasting was concerned, it was the rapid growth of local commercial radio during the 1980s that fostered the new linguistic climate. Regional radio gained audience (and national radio lost it) by meeting the interests of local populations, and these new audiences liked their presenters to speak as they did. At the same time, national listening and viewing figures remained strong for such series as BBC Radio 4's *The Archers* and ITV's *Coronation Street*, where local accents were privileged. The trend grew in the 1990s and developed an international dimension: alongside the London accents of the BBC soap opera *EastEnders* were the Australian accents of *Neighbours*. Soon, non-RP accents began to be used as part of the 'official' voice of national radio and television, most noticeably at first in more popular contexts, such as on Radio 1 and in commercial television advertisements. Some regional accents from the time even became part of national consciousness, widely mimicked in the manner of catch phrases – such as a 1977 Campari ad in which Lorraine Chase responded to the come-on line 'Were you truly wafted here from paradise?' with the immortal response, 'No, Lu'on airport.' Before long, regional voices began to be heard presenting other channels and are now routine, illustrated by the Scottish accents of several weather forecasters on BBC television or the South Welsh accent of Huw Edwards reading the BBC News. Non-

indigenous accents, especially from the West Indies and India, began to be heard. Old attitudes die hard, of course, and there will still be those who mourn the passing of the days when a single accent ruled the British airwaves. But they are a steadily shrinking minority.

RP continues to have a strong presence in public broadcasting, but its phonetic character has changed. Accents never stand still, and indeed radio is the chief medium where accent change can be traced. Anyone listening to radio programmes made in the 1920s and 1930s cannot fail to be struck by the 'plummy' or 'far back' sound of the RP accent then – when, for example, 'lord' sounded more like 'lahd' – but even the accents of the 1960s and 1970s sound dated now. And changes continue to affect RP. It is difficult to illustrate them without the help of phonetic transcription, but I can perhaps rely on our auditory memory to ask readers to compare the voice of the Queen, as classically heard in a speech for the opening of parliament or a Christmas message, with the voices of Prince Harry or Prince William, two generations on. There are many differences. The Queen would never, for example, replace the final consonant in such words as 'hot' with a glottal stop; the youngsters often do. Nor would she use the central vowel quality heard in 'the' in such words as 'cup'; her version is articulated much further forward in the mouth, more in the direction of 'cap'.

The BBC, or any other national broadcaster, does not introduce language change. Rather, it reflects it, and thereby fosters it by making it widely known. This has been the case with 'Estuary English', a variety which became noticed when it attracted media attention in the early 1990s, though the phenomenon had been evolving over many years. The estuary in question was that of the river Thames, and the people who were noticed as having an estuary accent lived on either side of it, chiefly to the north. The variety is characterised not only by accent but also by certain words and grammatical constructions, such as the use of 'right' as a tag question (*It starts at six, right?*) or 'innit' (*'isn't it?'*). Phonetically it can be roughly placed as an accent intermediate between RP and Cockney. Nationally known figures who use it include Jonathan Ross, and it is used by the two characters played by Pauline Quirke and Linda Robson in the BBC television comedy series of the 1990s, *Birds of a Feather*, as well as by some of the characters in *EastEnders*. The accents are not identical, and that is important. Estuary is a broad label, covering a number of closely related ways of speaking. (RP was never homogeneous either.)

One of the most noticeable pronunciation trends of the past twenty years has been to hear the way in which features of Estuary English have radiated from the London area to other parts of the country. They have travelled north towards Yorkshire and west towards Devon, and they are widespread in East Anglia, Kent and along the south coast. It is not that they have replaced the local accents of these areas (though this sometimes happens); rather, they have modified the phonetic character of those accents, pulling the vowels and consonants in different directions. Old-timers in a rural village now sound very different from the younger generations who live there. As part of the 'Voices' project, a television documentary was made (called *Word on the Street*) about four generations of a family living in Leicester. One could hear the changes from old to young: an East Midlands accent was present in all of them, but in several different forms.

It is this proliferation of accents which is the national pattern today. People sometimes claim that 'accents are dying out'. What they have noticed is the disappearance of old rural ways of speech as the people who used them pass away. But the people who now live in these localities still have accents, albeit very different in character. The Estuary English heard in Hampshire is very different from that heard in Leicestershire. Nor is Estuary English the only contemporary pronunciation trend. In the major population centres of the country we hear a new phenomenon: a remarkable increase in the range of accents within the community, brought about largely by the influx of people of diverse ethnic origin. In Liverpool, there used to be only 'Scouse'; today we can hear Chinese Scouse, Jamaican Scouse and an array of accent mixes reflecting the growing cosmopolitan character of that city. London, of course, is where this trend is most noticeable. There are well over 300 languages spoken in London now, and the English used by these ethnic communities inevitably reflects the linguistic background of the speakers. New combinations of sounds, words and grammatical constructions can be heard, such as the mix of Bengali and Cockney used by members of the Bangladeshi community in East London. Every British city today displays such accent and dialect mixes.

To understand why Estuary English has spread so widely and so rapidly we have to appreciate that it is the result of two complementary trends. First, an improved standard of living for many people formerly living in London's East End allowed them to move 'up-market' into the outer suburbs and the townships of the home counties of England's

south-east. As they began to interact with their new neighbours, their accents naturally accommodated to them. 'Accommodation' is the term sociolinguists use when talking about the way in which accents influence each other. People from different accent backgrounds who are in good rapport will find features of their accents rubbing off on each other. In a case where people want to 'fit in' to a society that speaks in a different way, and where careers and success can depend on the incomers developing a good relationship with the incumbents, the direction of the accommodation is largely one-way. Thus, Eastenders began to adopt features of Essex or Kent or Hertfordshire speech, when they moved into those localities, rather than the other way round. At the same time, people from counties further afield were commuting to London in increasing numbers, their travel facilitated by the new motorway system and faster rail connections. With cities such as Hull, Leeds, Manchester and Bristol now only a couple of hours away, huge numbers of people arrived in London with regional accents and soon found themselves accommodating to the accents of the city. It was now the Midlands and West Country commuters who adopted some of the London ways of speaking. And when these commuters returned home, they brought those London features back with them. And thus the accent spread.

Cutting across the Estuary English influence is an unknown set of other trends, all prompted by the increased mobility of the working and playing population. The BBC programme about Leicester showed some members of the family attending a biking convention elsewhere in the country. Bikers were there from many counties and presented a huge range of accents. When they talked to each other it was possible to hear their accents accommodating – often in a conscious and jocular way, as when one speaker mimicked another. An individual short-term encounter of this kind is unlikely to have a long-term effect, of course, but in contexts where people routinely interact in this way, accent change is normal. And commuters, by definition, have routine.

It is not that one accent replaces another. Rather, features of two accents combine to make a third. When an RP speaker is influenced by a regional accent, or vice versa, the result has been called 'modified RP', and there is modified Scouse, modified Geordie (the accent associated with the city of Newcastle), modified everything these days. I myself am a heavily modified speaker, using an accent which is a mixture of my original North Welsh (where I now live), Liverpool (where I spent my

secondary-school years), and the south of England (where I worked for twenty years). Apart from the overall auditory impression of my accent, which is difficult to 'place', it displays certain features characteristic of all modified accents, such as inconsistency – for instance, I sometimes say *example* and *bath* with a 'short *a*', and sometimes with a 'long *a*' (*exahmple, bahth*). And because I accommodate to my (now grown-up) children, who have been influenced by a more recent set of trends (such as American English), I sometimes say *schedule* with a *sh-* and sometimes with a *sk-*. There are hundreds of such variant forms in my speech.

As regional speech achieved a greater public presence – both privately, through increased social mobility, and publicly, through the new broadcasting scenario – attitudes towards individual accents began to change. Sociolinguistic research since the 1980s has identified two major trends: an increase in positive attitudes towards certain regional accents and an increase in negative attitudes towards RP. The methodology is to use reaction studies. People are invited to give their opinion of an accent using a wide range of questions, such as whether it sounds 'educated', 'sincere', 'honest', 'friendly', 'warm', 'intelligent' and so on. Traditionally, RP has been the accent that attracted all the positive values; regional speech would typically attract negative ones, with urban accents in particular being poorly rated.

The turnaround has been quite dramatic. Several regional accents now achieve strongly positive ratings such as 'warm' and 'customer-friendly'; whereas RP has begun to attract negative ratings such as 'insincere' and 'distant'. And organisations that rely for their income on voice presentation have noticed the change. Call centres in Britain, until recently, provided a convenient index of change. Formerly, the voice answering the phone at a national enquiry centre would have been RP, with local accents heard only in regional offices (and not always then). During the 1990s, there was a noticeable increase in the use of local accents at national level. The voice you would hear in enquiring about car insurance or a mortgage would very likely be Edinburgh Scots or Yorkshire (the two most preferred accents). Not all regional speech was favoured: in particular, some urban English accents, such as Birmingham's, still generated negative reactions.

The qualification 'until recently' should be noted. One of the trends in the 2000s has been the outsourcing of call centres to India, so that the voice we now hear at the other end of a phone is likely to display one of the range of educated Indian accents, some of which are not very

different from RP, but with a more staccato ('syllable-timed') rhythm. The accents have been controversially received, with some listeners finding them difficult to understand, some finding them unpleasant, some finding them quite attractive and some not noticing anything at all. It remains to be seen whether the reactions to these accents will diminish as people become more familiar with them.

Increasing familiarity there has to be, because the call-centre phenomenon is but a tiny part of a global trend towards the internationalisation of English which has been in progress since the mid twentieth century. It is now a truism to talk of English as a 'global language'; but a less noticed consequence of this spread has been the growth of 'new Englishes' around the world, in countries which have adopted English as a local lingua franca and have adapted it to express their identity. Alongside British English and American English, we now find Nigerian English, Singaporean English ('Singlish'), Jamaican English and dozens of other varieties, distinguished primarily by vocabulary and pronunciation. Each country is developing its own norms, but one trend is widely heard: the development of syllable-timed speech, as opposed to the 'stress-timed' speech characteristic of traditional British accents. Stress-timed speech takes place when the rhythmical beats fall at roughly regular intervals in the stream of speech, resulting in a 'tum-te-tum' rhythm widely heard in English poetry ('The *curfew tolls* the *knell of parting day*'). By contrast, in syllable-timed speech, each syllable carries a beat, so that the result is more like a 'rat-a-tat-a-tat'. The voices of the Daleks in *Dr Who* ('ex-ter-mi-nate') were syllable-timed, as is a great deal of contemporary rapping. And as one listens to the speech of people from Jamaica or South Africa or the subcontinent of India – whether in their original country or in a British city suburb – we hear a kind of accent characterised by these new rhythms. There hasn't been anything like it in a thousand years of English pronunciation history.

Vocabulary

The second main index of language change is vocabulary – the loss of old words and senses and the arrival of new ones. It is difficult to arrive at any accurate contemporary quantification. Whether a period of a language has been a particularly significant one for lexical change only becomes apparent after it has happened. The reason is that we

never know which of the new words we hear around us are going to be permanent features of English and which are transient – the slang and fashionable usage of the moment. Studies of the new words and phrases which were being used in English during the 1970s suggest that as many as 75 per cent of them ceased to be used after quite a short period of time.

Collections of 'new words' made by various publishers and diction-ary-providers, based on words which have been seen in print, indicate that hundreds of new expressions appear each year. For example, the Oxford University Press publication, *Twentieth Century Words*, contains a selection of about 5,000 items such as:

- from the 1990s: applet, Blairism, Britpop, cool Britannia, Dianamania, docusoap;
- from the 1980s: AIDS, backslash, bog-standard, BSE, cellphone, designer drug;
- from the 1970s: action replay, Betamax, biotechnology, cashpoint, club class, detox.

The average is 500 items a decade – roughly one a week – and this is only a *selection* from everyday written language. *The Longman Guardian New Words* collected those words which had come to prominence in written English in 1986: it contained around 1,000. No one has yet devised a technique for capturing the neologisms that enter the spoken language and which are rarely (sometimes never) written down.

That there should be so many new words entering the language should come as no surprise when we consider the many walks of life that motivate them, such as the arts, business, computing, the environment, leisure, medicine, politics, popular culture, sports, science and technol-ogy. The range can be illustrated by this set of headwords, taken from letter F of *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words*, a selection of some 2,000 items in 1997 said to be 'in the news':

face, in your	feel-good
fajitas	feminazi
false memory syndrome	fen (plural of fan)
fantasy football	feng shui
FAQ	file transfer protocol
fattism	film-on-demand
fatwa	First Nations
fax-on-demand	flame (= abuse)
feeding frenzy	flatline
feel-bad	flesh-eating disease

FLOPS (in computing)
Floptical
fluoxetine
flying bishop
FOB (Friend of Bill,
        i.e. Clinton)
foodie
footballene
for-profit
Fourex, Four-X
foxcore
fox-watch
freeride
Friday Wear

from hell (as in 'neighbours
        from hell')
frozen embryo
FTP
fuck-me (as adjective)
full-blown AIDS
fullerene
full monty, the
full pindown
full-video-on-demand
fully abled
functional food
fundholder
fundie (= fundamentalist)

Two points should be noted. First, over half the expressions contain more than one word, and this is typical of the collection as a whole: when we talk about 'new words' entering the language, we mean multi-word expressions as well as single words. Second, several of these items represent a whole 'family' of derived forms. 'Flame', for example, referring to online abuse, gave rise to 'flamer', 'flamage', 'flaming', 'flame war', 'flame bait', 'flame mail', 'flame on' and 'flame off'.

Plainly, the array of new words reflects the trends, inventions and attitudes seen in contemporary society. But this raises an interesting question: how do we define 'contemporary society' from the viewpoint of language change? During the 1980s, it is safe to say that virtually all the new vocabulary people heard in Britain – whether generated within Britain or introduced from elsewhere (e.g., the USA) – would have come from British sources – newspapers, magazines, radio, television or the local worlds of occupational idiom and street slang. But since the arrival of the Internet in its various manifestations (such as email, chat rooms, the World Wide Web and blogs), it is now possible for anyone (who has the electronic means) to directly encounter English in its worldwide lexical variety. A decade ago, it would have been extremely difficult for me to have explored the extensive regional vocabulary of, say, South Africa, without actually going to the place. Now, at the click of a mouse, I can call up the *Cape Times* and find myself reading (in November 2006) such opaque headlines as the following:

- Floors to Lead Bok Sevens in Dubai. (Kabamba Floors is to be the captain of the Springbok Sevens – a seven-a-side rugby team.)

- No Fynbos Hater. (Fynbos is a South African evergreen shrub.)
- Redefining ANC Needs Debate, Not Toyi-Toying. (A toyi-toyi is a militant dance.)

The cumulative impact of global English vocabulary – in the broadest sense, to include the distinctive names of people and places in foreign localities – is already very noticeable on the Internet and must eventually make an impact on our British linguistic consciousness. First of all, our comprehension of the foreign vocabulary will grow, and in due course some items will enter our spoken or written production. It is not, after all, an entirely passive situation. The millions of (predominantly younger) Britons who now routinely enter chat rooms, write or respond to blogs, play virtual-reality games and actively participate in community domains such as MySpace are encountering an unprecedented range of varieties of English. In the one chat room there may be participants from South Africa, Hong Kong or any other part of the English-speaking world. Different dialects of English become neighbours on the same screen, as do different levels of competence in the use of English. As a result, accommodation will be widespread – and operate in any direction. British people may be influenced by South African English – and of course vice versa. Nor are educated regional standards always going to be respected. An incorrect use of a word by a participant is not necessarily going to be corrected by other chat-room members. Rather, it might be adopted as a 'cool' usage – as happened in one group when 'comptuer' was mistyped for the word 'computer' and everyone thereafter chose to use it. In the short term, none of these accommodations is likely to be very influential; but in the long term some usages are bound to become current.

The Internet

And the long term is becoming shorter. Lexicographers used to say that a new word might take anything up to a generation before it became a permanent part of a language. That is how long it could take for people to start hearing it, then using it, and then routinely putting it down on paper. Today, a new usage can be around the world in seconds, in written (online) form, and a search for it a few days later can yield thousands of results. The Internet is without any doubt the largest corpus of English vocabulary there has ever been and presents us in our homes with more variant forms of the language than has ever been seen before.

The impact of all this variation on the character of the language as a whole is as yet unclear. But the pressures we all feel when we encounter someone else's use of language which is different from our own are bound to increase.

It is not only vocabulary which is being affected. Spelling is affected too. Thanks to 800 years of diverse linguistic influences on English, the current spelling system contains a great deal of irregularity, and there have often been proposals for spelling reform. Apart from Noah Webster's shaping of American spelling in the early 1800s, none of them have ever succeeded – and it is easy to see why. Even if one could agree on an optimal new system – something that the different groups of spelling reformers have never managed to achieve – any such system, imposed from above by a committee or government, presents huge problems of practical implementation. But the Internet suggests that a 'top-down' simplification of spelling is not the only way. It could easily be that some of the more extreme irregular forms might gradually simplify as a result of repeated public encounter online – a 'bottom-up' movement, in which people vote for change with their fingers.

This could never have happened in recent centuries. Any incorrect spelling in a text presented for print would have been eliminated by the copy-editors and proof-readers employed by publishers. Only the occasional error would ever have slipped through their eagle eyes. But on the Internet, in such contexts as blogging and chat, there are no copy-editors or proof-readers, and people can spell however they want. Naturally, there is a system of checks and balances: if people spell too idiosyncratically, no one will understand them. But no one misunderstands if a word such as 'rhubarb' is spelled 'rubarb' (over 50,000 hits on Google in June 2007) or 'diarrhoea' is spelled 'diarrea' (over 2.5 million hits). The pressure to maintain correct spelling is so great, through the educational and publishing systems, that it will take a much greater force to change public perceptions of what counts as correct. The Internet may be that force.

Grammar and punctuation, the two other great shibboleths of English usage, are also implicated. Neither readily change. The number of grammatical changes which have taken place in English since Shakespeare's time is small indeed. When we read Jane Austen, writing around 1800, there are only a tiny number of places where her grammar feels different from ours. And we see the same minuscule process of change today. Despite all the linguistic variation that we see around the

world in the use of English, only a tiny number of usages affect grammar. Examples include the use of the tag question 'or not' in Singapore ('They're coming, or not?') or the use of the present continuous in India ('I am remembering what you were saying') or the use of 'gotten' in American English. The same point applies to punctuation and capitalisation. The rules governing present-day practice in these areas were finally established in the nineteenth century and have been assiduously (though not always successfully) taught ever since. They change very little. One recent trend is the tendency to simplification, introduced by graphic designers in the second half of the twentieth century, so that full stops are dropped after abbreviations ('BBC' and 'Mr' instead of 'B.B.C'. and 'Mr.') and apostrophes dropped in such cases as '1960s'. A similar trend has affected the use of capitals in names, as seen in lower-case initialisms (such as 'vodafone') and midcap or bicap usages (such as 'eBay' and 'AltaVista'). But most of the orthographic conventions we use in Britain today are exactly the same as they were a century ago.

The exception is the Internet – not in the Web, where most English-language sites reflect conventional standard usage, but in the linguistically unmoderated domains, such as emails, chat rooms, instant messaging and blogs. Here some radically different practices are common, in extreme cases including the omission of all capital letters and the dropping of all but a few punctuation marks. To see why this could happen, we have to appreciate that several of the rules of punctuation and capitalisation are totally arbitrary – that is, they have no effect on meaning. The rule which says that the personal pronoun 'I' should always be a capital letter, for example, was introduced early on in English linguistic history, and everyone has learned to live with it – but if we were to use a lower-case 'i' instead, as people now often do in informal internet communication, no problem of meaning results. What is fascinating is to see the way people are discovering and exploiting the flexibility of English orthography in this way. How much punctuation can be dispensed with and still retain intelligibility? Once upon a time (in Old English), there was no punctuation, apart from a few marks to guide the inflection of the speaking voice. The Internet is renewing our connection with those early manuscripts and may eventually give us a clue as to how much punctuation is actually critical for the communication of meaning.

The same point applies to grammar. Not only does the Internet expose us to regional grammatical variation on a global scale, it is also

exposing us to a wider range of stylistic variation than we have experienced in print before. The kind of language we would traditionally see in print would be typically formal. Informal English would be restricted to certain contexts, such as conversation in a novel or a play. And there are several grammatical features that identify formality in standard English, such as not ending a sentence with a preposition: 'That is the man I was talking to' is much more informal than 'That is the man to whom I was talking', and the latter would be the recommended form in traditional grammars, along with a couple of dozen other prescriptive rules, such as 'never split an infinitive', or 'never begin a sentence with *and*'. What the Internet has done is allow us to put up on a screen, in the same type of printed graphic presentation as we see in any piece of formal language, the whole spectrum of informal English, ranging from slightly to radically informal. It is now possible to see blogs in which utterances run on with little or no punctuation, in much the same way as James Joyce ends *Ulysses*, and displaying all the colloquialism and dynamic changes of direction that we would previously only have encountered in informal conversation and never seen in print. A fresh kind of abbreviated language ('texting') has emerged in response to the limited character displays of mobile-phone screens. As a result, the expressive stylistic range of the written language has been enormously increased by computer-mediated communication. And it has all happened so quickly (within a decade, for most people) that there is a great deal of uncertainty as to how best to manage the changes, especially in schools, to ensure that children appreciate the importance of acquiring the well-established conventions of standard English, in order to ensure mutual intelligibility between generations and across regions (both national and international).

A balanced perspective

The Internet has been a major factor in bringing language change to the attention of the general public, but it is by no means the only factor. The broadcasting media have played their part – and so too has literature. Indeed, long before the Internet achieved its impact, we were aware of emerging global varieties of English through the work of the poets, novelists and dramatists who wrote in their local dialects – writers such as Benjamin Zephaniah (Caribbean), Chinua Achebe (West Africa) and Kamala Das (India). Today, we continue to experience non-indigenous

varieties of English in British writing as a new generation experiments with non-standard styles of expression. Novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* or Suhayl Saadi's *Psychoraag* illustrate fresh voices that rely for their effect on a blend of standard and non-standard usage, both within and across languages.

These books illustrate the increasingly multi-dialectal character of contemporary writing. Earlier novels such as Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* or Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* tap into rich veins of indigenous Celtic expression – Scots and Irish respectively. But the notion of 'indigenous' is itself no longer clear-cut. Saadi's novel, for example, is written in a mixture of standard English, Glaswegian and Urdu. There is frequent code-mixing: 'Sheila C's music seems tae slip like silence fae wan silver disc tae another. *Khamoshi, khamoshi, khamoshi.* Ah've nivir been thur but Ah wish Ah hud.'[1] He himself was born in Yorkshire; and Glasgow has many British-born Asians, several born in Scotland. Plainly, the traditional divisions between Germanic and Celtic, native and foreign, and first language and second language are blurred when we consider the language and languages used today in multi-ethnic Britain. And we must not forget the scale of what is happening. London is now one of the most multilingual cities in the world.

The published literature is but the tip of an iceberg of ethnic expression which is increasingly being given a public presence on the Internet. The proliferation of accents which we have seen to be a feature of contemporary Britain has its counterpart in a proliferation of dialects, many of which are now being written down – often for the first time. In the absence of a literary tradition, there is a great deal of uncertainty about how exactly to write them down. Different spelling conventions are used by different authors, and there is often inconsistency within the same author. What Saadi writes as 'fae', another writer in the same dialect might represent as 'frae', 'nivir' as 'niver', and so on. What we are seeing repeatedly in contemporary writing is the struggle of regional and ethnic dialects to achieve a coherent literary identity within a writing system that has for over 200 years been tuned to the sounds and structures of RP and standard English.

It is crucially important to avoid confrontation. It is all too easy for pedants to condemn the non-standard English of young people on the Internet or the new literary voices and to interpret these processes of language change as language deterioration. Conversely, it is all too easy for the new generation to revel in the linguistic freedom which

the Internet provides and to disregard the literary canon, much of it written in standard English, which is their heritage. One of the most urgent tasks facing us at present, accordingly, is to devise an appropriate philosophy and practice of language management in which the different forms and functions of standard and non-standard English are brought into a mutually enlightening relationship. If there are trends in usage which are genuinely damaging – such as the use of obfuscating or insulting vocabulary – these need to be identified and corrected. If there are trends which are artificially constraining – such as the imposition of unreal prescriptive rules – these need to be identified and avoided. Teachers of English are the cadre of professionals who are most involved in developing this relationship; but it is no easy task, given the speed and multidimensional complexity of contemporary language change. They will, however, be much helped if they find their work to be part of an informed cultural climate in which other institutions – such as broadcasting, literature and academia – share their sociolinguistic concerns, and it is towards the formation of this climate that I hope the present volume will make a contribution.

Note

1 Suhayl Saadi, *Psychoraag* (Edinburgh, Black and White Publishing, 2005), p. 50. *Khamoshi* = 'quiet'.