Diversity? We ain't seen nothing yet!

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We have become accustomed, in linguistics, to thinking of linguistic diversity as a given - a reflection of cultural and social variation, an inevitable consequence of language change, and a welcome index of linguistic vitality. Any indications of a reduction in the extent of this diversity, accordingly, has been a source of great concern. And in the past decade we have seen anxieties repeatedly expressed with reference to several areas of linguistic enquiry.

For example, we often hear such comments as 'globalization – often satirically represented by such labels as McDonaldization or Cocacolanization - is causing loss of identity everywhere', and 'languages are dying faster than ever before, causing a huge loss in the linguistic diversity of the planet.' Then, within a language, we hear such remarks as: 'the Internet is imposing a uniformity on our self-expression'; 'text messaging is reducing the expressiveness of language'; 'dialects are dying out'; 'everyone speaks in the same accent nowadays' (a comment often heard in the UK with reference to so-called 'estuary' English). The underlying claim is that diversity is disappearing, or at least significantly reducing. The purpose of this paper is to take a view about this claim. And I shall be arguing that, in all but one respect, the claim is wrong.

The exception, of course, is the first of those comments. Following the huge linguistic surveys of the 1980s, we now know that language death is taking place on a massive and unprecedented scale. Perhaps half the languages of the world are so seriously endangered that they will disappear in the course of the present century, and they are not being replaced. The disappearance of hundreds, probably thousands, of languages is inevitable. Here there is clear evidence of a loss of diversity – much greater, proportionately, to the losses being suffered in the more well publicized areas of planetary diversity, such as fauna and flora. Only some 2 per cent of biological diversity is thought to be seriously at risk of extinction; with languages, the consensus is that it is some 50 per cent.

But even here there are grounds for a degree of optimism. First of all, it is early days. Linguists have already done a great deal by way of getting their act together, documenting and revitalizing endangered languages, and at a political level there have been strong affirmations of the need to act, backed up in several cases by legal protection and supported (admittedly, in rather fewer cases) by cash. But, as I say, it is early days. It took the biological diversity lobby the best part of half a century to build up to the levels of public presence and funding that organizations like the World Wildlife Fund have today. We have to remember that our own lobby is hardly ten years old. It was only in 1995 that UNESCO launched its Red Book of Endangered Languages. Organizations such as the UK Foundation for Endangered Languages also date from the middle of that decade. Books and anthologies focusing on the problem emerged only towards the end of the decade. UNESCO conferences and statements on language endangerment, viewed as a worldwide phenomenon, are a feature only of the last five years. There is a strong likelihood that the next ten years will see a consolidation and expansion of international effort, and that languages which still have some life left in them will have a better chance of surviving than they had a decade ago. We cannot save them all; but there are some that can be pulled back from the brink.

The focus of this conference is diversity, so actually the question for this paper is not 'are languages being lost?' but 'are they being replaced?' so that diversity is being maintained.

The answer, surprising as it may seem, is not a total no. New pidgin and creole languages are continually evolving. Code-mixed languages, such as Singlish in Singapore, have come into being as a consequence of a dominant language – in this case, English - spreading around the world. Despite its name, Singlish is not easily analysed as a 'dialect' of English, for its admixture of Chinese and English makes it unintelligible to those who come from a monolingual background. Several other code-mixed languages have evolved, such as Taglish (Tagalog-English) in the Philippines and Malenglish (Malay-English) in Malaysia. The so-called 'new Englishes' of the world have given the lie to the claim that an inevitable consequence of globalization is linguistic uniformity.

Code-mixed languages are often given a bad press. They are condemned as gutter-speak and associated with the poorer members of society. But this scenario is changing. Increasing numbers of educated people are using them, and they have begun to take on a literary identity, both in professional settings (such as advertising and banking) and, as we shall see, in creative literature. Whether these systems of communication are ever graced by the title of 'languages' by their communities and the rest of the world will depend on factors other than the linguistic. Regional varieties can become known as separate languages if they are supported by political power, as we have seen recently in the case of Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. It has been often and rightly said, that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. A mixed-language would soon lose its demeaning connotations if it became associated with a political or economic power base.

We have to remember that diversity is inherent in the notion of language. All languages are mixed languages. No man, the proverb goes, is an island – and no language either. The concept of a totally homogeneous language, displaying no influence from other languages, is a myth. It is in the nature of languages to be diverse, and it takes a major piece of language planning, in the form of a standard language, to stop it happening. Even then, it is never totally successful. There is a huge amount of variation in modern standard English, as reference to the house-style of any publishing-house would quickly show. Do we spell verbs in –ise or –ize? Is it *flowerpot*, *flower-pot*, or *flower pot*? It has been estimated that as much as 25 per cent of the words in the English dictionary are subject to spelling variation.

I make no claim for the perpetual future of English as a global language. It is perfectly possible for some other language to replace it, if world power relations were to radically alter. But English will certainly take its place in history as the world's *first* genuinely global language. And we have learned, as a result of studying its spread, what happens to a language as it becomes global. The one thing it does not do is stay uniform. It manifests an increasing diglossia, with the international standard variety – chiefly controlled by the press – being supplemented by regional standards and by nonstandard varieties. The 'New Englishes', as they are now called, are many, and their linguistic character is highly distinctive, especially in vocabulary (where, for example, regional dictionaries routinely contain upwards of 10,000 items reflecting the cultural identity of a locality).

So, the development of international and global languages does not lead only to increasing standardization. That dimension is obligatory, of course: a lingua franca, by definition, has to achieve a common form if it is to perform its role of facilitating intelligible communication. But it does not follow that, just because the world needs a lingua franca, it disallows the evolution of other manifestations of language as expressions of identity. Both trends take place in parallel, and human beings have no problem with it. Studies of multilingualism have taught us that the human brain can cope with an indefinite number of languages – and (so the phenomenon of global English teaches us) varieties of language, too.

Nor does there seem to be a diminution in the rate at which new varieties of English are emerging around the world. To begin with, it was the ex-colonial territories (such as India, Singapore, Ghana) which manifested local distinctiveness; but the adoption of English as a

lingua franca has led to its adaptation in some countries where it has no special status as a first or second language, but is taught purely as a foreign language. It requires a high level of local fluency for this to happen, of course, and a degree of institutionalization – in the form of a local English-language newspaper, a well-developed school curriculum, and so on. But these conditions obtain in several countries. The fluency levels in Scandinavian countries, for example, are very high, leading to local expressions - 'Nordicisms', 'Swedishisms', and so on - whose status in teaching and examining is a matter of debate. And if we read a copy of the English-language papers in Cairo, Athens, or Tokyo, we encounter culture-specific allusions which are quite comparable to those found in newspapers in Sydney, Dallas, or Johannesburg. The evolution of a Swedish English, an Egyptian English, and so on, is only a matter of time. And the same thing happens in any language which has achieved an international presence.

New literatures

The process will be hastened by the authors who write in these new varieties. The analogous concept to 'New Languages' is 'New Literatures', but new literatures do not develop overnight. In the case of English, the evidence from earlier British Commonwealth manifestations of regional literature is that fresh literary voices take a considerable while to mature. Authors are always at first somewhat uncertain about the way to handle the nonstandard or innovative varieties of a language that are evolving in the community about which they are writing. But over time the writing gains in confidence. In relation to the presentation of nonstandard varieties in English, there seem to be four stages:

- All characters express themselves in Standard English, whatever their linguistic background; the author makes no comment. Example:
    'How long do you intend to stay with us,' said the Colonel.
    'As long as you will have me, sir,' replied Manuel.

- Characters express themselves in Standard English; the author tells the reader what variety or language they are really using. Example:
    'I'll leave as soon as I can,' said Manuel in pidgin.

- Characters express themselves in a local variety; the author additionally tells the reader what the variety is. Example:
    'Me go quick-quick,' said Manuel in pidgin.

- Characters express themselves in a local variety; the author makes no comment. Example:
    'Me go quick-quick,' said Manuel.

It is this last stage - a stage of 'showing', not 'telling' - which is a sign of real literary confidence.

As the number of English-language speakers in EFL countries increases, and as their confidence to use the language in distinctive ways grows, we must surely anticipate a major growth in the expressive range of English arising out of new literary uses. There is no reason why the Hawaiian or West African novel (in English) should not have its equivalent one day in the Scandinavian novel (in English) or the Oriental novel (in English), or Caribbean poetry eventually be matched by Russian poetry (in English) or Chinese poetry (in English). And similar developments will surely take place in other languages which have an international reach – and probably already have, in such languages as Spanish, French, and Chinese. [I would welcome examples.]

An indication of the correspondingly wider linguistic and cultural perspectives needed to interpret these new varieties can already be seen in the English-language newspapers from any of the EFL countries that produce one - such as Egypt, Japan, or Greece. A wide range of topic areas has generated an extensive local vocabulary of common nouns and proper names

which have acquired local overtones (the equivalent of such forms as *Whitehall*, *Soho*, and *West End* in British English). I do not know what the equivalent of *West End* and *East End* is in the English-language description of its corresponding locations in Tokyo, Bangkok, or Stockholm, but every city has names which reflect social realities, and the English which is used in these areas will include those resonances. We would need to know what they were if we were to interpret correctly any English-language novel or newspaper in Japanese, Thailand, or Sweden which incorporated them.

As with the literary example above, English-language newspapers uncertain of the level of awareness of their readership take pains to 'tell' their readers what they are talking about by translating potentially obscure vocabulary, especially in relation to proper names. Here is an example from a Russian English-language publication:

> Russia's Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost) whose official residence is in Veliky Ustyug (a town in Russia's northwest), Santa Claus from Lapland's village of Rovaniemi and their Yakutian counterpart Ekhee Dyyl are meeting this Saturday in the Yakutian village of Tomtor in the Oimyakon district (the Far Eastern Federal District) on the last day of the first Cold Pole-2002 festival. (*Pravda*, 2003)

This is a very high level of 'telling'. At a more mature stage of expression, there is no 'telling', only 'showing':

> Wakonahana, facing one of the few rikishi smaller than himself, had little trouble with No. 6 maegashire Mainoumi, who could use none of his tricks against the technically-sound sekiwake. (*The Daily Yomiuri*, 1993)

This is confident writing, assuming an aware readership who do not have to be written down to. Those who understand Japanese sumo wrestling of course find such sentences transparent. They are no more difficult, in essence, than is a baseball or cricket report to enthusiasts of either sport, as in these American and British examples:

> Brown was hit in the helmet by a Jim Taylor pitch in the top of the eighth inning and was down at home plate for three minutes.
> Hussein has placed two slips and a gully and a backward short-leg for the occasional ball zipping in off the seam.

Newspapers, creative literature, and printed ephemera (such as restaurant menus) involve a very wide range of subject-matter, reflecting the physical environment, history, society, and lifestyle of the host country. As a result, the number of culturally distinctive lexical items which accumulate is extensive, as demonstrated by the 'New English' dictionaries - of South African English, Jamaican English, Australian English, and so on - which have already been compiled. These usually include well in excess of 10,000 entries - and this figure does not take into account encyclopedic data, such as the names of people, places, and events, which most dictionaries tend to exclude. To come to terms with all this, a rapprochement between linguistic and cultural studies, at a comparative and global level, is a likely to be one of the major intellectual developments in 21st-century language studies.

Institutionalizing diversity

There has always been diversity, but it has routinely been marginalized, ignored, or condemned. The most significant change that is currently taking place, to my mind, is that institutions are taking diversity on board, and giving it a public presence and respectability which it has not had since the Middle Ages. Once a country develops a standard language, it is that variety which attracts all the prestige, and it takes a real effort – and the right social climate – for nonstandard varieties of the language to be taken seriously, illustrating the expressive richness of the language and appreciated as indicators of group identity. I only

know the English situation well, hence I will illustrate from that. But the English-speaking world has no monopoly of the social pressures which foster diversity, so I have no doubt that what I am about to say has parallels in other language communities.

What literature does is institutionalize diversity. It gives it status, respectability. When a poem or novel or play is published in a nonstandard dialect, a hidden boundary is crossed. And when large numbers of texts come to be published in nonstandard dialects, a significant change in the language has taken place. This has happened in English. Indeed, it is almost an obligatory feature of a book-prizewinner these days that its language must be anything *other* than standard English! Books by Irvine Welsh, Roddy Doyle, Suhayl Saadi, and Jonathan Safran Foer come to mind.

But literature is not the only institution in a community. The press and broadcasting are two others. And these perform an immensely important role in fostering diversity by providing opportunities for nonstandard varieties to be used and by cultivating a general ethos of celebration. As I said at the outset, diversity needs to be celebrated. And when a major institution such as the BBC celebrates it, another hidden boundary is crossed.

This happened, for the first time in the Corporation's history, in 2005, when the 'Voices' project came to fruition. This was a major effort to take, as it were, a snapshot of the regional linguistic diversity in Britain. Every local radio station in the BBC's portfolio was involved, and dozens of programmes were made, as well as several television documentaries. The results were broadcast in a week in August 2005, and an accompanying website (still live) gave people the opportunity to contribute information about the accents and dialects spoken in their locality. It was hugely popular. The recordings ranged widely over age, gender, and (very important, given the evolving nature of multicultural Britain) ethnicity. After the week was over, the set of recordings was lodged in the British Library and at the University of Leeds, the home of dialect studies in the UK, and is available for study by interested scholars.

The main finding was that the view that dialects are dying out is a myth. On the contrary, they are increasing. Certainly, the older rural dialects are disappearing, as that way of life disappears, but the new social character of the community is one of much greater diversity, and the language is keeping pace with it. Where once there was just one regional variety – such as Cockney in London or Scouse in Liverpool – now there are several varieties – Chinese Cockney, Bangla Cockney, Caribbean Cockney, and so on. They have attracted quite a bit of publicity recently, as newspapers have picked up on the thought that Cockney, for example, is dying out. But it is not dying out. It is changing.

It is really quite a sea-change to find the BBC doing this sort of thing, especially when we reflect that, as recently as 1980, announcers with regional voices were not welcome on the channels. But the growth of competition from commercial regional broadcasting stations changed all that. Listeners and viewers wanted to hear voices from their own locality, or at least voices which did not represent just one section of society – the upper-class accents that had dominated broadcasting from its earliest days. The BBC was also responding to the major shifts in society that were taking place during the latter part of the 20th century: a more egalitarian society began to reduce the severity of social-class distinctions, recognize the value of diversity, safeguard the rights of minorities, and revitalize demotic values. The Voices project could not have happened in the 1980s, or even the 1990s. It was a huge success in the 2000s, and is likely to be repeated.

When a major national institution like the BBC gives diversity its blessing, something very significant has happened. But the significance of this moment is dwarfed by what has happened in an even bigger institution, namely the school. Here the UK has seen a move away from the prescriptive ethos of the past 250 years, and the introduction of new

educational paradigms of language study, as part of the new National Curriculum in English, and a similar ethos pervades the teaching of foreign languages.

The new climate has particularly called for a reassessment of the relationship between standard and nonstandard language and for a fresh and realistic appraisal of just what a 'standard' language involves. We seem to be at a transitional point between two worlds. The 'old world' is one where a tiny number of rules, selected and defined by prescriptive grammarians, totally conditioned our sense of acceptable 'standard' usage, so that all other usages – informal speech, regional dialect - were considered to be inferior or corrupt, and excluded from serious consideration. The 'new world' is one where informal and nonstandard usage is achieving a new presence and respectability within society, reminiscent of that found in Middle English when dialect variation in literature was widespread and uncontentious. It is not a question, in this new climate, of nonstandard in any sense replacing standard. Rather, the two dimensions of language use are being brought into a new relationship, in which the essential role of the standard language (as a means of guaranteeing intelligibility and continuity among educated people) is seen to complement the essential role of the nonstandard language (as a means of giving expression to local identities). It is a move away from the confrontational situation which has had so many traumatic consequences for individual language users, most of whom have been brought up to believe that there is something seriously wrong with their demotic speech. You can hear it every time a native speaker says that 'foreigners speak English much better than I do'.

Eliminating such feelings from public consciousness will take some time. Once people have been given an inferiority complex about the way they speak or write, they find it difficult to be rid of it. But it *is* only a matter of time. In the later decades of the 20th century there were clear signs that institutionalized prescriptivism was already beginning to come to an end. The most important area of change was in educational practice - especially significant because it was only through the school system that prescriptivism had been able to propagate itself. In the UK, from the 1970s, changes in school syllabuses and examination systems introduced a new dispensation. The unthinking adherence to mechanical sentence analysis and old-style canons of correctness began to be replaced by a broad-based investigation of the functions of language in all their social manifestations - a 'language in use' era of linguistic pedagogy. By the end of the 1990s, in the new National Curriculum, as well as in the syllabuses which were being devised for higher examinations, the study of linguistic forms had been added to functions, with a complete change in emphasis. Similar educational changes took place in other parts of the English-speaking world.

The new emphasis integrated the insights of the 'language in use' approach with aspects of the earlier tradition of structural analysis, now seen through linguistic spectacles. Classes and exam papers no longer ask students to parse sentences or to make decisions about correctness in relation to such issues as split infinitives. Instead, the questions make students *explain* what happens when language is used - to go beyond the mere 'spotting' of a linguistic feature (a passive, a simile, a piece of alliteration) to a mode of inquiry in which they explore the reasons lying behind the linguistic choices being made by language users. It is no longer enough to say, 'I see an unusual adjective order in that poem'. The interesting answer - and the one which gained the marks in an exam - is to say why it was there. Only in that way, it is reasoned, can students develop a sense of the consequences of choosing one kind of language rather than another (such as formal vs. informal), when it comes to using language themselves or evaluating the effect of a language choice upon other people. The aim, in short, is to promote a more responsive and responsible approach to language, in which students come to understand why people use language in the way they do, and put this knowledge to active use to become more able to control language for themselves.

This change in emphasis is now being realised in the form of textbooks and teaching materials, but the new approach does not yet have an agreed name. It is not a matter of a

'prescriptive' approach being replaced by a 'descriptive' one, as has sometimes been suggested, for this pedagogy goes well beyond description into a world of explanation and evaluation. A better term would be 'pragmatic' (as opposed to 'dogmatic'), with all that this implies - an ability to adapt knowledge to meet the needs of differing circumstances and a readiness to judge cases on their merits. The pragmatic approach instils an awareness that variation and change are normal features of linguistic life, demanding recognition and respect. And it carries with it the corollary that those who make use of this variation must themselves be recognized and respected. In its strongest and most positive manifestation, the pragmatic approach replaces the concept of 'eternal vigilance' (beloved of prescriptivists and purists) by one of 'eternal tolerance'.

Although an educational perspective is crucial, in moving away from an institutionalized prescriptivism towards a more egalitarian linguistic era, it cannot operate alone. Other social institutions need to be involved. Indeed, without a sense of linguistic disquiet within society as a whole, it is unlikely that any change in educational practice would have taken place at all. What is interesting about the later decades of the 20th century is the way that different social trends began to reinforce pragmatic educational linguistic thinking. Not only did the BBC open its doors to regional speech, as we have seen, business management recognized the importance of speech variation in interacting with clients. The regional accents of a new linguistic order (international as well as intranational) may be heard now at the end of a telephone at many a call centre. Organizations such as the Plain English Campaign focused attention on the linguistic responsibilities of organizations towards the needs of the individual. Political correctness, in the best sense, fostered notions of gender and racial equality. And there was a fresh awareness of the nature of regional and ethnic identity, which led to a greater valuing of linguistic diversity. These trends had their parallels in other English-speaking countries. As I look back at the period, I have a strong sense that a new intellectual sociolinguistic climate was slowly but surely being formed, and diversity is going to be the leading beneficiary.

The Internet
There is one institution I have mentioned only in passing, but in my view it will become the most important influence of all, in its impact on diversity: the Internet.
The trend towards electronic communication in the second half of the twentieth century also made its public impact during the 1990s, when the World Wide Web and mobile telephony arrived, and interaction through email and chatroom became routine. A new technology always has a significant effect on the character and use of language, but when a technology produces a medium that is so different from anything we have experienced hitherto, the linguistic consequences are likely to be dramatic, involving all areas of structure and use, and introducing new considerations into the methodology of its study.

The impact of technology on diversity has been evident at every stage in linguistic history, from the arrival of pen and ink onwards. Writing introduced a graphological dimension to language, with all that this involved in terms of spelling, punctuation, and styles of handwriting. Printing added another dimension to written language, in the form of typography and graphic design, further developments in the orthographic system, and a huge expansion of language varieties through books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and printed ephemera. The telephone introduced new techniques of spoken discourse, and the telegraph added new written styles, such as 'telegramese'.

Radio broadcasting did analogously for the spoken language what print had done for the written, extending phonological expression, and introducing several fresh varieties such as announcements, sports commentaries, and news broadcasts. Film and television continued this process, adding cinematic or televisual speech varieties and also such forms of written expression as programme titles, screen credits, and commercials. The mobile phone (or cellphone), with its space-restricted screen, motivated the development of a further written

variety, based on linguistic abbreviation, in the form of text-messaging. It also altered speech styles. In British English, for example, we traditionally speak our number when receiving a phone call; but this does not happen when our mobile rings: '763452' is replaced by 'Hi' (or the like). And the Internet has taken this process even further, with emails, synchronous (real-time) chatrooms, asynchronous discussion groups, and the many types of Web-based text pulling languages in new stylistic directions, partly in response to the personalities and group dynamics of the participants, and partly because of the constraints introduced by the controlling hardware and software.

But the Internet has done more than earlier technologies in altering our perception of what language is and how it is used. There are plainly considerable differences between the kind of language used on the Internet - *Netspeak*, as I have elsewhere called it - and those used in traditional forms of speech and writing. Indeed, the extent of the difference is so great that it amounts to the arrival of a new medium – nowadays usually called *computer-mediated communication* (CMC) - which blends properties of traditional written and spoken language. CMC is not like traditional writing. It permits people to do things routinely to the written language which were not possible before, such as to interpolate responses into a message (as in emails) or to cut and paste from one document to another without the results clashing graphically. And it offers new dimensions of contrast which were not previously available, notably in animated graphic presentation. Nor is Netspeak like traditional speech. It lacks the simultaneous feedback which is an essential part of face-to-face conversation. It permits the carrying on of several conversations simultaneously in chat-rooms, where it is possible to attend to many interlocutors at once, and to respond to as many as taste and typing speed permits. And it allows people to participate in several totally different speech situations simultaneously - a computer may have a number of windows open at the same time, allowing the user to participate in a multi-user chatroom, engage in a one-to-one conversation using Instant Messenger, role-play an imaginary character in an Internet game, and much more.

The Internet is altering our conception of what the written language is for. The vast majority of traditional writing has represented the language of public record and debate, as manifested in administrative, academic, and expository material (e.g. newspapers, ephemera). It is formal in style, for the most part constructed with care, and expressed in the standard language. Creative literature, displaying a wider range of styles, forms only a small part of the written output over the centuries - as the proportions of texts in any modern corpus show - and informal writing (as seen in letters) an even smaller part. All kinds of imbalances exist. Texts written by men far outnumber texts written by women, at all stages in the history of the language. Texts written by young children or teenagers hardly ever achieve a public presence; nor do texts written by handicapped people or marginalized groups. It is difficult to find public examples of unedited regional or dialect writing, after the standard language is established. Likewise, the written language of many social groups, such as ethnic minorities, rarely achieves an outside audience. At any stage in the history of a language, if I wanted to find out what an in-group was saying, or how it used the language, as an outsider the task would be virtually impossible. The Internet has changed all this.

Probably the most important linguistic effect of the Internet is the way it offers an unprecedented degree of written public presence to small-scale regional and social groups, and thus a vast potential for representing local identities. At the level of regional dialect, developments have taken place both intranationally and internationally, corresponding to the way the Internet has - since the late 1990s - become increasingly multilingual, offering opportunities for self-expression to all languages, including many that are seriously endangered. At the level of the social group, every conceivable interest group now has an Internet presence, fostering new styles of linguistic interaction and giving rise to a range of fresh social concerns. The opportunities are unlimited even at the level of the individual: anyone with access to the medium can now present a personal diary-type statement to the

world, of unlimited length, in the form of a *blog*, or 'Web log' - one of the most proliferating functions of the Web in the early 2000s.

The representation of dialect was an early manifestation. Any intranational regional dialect which has a history of enthusiastic support will now have its Web pages. In the UK alone, there are hundreds of sites devoted to the local English of Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, as well as dialect sites focusing on Yorkshire, Lancashire, Newcastle, London, and elsewhere. There was a Web-based dimension to the BBC 'Voices' project, too - a nation-wide interactive survey of regional variation, and including transcriptions of dialect usage and sound-recordings. And at an international level, many of the New Englishes now have available a written electronic identity which previously could be achieved only through conventional creative literature.

Because the Internet is uncontrolled by the hierarchy of grammarians, lexicographers, publishers, printers, copy-editors, and proof-readers who established, disseminated, and controlled the standard language, it seems likely that we will see a much greater presence of informal written interaction than at any previous stage in the history of the language, and thus the rapid emergence and consolidation of local group norms of usage - several of which will privilege nonstandard forms. These new varieties are bound to achieve a more developed written representation than would ever have been possible before, and through the global reach of the Internet they may well extend their influence beyond their locality or country of origin. A whole new range of Internet-mediated regional written standards is the likely outcome. And as the amount of written language on the Internet will eventually far exceed that available in traditional print form, a new type of relationship between nonstandard varieties and standard languages will one day emerge.

What is especially interesting, from a linguistic point of view, is that most of this material will be unedited. Editorial involvement represents the biggest difference between speech and writing. By 'editing' I mean the presence of an intermediate stage of adaptation (usually by a professional) of a speaker/writer's output before it is received by a listener/reader. Most of the spoken language around us is unedited, in this sense - the only real exception being certain kinds of broadcast and cinematic material where producers, directors, or recording specialists may be heavily involved. By contrast, most of the written language around us is edited, often several times over. The exceptions include only informal letter-writing, graffiti, and a few other manuscript phenomena, which in modern times comprise a very small proportion of written language.

The Internet is changing this balance - not so much on the Web, where a great deal of editing takes place, but in email, chatroom, and instant messenger interaction, and especially in blogging, where the most 'naked' forms of writing appear. There is no single style. Different principles are at work in the use of capitalization, punctuation, abbreviations, and nonstandard spellings. These personality-influenced variations will certainly increase, as the population-base of the Internet grows, and the present generation of Internet-literate individuals grows old. But in all genres, from Web diaries to fantasy games, we will expect to find writing which reflects the speech rhythms, regional and class backgrounds, ages, personalities, and education levels of the participants. There has been nothing like it since the manuscript era of the Middle Ages. And the renewal of connection with medieval times may in due course be complete, for digital representations of handwriting already exist, and may well become routine - assuming of course that, at this point in the future, people are still being taught handwriting!

At the same time, the long-term linguistic character of the Internet remains unclear. This is partly because the technological revolution is in its earliest phase. Given the changes that have taken place in the last decade or so (the Web itself is a creation from as recently as 1991, and mobile phone technology more recent still), we must expect there to be further innovative

developments, especially of an interactive kind, which will push the language in unexpected directions. A spoken dimension of Internet use, supplementing the present graphic dimension, is in prospect, thanks to voice-over-Internet telephony. It is never possible to predict language outcomes. Text-messaging, with its array of idiosyncratic abbreviations (such as *lol*, used above, or *c u l8r* 'see you later'), was a totally unexpected linguistic innovation in the UK in the late 1990s. And since 2000 we have seen even more esoteric forms of usage arising out of the way in which the Internet is being used in unpredictable ways.

In relation to emails, for example, the early years of the new millennium have seen most email users suddenly having to cope with the arrival in their inboxes of large numbers of unwanted messages ('spam') which have been distributed in huge quantities from a single source. Efforts to prevent such messages through automatic filtering of their subject lines have resulted in ingenious efforts on the part of spammers to evade the filters. A whole new genre of English has been the consequence, chiefly seen in the subject-line of emails, and illustrated by such usages as:

> supr vi-agra online now znwygghsxp
> VI @ GRA 75% off regular xxp wybzz lusfg
> fully stocked online pharmac^y
> Great deals, prescription d[rugs

Many of the bizarre graphological expressions have been generated randomly - in itself an unprecedented procedure in everyday written communication.

Chatrooms provide another domain of innovation which has led to unexpected linguistic outcomes. I am not here referring to the distinctive use of rebuses and colloquial abbreviations which characterize 'textspeak'. It was perhaps not surprising to see the emergence of such forms in the technically constrained environment of a mobile phone, where there was a limit of 160 characters per screen, and space was at a premium. Nor was it surprising to see such abbreviations taken up universally in teenage interaction, where they are widely used as an economical and 'cool' style of communication. Much more unexpected was the way users adapted so quickly to the communicative potential of the medium and exploited it as part of a newfound virtual identity in which anonymity is the norm and the choice of personality (as expressed through a nickname or an on-screen character, or 'avatar') is limited only by imagination. The uncontrolled nature of many sites (especially teenage chat sites) has motivated their participants to indulge in every kind of fantasy, regularly resulting in written representations of language which previously would have been confined to maximally informal speech, and which would never have been included in traditional publishing outlets in the interests of public decency.

Obscene or aggressive exchanges have presumably been part of youngster communication since the invention of the teenager, and have been given some study. For example, sociolinguists have long known about the kind of ritual street confrontations described under the heading of 'verbal duelling', in which participants try to outdo each other in flights of linguistic fancy exploiting taboo language to the full. Competitive joke rituals similarly have an ancient history. What is unusual is to see such rituals carried on, at great length and often with great verbal skill, in the written language - especially when such material is spelled and punctuated according to the conventions of the standard language, as happens in a surprising number of cases. It is a new genre of writing - and one which will be very difficult to research, as many of the interactions are accompanied by the exchange of Webcam images which, if downloaded to a researcher's computer, would bring obvious risks.

This, then, is a necessary qualification about the linguistic character of future Internet language. Editing, in the traditional sense, there may not be. But moderating, in the modern sense, there certainly will be. Many chatrooms are now moderated - watched over by a person

whose role is to exclude unacceptable submissions to a site being seen by other participants. The notion of acceptability is very wide-ranging: it includes people who send in messages which are irrelevant ('off-topic'), aggressive ('flaming'), misleading ('trolling'), blasphemous, or obscene. It focuses on content, rather than linguistic structure (though doubtless there is a punctuation chatroom site somewhere where a moderator is sanctioning apostrophes), and usually takes the form of the deletion of a whole message rather than an editing of it. But the natural evolution of the discourse is inevitably affected by such activity. How much, it is difficult to say. It is practically and economically impossible to moderate everything, and even in moderated sites, the attention-span of the moderator has its limitations - especially when dozens of messages are arriving simultaneously from many members, and being displayed at various locations on screen. The degree of sanitization varies greatly, across chatroom logs, and also depends greatly on the personality of the moderators, whose censorship reflects to a degree their individual beliefs and tastes. Many sites publish logs of their interactions. However, many of these logs are a remove or two away from what actually went on in the session. Coping with this kind of material will be a new challenge for corpus linguistics. And it will bring new horizons to the study of linguistic diversity. Truly, we ain't seen nothing yet.