

Swimming with the tide in a sea of language change

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Most people are uncomfortable about the existence of linguistic change - the constant ebb and flow of words, sounds, and structures at the tidal margins of a language. It is not difficult to see why. The steady emergence of new forms and disappearance of old ones presents an ongoing challenge to our linguistic identity. Our intuitions about language are grounded in a lifetime of previous usage, laid down in childhood, and slowly nurtured through individual histories of linguistic contact and preference into a mature norm of comfortable familiarity which includes our native dialect and personal style. Most people become set in their ways, linguistically speaking, and find further change - whether in themselves, their children (or grandchildren), or in society at large - to some extent an intrusion. It is therefore not surprising that, whatever their political persuasion, most people are by nature linguistically conservative.

Everyone is aware of the fact of language change, and I have never met anyone who is entirely happy about it. Even linguists, dispassionate observers of all things linguistic, as they are supposed to be, can be heard off-duty complaining about various usages they do not like. The difference, I would hope, is that linguists are capable of recognizing these feelings for what they are, and are not in the business of trying to impose their personal views on society at large, in the manner of a crusade. They would also, I hope, recognize that linguistic change is unavoidable, an intrinsic feature of language, deep-rooted in its social milieu. The tidal metaphor above is a good one. Try to stop linguistic change, as purist commentators recommend. Can't, and you have to stop social change. It would be easier to stop the tide coming in.

Right and wrong metaphors

People become prophets of doom when they use the wrong metaphors in thinking about language change. If you conceive of change as unilinear, a single dimension, then it is a short step to thinking of it as a process of progress or decay. The history of linguistic thought displays both viewpoints. Some have seen language change as part of a perfectionist ethic, as an evolution towards a superior state of being - a golden age of the future. More common is to see it as evidence of a gradual slide towards dissolution - a sad departure from a golden age of the past. Both views are misconceived. There is no such thing as a single path of language change. As you read this article, language is changing around you in thousands of tiny different ways. Some sounds are slowly shifting; some words are changing their senses; some grammatical constructions are being used with greater or less frequency; new styles and varieties are constantly being formed and shaped. And everything is happening at different speeds and moving in different directions. The language is in a constant state of multidimensional flux. There is no predictable direction for the changes that are taking place. They are just that:

changes. Not changes for the better; nor changes for the worse; just changes, sometimes going one way, sometimes another.

Over the course of decades, or centuries, it is possible to see this see-sawing in action. There are even cases of changes reversing themselves. At one point in time, X becomes Y, and at another Y becomes X again. A classic example is the contemporary trend to use *disinterested* in the sense of 'uninterested'. In a recent *Daily Post* (7 November 1995), I read the headline 'North disinterested in Cardiff scheme' (a reference to a poll which showed that people in North Wales were not interested in a new development in the south of the principality). The copy-editor meant 'indifferent', but he used the word which traditionally means 'impartial'. (In 20th-century standard usage, a judge should be *disinterested* in a case, but not *uninterested* in it.) People argue, on this basis, that the language is losing a semantic distinction (not true, incidentally, as there are many other words available in the language to express the same difference in meaning - I have just used two of them). What is important to note is that the use of *disinterested* in the sense of 'uninterested' is in fact

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earlier than its sense of 'impartial'; and conversely, the early use of *uninterested* was in the sense of 'impartial'. Both are recorded with these senses in the early 17th century. The two words, it seems, have for some time been circling warily around a meaning, uncertain how best to handle it. The change went first one way, then the other. And who knows what will happen to it next.

The metaphor of the tide continues to be apt. No two high tides are the same. It does not make sense to say that yesterday's tide is in some sense better or worse than tomorrow's. The tides are different - reaching one part of the beach today, a different part tomorrow. And yet, somehow, the overall impression from one month to the next is that there has been no real change. Language is like that - but over decades and centuries. Lose a sound or word here; gain one there. There will be temporary confusion in one part of the language while there is transition, and then the uncertainty will resolve, while some other part of the language begins to shift. Language change is as unpredictable as the tides. What level on the beach will the incoming tide reach tomorrow? Will the wavelets hit that pebble? Who can say? It depends on the wind, on whether something unusual has happened deep out in the ocean, on ripples set up by a group of jetski enthusiasts - or maybe someone will simply move the peb-

ble. All of these influences have their parallels in language. Oceans do not stop the pressures of linguistic change, as the impact of American English on Australian, British and other world varieties of English has repeatedly shown.

If you do not believe that it is impossible to predict our linguistic future, all you have to do is try making a prediction. Which phrases will become a cliché next year? What will be the top Christian names in the year 2000? Which words will be the next ones to be affected by a stress shift (of the controversy - controversy type)?

Which prefix or suffix is going to be the next to generate new vogue words (as happened to mega- and -friendly in the 1980s)? We can always tell when a change has happened. With linguistic change, it's only possible to be wise after the event.

The reason why linguistic change is so unpredictable is that it is in the hands of so many people. In their minds, rather. And it is such an unconscious process. In the case of English, we are talking about some 400 million mother-tongue minds, plus an equivalent number of second-language minds. No single person can make a planned, confident impact on such masses. Individuals have sometimes tried with vocabulary - deliberately inventing a new word, and trying to get it established in the language. Just occasionally, it works: *blurb* is a good example, invented by US humorist Gelett Burgess earlier this century. Most of the time it doesn't. No one knows why, in the 15th century, the newly created words *meditation* and *prolixity* eventually came into the language, but *abusion* and *tenebrous* did not.

The books of new words, published from time to time, show the hazardous future of neologisms very well. Take the one edited by John Ayto in 1989, the *Longman Register of New Words*. It contained about 1200 new words or meanings which had been used in various UK spoken or written sources between 1986 and 1988 - words like *chatline*, *cashless*, and *chocoholic*. But how many of these will become a permanent part of English? It is too soon to say, though already several seem very dated: do people still say *cyberphobic*? do they still *chicken-dance*? did *condom fatigue* (analogous to compassion fatigue) or *cluster suicide* ever catch on? In an article written for the international *Journal of Lexicography* in 1993, 'Desuetude among new English words', John Algeo studied 3,565 words which had been recorded as newly entering the language between 1944 and 1976. He found that as many as 58% of them were not recorded in dictionaries a generation later, and must thus be presumed to have fallen out of use. As he says: 'Successful coinages are the exception; unsuccessful ones the rule, because the human impulse to creative playfulness produces more words than a society can sustain'.

A sense of proportion

In thinking about language change, we will never eliminate points of personal like and dislike, nor do we need to try. All we have to do is to think about things in a rational perspective, and try to get them in proportion. It is this sense of proportion which is critical. If every single point of language change or disputed usage were added together, we would be dealing with what? - less than 1% of the language? All the linguistic anxiety about usage and change, which has bedevilled our society since the late 18th century, can surely be no more than that. Change, to

continue with my sea metaphor, affects only the tidal margins. The vast expanse of the linguistic sea remains unaffected. Once in a millenium, maybe, a tsunami wreaks havoc with a fundamental feature of a language system - and then we recognize it,

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paying it special respect by giving it titles, such as the Great Vowel Shift. And we survive.

A sense of proportion is, however, conspicuous by its absence. People argue against tiny matters of language change with great emotion. The issues are blown up out of all proportion. For some, change destroys their language's imagined purity: the metaphors are those of deterioration and decay, and the shout is for 'eternal vigilance' to keep the language intact. These are the arguments of those who belong to Academies, Queen's English societies, and the like. The views are often linked to an imagined deterioration in society as a whole. The same views, it should be noted, are recapitulated in each generation (people have been steadfastly citing issues such as the split infinitive as a serious sign of the impending destruction of English, generation by generation, for over 150 years. For others, change diminishes the link people treasure with their own linguistic origins: the metaphors here are those of the golden age, and the shout is that things ain't what they used to be. These tend to be the arguments of older people, who recall their earlier dialect norms with nostalgia. For still others, change eats away at their community's linguistic identity and sense of national pride: the metaphors here are those of invasion, battle, and survival, and the shout is to stand up against the steamroller of some other linguistic power, such as the UK or - more commonly these days - the USA.

Even linguists will occasionally be heard inveighing about this last issue, and there is a nice recent local example to make the point. In the Winter 1995 issue of *Contact*, from the University of Queensland, Professor Roland Sussex bemoans the way so many 'good Aussie words' have been lost, in the face of massive 'Americanisation'. The argument could be replicated in almost every other part of the English-speaking world (apart from America, of course). 'Why do we have to try to look and sound like a 51st state of America?', he is reported to have complained. 'Are we a self-standing nation or just cobbled together from others?'. English, of course, is the most cobbled together of all languages. As has often been pointed out, it has sucked in words from other languages like a vacuum cleaner - over three hundred different language sources - and continues to do so. Australian English is only doing what has been going on since Anglo-Saxon times. Doubtless, there were always objections (expressed, at least, by the intellectual members of society), but time is a great healer. Generations later, the sense of objection is replaced by one of pride. We now comment with satisfaction on the flexibility, range, and versatility of the English lexicon, fostered during periods of past domination, as shown by its French, Latin, and other elements. The irony is that most people learn no les-

son from all of this, but continue to object to the self-same processes when they contemporaneously take effect.

This paradox is everywhere present. The magazine article continues: 'Professor Sussex points out that flexible languages which can absorb new words and be vital will survive, while languages

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like Latin will die'. That is: we want new words. On the other hand, there is a concern to put up barriers, to be selective. 'Many [of the new words] are words that add nothing to our communication or our cultural identity, and it's a pity when they squeeze out good Australian words.' That is: we don't want new words. This is the slippery slope into Academia, into the purist mentality which characterizes the French way of looking at their language. A moment's reflection will make it apparent that there is no way in which the distinction between a 'good Australian word' (which ought to be preserved) and a 'bad Australian word' (which can be surrendered) can be maintained. And, even if there were some criteria which would apply satisfactorily, how would one implement such decision-making? Set up a committee who would make recommendations? And would anyone pay attention to them?

In my travels around the English-speaking world, in radio and press debates and interviews, the issue of language change is far and away the most commonly raised topic. It cuts across the social divide. Regardless of whether the channel is down-market or up-market, the phone-ins repeatedly ask me for my opinion about the changes that are perceived to be taking place — whether as a result of the influx of other nationalities, the influence of American English, or the growth of indigenous dialects. My impression is that the anxiety (or insecurity, if you prefer) about linguistic change is much more pervasive in Australia than in Britain, and more than in many other English-speaking countries, except probably Canada (where the language issue is a matter for referenda) and South Africa (where the language issue is a reflex of that country's recent social turmoil). And the speed of contemporary change is one of the points being documented by Roland Sussex in his research into the Americanization of Australian English.

Static and dynamic

There is only one certainty, and this is that language will always be changing. If so, then it would seem sensible to replace any static conception we may have of language by a dynamic one, especially if we have responsibility for the language (in the sense that we have to work with it professionally, as in teaching). A static view ignores the existence of change, tries to hide it from the student, and presents students with a frozen or fossilized view of language. Once a rule is prescribed, no alternatives to it are tolerated. A dynamic view of language is one which recognizes the existence of change, informs the student about it, and focuses on those areas where change is ongoing.

And where is all this change? It is to be found in variation - in the alternative usages to be encountered in all domains of linguistic life. International and intranational regional and social accents and dialects, occupational varieties, features which ex-

press contrasts of age, gender, and formality, features which distinguish speech from writing - these are the potential diagnostic points for future linguistic change. The more we can increase students' awareness of contemporary language variation, therefore, the more we can give them a foundation for understanding and accepting linguistic change. The title of a contemporary academic journal suggests the interdependence of these notions: *Language Variation and Change*.

Many teachers, at least some of the time, try to hold a mirror up to (linguistic)

nature - to let students see something of the organized chaos which is out there. This is as it should be. Trying to protect students from it, by pretending it isn't there, does no-one any service. We need to find ways of reflecting it, but at the same time filtering it, so that students are not dazzled by the spectrum of alternatives which are part of sociolinguistic reality. In many cases in grammar and pronunciation, the choice is fairly straightforward, between just two alternatives, such as spoken vs written, or formal vs informal. I do not accept the conventional wisdom that students will be 'confused' by being told about both. Contrariwise, I do believe that to distort reality, by pretending that the variation does not exist, is to introduce a level of artifice which brings difficulties sooner or later.

And it may be sooner. Adopting a dynamic perspective is not just desirable; it is urgent. The reason is that the pace of linguistic change, at least for spoken English, is increasing. As English comes to be adopted by more and more people around the world, an unprecedented range of new varieties has emerged (chiefly since the 1960s) to reflect new national identities. The differences between British and American English pronunciation, for example, are minor compared with those which distinguish these dialects from the new intra-national norms of, say, Indian and West African English. When the English speakers of these countries numbered only a few tens of thousands, there was no threat to the pre-existing models, such as British and American English. But now that there are probably three times as many people speaking English in India as there are in Australia, an unfamiliar factor has entered the equation. What effect this will have on the balance of (linguistic) power, it is too soon to say - but the way that Caribbean rapping spread around the globe in the 1970s and the way that Australian English has travelled through British media programmes in the 1980s shows that even relatively small dialect populations can have an influence out of proportion of their size.

None of this has yet had any real impact on standard written English, as encountered in print. There is very little difference, for example, in the language of newspapers printed in Britain, the USA, Australia, or India - a point made evident in the section on 'a day in the life of the language' in my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. But, as far as speech is concerned, and informal speech in particular, the future is one of increasing variety, and thus change. The sooner we prepare people to cope with this diverse new world, therefore, the better. Part of the answer is to teach them to swim in the right direction - with the tide, rather than against it.

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