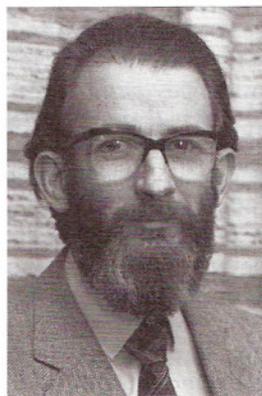


Reithed in gloom

DAVID CRYSTAL comments wryly on some implications of the BBC's annual Reith Lectures, given this year on language and linguistics by Jean Aitchison, the Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Oxford. A less developed version of the article appeared in 'The Independent on Sunday' in February 1996



'I think you ought to know,' says Marvin the paranoid android in *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 'I'm feeling very depressed'. When I heard the opening question posed by Professor Jean Aitchison, in the first of the 1996 Reith lectures, 'Is our language sick?', a deep sense of Marvinian gloom began to grow inside me. It wasn't that the lecturer didn't answer the question competently: she did indeed. It was the fact that the question was being asked yet again – and in a Reith lecture, of all places.

I've long lost count of the number of radio programmes which have addressed this question. The BBC gets hundreds of letters each week from people who believe (a) that the language is indeed sick, and (b) that it is the BBC's fault. They cite split infinitives, for example – as in *to boldly go* – ignoring the fact that these have been a normal feature of our language since the 12th century, and that it was only in the 18th century that an (influential) grammarian decided there was something ugly about them. They also ignore the fact that fussing about such matters was around long before the BBC was a twinkle in Lord Reith's eye.

To its credit, the BBC has devoted a fair amount of time to airing the issues. I did my bit on Radio 4 in the 1980s, in several series of *English Now*, trying to explain the facts of English usage. At the beginning of the decade, I was receiving letters like the ones Jean Aitchison quoted in her lecture – condemning language change unreservedly. At the end of the decade, I was receiving letters which said –

exactly the same thing. It was as if I had never been.

I shouldn't really be surprised, I suppose. As Aitchison says, 'Laments about language go back for centuries'. The 'cobweb of worries' which people have about English is indeed ancient. People insist on believing that spoken language is sloppy – even though the omissions of sounds in fast speech is a perfectly natural style which *everyone* practises to some degree. They insist on believing that language is like a crumbling castle of former excellence – though there has never been a time when English was in a perfect, changeless state. And they insist on thinking of language change as if it were a disease – even though change is a natural result of social contact between people who speak differently, and who unconsciously influence each other so that their speech converges or diverges.

I find these sensible points, as did our Reith lecturer. But why Jean Aitchison thought that the arguments would convince anyone today,

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any more than in previous centuries, is unclear to me. Linguistic likes and dislikes seem to be so deep-rooted that they are not easily affected by reason. There is something within people which makes them think of informal speech as sloppy, of change as decay. Why? There is something which makes them value the written language over the spoken, even though the latter antedates the former in the child and the race. Why? There is a 200-year-old view that we need eternal vigilance to keep the language intact: why is it now so difficult to replace this with a view of eternal tolerance? Indeed, why is it so difficult to be tolerant of other people's speech? Why do people ridicule accents? Why are people so hurt when others attack the way they speak – even (there are several attested cases) referring to this as a factor in their suicide letter?

I would like to know the answer to these questions, and would expect to hear such in-depth probing in a Reith lecture on language sickness. I was disappointed, therefore, that our lecturer did not move us in that direction, for I firmly believe that the really interesting question is not 'Is our language sick' but 'Why do we want to think that our language is sick?' Or, 'Why is language sickness thought to be so serious a disease anyway? And why is it chronic?' It is not enough to say that there is no disease – to point out that language change is the normal state of health. Why do people think there is a disease in the first place? We don't need the linguistic equivalent of a doctor: we need a psychiatrist.

Many of the worried reactions which followed the first Reith lecture stemmed from the fact that people are very protective about Standard English – the variety which binds educated people together all over the world. A standard variety is invaluable (not all languages have one), because it gives people from very different regional and cultural backgrounds an agreed way to communicate. People from earlier times chose *I am not* (formal) and *I'm not* (informal) as the standard forms, leaving *I's not*, *I ain't*, *I'm none*, *I en't*, *I isn't*, *I aren't*, *I bain't*, *I amment*, and many other expressions for continuing regional dialect use. You can see the value of a standard language from this example: without it, there would be real difficulties when people from Glasgow and Newcastle, or from the East End and East Virginia, tried to talk (or write) to each other.

The issue has in the past been particularly critical in relation to writing – for the obvious

reason that most written texts end up being read by an indefinitely large number of readers, most of whom do not have the opportunity of sorting out difficulties of comprehension with the original author. The whole point of Standard English, indeed, is that it is essentially a written language phenomenon – chiefly a feature of print. Examine the English newspapers in Sydney, Tokyo, Athens, Atlanta, or Edinburgh, and you will find little difference in their grammar and vocabulary. Standard written English patently exists, as a world-wide medium. That is why our children need to learn it, and learn it well – to enable them to communicate with confidence and as equals on the world stage.

A few people learn to *speak* Standard English, too. These are the people most in the national or international public eye – such as broadcasters – who have learned the importance of communicating with large numbers of people. (This factor was very much in the forefront of Lord Reith's mind, when the BBC had to choose a variety of English as its norm at the outset.) The grammar and vocabulary of their formal speech is very close to that of written Standard English. But it will never be a replica of written English, simply because people when they speak spontaneously do not have the opportunity to 'draft and revise', as they do in writing.

Being protective about our language is one thing. Being over-protective is quite another. Standard English has been around a long time, and is spreading around the world faster than at any other period in its history. If any variety of the language is in excellent health, it is Standard English. (Many regional dialects, by contrast, are in very poor health.) If you add up all the points of grammar and vocabulary which some people imagine to be 'mistakes' (like the split infinitive), you will find that they amount to only a tiny part of 1 per cent of the language.

Real mistakes stand out like the proverbial sore digit. These are usages which fall completely outside the norms of the dialect to which a speaker belongs. If I use the word *bibliography* to mean 'religious studies', or spell *psychiatrist* as *psyciatrist*, then I am an idiot. I have made mistakes in Standard English, and am right to be corrected. I should have looked the words up in an appropriate guide – such as a dictionary. And if I call a *see-saw* a *teeter-totter* in my home locality in North Wales, I have also made a mistake. That isn't an accepted local dialect usage, as locals would soon tell me (through their

blank looks). But none of this is to do with language change. Each dialect – whether regional or standard – has its rules of grammar and meaning, and children learn them, at home, in the street, or in school.

Most people learn Standard English in school. It is an artificial exercise, taught consciously according to rules which are as much social and historical as linguistic in character. Linguists who ignore the essentially prescriptive nature of the written language (most noticeable in the case of the spelling rules) do so at their peril. They must prepare for a ferocious counterblast from people who feel that the emphasis on the natural rules of speech has been at the expense of the partly contrived (but nonetheless desirable) rules of writing. There is nothing to be gained if linguists allow their position to be seen as one of ‘anything goes’. Anything does *not* go: that is the whole point.

Children can of course learn Standard English without losing any of their local identity. They do not need to *replace* their local dialect

when they reach school (thus giving them a lifelong linguistic inferiority complex). Rather, they should see Standard English as a valuable *addition* to their repertoire. They need to become bilingual (more precisely, ‘bidialectal’) in their own language. Indeed, there are signs that they will one day need to be tridialectal. I myself use one dialect at home (a mixed Welsh-Liverpudlian variety of British English), another when I talk in public in Britain (British Standard English), and a third when I meet people from other English-speaking countries (World Standard English). This last variety has been slowly growing since the 1960s, and is beginning to be heard in such places as international conferences and along the world corridors of power. It is a variety in which Americans, British, and other English-speaking nationals avoid the idiosyncratic features of their mother-dialect (such as UK *pavement* – US *sidewalk*) and move towards a neutral variety intelligible to all.

It is a pity that the first Reith lecture did not go into these issues. In particular, I think it was a mistake to ignore the relationship between speech and writing, as those especially concerned about standards immediately condemned the lecture for its failure to address what they perceived to be the ‘real issues’ – namely, the need to preserve satisfactory standards of written communication, nationally and internationally, and to be able to reflect this medium in formal speech. There are genuine worries about standards in the outside world, and some of these worries are well-founded. It is certainly possible for people not to take care when they speak or write, and there is nothing to be gained by dismissing all worries as myths.

The later Reith lectures dealt with such topics as how language began, how children learn it, and how we remember words. These were fascinating areas indeed – and those who had not turned off after being turned off by the first lecture would have found them interesting, whether they believed that language is decaying or not. Jean Aitchison felt that she needed to remove the cobweb of worries before moving on. She shouldn’t have bothered. If anyone had worries about English before their Reith encounter this year, those worries would still have been there afterwards. I sense Marvin still glooming in the wings. □

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