

The changing English Language (Keynote Lecture)

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The following is an edited transcript of the video recording made at the lecture. Of course no transcript can capture the flavour of such an entertaining talk. In particular it cannot attempt to reproduce the witty anecdotes illustrative of the phonological phenomena under discussion. The video recording is, however, to be had from the NELLE secretariat (see front cover for address).

This is a topic which has had at least three or four books written upon it and therefore what I thought I would do is try to introduce a different approach, an approach which is, as far as language teaching is concerned, I think, very important. Because when you work day by day with the problems of language teaching and have also at the same time to keep abreast of research findings in areas like linguistics and applied linguistics, it is very difficult sometimes to keep apart in your mind the reality of language change and the fiction of language change - fact and fiction blur. You encounter a new observation on the English language, and what you are unclear about is whether this is really a new feature of the language or something which has always been a feature of the language but which you've only now discovered.

This problem is particularly acute at the present time because so much research has gone on into everyday conversational English in the last ten or fifteen years. And this has now begun to percolate through to "the assembly" and one is often left a little confused as to what the reality of the situation is.

So I begin by distinguishing real change from imaginary change. I'll be talking in a little while about real change, but for the moment let me draw your attention to one or two aspects of imaginary change.

If you look at some of the (contemporary) material on conversational English, you are brought face to face with certain characteristics of the English language which traditionally have been ignored in language teaching materials. Certainly in the old days one was presented in language teaching materials with stereotyped situations which claimed to be real. If you examine the interchanges they are systematic and regular. People take turns, they do not interrupt each other. They do not speak remotely like people speak in our family, for instance, where there is perpetual interruption, lack of correspondence between question-stimulus and response etc. and people speak with their mouths full! And if you study material related to this kind of (real) conversation, there are features which, when brought to your notice, you might well construe to be features of language change, but in fact they have been around, I think, as long as the language has been

in existence.

For instance in everyday conversation people repeat themselves all the time. But if somebody says there is a great deal of repetition in modern English the implication is that there used not to be, that this is a feature of language change. But I don't think it is. Similarly, the more informal a conversation becomes the faster it becomes. Radio 4 news-readers tend to speak at the rate of 200 syllables per minute, whereas in informal taped conversations of native speakers you will find speeds (for brief bursts) of 400 to 500 syllables per minute. In order to speak that quickly you have to assimilate and elide to a degree not even A. C. Gimson predicted, and the listener (the native-speaker listener!) has to work out from the context what is meant. If you read an article saying "notice the amazing amount of assimilation and elision in informal conversational English" you might be forgiven for thinking that this is a feature of language change. It is not. I don't believe we are speaking any faster these days than people spoke a hundred years ago, though I cannot of course prove that.

Now similarly, when you read analyses of spoken English you will encounter various features of the language being noticed for the first time. A famous example is the so-called parenthetical "comment clauses" of English such as "you know", "you see", "I mean", "mind you" and more complex ones like "the trouble is", "frankly speaking", "to be perfectly honest about this", "putting it bluntly" and several hundred more. Now the first time I encountered comment clauses being systematically reviewed was in the Quirk grammar of 1972, where they were given half a page. In the 1985 Quirk grammar comment clauses have some six pages and the print is smaller! So you might well think that comment clauses were a modern phenomenon in the language, developing in the 1970s and now in the 1980s becoming even more common. This is not so. However the research into comment clauses is new. That is what is new, the research effort and the publicity given to the research effort, although, of course, we have no access to the informal spoken language of the past to prove this.

By contrast, there are some changes of a real kind taking place in the language. The most noticeable ones are in vocabulary. When vocabulary changes, it can change in all kinds of ways. You can borrow words from abroad. You can convert words from one class to another (“round” the adjective to “round” the verb to “round” the noun) and you can use affixes (prefixes and suffixes) to develop your new words. Now once upon a time in English there was a lot of affixation in use and an enormous amount of borrowing from foreign languages, especially in the Middle English period. In recent times affixation has not been particularly fashionable, but since the 1960s there seems to have been a trend to introduce word formations using affixes to a scale which has not been seen for several hundred years.

Look at books like the Longman Register of New Words, which looks at words which have come into the language in so far as those can be found in newspapers and magazines. Altogether there are about 1200 new words for a two-year period in the latest edition. If you examine them you will find that a very large number of them are affixal constructions.

The kind of thing I mean is that there is a fashion at the moment to prefix everything with “Euro-”. There is a “Euro-English” being discussed at length by several people in this very room! Of course there are all the economic terms like Eurobudget, Euroeconomy, Euromarket. But in recent times I have seen some rather more interesting ones and the following were all taken from newspapers and magazines in the last few months. Maggie was certainly not a “Eurofighter”. She expressed “Eurofeebleness”, is suffering from “Eurosclerosis”, she is a “Eurowimp” and demonstrates “Eurowimpery”. She is not “Eurofriendly”. “-friendly” is an interesting suffix. “Audience-friendly”, “customer-friendly”, “environment-friendly”, “user-friendly” of course, the original one, “farmer-friendly”, “girl-friendly” (in an advertisement for perfume), “labour-friendly” (that is “socialist-friendly”), “nature-friendly”, “newspaper-friendly” (the print does not rub off on your fingers). “-speak” is another suffix: “catalogue-speak”, “computer-speak”, “economospeak”, “technospeak”, “robospeak”. “TEFL-speak”! I heard that at a conference not long ago. “IATEFL-speak”. “NELLE-speak”? Does it exist yet? It does now, it’s on record!

Vocabulary is the obvious aspect of real language change. Yet the trend towards affixation has been a trend since the sixties and a very interesting one, because it has not been a trend in English for several hundred years.

In grammar there is very little going on at the moment, as far as I can tell. The only feature I’ve noticed in the last fifty years is a tendency to be increasingly elliptical. Fifty years ago you would not have had utterances like “as preacher and poet, ...”, leaving out the indefinite article: not “as a preacher and as a poet, ...”, which is the way it would have been a generation or so ago. I think you see

a genuine tendency to leave out words in the language. You see it particularly in informal conversation, for example the omission of initial subject and initial verb of the sort “Going to the library?” - “Just been”. If you look at the representations of informal speech in novels written forty or thirty years ago, you do not see this quite so dramatically as you see it now. I am not entirely sure if this is a real or an unreal change, but I think it’s real.

What interests me most is the genuine way in which the language is tending to change in phonology, in pronunciation. I am not here referring to vowels and consonants. The most noticeable trend in my estimation affects the prosody of the language, the rhythm, the intonation, the tone of voice. This is not an imaginary change. I know we do not know how people sounded a hundred years ago, but we do know how people sounded forty or thirty years ago with recordings being available. And any of you who have listened to material from the BBC sound archives will notice changes. (These are partly changes of a segmental character. You will notice an increasing use of the glottal stop at the end of a word, to take one example of segmental change. In fact two younger members of the Royal Family use it quite routinely, and if it’s the Royal Family, well, the British Council will start using it next!) But in prosody you get more noticeable things. If you listen to Radio One, for instance, you will notice the development of what is called a Mid-Atlantic accent, which is partly a segmental matter but mainly a cross between American and British intonation, a slower, more drawled, slightly nasal tone which to an American ear sounds British but to a British ear sounds American. It’s neither one thing nor the other.

Sometimes you can notice a very specific intonation pattern being used. My favourite example is the use of a falling-rising tone. Now the falling-rising tone in British English carries the connotation (assuming the face is neutral or slightly frowning) of doubt, uncertainty, reservation. In American English that particular tone does not have that range of meanings. But I sense a change in the values of the falling-rising tone in Britain at the moment.

And here’s another one, a change in the values of the high rising tone. The high rising tone has always been for me a tone of query. But of course in Australian English it has always meant other things, or at least for a generation or so. It’s a tentativeness marker. It started off as a female feature, apparently, and has been generalized to males, and now you hear it in Britain, probably due to “Neighbours” and “Crocodile Dundee”. The influence of Australian English on British English is quite extraordinary.

And my last example, one which I think hasn’t happened yet. So whereas a lecturer on the changing language usually talks about the past or the present, this example is about the future. I wonder whether it will happen, but I think I hear it in some younger people these days. One of the big things that’s happened in English in the last

generation is the world-wide development such that you now find major varieties of English in parts of the world where previously it was either not prominent or we had very little of it. And in particular what has happened is that English has come into contact with languages it never used to come into contact with, in places like the Caribbean, India, Pakistan, indeed in the whole of South Asia, in South Africa, in West Africa and to a lesser extent in East Africa. English is now rubbing shoulders with languages which are rhythmically at a remove from English. English rhythm, as you know, is an isochronous rhythm, a stress-timed rhythm, where the main pulses occur at roughly equal intervals in the stream of speech, not a syllable-timed rhythm such as you get in French. You know the problem of teaching English stress-timed rhythm to a person whose language does not have stress-timed rhythm.

Now when you go to places like India and the West Indies what you find is that the syllabic rhythm of Hindi, for example, has carried through to the variety of English used in those parts of the world. Consequently Indian English is syllable-timed English, not stress-timed English. But if you give full values to your unstressed syllables, comprehension becomes a very different game from when you know you can ignore your unstressed syllables. French learners of English would probably find it much easier to understand Indian speakers of English than native speakers of English would. I know of no evidence to support that assertion but I wouldn't be at all surprised. You get exactly the same thing happening in Jamaican English and indeed in all the Creole-influenced varieties of the West Indies. English has never before been affected in that way. The last time English rhythm was so fundamentally affected was in the ninth century, when English lost all its inflectional endings and the rhythm system changed and the stress system changed and we got the shape of English that we know. And now, a thousand years later, possibly another change is taking place. Is it going to affect British and American English? I don't know, but I listen to my daughter and her friends and every now and then I hear syllable-timed speech! They love to listen to rap and emulate it in their speech and one wonders if this might ultimately have some effect.

I've talked this morning about three kinds of change. I've talked about the real changes that are taking place in the language, and these are not many, except in the area of vocabulary, but they might be quite important in that they eat away at certain aspects of the language in which we have a traditional vested interest. These are however only the tip of an iceberg of imaginary change, and I think that most of the things that are cited these days as being examples of change in English are not real changes at all, but examples of phenomena that one has begun to notice for the first time because more research has been done on certain aspects of the language, and my examples there were things like comment clauses and the speed of informal speech and the repetition example from half an hour ago.

And then of course the most important change of all, not changes in the language but changes in attitudes. Because there's no point in keeping oneself up to date in current research, in finding out about the current issues in language change, if these factors affect one's teaching strategies not a jot. Obviously it is difficult to change one's tradition of teaching where one has been brought up with a certain standard in mind, a certain norm, and when one's materials have been devised to teach that norm. And it is extremely difficult to take on board factors of language change, especially when they're fundamental, in such a way that they will influence your teaching. Therefore in a sense the most important thing is a greater awareness, a greater preparedness to alter one's teaching strategies, if not in teaching production at least in teaching listening comprehension, where so many of these factors can be quite usefully introduced to students, and thus to develop a more flexible a more varied, a more versatile range of teaching than might perhaps previously have been the case.

That is why I applaud so strongly the aims, and already the achievements of NELLE. Because it seems to me that the best way of developing one's attitudes in this respect is to be part of an organization where that kind of flexibility is a keynote of its constitution.

Thank you.