



A Brief Overview of English as a Language in Change

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Abstract

This paper will make a brief review of the reasons for language change, before addressing the issue of how the concept of the native speaker as a model for English is also being modified. Some examples will then be given of recent changes that have been noted in the English language, covering the modification of pronunciation over time, the addition of lexis, and changing syntactical and semantic rules or levels of acceptability, to demonstrate how words and phrases are being used now in ways which might not have been considered acceptable in the past.

Keywords: English language, Change, Lexical development, Syntactical and semantic rules

1. Introduction: Why and how do languages change?

Some languages change more rapidly than others: in contrast to Japanese, for example, which has changed very little in a thousand years, the changes in English are both major and relatively rapid. 600-year-old English looked and sounded very different from the English used today, as demonstrated by this extract from the beginning of Chaucer's General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

*"Whan that Aprille with hise shoures sote
The droughte of March hath perced to the rote, ...
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages."*

Which might today be translated as

*"After April's sweet showers
Have soaked dry March down to its roots ...
Then people want to start a pilgrimage."*

As another demonstration of language change 'in action', as it were, here is just one phrase, as used in four different versions of the Bible, (1 Corinthians: 14) as edited in the English language, covering a range of around 600 years:

"If I speke with tungis of men" (Wyclif, 1395)

"Though I spake with the tonges of men" (Tyndale, 1525)

"Though I speak with the tongues of men" (King James, 1611)

"I may be able to speak the languages of human beings" (Good News Bible, 1994)

Why do languages change? In the past, many of the theories which were put forward tended to hinge around value-judgements that languages somehow became more decadent once they left behind all the complexities of Latin declensions (Lo, 1996-2005); ignoring the fact that in English, for example, particles and auxiliary verbs make the language complex in a different way. Another related (and similarly judgemental) theory of language change suggests that people have gradually become lazier in their pronunciation, and therefore, sound (and perhaps eventually spelling) changes occur when increasing numbers of speakers favour the 'easier' options. But who is to decide what is actually 'easier' to pronounce? Another theory in what might be thought of as the 'quality slip' group of explanations about language change is that we learn incorrect versions from our parents, but this theory ignores the fact that school and peer groups are also very powerful contributors to people's accents and vocabulary, as demonstrated by the fact that children of immigrants always pick up the language used at school.

These sorts of theories about language tends to be used by people who also favour the prescriptive approach to grammar, which, in effect, tells us what they think correct grammar ought to be. For example, a prescriptive grammar would probably indicate that one should never split an infinitive (an example of which 'grammatical sin' used to be heard at the beginning of every episode of the old American 'Star Trek' television series: 'to boldly go') – presumably on the grounds that it could not be done in Latin. Personally, I do not see a problem with splitting an infinitive apart from a

little stylistic clumsiness.

Another injunction of a prescriptive grammar might be ‘never start a sentence with ‘and’ or ‘but’. At this point I should admit that as a lecturer, I too, generally preach this latter rule, certainly for more formal writing, on the grounds that both ‘and’ and ‘but’ are conjunctions, and as such they function as ‘joining words’ that should come between two clauses, phrases or ideas within one sentence; but I am aware that in spoken English or informal writing, I and other native speakers (writers, even!) do not always follow this rule. My point is that some prescriptive rules that are found in grammar books do not reflect the changes in the way that English is actually being used by native speakers.

A more plausible theory to explain language change is that large-scale social, economic and political developments (in the past, events such as migration, invasion or colonization) may be responsible for bringing about language shifts. Trade and travel can influence languages, with people moving to new areas and bringing their vocabulary and pronunciation, for example settling in a small community which gradually develops its own further variations. This type of theory normally works in tandem with the descriptive approach to grammar, in other words describing what people actually write and say, rather than telling us what we ought to say.

Labov (1996) put forward a slightly different type of social theory suggesting that, at least for pronunciation, change happens when the particular vowel sounds used in certain words by a relatively small group come to be regarded as a sign of social and cultural identity, and so more people who wish to be part of that group copy or even exaggerate that sound, use it in other words that also have the same vowel sound, and gradually there is a sound change across a much larger group. A current example in Britain is the widening occurrence of an accent which is now referred to as ‘Estuary English’ (from southern Essex), which people seem to be copying from the influential sounds of young ‘personalities’ who appear regularly on television, radio and in films.

Because languages are dynamic, they can not only change and expand their range, but also die out. However, even the concept of a dead language has two different sides; Latin and Greek, for example, are sometimes described as dead languages, but this is not completely true, since native speakers of English use words that have Latin and Greek derivations all the time, often without knowing it, when they use words like ‘video’, ‘television’, ‘telephone’, ‘computer’, ‘centre’, ‘zone’, ‘pedestrian’ and ‘cinema’. The other side of language death, however, is much more serious. Many indigenous languages are indeed disappearing - at an alarming rate, according to sociolinguists - when there are no native speakers of that language left to keep using them. Let us consider, at this point, what is meant by the concept of ‘a native speaker’.

2. The ‘native speaker’; the best role model?

The old definitions of ‘native speaker’ were based, literally, on where you were born or what your mother’s first language was. While this may seem an obvious starting place, it is problematic in that it has the effect of linking the concept of native-speaker to class, education and colonial status. As an example, in Hong Kong it is common for an Indian whose first language is indeed English or who is totally fluent in the language, to be considered somehow not as ‘satisfactory’ a native speaker teacher as someone who has a strong regional accent, but who grew up in Scotland or Canada or Australia or America, whether or not they know anything about the grammar of their own language or can explain and teach it.

Partly because nowadays people are so mobile and there are many who are brought up with the benefit of two or more cultures and languages, a more inclusive definition of a native or near-native speaker is gaining ground: ‘someone who uses the language extremely confidently and well in all situations’. What is interesting about the use of English at the moment is that globally, the number of non-native speakers is greater than the number of native speakers by a factor of three to one. In this context of global English, the concept of being able to (for example) pronounce English ‘like a native speaker’ is therefore becoming less relevant as a goal, when most speakers of English in the future will not be native speakers anyway, and a better aim may simply be to function competently in English. To this end, many modern English language textbooks are already using role-models who are themselves competent users rather than native-speakers: ‘Ricky Martin rather than Elizabeth II’, as Cook (in progress) puts it.

If at this point you are now asking about English, ‘whose language is it?’ let John Simpson, the Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, provide an answer: “there is no longer one English - there are many Englishes. Words are flooding into the language from all corners of the world” (Dieu, 2005). So much so, in fact, that many words have been coined in order to describe what are now sometimes referred to as ‘international dialects with ties to English’ - Chinglish and Singlish, for example.

3. One example out of “many Englishes” : Hong Kong English

So what about the English used in Hong Kong, where the vast majority of the population are not native speakers of English? Most people would agree that there is such a thing as Hong Kong English, some of which consists of vocabulary items such as ‘shroff’, ‘amah’ or ‘chop’ which are not found elsewhere in Chinese or English, and some of which consists of a collection of typical fossilized errors due to the interference of the first language grammar (such as

tense confusions, ‘he/she’ and ‘his/her’ being applied interchangeably – which really does confuse native speaker listeners!) and pronunciation (difficulty in pronouncing consonant clusters, ‘lost’ consonants at the end of words, ‘/r’ and ‘s/sh’ confusion), and so on. The fact that books, articles and websites discussing Hong Kong English invariably refer to these ‘problem areas’ does suggest that people see Hong Kong English as not conforming to the norms of ‘Standard English’ (Hong Kong English, 2008). At this point is perhaps worth noting that as far as grammatical usage is concerned, ‘Standard English’ (the kind of English that appears in published work, is spoken in educational situations and by the ‘professional class’; using a phrase like ‘I did it’ rather than the non-standard ‘I done it’) is in fact probably spoken natively by only about 10% of the population of Britain; however, there are in fact only a very tiny number of differences between standard and non-standard English in terms of either grammar or vocabulary.

In Hong Kong, as perhaps in many other areas where non-native speakers predominate, those non-native speakers tend to be the people who most avidly refer to grammar books, with the result that they may in fact be judging the target language from a rather idealized perspective which does not allow for anything but the most inflexible usage. In illustration of this, there was a recent exchange of letters in the South China Morning Post where a local headmistress accused the Exams Authority of making a mistake by writing ‘do not take away’ on exam papers. She quite rightly pointed out that ‘take’ is normally a transitive verb which needs an object; however she had perhaps forgotten that the object can be implied, if the notice appears on the object being referred to (like ‘push’, written on a door, or ‘keep upright’ printed on a bottle.) One reply to her letter suggested that “common usage is often a better indicator of “correct” English than pedantic theory” (Dengate, 2007) which brings us to the implication that a native speaker can never be wrong in their use of their own language, by virtue of the fact that they are native speakers – something which is hotly disputed by many native speakers, who do in fact frequently accuse each other of, at worst, sloppy grammar, pronunciation or vocabulary usage, or at best, “fuzzy judgement” (Li, 1994).

4. Pronunciation Changes

Shakespeare used the phrase ‘the King’s English’ (although it had been used before then) and nowadays we still use the phrase ‘the Queen’s English’ (or ‘Received English’, or ‘BBC English’ or ‘High British’) to refer to correct English in general, but also to a particular accent or pronunciation in particular, one which used, at least, to be considered the best model for BBC radio and TV announcers, and learners of English, to aim for. Recently, researchers have analysed the pronunciation used by Queen Elizabeth II, as her radio broadcasts every Christmas of her more than 50-year reign offer a unique record of the changes in one person’s pronunciation over time. It turns out that her pronunciation has modified slightly (Agence France-Presse, 2006): in 1952, her accent was of a variety known as ‘Upper Received’ (the sounds used by the upper class and those who have attended public schools) but it is now closer to ‘Standard Received’ (still a prestigious but more widely used variety). Where she used to say ‘blek het’, she now says ‘black hat’; her original version of ‘I’m lost’ was ‘aym lorst’ and ‘he’s gone’ was previously ‘he’s gorn’. Her earlier pronunciation ‘haym’ is now ‘home’; ‘may hise’ has become ‘my house’ and ‘in the sitay’ is now ‘in the city’.

It’s not only the Queen whose accent is changing. In a recent pronunciation exam, we planned to ask students which of the following words rhymed: ‘suit’, ‘shoot’, ‘glued’, ‘food’. One native speaker (whose accent is closer to Received Pronunciation) was adamant that ‘suit’ should be pronounced as ‘syoot’ and ‘glued’ should be ‘glyood’, while another two (slightly younger) native speakers from different parts of Britain not only agreed that all the words rhymed, but were supported in their argument by the Collins English Dictionary: an example that nicely combines a demonstration of language in transition, with the realization that there are more- or less-Standard varieties within English and so native speaker teachers could help make tertiary level students aware of the range of possibilities that are often ‘allowable’ rather than implying that there is only ever one possible way to sound, spell or make lexical, semantic and syntactic decisions.

5. Syntactical Changes

Sometimes, the differences of usage which emerge among certain areas of the population will gradually spread until the common usage is in fact different from, or at least an accepted alternative to the older version found in prescriptive grammar books. One example that I have noticed is that while grammar books (and teachers) still tell us to move the tense one stage back into the past for reported speech, in actual use, native speakers do not always do this, so we get the original quote “I did it yesterday” changing to reported speech ‘She said she did it yesterday’, with no tense change from past simple to past perfect. Another example of native speakers being more flexible than a grammar book (or again, than a teacher striving perhaps too hard to create a memorable rule to help students) is the area of conditional sentences, where the tenses are frequently much more mixed than a prescriptive grammar book would suggest, and the subjunctive ‘were’ is not always used, so you may hear native speakers saying something like “I wouldn’t have done that if I was you”, which a prescriptive grammar would declare to be an incorrect mix of second and third conditionals.

Prepositions are another area where it seems to me that English is changing to allow a greater range of possibilities than those which may be listed in a dictionary. Before giving my example, I must remind you of the enormous amount of media attention given to footballer David Beckham and his wife Victoria, or Posh, to use the nickname from her pop

singing days. Indeed, it's so hard to avoid reading about them in the papers that T-shirts started to appear with the slogan on them "bored of the Beckams". Truss describes her horror at what she considered the wrong preposition: "Bored *with* the Beckhams!" I would inwardly moan, reaching for the smelling salts in my lavender portmanteau. "Or even bored *by* the Beckhams", if you must. But "bored *of* the Beckhams"? Never, my dear, *never!*" (2006, p.103) The fact that she is (in part) poking fun at herself is also demonstrated by her deliberate use of the dated vocabulary: smelling salts and portmanteaus, while popular with Victorian ladies, are good examples of words that are virtually never used these days, when women don't feel the need have medicine at hand to stop them from fainting, and a suitcase as large as a portmanteau would never be accepted on airlines.

6. Lexical Changes

For many people, vocabulary may be the only area of language change they are aware of, and perhaps even participate in changing. New words can be created in many ways; one way is by blending or combining (that is, mixing two words and their meanings together: an example is the word 'rockumentary', a film or programme on TV which is a documentary about a rock group). Another way of creating a new word is by conversion or changing the way a word is used, such as changing a noun to a verb, a method much loved by Americans in particular, for example turning the noun 'chair' into a verb, 'to chair' a meeting. Sometimes only part of a word is used, such as 'fridge' instead of 'refrigerator', which I would think very few native speakers say anymore; a word can be extended by adding a prefix or suffix as in the words 'diskette' (now itself already virtually obsolete) or perhaps 'misunderestimate' (an example of President George Bush's mangling of the English language). New words can also be formed from the letters of a phrase (imagine for a moment, wealthy, retired parents going on a 'SKI-ing' holiday, on which they are 'Spending the Kids' Inheritance'). Many words that we now perhaps take for granted as English were originally borrowed from other languages, like 'guitar', 'lunch', 'zero' and 'luck': the sheer quantity of these loan-words explains why English has a much larger vocabulary than many other languages. One more, rather fun way to create new words is by using rhyming pairs, such as 'snail-mail' to refer to the ordinary postal service.

New technology is an obvious area which requires new vocabulary to describe it, and the rapid growth of the internet and mobile phone culture encourages even faster changes in vocabulary, which can become wide-spread long before dictionaries can be re-printed to include them. As an example of this time-lag effect, it took until 2001 for the compilers of the Oxford English Dictionary to ask people to help them find the earliest use of the phrase "I could murder a curry", although the playwright Alan Bennett, who has kept a regular diary for many decades, was able to look up an entry in which he had recorded his friend using a variant of the phrase at least thirty years earlier (2005, p.288). You can murder a cake or a beer, for example, if you're really hungry or thirsty. It may have derived from a phrase using a similar type of metaphor, "I would kill for a beer".

Globalisation is another force that can be blamed, or simply noted as a reason for new vocabulary use spreading quickly. Starting with the lexical field of food and drink as an example, the vocabulary connected with coffee drinking has been widened considerably. In some places, you can't just ask for 'a cup of coffee' the barrista wants to know if you want a grande mocha soy whipped with sprinkles, or a tall, lite, latte, with syrup... and that's at your nearest café. If you go further abroad then the food and cooking styles change, and the names with them, even if you think you're still speaking English. Back in 1887, Oscar Wilde said that the British 'have really everything in common with America nowadays except, of course, language'. Most people would still agree. Truss tells a story about a friend's first visit to America, where she tried to order sausage for breakfast and was confused to be asked by the waitress "links or patties?" The American company Merriam-Webster's on-line dictionary, defines links as 'segments of sausage in a chain' (Link, 2007-8) and a patty as 'a small flat cake of chopped food', like the meat in a burger, round and flat (Patty, 2007-8). Truss dismisses this latter as "surely not a genuine sausage within the meaning of the word". (Truss, 2006, p.87) In Scotland, just to confuse things, you can also get square slices of sausage, though no doubt Truss would not call those sausages either.

There are many more examples of words which have changed their meaning as they cross (and perhaps re-cross) 'the Pond' (The Atlantic). In American vocabulary usage, if you 'slate a meeting' it means that you plan a date for it, not (as in British usage) say how awful it is. So a headline like "Third Harry Potter film slated" would mean they liked film number two in the U.S.A. enough to plan a third film, but in Britain, they thought that film three, already made, was rubbish. One more example: if someone asks you in America if you want hot milk in your coffee, you could answer "I don't care", meaning "I don't mind" in British usage. But if you answer "I don't care" to the same question in Britain, you may end up with a reputation for grumpiness or an inability to make up your mind.

Perhaps it is fair in a discussion of language change to consider also the curious phenomenon of words that refuse to change: those which are used so rarely, they ought to be obsolete, but survive because they are brought out for brief but regular usage at certain times of the year, the most obvious being at Christmas, as Alan Bennett points out (Bennett, 2005, p.301): that's virtually the only time we ever say or read words such as 'tidings', 'abiding', 'swaddling', 'lo!' and 'abhors', largely perhaps because the first three appear in the King James version of the Bible, which was published

in 1611, and the last two are from the carol 'O come all ye faithful, first translated into English in 1841. (Hymns and Carols of Christmas, n.d.) I think everyone would agree that this vocabulary is now obsolete and confusing ('tidings' being replaced by 'good news', 'abiding' by 'spending the night', and 'swaddling' by 'strips of cloth' in the 1994 Good News Bible; my 'translation' of 'lo' would be 'look' and 'abhors' would be 'avoids'). What is interesting is that many people of my age or older in Britain, having heard the language of 1611 read out or sung every Christmas in church, school, radio or TV broadcasts still feel that it somehow sounds more beautiful than modern translations, and we are therefore reluctant to abandon or modernise it.

However, clearly not all unusual words survive if they can be replaced by a more common or simpler variant. In the children's nursery rhyme, the little grey rodents who ran up the clock are mice, the irregular plural form of 'mouse'. However, as far as technology goes, it is now quite acceptable to ask the IT department to order three new mouses; (Do you Speak American? 2005) the more 'standard' way to make a plural form being used even by technophobes (to use another relatively new combination word).

7. Why do people become upset about language change?

Now and in the past, there have always been some people who get very irritated by what they consider to be un-necessary change or incorrect use of language, be it syntactical, lexical, spelling, pronunciation, or punctuation. But why do people get so upset about language which is not used in the way they expect it to be? Truss thinks that it is connected to the way some people get equally upset about what they feel is rudeness: She writes "We all draw the wavy contour line between polite and rude behaviour in a different place, much as we draw our own line in language use" (2005, p. 16-17). To me, this nicely sums up that language use is at once both personal and shared, but it is not stagnant. Whether we get annoyed by language changes or see them as new challenges, we cannot stop languages developing, which leads me to my final quote from that famous author, 'anonymous', combining at once an acceptance that the world moves on, with modern frustration at technology, and at the same time a demonstration of the flexibility of the English language, by punning on the different possible meanings of 'change' as 'progress' and as 'coins':

"change is inevitable ...

except from vending machines."

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