

1 The ever-whirling wheel

The inevitability of change

Since 'tis Nature's Law to change.
Constancy alone is strange.

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester,
A dialogue between Strephon and Daphne

Introduction

This chapter notes that language change is inevitable, yet points out that there is a puzzling, long-standing custom of moaning about it. The complaint tradition is outlined and some reasons for it are pointed out, such as an admiration for Latin, and a long-lasting, but unjustified preference for written language forms over spoken. But finding that some complaints are groundless does not answer the central question: is our language progressing, decaying, or standing still? This is the topic of the whole book. The chapter then discusses the meaning of the word *grammar*, distinguishing between old-style prescriptive grammars which tried to lay down outdated 'rules', and modern descriptive grammars which describe actual usage. The main components of a modern grammar are outlined. Finally, the chapter explains the organization of the book, listing the main sections, and the outline content of each.

Everything in this universe is perpetually in a state of change, a fact commented on by philosophers and poets through the ages. A flick through any book of quotations reveals numerous statements about the fluctuating world we live in: 'Everything rolls on, nothing stays still,' claimed the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus in the sixth century BC. In the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser speaks of 'the ever-whirling wheel of change, the which all mortal things doth sway', while 'time and the world are ever in flight' is a statement by the twentieth-century Irish poet William Butler Yeats – to take just a few random examples.

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Language, like everything else, joins in this general flux. As the German philosopher–linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt noted in 1836: ‘There can never be a moment of true standstill in language, just as little as in the ceaseless flaming thought of men. By nature it is a continuous process of development.’¹

Even the simplest and most colloquial English of several hundred years ago sounds remarkably strange to us. Take the work of Robert Mannyng, who wrote a history of England in the mid fourteenth century. He claimed that he made his language as simple as he could so that ordinary people could understand it, yet it is barely comprehensible to the average person today:

In symple speche as I couthe,
 That is lightest in mannes mouthe.
 I mad noght for no disours,
 Ne for no seggers, no harpours,
 Bot for the luf of symple men
 That strange Inglis can not ken.²

A glance at any page of Chaucer shows clearly the massive changes which have taken place in the last millennium. It is amusing to note that he himself, in *Troylus and Criseyde*, expressed his wonderment that men of long ago spoke in so different a manner from his contemporaries:

Ye knowe ek, that in forme of speche is chaunge
 Withinne a thousand yer, and wordes tho
 That hadden prys now wonder nyce and straunge
 Us thenketh hem, and yet they spake hem so,
 And spedde as wel in love as men now do.³

Language, then, like everything else, gradually transforms itself over the centuries. There is nothing surprising in this. In a world where humans grow old, tadpoles change into frogs, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered. As the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure noted: ‘Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.’⁴

In spite of this, large numbers of intelligent people condemn and resent language change, regarding alterations as due to

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unnecessary sloppiness, laziness or ignorance. More accurately, perhaps, they accept that language changes, but disapprove of particular alterations, namely those that they personally dislike. Letters are written to newspapers and indignant articles are published, all deploring the fact that words acquire new meanings and new pronunciations. The following is a representative sample taken from the last half-century or so. In the late 1960s we find a columnist in a British newspaper complaining about the ‘growing unintelligibility of spoken English’, and maintaining that ‘English used to be a language which foreigners couldn’t pronounce but could often understand. Today it is rapidly becoming a language which the English can’t pronounce and few foreigners can understand.’⁵ At around the same time, another commentator declared angrily that ‘through sheer laziness and sloppiness of mind, we are in danger of losing our past subjunctive’.⁶ A third owned to a ‘queasy distaste for the vulgarity of “between you and I”, “these sort”, “the media is” . . . precisely the kind of distaste I feel at seeing a damp spoon dipped in the sugar bowl or butter spread with the bread-knife’.⁷

In 1972 the writer of an article emotively entitled ‘Polluting our language’ condemned the ‘blind surrender to the momentum or inertia of slovenly and tasteless ignorance and insensitivity’.⁸ A reviewer discussing the 1978 edition of the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* announced that his ‘only sadness is that the current editor seems prepared to bow to every slaphappy and slipshod change of meaning’.⁹ The author of a book published in 1979 compared a word which changes its meaning to ‘a piece of wreckage with a ship’s name on it floating away from a sunken hulk’: the book was entitled *Decadence*.¹⁰

In 1980, the literary editor of *The Times* complained that the grammar of English ‘is becoming simpler and coarser’.¹¹ In 1982, a newspaper article commented that ‘The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much . . . that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it.’¹² In 1986, a letter written to an evening paper complained about ‘the abuse of our beautiful language by native-born English speakers . . . We go out of our way to promulgate incessantly . . . the very ugliest sounds and worst possible grammar.’¹³ In 1988, a journalist bemoaned ‘pronunciation lapses’ which affect him ‘like a blackboard brushed with

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barbed wire'.¹⁴ In 1990, a well-known author published an article entitled: 'They can't even say it properly now', in which he grumbled that 'We seem to be moving . . . towards a social and linguistic situation in which nobody says or writes or probably knows anything more than an approximation to what he or she means.'¹⁵ In 1999, a writer in a Sunday newspaper coined the label 'Slop English' for the 'maulings and misusages' of 'Teletotties' (young television presenters).¹⁶

In 2004, a journalist wrote a book with the emotive subtitle 'The mangling and manipulating of the English language'.¹⁷ He explained his worries as follows: 'Ugly language can ruin your day . . . I love words . . . Sometimes there is a real thrill of pleasure. It is like walking in the surf, letting the waves lap over your bare feet. Then you step on something nasty. Ugly language is the detritus washed up on the beach.'¹⁸ The same journalist became quite apoplectic over text messaging. He described 'texters' (those who 'text') as 'vandals who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours eight hundred years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.'¹⁹

The above views are neatly summarized in Ogden Nash's poem 'Laments for a dying language' (1962):

Coin brassy words at will, debase the coinage;
 We're in an if-you-cannot-lick-them-join age,
 A slovenliness provides its own excuse age,
 Where usage overnight condones misusage.
 Farewell, farewell to my beloved language,
 Once English, now a vile orangutanguage.

Some questions immediately spring to mind. Are these objectors merely ludicrous, akin to fools who think it might be possible to halt the movement of the waves or the course of the sun? Are their efforts to hold back the sea of change completely misguided? Alternatively, could these intelligent and well-known writers possibly be right? Is it indeed possible that language change is largely due to lack of care and maintenance on our part? Are we simply behaving like the inhabitants of underdeveloped countries who allow tractors and cars to rot after only months of use because they do not understand the need to oil and check the parts every so often? Is

it true that ‘we need not simply accept it, as though it were some catastrophe of nature. We all talk and we all listen. Each one of us, therefore, every day can break a lance on behalf of our embattled English tongue, by taking a little more trouble’, as a *Daily Telegraph* writer claimed?²⁰ Ought we to be actually doing something, such as starting a Campaign for Real English, as one letter to a newspaper proposed?²¹ Or, in a slightly modified form, we might ask the following. Even if eventual change is inevitable, can we appreciably retard it, and would it be to our advantage to do so? Furthermore, is it possible to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ changes, and root out the latter?

These questions often arouse surprisingly strong feelings, and they are not easy to answer. In order to answer them satisfactorily, we need to know considerably more about language change, how it happens, when it happens, who initiates it, and other possible reasons for its occurrence. These are the topics examined in this book. In short, we shall look at how and why language change occurs, with the ultimate aim of finding out the direction, if any, in which human languages are moving.

In theory, there are three possibilities to be considered. They could apply either to human language as a whole, or to any one language in particular. The first possibility is slow decay, as was frequently suggested in the nineteenth century. Many scholars were convinced that European languages were on the decline because they were gradually losing their old word endings. For example, the popular German writer Max Müller asserted that, ‘The history of all the Aryan languages is nothing but a gradual process of decay.’²²

Alternatively, languages might be slowly evolving to a more efficient state. We might be witnessing the survival of the fittest, with existing languages adapting to the needs of the times. The lack of a complicated word-ending system in English might be a sign of streamlining and sophistication, as argued by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen in 1922: ‘In the evolution of languages the discarding of old flexions goes hand in hand with the development of simpler and more regular expedients that are rather less liable than the old ones to produce misunderstanding.’²³

A third possibility is that language remains in a substantially similar state from the point of view of progress or decay. It may be marking time, or treading water, as it were, with its advance

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or decline held in check by opposing forces. This is the view of the Belgian linguist Joseph Vendryès, who claimed that ‘Progress in the absolute sense is impossible, just as it is in morality or politics. It is simply that different states exist, succeeding each other, each dominated by certain general laws imposed by the equilibrium of the forces with which they are confronted. So it is with language.’²⁴

In the course of this book, we shall try to find out where the truth of the matter lies.

The search for purity

Before we look at language change itself, it may be useful to consider why people currently so often disapprove of alterations. On examination, much of the dislike turns out to be based on social-class prejudice which needs to be stripped away.

Let us begin by asking why the conviction that our language is decaying is so much more widespread than the belief that it is progressing. In an intellectual climate where the notion of the survival of the fittest is at least as strong as the belief in inevitable decay, it is strange that so many people are convinced of the decline in the quality of English, a language which is now spoken by an estimated half a billion people or more – a possible hundredfold increase in the number of speakers during the past millennium.

One’s first reaction is to wonder whether the members of the anti-slovenliness brigade, as we may call them, are subconsciously reacting to the fast-moving world we live in, and consequently resenting change in any area of life. To some extent this is likely to be true. A feeling that ‘fings ain’t wot they used to be’ and an attempt to preserve life unchanged seem to be natural reactions to insecurity, symptoms of growing old. Every generation inevitably believes that the clothes, manners and speech of the following one have deteriorated. We would therefore expect to find a respect for conservative language in every century and every culture and, in literate societies, a reverence for the language of the ‘best authors’ of the past. We would predict a mild nostalgia, typified perhaps by a native speaker of Kru, one of the Niger-Congo group of languages. When asked if it would be acceptable to place the verb at the end of

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a particular sentence, instead of in the middle where it was usually placed, he replied that this was the 'real Kru' which his father spoke.²⁵

In Europe, however, the feeling that language is on the decline seems more widely spread and stronger than the predictable mood of mild regret. On examination, we find that today's laments take their place in a long tradition of complaints about the corruption of language. Similar expressions of horror were common in the nineteenth century. In 1858 we discover a certain Reverend A. Mursell fulminating against the use of phrases such as *hard up*, *make oneself scarce*, *shut up*.²⁶ At around the same time in Germany, Jacob Grimm, one of the Brothers Grimm of folk-tale fame, stated nostalgically that 'six hundred years ago every rustic knew, that is to say practised daily, perfections and niceties in the German language of which the best grammarians nowadays do not even dream'.²⁷

Moving back into the eighteenth century, we find the puristic movement at its height. Utterances of dismay and disgust at the state of the language followed one another thick and fast, expressed with far greater urgency than we normally find today. Famous outbursts included one in 1710 by Jonathan Swift. Writing in the *Tatler*, he launched an attack on the condition of English. He followed this up two years later with a letter to the Lord Treasurer urging the formation of an academy to regulate language usage, since even the best authors of the age, in his opinion, committed 'many gross improprieties which . . . ought to be discarded'.²⁸ In 1755, Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary of the English language was published. He stated in the preface that 'Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration', urging that 'we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure'. In 1762, Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, complained that 'the English Language hath been much cultivated during the last 200 years . . . but . . . it hath made no advances in Grammatical accuracy'.²⁹

In short, expressions of disgust about language, and proposals for remedying the situation, were at their height in the eighteenth century. Such widespread linguistic fervour has never been paralleled. Let us therefore consider what special factors caused such obsessive worry about language at this time.

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Around 1700, English spelling and usage were in a fairly fluid state. Against this background, two powerful social factors combined to convert a normal mild nostalgia for the language of the past into a quasi-religious doctrine. The first was a long-standing admiration for Latin, and the second was powerful class snobbery.

The admiration for Latin was a legacy from its use as the language of the church in the Middle Ages, and as the common language of European scholarship from the Renaissance onwards. It was widely regarded as the most perfect of languages – Ben Jonson spoke of it as ‘queen of tongues’ – and great emphasis was placed on learning to write it ‘correctly’, that is, in accordance with the usage of the great classical authors such as Cicero. It was taught in schools, and Latin grammar was used as a model for the description of all other languages – however dissimilar – despite the fact that it was no longer anyone’s native tongue.

This had three direct effects on attitudes towards language. First, because of the emphasis on replicating the Latin of the ‘best authors’, people felt that there ought to be a fixed ‘correct’ form for any language, including English. Secondly, because Latin was primarily written and read, it led to the belief that the written language was in some sense superior to the spoken. Thirdly, even though our language is by no means a direct descendant of Latin, more like a great-niece or great-nephew, English was viewed by many as having slipped from the classical purity of Latin by losing its endings. The idea that a language with a full set of endings for its nouns and verbs was superior to one without these appendages was very persistent. Even in the twentieth century, we find linguists forced to argue against this continuing irrational attachment to Latin: ‘A linguist that insists on talking about the Latin type of morphology as though it were necessarily the high water mark of linguistic development is like the zoologist that sees in the organic world a huge conspiracy to evolve the racehorse or the Jersey cow,’ wrote Edward Sapir in 1921.³⁰

Against this background of admiration for a written language which appeared to have a fixed correct form and a full set of endings, there arose a widespread feeling that someone ought to adjudicate among the variant forms of English, and tell people what was ‘correct’. The task was undertaken by Samuel Johnson, the son of a

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bookseller in Lichfield. Johnson, like many people of fairly humble origin, had an illogical reverence for his social betters. When he attempted to codify the English language in his famous dictionary he selected middle- and upper-class usage. When he said that he had 'laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations',³¹ he meant that he had in many instances pronounced against the spoken language of the lower classes, and in favour of the spoken and written forms of groups with social prestige. He asserted, therefore, that there were standards of correctness which should be adhered to, implying that these were already in use among certain social classes, and ought to be acquired by the others. Johnson's dictionary rightly had enormous influence, and its publication has been called 'the most important linguistic event of the eighteenth century'.³² It was considered a worthwhile undertaking both by his contemporaries and by later generations since it paid fairly close attention to actual usage, even if it was the usage of only a small proportion of speakers.

However, there were other eighteenth-century writers whose influence may have equalled that of Johnson. The best known of these was Robert Lowth, Bishop of London. A prominent Hebraist and theologian, he wrote *A short introduction to English grammar* (1762). Lowth's book title was possibly based on that of a well-known Latin grammar, *A short introduction to grammar*, by William Lily.³³ This grammar was several centuries old. Reportedly, it had been authorized as a grammar of Latin by Henry VIII in 1640, and remained in long-term use in English schools. It was possibly the grammar used by Lowth in his youth: he may even have been forced to memorize it.³⁴

Lowth claimed he had written his grammar 'for the use of my little boy', his young son Thomas. He believed he could prepare his son for the hard task of learning Latin, if he taught him the rudiments of English grammar before he went to school. As he stated: 'if children were first taught the principles of Grammar by some short and clear system of *English* grammar, . . . they would have some notion of what they were going about when they should enter into *Latin* grammar'.³⁵ Lowth's grammar was not really suitable for children, but it became widely used.

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Lowth is thought to have owned a copy of Johnson's dictionary, yet he disagreed with Johnson's procedure, which had been to describe the usages of the best authors. In contrast, Lowth wanted to show that 'our best Authors for want of some rudiments [of grammar] have sometimes fallen into mistakes and been guilty of palpable errors of Grammar'.³⁶ He also wanted to promote study of his own grammar in order to remedy the situation. Lowth's use of speech samples showing errors was an innovation in grammar writing. Only later did such behaviour become associated with pedantry. He appears to have found his samples somewhat at random in order to illustrate the points he wished to make. In some ways he was ahead of his time in that he distinguished everyday usage from elevated or written usage, tending to prefer the latter, as in his treatment of prepositions at the end of sentences:

The Preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the verb at the end of the Sentence . . . as, 'Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with' . . . This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style of writing; but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style.³⁷

As a result, the notion that it is somehow 'wrong' to end a sentence with a preposition is nowadays widely held. In addition, Lowth insisted on the pronoun *I* in phrases such as *wiser than I*, condemning lines of Swift such as 'she suffers hourly more than me', regardless of the fact that many languages, French and English included, prefer a different form of the pronoun when it is detached from its verb: compare the French *plus sage que moi* 'wiser than me', not **plus sage que je*. In consequence, many people nowadays mistakenly believe that a phrase such as *wiser than I* is 'better' than *wiser than me*. To continue, Lowth may have been the first to argue that a double negative is wrong, on the grounds that one cancels the other out. Those who support this point of view fail to realize that language is not logic or mathematics, and that the heaping up of negatives is very common in the languages of the world. It occurs frequently in Chaucer (and in other pre-eighteenth-century