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Why Do Languages Change?

The first recorded English name for the make-up we now call *blusher* was *paint*, in 1660. In the 1750s a new word, *rouge*, displaced *paint*, and remained in standard usage for around two centuries. Then, in 1965, an advertisement coined a new word for the product: *blusher*. Each generation speaks a little differently, and every language is constantly changing. It is not only words that change, every aspect of a language changes over time – pronunciation, word meanings and grammar. Packed with fascinating examples of changes in the English language over time, this entertaining book explores the origin of words and place names, the differences between British and American English, and the apparent eccentricities of the English spelling system. Amusingly written yet deeply instructive, it will be enjoyed by anyone involved in studying the English language and its history, as well as anyone interested in how and why languages change.

R. L. TRASK was a world authority on the Basque language and on historical linguistics. He wrote both academic and popular books, notably on grammar, punctuation, and English style and usage. His publications include *Language: The Basics* (1995) and *Mind the Gaffe* (2001). At the time of his death in 2004, he was Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex.

The book has been revised by Robert McColl Millar, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Aberdeen.

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For my wonderful Jan

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A few words before we start

This book is intended to give a sense of language change to interested laypeople of any age; it is not a textbook. I do hope, however, that it will act as a door into historical linguistics for some readers.

Because of its nature, I have made no assumptions about knowledge either of languages or, more importantly, of the techniques linguists use to describe language. If we are going to treat the subject in any depth or seriousness, however, I have found it necessary occasionally to use special terms and symbols in the text. I normally explain these, but I want to discuss some potential sticking points before we start. Readers may well find themselves coming back to this page occasionally.

The Roman alphabet used for English is not terribly effective, as we will see, in representing the sounds of English, never mind the potential sounds found in *all* the world's languages. Because of this, phoneticians and other linguists who work with sounds have spent a considerable amount of effort over the last hundred years and more developing an extended writing system, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which can describe *all* of these sounds. I will not use more than a handful of these symbols in this book, and only when necessary. Most of these symbols make sense to anyone used to the Roman alphabet: /p/ stands for <p>, for instance; /n/ for <n>. Sometimes, however, there is potential for confusion. IPA /j/ stands for the first sound in English *yes*; the <j> in *judge* is represented by /dʒ/ in IPA; IPA /y/ stands for the vowel in French *tu*. When potential headaches of this sort exist, I have highlighted them. It is worth noting that the vowel symbols in IPA stand for the 'continental' values associated with these letters. Thus /e/ stands for the vowel found in *bay*, if you are from Scotland and a few other places, not the vowel in *bee*. /a/ stands for the vowel in *cat* for most British people; while /æ/ is the vowel found in the same word in most North American accents (and some conservative upper-class varieties in southern England); /ɑ/ is the vowel found in words like *bath* in southeast England (other British varieties would have /a/).

You may have noticed that I have used the convention // to surround sounds in most of the book, but [] for a few. This represents a subtle but important distinction in sound perception. All speakers have the ability to produce *all*

x A few words before we start

sounds which can be produced by humans. By the time they have reached school age, however, the number of separate sounds speakers perceive from this variety depends upon what language they speak. For instance, German speakers can, of course, make the sound [θ], as found at the start of English *thing*; unless they are trained, however, they hear it only as a variant of a larger unit, /s/. For most English speakers, however, the initial sounds in *thing* and *sing* are absolutely separate; to a German speaker, they are variants of the same essential sound. These essential sounds are called *phonemes* and are represented by //; all variants of these phonemes are called *allophones* and are represented by []. The important thing to remember is that how phonemes are laid out over the range of potential sounds differs from language to language. Spellings, when necessary, are shown using < >.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Lyle Campbell, Richard Coates, Jan Lock, Tony Lock, Andrew Winnard and two anonymous readers for valuable comments on earlier drafts of some or all chapters. Many of the examples in Chapter 4 are taken from the scholarly publications of Richard Coates. Acknowledgements for examples taken from other people's writing are provided in the text.

For the origins of English words, I have relied chiefly on the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (originally published as the *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*) and on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In doubtful cases, I have consulted several other dictionaries and very many websites.

The map in Figure 1.1 is reproduced with permission from Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *American English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The BSL signs in Figure 8.1 are reproduced with permission from J. G. Kyle and B. Woll, *Sign Language: The Study of Deaf People and Their Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Any remaining shortcomings are my responsibility.

A note from the reviser

This book was left in an advanced state at the time of Larry Trask's death in 2004, since when it has passed through the editorial process at Cambridge University Press. When I took on the task of revising the typescript in Spring 2008, I made the decision that, unlike my treatment of Trask's *Historical Linguistics*, I would *not* stamp my own personality and views on *Why Do Languages Change?* When *I* is used in this book, therefore, it is Larry Trask who has chosen to do so. My task, as I saw it, was to do what Larry Trask would have done had he had the opportunity: 'cleaning' the text and ironing out inconsistencies. I hope that I have done so in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. My thanks go to my dear wife, Sandra, who helped with this work, despite the slight distraction of having a baby mid-way through the process.

I am very glad to answer queries on the material covered in this book. My e-mail address is r.millar@abdn.ac.uk.

Robert McColl Millar, November 2008