

1 How do languages change?

All languages change

My grandparents didn't talk the way I talk. For example, my father's mother never used the words *at the end*. Instead, she always said *at the last end*: 'at the last end of the movie', 'at the last end of the game', and so on. My father said the same. But I have never said this, and even in childhood I considered it strange.

You too have very likely noticed that your parents or your grandparents speak or spoke a little differently from you. And, if you have children or grandchildren, you have almost certainly heard them saying things that you would never say. Everywhere we look, we find differences in speech between the generations.

Each generation speaks a little differently because our language is always changing. And not just our language: *every* language is always changing. There is no such thing as a living language that fails to change. This is a piece of truth on which you can rely absolutely.

There's a widespread legend about a remarkable village, in the Appalachians or in Derbyshire or somewhere distant from London and New York, where the locals still speak pure and unchanged Elizabethan English. It doesn't exist. Nobody on earth has spoken Elizabethan English since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, around 400 years ago. There is nobody alive today who speaks English the way William Shakespeare spoke it, or the way Samuel Johnson spoke it, or the way Abraham Lincoln spoke it, or the way Queen Victoria spoke it. Apart perhaps from a handful of very elderly people, there is no one alive today who speaks English like Humphrey Bogart or Noël Coward (both born in 1899), or like Laurence Olivier or John Wayne (both born in 1907), or like Sir Donald Bradman or Bette Davis (both born in 1908). There aren't even many people around today who speak English like John F. Kennedy or Anthony Burgess (both born in 1917), or like Marilyn Monroe (born in 1926).

Watching English change

What do you call the coloured stuff that women sometimes put on their cheeks? The first recorded English name for this stuff is *paint*, recorded from 1660. In

2 Why Do Languages Change?

those days, both men and women of certain social classes painted their faces: you may have seen the garishly painted faces of the dandies in portraits of the time. In 1753, a new word appeared in English: *rouge*. The first writer to use this French word thought it necessary to explain to his readers that rouge was the same thing as paint. But *rouge* soon displaced *paint*, and it remained the usual English word for around two centuries. When I was a child, in the 1950s, *rouge* was the only word anybody ever used.

Then, in 1965, an advertisement coined a new word for the product: *blusher*. This word has gradually displaced *rouge*. When I recently heard a fashionable young woman call it *rouge*, I almost fell over with astonishment: I hadn't heard anyone use the word for decades, and associated it with styles which were already ancient when I was a child.

Few names of cosmetics are very old. Only in 1890 do we find the first mention of *mascaro*, a thick dark make-up used by (mostly male) stage actors to paint on eyebrows, so that their faces could be seen from the cheap seats. (The word derives from an Italian word for 'mask'.) And only in 1922 do we find the first use of the altered and presumably more feminine version *mascara* to label a slightly more subtle kind of eye make-up for women.

Fashionable items may be particularly given to linguistic change. Visiting my local cosmetics counter, I was startled to discover a sign inviting me to buy a certain product which, I was assured, was just the thing to 'fragrance your home or your car'. When I was just a little younger, English most emphatically did not permit me to 'fragrance' anything. Languages are always changing, and we older speakers find ourselves grumbling in the wake of the changes.

Sometimes, of course, the language changes because the world changes. When shiny little silvery discs began to appear a few years ago carrying recorded music, they had to be given a name, and so *compact discs* was duly coined – though it took English speakers the better part of ten minutes to shorten this intolerably long name to *CDs*.

This is just a very tiny sample of recent changes in English. Some have occurred within my lifetime; some have occurred very recently indeed. Consider Marilyn Monroe, who died in 1962. Marilyn never heard the word *compact disc* or *CD*. It is quite possible that she never heard *blusher*, since that word was not recorded in writing until shortly after her death. If she did hear it, it was a brand-new word, just beginning to be used in speech by Americans, but not yet found in print.

Since Marilyn's death, the language has acquired many new words. Here is just a tiny sample of the familiar English words that Marilyn Monroe never heard: *body-piercing*, *reggae*, *single mother*, *videotape*, *aromatherapy*, *G-spot*, *laptop*, *AIDS*, *miniskirt*, *jumbo jet*, *sex worker*, *designer label*, *downsizing*, *toyboy*, *trophy wife*, *sleaze*, *one-hit wonder*, *sound bite*, *bikini line*, *e-mail*, *Third World*, *GM food*, *microwave oven*, *smoking gun* ('hard evidence'), *into*

(‘deeply interested in’) and *topless dancer*. In fact, the word *topless*, applied to a woman’s attire, is not recorded until 1964, and Marilyn probably never heard it, even though *topless* is recorded from 1937 in connection with laws against such swimming costumes for *men*! Those were dear dead days indeed: the world has changed almost more than we can imagine, and the language has not lagged behind.

Social changes have introduced whole areas of vocabulary that Marilyn never heard. As a young woman, Marilyn didn’t smoke, but she was obliged to learn to smoke for her role in the 1953 film *Niagara*, in which she played a Bad Girl. We have many candid photos of a more mature Marilyn smoking off-screen, and so it appears that her film smoking led her to take up smoking in real life. This meant that she had to learn the vocabulary associated with smoking although, surprisingly, given how many people smoked then, this was very limited. In the 1950s, smoking went unremarked almost everywhere, and tobacco companies were still claiming that doctors endorsed their products. Accordingly, Marilyn never heard the words *nicotine-free*, *passive smoking*, *smokeless tobacco*, *advertising ban*, *nicotine patch*, *smoke-free zone*, *health warning*, *anti-smoking laws* or even *low-tar*. She never even heard *smoking area*, since practically everywhere was a smoking area in Marilyn’s day, and it was only the rare non-smoking areas that had to be labelled.

I must stress that the lists above do not contain even one-tenth of 1 per cent of the new words which have entered English since 1962 – even if I exclude the vast number of technical terms which have come into use in such fields as computing. There are so many thousands of words which we use every day, but which didn’t exist in 1962, that we might almost begin to wonder what Marilyn Monroe talked about when she was off the screen.

Of course, Marilyn never found herself short of words, since the English of the 1950s already provided her with a rich vocabulary for talking about anything she liked. Among the new words that only entered English in the 1950s are *rock ‘n’ roll*, *sex kitten*, *coffee break*, *bikini*, *hardback* (book), *junk mail*, *press release*, *dreadlocks*, *shades* (sunglasses), *sunroof*, *economy class*, *hula hoop*, *hacker*, *software*, *the pill* (for contraception), *BLT* (sandwich), *stir fry*, *scuba diving* and *exotic dancer*, among many hundreds of others, so Marilyn’s contemporaries were no slower than their successors in coining new words at will.

Language changes like fashion

Looking into word origins produces some surprises. I had always assumed, for instance, that *feminism* must be a very recent coinage indeed. But I was wrong: the word is first recorded in 1846! The word was never common, however, and gradually dropped out of use. The feminists of the 1960s called their movement

4 Why Do Languages Change?

women's liberation, later shortened to *women's lib*. But this name fell into disfavour in the 1970s, possibly because it became associated with radical posturing. The newly revived *feminism* gradually replaced it. Anybody who used *women's lib* today would get some pretty peculiar looks.

This last example illustrates one further point: words can disappear as well as appear. The formerly prominent *women's lib* is now gone, and few people now use *rouge*. In the 1960s, there was a *sit-in* or a *love-in* in the paper almost every week, but many younger readers probably don't even know what these things are. In the 1950s, everybody followed the *hit parade*. Any idea what that is? (We now call it the *charts*.) Do you know what a *B-girl* is, or a *carhop*, or a *flack*? (A female employee in a bar who encourages customers to spend money; a waiter in an eat-in-your-car fast-food restaurant; a public-relations person.) Can you remember *rabbit ears*? (A kind of indoor TV aerial.) Come to think of it, when was the last time you heard anybody talk about a *colour* television?

Only if you're acquainted with certain historical periods or topics are you likely to know what a *bustle* is, or a *flivver*, or a *Gibson girl* (A bizarre contraption for rearranging a woman's figure; a battered old car; a young woman epitomising the fashionable ideal of around 1900.) Most of us have come across *flivver* only from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where a future society has made Henry Ford, the car manufacturer, its God. One of the many clichés which has been altered to fit this new 'reality' comes out as 'Ford's in his Flivver: all's right with the world.'

As we move slowly back in time, the dead words we encounter become steadily more numerous, and perhaps steadily more obscure. You have to be an especially devoted fan of Victorian fiction to know what a *pocket pistol* is. (It's a hip flask.) Even this degree of devotion might not help you with *delope*. A duellist deloped by refusing to fire at his opponent, instead firing his pistol harmlessly into the air. With the disappearance of duelling, its associated vocabulary has evaporated, and only a handful of people with suitable historical interests now trouble to learn these antique words. For most of us they are as dead as the street slang of Pompeii.

Word meanings are slippery

What do you call the thing you sleep in at night? Unless you are a submariner obliged to sleep in a hammock, you probably call it a *bed*, like everyone else. This word has existed in English as long as English has existed as a distinct language, and in fact it was present in the ancestors of English earlier than that. Very likely future speakers will go on calling this object a *bed* for centuries to come. This is the way we expect words to behave. But our expectations are not always satisfied. Sometimes words do change their meanings, and sometimes those changes in meaning are breathtaking. For instance, today the word *bead*

means ‘small decorative ball with a hole through it’, and beads are usually found strung together into necklaces or bracelets. But, a few centuries ago, the meaning of *bead* was utterly different: the word meant only ‘prayer’. How could it change its meaning from ‘prayer’ to ‘small ball’?

Well, if you know a little about medieval Christianity, you can probably guess at least roughly what happened. Medieval Christians were in the habit of counting their prayers, and for this purpose they used a string of beads – a *rosary* – to keep track of the number of *Hail Marys* or other prayers that had been uttered. With each completed prayer, another bead was slipped along the string, and this activity was called *telling one’s beads*. The word *tell* originally meant ‘count’ as well as ‘relate’, which is why the person who counts out cash in a bank is called a *teller*, and so the expression *telling one’s beads* meant ‘counting one’s prayers’ – which is what the praying person was doing.

However, since the person doing this *appeared* to be counting off the little balls on the string of his rosary, the expression *telling one’s beads* came to be re-interpreted as meaning ‘counting the little balls on the string’. As a result, *bead* shifted its meaning from ‘prayer’ to ‘small ball’. In the context, this shift of meaning was natural and easy.

Slightly more complicated is the case of *grammar* and *glamour*. Though you may be astonished to hear this, *grammar* and *glamour* are the same word. But *glamour* is fashionable, sexy and utterly desirable, while *grammar* is just about the least fashionable and least sexy piece of the universe that non-linguists can think of.

So how did this happen? Well, the ancestor of the word *grammar* was coined in Ancient Greek and applied to the study of writing. This word was taken over by the Romans into their Latin, and from Latin it spread into much of Europe. Today we still use *grammar* to label the study of the structures of words, phrases and sentences. But things were a little different in the Middle Ages.

In medieval times, few people in Europe could read and write; literacy was seen as a rare, almost fabulous, achievement. Even fewer people could go beyond mere literacy to the extent of studying and understanding the writings of the great philosophers, scholars and scientists, particularly since these were generally available only in Latin. To most people, such a degree of book-learning appeared simply magical, and indeed book-learning, which was commonly referred to simply as *grammar*, was hardly distinguished from magic at all. In English, the variant form *gramarye* was an everyday word for ‘magic’ or ‘conjuring’, while in French the word *grammaire* was altered into *grimoire*, meaning ‘a book of magical spells’; the word was later borrowed into English in this form and has recently become current again through the Harry Potter books.

Our story moves now to Scotland, where the word *grammar* underwent a small change of pronunciation to *glamour*, reflecting the awkwardness of having two instances of /r/ in one word. In Scots, this form *glamour*, often

6 Why Do Languages Change?

compounded as *glamour-might*, acquired the sense of ‘enchantment’, ‘magic spell’, and eventually it came to be applied specifically to a kind of enchantment upon the eye, so that the victim sees things differently from the way they really are. Until the early nineteenth century, this sense remained unknown outside Scotland, but then Sir Walter Scott, a native speaker of Scots, began using it in his poems and stories. Here is an example from Scott’s poem *Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

It had much of glamour might,
Could make a ladye seem a knight;
The cobwebs on a dungeon wall
Seem tapestry in lordly hall;
And youth seem age, and age seem youth –
All was delusion, nought was truth.

The popularity of Scott’s writings carried this formerly obscure Scots word throughout the English-speaking world. But the meaning of the word began rapidly to shift. In Scots, *glamour* was specifically a kind of supernatural enchantment. Outside Scotland, other writers began quickly extending the sense of the word to label any kind of seductive but false charm, the sort of charm you get from an unscrupulous but skilful manipulator who hopes to take advantage of you. At this stage, the word was an insult, and one that could be applied to both sexes.

In the late nineteenth century, however, *glamour* came to be applied more and more regularly and finally only to women, apparently in line with the Genesis view of women as dangerous temptresses out to seduce honourable and upright men away from the paths of righteousness. For a while, the label was still an insult, applied to a woman portrayed as a devious siren up to no good, but before long it lost its negative connotations entirely, possibly because of the more fictional allure peddled by the Hollywood dream factory. *Glamour* became a term of enthusiastic approval, as it still is today. When a gushing magazine describes a female celebrity as ‘glamorous’, the word expresses unqualified admiration, and there is no longer the slightest hint that the young lady in the picture is an unprincipled home-wrecker. Other words must be found for such an insinuation.

The writer Jeffrey Kacirk has uncovered a particularly interesting use of *glamour* in a late Victorian ‘yellow’ novel (a cheap and downmarket work), with the engaging title *Held in Bondage*: ‘I know how quickly the glamour fades in the test of intercourse.’

This sounds a startling sentence to encounter in a Victorian novel, yellow or otherwise, and you might wonder how it slipped past the censors in a day when references to sexual intimacy, however discreet, were simply Not Allowed – and this one doesn’t sound very discreet. The apparent suggestion that a string

of eye-catching young ladies had grievously disappointed the narrator in bed does not sound at all like the sort of thing that would have amused Her Britannic Majesty. How could this happen?

Well, of course, we are looking at another change of meaning. In English, as with most languages, speaking about the act of sex has always proved difficult. At any given moment, we can usually choose between obscure medical terms that will scarcely be understood, and words so blunt and coarse they will get our faces slapped in some circles. As a result, we struggle desperately to find some clear but delicate way of talking about sexual congress. Polite expressions come and go in this domain at a brisk pace, since no word can remain wholly delicate for long.

The word *intercourse* has existed in English since about 1450, but for centuries it meant no more than ‘dealings between people’. This sense persisted into the nineteenth century. That very genteel novelist Jane Austen could write of her exceedingly genteel characters Miss Anne Elliott and Captain Wentworth that ‘they had no intercourse but what the commonest civility required’. All that Jane Austen meant was that Anne and the Captain barely exchanged a word beyond a grudging ‘good morning’, but a modern reader cannot avoid at the very least a snigger at the clear suggestion that minimal courtesy in Georgian England required rather more than it does now.

Why has this happened? In our never-ending quest for polite ways of talking about sex, somebody coined the clumsy but suitably decent expression *sexual intercourse*. But English speakers are not celebrated for their love of cumbersome polysyllabic expressions, and it was no time before this coinage had been shortened to *intercourse*. As a result, the word *intercourse* today is understood as meaning sex and nothing else, and the word cannot be used in any other way. Occasionally an unwary writer tries to recover the lost meaning of the word by turning out something like: *The Serbs and the Croats have resumed normal intercourse*. But the result is always surprising, and the older sense of the word is probably gone for good – or at least until another euphemism for naming the ‘unmentionable’ is found.

What words we use, what words we consider fashionable, can change from day to day. The variation involved can appear particularly fickle. With other linguistic features – grammar, sound, and so on – change appears much slower; yet when it happens, it can still be very striking.

Changes in grammar

Language change is easiest to see in vocabulary, since new words are coined in their hundreds every year, and since reading old prose will usually turn up a few dead words. But it is not only words that change: in fact, *every* aspect of a language changes over time. Pronunciation changes. Word meanings change.

8 Why Do Languages Change?

And, of course, grammar changes. Let's look at a few recent changes in the grammar of English.

A good place to start is the *progressive passive*, as in *My house is being painted*. This form seems wholly unremarkable, but in fact it is a recent introduction into English. Until only a few generations ago, this form did not exist and could not be used. A speaker had to say instead either *My house is painting*, a form which now seems strange or worse, or *My house is painted*, which exists for us but has an entirely different meaning.

In 1662, Samuel Pepys wrote in his famous diary *I went to see if any play was acted*. The intended sense is ... *was being acted*, but this form was impossible for Pepys. About 1839, Charles Dickens wrote in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: *[H]e found that the coach had sunk greatly on one side, though it was still dragged forward by the horses*. The intended sense is ... *still being dragged forward*, but Dickens, who *would* have known the new usage, obviously could not bring himself to use it. Indeed, we know that many people of the time considered it 'vulgar'.

Far more commonly, though, we find the other choice. For example:

[T]he King's statue is making by the Mercers Company. (The sense is *is being made*.) (Pepys's diary, 1660)

At the very time that this dispute was maintaining by the centinel and the drummer – was the same point debating betwixt a trumpeter and a trumpeter's wife. (Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, around 1760)

Whilst the Anthem was singing I was conducted by the Virger to the Pulpit... (James Woodforde's diary, 1784)

A code is preparing for the regulation of commerce (J. C. S. Abbot, *Napoleon*, 1854)

This construction began to recede in the nineteenth century, but it did not die out, and examples are not rare in the twentieth century:

...his canoe, which was towing behind the long-boat... (Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900)

Bramante's palace was still building until 1565. (C. N. Parkinson, 1957)

Today, however, this traditional construction seems strange or impossible, and we have to say instead *is being prepared*, *was being towed*, *was still being built*, and so on. The construction *My house is painting* is probably impossible for everyone, though a few speakers will still accept it with a handful of verbs. For example, in place of *My book is being reprinted*, some people are happy with *My book is reprinting*. Indeed, the linguist David Denison, from whose writings almost all of my examples are taken, found the following in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, 22 March 1983: *Inside the... room more than a dozen television cameras were setting up on an elevated stand*. I would consider this

construction to be impossible, and I require *were being set up*, but you may take a different view.

In spite of the presence of a few lingering traces of the old construction, it is now effectively dead, while the new construction is now for most of us the only possibility. This is just one example of recent change in English.

By the way, this change did not pass without comment. Until well into the nineteenth century, many educated and careful users of English regarded *My house is painting* as the only possibility in standard English. When a few innovating speakers began writing things like *My house is being painted*, these linguistic conservatives could not contain their fury. Veins bulging purple from their foreheads, they attacked the new form as ‘clumsy’, ‘illogical’, ‘confusing’ and ‘monstrous’. But their efforts were in vain: all the people who hated the new form grew old and died, until eventually the only speakers left alive were those who had grown up with the new form and considered it normal.

For some centuries now, English has had a construction called the *perfect*. Very often, the perfect is constructed by placing the auxiliary *have* in front of the verb. Examples: *I have finished dinner*; *Susie has written a book*. However, with intransitive verbs (those taking no object), earlier English frequently used, not *have*, but *be*. The common forms were therefore as follows: *Susie is arrived*; *My notes are disappeared*.

For example, Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado About Nothing*, written about 1599, has this: *...yet Benedicke was such another, and now is he become a man*. This form has for several centuries been gradually receding in favour of the *have* perfect, but the process was slow. Even as late as 1849, we find Charlotte Brontë writing this in her novel *Shirley*: *As it cleared away he looked again for the soldiers, but they were vanished*.

Forms like *she is arrived* and *they are vanished* are effectively dead for most English speakers today, at least in ordinary speech (although this may be hidden by pronunciation) and writing; the sole exceptions being Shetland dialect and a few other remote varieties. But you will doubtless recognise such usages in archaic English, perhaps most obviously in religious texts, where the archaic construction is sometimes maintained for solemn effect, as in *He is risen*. A few literary writers may occasionally write something like *they were vanished* for effect, though such archaising styles seem to enjoy little popularity among today’s streetwise novelists.

But there is one special case. Even though nobody says *She is come* any more, everyone is happy to say *She is gone*. This fossilised form is confined to the single verb *go*, and is now functionally distinct from the regular perfect with *have*: *She is gone* does not mean quite the same as *She has gone*. And note that the form with *is* cannot be extended: we can say *She has gone home*, but not *She is gone home*. Today, *She is gone* is just another way of saying *She’s not here*, and that’s it. Once again, English grammar has changed.

10 Why Do Languages Change?

Changes in grammar, like all linguistic changes, are happening all the time. At every moment, including this moment, every language is in the middle of a number of grammatical changes. Take a look at a few examples, and decide what you think of each:

- (1) *I recommend you to take the job.*
- (2) *He demanded that the agitators were arrested.*
- (3) *This is just between you and I.*
- (4) *Due to the rain, we had to cancel the picnic.*
- (5) *This paper was written by Susie and myself.*
- (6) *Please come between eight a.m. to six p.m.*
- (7) *If he'd've played, we would have won.*
- (8) *He makes tedious jokes about mother-in-laws.*
- (9) *Having said that, there is no feasible alternative.*

Every one of these examples was formerly impossible for all speakers, but every one of them is now perfectly normal for many speakers today – though not for all speakers. Every one represents a grammatical form or construction which was formerly absent from the language but which is now frequent and prominent in many or all parts of the English-speaking world. In each case, we are probably looking at a grammatical change in progress, and it may be only a matter of time before each is accepted by practically everyone as normal English grammar.

Of course, if your tastes are conservative, you may consider some of my examples to be unspeakably slovenly and ignorant. I don't much care for most of them myself. But remember what happened to all those conservatives who railed against *My house is being painted*.

On the other hand, we should realise that not all of these changes are recent ones. The constructions illustrated in examples (3) and (7) above have been recorded in writing for centuries, and they have apparently been frequent in speech for at least as long. So far, however, they have not been accepted as part of Standard English – that is, they are not considered to belong to that set of forms, usages and constructions which all educated people agree are appropriate in the most careful styles of speech and writing.

I will close this section by mentioning one of the most dramatic changes in English grammar of recent years. The construction is so new that it doesn't yet have an accepted name, but I'll call it the *I'm like* construction. This novel construction has recently appeared in the speech of young people; it seems to have originated in the USA, but it can now be heard in almost every English-speaking country. It is a way of relating narratives, and it is rather different from more traditional ways of doing this. An example: *Well, I'm standing there, like 'What's going on?', and he's like 'Can I put my arm around you?', and I'm like 'Yuck! What a pig!'*

I was raised in the USA, and I don't think I ever heard this construction used before I reached the age of twenty-five or so. Today, I can't get through a day