

A2 English Language

MODULE 3: LANGUAGE EXPLORATIONS

Descriptivism Resources

From the
**LANGUAGE CHANGE
RESOURCE PACK**

ATTITUDES TO LANGUAGE CHANGE

Resources for Descriptivism

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attitudes towards change

This chapter discusses language worriers, those who fear that English is declining. It considers why such worries arise, and clarifies the notion of a 'standard language'.

'The language the world is crying out to learn is diseased in its own country', raged a letter-writer to a newspaper. Language worriers pop up repeatedly, fearful for the health of English. These linguachondriacs – language hypochondriacs – often claim that they are defending a language which is collapsing into ruin.

But English is not crumbling away, it is expanding. It is spoken in almost every country in the world, and more speakers are added annually.

So what is the problem? This chapter will consider first, why language worries arise. Second, it will try to clarify the notion of a 'standard language'.

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A tradition of worry

Language worriers have always existed. 'Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration', said Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his famous dictionary of the English language, first published in 1755. He at first hoped to halt this presumed decline. But by the time he had completed his work, he realized that 'to enchain syllables' was as pointless as trying 'to lash the wind'.

Eighteenth-century worries were perhaps understandable. At that time, English was in a fairly fluid state, and was thought by many to need stabilizing. This anxiety about English coincided with admiration for Latin, which appeared to be fixed.

But who exactly should say what was, and what was not, good English? A number of church dignitaries thought they knew. In 1762, Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, complained that English 'hath made no advances in Grammatical accuracy' over the last 200 years, criticizing even 'our best Authors' as 'guilty of palpable error in point of Grammar'. He himself tried to remedy this, by writing a grammar of English. Unfortunately, his prescriptions were based partly on Latin, partly on his own personal preferences. For example, he noted that a preposition at the end of sentences was something which 'our language is strongly inclined to', but claimed that it was 'more graceful' to avoid this – even though he himself did not always follow his own advice!

Lowth therefore was one of a long line of well-meaning but ignorant worriers who invented strange personal 'rules' for language, several of which became fossilized in school grammar books.

Progress and decay fallacies

In the 19th century, pride in the British empire led to a mistaken belief that the English language was superior to others. But views differed as to why.

According to one view, English had progressed further than other languages, which remained primitive. 'What shall we say of the Fuegians, whose language is an inarticulate clucking?... Of the wild Veddahs of Ceylon, who have gutturals and grimaces instead of language?' asked a prominent churchman, Dean Farrar, in 1865.

According to another view, God had once created all human languages equal, but some had slithered down from their former excellence. 'Fearful indeed is the impress of degradation which is stamped on the language of the savage', ranted an influential archbishop of Dublin, Richard Chenevix Trench, condemning in particular a language which had supposedly lost its word for 'supreme Divine Being'.

This second view was more pernicious. It promoted three bizarre, wrong ideas: that language and morals are intertwined, that languages can disintegrate, and that constant vigilance is needed to prevent linguistic collapse.

Just as a lost nail is assumed to lead to a lost horseshoe, then a lost horse, then a lost rider, so generations of youngsters have been led to believe that they need to pay attention to linguistic details in order to preserve their language – even though such concern is pointless. Language behaves like a thermostat, and maintains its own patterns (Chapter 13).

Proper behaviour

Further worries surfaced in the 19th century. The inhabitants of England – and also some parts of America – were convinced that a 'proper way' to behave existed. Etiquette books were published with firm precepts on day-to-day life, such as: 'Don't drink from your saucer', 'Don't wear diamonds in the morning', 'Don't conduct correspondence on postal-cards'.

Language was assumed to be part of this 'proper behaviour'. A mish-mash of prohibitions was promoted: 'Don't say gents for gentlemen, nor pants for pantaloons. These are inexcusable vulgarisms', 'Don't use a plural pronoun when a singular is

called for. "Every passenger must show their ticket" illustrates a prevalent error', 'Don't say "It is him", say "It is he"'. And so on.

A widespread illusion prevailed, that something called 'correct' English existed, and that this was in some way linked even to morals:

Speech is a gift of God, ... and the habit of speaking correct English ... next to good morals, is one of the best things in the world,

proclaimed a 19th century manual used by schools.

Exactly what this 'correct English' consisted of was unclear. Those who believed in its existence tended to provide miscellaneous prohibitions against things you should *not*, in their opinion, say, as illustrated above.

Standard English

In the 20th century, a belief in 'proper English' persisted, linked to the notion of a 'standard language'.

The word 'standard' is ambiguous. Sometimes, it means a value which has to be met, as when people talk about 'keeping up standards', or 'reaching the required standard'. At other times, it refers to common practice, as in 'the standard way to make tea is as follows ...'.

Often, these two meanings have been confused, as when a mid-19th-century writer claimed that 'the common standard dialect is that in which all marks of a particular place of birth and residence are lost'.

In practice, standard English was commonly assumed to be the language of Oxford, so-called 'Oxford English', and the big public schools. It therefore came to be thought of as 'educated English'. Henry Wyld, in 1907, noted that 'Standard English ... is spoken by people of corresponding education and cultivation all over the country'.

As Henry Wyld pointed out, standard English refers primarily to written grammatical forms. These vary little from one area to another, even though speakers may differ in pronunciation and vocabulary. Standard English has never been an accent, and people with a Scottish, Welsh or Yorkshire accent are all likely to be using the same 'standard English'.

'Standard English' is often thought of as British English. Yet these days, English has spread around the world. So it is more accurate to speak of standard British English, standard American English, standard Indian English, standard Singapore English, and so on. Each of these has developed its own agreed grammatical forms. In Indian English, for example, the word *enjoy* need not be followed by a noun. An ice-cream seller is likely to say: 'Please enjoy' to someone who buys one. But in England and America, it is more normal to say: 'I hope you enjoy it'.

Non-standard English

Of course, many people speak English that is not standard. A huge amount of attention – and anger – arose when so-called 'Ebonics', a type of black English, was accepted as usable in some California Schools. Amidst the furore, many lost sight of a few straightforward facts.

First, Ebonics is not a new language, it is just an unfashionable variety of English. Second, Ebonics is not in any way defective, just because it is not Standard American English. Linguistically, nothing is wrong with it; its problems are social. Some features of it are more regular than the standard language. For example, the verb *to be* has been neatened up, and runs *I be, you be, he be, we be, they be*. Third, the most notable feature of Ebonics is its vocabulary – though this is recognizably English, as *feel froggy* 'want to fight', *knock boots* 'have sex'. Fourth, confidence in using one variety of English – Ebonics – is likely to lead to a desire to become familiar with other varieties, including perhaps, more fashionable ones.

The overall message is that all varieties of English are equally 'good' in that they are full languages, not defective or damaged ones. But they are not all equally useful or appropriate. Ebonics may be fine for chatting with mates in California. But it might be a disadvantage in London, where people could find it hard to understand, just as speakers with a strong cockney accent might find it difficult to make themselves understood in California.

Ideally, all speakers would be familiar with a variety of accents and dialects so that they could fit in anywhere, just as globe-trotters anywhere need to be equipped with a quiverful of different languages.

Questions

- 1 Why in the 18th century did people worry about language?
- 2 How did 19th-century worries about language differ from 18th-century worries?
- 3 Why is the word **standard** ambiguous?
- 4 What is **Standard English**?
- 5 What is **Ebonics**, and what is its relationship to Standard English?

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

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.

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

4 Preliminaries

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 *Troilus 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 unnecessary sloppiness, laziness or ignorance. 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 twenty-five years. 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 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

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 orangutangage.

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?¹⁶ Ought we to be actually doing something, such as starting a Campaign for Real English, as one letter to a newspaper proposed?¹⁷ 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 last 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."¹⁸

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."¹⁹

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 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.'²⁰

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 billion people – 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 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.²¹

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*.²² 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.'²³

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 Dean 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'.²⁴ 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'. He himself attempted to lay down 'rules' of good usage, because 'our best Authors for want of some rudiments of this type have sometimes fallen into mistakes, and been guilty of palpable error in point of Grammar.'²⁵

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.

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 speaks 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 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 race-horse or the Jersey cow,' wrote Edward Sapir in 1921.²⁶

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 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',²⁷ 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'.²⁸ 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 purists whose influence may have equalled that of Johnson, but whose statements and strictures were related not to usage, but to their own assumptions and prejudices. The most notable of these was Robert Lowth, Bishop of London. A prominent Hebraist and theologian, with fixed and eccentric opinions about language, he wrote *A short introduction to English grammar* (1762), which had a surprising influence, perhaps because of his own high status. Indeed, many schoolroom grammars in use in this century have laws of 'good usage' which can be traced directly to Bishop Lowth's idiosyncratic pronouncements as to what was 'right' and what was 'wrong'. His

grammar is bespattered with pompous notes in which he deploras the lamentable English of great writers. He set out to put matters right by laying down 'rules', which were often based on currently fashionable or even personal stylistic preferences. For example, contrary to general usage, he urged that prepositions at the end of sentences should be avoided:

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.²⁹

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', quite oblivious of the fact that many languages, 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 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 English authors). For example, in the Prologue to the *Canterbury tales*, Chaucer heaps up negatives to emphasize the fact that the knight was never rude to anyone:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In all his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.³⁰

Today, the belief that a double negative is wrong is perhaps the most widely accepted of all popular convictions about 'correctness', even though stacked up negatives occur in several varieties

of English, without causing any problems of understanding: 'I didn't know nothin' bout gettin' no checks to (= for) nothin', no so (= social) security or nothin''. This sixty-five-year-old black woman originally from the Mississippi River area of America was clearly not getting the social security payments due to her.³¹

In brief, Lowth's influence was profound and pernicious because so many of his strictures were based on his own preconceived notions. In retrospect, it is quite astonishing that he should have felt so confident about his prescriptions. Did he believe that, as a bishop, he was divinely inspired? It is also curious that his dogmatic statements were so widely accepted among educated Englishmen. It seems that, as a prominent religious leader, no one questioned his authority.

We in the twentieth century are the direct descendants of this eighteenth-century puristic passion. As already noted, statements very like those of Bishop Lowth are still found in books and newspapers, often reiterating the points he made – points which are still being drummed into the heads of the younger generation by some parents and schoolteachers who misguidedly think they are handing over the essential prerequisites for speaking and writing 'good English'.

Not only are the strictures set on language often arbitrary, as in the case of many of Bishop Lowth's preferences, but, in addition, they cannot usually be said to 'purify' the language in any way. Consider the journalist mentioned earlier who had a 'queasy distaste' for *the media is* (in place of the 'correct' form, *the media are*). To an impartial observer, the treatment of *media* as a singular noun might seem to be an advantage, not a sign of decay. Since most English plurals end in -s, it irons out an exception. Surely it is 'purer' to have all plurals ending in the same way? A similar complaint occurred several centuries back over the word *chicken*. Once, the word *cicen* 'a young hen' had a plural *cicenu*. The old plural ending -u was eventually replaced by -s. Again, surely it is an advantage to smooth away exceptional plurals? Yet we find a seventeenth-century grammarian stating, 'those who say *chicken* in the singular and *chickens* in the plural are completely wrong.'³²

Purism, then, does not necessarily make language 'purer'. Nor does it always favour the older form, merely the most socially

prestigious. A clear-cut example of this is the British dislike of the American form *gotten*, as in *he's gotten married*. Yet this is older than British *got*, and is seen now in a few relic forms only such as *ill-gotten gains*.

In brief, the puristic attitude towards language – the idea that there is an absolute standard of correctness which should be maintained – has its origin in a natural nostalgic tendency, supplemented and intensified by social pressures. It is illogical, and impossible to pin down to any firm base. Purists behave as if there was a vintage year when language achieved a measure of excellence which we should all strive to maintain. In fact, there never was such a year. The language of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time was no better and no worse than that of our own – just different.

Of course, the fact that the puristic movement is wrong in the details it complains about does not prove that purists are wrong overall. Those who argue that language is decaying may be right for the wrong reasons, they may be entirely wrong, or they may be partially right and partially wrong. All we have discovered so far is that there are no easy answers, and that social prejudices simply cloud the issue.

Rules and grammars

It is important to distinguish between the 'grammar' and 'rules' of Bishop Lowth and his followers, and those of linguists today. (A linguist here means someone professionally concerned with linguistics, the study of language.) In Bishop Lowth's view, 'the principal design of a Grammar of any Language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way of doing this is to lay down rules.'³³ A grammar such as Lowth's, which lays down artificial rules in order to impose some arbitrary standard of 'correctness', is a prescriptive grammar, since it prescribes what people should, in the opinion of the writer, say. It may have relatively little to do with what people really say, a fact illustrated by a comment of Eliza Doolittle in Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*: 'I don't want to talk grammar, I

want to talk like a lady.' The artificial and constraining effect of Lowth's pseudo-rules might be summarized by lines from the Beatles' song 'Getting better':

I used to get mad at my school
the teachers who taught me weren't cool
holding me down, turning me round,
filling me up with your rules...

The grammars and rules of linguists, on the other hand, are not prescriptive but *descriptive*, since they describe what people actually say. For linguists, rules are not arbitrary laws imposed by an external authority, but a codification of subconscious principles or conventions followed by the speakers of a language. Linguists also regard the spoken and written forms of language as separate, related systems, and treat the spoken as primary.³⁴

Let us consider the notion of *rules* (in this modern sense) more carefully. It is clear that it is impossible to list all the sentences of any human language. A language such as English does not have, say, 7,123,541 possible sentences which people gradually learn, one by one. Instead, the speakers of a language have a finite number of principles or 'rules' which enable them to understand and put together a potentially infinite number of sentences. These rules vary from language to language. In English, for example, the sounds [b], [d], [e] can be arranged as [bed], [deb], or [ebd] as in *ebbed*. *[bde], *[dbe] and *[edb] are all impossible, since words cannot begin with [bd] or [db], or end with [db], though these sequences are pronounceable. (An asterisk indicates a non-permitted sequence of sounds or words in the language concerned. Also, sounds are conventionally indicated by square brackets.³⁵) Yet in ancient Greek, the sequence [bd] was allowable at the beginning of a word, as in *bdeuro* 'rascal', while a sequence [sl], as in *sleep*, was not permitted.

Rules for permissible sequences exist also for segments of words, and words. In English, for instance, we find the recurring segments *love*, *-ing*, *-ly*. These can be combined to form *lovely*, *loving*, or *lovingly*, but not **ing-love*, **ly-love* or **love-ly-ing*. Similarly, you could say *Sebastian is eating peanuts*, but not **Sebastian is peanuts eating*, **Peanuts is eating Sebastian*, or **Eating is Sebastian peanuts* – though if the sentence was translated into a language such as Latin.

or Dyrbal, the words for 'Sebastian' and 'peanuts' could occur in a greater variety of positions.

In brief, humans do not learn lists of utterances. Instead, they learn a number of principles or rules which they follow subconsciously. These are not pseudo-rules like Bishop Lowth's, but real ones which codify the actual patterns of the language. Although people use the rules all the time, they cannot normally formulate them, any more than they could specify the muscles used when riding a bicycle. In fact, in day-to-day life, we are so used to speaking and being understood that we are not usually aware of the rule-governed nature of our utterances. We only pause to think about it when the rules break down, or when someone uses rules which differ from our own, as when Alice in Looking-Glass Land tried to communicate with the Frog, whose subconscious language rules differed from her own. She asked him whose business it was to answer the door:

'To answer the door?' he said. 'What's it been asking of?'
'I don't know what you mean,' she said.
'I speaks English, doesn't I?' the Frog went on. 'Or are you deaf?'

The sum total of the rules found in any one language is known as a *grammar*, a term which is often used interchangeably by linguists to mean two different things: first, the rules applied subconsciously by the speakers of a language; secondly, a linguist's conscious attempt to codify these rules. A statement such as, 'In English, you normally put an -s on plural nouns', is an informal statement of a principle that is known by the speakers of a language, and is also likely to be expressed in a rather more formal way in a grammar written by a linguist. There are, incidentally, quite a number of differences between a native-speaker's grammar and a linguist's grammar. Above all, they differ in completeness. All normal native speakers of a language have a far more comprehensive set of rules than any linguist has yet been able to specify, even though the former are not consciously aware of possessing any special skill. No linguist has ever yet succeeded in formulating a perfect grammar – an exhaustive summary of the principles followed by the speakers of a language when they produce and understand speech.

The term *grammar* is commonly used nowadays by linguists to

cover the whole of a language: the **phonology** (sound patterns), the **syntax** (word patterns) and the **semantics** (meaning patterns). An important subdivision within syntax is **morphology**, which deals with the organization of segments of words as in *kind-ness*, *kind-ly*, *un-kind*, and so on.

The comprehensive scope of the word *grammar* sometimes causes confusion, since in some older books it is used to mean only the syntax, or occasionally, only the word endings. This has led to the strange claim that English has practically no grammar at all – if this were really so nobody would be able to speak it!

Grammars fluctuate and change over the centuries, and even within the lifetime of individuals. In this book, we shall be considering both how this happens, and why. We shall be more interested in speakers' subconscious rules than in the addition and loss of single words. Vocabulary items tend to be added, replaced, or changed in meaning more rapidly than any other aspect of language. Any big dictionary contains numerous words which have totally disappeared from normal usage today, such as *scobberlotch* 'to loaf around doing nothing in particular', *ruddock* 'robin', *dudder* 'to deafen with noise', as well as an array of relatively new ones such as *atomizer*, *laser*, *transistorize*. Other words have changed their meaning in unpredictable ways. As Robin Lakoff has pointed out,³⁶ because of the decline in the employment of servants, the terms *master* and *mistress* are now used to signify something rather different from their original meaning. *Master* now usually means 'a person supremely skilful in something', while *mistress*, on the other hand, often refers to a female lover:

He is a master of the intricacies of academic politics.

Rosemary refused to be Harry's mistress and returned to her husband.

The different ways in which these previously parallel words have changed is apparent if we try to substitute one for the other:

She is a mistress of the intricacies of academic politics.

Harry refused to be Rosemary's master and returned to his wife.

This particular change reflects not only a decline in the master or mistress to servant relationship, but also, according to Lakoff, the lowly status of women in our society.

The rapid turnover in vocabulary and the continual changes in the meaning of words often directly reflect social changes. As Samuel Johnson said in the preface to his dictionary (1755): 'As any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice'. Alongside vocabulary change, there are other less obvious alterations continually in progress, affecting the sounds and the syntax. These more mysterious happenings will be the main concern of this book.

The chapters are organized into four main sections. Part 1, 'Preliminaries', deals mainly with the ways in which historical linguists obtain their evidence. Part 2, 'Transition', explains *how* language change occurs. Part 3, 'Causation', discusses possible reasons *why* change takes place. Part 4, 'Beginnings and endings', looks at the role of child language and language disorders in change, and examines how languages begin and end. The final chapter tries to answer the question posed in the title of the book: Are languages progressing? decaying? or maintaining a precarious balance?

Standards

A linguistically or dialectally diverse nation needs a standard language to permit mutual intelligibility. Nor is it just a nation. In a global society, it is the whole world that can benefit from a lingua franca. Latin once took on this role, at least among Western nations. French too has played its part as an international medium of communication. Today, English is the dominant global voice.

Whatever 'standard English' is, it is of relevance not just for Britain, but for all countries that want to talk to each other. If the United Nations is seen as an index of communicative intent, that means (in 2006) 191 nations. There are serious implications for usage here, as we shall see in due course. But in 1400, we are talking about just one nation, England—or Britain, if we allow that English had established itself in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales as a result of the political initiatives of the previous 200 years. How did the standard language develop here? And why?

There is nothing inherently complicated about the notion of a standard. We use it every day in relation to weights and measures. A standard exists to avoid the dangers of variability.

If coins varied in their weight and size from one part of the country to another, forgers would have a field day. But what does the notion mean when applied to language?

In language, variation causes problems of comprehension and acceptability. If you speak or write differently from the way I do, we may fail to understand each other, and we may also decide not to like each other. The differences may be slight or great. In Middle England, as we have seen in Chapter 3, the gap was becoming increasingly wide. And it was chiefly being noticed in relation to the written language.

There is a very close association between a standard language and writing—in the broadest sense of *writing*, to include handwriting, typewriting, printing, and electronic media. This is because the written language is something which can be controlled. It is not a natural medium of language, as speech is. It has to be learned, through formal processes of teaching, usually in school. If a country is to have a standard language, it has to be taught. And writing is the best medium for introducing it.

It is in any case the written medium that most needs to be standardized. Ambiguities in speech can be quickly cleared up. If you are talking to me, and you use a word I don't know, or you express yourself unclearly, I have the immediate option of asking you what you meant. I can even show you my lack of comprehension while you are talking, by using facial expressions and query vocalizations (*m?*, *huh?*). Communication theorists call this behaviour 'simultaneous feedback'. Conversation would break down without it.

But there is no simultaneous feedback in writing. How you are reacting to the paragraph you are reading now, I, as its author, will never know—unless one day you write and tell me, and that doesn't help me while I am writing it. Right now, I have no idea how it is going to be received. So I must make every effort to make it clear, able to stand on its own feet. Writing has an autonomy that conversation does not need, which is where a standard language comes in. It helps ensure that my communicative intentions will meet your requirements and expectations. Now that we have a standard, to dipart frm it wood intradjoos unecesri difkulti.

The equivalent of that last clause was perfectly possible in Middle English. And in it we can see the primary feature of a standard variety of a language. It is the spelling. There are other important elements in a standard, as we shall see—notably punctuation and grammar—but spelling is the critical thing. Nowadays, we can get away with a certain flexibility in punctuation, and also in grammar, but there is very little leeway in spelling. With just one or two exceptions (such as informal emails), if you spell incorrectly you will, nowadays, be considered careless, lazy, or uneducated, or possibly all three.

But that is a modern notion. It didn't exist in the Middle Ages. It took three hundred years for standard English to develop into something like the form we know today, and for modern criticisms of non-standard usage to be formulated. We shall see the standard language coming into its own in the eighteenth century. And after that, as they say in the movies, all hell breaks loose.

It is in the fifteenth century that we see the first signs of the emerging standard. Thanks to years of persistent research in historical linguistics, it is possible to detect a definite trend towards consistency in the documents from many London institutions of the time, especially among the scribes of the court of Chancery. It was fostered by the wide dissemination of a few important texts, especially after the arrival of printing—chief among them were Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and John Wycliffe's translation of the Bible. The linguistic features of one dialect—that of the east midlands, and notably of the London area—began to predominate. And in due course it is this dialect which forms the basis of the standard language.

The momentum towards a standard gathers pace during the fifteenth century. But this raises a question. Why did it take so long for it to happen? It wasn't just the late arrival of printing. There have to be more fundamental reasons.

It couldn't really have happened much earlier. A standard presupposes a certain level of stability in a language. And in Middle English, that stability wasn't there. It was a period when the language was rapidly changing—not only in vocabulary, with tens of thousands of new words arriving from French, Latin, and elsewhere, but also in grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Each of these areas was in a considerable state of flux.

Since Anglo-Saxon times, a major shift had taken place in the way English grammar worked. In Old English, the language had used many word-endings (inflections) to express the grammatical relationships between words.

In Middle English, these had largely disappeared, and English was beginning to rely on the order of words in a sentence to express meaning. But it takes time for a language to settle down, after such a major shift in its patterns of sentence construction. We can see the reverberations of the upheaval even as late as 1600, when Shakespeare was writing. He was, for instance, one of the last writers to make extensive use, outside of religion, of the old contrast between the pronouns *thou* and *you* and the associated inflection (*thou knowest*).

In spelling, the language was assimilating the consequences of having a civil service of French scribes, who paid little attention to the traditions of English spelling that had developed in Anglo-Saxon times. Not only did French *qu* arrive, replacing Old English *cw* (as in *queen*), but *ch* replaced *c* (in such words as *church*—Old English *cirice*), *sh* and *sch* replaced *sc* (as in *ship*—Old English *scip*), and much more. Vowels were written in a great number of ways. Much of the irregularity of modern English spelling derives from the forcing together of Old English and French systems of spelling in the Middle Ages. People struggled to find the best way of writing English throughout the period—and without much success, as we shall see in the next chapter. Even Caxton didn't help, at times. Some of his typesetters were Dutch, and they introduced some of their own spelling conventions into their work. That is where the *gh* in such words as *ghost* comes from.

Any desire to standardize spelling would also have been hindered by the major changes that were taking place in

pronunciation during the Middle English period, especially in the fifteenth century. A series of changes affecting the long vowels of English, known as the Great Vowel Shift, took place in the early 1400s. Before the shift, a word like *loud* would have been pronounced 'lood'; *name* as 'nahm'; *leaf* as 'layf'; *mice* as 'mees'. Although the shift had no clear beginning or end, the majority of the changes took place within two generations. Grandparents and grandchildren in 1450 probably had considerable difficulty understanding each other.

We can easily see the problem that a period of rapid pronunciation change presents for the emergence of a standard system of spelling. If some people are pronouncing *name* as 'nahm' and some are beginning to say something closer to 'naym', then how is it to be spelled? Only after the pace of change had slowed, towards the end of the century, would the introduction of standard spellings have begun to make any sense.

But once the linguistic climate of a country is ready for a standard, and once a particular dialect has emerged as a favoured candidate, the process is impossible to stop. This does not mean that its progress is steady, unidirectional, and uncontroversial. On the contrary. Caxton couldn't have predicted it, but within a few decades of his death, the country was having to cope with some of the biggest rows in the history of English usage.

Reformers

IF there are no rules, it is difficult to complain about them being broken. And linguistic rules can only be formulated when people have a clear intuition about normal usage. If usage is highly varied and rapidly changing, as it was in much of Middle English, then it is extremely difficult to work out what the rules are. That was Caxton's problem. There were no spelling manuals, guides to punctuation, grammars, or dictionaries of English in the fifteenth century. But a generation later, things had settled down considerably. People started to reflect on what had been happening. And then they began to complain about it.

Spelling, inevitably, was the first target. There was a growing opinion among the intelligentsia that English spelling was a mess. The Chester Herald, John Hart, was one of the strongest critics. He wrote three books advocating spelling reform, one of which shows his opinion in its title: *The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of our English Toung*, published in 1551. The spelling system was unreasonable, he argues—based on no rational principle. The language is full of 'vices and corruptions'. It had to be sorted out: 'confusion and disorder' in spelling 'bringeth confusion and uncertainte in the reading'.

What sort of thing was Hart referring to? It wasn't just the arrival of French spellings. It was also the way in which well-intentioned people had tried to help, and added to the confusion. The renewed interest in classical languages and cultures, which formed part of the ethos of the Renaissance, had introduced a new perspective into spelling: etymology. Etymology is the study of the history of words, and there was a widespread view that words should show their history in the way they were spelled. These weren't classicists showing off. There was a genuine belief that it would help people if they could 'see' the original Latin in a Latin-derived English word.

So someone added a *b* to the word typically spelled *det*, *dett*, or *dette* in Middle English, because the source in Latin was *debitum*, and it became *debt*, and caught on. Similarly, an *o* was added to *peple*, because it came from *populum*: we find both *poep* and *people*, before the latter became the norm. An *s* was added to *ile* and *iland*, because of Latin *insula*, so we now have *island*. There are many more such cases. Some people nowadays find it hard to understand why there are so many 'silent letters' of this kind in English. It is because other people thought they were helping.

Hart didn't like this kind of scholarly interference. Nor did he much like what the printers had been up to. Although Caxton had made a series of decisions about spelling, not everyone followed them. Indeed, Caxton had been very inconsistent himself. In his texts we find *wyf* alongside *wyfe* ('wife'), *lytyl* alongside *lityl* ('little'), *good* alongside *goode*, and many more alternatives. Even his own typesetters went

their own way, at times. They made arbitrary decisions. If a line of type was a bit short on a page, well, just add an *-e* to a few words, and that will fill it out. And if a line was too long? Take out some *e*'s, and then it will fit.

There is a good case for saying that, far from the arrival of printing helping the standard language to emerge, it actually hindered it, because there was so much inconsistency. Even a century after Caxton, the printers were still in a muddle. The headteacher of Merchant Taylors' school, Richard Mulcaster—said to be the model for Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*—was so unimpressed by printing practice that he decided to base his spelling rules on handwritten texts and not printed ones, because 'the printers, setters, and correcters . . . letteth manie errors abide in their work'.

We can hardly blame foreign typesetters for getting into a muddle and manipulating the language in this way. They would have had no intuition about what would count as an error. The case of final *-e* must have really confused them. They were printing at a time when *-e* was sometimes found at the end of a word and sometimes not. Sometimes it was pronounced and sometimes it wasn't. For example, we are still not entirely sure how many *e*'s were sounded in the first line of *The Canterbury Tales*—'When April with its sweet showers'...

Whan that Aprille with hise shoures soote...

The metre suggests that there is no *-e* pronounced in *Aprille* and *hise*, but that there is one in *shoures*—'shoor-uhs'. But people disagree over whether *soote* was 'soht' or 'soht-uh'.

A foreign compositor would get the impression that final *-e* was random, and that he could put it in or leave it out as he wished.

The situation would not be helped at all by the arrival of the Renaissance and the growth in international exploration and trade. New waves of foreign words came into the language, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and they brought with them unfamiliar pronunciations and alien letter-combinations. Thousands of words arrived from Latin and Greek, and many of them looked very strange in an English alphabet, such as *encyclopaedia* and *vacuum*. There were more words from French, such as *bizarre* and *moustache*. Words came in from Italian and Spanish—*piazza*, *macaroni*, *cocoa*, *guitar*. And hundreds of loan words arrived, from over a dozen languages, whose alien spellings added further complication to the already complex English system: *yacht* (Dutch), *yoghurt* (Turkish), *bazaar* (Persian), *pariah* (Tamil), *sheikh* (Arabic)... In all of this, we are not talking small numbers. A vocabulary of around 100,000 words at the end of Middle English had more than doubled by 1700. As a consequence, the number of 'exceptions to the rules' hugely increased.

But even in the early decades of the sixteenth century, readers were being faced with many spelling variations, and Hart identifies several major problems which he would like to eliminate. He especially objects to unnecessary letters, as when *good* is spelled *goode*, or cases where a sound is spelled by more than one letter, such as *set* spelled as *sette*. And he hates silent letters, as in *debt* and *people*. He is an early

phonetician, arguing vehemently for 'one sound—one letter'—so he is against having the same letter *g*, for example, in both *gentle* and *together*. The spelling system he devised proposed several new symbols and conventions to sort out the muddle. They never caught on. After Hart's time, only two new symbol innovations were ever accepted: *i* eventually came to be distinguished from *j*, and *u* from *v*. The English alphabet grew from twenty-four letters to twenty-six. And it has stayed that way.

Why weren't Hart's ideas for radical reform successful? The problem was that he was not alone. There were several other spelling reformers with the bit between their teeth, and each of them ended up with a proposal of their own. No two systems agreed as to what would be the best way of 'improving' English spelling. And there is in any case a natural reluctance to adopt an inventor's new and unfamiliar symbols. It was to be the same in the twentieth century, when George Bernard Shaw and others raised the case for spelling reform again. Spelling reformers have always been divided amongst themselves.

Nonetheless, the widespread opposition in the sixteenth century to 'too many letters' did influence publishing practice. The extra consonant and final *e* in words like *goode*, *sette*, and *hadde* eventually died out. It did not take long. Hart died in 1574. Within fifty years such spellings had almost disappeared. In the First Folio of Shakespeare (1623) we find 1,398 instances of *had* and only one of *hadde*.

If radical reform was not the way to sort out spelling, what was the alternative? Richard Mulcaster presented it,

in a work called *The Elementarie* (1582), a treatise on the principles of early education. He took the view that things had gone too far to be radically changed. Although English began with 'one letter—one sound', he argues, too much has happened since Anglo-Saxon times, so that introducing a phonetic approach would be unworkable. Better, he says, to deal with what we have—the established letters—and gather the words together, making adjustments where needed. Custom, he insists, is 'a great and naturall governour'. So, he concludes, let us gather all the 'roaming rules' that custom has introduced into English, and organize them into a single work.

He wasn't just a theoretician. He started the job off himself, creating an alphabetical list of over 8,500 words with recommended spellings, based on what he saw people using in their handwritten texts. It was almost a dictionary, but not quite, for it wasn't a systematic guide to meanings. His judgements were remarkably prescient. If we compare the words in his list with the standard spellings we use today, we find that over half are the same. And most of the differences are either due to the emergence of *i/j* and *u/v* or are minor variants at the ends of words, as in *elementarie* and *equall*.

The arguments about spelling reform died away, by the end of the sixteenth century, and the spelling system began to settle down. But it still had a long way to go before it reached the present-day level of standardization, and there would be several vacillating fashions in the meantime. In the late seventeenth century, for instance, it became

fashionable—following a trend in printing in Continental Europe—to capitalize the first letter of nouns. Virtually every noun is capitalized in Jonathan Swift's *Baucis and Philemon*, for example, written in 1706:

In antient Time, as Story tells
The Saints would often leave their Cells,
And strole about, but hide their Quality,
To try the People's Hospitality.

The practice lasted for a century or so, then died out—or rather, it was killed off, as we shall see (Chapter 24).

Even in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*, published as recently as 1755, there are many words spelled differently from today's norms—for instance, *fewel* ('fuel'), *villany*, *raindeer*, *downfal*, *comick*... And that work still groups together words spelled with *i/j* and *u/v*, so that, in Johnson's alphabetical listing, *ejectment* comes before *eight* and *avast* precedes *auction*.

It took nearly four hundred years, between 1400 and 1800, for English spelling to reach the kind of steady state that Mulcaster wanted to see. But even in 1800—or, for that matter, in 2000—there was more spelling variation remaining than we might realize. I'll be looking at this later (Chapter 21)—and also reflecting on the irony that, just as people thought they had sorted the spelling system out, something happened which began to mess it up again.

3/13

Borrowings

Rows over spelling continued throughout the 1500s. But they were a mild breeze compared with the tempestuous quarrels which took place that century over other aspects of language. Not over grammar and punctuation—those rows came later—but over vocabulary.

It is always dangerous generalizing about an age, but there is no doubt that during the sixteenth century anxiety levels about language increased greatly. There developed an intensity of interest in linguistic matters which had not been seen before. What caused it? The movement towards a standard language was not the reason. English was beginning to evolve a standard form, as we have seen, but there was no row about it. That came later. Indeed, the term 'standard language' is not recorded in English until the early nineteenth century.

The anxieties were more deep-rooted. They arose as a result of the huge cultural changes which had been taking place since the Middle Ages. The period from the time of Caxton until around 1650 would later be called the Renaissance—the rebirth of learning. It was a period which included the Reformation (Luther's protest at Wittenberg

was 1517), Copernicus (his major work was published in 1543), the first encounters with Africa and the Americas, and a renewal of connection with classical languages and literatures. Language never exists in a vacuum: it is always a reflection of cultural change. And if there is serious discord about that change, there will be serious discord about the language used to express it.

The discord that we now call the Reformation had immediate consequences for English, in the form of new translations of the Bible into the vernacular. John Wycliffe's translation had been the first, as early as the 1380s. But the first English text to be printed was the New Testament of William Tyndale, published in 1525–6. By 1611, when the King James Bible appeared, over fifty different Protestant or Catholic English translations had been made.

There were heated arguments over the linguistic choices made by the translators. Charges of heresy could be levelled at a translation depending on whether it used *congregation* or *church*, *repentance* or *penance*, *charity* or *love*. Sir Thomas More condemned Tyndale for 'certain wordes euille [evil] & of euyll purpose changid'. What words? More didn't like the way Tyndale used *senior* instead of *priest*—to take just one example. We can see theological concerns here. But he also didn't like Tyndale's choice of some quite everyday words too. For instance, he castigates him for mixing up 'two so plain englishe wordes, and so comen [common] as is *naye* and *no*'.

Tyndale thought things were going too far, and said so. His critics, he says, 'haue yet now so narrowlye looked [looked]

on my translatyon, that there is not so much as one I therin if it lack a tytle [tittle] over his hed, but they haue noted it, and nombre it vnto the ignorant people for an heresy'. He can't even leave a dot off the letter *i* without someone calling him a heretic, it seems.

One of the issues which exercised the minds of the early Bible translators was: would the English language be able to cope? For a start, were there enough words available to express everything that was said in the Latin or Greek originals? In the early decades of the sixteenth century, the general opinion was that there weren't. The traveller and physician Andrew Boorde wrote in about 1550: 'The speche of Englande is a base speche [compared] to other noble speches, as Italion Castyion [Spanish] and Frenche...' And there is a famous poem by John Skelton in which he bemoans his fate if he should choose to write in an ornate style, as appears in French and Latin poets:

Our Language is so rustye,
So cankered and so ful
Of frowardes [ugly things] and so dul
That if I wold [would] apply
To write ornatly
I wot [know] not where to finde
Termes to serve my minde.

If the problem was obvious, so was the solution. If the classical languages had all the words needed to talk about everything, and English hadn't, then all writers had to do was borrow. 'Borrow' is not the most apposite of terms for

what happens, in such cases, for the receiving language does not give the words back. 'Share' is perhaps more appropriate. But the tradition is to talk of 'loan words' and not 'shared words', in such cases. Certainly, whatever we call them, the sixteenth century saw an extraordinary influx of new words from Latin and Greek, especially the former: *anonymous, appropriate, commemorate, emancipate, relevant, susceptible...*

Many writers, such as the diplomat Thomas Elyot, embraced the new loan words with enthusiasm. We have to have them, he insists in 1531, 'for the necessary augmentation of our langage'. A generation later, in 1581, the translator George Pettie reaffirms their importance. We couldn't talk at all without them, he says:

if they should be all counted *inkpot* termes, I know not how we should speake any thing without blacking our mouthes with inke.

Inkpot terms. *Inkhorn* terms. These two words, both meaning a receptacle for ink, arrived in English at that time. Pettie is using a locution which had become common in the middle decades of the century. *Inkpot term* is first recorded in 1553, *inkhorn term* in 1543. Applied to language, they refer to words which are so lengthy (because of their foreign origins) that to write them down would use up a lot of ink. Accordingly, 'inkhorn terms' became an abusive label to describe the writing of anyone who welcomed Latinate neologisms, and especially for those who overused them.

There are certainly many examples of the style of writing which was thought to be excessively Latinate. In 1553, the scholar Thomas Wilson cites a letter—he may have concocted it, but it illustrates his point—supposedly written by a Lincolnshire gentleman. It contains such passages as:

how could you haue adepted suche illustrate prerogatiue and dominicall superioritee if the fecunditee of your ingenie had not been so fertile, and wounerfull prengaunt.

[‘how could you have acquired such illustrious pre-eminence and lordly superiority, if the fecundity of your intellectual powers had not been so fertile and wonderfully pregnant?’]

Faced with such usage, it is not surprising to see the pendulum swing to the opposite extreme, in which such coinages are avoided like the plague. Even a scholar of Greek, Sir John Cheke, was hotly opposed to them. In a 1557 letter he writes:

I am of this opinion that our tung shold [should] be written cleane and pure, vnmixt and vnmangeled with borowing of other tungenes.

It is a view strongly espoused by Wilson. We should never, he says, 'affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received'. And he adds, wryly:

Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were aliue, thei were not able to tell what they say.

The row went on for half a century—and indeed it has been rumbling on ever since. Four hundred years later,

George Orwell would be haranguing people for their reliance on classical words:

Bad writers... are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones.

And in the nineteenth century, the Dorset poet William Barnes went so far as to propose the removal of *all* non-Germanic words from the language. In his own writing, he replaced *conscience* by *inwit*, *ornithology* by *birdlore*, *grammar* by *speechcraft*, and many more.

Both sides of the inkhorn controversy had a point, and the extremists on both sides obscured it. Quite plainly, the routine use of classical terms makes for a style of English which is far removed from everyday speech, and which would be tolerable (and even then, not always) only in specialist circumstances such as the law. On the other hand, there are many classical terms which have been thoroughly assimilated into everyday speech, so much so that it would be very hard to talk for long without using them. That one sentence quoted above from John Cheke, arguing against foreign words, actually uses four of them: *opinion*, *pure*, *mix*, and *mangle*—all from Latin via Old French. And it is the same with Orwell: *haunt*, *notion*, *grand*.

Extreme trends in language use tend to be ironed out over time. Languages seem to operate with an unconsciously held system of checks and balances. If a group of people go wildly off in one linguistic direction, using a crate of new words, eventually—if they want to continue as part of society and be understood by its other members—they

will be pulled back, and they will drop some of their neologisms. At the same time, a few of the new words will have been picked up by the rest of the community. And so a language grows.

This is what happened in the sixteenth century. As a result of the inkhorn controversy, many of the classical neologisms fell out of use. It is thought that as many as a third of all the new words which came into English at that time are not recorded after 1700. We no longer use *accersite* 'summon', *dominical* 'lordly', and *suppeditate* 'supply', to cite just three. On the other hand, the foreign words that did remain added greatly to the expressive richness of English, and were put to very good use by writers who exploited their stylistic nuances and rhythmical differences. A language which can *question* (from French) and *interrogate* (from Latin) as well as *ask* (Old English) is three times more expressive in that respect than a language which can only 'ask'. And the same applies to *rest*, *remainder*, and *residue*, and many more such 'triplets'. Listen to them in Shakespeare, and judge for yourself:

- ... the residue of your fortune (*As You Like It*, II. vii. 200)
- ... upon remainder of a dear account (*Richard II*, I. i. 130)
- ... the rest is silence (*Hamlet*, v. ii. 352)

Clarity

It is such a shame. There is a lot of good stuff in the prescriptive grammars. They were written by people with considerable experience of using English, and they are full of good ideas which we can all learn from. Murray's book contains many accurate observations about English grammar. I have written a grammar myself, and you would be hard pressed to see the difference, a lot of the time.

It is the same with the modern manifestations of usage paranoia. The books contain much that is linguistically illuminating and uncontentious. They often draw attention to genuine points of ambiguity, and they can warn people about areas of usage where it is easy to be unclear. Excellent. Then the authors spoil it by homing in on aspects of usage which fail to recognize the shifting complexity of the linguistic world, and which are nothing to do with clarity at all. They propose solutions to language problems which cannot possibly work. And they charge you for it. Sometimes quite a lot, as you will know if you have ever replied to one of those advertisements promising to solve all your usage difficulties in one go.

They ought to be had up under the Trades Descriptions Act. Or run out of town, like the nineteenth-century quacks who claimed that their patent medicines would cure all ills. It is all (as Paul Newman's character in *The Sting* put it) a 'big con'.

The big con is to be told that the rules, if you follow them, will help you to be clear. But that is what most of the rules do not do. As we have seen in the previous chapters, there is no difference in clarity if you put a preposition in the middle or at the end of a sentence. The meanings are the same. Nor is there a difference in meaning between most uses of *will* and *shall*. Nor, to move on, is there usually any difference in meaning if you split an infinitive or not.

This was a rule which escaped Murray's attention. It didn't appear in grammar books until the nineteenth century. It was another example of Latin reasoning. The infinitive form of a verb is one which gives you just the basic form, without adding any endings to express such meanings as tense, person, and number. The verb is in its naked state, ready to take on any meaning you throw at it. It is not delimited in any way. As the Latin grammarians said, 'It has no finitude.' Hence the name: 'infinitive'.

In English the infinitive is typically presented as two words: *to love*, *to go*. In Latin, an inflected language, there is just one: *ire*, *amare*. If you want to add an adverb, to express such meanings as how or when or where you are loving, then you don't have the option to insert it within the verb—to say, in effect, *am-ADVERB-are*. But you do in English.

The Fight for English

In English, we can say *to boldly love*, and it is this separation of the *to* from the verb which is called the 'split infinitive'. It is a construction which has been in the language for centuries. It is popular because it is rhythmically more natural to say. The basic rhythm of English is a 'tum-te-tum' rhythm—what in the main tradition of English poetry is called an *iambic pentameter*, with strong (*stressed*) and weak (*unstressed*) syllables alternating:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day...

The strong syllables are underlined. When we split an infinitive we are striving to achieve this rhythm. Let us see why.

The *to* part of an infinitive carries no stress. And adverbs in English usually end in *-ly*, which also carries no stress. So of the three options, only one follows the basic heart-beat of English:

boldly to love strong—weak—weak—strong
to love boldly weak—strong—strong—weak
to boldly love weak—strong—weak—strong

That is why we do it. If you want to use one of the other possibilities, you can. It is a matter of stylistic taste, and that's all it is. But the split version is the more native.

So, don't be fooled when a grammarian tells you, 'Ah, but one is clearer than the other.' It isn't. The three forms above convey exactly the same meaning. If you let yourself believe otherwise, you have been taken in by the big con.

The split version is the norm. Things start to get linguistically interesting when we look for the exceptions.

Clarity

There are usually exceptions to grammatical rules, prescriptive or otherwise. That is one of the reasons why grammar is such a fascinating subject of study. So, be prepared for the occasional example where changing the position of the adverb *does* change the meaning of the sentence. Examples like this:

They failed completely to understand the problem.

They failed to completely understand the problem.

There are not many examples like this, but they do present real issues of clarity. Unfortunately, the prescriptive grammarians don't discuss them.

That is the other side of the con. We all need to learn how to be clear. But the prescriptive grammars don't tell us about the most important ways to achieve this goal. And their obsession with detail can distract us from the broader picture.

Only is a good example. Some books spend pages worrying about where *only* should go in a sentence. Some of the worry is unnecessary. There is no problem when the context makes it absolutely clear what is meant, as in:

I only bought two tickets, and I should have bought three.

But there can be a problem when the context is unclear, as in:

I only advised Mary.

The meaning is usually clear in speech, where the way we stress the words will distinguish the two meanings:

I only advised Mary—I didn't tell her.

I only advised Mary—not John.

But you can't see this in writing, so there is indeed a possibility of ambiguity. In these circumstances, it would be wise to be aware of the danger, and to place *only* next to the word it modifies—I advised *only* Mary—or, of course, to rephrase the sentence.

Some people worry endlessly about where *only* should go. They spend ages locating their *onlys* perfectly—and yet their language can still be unclear. That is because *only* is only a drop in the ocean of clarity. There are more things in heaven and earth entering into the notion of clarity than are dreamed of in prescriptivist philosophy. And the grammar pundits never mention them.

This isn't a grammar book, so I mustn't go on for too long; but let me take just one example of an important clarity principle. Which of the following two sentences do you find clearer?

It was nice having John and Mary come and see us the other day.

Having John and Mary come and see us the other day was nice.

I have put this choice before thousands of people, over the years, and they always opt for the first. Why?

It is all to do with the length of the subject—that part of the sentence which precedes the verb in a statement. Here are the sentences again, with the subjects underlined:

It was nice having John and Mary come and see us the other day.

Having John and Mary come and see us the other day was nice.

We do not like long subjects. Three-quarters of the subjects that we use in everyday speech consist of just one word (She is in the garden, I went down the street) or a short noun phrase (The woman was in the garden, The children went down the street). The longer the subject gets, the more uncomfortable we feel. If you don't believe me, try this next example, and note the point where you start to scream.

The real importance of this issue, critical to any discussion of the matter, and directly related to the other issues already discussed in this book, in the various chapters which deal with points about perspicuity, a topic of undoubted significance to all of us, and a topic moreover which will continue to be of importance...

It is an absurdly long subject. You need the main verb in order to know what to 'do' with this subject. And I am not giving you one.

The longer a writer (or speaker) makes you wait for a main verb, the more you have to 'process' the subject, holding it in your short-term memory. It is much easier to process a sentence if the main verb comes relatively early on. Notice how much more comfortable the silly example becomes if I begin with a verb:

I will now discuss the real importance of this issue, critical to any discussion of the matter, and directly related to the other issues already discussed in this book, in the various chapters which deal with points about perspicuity, a topic of undoubted significance to all of us, and a topic moreover which will continue to be of importance...

It is still a silly sentence, but at least you feel you are more in control of it now. That verb *discuss* helps enormously.

The basic grammatical principle is this: it is clearer, in English, to keep the weight away from the subject and locate it after the verb. You can depart from this principle if you like, but beware if you do.

Once we know this principle, we can apply it in all kinds of ways. For instance, when children are learning to read, it makes sense to keep the subjects of their sentences quite short. They will find it much easier to read this:

Jane saw the three little pigs with their mother.

than to read this:

The three little pigs with their mother saw Jane.

In fact, reading books often fall foul of this principle, and present the child with unnecessary difficulty as a result. The following are extracts from two versions of a well-known fairy tale. This one breaks the long-subject principle:

Turkey Lurkey, Ducky Lucky, Cocky Locky, Henny Penny, and Chicken Licken all walked into Foxy Loxy's den.

And this one doesn't.

Foxy Loxy ate up Turkey Lurkey, Ducky Lucky, Cocky Locky, Henny Penny, and Chicken Licken.

Not that it mattered much, either way, to Chicken Licken. There are more important things in life, and death, than grammar.

3/15

Punctuation

MORE important things than grammar? Yes, according to some—punctuation. Apostrophes, in particular. I don't know of any Society for the Protection of Infinitives. But I do know a Society for the Protection of the Apostrophe.

Readers who paid attention to my Preface, with its head-scratching over punctuation, will perhaps be surprised to find the topic only being dealt with now, in Chapter 20. But there is a reason. In the evolution of standard English, punctuation was the last feature people paid attention to. Spelling, vocabulary, and grammar had all been given a workover. Not punctuation. The topic is given just a few pages in Murray's *Grammar*, buried at the back of the book, and that is where it tends to stay, even in modern works.

It is a pity, because punctuation is much more than a grammatical afterthought. That is why I got so excited when I worked with Lynne Truss. As I said in the Preface, if anyone could make the subject sexy, she could. And she did. Her book is humorous, clever, clear, pretty accurate, well crafted, and deeply unnerving.

Zero tolerance. She uses metaphors of vigilantes, balaclavas, militant wing, criminal damage. It's a joke, of course. Yes, it has to be a joke. But it's a funny sort of joke. She kindly refers to me in her preface as one among several who have been 'inspirational'. I hope I didn't inspire that.

In fact, I know I didn't. She makes it clear at one point that it was the secretary of the Apostrophe Protection Society who triggered 'the awakening of my Inner Stickler': But even he must have been taken aback by the sudden militancy of her reaction. Society members, she says, write courteous letters to those shopkeepers who misuse apostrophes. She wants to go in with all linguistic guns blazing.

I agree totally with her underlying message, which is to bring the study of punctuation back into the centre of the educational stage. I am as disturbed as she is when I see the rules of standard English punctuation broken. As I have emphasized in earlier chapters, the whole point of a standard language is to ensure general intelligibility and acceptability by having everyone follow an agreed set of norms of usage. One of the jobs of education is to teach the written standard, and punctuation is part of that. If kids leave school not having learned to punctuate, then something has gone horribly wrong.

In a later chapter I'll talk about when things went wrong, and what is now being done to put things right. Here, I just want to point out why a 'zero tolerance' approach to punctuation, or to any aspect of English usage, is so misconceived.

Zero tolerance does not allow for flexibility. It is prescriptivism taken to extremes. It suggests that the language is in a state where all the rules are established with 100 per cent certainty. The suggestion is false. We do not know what all the rules of punctuation are. And no rule of punctuation is followed by all of the people all of the time.

Punctuation has always been a matter of trends. Commas, hyphens, semicolons, apostrophes—all have been subject to changes in fashion. In the seventeenth century the trend was to capitalize all nouns; in the eighteenth century, the trend was to leave the capitals out. Lindley Murray gave them the kiss of death, calling noun capitalization a 'troublesome' practice.

No one has ever been able to define a set of rules which will explain all uses of all punctuation marks. The selection of uses Lynne describes in *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* is only part of the story. Practice varies so much between formal and informal writing, between Britain and America, between page and screen, between publisher and publisher, between author and author, between generation and generation. The best we can do is identify and teach trends, and be very cautious indeed about making generalizations.

If you are not cautious, then be prepared to be taken to task. The 'dog eats dog' mentality of prescriptive critics gave Lynne a mauling, when her book first appeared. A reviewer in the *New Yorker* pointed out one punctuation error after another, beginning with her opening page:

The first punctuation mistake... appears in the dedication, where a nonrestrictive clause is not preceded by a comma.

And he goes on to note inconsistencies in her practice throughout the book.

This is one kind of zero tolerance being eaten by another. And yet both sides know very well that the matter is not so cut and dried. Lynne says herself at one point, talking about a use of the apostrophe, 'there are no absolute rights and wrongs in this matter'. She knows that punctuation is partly an art: she devotes a whole chapter to this topic. She knows about fashions and language change and all of that. So why didn't she adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards people who have problems?

Let's take one of her main apostrophe hates: the mixing up of *it's* and *its*. Here the situation is indeed clear-cut. The nineteenth-century printers and grammarians worked out the rules, and told everyone to follow them. It was all going to be so simple. Use the apostrophe either to show possession or to show an omitted letter. So: *cat*, *cat's*, and *cats'* for the former; *I've* and *there's* for the latter.

Generations of children had the first rule drummed into them. The apostrophe marks possession. The apostrophe marks possession. The apostrophe marks possession. And they started to write *cat's*, *dog's*, and *horse's*, just as they were supposed to do. Then they encountered *its*.

Its expresses possession. Compare:

The cat's food is in the bowl.

Its food is in the bowl.

And there you have the anomaly. *Its* is just as possessive as *cat's*, but it doesn't have an apostrophe. Why not?

Because the printers and grammarians never thought the matter through. They applied their rule to nouns and forgot about pronouns, thus creating an exception (along with *the food is hers, ours, yours, theirs*) without realizing it. And even if they had noticed, they wouldn't have done anything about it, for *it's* was already 'taken', as it were, as the abbreviation of *it is*.

But now look at it from the child's point of view. Teacher has told me that there is a definite correlation between the meaning of possession and the apostrophe. *Its food* has the meaning of possession. Therefore I will insert an apostrophe and I will get praise. *It's food*. And what does the poor child get instead? Blistering hellfire.

I really would have expected Lynne to be more sympathetic. After all, she went through just such a period of confusion herself. She tells us about one of her stratagems in her introduction. She would, she says,

cunningly suspend a very small one immediately above the 's', to cover all eventualities. Imagine my teenage wrath when, time after time, my homework returned with this well-meant floating apostrophe struck out. 'Why?' I would rail, using all my powers of schoolgirl inference and getting nowhere.

Many children have grown up confused by *it's* and *its*, and they remain so as adults. It doesn't have to be that way. Good teaching can point out the exception and explain it. I always tell my students about the way the printers thought—or failed to think—and it helps enormously. Lynne didn't get that perspective. Indeed, she got nothing at all.

She went to grammar school, she tells us, in the late 1960s, when formal work on language was out. I was luckier. I went in the mid-1950s, when it was definitely in. I never had a problem with *it's* and *its*.

I don't feel I want to kill, even in jest, when I meet someone who still mixes up *it's* and *its*. I don't call them lazy, or careless, or harangue them with shouts of 'you should know better'. Something deeper is wrong here. They have evidently not been taught properly about how their language works. So whose fault was that?

I would make the same kind of argument about the other major apostrophe hate: the use of an apostrophe in such words as *potato's*. Lynne knows exactly why it's there. We talked a lot about it during her radio recording, and the reasons are given in her book. It's because *potato* is a word ending in a vowel—an unusual ending for an English word. Simply adding an *-s* would promote the misleading pronunciation 'pot-at-oss'. If you are unsure about the spelling (*potatoes*), then you will try to solve the problem using punctuation. Inserting an apostrophe is as good a way as any of showing there is an unusual plural. After all, we have done the same thing elsewhere for other unusual words, such as *1960's* and *JP's*.

Once again, if you have had a good language-based education, you will not find this a problem. But if you have not, then I am not surprised that you remain confused. And my instinct is to help, to explain—in a word, to teach. Not to threaten death and destruction.

For one brief moment, I thought that Lynne had taken this point. In discussing the issue she says:

The only illiteracy with apostrophes that stirs any sympathy in me is the greengrocer's variety. First, because greengrocers are self-evidently horny-thumbed people who do not live by words. And second, because I agree with them that something rather troubling and unsatisfactory happens to words ending in vowels...

It's humorous, once again, but lurking beneath the surface there's an eighteenth-century 'us vs. them' attitude here which I find unpalatable. I know some greengrocers who are avid readers. And there's a curious double-think going on. 'I agree with them,' she says. With whom? With the greengrocers? On the one hand, she says greengrocers don't live by words; on the other, they are evidently so linguistically aware that they know about the problems of words ending in vowels.

Maybe it's just a slip in the writing. Maybe it's just an odd sense of humour. Having read the book several times now, I still am no nearer knowing whether the newspaper commentators I mentioned in my Preface—who think the book is a 'hoax' and a 'joke'—have a point. She writes about the topic with great good humour. She has the best of intentions. Her heart seems to be in the right place. So I would have expected tolerance of other people's educational handicaps, rather than the opposite. It's a puzzle.

15 Progress or decay? Assessing the situation

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not. . .

William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Predicting the future depends on understanding the present. The majority of self-proclaimed 'experts' who argue that language is disintegrating have not considered the complexity of the factors involved in language change. They are giving rise to a purely emotional expression of their hopes and fears.

A closer look at language change has indicated that it is natural, inevitable and continuous, and involves interwoven sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors which cannot easily be disentangled from one another. It is triggered by social factors, but these social factors make use of existing cracks and gaps in the language structure. In the circumstances, the true direction of a change is not obvious to a superficial observer. Sometimes alterations are disruptive, as with the increasing loss of *t* in British English, where the utilization of a natural tendency to alter or omit final consonants may end up destroying a previously stable stop system. At other times, modifications can be viewed as therapy, as in the loss of *h* in some types of English, which is wiping out an exception in the otherwise symmetrical organization of fricatives.

However, whether changes disrupt the language system, or repair it, the most important point is this: it is in no sense wrong for human language to change, any more than it is wrong for humpback whales to alter their songs every year.¹ In fact, there are some surprising parallels between the two species. All the whales sing the same song one year, the next year they all sing a new one. But the yearly differences are not random. The songs seem to be evolving. The songs of consecutive years are more alike than those that are separated by several years. When it was first discovered

that the songs of humpbacks changed from year to year, a simple explanation seemed likely. Since the whales only sing during the breeding season, and since their song is complex, it was assumed that they simply forgot the song between seasons, and then tried to reconstruct it the next year from fragments which remained in their memory. But when researchers organized a long-term study of humpbacks off the island of Maui in Hawaii, they got a surprise. The song that the whales were singing at the beginning of the new breeding season turned out to be identical to the one used at the end of the previous one. Between breeding seasons, the song had seemingly been kept in cold storage, without change. The songs were gradually modified as the season proceeded. For example, new sequences were sometimes created by joining the beginning and end of consecutive phrases, and omitting the middle part – a procedure not unlike certain human language changes.

Both whales and humans, then, are constantly changing their communication system, and are the only two species in which this has been proved to happen – though some birds are now thought to alter their song in certain ways. Rather than castigating one of these species for allowing change to occur, it seems best to admit that humans are probably programmed by nature to behave in this way. As a character in John Wyndham's novel *Web* says: 'Man is a product of nature . . . Whatever he does, it must be part of his nature to do – or he could not do it. He is not, and cannot be unnatural. He, with his capacities, is as much the product of nature as were the dinosaurs with theirs. He is an *instrument* of natural processes.'

A consideration of the naturalness and inevitability of change leads us to the three final questions which need to be discussed in this book. First, is it still relevant to speak of progress or decay? Secondly, irrespective of whether the move is a forwards or backwards one, are human languages evolving in any detectable direction? Thirdly, even though language change is not wrong in the moral sense, is it socially undesirable, and, if so, can we control it?

Let us consider these matters.

Forwards or backwards?

'Once, twice, thrice upon a time, there lived a jungle. This particular jungle started at the bottom and went upwards till it reached the monkeys, who had been waiting years for the trees to reach them, and as soon as they did, the monkeys invented climbing down.' The opening paragraph of Spike Milligan's fable *The story of the bald twit lion* indicates how easy it is to make facts fit one's preferred theory.

This tendency is particularly apparent in past interpretations of the direction of change, where opinions about progress or decay in language have tended to reflect the religious or philosophical preconceptions of their proponents, rather than a detached analysis of the evidence. Let us briefly deal with these preconceptions before looking at the issue itself.

Many nineteenth-century scholars were imbued with sentimental ideas about the 'noble savage', and assumed that the current generation was by comparison a race of decadent sinners. They therefore took it for granted that language had declined from a former state of perfection. Restoring this early perfection was viewed as one of the principal goals of comparative historical linguistics: 'A principal goal of this science is to reconstruct the full, pure forms of an original stage from the variously disfigured and mutilated forms which are attested in the individual languages', said one scholar.²

This quasi-religious conviction of gradual decline has never entirely died out. But from the mid nineteenth century onward, a second, opposing viewpoint came into existence alongside the earlier one. Darwin's doctrine of the survival of the fittest and ensuing belief in inevitable progress gradually grew in popularity: 'Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity... It is a part of nature',³ claimed one nineteenth-century enthusiast. Darwin himself believed that in language 'the better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly gaining the upper hand, and they owe their success to their inherent virtue'.⁴

The doctrine of the survival of the fittest, in its crudest version, implies that those forms and languages which survive are

since it confuses the notions of progress and decay in language with expansion and decline. As we have seen, expansion and decline reflect political and social situations, not the intrinsic merit or decadence of a language. Today, it is a historical accident that English is so widely spoken in the world. Throughout history, quite different types of language – Latin, Turkish, Chinese, for example – have spread over wide areas. This popularity reflects the military and political strength of these nations, not the worth of their speech. Similarly, Gaelic is dying out because it is being ousted by English, a language with social and political prestige. It is not collapsing because it has got too complicated or strange for people to speak, as has occasionally been maintained.

In order to assess the possible direction of language, then, we need to put aside both quasi-religious beliefs and Darwinian assumptions. The former lead to an illogical idealization of the past, and the latter to the confusion of progress and decay with expansion and decline.

Leaving aside these false trails, we are left with a crucial question: What might we mean by 'progress' within language?

The term 'progress' implies a movement towards some desired endpoint. What could this be, in terms of linguistic excellence? A number of linguists are in no doubt. They endorse the view of Jespersen, who maintained that 'that language ranks highest which goes farthest in the art of accomplishing much with little means, or, in other words, which is able to express the greatest amount of meaning with the simplest mechanism'.⁵

If this criterion were taken seriously, we would be obliged to rank pidgins as the most advanced languages. As we have already noted (Chapter 13), true simplicity seems to be counterbalanced by ambiguity and cumbersomeness. Darwin's confident belief in the 'inherent virtue' of shorter and easier forms must be set beside the realization that such forms often result in confusing homonyms, as in the Tok Pisin *hat* for 'hot', 'hard', 'hat' and 'heart'.

A straightforward simplicity measure then will not necessarily pinpoint the 'best' language. A considerable number of other factors must be taken into account, and it is not yet clear which they are, and how they should be assessed. In brief, linguists have been unable to decide on any clear measure of excellence, even

though the majority are of the opinion that a language with numerous irregularities should be less highly ranked than one which is economical and transparent. However, preliminary attempts to rank languages in this way have run into a further problem.

A language which is simple and regular in one respect is likely to be complex and confusing in others. There seems to be a trading relationship between the different parts of the grammar which we do not fully understand. This has come out clearly in the work of one researcher who has compared the progress of Turkish and Yugoslav children as they acquired their respective languages.⁶ Turkish children find it exceptionally easy to learn the inflections of their language, which are remarkably straightforward, and they master the entire system by the age of two. But the youngsters struggle with relative clauses (the equivalent of English clauses beginning with *who*, *which*, *that*) until around the age of five. Yugoslav children, on the other hand, have great problems with the inflectional system of Serbo-Croatian, which is 'a classic Indo-European synthetic muddle', and they are not competent at manipulating it until around the age of five. Yet they have no problems with Serbo-Croatian relative clauses, which they can normally cope with by the age of two.

Overall, we cannot yet specify satisfactorily just what we mean by a 'perfect' language, except in a very broad sense. The most we can do is to note that a certain part of one language may be simpler and therefore perhaps 'better' than that of another.

Meanwhile, even if all agreed that a perfectly regular language was the 'best', there is no evidence that languages are progressing towards this ultimate goal. Instead, there is a continuous pull between the disruption and restoration of patterns. In this perpetual ebb and flow, it would be a mistake to regard pattern neatening and regularization as a step forwards. Such an occurrence may be no more progressive than the tidying up of a cluttered office. Reorganization simply restores the room to a workable state. Similarly, it would be misleading to assume that pattern disruption was necessarily a backward step. Structural dislocation may be the result of extending the language in some useful way.

We must conclude therefore that language is ebbing and

flowing like the tide, but neither progressing nor decaying, as far as we can tell. Disruptive and therapeutic tendencies vie with one another, with neither one totally winning or losing, resulting in a perpetual stalemate. As the famous Russian linguist Roman Jakobson said fifty years ago: 'The spirit of equilibrium and the simultaneous tendency towards its rupture constitute the indispensable properties of that whole that is language.'⁷

Are languages evolving?

Leaving aside notions of progress and decay, we need to ask one further question. Is there any evidence that languages as a whole are moving in any particular direction in their intrinsic structure? Are they, for example, moving towards a fixed word order, as has sometimes been claimed?

It is clear that languages, even if they are evolving in some identifiable way, are doing so very slowly – otherwise all languages would be rather more similar than they in fact are. However, unfortunately for those who would like to identify some overall drift, the languages of the world seem to be moving in different, often opposite, directions.

For example, over the past two thousand years or so, most Indo-European languages have moved from being SOV (subject-object-verb) languages, to SVO (subject-verb-object) ones. As we noted in chapter 9, certain Niger-Congo languages seem to be following a similar path. Yet we cannot regard this as an overall trend, since Mandarin Chinese may be undergoing a change in the opposite direction, from SVO to SOV.⁸

During the same period, English and a number of other Indo-European languages have gradually lost their inflections, and moved over to a fixed word order. However, this direction is not inevitable, since Wappo, a Californian Indian language, appears to be doing the reverse, and moving from a system in which grammatical relationships are expressed by word order to one in which they are marked by case endings.⁹

A similar variety is seen in the realm of phonology. For example, English, French and Hindi had the same common ancestor. Nowadays, Hindi has sixteen stops, ...

according to one count. French, on the other hand, has sixteen vowels and six stops. English, meanwhile, has acquired more fricatives than either of these two languages, some of which speakers of French and Hindi find exceptionally difficult to pronounce. Many more such examples could be found.

Overall, then, we must conclude that 'the evolution of language as such has never been demonstrated, and the inherent equality of all languages must be maintained on present evidence'.¹⁰

Is language change socially undesirable?

Let us now turn to the last question, which has two parts. Is language change undesirable? If so, is it controllable?

Social undesirability and moral turpitude are often confused. Yet the two questions can quite often be kept distinct. For example, it is certainly not 'wrong' to sleep out in the open. Nevertheless, it is fairly socially inconvenient to have people bedding down wherever they want to, and therefore laws have been passed forbidding people to camp out in, say, Trafalgar Square or Hyde Park in London.

Language change is, we have seen, in no sense wrong. But is it socially undesirable? It is only undesirable when communication gets disrupted. If different groups change a previously unified language in different directions, or if one group alters its speech more radically than another, mutual intelligibility may be impaired or even destroyed. In Tok Pisin, for example, speakers from rural areas have great difficulty in understanding the urbanized varieties. This is an unhappy and socially inconvenient state of affairs.

In England, on the other hand, the problem is minimal. There are relatively few speakers of British English who cannot understand one another. This is because most people speak the same basic dialect, in the sense that the rules underlying their utterances and vocabulary are fairly much the same. They are likely, however, to speak this single dialect with different accents. There is nothing wrong with this, as long as people can communicate satisfactorily with one another. An accent which differs markedly from those around may be hard for others to comprehend, and is

therefore likely to be a disadvantage in job-hunting situations. But a mild degree of regional variation is probably a mark of individuality to be encouraged rather than stamped out.

A number of people censure the variety of regional accents in England, maintaining that the accent that was originally of one particular area, London and the south-east, is 'better' than the others. In fact, speakers from this locality sometimes claim that they speak English *without* an accent, something which is actually impossible. It is sometimes socially useful in England to be able to speak the accent of so-called Southern British English, an accent sometimes spoken of as Received Pronunciation (RP), which has spread to the educated classes throughout the country. But there is no logical reason behind the disapproval of regional accents. Moreover, such objections are by no means universal. Some people regard them as a sign of 'genuineness'. And in America, a regional accent is simply a mark of where you are from, with no stigma attached, for the most part.

Accent differences, then, are not a matter of great concern. More worrying are instances where differing dialects cause unintelligibility, or misunderstandings. In the past, this often used to be the case in England. Caxton, writing in the fifteenth century, notes that 'comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another'.¹¹ To illustrate his point, he narrates an episode concerning a ship which was stranded in the Thames for lack of wind, and put into shore for refreshment. One of the merchants on board went to a nearby house, and asked, in English, for meat and eggs. The lady of the house, much to this gentleman's indignation, replied that she could not speak French! In Caxton's words, the merchant 'cam in to an hows and axed for mete and specyally he axyd after eggys. And the good wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the merchaunt was angry for he also coude speke no frenshe, but wolde haue hadde eggys and she vnderstode hym not.' The problem in this case was that a 'new' Norse word *eggys* 'eggs' was in the process of replacing the Old English word *eyren*, but was not yet generally understood.

Unfortunately, such misunderstandings did not disappear with the fifteenth century. Even though, in both America and England, the majority of...

misunderstandings still occur through dialect differences. Consider the conversation between Samuel, a five-year-old coloured boy from West Philadelphia, and Paul, a white psychologist who had been working in Samuel's school for six months:

Samuel: I been know your name.

Paul: What?

Samuel: I been know your name.

Paul: You better know my name?

Samuel: I *been* know your name.¹²

Paul failed to realize that in Philadelphia's black community *been* means 'for a long time'. Samuel meant 'I have known your name for a long time'. In some circumstances, this use of *been* can be completely misleading to a white speaker. A black Philadelphian who said *I been married* would in fact mean 'I have been married for a long time'. But a white speaker would normally interpret her sentence as meaning 'I have been married, but I am not married any longer'.

Is it possible to do anything about situations where differences caused by language change threaten to disrupt the mutual comprehension and cohesion of a population? Should language change be stopped?

If legislators decide that something is socially inconvenient, then their next task is to decide whether it is possible to take effective action against it. If we attempted to halt language change by law, would the result be as effective as forbidding people to camp in Trafalgar Square? Or would it be as useless as telling the pigeons there not to roost around the fountains? Judging by the experience of the French, who have an academy, the Académie Française, which adjudicates over matters of linguistic usage, and whose findings have been made law in some cases, the result is a waste of time. Even though there may be some limited effect on the written language, spoken French appears not to have responded in any noticeable way.

If legal sanctions are impractical, how can mutual comprehension be brought about or maintained? The answer is not to attempt to limit change, which is probably impossible, but to ensure that all members of the population have at least one common language,

and one common variety of that language, which they can mutually use. The standard language may be the only one spoken by certain people. Others will retain their own regional dialect or language alongside the standard one. This is the situation in the British Isles, where some Londoners, for example, speak only standard British English. In Wales, however, there are a number of people who are equally fluent in Welsh and English.

The imposition of a standard language cannot be brought about by force. Sometimes it occurs spontaneously, as has happened in England. At other times, conscious intervention is required. Such social planning requires tact and skill. In order for a policy to achieve acceptance, a population must *want* to speak a particular language or particular variety of it. A branch of sociolinguistics known as 'language planning' or, more recently, 'language engineering', is attempting to solve the practical and theoretical problems involved in such attempts.¹³

Once standardization has occurred, and a whole population has accepted one particular variety as standard, it becomes a strong unifying force and often a source of national pride and symbol of independence.

Great Permitters

Perhaps we need one final comment about 'Great Permitters' – a term coined by William Safire, who writes a column about language for the *New York Times*.¹⁴ These are intelligent, determined people, often writers, who 'care about clarity and precision, who detest fuzziness of expression that reveals sloppiness or laziness of thought'. They want to give any changes which occur 'a shove in the direction of freshness and precision', and are 'willing to struggle to preserve the clarity and color in the language'. In other words, they are prepared to accept new usages which they regard as advantageous, and are prepared to battle against those which seem sloppy or pointless.

Such an aim is admirable. An influential writer-journalist can clearly make interesting suggestions, and provide models for others to follow. Two points need to be made, however. First, however hard a 'linguistic activist' (as Safire calls him) is,

unlikely to reverse a strong trend, however much he would like to. Safire has, for example, given up his fight against *hopefully*, and also against *viable*, which, he regretfully admits, 'cannot be killed'. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we need to realize how personal and how idiosyncratic are judgments as to what is 'good' and what is 'bad', even when they are made by a careful and knowledgeable writer, as becomes clear from the often furious letters which follow Safire's pronouncements in the *New York Times*. Even a Safire fan must admit that he holds a number of opinions which are based on nothing more than a subjective feeling about the words in question. Why, for example, did he give up the struggle against *hopefully*, but continue to wage war on *clearly*? As one of his correspondents notes, 'Your grudge against clearly is unclear to me'. Similarly, Safire attacks ex-President Carter's 'needless substitution of encrypt for encode', but is sharply reminded by a reader that 'the words "encrypt" and "encode" have very distinct meanings for a cryptographer'. These, and other similar examples, show that attempts of caring persons to look after a language can mean no more than the preservation of personal preferences which may not agree with the views of others.

Linguistic activists of the Safire type are laudable in one sense, in that they are aware of language and pay attention to it. But, it has been suggested, they may overall be harmful, in that they divert attention away from more important linguistic issues. The manipulation of people's lives by skilful use of language is something which happens in numerous parts of the world. 'Nukespeak', language which is used to refer to nuclear devices, is one much publicized example.¹⁵ We do not nowadays hear very much about *nuclear bombs* or *nuclear weapons*. Politicians tend to refer to them as *nuclear deterrents* or *nuclear shields*. Recently, other deadly Star Wars weapons have been referred to as *assets*.¹⁶ Whether or not these devices are useful possessions is not the issue here. The important point is that their potential danger is simply not realized by many people because of the soothing language intentionally used to describe them. In the long run, it may be more important to detect manipulation of this type, than to worry about whether the word *media* should be treated as singular or plural.

Summary and conclusion

Continual language change is natural and inevitable, and is due to a combination of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors.

Once we have stripped away religious and philosophical preconceptions, there is no evidence that language is either progressing or decaying. Disruption and therapy seem to balance one another in a perpetual stalemate. These two opposing pulls are an essential characteristic of language.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that languages are moving in any particular direction from the point of view of language structure – several are moving in contrary directions.

Language change is in no sense wrong, but it may, in certain circumstances, be socially undesirable. Minor variations in pronunciation from region to region are unimportant, but change which disrupts the mutual intelligibility of a community can be socially and politically inconvenient. If this happens, it may be useful to encourage standardization – the adoption of a standard variety of one particular language which everybody will be able to use, alongside the existing regional dialects or languages. Such a situation must be brought about gradually, with tact and care, since a population will only adopt a language or dialect it *wants* to speak.

Finally, it is always possible that language is developing in some mysterious fashion that linguists have not yet identified. Only time and further research will tell. There is much more to be discovered.

But we may finish on a note of optimism. We no longer, like Caxton in the fifteenth century, attribute language change to the domination of man's affairs by the moon:

And certainly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken whan I was borne. For we englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, which is neuer stedfaste but euer wauerynge wexyngne one season and waneth and dycreaseth another season.¹⁷

Instead, step by step, we are coming to an understanding of the social and psychological factors underlying language change. As the years go by, we hope gradually to increase this knowledge. In the words of the nineteenth-century poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson:

Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point

Eternal tolerance

The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance.

So said John Philpot Curran, the champion of Irish liberties, in a speech in 1790. 'Eternal vigilance' is a phrase many people have adopted, as part of their approach to the English language. Only by being continually on the alert, they say, can the language be safeguarded from decline. Some go further, and form societies to protect the language from abuse. Letters to the BBC regularly ask for a clean-up campaign. One letter I received wanted the language 'disinfected'. Another, using a metaphor whose implications I still ponder, wanted it 'sterilized'!

It's a linguistic fact of life that everyone has a set of likes and dislikes about other people's usage – self included. And, as we've seen, many people are ready to take up the linguistic equivalent of a butterfly net, and go out hunting for prize specimens of what they see as language abuse. Several people collect intrusive *rs*, it seems, found mainly in the winding valleys of Radio 2, if my correspondence is to be believed. Others collect split infinitives – great herds of them on Radio 1, I've been told. One correspondent offered me selections of misplaced prepositions, which – if I understood his letter correctly – he thought of as a stamp collection, for he offered to swap some of his for some of mine.

Now there's no harm, and there can be a great deal of fun, in collecting bits of language that you like and dislike. Some people have even made a living out of it. But there's a trap. The exercise can quickly turn sour, if you approach it in a negative, bitchy frame of mind. There's a world of difference between:

I don't like the way John Smith talks

and:

I don't like the way John Smith talks, and I'm jolly well going to do something about it

– by starting up a campaign of public ridicule and condemnation. People

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get hurt, when this happens. There are cases on record of people losing their jobs because their employer didn't like the way they spoke. The hurt can go deeper. The *Daily Express* ran a story a few years ago, which began:

Blacksmith X died a victim of dialect snobbery. He killed himself at 70 because he was ashamed of his Yorkshire accent when he went to live in the South, it was said at the inquest...

The consequences of our linguistic intolerance are indeed hard to foresee.

But what if the clean-up campaign isn't focused on any one person? What if your attitude is:

I don't like the way *most* people talk,

or even:

I don't like the way anyone talks – including me!

in relation to some particular point of usage. The over-use of *you know*, for instance. Or putting stress on the wrong syllable. Correspondents, in criticizing others, often blame themselves too. In fact, the most common metaphor used in letters about usage is a religious one. People talk about 'committing sins' of usage themselves, and of 'confessing' their errors. One correspondent went so far as to ask me – of all people – for absolution! Now, if they are serious, is this not a different kind of trap – the trap of wasted emotional energy, that might have been more fruitfully spent on other aspects of living? For no matter how they try, they cannot stop the tide (as King Canute might say) of usage.

'But you can! You can!' it's sometimes said in reply. 'If enough people shout ...' 'If enough of us give a lead ...' 'Someone must be concerned about falling standards these days ...' Yes, of course. If standards *are* falling, then there's cause for concern, and people should shout. If speakers and writers are unclear, ambiguous, unintelligible, confused, something ought to be done. But are the usage issues discussed in this book cases of this kind? And are things worse today than ever before?

I'll take the second question first, because the answer is easy. No. Or, if you want it put more circumspectly: there's no evidence that linguistic standards are worse today than they were, say, a hundred years ago. Consider this quotation, for instance:

A correspondent asks me to notice a usage now becoming prevalent among persons who ought to know better, viz. that of 'you and I' after prepositions governing the accusative.

Or this one:

Look, to take one familiar example, at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless exaggeration, and contempt for congruity ...

These are no letters to the BBC – though they might have been. They are taken from Henry Alford's *The Queen's English*, published in the 1860s. And almost every usage issue discussed in my book can be found in his – or in even earlier grammars and manuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It's easy to think that usage problems are new, or recent – that standards are deteriorating *now*, and that someone or something must be to blame. And if you want a scapegoat, you'll find one, lurking in the corridors of the BBC, or the national press. But things haven't really changed much in the past hundred years.

What has changed, of course, is our *awareness* of usage variation. That's been the main effect of radio, television, the press, and the media explosion in general – to keep before our eyes and ears the existence of language variety. We see and hear more language than ever before. In a single listening or viewing day, we encounter a host of Englishes, belonging to people of all kinds of regional and social backgrounds. They clamour for our attention, and we have to react to them. They force us to question our own identities, our loyalties, our tastes. In the old days, people weren't exposed to so many pressures. What the ear didn't hear, the heart didn't grieve about. These days, we hear and see so much, we can't help but grieve, some of the time.

So to return to my other question. Are the usage issues in this book worth getting upset about? Yes and no. Some of the issues seem to lead nowhere. If, by some magic, everyone were to stop using split infinitives tomorrow, what actually would have been achieved? My argument is: Nothing – and something might even have been lost. Several issues in this book suggest this kind of conclusion. On the other hand, certain usage topics have brought to light real problems of a linguistic or social kind, where unthinking language can lead to misunderstanding, disaccord, open hostility. These matters are certainly worth getting upset about, for they affect the way we live – not just the way we write and teach our grammars.

My aim in writing this book has been to help you develop a sense of priorities, when faced with usage problems. Some problems are really

Something to read?

If you want to read more about English usage, there's no shortage of choice. I would begin with Randolph Quirk and Gabriele Stein's *English in Use* (Longman, 1990). Then there's Brian Foster's *The Changing English Language* (Penguin Books, 1970) or Charles Barber's *Linguistic Change in Present-Day English* (Oliver & Boyd, 1964). A convenient collection of readings about the language, from 1858 to the present day, is in *The English Language*, Vol. 2, edited by Whitney Bolton and myself (C.U.P., 1969). Bolton also edited Vol. 10 of the Sphere History of Literature in the English Language, which was devoted to the language alone: *The English Language* (Sphere Books, 1975). Many aspects of English, ancient and modern, are dealt with in the Blackwell *Language Library*, which now contains over fifty volumes, representing both traditional and linguistic attitudes to language. If you are unfamiliar with the usage manuals which set the linguistic tone in the early part of this century, then you should look at one or other of them: perhaps H. W. and F. G. Fowler, *The King's English* (O.U.P., 1906), or Sir Ernest Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words* (H.M.S.O., 1954), or Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* (Penguin Books, 1963). An interesting modern study, which uses a questionnaire technique to find out about current opinions, is W. H. Mittins and others, *Attitudes to English Usage* (O.U.P., 1970). A guide to regional varieties of standard English is Peter Trudgill and Jean Hannah, *International English* (Edward Arnold, 1982). A fascinating collection of articles on the subject is to be found in Leonard Michaels and Christopher Ricks, *The State of the Language* (University of California Press, 1980), which had a follow-up volume in 1990. Other popular introductions to the language include Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue: the English Language* (Penguin Books, 1991) and my own *The English Language* (Penguin Books, 1988).

Attitudes to language change

Grade booster

Debates about current language usage often feature in newspapers – keep an eye out for these as they often provide useful, up-to-date reference material.

Changes in the language that we use arouse strong emotions, with examples of change often seized upon as confirmation that standards in society are falling. Others argue that change is inevitable, and that we should focus on how language is changing rather than make judgements about how good or how bad these changes are.

Prescriptivist and descriptivist approaches

- **Prescriptivists** favour rules that identify ‘correct’ language usage. They disapprove of uses of language that break these rules.
- **Descriptivists** seek to describe, as accurately and objectively as possible, how language is actually used. They do not label particular uses of language ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’.

Prescriptivism

Hostility to language change is not surprising. Each generation tends to regard its tastes, habits and values as superior to those of succeeding generations. There is a long tradition of such hostility: 2 000 years ago in ancient Rome, writers were railing against the way their younger contemporaries were speaking Latin.

Prescriptivism in England became firmly established in the 18th century, when there were strenuous efforts to standardize the language. Books of grammar set out numerous rules and sought to define correct and incorrect usage. Their authors were partly attempting to model English on the revered ancient languages of Latin and Greek, but personal likes, dislikes and prejudices also influenced what they wrote.

The rules of the 18th-century grammarians found their way into school textbooks, and many are still taught today. In fact, many of the complaints about declining standards of grammar in present-day English (see below) are concerned with breaches of these same rules.

During the 19th century, language became linked with general standards of behaviour. Just as there were ‘proper’ ways to act, so there was a proper way to speak. This association of language and morality is still with us: language is seen as a reflection of character, and those who deviate from the old standards of ‘correctness’ are condemned as ‘uncouth’ and ‘slovenly’.

Lynne Truss’s bestselling *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003) was an attack on declining standards of **punctuation**. Its success prompted the publication of many other books, which similarly sought to preserve traditional English usage (such as *Lost For Words* by the broadcaster John Humphrys).

Examples of prescriptivism

Grammar

- **Double negatives**, e.g. ‘I don’t know nothing about that’. These are often condemned on the grounds that in mathematics two negatives make a positive, so that the speaker is actually saying the opposite

Checkpoint 1

Can you name any 18th-century authors who published books on English grammar?

Checkpoint 2

How many of these grammatical ‘rules’ can you recall being taught at school?

of what he or she intended. Double negatives were once perfectly acceptable in English (they can be found in Chaucer and Shakespeare), and sentences containing them are not likely to be misunderstood. Many other languages employ multiple negatives.

- **Ending a sentence with a preposition** According to traditional rules of grammar, this is to be avoided: instead of asking 'Who will you be coming with?' we should say 'With whom will you be coming?' The rule is widely ignored but if obeyed can result in clumsy, tortuous sentences (compare 'People worth talking to' with 'People with whom it is worthwhile to talk').
- **Split infinitives**, as in the example made famous by *Star Trek*: 'to boldly go'. Some prescriptivists would argue that this should be corrected to 'boldly to go' (or 'to go boldly'). Again there is no logic to this rule, and following it can lead to awkward, unnatural constructions.

Vocabulary

There is often hostility to **borrowings**, especially if they seem likely to replace existing English words. People who wish to conserve English and protect it from foreign influences are known as *purists*.

In recent years, American English has been an especially strong influence on our language (as it has on other world languages), and objections are often raised to our increasing use of **Americanisms**.

Phonology

The spread of **Estuary English** is often condemned, with broadcasters using an Estuary accent perceived as loutish and ignorant.

Language change – progress or decay?

In the 19th century, it was often suggested that English, with other European languages, was experiencing a slow and inevitable decline. An alternative theory is that languages improve over time, steadily becoming more accurate and efficient.

The view most favoured today is that English is neither progressing nor decaying – it is simply changing. Languages adapt themselves to the differing needs of each generation.

If language change is inevitable, those who oppose it are essentially fighting a losing battle. But they do have some influence on the language: it has been said that the *h* sound would have disappeared from English long ago if it were not considered socially undesirable to drop one's aitches.

Example

Winston Churchill once famously ridiculed this rule by remarking, 'This is the sort of English up with which I will not put!'

The jargon

Borrowings are words that enter English from other languages.

Take note

This objection overlooks the fact that English has absorbed many Americanisms that are now accepted as standard usage (e.g. 'lengthy', 'belittle', 'bite the dust', 'strike it rich').

Take note

Opposition to loanwords (another term for borrowings) is not confined to England. In France, the Académie Française is an institution which has tried to stem the flow of foreign words into the language, and which exercises some control over the vocabulary that is used in advertising, broadcasting and official documents. It appears though to have had little influence over the spoken language of French people, who happily refer to *un bestseller*, *le parking*, *le hotdog* and so on.

Exam practice

answer: page 175

Would you agree that the English language has changed for the worse?

Attitudes Towards Language Change

This is for everyone. If there's one subject that's likely to cause a row down at the annual linguists' convention then it's language change. More people have got more bees in more bonnets over this than anything else. Time to get stuck in...

Attitudes towards Language Change can be Prescriptivist or Descriptivist

There are **two** main approaches to language change:

Prescriptivism

- 1) Prescriptivism involves stating a **set** of **rules** that people should follow in order to use language '**properly**' (**prescribing** what the language **should be like**).
- 2) Prescriptivists believe that language should be **written** and **spoken** in a certain way — in English this means using **Standard English** and **RP** (see p.32-33). Other **varieties** of English are seen as **incorrect** and **inferior**.
- 3) Prescriptivists argue that it's **essential** to stick to the rules of the **standard** form, so that everyone can **understand** each other.
- 4) The prescriptivist view is that language **decays** as it **changes**, and the only way to stop **standards falling** further is to try and **stop linguistic change**.

Descriptivism

- 1) Descriptivism involves **describing** how language is actually **used**.
- 2) Descriptivists **don't** say that aspects of language are '**correct**' or '**incorrect**'. They believe that different **varieties** of English should all be **valued equally**.
- 3) The idea is that language **change** is **inevitable**, so it's a **waste of time** to try and **stop** it. Instead, descriptivists record **how** and **why** change occurs, rather than assuming all change is bad.
- 4) Some descriptivists see **language change** as **progress** — they believe that English is becoming more **accurate** and **efficient**. E.g. they'd say that Old English inflections were lost because they no longer served a purpose.
- 5) Other descriptivists, like **David Crystal**, argue that language change is **neither** progress nor decay, as all languages **change** in **different** ways (e.g. some languages gain inflections).

Prescriptivist Attitudes have been around for a Long Time

- 1) In the second half of the eighteenth century there was a sudden flourishing of **grammar books** that outlined what the **rules** of grammar should be. The most influential was Robert Lowth's ***A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762)**. He argued that some constructions were grammatically **wrong**, e.g. split infinitives:

THE SPLIT INFINITIVE

- The infinitive (*to + verb*) should not be split by an **adverb**. The most famous example is *to boldly go*, from *STAR TREK™*.
- Lowth argued that the construction *to + verb* is a **complete grammatical unit** and that's how it should remain.
- However, the **meaning** isn't affected whether you say *to boldly go* or *to go boldly*, so **descriptivists** would argue that it's a **pointless rule**.



He was going to split an awful lot more than an infinitive if he didn't get up quick-smart.

- 2) Other prescriptivist texts have been more flexible about certain grammar rules, e.g. Henry Fowler's ***A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926)**. Fowler argued against some of Lowth's rules, because he thought that constructions should be used if they **sounded comfortable**, e.g. ending a sentence with a preposition:

Fowler would argue that:	<i>That depends on what they are hit <u>with</u></i>
Sounds much better than:	<i>That depends on <u>with</u> what they are hit</i>

- 3) However, many people still argue that certain rules **shouldn't** be **broken**, even though they **don't** affect the **meaning** of a sentence. For example, people often complain about constructions like *different to* and *different than*. They claim it should be *different from* because that's what you'd say in **Latin**, even though it's not the way that most English speakers say it.

Attitudes Towards Language Change

Descriptivism has become much more Popular in Recent Times

- 1) *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) was first published in the early 20th century.
- 2) The editors of the dictionary were **descriptivists** — they stated in the **preface** that their **aim** was to **record** the language as it was, **not** to **prescribe** rules. Lots of other modern dictionaries have the same aim.
- 3) However, most people look words up in the dictionary to **make sure** they get a **meaning** or **spelling** 'right'. This shows that most people think of dictionaries as **prescriptive rule books**, not just records of the language.

Many linguists are completely **against** prescriptivism. In the 1980s **Milroy and Milroy** argued that language change is **inevitable** and shouldn't be fought against. They also argued **against** the **high status** of **Standard English**. They claimed that fears about **falling standards** meant that people are often **discriminated** against, e.g. by employers, if they **don't** follow the **arbitrary** rules that were set out by grammarians in the **18th century**.

- 4) However, **Cameron (1995)** argued that prescriptivism **shouldn't** be **discounted** as just people being **fussy** or **pedantic** about something that doesn't really matter.
- 5) She's a **descriptivist**, but argues that **prescriptivism** shows that people realise that **language** is an important **social tool** and **care** about how it's used.
- 6) She also argues that **fear** about **language change** often **symbolises** fear about **social problems** — people worry that **declining** standards of **language** mirror **declining** standards in **behaviour** and **education**.
- 7) This means that people **focus** on **language change** because they want to **make sense** of **bigger problems** in **society**. She argues that this should be used to **start** a **debate** about what **attitudes** towards language change **symbolise**, rather than just being discounted as an **illogical belief**.

There are Different ways to Study Language Change

You can use different **methodologies** to **study** language change. You could look at:

Lexis

New words are constantly being **added** to the language. You could focus on **borrowings** from **other languages** or the **impact** of **technology**. To do this you could look at the **etymology** (origin) of new words in the **OED**.

Grammar

For example, you could look at how **syntax** has become a lot **less complex** since the **19th century**. You could do this by **comparing** the syntax in a page of a **Dickens novel** with the syntax in a page of a **contemporary** one.

Phonology

For example, you could analyse how **accents** have **changed** in **broadcasting** by looking at how **newsreaders** spoke in the **1950s** compared to **today**. You could **transcribe** recordings from the different periods and **analyse** how their **pronunciation** has changed, using the **phonetic alphabet**.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What is the difference between the prescriptive and descriptive approaches to language change?
- Q2 What was the purpose of 18th Century grammar books and dictionaries?
- Q3 Outline one method you could use to study language change.

Essay Question

- Q1 "Something must be done to halt the rapid decline in standards of English."

How far do you agree with this statement?

Refer to prescriptivist and descriptivist views in your answer.

Some of these prescriptivists have got a real attitude problem...

I mean, really, fancy telling people that the way they use language is wrong. Except, of course, everyone does it all the time. Maybe we're all prescriptivists at heart... Anyway, enough thinking, just try and force this into your brain — prescriptivism lays down rules about how the language should be, and descriptivism describes how it actually is. The clue's in the name really.

Prescriptivism versus descriptivism

The foregoing discussion raises the distinction between prescriptive grammars and **descriptive grammars**. Prescriptive grammarians specify what is right and what is wrong – what people should say and what they shouldn't say (*I say, Old Chap, next time you talk about the team, please remember – singular verb!*). A descriptive grammarian, on the

other hand, tries to avoid making pronouncements about correctness and focuses on describing the way people actually use language. In the case of *the team were*, the descriptive grammarian, rather than judging the utterance as incorrect, would seek an explanation such as the one I provided above, and would attempt to incorporate this explanation into his or her grammar. Luckily, contemporary grammars are overwhelmingly descriptive, and will point out the fact that plural verbs can exist quite happily alongside a singular noun phrase.

In fact, grammar is a battleground on which all kinds of conflicts are played out. Different speech communities will have their own grammars, and prescriptive grammarians have, over the years, played a part in the class warfare that is determined to impose the linguistic will of the ruling classes on the masses. I grew up in a working class environment where people said *youse* not *you* when referring to more than one person. Whenever I or my siblings used this form, our mother would castigate us, and make us repeat the correct form. She knew what was right and what was wrong, and she was going to make sure that we did too. It made no difference to her when, years later, I pointed out that the working-class pronoun *youse* is actually more sophisticated grammatically than *you* because in addition to indicating second person, it also marks the utterance for plurality. If someone says to me *Could you come over for a drink?*, I have no idea whether or not the invitation includes my mates. If they say *Could youse come over for a drink?*, it is clear that my mates are included.

In his *Encyclopedia of Language*, Crystal (1997a: 3) identifies three sources of prescriptivism as being responsible for the tension between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to grammar. The first of these is the fact that early grammars of English and other languages were based on normative rules from classical Latin and Greek. The second is the tension between spoken and written language, and the third is what he calls 'logical' analysis.

Because language is a tool for communication, and because, in the vast majority of instances, individuals use language to achieve communicative ends rather than to show how clever they are, they will, when it suits them, bend the language to their own ends. Ultimately, it is futile to try to preserve the 'purity' of language because there was nothing pure about it in the first place. Many people have pet peeves when it comes to correctness. Personally, I am quite comfortable with the use of *who* rather than *whom* in questions such as *To ___ did you give it?* (although not my grammar checker, which got so offended by the use of *who* that I had to turn it off). On the other hand, I get irrationally

Example of a prescriptive rule

Descriptive comment

Latin and Greek

The unchanging form of these languages, the high prestige they held in European education, and the undisputed brilliance of classical literature led to their adoption as models of linguistic excellence by grammarians of other languages.

You should say or write *It is I* and not *It is me*, because the verb *be* is followed by the nominative case in Latin not the accusative case.

The Latin rule is not universal. In Arabic, for example, *be* is followed by the accusative. In English, *me* is the educated informal norm; *I* is felt to be very formal. In French, only *moi* is possible (*c'est moi*, etc.)

The written language

Writing is more careful, prestigious and permanent than speech, especially in the context of literature. People are therefore often told to speak as they would write.

You should say and write *whom* and not *who* in such sentences as did you speak to?

Whom is common in writing, and in formal styles of speech, but *who* is more acceptable in informal speech. The rules which govern acceptable speech and writing are often very different.

Logic

Many people feel that language should be judged insofar as it follows the principles of logic. Mathematics, from this viewpoint, is the ideal use of language.

You shouldn't say *I haven't done nothing* because two negatives make a positive.

Here, two negatives do not make a positive, but a more emphatic negative – a construction which is found in many languages (e.g. French, Russian). The example is not acceptable in standard English, but this is the result of societal factors, not the dictates of logic.

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irritated when I hear someone say *different to*, not *different from*. However, I realize that on this point I am fighting a losing battle, and that I am hardly going to reverse the tide of change by pointing out the fact that *different to* is as logically offensive as *similar from*.

Attitudes towards language change

In this topic you will:

- learn about some of the major debates about change in the English language
- engage with a variety of attitudes towards the English language.

■ Debates surrounding language change

When you discuss language change features in the exam, it is important to link them to the attitudes towards language change that form part of the debate. This is particularly useful in Section B of the exam where you will need to evaluate these attitudes in the texts you are presented with, and engage with the debate yourself.

💡 Prescriptivism and descriptivism

The concepts of prescriptivism and descriptivism have been briefly explained earlier in this unit, and they represent useful extremes of attitudes towards change. We have seen how the Early Modern English period saw the rise of individuals who decided to impose rules upon the English language, to try to shape and standardise its usage, particularly in terms of spelling and grammatical construction. Their 'prescriptivist' model came largely from the example of classical languages.

Prescriptivism, however, is a wider concept than this, and you should use it to refer to any form of attitude towards language that seeks to:

- restrict variation
- control future changes
- impose standardised rules
- reject existing non-standard forms
- view non-standard varieties as inferior.

It would be a mistake to see prescriptivism as entirely negative. It has practical benefits for the language: for example, it provides a central Standard English form that helps English users from across the world to learn the language and communicate reliably. Nonetheless, prescriptivist attitudes have sometimes been criticised for placing too much emphasis on technical aspects of the language, and even discriminating against users of non-standard forms.

Descriptivism approaches language differently, and you should be able to identify its arguments in examples of use that you encounter. Key features of a descriptivist attitude include aiming to:

- describe forms of variation
- present varieties without preference
- record change as it happens
- avoid interference with change and variation
- understand use in context.

Again, it is important that you use these features to debate language use, and descriptivist models are at the heart of much of the research by linguists mentioned in the language variation section of this unit. Remember, though, that some descriptivist attitudes have received valid criticism: for example, the standard form of the language can be negatively affected by the use of non-standard varieties in written publications, school or the workplace.

Attitudes towards language change

Classroom activity 7

Non-standard usage	Prescriptivist attitude	Descriptivist attitude
Using 'txt' spellings such as 'gr8' (great), or 'c u ltr' (see you later).	'txt' style spellings cause a lot of problems. They make it harder for children in particular to learn the correct, standard English spellings of words. This is especially the case with words that have an irregular spelling pattern. People will start to use these spellings in particularly inappropriate contexts like exams, job applications, or in business communication.	'txt' style spellings are a creative and innovative part of modern English. They should not be used in every context (for example, in formal written texts) but are very convenient in other situations, making language easier, quicker and simpler. They are also an example of the language making use of new technological inventions to shape it, like the mixed-mode forms of text messaging and e-mails.
Using 'Americanisms' such as spellings like 'color' (colour), or words like 'pants' (trousers).	Americanisms entering British English usage contradict the rules of standard English. These American words and spellings can be quickly picked up by British English users who may forget or never learn the standard British English equivalent, and replace it with American forms. The overall effect is to corrupt standard English over time and ruin its heritage and history.	Americanisms represent an inevitable change to English. Fashions, trends and culture are commonly shared and swapped between America and Britain, and these are often accompanied by related terms and language. The difference between spelling 'colour' or 'color' (and other Americanisms) is very minor and only there for unintended historical reasons. As new technology and increased travel bring the American and British forms of English into closer contact, it should be expected that such minor differences are reconciled by the language.
Blending languages to form new varieties like London Jamaican, or MEYD (explored on pages 57–8).	Blending other languages with English corrupts the language and produces inferior varieties that cannot be considered languages in their own right. This also has a negative effect on the standard form of the language as borrowed words, pronunciations, or grammatical forms often find the way into mainstream usage. New speakers of such a blended variety are disadvantaged as they are restricted to using an informal, low-status form of language.	Language contact is an essential and healthy part of human communication and exchange, crossing national, religious or ethnic boundaries. The English language itself is historically formed by a series of prolonged passages of contact with other languages and the heavy blending that took place during those times. New varieties spring up to meet the needs of new communities and populations and require just as much linguistic skill as English does. In addition, speakers with this linguistic background are often able to use several languages and varieties fluently, including Standard English.

Language change theory

Classroom activity 8

Examples might include:

- immigrants intermingling with native speakers
- workplaces, especially of national and international companies
- regional borders
- the imposition of foreign power, for example in a military occupation
- tourism and travel
- international culture and multinational events
- the translation of written texts from other source languages.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Reflecting linguistic change

David Crystal

For language teachers, linguistic change is both a necessity and a nuisance. It is a necessity, because only by paying close attention to linguistic change can we guarantee our students an encounter with language which is realistic, relevant, and up-to-date. But it is a nuisance, because the arrival of new forms can mean the departure of old ones, and this raises the twin spectres of rethinking well-established lesson content and of fostering a positive attitude towards relearning in the student. The only consolation – if consolation it is – is that linguistic change is unavoidable, an intrinsic feature of language, deep-rooted in its social milieu. Try to stop linguistic change, as purist commentators recommend Canutely, and you have to stop social change. It is easier to stop the tide coming in.

If change were over and done with, in a moment, the situation would not be so bad. This does occasionally happen. On October 3 1957, no-one – apart from a few scientists – had heard of the word sputnik. On October 4 1957 it was everywhere. Vocabulary change is, sometimes, like that – sudden and definitive. Unfortunately, most forms of linguistic change take time to become established – often months, and very often years. There is thus a period of uncertainty and indecision, from the time when we first encounter a new form – a new pronunciation, a new grammatical construction, a new word or meaning – to the time when we can make confident normative judgments about how it is used. And during this time it is not possible to give a straight answer to a straight question. Student: 'How do you say X?' Teacher: 'It depends.' Or even: 'Don't know'.

Predicting Change

There are in fact hundreds of points of usage in a language where the only possible – let alone honest – answer is to say 'don't know'. The point is that nobody knows. What level on the beach will the incoming tide reach tomorrow? Will the wavelets hit that pebble? Who can say? It depends on the wind, on whether something unusual has happened deep out in the ocean, on ripples set up by a group of jetski enthusiasts – or maybe someone will simply move the pebble. All of these influences have their parallels in language. Oceans do not stop the pressures of linguistic change, as the impact of American English on the languages of Europe has repeatedly shown.

Language change is as unpredictable as the tides. We all recognize our linguistic past, but it is never possible to predict our linguistic future. Try it. Which phrases will become a cliché next year. What will be the top Christian names in the year 2000? Which words will be the next ones to be affected by a stress shift (of the controversy – controversy type)? Which prefix or suffix is going to be the next to generate new vogue words (as happened to

mega- and -friendly in the 1980s)? We can always tell when it's happened. With linguistic change, it's only possible to be wise after the event.

Change in Vocabulary

The reason why linguistic change is so unpredictable is that it is in the hands of so many people. In their minds, rather. And it is such an unconscious process. In the case of English, we are talking about some 400 million mother-tongue minds, plus an equivalent number of second-language minds. No single person can make a planned, confident impact on such masses. Individuals have sometimes tried with vocabulary – deliberately inventing a new word, and trying to get it established in the language. Just occasionally, it works: blurb is a good example, invented by US humorist Gelett Burgess earlier this century. Most of the time it doesn't. No one knows why, in the 15th century, the newly created words meditation and prolixity eventually came into the language, but abusion and tenebrous did not.

The books of new words, published from time to time, show the hazardous future of neologisms very well. Take the one edited by John Ayto in 1989, the Longman Register of New Words. It contained about 1200 new words or meanings which had been used in various spoken or written sources between 1986 and 1988 – words like chatline, cashless, and chocoholic. But how many of these will become a permanent part of English? It is too soon to say, though already several seem very dated: do people still say cyberphobic? do they still chicken-dance? did condom fatigue (analogous to compassion fatigue) or cluster suicide ever catch on?

In an article written for the International Journal of Lexicography in 1993, 'Desuetude among new English words', John Algeo studied 3,565 words which had been recorded as newly entering the language between 1944 and 1976. He found that as many as 58% of them were not recorded in dictionaries a generation later, and must thus be presumed to have fallen out of use. As he says: 'Successful coinages are the exception; unsuccessful ones the rule, because the human impulse to creative playfulness produces more words than a society can sustain'.

Change in Grammar

If it is difficult being definite about change in vocabulary, it is next to impossible to be definite about the much rarer changes which take place in grammar. These changes are in any case extremely slowly moving, and restricted to very small points of grammatical construction. There hasn't been a major change in English grammar for centuries. It is of course always possible to tell which grammatical features are in the process of change,

continued



because these are the ones which give rise to controversies over usage, and people will write to The Daily Telegraph or Radio Times about them. Contentious contemporary examples include the use of the past tense vs the present perfect (I've just eaten vs I just ate), the shifting uses of auxiliary verbs (such as may vs might or usedn't to vs. didn't use to), and the variations in noun number in such words as formula, data, and criteria. Not all points of grammatical usage reflect linguistic change, though. People have been complaining about the split infinitive for about 200 years, but the use of that construction is found well before the first prescriptive grammars were written, and will continue well after the last ones go out of print.

A Dynamic View of Language

There is only one certainty, and this is that language will always be changing. If so, then it would seem sensible to replace any static conception we may have of language by a dynamic one. A static view ignores the existence of change, tries to hide it from the student, and presents students with a frozen or fossilized view of language. Once a rule is prescribed, no alternatives to it are tolerated. A dynamic view of language is one which recognizes the existence of change, informs the student about it, and focuses on those areas where change is ongoing.

And where is all this change? It is to be found in variation – in the alternative usages to be encountered in all domains of linguistic life. International and intranational regional and social accents and dialects, occupational varieties, features which express contrasts of age, gender, and formality, features which distinguish speech from writing – these are the potential diagnostic points for future linguistic change. The more we can increase students' awareness of contemporary language variation, therefore, the more we can give them a foundation for understanding and accepting linguistic change. The title of a contemporary academic journal suggests the interdependence of these notions: Language Variation and Change.

What Language Teachers Can Do

Many teachers, at least some of the time, try to hold a mirror up to (linguistic) nature – to let students see something of the organized chaos which is out there. This is as it should be. Trying to protect students from it, by pretending it isn't there, does no-one any service. We need to find ways of reflecting it, but at the same time filtering it, so that students are not dazzled by the spectrum of alternatives which are part of sociolinguistic reality. In many cases in grammar and pronunciation, the choice is fairly straightforward, between just two alternatives, such as British vs American or formal vs informal. I do not accept the conventional wisdom that students will be 'confused' by being told about both. Contrariwise, I do believe that to distort reality, by pretending that the variation does not exist, is to introduce a level of artifice which brings difficulties sooner or later.

And it may be sooner. Adopting a dynamic perspective is not just desirable; it is urgent. The reason is that the pace of linguistic change, at least for spoken English, is increasing. As English comes to be adopted by more and more people around the world, an unprecedented range of new varieties has emerged (chiefly since the 1960s) to reflect new national identities. The differences between British and American English pronunciation, for example, are minor compared with those which distinguish these dialects from the new intra-national norms of, say, Indian and West African English. When the English speakers of these countries numbered only a few tens of thousands, there was no threat to the traditional British or American models. But now that there are almost as many people speaking English in India as there are in Britain, an unfamiliar factor has entered the equation. What effect this will have on the balance of (linguistic) power, it is too soon to say – but the way that Caribbean rapping spread around the globe in the 1970s and the way that Australian English has travelled through media programmes in the 1980s shows that even relatively small dialect populations can have an influence out of proportion of their size.

None of this has yet had any real impact on standard written English, as encountered in print. There is very little difference, for example, in the language of newspapers printed in Britain, the USA, Australia, or India. But as far as speech is concerned, and informal speech in particular, the future is one of increasing variety, and thus change. The sooner we prepare our students to cope with this diverse new world, the better.

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On the track of language change

Has this happened to you? The latest edition of a major dictionary appears in your bookshop, alongside so-and-so's latest novel, full of sparkling conversation. You buy both, and hope that the first will solve any problems you might encounter in understanding the second. But within pages, your hopes are dashed, as you find first one word, then another, which the dictionary doesn't contain. It's not uncommon. Nor is it surprising. Even the best dictionaries can't keep pace with language change. And the same point applies to grammars and manuals of pronunciation.

The effects of language change can be heard or seen everywhere — on radio and television, in the press, in modern plays, at British Council cocktail parties... Have you encountered *yuppies*, for instance — the acronym for 'young urban professional'? This curious word seems to have been first used by marketing personnel in the USA to refer to a new generation of young people moving upwards in society (economically speaking) and setting new trends in what they buy. The word caught on, and the pattern has begun to spread. In recent months I've heard *guppy*, for a 'gay urban professional', and in the Sunday Times recently I saw a reference to *bluppy* ('black urban professional'). This is obviously going to be a very fruitful area for new words. The Sunday Times article, in fact, was headed 'Yuppieland'!

Native-speaker problems

How is it possible to keep up-to-date with language change, when it moves so fast? Native-speakers themselves have difficulties of course. I recall being particularly confused the first time I heard, a few years ago, a reference to '*laid-back* discussions' — the context was a reference to the style of interaction used by George Schultz, the American politician. I made a guess at the intended meaning, and took it to

mean 'calm', 'unflappable'. Was I right?

According to the latest dictionaries, yes. *The Longman Dictionary of the English Language*, for example, defines it as 'relaxed', 'casual'. But the story isn't over yet. The other day I heard someone talking about the design of a new car as being 'very laid-back'. I'm still trying to work out exactly what he meant.

Lexical hates

One interesting thing about new words — and about new pronunciations and grammatical usages too — is that when native speakers come across them for the first time, they don't accept them silently. They talk about them, and in no uncertain terms! And, fortunately for the linguistic historian or the foreign learner, many react to them in public. They write to the press, or to the BBC, and complain at length about what they see as the latest nail in the coffin of the language. Whatever the new word, pronunciation, or grammatical usage, you can be sure that someone, somewhere, will hate it, and sound off about it.

This is particularly clear in the field of vocabulary. As you might expect, both *yuppie* and *laid-back* have been attacked in their time. But some of the other lexical hates I've read about recently are rather more surprising. Who would have thought that the little word *p* (as in *10p*, i.e. 'ten pence') would anger anyone? But many people objected to it when it was first introduced — and they still do. One lady recently called it a 'disgusting' word (did it remind her of 'pee', informal for 'urinate', I wonder?). Another writer objected to it because it was an abbreviation, saying that the French don't talk about '10 f', or the Americans about '10 c', so why should the British be the exception?

Then there was the man who complained about 'toughitis' — the disease that he felt was affecting the word *tough*. This is

now being used, he said, as 'a lazy alternative for such adjectives as *daunting, rigorous, robust, firm, hardy, difficult*' — and he listed several more. He cited such phrases as *tough policy, tough government statement, tough bargaining*, and *tough question*. Another regrettable Americanism, he concluded.

A third critic objected to the use of the word *home* instead of *house* on estate-agents' signs — as in *10 new homes being built on this site!* 'One cannot "buy a home", one "buys a house" and "makes a home" in it!', he complained.

Monitoring the media

I don't know whether complaints of this kind have any appreciable long-term effect on English, but I'm convinced that it's important for the foreign learner to get to know about them, by keeping an eye on the letter-columns of newspapers and magazines, or by listening in to audience-reaction programmes on the radio. The complaints draw attention to those parts of the language which are in the process of changing — information which it's difficult to get from grammars and dictionaries.

This is something which can be observed in many languages, of course, but one often forgets that it applies to the foreign language one happens to be learning. It's easy to get the impression, from English language textbooks, that the standard language is fixed, immutable, agreed, and that one shouldn't have any feelings about it. As my letter-writers show, it isn't, and they do.

David Crystal recently moved from the University of Reading where he was professor of Linguistic Science, to devote himself to full-time writing and broadcasting. His many publications include Who Cares About English Usage? He also broadcasts frequently with the BBC on language.

A language must change, to keep pace with society

19

A recent article by Donald Hughes about the use and abuse of our language aroused considerable interest. Here a linguist, DAVID CRYSTAL, of the Department of English at University College, London, discusses the question from a different viewpoint, and offers some answers.

methods of asking the question instead of one, a good case could be made out for saying the language has been enriched, based on arguments of rhythm, nuance, and so on.

There couldn't possibly be a case for making one construction more "harsh-sounding" than the other. Wherein does the harshness lie? In the "d"?

In the same way, the N.E.D. shows "suspect" used as a synonym for "think" since 1549, and the list of quotations is long: Sir Thomas Browne, Macaulay, Carlyle and Scott are all there.

As for the "distressing transatlantic habit" of turning a noun into a verb, although a perfectly good one exists already, this process has been going on in English since the earliest Anglo-Saxon, as any book on the development of the language will testify.

Why is the substitute "I would have thought" for "think" labelled genteel and cowardly? I would have thought "polite" or "careful" much better. (And if I substituted "think" in that last sentence, I would be called pompous.)

Why are people on television (or in front of any microphone, come to that) supposed to talk more naturally? I would have thought a self-conscious situation inspires in untrained people a self-conscious language.

I certainly would not expect colloquial diction, especially in discussions where precision (not affectation, note) is the aim.

It is also difficult to reconcile the generalisation that television lets "loose on the young a formidable organ of opposition to the best efforts of teachers of English" with such programmes as A.T.V.'s "Headway," and all the documentaries which, being in normal, "ordinary" English, are never noticed.

There is slang in the serials, sure, but remember, people were criticising "vulgar speche" before television was ever a twinkle in Baird's eye.

A lot of this criticism would have been unnecessary if the fact of language change had been borne in mind.

Language does change, and it is just as impossible to "preserve the tongue that Shakespeare spoke" as it is to stop cultural change.

If language stood still, culture would stagnate. All new ideas would be literally "inexpressible," and we would soon use up our resources. Dull indeed.

But what is there anyway about Elizabethan English that makes it more worth preserving than, say, English of 1963? Just because Shakespeare wrote in it?

If our age has not produced a Shakespeare, it is by no means the fault of the language (or the academic): could I suggest (with tongue in cheek, I assure you) that something's wrong with our teaching method?

all right for the specialist, though it may be condemned as "jargon" by the layman.

One regional dialect or accent is no better than another — one might be more common or useful (so-called "B.B.C. English," for instance), but this is quite a different thing.

And there is therefore no justification whatsoever in condemning the usage of others because it does not fit in with some preconceived notion of what English should be like, or how it should sound.

It is egocentric in the extreme to condemn types of language as "irresponsible," "abominable," mere prejudice to talk about linguistic monstrosities and and "cowardly" usage.

There's nothing wrong with "utilise" or "commence." They can be most effective at times for rhythmical reasons, or to avoid monotony. (And what's the "obvious, natural" word for "anticipate"?)

Condemn excessive usage, verbiage, by all means; but Mr Hughes gives us no instances of the kind of excesses which deserve to be shouted at (the businessness of "soliciting your kind indulgence in the interim" and the like).

He castigates "in fact" (which isn't as common as all that) but omits "indeed" and a host of others.

Such words are not meaningless: they may be signallers of emphasis, and are an essential part of the rhetoric of debate. Without them, discussions or speeches would sound very thin indeed.

So the first thing Mr Hughes mistakes is the purpose of the academic advocates of English Usage: they do not say "everything goes," still less "everything is good;" merely "everything has a valid use in its own context."

They have studied the

quirks and tendencies of the language, often in minute detail (as in the twelve year projected Survey of English Usage at London University, and others at Edinburgh and Leeds); and they have noted that people want to use a kind of language which suits the context they live or work in.

One of the dialects of English, they see, due to historical accident, has received more than the normal amount of attention, and has greater prestige and influence than other dialects; this "standard" language has become most people's objective as a result.

They need to be familiar with it if they want to get on. Which is why it is taught so widely. Not because it is better for communication; but because it is useful. Society has decreed it.

No-one has yet discovered a language which is not in a state of flux. And the changes in form and meaning which occur, and the innovations and obsolescences, are just not valid objects of criticism.

Most of the "new" usages objected to, are not as recent as Mr Hughes likes to think. The growth of concatenated prepositions after verbs, for instance, was parodied by Morris Bishop some time ago — "Come up from out of in under there" — but has been typical of English for centuries. "To face out with, out of, down with," for example, are all recorded in the Middle Ages.

Recourse to the N.E.D. would also have shown that though "image of" may be more popular these days (and what's wrong with popularity?), its meaning is certainly not new. As "symbol, emblem, representation" it has been recorded since 1568, and as "embodiment" or "natural representative, type, of an attitude or orientation" since 1374 — and used like this by Shakespeare, Chaucer and Shelley.

As for the use of "do you have" for "have you," why is this so abominable? The verb is merely conforming to a process of periphrasis in verbal expressions, using "do" or "did" which has been going on since late Anglo-Saxon times, and which has affected all verbs except "be" and a few anomalous examples ("might," "should.")

Some regional dialects have had "do you have" for ages. It certainly doesn't offend my sensibility to hear it. And as I now have two

Every now and then, the "Radio Times" columns erupt into the national press with tirades and complaints about the use and abuse of English. But it's unfortunate that when the subject is promoted onto the features-page (as in Donald Hughes' recent article) the naive tone and parochial conservatism of the letter-columns come as well.

And what happens when sound linguistic principle and practice are ignored by well-intentioned critics? Intolerance, misguided attacks, and usually a large proportion of factual error.

The scapegoat once again turns out to be the academic, typecast as an evil ogre living in a University castle and spending all his time importing verbal abominations to syphon into children's brains.

But, in the name of Roget, why! They are as little to blame for the present development of the English language as they are for the present influx of television westerns.

A language is what all its users make it; it is a social, not just an academic phenomenon.

But why talk about blame at all? Why, in fact, should one form of the language be treated as any better or any worse than another, in this absolute way? This sort of misdirected dogmatism has been going for some time, of course, ever since Latin was looked upon as the ideal language for all.

The plain fact is, there is no external standard of correctness for self-expression, no innate ideal in English which all must attain if they hope to avoid linguistic damnation.

English, above all else, is alive, changing, versatile, flexible.

It is composed of numerous overlapping registers and styles of speech and writing, each of which has a specific end, a purpose which is delimited by the deliberate use of a set of defining verbal forms. One kind of language suits one kind of context, and usually very few others.

No-one expects, let alone hopes for, legal jargon in Church, or Old Testament prose in a pub.

The only valid test of a piece of language, then, is whether it succeeds in the job the user intended for it. Specialised language is

Photography for the Amateur by **Noel S. Paul**

be too e true



tion employed, but in general it can be said that a fully automatic camera is baffled by shots taken against the light because it tends to read the light rather than the shadow areas, which are what the

Swimming with the tide in a sea of language change

David Crystal

Most people are uncomfortable about the existence of linguistic change - the constant ebb and flow of words, sounds, and structures at the tidal margins of a language. It is not difficult to see why. The steady emergence of new forms and disappearance of old ones presents an ongoing challenge to our linguistic identity. Our intuitions about language are grounded in a lifetime of previous usage, laid down in childhood, and slowly nurtured through individual histories of linguistic contact and preference into a mature norm of comfortable familiarity which includes our native dialect and personal style. Most people become set in their ways, linguistically speaking, and find further change - whether in themselves, their children (or grandchildren), or in society at large - to some extent an intrusion. It is therefore not surprising that, whatever their political persuasion, most people are by nature linguistically conservative.

Everyone is aware of the fact of language change, and I have never met anyone who is entirely happy about it. Even linguists, dispassionate observers of all things linguistic, as they are supposed to be, can be heard off-duty complaining about various usages they do not like. The difference, I would hope, is that linguists are capable of recognizing these feelings for what they are, and are not in the business of trying to impose their personal views on society at large, in the manner of a crusade. They would also, I hope, recognize that linguistic change is unavoidable, an intrinsic feature of language, deep-rooted in its social milieu. The tidal metaphor above is a good one. Try to stop linguistic change, as purist commentators recommend. Canutely, and you have to stop social change. It would be easier to stop the tide coming in.

Right and wrong metaphors

People become prophets of doom when they use the wrong metaphors in thinking about language change. If you conceive of change as unilinear, a single dimension, then it is a short step to thinking of it as a process of progress or decay. The history of linguistic thought displays both viewpoints. Some have seen language change as part of a perfectionist ethic, as an evolution towards a superior state of being - a golden age of the future. More common is to see it as evidence of a gradual slide towards dissolution - a sad departure from a golden age of the past. Both views are misconceived. There is no such thing as a single path of language change. As you read this article, language is changing around you in thousands of tiny different ways. Some sounds are slowly shifting; some words are changing their senses; some grammatical constructions are being used with greater or less frequency; new styles and varieties are constantly being formed and shaped. And everything is happening at different speeds and moving in different directions. The language is in a constant state of multidimensional flux. There is no predictable direction for the changes that are taking place. They are just that:

changes. Not changes for the better; nor changes for the worse; just changes, sometimes going one way, sometimes another.

Over the course of decades, or centuries, it is possible to see this see-sawing in action. There are even cases of changes reversing themselves. At one point in time, X becomes Y, and at another Y becomes X again. A classic example is the contemporary trend to use *disinterested* in the sense of 'uninterested'. In a recent *Daily Post* (7 November 1995), I read the headline 'North disinterested in Cardiff scheme' (a reference to a poll which showed that people in North Wales were not interested in a new development in the south of the principality). The copy-editor meant 'indifferent', but he used the word which traditionally means 'impartial'. (In 20th-century standard usage, a judge should be *disinterested* in a case, but not *uninterested* in it.) People argue, on this basis, that the language is losing a semantic distinction (not true, incidentally, as there are many other words available in the language to express the same difference in meaning - I have just used two of them). What is important to note is that the use of *disinterested* in the sense of 'uninterested' is in fact

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earlier than its sense of 'impartial'; and conversely, the early use of *uninterested* was in the sense of 'impartial'. Both are recorded with these senses in the early 17th century. The two words, it seems, have for some time been circling warily around a meaning, uncertain how best to handle it. The change went first one way, then the other. And who knows what will happen to it next.

The metaphor of the tide continues to be apt. No two high tides are the same. It does not make sense to say that yesterday's tide is in some sense better or worse than tomorrow's. The tides are different - reaching one part of the beach today, a different part tomorrow. And yet, somehow, the overall impression from one month to the next is that there has been no real change. Language is like that - but over decades and centuries. Lose a sound or word here; gain one there. There will be temporary confusion in one part of the language while there is transition, and then the uncertainty will resolve, while some other part of the language begins to shift. Language change is as unpredictable as the tides. What level on the beach will the incoming tide reach tomorrow? Will the wavelets hit that pebble? Who can say? It depends on the wind, on whether something unusual has happened deep out in the ocean, on ripples set up by a group of jetski enthusiasts - or maybe someone will simply move the peb-

ble. All of these influences have their parallels in language. Oceans do not stop the pressures of linguistic change, as the impact of American English on Australian, British and other world varieties of English has repeatedly shown.

If you do not believe that it is impossible to predict our linguistic future, all you have to do is try making a prediction. Which phrases will become a cliché next year? What will be the top Christian names in the year 2000? Which words will be the next ones to be affected by a stress shift (of the controversy - controversy type)?

Which prefix or suffix is going to be the next to generate new vogue words (as happened to mega- and -friendly in the 1980s)? We can always tell when a change has happened. With linguistic change, it's only possible to be wise after the event.

The reason why linguistic change is so unpredictable is that it is in the hands of so many people. In their minds, rather. And it is such an unconscious process. In the case of English, we are talking about some 400 million mother-tongue minds, plus an equivalent number of second-language minds. No single person can make a planned, confident impact on such masses. Individuals have sometimes tried with vocabulary - deliberately inventing a new word, and trying to get it established in the language. Just occasionally, it works: *blurb* is a good example, invented by US humorist Gelett Burgess earlier this century. Most of the time it doesn't. No one knows why, in the 15th century, the newly created words *meditation* and *prolixity* eventually came into the language, but *abusion* and *tenebrous* did not.

The books of new words, published from time to time, show the hazardous future of neologisms very well. Take the one edited by John Ayto in 1989, the *Longman Register of New Words*. It contained about 1200 new words or meanings which had been used in various UK spoken or written sources between 1986 and 1988 - words like *chatline*, *cashless*, and *chocoholic*. But how many of these will become a permanent part of English? It is too soon to say, though already several seem very dated: do people still say *cyberphobic*? do they still *chicken-dance*? did *condom fatigue* (analogous to compassion fatigue) or *cluster suicide* ever catch on? In an article written for the international *Journal of Lexicography* in 1993, 'Desuetude among new English words', John Algeo studied 3,565 words which had been recorded as newly entering the language between 1944 and 1976. He found that as many as 58% of them were not recorded in dictionaries a generation later, and must thus be presumed to have fallen out of use. As he says: 'Successful coinages are the exception; unsuccessful ones the rule, because the human impulse to creative playfulness produces more words than a society can sustain'.

A sense of proportion

In thinking about language change, we will never eliminate points of personal like and dislike, nor do we need to try. All we have to do is to think about things in a rational perspective, and try to get them in proportion. It is this sense of proportion which is critical. If every single point of language change or disputed usage were added together, we would be dealing with what? - less than 1% of the language? All the linguistic anxiety about usage and change, which has bedevilled our society since the late 18th century, can surely be no more than that. Change, to

continue with my sea metaphor, affects only the tidal margins. The vast expanse of the linguistic sea remains unaffected. Once in a millenium, maybe, a tsunami wreaks havoc with a fundamental feature of a language system - and then we recognize it,

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paying it special respect by giving it titles, such as the Great Vowel Shift. And we survive.

A sense of proportion is, however, conspicuous by its absence. People argue against tiny matters of language change with great emotion. The issues are blown up out of all proportion. For some, change destroys their language's imagined purity: the metaphors are those of deterioration and decay, and the shout is for 'eternal vigilance' to keep the language intact. These are the arguments of those who belong to Academies, Queen's English societies, and the like. The views are often linked to an imagined deterioration in society as a whole. The same views, it should be noted, are recapitulated in each generation (people have been steadfastly citing issues such as the split infinitive as a serious sign of the impending destruction of English, generation by generation, for over 150 years. For others, change diminishes the link people treasure with their own linguistic origins: the metaphors here are those of the golden age, and the shout is that things ain't what they used to be. These tend to be the arguments of older people, who recall their earlier dialect norms with nostalgia. For still others, change eats away at their community's linguistic identity and sense of national pride: the metaphors here are those of invasion, battle, and survival, and the shout is to stand up against the steamroller of some other linguistic power, such as the UK or - more commonly these days - the USA.

Even linguists will occasionally be heard inveighing about this last issue, and there is a nice recent local example to make the point. In the Winter 1995 issue of *Contact*, from the University of Queensland, Professor Roland Sussex bemoans the way so many 'good Aussie words' have been lost, in the face of massive 'Americanisation'. The argument could be replicated in almost every other part of the English-speaking world (apart from America, of course). 'Why do we have to try to look and sound like a 51st state of America?', he is reported to have complained. 'Are we a self-standing nation or just cobbled together from others?'. English, of course, is the most cobbled together of all languages. As has often been pointed out, it has sucked in words from other languages like a vacuum cleaner - over three hundred different language sources - and continues to do so. Australian English is only doing what has been going on since Anglo-Saxon times. Doubtless, there were always objections (expressed, at least, by the intellectual members of society), but time is a great healer. Generations later, the sense of objection is replaced by one of pride. We now comment with satisfaction on the flexibility, range, and versatility of the English lexicon, fostered during periods of past domination, as shown by its French, Latin, and other elements. The irony is that most people learn no les-

son from all of this, but continue to object to the self-same processes when they contemporaneously take effect.

This paradox is everywhere present. The magazine article continues: 'Professor Sussex points out that flexible languages which can absorb new words and be vital will survive, while languages

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like Latin will die'. That is: we want new words. On the other hand, there is a concern to put up barriers, to be selective. 'Many [of the new words] are words that add nothing to our communication or our cultural identity, and it's a pity when they squeeze out good Australian words.' That is: we don't want new words. This is the slippery slope into Academia, into the purist mentality which characterizes the French way of looking at their language. A moment's reflection will make it apparent that there is no way in which the distinction between a 'good Australian word' (which ought to be preserved) and a 'bad Australian word' (which can be surrendered) can be maintained. And, even if there were some criteria which would apply satisfactorily, how would one implement such decision-making? Set up a committee who would make recommendations? And would anyone pay attention to them?

In my travels around the English-speaking world, in radio and press debates and interviews, the issue of language change is far and away the most commonly raised topic. It cuts across the social divide. Regardless of whether the channel is down-market or up-market, the phone-ins repeatedly ask me for my opinion about the changes that are perceived to be taking place — whether as a result of the influx of other nationalities, the influence of American English, or the growth of indigenous dialects. My impression is that the anxiety (or insecurity, if you prefer) about linguistic change is much more pervasive in Australia than in Britain, and more than in many other English-speaking countries, except probably Canada (where the language issue is a matter for referenda) and South Africa (where the language issue is a reflex of that country's recent social turmoil). And the speed of contemporary change is one of the points being documented by Roland Sussex in his research into the Americanization of Australian English.

Static and dynamic

There is only one certainty, and this is that language will always be changing. If so, then it would seem sensible to replace any static conception we may have of language by a dynamic one, especially if we have responsibility for the language (in the sense that we have to work with it professionally, as in teaching). A static view ignores the existence of change, tries to hide it from the student, and presents students with a frozen or fossilized view of language. Once a rule is prescribed, no alternatives to it are tolerated. A dynamic view of language is one which recognizes the existence of change, informs the student about it, and focuses on those areas where change is ongoing.

And where is all this change? It is to be found in variation - in the alternative usages to be encountered in all domains of linguistic life. International and intranational regional and social accents and dialects, occupational varieties, features which ex-

press contrasts of age, gender, and formality, features which distinguish speech from writing - these are the potential diagnostic points for future linguistic change. The more we can increase students' awareness of contemporary language variation, therefore, the more we can give them a foundation for understanding and accepting linguistic change. The title of a contemporary academic journal suggests the interdependence of these notions: *Language Variation and Change*.

Many teachers, at least some of the time, try to hold a mirror up to (linguistic)

nature - to let students see something of the organized chaos which is out there. This is as it should be. Trying to protect students from it, by pretending it isn't there, does no-one any service. We need to find ways of reflecting it, but at the same time filtering it, so that students are not dazzled by the spectrum of alternatives which are part of sociolinguistic reality. In many cases in grammar and pronunciation, the choice is fairly straightforward, between just two alternatives, such as spoken vs written, or formal vs informal. I do not accept the conventional wisdom that students will be 'confused' by being told about both. Contrariwise, I do believe that to distort reality, by pretending that the variation does not exist, is to introduce a level of artifice which brings difficulties sooner or later.

And it may be sooner. Adopting a dynamic perspective is not just desirable; it is urgent. The reason is that the pace of linguistic change, at least for spoken English, is increasing. As English comes to be adopted by more and more people around the world, an unprecedented range of new varieties has emerged (chiefly since the 1960s) to reflect new national identities. The differences between British and American English pronunciation, for example, are minor compared with those which distinguish these dialects from the new intra-national norms of, say, Indian and West African English. When the English speakers of these countries numbered only a few tens of thousands, there was no threat to the pre-existing models, such as British and American English. But now that there are probably three times as many people speaking English in India as there are in Australia, an unfamiliar factor has entered the equation. What effect this will have on the balance of (linguistic) power, it is too soon to say - but the way that Caribbean rapping spread around the globe in the 1970s and the way that Australian English has travelled through British media programmes in the 1980s shows that even relatively small dialect populations can have an influence out of proportion of their size.

None of this has yet had any real impact on standard written English, as encountered in print. There is very little difference, for example, in the language of newspapers printed in Britain, the USA, Australia, or India - a point made evident in the section on 'a day in the life of the language' in my *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. But, as far as speech is concerned, and informal speech in particular, the future is one of increasing variety, and thus change. The sooner we prepare people to cope with this diverse new world, therefore, the better. Part of the answer is to teach them to swim in the right direction - with the tide, rather than against it.

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