

Week 1: What is language change?

1. Examples

1.1 Present-day English (PDE)

<p>'Scuse me girl I know it's a bit embarrassing But I've noticed some tan lines! On your shirt!</p> <p>See, I reckon you're about an eight or a nine, Maybe even nine and a half in four beers time, That blue top shop top you've got on is nice, Bit too much fake tan though but yeah, you score high, But there's just one little thing that's really really, Really really annoying me about you, you see, Yeah, yeah, like I said, you are really fit, But my gosh, don't you just know it!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>I'm not trying to pull you, Even though I would like to, I think you are really fit, You're fit but my gosh, don't you know it!</p> <p>So when I looked at you standing there with your hoard, I was waiting in the queue looking at the board, Wondering whether to have a burger of chips, Or what the shrapnel in my back pocket could afford, When I noticed in the corner of my eye, Looking towards my direction, your eyes locked onto my course, I couldn't concentrate on what I wanted to order, Which lost me the place in the queue I waited for, yeah!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p>	<p>Whoa! Leave it out! Are you smoking crack or something? Leave it out! Mike just leave it, just leave it! We cannot have that behaviour in this establishment!</p> <p>Leave it out! It's not worth it Mike, just leave it, it's not worth it! Don't touch me, Don't touch me! Leave it out! No, look, I'm alright, don't touch me!</p> <p>For a while I was thinking yeah, but what if? Picturing myself with bare white hot wit, Snaring at you as you were standing there opposite, Whether or not you knew it I swear you didn't tick, And when that bloke in the white behind us lot queuing, Was clocking onto you too yeah I had to admit that, Yeah you are fit, And, Yeah, I do want it, But I stopped sharkin a minute to get chips and drinks!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>I bashed my head hard earlier due to the brew, But I am digressing slightly so I'll continue, I didn't wanna bowl over all geezer and rude, Not rude as in good but just rude like uncouth, You girls think you can just flirt and it comes to you, But let me tell you, si, yes, yes, but you are really rude, And rude as in good, I knew this as you stood and queued,</p> <p>But I just did not want to give the satisfaction to you!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p>	<p>Just as you started to make your big advance, With the milkshake and your little doughnut in hand, I was like, nah, even though you look grand, But you look sharp there smiling hard, suggestin' and, Gleaming away with your hearty hearty looking tan,</p> <p>But I admit the next bit was spanners to my plan, You walk towards my path and you just brushed right past, And into the arms of that fuckin' white shirted man!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>Oh, what do I give a fuck, I've got a girlfriend anyway, (Whoa we've all had a drink mate) We're all a bit drunk, we've had a few, fair play, I got this Stella I bombed from that last cafe, This night's not even begun, yes, yes, oh yay! I did fancy you a bit, yeah, I must say, I would rather I hadn't mugged myself on display, But this is just another case of female stopping play, on an otherwise, perfect result of a holiday!</p> <p>(Chorus)</p> <p>You're fit but, you're fit but you know it! You're fit but you know it! I think I'm going to fall over! I think I'm going to fall over!</p> <p>(The Streets, <i>Fit but you know it</i>)</p>
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1.2 Modern English (ModE)

Mr. Bennet was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr. Bingley. He had always intended to visit him, though to the last always assuring his wife that he should not go; and till the evening after the visit was paid, she had no knowledge of it. It was then disclosed in the following manner. Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he suddenly addressed her with,

"I hope Mr. Bingley will like it Lizzy."

"We are not in a way to know *what* Mr. Bingley likes," said her mother resentfully, "since we are not to visit."

"But you forget, mama," said Elizabeth, "that we shall meet him at the assemblies, and that Mrs. Long has promised to introduce him."

"I do not believe Mrs. Long will do any such thing. She has two nieces of her own. She is a selfish, hypocritical woman, and I have no opinion of her."

"No more have I," said Mr. Bennet; "and I am glad to find that you do not depend on her serving you."

Mrs. Bennet dignified not to make any reply; but unable to contain herself, began scolding one of her daughters.

"Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake! Have a little compassion on my nerves. You tear them to pieces."

"Kitty has no discretion in her coughs," said her father; "she times them ill."

"I do not cough for my own amusement," replied Kitty fretfully.

"When is your next ball to be, Lizzy?"

"To-morrow fortnight."

"Aye, so it is," cried her mother, "and Mrs. Long does not come back till the day before; so, it will be impossible for her to introduce him, for she will not know him herself."

"Then, my dear, you may have the advantage of your friend, and introduce Mr Bingley to *her*."

"Impossible, Mr. Bennet, impossible, when I am not acquainted with him myself; how can you be so teasing?" (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

1.3 Early Modern English (eModE)

MERCUTIO

Where the devil should this Romeo be?

Came he not home to-night?

BENVOLIO

Not to his father's; I spoke with his man.

MERCUTIO

Ah, that same pale hard-hearted wench, that Rosaline.

Torments him so, that he will sure run mad.

BENVOLIO

Tybalt, the kinsman of old Capulet,

Hath sent a letter to his father's house.

(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

1.4 Middle English (ME)

A yong man whilom called Melibeus myghty and riche bigat vp on his wif, þⁱ called was Prudence a doghter, which þⁱ called was Sophie. Vpon a day bifel þⁱ he for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye. His wif & eek his doghter, hath he laft inwith his hous, of which the dores weren faste yshette. Thre of his olde foos, han it espied, & setten laddres to the walles of his hous, and by wyndowes ben entred, & betten his wif, & wounded his doghter with fyue mortal woundes in fyue sondry places. This is to seyn, in hir feet, in hir handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hir mouth, and leften hir for deed & wenten away, (Chaucer, *The tale of Melibee*)

1.5 Old English (OE)

Her (...) Ælfred cyning (...) gefeaht wið ealne here, and hine geflymde, and him æfter rad oð þet geweorc, and þær sæt XIII niht, and þa sealde se here him gislas and myccle aðas, þet hi of his rice woldon, and him eac geheton þet heora cyng fulwihte onfon wolde, and hi þæt gelaston
(*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*)

'In this year King A. fought against the entire army, and put them to flight, and rode after it to the fortress, and camped there 14 nights, and then the army gave him hostages and great oaths, that they would depart from his kingdom, and they also promised him that their king would receive baptism, and they did that.'

→ language change is continuous and affects all levels of the language

2. Attitudes towards language change: is language change progress or decay?

2.1 History: linguistic Darwinism and romanticism

2.1.1 Survival of the fittest

Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity (...) It is a part of nature (Herbert Spencer 1850)

[In language] the better, the shorter, the easier forms are constantly getting the upper hand, and they owe their success to their inherent virtue (Darwin 1871)

- true that individual forms, especially frequent ones, get shortened with some regularity (grammaticalisation → weeks 9-10)
- however: shortened forms, given time, tend to be replaced by longer ones:

Latin		French	
cantabimus 'we will sing'			
cantare habemus	>	chanterons	
		allons chanter	> ?

- also: languages are not all alike, which one would expect if they would all gradually gravitate towards some maximally efficient system → simplification in one area generally leads to complication in another
- function of language is communication → disregarding pidgins there is nothing to indicate that one language is superior to another

[T]he evolution of language as such has never been demonstrated, and the inherent equality of all languages must be maintained on present evidence (Greenberg 1957:65)

2.1.2 Dogma of the Noble Savage

A principal goal of this science [i.e. comparative historical linguistics] 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 (Curtius 1871)

- some earlier instances of this linguistic romanticism:
 - My Lord; I do here in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to your Lordship, as First Minister, the our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar. But lest Your Lordship should think my Censure to be too severe, I shall take leave to be more particular. (Jonathan Swift (1712) *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, addressed to Robert Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, the Lord High Treasurer)
 - Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration (Samuel Johnson 1755)
 - [T]he English language hath been much cultivated during the last 200 years (...) but (...) it hath made no advances in Grammatical accuracy (Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, (1762) *A short introduction to English grammar*, cf. further his criticisms of e.g. double negatives, split infinitives, stranded prepositions, and the use of *ain't*)
- linguistic change is never-ending and tends to be cyclic (Indo-European languages OV > VO, but Mandarin Chinese may be moving in the opposite direction; many IE languages have lost morphological case endings and acquired a more fixed word order, but e.g. Wappo (Yuki) is doing the reverse)

- Pinker (2002): Western civilisations are generally far more peaceful than "primitive" cultures

2.2 Present-day: folk conservatism, expert enlightenment

2.2.1 A quality example of modern prescriptivism

I have said before in this Chamber that in many respects the English language is degenerating rapidly. One can point to particular words of which that is true and "quality" is one. "Quality" is a noun which has become an adjective and quality has become synonymous with good quality—high quality. It has become a hooray word and not a boo word. That is imprecise thinking and dangerously imprecise thinking in what we do. People talk now about quality goods, without saying whether they are high quality or low quality goods. But I must confess that the height of absurdity came when the Welsh Rugby Football Union, which in recent years has not been notably successful in producing teams which win matches, held a debate in which one famous Welsh three-quarter said that the trouble lay with the forwards because, "We backs cannot win if we don't get quality ball." "Quality ball"—I invite the Committee to speculate on how that use of the language can possibly make sense. We know what it means but how can it make sense?

(Lord Morris of Castle Morris, 17 June 1996)

Quality:

IV. 13. a. *attrib.* and *Comb.* (chiefly sense 4), as *quality-acquaintance*, *-air*, *-blood*, *-end*, *-friend*, *gentleman*, *horse*, *lady*, *living*, *-pride*, *-white*, etc.; *quality-like*, *-mad*, *adjs.*; (sense 8) *quality mark*; *quality-tested* *adj.*; (sense 9c) *quality audience*, *food*, *note*, *producer*; *spec.* = of a high cultural standard, esp. of newspapers, as *quality magazine*, *newspaper*, *paper*, *press*, *programme*, *publisher*, *Sunday*, etc.

1701 FARQUHAR *Sir H. Wildair* II. i. Wks. (Rtldg.) 545, I thought something was the matter; I wanted of quality-air.

1751 SMOLLETT *Per. Pic.* (1779) II. lxxviii. 238 The influence of Peregrine's new quality-friends.

1819 *Metropolis* III. 149 The quality-end of the town.

1837 CARLYLE *Fr. Rev.* II. II. ii, Young..men, with quality-blood in them, poisoned with quality-pride.

1938 *Time* 10 Oct. 43/1 It has a fairly large and very vociferous 'quality' audience.

(*OED*, quality)

2.2.2 Asking the right questions

It is in no sense wrong for human language to change, any more than it is wrong for humpback whales to change their song every year (Aitchison 1991:210)

3. Inevitability of change

- Académie Française founded 1635 under Louis XIII by Cardinal Richelieu → 1694 first edition of its dictionary, 1992 ninth edition → its role:

Le rôle de l'Académie française est double: veiller sur la langue française et accomplir des actes de mécénat. La première mission lui a été conférée dès l'origine par ses statuts. Pour s'en acquitter, l'Académie a travaillé dans le passé à fixer la langue, pour en faire un patrimoine commun à tous les Français et à tous ceux qui pratiquent notre langue. Aujourd'hui, elle agit pour en maintenir les qualités et en suivre les évolutions nécessaires. Elle en définit le bon usage. Elle le fait en élaborant son dictionnaire qui fixe l'usage de la langue, mais aussi par ses recommandations et par sa participation aux différentes commissions de terminologie.

(<http://www.academie-francaise.fr/role/index.html>)

- Real Academia Española founded 1713 by 8 academics, led by Juan Manuel Fernandez Pacheco, Marquis of Villena → *Limpia, fija y da esplendor*, 'It cleans, fixes and gives splendour'
- 1664 Royal Society appointed a committee to "improve" the language, John Dryden being a prominent member, who had already lamented "that, speaking so noble a language as we do, we have not a more certain measure of it as they have in France, where they have an Academy, enacted for the purpose (Dryden, *Rival-Ladies*, dedication)

→ Nothing came of the plans in Britain; in France and Spain the academies have perhaps some influence on writing, but not on the spoken language

4. Conclusion

References

The essential reading is printed in bold; other references are optional.

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