

Lexical change: Why does English keep on changing?

Languages, including English, keep on changing. The changes can be related to the way we pronounce words or to the vocabulary and grammatical structures that we use. Some of the changes can be swift and noticeable, other changes occur more gradually and we hardly notice them. So what are the reasons for these linguistic developments? In many cases, the developments in language reflect the changing needs of the speakers and the changes in the environment in which we live. In this worksheet, we are going to explore lexical changes that have occurred in present-day English over the period of last twenty years. In particular, we will discuss how changes in society affect the words we use in our everyday conversations.

language change

technology

society

lifestyle

lexical changes

Task 1

How did the society change over the past twenty years? Discuss some of the major changes with your partner or a group. Which of these changes do you think have affected our language and the words we use? Use the space below to make notes on both, the areas of change in society and the changes in the language use.

Changes in society

Any related linguistic changes?

Task 2

We are now going to look at some ways in which our society changed and the areas of language that changed along. Perhaps one of the most dramatic changes have occurred with respect to technological development. Innovation in technology and our growing engagement with different types of technological devices have resulted in changes in the words we use to talk about new products and devices.

Can you think of some words related to technology that have not been in use in the 1990s but are quite frequent today? Use the Change button in BNClab to check your ideas. Note down the words and their frequency below – what is the most frequently used new word that you could find?

e.g. email 616 times _____

iPhone _____

Research bite

Lexical change is an ongoing process. Some new words are related to very short-lived phenomena and appear and disappear quickly from our use and vocabularies. Others stay for a longer time. The best source of information about when and how words entered the English language can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) whose task it is to capture and record changes in the lexicon of the English language.

“Whether by sudden invention or unhurried evolution, words come into the English language in all manner of ways. The Oxford English Dictionary’s mission is to record all of these word stories, capturing their development as they continue to unfold.” (25 February, 2019 at <https://public.oed.com/about/>)

Several times a year, the Dictionary publishes new entries that have been added to the dictionary. You can check these updates on <https://public.oed.com/updates/>. For example, January 2018 saw the addition of ‘binge-watch’ and ‘energy vampire’ to the Dictionary.

Task 3

Another source of changes in our vocabulary are the changing trends in people's lifestyles. Use the Change button to check the frequency of the following words both in 1990s and in current conversations. [Tip: When you hover with your mouse over each bar, you will get the frequency of mentions for each 10,000 words of speech].

Word	Freq. 1990	Freq. 2014	Trend
university	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
stressed	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
organic	<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>

- What changes in the use of these words have you identified?
- What area of our lives is each of these words related to?
- Can you explain the change in the use of these words? What trends in society are they related to?
- Think of other words that are related to the areas of our lives that you have identified above and check them in BNClab. Do they show a similar change in use?

Notes:

Task 4

Over the last twenty years, our perception of the world has changed and people have become more aware of various social issues. Search for *sexis** and *racis** in BNClab and use the Change button to see how the use of these words changed overtime (Note: the asterisk acts as a wildcard allowing us to search for different forms of a word at the same time. For example, *sexis** will search for *sexism* as well as *sexist*).

- First, discuss what these words (*sexist* and *sexism*, *racist* and *racism*) mean
- What trends have you observed in the use of these words?
- Can you explain the changes in how people used these words in the 1990s and today? [Tip: To help you understand the changes, have a look at the context in which these words appeared in conversations in 1990s and today. To see the context, click in turn on each bar under the Usage button].

Task 5

Look back at your notes in Task 1.

- a. Compare the areas that you have noted down with those discussed in this worksheet.
- b. Did the worksheet discuss some of the language changes that you expected? Are there some areas of language change that you have identified in Task 1 that did not appear in the worksheet? If yes, you can use BNClab to check these changes!