

Aitchison, Jean. Language Change: Progress or Decay. 3rd ed. Cambridge: CUP, 2001.

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 noht for no disours,
Ne for no seggers, no harpours,
Bot for the luf of symple men
That strange Inglis can not ken.²

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.¹

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 '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 In 1999, a writer in a Sunday newspaper coined the label 'Slop English' for the 'maulings and misusages' of 'Teletotties' (young television presenters).¹⁶

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 orangutanguage.

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?¹⁷ Ought we to be actually doing something, such as starting a Campaign for Real English, as one letter to a newspaper proposed?¹⁸ 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 nineteenth 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.'¹⁹

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.'²⁰

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.'²¹

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