

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN ENGLISH?

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All languages change. The English of 500 years ago is hard for us to read, and if we could hear it spoken we would understand very little. 500 years earlier than that, English was a foreign language: Anglo-Saxon. Even over a much smaller time-scale – ten or twenty years – enough changes take place to make older people complain that the language is going to the dogs, and to force teachers and grammarians to update their descriptions.

Language change happens for various reasons. One powerful mechanism is phonetic erosion. Speech production is a complex physical and mental operation, and speakers naturally seek to economise effort. So less important syllables easily lose stress and are reduced, to the point where they may disappear altogether, as in the British pronunciation of words like *February* ('Febry'), *probably* ('proibly') and *secretary* ('secretry' or 'secetry'). Small words may be merged in casual speech: *have to* > 'hafta', *going to* > 'gonna', *could have* > 'coulda'; or they can fade away completely: *I've got* > 'I got', *What do you want?* > 'What you want?' Such changes, initially regarded as examples of careless speech, can become so widespread that ultimately the whole grammatical system of a language is affected. This is part of the reason why modern English is so different from Anglo-Saxon. Anglo-Saxon verbs, nouns and adjectives had sets of endings which varied according to the grammatical roles of the words; most of these have long since been eroded, and their functions are now expressed by auxiliaries or word order.

Reduction of complexity operates at a structural, as well as a phonetic level. Languages make many small distinctions which contribute little to communication, and speakers can easily feel unconsciously that it is too much trouble to get them all right. Irregular verb distinctions such as *sank/sunk* or *sang/sung* are relatively unstable, as one can see if one looks up their history in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Currently, some of these forms are being increasingly confused, so that one often hears utterances like *'She sung very well in yesterday's concert' or *'The ship sunk without trace'. The subcategorisation rules that determine what structures can follow English nouns and verbs are something of a jungle; it is perhaps not surprising that variation in this area is common. Some time ago I received a letter which said *'I now have pleasure to enclose the correct enrolment form'; I recently heard somebody say *'They have a tendency of using plates as ashtrays'. While such slips are not at present regular features of the language, some of them might well become so in the future. This is happening with English modal verbs. Modals express numerous subtle shades of meaning which can easily become blurred, so that the verbs gradually shift their uses. A striking recent change involves *may have* + past participle. This structure has traditionally referred to a possibility that something really happened: for example (after an accident) *They've taken her in for an X-ray – she may have broken her leg*. But people are now starting to use the form to refer to an unrealised possibility, as in *You were stupid to go skiing there – you may have broken your leg* – a meaning that older speakers would only express by saying *you might/could have broken your leg*. Other current changes in small corners of grammar include the gradual replacement of inflected comparatives and superlatives (*commoner* used to be commoner, but *more*

common is now more common), and a growth in plural marking on noun modifiers (*antiques shop, drugs problem, arrivals lounge ...*).

As the world moves along, old forms of expression get tired and worn out, and speakers of a language – especially younger speakers – seek to brighten things up. Creative innovation, therefore, is another powerful mechanism of language change. The formula *I was like* meaning ‘I said’ (*I was like ‘You can’t do that’*. *She was like ‘Well, I’m gonna’*), introduced a few years ago, was novel and catchy enough to spread through the language very quickly. Less dramatically, present-day English seems to be developing a new future auxiliary. It is very common, especially in journalistic writing, to read that something is ‘set to’ happen: *interest rates are set to rise, pub opening hours are set to change*. Not long ago, this was a metaphor (referring to a runner in the ‘set’ position just before the starting pistol is fired), used only for people who were ready to do something. Now it is losing its original meaning and becoming grammaticalized as an auxiliary, used not only for people but also for things and processes. In another interesting change, we may be reintroducing the second person singular-plural distinction which standard English lost two or three hundred years ago (though distinct plural pronouns survive in dialects: for example Irish/Scottish *yez*, Southern US *y’all*). It is becoming increasingly common in casual speech for people to say *you guys* (to men or women indiscriminately) instead of just *you*, so perhaps this expression is slowly turning into a piece of grammar: a new pronoun.

Language change is not only a matter of grammar, of course; in fact, change is often particularly striking in the areas of pronunciation and vocabulary. The last half century has seen very rapid changes in English pronunciation norms, especially in Britain. ‘Received pronunciation’ (RP), the non-regional class-based British accent which had the status of a standard up to the 1960s, has lost its prestige and is now spoken by no more than 3% of the population. To the extent that an influential pronunciation standard continues to exist in Britain, it is a variety closer to vernacular London speech (‘estuary English’).

As far as vocabulary is concerned, the paucity of inflections makes English morphologically hospitable, and the language continues to borrow freely from elsewhere. Algeo (1998) lists 20th-century borrowings from 56 languages, with by far the highest proportion coming from French. Of the vast number of new words that have come into English over the last century or so, most however are home-grown, created primarily by affixation. Although English has few inflections, it has a good deal of derivational morphology, with well over 100 affixes in common use, including a stock of naturalized elements originally borrowed mainly from Greek and Latin which are particularly productive in present-day word-formation: for example *auto-*, *eco-*, *cyber-*, *mono-*, *macro-*, *inter-*, *-ology*, *-cratic*, *-phile*, *-phobe*.

An important mechanism of change is the influence that one form of a language can have on another. Non-standard dialects typically converge on the standard, which has more social and cultural prestige and is therefore felt to be more correct, elegant or desirable. Similarly, one national variety can influence another. British English is changing in various small ways under the influence of its powerful American cousin, so that some of the few grammatical differences between the two varieties are disappearing. British speakers today, for example, often use *Do you have ...?* for

current possession, as in *Do you have a match?* For an earlier generation, *Have you got a match?* would have been the normal form. Similarly, the use of *like* to mean ‘as if’ (as in *He looked like he’d seen a ghost*), which has become widespread in informal standard American English, is now increasingly common in Britain. British-American differences in the use of *must* and *have to* are also becoming blurred. The influence is not, however, entirely one way. British ‘high culture’ still has considerable prestige in some circles of American society, and this can encourage a tendency to imitate British ways of speaking. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* (reprinted in the *Guardian* of April 8 2005) deplored such fashionable instances of ‘Britspeak’ as *send up* for ‘parody’, *spot on* for ‘dead on’, *sacked* for *fired*, *go missing* for ‘disappear’ or *at the end of the day* for ‘in the end’.

Formal and informal varieties also influence each other. In 19th-century Britain and America the written language – the principal vehicle of legislation, social control and cultural transmission – had great prestige; informal spoken language was regarded as a poor relation, and the specific grammatical characteristics of speech were devalued. Today’s oral media have done much to rehabilitate the grammar of speech, and this is influencing written norms, so that the gap between spoken and written varieties has been greatly reduced, and many of the old prescriptive rules, promulgated by 18th and 19th-century grammarians in an attempt to ‘tidy up’ the language, are losing their grip. For instance, the use of *they/them/their* with indefinite singular reference (as in *If anybody phones, tell them I’m out*), which has existed in informal speech for centuries, is becoming increasingly acceptable in more formal styles, as are structures with clause-final prepositions (*something that teachers often worry about*). Something similar is happening with non-canonical pronoun forms in conjoined subjects and objects (as in *John and me went to the cinema* or *between you and I*). While these have been around for centuries (there are examples in Jane Austen and Shakespeare), standard speakers have only recently been able to use them without looking over their shoulders in case a teacher was listening. Currently, the use of highly informal grammar in emails is further reducing the spoken/written divide, and this may well influence the way people express themselves in more traditional letter-writing. (To say nothing of txt-msgs!)

Language change does not of course take place overnight. Small-scale changes to specific forms can certainly spread quite quickly, especially in this age of rapid worldwide communication. The informal use of *was like* to mean *said*, referred to above, moved from American English into the language of younger British speakers in a matter of ten years or so. But changes affecting larger linguistic systems can take centuries to work themselves out. The English progressive has been spreading through the language for several hundred years, and there are still verbs with which it is not generally used, although these small pockets of resistance are gradually being overrun: *I’m understanding maths much better now*; *She’s really liking her new job*; *I’m loving it*. The change in the formation of comparatives and superlatives, mentioned earlier, also has a long history: *more* and *most* first took over three-syllable adjectives (*beautifullest* was possible up to the 18th century), and are now moving gradually into two-syllable words. Other ongoing changes include the continuing spread of the *going-to* future, the replacement of *shall* and *should* by *will* and *would*, the spread of the *get*-passive, the decline of the subjunctive (especially in British English), and the disappearance of *whom*.

It is not only the language itself that is changing; our analyses of English are also being constantly extended and refined in the light of ongoing linguistic research, so that we know far more about our language than we used to. And with the growing availability of searchable electronic corpora comprising hundreds of millions of words of authentic spoken and written English, it is now becoming increasingly easy – and necessary – to supplement and revise our traditional descriptions, as corpus research uncovers new facts about how the language works. A recent study by Leech (2003) has revealed that modal verbs such as *must* and *may* are used less frequently than they were a few decades ago – something that we would never have been able to establish, or even to guess at, without the tools of corpus-based work. Such research is not only contributing to our understanding of grammar; it is transforming lexicography, as it becomes increasingly clear that every word in a language is involved in a complex and unique network of patterns and relationships.

What should we be doing about all these changes? In fact, teachers don't generally need to worry too much – despite developments in specific areas, English as a whole is not changing very quickly, and most of the language will stay the same for some time to come. But it's important to keep an eye on what is happening, so as to be able to answer students' questions about new usage, and to be able to modify traditional explanations as this becomes necessary. From this point of view, the authors of language courses, grammars, dictionaries and usage guides carry an important responsibility: they need to be continually alert to the small changes that are going on, in order not to find themselves giving misleading information that is no longer accurate. Writers such as myself are greatly helped in this endeavour not only by academic researchers, but also by English-watchers round the world. While working on the recently-published third edition of *Practical English Usage* I was fortunate enough to receive a large number of useful questions and suggestions from correspondents – students as well as teachers – drawing my attention to areas where descriptions of usage need to be updated. My thanks to all of them.

references

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