

# 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.

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