

The changing English language - fiction and fact

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Dear Sir

I was appalled to hear on the radio this morning two split infinitives, spoken within minutes of each other. One gentleman said "to really decide" and another "to clearly see". This recent habit is to be deplored, and the BBC should look to its standards at once...

Dear Sir

On Thursday's Today programme, I was surprised to hear the sloppy pronunciation "lawr and order" from one of your presenters. This carelessness seems to be on the increase, and I hope I am not the only one who is prepared to stand up and be counted. This kind of speech is typical of the lazy attitude found today in so many parts of society, and we should resist it at all costs...

These two letters, from a large postbag addressed to my Radio Four series "English Now", a couple of years ago, are typical, and illustrate one of the most widespread popular misconceptions about the nature of language: that it is always changing - fundamentally, pervasively, recently, and dramatically. As linguists, of course, we know that language is, indeed, never static; but as we compare the language of one generation with that of the next, the overriding impression is surely one of stability and continuity. There is no drama. The areas of linguistic structure which are on the move are few and far between - a slight shift in word order here, a subtle movement in articulation there. In aggregate they comprise what? Less than one percent of the language's structure, at any one time? And if you think that this figure is too small, I doubt whether anyone would wish to argue for more than five per cent, even including lexical change. If this is so, why is there such a

firmly-held belief that change is so fundamental and ongoing? For most letter-writers are convinced that they have spotted something new, recent, and important, and that if they shout loudly enough an unpleasant modern trend can be nipped in the bud.

What these amateur linguists do not know, as professional linguists never tire of pointing out, is that most of the points which upset them have been a feature of the language for a considerable period of time - in the case of the split infinitive, for example, for centuries. Objections to certain points of usage in grammar and pronunciation recur with deadly predictability in the writing of grammarians throughout the nineteenth century, long before the BBC was born - a point still to be appreciated by many contemporary letter-writers, who believe that the BBC is to blame for everything. The pity of it all is that, when the attention is taken up so completely with a small number of traditional shibboleths, the real and potentially more interesting aspects of language change are missed, or dismissed. The stereotype becomes the reality, and the reality is considered unreal.

But the professionals should not sit too comfortably on their laurels. The confusion of stereotype and reality is to be found in the professional domain also - and not least in the field of language teaching. Here too there are widely held beliefs about the English language which do not stand up to close examination. And there is an irony, also - for when the reality of the matter is investigated, there is a widespread tendency to interpret it as something recent and excusable - once again, as a feature of language change. A good example is the tendency to make present-day teaching materials "authentic" - to include extracts of language which reflect characteristics of naturally-occurring discourse. When foreign students encounter these characteristics for the first time, it is by no means uncommon to hear them reason diachronically, instead of synchronically. In a recent seminar, for example, one student remarked that the omission of subject elements in the tape he was listening to (as in *Got a light?* or *Just seen Mark in town*) seemed to be increasing in modern English. Another felt that the speed of conversation was getting faster. A third that people seemed to be running their sentences together much more these days.

The differences which these students had perceived were real enough, of course. It is indeed the case that the speed of natural conversational English is generally much faster than in the conversations found in traditional pedagogical exercises. I carried out some measurements, to determine the magnitude of the difference,

using the speech samples obtained in *Advanced Conversational English* (Crystal and Davy, 1975 - abbreviated as *ACE* below) and some dialogues I had available from various foreign language teaching contexts at post-Proficiency level. I used a simple but widely used measure, of number of syllables per minute (spm - one should never use words per minute, as words vary too much in length). The average rate of the traditional materials was less than 200 syllables a minute. To get a sense of how fast that is, look at your watch (if it has a second-hand on it) and say the 25 syllables of the last sentence out loud. If you are speaking at 200 spm, the sentence should take you about eight seconds. If you're reasonably fluent in English, you'll find that task quite hard to do - you have to slow yourself down quite dramatically. I just said this sentence to myself at normal speed and it took me four seconds - around 400 spm. And indeed, that is much more like the norm for spontaneous conversation (though it would actually be somewhat rushed for reading aloud - BBC newsreaders, for example, tend not to exceed 300).

As a matter of fact, there were several passages in the *ACE* materials which went well over 400 spm - or, to be more precise, where the passage was spoken at a rate which, if continued for a whole minute, would have exceeded that level. Some passages exceeded 500, which is incredibly fast. Now, it seems to me, no one can speak 500 syllables in a minute without dying. But the speed at which short sequences of unstressed syllables were produced was truly impressive. A common example was in the verb phrase, where such a sequence as "I would have been able to go" was said as two rhythmic pulses - one on *go* and the other on the *whole* of the remainder. The pronunciation is untranscribable, really, but can be hinted at by the transcription /ə'wʊ dnəbneɪblə/. All the connected speech features in this sequence (such as the reduction of /bi:n/ to /bn/ or of /tu:/ to /ə/) are listed in such standard sources as Gimson (1989); but what Gimson and the other sources do not point out is what happens when sequences of assimilations and elisions combine in this way. The effect on rate is immediate and dramatic. Indeed, in order to transcribe such speech at all, one needs to rely heavily on context. When Davy and I were transcribing the *ACE* samples, we regularly found it impossible to be certain what segments were being pronounced. As native speakers, we knew in most cases what the speaker must have been saying, so we read in the meaning accordingly. This process of informed guesswork is routine in everyday conversation, especially in noisy environments (such as a pub or train), and is of course exactly the kind of contextual

guesswork which foreign learners have to dare to rely on. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

What about the omission of elements of structure, which several students picked on? If you listen to conversational tapes very carefully (assuming they have been well recorded), you hear some interesting variations. On the *ACE* tapes, people often seemed to genuinely omit the subject, when expressing the first person singular, as in *Think so* - but on closer examination there was often a slight catch in the voice before the verb, a glottal stop, or a very brief schwa vowel. The indefinite article was also often reduced in this way. At first hearing, one sentence sounded as if the speaker had said "And as it was late I caught taxi back". The glottalization on the /t/ of *taxi* was the only sign that a determiner was present. And, indeed, I wasn't always sure that I really could hear such glottalization. My intuition as a native speaker told me that there just had to be an article there, so I heard one - or was it just noise on the tape? I can say *caught taxi* very fast, consciously omitting the article, then play the tape back to people, and they invariably hear one to be present.

These are all real consequences of the speed at which conversational English proceeds - but the speed itself is a function of the informality of the conversational situation, and not of a change in the nature of the language. Of course, if you asked me to prove this point, I would not be able to do so. I do not know whether the spontaneous conversational speech of 50 years ago was truly as rapid as that of today. The only dialogues we have are scripted and formal. The early radio dramas don't help, for the same reason. Indeed, even the early corpus material obtained in the 1950s is of limited value. Much of that material (such as the early tapes obtained by the *Survey of English Usage* in London) is of conversation between professional people on relatively formal occasions. Even if the speakers were unaware that they were being recorded, the situation and subject matter precluded really rapid discourse. When I examined a couple of randomly taken extracts, the average rate was around 300 spm. One speaker gets very excited on a radio programme, and reaches 350. Compared with the speeds heard on modern radio programmes, there seems to be little difference. I suspect that if the kind of sampling facilities had been available in the 1920s or 1950s as we had available in compiling *ACE*, there would have been no difference either.

It's important to appreciate the need to sample thoughtfully and efficiently when investigating the nature of the contemporary language. It isn't enough to get hold of a good quality tape recorder and

microphone (though these are prerequisite) and go out into the streets, looking for samples of "natural spontaneous colloquial English". The trick is not to devise a situation where people are led to speak in a totally natural way - that is not difficult, despite the sociolinguistic head-scratching which surrounded this issue in the 1970s. The trick is to obtain this kind of speech in an acoustically superb recording, so that features such as the glottal stops and rapidly articulated unstressed syllables can be confidently assessed. In the case of *ACE*, as we have reported elsewhere, we solved this problem by a temporary subterfuge. People who knew each other well would be invited to my house for an evening, in order (as they were told) for me to record their accents. People are very proud of their accents, and are very happy to think that they will be preserved for posterity. They would enter a room where there was a microphone in front of each chair, with wires leading to a tape recorder in the middle of the floor. They would sit down, rather self-consciously, and I would adjust the microphones so that they were very close to their mouths, but a little to the side, when they were sitting back in their chairs. I turned on the recorder, and we went through the "business" of the evening - counting from 1 to 20, each in his or her best accent. When that was done, the tape recorder was switched off, and everyone relaxed. The evening continued. At one point, I had an unfortunate long distance call from abroad, which meant I had to leave the room for quite a while.

Of course, as perceptive readers will have gathered, the microphones were in reality wired not to the tape recorder in the middle of the floor, but to a different machine, which was merrily recording the whole evening in the kitchen. My guests, when they saw the recorder switched off, relaxed totally, and - crucial to the point - hardly ever moved the microphones, which were thereby in an excellent position to pick up the minutiae of their speech. The effect of my presence was avoided by the telephone strategy, and other enforced absences. The material obtained was excellent (and is now part of the *Survey of English Usage*), and indeed it was only through having that material available that such observations as the above were obtained in the first place. (Incidentally, for those drawing dark analogies with Watergate, I avoided the Nixonian problem by telling my visitors what had happened at the end of the evening, and offering them the chance to erase the tape. No one ever insisted that I did so, though many a visitor imposed an immutable obligation on my part to buy the drinks whenever we should subsequently meet.)

Material of this kind brings forth many surprises. It is unusual material, in many ways - at least, from the foreign learner's point of view. As has often been pointed out, it is not often that a foreign learner becomes part of this kind of interchange - between native speakers who know each other intimately - and material of this kind inevitably presents certain problems. In particular, much of the material is difficult to follow because of the speakers' shared background and experiences. The participants presuppose so much. On the other hand, these objections mustn't be exaggerated. Such conversations also spend a great deal of time introducing new subject-matter (it would be deadly dull if it were not so), and in such circumstances the intelligibility to an outsider is much greater. In addition, there are perhaps more occasions than we realise where foreign learners encounter native speakers in such settings, or where native speakers choose not to make any allowances for the presence of a foreigner in their midst, and where conversational norms approach those of the *ACE* materials - an example which immediately comes to mind is the summer school, with its temporary but genuine camaraderie. For such reasons, I feel that this kind of material has a useful place in language teaching, as part of a listening comprehension programme, and am pleased to have found *ACE* used in exactly this way, in my travels.

But none of this is language change. It is simply a reflex of an informal speech situation. I do not deny, of course, that norms of informality can change over the years. There are signs of this happening today - notably on the radio channels. BBC's Radio 4, for example, has shown a noticeable increase in its presenters' level of informality over the past decade (and the point has not been ignored by my letter-writing listeners). How one views this change raises questions which go well beyond the linguistic - but change there is. So it is certainly possible in principle that there could be changes in informality in the norms of conversational speech, and I look forward (in a metaphysical sense, you appreciate) to some empirical comparisons between the tape recordings which will be made a century hence and those available today. But the pronunciation features described above are not part of such trends. I have so far illustrated the distinctive character of the *ACE* materials from features of pronunciation. Just as important were the distinctive characteristics of grammar and vocabulary which the materials brought to light. In grammar, the most noticeable feature was the absence of clearly-definable units at sentence level. It was not at all easy to identify "complete sentences". Now this observation alone can cause considerable disquiet. The sentence is probably the most established and

cherished fact of grammatical life, and its central role in linguistic theory, school grammar, and personal intuition is undeniable. We write in sentences, and we are supposed to speak in sentences - and while occasionally we may lose our way in our expression, and leave an utterance unfinished, for the most part people accept the proposition that educated speakers speak in sentences most of the time. Foreign language teaching materials certainly give the sentence pride of place. Given this background, it is not surprising to find that people are disturbed when they find themselves unable to identify clear sentence boundaries in such material as the following (in this simplified transcription, / marks the boundary of an intonation unit, and a dash marks a pause):

this chap lived in a semi detached house / and next door - there was a man who'd just bought a new car / - and he was telling me / that one morning / he was looking through the window / - and this man / allowed his wife to drive the car / very unwisely / and she was having a first go in it / - and he backed it / out of the garage / - so that it was standing on the driveway / - and he'd closed the garage doors / - and she came out of the house / - to take this car out / and go shopping for the first time / - so she came out / very gingerly / and opened the door / and sat in the car / - and er began to back / very very gently / - taking great care you see / that she didn't do anything to this new car / -- and - as she backed / - there was an unpleasant crunching sound / and she slapped on the brakes / and looked around frantically / - and realised / that she hadn't opened the gates / that let onto the main road you see / - and she'd just backed out...

The story goes on for some time, but the point is already made by this extract. The story was highly successful, as a monologue, judging by the laughter and counter-comment which came from the listeners (especially the female ones). But, from a grammatical point of view, where shall the sentence boundaries be drawn? At one extreme, it might be argued that the whole thing (the story goes on for nearly two minutes) is one enormous sentence, with clauses and phrases being linked together by a wide range of conjunctions, especially *and*. But the concept of a sentence extending over several pages of transcript is not one which appeals to many people. Alternatively, we could argue that each piece linked by *and* is a sentence - however, this solution doesn't work well, as it would result in (for example) *and opened the door* as a sentence. And it is difficult to see how any intermediate position can be imposed on the utterance with consistency. On the other hand, it is not difficult to see how this piece of language "works" - the balanced use of

connecting words and phrases (such as *you see*), and the important structuring role of intonation, rhythm, and pause. If there is any grammatical unit which seems to be organising this kind of speech, it is the clause, not the sentence. The concept of sentence does not seem to be so useful, with this material. It is not so obvious that we speak or think "in sentences", in intimate conversation.

The next step, of course, is a research exercise, to establish which kinds of linguistic unit best explain the way in which these speakers operate - how they process their language - and indeed, it is precisely this kind of activity which is carried on within present-day psycholinguistics. The English language scholar can make an important descriptive contribution to this study, by identifying which patterns are in common use, and analysing their properties. And here again, discussion in terms of language change is beside the point, as can be seen by looking briefly at a highly significant feature of this material - the use of "comment clauses" (*you know, you see, mind you, etc.*). These are very much the kind of utterances which attract the criticism of BBC letter-writers, because they are commonly used as non-fluencies which attempt to cover up unclear thinking and lack of confidence. Speakers often overuse them, and this promotes irritability on the part of the listener. Comment clauses are especially prone to criticism when they are overused in formal linguistic contexts, where listeners expect high standards of construction and fluency. And it is not uncommon to hear people bemoan the increased use of such features 'these days'.

Again, I do not know whether there has been any real increase in the frequency of comment clauses, as there are no comparable recordings from a generation ago. But I do not think it is right to issue a blanket condemnation of such features, as people sometimes do. Informal conversation presents a rather different setting from formal speech, and the same standards of precision and planning do not apply. When people are at their linguistic ease, when no one is listening critically to how things are put, when there is no alien audience, then different rules govern behaviour. Forms such as *you know*, in these circumstances, come into their own as a way of preserving the fluency, informality and continuity of informal speech. They give speakers a breathing space, while they work out what to say next, or consider whether what they have just said is clear enough. At the same time, they give listeners a breathing space, too, as they process the information they have just received, and decide whether and how to acknowledge it. A point which is often not appreciated, moreover, is that forms such as *you see* are strictly controlled by rules of pronunciation, grammar, semantics, and

pragmatics. They certainly cannot be used randomly. For example, at the beginning of a sentence, *you see* has a rapid rhythm and a high rising pitch, and adds a softening stylistic force to the utterance. Compare *That answer's wrong* and *You see, that answer's wrong*. There is very little stress on *you* (it is often represented in writing as *y'*). The clause is likely to be followed by a statement, and not usually by a question (*You see, is it raining?*) or a command (*You see, shut the door*) or an exclamation (*You see, damn!*). And where it goes in a sentence is governed by quite strict semantic considerations - try putting it between any two words in the present sentence, for example. May we say, *for you see example?* or *try putting you see it?*

People sometimes say that conversational English "lacks grammar" - by which they seem to mean that it does not display the kind of complex embeddings found in the written language. Certainly, conversational grammar is in many respects more loosely structured than written grammar - as the above example illustrates - but it does not thereby lack grammar. On the contrary, when one examines the way such clauses as *you see* are used, it becomes apparent that there is a great deal of grammar to be discovered - but it is a very different kind of grammar from that usually presented in traditional accounts. And it is a grammar where the prosody of speech has a very important role to play.

Features of connectivity, whether in pronunciation or grammar, are by far the most distinctive characteristics of conversational speech, and reflect the essential informality of the situation. They are not to be interpreted as features of language change. They are too pervasive for that. When linguistic change manifests itself, it is invariably of local application. For example, there are several changes in preferred stress patterning taking place in contemporary English, such as *dispute* vs *dispute* or *controverisy* vs *controversy*. Change is also affecting certain segments, such as the fronting of the first element in the diphthong /ou/ as in *go* - shown in Gimson's transcription as /əʊ/ - or the trend to use glottalization on final plosives, so that *hot* appears as [hɒʔ]. In grammar, there is the trend this century to omit the article in generic descriptions - *As preacher and poet, Smith has been a success* - where previous usage would have had *As a preacher and a poet...* Anyone who wants to develop a sense of which areas of language are changing has only to consult one of the many guides to current usage (a recent example of this genre is Crystal, 1991). Areas of controversy (whether praised, condemned, or simply described) are often an index of underlying language change. Vocabulary, of course, offers hundreds of specific instances - as chronicled in such useful publications as Ayto

(1989). But these cases do not equate with the very general effects which are observed when we compare formal and informal speech. A language change which affects the whole of a structural system - the whole of the sound system, for example - is rare indeed. A case occurred in the "Great Vowel Shift" of Middle English. In grammar, we have to look as far back as late Old English to find a comparable example, in the shift from an inflectional to a word-order based system.

Interestingly, I think there is evidence of pervasive language change taking place in English at present, though how far it will manifest itself is still by no means clear. I cite two examples. The first is a consequence of the great increases in social mobility which have taken place in recent decades. Many people now change their place of work several times in a lifetime. Many millions commute. The result is the development of styles of speech which betray the influence of several accents and dialects - "mongrel" varieties, as they are sometimes called. My own speech is a case in point, having been brought up in Wales and Liverpool, then studying in London, and living thereafter in Wales, Reading, and again Wales. The politest thing you can say about my accent is that it is inconsistent, and about my intuition that it lacks confidence. I know what I do because I have analysed it, not because I have much instinct about it. I know, for example, that I vary in my use of short and long /a/, in such words as *bath* (traditionally short /a/ in the north and long /ɑ:/ in the south). Indeed, I sometimes vary the sound even in the same word, in different contexts - saying *example* with an /a/ but *for example* with an /ɑ:/, for example. I know I say both controversy and controversy. You can hear this variation if you listen to any of my radio recordings, and my generous listeners do not hesitate to point out my inconsistencies. All heart, some people. But I also notice that I am by no means alone. Indeed, I have the impression that the amount of inconsistency is increasing. The exposure to foreign varieties of English (American and Australian are currently very strong in the UK, for instance) must surely be increasing the pressure on British accents to vary. I have heard several such forms in the speech of my teenage son and his friends, for example, all of them I imagine picked up from a regular dose of the television soap *Neighbours* and the works of Paul Hogan, notably in *Crocodile Dundee*. A case in point is the use of the Australian high rising tone on information statements (as in *I've just seen a film about natural ↑childbirth* - meaning, "I assume you know about natural childbirth, but if you don't, please stop me"). This tone comes and goes in his speech now, so that I have no idea whether he is asking me a question or not.

□ If inconsistency of this kind is indeed on the increase, this is surely a matter of great significance? The one thing you could say about traditional accents and dialects was that they were consistent systems. Indeed, the whole of classical philology was predicated on the assumption that linguistic systems were consistent - that people spoke in essentially the same way from one day to the next and from one social setting to the next. I have no idea how far the trend towards inconsistency can go before the power of the rule-governed linguistic system asserts itself, but it has already gone further than I would have expected. Whether this will affect mutual intelligibility in a fundamental way remains to be seen.

□ There is already one linguistic change which *has* fundamentally affected mutual intelligibility, and this is to be observed in the development of many new international varieties of English - especially those in the Indian subcontinent, in the West Indies, and in parts of West Africa. These varieties are emerging with a radically different rhythmical system from that found in other varieties. British and American English, as many pronunciation textbooks tell us, use a stress-timed rhythm - the "tum-te-tum" pattern familiar from traditional English poetry ("The curfew tolls the knell of parting day...") and found routinely (though much less metrically) in everyday conversation. This isochronous rhythm distinguishes English from, say, French, where the rhythm is said to be "syllable-timed" - a "rat-a-tat" machine-gun-like rhythm. However, the main characteristic of Indian English is precisely its syllable-timed characteristics - presumably a reflex of the influence of the native languages of the area. An Indian speaker is very likely to produce a polysyllabic word with equal stresses on each syllable - *con-se-quen-c-es* - rat-tat-tat-tat - and similarly (though with very different pitch movement) a speaker from the West Indies. This makes their speech very difficult for a British speaker to understand, and indeed it is commonplace to hear RP speakers comment that they are totally unable to understand the conversational speech of people from these parts of the world. Whether syllable-timed speech will ever influence traditional British or American rhythm it is too soon to say. All I know is that my son can imitate West Indian "rap" speech perfectly, in a way which I cannot. When awareness becomes so conscious, can new production be far behind?

This short paper is essentially about fact and fiction, about the reality and the stereotype in English language investigation. It is very difficult for foreign language learners to develop a "nose" for the realities - to sense stylistic differences, to spot when native speakers are daring to

play with their language. Conversely, it is very easy for foreign learners to stay with the stereotyped accounts of the language as presented in traditional teaching texts. When someone reared on the latter encounters the former, there is more than simply a linguistic shock - there is, I have observed, a ready tendency to misinterpret, and to assume that it is the language which has changed, rather than themselves. The only way out of this quandary is for teachers to ensure that their students are regularly exposed to as wide a range of linguistic variety as they can get hold of, so that their norms of listening comprehension become more catholic and flexible. They can, of course, in addition ensure that their students read widely from the works of those who have long been aware of the importance of language variety and who have done a great deal to promote the sophisticated levels of language awareness to which we all aspire. The present *Festschrift* is a testimonial to one who has done more than most to move us unerringly in that direction.

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