

LANGUAGE MATTERS

Reflecting linguistic change

David Crystal

For language teachers, linguistic change is both a necessity and a nuisance. It is a necessity, because only by paying close attention to linguistic change can we guarantee our students an encounter with language which is realistic, relevant, and up-to-date. But it is a nuisance, because the arrival of new forms can mean the departure of old ones, and this raises the twin spectres of rethinking well-established lesson content and of fostering a positive attitude towards relearning in the student. The only consolation – if consolation it is – is that linguistic change is unavoidable, an intrinsic feature of language, deep-rooted in its social milieu. Try to stop linguistic change, as purist commentators recommend Canutely, and you have to stop social change. It is easier to stop the tide coming in.

If change were over and done with, in a moment, the situation would not be so bad. This does occasionally happen. On October 3 1957, no-one – apart from a few scientists – had heard of the word sputnik. On October 4 1957 it was everywhere. Vocabulary change is, sometimes, like that – sudden and definitive. Unfortunately, most forms of linguistic change take time to become established – often months, and very often years. There is thus a period of uncertainty and indecision, from the time when we first encounter a new form – a new pronunciation, a new grammatical construction, a new word or meaning – to the time when we can make confident normative judgments about how it is used. And during this time it is not possible to give a straight answer to a straight question. Student: 'How do you say X?' Teacher: 'It depends.' Or even: 'Don't know'.

Predicting Change

There are in fact hundreds of points of usage in a language where the only possible – let alone honest – answer is to say 'don't know'. The point is that nobody knows. What level on the beach will the incoming tide reach tomorrow? Will the wavelets hit that pebble? Who can say? It depends on the wind, on whether something unusual has happened deep out in the ocean, on ripples set up by a group of jetski enthusiasts – or maybe someone will simply move the pebble. All of these influences have their parallels in language. Oceans do not stop the pressures of linguistic change, as the impact of American English on the languages of Europe has repeatedly shown.

Language change is as unpredictable as the tides. We all recognize our linguistic past, but it is never possible to predict our linguistic future. Try it. Which phrases will become a cliché next year. What will be the top Christian names in the year 2000? Which words will be the next ones to be affected by a stress shift (of the controversy – controversy type)? Which prefix or suffix is going to be the next to generate new vogue words (as happened to

mega- and -friendly in the 1980s)? We can always tell when it's happened. With linguistic change, it's only possible to be wise after the event.

Change in Vocabulary

The reason why linguistic change is so unpredictable is that it is in the hands of so many people. In their minds, rather. And it is such an unconscious process. In the case of English, we are talking about some 400 million mother-tongue minds, plus an equivalent number of second-language minds. No single person can make a planned, confident impact on such masses. Individuals have sometimes tried with vocabulary – deliberately inventing a new word, and trying to get it established in the language. Just occasionally, it works: blurb is a good example, invented by US humorist Gelett Burgess earlier this century. Most of the time it doesn't. No one knows why, in the 15th century, the newly created words meditation and prolixity eventually came into the language, but abusion and tenebrous did not.

The books of new words, published from time to time, show the hazardous future of neologisms very well. Take the one edited by John Ayto in 1989, the Longman Register of New Words. It contained about 1200 new words or meanings which had been used in various spoken or written sources between 1986 and 1988 – words like chatline, cashless, and chocoholic. But how many of these will become a permanent part of English? It is too soon to say, though already several seem very dated: do people still say cyberphobic? do they still chicken-dance? did condom fatigue (analogous to compassion fatigue) or cluster suicide ever catch on?

In an article written for the International Journal of Lexicography in 1993, 'Desuetude among new English words', John Algeo studied 3,565 words which had been recorded as newly entering the language between 1944 and 1976. He found that as many as 58% of them were not recorded in dictionaries a generation later, and must thus be presumed to have fallen out of use. As he says: 'Successful coinages are the exception; unsuccessful ones the rule, because the human impulse to creative playfulness produces more words than a society can sustain'.

Change in Grammar

If it is difficult being definite about change in vocabulary, it is next to impossible to be definite about the much rarer changes which take place in grammar. These changes are in any case extremely slowly moving, and restricted to very small points of grammatical construction. There hasn't been a major change in English grammar for centuries. It is of course always possible to tell which grammatical features are in the process of change,

continued



because these are the ones which give rise to controversies over usage, and people will write to The Daily Telegraph or Radio Times about them. Contentious contemporary examples include the use of the past tense vs the present perfect (I've just eaten vs I just ate), the shifting uses of auxiliary verbs (such as may vs might or usedn't to vs. didn't use to), and the variations in noun number in such words as formula, data, and criteria. Not all points of grammatical usage reflect linguistic change, though. People have been complaining about the split infinitive for about 200 years, but the use of that construction is found well before the first prescriptive grammars were written, and will continue well after the last ones go out of print.

A Dynamic View of Language

There is only one certainty, and this is that language will always be changing. If so, then it would seem sensible to replace any static conception we may have of language by a dynamic one. A static view ignores the existence of change, tries to hide it from the student, and presents students with a frozen or fossilized view of language. Once a rule is prescribed, no alternatives to it are tolerated. A dynamic view of language is one which recognizes the existence of change, informs the student about it, and focuses on those areas where change is ongoing.

And where is all this change? It is to be found in variation – in the alternative usages to be encountered in all domains of linguistic life. International and intranational regional and social accents and dialects, occupational varieties, features which express contrasts of age, gender, and formality, features which distinguish speech from writing – these are the potential diagnostic points for future linguistic change. The more we can increase students' awareness of contemporary language variation, therefore, the more we can give them a foundation for understanding and accepting linguistic change. The title of a contemporary academic journal suggests the interdependence of these notions: Language Variation and Change.

What Language Teachers Can Do

Many teachers, at least some of the time, try to hold a mirror up to (linguistic) nature – to let students see something of the organized chaos which is out there. This is as it should be. Trying to protect students from it, by pretending it isn't there, does no-one any service. We need to find ways of reflecting it, but at the same time filtering it, so that students are not dazzled by the spectrum of alternatives which are part of sociolinguistic reality. In many cases in grammar and pronunciation, the choice is fairly straightforward, between just two alternatives, such as British vs American or formal vs informal. I do not accept the conventional wisdom that students will be 'confused' by being told about both. Contrariwise, I do believe that to distort reality, by pretending that the variation does not exist, is to introduce a level of artifice which brings difficulties sooner or later.

And it may be sooner. Adopting a dynamic perspective is not just desirable; it is urgent. The reason is that the pace of linguistic change, at least for spoken English, is increasing. As English comes to be adopted by more and more people around the world, an unprecedented range of new varieties has emerged (chiefly since the 1960s) to reflect new national identities. The differences between British and American English pronunciation, for example, are minor compared with those which distinguish these dialects from the new intra-national norms of, say, Indian and West African English. When the English speakers of these countries numbered only a few tens of thousands, there was no threat to the traditional British or American models. But now that there are almost as many people speaking English in India as there are in Britain, an unfamiliar factor has entered the equation. What effect this will have on the balance of (linguistic) power, it is too soon to say – but the way that Caribbean rapping spread around the globe in the 1970s and the way that Australian English has travelled through media programmes in the 1980s shows that even relatively small dialect populations can have an influence out of proportion of their size.

None of this has yet had any real impact on standard written English, as encountered in print. There is very little difference, for example, in the language of newspapers printed in Britain, the USA, Australia, or India. But as far as speech is concerned, and informal speech in particular, the future is one of increasing variety, and thus change. The sooner we prepare our students to cope with this diverse new world, the better.

References

- Algeo, J. 1993. Desuetude among New English words. *International Journal of Lexicography* 6 (4), 281-93.
- Ayto, J. 1989. *The Longman register of new words*. Harlow: Longman.
- Sankoff, D., Labov, W. and Kroch, A. (eds) 1989-. *Language Variation and Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.