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JEAN AITCHISON

Worrying about English

Jean Aitchison är verksam vid London School of Economics språkcentrum. Hon är författare till flera välkända böcker om psykolingvistik och språkförändring: *The Articulate Mammal* (1976, ny uppl. 1989), *Language Change: Progress or Decay* (1981, ny uppl. 1991), *Words in the Mind* (1987). Här diskuterar hon den ofta framförda åsikten att engelska språket går mot förfall.

'The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much... that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it'.
Reuben Glass, *The Guardian* (newspaper) July 1982

English newspapers publish repeated complaints that our language is decaying. Why? At a time when English is a major world language, is it really crumbling away at its heart, in England? Or are the complainers simply mistaken? And, whatever the answer, does worrying about language serve a useful purpose? These are the questions discussed below.

Inherited Complaints

Inevitably, language is always changing. This is a fact of life, which has been known for a long time. In the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer noted that 'in forme of speche is chaunge', and the same is true today. There is no more reason to bemoan language change than there is to complain that humpback whales alter their songs every year, or that songthrushes incorporate new elements into their melodies. But change is one thing. Decay is another. Is British English changing for the worse, as some people argue? On investigation, it turns out that the laments form part of a history of complaining, which goes back several centuries.

'Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration' wrote the lexicographer Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his famous *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). This statement shows that pessimism about language has a long historical tradition, which was particularly prevalent in Johnson's time. Eighteenth cen-

tury complaints are perhaps understandable. Around 1700, English was in a fairly fluid state, and this fluidity existed alongside admiration for the apparently fixed grammar of Latin. There was therefore a conscious desire to lay down firm precepts for English, as well as a belief that some people, somewhere, knew what 'correct' English was—as shown by Dean Swift's letter to the Lord Treasurer (1712) urging the formation of an academy to regulate language usage, noting that 'many gross improprieties' could be found in the language of 'even the best authors'. 'Correct English' was hard to define, but in practice upper and middle class speech, artificially supplemented by imitations of various Latin usages, was often praised as 'good'. 'Language lamenters' therefore are not a new phenomenon.

In the twentieth century, the majority of complaints reflect beliefs about language which are partly inherited from the eighteenth century 'lamenters', and are partly due to a failure to understand how and why language changes. Above all, three overlapping accusations recur: first, change is due to ignorance; second, change is due to laziness; third, change is 'caught' from linguistically sick people. These mistaken beliefs can be called the 'crumbling castle' fallacy, the 'damp spoon' fallacy, and the 'infectious disease' fallacy. These are outlined below.

The 'Crumbling Castle' View

This treats the English language as a beautiful old building with gargoyles and pinnacles which needs to be preserved intact by successive generations of users. 'Language does not belong to the people, or at least in the sense in which *belong* is usually construed... *Belong*... should be construed in the sense that parks, national forests, monuments, and public utilities are said to belong to the people: available for properly respectful use but not for defacement and destruction', argues the American John Simon (1981). In his view, 'Language, for the most part, changes out of ignorance'—mostly ignorance of its 'correct' structure.

This view itself crumbles when examined carefully. It implies that the castle of English was gradually and lovingly assembled until it reached a point of maximum splendour at some unspecified time in the past. Yet there was no year when language achieved some peak of perfection, nor have those who claim that English is declining ever suggested what this date might have been. Moreover, many of the supposedly 'ignorant' constructions turn out to have been in use for centuries: 'I am irritated by the frequent use of the words *different to* on radio and other programmes', complained a letter in a daily newspaper, whose writer presumed *different from* to be the old, 'correct' form. But *different to* has been around for several hundred years:

'How much different art thou to this curs'd spirit here' (Thomas Dekker, dramatist, 1603). 'The party of prisoners lived... with comforts very different to those which were awarded to the poor wretches there' (Thackeray, 1852). Attempts to impose *from* as the standard may originally have been due to a misguided attempt to make English behave more like Latin. Nowadays, it seems quite pointless to judge one language by the standards of another. So *to* has quite as much claim as *from* to be the 'true' form of English. The notion of a past 'golden age' is therefore illusory in this case, as in many others.

Furthermore, the 'beautiful building' notion presupposes that rigid systems, once assembled, are better than changing ones. This is untrue. In the animal world, flexibility is a great advantage, and animals who adhere to fixed systems often lose out. Consider the blue-footed booby, a sea-bird which lives on the Galapagos Islands. This gannet behaves according to a rule of thumb: 'In the nest feed it; out of the nest ignore it'. So if a young booby falls out of its nest, it inevitably dies, even when the nest is at ground level. A less rigid system might allow the parent boobies to assess whether or not the squawking displaced youngster was one of its own, and if so, push it back into the nest. But the booby's rigid system does not allow for this.

The ever-shifting nature of language keeps it flexible. It can cope with changing social circumstances, as with the rush of new phrases relating to finance in recent years, such as *golden parachute*, a payment to someone who is dismissed but is given a large sum of redundancy money, which allows the person to float gently down to the problem of being unemployed. Another is *gazundering*, the withdrawing from an agreed house purchase, often with the hope of forcing the vendor to lower the price.

'Crumbling castle' supporters might argue that such additions are trivial and allowable, as long as older forms are preserved alongside them. But in the long run, this is impossible, as is shown by the increasing loss of irregular past tenses, which provide a clear example of how change often comes about. Three interwoven processes whittle the old, irregular forms away. First, new forms receive regular inflections, as in the new word *bland out* 'become conformist': 'Those that didn't burn out, *blanded out*' (*New Musical Express*). Second, new uses of old forms tend to acquire regular endings, as in *shoot up* of drugs: 'Someone passed me this syringe... and I shooted up' (*The Guardian*). Third, people gradually start to forget the 'correct' irregular forms, especially of infrequently used verbs. In this century, *gelded* and *girded* have mostly replaced *gelt* and *girt* as the past tense forms of *geld* and *gird*, and many people do not realize there has been a change. Eventually, even more past tense irregularities are likely to be wiped away as new, regular forms flood in. But

this is not disintegration, it is therapy. Gradual regularization is one of the mechanisms by which language reorganizes itself in order to lower the memory load. Neatening up of patterns is therefore inevitable and essential. It is one way in which the human mind avoids becoming overloaded with unpredictable forms. Yet complaints about 'wrong' endings persist among the 'lamenters'.

Apparent confusion between singular and plural forms is another common cause for concern. The Italian word *graffito* 'scratch' has been in use in English for well over a century, usually in the plural *graffiti*, meaning 'scratches or scribbles on walls'. Recently, this plural has begun to be treated as if it were the singular: *Graffiti is disgusting* proclaims an official notice in a London bus. 'The solecism *a graffiti*' is 'surprising and distressing' to 'anyone with a respect for language', according to a letter in the *Daily Telegraph*. But most English plurals now end with *s*, and so the treatment of *graffiti* as singular is in line with the general neatening up of plurals, a process which has been going on for several centuries.

There is a smidgeon of truth in the notion that ignorance of language is deplorable, though this is not particularly related to language change. Blameworthy ignorance is lack of awareness of one another's variety of language , and of linguistic knowledge in general. The verb *kill* is often quoted in this context. In some varieties of English, particularly Black English, *kill* means 'hit'. A shout of *Kill 'im* is reputed to have triggered off racial fights, and even accusations of incitement to murder, when nothing worse than a hard punch might have been intended. And one cannot say that Black English is 'wrong' in this case. If one adopts the 'crumbling building' view of language, this meaning of *kill* is the 'correct' one, since when the word first appeared in English, it apparently meant 'hit'. A further useful piece of linguistic knowledge, which might profit a lot of people, is that verbs meaning *hit* and *kill* often interchange and overlap. Our word *slay* is supposedly related to the first section of the word *sledgehammer*.

The 'Damp Spoon' View

The image comes from a writer in *The Guardian* newspaper, who has a 'queasy distaste' for the 'vulgarity' of some current usages, 'precisely the kind of distaste I feel at seeing a damp spoon dipped in the sugar bowl or butter spread with the bread-knife'. She implies that general sloppiness and laziness are the cause.

But what counts as laziness? Sloppy pronunciation is a common complaint among the 'lamenters'. Technically, this could only refer to a lack of muscular tension. If so, truly sloppy speech occurs primarily in the slurred pronunciation of drunken people. Yet their bumbles and mumbles are fairly unlike the alterations found in normal

change. Drunk people lengthen consonants, taking a long time to say a word like *locomotive*, which gets dragged out to *lllocccommmotttivvve*. They are also likely to pronounce *s* and *ch* as *sh*, so *soup* will probably sound like *shoop*, and *chips* like *ships*. These effects are due to a temporary lack of muscular coordination, and are not happening in English as a whole.

Change does not normally involve any lack of muscular coordination. And in present day English, a pronunciation change often branded as 'sloppiness' probably involves more effort, rather than less. Nowadays, it is common to hear *foo(t), bu(tt)er, ca(t),* with a 'glottal stop' (a stoppage of the airstream with no actual sound) in place of an earlier *t*. Whatever the reason for the increasing loss of *t*, it cannot be mere sloppiness. A glottal stop in a word such as *bu(tt)er* is probably harder to pronounce than *t*, because it requires a high degree of muscular tension.

Another pronunciation change sometimes claimed to be 'laziness', is the omission in spoken speech of the past tense-ending in phrases such as *Pamela jump(ed) back, Peter climb(ed) carefully down.* But these omissions enable speech to be speeded up, and are unlikely to destroy the meaning. So there is a trade-off between smooth, fast speech, and slow, careful, jerky speech. Faster speech involves more words per minute, and cannot justifiably be classed as 'laziness'. Of course, fast speech phenomena occur above all in casual conversation. But informal speech is not intrinsically 'worse' than formal speech, it is just different. Human beings naturally adapt their speech to suit the situation: they slow it down for babies and strangers, and they speed it up for friends. Eventually, some of these fast speech changes will creep into all types of speech. Hardly anyone nowadays pronounces *handbag* as it is written, almost everybody says *hambag*. Once a change of this type has occurred, hearers often judge the older, outmoded form to be pedantic and less 'streamlined'.

Several other types of changes are condemned as sloppiness by the 'lamenters'. One of these is the use of singular subjects with plural *they*: 'If anyone wants a drink, they can get one from the kitchen'. But this is not modern slovenliness, it is a usage of long standing: 'God send every one their heart's desire' (Shakespeare), 'It's enough to drive one out of their senses' (Bernard Shaw), 'Nobody likes a mind quicker than their own' (Scott Fitzgerald). Furthermore, it is a positive advantage in many people's opinion, since it avoids the use of supposedly generic *he*. There is now plenty of sociolinguistic evidence that both men and women assume that generic *he* refers primarily to men, even when they have been told that this is not so. So rather than sloppiness, this is a change in favour of a fair and democratic language.

There is perhaps one grain of truth in the notion that people are 'lazy' in their speech, though it is a type of laziness which is unlikely to cause change: this is when people are too 'lazy' or insensitive to tune in to the needs of others. This could apply equally well to a teenager gabbling modern slang to her grandmother, as it could to a retired colonel who uses military phrases to his toddler grandson. Sensitive people are able to adapt their vocabulary, their grammar, and their accent, to suit the occasion.

The 'Infectious Disease' View

'The wholesale spread of corruption may surely be ascribed to mere infection, to the careless, unthinking assimilation of the floating germs which envelop us', argued the writer of an article entitled *Polluting our language* (Douglas Bush, 1972). He was expressing a view which is widespread, that we somehow 'catch' changes from those around us, and that we ought to fight such diseases: 'Legislative anxiety about cigarette advertising did not extend to cancerous grammar', he notes.

Change is indeed brought about through social contact. But the 'disease' metaphor falls down, on two counts. First, change can only take hold if the language is predisposed to move in a particular direction. So social contact can only trigger or push onwards an alteration which was already likely to happen. Second, changes happen subconsciously.

The 'predisposition' factor is often overlooked. At any time, in any language, there are a number of potential points at which change could occur. Some of these are therapeutic, such as the pattern neatening changes already discussed for past tenses and plurals. Others are 'natural changes' which are inherent in the human vocal apparatus and mind. Consonants at the end of words, for example, are a recurring weak spot in language, since ends of words are inevitably pronounced with less force than beginnings. Over time, they gradually erode. This has happened in French, Italian, numerous dialects of Chinese, and various Polynesian languages. It is currently occurring in British English, primarily in London and the Southeast, but also in Scotland. *T* at the end of words such as *boo(t), bi(t)* is often replaced by a 'glottal stop', (as already mentioned), and this is also spreading to *k* and *p*. Eventually, the glottal stop is likely to disappear. Although speakers are 'catching' this change primarily from Londoners, it was a predisposition in British English which was ready to be implemented, as shown by its simultaneous occurrence in Glasgow. Interestingly, British people who deplore this change often praise languages without consonants at the end of words as being 'beautiful'.

Changes are often subconsciously desired by those who implement them. This, again, is often not recognized. Changes involve prestige which may be overt (obvious) or covert (hidden). Changes with overt prestige usually start in formal language styles, with people trying to imitate those they regard as their social betters, or to follow usages they imagine to be 'correct'. For example, the pronunciation of *-ing* as *-in* was once widespread: in 1700, Swift rhymed *fitting* with *spit in*, indicating that *fittin'* was the probable pronunciation. But attention to the spelling convinced people they 'ought' to say *-ing*, and so the pronunciation slowly, and partly consciously, shifted. Changes with covert prestige usually start in informal language styles, with people subconsciously imitating the speech of those they admire, as when teenagers pick up the accent of their favourite pop-star. In these circumstances, the notion of 'disease' is not particularly useful, even though change can be regarded as catching in the sense that that it is passed on from person to person.

Ways of Worrying

Overall, therefore, the 'lamenters' are simply wrong. Language is not decaying, it is just changing, like it always did. Decay would mean a breakdown in communication, which is not happening. The points complained about do not generally cause any disruption. Most of them are examples of normal, recurring processes of language change, some of which are neatening up the language.

But does worrying about language in this way serve a useful purpose? Probably not. 'Lamenters' reinforce prejudices, particularly against regional accents and stylistic variations. This could be harmful. And there is one greater danger. While they distract people with complaints over trivia, such as plural endings, they divert attention from a far more serious language threat. This is the manipulation of people's lives by the skilled use of language, as in so-called 'Nukespeak', language which refers to nuclear devices. Politicians do not talk very much about *nuclear bombs*. They tend to speak of *nuclear deterrents*, or *nuclear shields* or *nuclear umbrellas*. The possession of such devices may be useful, maybe not. Whatever the reality, many people do not realize their potential danger, simply because of the protective imagery surrounding them. This sense of false security is purely a function of the language, and is not based on an informed knowledge of the situation.

A more recent example is the 'surgical' language of the Gulf War. There was talk of 'laser-guided missiles', air-strikes which have 'pinpoint accuracy', and 'precision' bombing. These phrases lead people to believe that war has now changed into an attack on buildings, rather than humans. The whole affair seems like a video game. But

this is false. Humans get hurt in these attacks. Whether or not the war is justified is not the issue. The point is that many people do not realize that humans are dying, because the language used obscures this. Once again, judgements are being made on the basis of misleading language, not informed knowledge. In the long run it may be more important to detect manipulation of this type than to worry about *t* at the end of words, or the plurality of *graffiti*.

As the writer A.P. Herbert once said: 'Worry about words... For whatever else you may do, you will be using words always. All day, and every day, words matter'. But, he might have added, it is important to worry about them in the right way.

NOTES

Many of the points made here about language change are discussed at greater length in:
Aitchison, J. (1991). *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
The issue of standardization, which has not been discussed here, is dealt with in:
Milroy, J. & Milroy, L. (1991). *Authority in Language*. Revised edition. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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LINDSAY SMITH

New Trends in Shakespeare Criticism

Surveying the large body of critical work on Shakespeare produced during the fifteen year period 1975-1990 we can identify some of the most innovative and significant scholarship as occurring in particular theoretical and political areas: feminist, new historicist, cultural materialist, to name but three. These approaches have utilised larger develoments in critical and cultural theory such as Marxism, post-structuralism, anthropology, psychoanalysis and cultural studies which gained momentum particularly during the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, much recent Shakespeare criticism shares a pervasive inter-disciplinary bias such that, for example, some feminist criticism has taken a materialist position from debates within cultural studies, while cultural materialist approaches have attributed prime importance to issues of gender and sexuality. At the same time, within each of the aforementioned critical camps there has been considerable diversity generating continuous debate and development, and the challenging and overturning of former positions.

The inter-disciplinary bias that characterises new developments in Shakespeare studies as a whole — a radical intersection of what had been previously considered incompatible disciplines — means that some of the most exciting and influential work has been produced by writers who are not primarily 'Shakespeareans', and there has thus been a significant increase in the number of multi-authored collections dealing with aspects of Shakespeare in very different historical, cultural and theoretical contexts. The publications of *Representing Shakespeare* (1980, eds. M. Schwartz and C. Kahn), was followed in 1985 by three popular collections much used by students and higher education teachers alike: *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (eds. P. Parker and G. Hartmann), *Alternative Shakespeares* (ed. J. Drakakis) and *Political Shakespeare* (eds. J. Dollimore and A. Sinfield). These were closely followed by *Shakespeare Reproduced* (1987, eds. J. Howard and M. O'Connor) and *The Shakespeare Myth* (1988, ed. G. Holderness).

All of these collections claimed to be signalling a break with established canons of Shakespeare criticism characterised by liberal humanist conceptions of stable texts of unquestionable universal significance. They each identified part of their objective as a contestation of dominant meanings attributed to Shakespeare, and to what Shakespeare had come to represent in various cultural spaces, and to interrogation of a wider Shakespearean 'myth'. Such an interrogation thus