

- **Jean Aitchison** - Reith Lecture
- Wednesday 7 February 1996

Is our language sick? You might think so, judging from the complaints: "The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much ... that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it," moaned a writer in a daily newspaper. "The language the world is crying out to learn is diseased in its own country" ranted another.

But why? English is a major world language: is it really in need of hospital treatment? A cobweb of old ideas ensnares people as they think about language - any language, and this must be swept away. Webs, especially cobwebs, may entangle. But webs themselves are not a tangle. They have a pattern. Nature forces humans to weave the language web in a particular way, whatever language they speak. We are free only within a preset framework. I'll be looking at some key topics, how language changes, how it began, how children learn it, and how we remember words.

But first, the cobweb of worries must be removed. This envelopes all of language, though especially language change. Change is one thing. Decay is another. Is British English really changing for the worse, as some people argue?

As the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure said over 75 years ago: "No other subject has spawned more absurd ideas, more prejudices, more illusions or more myths". Things haven't changed very much since then. On inspection, the web of worries surrounding change turns out to be largely traditional, somewhat like the worries each new generation of parents has about its offspring. Laments about language go back for centuries.

A 14th-century monk complained that the English practised strange "wlaffyng, chytering, haryng, and garryng grisbittyng" (strange stammering, chattering, snarling and grating toothgnashing). And the complaints continued. "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 published in 1755.

Eighteenth-century worries are perhaps understandable. Around 1700, the seemingly fixed grammar of Latin aroused great admiration, at a time when English was in a fairly fluid state. Many people hoped to lay down similar firm precepts for English, and assumed that somebody, somewhere, knew what "correct" English was. Jonathan Swift wrote a famous letter to the Lord Treasurer in 1712 urging the formation of an academy to regulate language usage. But "correct English" was as hard to define then as it is now. In practice upper and middle class speech was often praised as "good", artificially supplemented by precepts from logic and imitations of various Latin usages.

All languages have their "rules" in the sense of recurring subconscious patterns. In English, we usually place the verb inside the sentence, and say: "The spider caught the fly". In Welsh, the verb comes first: "Caught the spider the fly" (*Daliodd y pryf copyn y gleren*), and in Turkish it comes last, "The spider the fly caught". Without these rules, communication would break down. But real "rules" need to be distinguished from artificially imposed ones. For example, an old and illogical belief that logic should govern language has led in English to a ban on the double negative, as in I don't know nothing, which is now standardly: "I don't know anything". This is odd, because in most languages of the world, the more negatives, the stronger the negation.

Another artificially imposed rule involves "different to". "I am irritated by the frequent use of the words 'different to' on radio and other programmes," ran a letter to a daily newspaper. "In my schooldays of 50 years ago we were taught that things were alike to and different from. Were our teachers so terribly ignorant?" Well, different to is found even in the 17th century. "How much different art thou to this curs'd spirit here," said the dramatist Thomas Dekker in 1603. The imposition of "different from" is a misguided attempt to make English behave more like Latin. But it's pointless to judge one language by the standards of another. Some of these artificial rules have been passed down from generation to generation. Their main effect is to make people insecure, to worry that they might not be using the right phrase, just as they might get anxious that they are not using the right type of spoon for soup.

In 1985, bad English, whatever that might be, was even linked to crime by Lord Tebbit, then a key government figure. He said: "If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy ... at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime."

This tangled web of worries around language show that many people, including some of those who rule our country, are back in the dark ages over understanding how it works.

But it would be oversimple to lump all language worries together, and just dismiss them. The different strands of worry need to be teased out. Three overlapping accusations recur, which can be called the "damp spoon" syndrome, the "crumbling castle" view, and the "infectious disease" assumption.

The "damp spoon" image comes from a newspaper writer, 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 sloppiness and laziness cause much of language change.

The notion that change is due to laziness has been around a long time. The only truly lazy speech is drunken speech, where alcohol affects co-ordination. The omission in spoken speech of past tense endings is sometimes claimed to be laziness, as in "Pamela jump back" rather than "Pamela jumpED back". But these omissions enable speech to be speeded up, and are unlikely to destroy the meaning. Informal speech is not intrinsically "worse" than formal speech, it's just different. Humans 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. Only actors pronounce handbag as it is written. Almost everybody else says "hambag".

Let's move on to the "crumbling castle" view. This treats the English language as a beautiful old building with gargoyles and pinnacles which need to be preserved intact, as implied in statements by the writer John Simon: Language, he argues, should be treated like "parks, national forests, monuments, and public utilities ... available for properly respectful use but not for defacement or destruction".

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 no year can be found when language achieved some peak of perfection, like a vintage wine. 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 that adhere to fixed systems often lose out.

The ever-shifting nature of language keeps it flexible, so it can cope with changing social circumstances, as with the rush of new words relating to cars in the 20th century, such as the recent "autochondria" - from "automobile" and "hypochondria" - someone with excessive concern for the health of their car.

Neatening up also happens with nouns. Houses was once housen and shoes were shoen, parallel to oxen. Imported words get tidied up, too. 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".

The "infectious disease" view is that we somehow "catch" changes from those around us, and that we ought to fight such diseases. Change is indeed brought about through social contact, so the catching notion is not wrong. But the disease metaphor falls down. People pick up changes because they want to. They want to fit in with social groups, and they adapt their hairstyle, clothes, and language, to those of people they admire, as with the Jocks and Burnouts, teenagers in a suburban high school in Detroit. Adapting to those around is normal human behaviour. In Northern Ireland, east Belfast men and west Belfast women both showed a tendency to pronounce "grass" as "grawss" at a time when in theory, the two halves of Belfast barely talked to one another. What could have been happening? The mind boggles. But the explanation was quite simple. East Belfast men sometimes visited a city-centre store staffed by mainly west Belfast women. It's well known that shop assistants match their speech to that of their customers, and this is what was happening. The shop assistants were then transferring the pronunciation to their friends.

Changes aren't random. They take hold only if the language is predisposed to move in a particular direction. Social contact can trigger a change only if it was already likely to happen. At any time, in any language, a number of potential change-points exist. Consonants at the end of words are a recurring weak spot in languages, since ends of words are pronounced with less force than beginnings: it's Kick, not kiCK. In British English, "t" at the end of words is eroding, moving from street to stree(t) and in the long run, it'll be stree.

Over time, end-of-word consonants may largely disappear, as has happened in some dialects of Chinese, several Polynesian languages, and nearer at hand, in French and Italian, where most words now end in vowels: Una bottiglia di vino bianco, "a bottle of white wine". Oddly, people who dislike this change often praise languages such as Italian as being "beautiful" even though many Italian words are simply Latin without their endings: Italian vino, "wine", was once Latin vinum.

The media are often blamed for change, but their role is indirect. Newspapers can popularise new words such as "bonk", "yomp" and "wimp", and radio and television can influence attitudes towards language. These days, they send the sensible but indirect message that it's all right to talk in different ways: Lenny Henry, Janet Street-Porter, Cilla Black and others show that variety is the spice of linguistic life. Variety is the key to language change. Earlier in the century, an old mutation viewpoint prevailed, that some sounds slowly turned into others, like tadpoles gradually changing into frogs. According to a newer view, variant forms arise, each used in a different area or speech style. Then one of the newcomers gets used

more and more and gradually ousts the older form, like a young cuckoo heaving an existing bird out of the nest.

In some situations, a whole nestful of young cuckoos compete with each other and with older forms. They may squabble for a long time until one wins out. This process is clearest in the case of vocabulary. It happened with the word "partner", which is now the standard word for life-companion. But at one time numerous words competed: live-in lover, mate, and for heterosexuals, posslq, an acronym for "persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters".

Variation in speech is the norm. Our linguistic wardrobe contains a range of speech styles, which we suit to the occasion. Bus-conductors, bosses and babies need to be addressed in different ways. Change often happens when one particular variant expands its usage.

But which variants should be used where and when still causes arguments as sharp as barbed-wire, especially as nowadays being matey is often more important than being "proper", resulting in increasing approval of informal styles of speech, including swearing.

Meanwhile, the tangled web of worries around language shows how little most people know about it. Next week I'll go right back to the beginning and discuss the origin of language in the human species.

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