REITH LECTURES 1996: The Language Web

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Lecture 1: A Web of Worries

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Is our language sick? You might think so, judging from complaints in newspapers: "The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much . . . that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it." "The language the world is crying out to learn is diseased in its own country." "We are plagued with idiots on radio and television who speak English like the dregs of humanity, to the detriment of our children."

But why? At a time when English is a major world language, is it really in need of hospital treatment? A wide web of worries; a cobweb of old ideas ensnares people as they think about language - any language, and this must be swept away. But clearing the cobwebs is only the first stage. The Language Web is the title of all these lectures. Webs, especially cobwebs, may entangle. But webs themselves are not a tangle. They have a preordained overall pattern, though every one is different in its details. Nature forces humans to weave the language web in a particular way, whatever language they speak. We are free only within a preset framework, so liberty within limits will be a major theme. I will 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 envelops all of language, though especially language change. Yet humpbacked whales alter their songs every year and no-one has complained.

Naturally language changes all the time; this is a fact of life. In the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer noted that: "in forme of speche is chaunge" (language changes), and the same is true today. But change is one thing; decay is another. Is British English really changing for the worse, as some people argue?

Of course it isn't. Over 100 years ago, linguists - people who work on language - realised that different styles suit different occasions, but that no part of language is ever deformed or bad. People who dispute this are like cranks who argue that the world is flat. Yet flatter views about language are still widespread. 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 that 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 stammering, chattering, snarling and grating tooth-gnashing: "strange wlaffyng, chytering, harryng, and garryng grisbittyng". 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 itself 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. He complained that many "gross improprieties" could be found in the language of even the "best authors". 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. These invented rules often get confused with genuine language rules.

All languages have their own "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", and in Turkish it comes last, "The spider the fly caught" or "A bottle of good wine I want". Without these genuine rules, communication would break down. "Henry ate an octopus" does not mean the same as "An octopus ate Henry".

But genuine "rules" or "patterns" 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.

This was true in 13th century English. Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales said of the courteous knight roughly: "He never said no bad thing to nobody". In Chaucer's words:

> He nevere yet no vileyene ne sayde
> In all his lyf unto no maner wight
> He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.

The prohibition on double negatives may have begun with Robert Lowth, an 18th century Bishop of London, who wrote A Short Introduction to English Grammar. Perhaps his high status as a bishop led people to believe that his strictures on language were divinely inspired. The ban stuck. In the late 19th century, for example, an educator commented: "The student is instructed how contrary to reason is a double negative". Yet it never entirely disappeared. It is still found in some varieties of English, as in the old music hall song: "I don't not know no-one who don't want no nine inch nails. I don't not know no-one who don't want no nine inch nails. I know the King, I know the Queen, I know the Prince of Wales, but I don't not know no-one who don't want no nine inch nails.

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 paper. "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 is pointless to judge one language by the standards of another. Some of these old invented prohibitions remind one of Alice in Wonderland: "That's not a regular rule. You invented it just now," Alice complained to the King.

Moving onto the 19th century, proper behaviour was a major concern to a lot of people. Etiquette books were popular and precepts about language were issued alongside advice about table manners. Consider some of the instructions in Don't, a manual of mistakes and improprieties more or less prevalent in conduct and speech, which was published around 1880. Don't drink from your saucer; don't wear diamonds in the morning; don't neglect the small hairs that project from the nostrils and grow about the apertures of the ears; don't say gents for gentlemen, nor pants for pantaloons. These are inexcusable vulgarisms. Don't say transpire when you mean occur. Don't say "loads of time" or "oceans of time". Say "ample time" or "time enough". Don't use a plural pronoun when a singular is called for. "Everybody put on their hats" illustrates a prevalent error. Don't say "It is him." Say "It is he" … and so on and so on. 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.

Again and again etiquette, morals and speech are confused. Groombridges' Annual Reader, a manual of recitation for the use of schools, said in 1867: "Speech is a gift of God, and the habit of speaking correct English next to good morals is one of the best things in the world". We might laugh at this quaint confusion of morals and speech, except that it is still found nowadays. 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 shows that many people, including some of those who rule our country, are back in the dark ages over understanding how it works.

But it is oversimple to lump all language worries together, and just dismiss them. The different strands of worry need to be teased out. Above all, 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 for a long time. In the last century, many people had a romantic notion of primitive tribes as noble savages. The linguist Max Muller, for example, argued that there's "a laziness inherent in civilisation, so that sophisticated people no longer use the forceful articulatory movements required for primitive tongues, which are a preference for relatively easy sounds produced fairly far forward in the mouth." But this is rubbish; sounds move back in the mouth as well as forwards. One that has moved back is the increasingly common pronounciation of bu'er with a glottal stop in place of older butter. But Be'y 'ad a bi' of bi'er bu'er requires a lot of muscular tension and cannot be regarded as a lazy development.

The only truly lazy speech is drunken speech, where alcohol affects co-ordination, and English is not getting like drunken speech. Some years ago researchers at the University of Texas checked this out. They plied student volunteers with slugs of neat whiskey every twenty minutes for six hours; and before each new drink, they asked the students to read a word list and chat. They found that the bumbles and mumbles of drunkards were fairly unlike the alterations in normal change. Drunken people keep vowels much the same, but lengthen consonants which get dragged out. They are also likely to pronounce 's' and 'ch' as 'sh'. These effects are due to a temporary lack of muscular coordination and are not happening in English as a whole.

CLIP: EXAMPLE OF DRUNKEN SPEECH

The omission in spoken speech of past tense endings is also sometimes claimed to be laziness, as in "Pamela jump back" rather than "Pamela jumpED back". "Peter climbed carefully down" rather than "Peter climbED 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 be classed as laziness. Of course fast speech forms occur mostly in casual conversation. But informal speech is not intrinsically "worse" than formal speech. It is just different. Humans 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 changes found in fast speech will creep into all types of spoken language. Only actors pronounce handbag as it is written.

CLIP: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
Lady Bracknell: Where did the charitable gentleman who had a first class ticket for this seaside resort find you?
Jack Worthing: In a handbag.
Lady Bracknell: A handbag?

Almost everybody else says "hambag". Once a change of this type has occurred, hearers often judge the older, outmoded form to be pedantic and less streamlined.

But 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. Nor have those who claim that English is declining ever suggested what this date might have been.

And 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 which adhere to fixed systems often lose out. Consider the blue-footed booby, a seabird 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 their own; and, if so, push it back into the nest. But the booby's rigid system doesn't allow for this.

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.

"Crumbling castle" supporters might argue that such additions are trivial and allowable, as long as older forms are preserved as well. But in the long run this is impossible, as shown by the increasing loss of old past tense forms, which provide a clear example of how earlier forms get whittled away. First, the old irregular forms gradually get forgotten, especially when the verbs are rarely used ones. In this century, "gelded" and "girded" have mostly replaced "gelt" and "girt" as the past tense forms of "geld" and "gird", and many people don't even realise a change has occurred. Replacement can happen even with better known verbs. The clothes designer Donna Karan, discussing the letters she received, said: "Anything that beared my name, I'd open". 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," said a drug taker in the Guardian. Third, any new forms receive regular inflections as in the word "bland out" - "become conformist". "Those that didn't burn out, blanded out", according to a writer in the New Musical Express. So more and more old forms are wiped away, as new, regular forms flood in. But this is not disintegration. Sweeping up old oddments is good housekeeping, or rather, good language-keeping. Gradual neatening up of patterns is inevitable and essential. In this way, the mind avoids becoming overloaded with unpredictable oddments.

Neatening up also happens with nouns. Houses were once housen and shoes were shooen, 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". Recently this plural has begun to be treated as if it were the singular. "Graffiti is disgusting," proclaimed an official notice on a London bus. Not everyone likes this. "The solecism a graffiti is surprising and distressing", according to a letter in the Daily Telegraph. But most English plurals now end with 's', so the treatment of graffiti as singular is in line with the general

tidying up process, which has been going on for centuries. Language is not crumbling away. It is maintaining itself pretty efficiently.

But let's move on to the "infectious disease" view. In an article entitled Polluting Our Language, the writer expressed a widespread view that we somehow "catch" changes from those around us, and that we ought to fight such diseases: "The wholesale spread of corruption may surely be ascribed to mere infection, to the careless, unthinking assimilation of the floating germs which envelop us." Change is indeed brought about through social contact, so the catching notion is not entirely 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. Jocks were regular guys who joined in school sports and wanted to conform. Burnouts were rebels who took drugs and behaved unconventionally. The speech of these two groups showed clear differences with the Jocks imitating the standard adult pattern, but the Burnouts moving away from it. 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.

But 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. The predisposition factor is often overlooked. At any time, in any language, a number of potential change-points exist. Anomalies tend to get smoothed out, as with the tidying up of past tenses and plurals. Human ears and the human vocal tract cause others. Consonants at the end of words are a 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 will be stree. The change is found in so-called Estuary English, around the Thames Estuary. It's also found in Scotland around Glasgow.

CLIP: BILLY CONNOLLY: A lot of kids like me. They don't come to the concerts or shows; but in Glasgow, in the stree(t), the kids all shout at me and things.

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.

Changes are normally triggered by personal contact, as with the Belfast shop assistants, and not via the media. 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. Janet Street-Porter, Lenny Henry, Cilla Black and others show that variety is the spice of linguistic life.

JANET STREET PORTER: Take a look at this. Elementary certificate. That’s a laugh because I couldn’t swim. If you imagine me swimming without my glasses on. I mean that is a real laugh.

LENNY HENRY: And then she worked for several years. And then I was born in ‘58 and then I sort of lived in and around Dudley and grew up with a West Midlands accent, which is really weird.

CILLA BLACK: Anybody in the audience tonight remember me when I first started? (shouts of “yes”) Oh gosh, you’re older than ya look. You are indeed.

Their different accents, like their different clothes, are a mark of individuality.

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. This is now outmoded. 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 often 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”. Then the word “partner” gradually pushed the other terms aside.

The young cuckoo process also happens with pronunciation as with the butter and bu’er variants which are competing in British English. They’re likely to co-exist, maybe for a longish time. Eventually bu’er may well win out, as these examples show. No change can occur without variation, though variation can sometimes exist without change.

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. I will return to this question in the third lecture.

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. A web of deceit and a web of friendship combine to produce the real web: the web of language.

But finally, I would like to stress again that we need to understand language, not try to control it. Samuel Johnson said this better than anyone else in 1755 in the preface to his dictionary: When we see men grow old and die … we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided … who shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language … With this hope, however, academies have been instituted to guard the avenues of their languages … but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been in vain … to enchain syllables and to lash the wind are equally the undertakings of pride.