

## **Language Change**

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**Abstract:** Every language changes constantly. English has been changing throughout its history and it is still changing today. New words are coming into use every day. The input of those words changes vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and spelling of language. Of course, old forms and old pronunciations are dropping out of use as time goes by. This work is about language change. There is a great variety of reasons for language change: influence of the mass media, influence of travel and global communications, computers and technology, social change, scientific and technological discoveries, new concepts. First language has an effect on the pronunciation of the English as a Second language as well. This work gives brief answers to questions: why language changes, what are types of language change, how language changes spread through communities, how historical circumstances influence language change, what is the relationship between language learning and change, what is the evolutionary path of a language etc.

**Key Words:** language, linguistics, change, grammar, pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, influence, relationship.

### **Introduction**

Languages change over time. It perhaps sounds a bit uncommon, but linguists find out that, for example, Japanese has not evolved a lot over centuries. On the other hand, English language changed very quickly in a relatively short period of time.

Historical development of English language is long-lasting, permanent, versatile, but above all fruitful, because of its rich lexicon in comparison to other language systems. Different changes happened in phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics and they are more radical than it actually appears. The pronunciation of English has changed a lot in past five centuries. The spelling has altered very little over the same period. So, we can conclude that English spelling is not the best marker for language change. Of course, we cannot predict the path of change, but we can describe one when it appears (Crystal, 2001). That is the way to find causes of change and to identify them. It is not easy to set a rule or pattern for an exact alteration, but when once done it becomes very important because of the application of those rules to other words, and also for building and expanding the vocabulary.

According to Grzega and Schoner (2007), lexical change may be based on the prestige of another language or another variety of the same language or simply certain fashionable word-formation patterns. In their study they say that the kernel of this force is mostly found outside of language and is often the prestige of a culture, the superiority of a group or politics which cause speakers to adopt linguistic elements (words, morphemes, morphs, sounds) from the prestigious group's speech. Example: English, for instance, borrowed heavily from French during the Middle English period because the upper social classes were made up of French people: *garment, flower, rose, face, prince, hour, question, dance, fork, royal, loyal, fine, zero* are all Gallicisms. Today, English is the most prestigious language in many parts of the world.

### **Why Languages Change**

Languages change for a great number of reasons. Various shifts usually happen in response to economic, social and political situation. Throughout history many examples of language change were caused

by invasions, colonization and migration. Of course, even without these extreme circumstances a language can change if enough speakers alter it. Very often, users' needs cause language change. Information technology, industry and some individual personal experiences require new notions and therefore, new words. For example, all the neologisms connected with cell phones or the Internet didn't exist in Middle English period.

No two individuals use a language in exactly the same way. That is also a great source of language change. The vocabulary and phrases people use are linked to where they live, their age, education level, social status and sometimes to their membership in a particular group or community. Through conversation, we absorb new words and endings and later use them in our own speech.

### **Types of Change**

There are three main domains of language change: vocabulary, syntactic structures and pronunciation. In the process of borrowing words from other languages, vocabulary changes very quickly. Some other ways are shortening, abbreviation or combining words. We also have examples of word creation by mistake. On the contrary, syntactic structure does not change that quickly. But if we compare Shakespeare's language to modern English — differences are more than visible. The sounds of the language transform as well. Pronunciation changes are more difficult to track down, but we can notice that words first written phonetically are now pronounced differently than their spellings suggest.

### **Borrowed Words**

The simplest kind of influence that one language may have on another is the "borrowing" of words. When there is cultural borrowing, there is always the likelihood that the associated words may be borrowed too (Sapir, 1921).

Jamil Daher (2003) writes that "languages use various strategies in borrowing: perhaps adopting and preserving the form used in the donor language, sometimes adapting the borrowed word to conform more closely to their own phonological and morphological systems, and sometimes creating a new word through loan translation. It is part of the cultural history of English speakers that they have always adopted loanwords from the languages of whatever cultures they have come in contact with". Approximately 10 percent of English words are actually of Anglo-Saxon origin. During its history, English has come into contact with many other languages and has adopted words from many of them (Daher, 2003). Though most of the additions were borrowed from Latin and Greek — either directly from those languages or through French — English has also borrowed words from other European languages, as well as from the languages of South Asia (e.g. *bungalow*), the Americas (e.g. *tobacco*, *tomato*, and *potato*), and Africa (e.g. *zebra*).

The following is only a small selection illustrating the range of languages that have contributed to English vocabulary: American Indian (*caucus*, *moose*), Arabic (*alcohol*, *assassin*, *zero*), Chinese (*ketchup*, *tea*, *wok*), Czech (*gherkin*, *robot*, *vampire*), Dutch (*brandy*, *cookie*, *landscape*), Finnish (*mink*, *sauna*), German (*kindergarten*, *sauerkraut*, *snorkel*), Hebrew (*cherub*, *jubilee*), Hindi (*bungalow*, *dinghy*, *shampoo*), Hungarian (*goulash*), Italian (*aria*, *balcony*, *lava*, *mafia*, *opera*, *piano*, *spaghetti*), Japanese (*futon*, *soy*, *sushi*), Mexican (*avocado*, *chocolate*, *tomato*), Persian (*arsenic*, *lilac*), Portuguese (*buffalo*, *marmalade*, *port*), Russian (*bistro*, *mammoth*, *sputnik*, *vodka*), Sanskrit (*candy*, *indigo*, *jungle*), Spanish (*cafeteria*, *cash*, *cockroach*, *sherry*, *siesta*), Tahitian (*tattoo*), Tamil (*catamaran*, *cheroot*, *mango*), Tongan (*taboo*), Turkish (*caftan*, *coffee*, *scarlet*, *yogurt*), Yiddish (*bagel*, *glitzy*, *kosher*, *schlep*, *schmooze*, *yenta*) (Hogg, 2006).

English still borrows, and is likely to continue borrowing from other languages of the world. However, borrowing in recent times is characterized by two main factors: the frequency of borrowing is considerably reduced; and English seems to be spreading its tentacles to reach and borrow from less and less known languages (Jackson and Ze Amvela, 2004). A study by Garland Cannon (1987) of more than a thousand recent loanwords from 84 languages shows that "about 25% are from French, 8% each from Japanese and Spanish, 7% each from Italian and Latin, 6% each from African languages, German and Greek, 4% each from Russian and Yiddish, 3% from Chinese, and progressively smaller percentages from Arabic, Portuguese, Hindi, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Afrikaans, Malayo-Polynesian, Vietnamese, Amerindian languages, Swedish, Bengali, Danish, Indonesian, Korean, Persian, Amharic, Irish, Norwegian, and 30 other languages".

### **Creating Words**

English has different ways for creating new words from existing resources, like derivation, compounding, conversion etc. There are many different ways in which speakers can coin new words by using only the existing resources of their language. Compounding - combining two existing words and forming a new one. From its earliest days, English has made frequent use of this device. Familiar examples include *blackboard*, *girlfriend*, *ginger bread*, *daredevil*, *paperback*, *strip-tease*, *skinhead* etc. Occasionally a new word is derived by combining two existing words with a suffix, as in *blue-eyed*, *bookkeeper*, *sky-diving* etc. Some of these compounds have been in the language for centuries, while the others are very recently formed. Among these words are *ozone-friendly*, *laptop* etc. (Trask, 1994). Great number of English words is formed by blending of existing words (e.g. *brunch* from *breakfast* and *lunch*) and by back-formations (e.g. *donates* from *donation*).

### **Change in Pronunciation**

Like other aspects of language, pronunciation also changes over time. That is why we have different 'accents' - different ways of pronouncing a language. Every speaker of English has an accent. The range of accents in English is impressive. Over the time, the pronunciation has changed at least as much as any other aspect of language, and it has changed in different ways in different places (Trask, 1994).

Consider the words *farther* and *father*. Do you pronounce these words identically or differently? If you pronounce those words identically you have what linguists call non-rhotic accent. If you pronounce differently, you have rhotic accent. These terms reflect the observation that rhotic speakers actually pronounce an R-sound in the first word, though not in the second. Non-rhotic speakers do not pronounce R-sound in any of these words (Trask, 1994).

### **Change in Spelling**

English spelling is complex and irregular, and it has only been fixed since the eighteen century. Much of this complexity derives from the custom of spelling words as they were pronounced centuries ago, rather than as they are pronounced now.

What is the reason for that? There is no single reason. The history of English spelling is a rather complicated affair in which a number of distinct developments and influences can be identified. Of course the language change is the most important factor of the odd-looking spellings. Words like *break*, *night*, *one*, *knife* and *should* have spellings which accurately reflect the way they were pronounced centuries ago (Trask, 1994). Their pronunciation has changed, but not their spelling. The change in spelling these words were considered by some people, but so far their arguments have had little effect.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible for spelling to change, and spelling of English has changed over the centuries. For example, spelling of the word *hloefdige* was eventually changed to *lady* to keep up with the newer pronunciation. In other cases spelling conventions have been altered, leading to a change in spelling even without any change in pronunciation, as when Old English *cwic* was replaced by *quick*.

As an illustration of the complex history of English spelling, consider the word *shield*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this word has various spellings: *scild*, *scyld*, *sceld*, *seld*, *sseld*, *sheld*, *cheld*, *scheld*, *sceild*, *scheeld*, *cheeld*, *schield*, *schilde*, *schylde*, *shilde*, *sciold*, *scheild*, *shielde*, *shield*, and *shield*. Only in the eighteenth century did the last form become fixed as the only possibility many other words show a similarly complex history (Trask, 1994).

### **Change in Grammar**

Differences in grammatical forms between varieties of English are perhaps less serious than differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, but nevertheless exist. For example the familiar verb *go* formerly had an irregular past-tense form *yede* or *yode*. In the fifteenth century, however it acquired a new past-tense form: *went*. Where did this odd-looking form come from? It came from the now rare verb *wend*, which was formerly inflected *wend/went*, just like *send/sent* and *spend/spent*. But the past tense *went* was detached from *wend* and attached to *go*, which lost its earlier past tense, giving the modern English pattern *go/went*.

On the whole, the changes of English in the last several centuries have been less dramatic. At an earlier stage of its history, however, English underwent some changes in its grammar which were decidedly more spectacular and far-reaching. However grammar is continuing to change even today.

### **Agents of Change**

Before one language changes, speakers absorb new vocabulary, sentence structures and sounds. The next thing is that they spread new altered language through the community and pass it to the next generation. According to linguistic researches, children are main agents for language change. They learn the language from their parents, teachers and relatives, process it and then produce and spread different variation of that language. Throughout the history, language constantly adapts to different circumstances. If we tried to restrict usage of certain foreign vocabulary, our attempts would be unsuccessful. For example, the French society tried to lower the introduction of English borrowings. As a result, *le weekend*, *boulidozeur* etc. are in common use and more people use *le computer* than the officially restricted *ordinateur*.

### **Influence of the mass media, computers and technology**

In 1755 Johnson's dictionary influenced spelling in the educated society. BBC pronunciation lowered the usage of local non-standard accents and BBC television has been a language standard from the half of the twentieth century onwards. US English has a great influence through film industry. The Internet is predominantly an English / American language medium too.

Newspaper language is an ever present influence too:

an experienced or able person = **ace**  
purpose, object or intention = **aim**  
prohibition, refusal, restraint = **ban**  
supervisor, governor or manager = **chief**  
married = **wed**

There is also a standardization of spelling and grammar under the influence of Microsoft products and their spelling checkers. Communications over the Internet reinforce a common language dominated by an overwhelming number of US speakers and US websites.

### **Social change**

Whenever one nation's culture has predominance in any sphere, its language leads the way. So we have French words for cooking and ballet; German words for war; US words for marketing, rock music, culture, technology.

Transformations in formality cause the language to transform too, bringing in slang, jargon, accent, dialect, where it may not have existed before. We refer to one group of words and phrases as *politically correct* and decide that some are no longer acceptable in society - US army terms such as **take out** and **collateral damage** as euphemisms for **kill** and **dead**; **nigger** is replaced by **African American**; *queer* is used instead of *mad*.

### **More changes**

- simplification of spelling in American English
- loss of **whom**
- **they** instead of **he / she**
- increase in computer vocabulary and effects of internet informal US-based vocabulary
- effects from non-native speakers
- loss of the apostrophe and the semi colon

- acronyms, blends and contractions

## **Conclusion**

Language is always changing — in vocabulary, in pronunciation, in grammar, in semantics, and partially in spelling. Change is a constant process and therefore unavoidable. Language has been changing since it first appeared on earth; it is changing now; it will surely continue to change for as long as human beings survive (Trask, 1994).

English language, as any other, is always clarifying itself in order to be more efficient. Of course, that process happens without sacrificing its expressivity, because we know that every change affects various parts, and there is always something else to fix. Languages which changed more than others do not have to be better. They only have different evolving power.

Language does not change everywhere in the same manner. When a language is spoken over a wide territory, changes which occur in one area do not necessarily spread to other areas. As a result, as time goes by, differences accumulate among the regional varieties of the language. Throughout history, older and more conservative speakers have objected to changes in the language whenever they have noticed them. Those attitudes are still with us today, but they rarely have much effect on the development of the language. A certain amount of inertia in resisting language change is no bad thing (Trask, 1994). After all, we do not want the language to change so fast that children cannot speak to their grandparents, or so fast that no one can read anything written a hundred years earlier. Language changes in the way that is quite normal and acceptable to all of its speakers.

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