

The nature and implications of language change and its impact upon teaching practice

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***Abstract:** This article presents the case for language change as a desirable and naturally occurring phenomenon that needs to be accommodated by EFL/ESL teaching practice. Following a brief examination of how and why language change occurs, the article accounts for the failure of attempts to contain it and discusses its pedagogic implications. Regarding the latter, and with specific reference to English and English language teaching, the article describes how change should affect what to teach, how to teach and how to assess what is taught. In conclusion, the notion of an immutable "standard" is rejected in favour of a more fluid and more representative consensus model. Though purely conceptual, the model is identified as viable and capable of serving as a reference to teachers and circumventing the threat to cross-cultural intelligibility posed by change and diversity.*

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Introduction: why language changes

"Ye knowe ek, that in forme of speche is chaunge."

(Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* II, 22-6)

The above observation is interesting within the context of this article for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that language change is by no means a modern phenomenon and may even go some way (if we are to delve further into the past for an elusive "year zero") toward proving that change has been a constant and necessary companion to language and its development. Second, the "forme of speche" used by Chaucer also exposes the fallacious nature of the charge that change is tantamount to degeneration, since it is unlikely that even the most conservative of today's "purists" would wish to conduct their daily lives within the parameters of a seven hundred year-old lexicon. As Aitchison has pointed out, "the language of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time was no better and no worse than that of our own- just different" (Aitchison, 1991, p. 13).

Language changes because it is predisposed to do so. The nature of this change is neither random nor wholly unpredictable, and occurs under particular circumstances prevalent at a particular time (McMahon, 1994, ch. 1). In order to accommodate this change and cope with what amounts to a never-ending state of flux, a lot of redundancy and flexibility is "built into" language and activated by language users as a matter of choice (Cameron, 1995, pp. 215-216; Aitchison, 1996, pp. 1-19). Language is therefore dependent upon and analogous to human behaviour, and as such is innovative, flexible, susceptible to influence, prone to manipulation and

resistant to regulation. It is however the phenomenon of globalisation, facilitated by advances in communications technology, affecting the most profound changes upon language today. This essay will examine the nature of that change with particular reference to English, the world's *lingua franca*, and discuss how and why it should affect teaching practice in EFL/ESL contexts.

How language changes

Language change manifests itself in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, the *sine qua non* of all change is variation and ongoing permutation. By suggesting that synchronic varieties compete with each other until one wins out, the parallels with Darwinism are made explicit. Nevertheless, the evolution of language would seem to be a far more dynamic affair, one effected over shorter periods of time and with greater capacity for the co-existence of distinct varieties, even within the same individual. While most people adapt language to their situation (the difference between talking to a baby and a member of the royal family, for example) language change in general manifests itself in the following four areas of lexis, grammar, phonology and pragmatics.

Regarding lexis, new words and phrases are constantly entering the English (and every other) language by virtue of the following:

New coinings (e.g. "*assassination*" and "*my mind's eye*", both of which were coined by Shakespeare)

Borrowings (e.g. "*karaoke*", "*glasnost*")

New meanings (e.g. "*gay*", "*sad*")

Catchphrases (e.g. "*Nice one, son*")

New technology (e.g. "*email*", "*Internet*")

Sociopolitical change (e.g. the effect of the feminist movement on gender, changing "*chairman*" to "*chair*", *etc.*)

If any of these words and/or phrases are unfamiliar today, it is again because of change. A shift in political climate is gradually condemning "*glasnost*" to the status of lexical has-been, while a change in "linguistic fashions" has also seen words such as "*groovy*" fall by the wayside. Lexical items also run the risk of being superseded, as in the substitution of "*wireless*" for "*radio*".

The "survival of the fittest" analogy appears at its least contrived when examined from a grammatical perspective. Any deviant form has the potential to supplant the previously accepted "standard", as in the case of "*aren't I*" successfully ousting "*amn't I*". Other long-established deviant forms still capable of provoking heated debate are split infinitives and hanging prepositions. The issue as to whether these and any number of other grammatical forms are appropriate emphasizes the all-important role of choice in determining language use and change.

Individuals commonly vary their pronunciation according to context. The nature of change as it affects phonology is therefore best described through an examination of its various causes, i.e. those contexts capable of inducing a shift in phonological orientation. Perhaps most obviously (and most pertinently from the perspective of the language teacher) one or both interlocutors may alter their own pronunciation in an attempt to accommodate the other's phonology. While this may be done out of a sense of

deference and a desire to facilitate understanding, the issue as to who accommodates whom is likely to be linked to prestige and a host of other factors such as location and gender. Nevertheless, the fact that pronunciation habits are contagious should act as a deterrent to those teachers inclined to move away from native-speaker forms in order to more closely approximate the learner's L1 or interlanguage.

Contextual and appropriacy issues may also be responsible for language change within the sphere of pragmatics. As to precisely what is deemed appropriate in a particular context is determined by whatever pragmatic schema is dominant (i.e. being most widely disseminated) at any given time. The current trend toward "first-name-familiarity" in business, for example, is attributable to the influence of today's "standard", namely American English. The effect of the dominant variety is not, of course, confined to pragmatics, and is demonstrably pervasive to other aspects of language. The habit of intoning a statement as if it were a question, for example, is becoming less idiosyncratic and more of a "standard" by virtue of its widespread adoption.

Reaction to change

Having examined why and how it occurs, let us now turn to how people react when confronted by language change. History suggests that the tendency to resist change, in language as in other spheres of human existence, often stems from its equation with decay. In the words of Samuel Johnson, "tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration" with consequences often perceived as affecting far more than the words people use and the way in which they use them (Johnson, quoted in

Aitchison, 1991, p. 8). Then as now, the change that is both natural and necessary for any living language to survive is often assumed to be indicative of declining moral standards. The fact that language, like life in general, involves an element of choice that may be expressive of the individual has sustained this argument despite a conspicuous lack of any correlative evidence between the two spheres. The suggestion that language change engenders a decline in moral standards would however seem to be undermined by the inevitability of every social being, including the most ultra of conservatives, assimilating a degree of change irrespective of any conscious desire to do so. Consequently, and unless we are to conclude that all change is degenerative, the entire proposition would seem to be invalid.

The contention of this article is that resistance to language change has no scientific basis and that it is indicative of social prejudice regarding class, race, region, *etc.* In short, people resist language change because it represents a threat to personal identity, national identity and the *status quo*. This may manifest itself as anti-multilingualism (quite a paradox in view of the number of words languages borrow from each other), or a reluctance to accept the legitimacy of new technology-related words. The latter is particularly prevalent in the workplace and among staff members facing obsolescence due to advances in technology. It is worth acknowledging however that, regardless of precise motives, few if any language conservatives resist change in all its forms. The issue is rather one of which changes are acceptable, which are not and (crucially) who has the right to make that judgement call and is, therefore, very transparently about power and vested (i.e. self-) interest (Penelope, 1985, p. 83). Though circumstances may vary, conservatives commonly wield sufficient authority to express

their intransigence in two broad ways, i.e. legislatively and prescriptively.

Resistance through legislation involves the imposition of legal countermeasures to change. When, in the late eighties and early nineties, the *Academie Francaise* banned foreign loan words in a highly publicized and ultimately futile attempt to preserve the sanctity of the French language, it did so out of misplaced patriotism. Though the *Academie* enjoyed considerable popular support for its stance against the "Americanization" of French culture, its impact in terms of reversing or even slowing the trend was, and for reasons already discussed, negligible (Aitchison, 1991, p. 218). Nevertheless, the delusion that language change may be resisted through legislation was and is far from exclusively Gallic. While the *Academie* was battling against the current, "Pro-grammar Conservatives" in England and Wales were busy concocting their own version of the climate of fear, albeit with similarly limited results. The English and Welsh did however manage to establish in the popular consciousness a causal relationship between the demise of prescriptive grammar teaching in schools and the rising crime rate, thereby paving the way for the national curriculum and more emphasis on grammar and "standard English" (Cameron, 1995, pp. 109-110). The issues at stake were, however, far broader than mere pedagogy, the curriculum concealing a none-too-hidden agenda that may be more pertinently interpreted in terms of morality, control and the preservation of the *status quo*.

Though, as we have seen, attempts to contain language change have found periodic legal expression, it is through the prescription of universal, perfect sets of "truths" that change has more traditionally (and more

effectively) been challenged. In what Crystal refers to as a form of "intellectual despotism", certain grammarians have sought to prescribe rather than describe the language (Crystal, 1995, p. 78). This charge may, for example, be leveled at such eminent scholars as Ben Jonson who, in 1640, based his grammar on the "Custome...of the learned", thereby excluding the vast majority of English users and imposing a standard representative of a privileged minority (Jonson, quoted in *ibid.*). Prescriptive grammarians have also unduly imposed rules derived from classical languages, thereby forcing revisionists to draw a distinction between those that have been artificially prescribed and those genuinely required for intelligibility (Pinker, 1994, p. 378). Though prescribing the language entails limiting the individual user's capacity for creativeness and choice, this form of resistance is nevertheless reliant upon the user aspiring to (i.e. choosing to emulate) a standard. If not overtly imposed through legislation, certain forms of pressure must therefore be applied in order to suggest that a certain variety is "proper". This suggestion may be made and subtly imposed upon the popular consciousness by, for example, the dissemination of a certain variety in the media. It was not until the 1980s, that British television and radio announcers and newsreaders (i.e. the intellectual elite controlling the flow of information) were free to use anything other than that upper-middle class home-counties variant known, appropriately enough, as "BBC English". While the balance has since been redressed in Britain and a range of regional and class accents admitted, similar practices regarding the exclusive dissemination of a standard are still prevalent in countries such as Japan.

Language change, diversification and the affect upon teaching

Despite attempts to contain it, language change inevitably occurs and in so doing challenges whatever conception of a "standard" any individual may have at any particular time. That it should also affect our teaching is the contention of this article, the remainder of which will deal with the following three issues relative to the reality of constant change: (i) what to teach, (ii) how to assess what is taught, and (iii) how to teach.

i) What to teach

When considering the question of what to teach it is important to acknowledge that, while the consensus on a written standard is converging as a consequence of globalization, spoken English is becoming more diversified. Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native-speakers, with the former bringing the idiosyncrasies of their L1 and cultural circumstances to bear upon the language. The result has been the rapid proliferation of local varieties, a phenomenon that English teachers in both EFL and ESL contexts, but particularly in classes with mixed L1 backgrounds, should respond to. In terms of what to teach, the question may be reduced (at least in the ESL context) to one of standard or dominant local variety. This also involves the wider issue as to whether the teacher is going to give precedence to international intelligibility (via a standard) or emphasize the identity of the learner and his or her own speech community.

While conceding that the local variety may indeed be most appropriate to the likely future needs of the student, it is nevertheless the contention here that those needs are neither definite nor in any way predetermined. It is simply impossible for the teacher, or indeed the student, to ascertain

those future contexts in which communicative competence will be required. Furthermore, local varieties "are often barely accepted in their own countries" (Norrish, 1997), while the non-production of a standard, far from being empowering, may actually prevent access to higher-status positions of power and responsibility (Quirk, 1990, pp. 3-10). The teacher therefore has a responsibility to respond to the fact that a prestige form often confers social advantage. Though unfortunate and undoubtedly elitist, if it were not true language users would not feel the need to adapt register to context. Nevertheless, we as teachers should recognize that, by conforming to prejudice implying the superiority of a standard, we are consequently enforcing it.

Perhaps more palatable to liberal sensibilities is the argument for a standard based on its status as a unifying force. As the world's *lingua franca*, English is also the broker of international intelligibility and susceptible to interference from local varieties. Nevertheless, the two are not mutually exclusive and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with supplementing a standard with the local variety in the classroom. In practical terms this involves "rethink(ing) the notion of error" out of respect for the local variety (Norrish, 1997) while also pointing out its limitations. This is not to suggest that the local variety should be "squeezed out" (even if it were possible to do so), or afforded second-class status (*viz.* Honey, 1997) relative to a standard. Instead, the objective is to equip students with whatever tools necessary for them to make a choice. Just as native speakers switch from variety to variety depending on context, so non-native speakers should be empowered with that same bi-dialecticism.

So far, this article has avoided any definition of "the standard". Indeed,

given the fluid nature of language, one may argue that it defies definition and, by extension, teaching. The temptation is to refer to "correct usage" as implicitly prescribed by examining bodies. I would nevertheless suggest that a more legitimate alternative, i.e. one that incorporates diversification and change, is the "composite" model envisaged by Modiano (Oct. 1999, pp. 3-13). As an amalgam of those features common to all English-speaking communities, native and non-native, the starting blocks for such a standard would be those rules necessary for intelligibility. Thereafter, any variant form found to be incomprehensible to a competent speaker from any other speech community would be excluded, thereby limiting change to incremental, comprehensible shifts and safeguarding cross-cultural intelligibility. Despite being at this stage purely conceptual, it is the contention of this paper that the composite-as-standard outlined here lies within the bounds of possibility. Its actualization is, however, unlikely to occur for as long as international examining bodies, grammarians, teachers *et al.* persist in eschewing the reality of how English changes, diversifies and is being spoken worldwide.

As a footnote to the question of what to teach, it is worth noting that a standard or any other variety cannot possibly be "imposed" upon a student. If, as we have suggested, language is a matter of choice, the student will have to want to acquire it regardless of his or her ability to do so. The teacher therefore has the responsibility of making transparent the benefits attached to a particular variety. Conversely, the teacher is incapable of teaching a variety that they themselves do not speak. This may preclude the teacher's own use of the local variety (in any case unnecessary, as already shown) and may also require him or her to approximate, as far

as possible, the composite-as-standard described above.

ii) How to assess what we teach

If, as envisaged, a certain standard is to be taught, that same standard has to be subject to assessment. This raises the issue of intelligibility versus accuracy and how, in light of change, one can distinguish between mistakes and "evolutionary interlanguage". There must have been a point, for example, at which "aren't I" stopped being deviant and became the most commonly accepted and then the prescribed form. The dilemma faced by the assessing teacher is whether or not to penalize (and thereby impede) language that may at some point in the future become part of the greater standard.

In addressing the dilemma, the contention here is that teachers should assess according to the twin criteria of success and appropriacy. The former may be reduced to the question, "Was the language produced sufficient to procure the speaker's aims?" and in effect lends the speaker enormous scope in his or her choice of lexicon, grammar, *etc.* While this criterion has the effect of polarizing students into basic "yes/no" camps, appropriacy serves to refine the assessment process. If, for example, the language under scrutiny is derived from a formal situation such as a job interview, a prestige form may be regarded as appropriate and the student's approximation of one justifiably assessed. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher not only to equip the student with the choice of a standard but also to raise awareness about when and where to apply it. It is furthermore the contention of this article that the assessing teacher should strictly apply the principles of accurate, appropriate language so as

to provide a "deviation buffer-zone" capable of preserving intelligibility in cross-cultural contexts.

iii) How to teach

Having discussed the nature of language change and its effect on what is taught and how it is assessed, let us now turn our attention to the impact of change upon how language is (or rather should be) taught. The contention here is that, broadly speaking, the language teacher has a responsibility to do the following three things:

- i) Teach in a manner that raises learner awareness relative to change.
- ii) Keep track of and keep up with change.
- iii) Teach change, i.e. the language as it is really spoken.

The first point refers to making the student aware that they are participating in and contributing to an ever-evolving, dynamic entity. This awareness, if successfully grasped, may have further, beneficial connotations regarding their own perception of "mistakes" and the importance of appropriacy. It is also, I would suggest, a prerequisite to nurturing tolerance and the willingness to negotiate toward a successful resolution of any speech act. While a standard serves an important function in protecting intelligibility, it is nevertheless necessary for all English speakers to be able and willing to adapt to, circumvent and even absorb variation. This is especially relevant to those teachers with a predisposition to prescription.

Our second point is tantamount to an appeal for teachers to stay abreast of change. This entails exposure to the most current media forms,

materials and as many varieties of English as possible. This language should then be introduced to the student in order to engender multi-contextual functional competency. The risk for teachers, particularly those living in EFL/ESL contexts, is of their own English becoming obsolete and remote from any reality other than their own, thereby impairing their ability to equip the student with the language necessary to function effectively beyond the classroom. The need to "keep up with change" is therefore obvious, but does raise the awkward question as to when a new or divergent item should be incorporated into the lesson. Obviously, if a word has already been included in the assessment requirements set by an examining authority, it should also be taught in the classroom. The real problem, however, is one of unilaterally determining when use has become "general" enough to warrant inclusion or, conversely, when a word has become sufficiently redundant to warrant expulsion. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers and it is left to the individual to apply his or her own subjective judgement. Though there is an understandable tendency on the part of teachers to lag behind and await the formalization of change via its inclusion in textbooks, exam papers, *etc.*, it is nevertheless in the interests of their students relative to real-world (as opposed to exam) competency that they try to anticipate shifts in the language dynamic.

Our third and final point proposes that teachers go beyond merely cataloguing change and instead use, present and encourage it. A significant advance in this field has been made through the use of corpora. As Willis' critique of the "Cobuild" project has demonstrated, corpora may be regarded as the antithesis of "artificial prescription" in that they present language as it is really being used in its spoken form (Willis, 1990). Some

popular conceptions regarding grammar have in this way been exposed as obsolete and/or redundant, with obvious implications for teaching. By incorporating, as far as possible, the developing language as it is being used by real-world interlocuters, the teacher is significantly increasing the student's chances of success in speech events beyond the classroom.

Conclusion: finding the common ground via consensus

To conclude, change both guarantees the survival of a language whilst simultaneously defying its reduction to a perfect set of truths. It is, by virtue of its close association with human nature, irresistible and haphazard, and as such precludes any but the most sweeping of forecasts concerning a language's course and development. The pedagogic challenge lies in accommodating a language's propensity for change whilst preserving cross-cultural intelligibility, i.e. enough of a common core to ensure successful communication. Teachers in EFL/ESL contexts therefore have a responsibility to anticipate the effects of change and practice negotiation and repair strategies accordingly. Nevertheless, and by their very definition, such strategies are useful in circumventing communication breakdown only once it has occurred and are secondary to the pre-emptive measures discussed above. For the sake of clarity, these may be reduced here to exposing the student to as many varieties as possible, and (crucially) to teaching an internationally intelligible strain of English. It is in regard to this latter objective that allusions to "a standard" may most justifiably be made, albeit one that is neither immutable nor prescriptive. Rather the standard referred to here is, at present, a purely conceptual model based upon an ongoing consensus of how English is being used in all or as many

of its worldwide speech communities as possible. The nature of the challenge may therefore be as much technical as it is pedagogic, but in this age of the Internet and the synchronous relaying of information, it may also be feasible. And until such a reference becomes a reality, the question as to what constitutes internationally intelligible English will remain, somewhat precariously, at the discretion of each and every individual teacher.

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