

Language changes – and you can't stop it!

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Authorities in many countries have had a misguided belief that the best way to protect their language was to place it in the care of an academy. Italy's *Accademia della Crusca* was founded as early as 1582, Richelieu established the *Academie Française* in 1635, and, nearer home, the *Academia Real* was founded in 1713.

The idea of all these organizations, and of many more which were to spring up over the years (e. g. Swedish - 1786, Hungarian - 1830, Hebrew - as late as 1953, but the case was rather different), has been to 'protect' the language and its grammar. Grammar, in the words of Richelieu, is ". . . the art of speaking and writing **correctly** . . . it describes **good usage** and **defends** this from all causes of **corruption**". (My bold letters, and I shall return to the theme in a moment).

Now this never happened in England or America. Proposals for an English Academy were made in the Seventeenth Century, supported by such literary stalwarts as Daniel Defoe and John Dryden, and again by Jonathan Swift in 1712, in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, in which he complained that:

. . . . our language is extremely imperfect; that its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions; that the pretenders to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and that in many instances it offends against every part of grammar."

But Englishmen who had been observing the Academies in other European countries were reaching the conclusion that nothing was being done to stem the flood of change. Dr Johnson writes in the preface to his first Dictionary (1755):

When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, century after century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from immutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption, and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affection.

There has never been an English Academy, although the idea is still occasionally mooted. There has on the other hand been an ever-increasing flow of individual grammars, dictionaries, thesauri, and style manuals in all parts of the English-speaking world. You have only to go into an English language book shop to see just how many books there are today concerned with different aspects of the English language. Computer concordances are now shedding new light on how language is really used, rather than how lexicographers and grammarians have thought it was used.

One of the earliest recorded writers in English to complain about language change was William Caxton. He was born in approximately 1422 and died in 1491, at a time when the language spoken in England was just recognizably the English language we use today. The language had recently come through an enormous change - a major shift in pronunciation, the near-total pruning of Anglo-Saxon inflections and an enormous influx of new words, mainly from the French brought over by the Norman conquerors who ruled court and country.

Here is Caxton's complaint. I have kept his spelling but modernized his punctuation for the sake of clarity:

And certaynly our language now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used and spoken whan I was borne . . . And that comyn Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn merchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse for to have sayled over the see into Zelande, and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them. And one of theym named Sheffelde,

*a mercer, came in to an hows and axed for mete, and specyally he axyd after 'eggys'. And the good wyf answerde that she coude speke no Frenshe. And the merchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wold have hadde eggys, and she understode hym not. And thenne at last a nother sayd that he wolde have 'eyren'. Then the good wyf sayd that she understode hym wel. Loo! What sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, 'eggys' or 'eyren'? Certaynly, it is harde to playse every man by cause of dyversite & chaunge of langage. (Preface to *Enydos*, 1490).*

That passage itself, if nothing else, serves as a graphic example of the fact that language does change.

But not everyone seems so willing to accept that language changes; that the English of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens and Joyce is demonstrably different. Many people today think that contemporary language is decaying as never before, but this is a belief that seems to be shared by every generation, a classic illustration of the generation gap. A book published in 1863, *The Queen's English*, (the Queen in question being Victoria), deals with such hoary chestnuts as 'It's me' Vs. 'It's I', and tautologies like 'very unique'; matters which regularly crop up as complaints in the letters pages of newspapers today from linguistic reactionaries who fail to understand that usage is dynamic rather than static.

The first grammars were Greek; Protagoras, Plato and Aristotle are names that spring to mind. Later Latin grammarians such as Donatus and Priscian systematically applied these Greek grammars to their own language, with mixed results. In turn, Latin was the academic language in England for a long time, and it was perhaps natural that Latin case grammars should be applied to the English language, but the coat was by now very ill fitting. Prescriptive grammars can in any case only describe a language as it was, and, in the case of English, were often being used to describe the language as it never had been!

Language is organic. It changes because society changes. It is inevitable, and also unpredictable - one can perhaps hazard educated guesses such as, for example, that the third person singular of the present tense will before too long lose its inflection marker ('-s'), but then again who knows? This does not mean that we cannot teach a common standard - of course we can - but at the same time we should recognize the existence, indeed the immense variety of different language types. There is nothing teleological about language change - it merely happens - in the same way that the tide comes and goes, so language changes, but the tide never gets anywhere, never stops, it just ebbs and flows. So, in its way, does language.