

Language change

(Grafmiller, 2019) Language change is diachronic (changing over time), revealing linguistic patterns across different points in time

(Clayton and Giovanelli, 2018) “Language change is not arbitrary, but exhibits patterns that are driven by sociocultural changes.”

(Halliday) Systemic functional linguistics (SFL): study of the relationship between language and its function in social settings; follows the principles that language is used to make meaning that is influenced by the social and cultural context in which the language is exchanged, and that using language is a semiotic process that fundamentally allows users to make meaning by choosing.

- Ideologies, attitudes and behaviour influences/reflects language, and vice versa

Terminology for historical development of English:

- 1) 450-1100AC Old English
- 2) 1100-1500AC Middle English
- 3) 1500-1800AC Early modern
- 4) 1800AC-present Modern English
 - Vocabulary affected by vast social and technology changes since the industrial revolution, the interest is influencing the speed at which new words are entering English
 - Unprecedented growth of scientific vocabulary (scientific and technical terms now comprise $\frac{2}{3}$ of the English vocabulary)
 - British empire at its peak covered $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Earth's surface, and the English language adopted foreign words from many countries
 - American English continues to grow as a dominant variety due to the emergence of the US as a leading economic power in the 20th century

Factors for language change:

- 1) New concepts that need to be named in new cultures
 - Borrowing from other languages (to fill a referential gap to refer to notions and things that have been newly introduced to English speakers)

“Blush”, the cosmetic product used to colour cheeks was first called “paint” as recorded from 1660. Those days, both men and women of higher social classes painted their faces to show their high status. In 1753, the term “rouge” meaning red was borrowed from French and it displaced “paint”. “Rouge” remained the usual word for the product for around 2 centuries before an advertisement in 1965 coined the term “blusher” for the product. The term “blusher” displaced “rouge”

in everyday speech and it underwent back-clipping to form the term “blush” that is commonly used today to refer to the same cosmetic product.

- **Coinage: social change giving rise to new concepts, the naming of new technology and innovations, etc.**

The Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to the coinage of new terms that we are all familiar with today, initialisms such as “WFH” meaning work from home and compounded phrases such as “safe-distancing” were introduced and heavily used by institutions globally.

To label things that existed previously but were not of focus, the term “teenager” was only coined in the 1910s but became popularised as a marketing neologism in the 1950s.

2) Political/economic/religious motivations: driven by new needs, new technologies, new fields of knowledge

- **Blending: combining existing concepts to describe overlaps and innovations across industries**

Economic changes resulted in “fintech”, “bitcoin”

- **Change of meaning**

“POV” no longer strictly means point of view, it is now used on social media as an interpersonal discourse marker to introduce a familiar experience or life event, like “POV you go to Costco and end up with a haul”; Also serves a sociological function because it is associated with the posting of memes, so when “POV” is used the watcher is psychologically primed for something funny, such templates including “me when” or “that feeling when” serve similar purposes making memes using these phrasal templates more successful

(Social factors affect rate of change. A person simultaneously belongs to a particular age group, region, and social group so change may spread through diffusion.)

3) Ideological changes

- Political correctness: avoiding offence and being impolite
“Disabled” or “Handicapped” is increasingly viewed as unacceptable, “Person with disabilities” is the PC term for this group; can be linked to (Pinker, 2003) Euphemism treadmill and Identity-first labelling
- Speaker attitudes towards causes (such as inclusivity)
The push for more gender-inclusive pronouns has led to the coinage of new gender-neutral pronouns such as ze/zir and the increase in use of the pronouns they/them even when referring to a singular person. Additionally, the creation of the honorific “Ms” to be used in place of “Miss” or “Mrs” was to resist the convention of women to declare their marital status publicly
- Group identity: maintenance and expression of group identity (Boomers, Gen Z, etc.)
(Labov, 1963) Martha’s Vineyard study: On Martha’s vineyard, an island off the north-east coast of America, a small group of fishermen began to exaggerate a tendency already existing in their speech (more frequent use of the centralised diphthong). They did this to establish themselves as an independent social group with superior status to the despised summer tourists, who they claim disrupt their way of island life. A number of other islanders regarded this group of fishermen as the representation of old virtues and desirable values, and subconsciously imitated the way they spoke. The new pronunciation, seen as an innovation by the other islanders, became the norm for those living on the island and the way of speaking established itself as a dialect.
- Markers of distinct ethnic identities

4) Social change driving speaker preference

- Informalisation of discourse: process by which language forms traditionally used for close personal relationships are now used in much wider social contexts
(Fairclough, 1994) “Professional encounters are increasingly likely to contain informal forms of English; they are now becoming conversationalised”
- Prioritise convenience and efficiency
“God be with you” shortened to “Good-bye”, initialisms “FBI” “BBC” “CD”, blending “sitcom”

- **Words that are simply less used and becomes obsolete**
“Bridegroom” evolved from the word “brydguma”, literally meaning “bride-man” but the word “guma” eventually dropped out of use and became obsolete. The loss left the second half of “brydguma” isolated and a mystery to English language speakers who understood the bride part without difficulties. Trying to make sense of it, they altered it to the similar sounding “bridegroom” because “groom” was a word familiar to them; Although “groom” meant somebody who looks after horses, at least they knew it referred to a person instead of the mysterious “guma”.
- **Semantic broadening (misinterpretation): the more people use a word, the more likely it is going to undergo change even if the word is used wrongly**
“Fortuitous” the word, until recently elevated and rather rare, means “accidental” or “happening by chance”; it does not mean “lucky” and is only very distantly related to “fortunate”. However, in recent years, some people have stumbled across the unfamiliar word “fortuitous” in reading and have taken the word to be a fancier version of “fortunate”. As a result, people now use the word “fortuitous” more frequently and often use it to mean “lucky”.
- **Semantic broadening (narrowing):**
“Girl” used to refer to a child of either sex, but now it only refers to a female child. However, in Irish English it still refers to a child of either sex.

5) New communications technology (NCT)

The spoken hashtag: initially used for organisation purposes – in chat rooms, you could type “join #gardening” to talk with gardening enthusiasts. It gradually became the tool of choice on social media platforms to link posts with relevant categories. The hashtag also became used to add metacommentary, or side commentary, which bled into speech as a way to emphasise or categorise the utterance before it. By the mid-2010s, the spoken hashtag to indicate metacommentary spread to people who were not even online yet; namely, kids.

- This follows other linguistic trends in English which similarly verbalises pronunciation, most commonly “period” at the end of an utterance to express finality and “quote un-quote” to indicate that another speaker is being referenced. The spoken hashtag is simply the latest on the list of features to add context, control the flow of information, or indicate that something is of less importance.

6) Language contact through globalisation, colonisation and language contact over the internet

- **Globalisation: increased ease of travel, exposure to speech habits in the media**

- Colonisation: spread of languages of power and prestige through conquest and colonisation; can also lead to the nativisation of English (superstrate and substrate languages)

The conquest of England by French-speaking Normans elevated French to a high level of prestige among English-speakers in England, where French became the language of the king, the court, and the aristocracy while English remained the language of the common men. The native upper class and those who wished to join them, learned to speak French to integrate into prestigious social circles. The speakers often dropped French words into their English to show off their status and prestige and since French was viewed as more refined and elevated, French words gradually displaced their native English equivalents. This can be seen in modern English words such as “mountain”, “river” and “glory” that were borrowed from French, while their old English equivalents were “berg”, “ea” and “wuldor” initially.

- Language contact over the internet: prevalence of social media

(Cameron, 1995) Verbal Hygiene

Argued that people with conservative views use ‘grammar’ as a cluster of related political and moral terms: *order, tradition, authority, hierarchy and rules*. In the conservatives’ ideological world, these terms are not only positively connotated, they define the conditions for any civilised society. The antonyms of these terms:

New communications technology (NCT)

- Convenience of adding videos and pictures in communication gave rise to the increase in multimodal communication, allowing for the use of memes, GIFs and stickers in communication

(Evans, 2017) Emojis help us to communicate better by filling in the gap of non-verbal cues like gestures and facial expressions that allows us to communicate in more nuanced ways. He claims that the use of emojis can be used to avoid the “angry jerk phenomenon” which is when a person receives a text-based form of digital communication and misinterprets the intended meaning usually due to a misinterpretation of tone.

- Oxford dictionary’s word of the year for the UK and the USA for 2015 was “😂” – officially known as the “Face with tears of joy” emoji. The President of Oxford Dictionaries then justified this choice, saying that emojis have stepped up to meet “the rapid-fire, visually focused demands of 21st century communication” and that it reflected real-life language use and change. The pictographic script is becoming an increasingly popular and rich form of communication, now used commonly in

everyday online discourse alongside other pictographic forms such as GIFs, chat stickers and memes. This choice was met with strong disapproval from online netizens, citing the choice as a reflection of the poor communication skills of people today and a lower standard of English. (Descriptivist and Prescriptivist views)

- In 2023, a Canadian judge ruled that the thumbs-up emoji can represent contractual agreement and is as legally binding as a signature. A farmer, Kent Mickleborough, who was looking to buy flax spoke with farmer, Chris Achter, on the phone and texted an image of the contract for flax delivery, asking the farmer to “Please confirm flax contract”. Achter replied with a thumbs-up emoji but the flax was never delivered upon the contract date and by that time the price of flax had increased. Mickleborough and Achter dispute the meaning of the emoji. While Mickleborough referenced previous contracts confirmed by text messages suggesting that the emoji meant Achter had agreed to the terms of the contract, Achter argued that the emoji only indicated that he had received the contract in the text message. The court “readily acknowledged that a thumbs-up emoji is a non-traditional means to ‘sign’ a document”, and Achter was ordered to pay \$C82,000 for an unfulfilled contract. Emojis, once viewed only as a supplement for colloquial communication in digital platforms, are now increasingly recognised as valid and acceptable for its use even in formal contexts such as workplace discourse, and by institutions such as the court of law.
 - Possible further expansion: intelligibility due to differences in societal contexts and thus, differences in the interpretation of meaning of fistbump emoji, handshake emoji...)

LFs for language change:

- Spelling

Speech changes faster than writing so many spellings reflect an earlier pattern of pronunciation, especially before the invention of the printing press, codification and the standardisation of spelling.
- Lexical change: 2 main types – borrowing and word formation

(Crystal, 1991) Vocabulary / lexical change is the most obvious aspect of language change. Crystal notes that sometimes vocabulary change is instant though most lexical change is gradual.

 - Borrowing: usually due to language contact (globalisation, migration and mass media)
 - Entry of the word “Sputnik” borrowed from the Russian language overnight, originally meaning “fellow traveller”, after the successful launch of the first artificial satellite. Now, it is universally used to refer to any series of 3 artificial satellites in English; interestingly, the meaning has also been broadened to mean any satellite in modern Russian.

- Word formation:
 - a) Abbreviations: initialisms, acronyms, clipping
 - b) Affixation: prefixes, suffixes – Interesting, has not been a trend in English for several hundred years but has been a trend since the sixties
 - Mega “Megastore”, “Megaphone”, “Megabyte”
 - Dis “Displeasure”, “Disagree”, “Disqualify”
 - Ful “Plentiful”, “Useful”, “Careful”
 - Hood “Neighbourhood”, “Brotherhood”, “Childhood”
 - c) Blending
 - d) Conversion: moving a word from one grammatical category to another without changing the morphology of the word
 - “Google, the online search engine...” (Noun)
 - “Can you google something for me?” (Verb)
 - e) Compounding
 - f) Coinage / Neologisms
- Others:
 - a) Obsolescence: decrease and then disappear from use
 - Things that are no longer in use “Organ grinders”, “Gramophones”, “Slide rules”
 - b) Language fashion: some lexemes return to fashion

- Semantic change: change in the meaning of a word over time
 - Broadening: a word acquires extra layer of meaning
 - Narrowing: a specialised meaning becomes exclusive or dominant
 - Amelioration: a word improves in meaning
 - Pejoration / Degeneration: a word takes on a more negative meaning
 - Euphemism: a word that is more polite, more pleasant than the real meaning
 - Dysphemism: Using an offensive word instead of a more polite one
 - Vocatives, especially when there is a huge difference in power or abuse of power
Slave as "Negro"
 - Metaphorical extension:
 - "Mouse" the animal to "Mouse" the computer accessory
- Grammatical change: changes in the structure of the language; slower process than lexical and semantic change
 - From Old English to Modern English, the word order SVO (Subject, Verb, Object) was established; In contrast Old English was more flexible such as in the placement of pronouns
"She gave it me." (OE)
"She gave me it."
 - Loss in subject / object distinction in the use of who / whom; Fewer people now use whom.
"Who" refers to the subject of a sentence
"Whom" refers to the object of a verb or preposition
"To whom were you talking to this morning?" Now seen as snobby or superior