

New English

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Language, and not only spoken language, is an essential element in our relationships; first impressions are significantly influenced by language and our rapport with others is subject to the emotive connotations of the particular language and way it is used. People are labelled according to the way they speak. English reflects regional and educational differences so clearly that in the past public figures tended to adopt an anodyne and anonymous “BBC English”. Today accent and idiomatic diction are recognised as part of the personality but acceptance in public speaking has come very slowly.

George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, the basis for the musical *My Fair Lady*, and Paul Scott’s *Jewel in the Crown* both deal with this aspect of English.

History

The richness of the English language is historically founded. England or rather Great Britain was exposed to successive waves of invaders and settlers from the east and south: Danes, Norsemen, Vikings, all the seafaring peoples, the Romans of course and last of all the Normans, each bringing their own language and pushing the previous inhabitants away to the north and west. This is why idioms and dialects are much stronger in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. But English is not just a conglomerate of numerous languages, it has managed to absorb positive linguistic and verbal influences, giving them new character and strengthening and enriching the language.

Old English or Anglo Saxon

The newcomers ousted the indigenous people claiming all important administrative posts and functions for themselves. So Old English remained the language of the peasant farmers. Today a very high proportion of words connected with the land, farming and crafts are Anglo Saxon. They are fundamental, short and direct. We also tend to use the expression “Anglo Saxon” as a euphemism for swear words.

Latin languages

French was the language of all educated people and virtually the official language in England for over 300 years: from the Norman invasion (1066) to the late 14th century. In law, French remained the standard language well into the 18th century and even modern law is still permeated with French expressions – mortgage, feu duty. French was particularly strong in Scotland, Mary Queen of Scots could hardly speak English on her accession and never learned it properly. This is reflected in many words and expressions still in common use in Scotland today – ashet for a meat dish from assiette, a roser for the spray on a watering can from arrosier. Italian ousted Latin in diplomacy before giving way to French, and Spanish was the language in Catholic politics. By the late sixteenth century all these influences had coalesced into an exceptionally rich and vital vocabulary. The progress of printing and the publication of the authorised version of the Bible at the beginning of the 17th century helped to establish standards in language and spelling. This, combined with a long period of peace and Elizabeth’s patronage of poetry and music generated the Golden Age of English literature – and it would still have been a golden age even without Shakespeare. The other authors of the time were just unlucky and are hardly known today.

Pronunciation has also changed considerably since Chaucer or even Shakespeare’s time and seeming vagaries of spelling usually have etymological roots or are due to an evolution in sound patterns and pronunciation. Sounds patterns and speech melody are an essential element of spoken language. Anyone with a good ear has an immense advantage in learning a language.

English is not always English. The Englishes.

This is not only a question of UK v. US English, Australian, Indian, South African English and a few others cannot be discounted. They are perfectly viable forms in their own right often preserving words and expressions that have been lost in England.

Is the word *kid* old or new? Slang or correct English? US or UK? Many English people look down their noses at *kid* as American slang. Little do they know. It first appears very early and Shakespeare certainly used it as we do. Some time in the 17th or 18th century it disappeared in England only to be re-imported as American slang in the middle of the last century. It crossed the Atlantic twice.

Is one universal language possible? Can English be universal?

"They reeled they set, they crossed, they cleekit
Til ilka carlin swat and reekit
An coos't her duddies to th'wark
An lenkit at it in her sark"

"But pleasures are like poppies spread
You seize the flower, the bloom is shed
Or like the snowfall in the river
A moment white, then melts for ever."

These quotations are not only from the same poet but from the same poem – Tam o' Shanter by Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland (1759-1796). If there are such differences within the UK – I dare not say one country – how can you expect one language to serve throughout world? Today, an Englishman still has trouble understanding a Glaswegian or an Aberdonian so how can one expect people the world over to speak a single uniform language?

Everyone has their own speech patterns, speech melodies, idioms etc. The differences are even more striking when the speaker is from a non-Indo-European language group. As long as he retains the speech patterns and intonation of his native language, the English will sound different. Even the speed of delivery can distort fluency, which is why dubbed films invariably sound artificial.

Richness

As English has coalesced from several languages there are often two or more words with identical or similar meanings - one explanation for the sheer volume of words in English. But it also has an exceptional number of words with several different meanings – one reason why it is such a minefield for translators! It is an interesting exercise for students to tell them to look them up a few common words in the biggest dictionary they can get their hands on to see how many different meanings they can find. *Match*, *set* and *plant* are usually the winners. But there are so many – even *translate* does not always mean *translate*. In genetic engineering, to translate means to transfer a gene from one plant to another. In fact there are two distinct meanings in genetics and botany, luckily for us translated literally as traduire, traduir, tradurre, übersetzen etc. To be translated may even be used as a very affected expression for to die e.g. in New Age writing. *Rocket*, *rape* and *panic* may all be botanical: rocket salad (Ruccola, roquette), rape oil (Raps, colza) and panic for millet, a perfectly logical play on the Latin name *panicum*. *Discount* is not always a question of percentages, it is also the conventional word for not to take into account, to exclude or omit. *Recorder* has three distinct meanings, a musical instrument (Blockflöte, flute à bec); the person who takes the minutes at a meeting and tape or video recorder.

Neologisms – New Words – New Usage

Language is not rigid; usage and meaning have always been fluid, in the process of evolution. *Simple*, *ordinary* and *fool*, for example, sound very basic but what did they mean in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, to Shakespeare or Pepys? When Lear moans “*My poor fool is dead!*” he is mourning the loss of his daughter: *fool* used to mean darling. At that time *simple* meant a remedy or medicine e.g. in the first Friar scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. And an *ordinary* was the cheapest kind of eating house with long tables and only one dish. Even *friend* has changed considerably. Originally it meant lover, which is still reflected in the modern ‘boyfriend’, then a member of the extended family, a relation before arriving at the current meaning.

Today the evolution process is much more rapid. *Gay* is the classic example. For centuries it was the usual word for cheerful, light-hearted. A gay bachelor was the stock expression for a carefree young man. In the fifties, gay started to be used to mean a homosexual and soon became the established, non-discriminatory term and gay in the original sense disappeared from English virtually overnight.

Think how many simple words have acquired a new meaning in the wake of new technologies: *crash*, *bits* and *bytes*, *windows*, *notebook*, *mail*, *attachment*, *browse*. Or how many have simply adapted to fit changed circumstances. *Program* for computers and *programme* for concerts and so on. *Ton* for an imperial ton, *tonne* for a metric tonne. *Bike* is no longer simply colloquial for *bicycle* but has come to mean a mountain bike. Today bike is used concurrently in both senses in the UK.

An important new feature in English is the necessity to be *PC* or *politically correct*, and not to use anything offensive, discriminatory, sexist, racist etc. The concept is positive but frequently goes too far: a man is a chairman but a woman becomes a chairperson and does not have any sex at all. Naturally, the feminist movement has made an impression. Words like sex, gender, housewife and so on have all been reassessed. As feminist logic in English is often diametrically opposed to the German or French, translation of a feminist text is more than a challenge.

The avoidance of discriminatory, derogatory or downright abusive vocabulary can only be welcomed but the effort to do so has produced some strange alternatives. One can no longer say someone is stupid or an idiot, they are now slow learners, mentally challenged or learning disabled. The illiterate have become print handicapped. The word crippled was ousted by disabled many years ago. In the wake of PC thinking the same people became physically challenged or physically different.

One interesting aspect of the difference between US English and UK English is that the Americans have a tendency to form verbs from nouns or even adjectives. The English purist will not stand for this but some of the coinages are useful and some have become well established - bill the company – others are struggling and some will ‘hopefully’ soon be forgotten. Hopefully, in this sense is more put up with than accepted but it looks as if it is here to stay.

Another US speciality is to drop prepositions and adverbs, and to use intransitive verbs transitively. Is this new usage or bad usage? This is probably influenced by pithy headlines and the ubiquitous banners, the runners moving across the bottom of the TV screen, in an increasingly visual age. “The situation in Israel is fraught.” Fraught with what? Grammatical nonsense but used every day in US reporting. Similarly “Demonstrators protest the situation over Iraq” (try parsing that one).

There was such a spate of neologisms in the eighties and nineties that both Oxford and Longman started publishing regular compendiums of new words and there have been many other new glossaries and word guides over the last few years. Going through the older ones it is fascinating to see how many gadflies – *one-offs* in New English – there are and how few have

become assimilated. *Perestroika* and *glasnost* are a case in point, in most languages. They emerged in the late eighties, became the buzzwords of the early nineties and were relegated to history all within a span of about ten years.

A few examples of neologisms and new usage

Accounting

creative accounting	giving a false picture; the negative positions have been disguised
selective accounting	what is shown on the balance sheet is correct, but the negative positions have been left out
aggressive accounting	massive weighting of the accounts to conceal any weaknesses
off-balance sheet financing	the Enron phenomenon is not new - The Guardian reported this as a "major problem" in 1984.
massaging the accounts	moulding the accounts to fit the forecasts
forensic auditor	an auditor trying to find out what really happened after an accounting scandal e.g. Enron, Arthur Andersen

Business – job losses

retrenching	restructuring; return to core business; firing people
down-sizing	restructuring; firing a lot of people
redimensioning	restructuring; firing a lot of people
laying-off	firing people
disconnected	fired; the telephonist will tell you "Mr Soandso has been disconnected."
outsourcing	"lending" staff to another company instead of firing them direct – not to be confused with farming out work e.g. outsourcing translations
plastic	adopted very quickly for credit cards
business angel	someone who puts up the money to cover the process from invention or discovery to the production line
seed money	money put up by a business angel

Warfare

collateral damage	has some spine-chillingly cynical expressions
friendly fire	people killed by accident
blue on blue	soldiers killed by fire from their own side
	dating back to the American Civil War and readopted by politicians and reporters during the fighting in Iraq in the hope that it does not sound as crass as friendly fire
lethal aid	money granted to other countries to buy weapons
misery index	statistical appraisal of the degree of human suffering and deprivation of the civilian population in war
game plan	strategy to achieve an objective in a series of precise steps.
road map	the same thing but sounds less cynical
on lighter note	
netochondriac or interchondriac	people who visit all the medical web sites and scare themselves so much they need treatment. Not a joke, US surgeries are full of them.
cyberphobic	person who is afraid of computers

Abstract of a talk given at the ASTTI regional meetings in Zurich and Bern.

Contact gartmann.english@bluewin.ch for a copy of the word lists presented at the talks