

## “In Forme of Speche is Chaunge”

Kate Burridge, La Trobe University

“Ye know ek that in forme of speche is chaunge / Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho / That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge / Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so” [Geoffrey Chaucer, c. 1385, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 11, 22]

“Copious without order, and energetick without rules [...] perplexity to be disentangled, and confusion to be regulated” — this is how Samuel Johnson described the English language in the preface to his dictionary of 1755. Like others of his time, Johnson couldn’t help but contrast English with the classical languages Latin and Greek. These were written varieties, of course, which meant they lacked the natural flux and variance of any normal spoken language. Against these ossified paragons of linguistic virtue, it is not surprising that English appeared unregulated and unrefined.

Since Johnson’s time, a standard language has stabilised. English has now acquired its army and navy (to adapt a description attributed to Max Weinreich); in other words, the arsenal of prescriptive texts like dictionaries, grammars and style guides that give standard languages like English so much of their clout. Once again we are confronted with neat lists and fine-spun paradigms that present a regularity and homogeneity that is a total fiction. Even the labels we use like “standard” and “non-standard English” imply that we are dealing with a clear-cut distinction. Such labels obscure a reality of variation and fuzziness that is an inherent part of any language system.

Variability is what provides the vehicle for change. The infinite variation in everyday speech — the so-called slipshod pronunciations, mistakes in grammar, coinages, new-fangled meanings and so on — these are the basis for real change. The majority of them will drop by the wayside, but some will catch on, be used more and more and will eventually form part of the repertoire of Standard English in the future. Most of the time we fail to see the stirrings going on around us. Changes in language are as gradual and imperceptible as the changes in the growth of a plant or tree. But the clues to where our language is heading are everywhere.

All aspects of the system — sounds, words, grammar — are constantly on the move. Most of the changes result from a complex network of different influences. One of the most important of these is repetition or ritualisation and part of this talk will explore the many different ways change is shaped by the frequency with which we use words and phrases. The talk will also focus on the way in which language evolves. Often changes introduce complexity and anomaly elsewhere. Typically they take a long time to complete — in fact many never come to completion. Competing changes can interfere. Other changes simply peter out. They might even reverse themselves. Frequently they leave behind relic forms. These become the eccentricities of the language — the forms, functions and meanings that are out of alignment with the usual patterns of behaviour in the language. Modern English is full of rubble, and hidden in all this debris it is possible to uncover a partial history of the language.

