Deutscher, Guy (2006-05-02). The Unfolding of Language: An Evolutionary Tour of Mankind's Greatest Invention. Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

All the obvious explanations, therefore, fall short of accounting for the sheer scale of the changes. It seems that languages need neither nudging from the Joneses nor the gadgetry of ploughs in order to be transformed, for they keep changing, even without the slightest provocation, and even in spite of people's best intentions. But if all these external reasons fail to explain the changes, then there must be something in language itself which makes it so unsteady. There must be something inherently unstable in the very way in which we communicate, some element of volatility which drives language into a state of inner restlessness, and gives it itchy feet. But what? The conundrum of change has been one of the enduring puzzles in the study of language, and it preoccupied linguists throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. But only in the last few decades have linguists finally managed to make significant progress in cracking it. Like any respectable whodunit, the mystery of change turned out to have three main elements: a suspect – who is really behind the changes? a motive – why should whoever is doing it be doing it? and finally the toughest question of all, the get-away – how do the perpetrators get away with these changes, without causing devastating damage to communication? Tracking down the suspect may at first seem a rather difficult mission, since it's quite hard to think of anyone who is really trying to change language. (Are you?) But the identification turns out to be fairly straightforward, since although no one in particular is changing language, it is in fact all of us who bring about the changes, even if we never wish to. There are a great number of things that people bring about without ever

intending to. Just think of traffic jams. Nobody has ever set out on their daily commute with the express purpose of creating one, and yet each driver contributes to the congestion by adding one more car to an overcrowded road. But unintended changes don't always have to be harmful. Imagine two public buildings with an overgrown field lying directly between them. The only road connecting the buildings winds its way lengthily around the field, so people who have to walk from one building to the other start crossing the field as a short-cut. The first person to do so tries to make his way through the long grass, and people who come afterwards find the track which the first person has made the most inviting way through, because some grass and bracken have already been trodden down. As more and more people cross the field, more and more vegetation is trampled, so that eventually the track turns into a nice clear footpath. The point is that no one in particular created this footpath, and no one in particular even intended to. The path did not emerge from some project of landscape design, but from the accumulated spontaneous actions of the short-cutters, who were each following their own selfish motives in taking the easiest and quickest route. Changes in language come about in a rather similar fashion, through the accumulation of unintended actions. These actions must stem from entirely selfish motives, not from any conscious design to transform language. But what could these motives be? This is a rather more involved question, and doing justice to it will occupy us in the next few chapters. But in essence, the motives for change can be encapsulated in the triad economy, expressiveness and analogy. Economy refers to the tendency to save effort, and is behind the shortcuts speakers often take in pronunciation. As we shall see in the following chapter, when these short-cuts accumulate, they can create new sounds, just like the new footpath cutting through the

field. Expressiveness relates to speakers' attempts to achieve greater effect for their utterances and extend their range of meaning. One area where we are particularly expressive is in saying 'no'. A plain 'no' is often deemed too weak to convey the depth of our unenthusiasm, so to make sure the right effect is achieved, we beef up 'no' to 'not at all', 'not a bit', 'no way', 'by no means', 'not in a million years', and so on. But as we shall see later on, the results of this hyperbole can often be self-defeating, since the repetition of emphatic phrases can cause an inflationary process that devalues their currency. The third motive for change, analogy, is shorthand for the mind's craving for order, the instinctive need of speakers to find regularity in language. The effects of analogy are most conspicuous in the errors of young children, as in 'I goed' or 'two foots', which are simply attempts to introduce regularity to areas of the language that happen to be quite disorganized. Many such 'errors' are corrected as children grow up, but some innovations do catch on. In the past, for example, there were many more irregular plural nouns in English: one bōc (book), many bēc; one hand, two hend; one eye, two eyn; one cow, many kine. But gradually, 'errors' like 'hands' crept in by analogy on the regular -s plural pattern. So bēc was replaced by the 'incorrect' bokes during the thirteenth century, eyn was replaced by eyes in the fourteenth century, kine by cows in the sixteenth. The following chapters will take a much closer look at the different motives for change, and explore their effects on language in much greater depth. Economy and expressiveness will feature first, and the third part of the triad, analogy, will be the subject of Chapter 6. But for the moment, and even without going into all the details, the reasons for language's chronic inner restlessness should be beginning to come into focus. Different forces, powered by different motives, keep pulling and pushing

language in different directions, and in such a complex system, these constant thrusts ensure that the whole never stays still.