

Essay Assessment

Garv Shah

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The English Language has continually evolved throughout its history and will continue to do so for its foreseeable future. Modern English has come a long way from its Old English counterpart, both lexically and syntactically, demonstrating how the language has been far from resistant to change in the past. Modern English is subject to similar changes, as seen from the emergence of ‘e-language’ in online communities. Though these changes can temporarily harm intelligibility, they should ultimately be embraced as useful additions to the English Language.

Throughout the course of history, English has not been resistant to change. Old English was a highly inflected language, containing an intricate system of inflections for each of its 5 grammatical cases. Since then, there has been significant inflection reduction, namely during the Middle English period where the -a, -u and -e suffixes all merged into the ending -e. The nominative case also housed an extensive grammatical gender system, which fell out of favour after contact with other languages with simpler syntax. Notably, the syntax of Old English displayed a flexible word order, but throughout the 12th Century CE, the SVO structure was settled upon as the language entered the phase of Early Middle English. This change was largely driven by the 1066 Norman invasion of Great Britain, which brought the influence of the French Language to British English. “English has been this vacuum cleaner of a language because of its history,” (Stimulus 1, D. Crystal) and the newfound rulers brought many French-derived lexemes to the language, such as ‘mansion’ and ‘inquire’ for the respective Old English synonyms ‘house’ and ‘ask’. “People did not wake up in the morning and decide to use the word ‘beef’ instead of ‘ox meat’, [but rather] these changes to English took place over centuries” (Stimulus 3, K. Lowe) as the language changes and adapts to new needs and demands. Nonetheless, English has historically shown significant change and has been anything but resistant to adaptation.

Modern English is changing right now and will continue to change. Consider the rapid technological advancements throughout recent decades which have profoundly influenced the English Language. Text messaging as a new medium for communication has created a need for the language to be short and succinct, pressuring native speakers to use language reminiscent of the telegraphic stage of child language acquisition. Text messaging acronyms such as ‘LOL’ have arisen from these needs for convenience. Even newfound additions to the language such as ‘LOL’ are undergoing rapid semantic shift; previously intended to express the literal action of laughing out loud, the acronym is now more of a way to signal irony or that a comment is intended to be funny. This changes depending on the semantic/syntactic content of the message, such as conviviality in ‘I had a great time lol’,

lightheartedness in ‘lol okay I’ll see you soon and self deprecating humour in ‘i’m drowning in bills fml lol’. As such, the acronym ‘LOL’ has seen significant semantic shift throughout solely the last few decades. Nouns such as the clipped and suffixed ‘selfie’ along with the compound ‘emoji’ borrowed from Japanese are both relatively recent additions to the English lexicon, demonstrating how change is ever present. Further, the ongoing development of gender neutral pronouns demonstrates English’s willingness to adapt to the changing needs of individuals who do not identify within the traditional gender binary, shown by the recent changes to what was previously a closed word class, pronouns. Whilst not only being a lexical change, the change in pronouns from he/she to they/them requires a syntactic change of the language as well: when using they in reference to a singular subject, the verb conjugation does not take the singular form - not ‘They writes’ but ‘They write’ - demonstrating an acceptable modern change to the syntax of the language. Thus, Modern English continues to change, both lexically and syntactically, as it has done in the past.

Language change should be embraced so long as it improves the communication of ideas and maintains mutual intelligibility. As discussed above, there have been several additions to the English lexicon due to the emergence of e-language. “English speakers already have over a million words at our disposal” so it is far to ask if “we really need to add 1,000 new ones a year to the lexicon” (Stimulus 2, A. Bodle), but so long as these additions are mutually intelligible in the long run and allow language users to more effectively communicate otherwise foreign concepts, they are worthwhile additions to the rich lexicon of English. During adoption periods, it may be hard for other language users to understand the semantics behind a lexeme, but this stands true for the introduction of any new concept and is not harmful. Similarly, the use of they/them as a singular pronoun could be viewed as incorrect use of the language. “The problem is that the word has a specific meaning, which is being diluted and devalued by its overuse in incorrect contexts” (Stimulus 4, J. Lloyd). However, this semantic shift accommodates for a change in perception of concepts such as gender for the speakers of the language while maintaining mutual intelligibility. Therefore, change of this form should be embraced, as it allows for further expression through the language.

In summary, the English Language has seen great change throughout its history and continues to do so in the modern era. The purpose of language is to communicate ideas, and so long as language change aids in this process, it should be embraced as a beneficial feature of any living language. From Old English to Modern English, from archaisms to modern e-language, language change has been and will continue to be an integral feature of English that facilitates the effective communication of speakers around the world.