1 The ever-whirling wheel
The inevitability of change

Since 'tis Nature's Law to change.
Constancy alone is strange.
John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester,
A dialogue between Strephon and Daphne

Everything in this universe is perpetually in a state of change, a fact commented on by philosophers and poets through the ages. A flick through any book of quotations reveals numerous statements about the fluctuating world we live in: 'Everything rolls on, nothing stays still', claimed the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus in the sixth century BC. In the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser speaks of 'the ever-whirling wheel of change, the which all mortal things doth sway', while 'time and the world are ever in flight' is a statement by the twentieth-century Irish poet William Butler Yeats – to take just a few random examples.

Language, like everything else, joins in this general flux. As the German philosopher–linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt noted in 1836: 'There can never be a moment of true standstill in language, just as little as in the ceaseless flaming thought of men. By nature it is a continuous process of development.'[1]

Even the simplest and most colloquial English of several hundred years ago sounds remarkably strange to us. Take the work of Robert Mannyng, who wrote a history of England in the mid fourteenth century. He claimed that he made his language as simple as he could so that ordinary people could understand it, yet it is barely comprehensible to the average person today:

> In symple speche as I couthe,
> That is lightest in mannes mouthe.
> I mad noght for no disours,
> Ne for no seggers, no harpours,
> Bot for the luf of symple men
> That strange Inglis can not ken.[2]

A glance at any page of Chaucer shows clearly the massive changes which have taken place in the last millennium. It is amusing to note that he himself, in *Troylus and Criseyde*, expressed his wonderment that men of long ago spoke in so different a manner from his contemporaries:

> Ye knowe ek, that in forme of speche is chaunge
> Withinne a thousand yer, and wordes tho
> That hadden prys now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thenketh hem, and yet they spake hem so,
> And spedde as wel in love as men now do.[3]

Language, then, like everything else, gradually transforms itself over the centuries. There is nothing surprising in this. In a world where humans grow old, tadpoles change into frogs, and milk turns into cheese, it would be strange if language alone remained unaltered. As the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure noted: 'Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law.'[4]

In spite of this, large numbers of intelligent people condemn and resent language change, regarding alterations as due to unnecessary sloppiness, laziness or ignorance. Letters are written to newspapers and indignant articles are published, all deploring the fact that words acquire new meanings and new pronunciations. The following is a representative sample taken from the last twenty-five years. In the late 1960s we find a columnist in a British newspaper complaining about the 'growing unintelligibility of spoken English', and maintaining that 'English used to be a language which foreigners couldn't pronounce but could often understand. Today it is rapidly becoming a language which the English can't pronounce and few foreigners can understand.'[5] At around the same time, another commentator declared angrily that 'through sheer laziness and sloppiness of mind, we are in danger of losing our past subjunctive'.[6] A third owned to a 'a queasy distaste for the vulgarity of "between you and I", "these sort", "the media is" . . . precisely the kind of distaste I feel at seeing a damp spoon dipped in the sugar bowl or butter spread with the bread-knife'.[7] In 1972 the writer of an article emotively entitled 'Polluting our language' condemned the 'blind surrender to the

momentum or inertia of slovenly and tasteless ignorance and insensitivity'.[8] A reviewer discussing the 1978 edition of the *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* announced that his 'only sadness is that the current editor seems prepared to bow to every slaphappy and slipshod change of meaning'.[9] The author of a book published in 1979 compared a word which changes its meaning to 'a piece of wreckage with a ship's name on it floating away from a sunken hulk': the book was entitled *Decadence*.[10] In 1980, the literary editor of *The Times* complained that the grammar of English 'is becoming simpler and coarser'.[11] In 1982, a newspaper article commented that 'The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much . . . that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it'.[12] In 1986, a letter written to an evening paper complained about 'the abuse of our beautiful language by native-born English speakers . . . We go out of our way to promulgate incessantly . . . the very ugliest sounds and worst possible grammar'.[13] In 1988, a journalist bemoaned 'pronunciation lapses' which affect him 'like a blackboard brushed with barbed wire'.[14] In 1990, a well-known author published an article entitled: 'They can't even say it properly now', in which he grumbled that 'We seem to be moving . . . towards a social and linguistic situation in which nobody says or writes or probably knows anything more than an approximation to what he or she means.'[15] In 1999, a writer in a Sunday newspaper coined the label 'Slop English' for the 'maulings and misusages' of 'Teletotties' (young television presenters).[16]

The above views are neatly summarized in Ogden Nash's poem, 'Laments for a dying language' (1962):

> Coin brassy words at will, debase the coinage;
> We're in an if-you-cannot-lick-them-join age,
> A slovenliness provides its own excuse age,
> Where usage overnight condones misusage.
> Farewell, farewell to my beloved language,
> Once English, now a vile orangutanguage.

Some questions immediately spring to mind. Are these objectors merely ludicrous, akin to fools who think it might be possible to halt the movement of the waves or the course of the sun? Are

their efforts to hold back the sea of change completely misguided? Alternatively, could these intelligent and well-known writers possibly be right? Is it indeed possible that language change is largely due to lack of care and maintenance on our part? Are we simply behaving like the inhabitants of underdeveloped countries who allow tractors and cars to rot after only months of use because they do not understand the need to oil and check the parts every so often? Is it true that 'we need not simply accept it, as though it were some catastrophe of nature. We all talk and we all listen. Each one of us, therefore, every day can break a lance on behalf of our embattled English tongue, by taking a little more trouble', as a *Daily Telegraph* writer claimed?[17] Ought we to be actually doing something, such as starting a Campaign for Real English, as one letter to a newspaper proposed?[18] Or, in a slightly modified form, we might ask the following. Even if eventual change is inevitable, can we appreciably retard it, and would it be to our advantage to do so? Furthermore, is it possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' changes, and root out the latter?

These questions often arouse surprisingly strong feelings, and they are not easy to answer. In order to answer them satisfactorily, we need to know considerably more about language change, how it happens, when it happens, who initiates it, and other possible reasons for its occurrence. These are the topics examined in this book. In short, we shall look at how and why language change occurs, with the ultimate aim of finding out the direction, if any, in which human languages are moving.

In theory, there are three possibilities to be considered. They could apply either to human language as a whole, or to any one language in particular. The first possibility is slow decay, as was frequently suggested in the nineteenth century. Many scholars were convinced that European languages were on the decline because they were gradually losing their old word-endings. For example, the popular German writer Max Müller asserted that, 'The history of all the Aryan languages is nothing but a gradual process of decay.'[19]

Alternatively, languages might be slowly evolving to a more efficient state. We might be witnessing the survival of the fittest, with existing languages adapting to the needs of the times. The

lack of a complicated word-ending system in English might be a sign of streamlining and sophistication, as argued by the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen in 1922: 'In the evolution of languages the discarding of old flexions goes hand in hand with the development of simpler and more regular expedients that are rather less liable than the old ones to produce misunderstanding.'[20]

A third possibility is that language remains in a substantially similar state from the point of view of progress or decay. It may be marking time, or treading water, as it were, with its advance or decline held in check by opposing forces. This is the view of the Belgian linguist Joseph Vendryès, who claimed that 'Progress in the absolute sense is impossible, just as it is in morality or politics. It is simply that different states exist, succeeding each other, each dominated by certain general laws imposed by the equilibrium of the forces with which they are confronted. So it is with language.'[21]

In the course of this book, we shall try to find out where the truth of the matter lies.

The search for purity

Before we look at language change itself, it may be useful to consider why people currently so often disapprove of alterations. On examination, much of the dislike turns out to be based on social-class prejudice which needs to be stripped away.

Let us begin by asking why the conviction that our language is decaying is so much more widespread than the belief that it is progressing. In an intellectual climate where the notion of the survival of the fittest is at least as strong as the belief in inevitable decay, it is strange that so many people are convinced of the decline in the quality of English, a language which is now spoken by an estimated half billion people – a possible hundredfold increase in the number of speakers during the past millennium.

One's first reaction is to wonder whether the members of the anti-slovenliness brigade, as we may call them, are subconsciously reacting to the fast-moving world we live in, and consequently resenting change in any area of life. To some extent this is likely to be true. A feeling that 'fings ain't wot they used to be' and an attempt to preserve life unchanged seem to be natural reactions to

insecurity, symptoms of growing old. Every generation inevitably believes that the clothes, manners and speech of the following one have deteriorated. We would therefore expect to find a respect for conservative language in every century and every culture and, in literate societies, a reverence for the language of the 'best authors' of the past. We would predict a mild nostalgia, typified perhaps by a native speaker of Kru, one of the Niger-Congo group of languages. When asked if it would be acceptable to place the verb at the end of a particular sentence, instead of in the middle where it was usually placed, he replied that this was the 'real Kru' which his father spoke.[22]

In Europe, however, the feeling that language is on the decline seems more widely spread and stronger than the predictable mood of mild regret. On examination, we find that today's laments take their place in a long tradition of complaints about the corruption of language. Similar expressions of horror were common in the nineteenth century. In 1858 we discover a certain Reverend A. Mursell fulminating against the use of phrases such as *hard up, make oneself scarce, shut up.*[23] At around the same time in Germany, Jacob Grimm, one of the Brothers Grimm of folk-tale fame, stated nostalgically that 'six hundred years ago every rustic knew, that is to say practised daily, perfections and niceties in the German language of which the best grammarians nowadays do not even dream'.[24]

Moving back into the eighteenth century, we find the puristic movement at its height. Utterances of dismay and disgust at the state of the language followed one another thick and fast, expressed with far greater urgency than we normally find today. Famous outbursts included one in 1710 by Jonathan Swift. Writing in the *Tatler*, he launched an attack on the condition of English. He followed this up two years later with a letter to the Lord Treasurer urging the formation of an academy to regulate language usage, since even the best authors of the age, in his opinion, committed 'many gross improprieties which . . . ought to be discarded'.[25] In 1755, Samuel Johnson's famous dictionary of the English language was published. He stated in the preface that 'Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration', urging that 'we retard what we cannot repel, that we

palliate what we cannot cure'. In 1762, Robert Lowth, Bishop of London, complained that 'the English Language hath been much cultivated during the last 200 years . . . but . . . it hath made no advances in Grammatical accuracy'. He himself attempted to lay down 'rules' of good usage, because 'our best Authors for want of some rudiments of this type have sometimes fallen into mistakes, and been guilty of palpable error in point of Grammar.'[26]

In short, expressions of disgust about language, and proposals for remedying the situation, were at their height in the eighteenth century. Such widespread linguistic fervour has never been paralleled. Let us therefore consider what special factors caused such obsessive worry about language at this time.

Around 1700, English spelling and usage were in a fairly fluid state. Against this background, two powerful social factors combined to convert a normal mild nostalgia for the language of the past into a quasi-religious doctrine. The first was a long-standing admiration for Latin, and the second was powerful class snobbery.

The admiration for Latin was a legacy from its use as the language of the church in the Middle Ages, and as the common language of European scholarship from the Renaissance onwards. It was widely regarded as the most perfect of languages – Ben Jonson speaks of it as 'queen of tongues' – and great emphasis was placed on learning to write it 'correctly', that is, in accordance with the usage of the great classical authors such as Cicero. It was taught in schools, and Latin grammar was used as a model for the description of all other languages – however dissimilar – despite the fact that it was no longer anyone's native tongue.

This had three direct effects on attitudes towards language. First, because of the emphasis on replicating the Latin of the 'best authors', people felt that there ought to be a fixed 'correct' form for any language, including English. Secondly, because Latin was primarily written and read, it led to the belief that the written language was in some sense superior to the spoken. Thirdly, even though our language is by no means a direct descendant of Latin, more like a great-niece or great-nephew, English was viewed by many as having slipped from the classical purity of Latin by losing its endings. The idea that a language with a full set of endings for its nouns and verbs was superior to one without these

appendages was very persistent. Even in the twentieth century, we find linguists forced to argue against this continuing irrational attachment to Latin: 'A linguist that insists on talking about the Latin type of morphology as though it were necessarily the high water mark of linguistic development is like the zoologist that sees in the organic world a huge conspiracy to evolve the race-horse or the Jersey cow', wrote Edward Sapir in 1921.[27]

Against this background of admiration for a written language which appeared to have a fixed correct form and a full set of endings, there arose a widespread feeling that someone ought to adjudicate among the variant forms of English, and tell people what was 'correct'. The task was undertaken by Samuel Johnson, the son of a bookseller in Lichfield. Johnson, like many people of fairly humble origin, had an illogical reverence for his social betters. When he attempted to codify the English language in his famous dictionary he selected middle- and upper-class usage. When he said that he had 'laboured to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms, licentious idioms, and irregular combinations',[28] he meant that he had in many instances pronounced against the spoken language of the lower classes, and in favour of the spoken and written forms of groups with social prestige. He asserted, therefore, that there were standards of correctness which should be adhered to, implying that these were already in use among certain social classes, and ought to be acquired by the others. Johnson's dictionary rightly had enormous influence, and its publication has been called 'the most important linguistic event of the eighteenth century'.[29] It was considered a worthwhile undertaking both by his contemporaries and by later generations since it paid fairly close attention to actual usage, even if it was the usage of only a small proportion of speakers.

However, there were other eighteenth-century purists whose influence may have equalled that of Johnson, but whose statements and strictures were related not to usage, but to their own assumptions and prejudices. The most notable of these was Robert Lowth, Bishop of London. A prominent Hebraist and theologian, with fixed and eccentric opinions about language, he wrote *A*

short introduction to English grammar (1762), which had a surprising influence, perhaps because of his own high status. Indeed, many schoolroom grammars in use to this day have laws of 'good usage' which can be traced directly to Bishop Lowth's idiosyncratic pronouncements as to what was 'right' and what was 'wrong'. His grammar is bespattered with pompous notes in which he deplores the lamentable English of great writers. He set out to put matters right by laying down 'rules', which were often based on currently fashionable or even personal stylistic preferences. For example, contrary to general usage, he urged that prepositions at the end of sentences should be avoided:

> The Preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the verb at the end of the Sentence . . . as, 'Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with' . . . This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style of writing; but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous; and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style.[30]

As a result, the notion that it is somehow 'wrong' to end a sentence with a preposition is nowadays widely held. In addition, Lowth insisted on the pronoun *I* in phrases such as *wiser than I*, condemning lines of Swift such as 'she suffers hourly more than me', quite oblivious of the fact that many languages, English included, prefer a different form of the pronoun when it is detached from its verb: compare the French *plus sage que moi* 'wiser than me', not **plus sage que je*. In consequence, many people nowadays believe that a phrase such as *wiser than I* is 'better' than *wiser than me*. To continue, Lowth may have been the first to argue that a double negative is wrong, on the grounds that one cancels the other out. Those who support this point of view fail to realize that language is not logic or mathematics, and that the heaping up of negatives is very common in the languages of the world. It occurs frequently in Chaucer (and in other pre-eighteenth-century English authors). For example, in the Prologue to the *Canterbury tales*, Chaucer heaps up negatives to emphasize the fact that the knight was never rude to anyone:

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
In all his lyf unto no maner wight.
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.[31]

Today, the belief that a double negative is wrong is perhaps the most widely accepted of all popular convictions about 'correctness', even though stacked-up negatives occur in several varieties of English, without causing any problems of understanding: 'I didn't know nothin' bout gettin' no checks to (= for) nothin', no so (= social) security or nothin'.' This 65-year-old black woman originally from the Mississippi River area of America was clearly not getting the social security payments due to her.[32]

In brief, Lowth's influence was profound and pernicious because so many of his strictures were based on his own preconceived notions. In retrospect, it is quite astonishing that he should have felt so confident about his prescriptions. Did he believe that, as a bishop, he was divinely inspired? It is also curious that his dogmatic statements were so widely accepted among educated Englishmen. It seems that, as a prominent religious leader, no one questioned his authority.

In the nineteenth century, prominent church dignitaries continued to make bizarre pronouncements. An influential Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Chenevix Trench, promoted his bizarre belief that the language of 'savages' (his word) had slithered down from former excellence, due to lack of care: 'What does their language on close inspection prove? In every case what they are themselves, the remnant and ruin of a better and a nobler past. Fearful indeed is the impress of degradation which is stamped on the language of the savage.'[33] He urged English speakers to preserve their language, quoting with approval the words of a German scholar, Friedrich Schlegel: 'A nation whose language becomes rude and barbarous, must be on the brink of barbarism in regard to everything else.'[34]

We in the twenty-first century are the direct descendants of this earlier puristic passion. As already noted, statements very like those of Bishop Lowth are still found in books and newspapers, often reiterating the points he made – points which are still being drummed into the heads of the younger generation by some parents and schoolteachers who misguidedly think they are

handing over the essential prerequisites for speaking and writing 'good English'.

Not only are the strictures set on language often arbitrary, as in the case of many of Bishop Lowth's preferences, but, in addition, they cannot usually be said to 'purify' the language in any way. Consider the journalist mentioned earlier who had a 'queasy distaste' for *the media is* (in place of the 'correct' form, *the media are*). To an impartial observer, the treatment of *media* as a singular noun might seem to be an advantage, not a sign of decay. Since most English plurals end in *-s*, it irons out an exception. Surely it is 'purer' to have all plurals ending in the same way? A similar complaint occurred several centuries back over the word *chicken*. Once, the word *cicen* 'a young hen' had a plural *cicenu*. The old plural ending *-u* was eventually replaced by *-s*. Again, surely it is an advantage to smooth away exceptional plurals? Yet we find a seventeenth-century grammarian stating, 'those who say *chicken* in the singular and *chickens* in the plural are completely wrong'.[35]

Purism, then, does not necessarily make language 'purer'. Nor does it always favour the older form, merely the most socially prestigious. A clear-cut example of this is the British dislike of the American form *gotten*, as in *he's gotten married*. Yet this is older than British *got*, and is seen now in a few relic forms only such as *ill-gotten gains*.

In brief, the puristic attitude towards language – the idea that there is an absolute standard of correctness which should be maintained – has its origin in a natural nostalgic tendency, supplemented and intensified by social pressures. It is illogical, and impossible to pin down to any firm base. Purists behave as if there was a vintage year when language achieved a measure of excellence which we should all strive to maintain. In fact, there never was such a year. The language of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time was no better and no worse than that of our own – just different.

Of course, the fact that the puristic movement is wrong in the details it complains about does not prove that purists are wrong overall. Those who argue that language is decaying may be right for the wrong reasons, they may be entirely wrong, or they may

be partially right and partially wrong. All we have discovered so far is that there are no easy answers, and that social prejudices simply cloud the issue.

Rules and grammars

It is important to distinguish between the 'grammar' and 'rules' of Bishop Lowth and his followers, and those of linguists today. (A linguist here means someone professionally concerned with linguistics, the study of language.) In Bishop Lowth's view, 'the principal design of a Grammar of any Language is to teach us to express ourselves with propriety in that Language, and to be able to judge of every phrase and form of construction, whether it be right or not. The plain way of doing this is to lay down rules.'[36] A grammar such as Lowth's, which lays down artificial rules in order to impose some arbitrary standard of 'correctness', is a **prescriptive** grammar, since it prescribes what people should, in the opinion of the writer, say. It may have relatively little to do with what people really say, a fact illustrated by a comment of Eliza Doolittle in Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*: 'I don't want to talk grammar, I want to talk like a lady.' The artificial and constraining effect of Lowth's pseudo-rules might be summarized by lines from the Beatles' song 'Getting better':

> I used to get mad at my school
> the teachers who taught me weren't cool
> holding me down, turning me round,
> filling me up with your rules . . .

The grammars and rules of linguists, on the other hand, are not prescriptive but **descriptive**, since they describe what people actually say. For linguists, rules are not arbitrary laws imposed by an external authority, but a codification of subconscious principles or conventions followed by the speakers of a language. Linguists also regard the spoken and written forms of language as separate, related systems, and treat the spoken as primary.[37]

Let us consider the notion of **rules** (in this modern sense) more carefully. It is clear that it is impossible to list all the sentences of

any human language. A language such as English does not have, say, 7, 123, 541 possible sentences which people gradually learn, one by one. Instead, the speakers of a language have a finite number of principles or 'rules' which enable them to understand and put together a potentially infinite number of sentences. These rules vary from language to language. In English, for example, the sounds [b], [d], [e] can be arranged as [bed], [deb], or [ebd] as in *ebbed*. *[bde], *[dbe] and *[edb] are all impossible, since words cannot begin with [bd] or [db], or end with [db], though these sequences are pronounceable. (An asterisk indicates a nonpermitted sequence of sounds or words in the language concerned. Also, sounds are conventionally indicated by square brackets.[38]) Yet in ancient Greek, the sequence [bd] was allowable at the beginning of a word, as in *bdeluros* 'rascal', while a sequence [sl], as in *sleep*, was not permitted.

Rules for permissible sequences exist also for segments of words, and words. In English, for instance, we find the recurring segments *love, -ing, -ly*. These can be combined to form *lovely, loving*, or *lovingly*, but not *ing-love, *ly-love* or *love-ly-ing*. Similarly, you could say *Sebastian is eating peanuts*, but not *Sebastian is peanuts eating, *Peanuts is eating Sebastian*, or *Eating is Sebastian peanuts –* though if the sentence was translated into a language such as Latin or Dyirbal, the words for 'Sebastian' and 'peanuts' could occur in a greater variety of positions.

In brief, humans do not learn lists of utterances. Instead, they learn a number of principles or rules which they follow subconsciously. These are not pseudo-rules like Bishop Lowth's, but real ones which codify the actual patterns of the language. Although people use the rules all the time, they cannot normally formulate them, any more than they could specify the muscles used when riding a bicycle. In fact, in day-to-day life, we are so used to speaking and being understood that we are not usually aware of the rule-governed nature of our utterances. We only pause to think about it when the rules break down, or when someone uses rules which differ from our own, as when Alice in Looking-Glass Land tried to communicate with the Frog, whose subconscious language rules differed from her own. She asked him whose business it was to answer the door:

'To answer the door?' he said. 'What's it been asking of?'

'I don't know what you mean,' she said.

'I speaks English, doesn't I?' the Frog went on. 'Or are you deaf?'

The sum total of the rules found in any one language is known as a **grammar**, a term which is often used interchangeably by linguists to mean two different things: first, the rules applied sub-consciously by the speakers of a language; secondly, a linguist's conscious attempt to codify these rules. A statement such as, 'In English, you normally put an -*s* on plural nouns', is an informal statement of a principle that is known by the speakers of a lan-guage, and is also likely to be expressed in a rather more formal way in a grammar written by a linguist. There are, incidentally, quite a number of differences between a native-speaker's gram-mar and a linguist's grammar. Above all, they differ in complete-ness. All normal native speakers of a language have a far more comprehensive set of rules than any linguist has yet been able to specify, even though the former are not consciously aware of possessing any special skill. No linguist has ever yet succeeded in formulating a perfect grammar – an exhaustive summary of the principles followed by the speakers of a language when they produce and understand speech.

The term **grammar** is commonly used nowadays by linguists to cover the whole of a language: the **phonology** (sound patterns), the **syntax** (word patterns) and the **semantics** (meaning patterns). An important subdivision within syntax is **morphology**, which deals with the organization of segments of words as in *kind-ness, kind-ly, un-kind*, and so on.

The comprehensive scope of the word *grammar* sometimes causes confusion, since in some older books it is used to mean only the syntax, or occasionally, only the word endings. This has led to the strange claim that English has practically no grammar at all – if this were really so nobody would be able to speak it!

Grammars fluctuate and change over the centuries, and even within the lifetime of individuals. In this book, we shall be con-sidering both how this happens, and why. We shall be more inter-ested in speakers' subconscious rules than in the addition and loss of single words. Vocabulary items tend to be added, replaced, or changed in meaning more rapidly than any other aspect of

language. Any big dictionary contains numerous words which have totally disappeared from normal usage today, such as *scobberlotch* 'to loaf around doing nothing in particular', *ruddock* 'robin', *dudder* 'to deafen with noise', as well as an array of rela-tively new ones such as *atomizer, laser, transistorize.* Other words have changed their meaning in unpredictable ways. As Robin Lakoff has pointed out,[39] because of the decline in the employ-ment of servants, the terms *master* and *mistress* are now used to signify something rather different from their original meaning. *Master* now usually means 'a person supremely skilful in some-thing', while *mistress*, on the other hand, often refers to a female lover:

> He is a master of the intricacies of academic politics
> Rosemary refused to be Harry's mistress and returned to her husband.

The different way in which these previously parallel words have changed is apparent if we try to substitute one for the other:

> She is a mistress of the intricacies of academic politics
> Harry refused to be Rosemary's master and returned to his wife.

This particular change reflects not only a decline in the master or mistress to servant relationship, but also, according to Lakoff, the lowly status of women in our society.

The rapid turnover in vocabulary and the continual changes in the meaning of words often directly reflect social changes. As Samuel Johnson said in the preface to his dictionary (1755): 'As any custom is disused, the words that expressed it must perish with it; as any opinion grows popular, it will innovate speech in the same proportion as it alters practice.' Alongside vocabulary change, there are other less obvious alterations continually in progress, affecting the sounds and the syntax. These more myster-ious happenings will be the main concern of this book, though vocabulary change will also be discussed (Chapter 9).

The chapters are organized into four main sections. Part 1, 'Preliminaries', deals mainly with the ways in which historical linguists obtain their evidence. Part 2, 'Transition', explains *how* language change occurs. Part 3, 'Causation', discusses possible reasons *why* change takes place. Part 4, 'Beginnings and endings',

looks at the role in change of child language and language dis-
orders, and examines how languages begin and end. The final
chapter tries to answer the question posed in the title of the book:
are languages progressing? decaying? or maintaining a precarious
balance?

2   Collecting up clues
Piecing together the evidence

> There was no light nonsense about Miss Blimber . . . She
> was dry and sandy with working in the graves of deceased
> languages. None of your live languages for Miss Blimber.
> They must be dead – stone dead – and then Miss Blimber dug
> them up like a Ghoul.
>
> Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*

A Faroese recipe in a cookbook explains how to catch a puffin
before you roast it.[1] Like a cook, a linguist studying language
change must first gather together the basic ingredients. In the case
of the linguist, the facts must be collected and pieced together
before they can be interpreted. How is this done?

There are basically two ways of collecting evidence, which we
may call the 'armchair method' and the 'tape-recorder method'
respectively. In the first, a linguist studies the written documents
of bygone ages, sitting in a library or at a computer, and in the
second he or she slings a tape recorder over one shoulder and
studies change as it happens. Both methods are important, and
complement one another. The armchair method enables a large
number of changes to be followed in outline over a long period,
whereas the tape-recorder method allows a relatively small amount
of change to be studied in great detail.

The armchair method is the older, and the basic techniques
were laid down in the nineteenth century – as is shown by the
quotation above from Dickens' novel *Dombey and Son* which was
published in 1847–8. Let us therefore deal with it first.

To a casual onlooker, afternoons spent sitting in a library study-
ing old documents sound like an easy option. In practice, it presents
numerous problems. The data are inevitably variable in both
quantity and quality, since some centuries and cultures are likely
to be well represented, others sparsely. Our knowledge of early
Greek, for instance, might be rather different if Greece, like Egypt,
had a sandy soil in which papyri can lie preserved for centuries. In

Once we have stripped away religious and philosophical preconceptions, there is no evidence that language is either progressing or decaying. Disruption and therapy seem to balance one another in a perpetual stalemate. These two opposing pulls are an essential characteristic of language.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that languages are moving in any particular direction from the point of view of language structure – several are moving in contrary directions.

Language change is in no sense wrong, but it may, in certain circumstances, be socially undesirable. Minor variations in pronunciation from region to region are unimportant, but change which disrupts the mutual intelligibility of a community can be socially and politically inconvenient. If this happens, it may be useful to encourage standardization – the adoption of a standard variety of one particular language which everybody will be able to use, alongside the existing regional dialects or languages. Such a situation must be brought about gradually, with tact and care, since a population will only adopt a language or dialect it *wants* to speak.

Finally, it is always possible that language is developing in some mysterious fashion that linguists have not yet identified. Only time and further research will tell. There is much more to be discovered.

But we may finish on a note of optimism. We no longer, like Caxton in the fifteenth century, attribute language change to the domination of man's affairs by the moon:

> And certaynly our language now vsed varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken whan I was borne. For we englysshe men ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, which is neuer stedfaste but euer wauerynge wexynge one season and waneth and dycreaseth another season.[17]

Instead, step by step, we are coming to an understanding of the social and psychological factors underlying language change. As the years go by, we hope gradually to increase this knowledge. In the words of the nineteenth-century poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson:

> Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point.

Symbols and technical terms

Most symbols and technical terms are explained in the text the first time they occur, in cases where an explanation seems necessary. But since several common ones occur more than once, this glossary has been added for the benefit of those readers not familiar with them.

General

[ ]   Square brackets indicate sounds. For example, the pronunciation of the English word *kissed* may be represented by the phonetic transcription [kɪst].

*   An asterisk indicates a non-permitted sequence of sounds or words in the language concerned. For example, English does not permit a word with the sound sequence *[tpet], or a sentence **Augusta roses wants*.

→   An arrow means 'changed into historically', as in [e] → [i], which means [e] changed into [i].

Phonetic symbols

When a phonetic symbol is essential, this book uses IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols, which are conventionally put between square brackets. However, since phonetic symbols make a text more difficult to read, the standard written form is used whenever possible, even though the spoken form is under discussion.

Phonetic symbols which are not explained are either obvious from the context, or have a value similar to that in the standard written form, e.g. [m] symbolizes the sound at the beginning of the word *men*.

The following list gives some of the less obvious terms and symbols.

Consonants

[θ]	The sound at the beginning of English *thick*.
[ð]	The sound at the beginning of *then*.
[ʃ]	The sound at the beginning of *shock*.
[ʒ]	The sound at the end of *beige* or in the middle of *leisure*.
[tʃ]	The sound at the beginning and end of *church*.
[dʒ]	The sound at the beginning and end of *judge*.
[ŋ]	The sound at the end of *bang* (**velar nasal**).
[ʔ]	A **glottal stop** – see explanation below.

Stop: a consonant involving a complete stoppage of the airstream at some point in the vocal tract, as [p], [t], [k]. A glottal stop [ʔ] is a complete stoppage of the airstream in the glottis (lower part of the throat), as at the end of Cockney or Glaswegian *pit* [pɪʔ].

Fricative: a consonant in which the airstream is never completely cut off, resulting in audible friction, as in [f], [v], [s], [z].

Affricate: a combination of a stop and a fricative, as in [tʃ], [dʒ].

Sibilant: a hissing or hushing sound, as in [s], [z], [ʃ].

Voiced: a voiced sound is one whose production involves vibration of the vocal cords, as in [b], [d], [g], [v], [z].

Voiceless: a voiceless sound is one whose production does not involve the vibration of the vocal cords, as in [p], [t], [k], [f], [s]. Technically, it involves 'late voice onset', that is, some voicing, but delayed.

Vowels

: A colon added to a vowel indicates length, as in [tiː] *tea*.

˜ A wavy line over a vowel indicates nasalization, as in French [bɔ̃] *bon* 'good'.

[ə] **Schwa:** a short indeterminate vowel, like that at the beginning of *ago*, or the end of *sofa*.

[iː] a vowel somewhat like that in *meet, bee*.

[ɪ] a vowel like that in *hit*.

Other vowel symbols are mostly explained as they occur. Key words are less useful for vowels, since there is so much variation in accent in the English-speaking world.

Diphthong: a sequence of two vowels which glide into one another, as in *play* [pleɪ].

Notes and suggestions for further reading

1   The ever-whirling wheel

1 In Lehmann, 1976: 63.
2 In Fisher & Bornstein, 1974: 77. *Disours* and *seggers* are public reciters, *harpours* are harpers.
3 *Troylus and Criseyde* II, 22–6.
4 Saussure, 1915/1959: 77.
5 Spike Hughes, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 April 1968.
6 Anthony Lejeune, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1971.
7 Mary Stott, *Guardian*, 9 September 1968.
8 Douglas Bush, *American Scholar*, Spring 1972: 244.
9 David Holloway, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1978.
10 Richard Gilman, *Decadence*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1979.
11 Philip Howard, *Words fail me*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980.
12 Reuben Glass, *Guardian*, 13 July 1982.
13 Val Hume, *Evening Standard*, 22 July 1986.
14 Edward Pearce, *The Sunday Times*, 16 October 1988.
15 Kingsley Amis, in Ricks & Michaels, 1990: 458. On laments about language in general, Crystal (1981, 1984) lists some common current complaints about English usage, and points out that several of them have been around for centuries. Aitchison (1997), R. W. Bailey (1992), Tony Crowley (1989), Milroy & Milroy (1998) discuss 'the complaint tradition'.
16 Philip Norman, *The Sunday Times*, 14 February 1999.
17 Anthony Lejeune, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1971.
18 Val Hume, *Evening Standard*, 22 July 1986.
19 In Jespersen, 1922: 322.
20 Jespersen, 1922: 263.
21 Vendryès, 1923/1925: 359.
22 In Hyman, 1975: 131.

23 In Wilkinson, 1967: 18–19.
24 In Jespersen, 1922: 42.
25 Swift, J. 'A proposal for correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue', reprinted in Bolton (1966).
26 Lowth, 1762/1967: i, ix.
27 Sapir, 1921: 124.
28 *The Rambler*, 15 January 1752.
29 Pyles, 1971: 224.
30 Lowth, 1762/1967: 127–8.
31 *Canterbury tales*, Prologue, 70–3.
32 Collected by Guy Bailey.
33 Trench, 1855: 18–19.
34 Trench, 1856: 5.
35 John Wallis, in Jespersen, 1942: II, 161.
36 Lowth, 1762/1967: x.
37 See Aitchison (1999) for a brief introduction to linguistics, with further reading suggestions. For a fuller account, see Radford *et al.* (1999).
38 As already noted (p. 261) this book uses IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols. The main symbols used are explained on pp. 261–2.
39 Lakoff, 1975: 28.

2 Collecting up clues

1 Kuper, 1977.
2 Saussure, 1915/1959: 51.
3 Conan Doyle, *A case of identity*.
4 Shakespeare, *A midsummer night's dream*, II, ii, 9–12.
5 Shakespeare, *Twelfth night*, I, iii, 97ff.
6 *The merchant of Venice*, IV, i, 123–4.
7 Cicero, *De divinatione*, ii, 84, in Allen, 1978: 98.
8 Allen, 1974: 67. Allen (1974) on ancient Greek, and Allen (1978) on Latin, are clear and comprehensive accounts of how to reconstruct the pronunciation of 'dead' languages. See Gimson & Cruttenden (1994: 68f.) for English. See also Hock & Joseph (1996: ch. 3).
9 Catullus, *Carmina*, 84.
10 *Pickwick papers*, chapter 34.
11 Allen, 1978: 34.
12 John Hart, in Danielsson, 1955: 190.
13 'F litteram imum labrum superis imprimentes dentibus, reflexa ad palati fastigium lingua, leni spiramine proferemus.' Marius Victorinus K, vi, 34, partially quoted in Allen (1978: 34).

14 On Indo-European, see Baldi (1983), Beekes (1995). The homeland of the Indo-Europeans, including its flora and fauna, is discussed in Thième (1964) and Mallory (1989). For a controversial view, see Renfrew (1987), also counter-arguments by Morpurgo Davies (1989) and Szemerényi (1989).
15 On the comparative method, see Fox (1995). Also relevant chapters in Anttila (1989), Bynon (1977), Campbell (1998), Tony Crowley (1997), A. Harris & Campbell (1995), Hock (1991), Hock & Joseph (1996), Jeffers & Lehiste (1979), W. P. Lehmann (1992) and Trask (1996). Durie & Ross (1996) is a book of readings which discusses the limitations and potential of reconstruction. See also Harrison (2001), Lass (1993) and Rankin (2001). Thomason & Kaufman (1988) explain why comparisons break down in mixed-language situations. McMahon & McMahon (1995) explore the problems of handling American-Indian languages, where it is unclear how many languages are involved. Most books deal with the Indo-European language family, but see Campbell (1997) on American-Indian languages, and Crowley (1997) on Polynesian.
16 Unreliable resemblances, Campbell, 2001.
17 *Papa, mama*, Jakobson, 1941/1968.
18 Campbell, 2001.
19 Chance similarities, Frances Guy, on HISTLING (historical linguistics electronic discussion list), 30 May 1996.
20 Statistical calculations on chance, Ringe, 1992.
21 Polynesian examples, Crowley, 1997.
22 Grace, 1990.
23 Nichols, 1992, 2001.
24 The word *Nostratic* was probably coined by Holger Pedersen in the first decade of the twentieth century, though it became more widely known via his later work (1931/1962).
25 On Nostratic, see Dolgopolsky (1998) and Salmons & Joseph (1998). Kaiser (1997) and Peiros (1997) have good discussions of the problems of the reconstruction of macro-families.
26 Stress and accent reconstruction, Halle, 1997.
27 Reconstruction of formulae, Watkins, 1989, 1995.
28 Iroquoian 'and', Mithun, 1992.
29 On typological reconstruction, see Hock (1986: ch. 19), Comrie (1989: ch. 10; 1993). Hawkins (1983) contains a fairly detailed attempt to set up typological probabilities among the world's languages, and is perhaps best approached via reviews, e.g. Aitchison (1986).

Language change: progress or decay?

Third edition

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