

America is Ruining the English Language

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America is ruining the English language – everyone knows that. We have heard it from early days right up to the present. We have heard it from English men and English women, of course, but from Americans as well – self-confessed linguistic vandals. We have heard it from the famous and the obscure. So it must be true. But in what does the ruination lie? How are Americans ruining English?

In the early days, British travelers in the American colonies often commented on the 'purity' of the English spoken in the new world. It wasn't until the American impertinence of 1776 that Americans seem to have begun ruining English. Yet, as early as 1735, a British traveler in Georgia, Francis Moore, described the town of Savannah: 'It is about a mile and a quarter in circumference; it stands upon the flat of a hill, the bank of the river (which they in barbarous English call a bluff) is steep.' The Americans had taken an adjective of nautical and perhaps Dutch origin, meaning 'broad, flat and steep', to use as a noun for the sort of river bank that hardly existed in England and for which, consequently, earlier English had no name.

In 1995, in much the same vein as the comment 260 years earlier, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was reported by *The Times* as complaining to a British Council audience that American English is 'very corrupting'. Particularly, he bemoaned the fact that 'people tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs and make words that shouldn't be.' By this time the barbarous use of *bluff* for a steep bank had been civilized by being adopted into the usage of the motherland, but doubtless if the Prince had lived about nine generations earlier, he would have agreed with Francis Moore that *bluff* was a word that shouldn't be.

The Prince concluded: 'We must act now to insure that English – and that, to my way of thinking, means English English – maintains its position as the world language well into the next century.' His concern seems to be as much commercial as merely ethnocentrically aesthetic, the English language being one of England's most popular exports, along with gossip about the escapades of the Royals. The Prince, after all, was only doing his bit to keep the English pecker up.

One way Americans are ruining English is by changing it. Many of us, like Francis Moore and Prince Charles, regard what is foreign to us as barbarous and corrupt. We owe the term *barbarous* to the Greeks; they pitied the poor foreigner who could only stammer 'bar-bar' and hence was a 'barbaros'. Barbarians are simply those who do not talk as we do, whether they are outsiders, Yanks or fellow countrymen and countrywomen whose style we do not admire.

The journalist Edwin Newman is a linguistic prophet who sees the language style of his fellow Americans as deadly. In 1974 he vaticinated in a book called *Strictly Speaking*, which was subtitled *Will America be the Death of English?* In it, he too objected to the invention of all sorts of nouns and verbs and words that shouldn't be. In particular he objected to verbosity and euphemism as bad style. A number of Americans bemoan the baleful influence of their fellow citizens on the health or integrity of the language, but only a few, like Edwin Newman, have been able to make a career of it.

In England, on the other hand, a perception that America is ruining the language pervades the discourse of the chattering classes. Indeed, a fair number of British intellectuals regard 'new', 'distasteful', and 'American' as synonymous. A knowledgeable British author complained about the supposedly American pronunciation *conTROVersy* and was surprised to hear that the antepenult accent is unknown in the States, being a recent British innovation. The assumption is that anything new is American and thus objectionable on double grounds.

Change in language is, however, inevitable, just as it is in all other aspects of reality. Particular changes will be, in the eyes of one observer or another, improvements or degenerations. But judgments of what is beautiful or ugly, valuable or useless, barbarous or elegant, corrupting or improving are highly personal and idiosyncratic ones.

There are no objective criteria for judging worth in language, no linguistic Tables of the Law, no archetypal authority called 'The Dictionary', though there are wannabe authoritarians aplenty.

On the other hand, no one is required to like all or any particular changes. It is, in the great Anglo-American tradition, our God-given right to have our own opinions and to take it or leave it when it comes to style in couture, diet, entertainment, religion and language. We need not be equally enthusiastic about catsuits and muu-muus, macrobiotics and *haute cuisine*, grunge rock and Philip Glass, the World Wide Web and MTV, *bank and bluff*, or *conTROVesy* and *CONtroversy*. We don't have to like particular changes, or even the fact of change itself. But a language or anything else that does not change is dead.

The eighteenth-century hope that a language could be 'fixed' – that is, improved, or changed in a way some self-appointed linguistic judge would approve of until it reached a state of perfection and then preserved so that it would not thereafter degenerate or change in a way the judge disliked – was a chimera. It was an illusion based on misunderstandings about the nature of language, values and human nature.

The earliest English we can catch sight of in manuscripts of the seventh century was the product of millennia of change. We can only reconstruct its earlier history back through stages we call Anglo-Frisian, Germanic, Indo-European and maybe even Nostratic and Proto-World. During the recorded history of English, the language has changed from something quite incomprehensible to a present-day English speaker, which we call Old English (Hwæt! We Gar-dena in geordagum theodcyninge thrym gehyrdon) to something equally incomprehensible to many of us, computerspeak (Some memory resident programs steal too much of the CPU to work with an asynchronous download).

During its roughly thirteen centuries of recorded history, English has diversified in many ways. Any two varieties of a language become increasingly different from each other when their speakers do not communicate with one other but more alike as those who use them talk among themselves. That is the way language works.

British and American started to become different when English

speakers first set foot on American soil because the colonists found new things to talk about and also because they ceased to talk regularly with the people back home. The colonists changed English in their own unique way, but at the same time speakers in England were changing the language too, only in a different way from that of the colonists. As a result, over time the two varieties became increasingly different, not so radically different that they amounted to different languages, as Italian and French had become a millennium earlier, but different enough to notice.

The differences between American and British are not due to Americans changing from a British standard. American is not corrupt British plus barbarisms. Rather, both American and British evolved in different ways from a common sixteenth-century ancestral standard. Present-day British is no closer to that earlier form than present-day American is. Indeed, in some ways present-day American is more conservative, that is, closer to the common original standard than is present-day British.

Some examples of American conservatism versus British innovation are these: Americans generally retain the r-sound in words like *more* and *mother*, whereas the British have lost it. Americans generally retain the 'flat a' of *cat* in *path*, *calf*, *class*, whereas the British have replaced it with the 'broad a' of *father*. Americans retain a secondary stress on the second syllable from the end of words like *secretary* and *dictionary*, whereas the British have lost both the stress and often the vowel, reducing the words to three syllables, 'secret'ry'. Americans retain an old use of the verb *guess* to mean 'think' or 'suppose' (as in Geoffrey Chaucer's catch-phrase 'I gesse'). Americans retain the past participle form *gotten* beside *got*, whereas the British have lost the former. (The British often suppose that Americans use only *gotten*; in fact they use both, but with different meanings: 'I've got a cold' = 'I have a cold' and 'I've gotten a cold' = 'I've caught a cold'). Americans have retained use of the subjunctive in what grammarians call 'mandative' expressions: 'They insisted that he leave,' whereas the British substituted for it other forms, such as 'that he should leave' or 'that he left'.

On the other hand, the British are more conservative than Americans

in other ways. Thus they continue to distinguish *atom* (with a t-sound) and *Adam* (with a d-sound), whereas Americans typically pronounce the two words alike, with a flap sound that is more d- than t-like. Similarly, in standard British *callous* and *Alice* do not rhyme, whereas they usually do in standard American, both having a schwa. So too, the British have different stressed vowels in *father* and *fodder*, whereas Americans pronounce those words with the same first vowel. The British have retained an old use of *reckon* in the sense 'think' or 'suppose' in serious discourse, whereas that use in America is old-fashioned or rural, a comic marker of 'hick' talk. The British have retained the term *fortnight*, whereas Americans have lost it. The British have retained the primary meaning of *corn* as 'grain', whereas Americans have changed it to 'maize' (the image many Americans have of 'Ruth amid the alien corn' being both anachronistic and ectopic). The British have retained the inversion of *have* with its subject in questions: 'Have you the time?' whereas Americans use the auxiliary verb *do* with it: 'Do you have the time?'

On balance, it is hard to say which variety of English, American or British, is the more conservative and which the more innovative. A lot depends on how you look at the question. It is clear that the British are keen on (Americans would say 'fond of') the pluperfect, whereas Americans prefer the simple past: British 'He had left before they arrived' versus typical American 'He left before they arrived.' But it is less clear which usage should be regarded as older. Is the American preference a degeneration of the tense system? Or a preservation of the English of the Anglo-Saxons, who had little truck with complex tenses?

Both American and British have changed and go on changing today. Among recent innovations in British English, in addition to the pronunciation of *controversy* already cited, are such vocabulary novelties as *gazumping* and *gazundering*, *Essex man* and *Estuary English*, *toy boy*, and *redundancy* for 'sacking' or 'firing' (a bureaucratic euphemism fit to exercise the spleen of a British Edwin Newman). Paralleling the American retention of the mandative subjunctive ('They insisted that he leave') is a British innovative use of the indicative in such expressions: 'They insisted that he left,' which in American use could

only be a statement of fact ('They insisted it was a fact that he had left').

British speakers have also been extraordinarily fertile in expanding the range of use for tag questions. Tag questions are little bobs at the end of sentences that can turn them into questions, or sometimes into something else. The basic tag questions are general English, shared by British and American:

informational: 'You don't wear glasses, do you? (I'm not sure, but think you don't. Am I right?)

inclusive: 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' (It obviously is – I'm not really asking, but just making polite remarks so you can join in the conversation.)

emphasizing: 'I made a bad mistake, didn't I?' (This is a soliloquy. I'm not talking to anybody but myself and don't expect an answer to the rhetorical question. It's the verbal equivalent of underlining.)

The last of the above types is more characteristic of British than of American use, but the next two are distinctively British and are relatively recent contributions of British English to the rhetorical inventory of impoliteness:

peremptory: 'Is the tea ready?' 'The water has to boil, doesn't it?'

(Everybody knows you can't make tea without boiling hot water, and you can see that the water has not come to a boil yet, so stop bothering me with idiotic questions.)

antagonistic: 'I telephoned you this morning, but you didn't answer.' 'I was in the bath, wasn't I?' (The reason I didn't answer was that I was in the bath, and it was a great annoyance having you phone at that time; if you had any sense and consideration, you would not have called then. [Never mind that the caller could not possibly know all that – I was annoyed at the time and I'm even more annoyed now at what I perceive to be a complaint when I am the one who was put upon.]

Both Americans and the British innovate in English pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. British people, however, tend to be more aware of American innovations than Americans are of British ones. The cause of that greater awareness may be a keener linguistic sensitivity on

the part of the British, or a more insular anxiety and hence irritation about influences from abroad, or the larger number of American speakers and their higher prominence in fields that require innovation, or perhaps the fact that present-day Americans have cultural rootlets all over the world and so are less aware of the British Isles.

Perhaps Americans do innovate more; after all, there are four to five times as many English speakers in the United States as in the United Kingdom. So one might expect, on the basis of population size alone, four to five times as much innovation in American English. Moreover, Americans have been disproportionately active in certain technological fields, such as computer systems, that are hotbeds of lexical innovation.

It is curious and remarkable that the present state of affairs was foreseen with great accuracy by John Adams, who in 1780, even before it was obvious that the American Revolution would succeed, wrote:

English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age. The reason of this is obvious, because the increasing population in America, and their universal connection and correspondence with all nations will, aided by the influence of England in the world, whether great or small, force their language into general use.

So is America ruining the English language? Certainly, if you believe that extending the language to new uses and new speakers ruins it. Certainly, if you believe that change is ruin. Certainly, if what John Adams foresaw was ruination.

Source: 'Language Myths'
Edited by Laurie Bauer and
Peter Trudgill (Penguin).