as vehicles, sometimes, of sublime expression, they should also be discussed dispassionately and objectively if we are to achieve a better understanding of this uniquely human characteristic.

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

MYTH 1

The Meanings of Words Should Not be Allowed to Vary or Change

Peter Trudgill

All languages change all the time. It is not very well understood why this is the case, but it is a universal characteristic of human languages. The only languages which do not change are those, like Latin, which nobody speaks. Languages change their pronunciations through time. Five hundred years ago, all English speakers used to pronounce the *k* in *knee* – now nobody does. Grammatical structures also change. English speakers used to say *Saw you my son?* Now everybody says *Did you see my son?* But perhaps the most obvious way in which languages change is in the usage and meaning of words.

A number of people seem to think that the fact that languages change the meanings of their words in this way is unfortunate. They believe that change in language is inherently undesirable and that we should do everything we can to stop it because change can be dangerous and confusing. In particular, any tendency for words to start to mean something which they have not always meant should be resisted.

This leads such people to argue that it makes sense to determine what a word means by looking at its origins – the *real* meaning of a word. So, for example, they would claim that it is wrong to use *aggravate* to mean 'irritate', even though this is its most common use in English, because it comes originally from Latin *aggravare*, which meant 'to make heavier' and was originally borrowed into English with the meaning 'to make more serious'. They also would maintain that it is wrong to talk about having *three alternatives*, because *alternative* comes from the Latin word *alter*, which meant 'second', and that *nice* really means 'precise' – and so on.

Actually, the history of the word *nice* provides a very good illustration of the untenable nature of this way of thinking. *Nice* comes

originally from two ancient Indo-European roots, **skei* meaning 'cut', which came down into Latin as the verb *scire* 'to know', probably via a meaning such as 'be able to distinguish one thing from another', and **ne* meaning 'not'. The combination of the two forms gave the Latin verb *nescire* which meant 'to be ignorant of'. This led to the development of the adjective *nescius* 'ignorant', which came down into Old French as *nice* meaning 'silly'. It was then borrowed from French into medieval English with the meaning 'foolish, shy' and, over the centuries, has gradually changed its meaning to 'modest', then 'delicate', 'considerate', 'pleasant' and finally 'agreeable' – a very long way in 6,000 years from its original meaning. No one in their right mind, though, would argue that the 'real' meaning of *nice* is, or ought to be, 'not cutting'.

The English language is full of words which have changed their meanings slightly or even dramatically over the centuries. Changes of meaning can be of a number of different types. Some words, such as *nice*, have changed gradually. Emotive words tend to change more rapidly by losing some of their force, so that *awful*, which originally meant 'inspiring awe', now means 'very bad' or, in expressions such as *awfully good*, simply something like 'very'. In any case, all connection with 'awe' has been lost.

Some changes of meaning, though, seem to attract more attention than others. This is perhaps particularly the case where the people who worry about such things believe that a distinction is being lost. For example, there is a lot of concern at the moment about the words *uninterested* and *disinterested*. In modern English, the positive form *interested* has two different meanings. The first and older meaning is approximately 'having a personal involvement in', as in

He is an interested party in the dispute.

The second and later, but now much more common, meaning is 'demonstrating or experiencing curiosity in, enthusiasm for, concern for', as in

He is very interested in cricket.

It is not a problem that this word has more than one meaning. Confusion never seems to occur, largely because the context will normally make it obvious which meaning is intended. In all human languages there are very many words which have more than one meaning – this is a very common and entirely normal state of affairs. Most English speakers, for example, can instantly think of a number of different meanings for the words *common* and *state* and *affairs* which I have just used.

Perhaps surprisingly, according to dictionaries the two different meanings of *interested* have different negative forms. The negative of the first meaning is *disinterested*, as in

He is an interested party in the dispute, and I am disinterested and therefore able to be more objective about it.

Disinterested is thus roughly equivalent to 'neutral, impartial'. The negative form of the second, more usual meaning is *uninterested*, as in

He is very interested in cricket, but I am uninterested in all sports.

Uninterested is thus roughly equivalent to 'bored, feeling no curiosity'.

Now it happens that *interested*, in its original meaning, is today a rather unusual, learned, formal word in English. Most people, if they wanted to convey this concept in normal everyday speech, would probably say something like *not neutral*, or *biased* or *involved* or *concerned*. Recently, this unfamiliarity with the older meaning of the word *interested* has led to many people now using *disinterested* with the same meaning as *uninterested*:

I'm disinterested in cricket.

They have, perhaps, heard the word *disinterested* and, not being aware of the meaning 'neutral, unbiased', they have started using it as the negative form of *interested* in the more recent sense. Opponents of this change claim that this is an ignorant misuse of the word, and

that a very useful distinction is being lost. What can we say about this?

We can notice that this relatively sudden change of meaning is rather different from the changes of meaning we discussed above in the case of *awful* and *nice*, which seem to have changed gradually over long periods of time. But, all the same, it is not something which is particularly surprising to students of language change. The English prefix *dis-* is very commonly employed to turn positive adjectives into negative adjectives. In this way, *pleasing, honest, fluent, agreeable* become *displeasing, dishonest, disfluent, disagreeable.* (Note also that *displeasing* and *unpleasing* both occur with approximately identical meanings, although *displeasing* is more common.) We cannot therefore be surprised if, by analogy, speakers start following this pattern of using *dis-* to make a negative form out of the newer meaning of *interested.*

We also have to point out to opponents of this change that there are actually some benefits to be gained from this development. For example, there now seems to be a tendency for speakers to make a small difference of meaning between the two forms. This is something which very often happens to synonyms – they very rarely stay complete synonyms. So *disinterested* often seems to be stronger in meaning than *uninterested*, with the former indicating real, positive lack of interest, perhaps even hostility, while *uninterested* refers to simple apathy or indifference.

Even more useful is the fact that we now have something which we never had before – the possibility of a single-word noun corresponding to the adjective. There was never a word *uninterestedness* or *uninterest* in English, so we had to use rather clumsy, longer noun-phrases such as *lack of interest*, which I just used above. Now, however, we can say things like

John demonstrated considerable disinterest in the game of cricket.

But are there also any difficulties caused by this change? Are those who resist the change right to do so? Surely confusion can result from this development? Actually, it does not seem so. For many people, of

course, there was never any danger of confusion because they did not know or did not use *disinterested* in its original meaning anyway. But even for those perhaps more educated people who did and do make a distinction, there do not seem to be any problems of comprehension.

As usually happens with words with more than one meaning, the context in which the word is used nearly always makes it clear which meaning is intended. After all, we never seem to get confused about the two different meanings of *interested*, so why should we be confused if *disinterested* has two meanings also? We will not usually confuse the meaning of *common* in 'Chaffinches are very common in England' with its meaning in 'Only common people eat peas with their knife'. We are very unlikely to misinterpret the meaning of *state* on hearing 'Slovakia has become an independent state' as opposed to 'John was in a very bad state'. How many people would confuse the meaning of *affairs* in 'Mary's husband left her because she kept having affairs with other men' with its meaning in 'Mary is very busy at her office and has many different affairs to attend to'? Equally,

The school children looked very disinterested

is not likely to be ambiguous, and nor is

As an arbitrator, they need someone who is completely disinterested.

This is true of a number of other pairs of words which dictionaries distinguish between, but for which many speakers and writers make no difference. One such well-known pair is *imply* and *infer*. Dictionaries, and schoolteachers, tell us that these two words mean different things, and that they should be used differently. So,

She implied that he was stupid

means that, by something she said, she hinted or gave clues to the effect that he was stupid, without actually saying so outright. On the other hand,

She inferred that he was stupid

means that his behaviour or speech was such that she was able to deduce from it that he was stupid. However, many people in the English-speaking world who do not read dictionaries or do not listen to what their schoolteachers tell them are liable to use *infer* with the meaning that the dictionary says should be confined to *imply*:

Are you inferring I'm stupid?

Now, it is undoubtedly true that if you use *infer* in this way, there are people around who will infer that you are uneducated or careless. But it is very unlikely indeed that there will be any actual confusion of meaning. Even if the situational context does not make it clear what is meant, the grammatical context will: if I imply something *to* you, you will, if you are clever and sensitive enough, infer that same something *from* what I have said. This is a distinction which can just as well be made, then, by means of *infer to* and *infer from*.

The same can be said of certain other pairs of words which are related to each other in this way. The technical term for such pairs is *converse terms*. Examples are *lend* and *borrow*, and *learn* and *teach*. They are converse terms because, if you lend me something, I necessarily borrow it from you. *Lend* and *learn* vary in usage between one dialect of English and another. In some dialects, including Standard English, they are always distinguished. Many English speakers of other dialects, however, do not observe the distinctions enshrined in dictionaries, and say things like

Can I lend your bike?

and

The teacher learnt us geography.

Purists might want to argue that we should not permit potentially confusing variation of this type between dialects. But, once again, it

is clear that absolutely no confusion of meaning can result, and that speakers of the different dialects will always understand one another even if they follow different patterns of usage. The context, and/or the use of prepositions like *from* and *to*, will make it clear what is intended. It is therefore difficult to argue that there is anything particularly reprehensible in failing to observe such distinctions. (Actually, it is not only dialects of English which vary in this way. Individual languages differ from one another quite a lot in the extent to which they use different words for converse terms. The German verb *leihen*, for example, means both 'to lend' and 'to borrow', something which causes German speakers no distress whatsoever.)

But – to go back to *disinterested* – what should we say about the claims of 'ignorance' and 'misuse'? It is certainly true that those people who originally started saying *disinterested* in the new way probably did not know its other meaning. We could then say that they were misusing the word. There is a very important observation we can make about this, though. The fact is that none of us can unilaterally decide what a word means. Meanings of words are shared between people – they are a kind of social contract we all agree to – otherwise communication would not be possible. If somebody decides all by themselves that *nice* ought to mean 'ignorant' because that is what it meant originally in English, he or she will have a very hard time. If I said 'Because they do not study very hard, my students are very nice,' it is certain that people would misunderstand me and probable that they would think that I was mad. Similarly, it is certain that anyone who found Salisbury cathedral enormously impressive and said 'I find this building really awful' would also be completely misunderstood.

The same is likely to be the case in future with *disinterested*. If we ask the question 'When is misuse not misuse?', the answer is clearly 'When everybody does it'. If, in 200 years' time, all English speakers use *disinterested* in the new way, which they probably will, the language will perhaps have lost something, but it will also have gained something, as we have seen above – and we will no longer be able to talk of misuse, even though the initial change may have occurred because of lack of knowledge of the original meaning.

In any case, it is clear that even if the worriers regard this change

as undesirable, there is nothing they can do about it. Words do not mean what we as individuals might wish them to mean, but what speakers of the language in general want them to mean. These meanings can and do change as they are modified and negotiated in millions of everyday exchanges over the years between one speaker and another. Language change cannot be halted. Nor should the worriers feel obliged to try to halt it. Languages are self-regulating systems which can be left to take care of themselves. They are self-regulating because their speakers want to understand each other and be understood. If there is any danger of misunderstanding, speakers and writers will appreciate this possibility and guard against it by avoiding synonyms, or by giving extra context, as in the well-known

I mean funny ha-ha, not funny peculiar.

There is nothing at all funny-peculiar about the fact that some words in modern English are currently changing their meanings.

I would like to thank Malgorzata Fabiszak, Jean Hannah and Ian Kirby for their comments and advice on earlier versions of this chapter.

Source

Lars Andersson and Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; and London: Penguin, 1990).