Hitting a moving target

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An interim report on language change across generations

[A slightly adapted version of a talk given at Handelshøjskolen in Århus, Denmark in April 2002]

A FEW months ago, I was reading something that had been published in the final years of the last century, and I found the term *Y2K* used. From being the expression (I hesitate to say 'word') of the moment in 1999, *Y2K* has vanished virtually completely, and is now used only in historical contexts (albeit in terms of a history not yet two years old). I was struck by how rapidly our vocabulary can change, and how yesterday's expressions can vanish without trace.

The observation is scarcely new. We've known for years about the relatively rapid replacement of words for *privy*, *lavatory*, *toilet*, *loo* in modern English, and the rapid fashions among the young for expressions of delight: while *cool* may have survived fairly well for a number of years, and *neat* is still used by adults (if not by children), *the gear*, *swinging*, *fab*, and *groovy* from my 1960s British upbringing are long gone (except for an unexpected blip when Austin Powers resurrected *groovy* for a new generation). Even words which were used by people the age of my children just a few years ago have vanished without trace: *untold* had a brief flourishing in Wellington as a term of approval, but has vanished completely; *grouse*, a rather older term, still survives but again not among the young.

If old words go, new words come – and not only such obviously fashionable words as the ones I've just mentioned. In a recent survey of the language of primary school children in New Zealand, we discovered a word that all the children knew and virtually none of the teachers knew. To understand the expression, one has to understand something about the games played by children in English-speaking countries. These games may or may not correspond to games elsewhere. One fundamental game is a chasing game where one person is *in* or *it* and has to chase the others until they touch somebody, at which point that person becomes *in/it* and takes on the chasing role. The game is usually called *tag* in the USA, *tig* in the UK, usually *chasey* or some such variant in Australia, and *tig*, *tag* or *tiggy* in New Zealand, depending on where you come from.

Children make up their own rules and variants of this game, sometimes to suit a particular locale. So in a playground where there are a lot of bark chips on the ground, you may be safe (un-touchable?) if you are standing on the bark chips. Typically, though, you will not be allowed to stay on the bark chips for more than 5 seconds or so. Alternatively there may be a home, base or den where you are safe from the chaser. Right throughout New Zealand children have a rule that the chaser is not allowed to stand right by a *base* and wait for a victim's five seconds to run out. The rule is enforced with the command: *no goose-guarding*. The term *goose-guarding* was known in every one of the thirty-three schools from Northland to Southland in which we carried out interviews – but rarely by the teachers. Enquiries among

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young adults suggested that the word reached Wellington sometime in the mid-1990s. We have not yet met a twenty-one year old who knew this word at primary school, but sixteen-year olds did. The reason teachers don't know the word is that it is a recent arrival, and has apparently spread like wildfire throughout the primary-school aged population. Words come quickly, too.

This is a problem for all sorts of people. It is now over twenty years since I left Europe to live in New Zealand, and closer to thirty since I felt fluent in three European languages. Nowadays I don't have words in any of those languages for things like *PC*, *operating system*, *mouse*, *mouse-pad*, *spam*, *user-friendly*, *LAN*, *the net*, *URL*, and so on; nor do I have words for *catalytic converter*, *CD*, *couch potato*, *downsizing*, *DVD*, *ethnic cleansing*, *flat white*, *eco-terrorism*, *OOS*, *restructuring*, *smoke-free workplace*, *SPF* [sun protection factor], *spin doctor*, *stalker*, *superbug*, *tough love*, *tree-hugging*, *vegan* and no doubt hundreds of other words (see any good dictionary of neologisms).

So is this just my hard luck? I should have kept in touch, had copies of *Jours de France*, *Paris Match*, *Stern* or *Politikens Weekly* sent to me. Perhaps. And if we are dealing solely with vocabulary matters, then that would certainly have allowed me to fill the gaps as these things started to be talked about. But what if it is not simply a matter of vocabulary? What if other things are going on as well? Because they are.

Consider what is happening in pronunciation. One of the striking developments in the second half of the twentieth century in England is the lowering of the DRESS and TRAP vowels. These vowels appear to have reached their closest point in the late 1940s (if we can believe the movies of the period), but their opening did not start to become clear to observers until the early 1960s. This has been a personal benefit to me: the modified Yorkshire accent that I had when I left home to go to university and which I have moved away from all my adult life (although fairly obvious traces still remain) has become more like modern RP, not because I have changed my accent (though I have) but because RP has changed to be more like my accent in these important features. Listen to Jennifer Ehle and compare her voice with that of Judi Dench or Diana Rigg. You can hear the difference. Jonathan Harrington and colleagues have even documented changes in the Queen's accent over the years, moving in the same directions (Jonathan Harrington, Sallyanne Palethorpe & Catherine Watson, 'Monophthongal vowel changes in Received Pronunciation: an acoustic analysis of the Queen's Christmas broadcasts', in *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 30 (2000), 63–78). When we go to see the Harry Potter movie and listen to the young woman who plays Hermione, we can realise that the movement is not yet complete.

In some cases we have recognised the changes by giving them names: There is the Northern Cities Shift in the USA (named by Labov), and Estuary English in England (named by Rosewarne). This recognition at least allows us to name phenomena which have emerged in the way we speak English.

When I was an undergraduate in Edinburgh in the late 1960s, students were aware that they were not universally liked or trusted by the 'town', and that they were often disparagingly referred to as 'they students' with [ʃtʃ] as the initial cluster in the word 'students'. This was in line with the then frequent modification of [tj] to [ÿ] in any environment; it was colloquial and informal. The same phenomenon persists today. There have probably been changes in the usage of this feature, but I cannot tell you what they are. However, since that period, a related phenomenon has arisen. We find similar palatalisation occurring in original [str] clusters in words like *strong*, *street*, etc. Originally, I believe, this became a retroflex cluster. But my students who use this pronunciation today are adamant that they have a tongue-tip down oral configuration, giving [ßÿ®]. This is widespread. It has been widely used in the USA for many years (though not, apparently throughout the linguistic South, being present in Texas but not in Carolina), and is found in Canada and Hawaii as well as more obviously central places. It is also found in the South East of England and in Australia. (Dan Moonhawk Alford, *Linguist* 5.507, 02 May 1994; Shelly Harrison, *Linguist* 10.217 10 Feb 1999).

In my teens and early twenties, I put a lot of effort into trying to learn to pronounce the foreign languages I was learning as well as possible. Of course, I was still some distance from the target, but I aimed for the best models I had at the time. All the languages I learnt then must have changed as much as English has, so to the extent I have maintained any competence in those languages, I must now be speaking an

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old-fashioned (perhaps slightly quaint) variety. Europeans who were doing their best to learn RP in the 1960s are in the same situation: unless they have been using the language with native speakers all the time, they must be starting to sound wrong because they are not changing fast enough. If all we want to do is be tourists in the countries whose languages we could once speak, little harm is done. The people who are in the position of greatest difficulty are those who are employed to teach the new generation how to pronounce and use English. Students learning from them are like native speakers growing up outside the country where their language is spoken with only grand-parents for company.

But surely the same problems are not affecting grammar? Grammar is notorious for changing extremely slowly. Well, there are a couple of parts of English grammar which may be changing a bit faster than we would expect, and the results of that may not be expected.

The first of these is the area of countability, which affects the determiner system in English, with distinctions like *many/much*, *a/Ø* depending on the countability of the noun involved. Most of this system is stable, but at two points it shows signs of collapse.

The first of these points is related to the determiner *more*. *More* can be used with either plural countable nouns (*more skittles*) or with unmarked mass nouns (*more beer*). Traditionally, each of these had a different opposite: it was *less beer* but *fewer skittles*. Probably because you could use *more* in either kind of construction, the feeling has arisen that there should be a single word for the opposite of more on all occasions. The word that has been chosen is *less*. So young speakers today can have *less beer*, but they can also have *less skittles*. Some years ago, an advertising hoarding for a local radio station announced proudly 'more music, less ads'. A literate graffiti artist added 'fewer grammar'. A few years further down the track, it seems unlikely that many people will see the point of the graffiti artist's message. And those that do will be old fuddy-duddies like me. After all, the new usage is found in published texts these days.

> For the time being the less people who know about it at this stage the better (Follett, James, *Torus.* London: Methuen, 1990:36–7).

The second point relating to countability has to do with the word *amount*. Traditionally, *amount* was used to measure mass nouns, so that you could have *a large amount of beer*, but you could not have *a large amount of skittles*. You could have *a large number of skittles*. *Amount* has changed. It is now regularly used with countable nouns, especially in speech and especially by younger speakers.

The result is that you have two competing formal varieties, one in which *a large amount of skittles* is acceptable in the most formal style, and one in which *a large amount of skittles* is meaningless; one in which *less skittles* is acceptable in the most formal style, and one in which it is not. In this case, I don't think that native speakers are really aware of the complexity of the system they are faced with. But what are we to tell the foreign learner? I came across material written by a young European the other day, where there was talk of *a large amount of people*; I immediately saw this as an error, and one that tended to indicate lack of education. I'm sure the author would have been horrified to have known the effect that had been given. But the author was probably only repeating things heard from native speakers on many occasions. These things escape from the spoken domain into the written domain, sometimes in even more convoluted forms:

> They've got a fair amount of members here. (Walter Satterthwait, *A Flower in the Desert.* Toronto, etc.: Worldwide, 1992:119)

> There would be just the right amount of people on the street (Eric Van Lustbader, *French Kiss.* London, etc.: Grafton, 1989:111)

> You're going to end up in the *Guinness Book of Records* for kissing the most number of arses (Bryan Forbes, *Quicksand.* London: Heinemann, 1996:136)

> The faceplate came off easily, exposing a circuit board and an amazing amount of small wires. (Stephen Coonts, *Final Flight.* New York, etc.: Doubleday, 1988:225)

> Digital reception increases the amount of calls that can be made on the cellular network stations, lowering the chance of overloads on the system. (*Contact*, Wellington, New Zealand, 14 Jan 93, p. 10: Cellular phone network spreads)

My next example is slightly different, but only in that native speakers seem to be more aware of the problem, so that it is rarely found in writing. It is the use of which with human antecedents in relative clauses. Christian Mair

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suggests that I am over-reacting to these examples (in *'Man/woman which…* – Last of the old, or first of the new?', in Antoinette Renouf, ed., *Explorations in Corpus Linguistics*, Amsterdam and Atlanta Ga.: Rodopi, 1998: 123–33), but it does seem to me that they are being heard more and more in precisely the central instances where Mair thinks they don't occur.

> These men and women … bore children for which they had to provide (Ludlum, Robert, *The Apocalypse Watch*. London: HarperCollins, 1995:401)
>
> The First National customers which had borrowed most heavily ... were forced under. (Erdman, Paul, *The Panic of '89*. London: Sphere.1986:14)
>
> "There are currently 19 Maori students doing post-graduate work of which 18 are women," said Kathy. (*VUW Equal Employment Opportunities News*, Number 14, September 1993:2)

My final example is of a change which has been going on for at least 400 years: confusion between *I* (and the other subject pronoun forms) and *me* (and the other oblique pronoun forms). The interest of this example lies in the fact that perceptions of what is happening seem to have changed relatively recently, and we also seem to be getting a regional literary dialect where the prescriptively 'correct' forms are the expected forms (if the authors can manipulate them).

My impression of change in perceptions comes from talking to my students, nearly all of whom these days see a construction like *between you and I* as being more formal, and in some sense 'better' than *between you and me*. This perception is clearest in the coordinated instances, and it is not clear to me whether it is limited to them. Nevertheless, when so many of the supposedly educated believe this to be true, we might as well admit that prescription has been overthrown by usage. We also find written examples which point in the same direction.

> On the other hand, it could be an unmitigated nightmare, which is the way it seemed to be working out, with Osa and he doing twenty years, ploughing rice paddies … (Tony Hillerman, *Finding Moon*. London: Michael Joseph, 1996:151)
>
> Dad claimed that the fuel odor gave food a bad taste, but I'm pretty sure he was just trying to protect my brothers and I from the scourge of doing something 'the easy way'. (Richard Laymon, *The Travelling Vampire Show*. London: Headline, 2000:149)
>
> ... around two-thirty there were only four of us left – Billie Keegan behind the bar and I in front of it and a couple of nurses. (Lawrence Block, *When the Sacred Ginmill Closes.* London: Macmillan.1986:3)
>
> Brigitte had no intention of letting she and Kurt talk (Craig Thomas, *All the Grey Cats.* London: Collins.1988:59)
>
> Dr Bernard Verdcourt … volunteered to drive Vanne and I to Kigoma. (Jane van Lawick-Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man.* London: Collins, 1971:20)

My suggestion that there is a regional literary dialect where the prescriptively 'correct' forms are expected comes from examples like the following:

> If it were I, I thought, I could live without them. (Aaron Elkins, *A Glancing Light.* New York: Fawcett, 1991:86)
>
> He ... looked at me, surprised that anyone but he had picked up on it (Sue Grafton, *'F' is for Fugitive.* London: Macmillan,1989:65)
>
> She had two sisters and a brother, all younger than she. (Lawrence Sanders, *The Tangent Objective.* London: Hart Davis McGibbon 1977:199

which, despite the editions I have seen, are all of American origin) and hypercorrect. And:

> It was she Metchnikov wanted as a shipmate – if he wanted anybody – not me. (Frederik Pohl, *Gateway*. London: Gollancz, 1977:196)
>
> Beware of he who spells adjectives and common nouns with capitals. (Robert Katz, *Ziggurat.* London: Eyre Methuen 1977:16)

and subverting the whole style:

> 'It's not she,' he said.
> 'Don't talk like that,' Dino whispered. 'It's not her.'
> 'It's not she,' Stone said again.
>
> [14 lines]
>
> 'And, Stone,' Dino added, 'never say "It's not she" to some guy at the morgue. He'll think you're a jerk.' (Woods, Stuart, *New York Dead.* London: HarperCollins, 1991:20)
>
> If not me who? Whom? And does it matter? (Abbey, Edward, *Hayduke Lives!* Boston, etc.: Little, Brown,1990:9)

Does any of this matter? For the pronunciation

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and grammar, probably only to a very limited extent. Although I strongly believe that the pronunciation of individuals changes as they age, and that such changes are probably in the direction of on-going change in the society, there are enough conservative speakers in the population for younger speakers to have to be able to understand them. Young speakers may think we sound weird, and we certainly don't sound 'cool', but on the whole we are comprehensible. Most of the changes affect the fringes of the system, not the central part of the system: countability is not under threat (at the moment, at least), only a couple of expressions have shifted category. The fate of the short front vowels is rather more important, and rather more central, but those vowels have been regionally variable for a hundred years or more, and no great change is required for native speakers to be able to interpret what they are hearing in this area.

The only problem comes in correcting the language of the young. We know that grandparents will think for some time that their grandchildren are slovenly because they can't get *amount* right (that's just the way people are), but what about teachers correcting the writing of teenagers in a foreign language? Despite the fact that the teachers grew up finding *amount* impossible with a plural noun, presumably they should not correct it in the prose of their students. Or at least, they should be aware that there may be an issue here.

Vocabulary is a different problem. It is also (fortunately) easier to solve. We do need to keep upgrading our vocabulary in a foreign language, and if we don't we must expect to be left behind. Of course, we will always be behind (even in our own language, using it every day), but we must try to keep reasonably up-to-date. Not only will we simply not be understood if we insist on a distinction between *uninterested* and *disinterested* or between *imply* and *infer*, but we will mislead ourselves and our students if we fail to understand *user-friendly* or *jet-ski*. This implies that we should keep in touch with a foreign language wherever possible through radio broadcasts, movies, novels, the press – whatever is available.

But that is not the moral that I wish to draw here. The moral is that there is a job here for linguists and tertiary language teachers, which I don't think they have been taking seriously. Not only do such people have responsibility to see that the best possible and the most useful descriptions of the target language are available to learners, they also have a responsibility to keep those descriptions up-to-date, and to inform their constituency about what changes are taking place and what the social value of the various options in a system is. Whether in the form of irregular retraining courses or written reports, they can not only help prevent teachers from correcting what – for speakers of the appropriate generation – is already correct; they can also show what errors will stand out as having a social value unappreciated by the foreign learner. ■



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