

UDC: 378

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ENGLISH

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Abstract: Language is one of the greatest cultural accomplishments the humanity has made. It evolves and develops together with the nation that speaks it. Such historical events as wars, exploration, colonization, migration make the language change, borrow new elements or sometimes even disappear. So, we may say that the history of the nation is reflected in its language.

Key words: Received Pronunciation, learning, speaker, exploration, colonization, migration, historical, regional, prestige dialect.

As English has spread throughout the world certain dialects and speech forms have become more prestigious than others. In England Received Pronunciation (RP) is the dialect form of the Royal Family, the elite schools, the government, and the courts. RP marks the speaker as educated and socially important. However, RP is viewed with suspicion in some places. So, even politicians switch to the dialects of their own regions when speaking for the home audience. Some research has shown that people evaluating oral arguments in legal cases rated the arguments in the regional accent as more persuasive than those made in RP.

This explains why prestige dialects have not overwhelmed regional variants throughout the world, and why people persist in using regional forms of language.

On the one hand, a person can adopt the prestige dialect and avoid the more stigmatized form. It is the sign of education and cultural connections. On the other hand, a person can choose the dialects of solidarity, trying to sound trustworthy

and friendly. When people switch from one dialect to another, they are said to practice code switching.

Code switching is a very complicated process that allows individuals to mediate their own identities. A person's attitude toward identity is extremely significant in regional dialect performance. These attitudes toward identity explain why dialect forms whose speakers are discriminated against nevertheless persist.

The development of regional and class variations of English, and the persistence of stigmatized forms of the language, tell us some very important things about the future of English. This language is spoken in various forms by nearly one fifth of the population of the earth. And there is a network effect: the more people speak it, the more valuable it is to learn to speak it. For native English speakers this is obviously a good thing, as their natural linguistic ability, acquired in childhood, provides advantages in the worlds of commerce, entertainment, technology, and other areas where English is now a global standard. But the success of English has cost many other languages a lot. Scholars are worried that the more than six thousand living languages will be radically reduced in the next century, and only few major languages will survive the next five hundred years. This would be a tragic loss of human accomplishment no less horrible than the loss rare species.

But the spread of new dialect forms, the diversification of English, and the persistence of even the most stigmatized variants give us reasons for optimism.

It seems that we humans preserve our native languages, even under an intense pressure. We may switch codes, adopt prestige dialects, but still we retain the ability to speak in the languages that make us feel solidarity and comfort. Even if our language starts from the same root, it seems to have a drive to diversify, and to continual changes. The story of English has been one of change and diversity, and hopefully its future will be also.

Another major event that affected greatly the English language was the Great Vowel Shift. Its simplest description is that the seven long Middle English

vowel shifted higher (it is are called high front vowel) with greater closing of the mouth. That now became diphthong. So, in the Great Vowel Shift, “fif” (pronounced “feef”) becomes “five” (with the “iy” diphthong). The mid front vowel moved to the now vacant high front vowel space, and became high front vowel, so: “mede” (pronounced “maid – eh”) became “meed.” The low front vowel in its turn moved to slot left by the mid front vowels “breke” (pronounced “bray – keh”) became “break.” The next vowel from the back of the mouth moved to this spot: “name” (pronounced “nahm – he”) became “name.” The high back vowel in

Middle English “mus” (pronounced “moose,” (mouse)) became a diphthong, “mouse.” The sound that had been a mid back vowel jumped into that vacant high back vowel place: “roote” (pronounced “row – teh”) became “root.” A mid back vowel in tis turn moved to the slot of the previous low back vowel moved: “goote” (pronounced “gaw – teh”) becomes “goat.”

As one can see, this shift is only applicable to the long vowels. The short vowels were not affected and almost didn’t change at all. Word elements that were not stressed did not undergo vowel changes.

The explanation of the Great Vowel Shift is rather controversial and sound as follows: at the time of the Shift England experienced a major demographic change. There was mass immigration from the north to the south of England after the Black Death and a shift from rural to urban living patterns.

Linguists suppose that the sudden arrival in the south of many individuals with northern accents or the arrival of many rural dwellers in urban areas triggered, a major pronunciation change.

The Great Vowel Shift was the most significant factor in changing Middle English into the language that we now speak, but not the only one.

The following grammatical changes happened:

the plural ending “-n” continued to lose ground and finally “-s” won the battle.

the apostrophe s (’s) appeared as the genitive ending. The genitive case was the Old English method of indicating possession. For strong nouns, the genitive singular ending was “-es,” “stan” (stone) – “stanes” (pronounced “stahn – ehs”) “of the stone”. In Middle English the genitive ending was unaccented it ends up being spelled with a variety of vowels, such as “-is” or “-ys”. Thus the apostrophe marks the missing “e” in the “-es” ending.

other significant grammar changes occurred in the pronouns and the verbs. In Old English, “ge” (pronounced “ye”) and “þu” (pronounced “thoo”) indicated different numbers in the second person (“ge” – plural, “þu” – singular). In the thirteenth century, the forms thou, thy, thee were used when addressing social inferiors, children, and close friends. The forms (ye, your, you) were a sign of respect. Eventually the “thou” forms disappeared from speech.

The ending of the third person singular verb in Middle English was “-eth”. In XVI-th century it became “-s” and both endings coexisted for some time, but by the eighteenth century, “-eth” had been lost from all speech.

English has a lot of rules and numerous exceptions to all of them, it rapidly adopts new vocabulary, and its rules of reading are so vague that one has a hard time learning how to read in English. However these rules don’t seem so strange for those who know the history of the English language. As any living creature, a language changes constantly and many of its “unexplainable” features have logical historical explanations.

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