

So what's new? How we recognise linguistic change

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Intro

Thanks for invitation. Perhaps one day I'll write a lecture **before** the abstract which purports to summarise it. My abstract for this lecture posed a series of questions, and in actually writing the lecture I've often found I want to answer those questions with other questions, which I suppose makes it a rather Jewish affair.

The genesis of this talk is bound up with 'where I'm coming from'. Not in the sense with answer 'Manchester', but that hateful modern phrase which appears to be illustrated in (1):

- (1) 1980 G. B. Trudeau *Tad Overweight*, Seriously, I think I know *where you're coming from*, and I'd like to share that space. (*OED*)

Example (1) is an *OED* citation for another word (*space*), and there is no sign in the 2nd edn that the idiom is recognised. Perhaps it's a literal usage after all — no context is given — but it wouldn't be the first time the *OED* has been able to provide corpus evidence without recognising as a dictionary that it has. (Must check *OED Online*.) But development of idioms isn't really grammatical change, which is what I want to concentrate on here. (So title is a misnomer.)

Where **am** I coming from? I started out working on various early periods of the language, and in the last few years have been more concerned with ModE, especially the late ModE of the last 2-300 years, and most recently with PDE and current change. I still think of myself as a historical linguist, and one point of this talk will be to defend the claim that looking at current English is — or at least, should be — historical.

What does a historical linguist do? There are many approaches. Amongst other things we look for a perspicuous way of **describing** linguistic changes, aim to select appropriate and telling **examples** to illustrate them, try to **relate different changes** to one another, and hope to come close to a decent **explanation**.

description of change ~ exemplification ~ relation to other changes ~ explanation
All of which begs the question, how do we know what the changes are in the first place?

How to become aware in the first place of (the possibility of) linguistic change.

I am very conscious in my own work of the haphazardness of awareness. The serendipity which leads one to notice something going on could so easily **not** have struck at the crucial moment. This is rather frightening. On top of this there is a more systematic problem which depends both on the observer and the phenomenon observed (or missed). Gil Youmans talks of ‘the tendency of listeners to filter out linguistic signals that do not conform to their own idiolects’ (1986: 71), and it is indeed hard to train oneself not to do this. For example, for many years I must have simply ignored my colleague Richard Hogg saying things like

(2) This door *needs fixed*.

I think I must have assumed I had misheard, or that Richard had made a slip of the tongue for one of the expected alternatives:

(3) This door *needs fixing*.

(4) This door *needs to be fixed*.

Only when I read somewhere that (2) was a known Scotticism did I suddenly notice that Richard used the construction all the time. [Alternative explanation.] Notice that Lesley Milroy in her lecture quoted Dennis Preston as saying (2) was not salient in US dialect variation. I suspect similar things may go on with innovations that appear around us.

Not always, of course: sometimes a strange usage hits us between the eyes. Indeed, I am still continuing to notice with a curious mixture of pleasure and discomfort one I first discussed some 15 years ago, counterfactual *may have*:

(5) But science is a very strange activity. If it hadn’t been for certain historical accidents, human beings *may never have stumbled* across it at all.

(1999 Paul Davies, *The Guardian Online* p. 7/1 (8 Apr.))

(The context of (5) makes clear that we humans **have** stumbled across ‘it’.) This is so bizarre in my dialect that for me it just can’t be ignored. I would say, though, that a large majority of my current British students not only **don’t** find it bizarre, they notice nothing wrong and often have the usage of (5) themselves. The dialects which distinguish between *may have* and *might have* in this context are increasingly being confined to proficient non-native speakers and to native speakers of middle age or older from SE England or the US. And my point here is, how could one of my current

students, that is, a speaker of the more advanced dialect type, ever find out without being told that there is a change in progress? An example like (5) would not seem odd to them, nor would the equivalent from the more conservative dialect type:

(6) ... human beings *might never have stumbled* across it at all.

which as far as I know remains possible in all dialects. So unless their attention had been drawn to the construction and they had done some corpus investigation, there would be nothing to signal to them what is in fact a major upheaval in the auxiliary system. Actually, that's not quite true, since standard grammars of English — whether or not they discuss this change

- (7) a. note that the apodosis of an **unreal** conditional (its main clause) must start with a past tense modal verb [**“unreal” om. in h/o**]
 b. don't generally include *may* among the past tense modals

So an alert student would have a strong clue that the grammars had missed something.

Then not all change is innovation: there is also loss. Loss is more difficult to spot: the well-known difficulty of proving — in this case **noticing** — a negative, the dog which doesn't bark. You cannot observe a loss in some language state; only by comparison with a previous state where that something is present. The *may have* usage may be thought of as an innovation or as the loss of a distinction.

Here is another example. Adverbials may be realised by all sorts of phrases: AdvPs, PPs, clauses, and — sometimes — NPs. The distribution of the bare NP adverbial is very hard to pin down. Many time phrases can be expressed as bare NP adverbials:

- (8) The weather is/was terrible this summer / that summer / *these summers / *those summers / *this day / that day / these days / *those days

Some cannot, as the asterisks indicate. Absence of **this day* as an adverbial can be explained as due to blocking by *today*, but why for example are the *those* expressions impossible? [**Kirsti Peitsara pointed out that all OK in dialects with *them days* for *those days***]

- (9) We visited our grandparents every summer / most summers / *(in) those summers when they were in France.

The rules are very subtle and poorly understood, and there is a great degree of variation. Jespersen thought that the bare NP adverbial *all summer* was recent and/or American, though data in *OED* makes clear it had been common in the language since the seventeenth century. We have the advantage of electronic corpora: great when

you know what you're looking for. Changes in this area may be hard to detect. It was only by chance in reading the letters of Keats and of Mrs Gaskell that I realised that a type of phrase with head noun *weather* had been able to function as a bare NP adverbial in earlier English. Here are three examples from *OED* showing just how long-lived it was:

- (10) Would any but these boylde-braines of nineteene and two and twenty hunt *this weather*? (1611 Shakes. *Wint. T.* [*OED*])
- (11) You ought to hev more sense than to bum araound on deck *this weather*. (1897 Kipling [*OED*])
- (12) The latter, droopy after being out all night, should be rugged up *this weather*. (1936 [*OED*])

But it's obsolete now, if my dialect and the one described in the Quirk grammars is typical, and that means the grammar has changed.

Speakers of British standard notice that other speakers, notably but not exclusively Americans, can use phrases with head noun *place* where they can not:

- (13) someplace / any place / no place
- (14) Be it ever so humble, there's *no place* like home. (1822 J. H. Payne *Song, Home, Sweet Home* [*OED*])

(Payne was indeed American. As, of course, was Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.) This implies that one or other of the major varieties has undergone a change, if we are safe in assuming common ancestry. Then it's a matter of historical investigation: present-day dialectal variation has given us the clue.

A historical example.

- (15) 'Yes,' Anna replied, 'he is always up at six.'
 'But you aren't, I suppose?'
 'Yes, *I too*.'
 'And *me too*,' Agnes interjected.

(1902 Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (Penguin), i.26)

The sensitive modern reader will recognise what's going on here: a change in progress, and still not quite complete a century later, exemplified by Anna —aged nearly 21 and talking to a suitor — carefully using the prestige subjective form, while the impatient half-sister Agnes, only 12 years old, makes the more natural colloquial choice. Modern descriptive grammars of PDE will have something to say about subjective ~ objective variation in such contexts, relating it essentially to **formality**.

What I only stumbled across by chance a few years ago was a different kind of variation according to **person**. That is, around the time Bennett was writing, the objective pronoun had already become reasonably commonplace in colloquial contexts, but for the first person only; third person use (*not him / not her / not them*) was still virtually unknown, even in representations of speakers of highly nonstandard dialects. This would be very hard to spot, as the natural reaction on finding an example like

(16) “ ... D’you s’pose he did it? *Not he!* ... “

(1905 M. Loane, *Queen’s Poor* ix.219)

in a representation of working-class language would be to ascribe it to the date of the text rather than to the person of the pronoun. The clue here came from Jespersen, and then via Dekeyser from various nineteenth-century grammarians who commented favourably or otherwise on *Not me!* while assuming the impossibility of *Not him!* And once you’re primed to detect this new kind of variation, you quickly find that it was a very salient conditioning factor in the period from maybe 1850 to 1920, or even later. (**Why** this should be is interesting, but I must stick to the **what** of change.)

How to decide what constitutes grammatical change.

This was a question I posed in my abstract, but it’s a less interesting one concerned really with labelling. Only for those whose believe in a strictly modular theory of language is it critically important to distinguish grammatical change from pragmatics on the one hand and lexis on the other. It can be hard to separate them. The development of *any place* beside *anywhere* is on the borderline between lexis and syntax, as is the use of particular items as bare NP adverbials. To take another particular example, consider

(17) Sometimes her solitary existence is painful. When she is sick she *misses* having *no one* to take care of her; sometimes she regrets that she has no one from whom to ask advice; sometimes she wants to share her joys.

(1994 Theodore Zeldin, *An intimate history of humanity*, iii.45)

Zeldin obviously means that she misses having *anyone* to take care of her. Insertion of a superfluous negation after MISS is extremely frequent (see *BNC*). Is it a lexical matter, part of the history of MISS? Probably not, since a lot of verbs, nouns and adjectives with a semi-negative meaning show — or have shown — effects of a similar kind, sometimes leading to permanent change. This phenomenon should be

handled under the general heading of embedded negation. It also clearly has to do with pragmatics.

In this context I won't discuss another and interesting subquestion: whether there are underlying structural changes associated with a particular set of data. This cannot be considered without going into issues of theoretical orientation.

How to decide whether a nonstandard or unusual usage is indicative of change or of idiosyncrasy or of error.

The first point to note is that linguistic change is often said (eg Croft 2000: 4-5) to have two main components: the initial use of a novel form,

(18) actuation / innovation

and its spread,

(19) propagation / diffusion / 'change'

A linguist's awareness of (18) means only the **possibility** of change [hence heading of first Q]: many innovations do not make it.

If we hadn't known better, example (17) could have been an isolated error.

Here are some more:

(20) The new technology will allow us to offer exciting alternatives to the main channel schedules on BBC1 and BBC2, multiple choices varying from hour to hour. We either join it or *be history*.

(1996 John Birt, *The Guardian* p. 27 (24 Aug))

(21) I try to fit in with everyone so I *don't be* the odd one out or something

(ca 1984, quoted Chambers, *Language* 1992: 676 n.2)

What was that Director-General of the BBC doing, linguistically, in the last two words of (20), before he himself became history? He appears to have failed to integrate his slogan into the syntax of his sentence:

(22) "Lucky me." He nodded. "An inch either way and you'd *be history*, so I hear."

(*BNC*)

On the other hand, uses of the bare stem *be* are increasingly common in places where the grammar books say they should be impossible, as in (21) and many others. There **may** be a change in the making. Occasional innovation is not change, however.

Awareness of (19) means that change has started — but again, not all changes go through to completion. One that has is the *Why don't you* construction, as perhaps in (23) and certainly in (24):

(23) “Who’s ‘they’? *Why don't you* all get together and *be ‘they’* yourselves?”

(1920 Edith Wharton, *Age of Innocence* (Virago, 1993) xiv.118)

(24) *Why don't you be* more forceful?

This is now fully acceptable even in standard.

The conventional wisdom is that much linguistic change proceeds along an S-curve: very slow and sporadic beginning, rapid take-up, and a slowing-down again as the change approaches completion. (I have to say ‘conventional wisdom’, even though I share it, because a recent paper of mine comes to the conclusion that the S-curve is a rather artificial and in some ways unexpected construct.) It is difficult to distinguish between insignificant, random bumps in the historical record — John Birt? — and the foothills of what will become in time an S-curve. Hindsight is crucial here, and hindsight is exactly what we don’t have for current change. On the other hand, to compensate for it we have a vast supply of data and full access to native speakers. Therefore it is usually possible for current English to distinguish quite quickly between individual random error and systematic innovation. What is much riskier is predicting whether an innovation will be successfully propagated to the point where we can call it a change.

We can be sure that the usage of (25) is well into the propagation stage:

(25) I’d *of* said the old girl was always listenin’ when there was anyone on the blower. (1957 [*OED*])

It’s too common in speech to be ignored. I see that Bill Gates’s minions have set up MS Word by default to correct *may of been* (and similar strings) to *may have been*, which is another indication of its prevalence. (In fact I had to uncorrect that form after I’d typed it.) We may disagree as to whether or not the usage is a sign of the decline of civilisation as we know it; novelists are less inclined than formerly to use it as a sign of uneducated, nonstandard speech. Linguists — who of course relish it — have reached no consensus about how to analyse it. One can at least demonstrate that it’s a usage of fairly long standing:

(26) Had I known of your illness I *should not of written* in such fiery phrase in my first Letter. (1819 Keats, *Letters* 149 p. 380 (5 Sep.))

- (27) Soposing seven hundred and sixty [servants] *to of advertised* and the same number *not to of advertised*. (1837 [OED])
- (28) I never *would of married* in the world, ef I *couldn't of got* jist exactly suited. (1844 [OED])

OED's first examples are (27) and (28), labelled as 'jocular'. Why was the Keats example missed? Because literary readers were conditioned to read *must of* and *might of* and *should of* as signs of near-illiteracy and insensitivity to language? — and therefore not Keats. Because of the tendency to filter out dialect forms different from one's own? Because it's rather isolated chronologically?

Now consider this example, also involving what is historically a preposition:

- (29) 'You won't forget?' said Newman.

'I am not very likely *to*,' rejoined Nicholas.

(1838-9 Dickens, *Nickleby* xxii.271)

Nicholas's usage seems entirely normal to us, and unlike (25), uncontroversially standard, but a linguist of the 1830s might have found it more interesting: it is one of the earliest examples I know of which shows ellipsis of a VP after *to*. (So far I have just two reliable earlier ones: in an American letter of 1766, and in Hannah Cowley's play *Bold Stroke for a Husband*, though only in her collected *Works* of 1813, not earlier editions.) Within a few years of Dickens's using it in dialogue in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the construction was starting to appear more widely. Modern linguists generally take it as a very significant diagnostic, even justifying the analysis of infinitival *to* as a non-finite auxiliary verb on the strength of it. What would our putative contemporary linguist have made of it? Would it have seemed very isolated and strange? What kind of analysis could he or she have offered? Here theory is important. On some views, this is not merely a new kind of ellipsis, it's a symptom of major reanalysis in the auxiliary system.

How to decide whether a change is a categorical innovation/loss, or merely a change in frequency or of distribution among registers or dialects.

In Britain you can't avoid *well* + Adj these days:

- (30) If someone had said we would get a draw here, we would have been *well happy*. (BNC)

This seems like a categorical innovation, since previously the construction had been confined to the particular collocations *well able* / *well worth* / *well aware* or cases where the head was a past participle (*well known* / *well balanced* / etc.). And it seems recent. FLOB (1 million words, 1991) has no examples, unless you count *well south* or *pulled well clear*. So an innovation? And yet *OED* (s.v. *well* adv. 16a) has examples like *well suitable* / *well warm* / *well dry* all the way from OE to the early 19C, which it says were ‘formerly in common use’ but are ‘now rare’. So the categorical innovation may be more of a revival, and if so, probably a spread from a restricted register or dialect to more fashionable use.

Something similar can be said about the use of *themselves* as the reflexive appropriate to indefinite *they*. (And you may be amused to know that when I had written that line and immediately afterwards searched for *themselves*, sure enough the idiots at Microsoft had obliterated it for me and replaced it by *themselves*.) Anyway, examples like the following are becoming more and more frequent:

- (31) You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he’s a real hot-shot, and they’re always asking you to do them a big favor. Just because *they’re* [orig italics] crazy about *themselves*, they think *you’re* [orig italics] crazy about them, too, and that you’re just dying to do them a favor.

(1945-6/1951 J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* [Penguin, 1994] iv.24)

- (32) It became clear that the person was alone, talking to *themselves*.

(1991 Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* [Vintage, 1992] III.xi.249)

But *OED* shows that the form is not actually an innovation, more of a revival. (I have found this on several occasions.)

Let’s take the converse situation, an apparently lost usage. Example (33) is clearly archaic, and not just because a Gaskell heroine wouldn’t even **discuss** *intercourse* in its general PDE sense:

- (33) *The giving that letter* ... make all the private intercourse I have had with Mr. Preston.

(1864-6 Gaskell, *Wives & Daughters* xlvi.598)

Gerunds can occur nowadays with *the* (a nominal property) or with a direct object (a verbal one), but not generally with both at the same time. Although gerunds remain a difficult category, that particular mixed construction seems intuitively to be a clear-cut loss, having been common in the nineteenth century. But the loss isn’t quite categorical:

- (34) The days had been very full: the psychiatrist, the obstacle courses, *the throwing herself from the hold of a slowly chugging plane* ... The extraordinary had become normal, or, if not normal, everyday. [ellipsis in original]

(1998 Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Gray* x.111)

- (35) “The key moment of the film for me isn’t *the cracking someone’s head on a kerb*” — making them bite the pavement and stamping down, as Derek does. “It’s after Derek’s been raped in prison”

(1999 Edward Norton, quoted in *The Guardian Friday Review* p. 6 (19 Mar.))

Once again we see the language showing an S-curve-like slowness to complete a change.

Similarly, the form *mayn’t* has moved from its origins in the 17C (1631) to great frequency in colloquial standard around the turn of the 20C, to what my students universally agree is complete obsolescence at the turn of the 21st, yet I have 1998 and 1999 examples from *The Guardian* which do not appear to be marked, or pseudo-archaic, or the output of elderly writers:

- (36) He uses colour because “you may as well, *mayn’t* you? And you can get someone else to develop it for you.”

(1998 interview with Richard Billingham, *G2 (The Guardian)* p. 11 (26 Nov.))

- (37) It’s hard to say whether Peter — I think we may call Peter Peter, *mayn’t* we, now that we’ve read his letters, and been introduced to his previous partners? — will succeed in making us love him.

(1999 Catherine Bennett, *G2 (The Guardian)* p. 5/1 (22 Apr.))

Has made me increasingly nervous of identifying innovations and losses.

How to decide whether change in one variety can be called a change in the English language.

In my chapter in *CHEL* on syntactic change of the last two hundred years, I wrote that it was ‘assumed throughout that comments apply to the “common core” of English, apart from sporadic references to the behaviour of particular dialects and registers’. I still think it is reasonable to treat the syntax of all varieties together most of the time, unlike, say, (lexis or) phonology. But the exceptions are important, and they may be becoming more so. David Crystal gave a recent lecture at the SEU in which he detailed the increasing distinctiveness in grammar of national varieties of spoken

English which will become increasingly self-confident and influential, eg Singaporean, S African Indian, Pakistani.

I give a few examples from my own work which suggest we cannot always simply treat 'English' as a monolith.

The present perfect is standardly said to co-occur with the simple past and to be incompatible with adverbials of past time:

(38) *We have visited Warsaw last month.

Various commentators have noticed cracks in this prohibition. Bauer claims it is found in nonstandard usage in New Zealand. I keep seeing present perfect for past in the language of English policemen, though I haven't yet caught them bang to rights with an explicit adverbial of past time:

(39) Assistant chief constable [*sic*] John Vine told a press conference at Preston police station: "We don't know how the two people *have been killed*. We *have been rung* from the premises. We *have been informed* by somebody who *has gone* to the premises. We are examining the scene now."

(1999 *The Guardian* p. 7 (20 Mar.))

(40) "The lightning *has struck* the tree and *shot* down the trunk. One of the women had her back to the tree trunk, and the lightning *has gone* down her back, *ripped* open her shirt and *come* out through her feet," the officer said.

(1999 *The Guardian* p. 4 (24 Sep.))

(Trudgill has claimed even that as normal in standard English English usage — surely an exaggeration.) If in retrospect it turns out that there was a general change in progress here, it will undoubtedly show differential progress through different varieties of English, at least in the early stages.

In the 19C, pronominal direct object could precede indirect object: *gave it him / tell it us*. Poutsma still regarded that as normal as late as the First World War (1914-29: I 426):

(41) either her Ladyship gave him that watch, or he took it. I think she *gave it him*.

Now, what should she *give it him* for?

(1853 Dickens, *Bleak House* (Penguin, 1988), lvii.836)

(42) "... *Give them me* here," said Clennam, in a low voice.

(1855-7 Dickens, *Little Dorrit* lxxii.251)

(43) Silently Judith *gave it her*.

(1932 Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (Penguin, ?1938) xiv.151)

(44) “Well come on then, *give it us*, will you?” (1987 Ann Pilling, *Henry's leg* [BNC]) Now however, according to Quirk *et al.* (1985: 10.7, 18.38), indirect objects normally precede direct objects in PDE — meaning southern BrE and AmerE — so that *gave him it*, *tell us it*, and so on would be the norm, with pronouns ordered the same as full NPs. (As an example, BNC has 4 *give it us* vs. 14 *give us it*.) There appears to have been a significant change in standard English in the last century or so, though this particular phenomenon has been little studied. However, since there is both dialectal (Kirk 1985) and chronological variation, a future analysis of the changes involved will not be able to treat the language ‘as a whole’.

Going back to Old and Middle English, some of the most interesting recent work on word order changes (Kroch and Taylor) has explained them in dialectal terms, in two senses: the grammars of different areas of the country are given different analyses, and dialect contact is a significant factor in change. In the end they are attempting to explain part of the word order history of the English language as a whole.

Those are some of Qs which troubled me, and still do.

Conclusion

So what’s new? Well, a great deal more than I’ve had time to discuss here. And how do we recognise linguistic change?

- By luck.
- By comparing the experience of speakers of different varieties.
- By comparing different dialects and registers and genres.
- By reading descriptions of the language, both ‘professional’ descriptive and opinionated prescriptive.
- (Could one find changes mechanically, for example by running a parser set up for a corpus of one period on texts of another period, and looking either for hiccups or for statistical changes? It doesn’t sound very promising.) Nor WP grammar checker.
- Above all, by listening to and reading the language itself from our own time and from different historical periods.

Nevertheless there are real problems of recognition, some of which I’ve mentioned. By and large those problems are much the same whether we’re dealing

with the present day, a few years or decades ago, or with the distant (but still historical) past. Knowledge of later developments is of great help in interpreting sporadic uses in the past, and knowledge of prior history makes it easier to interpret and understand current change. Not that changes are generally unidirectional, simple, one-for-one replacements: the linguistic and social contexts of a change will themselves change over time.

But it seems to me that the more you look at a language, say present-day English, the more you realise that it's not **just** a Saussurean system where everything hangs together, *ou tout se tient*, and where because speakers (allegedly) know nothing about language history, history must be irrelevant to usage. Sylvia in her lecture argued for attention to folk history and etymology. There is another truth too, which is that a language at a given time is a collage of all sorts of different individual **histories** (of words, constructions, phonologies, spellings, and everything else), often at different stages of development for different speakers or groups of speakers, and where many facts are conditioned by the past, and/or by the relationship between currently relevant histories. History is not bunk. But you knew that already, didn't you? So what's new?

not discussed

SHALL, epistemic HAVE *to*

phenomena, criteria, TRY and

being Ving

neg contraction, *there's*, pres subjunctive, *ought ~ should, the dead sg., all the Ns ~*

all of the Ns, clipped progressive, non-finite modal BE (BE to come)