

Evolving literacy standards in English: language domains, rise of the vernacular and challenges for EFL speakers

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1. Introduction:

- Literacy = the ability to read, to write and to do numeracy
- the world we live in has become much more complex
- the language has adapted accordingly
- need to redefine literacy standards and goals

1.1 Why does language change?

- Language has always been changing, evolving, and adapting to **the needs of its users**.
- William Croft (2000) claims in his book *Explaining Language Change: an evolutionary approach*:
„Linguistic innovations emerge from the remarkable complexity of communication in social interaction and once innovations occur, they are propagated through the equally complex social structures of the speech communities we participate in“.

- People move between countries and continents.
- No two people have had exactly the same language *experience*.
- Everyone has to some extent a 'personal dialect', which is technically known as an *idiolect*.
- There are variations depending on a speaker's age, gender, ethnicity, social and educational background.
- Language is used as a way of marking a group identity.

Areas the paper focuses on:

- some words with strikingly different meanings which have evolved over centuries
- language domains
- those domains main language characteristics
- implications for EFL teaching

2.1 Some words with changed meanings

- **Busking** was originally *piracy*. Now it is used in the sense of *giving some kind of public performance for cash*.
- **Cheap** originally meant *a market place* and was used as a noun and a verb in the mid-16th century.
- **Clue**: Centuries ago, a clue was a *ball of yarn*. If you imagine you are threading your way through a maze, you will see how the meaning evolved from yarn to *key bits of evidence* that help us solve things.
- **Deer** originally meant *animal in general*, and **meat** meant *food in general*.
- **Girl** originally referred both to *girls* and *boys*.
- **Naughty**: Originally meant *having nothing*. Then it came to mean *evil or immoral*, and now, such people are just *badly behaved*.
- **Nice** used to mean *ignorant, silly, foolish, simple*, today it is used as a compliment.
- **Silly** went in the opposite direction. Originally, in its earliest usage, it referred to things *worthy* or *blessed*; from there it came to refer to the *weak and vulnerable* and later to those who are *foolish*.
- **Manage** originally meant *to control a horse*.

2.2 Language domains

- **2.2.1 Politicians**

- extensive use of euphemisms and imprecise constructions

- *extraordinary rendition = superb interpretation of a piece of music*

Now: the practice of sending a foreign criminal or terrorist suspect covertly to be interrogated in a country with less rigorous regulations for the humane treatment of prisoners

- George Orwell wrote in one of his essays: *'The mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristics of any kind of political writing'*. As soon as topics are raised, the concrete (ie certainty and promises) *melts into the abstract*. (Horizon, 1947)

Some main characteristics

- **Metaphors:**
- dead metaphors
- tired, over-used metaphors
- dying metaphors: *ring the changes, toe the line, ride roughshod over, play into the hands of, stand shoulder to shoulder with, no axe to grind, fishing in troubled waters, on the order of the day, drill down, low-hanging fruit, etc.*

- **Phrasal verbs:**
- *prove unacceptable, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading role in, make itself felt, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of, etc.*
- elimination of simple explicit verbs, such as *break, stop, mend, spoil, etc.*
- *N or Aj + a general-purpose verb, such as prove, serve, form, etc.*

- the **passive voice** employed wherever possible
- **noun constructions** used instead of gerunds
(*by examination of* instead of *by examining*)
- the **de-** prefix (eg *deintensify*) and the **-ise** suffix (eg *incentivise*)
- **not un-** double negative construction, eg *it is not unlikely that...*

- Simple **conjunctions and prepositions** are **replaced** by such phrases as: *with respect to, having regard to, by dint of, in view of, on the hypothesis that, in the interests of, etc.*
- Ends of sentences **lack anti-climax** by resounding **platitudes** such as *to be greatly desired, cannot be left out of account, a development to be expected in the near future, brought to a satisfactory conclusion, etc.*

2.2.2 Journalists

- renowned for their exaggeration (*spectacularisation*)
- **Paul Dickson** and **Robert Skole** (2012): *Journalese – A Dictionary for Deciphering the News*.
- *Examples:*
- *exponentially* = greatly over-used and abused adverb, *but it sounds impressive for something expanding*
- *people are never simply Protestants, Catholics or Jews; they are staunch Protestants, devout Catholics and observant Jews'!*
- Journalists have to produce newsworthy articles even out of mundane topics, so **hyperbole** is often a useful tool!

2.2.3 Youthspeak

- full of abbreviations, neologisms and changed meanings
- **Multicultural London English (MLE):** "*Safe, man,*" says one. "*Dis my yard. It's, laahhkh, nang, innit? What endz you from? You're looking buff in them low batties.*" "*Check the creps*". "*My bluds say the skets round here are nuff deep.*" "*Wasteman, you just begging now.*" (taken from The Independent, 5 November, 2006).

- *'Hi, what's going on?'*. Their equivalent would be *'Yeah wassup, wagwan?'*, or maybe, *'You alright bruv?'* or *'Wassup cussie?'*."
- A popular form of slang used by youngsters is what has been dubbed "**multi-ethnic youth vernacular**" by language experts
- Tony Thorne, editor of the *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*

- no definitive list of terms that teenagers use, but many words and phrases do cross domain and vernacular boundaries, such as *cool* (meaning good, OK) or *sweet as* (similar meaning but Australasian).
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- Aa few examples of teenage slang from around the UK:
- ***Wagwan*** - what's going on
- ***Gyaldem*** - group of girls
- ***Skeng*** - a knife
- ***Showa*** - something good
- ***Shan*** - unfair
- ***Peng*** - looking good
- ***But*** – mate
- ***Lush*** – something pleasing or desirable

2.2.4 Scientists

- *“The phospholipid bilayer allows for bidirectional transport of cellular metabolites via membrane pores and transmembrane proteins”* . A jargon-like version could be: *“The cell membrane allows for the entry of molecules needed by the cell as well as the exit of molecules produced by the cell. Depending on the molecule, it will either pass through small holes in the membrane called pores or through proteins embedded in the membrane”*. (examples taken from <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/scientific-jargon.original.pdf>).

2.2.5 Legalese meets technicalese

- impenetrable hyperbaton requiring a translator
- a very precise 'domain dialect'
- may be incomprehensible to those without experience of the legal system, but within the legal domain it has precise meaning
- *to table a motion* = to suspend consideration of a motion (US);
= to commence consideration of a motion (GB)

2.2.6 Corporate jargon

- business jargon, management speak, workplace jargon, commercialese
- lack of clarity
- long, complicated, or obscure words, abbreviations, euphemisms, and acronyms
- **Marketing speak** closely related to business speak and commercialese, in that it is loaded with rhetoric, platitudes, superlatives and unsubstantiated enticements, such as *,scientifically tested‘*.

- Consider for instance, the two versions of the following statement:
- *“If we realise the large synergy between our companies, we’ll be able to seriously impact the marketplace and fund new growth throughout the sector.”* Or:
- *„If we merge, we’ll have more customers and make more money.”*
- The second sentence may sound a little greedier, but it’s much easier to understand and makes more sense.

- To *leverage a company or investment* = to use borrowed money in order to buy something or pay for it.
- Business speak often uses the term in the following way: „**Leveraging** our goodwill with millennials will help us increase sales.” This is the same as the deliberately less transparent: Leveraging will give us the ability to better influence situations or people and control outcomes.
- The following examples are taken from Wink (2012), an editorial director of Technical Media. Note the various word derivations – metaphors, initialisms, new meanings for existing words, use of inflections, etc.

- **Alignment** = agreement, *i.e. Your plan sucks and mine is better, so let's have a conference call to reach some alignment.*
- **Bandwidth** = willingness to do something, *i.e. I want to drop a bunch of work on you, do you have the bandwidth to get it done by next week?*
- **Core competency** = stuff someone is definitely responsible for, *i.e. I know you have taken on a lot of extra responsibilities lately, but this project really seems to be in your core-competency.*
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2.2.7 Digital messaging.

- **Twitterification** is based on the concept of **microblogging**: providing short snippets of text which invite responses from other users, often in real time.
- **Tweets**, can be a maximum of 280 characters long.
- Average number of characters per tweet is only 33.
- Short twitterified messages are more prone to ambiguity than more expressive longhand communications.

2.2.8 Vernacular

- is the common language spoken by ordinary citizens of a particular place.
- is different from literary or official language: it's the way people really talk with each other, like how families talk at home.

3. Implications for EFL teaching

- **teachers' awareness of ,practical' English** therefore performs a crucial role in the language teaching and language learning process because of its influence upon input for learning
- This awareness should be seen as forming a bridge between knowledge of subject matter and the ability of the teacher to communicate that knowledge to students.

- Teacher training institutions should, in their curricula, include modules focusing on teacher training strategies which would show the many benefits which would accrue for teachers of general subjects if they were able to work together with EFL teachers familiarising pupils/students with ,practical' English.

4. Conclusions

- The language of politics, corporate jargon and youthspeak owing to their wide public exposure, have the greatest impact upon the language people use in normal communication (the vernacular).
- American English can be regarded as a language domain too, one which has been hybridising rapidly with British English for 400 years, but particularly during the last 100.

- AmE is enrichening the English language, not destroying it (Engel, 2017). Language changes and trends are driven by people, not by institutions.
- Language domains develop when there is some restriction to membership, but there are indications that some domains (particularly banks and the legal profession) are giving thought to providing plain English translations.

- The increasing influence of domain dialects and the trend of vernaculars replacing textbook English will continue to create minefields for non-native speakers of English.
- As society becomes more and more complex, domain dialects, including the vernaculars, will continue to evolve, with the added complexity of interpreting metaphors.

- These issues must be taken into account in redefining literacy standards and goals because today literacy levels cannot be restricted to proficiency in basic reading, writing and numeracy alone. EFL students need to be familiarised also with language as it is in everyday use.

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