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**Some say that the impact of media technology on language will have consequences as far reaching as the invention of printing had on language 500 years ago. Do you think the parallel is justified? Explain your viewpoint**

There is evidence to support the idea that, with communicative technology progressing as rapidly as it is today, the evolution of the English language will occur more rapidly than ever before. It is worth noting that the language is studied and, perhaps more importantly, taught to a larger population today more than ever before. Simply put; the more different thinking communities that are using the language in a variety of different environments, the more deviations from the norm we are likely to see in its use. Its usage in new, unmediated environments like the internet means that many are practicing the English language in an area without preset boundaries or rules to refer to and are far more likely to take a creative or experimental approach to its use. David Crystal (2004) described the language in its current state as "Volatile, unprecedented and unpredictable" and this probably reflects how easily the language can and will be shaped by its widespread usage in different mediums with new restrictions and benefits.

The emergence of several new communicative platforms, and the possibility of a linguistic "renaissance" occurring as a result, can be likened to that observed after the invention of the printing press in 1476. Although there was some evidence of standardization in writing some time before this, the ability to distribute texts to a much larger population at a lower cost certainly helped substantiate uniform spelling and syntax with far greater efficiency than before. A significant difference, however, is that technology supporting change in the language at present is through different conversational mediums entirely – each with their own benefits and restrictions on the language. Simply spreading the ideal of linguistic standardization, or the mass production of selected texts in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, could be compared to the increase in schooling in the developed world or the abundance of learning resources at the present day. The degree of technological changes at present and the immediate effects of them on written English is arguably far in excess of the changes present after the invention of the printing press. Baugh and Cable described the centuries following the invention of printing as the "linguistic Renaissance" (2002) and there is certainly a similarity to be drawn between two eras, with both exhibiting technological advance and fundamental changes to the language as a result. However, the degree of change that technology is accountable for in each is arguable. Following the invention of the printing press, translation of the Bible into "vulgar" English probably served to distance the language further from its Latin components, and the publishing of the first ever Dictionary would have heavily influenced uniform spelling. However, it can be argued that these changes simply served only to bring the language into a more complete article, better suited for common use, rather than drastically alter its use as such.

David Crystal said "However impressed we are at the evolution of regional standards and the re-emergence of nonstandard English over the past century or so, this is nothing compared with the linguistic developments which are about to take place as a result of new technology" (2004). The huge impact of recent cultural and technological changes on the English vernacular could be attributed to the change in education prior to them, although the culmination of all these factors is probably responsible for the seemingly accelerated changes observed in

the language. In 1970 Prescriptivism steadily took a backseat to a more liberal approach, further perpetrating infiltration of regional language or international changes to what was considered "correct." This combined with a multitude of technological developments and an ever increasing connection between multinational communities more accurately portrays why the language is adapting so rapidly at present.

In terms of contemporary English and how technology is affecting it, the usage of mobile phones, the internet and television/radio, has exposed the language to a much larger audience and subsequently to restrictions in its use that were never present before. The introduction of mobile phones for example, brought about a method of communication with a great restriction on the speed one could communicate, and also a restriction on the amount of space that could be utilized to write a message. Likewise, holding many online conversations at once has almost certainly brought about a new level of brevity in communication across these platforms, with acronyms, elision and assimilation occurring far more frequently in order to better serve these mediums. Words like "cya" not only emerged to save time and space in these forms of communication, but were quickly absorbed and widely understood in the developed world – perhaps due to its reliance on technology in this manner.

Examining changes to the language based on adaptation to its use in new mediums, it could be argued that a fundamental change in what we are using the written language for is responsible for the emergence of so many linguistic changes. Previously, English was written to inform, record or entertain in a past tense – with no emphasis on immediacy or brevity. The widespread use of the internet and mobile phones for socializing has led to written English taking on a much more conversational role where formal language, punctuation and academic trends become far less important and where tone, attitude and perhaps personality take precedence. These are all qualities easily observed in spoken English, but in written English it is impossible to gauge subtle things like body language, intonation and sometimes effects such as sarcasm – so it can be expected the language must evolve to accommodate the need for these things on a new platform.

The relatively simplistic usage of "smileys" to help forward the attitude of a given sentence is hardly a change in language, but is certainly an indication of how its usefulness is limited in the online environment. Abbreviations like "lol" meaning "laugh out loud" are used often not to signify a person is laughing, but instead tacked onto a sentence to indicate a playful or sarcastic tone, simply because the written language supports no other way to do this. The fact that devices like this have become understood and widely used in less than fifteen years suggests that the multitude of problems written English has in these new mediums means that a disproportionate amount of changes are emerging before becoming used worldwide at an accelerated rate. Seemingly, online "conversation" is not only exposing difficulties for written English, but also facilitating changes to it rapidly.

The importance of music, sensationalist media publications, film and art in our current society, and the level of technology used to distribute it, means we are exposed to an abundance of language used primarily for artistic purpose. It could be argued that linguistic accuracy is not needed to generate effect, but certainly that unusual trends or freedom with English is more readily observed in these areas. The use of archaic phrases like "the taxman cometh" in modern media is often used out of context and used improperly, yet still understood and absorbed into our vernacular. Catchy news headlines, song titles and film quotes all yield increased exposure to this eclectic use of English and when so much of a person's dialect comes directly from influences like this, it is almost certain to have an

impact on the language itself. As a base example, modern Rap music is performed by artists portrayed as disadvantaged or aggressive individuals. The language contained in their material is therefore simplistic, informal and often deliberately incorrect to achieve this effect. People citing Rap as an influence are therefore likely to absorb elements of this into their spoken vernacular and deviation in standard English occurs. A similar example would be the use of words like "awesome" as a slang term after being exposed to the American media, through magazines or television.

Another example where English is adapted for a contemporary purpose is advertising. As technology has advanced, the amount of advertising has increased and as such, the language used here is globally influential. Unusual word collocation, over or incorrect punctuation and use of non-standard English are all performed to attract attention but when observed on a daily basis, will almost certainly have an impact on language. For example, the alcoholic beverage "WKD" is an abbreviation of "wicked" to mean "cool". An incorrect connotation of the word entirely, but through mass advertising and product popularity, an unusual connotation of the word "wicked" is now probably accepted as genuine meaning. Likewise, the multinational nature of advertising means often popular products will have imperfectly translated slogans or will be entirely foreign. The result is the assimilation of foreign words like "deluxe" (French) into the language as a result of advertisers using it to promote quality. In the same manner, the connection between different nations in the online community has led to many forms of hybrid English becoming prevalent. Characteristics of one language can be drawn into English speech as a result of frequently swapping between the two during conversation. For example, Asian-English speaking communities will often use "ma" and "la" to add explanation or assertiveness to their written English conversations.

Although the parallel between linguistic evolution post-printing, and as a result of modern media technology appears to exist in terms of similarity, the degree of change resulting from either appears greatly inflated in the contemporary environment. However, there are several factors inhibiting the complete evolution of English at present and which may serve to confine changes, as a result of online communication for example, to specific platforms only. Explored by David Crystal, he suggests that "These changes in linguistic practices do not happen overnight, but the cumulative effects of ten generations of prescriptive teachings are still around us." When observing the parallel between printing and media technology on a purely educational basis, it could be argued that in terms of linguistic evolution the two instances are much closer than it seems. Whilst the level of technology, and the resulting adaptation of language required is far greater at present than in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, the language is also far more standardized and this is likely to inhibit any deviation from what is considered to be "correct". Until recently, a prescriptivist approach to schooling since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century has created a much more uniform teaching of English, coupled with education encompassing infinitely more people. Even those almost exclusively communicating through abbreviated "Netspeak" or omitting punctuation for convenience for example, are therefore likely to realize that they are doing so and that it isn't necessarily "correct" English.

To expand on this, the education of a more "complete" linguistic model is likely to be more or less unaffected by the informal nature of online chat and the base language will still be taught similarly, limiting somewhat the effect technology will have on the language itself. Likewise, organisations which were set up to "safeguard" the English language founded in the prescriptive era continue to exist and attract members. Endangered forms of English can be preserved online as the internet offers a connection between individuals speaking a rare or regional

dialect and these are all restraints which will inhibit the evolution of contemporary English and supports the view that both linguistic periods are similar. However, in the initial centuries following the invention of the printing press, only a select few would have refined written English from any substantial material available and, as such, "proper" English became a hallmark of higher social status and better education. This means a significant portion of the population will have been untouched by the advances in printing and availability of resources to learn from and this would certainly have stemmed the pace at which any changes took place and drawing away from the view that contemporary changes will not grossly out scale those arising as a result of printing.

In terms of a parallel between the two eras, a linguistic development triggered by new technology is present in both. However, the sheer enormity of technology and its effect on society at present puts an entirely different complexion on modern day linguistic development and the parallel probably isn't justified. Multinational communication, ever evolving communication mediums, unrestricted exploration of content and a staggering degree of intrusive advertising and media influences lends itself to the idea that contemporary English has evolved more rapidly than ever, and is likely to undergo a far more substantial change in the near future than previously recorded.

### **References**

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