Bad Language or Language Variation and Change? Interpretation, Context and Social Motivations in English

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Abstract

This paper tackles the role of language variation and change in the history of the English language and advocates for a descriptivist view on language. Instances of language variation should be acknowledged and analysed, instead of being labeled 'bad language' or incorrect grammar/pronunciation/spelling. This study starts from the hypothesis that language change represents a progress in the evolution of English and discusses different aspects that have changed from Old English to present-day English. It also focuses on regional and social aspects of English and attempts to account for them.

Keywords: *language change*; *language variation*; *bad language*; *descriptivism*; *culturally-specific swear words*.

1. Language change: progress or decay?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the famous Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1915/1959: 77) wrote that: "Time changes all things: there is no reason why language should escape this universal law." A simple glance at *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer or the plays written by Shakespeare shows how language has changed throughout the centuries. We do not sound like Beowulf or Chaucer or Shakespeare, we do not sound like our parents and our children do not sound like us. Language changes from one generation to the next, in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax or lexis. Let us consider some examples and see what changed and how in terms of language:

> (1) Take Capouns and seeÞ hem, Þenne take hem up. take Almandes blaunched. grynd hem and alay hem up with the same broth. cast the mylk in a pot. waisshe rys and do Þerto and lat it seeÞ. (Blank Mang, from *The Forme of Cury*, c. 1390, quoted in Freeborn, 2006: 42)

The example provided in (1) represents a recipe written in c. 1390, in Middle English. In 1066 CE William of Normandy invaded and conquered England and Norman French started being used by those in power. Old English was preserved among the lower classes (i.e. the peasantry). Around 10,000 words were borrowed from French, especially in the legal system. Middle English was the spoken and written language which evolved from the fusion of Norman French and Old English dialects. During this time, the structure and sounds of Old English changed. Thus, the Norman Conquest had quite a powerful impact on the spelling system. Some Old English letters became obsolete and were gradually abandoned or replaced by others. For

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example, *æ* and other letters started being used: *k*, *q*, *x*, *z*; Þ (thorn) or ð (eth) were replaced by '*th*'; ȝ (yogh) was replaced by *g*.

The introduction of the printing press to England in 1476 enabled the mass reproduction and circulation of printed material, which resulted in a major change to the presentation of written English. Before this major discovery, books were written by hand, by scribes who made their own decisions about how to spell words and punctuate sentences. William Caxton, the person who brought the printing press to England, had to make some difficult linguistic decisions at a time when there were marked differences in English regional dialects. He opted for the variety of English used in London, where he settled after travelling widely as a highly successful merchant. In 1490, he wrote about the problems posed by the English language in a preface to *Eneydos*, a book he translated and produced:

> And certainly our language now used varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken when I was borne / For we Englysshe men / ben borne under the domynacyon of the mone, which is never stedfast / but ever wauerynge, wexynge one season / and waneth & dyscreaseth another season / And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my days happened that certain marchauntes were in a ship in tamyse for to have sailed over the see into zelande / and for lack of wind, they taryed atte forlond, and went to land for to refresh them; And one of theym named sheffelde, a mercer, cam in to an hows and exed for mete; and specyally he axyd after 'eggys'; And the good wyf answered, that she coude speke no frenshe. And the merchant was angry, for also he coude speke no frenshe but wolde have egges/ and she vnderstode hym not. And thenne at last a nother said he wold have 'eyren' / then the good wyf said she vnderstood hym well / Loo, what sholde a man in these days now write, 'egges' or 'eyren' / Certainly, it is hard to playse every man by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage.
>
> (Adapted from Gould and Rankin, 2019: 211)

The translation of this excerpt from Caxton's preface to *Eneydos* into Modern English would sound like this:

> Indeed our language today is very different from the one that was used when I was young. English people are born under the influence of the moon, which never stays the same and is always changing, waxing and waning. The English that is spoken by the people in one county varies from that which is spoken in another. To give you an example: Some merchants on a ship on the Thames were sailing to Holland when lack of wind meant that they had to delay their journey and find some food and drink on land. One of them, called Sheffelde, a merchant, went to a house and asked for some food, specifically

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> for eggs. The woman replied that she could not speak French. The merchant was angry, because he could not speak French either, and wanted to have some eggs but she did not understand him. Another man eventually said he would like some 'eyren' and at this point the woman understood what he meant. What should you write these days 'eggs' or 'eyren'? It is hard to please everybody because our language is so diverse and always changing.

The problems that Caxton identifies are those caused by the continuous process of language variation and change. The variations in language pose difficulties for the printer, who is forced to make decisions about which dialect of English to use so that a very wide number of readers will be able to read and understand the book. The author also stresses the difficulties that arise in communication, which are posed by lexical variation between dialects of English. Sheffelde's anger at being perceived as speaking French reveals some anti-French feeling among the English at the time, and is depicted with humour.

Table 1 below provides an overview of some of the linguistic changes that have occurred in English, as exemplified in the excerpt presented above:

Framework	Observation/ description of difference	Comment
Lexis and semantics (words and their meanings)		
Archaisms	'forlond' and 'mercer'	Two examples of nouns that have fallen out of use but might be recognised or guessed (we still have the adjective 'mercantile', and 'lond' is similar to 'land' with just a change in the medial vowel).
Direct lexis	'egges' and 'eyren'	Lexical variations from Old Norse and Old English respectively. The Standard English form 'eggs' derives from the Old Norse form.
Old-fashioned lexis	'stedfaste', 'taryed', 'lo'	The adjective 'steadfast', the verb 'tarried' and the exclamation 'lo' are still used in certain types of written texts such as the Bible and romantic poetry.
Semantics	'mete' and 'wyf'	These nouns are easily recognisable but are 'false friends' as their meaning has narrowed over time. 'Mete' in this text means 'food' not 'meat' and 'wyf' means 'mistress of the household' (regardless of marital status) whereas 'wife' today means a married woman.
Grammar (syntax, inflections)		

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Syntax	'And' in the initial position of sentences.	The conjunction 'and' is used to begin sentences, which is a practice disliked by those with a prescriptive attitude towards language. Caxton is using 'and' in a way that might today appear stylistically rather simple, although it suits the anecdote that he tells.
Syntax	'And she vunderstode hym not'	Standard English today forms negative constructions with the auxiliary verb 'do', as in 'Mary did not understand him', whereas Middle English just uses the negative particle 'not' at the end of the sentence.
Inflections	'varyeth', 'eyren'	Modern English uses 's' to mark a third person present tense verb. The 'eth' verb inflection can still be read in texts such as the Bible and in novels that represent the dialectal speech of the time of production, such as the 19th-century novels of Thomas Hardy. The 'en' plural of 'eyren' is an Old English inflection. We still have the remnants of this inflection in Modern English (e.g. 'children', 'oxen' and 'brethren'). Inflections have been simplified or lost over time as word order rather than inflections began to signal grammatical relations.
Orthography		
Orthography	'certaynly', 'shyre' (and other examples) and 'haue', 'dyuersite'	Transposition of y/i and u/v. 'V' is usually used at the beginning of words in Middle English and 'u' in the medial position.
Variability of spellings	'axyd' and 'exed' (for 'asked')	Spelling had not been standardised, as these inconsistencies suggest. These variations eventually settled into the standard form 'asked'.
Discourse structure		
Paragraphing	The extract is one long paragraph	In Modern English we use paragraphs to mark topic change. This enables written texts to be read and processed more easily and efficiently.
Punctuation and graphology		
Punctuation	. /	Sentence boundaries are marked by '.' or '/'. There does not appear to be a reason why both

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		are used to perform the same function. Sometimes / marks clause boundaries.
Graphology	&	The ampersand & is used in this preface, which is a formal text. & is used in informal written texts today but would not be used in a preface or an essay or a novel.

Table 1. *Language differences between Caxton's use of English in 1490 and present-day Standard English*

All these features show how English has evolved and changed in the last five hundred years. Another important difficulty in capturing and rendering the sounds of English in writing was due to phonetic change. The changes in pronunciation that took place towards the end of Middle English and continued for the next two hundred years is known as the ***Great Vowel Shift***. Freeborn (2006: 128) notes that between the time of Chaucer in the late fourteenth century and William Shakespeare in the late sixteenth century, all the long vowels in the English used in the Midlands and South of England changed their pronunciation. The causes that led to such a change are unknown and no other change is known to have occurred at other times.

Word	Middle English vowel sound	Present-day English vowel sound
life, bite	[i:]	[aɪ]
meet	[e:]	[i:]
meat	[ɛ:]	[i:]
gate	[a:]	[eɪ]
town	[u:]	[au]
mood	[o:]	[a:]
boat	[ɔ:]	[oʊ]

Table 2. *The Great Vowel Shift* (adapted from Smith 1999: 131)

Freeborn (2006: 128) further adds that the shift was not complete in 1569 and, quite interestingly, there was variation between regional and social dialect speakers. It is still debatable as to what factors triggered the Great Vowel Shift, but the ones usually mentioned are: an influx of loanwords from other languages; a high number of deaths during the Black Death and changes in perceived social status of vowel sounds.

Language change has also been influenced by the writings of different well-known writers. One such example is the case of Robert Lowth, Bishop of London. He is the author of *A short introduction to English grammar*, written with the purpose of educating children before they went to school. He claimed that "if children were first taught the principles of Grammar by some short and clear system of English grammar…they would have some notion of what they were going about when they should enter into Latin grammar" (Lowth, 1762, quoted in Aitchison, 2013: 11).

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Even though Lowth's grammar was not adequate for children, but it became very influential and widely used. Lowth commented, among other things, on the tendency to end a sentence with a preposition:

> The Preposition is often separated from the Relative which it governs, and joined to the verb at the end of the Sentence…as, 'Horace is an author, whom I am much delighted with'…This is an Idiom which our language is strongly inclined to; it prevails in common conversation, and suits very well with the familiar style of writing; but the placing of the Preposition before the Relative is more graceful, as well as more perspicuous and agrees much better with the solemn and elevated style. (Lowth, 1762, quoted in Aitchison, 2013: 13)

This statement that it is 'wrong' to end a sentence with a preposition has contributed to the general feeling used even nowadays that ending a sentence with a preposition is grammatically incorrect. This view has also been shared by prescriptivists. Even Winston Churchill, the prime-minister of the United Kingdom has commented on this issue, asserting that 'Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put.' How should we treat then wh-movement? For example:

(2) a. Mary bought this car for John.
b. For whom did Mary buy this car?
c. Who did Mary buy this car for?

When questioning the object in English, two constructions are possible: pied-piping and preposition stranding. In 2(b) the preposition follows the *wh* element to front position in a construction known as pied-piping. In 2(c) the preposition remains stranded at the end of the sentence. How should we treat 2(c), then? Is it an example of bad language?

Lowth also seems to be the first to claim that a double negative is grammatically incorrect, saying that one cancels the other. Double negatives occur frequently in the Canterbury Tales and even in Shakespeare's plays.

(3) He **nevere** yet **no** vileynye ne sayde
In all his lyf unto no maner wight.
Geoffrey Chaucer – *The Canterbury Tales*

(4) Bottom: Nay, I can gleek upon occasion.
Titania: Thou art as wise as thou art beautiful.
Bottom: **Not** so **neither**, but if I had wit enough to get out of this wood, I have enough (…)
William Shakespeare – *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 3, Scene 1

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(5) Celia: Marry, I prithee do, to make sport withal; but love no man in good earnest, **not no** further in sport **neither** than with safety of a pure blush thou mayst in honour come off again.

William Shakespeare – *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2

(6) Viola: By innocence I swear, and by my youth
I have one heart, one bosom, and one truth,
And that no woman has, **nor never none**
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone.

William Shakespeare – *Twelfth Night*, Act 3, Scene 1

It seems that Shakespeare used not only double negatives, but also triple negatives, as the examples in (5) and (6) illustrate. Are these examples of bad language? Prescriptivists might argue that they represent deviations from the standard norms of the English language. Nowadays, the fact that double negation is deemed as grammatically incorrect is a widely held idea, despite the fact that such a construction appears in many varieties of English:

(7) a. Yes, and no people didn't trouble about gas stoves then.
[Southeast of England, Anderwald, 2004: 188]

b. We didn't have no use for it noways.
[Appalachian English, Montgomery, 2004: 258]

c. He is not supposed to mention nobody's name.
[Ghanaian English, Huber and Dako, 2004: 857]

d. I couldn't find hardly none on 'em.
[East Anglia, Trudgill, 2004: 151]

e. Nobody don't have none here.
[Bahamian English, Reaser and Torbert, 2004: 400]

f. I don't never have no problems
[African American Vernacular English, Green, 2002: 123]

g. Och, I don't know just, they're just not the same, nor never will be like the old people.
[Irish English, Filppula, 2004: 82]

All these examples highlight the use of negative concord in a wide array of English dialects. It is interesting that this feature, which once existed in standard

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English, has been preserved in so many dialects and varieties of English. These features all show how the English language has changed and evolved throughout the centuries and in some cases certain grammatical features have not perished, but have been preserved in dialects.

2. Language variation

The most important thing about variation in language is that it occurs in the vernacular of everyday life. An adolescent says *I was like, whatever dude* while a 70-year old would say something like *You was always workin' in them days*.[1] Are such utterances considered slang or bad language or even part of a dialect? Maybe not. We should try to understand why people speak like this and what factors are involved. The vernacular was first defined by Labov (1972: 208) as "the style in which the minimum attention is given to the monitoring of speech" and later analyses of the vernacular showed that its target of investigation should be "every day speech" (Sankoff 1980: 54), "real language in use" (Milroy 1992: 66) and "spontaneous speech reserved for intimate or casual situations" (Poplack 1993: 252).

Language varies at all levels and it is influenced by a wide array of factors: geographical location, gender, age, ethnicity, social class. A geographical variety represents a form of language which offers information about a speaker's geographical origin through words, grammatical constructions or features of pronunciation which exist in some regions but are absent in others (Watson, 2009: 337). Take, as an example, the conversation provided in example (8), between an Englishman and an American:

(8) Peter: Have you seen the new food court on the fourth [fɔːθ] floor [flɔː]?
Mike: Nope, I didn't have time because I went to pick up my new car [kɑːr]. But I will right [raɪr] now.

Even though Peter and Mike do not say anything in particular about the place they are from, there are certain clues which tell us who is American and who English. First of all, Peter does not pronounce postvocalic /r/ (in *fourth* and *floor*), but Mike does (in *car*). Non-rhoticity (the lack of /r/) is more common in England than in the United States of America (which is usually rhotic). Second, Mike pronounces the /t/ in *right now* as a tap [ɾ], instead of [t]. This feature is more common in American English than in British English.

One of the most significant differences between the two language varieties is to do with spelling. Baker (2017: 28) notes that a key point in the creation of a standardized and different American English orthography is marked by the publication in 1806 of Noah Webster's *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. A definitive edition of his dictionary was published twenty-two years

[1] Examples taken from Tagliamonte (2011: 2).

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later in 1828 under the title *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. He recommended some changes in terms of spelling:

Difference	American English	British English
or/our	color	colour
re/er	centre	center
ize/ise	mobilize	mobilise
ization/isation	civilization	civilisation
yze/yse	analyze	analyse
og/ogue	catalog	catalogue
e/ae	anemia	anaemia
e/oe	fetal	foetal
se/ce	defense	defence
l/ll	traveled	travelled
m/mme	program	programme
ction/xion	connection	connexion
-/e	aging	ageing
toward/towards	toward	towards
-/st	while	whilst
gray/grey	gray	grey

Table 3. *List of spelling differences between American English and British English* (adapted from Baker, 2017: 30)

We can state that American English and British English are mutually intelligible, therefore it makes perfect sense to consider them as varieties of the same language rather than as distinct languages, while also keeping in mind that each variety displays variation (e.g. British English has dialects like Geordie, Brummie, Mancunian, Scouse, Northumbrian, Yorkshire, Cockney, etc., while American English contains dialects such as Appalachian English, Chicano English, African American Vernacular English, Cajun English, etc). Each such dialect has its own particular words, pronunciations and grammatical features. The study of such regional differences is known as ***dialectology***, or, more recently, ***geolinguistics*** (Britain, 2002) and concerns the study of the geographical distribution of linguistic variables.

It has been argued that, in the case of some linguistic features, dialects do 'a better job' than Standard English (Watson, 2009: 344). For example, the pronominal system in Standard English fails to distinguish between second person singular and second person plural, in the sense that it uses the same pronoun, *you*. The form *y'all* (a contraction of *you all*) is found in Southern American English, African American Vernacular English and South African Indian English. Another example concerns verbal *-s*:

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Person and number	Standard Romanian	Standard English	Norwich English	Bristol English
1st person, sg.	vorbesc	speak	speak	speaks
2nd person, sg.	vorbeşti	speak	speak	speaks
3rd person, sg.	vorbeşte	speaks	speak	speaks
1st person, pl.	vorbim	speak	speak	speaks
2nd person, pl.	vorbiţi	speak	speak	speaks
3rd person, pl.	vorbesc	speak	speak	speaks

Table 4. *Verb inflection for speak in four language varieties* (adapted from Watson, 2009: 345)

In many languages, verbs receive an inflection depending on their grammatical person, number or tense. In Standard English, for instance, present tense verbs receive the inflection *-s* to mark 3rd person singular. In this respect, Standard English is simpler than Standard Romanian, which receives a different inflection for each person and number. In Norwich English present tense verbs do not receive any type of inflection, the form *speak* is used for all persons, whilst in Bristol English the form *speaks* is used for all persons.

The term *dialect* can also be used to refer to differences in speech associated with various social groups or classes. Social dialects are related to a wide array of factors, among which it is worth mentioning social class, religion, race/ethnicity, gender and age. In the play *Pygmalion* published in 1913 by George Bernard Shaw, a phonetics professor, Henry Higgins, tries to teach Eliza Doolittle to speak like a lady. Eliza is a speaker of Cockney (the dialect used by working-class Londoners) and professor Higgins tries to make her use the accent of the upper-class, what is known today as *Received Pronunciation*. Though his desire is met by a storm of protests from Eliza's part, in the end the girl acquiesces because she notices the social benefits of using an upper-class accent. Apart from using RP, Eliza must also use proper grammar and refrain herself from swearing. Shaw's play is more than using a proper accent, it highlights the way language is influenced by social class and the social implications of language.

3. Bad language: good or bad English?

The label 'bad language' has acquired a rather negative connotation, in recent years being associated with bad words (swearing, cursing, insults, slang). However, in this study, the term *bad language* is used to encompass grammar, spelling and accents. Bad language is also a concept used by prescriptivists to describe deviations from standard language. Descriptivism, on the other hand, uses the term *language variation* to refer to such deviations. Battistella (2005: 6) notes that we might think of regional dialects as breaking the rules of good English, but this could not be further from the truth. The grammar of regional dialects, albeit different from that of Standard English, is systematic and patterned. In Appalachian English, for instance,

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speakers sometimes put an *a*-prefix before words that end in *-ing*. It has been argued that the use of proclitic *a-* in V-*ing* structures, as in *John was a-huntin' and a-fishin'* or *The people came a-lookin' for the possum* is a common structural trait in enclave dialect communities in the American Southeast as well as in several rural vernacular varieties of English.

Battistella (2005: 9) further writes that "some people see the standard language as representing linguistic health and see variation as a metaphorical infection". Language change occurs precisely because of this "metaphorical infection". If we did not have language variation, then language would not evolve and adapt to modern times. To this we could also add the difference between written and spoken language. Written language has traditionally been associated with standard language, and spoken language to nonstandard language. In spoken language variation takes place. Even the same speaker does not always pronounce a word the same way, displaying what is known as *intra-speaker variation*. For example, in the case of the variable -ing, a person might prefer the velar nasal variant [ŋ] in some contexts and the alveolar nasal one [n] in others. The vernacular is what linguists are interested in and it is in the vernacular of everyday use that linguistic innovation takes place.

There is no bad grammar, just as there are no bad accents or bad spelling. From a descriptivist point of view, these are instances of language variation, influenced by a plethora of factors. Before labelling a feature as 'bad language', we should consider and the internal as well as the external factors which have led to that respective feature of language.

Bad language also encompasses words one would not hear in a polite conversation. There are many examples of how people consider different words to be either bad language or not. McEnery (2009: 565) writes that some people feel genuinely offended to hear expressions like *Oh God* and *Damn it* used on a daily basis in casual conversations. We can agree, however, that swear words and taboo words exist and are used in all societies for a plethora of reasons. One might argue that certain English words are culturally-specific. By ***culturally specific swear words*** we mean words which are used in one English-speaking society more often than in another. For example, swear words such as *bloody*, *cunt*, *arse*, *john*, *slag*, *bollocks*, *bloody hell*, *rubbish*, *wanker*, *twat*, etc., are more frequently used in British society that in the American one. In terms of swear words, Americans might prefer *motherfucker*, *pussy*, *bitch*, *son of a bitch*, *asshole*, *shit* etc.

Allan and Burridge (2006: 70) highlight that nowadays teenagers use "inverted language": a person who is really attractive might be described as scum; words such as *vicious, sick, wicked* are used to refer to things which are really good. Even though they have a negative meaning, they are used with a positive connotation. What one generation might consider slang could become outdated for the next or become mainstream. One such example is *cool* (Allan and Burridge, 2006: 71), which was quite frequent in the 1950s and 1960s, but which has been replaced by

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awesome, and more recently, *wicked*. What is interesting, is that negative words are used with a positive connotation, meaning that they have somehow lost their original meaning and have acquired a new one. The same thing happened with the word *mistress*, which had a positive connotation and has undergone pejoration, referring, nowadays, to a person who is romantically involved with a married man.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss the role of language variation and change and see to what extent they are instances of bad language. Even though bad language has a negative connotation attached to it, differences in pronunciation, grammar and spelling should not be labelled bad language, but regional or social features of language. We pleaded in favour of a descriptivist approach to language, and stressed the importance of language change in the history of the English language as well as that of language variation in present-day English. These differences help built our identity as speakers and contribute to the development and evolution of language.

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