

The 1996 BBC Reith lectures

# **The language web**

**The power and problem of words**

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## 1 A web of worries

### Anxiety about language

Personally I wish someone had told me . . . in my youth that . . . language is primarily speech and only secondarily writing. I wish someone had also told me that most grammar texts are so many etiquette books, and accepted usage a dialect of middle-class residents of a capital city . . .

The truth is that 'rules' never existed, they have little to do with language. They were superimposed on organic word-wisdom by a set of largely clerical-minded inkhorns standing around with a lot of egg on their faces.

**Geoffrey Wagner** *The wisdom of words* (1968)

Is our language sick? You might think so, judging from complaints: 'The standard of speech and pronunciation in England has declined so much . . . that one is almost ashamed to let foreigners hear it', moaned a writer in a daily newspaper. 'The language the world is crying out to learn is diseased in its own country', ranted another. 'We are plagued with idiots on radio and television who speak English like

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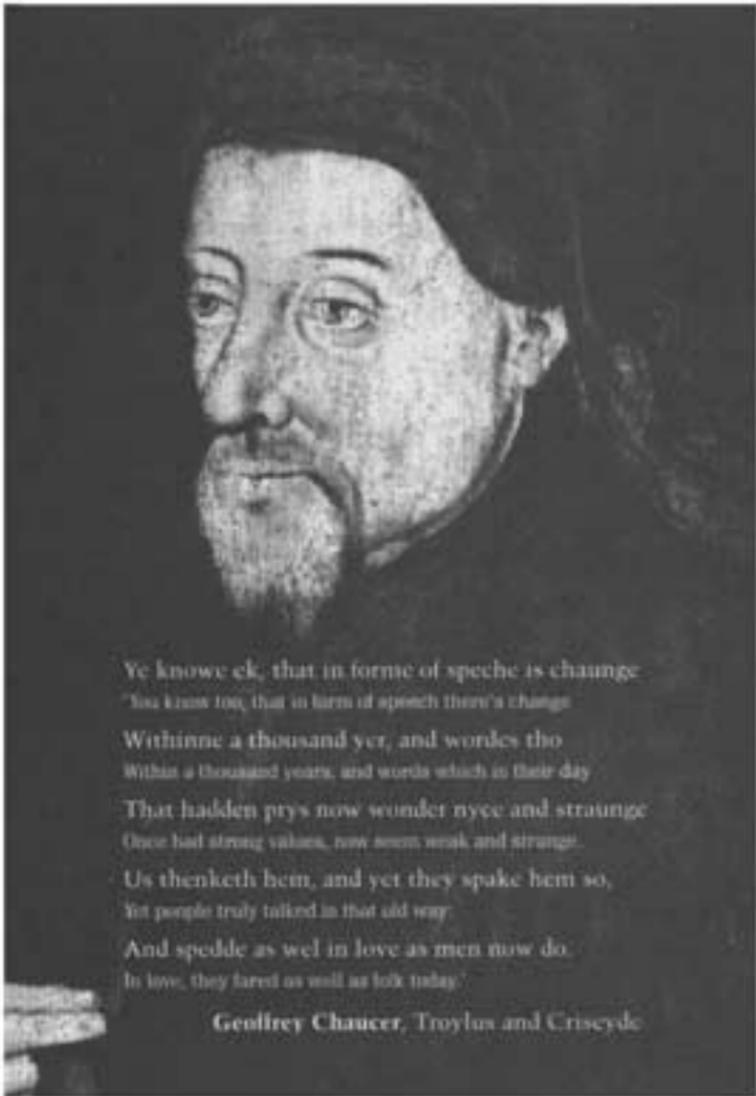
the dregs of humanity, to the detriment of our children', lamented yet another.

But why? At a time when English is a major world language, is it really in need of hospital treatment? A wide web of worries, a cobweb of old ideas, ensnares people as they think about language – any language – and this must be swept away.

But clearing the cobwebs is only the first stage. *The language web* is the overall title of this book. Webs, especially cobwebs, may entangle. Yet webs themselves are not a tangle. They have a preordained overall pattern, though every one is different in its details. Nature forces humans to weave the language web in a particular way, whatever language they speak. We are free only within a preset framework. The outline plan of language is fixed, part of our genetic inheritance. So liberty within limits will be a major theme. Another will be the inter-linked nature of the various strands. I shall look at some key linguistic topics which illustrate these themes: how language changes, how it began, how children learn it, and how we remember words.

But first, the cobweb of worries must be removed. This envelops all of language, though especially language change. Yet humpback whales alter their songs every year, and nobody has complained.

Naturally, language changes all the time. This is a fact of life. In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer noted that *in forme of speche is chaunge* 'language changes' (see figure 1.1), and the same is true today. But change is one thing. Decay is another. Is our language really changing for the worse, as some people argue?



Ye knowe ek, that in forme of speche is chaunge

*“You know too, that in form of speech there’s change*

Withinne a thousand yer, and wordes tho

*Within a thousand years, and words which in their day*

That hadden prys now wonder nyce and straunge

*Once had strong values, now seem weak and strange.*

Us thenketh hem, and yet they spake hem so,

*Yet people truly talked in that old way.*

And spedde as wel in love as men now do.

*In love, they fared as well as folk today.”*

**Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde**

#### 1.1 In forme of speche is chaunge

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Of course not. Over a hundred years ago, linguists – those who work on linguistics, the study of language – realized that different styles of language suit different occasions, but that no part of language is ever deformed or bad. People who dispute this are like cranks who argue that the world is flat. Yet flat-earth views about language are still widespread. As the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure said over seventy-five years ago: ‘No other subject has spawned more absurd ideas, more prejudices, more illusions or more myths.’ Things have not changed very much since then.

On inspection, the web of worries surrounding change turns out to be largely traditional, somewhat like the worries each new generation of parents has about its offspring. Laments about language go back for centuries.

A fourteenth-century monk complained that the English practise *strange wlaffyng, chytering, harryng, and garryng grisbittyng* ‘strange stammering, chattering, snarling and grating tooth-gnashing’. And the complaints continued. ‘Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration’, wrote the lexicographer Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his famous *Dictionary of the English language* published in 1755.

Eighteenth-century worries are perhaps understandable. Around 1700, the seemingly fixed grammar of Latin aroused great admiration, at a time when English itself was in a fairly fluid state. Many people hoped to lay down similar firm precepts for English, and assumed that somebody, somewhere, knew what ‘correct English’ was. Jonathan Swift wrote a famous letter to the Lord Treasurer in 1712 urging the forma-

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tion of an academy to regulate language usage. He complained that 'many gross improprieties' could be found in the language of 'even the best authors'. But 'correct English' was as hard to define then as it is now. In practice upper- and middle-class speech was often praised as 'good', artificially supplemented by precepts from logic and imitations of various Latin usages. As long ago as 1789, the dictionary writer Noah Webster commented: 'Had the English never been acquainted with Greek and Latin they would never have thought of one half the distinctions and rules which make up our English grammar.' These invented rules often get confused with genuine language rules.

All languages have their own 'rules' in the sense of recurring, subconscious patterns. In English, we usually place the verb inside the sentence, and say: 'The spider caught the fly.' In Welsh, the verb comes first: 'Caught the spider the fly' *Daliodd y pryf copyn y gleren*, and in Turkish it comes last, 'The spider the fly caught', or 'A bottle of good wine I want' *Bir şişe iyi şarap istiyorum*. Without these real rules, communication would break down: 'Henry ate an octopus' does not mean the same as 'An octopus ate Henry.'

But real rules or patterns need to be distinguished from artificially imposed ones. For example, an old and illogical belief that logic should govern language has led in English to a ban on the double negative, as in 'I don't know nothing', which is now standardly: 'I don't know anything.' This is odd, because in most languages of the world, the more negatives, the stronger the negation. This was true in thirteenth-century English.

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Chaucer, in the *Canterbury Tales*, said of the courteous knight, roughly: 'He never said no bad thing to nobody.' In Chaucer's words:

He *nevere* yet *no* vileyne *ne* sayde  
In all his lyf unto *no* maner wight.  
He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght.

The prohibition on double negatives may have begun with Robert Lowth, an eighteenth-century Bishop of London, who wrote a *A short introduction to English grammar*. In it he stated that 'two Negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative'. Perhaps his high status as a bishop led people to believe that his strictures on language were divinely inspired. The ban stuck. In the late nineteenth century, for example, John Earle, an educator, commented: 'The student . . . is instructed how contrary to reason is a Double Negative.' Yet it never entirely disappeared. It is still found in some varieties of English, as in the old music hall song: 'We don't know no one wot don't want no nine inch nails.'

Another artificially imposed rule involves *different to*. 'I am irritated by the frequent use of the words *different to* on radio and other programmes', huffed a letter to a daily paper. 'In my schooldays of fifty years ago we were taught that things were *alike to* and *different from*. Were our teachers so terribly ignorant?' Yet *different to* is found even in the seventeenth century. 'How much different art thou to this curs'd spirit here', said the dramatist Thomas Dekker, in 1603. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists several other examples of *different*

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to, and a preference for *different from* is labelled a 'superstition' by Fowler in 1926 in his widely admired book *Modern English usage*. Some of these old invented prohibitions remind one of Alice in Wonderland, who complained to the king: 'That's not a regular rule, you invented it just now.'

Moving on to the nineteenth century, proper behaviour was a major concern to a lot of people. Etiquette books were popular, and precepts about language were issued alongside advice about table manners. Consider some of the instructions in *Don't. A manual of mistakes and improprieties more or less prevalent in conduct and speech*, which was published around 1880:

Don't drink too much wine. Don't drink from your saucer . . .  
Don't wear diamonds in the morning. Don't neglect the small hairs that project from the nostrils and grow about the apertures of the ears . . . Don't say gents for gentlemen, nor pants for pantaloons. These are inexcusable vulgarisms. Don't say transpire when you mean occur. Don't say 'loads of time' or 'oceans of time' . . . Say 'ample time' or 'time enough'. Don't use a plural pronoun when a singular is called for . . . 'Everybody put on their hats' . . . illustrates a prevalent error . . . Don't say 'It is him,' say 'It is he . . .'

And so on, and so on. Yet some of these injunctions are at odds with history. The 'prevalent error' of mixing singular and plural pronouns is a usage of long standing: 'If a person is born of a gloomy temper . . . they cannot help it', said the Earl of Chesterfield in the eighteenth century (see figure 1.2).

Some of these artificial rules have been passed down from generation to generation. Their main effect is to make people insecure, to worry that they might not be using the right phrase,

---

## Anyone . . . they

### **Eighteenth century**

If a person is born of a . . . gloomy temper . . . THEY cannot help it.  
*Earl of Chesterfield*

### **Nineteenth century**

A person can't help THEIR birth. *William Thackeray*  
But how can you talk with a person if THEY always say the same  
thing? *Lewis Carroll*

### **Early twentieth century**

I know when I like a person directly I see THEM. *Virginia Woolf*  
Nobody would ever marry if THEY thought it over. *George*  
*Bernard Shaw*

### **Late twentieth century**

If somebody earns \$40,000 a year we would expect THEM to  
pay for their course. *A University Vice-Chancellor*

We are looking for a young man or woman in THEIR mid-  
twenties . . . *Job advertisement*

If anyone calls, tell THEM I'm at a meeting . . . *Often heard*  
*instruction*

AND I THOUGHT  
ALL THIS WAS MODERN  
DECADENCE!



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just as they might get anxious that they are not using the right type of spoon for soup. Again and again, etiquette, morals and speech are confused. *Groombridge's Annual Reader*, a manual of recitation 'for the use of schools' said in 1867: 'Speech is a gift of God . . . and the habit of speaking correct English . . . next to good morals, is one of the best things in the world.'

We might laugh at this quaint confusion of morals and speech, except that it is still found nowadays. In 1985, 'bad English', whatever that might be, was even linked to crime by Norman Tebbit, then a key British government figure. He said:

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy . . . at school . . . all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime.

This tangled web of worries around language shows that many people, including some of those in positions of power, are back in the dark ages over understanding how it works.

But it would be oversimple to lump all language worries together, and just dismiss them. The different strands of worry need to be teased out. Above all, three overlapping accusations recur, which can be called the 'damp spoon' syndrome, the 'crumbling castle' view, and the 'infectious disease' assumption.

The 'damp spoon' image comes from a British newspaper writer who had a 'queasy distaste' for the 'vulgarity' of some current usages, 'precisely the kind of distaste I feel at seeing a

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damp spoon dipped in the sugar bowl or butter spread with the bread-knife'. She implies that sloppiness and laziness cause much of language change.

The notion that change is due to laziness has been around for a long time. In the last century, the linguist Max Müller argued that 'the principal cause of phonetic degeneracy in language is when people shrink from articulating each consonant and vowel; when they attempt to economize their breath and their muscular energy . . . If the provincial of Gaul came to say *père* instead of *pater*, it was simply because he shrank from the trouble of lifting his tongue, and pushing it against his teeth.' But omission of *t* within a word is unlikely to be due to laziness. In British English, the pronunciation of *bu'er* with a glottal stop in place of older *butter* is often heard. But *Be'y 'ad a bi' of bi'er bu'er* for older 'Betty had a bit of bitter butter' requires considerable muscular tension, and cannot be regarded as a lazy development.

The only truly lazy speech is drunken speech, where alcohol affects coordination, and English is not getting like drunken speech. Some years ago, researchers at the University of Texas checked this out. They plied student volunteers with slugs of neat whiskey every twenty minutes for six hours, and before each new drink, they asked the students to read a word list and chat. They found that the bumbles and mumbles of drunkards were fairly unlike the alterations in normal change. Drunken people keep vowels much the same, but lengthen consonants, which get dragged out. They are also likely to pronounce *s* and *ch* as *sh*, so *yes* comes out as *yesh*, and *church* as

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*shersh*. These effects are due to a temporary lack of muscular coordination, and are not happening in English as a whole.

Tense-endings are quite often omitted in spoken speech. A sentence written as *Pamela jumped back* is likely to be pronounced as *Pamela jump back*, or *Peter climbed carefully down* as *Peter climb carefully down*. This is sometimes claimed to be 'laziness'. But these omissions usually take place when three consonants come together. The omission of the middle consonant enables speech to be speeded up, and is unlikely to destroy the meaning. So there's a trade-off between smooth, fast speech, and slow, careful, jerky speech. Faster speech involves more words per minute, and cannot be classed as 'laziness'.

Of course, fast speech forms occur mostly in casual conversation. But informal speech is not intrinsically 'worse' than formal speech, it is just different. Humans naturally adapt their speech to suit the situation: they slow it down for babies and strangers, and they speed it up for friends. Eventually, some of these fast speech changes will creep into all types of speech. Only actors pronounce *handbag* as it's written, most famously in Oscar Wilde's play *The importance of being earnest*, when Lady Bracknell, acted by Edith Evans, expressed shock and horror that the young man to whom she was talking had as a baby been found abandoned in a handbag. 'A handbag!!!' she exclaims in horror, lingering over each sound. Almost everybody else says *hambag*. Once a change of this type has occurred, hearers often judge the older, outmoded form to be pedantic and less 'streamlined'.

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The 'crumbling castle' view is a second common accusation. This treats the English language as a beautiful old building with gargoyles and pinnacles which need to be preserved intact, as implied in statements by the writer John Simon. Language, he argues, should be treated like 'parks, national forests, monuments, and public utilities . . . available for properly respectful use but not for defacement or destruction'. This view crumbles when examined carefully. It implies that the castle of English was gradually and lovingly assembled until it reached a point of maximum splendour at some unspecified time in the past. Yet no year can be found when language achieved some peak of perfection, like a vintage wine. Nor have those who claim that English is declining ever suggested what this date might have been.

Furthermore, the 'beautiful building' notion presupposes that rigid systems, once assembled, are better than changing ones. This is untrue. In the animal world, flexibility is a great advantage, and animals which adhere to fixed systems often lose out. Consider the blue-footed booby, a sea-bird which lives on the Galapagos Islands. This gannet behaves according to a rule of thumb: 'In the nest feed it, out of the nest ignore it.' So if a young booby falls out of its nest, it inevitably dies, even when the nest is at ground level. A less rigid system might allow the parent boobies to assess whether or not the squawking displaced youngster was one of their own, and if so, push it back into the nest. But the booby's rigid system does not allow for this.

The ever-shifting nature of language keeps it flexible, so it

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can cope with changing social circumstances, as with the rush of new words relating to cars in the twentieth century, such as the recent *autochondria* from 'automobile' and 'hypochondria' – someone with excessive concern for the health of their car.

'Crumbling castle' supporters might argue that such additions are trivial and allowable, as long as older forms are preserved alongside. But in the long run, this is impossible, as shown by the increasing loss of old past tense forms, which provide a clear example of how earlier forms get whittled away. First, the old irregular forms gradually get forgotten, especially when the verbs are rarely used ones. In this century, *gelded* and *girded* have mostly replaced *gelt* and *girt* as the past tense forms of *geld* and *gird*, and many people don't even realize a change has occurred. Replacement can happen even with better known verbs. The American clothes designer Donna Karan, discussing the letters she received, said: 'Anything that *beared* my name, I'd open': in her speech, *beared* has apparently replaced older *bore* as the past tense of *bear*. Second, new uses of old forms tend to acquire regular endings, as in *shoot up* of drugs: 'Someone passed me this syringe . . . and I *shooted up*', said a drug-taker quoted in *The Guardian* newspaper. Third, any new forms receive regular inflections, as in the term *bland out* 'become conformist': 'Those that didn't burn out, *blanded out*', according to a writer in the *New Musical Express*. So more and more old forms are wiped away as new, regular forms flood in. But this is not disintegration. Sweeping up old bits and pieces is good housekeeping, or rather good language-keeping. Gradual neatening up of patterns is inevitable and essential. In this way,

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the mind avoids becoming overloaded with unpredictable oddments.

Neatening up also happens with nouns. *Houses* were once *housen* and *shoes* were *shooen*, parallel to *oxen*. Imported words get tidied up too. The Italian word *graffito* 'scratch' has been in use in English for well over a century, usually in the plural *graffiti*, meaning 'scratches or scribbles on walls'. Recently, this plural has begun to be treated as if it were the singular: *Graffiti is disgusting* proclaimed an official notice on a London bus. Not everyone likes this. 'The solecism *a graffiti*' is 'surprising and distressing', according to a letter in the *Daily Telegraph*. But most English plurals now end with *s*, so the treatment of *graffiti* as singular is in line with the general tidying up process, which has been going on for centuries. Language is not crumbling away. It is maintaining itself efficiently.

The 'infectious disease' idea is the third commonly expressed notion. In an article entitled 'Polluting our language', the writer Douglas Bush expressed a widespread view that we somehow 'catch' changes from those around us, and that we ought to fight such diseases: 'The wholesale spread of corruption may surely be ascribed to mere infection, to the careless, unthinking assimilation of the floating germs which envelop us.' Change is indeed brought about through social contact, so the catching notion is not entirely wrong. But the 'disease' metaphor falls down. People pick up changes because they want to. They want to fit in with social groups, and they adapt their hairstyle, clothes, and language, to those of people they admire,

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as with the Jocks and Burnouts, teenagers in a suburban high school in Detroit. Jocks were regular guys, who joined in school sports and wanted to conform. Burnouts were rebels who took drugs and behaved unconventionally. The speech of these two groups showed clear differences, with the Jocks imitating the standard adult pattern, but the Burnouts moving away from it.

Adapting to those around is normal human behaviour. In Belfast, in Northern Ireland, a deep-rooted hostility exists between Protestants and Catholics, two religious-ethnic groups which barely talk to one another, and are sometimes in open conflict. Yet when the speech patterns of a group of East Belfast men were compared with those of a group of West Belfast women, both groups showed a tendency to pronounce *grass* as *grawss* at a time when in theory, the two halves of Belfast barely talked to one another. What could have been happening? The mind boggles. Yet the explanation was quite simple. East Belfast men sometimes visited a city-centre store staffed by mainly West Belfast women. It is well known that shop assistants match their speech to that of their customers, and this is what was happening. The shop assistants were then transferring the pronunciation to their friends.

But changes are not random. They take hold only if the language is predisposed to move in a particular direction. Social contact can trigger a change only if it was already likely to happen. The predisposition factor is often overlooked. At any time, in any language, a number of potential change-points exist. Anomalies tend to get smoothed out, as with the pattern-neatening of past tenses and plurals. Human ears

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and the human vocal tract cause others. Consonants at the end of words are a recurring weak spot in languages, since ends of words are pronounced with less force than beginnings: it's *Kick* not *kiCK*. In British English, *t* at the end of words is eroding, moving from *street* to *stree(t)* with a glottal stop and in the long run, it will probably be *stree*. The change is found in so-called Estuary English – an accent found in south-east England, radiating out from the area around the estuary of the river Thames. Glottal stops are also found in Scotland around Glasgow.

Over time, end-of-word consonants may largely disappear, as has happened in some dialects of Chinese, several Polynesian languages, and nearer at hand, in French and Italian, where most words now end in vowels: *Una bottiglia di vino bianco* 'a bottle of white wine'. Oddly, people who dislike this change often praise languages such as Italian as being 'beautiful' even though many Italian words are derived from Latin ones which once had endings. Italian *vino* 'wine' was once Latin *vinum*: the ending *m* was lost, and the vowel *u* changed to *o*.

Changes are normally triggered by personal contact, as with the Belfast shop assistants, and not via the media. The media are often blamed for change, but their role is indirect. Newspapers can popularize new words such as *bonk*, *yomp* and *wimp*, even though the words themselves had been around for a long time. *Bonk* 'to copulate', probably an extension of the slang word *bonk* 'to hit', became widely known in 1987 when various tabloid newspapers took an interest in the love life of the tennis player Boris Becker, whom they referred to as 'bonking Becker'. *Yomp* 'to march with heavy equipment

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over difficult terrain' was a military term used extensively in press reports of the Falklands War in the 1980s. *Wimp* 'a feeble or ineffectual person', usually male, originated in America, but became widely used in England in the 1980s, especially in newspaper reports of politicians who were labelled *wimps*. Radio and television can influence attitudes towards language. These days, they send the sensible but indirect message that it is acceptable to talk in different ways. Prominent entertainers and reporters show that variety is the spice of linguistic life. Their different accents, like their clothes, are a mark of individuality.

Variety is the key to language change. Earlier in the century, an old mutation viewpoint prevailed, that some sounds slowly turned into others, like tadpoles gradually changing into frogs. This is now outmoded. According to a newer view, variant forms arise, each used in a different area or speech style. Then one of the newcomers gets used more and more often, and gradually ousts the older form, like a young cuckoo heaving another bird out of the nest. In some situations, a whole nestful of young cuckoos compete with each other and with older forms. They may squabble for a long time until one wins out.

This process is clearest in the case of vocabulary. It has happened in England with the word *partner* which is now the standard word for life-companion. But at one time numerous words competed, *live-in lover*, *mate*, even *posslq*, an acronym for 'persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters', a strange formation which a few people perhaps remembered because of the rhyme:

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There's nothing I wouldn't do

If you would be my *posslq*.

Then the word *partner* gradually pushed the other terms aside. In America, no clear winner has yet emerged, though *significant other* is widely used. The young cuckoo process also happens with pronunciation, as with the *butter* and *bu'er* variants which are competing in British English. They are likely to co-exist, maybe for a longish time. Eventually *bu'er* may well win out. As these examples show, no change can occur without variation, though variation can sometimes exist without change.

Variation in speech is the norm. Our linguistic wardrobe contains a range of speech styles, which we suit to the occasion. Toddlers and tax-inspectors need to be addressed in different ways. Tennis-players, cricketers and taxi-drivers each have their own specialized vocabulary, some words of which are now widely used. Change often happens when one particular variant expands its usage, and spreads across a broader area. But which variants should be used where and when still causes arguments as sharp as barbed-wire, especially as nowadays being 'matey' is often more important than being 'proper', resulting in increasing approval of informal styles of speech, including swearing. This point will be discussed further in chapter 3.

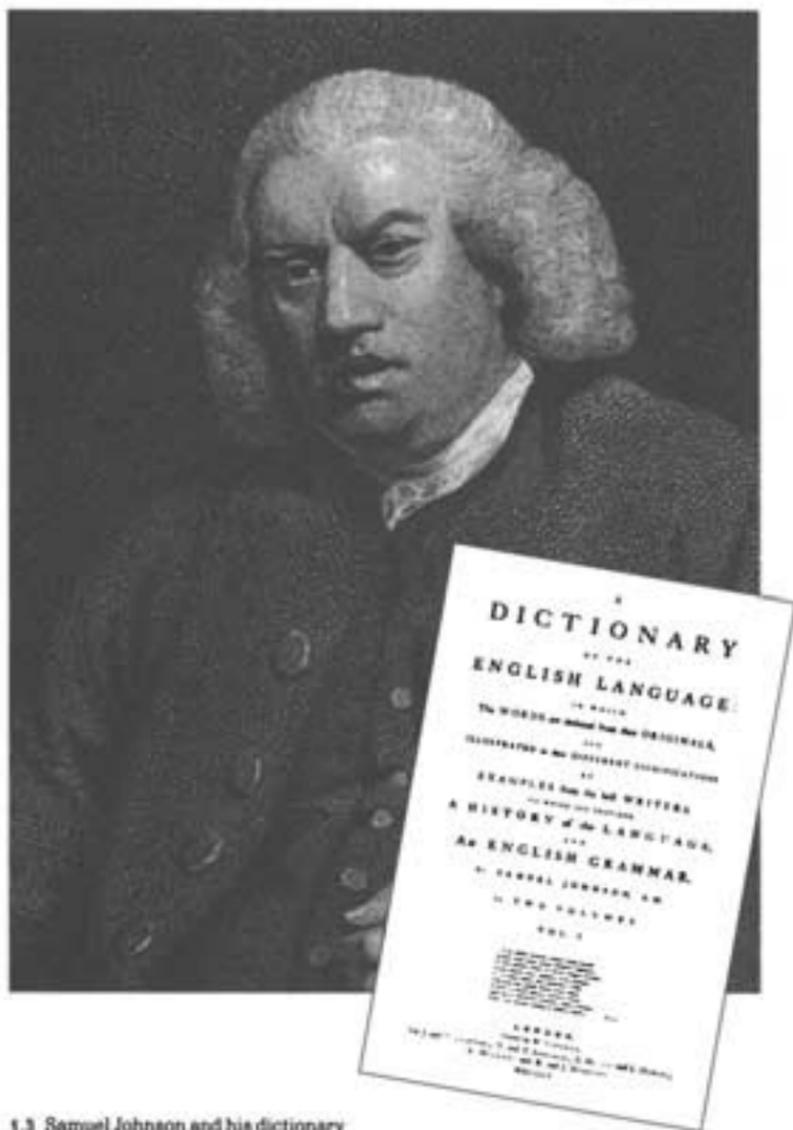
Meanwhile, the tangled web of worries around language shows how little most people know about it. In the next chapter, I will go back to the beginning and discuss the origin of language in the human species. An understanding of how the

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human language web began can give us insights into language today – and perhaps soothe some worries.

But finally, I'd like to stress again that we need to understand language, not try to control it. Samuel Johnson came to realize this (figure 1.3). In the preface to his dictionary, he said:

When we see men grow old and die . . . , we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who . . . shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language . . . With this hope, however, academies have been instituted to guard the avenues of their languages . . . : but their vigilance and activity have hitherto been in vain; . . . to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride.



1.3 Samuel Johnson and his dictionary