



Why and How Language Changes  
aka Mr B's Nut & Bolts Checklist

Based on Blake & Moorhead: *An Introduction to English Language*

Language changes in every feature, though in lexis it provokes most complaints, usually from the older generation who “resent the way language is being used by younger people”. 55

Ways in which languages change:

Spelling – Punctuation – Sounds – Morphology – Syntax - Word-formation - Vocabulary

Influences on language change

Regional and social varieties	More likely to remain in spoken forms: <i>“E were right gormless” v “He was absolutely stupid”</i>
Register of texts (purpose, audience, topic)	Formality of letter v informality of email
Standardisation of the language ad rise of prescriptivism	Printing introduced to England in 1476. Particular impact on spelling. Begins to create sense of a ‘correct English’ and of superior forms associated with prestige and status
Fashion	Sometimes society will react against attitudes of a previous period: eg shift between prescriptive and descriptive approaches
Nationalism	Wanting language to serve to uphold our identity
Technology	New words needed – compounds, borrowings
Advertising	Need for memorability of product names
Globalisation	Shift away from regional and local dialects
Trade	New products
Pronunciation	Shifting emphasis of prestige forms; assimilation

## Brief History of Language Change

Nationalism (16 <sup>th</sup> C )	Self-confidence of a trading nation in Tudor and Elizabethan times led to more elevated style (loan words from French, Latin, Greek): “rush to introduce polysyllabic words and rhetorical effects”
Science and rationalism (17 <sup>th</sup> /18 <sup>th</sup> C)	Distrust of rhetoric in Puritan times (17 <sup>th</sup> C) and growth of rationalism (18 <sup>th</sup> C): emphasis on reason, word order, development of standard grammar, first dictionaries. Latinate emphasis on prescriptivism
Romanticism (19 <sup>th</sup> C)	Early 19 <sup>th</sup> C attention to regional and class varieties, and a desire to record them. Poetry written in vernacular forms
Victorian period(19 <sup>th</sup> C)	Desire to educate the people = standard English and received pronunciation gain status; influence of new technology – many new words
20 <sup>th</sup> C	Loosening of hold of standard form; wish to establish confidence of former colonies; lifting of inhibitions in social attitudes – greater overall variety of forms
21 <sup>st</sup> century	Globalisation of language and influence of new technologies

## What Changes in Language?

Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In early days of printing, tolerance of difference spellings continued for a long time in less formal writing: <i>write/wryte; magnifie/magnify; worship/worshipp/worshippe</i></li> <li>• 17<sup>th</sup>C standard word endings = <i>musick</i> and <i>magicall</i></li> <li>• “Attitudes to spelling were much more relaxed before the middle of the eighteenth century”</li> <li>• History of spelling is history of reduction in variants, though some remain: -ise/-ize endings</li> <li>• Current relaxing of attitudes – eg use of abbreviations – <i>cd.</i> for <i>could</i> <i>wh</i> for <i>which</i></li> <li>• GB: Playfulness of advertising</li> </ul>
Morphology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Move away from inflectional endings (-eth/-es): <i>he cometh/he comes</i>. Retained only in Biblical forms</li> <li>• Plural form of nouns (-es) prevails over (-en)</li> </ul>
Syntax	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freer attitude to word order as inflection dies: modern meaning indicated by increased use of grammatical words (eg auxiliaries like <i>do</i> and modal auxiliaries <i>will / must / should</i>). In Shakespeare’s time “do” was a very formal expression</li> <li>• Avoidance of double and triple negatives which up to 18<sup>th</sup>C was not necessarily regarded as incorrect</li> <li>• Standard negation used to be: <i>he comes not</i></li> </ul>
Word-Formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compounds: <i>skyscraper</i></li> <li>• Use of prefixes and suffixes: <i>non-</i> and <i>-free</i> (<i>non-combatant / gender-free</i>)</li> </ul>
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in meaning: <i>gay</i></li> <li>• Borrowing from other languages: <i>bungalow</i></li> <li>• Change in register: slang words become accepted: <i>cool</i></li> </ul>
Punctuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modern move away from heavy capitalization</li> <li>• Simplification of punctuation with type-setting :- and . after abbreviations</li> </ul>

[www.geoffbarton.co.uk](http://www.geoffbarton.co.uk)

October 2010