An Appreciation of English: A language in motion

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Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorlas. Syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan. þæt wæs god cyning!

[LO, praise of the prowess of people-kings
of spear-armed Danes, in days long sped,
we have heard, and what honor the athelings won!
Oft Scyld the Scefing from squadroned foes,
from many a tribe, the mead-bench tore,
awing the earls. Since erst he lay
friendless, a foundling, fate repaid him:
for he waxed under welkin, in wealth he throve,
till before him the folk, both far and near,
who house by the whale-path, heard his mandate,
gave him gifts: a good king he!]

That's some good English, innit? The way it was meant to be spoken… a thousand years ago. You all know the quotation, of course, right? Anyone? …The opening lines of *Beowulf*. Old English.

Here's some more good English from one of our best, most famous authors:

Derk was the nyght as pich, or as a cole,
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savorly, er he were war of this.
Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"
"Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to,
And Absolon gooth forth a sory pas.

Anyone know that one? …Possibly the best-known passage of *Canterbury Tales*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, from the Miller's Tale. Middle English. Includes the first known usage of the word "tehee," and some other rather choice phrasing, too. I'm thinking maybe you understood a bit more of that. Yes? It's about 400 years more recent, but it was still written 600 years ago.

Add another 300 years and you get something of this order:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd.

Also good English! I won't even bother asking you if you know what it is. Note the pronunciation – we say things just a little differently in the here and now. But it's much closer to ours than it is to Chaucer's. It's Early Modern English.

And Modern English? Well, sticking with poetry, we get stuff like this:

Let us go, then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table…

That's the opening of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," by T.S. Eliot.

Or maybe this: "OK, you two. We've had some reports of some gang activity over in Anchor's Cove."

Baywatch. We've just gone from *Beowulf* to *Baywatch* in a few short minutes. Or in a thousand years. But I think the best way to know about what your language *is* is to know about what it *has been* and to know *how it changes*. As Eliot says,

Oh, do not ask, 'What is it?'
Let us go and make our visit.

Now, you all got the handout, right? I'm not going to go over it in every little detail; that would just be redundant. Any time I start getting boring, you'll be reading it anyway. I want to spend most of the time saying things that aren't already on your handouts. So get out your pens. But I want to paint the broad strokes of English history first.

Old English started when the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were invited over from what's now northern Germany to help the Britons defend themselves and, seeing how generally feckless the Britons were, decided to take over. And the language the new overlords spoke became the national language.

About 500 years later, there were some Danish incursions. The Danes, who of course spoke Old Norse, had a sustained presence and many Old Norse words and forms seeped in. The English language also simplified from this contact.

But possibly *the* most important event in the history of English happened in 1066. The what? …Battle of Hastings. The Norman French took over – they were also of Scandinavian origin, but these ones had moved to France a few generations earlier and gone local, linguistically. Well, they didn't do that in England! French became the

official, polite language. And for the majority who still spoke English – the underclasses, mainly – French words became the polite words. Rude farmers grew cows and pigs; cultivated lords ate beef and pork. The languages of politics, business, and property took on lots of French terms.

By the time English came back into vogue – because of fights with France and because the plague had killed so many people the Anglophone working class actually began to have some value and influence – it was much changed. It had also diverged into many dialects because of the lack of an official standard.

The other big influence on English was the Church. It brought Latin, which became the language not only of worship but of scholarship, since the Church also ran education for a long time. (The Renaissance also spurred learning in Greek.) So we have gotten into the habit of using Latin, Greek, or both to form new terms in just about any learnèd field.

The invention of the printing press was also important. Written material was more widely disseminated and standardized – but the printers tended to use spellings from manuscripts a hundred or more years old, and pronunciation was in the middle of a huge shift just then!

The most recent major changing factor in English started in the 16th century and really flourished in the 18th – and is still with us to some extent today. That's the desire to *fix it*. To adhere to some idealized standard – often taken from Latin, or invented on the basis of "logic," and frequently looking to etymology for guidance. That's how "faut" became "fault" and "det" acquired its b: etymological – or sometimed pseudo-etymological – respelling, followed often by spelling pronunciations. And a minister and classicist without much linguistic understanding invented rules that are still used as weapons today – take a bow, Robert Lowth.

Now I'd like to build the rest of this session on some general facts about language change.

Fact one: Language changes.

All languages that are actually spoken by actual people change. Constantly.

Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes! Turn and face the stranger. Oh, look out, you language speakers…

(La lingua è mobile!)

Now, of course, some of them change more than others. Icelanders of today can read the sagas that were written a millennium ago and understand them. It's a small, isolated country. And they strive to keep their language from changing too much. When there's a new thing that needs a name, they come up with a word for it from wholly Icelandic parts. Their word for "computer" is "talva"; it's a blend of a word used for electric things and the name of a prophetess. Elephant: "fill." Car: "bill."

Now, we don't do that so much. English is a magpie language. It steals from everywhere. And it's had so many foreign influences. Actually, the whole language *is* a great big foreign influence, as the history I just blitzed through shows. What we speak now is a medley of bits taken from all over the place.

So… what… is the real English? What version of English is real? Is the best, the real thing? English is spoken all over the world now (thanks to some bellicose adventurers and imperial excursions). Which one is the right one? Anyone? Who will tell me how you determine what is English?

English… is what English speakers speak. Real English? It's what real English speakers speak. And always has been. *Time may change it… but it's still English.*

Ah, but we know how deplorable the English many people use is, don't we? People using words [slide into Old English Lady accent] in all the wrong ways for all the wrong things. It's absolutely dreadful.[/accent] And, indeed, we have some say in the matter; we have some choice. We don't have to accept every change. But we should be clear-headed about it.

There's a reasonably well circulated web newsletter called *The Vocabula Review*. Its motto is "A society is generally as lax as its language." Just so you know, actual linguistic research by people who actually care to find out how language really works has found that this assertion is bullshit. …Oh, excuse me. "Bovine feces." Latin is polite, Anglo-Saxon is rude.

But, yes, people don't speak English as well as they used to… and they never have. Anyone who's looked at a variety of English texts, formal and informal, from ages past should know that the general level of usage is no sloppier now than at any previous time – in fact, a good argument can be made that, on the average, English users are more careful now. This is because our education for the great majority of people who *aren't* rich is much better than it used to be.

As you will see when we look at some of the examples on your handouts, one problem that prescriptivists face when determining what's the best English is whether we should be adhering to the usages of our virtuous forebears, or correcting the faulty usage of people who have been speaking the language sloppily for centuries. Correcting faulty usage? Why, yes: nobody realized that double negatives and double superlatives were wrong until someone in the 18th century pointed it out to them. "Oh, most unkindest cut of all!" Adhering to the virtuous forebears? Anytime someone tells you that a word has to mean what people used it to mean a hundred years ago is making such an appeal. (But as you will see from the examples on your handouts, etymology is in no way a suitable guide to meaning.)

Now, let me ask you: what's better, talkin' or talking? Hearing, or hearin'? We would all say that "-ing" is more proper than "-in," and might talk about how déclassé it is to drop the g… though there's no g to drop. It's just fronting. But in the 17th and 18th centuries, proper pronunciation was "talkin." If a person had said "talking," it would have been as wrong as saying "tall-kin." The pronunciation was reverted atavistically to a much older model because the spelling had never changed, and thus the schoolmasters considered it more correct to say it the way we say it now.

So is it actually better or more correct to say "talkin"? Well, no. Now it's more correct to say "talking." We may or may not agree with how or why that changed, but in modern English, the formal standard is "talking." Why? Because *everyone knows it is*. That's how it works. And if you don't like it, you can beg to differ. You can speak differently. Maybe it'll catch on. Not all language change is gradual and organic; much of it is quite deliberate. And we, as users, have the right to decide what usages and rules to keep, and what to discard. For editors, I'd say that right is an obligation. But at the same time, I hope we all recognize that there is not just [slide into OEL] one way that English must be spoken in all places and at all times. [/accent] There are different dialects, different connotations of social status and context. You don't behave in exactly the same way in all

contexts. You don't dress the same everywhere, you don't stand the same way, you don't do the same things with your shoes. And language… is… behaviour.

Let's make that fact number two. **Language is behaviour.** Everything you say is said not simply to convey what it denotes. "The window is open." Do you say that just because you want someone else to know that it's open? Depending on the context, you might be answering a question, you might want them to close it… but if you want them to close it, you could also say "Close the window." Or "please close the window." "Would you please close the window." "It would be awfully nice if someone were to close the window." "Little drafty in here, don't you think?" "Close the window." "Close the damn window." "Window!!" It always participates in a definition of the situation, including the relationship between speaker and addressee.

This is quite germane to understanding the reasons for fact one. What was fact one? …Language changes.

There are two main reasons people change their language – or participate in language changes.

One: To make their lives easier.

Two: To make themselves feel better.

Let me expand those a little more.

Language change can **make people's lives easier** by, for instance, **making it easier to say.** This can be the lazy tongue. French "gentile" became English "jaunty." That's why we say "gonna," innit? All sorts of pronunciation changes are just from making it easier. It can also be using one word instead of several. Verbing, for instance. "Cloud," which I have the history of in its noun form on the handout, can also be used as a verb. So can "skirt." More recently, so can "cocoon." Not all languages allow that. English has been doing it for a long time. We can also deliberately trim a word: "zine" from "magazine," for instance. And we can certainly borrow a word if we need one.

We make our lives easier if we make a change because **we need it – it fills a gap.** "Computer." You got a thing, you need a name for it. That applies to pretty much all of

the words on the fifth page of your handouts, the new words – and, of course, at some time in history, all of the ones on the fourth page, the not-so-new words.

Language change can also **make it easier to use** by, for instance, simplifying complexities. Some might say that the almost total loss of inflections in English nouns is an example of this, although native speakers of heavily inflecting languages find it quite natural. But when you have people whose first language is Norse or French moving in and settling down or even just trading, they might not want to learn all those frickin' inflections. It's thought that this is a very important reason we lost most of the inflections that were present in Old English. That and the good old lazy tongue – many of them just came to sound all the same.

And of course language change can **make it clearer**, which is again pretty similar, but accounts for some cases where, for instance, something that takes more effort to say is used in place of something that takes less effort. Because it takes even *more* effort to correct misunderstandings. That's why, for instance, for the third person plural, we say "they," "them," and "their" rather than "hie," "him," and "hire." The old versions came to be too much like their singular counterparts, so we came to use forms borrowed from Old Norse. The only survivor of the old forms is the casual "'em" for "them" – it's not simply a dropping of the "th"; we don't normally drop that.

Now, it's probably fairly unsurprising that people would change language to make their lives easier. But to **make themselves feel better**? Yes indeedy. Let me tell you how.

First of all, some language changes are **fun** or aesthetically pleasing. People like the way it sounds; they think it's clever; it adds something new to their lives. Often something will start as a vivid metaphor or image and ultimately lose its metaphorical flavour. "Livid." Most people use it to mean "furious," though originally it meant "black and blue" or "ashen." The "outskirts" of a city – see the entry on "skirt" on your handout: cities don't wear clothes, though most people skirt that issue. We even do this with borrowed words: escalating – climbing the stairs. Sesquipedalian – foot-and-a-half long.

And then there are jaunty little in-speak abbreviations: "Association Football." "Assoc. Football." "Soccer." Cockney rhyming slang is an especially notable case of change for amusement. "Take a butcher's: nice titfer, not much on the boat race, though."

"Butcher's" is from "butcher's hook," rhymes with "look." "Titfer" comes from "tit for tat," rhymes with "hat." "Boat race" rhymes with "face."

And if you get it – or if you get any of gazillions of other creative usages – you **feel smarter.** And you can **feel like you're part of in "in group,"** either just with whoever else has used or understood the cryptic phrase or with a whole social set.

Now, those two reasons for change also manifest in several other ways, not always as amusing. I'm sure we've all had to deal with texts that are just opaque with nouns, prepositional phrases, and passive sesquipedalian verbs. "Redaction will be accomplished on hardcopy media." "We'll edit it on paper." Why write this stiff way? Because it "sounds smarter." And we get a lot of newly derived words for old things also because they "sound smarter." Also, it's no news to anyone here that people often like to take words they've heard and been impressed by and use them when they don't actually know what they mean. Because they want to sound smarter. And they do – to other people who don't know what the word means. They want to impress "the hoi polloi," but at most they impress some of "hoi polloi." But those mistakes can get entrenched!

A particular dark side of the desire to feel smarter is the tendency some people have to denounce other people's usages on usually questionable bases – as I mentioned in the brief historical review. Appeals to Latin, to logic, to history…

And sometimes it's phonetic profiling – any word that sounds like a bad word is bad by association. "Niggardly." A word that has exactly nothing to do with anything racial; it just happens to sound the wrong way. Its root is cognate with Norwegian "nøgg" and Swedish "njugg," and refers to a miser. But since it sounds the wrong way, you might find yourself avoiding it. It gives some people an excuse to point fingers, feel self-righteous, and exert control over others.

Phonetic profiling also comes in in the impulse **not to be embarrassed.** Some things come to have a fairly high snicker quotient. For instance, "The space probe will be passing Uranus…" News readers worry about saying "your anus" with a straight face, so they say "urine us" – which isn't much better. Likewise "harris ment" rather than "her ass ment."

On the lighter side, but still irritating for geeks like me, are folk etymologies used as conversational trump cards: here's a neat thing that I know that you didn't. A friend of my father's once explained to me that there was a game that got its name from being reserved for men: "Gentlemen Only, Ladies Forbidden." G-O-L-F. [cough] (Bullshit!) That's completely false. Here's a tip: if someone tells you a word that's more than 80 or so years old is from an acronym, disbelieve them. Letter acronyms were almost never used for word formation before the early 20th century. Syllable acronyms were used on occasion – for place names like SoHo, for example. But "posh," for instance, does *not* come from an acronym. Its real history is much more interesting and unclear – but less suitable as a trump card. Also, no vulgarities have ever come from acronyms. Acronyms are used to hide vulgarities, not make them.

Now, how about this matter of being part of an "in group"? Of **belonging**, of **social identification**? That's actually a *huge* factor. You talk like people you want to be like, people you want to belong with. Nobody does this more than teenagers – and those incomprehensible carbuncular youths are tomorrow's standard users. They like to use "cool" usages. Oops – not "cool." "Sick." I think that's it now, yes? Do we all remember when "cool" felt like cutting-edge slang? Now it's a pretty unexceptional term of approbation for something stylish or nifty. Expect to hear it from a reigning monarch in a speech within half a century.

But academic fields also have their own jargon. As do pretty much all specialized fields. Effort is put into developing new words and specialized uses that mark the user as an insider – one who knows. And different social sets also use different words. And since most people travel between different social circumstances, we have use for different words for the same thing just like we have different clothes and only use the nice silverware for guests. "This material is of inferior quality." "This stuff is crap." You talk like the people you're with, or want to be with, or want to be like.

Or, in some cases, you talk like you *think* they talk. A lot of social-climbing middle-class Brits got in the habit of saying things like "wealthy" and "perspire" because they thought they sounded more high-class, while the upper classes were actually saying "rich" and "sweat."

This goes well beyond vocabulary. It's very important in sound change. Very. Accents, of course, are key regional and socioeconomic identifiers. But there are attitudes towards

these kinds of identification. Some accents are thought of as "lower-class," others as "higher-class." Now, everyone wants to sound higher-class, right? Not actually. You can get the sense of belonging you want from being deliberately lower-class, too. You might find it interesting to know that, very generally speaking, males are more likely to prefer lower-class or nonstandard variations, whereas females are more likely to aim for higher-class or more standard (or standard-setting) variations. And, as it happens, in general, language change is led by females. The males tend to prefer the nonstandard; the females tend to set the standard, and to aim to set it higher.

It gets more interesting. There's research suggesting that the different resonating spaces of the female vocal tract compared with the male have led to certain sound resonances and tendencies more characteristic of female speech tending to be seen as more high-class and often more effeminate, while ones that are more characteristic of male speech tend to be seen as more low-class and more masculine. And it's also been observed that when vowels shift in a language, they tend to shift in certain directions. Guess which directions are more common for the more pervasive and lasting shifts. Yep, the ones that are more feminine and high-class. This research is not universally agreed on, but it's suggestive. It gives some interesting ideas for explaining one of the very big changes in the English language: the Great Vowel Shift.

The Great Vowel Shift is why our long vowels are not long versions of our short vowels. Over a period of a couple of centuries from late Middle English into Early Modern English, the long vowels shifted. [a:] became [e:]; [ɛ:] became [e:] and often moved up to [i:]; [e:] became [i:] as well. Look at "meat" and "meet": the two-e's version was originally [me:t], and the ea version was [mɛ:t]. The distinction between [mɛt] and [mɛ:t] was actually length, which it no longer is. And [i:], with nowhere higher to go, became [ei] or [əi] – there's some debate on what it was at first. Same thing with the long back vowels. That's why something written with two o's is pronounced [u:]. And the [u:] sound became [aʊ] or [əʊ]. This is diagrammed on the third page of your handouts.

Here are some main ways that language can change:

Sound change

- **assimilation, dissimilation, epenthesis, weakening and deletion, consonantal strengthening, simplification, substitution**
- **new allophones**

- **new phonemes – splits, mergers, shifts**

Morphological change

- **addition of affixes**
- **loss of affixes**
- **analogy**
- **reanalysis**

Syntactic change

- **word order**
- **inversions**

Lexical change

- **addition of lexical items (compounding, derivation, borrowing, etc.)**
- **loss of lexical items**

Semantic change

- **shift, metaphor, broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, weakening**

First of all, **sound change**. **Assimilation** is when one sound moves towards an adjacent sound – "strenth" instead of "strength." **Dissimilation** is when the sounds move farther apart, often for reasons of clarity. **Epenthesis** is insertion of a sound – "fillum," "sumpthing." **Weakening and deletion** are basically, underpronouncing and not pronouncing a sound. It's how we get from "Wodnes dæg" to [wɪnzde:]. Examples can be found on your handout in "dinner" and "jaunty." **Consonantal strengthening** is just the opposite – Latin [j] has become English "j". **Simplification** is changing [ts] to [s] or [t], for instance. OK, where do you catch the ferry to Swartz Bay? …Tsawwassen. What's that first consonant? And **substitution** is where you just plain old put one sound in for another – Middle English [lax] becomes modern [laf]. Any time we borrow a word that has sounds that aren't part of English, we tend to do this, too.

Now, there's the matter of what sounds we recognize as sounds. We have **phonemes**, which are sounds that we agree are identifiable, usable sounds, but a given a phoneme can actually have variations according to its position; these variations are **allophones**. Like what n does in "Banff" or l in "Calgary." And sometimes a new phoneme enters the repertory, usually by way of being an allophone. In English, [ŋ] used to be just how n

was said before g or k. Then it started showing up without "g" or "k" after, sometimes because the [g] was dropped. So [sɪŋg] became [sɪŋ] and now you had a differentiation between "sin" and "sing" that really rested on this new phoneme. People no longer heard [ŋ] and assumed it was [n], like they hear the l in "Calgary" and assume it's the same as the l in "Lillooet." If that sound were to become a separate phoneme, that would be a **split**. When long [ɛ:] became long [e:] and, in some cases, long [i:], that was a **merger**. And the Great Vowel Shift was a… **shift**.

English has lost and gained assorted phonemes. It's lost [y], [ʏ], [x], [ɣ], and [ç]; it's gained [v], [ð], [ŋ], and [ʒ].

English has undergone quite a bit of **morphological change**. **Affixes** are big in this – affixes are prefixes and suffixes. Often they were originally independent words and then just got stuck on and treated as grammatical parts. The suffix "-ly" is of that sort: it came from a word meaning "like." Of course, affixes can be lost, too; most of the affixes used in Old English inflection have been lost. **Analogy** is when you change one word or part of a word to make it more like another. When you look at your shoes with your eyes rather than looking at your shoon with your eyen, that's because the plurals of those two words were changed by analogy – regularized. This is also how we can get two words that are written and sound the same that mean opposites: "cleave" and "cleave." The one that means "adhere" could have – should have – become "clive," but it didn't. **Reanalysis** is when something is taken for something other than it originally was. So now we have suffixes like "-aholic" and "-burger": "shopaholic," "fishburger." A word formed from "helico" and "pter" is now seen as coming from "heli" and "copter," so you get "copter" by itself. Reanalysis can also affect semantics: look at "internecine" on your handouts.

Syntactic change doesn't happen quite as quickly, perhaps, but it does happen. In Old English, for instance, many kinds of sentences used subject-object-verb order where now we would use our standard subject-verb-object. Let's have a look at the word order of the passage from Genesis in Old English, top of the first page of your handouts: "On the beginning made God heaven and earth." They used inversion more widely. This was true well into Early Modern English: "Know you not?" Now we'd say "Don't you know?" because only auxiliaries can be inverted.

I doubt that we're all done with changes to word order, either. Colloquialisms, often borrowed from other languages, slide in gradually. "It's a tall man he is." "Shirts we have over there. Shoes we keep here." "Makes a wicked drink, doesn't he?"

We've also gained features such as more flexibility in subordinate clauses. In Old English, relation between two statements often had to be expressed just by proximity. Now we have words and structure to enable more nuance.

Lexical change is perhaps the most immediately noticeable kind of change. New words form old, or from thin air. "Blurb." Didn't come from anywhere except possibly some vague phonaesthetic impulses. "Canola," from an acronym. More fun with acronyms at "nimby" and "sabermetrics." Reanalysis and blending: "Frankenfood." Other blends include "gastroporn" and "gaydar." Conversion: "incent." And borrowing, lots of borrowing. Newer borrowings still bear the marks of their sources: "chauffeur," from French; "mosquito," from Spanish; "chutzpah," from Yiddish. Older borrowings have generally become accepted English. In the list of old words on your handouts, borrowings include "asparagus," "carouse," "dinner," "farm," "glitch," "hearse"… um, let me put it another way: of the words in that list, "awful," "cloud," "methinks," "silly," "shirt" (but not "skirt"), "throw," "tide" "warp," and "weird" come from Old English, if somewhat changed; all the rest were borrowed from somewhere else. "Borrowed." That's cute. I'd like to borrow money from the bank like English borrows words. "I'd like a million bucks." "OK. When do we get it back?" "Never, of course. It's mine now!" And with money, after you borrow it, there's interest. With words, you borrow them *because* there's interest.

We also lose words that we just don't need anymore. And sometimes we lose words that we really could use, but they've fallen out of fashion. "Nimshite," for instance. A perfectly good term of abuse, meaning literally that the person takes or steals, uh, feces. How can we ever have too many insults? But we gain at least one for every one we lose. "Dork," for instance. "Twerp." And about twenty percent of the vocabulary of the average 14-year-old boy.

And meanings change. **Semantic change**: the reason etymology is not a suitable guide to current meaning. Meanings can do all sorts of interesting things. **Shift** is when a word comes to mean something else from what it used to. "Cloud," for instance. "Dinner." "Hearse," largely by metonymy. "Travel" – this one's fun. I'm thinking with the way

travel is for most people these days, it's heading back to its origins. "Weird," by reanalysis. And "throw" and "warp" have actually traded meanings! **Metaphor** is, of course, an Italian term – "Wassa metaphor you?" Yes, that was a cheap joke; the word comes from Greek and is itself metaphorical, because it comes from words meaning "carry with." "Slipshod" is metaphorical in current use. **Broadening**: a word comes to refer to more things. "Bird" used to mean "a small, winged fowl." One's "aunt" used to be one's father's sister, but not one's mother's sister. A "farm" used to be land that was used on a rental tenancy basis. **Narrowing** is, naturally, the opposite. "Skirt" and "shirt" have narrowed in different directions; "tide" has narrowed and shifted. "Deer" used to mean any animal, "hound" any dog, and "meat" any food. **Amelioration** is when the word comes to mean something better or more positive. "Nice" is an example of this. And "knight" originally meant "boy" – just as its German cognate, "Knecht," still does. **Pejoration** is the opposite. "Awful" has undergone this; so has "mess" (it has also shifted, through metaphor); "silly" and "surly" have also slid down on the scale. And **weakening** is when a word just comes to be less specific in its meaning. "Nice," after it shifted, weakened quite a bit. Any word that gets popular use as an intensifier is thereby weakened, at least in that use: "Dude, that was wicked." "That was a wicked test." "He makes a wicked Margarita."

So… *Cha-cha-chaange… …For every word (terms, terms, terms), there is a season (terms, terms), and a time for every usage under heaven…* Our language changes, it is always changing, and we're part of that. Think about that next time you have some awful asparagus for dinner, or wake up in a cloud after carousing; think about it when you have to deal with a glitch, a tawdry mess, or some slipshod writing; think about it when you're jaunty, or silly, or nice, or surly (perhaps you just have affluenza, or are cocooning, or have eaten some Frankenfood because you were incented by gastroporn); think about it when you throw shirt in your travel bag; think about it when you deal with a weird, warped author whose work you want to throw across the room. And think about all the nuances and expressiveness of English – the things you can say with it, and how cogently and efficiently you can express things. And how many more words it takes to say things in French, a language which has long been quite conservative.

But we can exert influence on language change. Given that we can and should decide what usages we want to keep and what to discard – although we may or may not be heeded, we can at least try – on what basis should we make these decisions?

I say **a change is worth keeping if it lets you do more with the language** – if you can express more meaning, express things more clearly or efficiently, have more fun. **A change is not worth keeping if it serves mainly to limit what you can do with the language.** The supposed "rule" against split infinitives is one such. This "rule" was invented in the 18th century on the basis that Latin doesn't split its infinitives – well, of course it doesn't; they're one word. And English isn't Latin. If we allow split infinitives, we can allow different meanings for "to really do something" and "really to do something," for instance. We can also avoid some annoyingly difficult phrasing on occasion. The main value of the supposed rule is that it allows people to browbeat others and set themselves above them – belonging to the group of "those who know."

So when we look at new usages, we can ask ourselves whether we think a given change is an asset to the language. Some changes that bother us have been accomplished long since and there's little avail now in kicking against the pricks; others, however, are still subject to our godlike influence. (We wish.) The one unchanging thing about English is that it changes. But we're part of that change.

Strange fascination fascinating me. Oh, changes are shaping the language that I use. Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes!