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A Survey of Factors Contributing to Language Change in English With Special Reference to Lexical Change

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to create awareness among language users of the need to be current with our knowledge of lexis. Older and contemporary dictionaries as well as popular reading materials were used to investigate lexical change. It was found that certain lexical items had acquired additional meaning. Some were gradually being replaced with others. There was variation between varieties of English. Some were becoming old-fashioned in the modern context. Words which were considered formal are also being used casually. Certain vocabulary items were unpredictable in meaning. It was also found that there were many euphemistic, non-sexist and new coinages.

Language users, be they educators, students, journalists or concerned members of the public need to be aware of ongoing lexical change for their academic and professional development.

The language change described here is primarily with reference to Standard British English. References to other native varieties spoken by first language speakers of English and certain non-native varieties will be made where relevant. A brief mention of related changes in Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia (BM), the major and national language spoken in Malaysia, will also be made, by way of comparison.

Keywords

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Human languages which are actively being used experience language change over the years. They are “never uniform entities; they can be observed to vary geographically and socially, and according to the situational contexts in which they are used... this homogeneity of language is of crucial importance” (Milroy, 1992, p.1). William Dwight Whitney insists that change is one of the fundamental properties of language (cited in Nerlich, 1990). Linguistic change is not confined to particular languages or generations. It is a fact which is universally acknowledged (Schend, 2001, p. 5). With regard to English it is changing all the time whether we are aware of the change or not. New words have been constantly coming into use, “and not only new words, but also new pronunciations and even new grammatical forms. At the same time, old words, old forms, and old pronunciations are gradually dropping out of use” (Trask, 1996, p. 1). Changes have been observed in the areas of orthography, morphology, phonology, lexis, semantics and syntax.

The stages of British English (BE) may be classified into three divisions as follows:

1. The Old English (OE) stage (449- 1066) with which the epic poem *Beowulf* is often associated. It is unintelligible except for those who can decipher Old English.
2. The Middle English (ME) stage (1066- 1500) with which Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is often linked. Chaucer’s language may be understood with a lot of effort on the part of the reader.
3. The Modern English (ModE) period, beginning from 1500 until the present time. The works of Shakespeare herald this period (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003, p. 500).

A few lines from the popular literary works representing the three stages will give us some insight into the changes that had been taking place over many years. The following lines from the prologue of the *Summoner’s Tale* of Chaucer and its modern English translation illustrate:

Lines from Chaucer

*This frere bosteth that he knoweth helle,
And God it woot, that it is litel wonder;
Freres and feendes been but lyte asunder.*

Translation

This friar boasts that he knows hell,
And God knows that it is little wonder;
Friars and fiends are seldom far apart.

Shakespeare is considered to have penned his works in an earlier form of Modern English. The following is an extract from *The seven ages of man* in the play *As You Like It*.

..... And then the lover
Sighing like furnace. With a woful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth.

The Shakespearean text is less incomprehensible. Let us briefly discuss some of the items in the extract which deals with two of the seven ages of man, namely the lover and the soldier. Variation is observed in the spelling of 'woful', the modern spelling of which is 'woeful'. In his language, 'oaths' are 'swear words', not 'a formal promise' (Longman, 2003, p. 1128) as we understand it today. It is originally from Old English /a:th/ and later /oth/ from Middle English (American Heritage Dictionary, hereafter abbreviated to AHD, 1996, p.1245).. A 'pard' is today's priest. A 'mistress' in Shakespeare's language was a sweetheart, not a woman who is maintained by a man for sexual gratification which is a popular meaning today.

American English (AE) too has a similar language history comprising three periods: 1) The Colonial Period (1607- 1776), involving the English colonization of the Americas. During this period a distinctive AE was said to be gestating, 2) The National Period (1776- 1898) which saw the colonization of their country coming to an end through the War of Independence. Nationalistic Americans felt they needed an English which was separate and distinctive of Americans, and 3) The International Period (1898 until the present) during which the US has played an increasingly influential role internationally in economics, education, the entertainment industry, politics and popular culture. Consequently AE usage has become prevalent and popular (mhtml:file:///J:/AMERICAN ENGLISH Oxford Reference Online.mht).

Nerlich (1990) asserts that the “forces of change are of individual and social nature, given that language is a means of communication and a social institution” (p.100). He emphasizes that individual speakers’ will has an important role to play in language change. Although linguistic variation is initiated by the individual, “only certain variations are selected by society, become usage, and change the language” (p. 94).

Let us briefly deal with some of the changes in the various components of language before we look at lexical change in more detail.

1.1 Spelling change

Spelling has shown variation throughout the ages. The word ‘hell’ was spelt as ‘helle’ in Middle English, and ‘old’ as ‘eald’ in Old English (AHD). In the 1611 Bible (Authorized Version or King James Bible), readers are informed that God “formed euey beast of the field, and euey foule of the aire” (Genesis 2. 19). We can safely assume the current spelling to be ‘every’ for ‘euey’, ‘fowl’ for ‘foule’ and ‘air’ for ‘aire’ (<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/history/Vocab/C.htm>). American English spelling is prevalent in many international publications which are circulated widely. And this may be one of the reasons for others to introduce American English spelling. Besides, this spelling variety is

appealing in the sense that it is economical, by dropping the <u> in words such as honor, color, flavor, gynecology and ax for British English spelling axe .Microsoft Word regards non-American English spelling as erroneous by underlining such spellings in red which writers may find irritating, and thus the pull towards the spelling acceptable to the computer program. The ruling party in Australia spells its name as the Labor Party, and not as the Labour Party as in the UK. In Canadian English there is much variability in spelling, due to the writers divided loyalties to Britain and the USA (Melchers and Shaw, 2003, p.14).

In Bahasa Melayu/Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language spoken in Malaysia, hereafter BM), spelling changes have taken place over many years. The earlier and current spelling of some words is given as an illustration: *bahwa* - *bahawa* (that), *deri- dari* (from), *kesah- kisah* (story), *sungei –sungai* (river), *cepat- cepat* (quick), *puteh- putih* (white), *hadhir- hadir* (to be present) and *shariah- syariah* (Islamic law). Some words are spelt in two slightly different ways, for example, *hajah* and *hajah* (a woman who has performed the hajj pilgrimage) and *setan* and *syaitan* (the devil).

1.2 Phonological change

Phonological changes arise when sounds once present in a word no longer are, and when alternative pronunciations exist alongside. Some English words which were previously pronounced with a /t/ have lost that /t/, although the spelling retains the <t> (Trask, 1996, p. 71). Examples of such words are ‘bristle’, ‘bustle’, ‘castle’ and ‘fasten’. But the /t/ sound has not been lost in words like ‘blister’, ‘custom’ and ‘foster’. However, ‘often’ may be pronounced with or without a /t/.

There are systematic differences between Old English and present day modern English. The Mod.E examples follow the OE ones: stone- /sta:n/, /stoun/; house- /hu:s/, /haus/; brown- /bru:n/, /braun/; doom- /do:m/, /du:m/ and root- /ro:t/, /ru:t/ (Trask, 1996, p. 72). Words in Mod.E which had the /au/ sound were consistently pronounced as /u:/ in OE. Some of the OE

pronunciations appear to have continued to the Middle English period, for example, /hu:s/ for 'house'. In ME, words which had the /au/ sound in words such as 'mouse', 'house', 'south' and 'out' in Mod.English were generally pronounced as /u:/ (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 501). This change from /u:/ to /au/ has been attributed to a phonological change known as sound shift.

There are alternative pronunciations to what is generally considered to be prestigious, for example, Received Pronunciation (RP) in the UK. Words such as 'sure' and 'poor' may also be sounded like 'shore' and 'pore' respectively. We can sound words with the <r> as rhotic or non-rhotic, depending on the situation. We can pronounce words such as 'dance', 'fast' and 'example' differently too. The pervasive influence of American English sounds is making English language users mix the sounds unintentionally. Students are often advised to use either the British or American pronunciations consistently, but this is not always practical.

1.3 Morphological change

Morphological changes commonly occur through affixation. The nominative case singular item spelt as <stan> meaning 'stone' in OE was pluralized to <stanas> by the addition of the OE suffix -as, giving the meaning 'stones' (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 507). In ME, the noun 'frere' (friar) became the plural 'freres' (friars) by the addition of the suffix -s. Morphemes play a crucial role in morphological change. Bound morphemes include both prefixes and suffixes. Prefixes such as anti-, cyber-, dis-, pro- and -un, and suffixes like -ness, -ation, -ment, -ance, -ist and -ity help to form new words. The following exemplify: anti- war, cybercrime, disloyal, pro-Palestine, uncivilized, Malaysianness, civilization, improvement, governance, jihadist, Islamist and mediocrity.

Morphological changes can also involve other features of grammar. For instance, the preposition 'up' has come to be used as a verb with the addition of the suffix-s, e.g. Kuwait ups salaries to offset inflation (*New Straits Times*, June 25, 2008, p.29). The grammatical verbal suffix -ing may be added to the noun 'police' to have 'policing' which is a gerund or verbal

noun, e.g. Leave policing to the cops (*New Straits Times*, June 25, 2008, p.23). The item ‘professional’ with the suffix –ize is rarely used to produce ‘professionalize’, as in the example which follows: “... restores the independence of the judiciary, professionalizes the police and paramilitary forces...” (*Newsweek*, June 23, 2008, p.31). The prefix –er, added to ‘oil’ to refer to someone who owns an oil company or works in the oil industry is a very rare combination. Maybe the writer intended it as a replacement for ‘oilman’, to make it gender-neutral: “Oilers built this hospital. All of the objects in this city have been built with oil money...” (*National Geographic*, June, 2008, p.85).

1.4 Syntactic change

Syntactic change may be attributed to social, ethnic, historical and geographical factors, which are also involved in the other types of change. Malory’s *Tales of King Arthur* written in 1470, before 1500 considered to be the advent of Modern English, double comparatives, for example, *more gladder*, *more lower* and double superlatives such as *moost royallest* and *moost shamefullest* are used (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 509). More than a hundred years later these also occur in Shakespeare’s plays (<http://www.bardweb.net/grammar/03shifts.html>):

And his more braver daughter could control thee

(*Tempest*, Act I, Scene ii)

With the most boldest and best hearts of Rome

(*Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene i)

In standard varieties of British and American Modern English, double comparatives and superlatives are ungrammatical.

In Shakespeare’s grammar, a word class is used for another, for example: *Grace me no grace*, *nor uncle me no uncle* in *Richard II*, Act II, Scene iii, and *That may repeat and history his loss* in *King Henry IV*, Act IV, Scene i. ‘Uncle’ is used in the sense of treating someone as an uncle, as

a verb. But 'uncle' is a noun only in today's use. Similarly 'history' which is also a noun is used as a verb in the sense of 'recording an event as something historical' (<http://www.bardweb.net/grammar/03shifts.html>). The progressive aspect was not fully established during Shakespeare's time. Thus Polonius asks Hamlet who is absorbed in a book: *What do you read my lord?* rather than *What are you reading my lord?* (Schendl, 2001, p. 39).

Some native varieties of English behave differently with regard to the progressive and perfect aspect. *This belongs to me* in Standard British English is *This is belonging to me* in Irish English. *Have you called her yet* in SBE is *Did you call her yet* in Standard American English (Melchers and Shaw, 2003, p. 22). There are different ways of expressing the same thing in various varieties of the language:

I am going to visit my neighbor in hospital

I am gonna visit my neighbor in hospital

Going to may be shortened to *gonna* in speech.

I haven't got any money in SBE could be expressed as *I ain't got no money* in African American Vernacular English. *How long have you been here* in SBE has its equivalent in an Irish English dialect as *How long are yous here?* (Milroy, 1992, p. 33).

Thomson and Martinet (1986, p.64) state that *each* and *every* take a singular verb and the possessive adjective for them is his/her. So, *Every employee must submit his overtime claim* is grammatically correct, but gender-biased. In modern usage we may express the same as *Every employee must submit his or her overtime claim* or *Every employee must submit their overtime claim*.

We move on to deal with lexical change in the subsequent sections.

2.0 LEXICAL CHANGE

Changes which are most obvious in the study of language change are those affecting lexis or vocabulary. Speakers constantly find themselves having “to adapt language to changing communicative needs in a changing environment. Thus new words are coined, old ones get their meanings extended, while on the other hand existing words or meanings constantly fall into disuse” (Schendl, 2001).

In the opinion of Trask, there are many different ways of acquiring new words. Some of these are exceedingly common, while others are rather unusual (1996). We shall discuss lexical change according to the various strategies it is possible.

2.1 Change in lexical category

A word which is normally used as a noun, may also be used as a verb. Examples of words functioning as such include the following in the sample sentences below:

1. The newly married couple holidayed in India.
2. The family picnicked on the beach.
3. You can google for the information you require.
4. Have you xeroxed the documents already?
5. I was sandwiched between two burly passengers.

2.2 Addition of new words

New words can enter a language through compounding, acronyms, back-formation, abbreviation, words from proper names and blends (Fromkin et al, 2003) and lexical differentiation.

2.3 Compounding

Two or more words may be combined to form new compound words. Noun + noun combinations include firefighter, chairperson, gold digger, guest worker and laptop. The resulting words are also nouns. Noun + verb combinations include manslaughter, spoon feed and bullshit. The resulting word depends on how the compound word is used: It's all bullshit (noun). Don't take him seriously, he may be just trying to bullshit (verb). Noun + adjective compound words include the following: airtight, lifelong, footloose and stone- cold. The resultant word class is very often an adjective as the examples suggest. Trask (1996) believes that compounding has been exceedingly common in English at various times.

The sum of the meanings of the parts of a compound does and does not result in a similar meaning. The following do. A 'milkmaid' is a girl or woman who milks cows and sell the milk. A 'mailman' is a man who delivers mail or letters. 'Wage earners' are those who work and earn their wages. A 'headscarf' is a scarf worn around the head, especially by women. However there are also compound words whose meanings cannot be understood straightforwardly. A 'carpet' (car + pet) has nothing to do with either a car or pet as everyone knows. A 'ladybird' is not a type of bird, but a beetle. A 'deadpan' is surprisingly an adjective, meaning sounding and looking serious when one is doing something (Longman, 2003, p. 401). In American English, a 'doghouse' is a kennel built outdoors for a dog. But a 'cathouse' is not a place for a cat, it's a brothel!

Some examples of compounding with non- English words are *syariah* law, *halal* meat, *surau* committee, *tahlil* gathering, *panchayat* meeting, *feng shui*- compliant and *datukship* (the award of the title 'datuk' is conferred upon those who have distinguished themselves in the service of the country, by a sultan or governor in Malaysia).

2.4 Acronym

Acronyms are words made up from the initial letters of several words and pronounced as separate words. Some people differentiate between initialism and acronym. The former can only

be pronounced letter by letter, for example, ACA for the Anti- Corruption Agency. The latter can be pronounced as a single word as in UNESCO for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. There are others who regard both cases as acronym (Trask, 1996). Additional examples and their use in context follow: kiv- keep in view as in ‘We’ll kiv this application,’ DJ- deejay (disc jockey) as in “Future DJs and those who love throwing parties should get their hands on ...” (*Home Concepts*, May/June 2008, p.113). In BM, *pawagam* (cinema) is the acronym of *panggung wayang gambar*, formed from the initial letters of the three words: pa + wa + gam.

2.5 Back- formation

Back-formation refers to the formation of a new word from an older one (Longman 2003). From the older words ‘radio’, ‘father’ and ‘mother’, which are all nouns we now have verbs derived from them, ‘radioed’, ‘fathered’ and ‘mothered’ respectively. From the previously existing nouns ‘hawker’, ‘swindler’, ‘resurrection’, ‘gestation’, and ‘television’, we have their verbal back- formation: ‘hawk’, ‘swindle’, ‘resurrect’, ‘gestate’ and ‘televise.’

2.6 Clipping

This is a process of contraction whereby abbreviated or shortened forms of longer words or phrase become separate lexical items: ‘ads’ for ‘advertisements’, ‘sub’ for ‘submarine’, ‘demo’ for ‘demonstration’, ‘co- ed school’ for ‘co- educational school’, ‘fab’ for ‘fabulous’, ‘celeb’ for ‘celebrity’, ‘CV’ for ‘curriculum vitae’, ‘Dems’ for ‘Democrats’ and ‘uni’ for ‘university.’

Clipping is very much evident in the mass media, in news captions and reading materials. They are also common in informal speech. The examples below are from reading materials:

“For some living in a *condo* means no worries about garden maintenance, availability of recreational facilities...” (*Home Concepts*, May/June, 2008, p.23).

“Milan’s Yunique gym and spa pays attention to the details” (*Newsweek*, June 9, 2008, p.57).

2.7 Eponyms (words from proper names)

Sometimes words are derived from names of people, places and sometimes non-human elements and they go on to become lexical items, for example, the noun ‘bikini’ could have been derived from the Bikini Islands, an atoll of the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean; the verb ‘xerox’ is from ‘Xerox’ which is the trademark of a machine used for photocopying; the verb ‘google’ is from the internet search engine ‘Google’; the word ‘sandwich’ which may be used both as a noun and a verb owes its existence to a British royal, the fourth Earl of Sandwich who sometimes ate his food between two slices of bread (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 98), the item ‘gypsy’ is from ‘Gypsy’, who are a nomadic group of people who live in many countries, including Romania and lastly, ‘gulag’ comes from Gulag, a Russian province which had very difficult living conditions Today it is used in the sense of a “place or situation of great suffering and hardship...” (AHD, 1996, p.805).

2.8 Blends

The process of blending is a “sort of combination of compounding and clipping” (Trask, 1996, p. 34). Blends are produced from the combination of two words. Although it is similar to compounding, in blending parts of the combining words are omitted or clipped. ‘Infotainment’ for example is a blend of ‘information’ and ‘entertainment.’ ‘Catnap’, for instance, is a combination of ‘cat’ and ‘kidnap,’ meaning ‘kidnapping a cat.’ Students often have brunch, a meal combining breakfast and lunch. ‘Petrodollars’ and ‘stagflation’ which is a blend of ‘stagnation’ and ‘inflation’ are also examples of this lexical process. ‘Netizens’ (‘internet’ and ‘citizens’) has come to refer to users of the internet: “As if spam mail is not enough, email threats, warnings and scams are becoming a disconcerting issue to Netizens” (*New Straits Times*, June 16, 2008, p. 1). A college of medical sciences has come out with the following

advertisement which exemplifies creative blending: *Looking for medication? Get medicated at Allianz College of Medical Sciences (ACMS), a medicationist established since 2002*. Three blends, ‘meducation’ = medicine + education, ‘meducated’ = medical + educated, and ‘meducationist’ = medical + educationist are used.

2.9 Word coinage

Word coinage is a superordinate term for various instances of word formation. They may be fairly new or derivations or predictable derivations. From the geographical area known as the Balkans, we now have ‘to balkanize’, meaning “to divide (a region or territory) into small, often hostile units” (AHD, 1996, p. 140) and ‘Balkanization’ which is the “practice of dividing a country into separate independent states” (Longman, 2003, p. 99). Both terms of disapproval are related to the political, ethnic and religious conflicts in some European countries.

In view of changing physical relationships in some western societies we now have ‘same-sex unions’, ‘same-sex couples’ and ‘gay marriages.’ Recent coinages include ‘e-commerce’ and ‘e-banking.’ Due to some people’s fear of Islam and Muslims, the coinage- Islamophobia is currently gaining currency (please refer to Haja Mohideen and Shamimah Mohideen, 2008, for an extensive discussion on the topic).

2.10 Collocation

New collocations, some of them though may be rare, also contribute to language change, for example, “To feed a hungry soul. The quest for meaning sends writers on global *food pilgrimages*.” The word ‘pilgrimage’ is normally associated with a place. The term ‘rogue states’ is often used by the US to refer to hostile countries which may possess nuclear technology and may therefore, in its view abuse their capability. We wonder what we call countries with superior military technology which regularly kills or maims civilians. The phenomenal rise in fuel prices has made *Newsweek* come up with “The \$200 oil bomb” on its cover page (June 9, 2008). We

know of collocations which has 'bomb', e.g. 'time bomb', 'letter bomb' and 'cluster bomb.' New collocations include 'gated community' which has joined communities such as the 'business community', 'academic community' and 'Asian community.' People with valuable expertise and skills are now also called 'knowledge workers.' An entertainment magazine- *Astroview* has the following collocations which may be considered new. A famous male celebrity has been described as a "chick magnet" (June 2008, p. 8). We are familiar with 'babe magnet' though. A safari is often associated with animals, but now we have a TV program- Food Safari, on the Travel & Living channel (*Astroview* June 2008, p.125).

2.11 Borrowings or loan words

It is common for a particular language to borrow vocabulary items from another. Words are borrowed to fill the lexical gap in the borrowing language. English has borrowed from other languages through the Norman conquest of England, its own colonization of many countries in the world and presently globalization. With a borderless world, borrowed or loan words would only increase. OE had only about 3% of borrowed words, but Mod. English has about 70% from no less than 80 different languages (Schendl, 2001).

BM has adopted many loan words into its lexis from Arabic, English and to a lesser extent from Chinese and Tamil. BM is borrowing heavily from English. There are many English loan words in BM for which there are no equivalents. However, even when there are words with equivalents, there seems to be a preference for the English loans among readers and journalists of Malay language newspapers. Shamimah (2008) found that English loan words were used in specialized areas such as educational, scientific, technological, economic and political. The reason for the preference was because the English loans sounded more elegant, modern and sophisticated, according to the subjects of her study.

English has borrowed vastly not only from neighboring European countries, but also from its former colonies' languages and non- English speakers whom they came into contact

with. From Arabic, the words borrowed include ‘admiral’, ‘algebra’, ‘barbican’, ‘coffee’, ‘giraffe’, ‘hazard’ and ‘magazine’. (<http://www.zompist.com/arabic.html>). Those of Turkish origin include ‘horde’, ‘kiosk’, ‘turkey’, ‘turquoise’ and ‘yoghurt’ (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_words_of_Turkish_origin). From the Malay language, some of the borrowed words are: ‘amok’, ‘bamboo’, ‘cockatoo’, ‘junk’ and ‘pangolin’. Borrowing is a common way for newly arrived immigrants who don’t speak the host country’s dominant language to acquire the target language.

Over time, borrowed items might undergo the process of nativization, naturalization or in the case of English, Anglicization (<http://course.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/history/Vocab/C.htm>). Many Arabic and Islamic words which function as nouns are pluralized following English orthography, e.g. ‘imams’, ‘madrasahs’ and ‘mullahs’. The suffix-ism is added to ‘jihad’ and the resulting word is ‘jihadism’, and the suffix –ic may go with ‘ummah’ to provide ‘ummic’ as in ‘ummic consciousness’.

2.12 Lexical differentiation

Varieties of English can contribute to additional words in the language. We can use two, even three words for the same thing, e.g. elevator and lift; sidewalk and pavement; cell phone (American English), mobile phone (British English) and hand phone (Malaysian English), and eggplant (AE), aubergine (BE) and brinjal in Indian and South African English (Melchers and Shaw, 2003, p. 24). A ‘hotel’ in Indian English in general, is a ‘restaurant’ to many others. In India, a distinction is made between restaurants that serve vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. Those that serve the latter are also referred to as military hotels. A ‘lodge’ in Indian English is a ‘hotel’ in many parts of the world. A ‘theatre’ in Malaysian English (e.g. Coliseum Theatre) is a ‘cinema’ in the UK, ‘movie theatre’ in the US and ‘talkies’ in India (e.g. Thangam Talkies). A ‘coach’ in BE is a bus used for a long journey, a ‘bus’ is one for shorter journeys within the city and neighboring towns. The AE equivalent of ‘coach’ is ‘bus.’

2.13 Loss of words

Just as new words and loan words may be added to a language, words can also be lost from a language due to being old-fashioned or their less frequent use. In Mod. English, the pronouns, ‘thou’, ‘thee’ and ‘thy’ are obsolete. They are used in fixed expressions and in the Bible, e.g. ‘to have a holier than thou attitude’ and “Thou shalt not kill.” The word ‘swine’ for ‘pig’ and ‘swineherd’ for someone who looks after ‘pigs’ is of old use (Longman, 2003, p. 1681).

In BM, words which are going or gone out of circulation include *mata-mata*, *khutub khanah*, *panggung wayang* and *jamban*. They have now been replaced respectively with *polis* (police), *perpustakaan* (library), *pawagam* (cinema) and *tandas/ bilik air* (toilet).

‘Spinster’ is old-fashioned. The modern synonymous expression is ‘single woman.’ The word ‘intercourse’ in the sense of having “an exchange of ideas, feelings etc. which make people or groups understand each other better” (Longman, 2003, p. 848) has been overtaken by ‘discourse’ because of its other meaning concerning sexual activity.

2.14 Semantic change

Lexical change also involves semantics. The meaning of words in a language may change, that is, by becoming broader, narrower or by shifting (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 515). We shall discuss each of these phenomena.

2.14.1 Broadening

Broadening or generalization is “the spread of meaning from a narrower to a broader class of things (Trask, 1996, p. 42). In the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (OALDCE) published in 1974, there was only one entry for ‘carnival’, that is “public

merrymaking and feasting, usually with processions of persons of persons in fancy dress....” A festival of this kind was a carnival (p.127). Those of us who have seen pictures of a carnival as described above know that in such carnivals, there is free intermingling of the sexes, dressed in outlandish attire, and behaving in ways which are inappropriate to many people. Today, a carnival has become a healthy family event. In AE, it may refer to outdoor amusement, park activities and a school event which students participate in games for prizes. In the UK it refers to a funfair (Longman, 2003, p. 223). In Malaysia there are carnivals all the year round, for example, ‘book carnival’, ‘career carnival’, ‘computer carnival’, ‘food carnival’ and ‘shopping carnival’.

According to The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English (ALDCE), first published in 1948, there was only one meaning for ‘icon’ and that was “a sacred image or picture (e.g. of a saint or of the Virgin Mary)” (p.617). The OALDCE has also one similar meaning (1974, p.420). The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) has two additional meanings for the items, namely “a small sign or picture on a computer screen to start a particular operation” and “someone famous who is admired by many people and is thought to represent an important idea” (p.803).

The word ‘hero’ referred to a courageous and admirable boy or man and also the chief male character in a story in the 1948 ALDCE (p.589). Today the meaning has broadened to include a female who possesses these characteristics.

Another example of broadening is with reference to the item ‘guys.’ It was once limited in usage to males. But today, in AE, women can also be included in the meaning of ‘guys’ when referring to a group comprising both male and female (Longman, 2003, p.724), for example: We are late guys, can we hurry up please.

In BM, we have the two following words which originally meant ‘prince’ for *putera* and ‘princess’ for *puteri* broadened to include the meaning ‘honored son’ and ‘honored daughter’ respectively, as in the cliché *putera puteri negara* meaning ‘sons and daughters of our land.’

2.14.2 Narrowing

Specialization or narrowing is the inverse where the meaning of a word narrows down from a broader class of items. Alternative meanings are semantically limited by narrowing (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_change).

A good example of a word whose meaning has narrowed is ‘gay.’ Although as an adjective it can refer to bright or attractive colors, being cheerful and a lifestyle of mutual attraction between people of the same sex (Longman, 2003, p. 668), it is the last of the three meanings that people usually associate the word with. At one time, ‘girl’ had the meaning of “a young person, male or female.” But today the meaning is reserved largely for a young woman (Trask, 1996, p. 42).

The word ‘bitch,’ though it has two meanings: 1. a female dog and 2. a woman whom a person dislikes intensely, it is the latter meaning that is more popular. The word ‘meat’ once meant “food in general”, but today it is only with reference to “flesh food” (Trask, 1996, p. 42).

‘Fowl’ from OE ‘fugol’ had the original meaning of ‘bird’ in general. But it has narrowed down to mean chicken which people rear for its meat and eggs. The words ‘deer’ and ‘hound’ were used as general terms for ‘animal’ and ‘dog’ respectively. Not anymore, the former refers to a specific animal which is reared or hunted for its meat. The latter refers to a dog used for hunting purposes (Fromkin et al, 2003, p. 516).

2.14.3 Meaning shift

Besides broadening and narrowing, a shift in meaning is also an example of semantic change. Schendl (2001) gives a very interesting example of the word 'silly' whose meaning has shifted at various times. In the OE era, it meant 'happy, blessed' until the late 15th century. From the late 16th century until today, it has meant 'foolish, empty-headed.' But between the two intervening periods the word had variously meant 'innocent', 'deserving pity', 'weak, feeble', 'simple, ignorant' and 'feeble-minded' (p.31). The word 'swine' in old use was a 'pig.' Today the word is used disapprovingly at someone who behaves rudely or disgustingly. We can go on to deal with shift in meaning with reference to what is known as amelioration and pejoration.

In amelioration, words improve positively in meaning. The word 'luxury' had the original meaning of 'lasciviousness' or 'lust.' Then it was associated with indulgence in expensive things. Today the non-positive connotations have diminished and the word has come to be associated with refined enjoyment

(<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltankw/history/Vocab/C.htm>). The word 'wicked' in informal English today means 'very good', whereas it generally means 'being bad.' Two words associated with royalty, 'queen' and 'knight' formerly meant 'woman' and 'boy' respectively. But we know the exalted meanings of the two now (Trask, 1996, p. 42).

Pejoration is the opposite of amelioration where a word with a non-negative meaning acquires negative meaning. An example often cited is 'villain.' It meant a 'peasant' or 'farm worker', but the present day meaning is 'a bad person.' The word 'mistress' was used to refer respectfully to the woman of the house, e.g. *The maid looked up to her mistress.* Today the meaning has deteriorated to 'a woman who is maintained by a man for sexual gratification.' If we observe the meaning of 'silly', it has degraded from the previous meanings of 'simple, ignorant' and 'feeble-minded' to the current meaning which is 'foolish, empty-headed' (Schendl, 2001, p. 31).

Words which were once parallel in meaning between men and women have experienced pejoration in the case of words referring to women, e.g. 'courtesan' is the female equivalent of

‘courtier’ who is a male holding an important position in the royal court. But a ‘courtesan’ had become a woman who catered to the sexual needs of the powerful. A ‘governor’ is one who is in charge of some authority, but a ‘governess’ is not one such person. Rather, she is a live-in teacher with a rich family.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

Human language is continuously evolving. Languages have changed from the time they were first used. We have seen the variation in English between the different eras. Just like that the English language is going through change now as it did in the past. The change is phenomenal as “old varieties are dying out and new varieties are springing up; pronunciations are changing, new words and constructions are being adopted and old ones are adapted to new uses” (Milroy, 1992, p. 1). Active human languages are not stable. Change is an important ingredient in such languages and this is very much evident in the materials we read and the spoken language we hear.

With regard to future changes in the English language, according to a *Daily Mail* report which appeared in the Malaysian daily *New Straits Times*, May 2, 2008, (p.7), there is serious apprehension that the language would become increasingly fragmented into regional dialects, with wildly differing Englishes all over the world and become unintelligible to each other. This is in no small measure attributed to the phenomenal increase in the number of speakers of English as a second language and the proliferation of ever so many varieties of English as English today has become practically a universal language.

As Bloch and Starks (1999) rightly observe, although there is some level of standardization, there are significant differences between the varieties. There are still a lot of people who manifest significant divergence from the norms of English usage considered as mainstream. The future direction English might take is really unpredictable as anyone can speak English the way they want to in the name of linguistic autonomy. Insistence on particular global

varieties may be misconstrued as linguistic imperialism. The next century would be able to determine the future of English as we know it today. Only time can tell.

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