

From *When Languages Die* by K. D. Harrison

Language Change Just Happens

Languages are highly complex, self-organizing systems in constant flux. The English spoken by our great-great-great grandparents, who might have used a word like ‘hither’, is very different from how we ‘conversate’ nowadays. Geoffrey Chaucer could not chat with Bill Gates. We all participate in constant change, but no individual speaker controls the speed, trajectory, or character of change. A process of emerging complexity—not yet well understood—gives a language its constantly changing and characteristic shape.

Individual speakers of any language can and do make up new structures on a whim, by slip-of-the-tongue, or through creativity. Rap singers’ terms ‘b-iz-itch’ (or ‘biznitch’ or ‘biznatch’) or cartoon character Homer Simpson’s ‘saxa-ma-phone’ and ‘platy-ma-pus’ are examples of recently invented speech play. These innovations only become part of the language by a mysterious process of social learning and consensus. Other speakers must adopt and use (and perhaps revise or expand upon) these new ways of talking. At first, purists may denounce such changes as ‘bad English’. But if the changes endure, dictionary writers and grammar teachers eventually catch up and acknowledge such innovations.

Besides consciously creative innovations, many changes take place of which speakers are unaware. Californians whose grandparents pronounced the words ‘cot’ and ‘caught’ differently now pronounce these words the same. Somewhere along the line they lost an entire vowel. Nobody decided to jettison it, it just happened. Eastern U.S. speakers who maintain the ‘cot’/‘caught’ distinction may find this vexing, leading to misunderstandings. (When I listen to people who lack that vowel, I often wonder, did they mean ‘sot’ or ‘sought’, ‘hottie’ or ‘haughty’, ‘body’ or ‘bawdy’? For me, and speakers who share my set of vowels, these paired words all sound unambiguously distinct.)

People also unconsciously change their own speech habits even over the course of a lifetime. We adopt new words like ‘phat’, ‘metrosexual’, ‘pizzled’, new expressions like ‘twenty-four seven’, and we may even shift our pronunciation. Queen Elizabeth II’s speech has changed noticeably in the fifty years since she ascended the throne. Measurements of her vowels in her annual Christmas radio speeches showed that from the 1950s to the 1980s she shifted noticeably away from the “Queen’s English” and towards pronunciations favored by the lower social classes.

Nobody directs this intricate process of language change, on its individual or group levels—it is an orchestra without a conductor or even a musical score. There is no central decision-maker or authority, but orderly change happens nonetheless. Like complex termite mounds that get built with no blueprint, architect, or foreman, language is a self-organizing system. It has many

distinct parts that interact in complex and often unpredictable ways, resulting in surprising and unplanned patterns.

No schoolteacher, committee, or lexicographer has authority to decide whether 'biatch' or 'puhleeze' counts as a word of English or not. If English speakers use such words widely enough, they become part of English. This is true of new meanings for old words ('spam' used to mean canned meat, now it means unsolicited e-mail), new coinages ('e-commerce', 'conversate'), borrowings (jihad from Arabic, perestroika from Russian), and even new grammatical constructions.