



## English Tomorrow

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# *English Tomorrow*

## *Introduction*

It is timely to discuss the English language from a future perspective. Based on what has already been said and done regarding the language, this endeavour faces only limited risk of error. Just as it will be of great interest to all and sundry considering that it will enable users and non-users of the language the world over to make necessary adjustments. A retrospective survey of the language already shows it as one that emerged from a tumultuous context marked by noteworthy social, political, and linguistic upheavals. From the origin, English has been a composite of languages, indeed a motley language, and it was not the original language of England.

In spite of its diverse character, English has continued to be the object of an immanent diversification process in the course of time. Although English, as a result of this phenomenon, has considerably leaned away from the base, the process of change affecting the language has not yet come to an end. On the contrary, the language seems prone to even greater and more rapid change from now hence. One only needs to take into consideration the dynamism, fluidity and heterogeneity of the present day world, as well as the emergence of the phenomenon of varieties or new Englishes. Hence the necessity to carry out a multivariate discussion of the language against this background in prospective terms.

## *1. Linguistic Future*

Obviously, “change” is the word as far as making projections about English language is concerned. Priority is, of course, due to the language itself, *i.e.* its own internal state deserves attention on the part of observers and users alike. In this regard focus has been, so far, on the sound system, the grammar and the spelling of the language. This is the approach of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which embarks on the exercise by first of all justifying it in the following statement : “It is reasonable to ask if changes in English can be predicted.” Seemingly drawing inspiration from the Great English

Vowel Shift following Chaucer's death at the close of the century (1400), the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* proceeds to a discussion of English in future by arguing that : there will doubtless be modifications in pronunciation, especially in that of long vowels and diphthongs. In weakly stressed syllables there is already a discernible tendency, operating effectively through radio and television, to restore the full qualities of vowels in these syllables. This tendency, E. B upholds, may bring British English more into line with American English... Further, it may help to narrow the gap between pronunciation and spelling. Other factors will also contribute toward the narrowing of this gap: advanced technological education, computer programming, machine translation, and expanding mass media.

In fact, contrary to this stand by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and probably other scholars and observers of the English language, the future of English cannot be envisioned only linguistically; the language itself does not relate to mankind or affect the society in one direction only. Consequently, we can also contemplate the future of English sociolinguistically, *i.e.* within the perspective of the interaction between language and society, as well as other variables.

However, we may add, to beef up the linguistic stand of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* above, that with the advancement or progress of literacy and education in societies that use the language non-natively, there will be a remarkable trend toward RP. Alongside the rise in enlightenment, civilization and sophistication (which will be the inevitable, happy outcomes of education and evolution or progress) in non-native, non-modern societies, there will emerge a strong tendency toward Johnsonism. Samuel Johnson, the compiler of the 1755 Dictionary of the English Language, emerged as a linguistic legislator concerning English. In a nutshell Johnson stood for the prescriptive approach to the language hardly leaving room for the types of deviation from the standard norm or tradition in English observable today. Steadfast adherence to the norm or RP is, therefore, legitimately attributed to him, and the tendency can very well be expressed in doctrinal parlance as Johnsonism. For the societies described above, the latter will be relatively viewed as the ideology or advocacy in favour of greater respect for laid down tradition and

norm such as form the basis and discreteness of RP across the English using world.

It should be underscored, following this line of thinking, that deviations from RP are not deliberate or consciously planned, nor are wielders of non-RP forms contented or complacent, let alone complacent towards their own versions of English. These non-RP forms of English are for now only attempts by their authors to aspire to an ideal which, though they may not attain it now, will continue to be a desired target which will continue to motivate these users to pursue their effort to bring themselves closer to RP. Something which the advent of education, enlightenment and sophistication will help facilitate. In the final analysis, there will be a greater respect for, and the preservation of, the purity of English. And with this will come greater coherence, unity and stability of the language, in the future.

## *2. Sociolinguistic Future*

Taking into account the transformations taking place in English today, and in spite of Johnson's work, it would be unnecessarily dogmatic and unrealistic to take a unidirectional view of the language in the future, *i.e.* one that sees only conformity to the language's laid down norm. More so because from the outset Johnson's approach to the language was already challenged by the Oxonian reportorial tradition. Therefore, contradictorily, but interestingly enough, there will obviously be new rules that will accommodate New Englishes. There most probably will be the tendency to normalize and rehabilitate novelty or de-stigmatize some deviation. Non-standard or non-RP usages will become norm when more people or the majority will start relying on them. Progressives will see all these as linguistic development or evolution and some errors will no longer be considered as such. Yet there will normally be purists (or Johnsonists) who will try to arrest the drift so as to contain deviations and preserve the language. Proscriptive attitudes such as editing will be carried out (but with less vigour) in order to rescue the language from disintegration. If this regulation, though minimal, were not to be undertaken, the language would experience more alarming drift in the future. This feeling is founded on the mercurial character of the

contexts in which the language is evolving, and the general permissiveness observed on the part of would-be custodians and other opinion leaders in the language nowadays such as linguists, grammarians, publishers, scholars and teachers.

Looking at analyses and discussions about norms of the language, carried out by some of the above-mentioned personalities, we see clearly that the language will still need some restraining measures to limit and contain the liberalism, indeed deviation affecting it. In a book entitled *Word Power Made Easy*, (1979) the renowned linguist and teacher, Norman Lewis, takes up the issue of norm in English language in the most devoted way from various standpoints — all leading us to the fatal conclusion that the future of the language will be very bleak as far as its integrity and stability are concerned.

In fact, grammar is the bed-rock of language and any irregularity observed in this aspect is actually a microcosm of the state of the language as a whole. Lewis upholds that : English grammar is confusing enough as it is – what makes it doubly confounding is that it is slowly but continually changing. This means that some of the strict rules you memorized so painfully in your high school or college English courses may no longer be completely valid. Following such outmoded principles, you may think you are speaking “perfect” English, and instead you may sound stuffy and pedantic. (77) On how grammar changes, Lewis pursues his discussion in the following terms:

If you think that grammar is an exact science, get ready for a shock. Grammar is a science, all right – but it is most inexact. There are no inflexible laws, no absolutely hard and fast rules, no unchanging principles. Correctness varies with the times and depends much more on geography, on social class, and on collective human caprice than on the restrictions found in textbooks. In grammar, however, since the facts are highly susceptible to change, we have to keep an eye peeled for trends. What are educated people saying these days? Which expressions are generally used and accepted on educated levels? If such trends come in conflict with academic rules, then the rules are no longer of any great importance. (109)



Lewis wonders: "Do you always use the proper word?" And, then, he proceeds to underline the liberalism language is encountering and the general tendency to break rules governing language. However, he ends on a consoling note for those of us who, though taking cognisance of the inherent dynamic character of the language, still uphold that discipline, orderliness and some measure of prescription and proscription should continue to prevail. Change should not necessarily signify degeneration, deterioration or total anarchy as far as language is concerned. According to him, the fact is that grammar is getting more liberal everyday. Common usage has put a stamp of approval on many expressions which your grandmother would not have dared utter in her most intimate conversation – not if she believed she was in the habit of using good English. (279)

Lewis drops a consoling hint by arguing : "however, such a liberal policy does not mean that all bars are down. Only a person whose speech borders on the illiterate would make such statements as: 'can you learn me to swim?'; 'he don't live here no more;' 'we ain't working so good;' 'me and my husband are glad to see you.' There are still certain minimum essentials of good English that the cultivated speaker carefully observes." (279)

### ***3. Social and Cultural Future***

Socio-culturally, English will command even more respect in future and more people will like to be identified with it. More people will tend to use it as a language for courtship, elegance, gallantry and nuptials. They will equally use it as a language for self-aggrandisement and propaganda. More and more books will be published in English. More films will be acted or translated into English so as to gain a wider audience. Journalism and evangelism will more and more be carried out in English. To buttress these facts, Jespersen makes the following remarks:

Whatever a remote future may have in store, one need not be a great prophet to predict that, in the near future the number of English-speaking people will increase considerably. It must be a source of gratification to mankind that the tongue spoken by two of the greatest powers of the world is so noble, so rich, so pliant, so ex-

pressive, and so interesting as the language whose growth and structure I have been endeavouring to characterize. (1968 234)

In fact, the glowing homage paid to English, as seen in its being considered or described as the most important language on earth, far from reflecting the fanatical sentiments of anglophiles, is based on objective scientific consideration. Quirk (1972) has elaborated scientific criteria for the classification and assessment of the fortunes of any language, and English emerges as the most important language of the world and will continue to be no matter which of the criteria is applied. The number of native speakers that a language happens to have, the extent to which a language is geographically dispersed; its vehicular load and the economic and political influence of those who speak it as their own language "are some of the criteria that help us to see the worth of any language" (Quirk: 1972 2). The finding Quirk makes is that : "what emerges strikingly about English is that by any of the criteria it is prominent, by some it is pre-eminent, and by a combination of the four it is superlatively outstanding" (2-3).

In this way, there is going to be a more general or massive scramble for the language in the near future. In Cameroon, which is a bilingual country, but with institutional bias in favour of French, for instance, a tremendous trend is underway to the advantage of English. The impetus from the international scene (where English is superlatively outstanding) and the upsurge of national awareness about the assets and the instrumentality of English are jolting Francophones out of their self-sufficient and complacent attitude. They are now scrambling for Anglo-Saxon education by learning English and training their descendants or offspring in English institutions on the national and international levels.

This renaissance of English in Cameroon is leading the formerly apathetic and, perhaps, haughty, Francophone towards English to embark vigorously on acquiring and exhibiting the language. Francophone Cabinet Ministers (who are in the majority) now seize every media opportunity to express themselves in English. The situation is the same in most of the Francophone African countries. Eng-

lish will, then, be seen in the world as the language of authenticity, superiority, civilisation, culture, enlightenment and general universal communication.

#### ***4. Politico-Diplomatic Future***

Politically and diplomatically speaking, English will be used as the official language of administration in countries where it is not yet being used for this purpose. In international circles, more and more English will be used as it is definitely going to serve as a *lingua franca*. Most political materials will be published in English. To support this fact, Jespersen makes the following submission :

Nowadays, no one would overlook English in making even the shortest possible list of the chief languages, because in political, social and literary importance it is second to none, and because it is the mother-tongue of a greater number of human beings than any of its competitors. (232)

Allegiance will be paid to English given its status as the world's language. Exchanges will be carried out in English even when counterparts or interlocutors might not be originally English.

In fact, it is quite predictable that English will be given more priority as a medium of international politics and diplomacy. Arguing for this is the status of English today already as the language of the United Nations. Today not only are all important documents containing information in other languages (which is seldom) systematically translated into English for the use of the United Nations Organisation (where there is reluctance to translate material from English into other languages) but also, in the recruitment of staff, the UNO carefully ensures that its personnel or candidates to any position in the organisation are proficient in English. In short, according to Quirk:

Although patriotism obliges international organisations to devote far more resources to translation and interpreter services than reason could dictate, no senior post would be offered to a candidate deficient in English. (4)



## ***5. Globalization***

Although for cultural and ideological reasons the policy of globalisation does not yet enjoy 100% adherence, it is all the same a concept commonly seen as the process of bringing mankind closer together on the basis of common shared values for the establishment of universal criteria for the evaluation of performances in the various domains of life. Whether we are enthusiastic advocates of globalisation or its detractors, we can, all the same, acknowledge that the process will inevitably need a common medium for the creation and transmission of these common values. Furthermore, we commonly recognise that this medium can only be provided by language, and, definitely, we agree that after the failure of Esperanto the language that will play this role will be the English language. All the assets and fortunes of the language so far discussed point to the fact that English without rival will be the language of globalisation. This incontrovertible finding is further buttressed by Quirk:

...to put it bluntly, English is a top requirement of those seeking good jobs and is often the language in which much of the business of good jobs is conducted. One needs it for access to at least one half of the world's scientific literature. It is thus intimately associated with technological and economic development and it is the principal language of economic aid. Not only is it the universal language of international aviation, shipping and sport, it is to a considerable degree the universal language of literacy and public communication . . . It is the language of automation and computer technology. (4)

This authoritative tone of finality and irreversibility together with all the assets of English only constitute a sound launching pad for the language into the future where it will cruise further above all the other languages of mankind.

## ***Conclusion***

An important conclusion or finding is that linguistically and sociolinguistically speaking English in the future eludes any hard and

fast clear-cut prediction or rule. Neither normlessness nor hidebound adherence to norm or RP will carry the day or prevail. Fascinatingly enough, the future of English, thanks to inspiration from the two forces represented by Johnsonism and Oxonianism, both of which have their respective fortunes, will be an interplay between standard and change (the latter not being necessarily synonymous with deterioration, let alone disintegration). In a nutshell, these two approaches fuse in the stance that although the language is changing, its norm continues to be devotedly taught in schools and it pursues its role of guide and reference. Furthermore (as seen in Lewis' work which combines prescription and description), although grammar rules may change, a certain margin of acceptability continues to prevail beyond which outright rejection is met. In the future, English will be moulded through prescriptivity (proscriptivity) and descriptivity (liberalism) which will lead to a sort of linguistic homeostasis or stability.

This will be a very happy outcome indeed for it alone will provide adequate accommodation for both camps (purists and liberals), and the attendant reconciliatory sense of no-winner-no-loser between Johnsonists and Oxonianists will provide a common platform or forum for all and sundry to work hand-in-hand for the progress and prosperity of the language.

The prosperity of English tomorrow will be considerably enhanced by new-comers to the language who will swell the size of the English-speaking population. Globalisation will serve as a source of great impetus for the language given its ability to bring about a convergence of mankind in common values, criteria and the rating of performances. In this latter regard, it is interesting, for instance, to note that the German NGO, Transparency International collects and presents data *i.e.* the corruption perception index (CPI) in English.

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