# "How about Chatting on Skype, Mr. Shakespeare?"

# An argumentative look at Language Change

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## Abstract

Language change has been the province many researchers studying historical linguistics and sociolinguistics in the last two decades. While it appears that most, if not all, writers agree that all languages in the world change over time in line with the speakers' needs, it is argued that languages become disfigured in their linguistic development. This paper will consider a number of explanations for language change in opposition to the notion that languages decay over time. Taking the definition of language change as a point of departure, the paper proceeds to present the two types of language change before finally concluding that languages do not become mutilated throughout human history.

**Key Words:** language change, language decay, internal change, external change

## Introduction

The topic of language change has generated excitement and interest among language researchers for many years. While historical and linguistic literature refer to the existence of a notion that languages are getting worse from time to time (Curtius, as cited in Yule, 2006, p. 192), it is well-known fact that all languages are continually changing to suit different conditions and uses. History records many examples of linguistic change throughout the

world. The fact that Chaucer's fourteenth century English Canterbury Tales are linguistically different from Shakespeare's sixteenth century English texts shows how one language has changed in response to a changing environment (Yule, 2006, p.186).

Everything in this world, including language, is in a state of change (Aitchison, 2001, p. 3). As we live in a world of words (Fromkin et al., p. 3; as cited in Jil, 2007, p. 7), our conditions and needs drive language change. New products and experiences require new words. Internet and chatting did not exist in Shakespeare's time. The use of new words indicates that human languages are subject to change.

Language change refers to how the pronunciation, sentence structure and word meaning of language undergo alterations through time (Aitchison, 2003, p. 160). The study of language change is often associated with two branches of linguistics: historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. Historical linguists study the link between languages of the past and languages of today. Sociolinguists explore how languages are affected by society and changes in society. Furthermore, language change can be classified into two forms: internal change and external change. While internal change shows the gradual development of a language in its own history, external change has to do with how one language changes due to influences from other languages (Yule, 2006, p. 188).

**Internal change**

Every language has a history. As with other forms of human culture, changes are constantly occurring in the course of the language transmission from one generation to another. While most language scholars believe that linguistic change can not be observed due to its gradual process (Aitchison, 2003, p. 160), a number of researchers have attempted to identify the mechanism of language change. Yule (2006, pp. 188-190), for example, describes the internal change of language as taking place in three major linguistic aspects which include phonetics, syntactics and semantics.

Regarding the sound change, Yule (2006) points out that it occurs in three processes: metathesis, epenthesis and prothesis. Metathesis deals with the sound reversal in a word. Examples of metathesis can be seen in how the pronunciation of *frist* becomes *first*, how *hros* becomes *horse, etc*. Another process of sound change, called epenthesis, is concerned with the addition of a sound to the middle of a word as in *timber* (from *timr*) and *spindle* (from *spinel*). The so-called prothesis is related to the addition of a sound in a word. While this sound change is not found in English, it is evident in other languages. To illustrate this point, let us consider how the Spanish word *escuela* develops from the Latin word *schola* (pp. 188-189).

Just like a sound change, the way people structure their sentences has also undergone a substantial change through time. To quote Aitchison (2001), this syntactic change involves a linguistic "change in the form and order of words" (p. 98). While the Old English speakers simply used inflectional suffixes (-e and –est) to differentiate forms like *sealde* (he gave) and *sealdest* (you gave), these old forms of English are not used anymore by speakers of today. In addition, some word orders of the past are no longer considered grammatical. For instance, the Subject-Object-Verb order, as in *he hine geseah* (he saw him), or the Verb-Subject order as in *ferde he* (he travelled) (Yule, 2006, pp. 189-190).

One other aspect of language change, known as semantic change, has to do with word meanings. During the long process of language transmission, speakers of a language accept or invent new meanings for existing words. As a result, they stop using some words or stop using them in certain meanings. Dictionaries list some words like *foin* and *verily* as "obsolete" to indicate this process. In other cases, there are times when a speech community broadens or narrows the use of words. The present use of the word *dog*, for example, is a called a broadening process because the word *dog* used to be associated with one certain breed in the period of Old English. On the contrary, the Old English word *hund* (hound) is no longer used to describe all breeds by the Modern English speakers (Yule, 2006, p. 190).

From the above descriptions of internal change, it is clear that in the transmission of a language from one generation to another, language can be adapted to meet changes taking place in the life and culture of its speakers. While the child's speech differs to a certain degree from that of his parents' generation, changes of language use occur by following definite patterns in their adaptations. If linguistic change took place randomly, the organisation would break down and it would be impossible for people to communicate. In the simplest terms, language patterning serves a restorative function for language deviations and thus prevents the language from being disfigured.. As Aitchison (2003, p.164) puts it, "the patterns within language enable the mind to handle large amounts of linguistic information without strain".

**External change**

A variety of factors have triggered linguistic change over the centuries. While there is no consensus on the causes of language change, the majority of linguists describe linguistic change as occurring in response to economic, political and social contacts (Aitchison, 2001, p. 133). Language change occurs when a language community imports new words and phrases which are introduced by another language community. In other words, when speakers of different languages interact, it is natural for their languages to influence each other (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 257).

The most common way that languages influence each other is the borrowing of words. Loan words are words taken into a language from another language communicative purposes (Wardhaugh, 1992, p. 193). In the world's history, language influence often occurs as a result of international trade, colonial invasion and geographical spread (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 257). The large-scale importation of words from other languages into Indonesian, for example, has become a fundamental source for the Indonesian lexical extension.

Moslem influence from Arabic traders results in many Arabic words in Indonesian. They have contributed words like *waktu* (time), *jumat* (friday), *halal* (lawful) and *mesjid* (mosque). Dutch colonisation, lasting from the 17th century to the 20th, had an extensive impact on the Indonesian vocabulary. The Indonesian words *bioskop* (cinema), *handuk* (towel), *kulkas* (refrigerator), *rekening* (account), and *kantor* (office) are loanwords of Dutch origins. In addition, a significant number of Chinese words, brought by Chinese migrants, have also enriched the Indonesian lexicon. Examples of this influence include *bakso* (meatball), *pasar* (market), *mie* (noodle), and *tahu* (tofu).

Borrowings are concentrated in the areas where contact is most intense and where there is no exact equivalent in the native language (Bolinger & Sears, 1981, p. 257). In these circumstances, they are rapidly assimilated to the lexical patterns of the borrowing language to meet communicative needs and goals. Thus, while it is widely accepted that loanwords extend the vocabulary of the borrowing language through time, there is no ample evidence to suggest that they ruin the native language. The fact remains that there are good social and cultural advantages in borrowing words. Knowing scientific words and specialist terminologies will enable speakers of a language to keep up with the world's science and technology.

**Conclusion**

Just like everything in this world changes all the time, languages also undergo the same condition throughout history. The words and phrases people use depend not only on where they live but also when they live. While languages change as a natural process of development (Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1836; as cited in Aitchison, 2001, p. 3), they change either due to internal or external factors.

Languages change internally when their sounds, syntax and semantics undergo developmental alterations from their original forms over time. Since languages follow a

pattern in their change, there is a tendency that they gradually change to restore broken forms from the previous changes. This linguistic phenomenon provides strong evidence that languages do not become worse over time.

Another factor that provides a major cause of language change is the influence from other languages. Language influence has likely been common throughout much of human history as a result of language contact and spread. As such, speakers from different countries either introduce or adopt new terms to support their communicative needs. In this process, people benefit from loanwords in a way that they both enrich the vocabulary of the borrowing language and increase the knowledge of its speakers in terms of global interests.

Given the fact that language change is natural, inevitable and continuous, it follows that it is unquestionably right for languages to change. To paraphrase Aitchison (2001, p. 249), just as it is acceptable for humpback whales to make annual change of their songs, then it is equally acceptable for people to modify their languages through time. Languages do not become worse, they simply develop to suit the changing situations and needs of their speakers in both progressive and innovative manners. Curtius' misleading claim that languages decay over time shows that he had a poor understanding of the complexity of language change factors.

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