The future of English

Simon Horobin considers what the English language will look like in the future.

Users of English can often get very anxious about the state of the language; since the fifteenth century people have feared that English is in decline. A recent discussion about the state of English and its future, featuring John Humphrys, Simon Heffer, Mary Beard and Oliver Kamm, debated the claim that 'Between you and I, the English Language is going to the dogs'. Are these fears justified? What will the English language look like in a hundred years?

One way of trying to predict the future of a language is to look back at its history. Today the English language is widely employed as a lingua franca – a language used as a means of communication by speakers of different languages. This role finds parallels in the way the Latin language was used in pre-modern Europe. Having been spread by the success of the Roman Empire, Classical Latin was kept alive as a standard written medium throughout Europe long after the fall of the empire. But while 'Neo-Latin' continued to be used as the language of science and taxonomy up to the nineteenth century, the language used in

speech, known as 'Vulgar Latin', continued to change, forming new dialects, which in time gave rise to the modern Romance languages: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian and Italian.

Similar developments may be traced today in the use of English around the globe, especially in countries where it operates as a second language. Does this mean English will break up into different languages, which will ultimately become mutually unintelligible? Throughout the

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world new 'interlanguages' are emerging, in which features of English are mingled with those of other native tongues – this produces languages which are very different from the English spoken in Britain. In Singapore, a mixed language known as Singlish is spoken on the street and in the home, despite the best attempts of the Singaporean Government to promote the use of Standard British English

using the Speak Good English Movement. It seems quite possible that, as new generations grow up preferring Singlish to British English, this mixed variety will begin to supplant Standard English in more formal domains, on the television, and in newspapers.

The mixed variety called Chicano English, popularly termed Spanglish, is widely used among the more than 44 million members of America's Hispanic population, alongside several other Spanish-influenced dialects. Since it is spoken as a first language by people who are not bilinguals of Spanish and English, and has its own radio stations, TV talk shows, advertisements, and magazines, Chicano English has a strong case to be considered a language in its own right. Yet while many of its native speakers praise its flexibility and expressiveness, traditionalists continue to cast it in socially-divisive terms as an 'invasion' of one language by another.

In former British colonies, the appropriation and remodelling represented by mixed forms of English have political and ideological ramifications. Where the Standard English of Britain is linked with a nation's colonial past, mixed forms of English come to stand for greater political and national independence. The reappropriation and remodelling of English found in mixed languages, driven by both communicative and ideological factors, is likely to play a major role in the future development of the English language – or the English languages.

Standards
If we look back to the early twentieth century, it was the Standard English used in

England, spoken with the accent that was christened 'Received Pronunciation' (formerly 'Public School Pronunciation'), that carried prestige – both in Britain and throughout its empire. But today the largest concentration of native English speakers is found in the USA, and the influence of US English can be heard throughout the world – can I get a cookie, I'm good, did you eat, the movies, do the math, elevator, gotten, 'skedule' rather than 'shedule', 'leverage' rather than 'leeverage'. American usage is especially prevalent in youth slang – bae, on fleek – suggesting that this process of Americanization will increase in the future. US spellings such as disk and program are already preferred to British equivalents disc and programme in computing; the dominance of US usage in the digital world will likely lead to the wider acceptance of further American preferences, such as favorite, dialog, center.

At the turn of the twentieth century it was feared that English dialects were dying out with their speakers; as a response, projects were launched to collect and preserve endangered words before they were lost forever. A similar study was undertaken by the BBC in 2004; the BBC Voices Project turned up a rich range of regional terms, demonstrating the vibrancy and longevity of dialect vocabulary. But while numerous words were collected for 'young person in cheap trendy clothes and jewellery' throughout the country – pikey, charva, ned, scally – the South-Eastern chav was attested throughout England, thereby demonstrating the way features of the Estuary English spoken in the Greater London area are increasingly influencing local language, especially among the

younger generations. The spread of Estuary English is not the only threat to regional usage; rural dialect distinctions are also being reduced through a process known to dialectologists as 'levelling': dialects which were formerly distinct are becoming more similar. Does this mean that dialect differences are being lost entirely, pointing to a future in which everyone will speak Standard English, or perhaps Estuary English?

The early twentieth century was a period of regulation and fixity – the rules of Standard English were established and codified in grammar books and usage guides, such as the highly influential Dictionary of Modern English Usage by H.W. Fowler (1926), while Daniel Jones's authoritative English Pronouncing Dictionary appeared in 1917. This period also witnessed the inception and completion of the New [Oxford] English Dictionary on Historical Principles, published in a series of fascicles from 1884–1928. We still consult dictionaries and guides to usage today, although the availability of collaborative online resources such as Wiktionary and Urban Dictionary, where users are actively encouraged to offer their own definitions, marks a shift away from the lexicographer as the impersonal voice of authority towards a more openly personal and subjective mode of definition. Here the community of users is responsible for supplying definitions and quotations, as well as choosing which words are included. Where modern print dictionaries aim to supply neutral definitions that report the facts of contemporary usage, Urban Dictionary's contributions frequently reflect the subjective

bias and personal prejudices of its users.

For instance, the Urban Dictionary entry for nerd offers a definition from an openly defensive position – insisting on a clear distinction between the positive associations of nerd and the more negative connotations of geek: "A person who gains pleasure from amassing large quantities of knowledge about subjects often too detailed or complicated for most other people to be bothered with. Often mistaken for geeks, who aspire to become nerds, yet lack the intelligence, and end up giving nerds a bad name due to their poor social skills".

This form of definition returns to the approach to definition employed by Dr. Johnson in his Dictionary of the English Language (1755), where personal opinions and prejudices are openly offered; compare, for example, Johnson's definitions of Tory ("One who adheres to the antient constitution of the state, and the apostolic hierarchy of the church of England") and Whig ("The name of a faction"), which blatantly advertise his own political leanings.

The Victorian era oversaw the codification of the written language, which was monitored and enabled by the technology of print and the associated roles of copyeditor and proofreader. As the traditional printed book and newspaper is rapidly being replaced by publication in electronic form, we are witnessing a process of de-standardization, and the emergence of competing norms of usage. In the online world attitudes to consistency and correctness are considerably more relaxed: variant spellings are accepted and punctuation marks are either left out entirely, or they are repurposed to

convey a range of attitudinal information. In electronic discourse exclamation marks can carry a range of exclamatory functions: apologizing, challenging, thanking, agreeing, and showing solidarity. Capital letters are used to express anger, misspellings convey humour and establish group identity, and smiley-faces or emoticons express a range of reactions. Will the increasing development and adoption of emoji pictograms, which allow speakers to communicate without the need for language, mean that we will cease to communicate in English at all? ;-)

Emoji: the new face of English?
In December 2015, Oxford Dictionaries caused widespread consternation when it nominated the laughing with tears emoji as the word of the year. For many people this was yet further evidence of the English language's downward spiral. 'R.I.P. Language' ran the headline in The Telegraph. If Oxford Dictionaries could not be relied upon to distinguish between a word and a smiling face then the future looked bleak indeed. But it also prompted discussion about whether emoji could function as a language in their own right and thus replace English as a lingua franca. After all, one of the obvious benefits of such a system is that it can be understood by all users, irrespective of their native tongue.

The success of emoji is a direct consequence of the digital medium in which they are employed – their continued use will to some extent depend on subsequent technological developments. The early years of SMS texting spawned a series of logograms such as cu l8r, but these have largely fallen

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out of use with the advent of predictive texting and a lack of restrictions on the number and length of messages. Further changes in technology may lead to alternative forms of expressing emotions electronically, causing the demise of the emoji.

Emoji are currently flourishing in the digital world since they enable users to communicate some of the extra-linguistic cues such as facial expression, tone of voice, and hand gestures that help to convey meaning in face-to-face interactions. As such they replace some of the cruder methods of expressing non-linguistic interjections in electronic communication, such as the use of asterisks – *doh* – or the use of capital letters to raise your voice, and additional spaces to add a dash of condescension, e.g. I S T H A T C L E A R?

Another means of expressing attitude in electronic text is the emoticon (a blend of emotion and icon), or smiley. Emoticons first appeared in computer science bulletin boards in the early 1980s, where the combination of keyboard strokes : -) was used to mark jokes, while : - (indicated seriousness. Despite being dismissed by punctuation crusader Lynne Truss as a "paltry substitute for expressing oneself properly", emoticons developed to convey a wider range of emotions, including a straight face : | , and ones expressing surprise > : o and scepticism > : \

Emoji have come to replace the comparative crudity of the emoticon, enabling the representation of a far greater range of expressions with less ambiguity. Where the double smiley :-)) – used to express an increased level of hilarity – runs the risk of appearing to imply your recipient has a double chin, emoji offer a variety of grinning faces, including ones crying with laughter, or with smiling eyes. While a similar attitude may be rendered by the ubiquitous LOL ('laughing out loud') this has the disadvantage of being potentially misconstrued as 'lots of love', with embarrassing results. Acronyms describing increased levels of amusement, such as ROTFLMAO ('rolling on the floor laughing my ass off'), are less well-known and considerably less snappy.

But where the use of emoji has grown out of a radical move to shake off the constraints of written language, users remain restricted by the numbers and types of emoji available. The release of new emoji is subject to the approval of the Unicode Consortium, a kind of Académie Française for emoji. Such decisions are frequently

contentious, given the lack of representation of certain ethnic groups, their cultures, and religions; it is only recently that it has become possible to choose from a range of skin tones.

While recent updates have enabled greater cultural diversity, the representation of foods, clothes, and places of worship remain highly westernized. However representative emoji become, it is not possible to legislate for the cultural sensitivity of their users. The pine decoration emoji, representing kadomatsu – placed at the front of Japanese homes at New Year to welcome spirits in the hope of a plentiful harvest – is regularly used in the west as an offensive gesture, since it resembles a raised middle finger. The creativity with which users repurpose emoji is further apparent from the surprising success of the aubergine (or US eggplant) emoji, whose suggestive shape has made it a favourite amongst sexting teenagers.

But there is no danger of emoji replacing English as the global language. For emoji to become a fully-fledged language in its own right we would need a vastly greater number of characters. But most significantly, the system of emoji lacks any of the grammatical rules that are necessary for the formation of more complex constructions. At present the system remains too crude to represent all but the most straightforward concepts, as is apparent from the rendering of Herman Melville's classic novel Moby Dick in emoji. In Emoji Dick, the novel's famous opening sentence "Call me Ishmael" is rendered somewhat cryptically by a series of icons showing a telephone, a man with
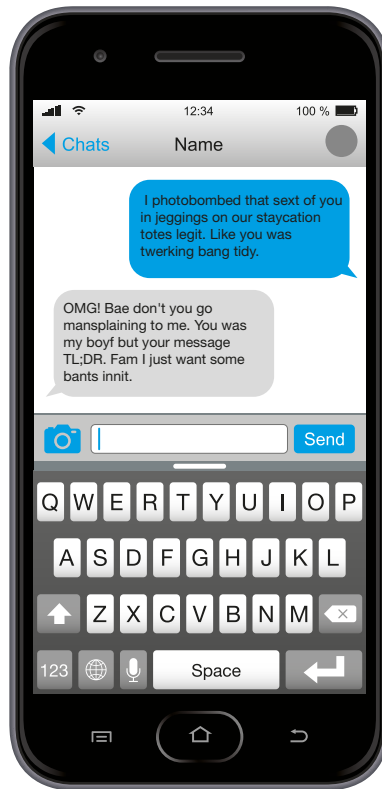
a moustache, a boat, a whale, and an OK sign.

Language and technology
The fast-changing world of digital technology is also responsible for the coining and spreading of neologisms; recent updates to Oxford Dictionaries give a flavour: mansplaining, bae, boyf, chatbot, mumblecore, forumite, bants, TL;DR. These examples represent methods of word formation that have long been productive in English. Clipped forms like bants, bae and boyf are formed in precisely the same way as other school slang shortenings such as maths, gym, lab, exam – all of which are now entirely unobjectionable.

Acronyms and initialisms, like NATO and UK, have been in regular use in Standard English for some time. While most of these forms are explicitly designed for keyboard use, some are passing into the spoken language. LOL began life as an initialism in which each letter was sounded – 'L-O-L' – and added to messages to indicate humour. But now it is more commonly pronounced as an acronym and is commonly heard in teenage speech. This is no different from the development in the use of V-A-T, or VAT, or even scuba (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) and radar (Radio Detection and Ranging), whose origins as acronyms are now largely forgotten. Other acronyms that are regular features of teenage slang now passing into more general usage include FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), FOGO (Fear of Going Out) and YOLO (You Only Live Once).

Blends are also traditional methods of word formation in English (think of brunch, sitcom, Oxbridge); it was Lewis Carroll in 1871 (or rather his creation

Humpty Dumpty) who coined the termed portmanteau, which he uses to explain the word slithy – "It's like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed up into one word". But while blends have a long history in English word formation, the changing world of new technologies has seen a huge increase in their use. New technologies themselves are frequently named using words formed in this way, often as a means of reflecting their origins in modifications of existing technologies or gadgets: podcast, webinar, phablet. But, as the referendum in which the British will vote on whether to leave the European Union approaches – popularly termed Brexit (British + exit) – we should remember that it is not only teenagers and technologists that favour such methods of word formation.

While youth slang may be more visible today than in the past – thanks to new technologies and social media – it remains likely that their lifespan will be short-lived. Since much youth slang is concerned

with the definition of a cool subculture, directly opposed to the adult world of Standard English, that very prominence – which leads to their adoption by adults and inclusion in dictionaries – also serves to sound their death knell.

In conclusion, the future of English seems assured, but it is likely to be one of multiple Englishes, as new varieties emerge throughout the world, and new technologies spawn new modes of communication. Just as the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons more than a thousand years ago cannot be understood today without special study, the same may be true for scholars looking back at the English of 2016 a thousand years from now. ¶

Simon Horobin is Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Magdalen College. He is the author of Does Spelling Matter? (OUP, 2013) and a number of books on the history of English and the language of Chaucer. His latest book is How English Became English: A Short History of a Global Language (OUP, 2016).

Find out more

Books
David Crystal (2006) *Language and the Internet* 2nd edition, Cambridge University Press.

Simon Horobin (2016) *How English Became English: A Short History of a Global Language*, Oxford University Press.

Online
Find out about voices from across the UK at bbc.co.uk/voices.

To browse a thorough overview of emoji, visit emojipedia.org.

Read the emoji version of *Moby Dick* at emojidick.com.