

# Predicting the future of English

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Considerations when engaging with the public

## Predicting the future of English

Predicting the future of English has been an exercise linguists have engaged with in academic settings for a long time, e.g. Sélincourt (1928), Jagger (1940), Quirk (1972) and Kortmann (2001). Mair (2013: 314) remarks that ‘in spite of the known risks involved in the task, there is no dearth of prophets in the linguistic community’. While he does not discuss the ‘known risks’ in his chapter, he does show that a lot of these predictions have not become true over the course of time.

Various linguists have questioned the (linguistic) value of making such predictions. Crystal (1995: 112), for example, states that ‘[p]erhaps the only safe generalization to be made is that predictions about the future of English have a habit of being wrong’, while Labov (2007) states that ‘linguistics is not a predictive science’ and that language change is ‘irrational, violent, and unpredictable’ (Labov, 1994: 10). Graddol (1997: 16), discussing trends in the development of English worldwide, is equally critical:

identifying trends even in the present can be remarkably problematic. And although statistical information is a primary resource for the futurologist, anyone trying to forecast the future of English will encounter problems in locating and using statistics associated with relevant worldwide trend data.

Szmrecsanyi (2014) argues that linguistic changes are as unpredictable as any other societal changes. Similarly, Labov (1994: 21) states that ‘sudden and unique events’ such as political changes which result in ‘radical substitutions of one prestige norm for another, and consequent long-term effects on the language’ (Labov, 1994: 24) make the development of English unpredictable, and thus – it would seem – not worth speculating about.

## Predicting the future and public engagement in the UK

Academics in the UK are now advised to engage with the public to communicate research results and generally raise interest in linguistic themes. The National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2017) defines public engagement as ‘the myriad of ways in which the activity and benefits of higher education and research can be shared with the public. Engagement is by definition a two-way process, involving interaction and listening, with the goal of generating mutual benefit’.

Somewhat ironically, given the preceding discussion, one topic which invariably sparks vivid discussion among the wider audience is that of predicting the future of English in the UK, and in particular whether certain urban dialects will survive or disappear. Articles featuring linguists are found on a regular basis in national newspapers, in which the linguists make predictions about changes that might happen. Here are three examples of headlines from recent years:

1. British regional accents ‘still thriving’: Britain’s regional accents are becoming more widespread

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despite the increasingly homogeneous nature of society, according to academic studies (Savill: *The Telegraph*, January 3, 2010)

2. Geordie's still alreot: Some accents are becoming more distinctive and others more widespread (*The Economist*, June 2, 2011)
3. Geordie accent could disappear, experts claim (Sunderland: *Consett Magazine*, October 2, 2016)

Even though in newspaper articles like these it is often claimed that the stories are based on research, in fact the articles are usually based on off-the-cuff comments by linguists who have been asked by journalists what they think will happen to the different dialects in the UK. Just like the predictions regarding the future of English made by linguists for a linguistic audience mentioned above, these comments are highly speculative and are no more than educated guesses.

This co-opting of academic opinion is potentially highly problematic, given that, as Eckert (2013: 12) has pointed out, 'parties such as the media, government, and publishers have their own interests in language, which may be at odds with those of the research participants (or researchers), and can have a considerable effect on visibility, public attitudes, and funding'. With topics like linguistics or the humanities more broadly, some newspapers (particularly those with a broadly right-wing agenda such as *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* or *The Daily Telegraph*) seem to have a tendency to twist academics' views in order to push their own agenda, which can as a consequence potentially harm and marginalize minority groups such as immigrants. One example from 2016 in particular shows how quickly predictions about the future of English can be instrumentalized in this way by the press.

In September 2016, a report commissioned by HSBC (Watt & Gunn, 2016) was released, in which predictions were made about the development of English in Britain and the implications of this for the development of speech recognition technology. Watt and Gunn (2016: 4) state that they 'make a number of predictions about how some key accents of British English might sound in half a century's time'. In the report the linguists briefly discuss the homogenization of British dialects, and mention changes which are currently observed in several major cities in the UK (e.g. London, Liverpool, Glasgow and Newcastle) and which they could imagine continuing:

Some of the changes we identify have in fact already started. In other cases we're being more speculative, but by looking at how English has changed over the

last 50 years, we can identify patterns that seem to repeat' (Watt & Gunn, 2016: 4).

One feature which they mention for London is an increase of TH-fronting over the next 50 years. TH-fronting in British English is currently a somewhat socially stigmatized feature associated with Cockney speakers, but it can now be found in places as far away from London as Carlisle and Glasgow (cf. Jansen, 2014; Stuart-Smith & Timmins, 2006). The original passage in the report reads:

In future we're likely to see the standard 'th' sounds being lost altogether. Fin and thin will no longer be distinguished even in careful speech, and bother will always rhyme with hover. This may come as a relief to foreign learners of English, who struggle with the dentals more than any other pair of sounds.

The *Daily Mail* 'reinterpreted' this statement into the headline 'Is immigration killing off the Queen's English?' The headline was then shortly afterwards modified to 'What do you fink of dis? The 'th' sound will disappear from speech within 50 years as urban dialects spread'. *The Telegraph* ran a story titled 'Th sound to vanish from English language by 2066 because of multiculturalism, say linguists'. Given that this story ran about three months after the EU referendum and that EU immigration was an argument for people to vote Leave, it is hard to see these headlines as anything other than supporting xenophobic views,<sup>1</sup> which Watt and Gunn did not intend and which actually contradict Wolfram's (2016) description of the linguist's role: 'Language is often used as a tool of exclusion and social oppression. As social beings who are linguists, we have a responsibility to address language-related inequalities – and our professional knowledge helps us'.

The comment by Watt and Gunn (2016) that non-native speakers of English struggle to produce [θ] is not problematic at all from a linguistic point of view. Linguists working on changes in British English varieties know that TH-fronting is already a change in progress in many varieties as we speak and that phonetic properties play a role in the instability of TH (see Setter, 2016 for further discussion). Linguists also know that the predictions made are speculations and that language changes all the time; in fact, only if a language changes can it said to be alive. However, for newspapers which push a conservative agenda which includes the deliberate pathologising of immigrants, a seemingly unproblematic but unfortunate comment made in the report was used to transmit a message which was never intended this way. Eckert (2013: 25)

sums the problem up as follows: ‘we are engaged in a meaning-making enterprise, and our ethical responsibility involves not just behaving well as we gather data, but doing what we can to make our participants’ cooperation worthwhile’.

Obviously, these newspaper articles are not addressed at linguists but at a general readership who will not necessarily understand that linguists’ predictions are no more than educated guesses. Burrige and Bergs (2017: 21) make the point that ‘from a socio-psychological perspective, any sort of change often leads to worries, scepticism and even fears and anxiety. And language change is no different in this respect’. Hence there is a discrepancy between what linguists think of language change and what lay people are made to believe based on certain media reports. In the particular case discussed above, public engagement by academics partially<sup>2</sup> led to the spreading of false information, i.e. the opposite of what public engagement is supposed to do.

## Making predictions or discussing language change?

I am not opposing engaging with the public; on the contrary, I share Wolfram’s (2012: 111) view that ‘[i]f linguists firmly believe that understanding the nature of language is central to understanding human cognition and behavior, then we owe it to the profession to have more of a presence in public life’. Academics should seek opportunities to engage with the public, such as by having language-focused events in schools, organising exhibitions and arranging workshops for teachers or carers. There are a number of good examples of highly successful engagement with the public, e.g. blogs like Lynne Murphy’s (2006–2017) *Separated by a Common Language*, the *Linguistics Research Digest* by Sue Fox et al. (2011–2015) and Bas Aarts’s Survey of English Usage (2012–2017) *Englicious* website, which includes material for teaching English grammar in schools. However, linguists might want to think twice about making predictions for the future of English; as these predictions are not usually based on actual research, they do not hold true in many cases and the public does not actually benefit from these predictions. On the contrary, there are many linguists who are opposing the idea of predicting the future of English as an academic exercise. Why should this then be a good engagement exercise?

Linguists also need to bear in mind that most people who read these articles have not had any linguistics training and are therefore potentially less

able to question the content of newspaper articles. Referring back to Burrige and Bergs’ point that social changes, including language change, often lead to ‘worries, scepticism and even fears and anxiety’, the aim of engaging with the public as a meaningful enterprise should be to engage with them about the process of language change rather than presenting the audience with highly speculative end results without explaining how language change works. Hence, my proposition is to engage with the public about language change rather than assuming that they know that language change is a natural process in English, as it is in every other living language.

## Notes

- 1 The newspaper articles do not or only marginally comment on immigration as the reason for language change. However, as we know, headlines are the most important part in newspapers and the content of the article is often ignored.
- 2 Other newspapers such as *The Guardian* ran news stories on the basis of the commissioned report but did not mention this point.

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