

# Blaming the media? Folk attitudes towards the state of the English language and its 'wrongdoers'

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A further invitation to contribute to questions studied by the 'Bridging the Unbridgeable Project' at the Leiden University Centre for Linguistics

Every now and then one stumbles across complaints about the decaying state of the English language. British English is under threat from American English. English is dying or just on the verge of drawing its last breath. Recurring allegations similar to these are made by worried, albeit self-opinionated, speakers who are not only quick to declare the time of death of English, but also to point the finger at who they think is to blame for these developments. As part of my PhD project on usage attitudes in British English, I included the somewhat general question 'What do you think about the state of the English language?' in an online questionnaire which was completed by 230 informants from Great Britain in order to obtain an insight into commonly held beliefs about British English. This particular question generated answers from 176 informants who shared their personal beliefs, or rather fears, about the state of the English language. In this article, I would like to share some of the insights gained through the preliminary analysis of these answers and invite you to contribute by completing a survey on this topic.

First of all, it needs to be mentioned that not all 176 informants decried the inexorable decay of British English, but due to space limitations I will focus on mainly negative statements. While some of the answers contain just a simple negative evaluation of the current state of British English, as example (1) shows below, a great number of informants go further into detail.

1) I have noticed a sad decline. (Female, above 60, retired)

Analysing the answers, several patterns can be distinguished. Besides blaming an inadequate education system and the negative influence of speakers' peer environments, one pattern which became visible deals with the role of the media. The media is often blamed for declining language standards as described by Jean Aitchison (1998), who mentions the so-called 'dirty fingernails fallacy' according to which not enough attention is paid to language details by journalists. With new technological advancements, this fallacy can also be extended to the social media, which is frequently accused of accelerating the decay of English. Examples (2) to (4) illustrate the 'dirty fingernails fallacy' with regard to different media institutions such as



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the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC), the broadsheet press and Facebook.

- 2) Awful. The BBC pronunciation unit should nowadays be called its pronunkiation unit. “gonna” for “going to” has become one of its standard desecrations. Newspapers are better, but spellcheckers seem to predominate, and spellcheckers never seem to be cheked [sic]. (Male, 51–60 years old, proof reader)
- 3) Good, fluent use of English still continues – but there seems to be a wider gulf between this and colloquial usages, and definitely a lack of awareness and understanding of received usage. Much of this slapdash development must be the trickle-down effect of the media - the broadsheet press are particularly at fault, partly in an attempt to be fashionable and capture the young. . . . (Female, above 60, retired)
- 4) The places that I see the worst mangling of the English language are Facebook and comments sections of websites. Some comments have brely [sic] any words spelt correctly and use little to no punctuation, which is sometimes a bit worrying! I tend to ignore comments with really bad spelling and little knowledge of grammar as I tend to assume that the content of the post isn't going to be worthwhile [sic] deciphering. (Female, 18–25 years old, Librarian)

Blaming the media for declining language standards contradicts a view frequently held by society according to which media institutions are also considered language guardians whose interest lies in maintaining the standard language (Bell, 1983: 30–31; Butterfield, 2008: 142). Having to tread a fine line between linguistic prescriptivism and descriptivism is acknowledged by John Allen, author of the 2003 *BBC News Styleguide*, who states that some members of the BBC's audience are convinced to know better and do not hesitate to express their disappointment with the BBC. Consequently, striking a balance between linguistic

‘conservatism and radicalism’ is a delicate task for the BBC (2003: 8–9).

This ambivalent view of the role of the media as language guardian on the one hand and ‘wrongdoer’ on the other is also reflected in the views of lay people. Unlike the previous examples which highlighted the media's role as a ‘wrongdoer’, example (5) illustrates how media, in this specific case the BBC, catches up with the language use of society.

- 5) Any language is dynamic and therefore evolves with popular usage. In the '80s and '90s americanisms [sic] became common and popular (eg even the BBC adopted ‘meet with’ where previous British English had always been just ‘meet’)

While keeping up with the language use of society is sometimes viewed as a relaxing and losing of standards, the media's role in the standardisation process cannot be neglected as it serves as one of the main purveyors of standard language. When the media decides to follow descriptive usage, prescriptivists will take notice. How severe the consequences of this might be needs to be discussed further. So therefore please let us know what you think about the role of the media in the usage debate by visiting our blog and filling in a short survey which can be found at <http://bridgingtheunbridgeable.com/english-today/>.

## References

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