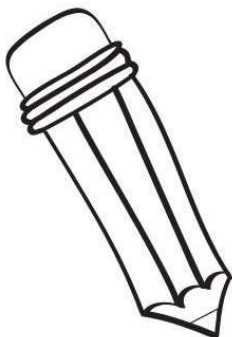


HIGH STORRS SIXTH FORM BRIDGING WORK



2023

*English
Language*



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...there's more than one way to put two words together. Language isn't just rules and words, but communication..." Lane Greene- 'You Are What You Speak' 2011

A key part of our work as A Level students is understanding and discussing discourses around the development and change of the English Language. **Descriptivists** such as Lane Greene or David Shariatmadari put language change in a positive historical context. The English Language has always changed, adapted and (more importantly) survived they say: in fact, it's one of the elements that makes our language so interesting and endlessly fascinating!

The other side of this argument however would be **the prescriptivist approach** as espoused by writers such as Lynne Truss in her book 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves'. Prescriptivists adhere to the idea that the English Language has a rich, rule based heritage and this must be adhered to; fighting the evil harbingers of change such as technology and slang.

Task One: You will be expected to complete **detailed notes** on the key terms/theorists below and bring them to your first lesson in English Language. You will need to have completed the background reading in order to access the ideas in the lesson. Your notes will be **formally checked** by your teacher in class.

Task Two: After you have taken detailed notes, read the articles on the following pages and annotate them for any familiar ideas/links to theorists. Again, this will be **formally checked** by your teacher in class

Key Terms:

Prescriptivism

Descriptivism

Grammar Pedantry

Polysemy

Language purists

Standard English

Semantic change

Theorists (and what they say about language change):

Jean Attie's Reith Lectures (with reference to the following theories: 'crumbling castle', 'damp spoon' and 'infectious disease')

John McWhorter

Robert Lane Greene

David Crystal

Steven Pinker

Article A:

Lost for words: As terms like 'cloud' and 'tweet' lose their true meanings in our digital age, a glorious evocative elegy for the richly beautiful but vanishing language of rural Britain

Horatio Clare The Daily Mail

Among my first words, apparently, were 'Jack' and 'tractor'. Jack was the farmer who taught my parents the secrets of hill-farming, and what country boy does not love the sound, the sight, the magnificence of tractors?

The vocabulary of our life on the sheep-covered Black Mountains of South Wales was a glossary of wonder and intrigue to me. Our year was a turning calendar of haymaking, shearing, dipping, tupping and lambing. Each word was spoken in a way that invoked its work in barns and yards and [the open](#) air. In those words remain the sweet smell of dusk in the meadows, tractors to haul the hay; the chatter of shearing machines, fleeces peeling off the ewes in creamy waves and the reek of lanolin, rivers of animals belling in the lane on the way to being dipped — a country childhood locks sensations in language.

I cannot remember a time when I did not know what a buzzard was, or an oak tree, or a wren. Inside these words are the wheel of the hawk's wings, the spread of branches waxy green with clustered leaves, and the cock-tailed darting of the tiny bird.

It was reported this week that words we used to use to describe nature now speak instead of technology.

When did you last use 'tweet' to describe birdsong, 'web' to mean a spider's creation, 'stream' to mean running water and 'cloud' to mean vapour overhead? According to a study by the University of Leeds, which looked at datasets of informal conversations, all mentions of the word 'tweet' in the Nineties referred to birdsong, while one in 100 do now. Seven in ten uses of 'web' in the same period referred to spiders: this has become one in ten. 'Field', 'fibre', 'cloud', 'branch' and 'net' have all changed meanings, too, co-opted for commercial or technological ends.

This is the living mutability of language, the way it shifts to keep tight its embrace with the world. But there is an edge of loss to this change. Now, the speaker is not contemplating a sky or the running twists of water, the slender might of a spider's web, or pasture, trees or the music of birds. He or she refers to a 'virtual' world, conjured in pixels.

What the tech firms call 'disruption', when they destroy old trading networks, is one of the forces of our time. Populist politicians disrupt electoral tribes; the Leeds study shows that technology disrupting language itself.

In so doing, we have lost a little of what connected us to our ancestors and their way of life.

Take 'cloud'. It comes from the Old English 'clut', meaning a mass of rock or earth, a hill, possibly related to 'clod'. This seems magical. Our forbears looked at the puffy heaps of cumulonimbus sailing through the blue and saw them as massy hills in the sky. Heavy grey rain skies are also caught in 'clut' or 'clod', rock-heavy, water-bearing strata.

To children now, they will still be clouds, but the word will also and increasingly mean data somewhere in someone else's charge, part of the world of computers where power belongs not to Nature, God or the unknowable, but to a technological elite.

In this transfer of meanings, lines of beauty and history are disrupted.

Article B:

Why it's time to stop worrying about the decline of the English language (*excerpts*)

David Shariatmadari The Guardian

"It is frightening to think where all this might lead. If English is in such a bad state now, what will things be like in a generation's time? We must surely act before it is too late."

There is something perplexing about claims like this. By their nature, they imply that we were smarter and more precise in the past. Seventy-odd years ago, people knew their grammar and knew how to talk clearly. And, if we follow the logic, they must also have been better at organising, finding things out and making things work.

Since the end of the Second World War, the English-speaking world has grown more prosperous, better educated and more efficiently governed, despite an increase in population. Most democratic freedoms have been preserved and intellectual achievement intensified.

Linguistic decline is the cultural equivalent of the boy who cried wolf, except the wolf never turns up. Perhaps this is why, even though the idea that language is going to the dogs is widespread, nothing much has been done to mitigate it: it's a powerful intuition, but the evidence of its effects has simply never materialised. That is because it is unscientific nonsense.

There is no such thing as linguistic decline, so far as the expressive capacity of the spoken or written word is concerned. We need not fear a breakdown in communication. Our language will always be as flexible and sophisticated as it has been up to now. Those who warn about the deterioration of English haven't learned about the history of the language, and don't understand the nature of their own complaints – which are simply statements of preference for the way of doing things they have become used to. The erosion of language to the point that "ultimately, no doubt, we shall communicate with a series of grunts" (John Humphrys) will not, cannot, happen. The clearest evidence for this is that warnings about the deterioration of English have been around for a very long time.

The hard truth is that English, like all other languages, is constantly evolving. It is the speed of the change, within our own short lives, that creates the illusion of decline. Because change is often generational, older speakers recognise that the norms they grew up with are falling away, replaced with new ones they are not as comfortable using. This cognitive difficulty doesn't feel good, and the bad feelings are translated into criticism and complaint. We tend to find intellectual justifications for our personal preferences, whatever their motivation. If we lived for hundreds of years, we would be able to see the bigger picture. Because when you zoom out, you can appreciate that language change is not just a question of slovenliness: it happens at every level, from the superficial to the structural.

Any given language is significantly reconfigured over the centuries, to the extent that it becomes totally unrecognisable. But, as with complex systems in the natural world, there is often a kind of homeostasis: simplification in one area can lead to greater complexity in another. What stays the same is the expressive capacity of the language. You can always say what needs to be said.

English Language reading list – suggested titles

Please note- there is absolutely no imperative to buy and/or read all of the books below. You may want to see if your local library has some of the following titles or if you can find a few second hand.

Jean Aitchison – ‘Language Change: Progress or Decay’

Melvyn Bragg – ‘The Adventure of English’ – language change

Bill Bryson – ‘Mother Tongue’

Deborah Cameron – ‘The Myth of Mars and Venus’ - gender

Jenny Cheshire – ‘What is Sociolinguistics?’

Dan Clayton – ‘Attitudes to Language’

Jennifer Coates – ‘Men Talk’ – gender

Ben and David Crystal – ‘You Say Potato’ – accents and dialects

David Crystal - ‘How Language Works’

David Crystal – ‘A Little Book of Language’

David Crystal – ‘Encyclopedia of the English Language’

David Crystal – ‘The Fight for English’ – attitudes to language change and diversity

Susie Dent – ‘Modern Tribes’ – language and social groups

Janet Holmes – ‘An Introduction to Sociolinguistics’

Robert Lane Greene- ‘Talk On The Wild Side’

Robert Lane Greene- ‘You Are What You Speak’

Gretchen McCulloch – ‘Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language’ – language change

Lynne Murphy – ‘Prodigal Tongue’ – Dialect, American and British Englishes

Steven Pinker – ‘The Language Instinct’ – child language acquisition plus some sociolinguistics

Paul Simpson – ‘Language and Power’

Felicity Titjen – ‘Language and Gender’

Various authors – ‘Language - A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories’

(Copies of most of these are available in school)

Wider reading – language magazines:

Emagazine – from the English and Media Centre

Babel – from Huddersfield University

Both are full of interesting articles about language topics, which are aimed at students. Some content is available to read for free on-line, or ask for the High Storrs login details to get full access to Emagazine.

Online sources of wider reading for English Language – blogs, podcasts, etc.:

- <https://anchor.fm/lexispodcast/> - Lexis Podcast – lively and useful review of language issues
- <http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk/> Detailed, readable, aimed specifically at 'A' Level students
- http://www.slate.com/articles/podcasts/lexicon_valley.html Excellent podcasts on language variation and change
- <https://debuk.wordpress.com/> Deborah Cameron's language and gender blog
- <https://mashedradish.com/> Blog on word origins by John Kelly
- <http://www.superlinguo.com/> Posts, articles and podcasts about linguistic topics
- <https://stancarey.wordpress.com/> Various English language topics
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b040hx6v> Word of Mouth - BBC radio discussions and documentaries on language
- <https://www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language> Guardian newspaper language blog
- <http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/contents.htm#langua> Andrew Moore's guide to 'A' Level English Language topics.

Online sources of wider reading for English Language – Twitter accounts:

- [@robdrummond](#) Linguist at Manchester Met University - various articles and opinions on language in the news
- [@EngLangBlog](#) Language-related stories from the media
- [@paulkerswill](#) Research and opinions on dialects and accents
- [@MerriamWebster](#) Word meanings, histories and controversies
- [@lynneguist](#) Mostly comparing British and American English

- [@lexiconvalley](#) Language blog and podcast
- [@susie_dent](#) Word meanings and histories, plus links to language in the news
- [@OxfordWords](#) Insightful blogs and articles about words and languages
- [@wordspinster](#) Blog on language and gender by the linguist Deborah Cameron