English Language: The Process Of Language Change

Linguist Felicity Cox states, “Linguistic change runs parallel with social change”, this reflects the belief that language change is a result of societal change.

There are many changes shown throughout history that have shaped the English language to what it is as we know it today, with the invention of the printing press and codification introducing grammar styles and books to the Early Modern English period (1500AD-1800AD).

Influential figures in English like grammarians have introduced new approaches and attitudes to language, for example, descriptivist Samuel Johnson dictated the use of language with the Dictionary of the English Language. As history and society progressed, a separation occurred with English languages globally, with a divide between American English and English holding different approaches within its spelling systems. These attitudes within language change have varied greatly, with the passionate debate of prescriptivism and descriptivism still thriving today among many linguists and grammarians.

After the decline of Old English and the coming of early modern English came the rise of codification from 1500AD - 1800AD onwards. The remnants of Old English phased out and many grammarians such as the likes of William Jones and Samuel Johnson helped within the codification of language.

The codification of English involves the compiling of language and providing a systematic approach to display the fundamentals of the language through dictionaries, style guides and more.

There has also been evidence of standardization present within dialects to which a common standard has developed. Standardization became prevalent with inventions, such as the printing press in 1476 (William Caxton). In 1762, prescriptivist Robert Lowth told England the ‘correct way’ to use grammar and language with the publishing of ‘A Short Introduction to English Grammar’.

Standardization then slowly began to develop within different dialects today, especially with the diffusion of technology, enabling those of different descents to converse at a rapid rate.

The changes that the printing press brought to the English language within the industrial revolution coined many new words such as watt, bacterium and centigrade. It was that historical period that demonstrates how society adapts to technological changes and proves to continue to do so today.

Within society, there are cultural differences that bring change to our language and show how we adapt towards one another. Despite both countries using Standard English, there are some phonological and phonetical differences in which language is used between Britain and the United States of America. Notably, it is the spelling system that typically sets apart the two countries.

In the subsystem of morphology, there is an outstanding difference between spelling of words such as ‘flavor’, ‘color’, whereas English would add a ‘u’ between the ‘o’ and ‘r’ to form ‘flavour’ and ‘colour’, as well as the use of ‘z’ in words such as 'realize’ and ‘fertilize’ compared to counterparts, ‘realise’ and ‘fertilise’. These suffixes sometimes cause confusion, especially with 2nd language learners and children that may rely on technology that may utilise the more common, American spelling system.

Within the use of over-generalization common in language, there are words that can be used in speech with a use of the semantic shift, for example, the word ‘literally.’ This word is defined by the Oxford Dictionary, to mean ‘in a literal manner or sense’, but has since been use as a colloquialism to mean ‘absolutely, utterly, completely’. This colloquial use of ‘literally’ has become a common norm, especially within the younger generation as colloquial language is common within the discourse and is often used to strongly emphasise a point.

Attitudes to language change tend to vary across a broad range of demographics such as age, culture, professions and identity. Those from a younger demographic (approximately 14-20 years) tend to be more open to the idea of descriptivism and that the way language is perceived as a personal thing.

Additionally, descriptivism has the potential to change easily within breaking standard language rules, seen as a way of it progressing.

Moreover, older generations (approximately 60 years) may have a more close-minded approach to language change as it has faced a lot of changes throughout generations.

Those who are older also may have ideas that language is to be used strictly within its proper form set out from dictionaries and other grammar tools.

There is an avid and constant debate over how to use language between prescriptivists and descriptivists. However, with the regular change of language, it is difficult to conclude that there should be a specific use of the English language. Furthermore, is the different cultures and demographics that communicate in different manners connect society as a whole, which is a difficult factor to manipulate.

Australian English has a particular attitude towards language change, the magnitude and rise of multiculturalism in Australia have peaked, and these new cultures bring new accents, slang and way of conversing with each other. This diversity has gained a variety of accents such as the Chinese-Australian and Malaysian-Australian accent adding variety to the phonetic sound of the Australian accent. Furthermore, there is a common colloquial use of language in Australian English within daily discourse with the common use of slang, commonly shortening words such as ‘service station’ to ‘servo’ and ‘afternoon’ to ‘arvo’, this slang has become a staple for Australians and the global perception.

In conclusion, language change is a continual process developing within society with varying perspectives. Although standardization of the English language from the works of many grammarians, it is shown that as society progresses and younger generations arise, that there is a variation to be shown in the manner in which language is used, which can be based on technology and societal issues present at the time. Alongside this, the melding of cultures worldwide continues to progress in Australia, with the morphological and phonetical inspiration

taken from both the UK and USA, alongside other countries. The debate of prescriptivism and descriptivism may still hold strong, however, within the variety of viewpoints of culture and varying perspectives of the necessity for language reform, language copes fine as it is currently as the variation between culture and viewpoints helps in the progression of society as a whole.