

Modern English is Passé, Global English Replaced it Without Our Permission

By: Judy M. Thompson

Change is part of nature, it is part of life and it is part of language. So it is with English. Email, text, blog and Twitter are modern day forms of English, totally foreign to adults half a generation away. The English language is no stranger to change. Every 500 years, English transforms as radically as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The time is up for Modern English and change is upon us. Native English speakers struggling daily with confusing and rapidly evolving lingo we can't stop or control. Our generation is in the middle of a seismic language shift toward **Global English**.

A brief glimpse at the evolution of English so far paints a clear picture of the language, how it got to be this way and where it is going.

1,500 years ago English began to emerge from Germanic origins when the Angles, Saxons and Jutes crossed the North Sea and conquered Briton. In 800 AD, Norse was added and the first form of English - **Old English** - came to be. Few scholars today can decipher this sample of the first incarnation of the English language.

***Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum si þin nama
gehalgod tobecume þin rice gewurþe þin willa***

In 1066 William the Conqueror defeated the Anglo-Saxons and it was lights out for phase one of the English language. French was added to Old English and the result was a new form of the language and the beginning of the next 500-year era called **Middle English**. The same passage as above is a little more recognizable by 1384 AD in the Middle English period.

***Ovre fadir þat art in hevenes halwid be þi name
þi revme or kyngdom come to be***

Until the mid-15th century, few people other than the clergy or aristocracy were literate. After a thousand years of evolution as an oral language, one man changed everything. William Caxton introduced the printing press, made English widely available to commoners in a written form, and single-handedly ushered in **Modern English**. Although Caxton struggled valiantly to reconcile the 40+ sounds regularly used in English with the 26 symbols in the Latin alphabet, he was not particularly successful. The resulting disastrous English spelling is something the world still grapples with today. Printed in 1611, the previous passage is easily recognizable.

***Ovr father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come***

Except for distinguishing “u” and “v” as separate letters, Modern English has changed little since 1478 when William Caxton carved it in stone.

English has enjoyed some exciting times during its 500-year reign. The British naval dynasty gave Briton access to the world where “The sun never set on British soil.” Everywhere the sailors went, they brought back words such as:

- zero, chocolate, sugar and alcohol from Arabia
- shampoo and pajamas from India
- ketchup and tycoon from China
- gum and paper from Egypt...and on and on.

English’s penchant for adopting words from other languages that started in 800 AD with the German and Norse had expanded to include every major language on Earth.

The elastic quality of English allowed for individuals to make significant contributions to the language as well. William Shakespeare coined the phrase, “coined the phrase,” as well as 2,000 other words and phrases. Sir Isaac Newton published *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* or ‘Principia’ in 1687 and gave us “gravity,” “mass,” “velocity”... in *one fell swoop* (oops, Shakespeare again) establishing English as the language of science for centuries to come. Britain dominated as a world power for hundreds of years, and then in 1945 at the close of WWII passed the torch to the United States of America. These back-to-back English-speaking super powers were *the makings of* (Shakespeare) English as the international language of commerce.

Today there are more than a million words in the English language. It is the largest language in the world by far, and it grows larger every day. “Double, double,” “Gonna” and “24/7” are relatively new additions to the dictionary. The average high school graduate has a reading vocabulary of about 300,000 words (much fewer for speaking) and a Ph.D. about 600,000. These are daunting numbers for anyone who wishes to learn or teach English as a Second Language (ESL).

But it is almost midnight for the era that began with William Caxton in 1478. After exactly 500 years, Modern English sovereignty is all but over. In 1981 Bill Gates launched Microsoft and the language will never be the same. Here is the Lord’s Prayer in text.

**dad@hvn, ur spshl
we want wot u want & urth2b like hvn**

In terms of transition, we are the sandwich generation, and our children use a completely different language than our parents did. With history as our guide, we know new incarnations of English take almost 100 years to complete. Some believe the most

recent mutation began with Microsoft and we are thirty years into it. I disagree. In 1930, David Ogden published *Simplified English*, which included a basic word list of 850 words and 10 grammar rules, and sent it to Asia. Voice of America (VOA) has been broadcasting to the Third World using a basic list of 1,500 allowable words since 1959. That list with few additions is still being taught to 1.5 billion people around the world and the transfer to Global English is almost complete.

As the language of science, commerce and technology worldwide, non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers by a margin of 4:1, which means most conversations in English today occur between two non-native speakers. They don't use a million words to communicate: they have made the language their own. Thanks to David Ogden, non-native speakers successfully use fewer than 2,000 words and a simplified set of grammar rules where there is no "s" on the third person singular, pronouns and word order is fairly liquid, and subject and verb don't have to agree. Global English includes concoctions like:

Where is my keys?

Him and me go to the store.

cu l8r

And in the song unblinkingly embraced during the 2010 Olympics,

I believe in the power of you and I.

Summary

The biggest shift from Modern English to Global English is in intention. It is no longer as critical to be perfect as it is to be understood. Communication is successful if it is understood and no one's feelings are hurt.

As newcomers infuse the country, language, culture, workplace and family unit, the impact on the English language is unavoidable. The next time you hear a frustrated native speaker mutter, "Why don't they just speak English?", you might consider that the newcomer is speaking English and we are not.

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