

Open Forum 2

Web Site Transcript

Chapter 7

A = Professor

B = Dr. Herman Nash, guest speaker

A: OK, let's get started. I've invited a guest speaker to our class today. His name is Dr. Herman Nash, and he's a historical linguist. Dr. Nash is going to talk to us about the topic of language change. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Nash.

B: A pleasure to be here.

A: Can you begin by telling us what a historical linguist does?

B: Well, one of the things we do is study how languages change over time. You all may or may not notice it, but the languages we speak—no matter what languages they are—they don't stay the same for very long . . . they're always changing.

Some of these changes are easy to observe. For instance, new words are being added to our language all the time to meet the needs of speakers . . . for instance, words relating to technology, like "fax" or "cell phone," are recent additions to English . . . they haven't been around very long at all. And think about words related to computers and the Internet . . . they're also constantly appearing. I mean . . . who knew what a "podcast," or a "blog" was even a few years back?

Now, there are other types of language change that are more difficult to notice because they're much more gradual. They come about over long periods of time, and they're only really noticeable when we compare language samples from, say . . . different centuries. For instance, if we compare the English we speak today to the English spoken by, say . . . William Shakespeare—in the 16th century—we'd see lots of differences . . . different words, different pronunciation, even different grammar.

A: Excuse me, Dr. Nash, may I ask a question?

B: Sure.

A: So over the next 200 years, we can expect many new words to be added to English . . . but will English continue to change as much as it has in the past? I mean, will many of the words we use now be replaced by new words in 200 years? Will the grammar be different?

B: Well . . . it's hard to predict exactly how a language will change over that much time. We know that new words will be developed. One of the interesting ways that this happens is through slang—informal expressions that are typically used by a small number of people. Often times, a slang term starts to become more and more common, until it eventually becomes part of the standard language used by the majority of speakers.

Another way that a language changes is when words are borrowed from other languages. For instance, a large number of the English words we use nowadays were originally borrowed from French. These processes will continue to take place in the future. So, yes, English may be very different in 200 years.

A: That's very interesting. Now I've heard it said that some of the changes happening in English are not necessarily good. Don't some people believe that English is being "corrupted"—that it's changing for the worse and . . . well . . . getting "dumbed down"?

B: Yes, people have been saying that for centuries. One important thing to remember is that language change is a natural process. It has always taken place. And I don't see any reason to see this as a process of "corruption" or "deterioration."

Over history, people have often taken a negative attitude toward language change . . . and there have been many attempts to stop the changes from taking place. To give you a recent example . . . in 1994 the French government instructed its citizens not to "corrupt" French by using terms like *le computer* and *le walkman* . . . words that had been borrowed from English. Needless to say, most attempts like these to stop language change have failed.

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A: Have any attempts been made to keep English from changing?

B: Yes! Two famous examples are Jonathan Swift—the 18th century British writer—and Samuel Johnson, who wrote a Dictionary of the English Language in 1755. Swift wrote a famous essay calling for the establishment of an official organization with the authority to declare what is proper and what is not proper English.

As for Johnson . . . well he has a famous quote in the preface to his dictionary in which he says, “Languages, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make our struggles for our language.”

A: Interesting. Well, I don’t think we all speak like Samuel Johnson did, so I guess his warning didn’t help much.

B: No, I guess not.

A: Thank you, Dr. Nash. Does anyone have any questions . . .