

English Is Going to the Dogs: Let me know when it's arrived Some quotes about changing English

Throughout the history of English, people have been lamenting its corruption and decay (their words for change) as it moves on from the language they learned in their youth. We are taught as children about “good” and “bad” language, the “principles” of grammar, “correct” and “incorrect” usages – as if these things were, and always had been, permanent features of the linguistic landscape.

As linguists, you know otherwise; but it's interesting to see how t'was ever so (try analysing that with a tree structure – which goes to show that even some linguists have not yet got [or gotten] the memo). Several famous people in history have been guilty of treating their version of English as somehow privileged over that of the next generation. Here are some quotes, some of which are in favour of change, but most are against; yet more evidence that ill-informed majorities are often wrong. Quotes indented on the right are pro-change, on the left, anti-change. The Caxton, Puttenham and Orwell quotes are unindented; make of them what you will.

Also Englishmen, theigh hy hadde fram the beginning three maner speche, Southeron, Northeron, and Middel speche in the middel of the lond, as hy come of three maner people of Germania, notheles by commixstion and melling, furst with Danes and afterward with Normans, in many the contray longage is apeired, and som useth strange wlaffyng, chytering, harryng, and garryng grisbittyng.

Ranulph Higden, a 14th-century monk of the Benedictine order, St. Werburgh, Chester.

<http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/rvt/dialect2.html>

And þis corrupcioun of Englysshe men in yn þer moder-tounge, begunne as I seyde with famylyar commixtion of Danys firste and of Normannys aftir, toke grete augmentacioun and encrees aftir þe commyng of William conquerour by two thyngis. The firste was: by decre and ordynaunce of þe seide William conqueror children in gramer-scolis ageyns þe consuetude and þe custom of all oper nacyons, here owne moder-tonge lafte and forsakyn, lernyd here Donet on Frenssh and to construyne yn Frenssh and to maken here Latyns on þe same wyse. The secounde cause was þat by the same decree lordis sonys and all nobyll and worthy mennys children were fyrste set to lernyn and

speken Frensshe, or þan þey cowde spekyn Ynglyssh and þat all wrytyngis and endentyngis and all maner plees and contrauerces in courtis of þe lawe, and all maner reknynge and countis yn howsoolde schulle be doon yn the same. And þis seeyinge, þe rurales, þat þey myghte semyn þe more worschipfull and honourable and þe redliere comyn to þe famylarite of þe worthy and þe grete, leftyn hure modre tounge and laboured to kunne spekyn Frenssh: and thus by processe of tyme barbarizid thei in bothyn and spokyn neythyr good Frenssh nor good Englyssh."

Stephan A. Gramley, 1440. History of English, p5. <https://qoo.gl/fxbR97>

And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that, whiche was vsed and spoken whan I was borne

William Caxton, 1490.

I am of this opinion that our own tung shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangled with borowing of other tunges, wherein if we not heed by tiim [by time], ever borowing and never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt.

Sir John Cheke, Provost of King's College, Cambridge, 1538-1544.

[The speaker shall follow the] naturall, pure, and the moft usuall of all his country: ... rather that which is [spoken in the kings Court, or in the good townes and Cities within the land, than in the marches and frontiers, or in port townes, where [traungers haunt for traffike fake, or yet in Universities where Schollers ufe much peevisch affectation of words out of the primative languages, or finally, in any uplandifh village or corner of a Realme, where is no refort but of poore rufticall or uncivill people: neither [hall he follow the [peach of a craftes man or carter, or other of the inferiour sort ... for such perfons doe abufe good [peaches by [trange accents or ill [hapen foundes, and falfe ortographie. But he [hall follow generally the better brought up sort, such as the Greekes call [charientes] men civill and graciously behavoured and bred.

George Puttenham, 1589.

<https://archive.org/details/georgeputtenham01puttqooq>.

I knew the time when great care was had about printing, the Bibles especially, good compositors and the best correctors were gotten being grave and learned men, the paper and the letter rare, and faire every way of the best, but now the paper is nought, the composers boys, and the correctors unlearned.

George Abbot, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1631.

... our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; and the Pretenders to polish and

refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and, that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar.

Jonathan Swift, 1712. Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue.

It must be owned that our language is at present in a state of anarchy

Lord Chesterfield, 1754.

the corrupt and unsound form of speaking in the plural number to a single person, “you” to one, instead of “thou”, contrary to the pure, plain, and single language of truth, “thou” to one, and “you” to more than one, which had always been used by God to men, and men to God, as well as one to another, from the oldest record of time till corrupt men ... brought in that false and senseless way of speaking YOU to one, which ... hath greatly debased the spirits and depraved the manners of men

Thomas Ellwood, 1838. The History of the Life of Thomas Ellwood: Or an Account of His Birth, Education, &c. New York: Hopper, p27.

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YKQDAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA27>

The now fashionable pronunciation of several words is to me at least very offensive: cóntemplate—is bad enough; but bálcony makes me sick.

Samuel Rogers, 1855 (published posthumously).

It is an opinion held by many that “received speech is pure, and dialectal speech impure”, forgetting that received speech has been highly “doctored” in the course of ages from some form of dialectal hereditary, and hence is really the impurest possible form of speech.

A.J. Ellis, 1889. On Early English Pronunciation, p254.

<https://archive.org/details/onearlyenglishpr00elliuft>

There seems to have been in every period of the past, as there is now, a distinct apprehension in the minds of very many worthy persons that the English tongue is always in the condition approaching collapse, and that arduous efforts must be put forth, and put forth persistently, in order to save it from destruction.

Thomas Lounsbury, 1908.

In these days when the vernacular of the street invades the home, when illiterate communications corrupt good grammar, and when the efforts of the teachers in the public schools are rendered ineffective by parents careless of their diction, constant attempts are being made to point out the way to that “Well of English undefiled” so dear to the heart of the purist. But,

notwithstanding these efforts to correct careless diction, the abuse and misuse of words continue.

Frank H. Vizetelly, 1908, A Desk-Book of Errors in English, Including Notes on Colloquialisms and Slang to Be Avoided in Conversation.

... one ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy.

George Orwell, Politics and the English Language, 1950.

http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit/

If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards there's no imperative to stay out of crime.

Norman Tebbit, Conservative British politician, 1985.

... What I find hard ... to stomach ... these days is the pidgin being served up more and more by television and radio as well as the press ... Only Canute's courtiers would deny that language is a living thing ... But the increasingly rapid spread of what I can only describe as Engloid throughout the all-pervasive communications media foreshadows an anarchy that must eventually defeat the whole object of communication ... to understand and be understood

20th cen. letter to editor quoted in Laurie Bauer & Peter Trudgill, Language Myths, Penguin, 1998.

[Textese is] bleak, bald, sad shorthand. Drab shrinktalk ... Linguistically it's all pig's ear ... it masks dyslexia, poor spelling and mental laziness. Texting is penmanship for illiterates."

John Sutherland, University College London, 2002. The Guardian.

English has had abbreviated words ever since it began to be written down. Words such as exam, vet, fridge, cox and bus are so familiar that they have effectively become new words. When some of these abbreviated forms first came into use, they also attracted criticism. In 1711, for example, Joseph Addison complained about the way words were being "miserably curtailed" - he mentioned pos (itive) and incog (nito). And Jonathan Swift thought that abbreviating words was a "barbarous custom".

David Crystal, 2008. 2b or not 2b? The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jul/05/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview>
