from some other language and been incorporated into English. This process is usually called ‘borrowing’, though there is no thought that the words will be given back somehow! All languages do this to some extent, though English is perhaps the language which has the highest level of ‘borrowed’ vocabulary, at least among the world’s major languages.

However, this is by no means the only way in which a language can develop its vocabulary; there are many cases where a language’s vocabulary is developed ‘from within’, that is, by using its own existing resources. Sometimes, but by no means always, this path is followed by a language and its speakers, if there is a notion that borrowing will hurt the language. Another reason why a language’s own resources may be used in the expansion of its vocabulary is because a writer wants his/her work to be readily understood by its intended audience, who might be put off by too much borrowing. This is what Cicero did. In order to write in Latin about the ideas of Greek philosophy, he had to develop a Latin vocabulary which corresponded to the ideas he wanted to put across. Most of the time he did this by taking a particular Latin word and deliberately assigning it a technical meaning. A particularly important example of this was his use of the Latin word *ratio* to mean ‘reason’, a usage which has come down to us today in English. On other occasions, he invented new words made up of Latin elements, for instance, the word *qualitas*, which became of course ‘quality’ in English, was deliberately coined by Cicero to correspond to a Greek idea.

Minority languages, like Maori and Romany, are today doing very much the same thing as Cicero did for Latin, constructing vocabulary out of existing resources within the languages, precisely so that they can be used to talk about areas like computers, law, science, and so on, for which they have not been used so much in the past. These two languages are unlikely ever to become international languages of science or diplomacy, but if history had been different, they could have, and then we might have been wondering whether perhaps English was ‘just not good enough’.

**MYTH 3**

**The Media are Ruining English**

Jean Aitchison

English is sick, maybe even fatally ill, judging from complaints: ‘The language the world is crying out to learn is diseased in its own country,’ moaned one anxious worrier. ‘Oh, please, English-lovers everywhere, do your bit for the language. Let’s stop this slide down the slippery slope . . . before communication becomes a frustrating exercise we are unable to face,’ urged another.

This morbid concern for the health of English is not new. In every decade, language ‘defenders’ pop up like sentries before old castles. They behave as if they alone are preventing the language from crumbling into dust. As the writer Thomas Lounsbury commented in 1908:

*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.*

The delusion that our language is sick is therefore a recurring one. What changes are the culprits of this supposed linguistic slide? These vary. Parents, teachers, the press, have all been blamed. But in recent years, the media – television, radio, newspapers – have been widely criticized as linguistic criminals. To take a typical example:

*… 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 . . .*
Language Myths

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 . . .

Even in the last century, journalists were regarded as linguistic troublemakers: ‘Among writers, those who do the most mischief are . . . the men generally who write for the newspapers,’ commented a writer on ‘popular errors in language’ (1880). ‘Many causes exist which tend to corrupt the “well of English unfilled” . . . [One is] the immense extension and influence of the newspaper press . . .’ lamented another (1889). He continued: ‘The newspaper press of the United States and the British colonies, as well as the inferior class of newspapers in this country, is to a large extent in the hands of writers who have no respect for the propriety or reticence of language.’

In the twentieth century, complaints about media language have escalated, above all because of the advent of radio and television. This has added concern about spoken speech to that about written: ‘We are plagued with idiots on radio and television who speak English like the dregs of humanity,’ bemoaned one letter-writer. ‘I have two young children . . . who try to keep afloat in a flood of sloppy speech poured at them from the television set,’ raged another.

The objections range over all aspects of language. When the ‘Top Twenty’ complaints about broadcast language were listed by David Crystal in 1982, he found that nine related to grammar (the way words are combined), six were about pronunciation (the way words were articulated) and five about vocabulary (the particular words used).

Disliked usages are frequently assumed by grumblers to be new, a sign of modern decadence. Yet, as Crystal commented, many have been around for a long time. Top of the ‘Top Twenty’ complaints was the supposed misuse of you and I versus you and me. Yet around 400 years ago, in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, the merchant Antonio says: ‘All debts are cleared between you and I,’ so breaking the supposed ‘rule’ that you and me is the ‘correct’ form after a preposition. In the late-eighteenth century a writer commented on ‘the phrase between you and I, which tho’ it must be confessed to be

The Media are Ruining English

ungrammatical, is yet almost universally used in familiar conversation.’ And in the last ten years, Oxford-educated Lady Thatcher proclaimed: ‘It’s not for you and I to condemn the Malawi economy.’ So this is not a ‘new’ phenomenon.

So if media usages which upset language worries are often old ones, why do so many people complain about ‘modern decadence’ and ‘journalistic incompetence’?

Two interwoven misunderstandings underlie complaints about media language. First, a ‘dirty fingernails’ fallacy, a notion that journalists are sloppy language users. Second, a ‘garbage heap’ fallacy, a false belief that ‘journalism is junk writing.’ Let us consider each in turn.

Dirty fingernails fallacy: journalists use language sloppily

According to the ‘dirty fingernails’ fallacy, journalists do not pay sufficient attention to language details: they never bother to scrub their linguistic fingernails clean, as it were. On closer inspection, this is untrue. The fallacy is largely due to ignorance about how language changes — perhaps not surprisingly, since how change happens has become clear only in the last thirty or so years.

Until around 1960 language change was regarded as a slow and mysterious process, rather like the budding and blooming of flowers — something hard to see, however long you stare. A popular view in the 1950s was that change occurred when speakers somehow missed their linguistic target and drifted away from the original norm. One word was assumed to turn into another over time, like a tadpole slowly transforming itself into a frog.

Yet this tadpole-to-frog view of change is now outdated. In recent years a ‘young cuckoo’ model has replaced it. This new, more realistic viewpoint arose largely from the pioneering work of the American sociolinguist William Labov. Competition rather than metabolism is at the root of language alterations, he demonstrated. A new variant arises in some section of the community and competes with an existing one. Then the newer form is likely to expand and gradually oust the older ones, like a young cuckoo pushing a previous occupant out of
Language Myths

The Media are Ruining English

They do not normally invent these forms, nor are they corrupting the language.

Radio and television reproduce the various ways of speaking we hear around, they do not invent them. Often, several different ways of pronouncing the same word co-exist. This worries some people. In a recent radio talk, the speaker referred to kilOmetres, a pronunciation which attracted angry letters, such as:

I was astonished to hear you pronounce kilometre as kilO metre...
Surely, even if it is argued that language has no rights or wrongs, but merely usage, there is sense and nonsense. The pronunciation kilO metre is in the latter category, kilometre in the former.

Yet both pronunciations are common, according to a survey carried out by the editor of the Longman Pronunciation Dictionary (1990): 52 per cent preferred the older kilometre and 48 per cent the newer kilO metre. This type of fluctuation suggests that a change is underway. The main pronunciation grumble in David Crystal's 'Top Twenty' complaints was about the stress on words such as controversy. The survey found that 44 per cent preferred CON troversy, and 56 per cent con TRO versy, indicating that both are acceptable.

The kilometre and controversy complaints are puzzling: the altered stress is fairly trivial and does not affect understanding. Perhaps worriers are working with an outdated view of language: an old 'for want of a nail' image is embedded in some people's minds, the old proverb in which a lost nail led to a lost battle: 'For want of a nail, a shoe was lost, for want of a shoe, a horse was lost, for want of a horse a man was lost, for want of a man, a battle was lost.' Lack of care over 'linguistic fingernails' is presumed to lead to language collapse. But metaphors which apply to one area of life do not necessarily apply to others. The 'young cuckoo' image is a more realistic one. Furthermore, the young cuckoos cannot unbalance language. English, like any tongue, maintains its own patterns and keeps itself organized: a language, like a thermostat, regulates itself constantly. Some inbuilt property in the human mind maintains all languages, everywhere.

the nest. Old and new forms therefore coexist and compete: the old is not magically transformed into the new.

These young cuckoo takeovers typically have a slow beginning, then a sudden upsurge. A form first creeps in among a subsection of the population. The word gay for 'homosexual' had long been in use in San Francisco before it expanded its territory and pushed aside other terms such as queer, poof. The term wimp for 'feeble male' had also been around for years in California before it gradually ousted other words for 'weak or insignificant person' such as nebbish, nerd, weed. The older words get used less and less often and gradually dwindle away. But the media did not initiate these changes; they were reflecting current usage.

The prefix mini- provides a blueprint for the slow beginning and sudden upswing of a typical change. It also illustrates the role of the media. The prefix occurred as early as 1845, when the Scotsman newspaper carried a notice of an 'important sale of horses, harness, and carriages', which included 'one excellent 12-inside omnibus' and 'one handsome minibus', both horse-drawn. A fairly long time elapsed before sporadic other mini- forms arrived in the language: mini-camera came in the 1930s, mini-piano in the 1940s. The prefix therefore gradually crept into the language, like a bit-player in a drama.

Take-off point came in the 1960s when mini-cab, mini-van and other transport words became widely used, alongside clothing words, such as mini-skirt and mini-dress. Then mini- started appearing on other types of word: a mini-boom occurred in economics, a mini-bar became standard in some hotel rooms, mini-computers were widely used, and a writer commented that he must have been out of his mini-mind.

The media nurtured the mini- explosion by reporting the news. Vogue, the fashion magazine, noted mini-skirt first in 1965. Television produced several mini-series. Newspapers also joined in. A total of 125 stories contained a mini- prefix in The Times and Sunday Times in the first three months of 1993, for example.

The media are therefore linguistic mirrors: they reflect current language usage and extend it. Journalists are observant reporters who pick up early on new forms and spread them to a wider audience.
**Language Myths**

**Garbage heap fallacy: journalism is junk writing**

The 'garbage heap' fallacy is a false belief that 'journalism is junk writing.' Yet writing for the press is a demanding skill. The public reads newspapers avidly because they are written in a way which attracts attention and then sustains it. Such writing requires training and practice. Newcomers may flounder, as satirized by Evelyn Waugh in his novel *Scoop*. The hero, Boot, is a novice writer who pens a bi-weekly half-column on nature: 'Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the questing vole...' He is mistaken for a top journalist and sent to a world trouble-spot. His heart heavy with misgiving, he types the first news report of his career:

_Nothing much has happened except to the president who has been imprisoned in his own palace by revolutionary junta... They say he is drunk when his children try to see him but governess says most unusual. Lovely spring weather. Bubonic plague raging._

Compare this with a typical 'real' newspaper report:

_Up to six people were feared dead and 60 injured yesterday after a cargo ship lost power and ploughed into a busy shopping mall built on a wharf in the American port of New Orleans._

Here the writer has specified what happened, where it happened, when it happened, who was involved, how it happened in thirty-five words – a so-called 'hard news formula'. It's clear, it's informative and, in the words of George Orwell, it uses 'language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought'. Orwell, best known as the author of the novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was a successful journalist as well as a best-selling novelist. He pointed out the importance of making one's meaning clear. For doing this, he provided 'rules that one can rely on when instinct fails'. Below, slightly rephrased, are his six guidelines, which trainee journalists are still taught to follow:

**The Media are Ruining English**

1. If it's possible to cut out a word, cut it out.
2. Never use a long word where a short word will do.
3. Never use a passive if you can use an active.
4. Avoid foreign and technical words.
5. Never use a metaphor you've seen in print.
6. Break these rules to avoid something outlandish.

Readers may dispute the choice of newspaper content: 'An editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff and prints the chaff,' according to Adlai Stevenson. The blood-and-guts detail of a recent murder may disgust some, the convolutions of a film star's love-life may bore others. But the language in which the murders and marriages are recounted is likely to be lucid and polished. Journalists generally follow the advice not only of George Orwell but also of Joel Chandler Harris, the nineteenth-century author of *Uncle Remus*. Harris worked as a journalist for a large part of his life. He advised:

_When you've got a thing to say,_
_Say it! Don't take half a day..._  
_Life is short — a fleeting vapour —_  
_Don't you fill the whole blamed paper_  
_With a tale, which at a pinch,_  
_Could be covered in an inch!_  
_Boil her down until she simmers,_  
_Polish her until she glimmers._

Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century dictionary-writer, once said: 'I never open up a newspaper without finding something I should have deemed a loss not to have seen; never without deriving from it instruction and amusement.' He does not specify what kind of instruction he was seeking. But almost certainly, if he looked at a newspaper today, he would learn both about the modern language and how to use it clearly.
Language Myths

Sources and further reading


MYTH 4

French is a Logical Language

Anthony Lodge

French people have been claiming that theirs is a logical language for the past three and a half centuries, though what they mean when they say this is rather obscure – which is a pity, since the other adjective they use to describe French, along with ‘logical’, is the word ‘clear’, as we shall see.

In 1647 the father of all French purist grammarians – Claude Favre de Vaugelas – referred to ‘clarity of language the which property French possesses over all other languages in the world,’ and he was swiftly followed by people who asserted things like, ‘we [the French] in everything we say follow exactly the order of rational thought, which is the order of Nature.’

The most celebrated expression of this idea came in 1784 when a self-styled aristocrat (Count Antoine de Rivarol, 1733–1801) won the prize for the best essay presented at the Berlin Academy that year. Actually, ‘Count’ Rivarol was the son of an innkeeper in the southern French town of Bagnols, but he knew there was little hope of advancement unless such an unfortunate fact could be disguised. The title of his prize-winning essay was: ‘Concerning the universality of the French language’, and the author’s aim was to explain why French was used by all the toffs and intellectuals of Europe (including students at the Berlin Academy) in preference to other languages, even their own. Of course, it had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that France had been ‘top nation’ in Europe for a century and a half. French, he believed, was preferred by all rational-minded people on account of its inherently logical structure:

What distinguishes our language from the ancient and the modern