
How New Words are Created and how It Affects Language as a Whole

The Evolution of a Word

The ability to communicate seems to come naturally to humans; it is a trait that is fairly unique to mankind. Parents teach their children to speak, and children learn without realizing how extraordinary the art of language really is. However, the languages of the modern world are not the same languages used in early civilizations, nor are they the same languages that even the previous generation used or that generations to come will use. There are certainly innate similarities, but language is a dynamic concept which has continuously evolved. Nearly all individuals have the ability to communicate through some form of language, and yet very few are aware of the process by which language evolves. Some languages have diverged to form new languages, others have collided into a single language, and few have vanished from existence altogether. How is it that an entire language can change without the majority of the population noticing? This essay will explore how new words are created, how the creation of new words affects language as a whole, and why languages need to evolve.

Dictionaries are often considered the most reliable resource for determining what constitutes a word, yet many people have no idea how a word gets to be in the dictionary. Who decides that one string of letters is a valid word, while another is nonsense? Most dictionaries are updated annually, if not more often now that several are available online. With each new edition comes new words with new definitions, and suddenly a former nonsense word is now official. Anytime a new invention is released, there must be a new word to correspond with the creation. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary site, there are many ways in which new words are created, including borrowing, truncation, back-formation, blending, and many other routes. All of these processes contribute to the creation of new words to be added to the dictionary. In his article "Language Issues – How New Words Are Created," Luke Mastin says,

Many of the new words added to the ever-growing lexicon of the English language are just created from scratch, and often have little or no etymological pedigree. A good example is the word dog, etymologically unrelated to any other known word, which, in the late Middle Ages, suddenly and mysteriously displaced the Old English word hound (or hund) which had served for centuries.

Another way that words are added to a language is by borrowing from another language. According to Bill Bryson in *The Mother Tongue*, the English language adopted over 10,000

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Norman French words following the Norman conquest of 1066, three-quarters of which are still in use (55). Later on in his book, Bryson mentions a multitude of words that the English language adopted from other languages, including Indian, Chinese, Greek, Latin, French, and nearly every other language that has ever existed. Many of these words have undergone serious changes from their original forms, to the point where they are almost unrecognizable, while others bear a striking resemblance to their origins. Still, other words are created through truncation – a process in which old words are shortened to create new words – and blending – a process in which multiple words are combined to make a new word. Once a word is created, it must gain popularity to enter into the dictionary. Words are not created overnight, but rather through repetition and necessity. However new words are created, they greatly contribute to a changing language overtime.

Simply adding new words is not enough to change a language completely, and yet modern English is vastly different than the English that Shakespeare used in his day. There are many other factors that contribute to a changing language. For example, the same process that creates new words can also remove old words from a language. As words fall out of common use, they lose popularity to the point where they are nearly non-existent. These words are then removed from dictionaries and are no longer considered valid words. The combination of adding new words and removing old words significantly impacts a language. After all, using words that nobody understands is much like speaking a different language altogether. Another phenomenon that contributes to a changing language is the drifting of word meanings. According to Bryson, “counterfeit” once meant a legitimate copy, “brave” once meant cowardice, and “egregious” once meant admirable, though these words now have very different meanings (77-78). The reason for shifting meanings is often unclear; perhaps they are derived simply from misuse again and again. For whatever reason, changes in meaning are quite common and have resulted in the changes to the English language.

There are many reasons why changing language is necessary. As mentioned earlier, new inventions require new words to name them. Betty Birner addresses this in her article “Is English Changing?” by saying,

New technologies, new products, and new experiences require new words to refer to them clearly and efficiently. Consider texting: originally it was called text messaging, because it allowed one person to send another text rather than voice messages by phone.

A similar article entitled “How Technology has changed our Language” also addresses the necessary changes that have occurred due to technological advances.

In general, languages are constantly evolving, usually very slowly over time. But over the last decade our language has taken a great leap forward. And much of the responsibility for the

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change falls onto modern technology. Take the phrase “Google it” for example. The word Google (meaning to conduct an internet search using a search engine) has become a universally understood verb over the last decade, and officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006. Meanwhile, some words have taken on a whole new meaning thanks to modern technology...The word “friend” has become a verb, as in “she friended me on Facebook.” Meanwhile, text language (or “txt spk”) is full of abbreviations, missing vowels, and acronyms.

All of these changes in the English language have occurred just over the past decade or less. Such a language shift could only occur out of necessity. For example, the reason for abbreviations and acronyms in text language is not only for convenience, but also because of limited space as screens become smaller and smaller. It is quite possible that this fact could lead to the invention of some new words derived from acronyms. Words like these would not be the first of their kind; radar, sonar, NASA, and NATO all began as acronyms, yet are pronounced and understood as if they were actual words, until they actually became true words. Almost all language shifts begin with younger generations. According to Betty Birner, mentioned earlier,

Many of the changes that occur in language begin with teens and young adults. As young people interact with others their own age, their language grows to include words, phrases, and constructions that are different from those of the older generation. Some have a short life span (heard groovy lately?), but others stick around to affect the language as a whole.

While changes to the English language do not occur overnight – and in reality, may be hardly noticeable during one’s lifespan – the shift is completely natural and necessary to adapt to an ever-changing world.

All languages of the world have undergone constant change over the course of history. Some languages have diverged to form new languages, others have collided into a single language, and few have vanished from existence altogether. It is natural for languages to evolve as the world also evolves, yet many people remain completely unaware of such language shifts. Communication is an important skill for transmitting and understanding other individuals, so it is important to be aware of how language changes in order to communicate effectively. Language will always continue to change as long as the world remains a dynamic place.

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