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The Queen’s English:

Why the Digital Age Won’t Kill It

Language is a basis on which we live our lives. It allows us to convey powerful emotions and great ideas. Language is a symbol of national pride, of worldwide standing. It also changes. Every language in the world has undergone some form of change from the time it was conceived until now. And languages will continue to change for the rest of time. The English language in particular has gone through a very interesting process of change. The English that we know today has resulted from many arguments, rewrites, revisions, and headaches. There have been many twists and turns in English’s ascendance to an international language, and many bumps in the road, but it has remained in a certain tradition, a kind of constant. In general, although they change, languages tend to remain at some form of constant. This constant is kind of like a security blanket for the speakers of the languages, a blanket that assures that the speakers are expressing themselves in the right way, and that they’re also doing it in their own unique way. However, many English users today worry that a relatively new bump in the road stands to tear apart the fabric of their language, their “constant”. That phenomenon is the Digital Age.

The Digital Age encompasses not only computers in general, but the ever-increasing use of instant messaging, emailing, and texting. (I separate texting from instant messaging because it has largely become a category of its own) There have been many concerns voiced by a variety of different people that these things are damaging the English language in its entirety.

Texting may be the most famous product of the Digital Age to come under fire, in part because of its rampant popularity around the world. In 2008 alone, 2.3 trillion texts were sent worldwide. That’s a 20% increase from 2007 and almost an 150% increase from 2000 (Huang). Needless to say, texting has become an important part of the worldwide culture. The part of texting, however, that has come under scrutiny is not the messages themselves, but how they’re written. As texting began to grow in popularity, different shortened versions of words or phrases began popping up. Among the most famous are “lol” (laughing out loud), “omg” (Oh my God), “brb” (be right back), “gtg” (got to go), and “ttyl” (talk to you later). Other simplifications occur with letters and single words as well, like substituting *u* for the word *you* and *4* instead of *for*.

Though texting is the most famous issue, there are problems with instant messaging and emailing as well. A commonly recurring thought is that this shortening and changing of English is detrimental for the communicational health of English-speakers. By shortening phrases and limiting human interaction, it is believed that this Digital Age generation has grown to rely on convenience and efficiency when it comes to communication. And that this reliance is changing the very fabric of English.

Others still believe that, though people may be shortening up their speech in texts and on the internet, the Digital Age will not have as huge of an impact on the English language as is popularly believed. It is a topic that has been heatedly debated across various mediums for some time.

I don’t believe that the Digital Age has had or will have a great effect on the English language.

First and foremost, I think it needs to be said that people have always been complaining about English. Even in the Victorian age from 1837-1901, when a great deal of the English language’s known traditions were created, there were still those who believed that complete reform was in order (Hitchings 143). One of the biggest complaints against the Digital Age is that it’s ruining the English language entirely. Those who pose this complaint seem to rarely think about all of the times in the history of English in which people have thought the same thing. There has always been and will always be those who think that there is something wrong with English, and that it should be changed. As Henry Hitchings so eloquently put it in his book *The Language Wars:* “Vocabulary is a garden of delights. But all gardeners are obsessed with pulling up weeds (Hitchings 271)”. For example, the Simplified Spelling Board was established in the United States in 1906 to raise awareness of the many irregularities in English and propose solutions for them. It was largely funded by the steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie, and soon even President Roosevelt jumped on the idea and decided that the federal printing office should adopt 300 of the Board’s new spellings (Shea). The amount of ridicule that Roosevelt received from that decision quickly made him lose interest in the Board. Andrew Carnegie faced the same dilemma, and soon stopped funding the Board. It faded out of existence shortly after (Hitchings 72). Two very influential people who believed that English could benefit from being noticeably changed hurriedly ducked out of the whole process after the public lashed out at them. This goes to show a few things. First, U.S. citizens haven’t just been muttering to each other how much they detested English. They’ve been very open about it. Even very high people in society, like Carnegie and Roosevelt, insisted that English needed to be changed. Much like how people in today’s society (teachers and scholars for the most part) are very vocal about how much they believe the Digital Age is ruining their language. The second thing that this reform failure shows is that, generally, people will be against any radical sudden change. Especially in language. And that leads me to my next point.

Language is always naturally changing. And I don’t mean just English. I mean language in general. Over time, people develop different lifestyles and have to adapt their use of language to fit that lifestyle. The Digital Age is just another “lifestyle” of sorts that we English speakers have learned to adapt to, and are constantly continuing to adapt to.

As I mentioned earlier, people usually don’t take too well to radical sudden changes in anything. Language is a big one. Understandably so, as it’s the way that we’re able to live the lives we do. That is one of the reasons why any attempt at solid language reform is extremely difficult. Another reason, of course, is that language reform is an economic nightmare. If any large-scale reformations were made to English, every publisher would have to implement those changes. That in and of itself would be an immensely expensive process. In addition to that, every book/article/piece of literature printed before the reformations would become obsolete. That tacks even more costs on.

English is a tricky language to reform anyway because of how many different variations of pronunciations and spellings there are. If any reform were to work at all, it would have to be completely universal (Hitchings 74). With that in mind, if you take into account all of the different ways of speaking there are in the U.S. alone, the idea of universal reform becomes a little overwhelming. Every part of the United States has its own dialect, so how would those change if language reform were to be seriously pushed? Would certain groups of people be told that the way they spoke is wrong? And that isn’t even taking into account the countless differences between “American English” and “English English”. I say countless because the amount of differences continues to grow. Robert Burchfield, editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* even claimed that, within 200 years, American English-speakers and British English-speakers wouldn’t be able to understand each other in the slightest anymore (Bryson 12). There have always been general ideas of *good* and *bad* English- especially in writing -but they aren’t strictly enforced to the point where people have to make an actual effort to change the way they use the language. One of the beautiful things about English is that it can be interpreted in so many different ways. By imposing language reform, we would be hampering that beauty.

Trying to physically change English instead of letting it change on its own has historical roots, as it has been done several times. Not only with cases like the Simplified Spelling Board and President Roosevelt, but with more extreme ones. There was a man by the name of George Bernard Shaw who was obsessed with spelling reform all the way to his death in 1950. He created the Shaw alphabet, a system of forty brand new letter shapes created, naturally, by him. A famous story goes that, in order to show the inconsistencies in English, he claimed that *fish* could be spelled *ghoti.* Why not? If you look at it closely, it seems to make sense. After all, *gh* sounds like *f* in *enough,* *o* sounds like an *i* in *women,* and *ti* sound like *sh* in *nation*. And while this story is enough to make English buffs either chuckle or rip their hair out, as well as show that Shaw had a sense of humor, it didn’t help his case. This story does highlight some of the strange inconsistencies that tend to run rampant in English, but the pronunciation/spelling comparisons that are made are somewhat faulty if you take an even closer look. Most of the sounds mentioned (like the *i* in *women)* are unique or only happen under specific circumstances. Needless to say, Shaw’s alphabet never took off. The masses didn’t find it altogether appealing (Hitchings 74). That is a good example as any of why radical spelling reform ideas will not work for English. Or most any language for that matter. Language change needs to be gradual and natural. The impact will not be considerable otherwise.

Because language change is naturally gradual, modern trends like instant messaging/texting will not have an enormous effect. There is a difference between social norms and written norms. Rightly so, as the two should remain separate. Having said that, as an English-lover myself, I can understand the concern that the social and written norms are clashing in a harmful way.

The social norm in today’s society revolves around convenience and quickness. We live in this kind of “internet fast-lane” (Davis). Because of the wealth of information available at just the click of a mouse, the attention spans of people all around the world are shortening. You can literally read/learn/buy/watch almost anything you could imagine on the internet. Because of that, things in the so-called “real world” often seem unimpressive and aren’t stimulating. One of the biggest reasons why social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are so popular is that they present short batches of information that can be taken in quickly and easily by the reader with the least amount of work involved (Deakin). Many worry that this laziness is translating over into actual written language. I’m not denying that it happens sometimes. I myself have seen students using textismson essays and other school assignments. And I completely agree that language should in no way be convenient. However, I don’t think that the problem is as astronomical as everyone seems to fear it is. While some of the “quick and easy” mindset of the day does end up translating into written language, that doesn’t mean that it will be permanent. Social and written norms are alike in the sense that they both change naturally over time. However, social norms tend to change much faster than written norms. Things that are “in” now probably won’t be in a few years. For example, popular internet phenomena like LOLcat and Leetspeak are relatively recent. They both involve playing around with English. LOLcat uses terrible grammar and bad spellings on purpose for the sake of comedic value. Leetspeak replaces some of the letters in English with numbers, coming from programming code. Both purposely mess with traditional English as sort of a means to an end. Ironically enough, the creators/users of these are sometimes even admired by scholars and professors for being so creative and knowing enough about English to twist it around on itself (Kleinman). Again, though, these are social things. They won’t be around forever. According to David Crystal, honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor in the United Kingdom, these trends are “fashionable” now, but he would be surprised if they were still around after fifty years roll by. He also states that these perversions of English are only used by a few thousand people as opposed to the millions of English-speakers in world.

Like slang, social norms change very quickly. And with the growing influence of the internet on these norms, the speed at which they are able to change has gone up dramatically. I mentioned earlier on that sudden drastic reforms to language don’t work because of their abruptness. The changes don’t have a great impact because they aren’t allowed to happen gradually over a period of time. The same goes for social norms. Social norms do make enormous impacts on society, but when it comes to written language, they don’t make too big of a dent. The Digital Age is indeed a form of social norm now, and while it won’t necessarily stop, it will change. So what’s happening right now with it will not affect the longevity of English.

As unbelievable as it seems on the surface, things like texting can actually improve communication/English skills. That seems hard to believe simply because of the staggering number of texts sent worldwide per year and the way in which English has been shortened and cut up in these messages. But it’s not as big a problem as we’re led to believe. For example, only 10% of the words in an average text message are actually abbreviated (Kleinman, Lomas). That means that 90% of the language used in texting is completely normal. No shortcuts. In addition to that, many believe that texting and instant messaging has actually opened the door for language growth. Instead of taking away from English, the internet and texting has added to the contemporary English vocabulary and the richness of English as a language. They have allowed humans to discover entirely new ways to use language to communicate with each other (Abrams). Texting in particular has even shown the ability to increase the English skills of its users. A British study was conducted in 2007 that showed students who texted more scored higher on reading and vocabulary tests. It also showed that, shockingly, the more abbreviations the students used while texting, the better they did with spelling and writing. These results seemed to relate texting to parents reading or talking to their children at very young ages. The bottom line is, the more exposure you get to a certain language, the more adept you will be at using that language (Huang). Textisms are much like slang in that they remain separate from actual traditional English. In a metaphorical sense, they sort of “sit” next to it (Parry).

I understand completely the frustration that teachers must feel when finding things like *4* and *u* instead of *for* and *you* while grading papers, however. In fact, the largest complaints first made about texting’s impacts on English didn’t come from linguists, but from teachers who were horrified at some of the lazy spelling errors their students were making. In some cases, the abbreviation language does slip through into normal language. There’s no denying that. However, as said earlier, Textisms are like slang. I believe they should be treated as such in a school setting. Writing “rad” in a paper doesn’t mean that you’re trying to destroy your own English skills and create a new slang language, it just means that part of your social diction has crept into your school diction. Those are mistakes that can be corrected by teachers. Textisms are the same way. If educated well enough, students can know to keep their social norms and writing norms separate. And I will repeat myself yet again by saying that that’s the way it should be.

Though the Digital Age has made profound impacts on the way we live our lives, I don’t believe that it will have a heavy lasting impact on the English language. Because of the way language forms and grows, sudden changes in behavior- radical ones at that –usually don’t stand to make a huge dent in the way we know our respective languages to work. In light of that, I don’t think there is any reason for so much time and energy to be spent on worrying about how the Digital Age is killing English. English is resilient. It’s eccentric. It has imperfections. That’s one of the reasons why people have been complaining about it since rules were first set in stone for how it should be handled. And ever since those rules were established, there have been extreme reformists seeking to completely change those rules. Of course, none of the radical notions have worked because languages change naturally. That’s the only way they can grow and become richer. Worrying about something “drastic” like the Digital Age completely changing English for worse is meaningless because it won’t happen. The Digital Age has had a large impact on the social norms accepted by English-speakers. But social and written norms are extremely different and should be kept separate. Again, there is no threat that our language will be dismantled. In many ways, things like texting and surfing the web can actually be beneficial to the young creative minds out there, despite what popular thought might have you think. In order to be able to play with a language, you have to understand it after all. This demonstrates the actual ability of texting students and emailing businessmen to command English.

English has been through an incredible series of ups and downs, and yet remains one of the most influential languages in the world. It is an international language, one spoken by millions of people worldwide. I believe that one of the biggest reasons for English’s growing status is its beauty and sheer opportunities. There are so many ways to communicate with English, and it has shown to be a wonderfully tough language able to adapt to a plethora of situations. The Digital Age will not kill English, but prove a point. It will prove that no matter what you throw at it, The Queen’s English will stand tall and proud. It will not fade, but grow. It has stood the test of time for centuries. A few more years won’t dull its shine.

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