

dEvolution of *Language*

The Evolution or Degeneration of Language, its Relationship with Technology, and How it Affects Us

By: Claire Alexander

I stopped listening to the words of the conversation and instead started counting. 6, 7, 8... My right index finger tapped on the notebook with each successive time as my left hand wrote out the tally. 11, 12, 13... I grit my teeth as I struggled not to speak out against the vapid tone and decimation of words, chastising myself not to be a grammar Nazi. 16, 17, 18... Still, the mild torment, like being mentally prodded with a blunt piece of metal, continued until... 21. “Like” had been used as a filler word 21 times in the last 2 minutes, equaling roughly 1 use every 6 seconds. I sighed, and in a tone of faint despondency mentally cried out “Whyyyyyyyy?” as I lifted my eyes to the heavens. It is counting the use of the word “like” as a filler word 21 times in the course of a 3-way, 2-minute conversation that makes me despair for the future of language and eloquence. It is technologies like Twitter that make me cringe in worry about the future of writing. But is the future of writing, language, and eloquence, really so grim as I fear it will be? Language, particularly the lingua franca of a time, is a tricky and slippery beast to define and determine, especially since it changes with the frequency of fad diets. Even within as short a period as the last 50 years, there is a substantial difference between the more elevated language of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the simplistic but effective speech of President Barack Obama. But is this shift simply the course of language’s latest evolution, or a sign of its devolution?

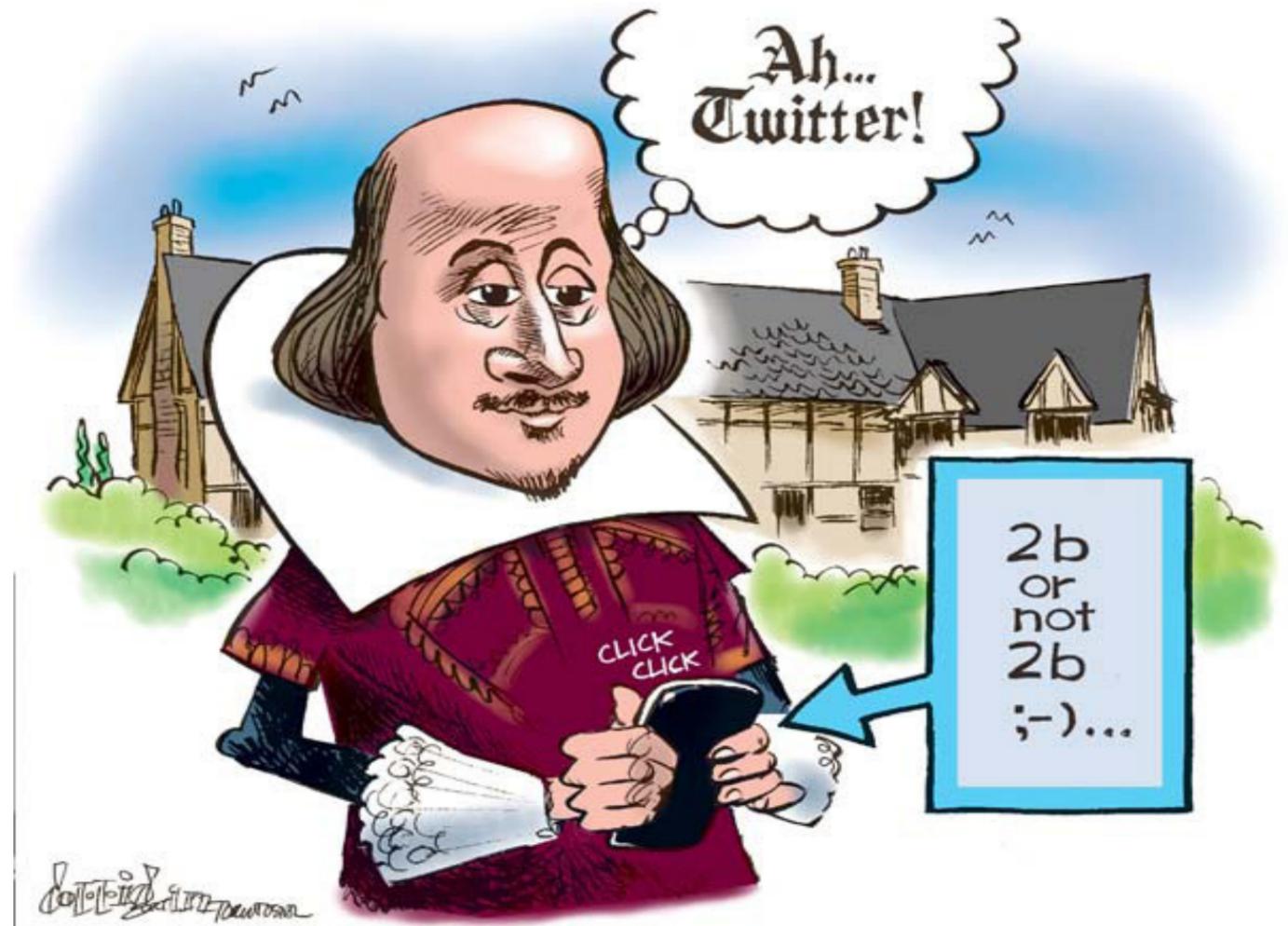
There is no question that languages change and evolve over time. Otherwise English speakers would still be using “Hwæt!” as a call for attention and video games might say FORFARAN instead of FINISH HIM. The change from Old English to Modern English is apparent, though the transition from Old to Middle to Modern cannot truly be pinpointed. Historians might define the time period of Middle English to be roughly between the 12th and 15th centuries, but that does not mean that in the year 1100, the Anglo Saxons said the equivalent of “Oh Old English is so last century, we speak Middle English now”. Nor does it mean that Shakespeare woke up one day to find that his writing was too similar to Middle En-

glish instead of Modern, and so in a panic started scratching out “thee”s and “thou”s from his work at once. All of them, in their minds, were simply speaking English. Thus, looking back, we see the evolution and change of language. But change has come even more drastically to the language today with the rise and implementation of instantaneous communication and the expansion of technologies and avenues with which to communicate.

The speech of Dr. King sounds more akin to that of Winston Churchill than it does to President Obama’s, and though historically the two are closer in time, there is a tendency to think of Dr. King as closer, or at least more of a contemporary, of our own time. Still, though the latter, President Obama, lacks the eloquence of the former two, there is no denying that all are good speakers who get their message across with the clarity and effectiveness of a bull’s-eye. And despite the change and evolution of the English language, we can still look back and point to many good speakers and writers who lived in vastly different times and hold them up on levels of their own as well as “colleagues” of each other. It’s amusing to imagine that somewhere in an ethereal café, Dickens and Jane Austen are having lively discussion with Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and it’s heart warming to think that the Inklings still gather for their shared sessions of stories and pints. But does change in the language mean we have reached the end, all the greats that there ever will be? It is short sighted and pessimistic to say yes, but it seems overly optimistic and idealistic to say that we will ever have another Keats, or Dickens. But is it?

The question of how our language is changing and how it will affect us begs the question of what will happen to our communication and writing standards, or as I like to put it: Will we ever have another Shakespeare? If we examine the case for it, it seems a logical possibility. After all, Shakespeare’s time and our own share several common factors, such as the influences of technology and foreign language, adaptability, and, in his case, the creation of new words or use of slang. In Shakespeare’s time there was the language and literature influence of Latin among the educated, and though today we may not all be able to recite Plato by heart, the study of a second language such as French, Latin, and particularly Spanish is fairly broad across the education system. There’s no question that this study of Latin and Classical works influenced and manifested itself in Shakespeare’s writing. Ovid probably still spins in his grave at every performance of Romeo and Juliet, and undoubtedly the Classical works still influence our writing today, if on a smaller scale. Whether the secondary language will have the same shape or influence today remains to be seen, though use of foreign language phrases that have been adopted into the English language is not uncommon. Shakespeare was also a very adaptable writer, and if anything adaptability is something we understand today. It’s a necessity when new programs and technologies are constantly emerging, that we adapt to these popular sources of information broadcasting. The technology of the printing press was roughly a hundred years old around the time of Shakespeare, and the technology of the Internet and computers is even newer than that, though granted, much more fast-paced. Still, both had profound affects on writing and the spread of information.

The necessity of adaptability in communication and writing is not all that dissimilar to Shakespeare’s own adaptability in genre. Just as there is a difference in writing a historical analysis and writing a restaurant review, or Pope Francis posting a tweet versus composing a sermon, there is a difference between writing comedy, tragedy, history, prose, and poetry, all to which Shakespeare applied his quill. And then of course, there is word play and the invention of words. While we aren’t, per say, actively coming up with new words to suit our purposes, with the notable exception of Dr. Seuss, we are making greater use of abbreviations, which on their own are new words or even a new “language” of text-speak. Also, it must be remembered that Shakespeare used his fair amount of slang, and the greater awareness



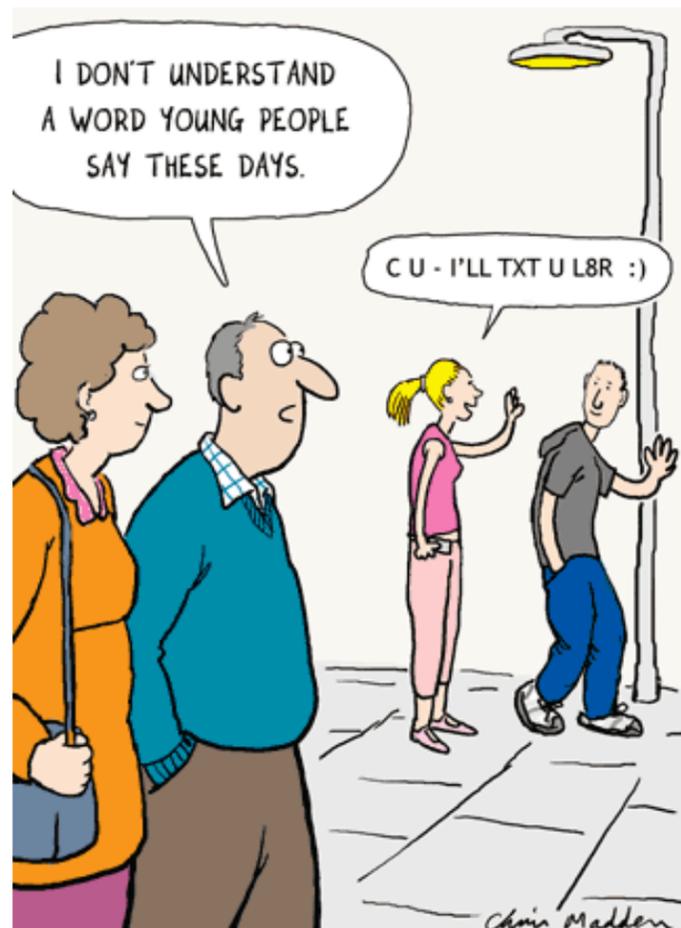
of it that we have today can skew our view of what language is and the direction it’s taking, particularly since the technology of texting seems to be narrowing the gap between writing and speaking with the use of slang. The greater awareness of slang has also increased our awareness of the greater gap and range of formal and informal writing that we engage in. After all, no one in his right mind formally responds to an acceptance letter with “OMG! Thank u soooooo much!!!” This greater range is both influenced by the language and our target audience, two factors that influence the author in the never-ending writer’s triangle. This closing of the gap between speaking and writing does have great potential to dramatically influence the evolution of the English language not only as a way not to worsen grammar and sentence structure, but to correct grammar and spelling inconsistencies, making the language more phonetic. But that remains a distant future possibility. It is the tool of communication technologies that simultaneously open up bright shining possibilities, even as they warn of darker pitfalls. How our shifting language will be influenced by even more rapidly shifting technology remains to be seen.

In some ways, this is a trail unblazed, as, even though some symptoms of what technology can do to writing have already been demonstrated and hinted at through examination of articles not only online and social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, but even in the consideration of what forms of communication are not as widely used any more. For instance I myself was struck with surprise the other day in composing a letter just how long it had been since I actually written a letter, rather than sending a text or giving a call or status update. The loss of physical writing, such as letters and docu-

ments, is also a danger because of the fallibility of technology and its shifting nature. Few of us haven't suddenly felt very religious when an important deadline looms like Judgment Day, or cursed everything above and below earth when our laptop dies, our hard work unsaved. Even because of the rate technology changes, things that we recorded or wrote down before may be incompatible with newer technology, thus rendering the old technology essentially useless, like those dozens of floppy disks gathering dust stuffed in a box or forgotten desk drawer somewhere. Ironic, that we should experience this loss of information and memory even as we suffer from information overload. But I digress.

While things like texting have had a visible impact (especially to teachers) on how we write, they have also had the benefit of shortening response time, meaning even if the quality of our writing has dropped perceptibly, the speed at which we write it has shortened, a useful skill in a time that demands instantaneous information. Thus, the way remains open, the future a tabula rasa on which we can still make our mark and dictate, to an extent, the course of language history.

Part of the reason this way is so open is because the structure of language and speaking, and even more so the culture into which it is spoken, has changed so much. For instance, Shakespeare's audience had their Latin and church background, Churchill and his political contemporaries had Cicero, and even Dr. King drew on the Latin and Biblical traditions. But today, with such an expanded access to diversity and culture, it is hard to know what common traditions and basis of knowledge potential audiences will have. The "melting pot" fails to have a single universal flavor. In the course of my discussion of the topic with Shakespeare scholar, Professor McDonald, she remarked "you can't plug in to your audience without plugging into their traditions, their basis of knowledge." Thus, this expanded audience and absence of tradition or locality has the potential, especially for larger and even global audiences that speakers and writers might be trying to reach, of completely changing the way we speak and write, effectively changing the way we use language as a messenger and means of expression. Without this common background to draw on, we must instead forge new ways of connecting to the audience. Now, audibly even if not consciously, a listener can recognize President Obama's use of literary devices such as alliteration and metaphor. Anyone can listen and hear the repetition of the 's' sound when President Obama says "safety, security, success" etc., but not everyone would get Dr. King's allusion to the Exodus of the Jews from slavery out of Egypt because not everyone would have a tradition or background of which that was a part. Again though, the Internet provides a possible solution to the potential loss of common tradition by being able to instantly supply the Biblical allusion via the power of Wikipedia. More promising though, is the possibility that the Internet will enable the forging of a new culture through the common bond of



university. The common tradition and cultural awareness of the past would not have been established via information osmosis. Unfortunately, just because a person gets older, the passage of time doesn't suddenly transform them into the powerful, awe-inspiring, omniscient creature that we dreamed of as kids when we contemplated the idea of being an "Adult" deep in our six-year old brains. Everyone has to learn it at school, higher education, and universities, even Shakespeare, Churchill, and King. Even as articles protest that universities are once again becoming closed off and available only to a blessed few, the Internet is again providing a potential tool through the use of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs. These courses are more widely available without the same staggering cost of tuition as a traditional university, again providing an avenue for information and the continuation, or establishment of a new, common culture and tradition. Thus, universities and possibly MOOCs by extension, provide the possibility of keeping a standard of language afloat. But practicality itself also dictates, to an extent, that we simply cannot communicate effectively in 140 characters and a series of "LOL"s and emoticons, though that might seem to be the trend and direction in which communication is heading.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, spoken and written language, particularly English, do not change and evolve at the same rate. This leaves me cautiously optimistic about the future of the English language and its evolution. If we handle the delicate balance between the old changing nature of language and its relationship with this new technology with care, then there is reason to believe that we'll be just fine. And who knows, perhaps in time we may even have another Shakespeare emerge, shining from the ashes of abbreviations and emoticons. And that's something to ☺ about.