Does English have a future?

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Vice-Chancellor, Chair of the Governors, colleagues, family and friends.

My theme tonight is the question "Does English have a future". In this lecture I plan to:

- Challenge some mistaken beliefs about English
- Invent a new word
- Quote some classic writers such as Orwell, Milton and Hardy
- Make a joke involving the Prince of Wales

More seriously, I’m going to argue that questions about language often turn out to be questions about cultural politics and ideology.

My question, “Does English have a future”, may seem rather a strange one. Millions of people around the world speak English. Millions more learn English as a second language. English is the language of international trade, politics, research, sport, popular music, the internet, and so on. Other languages are dying out, but surely not English? In fact, everyone speaks English these days:

“If English was good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for you.”
- Arkansas School Superintendent, refusing a request for foreign languages to be taught in high school

So is our original question a good one? More generally, what makes a good question about language? I think we need to distinguish between normal people like most of you, and strange people like me who spend their lives trying to analyse how language works. A good question for you might not be a good one for me, and vice versa. For a "normal" person, a good question is one which helps people use language confidently and effectively. For a linguistics specialist, a good question is one which leads to deep insights into the nature of language.

As a linguistics specialist, I just observe how language works without passing judgement. I’m interested in facts about language, not feelings about language. But that isn’t the whole story. I am also a normal person and I often struggle to express myself accurately and to understand what other people say and write. I have feelings about language. I like to see English used effectively. I teach writing and translation as well as linguistic analysis, and there I have to make judgements of quality all the time. I’m normal enough to know that it isn’t normal to enjoy grammar as much as I do. I don’t like clumsy language that is hard to understand, for example:

The function of the teeth is essentially to facilitate and optimise the eating process.

I much prefer lucid, elegant language like this:

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1 This remark can be found on the internet attributed to many different people, and may be no more than an urban myth. If so, it’s a very entertaining myth.
Teeth make it easier to eat.

My motto is “Keep it Short and Simple” (KISS). I object strongly when people write like this:

I regret that the survey officer who is responsible for the preliminary investigation as to the technical possibility of installing a telephone at the address quoted by any applicant has reported that owing to a shortage a spare pair of wires to the underground cable (a pair of wires leading from the point near your house directly back to the local exchange) is lacking and that therefore it is a technical impossibility to install a telephone for you.

I much prefer to read prose like this.

I am sorry to have to tell you that we will not be able to install a telephone for you.

We have checked the cable that we would need to use to connect your house with the exchange.

Unfortunately we found that there is no spare pair of wires on the cable.

And I have major problems with this:

The town hall is closed until opening.
It will remain closed after being opened.
Open tomorrow.

Sign outside a new town hall which was to be opened by the Prince of Wales

So I’m both a normal person with feelings about language as well as someone who analyses language. I’m prepared to look at our opening question about the future of English in those two ways: Does our opening question help people use language confidently and effectively? And does it lead to deep insights into the nature of language? I will answer no to both these questions.

In the next part of this lecture I’m going to look at the views of some eminent people who are concerned about English. Then I will ask if the evidence supports their views, and I’ll present some rather strong evidence that they are wrong.
What kind of people think that the English language is in trouble? Essentially there are two types:

- People who don’t want English to change – I will call them the Antiquarians.
- People who hate sloppy, imprecise, confusing language – I will refer to them as the Angry Grammarians.

To make it quite clear, let me add that the Antiquarians hate egalitarians, while Angry Grammarians hate barbarians. Both of them hate quadragenarians\(^2\) like me who ask uncomfortable questions. I call this Antiquadragenarianism—a word I’ve just invented which means “picking on people in their forties”. Shame on anyone who does this. Next year when I’m fifty I won’t care so much.

Let’s look at some examples of each type. One of the clearest statements of concern is from George Orwell. In his 1946 essay “Politics and the English Language” he wrote:

> Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way.

There are academics who share Orwell’s views. One of them, a particularly furious man, was Basil Cottle, Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol, who wrote:

> A language where ‘everything goes’, where the foul, callous, sick, mindless, un-grown-up remark finds an accepted place, is as doomed as Nero. – *The Plight of English*, 1975.

The writer Kingsley Amis often grumbled about the way English was used. As an angry old man, he thundered:

> “The most effective and insidious attack on the language is coming now probably from the spoken, not the written, word, from actors and broadcasters. An evening's TV in the UK (I cannot believe it is any better in the US) will show that a large number of people who make their living from speaking the language have lost interest in the meaning of what is said.” *The State of the Language*, 1990

Many members of the public feel strongly about these matters. David Crystal, the well-known expert on language, invited listeners to Radio 4 to write to him with their pet hates about English usage. Over a thousand people responded. Top of the list were:

- Between you and I (should be *Between you and me*)
- To boldly go where no man has gone before. (Split infinitive)
- Different to / different than (only different from will do)

\(^2\) *Quadragenarian*: a person from 40 to 49 years old. – *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 
• Hopefully this lecture will not go on too long. (use of hopefully as a sentence adverb)
• This is a question that I know the answer to. (ending a sentence with a preposition)

What particularly struck Crystal was how enraged his correspondents were. He commented:

“The language of most letters was intemperate in the extreme, using apocalyptic metaphors to describe the writers’ feelings. The reactions listed below are typical.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>abomination</th>
<th>shudder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>makes my blood boil</td>
<td>cringe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drives me wild</td>
<td>horrified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prostitution</td>
<td>appalling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now let’s look at a couple of antiquarians, starting with a journalist from the US:

If English is allowed to degenerate into a babel of regional dialects, social stratifications, vulgarities, jargon, and juvenile slang, the hope of true understanding among the millions of English-speaking people around the earth is commensurately dimmed. In the health of the English language, the health of Western Civilisation may well reside. – Lincoln Barnett, *The Treasure of our Tongue*, 1966.

Meanwhile on this side of the Atlantic we find John Honey, a writer on language and education:

... the end of word treatment of *t* has reached epidemic proportions, and it is now common to hear it among school teachers and other professional people, including university professors...³ [we should not] underestimate the feeling of deep unease which this development in our language causes. – *Language is Power*, 1997.

I hope that many of you are feeling uneasy right now.

How much does all this matter? Rather a lot, if you believe Plain English Campaign, who say:

Research has indicated that sloppy letter-writing alone costs the UK £6 billion a year as a result of mistakes, inefficiency and lost business. – *Utter Drivel: a decade of jargon and gobbledygook*, 1994.

³ Imagine this pronounced “and i’ is now common to hear i’ among ... universi’y professors”.
As the title suggests, their book is mostly examples of bad writing, with some useful suggestions about how it could be improved. That’s fine, in my view. Unfortunately, anyone who can say “Research has indicated” in this cavalier way is probably talking “utter drivel”. But let’s just imagine for a moment what you could do with £6 billion. If we all stopped splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions, we could build a huge football stadium just near this lecture hall, build a new runway at Gatwick, and buy me a new computer…

Seriously though, if these complaints are correct, the future of English is indeed looking grim. Let’s look now, however, at two people who think that the antiquarians and the angry grammarians are wrong about the future of English. One of the things that Orwell and the others were complaining about was pretentious English – people trying to sound important and profound by writing in an elaborate and complicated way, or people writing in a way which is deliberately confusing. Anyone who reads academic journals or tries to make sense of their insurance policies will know what he meant.

One way to measure complicated writing is to count the average number of words in a sentence. This is a crude statistic, because it ignores other factor which make for complexity like the use of long and unfamiliar words, but it can be suggestive. Other things being equal, straightforward writing uses shorter sentences, whereas convoluted writing uses longer ones. In other words, to paraphrase Orwell’s sheep: “Short sentences good, long complicated sentences with many dangling postmodifiers and cascading subordinate clauses – bad”

A century ago, an American scholar called L.A. Sherman took some samples of English writing over several hundred years and measured their complexity in this way. His conclusion was:

> English sentences have grown shorter and shorter for centuries.
> – Analytics of Literature, 1893

In other words, if anything we wrote more clearly in 1893 than in previous times. Here’s an example of the type of prose that was written a few hundred years ago.

> And then we began to reckon amongst ourselves how many we were set on shore, and we found the number to be an hundred and fourteen, whereof two were drowned in the sea and eight were slain at the first encounter, so that there remained an hundred and four, of which five-and-twenty went westward with us, and two-and-fifty to the north with Hooper and Ingram; and, as Ingram since has often told me, there were not past three of their company slain, and there were but six-and-twenty of them that came again to us, so that of the company that went northward there is yet lacking, and not certainly heard of, the number of three-and-twenty men. And verily I do think that there are of them yet alive and married in the said country, at Cibola, as I purpose (God willing) to discourse of more
particularly, with the reasons and causes that make me so think of them that were lacking that were with David Ingram, Twide, Brown, and sundry others, whose names we could not remember. – Richard Hakluyt, Geographer, c. 1600.

The first sentence of this extract contains 116 words, the second 61.

Someone else who does not agree with the antiquarians is Rudolf Flesch. He wrote a book in 1948 full of tips about how to write readable English. He condemned convoluted writing wherever he found it, and he was not afraid to criticise some of the classic writers like Thomas Hardy. Flesch said:

The prose of some of the literary great, by today’s standards, is wretched and [one] should avoid imitation of that prose like a plague” – The Art of Readable Writing, 1948

Here’s a passage from Hardy’s novel Return of the Native:

The gloomy corner into which accident as much as indiscretion had brought this woman might have led even a moderate partisan to feel that she had cogent reasons for asking the Supreme Power by what right a being of such exquisite finish had been placed in circumstances calculated to make of her charms a curse rather than a blessing.

Flesch comments: “It’s about time someone said out loud that prose like this is ridiculous”.

So we have seen that some people don’t share the view that English is declining, and they offer some evidence to back up their views. What I want to do now is to challenge the Antiquarians and the Angry Grammarians in a different way. It turns out that the kind of complaints that Orwell and the others make have in fact been common for hundreds of years. We’ll see some examples in a moment. So either English has been in decline for hundreds of years, which does not seem likely, or the complaints don’t reflect reality at all but form part of an ideological offensive. Let’s start with an example that dates from twenty or so years before Orwell, by Henry Fowler, who could be as angry as anyone.

The stern author of Modern English Usage (1926) denounced several fashionable French expressions as “abominations”, and after giving several examples where authors used was the recipient of rather than received he stormed: “Can any man say that sort of thing & retain a shred of self-respect?”.  

Now let’s go back another twenty or so years:
We have frequent occasion to observe this tendency to neologism, and the avidity with which [writers] cover a certain crudity of reasoning and obscurity of thought, or endeavour to give weight to a shallow theory, by the selection of the very longest and most technical words which the medical vocabulary will supply. This is an error to be deplored and reprobated. – Editorial in The Lancet, 30 September 1885

The first sentence by these eminent medical writers contains 52 Words. I wish they had made their point like this:

We have often noticed how writers invent new words for no good reason, and try to cover up their crude, obscure or shallow thinking by using long and technical words. We don't like this at all.

We can go back much earlier and find similar opinions in the eighteenth century:

Jonathan Swift published a pamphlet in 1712, fourteen years before he wrote Gulliver’s Travels, called Proposal for Correcting,Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue. He argued that English was being “maimed”, in particular by poets and “young men at universities”.

I suspect that there are people in the audience here tonight, including some members of my own family, who would be guilty in Swift’s eyes.

A century earlier, one of our greatest poets had argued:

When the language in common use in any country becomes irregular and depraved, it is followed by their ruin and corruption. – John Milton, 1638

So for a long time, some people have said that English was in trouble, and that change was change for the worse. I put it to you that we should not take them too seriously, but we should ask instead why they held these views. I believe that they held them because they were members of privileged elites who felt that their privileges were under threat.

I’d like to support this harsh judgement by moving away from language for a moment and looking at another topic where for hundreds of years, people have been saying that things are changing for the worse, namely crime and specifically street crime. Let’s start with a recent column in a daily newspaper.
Thrash the thugs and save Joan for London

Joan Collins ... alarms us by announcing that London crime is so frightening that she has decided to leave her apartments in Belgravia and reside in New York because she is too frightened to walk the 400 yards to her hairdresser ...

Anyone who was a teacher more than 25 years ago knows the mysterious change in the demeanour of the worst teenage offenders, the moment a large cane was produced and put on the desk. Londoners are now in the position of teachers without the capacity to cow or threaten the aggressive teenager-menace. – A.N. Wilson, *Evening Standard*, September 2002

Note the reference to 25 years here, which roughly corresponds to a generation. Let me just say that I was in school more than 25 years ago, and the cane was used frequently. We had appalling disruption in the classroom, violence, bullying, vandalism, teachers being blackmailed by students, theft – and all this in a grammar school in a quiet seaside town. Ah, those were the days.

Let’s go back a generation earlier and see what people were saying then.

Standards are falling

People are bound to ask what is happening to our country ... Having been one of the most law-abiding countries in the world, a byword for stability, order and decency – are we changing into something else?” – *Daily Express*, July 1981.

Suppose we look back another twenty or so years:

- “This disturbing increase in crime and brutality ... is so foreign to our nature and our country.”
- “Is it not a fact that our wives and mothers, if they are left alone in the house at night, are frightened to open their doors?”
- “Over the past 25 years we in this country, through misguided sentiment, have cast aside the word ‘discipline’, and now we are suffering from it.”

- Speakers at Tory Conference in Blackpool, 1958

If anyone here tonight left their mother alone in the house in 1958, shame on you!

About twenty years before that, we find Orwell putting these words into the head of one of his characters; in his essays he voiced similar views:
‘There’s something that’s gone out of us in these twenty years since the war.’ ... ‘People then had something they haven’t got now,’ he thought as he remembered the years before the Great War. ‘A feeling of security, even when they weren’t secure. More exactly, it was a feeling of continuity’. – George Bowling in Coming Up for Air, 1939

Go back even earlier, to that hotbed of crime, Brighton, and we find a magistrate saying:

If it be true, as is so frequently asserted, that the manners of children are deteriorating, that the child of today is coarser, more vulgar, less refined, than his parents were, then, it must be admitted ... that the education presented to the children of the poor falls lamentably short of its ideal... – C.G. Heathcote, Brighton Magistrate, 1898.

If we had time I could show you earlier statements like these, about how crime has got worse in the last generation. The writers – usually quadragenarians – always harked back to a golden age, about 20 or 25 years ago, when they were young and filled their time with innocent pleasures. It is easy to show that these complaints have a tenuous relation with reality. England has long been a violent and dangerous place. Here’s just one example:

From the early 1600s the streets of London and other cities had been terrorised by a succession of organised gangs – calling themselves the Muns, Bugles, Dead Boys, Nickers, Roaring Boys, Bravadoes, Mohocks, etc. – who found their amusement in breaking windows, demolishing taverns, assaulting the Watch, attacking wayfarers and slitting their noses with swords, rolling old ladies in barrels, and other violent frolics.” – D. Bahlman, The Moral Revolution of 1688.

So what can we learn from this comparison of complaints about language and complaints about street crime? I think that we can learn three things:

• There never was a golden age of Merrie England without crime and disorder.
• Likewise, there never was a golden age when everyone used English properly.
• Both of these beliefs are myths used by elite groups to defend their privileges and to resist change.

English is a dynamic mixture – that’s what makes it interesting. The English language has always been a mixture of many different varieties. English constantly changes. The particular variety used as a written standard in England may be losing its dominance as other regional standards emerge.
Yes, sloppy, imprecise or pretentious writing needs to be challenged. The battle against bad writing is worth fighting, but it’s not about resisting change or preserving “The Queen’s English” at all costs. It’s about writing for clarity and elegance, not some outdated dogma about what’s correct and what isn’t.

So Does English have a future? turned out not to be a useful question for “normal” people. Is it a good question for a linguistics specialist? Let’s change the question slightly, and ask Does English have a future tense? Sometimes it’s useful to question things that seem very obvious.

I enjoy getting involved in debates about the politics of language, but my own teaching and research are not in this area but in the area of grammar, and it’s this area that I want to explore in the next part of my lecture.

Again, our starting question may seem a strange one. Of course English has a future tense, you might say – we can all talk about the future, therefore English has a future tense. And some grammars of English agree:

- If you want to say that something is planned to happen, or is likely to happen in the future, you use the modal will in front of the base form of the verb. This is called the future tense. – Collins COBUILD English Grammar

- ... the future tense (with will or shall) … – A. Hornby, Guide to Patterns and Usage in English

However, most grammars nowadays don’t agree. Two of the most distinguished grammarians of English, Randolph Quirk and the late Sidney Greenbaum, said:

There is no obvious future tense in English corresponding to … present and past. Instead, there are several possibilities for denoting future time. – R. Quirk & S. Greenbaum, A University Grammar of English

A major new grammar of English appeared earlier this year. It is monumental both in the scholarship which went into it and its size – 1800 pages. The authors spend several pages arguing that English does not have a future tense, and assert:

... we do not recognise a future tense for English. ... we will argue that will is an auxiliary of mood, not tense. – R. Huddleston & G. Pullum, The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, pp. 208-9

Why do most grammarians take this view? One reason is that English has many ways of referring to future time:

- I’m going to visit Germany next March.
- The train leaves in 2 hours.
Helen is taking her exam tomorrow.
Frank may arrive next week.
Julie will visit Germany next April.
… etc.

Why should we pick out one of these ways and call it “the future tense”? Where does that leave the others?

Another reason is that WILL has the same grammar as other modal verbs like may, must, can:

- No -s in 3rd person singular (He will, not *He wills)
- Takes a bare infinitive (I will go, not *I will to go)
- Moves to the front in questions (I will go → Will I go?)

Furthermore, WILL is often used like other modals:

- How old is he? He’ll be about fifty. cf. He may be about fifty.
- [Knock at the door]. That will be the postman. cf. That must be the postman.
- Will you please open the door? cf. Could you please open the door?

The view of these scholars, then, is that WILL is a modal verb both in its grammar and in the way it is used.

A counterargument would be to point out that WILL is different from the other ways of talking about the future, because it is unrestricted while the others are restricted in various ways. For example, using the present tense as in The train leaves in 2 hours is only possible for a scheduled event like a train departure. So you can’t use this construction for future events which aren’t scheduled: you can’t, for instance, say, *Leeds Utd. lose to Blackburn tomorrow, though you can say Leeds Utd. play Blackburn tomorrow.

Another counterargument comes from frequency data. A grammarian called Dieter Mindt recently looked at a sample of over 80 million words. He found that 94% of the examples of WILL referred to future time. The “modal” uses like our postman example were not very common. Even Huddleston & Pullum concede:

> The default way of locating a situation in future time is by means of WILL. – Cambridge Grammar, p. 189

I’d like to challenge an assumption behind this debate. The argument about the future tense assumes that there is one thing called the “future tense” and that languages either do or don’t have this thing. I call this the supermarket model of language, because it assumes that there is a pre-existing range of grammatical terms, including the future tense, which grammarians have to choose from.

I think that this model of language is unhelpful. Instead, we need a corpus-driven model which is based on evidence, not on pre-conceived ideas about what we will find. According to
the corpus-driven model, the grammatical concepts for each language should derive from the data.

A corpus is simply a large collection of samples of real language, usually stored on a computer. In the past ten years I’ve done a lot of work with corpora of English and other languages. They make it easy to examine large amounts of evidence about how English is really used, and often contain surprises. Using corpora has revolutionised my work and led me to challenge some widely-held assumptions about language.

In a corpus-driven model, Languages have words (like will) and inflections (like -ed in English walked, jumped, etc) with particular meanings and uses. We can investigate them using a large body of evidence. Giving them names like “future tense” may be convenient for some purposes, but the name has no theoretical significance. So we have been asking the wrong question – again. “Does English have a future tense?” turned out not to be a useful question for linguistics specialists. It rests on assumptions about language which are simply prejudices, not based on research.

To sum up, then: Our opening question was: Does English have a future? I have argued that this is the wrong question, both for “normal people” and linguistics specialists, if we try to answer it directly, but that it is a useful exercise to expose the assumptions about language which lie behind the question. As I try to tell my students, a lot of what you learn at University is how to ask the right questions.

In conclusion, I’ve been tough on Orwell at several points in this lecture, so let me end by agreeing with him. Orwell criticises “comfortable English professors” who use an “inflated style” and says:

> If you simplify your English ... when you make a stupid remark, its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself.

I hope that I haven’t made too many stupid remarks this evening.

Thank you.

Note: To make the text easier to read, I have not indicated my sources in the usual careful way. I would like to acknowledge, however, my debt to one splendid book which should be required reading whenever our society is beset by moral panic, whether it is about crime, grammar, or most recently, asylum seekers:


Several of the laments for a crime-free golden age are taken from this book.