Escape of the 'i' so not surprising

Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

"ENGLISH ain't gonna be what it used to" says a recent headline in the *Dominion Post* (March 28). To which our response ought surely to be, "Well, obviously!"

The fact that English (or any living language) will change over the next period of time is about as surprising as saying that if you throw your apple core on a compost heap and then come back after two years, you are unlikely to find the same apple core. It might have been carried off and used for something else, it might have rotted, or it might have turned into a sapling, but it will have changed.

Languages change a little more slowly than apple cores, but the basic principle, that the only constant is change, remains just as true. So if English will be different, can we see it changing now? The traditional answer to this is no, but the more recent answer is that we actually can see it happening around us. We see change happening when young speakers no longer speak (or write) the way in which older speakers do. There are hundreds of examples of this, but let me name just a few.

New Zealanders have long said (and written) "good day" as "gidday". The implication of the spelling is that the first vowel sound is now more like the vowel usually written with an "i" than like the vowel written with "oo".

For a long time, people restricted the i-like pronunciation to the expression "gidday", but then it escaped, and if you asked someone how they were, they'd answer "gid" rather than "good". But then that change escaped from the word "good", and we can hear young speakers saying "pish" for "push" and "kishion" for "cushion".

When I asked a class of students a little while ago about the word "push" I was surprised to find that only one retained the old "u" sound (the same sound that is spelled "oo" in "good") in this word. This change is happening not only in New Zealand, but in the United States, in England and in Australia as well.

A young speaker recently, when talking about a cricket match his team had lost, said that they had started well "and we so could have won" (or perhaps "could of" — but that is a different story). Speakers of my age could never use "so" in this position in a sentence, or with this meaning. Young speakers say things like "That is so not true" without hesitation. The use of "so" has changed between generations. If you were around when people were protesting against (or protesting, with no "against") the Vietnam War, and someone had complained to you that the instructions on a package were not "user-friendly", you would have looked at them blankly.

"User-friendly", along with a host of other such terms, came into general use in the 1980s and 1990s, with the advent of the ubiquitous personal computer. As we get more technology we need new words for it, and we lose a few technologically obsolete words like "dog cart", which we now only meet in Jane Austen's novels and the like.

These are small examples, but they cover a very short period of history. As change is added to change, the language becomes increasingly different, till we are looking at differences as great as "Whan that Aprille with hir shoures sote" and "When April with its sweet showers".

But before you start writing in and telling me that the examples I have cited are simply the effect of slovenliness or laziness and that they show that English is going to rack and ruin, let me point out that at some stage people no doubt said precisely the same thing about the differences between "shoures sote" and "sweet showers".

We get upset by things that have happened in our lifetimes, but completely ignore the things that happened before that — just as the young of today are completely unaware that "we so could have won" is not perfectly normal English. For them, it is normal.

If you could travel through time to the year 3008, you would find English changed beyond recognition. You would have difficulty in understanding it. But while we can make some educated guesses, we cannot entirely predict what direction that change will take.

■ *Laurie Bauer is a linguist at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University.*

■ *Send your questions about language to* **words@dompost.co.nz**