

Language needs to change

Sarah Churchwell

- 1 **Y**ou can feel the collective shudder among language purists: "innit", "grrl" and "thang" have been admitted into the Collins Scrabble Dictionary. Admission into any dictionary is the first step on the road to legitimation, thus raising the question of whether mispronunciation constitutes a genuine neologism. I hate to admit it, but historically speaking the answer to that question is yes.
- 2 The cynics amongst us might wonder whether the dictionary's editors made deliberately provocative choices to stir up publicity. The Americans amongst us might wonder why an American like me is using the archaic "amongst" instead of "among" like a normal person.
- 3 Language usage matters, in other words, not merely because of our need to communicate denotatively, but because of the complex, subtle array of connotative meanings conveyed by specific usages. Usage creates groups; it includes and excludes, and it hierarchizes. To wit: my use of the "-ize" suffix in "hierarchize" will brand me as a philistine¹⁾ to certain readers — a point to which I'll return.
- 4 We all know that language is mutable, that it must either evolve or wither away: Babylonian is untroubled by the intrusion of new slang, as it is untroubled by speakers. The word "slang" is itself illustrative: it was first recorded in 1756, I learn from the OED²⁾, which offers a wonderfully sniffy definition: "The special vocabulary used by any set of persons of a low or disreputable character." Language thus signals not education, but character: not what you know, but who you are. And who you are, linguistically speaking, is all about class, innit.
- 5 It is no coincidence that the word "slang" entered the language immediately after Samuel Johnson codified it for the first time in his 1755 dictionary. Johnson took a surprisingly descriptive (rather than prescriptive) stance toward English, acknowledging that change wasn't just inevitable, but normal. He also thought that an F was the same as an S, so what did he know? (This is a joke. I may be American, but I am familiar with the orthographic peculiarity that was the "long S" in the 18th century.) Standardized spelling soon followed, and the British generally chose the Norman route.
- 6 It took an American to start purging the French out of English. After the revolution (not "war of independence", thank you) the fledgling US sought to establish its independence culturally as well as politically. Moreover, the Enlightenment project of America's founders meant emphasizing literacy education; and pronunciation had already altered over the previous two centuries. In 1828 Noah Webster produced the first American dictionary, seeking to establish America's cultural distinctiveness. The much-maligned (in Britain) suffix "-ize" is not a modern outrage derived from US business-speak, but dates back to Webster, who returned it to words derived from Greek verbs ending in "-izein". He also took the French out of words ending in "-re", and the "u" out of

the suffix "-our", another French spelling. In other words, when the British mock "American" spellings, they are usually defending the French. That's what you call historical irony.

7 I was recently upbraided by an English woman for using what she called an "American barbarism" – the form "gotten", as in "I'd gotten tired of being corrected by arrogant, misinformed persons". I explained that "gotten" is a Renaissance usage found throughout Shakespeare; he uses "ungotten" too.

8 The standardisation of language may be a comparatively recent phenomenon, but fears about its corruption by foreign or degenerate "speches" are as old as xenophobia. The argument is always framed as an effort to keep the original language from "degenerating", but language can't degenerate: it can only live or die.

9 The idea that languages are threatened by the inclusion of new words is as foolishly nativist as the idea that exogamy³⁾ threatens bloodlines. What may be threatened by admitting new words are class prerogatives based on exclusive access to standard forms – and from a democratic perspective, that's not a bad thing.

10 From an aesthetic standpoint, however, "innit" remains an abomination. That said, true language purists won't admit the authority of Scrabble's dictionary in the first place. But they should: the first recorded use of "scrabble" is from no less canonical a source than the King James Bible itself.

11 But note to the Scrabble editors: they spelled it "scrable".

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noot 1 a philistine: someone who does not like or understand art, literature, music, etc.

noot 2 OED: Oxford English Dictionary

noot 3 exogamy: marriage outside your family or caste

Tekst 7 Language needs to change

- 1p 24 What is the main point of paragraph 1?
- A Less popular lexical items should also be included in dictionaries.
 - B Mistakes in the way words are spoken may well result in new words.
 - C Old-fashioned vocabulary tends to frustrate effective communication.
 - D People advocating correctness in the spelling of new words stick to outdated conventions.
- 1p 25 What becomes clear from paragraph 3?
- A A person's choice of words is indicative of the cultural group he/she belongs to.
 - B Having a rich vocabulary enhances one's social standing.
 - C Inclusion of new words in everyday language proves their relevance.
 - D The origin of class-based linguistic distinction is a subject of discussion.
- 1p 26 Which of the following statements reflects Sarah Churchwell's attitude towards Samuel Johnson according to paragraph 5?
- A She agrees with him that language is prone to change.
 - B She expresses her annoyance with his arbitrary inclusion of words.
 - C She feels disappointed with him for using unorthodox spelling.
 - D She praises him for preferring the French over the English spelling.
- 1p 27 Which of the following observations about Noah Webster is in line with paragraph 6?
- A He changed the spelling of words, making them "American" in character.
 - B He embraced American English pronunciation as a distinctive feature.
 - C He is still criticised for introducing typically "American" suffixes.
 - D He is the one responsible for America's linguistic independence.

- 1p 28 What is the function of paragraph 7?
- A To explain the history of the American spellings referred to in paragraph 6.
 - B To explore if traditional British English is at the root of American English.
 - C To give another example of the disdain the English display with regard to American English.
 - D To illustrate the historical irony mentioned in paragraph 6.
- 1p 29 Which of the following reflects the writer's opinion as expressed in paragraphs 8-11?
- A A language should not adopt too much of its vocabulary from other languages.
 - B Developments in the field of linguistics are not compatible with democratic processes.
 - C Inclusion of a word in the Collins Scrabble Dictionary does not reflect its standardisation.
 - D The right to accept new vocabulary is not reserved to a privileged social group.
- 1p 30 Which of the following shows Sarah Churchwell's annoyance?
- A "my use of the "-ize" suffix in "hierarchize" will brand me as a philistine to certain readers" (paragraph 3)
 - B "And who you are, linguistically speaking, is all about class, innit." (paragraph 4)
 - C "He also thought that an F was the same as an S, so what did he know?" (paragraph 5)
 - D "I'd gotten tired of being corrected by arrogant, misinformed persons" (paragraph 7)
- 1p 31 "Language needs to change" (titel)
Welke zin maakt voor het eerst duidelijk waarom dit nodig is?
Citeer de eerste twee woorden van deze zin.

Bronvermelding

Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift, dat na afloop van het examen wordt gepubliceerd.