

# EL2211 Historical Variation in English

## (Sem 2, 2011/12)

### Tutorial No. 4

1. When languages come into contact with each other, they may borrow each other's lexis, grammar or sounds. Where has English 'borrowed' these words from: *stanza*, *stigma*, *shampoo*, *sausage*, *sublime*, *compound* (as in *prison* or *school compound*), *ketchup*? (You need to look up dictionaries with etymological entries.) What about these words from Singlish (or Colloquial Singapore English, CSE); where do they come from: *goondu*, *kachau*, *kiasu*, *laku*, *jialat*, *pantang*, *ponteng*, *samseng*? (Please consult your friends or family if you don't speak Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese or Tamil.)

2. The term 'slang' is used in Singaporean English (SgE) to mean 'put on an accent'.

Here is a definition of *slang* from Graddol *et al.* (2007): *In Singapore some individuals may adopt salient features of American English to transmit a westernised identity. The features most commonly adopted are non-prevocalic /r/, and the replacement of intervocalic /t/ with /d/.<sup>1</sup> . . . This adoption of an Americanised accent, as opposed to a Singaporean accent, is called 'slanging' in Singapore. Those who do this have been satirised in comic books and in sketches (p. 240).*

Adam Brown (1999) says this: 'SgE speakers sometimes use *slang* to mean "talk posh, put on an accent" '.

(a) Which of the definitions of *slanging* do you agree with more (make sure you understand what Graddol means by a **non-prevocalic /r/** and **intervocalic /t/**)? Why should some Singaporeans want to (consciously, sub-consciously or unconsciously) 'slang'?

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a simplification. The actual sound is a 'flap t' (IPA symbol is [ɾ] and is also used for the 'r' sound in Scottish English and Spanish).

- (b) Would there be those who choose (consciously, sub-consciously or unconsciously) *not* to do this?
- (c) Compare the behaviour of Singaporeans with what we know about linguistic behaviour in
- Norwich
  - New York
  - Martha's Vineyard

What are the similarities and differences? You might want to employ some of the terms introduced in the lecture: *accommodation, centripetal force, centrifugal force, convergence, divergence.*

3. What is your view of the relationship between language and culture? Does language *reflect* culture or does language *embody* culture?

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, a kind of language called Newspeak is promoted. Here is Orwell describing it in an appendix to *1984*:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of IngSoc [English Socialism], but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought – that is, a thought diverging from the principles of IngSoc – should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods. This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meaning whatever.

Here is a passage from *1984* itself. The protagonist Winston's friend Syme is an expert compiling the eleventh edition of the Newspeak Dictionary.

'The Eleventh Edition is the definitive edition,' said Syme. 'We're getting the language into its final shape – the shape it's going to have when nobody speaks anything else. You think our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We're destroying words – scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone. In the final version of Newspeak there'll be nothing else. It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. The great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well. It isn't only the synonyms; there are also the antonyms. After all what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take "good", for instance. If you have a word like "good", what need is there for a word like "bad"? "Ungood" will do just as well – better, because it's an exact opposite, which the other is not. Or again, if you want a stronger version of "good", what sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like "excellent" and "splendid" and all the rest of them? "Plusgood" covers the meaning; or "doubleplusgood" if you want something stronger still. In the final version of Newspeak there'll be nothing else. The whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word.

'Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten. Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. There's no reason or excuse for committing thoughtcrime. It's merely a question

of self-discipline, reality-control. The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect. Newspeak is Ingsoc and Ingsoc is Newspeak.

‘By the year 2050 – earlier probably – all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron – they’ll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of The Party will change. Even the slogans will change. How could you have a slogan like “freedom is slavery” when the concept of freedom has been abolished? The whole climate of thought will be different. In fact there will be no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking – not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness.’

What assumptions are made about the role of language in thought in 1984? You might want to use the term *linguistic determinism* or *Whorfism* or *the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* in your discussion.