

Good and Bad English:

How to Deal with Language Variation and Change in Language Learning

Ikmi Nur Oktavianti
ikmi.oktavianti@pbi.uad.ac.id

Universitas Ahmad Dahlan

Abstract

Language practitioners often seem language phenomena as degeneration or decay. This is something misleading and need to be taken seriously into consideration. Purists and prescriptivists should see the phenomena not only from the normative point of view but also from the science of language itself, which is still forgotten. This article thus attempts to propose insights from linguistics related to the term good and bad language, with the focus on good and bad English. Is there any good and bad language? The answer to the question can only be given at best by elaborating the linguistics concept. This discussion is of benefit for language learning of which it is closely related.

Keywords: *English, language variation, language change, language learning*

A. Introduction

In this century, English has arrived at unbeatable position in terms of its wide use among people in the world. Coming from British Isles, it is now spoken worldwide. Its vitality as one of the most powerful living languages is of prominent to study. Yet, alike many other languages, it undergoes changes in its phonological, lexical, syntactical, and semantic level. Thus, when we read works of Chaucer from Middle Age, we nearly find it possible to understand. Even when we read the later work of Shakespeare (more modern than Chaucer's), we—as the speakers and learners of Today's English—find some obstacles here and there.

Change will not merely affect languages diachronically, but in a certain period of time, we can observe changes as well. As of these days, English itself has many variants. Generally, there are two biggest English varieties: British and American English, although along with the dispersal of English, now we have Australian English, Singaporean English, Hongkong English, and many others belong to world Englishes (Jenkins, 2009: 5—6). English as spoken in Britain, for example, is different from English that is used in USA, though both are basically the same language (Rohdenburg and Schlüter, 2009: 1). The more interesting part is to know that even in a country, for example USA, people have

their own "English". In USA, there are some regional English varieties; Eastern States, for example, has some distinct dialects such as its the northern, middle, and south part (Finnegan and Rickford, 2004: 43).

People who concern more on language consider the variants of English today as the degeneration of English language. Most of them will blame certain ethnicity or teenagers as the agent of the decay. Those English are incorrect and must be corrected to save the language. According to Meshtrie (2009: 13), language education practitioners uphold that changes in language occur to the detriment of the language, and are a result of laziness, sloppiness and a lack of attention to logical thinking.

Seeing the phenomena, it is then very urge to discuss more on those variants from the perspective of linguistics. As the science of language, linguistics is capable of giving another insight for language learning that the process of learning a language will be of effective.

B. What is good and bad language?: When prescriptivism arises

These good and bad terms result from laymen's judgement on the phenomena of language. When they find some forms of English which are not appropriate to the kind of grammar they learned at school, they call it as bad English. When there was a construction such as 'such a thing is very damaging', P. Marsh stated that it is an act of "vulgarism of the phrase in our midst" (in Baugh and Cable, 2005: 317). Other linguistic changes at that time were seen as the distraction to language; every single change in language is a corruption.

The act of purifying the language is not a breakthrough; it had happened in the 18th century when the act of purification reached its peak position (Aitchison, 2004; Baugh and Cable, 2005: 317). Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, was the one against every single aspect of changes in language. He thought of the idea that language should be fixed forever, frozen in time, and protected from the ravages of fashion and social trends. To him and people in line with him, language change was always perceived as a negative thing. Alike Swift, we can find the same expression of decline in Samuel Johnson's dictionary stated that "Tongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration" (Aitchison, 2004: 8).

Purists insisted that we all must strive to maintain the language to its golden years where all is correct. They thought of a certain period when English is at its best status. However, as written by Aitchison, the language of Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time was no better or no worse than that of English today. The main point is they are different (2004). As many aspects of life change, we cannot expect language remain the same.

Along with the development of language science, the focus of language study shifted to describe languages, rather than to judge them. A descriptive approach attempts to study and characterize the language of specific groups of people in a range of situations, without bringing any preconceived notions of correctness or favoring the language of a

society as 'better' than those of others. (Meshtrie et al., 2009: 12). Nevertheless, prescriptive grammar exists until today. It is significant to teach the standardized language (grammar) at formal institution or school.

C. Insights from linguistics: Language variation and change

Language phenomena is best described under the field of linguistics. As linguistics is a descriptive science, therefore, it might give different perspectives on the phenomena of good and bad English, related to language learning. As stated that language will inevitably change, the possibility of change also triggers variation of a language.

1. What is language variation?

Due to its function as a means of communication, language is used among people to interact and getting closer to each other. Fulfilling its function, no wonder if language is able to vary—or adapt to its use. This variation is demonstrated by linguistic differences in the level of sound or structure. Sociolinguistically, language variation involves geographical and social variation or known as dialect. Dialect refers to varieties which are grammatically and phonologically different from other varieties (Chambers and Trudgill, 2004: 5). Meanwhile, diachronically, language varies from time to time.

Sociolinguists have shown that variation and change in language go hand in hand. Changes within a speech community are preceded by linguistic variation. Language variation can occur as a result of regional, social and stylistic differentiation. On the other hand, if a change occurs in one speech community only, while in another community there is no change, thus such change is the cause of variation between the two communities (Meshtrie et al., 2009: 110).

2. English Varieties

The division of English varieties basically can be stated in two concepts: standard and non-standard English (Thomas in Graddol et al., 1996). The standard version is the English language that is taught and learned worldwide at schools or courses. Since it is the standard form, its use is focused on formal occasions, including academic things. The standard English is the same whether it is in Britain or in USA, whether it is taught in Indonesia or in Nigeria. Open the grammar books from your English teacher and you will find the example of the standard English.

The latter concept is non-standard English which refers to all other varieties than the standard one (Thomas in Graddol et al., 1996). These non-standard varieties may be classified based on geographical aspect. Known as the biggest English varieties, we have British and American English. The linguistic differences are seen from the lexical choice they have. In British English, one will speak of biscuit, while in American English, it is cookie. British English has dustbin, whereas American English has garbage can. If people in Britain listen to newsreader to get news, American people listen to newscaster.

Interestingly, although it is in the same region, English language might also vary. For instance, English which spoken in Tyneside is different from English spoken in Ireland, even though both are located in Great Britain. Let's see the following example (taken from Graddol et al., 1996).

Tyneside English			Irish Englishs		
Base	Past	Past participle	Base	Past	Past participle
Sing	Sang	Sang	Sing	Sung	sung
Come	Come	Came	Come	Come	Come

Table 1 Tyneside English and Irish English

Based on the example, it can be analyzed that Tyneside English and Irish English are different to each other, while both are also different from standard English.

Talking about varieties, it is apart from correct or incorrect from. It is because the languages spoken in each society serve as a means of delivering message in the basis of daily interaction. As long as it is able to meet the need of the speakers, it will still alive. Still, when the speaker meets a president or deliver speech in formal occasion, he will use the standard form. Here, it is obvious that the function of standardizing a variant of language is to be able to communicate through different regions, societies, and ethnicities; it enables the speaker of a language to talk to others speaking the same language but live in distance which might have "different" English.

3. Why does English language vary?

It is getting more interesting then to find out that there are many variations in non-standard English. The phenomena of language is as complex as phenomena of living organism. Regarding the phenomena of English varieties worldwide, it is prominent to figure out the background. First, English varies because language is subject to change. This nature enables differences among languages and within a language. The basically same language, let's say *Joglo-Semar Javanese* and *Suroboyo Javanese*, might have some distinct features as the proof of language variation. However, the speakers of the languages have high mutual intelligibility due to the high similarity which cause them categorized as a single language. These variants of Javanese can be called as dialect; so Joglo-Semar Javanese and Suroboyoan Javanese are the dialects of Javanese language. There is absolutely a single variant which occupy the standard form of the language: the standard Javanese that makes all Javanese people from all parts of Java can speak effectively to others.

Second, language varies because it is widely spoken among various societies. Different societies have discrete way of thinking, environment, costumes which affect the language and the language use. If it is spoken in a homogenous society—which is almost impossible—in an idealized speaker-hearer condition, variation is nearly implausible. Language also changes because of contacts among speakers in their own society or other societies. There will be no two individuals speak identically since there are variations based on the speaker's age, gender, ethnicity, social and educational background. Through these interactions with different speakers, we find new words, terms, expression, and pronunciation and integrates them into our speech.

Moreover differences can also be seen through different generation (Krug et al., 2013: 1). You might identify a number of differences between the language you use and the way your grandparents speak. Every successive generation makes its own small contribution to language change and when sufficient time has elapsed the impact of these changes becomes more obvious.

4. English is not a pure language

Even though some purists tried to "purify" English language, it will remain changing and evolving. They must realize one fact: English itself is not a pure language. It is as a result of many contacts from many languages. Old English, the oldest version of English, was basically part of West-Germanic languages which having contact with some other languages such as Celtic, Latin, French, and Skandinavian (Payne, 2011). Even today there are oodless of words borrowed from other languages (Baugh and Cable, 2005). As Crowley (1992: 31) stated, if English language purists insist to purify English language, they have to realize that basically English is one of the most unreal language in the world.

D. Dealing with language variation and change in language learning

In language learning, knowing—or even understanding—the very nature of language variation and change is of important. To elaborate insights from linguistics regarding the phenomena of variation and change toward language learning, it is easier to focus on some prominent highlights.

1. No good or bad language

We have to bear in mind that there is no such good or bad language. One cannot judge that one "language" is better than another. Although sociolinguistically each language will have its status, yet it has nothing to do with good or bad labelling. Generally linguists see languages as equally complex and fascinating. The complexity lays either on the structure or the use of language. Because it is used, thus it will vary depending on the location, time, and users' motivation of using the language. If there are different forms of a language, they are not necessarily better or worse; once again they are just different.

2. Language is used based on context

Since language is used to communicate, communication factors hold important part of using the language. The speaker needs to consider “where am I?”, “with whom do I communicate?”, “in what occasion?” (Meyerhoff, 2006: 117). The answers to those question determine “what kind of form” of a language that he is going to use. In short, we speak the same thing in different ways to different people. We have what so called language choice: which code (language) a speaker is going to use in certain domain and with particular person (Meyerhoff, 2006). Here is an example of language choice of university students in Honolulu, Hawai’I (taken from Meyerhoff, 2006).

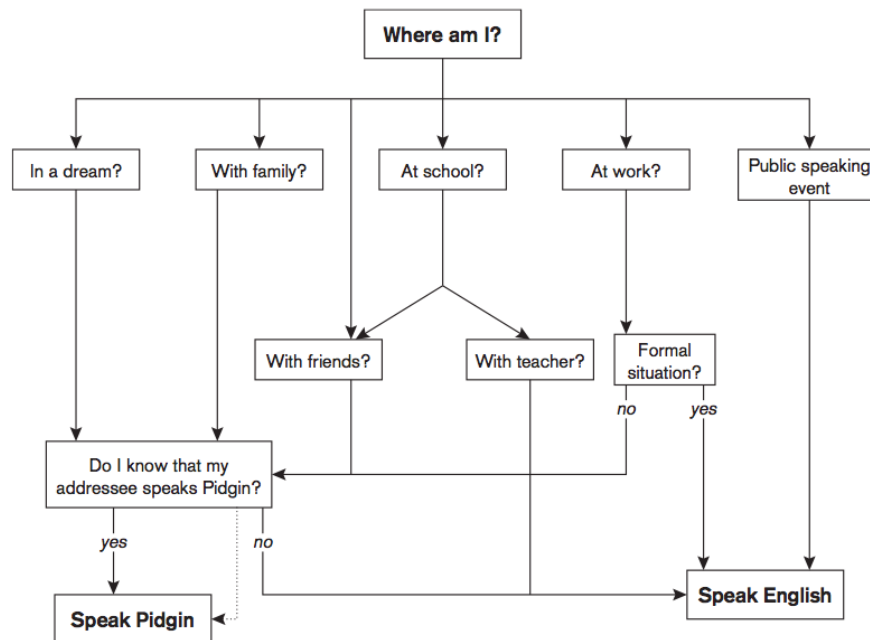


Figure 1 Language choice of university students in Hawai’i

3. Language teachers and language practitioners must possess sufficient linguistics knowledge

Language teachers and practitioners are the ones who teach or analyze language. Dealing with language, it is better for them to comprehend linguistics. By having sufficient linguistics knowledge, teachers understand that learning a (foreign) language starts from the standardized form. The non-standard form can be learned individually and independently or along with the standard one. If the learners master the standard language in advance, it is easier for them to learn the variants of the language. By having good linguistics knowledge, teacher will not easily judge a variant of a language as better or worse version; they are just different.

E. Conclusion

To sum up, notice that what is seen as good or bad language is actually variations of language. This variation can be associated with age, gender, ethnicity, social, educational background, and geographical reasons. Seeing this phenomena, as a language teacher, practitioner or learner, we have to grow positive attitude, regarding changes (variations) as the nature of language. This belief is upheld by linguists in this century. Because change is inevitable, it is our task then to introduce to others that what we need is actually a good understanding on linguistics. However, normative point of view is still needed in formal teaching in terms of standard language mastery.

References

- Aitchison, Jean. 2004. *Language Change: Progress or Decay*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baugh, Albert C. and Cable, Thomas. 2005. *A History of the English Language (fifth edition)*. London: Routledge.
- Chambers, J.K., and Trudgill, Peter. 2004. *Dialectology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crowley, Terry. 1992. *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graddol, David, Dick Leith, and Joan Swann. 1996. *English: History, Diversity and Change*. London: Routledge.
- Finnegan, Edward, and John R. Rickford. 2004. *Language in the USA: Themes for the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, Jennifer. 2009. *World Englishes*. London: Routledge.
- Keller, Rudi. 2005. *On Language Change*. London: Routledge.
- Krug, Manfred, and Julia Schlüter. 2013. *Research Methods in Language Change and Variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Ana Deumert, and William L. Leap. 2009. *Introducing Sociolinguistics (second edition)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Meyerhoff, Miriam. 2006. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Payne, Thomas E. 2011. *Understanding English Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rohdenberg, Gunter, and Julia Schlüter. 2009. *One Language, Two Grammars?: Differences between British and American English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



Ikmi Nur Oktavianti is a lecturer at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, Yogyakarta. While teaching and conducting research, she is studying Linguistics at Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta. Her research interest is in the field of theoretical linguistics (syntax, semantics, linguistic typology, and diachronic linguistics). Recently, she is interested in corpus linguistics and trying to combine theoretical research with corpus-based method. She can be reached by e-mail and Twitter account @ikmiinu