Internet Slang: Corruption of the English Language?

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Though we use language every day, most of us fail to realize just how transient it is, and the extent to which our own culture drives this language change. Linguist Rosalie Maggio states: "If there's one thing consistent about language it is that it is constantly changing. The only languages that do not change are those whose speakers are dead" (Maggio, n.d.). Many of the words and phrases that develop within a particular language do so either to communicate new ideas or to express old ideas in a new way. Oftentimes, these words and phrases are central to certain groups and may only be understood by members of these groups (YourDictionary, 2019). These expressions may be classified as *slang*- "an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed typically of coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Slang is typically used consciously within specific groups of people, differentiating it from informal colloquial speech, which is used naturally by most speakers of the mother tongue (Macdonald & Marsall, 1994). For example, during the first world war, close contact in the trenches produced more slang than any conflict to date. Soon after the second world war, American slang came to be all-pervasive, thanks to United States television, films and music

(Skapinker, 2014). Professor of Linguistics at Columbia University, Dr. John McWhorter, describes slang as language that gives one a sense of ingroup belonging (Hill, 2013).

Society has seen an inexhaustible supply of these new words, phrases and slang terms, usually introduced to the English language by the younger generations (Skapinker, 2014). Despite its popularity, slang can be perceived negatively by older members of society. American writer and researcher, Doug Casey, goes so far as to say "many of the words you hear, especially on television and other media, are confused, conflated, or completely misused. Many recent changes in the way words are used are corrupting the language. The corruption of language is adding to the corruption of civilization itself" (Casey, 2018). Casey's strong words seem to summarize convictions held by those who view informal speech as inherently wrong.

While the English language has absolutely changed, and continues to evolve, to call it "corrupted" would be a terribly misguided notion. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines *corruption* as "the destruction or spoiling of anything" (OED, 2019). If we are to apply this word to language- specifically English, this implies that there exists, or once existed, some form of untouched, pure language that is more "correct" than forms of English spoken now. As this paper will demonstrate, there is no such thing as pure language, as all languages undergo the same process of language change- a natural phenomenon toward which many people can have very negative feelings (Hult, 2016). These uninformed attitudes are unwarranted for a number of reasons.

Language Purism and Language Change:

Casey, as well as others who believe new jargon is a linguistically corruptive force, can be described as *language purists*- a pejorative term in linguistics. A language purist is "someone who

expresses a desire to eliminate certain undesirable features from a language, including grammatical errors, jargon, neologisms, colloquialisms, and words of foreign origin" (Nordquist, 2019). Usually believed to threaten the identity of the culture in question, these language features are believed to degrade language and are recognized by purists as "bad."

Simon Heffer, language purist and journalist of Britain's *Daily Mail*, claims that the completion of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1928 "effectively codified the language" and further changes should cease (Skapinker, 2014). Heffer contends that unnecessary changes to language result in the misuse of words and abuse of grammar, both of which should be standardized. This idea reveals the way language purists perceive language- as a social device used to mark etiquette, rather than a rhetorical tool meant to foster effective communication.

The views of language purists might not be *completely* unfounded. A foreign language teacher at St. Mary's Ryken High School in Leonardtown, Maryland believes slang, particularly that used on the internet, is leading to the decline of literacy in students. "They do not capitalize words or use punctuation anymore… even in emails to teachers or on writing assignments, any word longer than one syllable is now abbreviated to one" ("Digital Slang," 2017). The concern that young people may be learning to use slang in inappropriate situations is a real one. Consequently, this raises the question if those who believe slang is being overused should be considered language purists? Such concerns are directed at youth development and education rather than the decency of language or their own "threatened" identities.

Regardless, it is a fact that language change is perceived negatively by a number of people, which suggests that many wrongly consider language change to be the same as language corruption- if such a thing exists. According to linguists, the phenomenon of language change

may result from the ways in which the youth acquire language. As children learn to communicate, they naturally acquire the language of the adults they hear speaking. However, no child's grammar is exactly like an adult's grammar, as children construct their own unique styles based on the dialects and slangs to which they are exposed. Language will gradually change if particular language features are widespread enough throughout a generation of young people (Hult, 2016), prompting us to wonder what could enable such a proliferation of new language innovations.

Internet Slang and Language Change Today:

As I have already mentioned, slang is a social marker of youth (Cheshire, 2017), hence why critics of these language features are often members of older generations who are not able to understand where the new jargon is coming from (Jabali, 2016). One answer to their questions is social media. Social media enables the spread of language innovations faster than they have ever spread before (Bhana, 2014). Slang, like other conventional matters, such as fashion or entertainment, is culturally transmitted. Each of these cultural activities are constantly evolving to meet the needs and wants of their users, and thus, change is inevitable (Algeo, Butcher, & Pyles, 2014). O'Grady, Archibald, Aronoff and Rees-Miller, authors of *Contemporary Linguistics: an introduction,* state:

> "The inevitability of language change is guaranteed by the way in which language is passed on from one generation to the next. Children do not begin with an intact grammar of the language being acquired but rather construct a grammar on the basis of the available data. In such a situation, it is hardly surprising that differences arise, even if only subtle ones, from one generation to the next."

Each subsequent generation of young people makes up its own slang and uses it as a private language (Macdonald & Marshall, 1994). Advances in technology have made the spread of culture, which includes this new slang, quick and easy ("How Does Culture Spread," 2019). Katherine Connor Martin, Head of U.S. Dictionaries at Oxford University Press, states "slang is often very transient, first appearing in subcultures, and then tends to be proliferated online. It's usually difficult to predict which words will break through" (Zarinsky, 2017). Therefore, as each generation continues to pursue social media, they naturally acquire new expressions and word meanings. The internet is responsible for transmitting these changes to a large audience of young media consumers, who then drive language's evolution by using these expressions in everyday speech (Knibbs, 2013). As I will illustrate, these slang words and phrases may be either completely made up or based on already existing linguistic constructions ("Digital Slang," 2017).

Current Slang:

In 2014, the slang term *bae,* originally "used to address or refer to one's girlfriend, boyfriend, etc…" reached an incredible level of popularity ("Bae," 2019). Believed to have its origins in African-American English or African-American Vernacular English (AAE/AAVE), *bae* has been spreading by way of social media and hip-hop and R&B music since the early 2000s, only to become mainstream after the release of Miley Cyrus and Pharrell Williams' song "Come Get It, Bae" (Hamblin, 2014). It is important to note that AAE/AAVE is a major area of study within linguistics, referring to a variety of English spoken by some, not all, black Americans. It is distinct from Standard American English (SAE) but is regarded by linguists as equally legitimate and "correct," despite the common misconceptions attached to it (Bland-Stewart, 2005).

The Urban Dictionary refers to *bae* as a shortening of "baby" or as an acronym standing for "before anyone else" (Zarinsky, 2017). When it appears as a noun, *bae* is meant to be used as a term of endearment, such as in the sentence: "I went on a date with my *bae* last night." It can also be used as a verb, meaning, "to make someone your significant other," and may also appear in this sense as an adjective, as seen in the tweet below: ("Bae," 2019)

However, as Martin points out, *bae* seems to be in transition, as it has been increasingly used as an adjective to express a general affection for anything or anyone (Hamblin, 2014). Some people would like to rid the language of the term *bae*; however, the internet has found it to be incredibly productive, giving way to related forms such as "baeful," "baeness," "baedom," and so many more ("Bae," 2019). Just like standard speech, even slang, providing a wonderfully productive means of talking about a variety of popular concepts, can undergo semantic change. The tweets below illustrate these nuances:
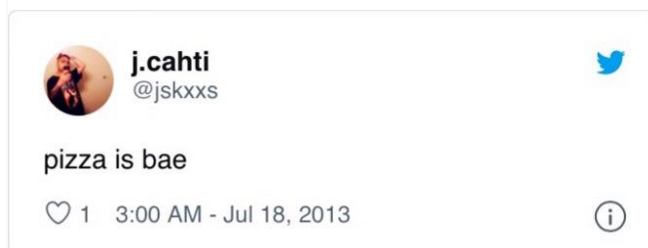
Another slang term permeating social media today is *slay*, meaning "to do something spectacularly well, especially when it comes to fashion, artistic performance, or self-confidence" ("What Does Slay Mean," 2019). Its most recent meaning comes from 2016, when Beyoncé commanded her ladies to get into formation and *slay*, however, the word itself, Germanic in origin, has been around for much longer. In early Old English, it was used transitively to describe killing mythical beasts and enemies, and it does still carry this meaning when used in a more formal, though much rarer, context. In the 1920s, it came to mean "to make someone laugh very hard" ("What Does Slay Mean," 2019). This meaning also still appears to be in use today, as one might say to a funny person: "you *slay* me." By the 1980s, *slay*, used either transitively or intransitively, had come to be used as slang for "looking attractively fashionable," a meaning that continued to spread through fashion, LGBTQ+ culture and the drag scene ("What Does Slay Mean," 2019). One might say, "She *slayed* at the fashion show last night," or "She *slayed* that look at the fashion show last night." This demonstrates the way in which old words, over time, may come to be used in new contexts. Even very informal speech can reflect language's adoption of shifts in meaning.

In 2010, a Twitter user tweeted "wonder who ur sliding into dms with," sparking a rampant spread of the expression that was likely aided by the rising popularity of online dating. The phrase, *slide into the DMs*, refers to the act of "sending someone a private message on social media, often to initiate or extend romantic contact-" the verb *slide* typically suggesting that this action is made with suave confidence. ("What does Slide into the DMs Mean," 2019) However, romantic purposes may not be the sole motivation behind *sliding into someone's DMs*: "The Dallas Mavericks star told reporters Thursday that he was able to convince Ben Stiller to play in his charity tennis tournament by sending him a private message on Twitter. 'I slid into his DMs, like the kids say these days,' Nowitzki said" ("What does Slide into the DMs Mean," 2019). In this case, Stiller is

not a romantic interest, but the sender still referred to his own actions as *sliding into the DMs* because of his personal agenda. DM is short for "direct message," the private messaging feature on Twitter, but the abbreviation is commonly used to refer to private messages on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram.

Social media has allowed for unique situations in which no one except for the sender and the recipient can see a message. DMs are inherently more intimate, which thus aids in dampening the effects of possible rejection from a romantic interest or otherwise. New phrases such as *slide into the DMs* allow people to describe the nuances of new situations, such as sending someone a private message for some personal reason, which are unique to social media. Like many events in history, the rise of social media has created new situations that require new innovations in language- vocabulary and phrases- in order for people to talk about them and create a shared experience.

It is clear to see that the language used on the internet is always evolving. Music, memes, well-known influencers and more are constantly finding new ways to entertain and communicate effectively to young consumers. Consequently, this younger generation naturally develops a unique ingroup language that does not seem to make much sense to older members of society who are less involved in the world of social media. However, this is how language often changes- new conventions enter into a language in response to events that create them (YourDictionary, 2019).

Past Examples of Language Change:

In spite of the purists' arguments against language change, it should be emphasized, again, that it is a completely natural, unavoidable process, as evidenced by a multitude of past examples, many of which a purist might not find all that out of the ordinary. For example, "losing one's temper" became 'going nuclear' or 'having a meltdown' with the advent of atomic power…

likewise, 'moonshot,' 'spacey,' and 'far out' all owe their origins to the space race" (YourDictionary, 2019). These phrases, like *slide into the DMs,* were each brought on by events in history. It is natural that new phrases would arise out of these events to describe particular situations.

In response to language purists who claim internet slang is corrupting the English language, linguist David Crystal points out that shortenings, like *bae,* have existed for a long time. The use of "u" for "you" and the number "8" as a syllable in "later" have been in use for at least a century (Zazulak, 2016). In addition to this, the words "clever," "fun," and "mob" were all regarded as slang at one time (Macdonald & Marshall, 1994). There must be countless more examples of once undesirable language features or, slang, becoming widely standard and acceptable once perceived to be useful. Nordquist states in his article, *What is Purism in Language?:*

> "Despite the exacerbated protests of the upholders of authority and tradition, a living language makes new words as these may be needed; it bestows novel meanings upon old words; it borrows words from foreign tongues; it modifies its usages to gain directness and to achieve speed. Often these novelties are abhorrent; yet they may win acceptance if they approve themselves to the majority."

Casey himself probably drew upon his own slang-term lexicon, using a variety of English different from the one his parents used. To propose that there is a pure form of English, persons such as Casey would first have to ask why we should not revert back to that one, or better yet, the English spoken by their parents.

The notion that there are ideal, more "pure" forms of language results from a misunderstanding of language change. For example, a purist might hold that the Greek spoken today is a

corrupted form of Classical Greek when really it is simply a development of it, just as Romance languages are developments of "bad" Latin, which comes from Classical Latin. The language purists do not seem to realize that their ideology supports "bad" Latin becoming "good" French (Algeo, Butcher, & Pyles, 2014). This raises the question of where we would stop if we were to restore English to its "pure" form. Our Modern English is a development of Middle English (1100-1500 A.D.), which is a development of Old English (450-1100 A.D.). The history of the English language is traditionally divided into those three periods (Algeo, Butcher, & Pyles, 2014). If we were to transition back to Old English, we would be required to pronounce "bird" as "brid," as our modern word for the small winged creature is really an "incorrect" slurring that became standard over time (Birner, 2019). In reality, when tracing languages back to their roots, there really is no acceptable stopping place, for as long as there has been language, it has been changing.

A Counter Response to Purism:

Not only is language constantly evolving, but the very definition of what constitutes slang is always evolving too. In early American history, any word not being used in Britain was considered slang. It was only a matter of time before those idioms became firmly integrated into American English (YourDictionary, 2019). While purists find this trend regrettable, experts do not view this change as a bad thing. In fact, those arguing that British English is more "correct" than American English must not realize that the English spoken in America now has actually retained more characteristics of earlier English than that currently spoken in Great Britain (Algeo, Butcher, & Pyles, 2014). We have already discussed Heffer, who believes that those whose words are at odds with the dictionary are wrong. However, the OED itself disagrees, "regarding itself as a recorder of how we use words rather than as a prescriber" (Skapinker, 2014). As the OED is widely held by experts

as an unsurpassed authority on the English language ("About," n.d.), Heffer would do well to reconsider his position.

In response to educators and others concerned with youth language development, Katherine Barber of the Canadian Oxford Dictionary states "If the kids are picking up new words and new meanings then that means that they're playing with the language" ("Slang? Maybe Not Such a Bad Thing," 2007). According to her view, the internet and social media have created a unique environment in which the younger generation can play a direct role in language development by interacting with language through wordplay, spellings and meanings. While it is important that young people are able to use language appropriate to the situation, the use of slang may allow them to demonstrate complete ownership of the language they speak by introducing new innovations that communicate novel meanings more efficiently. Perhaps "bad" English only exists when a particular variety of the language is used in the wrong context.

Professor Dr. Clive Upton, English language specialist from the University of Leeds, states, "If they [young people] do deploy the sort of language they're using on the streets in formal settings then it could well be a disadvantage to them but at other times it's quite clearly the way they get along, the way that they signal they belong in a group, the way that they fit in" (Winterman, 2010). Not only is internet slang a means of developing language, it is also a mechanism that allows young people, and other minority groups, like the soldiers in the trenches during WWI, to show solidarity with one another, providing them with a sense of in-group belonging (Newsome, 2019). I propose that this is why language purists become so uneasy- their own ingroup languages become outdated as new ones arise with each generation. Purism becomes their new means of ingroup belonging. Rather than feel threatened themselves, the purists can threaten the new ingroups with strict grammars and stifling vocabularies.

The Future of English:

It is a fact that the English language, like all languages, is subject to natural and inevitable change. This paper has looked at just a few examples of current slang that made its way into the everyday speech of today's young people via the internet. Upon comparing these innovations to just a couple past changes in the English language, it is clear that English is not changing any differently than it always has. New phrases are crafted to describe novel situations, actions and events and previously existing words continue to acquire additional parts of speech and changes in meaning. Language is constantly changing, but this does not mean that it is becoming worse. The reality of language change means that each subsequent generation may contribute its own creative means of expressing ideas and entertaining. These new innovations may serve the English language by providing richer meanings and connotations, shared linguistic experiences and jokes, and solidarity amongst different generations.

It is for these reasons that Doug Casey's word, "corruption," is the wrong one to use. Rather, in discussing the current evolution of English, we should hold that *development* of language leads to the development of society itself, because slang is not taking away from English-only adding to the language toolbox. We have discussed language change of the past and the present. As for the future, we can rest assured that there will be an increasing repertoire of slang allowing for subtle differences of expression. After all, as David Crystal reminds us, the internet has only been around for a little over twenty years (Zazulak, 2016), and since there are guaranteed to be advancements in technology, so too are there bound to be further innovations in the internet talk that gets absorbed into everyday speech. Language will continue to change to meet the needs of the people who use it. Therefore, we should look forward to the inevitable and timeless tradition

of language change, embracing all generations and their contributions to our communicative inventory.

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