English as she will be spoke

Our language is evolving fast. How will it sound in 500 years, asks **Michael Erard**

ON 23 September 1938, engineers from the Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company sank a time capsule deep into the ground at Flushing Meadows Park in New York City, venue of the 1939 World's Fair. Among other artefacts, the capsule contained a printed "key to English" that described the words, sounds and grammar of 20th-century American English to help its discoverers, 5000 years in the future, understand a language that presumably would be as foreign to them as Hittite is to us.

The author of the document, John Harrington of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, presumed that modern English would be radically changed by the year 6939. But how? Is it possible to say what English will be like 5000 years from now, or even 500?

Will it be like this: "I punya manglish iz wely chekai wan lah, singlish lagi terok, i tok chinglish beter"?*

Or this: "Our Father, who comes to us from above, your name is holy"?**

Or this: "It musve ben some girt jynt thing hy hy up and with a shyning and a flashing to it time back way back when they had boats in the air and all the res of it"?***

It's a safe bet that the discoverers of the Westinghouse time capsule will need to use Harrington's key, because 5000 years is a long time in the life of any language. Only 1600 years ago, the people who spoke the languages that would form the core of English had not yet migrated to England. A thousand years ago, English was a language so different from our own you'd have to learn it as a foreign language; very few people can understand *Beowulf* in its original Old English. The 14th-century Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* needs to be updated to make it fully intelligible. Even the unmistakably modern English of Shakespeare can be hard to understand, and that's only 400 years old.

Historical trends are a useful guide to the future. One common prediction is that Modern English is following the same path as classical Latin – a global language belonging to a powerful empire which evolved gradually, broke apart and was eventually buried by its progeny. According to language historians, as early as AD 300 the Latin of the masses had a vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar largely distinct from the elite's classical Latin. Over the next 500 years this "vulgar" Latin split into increasingly distinct regional dialects, and by AD 800 it had evolved into a family of mutually unintelligible languages – the forerunners of today's Italian, Spanish, French and other Romance languages.

But history can only take us so far. The worldwide success of English, which puts it on many more lips and tongues than are found in its native-speaking homelands, and the development of global communications mean that the forces acting on the language are unlike anything seen in the past. Fortunately, recent research into language evolution can help.

What seems certain is that new words will form, meanings will migrate, and obsolete ▶


SORRY"
The droghte of March
Hath in the Ram
Polis ekzisted and woz op' rated
musve ben some girt iyat thing
slepen al the nyght
with open ye

ANDY SMITH

ANDY SMITH

words will die out. These are the facts of life for any language. Vocabulary changes not so much because new words are invented but because words take new meanings and are combined in new ways. For this reason, "most likely the English of 2300 will be harder for us to understand than the English of 1700", says Edwin Duncan, a historian of English at Towson University in Maryland. He points out that Shakespeare knew the words "hot", "dog", "ice" and "cream", but he wouldn't know what we mean by "hot dog" and "ice cream".

Predicting future vocabulary is difficult, but what of how the language will be pronounced, how words will be put together, and the shape of sentences? Nearly 50 years ago, Albert Marckwardt, a linguist at the University of Michigan, predicted some characteristics of the English to come based on where it had been. Take, for instance, the shifting sands of English vowels. From around the 12th century until the 16th century, English underwent the "great vowel shift". This shortened some vowels – like "ee" to "aye," as in "mice" – and pushed others to the front of the mouth, for example the Middle English vowel pronounced "oh", which became "oo" as in "boot."

The momentum of this shift is still being felt. Marckwardt predicted that some vowels of English will continue to evolve. The word "home" – pronounced "heim" in Germanic, "hahm" in Old English and "hawm" in Middle English – might someday be "hoom." Some vowels, however, appear immutable: those in "ship", "bet", "ox" and "full" have remained the same for centuries.

Compared to vowels, English consonants have always been fairly stable. There have been some notable changes – the "k" in "knife" was once pronounced, "nature" was "natoor", "special" was "spe-see-al", and there have also been some shifts in how people say "r" and "l". But Marckwardt was confident that English consonants would stay the same.

His predictions for grammar were more radical. His main prediction was that more and more English words would lose their inflections, in keeping with long-term trends. Old English had a rich system of inflections for conjugating verbs (for example sing, sang, sung) and marking nouns with inflections to indicate such things as possessive, indirect objects or the objects of a preposition. Then, about 900 years ago, the system began to collapse, mainly because words borrowed from Latin, French and Norse had stress on their first syllables, which de-emphasised the final syllables where the inflections were. Norse speakers also introduced new endings. English began its life as a language like Latin, where word order mattered little because inflections kept meaning and syntax straight, but ever since 1066 it has been on a slow path to becoming a language like Chinese, where word order is fixed because the language has no inflections at all.

The fate of the few remaining inflections (including the plural -s, the possessive -'s, the past tense -ed and -ing on verbs) is up in the air. Some show signs of changing. Words like "messier" and "messiest" are giving way to "more..." and "most messy", while the possessive is being replaced by phrases with "of". English speakers used to be able to say "our's one"; now we say "one of ours." The verbal inflections (-ed and -ing, among others) seem more stable. "I really think these won't drop," says Geoff Pullum, a linguist at the University of Edinburgh, UK, and co-author of *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. "Not in hundreds of years."

Holp becomes helped

Any changes that do occur to our language will probably be quite slow. Last October, *Nature* published a paper (vol 449, p 713) about the pace at which irregular English verbs such as "run/ran" regularise by acquiring "-ed" to mark them as past tense. This has been happening gradually over the past 1200 years as modern English evolved from its Germanic roots. As one example, what we know as "helped" was "holp" in Middle English.

The main author of the paper, Erez Lieberman, an evolutionary mathematician at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, compiled a list of 177 irregular English verbs from Old, Middle and Modern English, and estimated their frequency in everyday speech. He found that the less common a verb, the sooner it regularises. In other words, irregular verbs that get used a lot remain irregular (in fact, the 10 most common English verbs are irregular – be, have, do, go, say, can, will, see, take and get). As Lieberman puts it: "The half-life of irregular verbs is proportional to the square root of their frequency."

Of the 177 verbs Lieberman tracked, 79 have now regularised. So what is to become of the remaining 98? They are not going to follow suit any time soon. Lieberman predicts that only 10 more will become regular by 2500. The next candidate is "wed", whose past tense ("wed") is already giving way to "wedded".

The ghosts of English past are useful for predictions, but to get a full sense of where English is going we must also consider the ghosts of English present. The future depends heavily on where influences are coming from. For the foreseeable future, the most dramatic changes will be made by people learning English as a second language. "The new language which is rapidly ousting [that] of Shakespeare as the world's lingua franca is

English itself – English in its new global form," wrote David Graddol, a language researcher and managing director of The English Company in a 2006 report for the British Council.

This means that the dominance of English won't be overturned by other world languages such as Chinese or Spanish. Instead, the new global form of English is already becoming a loose grouping of local dialects and English-based lingua francas used by non-native speakers to communicate with each other. The vast majority of interactions in English are between non-native speakers – as many as 80 per cent, according to Jürgen Beneke of the University of Hildesheim in Germany. Graddol predicts that by 2010 there may be 2 billion people on the planet speaking English, of whom only 350 million will be native speakers. By 2020 the number of native speakers will have declined to around 300 million. At that point English, Spanish, Hindi-Urdu and Arabic are predicted to have an equal number of native speakers.

Whether they are local creoles (such as Singaporean English, which combines English with Chinese, Tamil and Malay) or regional Englishes (such as the English used on the European mainland), non-native Englishes are already becoming less intelligible to each other. This fragmentation happens to all languages, says Braj Kachru, professor emeritus at Ohio State University in Columbus, who is one of the world's pre-eminent scholars of English as a world language. "There have always been mutually unintelligible dialects of languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Hindi and Latin," he says. "There is no reason to believe that the linguistic future of Englishes will be different."

"There have always been mutually unintelligible dialects of Arabic, Chinese and Hindi. There's no reason to suppose that the future of English will be different"

Paul Bruthiaux of Asian University in Chonburi, Thailand, agrees. "Even when spoken by highly educated speakers addressing the international media in television interviews, for example, Kenyan, Indian or Singaporean speakers are difficult to understand, largely for reasons related to the way their English is stressed," he says.

Bruthiaux writes persuasively that one strength of English is that the English-speaking world does not have a central standards body, as French has its Académie Française. Without a language police, the norms of English native speakers will become less important to the language's evolution. The reality of English is that its future is on the tongues of non-native speakers, says Jean Paul Nerrière, a French former IBM executive who worked in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s, and discovered that his Japanese counterparts were more comfortable conversing in English with him than with native speakers. "I was speaking a kind of English they could understand," he says.

He named what they spoke "Globish", and reckons that it has a basic vocabulary of 1500 words. Nerrière is working on a book of Globish for native English speakers, in which he warns us to speak in simple sentences and avoid idioms. But he is not advocating that non-native speakers take over; native speakers should still make the rules. "I'm not saying the trend is towards 'Me, Tarzan, you Jane' English," Nerrière says. "We want to speak simple English, but correct English."

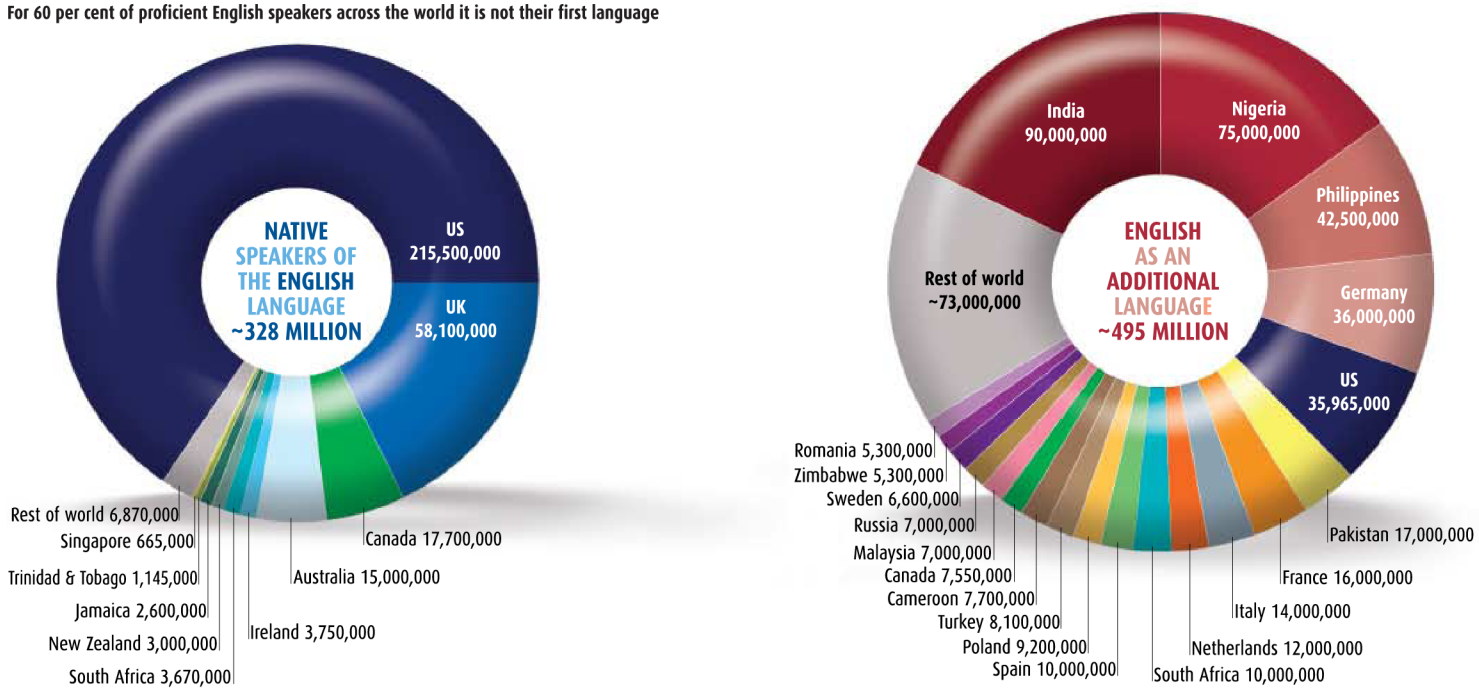
This suggests that English may follow the path not of Latin but of Arabic, a language that was spread with Islam over 500 years and evolved into multiple local dialects, the speakers of which all feel united by the literary Arabic of the Koran. What may keep the world of English from dissolving entirely into mutual unintelligibility is scientific and technical writing, as well as worldwide media.

Realistically, though, the English of the future will probably look and sound like some stripped-down forms of English that are already around. Already, non-native speakers are stripping out parts of English that cause misunderstandings with other non-native speakers, regardless of what native speakers think about the changes. "If you heard me talking with a Chinese citizen or a guy from Valparaiso [in Chile], you might think we were not talking in English," Nerrière says. "But you'd be surprised how easy it is between us – and how inhibiting it is when an anglophone shows up. Everyone freezes."

Jennifer Jenkins, a linguist at the University of Southampton, UK, studies the mispronunciations of non-native English speakers to see which ones create communication problems. These stumbles need to be fixed, but she says that English ▶

THE ANGLOSPHERE

For 60 per cent of proficient English speakers across the world it is not their first language



The ghosts of English future

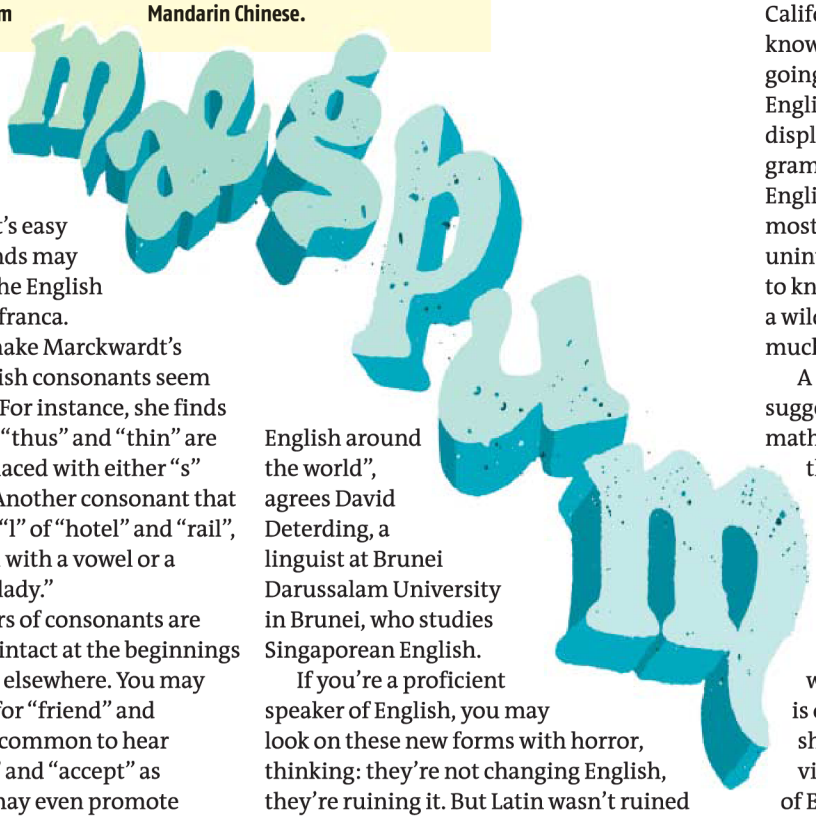
For a real taste of the English of the future, science-fiction writers are perhaps the most reliable sources. H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell and Anthony Burgess all created new words for the English of their futures, from Orwell's "doubleplusungood" to Burgess's "droog" ("friend" in Russian).

Such writers face a challenge. On one hand, they have to evoke a strange world and acknowledge the ravages of time; on the other, they can't demand too much of the reader.

Most writers solve this by deforming the spelling, such as Cyril M. Kornbluth in his 1958 story *Time Bum*, where he depicts the language of 2403 as something like this: "It konsis'd 'v hiz admish'n too a sit'zen 'v thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri that thi Taim Polis ekzisted and woz op'rated fr'm thi Twenti-Fifth Sentch'ri."

In his 2004 novel, *Cloud Atlas*, David Mitchell depicted the English of his post-apocalyptic future with deformed spellings and invented words, in homage to Russell Hoban's 1980 novel, *Riddley Walker*, which has struck many readers with its overwhelmingly consistent though degraded English from an unspecified time at least 2000 years in the future.

But perhaps the realism prize should go to Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and director of the cult TV show *Firefly*, a space western set 510 years in the future where everyone speaks a slangy form of English – and perfect Mandarin Chinese.



teachers may some day decide not to fix others that don't cause problems. As a result, it's easy to see how certain sounds may eventually drop from the English that is used as a lingua franca.

Jenkins's findings make Marckwardt's predictions about English consonants seem absurdly conservative. For instance, she finds that the "th" sounds of "thus" and "thin" are often dropped and replaced with either "s" and "z", or "t" and "d." Another consonant that causes problems is the "l" of "hotel" and "rail", which is often replaced with a vowel or a longer "l" sound as in "lady."

What's more, clusters of consonants are simplifying, surviving intact at the beginnings of words but vanishing elsewhere. You may hear "frien" and "sen" for "friend" and "send". It may become common to hear "succeed" as "suss-see" and "accept" as "assep", and teachers may even promote those pronunciations once they recognise that their students may never have a conversation with a native English speaker.

A similar set of observations has been made by Barbara Seidlhofer, a linguist at the University of Vienna in Austria, who also studies verbal interactions between non-native English speakers. She notes that they don't distinguish between mass nouns (like "information" and "furniture") and countable nouns (like "ball" and "onion"); some day it may be reasonable to talk about "informations" and "furnitures." The conflation of types of nouns "is extremely common in new varieties of English around the world", agrees David Deterding, a linguist at Brunei Darussalam University in Brunei, who studies Singaporean English.

If you're a proficient speaker of English, you may look on these new forms with horror, thinking: they're not changing English, they're ruining it. But Latin wasn't ruined in a day. It changed slowly over generations, sound by sound, word by word, and people probably complained about every step. Alternatively, you might consider that new speakers are actually making the language more streamlined and consistent. Only native speakers are attached to exceptions, anyway.

For instance, the third-person singular (such as "she runs" or "he writes") is the only English verb form that adds an -s at the end. Seidlhofer has found non-native speakers often drop this -s. They also simplify verb phrases, saying "I look forward to see you tomorrow" instead of "I am looking forward to seeing you tomorrow". And they overuse some prepositions as in "emphasise on" and "discuss about", which come from the phrases "emphasis on" and "discussion about".

All this means that English is under more pressure to change, from more directions, than Latin or Arabic ever were. Rather than look for single factors that have the biggest impact, Lisa Lim, a linguist at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, who studies the evolution of Singaporean English, stresses what she calls the "ecology of language". This allows you to consider all the sources of change, from predictable ones (such as the speed at which irregular verbs become regular) to complex, unpredictable external events such as wars, migrations or the rise of rival global languages like Mandarin. The internet looms large in this ecology, as does the direction of the world economy.

Suzette Haden Elgin, a retired linguist formerly at San Diego State University in California, says: "I don't see any way we can know whether the ultimate result of what's going on now will be Panglish – a single English that would have dialects but would display at least a rough consensus about its grammar – or scores of wildly varying Englishes all around the globe, many or most of them heading toward mutual unintelligibility." How long will it take for us to know which path English is on? "My guess – a wild guess – is less than 100 years. How much less, I can't say."

A recent paper in *Science* (vol 319, p 588) suggests that Elgin may be right. A team of mathematical biologists led by Mark Pagel of the University of Reading, UK, found that when a new language splits from its mother language, such as the divergence of Proto-Polynesian from Proto-Fijian in around 1500 BC, it generally undergoes a burst of rapid change in its vocabulary. All over the world this abrupt "punctuational" change is occurring with local Englishes, and the shifts are occurring quickly enough to be visible in a human lifetime. The future of English is taking shape right now, in the mouths of billions of people who grew up speaking something else. ●

Michael Erard is a writer based in Portland, Maine. His new book is *Um...: Slips, stumbles, and verbal blunders, and what they mean* (Pantheon Books)

* Malaysian English: "I can't speak Malaysian or Singaporean English very well, but I speak Chinese English better."
** Globish, developed by Jean Paul Nerrière
*** From *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, set in a post-apocalyptic future England