



LANGUAGE FOR TIME TRAVELERS

"GRADUALLY, the rainbow flicker of light died away, and Morgan Jones felt the tingle leave his body. The dial read 2438. Five hundred years! He opened the door of the compartment and climbed out.

"At first, he saw nothing but fields and woods. He was evidently in a farming country. Nobody was in sight- No, here came a rustic along the road, trudging through the dust with his eyes on the ground in front of him.

"Hey there!' Jones called. 'Could you give me some information?'

"The man looked up; his eyes widened with astonishment at the sight of the machine. 'Wozza ya sth?' he asked.

"Jones repeated his question.

"Sy; daw geh,' said the man, shaking his head.

"Now Jones looked puzzled. 'I don't seem to understand you. 'What language are you speaking?'

"Wah lenksh? Inksh lenksh, coss. Wah you speak? Said, sah-y, daw geh-ih. Daw, neitha. You fresh? Jumm?'

"Jones had an impulse to shake his head violently, the same feeling he always had when the last word of a crossword puzzle eluded him. The man had understood him, partly, and the noises he made were somehow vaguely like English, but no English such as Jones had ever heard. 'Inksh lenksh' must be 'English language'; 'sah-y daw geh-ih' was evidently 'sorry, don't get it.'

"What,' he asked, 'is a fresh jumm?'

"Nevva huddum?' said the rustic, scorn in his tone. 'Fresh people, go Oui, oui, p~rlez-vous français, va t'en, sale bête!' He did this with gestures. Then he stiffened. 'Jumms go'-he clicked his heels together-'Achtung! Vorwärts, rn~rsch! Guten Tag, meine Hen-en! Verstehen Sie Deutsch? Fresh from Fress; Jumms from Jummy. Geh ih?'

"Yes, I suppose so,' said Jones. His mind was reeling slightly-

Thus might almost any novel on the time-travel theme or the Rip Van Winkle theme begin. The author, having landed his hero in the far future, may either ascribe telepathy to the people of the time, or remark on how the English language will have changed. The foregoing selection shows-in somewhat more detail than do most of the stories-a few of the actual changes that might take place. To be strictly consistent, I should have changed the French and German selection also, but, in the first place, I don't know enough about French and German to predict their future evolution, and, in the second, it would have made the rustic's explanation utterly unintelligible. It might be interesting to consider in detail just what change may occur. To do this thing right we shall have to first take a brief look at the language's present state and its past history.

English is a Teutonic language, like German, Dutch, and Swedish, with a large infusion-perhaps a majority-of French words. Its parent tongue, Anglo-Saxon, was more highly inflected than its descendant-less so than Latin, but about as much so as modern German* Anglo-Saxon would sound to a modern



hearer as much like a foreign language as German; English didn't become what would be intelligible to us until about the 16th Century. English of the 1500s would sound to us like some sort of Scotch dialect, because it had the rolled "r" and the fricative consonants heard in German: ich, ach (that's what all those silent gh's in modern English spelling mean-or rather, used to mean) which have been retained in Scottish English, but lost or transformed in most other kinds of English. We have a fair idea of the pronunciation of Shakespeare's time because about then people began writing books on the subject. It's amusing to reflect that if Shakespeare returned to Earth, he'd get along passably in Edinburgh; he could manage, with some difficulty, in Chicago- but he'd be hopelessly lost in London, whose dialect would differ most radically from his! So much for the "language of Shakespeare"!

Authors are fairly safe in having the people of the future speak

* For instance, the noun end in Anglo-Saxon had these forms:

	Singular	Plural
Nominative	ende	endas
Genitive	endes	enda
Dative	ende	endum
Accusative	ende	eudas

English-which is very convenient for the authors. Aside from the fact that nobody can prove them wrong, English is, today, well on the way to becoming the world's international language. It is probably taught in the schools of more countries than any other. In number of speakers it is exceeded only by Cantonese and Mandarin, the chief languages of China, each of which is divided into a myriad of mutually unintelligible dialects; its nearest rivals, Spanish and German, are far behind it in number of speakers. It's a concise language,* and the simplicity of its grammar makes it easy to learn, though its fearsome spelling is an obstacle to the student. It's a safe bet that another century will see it as the second language of every passably educated person on Earth, and in another millennium it may well be the only living language.

Like all living languages, English is changing slowly but constantly in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. The first would probably cause our hero the most trouble. It changes pretty rapidly, and is responsible for the fantastic irregularity of English spelling, the spelling usually being a few centuries behind the pronunciation. The spelling of caught was reasonable when the word was pronounced "kowcht," with the "ch" as in German ach. But consider the number of sounds a single letter may represent today, as in odd, oft, come, worry, old, wolf, do, women, lemon. Shades of sound can't be represented exactly by ordinary spelling, because all readers won't interpret the letters the same way; and some sounds simply can't be spelled: for instance, the ir part of first as often pronounced in New York City and parts of the South-a sound halfway between "or and "ay."

Speech sounds can be analyzed into fundamental units called phonemes; these move around like protozoa in a drop of water, and, like protozoa, join together and split up. For instance, a few centuries ago person and parson were one word, spelled person and pronounced "pairson." But the "air" group of words split, some like jerk joining the words like turn, and some like heart joining the



words like march. In this process person acquired two pronunciations with different meanings.

~ The same passage translated into various modern languages has the following numbers of syllables:

Cantonese	89	Ukrainian	189
Annamese	100	Hungarian	196
English	146	Greek	234
Spanish		Japanese	242

Much commoner is leveling, wherein two phonemes merge. For instance, vain, vein, and vane were once all pronounced differently; so were right.wright:rite:write. We can see the process at work in the leveling, by many Americans, of due:do and Mary:merry:marry. The British, with their loss of "r" except when a vowel follows, do worse, leveling over:ova, sort:sought, and paw:pour:poor.

If the process goes far enough-as it has in those concise Chinese languages-language becomes a guessing game between speaker and hearer, and speech is one long pun. In some forms of Chinese a single spoken word may have as many as 69 distinct meanings. French is worse than English in this respect, but neither is anything like as terrible as Chinese. In English a hearer can usually tell, upon hearing such an ambiguous sound, which meaning is meant from the context. If, as some people do, you pronounce whale like wail, nobody will think, hearing you speak of harpooning a whale, that you really meant harpooning a wail. But if, as some do, you pronounce oral like aural, you're very likely to confuse your hearer if he doesn't know in advance what is coming.

If we add together all the leveling tendencies of modern English, we can synthesize a dialect in which cud, card, cowed, coward are all pronounced like cod; tarred, torrid, tied, tired, towered are all pronounced like Todd; show, shore, sure are pronounced like show, and so forth. This is a reasonable speculation: some Southerners pronounce shore, sure like show; some Londoners use an "ah" sound in cud, etc. I hope it never happens, but it might, and we should probably manage to communicate-though with more misunderstandings, especially over the telephone. Leveling seems to be an inevitable linguistic development, though literacy-a relatively new thing for the masses-may have a countereffect. Boil and bile were once pronounced alike, but were pried apart by the influence of spelling.

The thing that would most completely bewilder our hero would be another Great Vowel Shift. The last occurred in the years 1400-1800, and resulted in changing time, teem, team, tame from "teem," "tame," "tehm," "tahm" to their present pronunciations. All the front vowels except those in bit, bet moved up. The top one, "ec," being unable to go higher, became a diphthong.* The back vowels underwent a similar change.

* If you can watch your tongue in a mirror while saying the vowels of beet, bit, bait, bet, bat without the "b" and the "t," you'll see why we say that beet has a high vowel and bat a low one, Front and back re~fer to the part of the tongue that

There are signs that another vowel shift, a little different from the last,



impends. In London Cockney it has practically taken place: punt has become something like pant, pant like pent, pent like paint, paint like pint, and pint like point. Call has become like coal, and coal something like cowl.

Imagine our hero's predicament if this sort of thing becomes general. He crawls out of his time machine in 2438 A.D., as stated at the beginning of the article, and promptly runs afoul of the law.

Hero: Beg pardon, but could you tell me-

Cop: Hanh? Did jue sy samtheng?

Hero: Yes, you see-

Cop: Speak ap; kent mike it aht.

Hero: Well-

Cop: Woss thowse fanny dowse? P'ride?

Hero: I'm sorry, but---

Cop: Downt annersten ja; kentcha speak English?

Hero: Yes, of course--

Cop: Woy downtcha, thane? Luck loik a spicious kerracter; bayter cam 'lohng to the stytion. Jile for you, me led!

Another factor in linguistic evolution is the influence of sounds on those preceding and following them. We tend to take shortcuts in getting from one sound to another. The "k" sounds in cool and cube differ slightly; the second is nearer "t" than the first, because of the influence of the following "y" sound. If this process goes far enough (as it did in Latin), the "ky" combination may become "ty," and finally "ty" may become "tch," as statue has changed from "statyue" to "stat-chue." Hence our descendants may pronounce cube as "chube."

Our weakness for shortcuts-plus plain laziness-results in the complete dropping of sounds. Hence we often hear "prob'ly," "partic'lar," and "comf'table." The contracted forms "int'rest," "gen'ral" have become more or less standard; the others may follow in due course. Most of the "silent" letters in our spelling, as in askEd, WrotE, KniGHt, once stood for real sounds. The British outdo us in this respect, with their Whitehall "wittle" and military "miltry."

The British have slaughtered a large fraction of their r's; some of them have dropped "h" from their speech. The Scotch have dealt similarly with "l" and "v," so that in Broad Scottish gave is "gay."

is highest when the vowel is sounded; hence beet, etc., have front vowels while odd, all, go, good, do have back vowels; those in above are intermediate.

The story is told of an Aberdeenian in a dry-goods store who held up a piece of cloth and asked the clerk, "Oo?"

"Ay, oo."

"Ah oo?"

"Ay, ah oo."

"Ah ae oo?"

"Ay, ah ae oo."

Not to keep the reader in suspense any longer, "Ay, ah ae oo" means "Yes, all one wool." (In repeating this story, remember that "Ay" is pronounced like eye.)



Our chief victim seems to have been "t," whence we often hear posts, tests, loft, wanted as "poce," "tess," "loff," "wanned." Sometimes we drop "in," nasalizing the preceding vowel to make up for it, as don't, sometimes pronounced "dote" or "doh" with a nasal "o."

Let's suppose that our hero has been hailed before a magistrate. To change the assumptions a little, suppose that the vowels are still recognizable, but that dropping and assimilation have been going full blast.

Magistrate: Wahya, pridna?

Hero: Huh?

Mag: Said, wahya?

Hero: You mean, what's my name?

Mag: Coss ass way I mee. Ass wah I said, in ih?

Hero: I'm sorry. It's Jones, j-o-n-e-s, Morgan Jones.

Mag: Orrigh. Now, weya from?

Hero: You mean, where am I from?

Mag: Doh like ya attude, pridna. Try to be feh, huh woh tollay dispecfa attude. Iss a majrace coh, ya know.

Hero: You mean, this is a magistrate's court? I don't mean to be disrespectful, but-

Mag: Weh, maybe in yooh faw. Eeah ya fahna, aw nah righ melly. Sodge, lock im up. Gah geh mel zannas dow ih, to zam is satty.

Hero: But look here, I don't need a mental examiner to examine my sanity-I'm all right mentally- It seems our time-traveling hero may be reduced to the device adopted by a man I once knew who made a trip to Germany. Entering a hotel with a companion, he asked, in what he thought was German, for two rooms and bath. The clerk looked blank, then replied in something that was evidently intended to be English, but which conveyed no sense whatever to the American. After some futile vocalization of this sort, the clerk had an inspiration: he got out a pad and wrote in the plainest of English, "WThat do you gentlemen want?" The American took the pad and wrote "Two rooms and bath," after which there was no more difficulty.

However, it's unsafe to say that English as a whole will take any particular course, merely because one of its many dialects shows signs of doing so. A phoneme may reverse its direction of change repeatedly: in King Alfred's time the first vowel in after was about that of modern cat; by 1400 it had moved down and back to the vowel of modern calm; by 1600 it had moved back to the cat position, where it still is with the great majority of Americans (don't let the dictionaries fool you with their "intermediate 'a'"). Finally in modern Southern British it has moved back down into the calm position again. This sort of thing can go on indefinitely.

Sounds that have been dropped can be restored by the influence of spelling. An example is the "t" in often, which was dropped long ago with the "t's" in soften, listen, castle, but which has been revived by a few speakers, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Such an addition of a sound to a word is called a spelling pronunciation and is considered incorrect when first introduced. But sometimes one takes hold and becomes universal, after which it is "correct." Examples are the "h" in hospital and the "l" in fault, which originally (when the



words were taken over from French) weren't sounded at all.

We might here dispose of the illusion that there is an absolute standard of "correctness" to which we can refer. There are no tablets of stone stating once and for all what is and isn't correct, and dictionaries are compiled by fallible human beings and often disagree. The only real standard, aside from individual prejudices, is the actual usage of educated people. The fact is not that we use pronunciations because they're correct, but that they're correct because we-or a large number of us-use them. If a hundred million people pronounce after with the vowel of cat, that's correct by definition, even though not the only correct form, dictionaries to the contrary notwithstanding.

The rate of change of pronunciation is probably dependent, to some extent, on the state of a civilization, and changes should take place more rapidly in periods when illiteracy is high, and schools and spelling have less braking effect. A collapse of civilization in the English-speaking world would make another vowel shift more likely, and result in more dropping and assimilation of sounds. If our hero knows this, he might be able to make a shrewd guess at the vicissitudes through which the world has passed even before he learns its actual history since his time.

English has numerous dialects, some being beyond the range of mutual intelligibility. A Scotchman I once knew would testify to this: he spent an unhappy afternoon trying to find Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn. After asking innumerable Brooklynites how to get to "Mair-rrtle Ahvenfl," one of them finally caught on and said, "Oh, you mean Moitle Ehvenya!"

But which dialect most resembles the English of the future? North America has four major dialects: those of New England, New York City, the South, and General American, which includes everything else. The British Isles have a much bigger variety; that of London and vicinity has, by virtue of London's being the capital and the commercial metropolis of Great Britain, acquired the prestige of a standard. Hence Londoners are wont to say that they speak true English, and anything else is a "bahb'rous dahlect." Often they argue that their form of speech is the "most beautiful," but that merely means that they're accustomed to it and so like it best. One feature of Southern British (the speech of educated Londoners and ruling-class Englishmen generally), the loss of "r" sounds except when a vowel follows, is also heard in New England, New York City and the South: others, such as the use of "ah" in half, last, dance, and about i ~o similar words, occur in New England but are rare elsewhere in North America.

These dialects tend to evolve in different directions, like species. Unlike species, they also merge into intermediate forms. Right now, the forces tending to merge and homogenize them (radio, etc.) are much stronger than those tending to separate and diversify them. Given our mechanical culture, this is likely to continue until they have all been pretty well leveled. What will the result be?

The prestige of Southern British is high; European schools teach it. Many actors and radio announcers in this country imitate it- though the result is often more funny than impressive. But as a result of economic forces, the commercial and intellectual center of gravity of the English-speaking world seems to be shifting to this side of the Atlantic, which phenomenon should cause a decline in the



prestige of Southern British. As this happens, some form of American speech will become a "world standard." -

The dialects with the best chance of doing this are probably New York speech and General American. The former has the advantage of being the speech of the country's greatest metropolis and its cultural center. The latter has the advantage of numbers: about as many people speak it (90 or 100 million) as speak all the other kinds of English combined. It conforms more closely to the spelling, so that it is easier for foreigners to learn. My money would go on General American-but then, like most people, I'm probably prejudiced in favor of my native tongue. Very likely the final result will combine features of both dialects.

Our grammar has been simplified about as much as it can be, so that only limited changes are to be looked for therein. We still have some irregular plurals, such as child:children, mouse:mice, deer:deer; these are hangovers from Anglo-Saxon, which had several declensions of nouns forming the plural differently.* Given enough time, they will probably be cleaned up: brethren, for instance, has been displaced by the regular brothers. Our irregular verbs, such as take :took, drink:drank, put:put are more numerous and will be harder to get rid of.

Idiomatic word combinations such as make at, make away with, make bold, make good, make light of, make off, make off with, make out, make sure, make sure of, make up, make up to, make up with are the despair of foreigners learning English, as their meanings cannot be derived from a consideration of their component words separately. The making of these combinations goes on all the time, and they are likely to cause our heroes plenty of headaches.

Another change that may cause him difficulty is the dropping of understood words from sentences, as when we say "the man I saw" for "the man whom I saw," or "Going?" for "Are you going?" That's ellipsis, if you want a five-dollar word. We practice it when we write

\$ For this undiluted blessing-the loss of a multitude of cases, forms, and rules -we are, probably, indebted to the fact that English was, for some centuries, the poor-man's tongue. The Normans invaded England, and made their language the tongue of all educated, refined people. For centuries, all who could write, wrote anything but English-usually Latin. The result was that English was freed of all grammarians, conservatives, and formulists. The farmers, peddlers, and country people proceeded joyfully to throw out large quantities of unnecessary verbiage that got in their way. By the time the grammarians again laid hands on the language, a lot of useful pruning had been accomplished.

telegrams or newspaper heads. As with leveling and compression of words, we gain in speed at the expense of clarity. I recall once being puzzled by a headline reading "Little British Golf Victor." Did it mean that a horse named "Little British Golf" had won a race? No it transpired that a man named Little had won a golf tournament in England. Another read "Gold Hunt Started by Skeletons." Alas, a reading of the article dispelled my first cheerful picture of a crew of skeletons slogging off to the gold country with pick, pan, and packmule. All that had happened was that somebody had dug up some skeletons, quite inanimate, and this discovery had caused local gossip about the possible existence of a buried cache or hoard of gold. Of course, the head writer had meant: "The Starting of a



Hunt for Gold Has Been Caused by the Discovery of Skeletons." He simply assumed that the reader would fill in all the missing words.

Again, the Chinese languages are a horrible example: one may say that the Chinese talk in headlines. The table showing the comparative conciseness of languages, in the early part of this article, indicates the extraordinary terseness of Cantonese; Annamese, another Indo-Chinese language, is second on the list. Pitkin's History of Human Stupidity cites the Chinese proverb "Shi ju pu ju shi ch'u"- literally "Miss enter not like miss go-out." Even a Chinese would be baffled by this unless he knew that it meant, "It is worse to imprison an innocent man than to release a culprit" As far as the actual words go, it might as well mean the opposite.

Suppose that as a result of a prolonged diet of headlines, English is reduced to a terseness like that of Cantonese. Our hero is being examined by the experts for whom the magistrate has sent. We'll neglect changes in pronunciation-I think you'll have had enough of my quasiphonetic spelling-and concentrate on changes in syntax.

Hero: Welcome to my cell, gentlemen. Your names please?

ist Expert: I Mack.

znd Ditto: I Sutton.

Hero: Delighted; you know my name, of course. What do you want me to do?

Mack: From?

Hero: What?

Mack: No what, from.

Hero: Now, let's get this straight. You want to know where I'm from?

That's easy; Philadelphia.

Sutton: No hear.

Hero: PHILADELPHIA.

Sutton: No mean no hear you; hear plenty. No hear Philadelphia.

Mack: Such place?

Sutton: Maybe. Ask more. Continent?

Hero: No, it's a city.

Sutton: No mean no. Philadelphia no continent, Philadelphia on continent. Six continent. Which?

Hero: I see-North America.

Mack: No North America Philadelphia.

Sutton: Crazy. Too bad.

Mack: Yes. Word-crazy. Too much word.

Hero: Say what is this? You two sit there like a couple of wooden Indians, and expect me to understand you from one or two words that you drop, and then you say I've got a verbal psychosis-

Mack: Proof. Escape. Fingerprint. Check, sanitarium.

Sutton: Right. Interest. Health. Too bad. (They go out.)

But actually, I doubt whether headlines will ever bring the language to this sad state. Their influence is probably confined to popularizing a few uncommon words, such as laud, flay, which are preferred to praise and denounce because of their shortness.



Changes in vocabulary are difficult to foresee, though we can classify, if we can't prophesy, them. When we have a new meaning to express, we can do any of several things: we can invent a new word out of whole cloth, like gas, hooey. We can combine Latin or Greek roots to make a word, like Ornithorhynchus, telephone. We can combine parts of existing English words, as in brunch (Hollywood slang for an eleven o'clock meal). We can borrow a word from another modern language, either in something like its original form, as with knout (Russian), khaki (Hindustani), or corrupted, as with crawfish (Old French crevice), dunk (German tunken). Most often, we pile the new meaning on some unfortunate existing English word, which thereafter does double, triple, etc., duty. Thus short has acquired the meanings of a short circuit, a short story, a short movie such as newsreel, a short shot in artillery fire, a type of defect in iron castings, etc. Next to pronunciation changes, vocabulary changes will be the most baffling of our hero's troubles with Twenty-Fifth Century English. Perhaps he'd better take a course in sketching before starting his time journey: when words, both spoken and written, fail, he can fall back on pictures!

Words also become obsolete and disappear. Sometimes we adopt another way of saying the same thing, because of convenience, fads, or reasons unknown. Where we once said "I height Brown," we now say "I am called Brown" or "My name is Brown." (Germans still say "Ich heisse Braun.") The old second-person singular pronoun thou has become obsolete, the plural you being used instead.

Again, words may disappear because the things they refer to disappear. Thus hacqueton is obsolete, because nobody has used a hacqueton (a padded shirt worn under armor) for some centuries. Buggy and frigate, to name a couple, will probably follow hacqueton in all vocabularies save those of historians and specialists, unless somebody finds new meanings for them. Thus clipper has been saved by a transfer of its meaning to a modern object.

It's not strictly correct to say that today's slang is tomorrow's standard English, if we can judge from history. Of our vast "floating population" of slang terms, only the most useful few (like mob, originally a slang word) will be admitted to the company of words used in serious speech and writing. Our hero will find that most of the slang of his time has gone without a trace, and that the people of 2438 have a whole new set of slang terms wherewith to bewilder him. (I'm reminded of a time I had occasion to explain to a South African that by "the grub is fierce" I meant, not "the larva is ferocious," but "the food is unpalatable.")

Let's suppose that our hero has been let out of the psychopathic ward, and has convinced the authorities of his true origin. He's turned over to a local savant who is to act as his guide and interpreter. This time we'll concentrate on changes in vocabulary and idiom.

Savant: Morning, Mr. Jones. I'm Einstein Mobray, who is to symbiose you for a few days until you hoylize yourself.

Hero: i'm sorry-you're going to what me until I what myself?

Mobray: I mean, you're going to reside with me until you adapt yourself. "Symbiose" is from "symbiosis," meaning "living together"; "hoylize" is from "Hoyle," as in the old term "according to Hoyle," "in conformity with the prevailing rules." I'll try to avoid terms like that. I have a surprise for you:



another man from the Early Industrial Period-about 1600. Ah, here he is- Come in, Godwin. This is Morgan Jones, who I was telling you of. Mr. Jones, Godwin Hill.

Hill: Verily, 'tis a great pleasure, Sir.

Mobray: Mr. Hill had a most markworthy accident, which by he was preserved from his time to ourn. He'll tell you of it, some day.

Hill: Faith, when I awoke I thought I had truly gone mad. And when they told me the date, I said, "Faugh! 'Tis a likely tale!" But they were right, it seems. Pray, how goes your trouble with authority, Einstein?

Mobray: The cachet's still good, but I'll get up with the narrs yet. What happened, Mr. Jones, was that I was gulling my belcher-

Hero: Your what?

Mobray: Oh very well, my aerial vehicle propelled by expanding gasses, like a rocket. I was coasting it, and getted into the wrong layer, and they reddeed me down. The cachet means an upcough and thirty days' hanging.

Hill: 'Sblood, do they hang you for that?

Mobray: Not me, my silk. I mean, my operating permit will be suspended for thirty days, and I'll have to pay a fine. But I hope to get up with them.

Hero: You'll get up with them? Do you mean you'll arise at the same time they do?

Mobray: No, no, no! I mean I expect to exert influence to have the cachet rubbered.

Hill: You-your???

Mobray: I mean, to have the summons cancelled.

Hero: Oh, I see! Just like fixing a ticket!

Hill: 'What, Mr. Jones? Does that not mean "attaching an admission card"?

Mobray: I'd never neured that he meant, "repairing a public conveyance." What did you mean, Mr. Jones?

Hero: Well, in my time, when a cop pinched you-

Mobray: (dials the portable telephone on his wrist) Quick, send up six dictionaries and a box of aspirin!

Hill: Aspirin? You mean "aspen"? There grows a tree by that name- (CURTAIN)

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