

“words will not stay  
still” t. s. elliot

Experience, Meaning of Life



“ Words Will not stay still” T. S. Elliot The English lexicon is changing and always will change. Discuss with reference to contemporary Australian English. Whether it is the creation of the new or the dying out of the old, the shortening of one or the blending of two, words and their semantics are forever transforming. The English language, as with all “ living, ” i. e., currently spoken, read, and/or written, languages are constantly changing. But that change only happens as people use the language, try out changes in meaning or spelling, and then spread that change. Language meaning or usage does not change “ overnight, ” it changes over time. Words change their meanings because a community of speakers who use those words cause them to change. Language changes when words get old and new words are created to replace these expired words. This change can also occur when there are no previous words to describe a certain thing. This development of the English language occurs through methods such as compounding, broadening, narrowing and affixation. Compounding is joining two separate words to make a whole new word. An example of this may include “ gold-digger” which as two separate words means different things. However, the recent fusing together of these words now means that a gold-digger is a woman that is only together with a man because she wants his money. This neologism has been established to describe a certain type of woman who can be found within today’s society. Broadening is when the meaning of a word becomes broader or more inclusive than its earlier meaning. A modern example of this shift in meaning is the word “ mint”. Mint used to be a type of herb but is now used as an evaluative/descriptive adjective used especially by teenagers, meaning “ cool”, “ good”, “

attractive". This transition shows how the younger generations have such a big impact on language change. The opposite of this process is Narrowing. The word naughty used to mean something much worse, being of naught (zero) value to anyone. Now it means you're a bit troublesome, but not in a serious way. From this example it is obvious that the meanings of words shift over time due to new words with stronger implications such as wayward. Finally, affixation is a very common way in which new words are created as new words are created by adding an affix to a pre-existing word. One interesting example includes the very recent affixation of feminism to feminism. This word was just coined towards the end of the 20th century to accommodate social change whereby people recognised the need to promote the equality of women — it demonstrates that people nowadays have more social awareness and that more women in particular, are willing to fight for their rights. I find it fascinating that over the thousands of years of human and language evolution, it was only until late 20th century that a word was created for movements aimed at establishing and defending equal rights for women. Why did it take us so long for this simple change to occur? Such change can occur because the times demand such changes. It is interesting to think that the word "web," from Old English "webb" for "woven fabric" and originally from an even older Germanic word, would now be associated with computers and the internet. A common trend in recent times is the changing of nouns into verbs. Have you noticed this lately? It is called verbing. Mothers and fathers used to bring up children, now they parent, athletes podium and everybody Googles. Verbing or denominalisation is found in all areas of life. New technology is fertile ground

for this, partly because it is constantly seeking names for things which did not previously exist: we “text” from our mobiles, “bookmark” websites, “inbox” our e-mail contacts and “friend” our companions on Facebook, only, in some cases, to “defriend” them later. Verbs such as “twitter” and “tweet” have been transformed into noun, although this process is far less common. Sport is another ready source. Football referees used to book players, or send them off: now they “card” them. Racing drivers “pit” and golfers “par”. Why do we do this? It may be because we are looking for short cuts, especially if we need to say something over and over again. It is a common motivator. So fund-raisers say, “to gift-aid” rather than repeat, “donate using gift aid” all day long, and CIA agents looking for suspects to kidnap find “to rendition” handier than “to subject to extraordinary rendition”. Another aspect of language change is the influence of fashion and even of individual idiosyncrasies. For example, in my family my Nan says “birsday” instead of “birthday” because of her inability to pronounce the unvoiced dental fricative, “th”. My brother and all my cousins find this pretty funny so we imitate her by also saying “birsday”. Imagine if our family were a part of a tightly knit tribal village and if others thought it was as funny as we do, the word “birthday” could slightly change evolve into “birsday” in one generation. This has probably happened many times throughout human history. If language did not change then we as humans would be bored. Bored in the way we express ourselves, entertain, learn, etc. So to have fun we change the language and how it is used. Blending is a common way in which these new words are formed. A typical blend used these days is “emoticon”(emote+icon); just have a look at one of your messages on your

phone or on your Facebook wall and you will see characters intended on representing a human facial expression to convey and emotion. Why are these neologisms created? It can be for many reasons, to fit into a group, to be new or cool or funny. However, it can simply be from playing around with the language and its lexicon for personal enjoyment, to see if the public will catch on and accept a change to the language. Language has meaning. Words have meaning. That meaning may or may not change, but such change when it comes generally happens slowly as many speakers of the language accept or reject a particular change. This language is in a constant state of flux. New words are formed and old ones fall into disuse. Ultimately, it is up to us. If we chose to use language then the language will evolve, transform and will not stand still. On the flip side if we continue making rules about how, what and when we can use language then language evolution will come to a halt.