

# **“The boundless chaos of a living speech”: Blooming English**

English Australia Conference

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1<sup>st</sup> September 2023

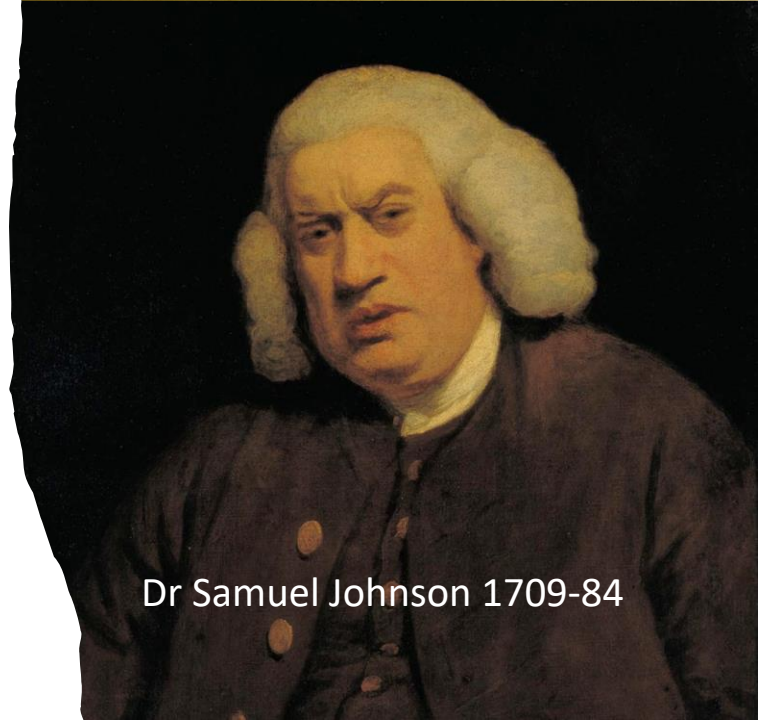


MONASH University

# Embalming the English language

Samuel Johnson recognized the futility of his original aim to “ascertain” or “embalm” the “boundless chaos of a living speech”:

When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language [...] sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; **to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride.**



Dr Samuel Johnson 1709-84



# What I'll cover

1. Change and variation
2. The causes of change
3. Some examples of change
4. An end on't

1. Variation and change —  
two sides of the one coin



## English in medieval times

\*Extracts from the 14<sup>th</sup> c. cookery  
manuscript *Forme of Cury*

\***CONYNGGYS** IN GRAVEY. Schul be **sodyn**  
and **hakkyd** in gobbettys.

\*BAKYN CHIKENES. Take chikenes ... couch  
hem in **cofyngs**

Note, spelling variation was rampant:

coneyns [= rabbits]

connynges, conynges, conyngs, connynges,  
conynggys, conyes, conynggis

# English in Anglo-Saxon times



A remedy against airborne viruses — extracted from from a 9<sup>th</sup> century *leechbook*:

*Wyr̅c sealf̅e wip̅ aelfcynne and nihtgengan ...*

“Make a salve against the elfin race and nocturnal demons ...”



Change is slow to take place

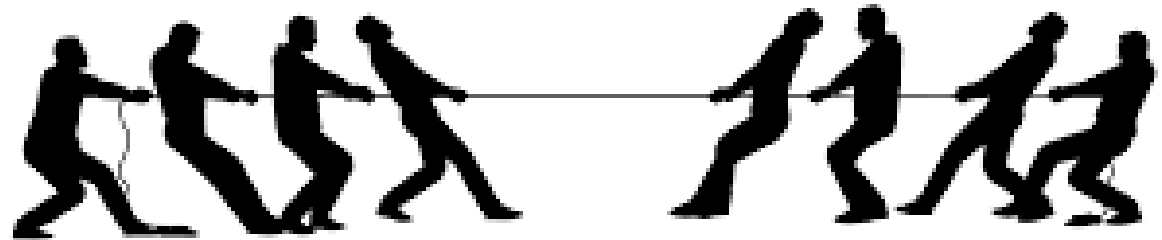
# Change involves variation

*What's the green stalk-like vegetable that people sometimes put peanut butter on?*



# “G-dropping”

Some  
variation  
endures  
for  
centuries



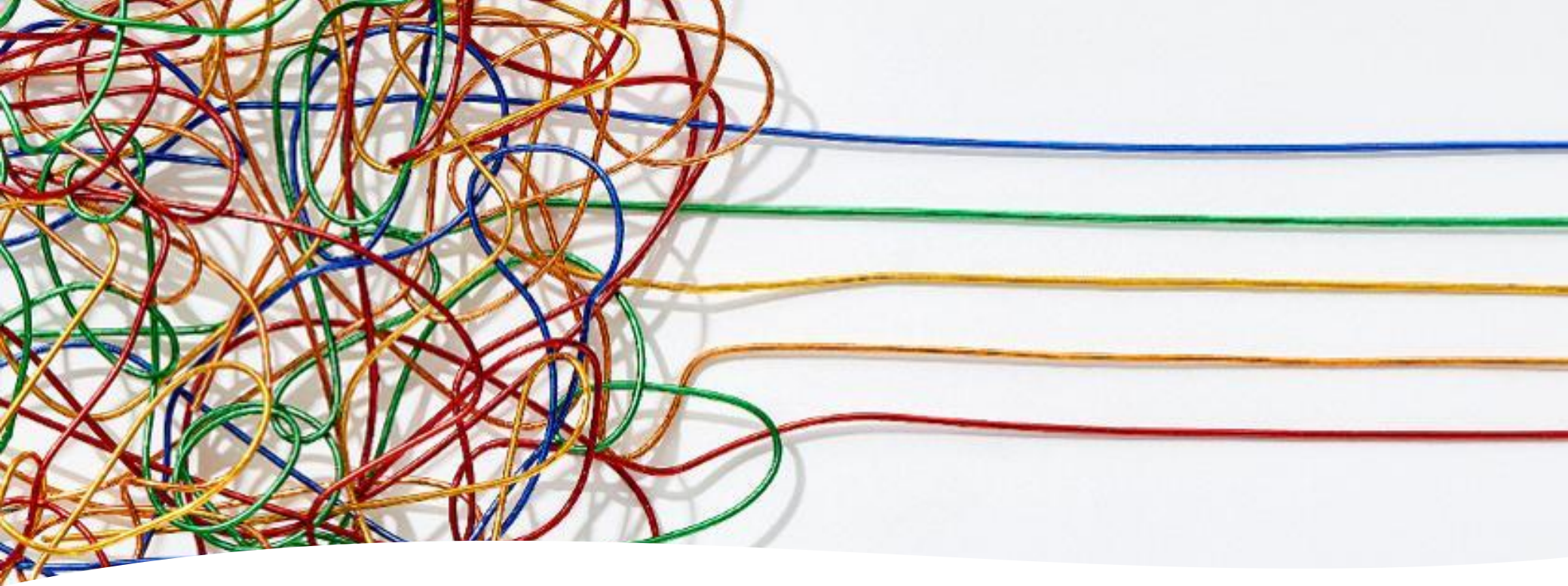
**pulling**

**pullin'**

Christopher Cooper, an early orthoepist (or scholar of pronunciation), stated in 1685 that *coughing* and *coffin* rhymed (= “coffin”), as did *coming* and *cummin*.

The writer Jonathan Swift rhymed phrases like *fitting* and *spit in*.

2. Why does English change?



There are  
many  
reasons

Multiple factors (external and internal) work together to resolve variation and bring about change:

- contact with other languages
- linguistic (the system with interacting components)
- psychological (the mental makeup of speakers)
- social and cultural (ways of thinking and behaving)

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# Privileging the vernacular downunder

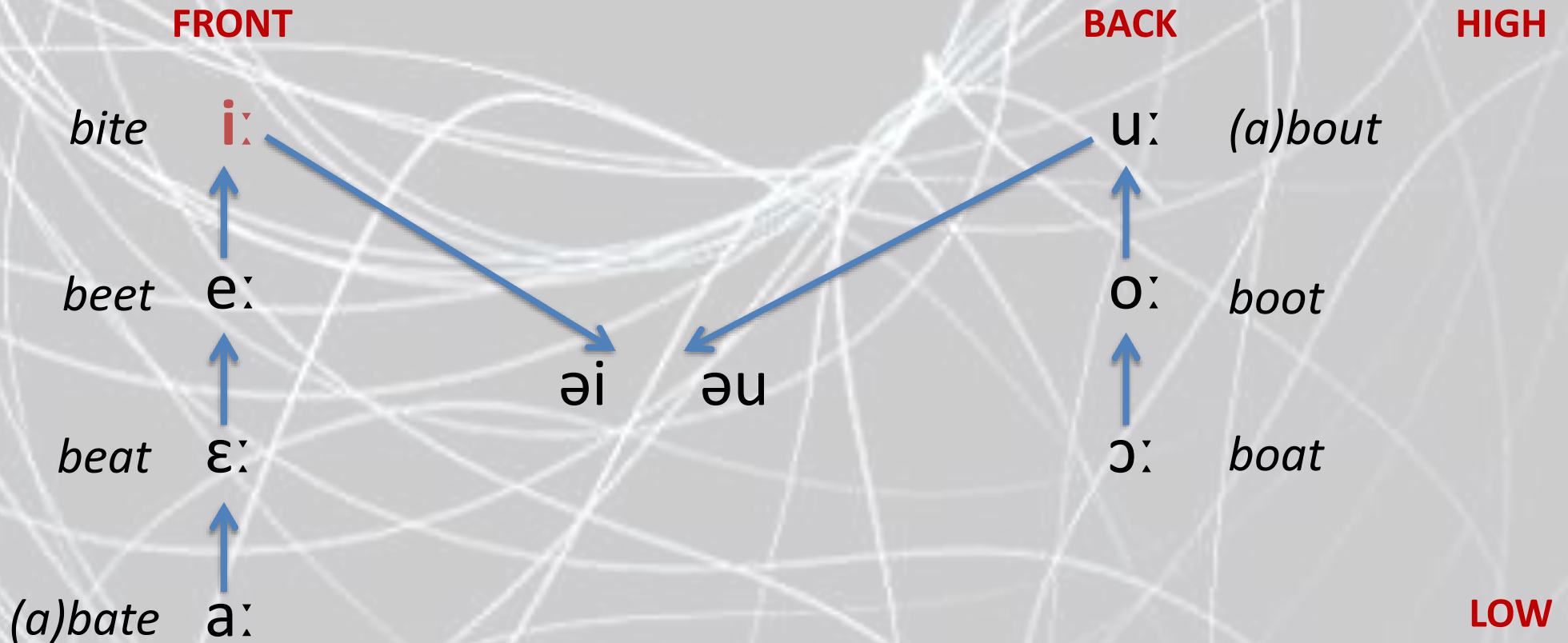
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Colonial society fashioned the egalitarian, laid-back, tough but friendly Australian — and this is how Australia still like to think of itself, whatever the reality.

With this culture of informality comes a **greater take up of colloquial styles** of discourse and lexical choices (e.g. shortenings, insults, swearwords) — even grammatical choices.

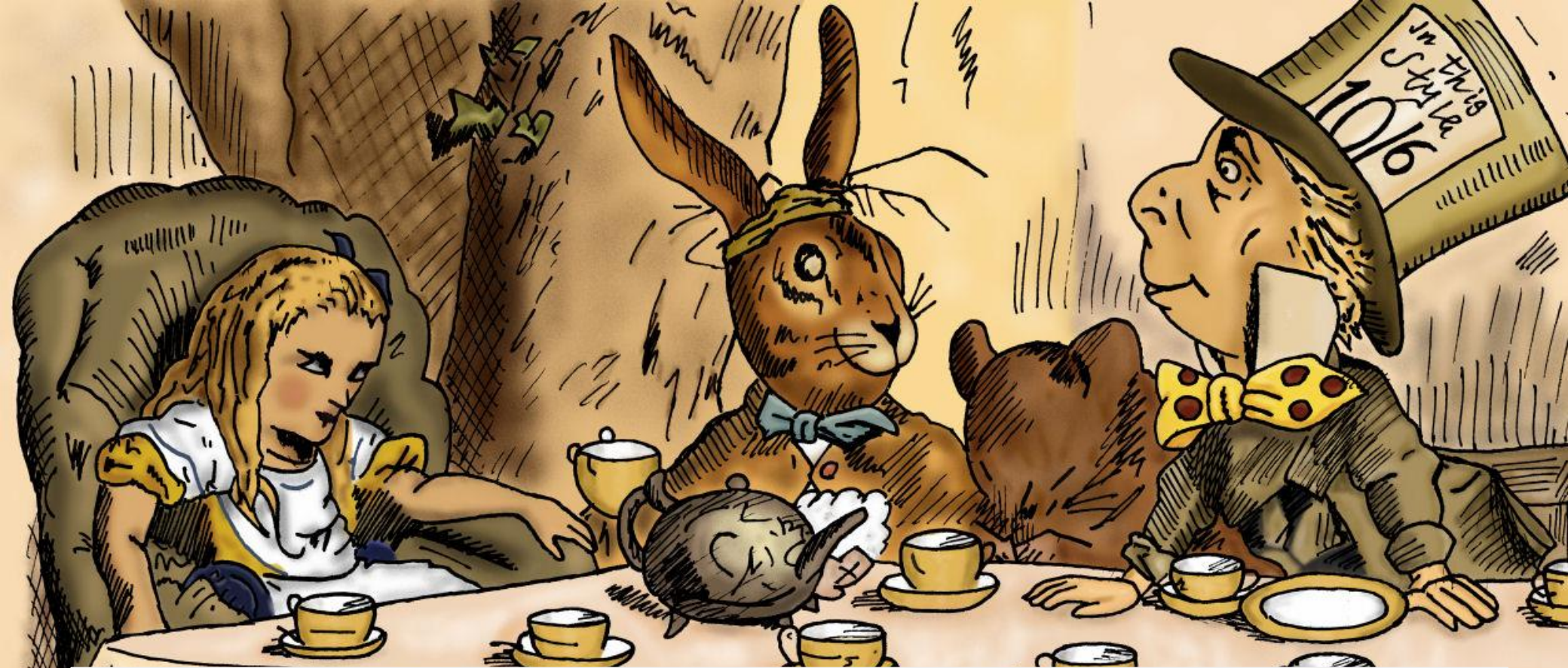


# The Great English Vowel Shift



Some time between Chaucer and Shakespeare, all long vowels moved one place higher in the mouth

“small causes can have larger effects”



## The (Mad) Hatter's Tea Party

(Many thanks to Jean Aitchison for this analogy!)

“I want a clean cup,” interrupted the Hatter:  
“let's all move one place on.”

Jan  
Oct 11

**Bret:** Did she sound Australian? Australian accent?

**Jemaine:** Yes, yes.

**Bret:** What did it sound like?

**Jemaine:** Kind of like an evil version of our accent.



There are all sorts of reasons languages change —  
never underestimate social and cultural factors

# Predicting change is tricky “Whom loves ya”

For some time, linguists have predicted the death of *whom*.

But — perhaps a brand new function for *whom*?

“You'll seem more intelligent if your language is more *whomish*”  
(Geoff Pullum *Language Log* Feb. 12, 2014)





Like whims of fashion — there are also human wild card factors involved.

But change is hugely complex, with contingent internal and external factors (systemic and speaker-oriented), snowballing effects — and an element of chance.

### 3. Examples of change at all linguistic levels

## (i) Vocabulary — losing words

Sometimes it's clear why words disappear:

***anatiferous*** 'producing ducks'

***nugipolyloquous*** 'speaking much about trifles'

But how did we let the following words go?

***kakistocracy*** 'the government by its most unprincipled citizens'

***trumpery*** 'deception, fraud', and later 'something of no value at all' (from *trump* 'to deceive, cheat')

***snollygoster*** 'crafty and unprincipled politician' (originally dragon-like creatures)



## (ii) Vocabulary — creating words

Rarely are they created from scratch — new expressions are typically built on pre-existing elements.

- *Blursday* (unspecified day of the week)
- *iso* ((self)isolation)
- *wfh* (working from home)
- *covidiot* (someone who ignores public health advice)
- *coronacuts* (haircuts carried out at home)
- *to magpie* (to hoard grocery items like toilet paper)
- *to yob-dob* (to report someone's antisocial behaviour to authorities)

# Thousands of new uses are detected each year

“Selfie” — Oxford Dictionaries’ *Word Of The Year* (2013)

The origin of *selfie* — Australian Nathan Hope (Hopey) on an ABC online forum (2002).



“Milkshake Duck” — Macquarie Dictionary’s *Word Of The Year* (2017)

= ‘a person who is initially viewed positively by the media but is then discovered to have something questionable about them which causes a sharp decline in their popularity’

"Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer [sic] and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps.

"I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie."

In 2013, its use increased 17, 000% since the previous year.



**Pixelated Boat**  
@pixelatedboat [Follow](#)

The whole internet loves Milkshake Duck, a lovely duck that drinks milkshakes! \*5 seconds later\* We regret to inform you the duck is racist

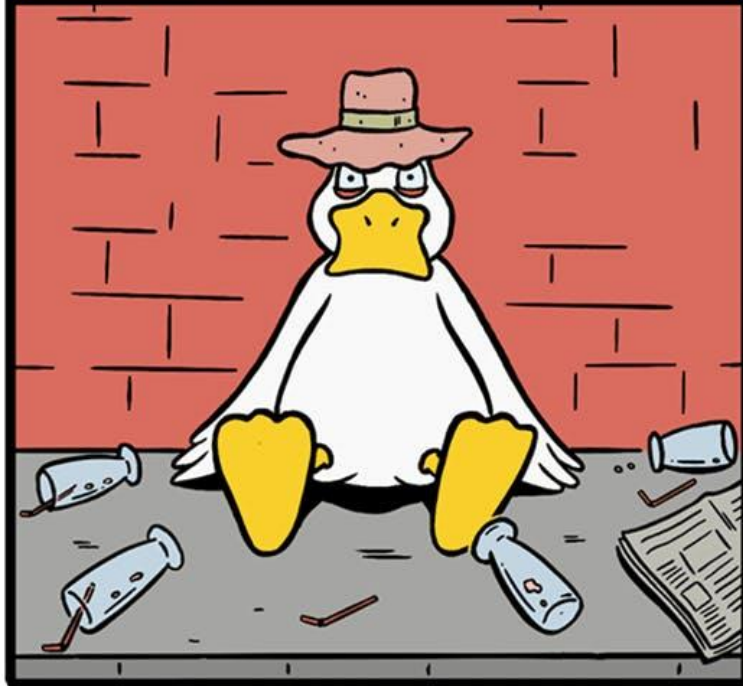
Retweets **10,146** Likes **24,084**

1:07 AM - 12 Jun 2016

81 10K 24K



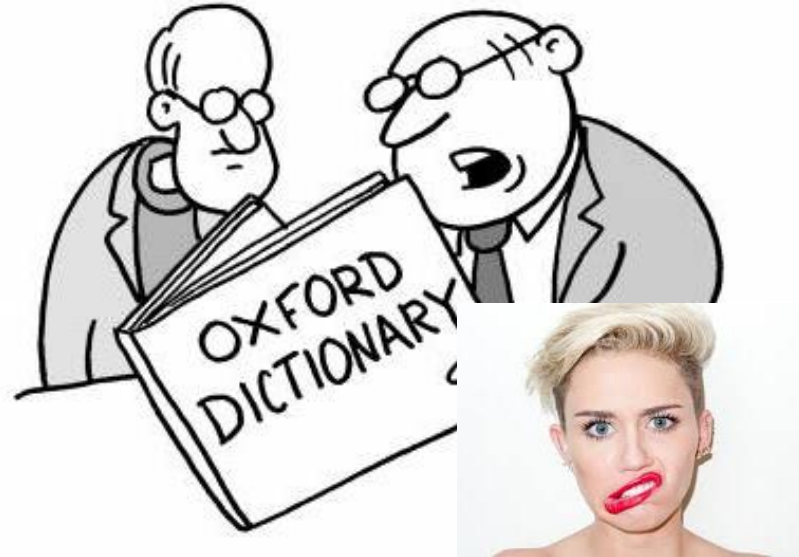
HOW DID I END UP HERE, LIVING  
IN THE GUTTER? I USED TO BE  
SOMEBODY. I WAS A BIG SHOT  
ONCE ... FOR ABOUT *FIVE*  
*SECONDS*.



# Survival of the fittest

So how do we explain those few that go on to survive?

- 1) 'communicative utility'; *to verse* (X is versing Y)
- 2) celebrity endorsement; e.g. *to twerk*
- 3) multiple origins; e.g. *ok*

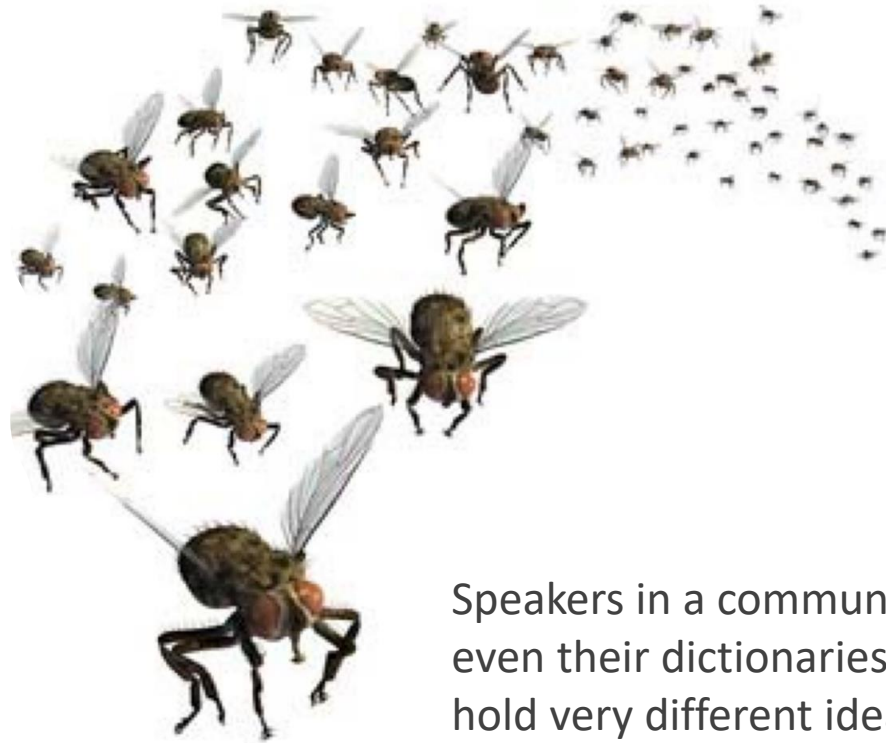


**“There it is, ‘Twerk’, right next to ‘Twerp’.”**

## (iii) Vocabulary — shifting meanings

Meanings that are inside and central, meanings that are inside but peripheral, meanings that hover on the outside like hungry flies — **a word is anything but the tight package of form and meaning** that it is usually thought to be.

[Dwight Bolinger 1975 *Aspects of Language*, p. 205]



Speakers in a community, and even their dictionaries, can hold very different ideas of what a word means. What do you understand by:

*instep, luck out, penultimate*

What unifies the many types of changes is the strong tendency for meanings to take on more personal (e.g. moral) viewpoints — typically **meanings become increasingly anchored in the speakers' worlds**, more and more inclusive of their perspectives.



# (iv) Pronunciation — shifting sounds

Watch your language — it's vu'nerable

**L-drop:** *walk, talk, balm, calm, folk, yolk*

— *walk* and *talk* once rhymed with the first syllable of the word *Balkan*

But spelling throws out a life jacket and [l] returns **to some words** like *malt, salt*

**Early spellings (1500s):**

*mautte, maut, mote*

*sawte, saute*



How do you pronounce *milk, pill* and *buckle*?

# More pressure of spelling



Early spellings of *sugar*: *suigur*,  
*sewger*, *seukere*, *suggur*, ***shugar*** ....

Three ways of pronouncing ***tune***:

“tyun” [tjun] ~ “toon” [tun] ~ “choon” [tʃun]

Pronunciation tugs-o-war over centuries — 17<sup>th</sup>  
century spellings give us a clue:

- sesschyonys
- sawgear
- shuite
- teges
- sessions
- soldier
- suit
- tedious

## (v) Change — grammar

Some 15<sup>th</sup> c. etiquette advice for children:

*Ley not **pyne** Elbowe nor **thy** fyst*  
lay not thine elbow nor thy fist

*Vpon the tabylle whylis þat **thow** **etist**.*  
upon the table while that thou eatest

*Bulk not as a Beene **were** yn **þi** throte*  
belch not as (if) a bean were in thy throat



Bulk not!

# Even expressions for time change

Layers of future time:

I **shall** do some work

I **will** do some work

I'm **gonna** do some work

Plenty more lurking in the wings:

“Yo I'm really happy for you, and **ima** let you finish”

“I know what you **fixin' to / finna** do”

(from “fixing to”)

I **hafta / wanna** do some work



4. An end on't

# Linguistic doublethink down-under

A man in a dark suit and white shirt stands on the left side of the frame, partially obscured by a semi-transparent overlay. On the right side, a shirtless man in red swim trunks stands on a beach. The background shows the ocean and a cloudy sky.

## **Grassroots prescriptivism**

The complaint tradition in Australia goes well beyond what has been observed in other major English-speaking nations.

## **Love of the vernacular**

A strong preference for informality, familiarity and friendliness, whatever the setting, has for long been identified as a prominent feature of Australian culture — and Australia's love affair with slang is legendary.

# Deep social underpinnings

Jonathon Swift blamed those  
“University-Boys” — and  
“Frequenters of Coffee-Houses”

or as satirist Archibald Campbell  
described them:

“the pert and lively fops [...] the  
great curtailers of words”

[Preface to *Lexiphanes* 1767]



Processes set in place by globalization, colloquialization, liberalization and the electronic revolution are releasing speech — features that have been lurking in the wings as variation now have a greater chance taking hold and being embedded in the language system as actual change.

We live in interesting times!

A photograph of a newspaper titled "News Today" lying on a wooden surface. The newspaper is slightly out of focus, but the headline "CHANGES AHEAD!" is prominently displayed in large, bold, black capital letters. The masthead "News Today" is written in a classic serif font at the top. To the right of the masthead, there is some smaller text, likely the date and price, which is partially obscured and difficult to read. The background is a warm-toned wooden surface.



“There can never be in language, just as there can never be in the ceaselessly blazing thoughts of men, a moment of true standstill”

[Wilhelm von Humboldt 1836, Ch. 19]

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Thank you!