

Purists are in despair over the latest abomination to plague our language. Technology, the prophets of doom declare, is destroying 'good' English.

'Sum ppl h8in like dey got no lyf, man,' one year-nine pupil comments on Youtube.com, which for those of us no longer in our teens translates as, 'Some people hating like they got no life, man.' Another example dis-

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'SUM PPL H8IN LIKE DEY GOT NO LYF, MAN'

playing truly innovative spelling reads, 'Wahh yr waz dahh? dahhz oldd inii,' meaning, 'What year was that? That was old, wasn't it?' It most certainly is not, as Virginia Woolf once referred to words, 'wine upon the lips'.

'Wine upon the lips'

Linguistic purists - people who insist on adherence to traditional rules and structures - have always fought to preserve the English language as the last bastion of civilisation. 'Bad' language is not just a symptom of moral and intellectual laxity, but also a cause. For many this 'textese', which sets the generation born into the digital age apart from those that have adapted to it, represents the ultimate degradation of the English language. Broadcaster John Humphrys labelled texters vandals 'who are doing to our language what Genghis Khan did to his neighbours 800 years ago. They are destroying it: pillaging our punctuation; savaging our sentences; raping our vocabulary. And they must be stopped.'

It is ironic to be so protective of English, a mongrel language, the love child of more than 350 nations. Only a handful of words now in use predate invasions

CAIRAVAIN

from the Vikings and Romans. Germanic settlers brought over our basic framework of pronouns, numbers, as well as seafaring, farming, warfare and household vocabulary. The Norman Conquest of 1066 installed a French-speaking aristocracy and monarchy, which taught us words for cuisine, culture and

class, so that when we ate cow we called it 'beef'. The clergy wrote in Latin and brought words for medicine and law. The varied and rich vocabulary of English lies in its tripartite structure of Anglo-Saxon, French and Latin synonyms. Fear, terror, trepidation. Rise, mount, ascend. Shit, excrement, ordure. The rest of our words we pillaged and plundered on our imperialistic

jaunts around the globe like artifacts in the British Museum: 'shampoo' from Hindi, 'caravan' from Arabic, 'ketchup' from Chinese and to run 'amok' from Malay. But despite this history of linguistic kleptomania, purism prevails through some sort of loyal collective amnesia.

The idea of Standard English didn't arrive until the 15th century,

prior to which there were so many dialects across the country that Londoners and Mancunians would have struggled to communicate. To have unity amongst his courtiers, Henry V developed the Chancery Standard based on a south east dialect. The advent of the printing press a few decades later, which favoured London trends in vocabulary, standardised further.

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Since this imagined ideal of English, any new dialects, slang or loan words have caused great anxiety and resistance. This purism is usually ideologically or politically charged. 'Grammar personifies the idea of law and order. Any change to that is threatening. People who try to control language are often using it as a surrogate for controlling

something else or disguising prejudice,' says Deborah Cameron, Professor of English Language at Oxford University.

For example, in Shakespeare's time there was such deep suspicion of the French, some said their lascivious, even syphilitic tongue would infect us with their depravity. Editors changed 'Preface' (French) to 'Foreword' (Anglo-Saxon) in the

BLOKEY

name of preserving our nation. But language is an organic entity and any attempt to shape or control its growth is futile.

L'Académie Française - dedicated to protecting French from degrading imports - has not been able to prevent 'les blue-jeans', 'le weekend' and even 'le self-made man' from finding their way into the lexicon.

Despite British public conservatism, the authorities behind the *Oxford English Dictionary* are tolerant of trends in usage and foreign imports. Using written evidence from across the English-speaking world, thousands of new words are added every

shampoo

Beef.

GR8 DB8

stylee

'WAHH YR WAZ DAHH? DAHHZ OLDD INII'

amok

English language. As seen with the reaction to textese, there will always be a backlash against the new and unfamiliar. In adolescence, language is used to mark one generation as different from the generations that came before. Like 'blokey' and 'stylee', some textese might insinuate its way into the general lexicon, but that won't be at the exclusion of other forms of speech.

A few years ago, a story that a student had written an entire GCSE paper in textese caused uproar about the devastating effect of mobile phones and the Internet on the young. People feared that 'you' would permanently become 'u' and the future Prime Minister would email his chancellor about the 'bdgt'. But as David Crystal in his book *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8* explained, this was just a myth. No paper was ever discovered and stories like this illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding about how language skills develop.

Children know as well as adults what form of English to use in what situation. A 2007 study found children who texted in fact scored higher on reading and vocabulary tests. Abbreviations and wordplay require a prior understanding of language. Textese may not have a written rulebook but that doesn't mean there are no rules. Like any dialect or slang, textese is not a sign of illiteracy but another form of literacy. In the words of one *Oxford English Dictionary* contributor Clive Upton, 'non-standard is not sub-standard'.

'Whereas the printing press was an engine of standardisation, you can argue that the digital age is an engine of diffusion,' says Henry Hitchings. The sweeping technological advances of the 20th century introduced 90,000 new words. Mobiles phones and the global online community have had a huge creative impact sending English spiralling in hundreds of unexpected directions.

There has never been one English, but a great family of Englishes expanding all the time. Language vibrates and mutates with the flux of history signalling contact with other cultures, developments in technology and changes in social, political and aesthetic thinking. These changes can never be viewed as degradation. Without them, we would still be grunting and waving big sticks at each other.