

OpenLearn animation

The future of language

Narrator:

Cassandra News Productions' presents

'The Future of Language'

The march of progress never stops.

Our species, Homo Sapiens, is forever on the move.

Since the nineteen-hundred-and-nineties, we've witnessed a revolution in the way we communicate. As our tools of communication change, so too does our language.

And as our use of language changes, so too does the shape of society itself.

When we look around our world today, we can see the positives and negatives of this relentless march of progress – all pushing us, inexorably, towards the future.

So, what can we expect language to look like in 10, 50, 100 years' time?

And how will this future-language transform the way we live – and perhaps even transform civilization as we know it?

The only constant when it comes to language is change. All languages are continuously changing.

There are two main reasons which drive this change.

The first is the relationship language has with society. As society changes, so too does language – and vice versa.

The second is its relationship to technology. With new technologies come new forms of language, and new ways of using it.

One of the obsessions throughout history has been the idea that, one day, we'll all be able to speak a universal language – a language that will allow the whole population of the Earth to communicate in perfect harmony.

Over the centuries this dream has produced several different solutions.

There have been the 'philosophical languages' of the late Renaissance

The auxiliary languages, like Esperanto, in the early twentieth century

And the rise of English as a global language in the second half of the twentieth century.

But whatever relative success some of these have had, none of them has ever achieved a really 'universal' status.

Today though, perhaps technology can solve this age-old problem through the use of machine translation and artificial intelligence

These are ways of harnessing the computational power of digital technology to manipulate huge amounts of data in order to analyse human speech.

There are other ways in which artificial intelligence is already changing language, with things like autocorrect and predictive text which supposedly 'help' us compose messages.

But there are even more radical ideas in development as well. These include 'Brain Computer Interfaces', where sensors are placed around or under the skull to read the way the brain processes our thoughts

With this sort of technology, you can 'type' directly with your mind.

And perhaps, one day, you'll be able to transfer your thoughts directly to another person without needing to speak or write at all.

There are lots of possible advantages to these sorts of innovations

They can help with speech impairments, for example, and make communication around the world ever easier and quicker.

But despite the advantages, whenever a new technology emerges there's nearly always a panic in the media about whether it's ruining language, and if it's undermining our culture and civilization.

This has been the case with each new innovation and each new generation.

But in each case, the language is simply changing, rather than decaying.

That's not to say we shouldn't worry about the way language is developing

But our focus shouldn't be on whether apostrophes are going to become obsolete, or whether no-one uses the subjunctive properly anymore.

It should be about what this increased incursion of computer technology into the way we use language might mean for things like surveillance and control.

What we should be wary of is what it means if a private company is sitting directly between our thoughts and our ability to express those thoughts.

What it would be like if technology was constantly nudging us to speak in a particular way.

And whether we want to live in a world in which everything we say, write or think becomes 'data' that can be monitored by a computer.

But whatever the future brings, we can be sure that the human race will find ways to adapt to it – and that language, in one form or another, will remain central to our identities as human beings.

The End.