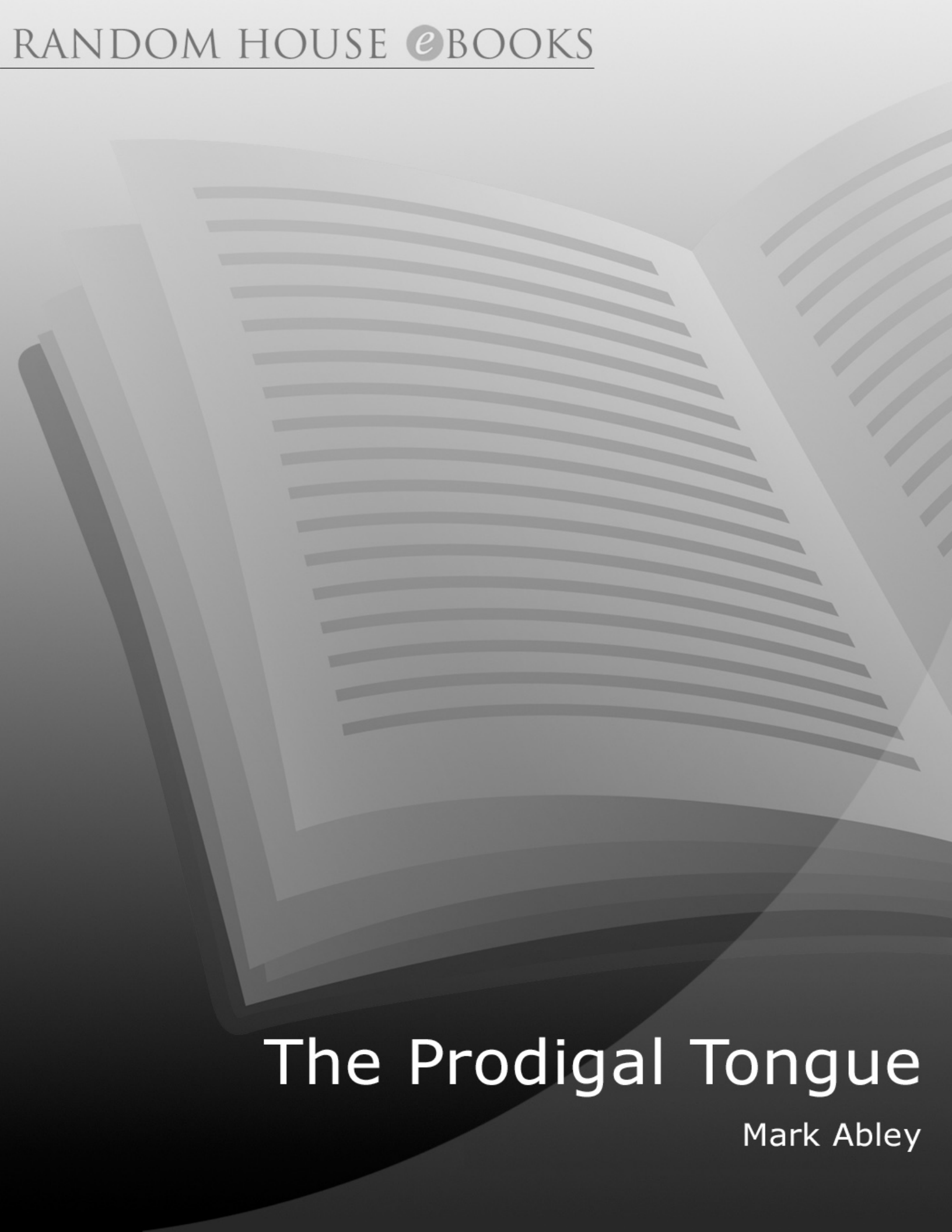
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



The Prodigal Tongue

Mark Abley

Contents

About the Book

The Prodigal Tongue takes us on a world-wide trip like no other – from Singapore to Japan, Oxford to Los Angeles, through the web and even back in time. On his travels Abley encounters bloggers, translators, novelists, therapists, dictionary makers, hip-hop performers and web-savvy teenagers. He talks to a married couple who were passionately corresponding online before they met in 'meatspace.' And he listens to teenagers, puzzling out the words they coin in chatrooms and virtual worlds.

As much a travel book as a linguistic study, this book goes beyond grammar and vocabulary; more importantly, this book is about the people of the world.

About the Author

Mark Abley, winner of Canada's National Newspaper Award, has written for the *TLS* and the *Guardian* among other publications. He is the author of one other book on language, the acclaimed *Spoken Here*, as well as three books of poetry.

Also by Mark Abley

Non-fiction
Beyond Forget: Rediscovering the Prairies
Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages

Poetry
Blue Sand, Blue Moon
Glasburyon
The Silver Palace Restaurant

The Prodigal Tongue

DISPATCHES
FROM THE
FUTURE OF ENGLISH

Mark Abley

arrow books

For my daughters,
Kate and Megan

Loo! what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, “egges” or “eyren”? Certaynly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage.

— William Caxton, prologue to *Eneydos* (1490)

Each word was at first a stroke of genius … The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet”

1

Roarific

The Power of Language Change

WAS I IN Arcadia or Alhambra? Was I speeding past Temple City or City of Industry?

Somewhere amid the grind and spurt of traffic on a southern California freeway, I slipped a Coldplay disc, *X&Y*, into my car's CD player. The morning sun lit up the distant, snow-clotted San Gabriel Mountains, a prospect as exhilarating as the opening song, "Square One." As the lead singer, Chris Martin, evoked discovery, travel and the future, his tenor voice seemed to soar high above the choking swarm of vehicles; half consciously I swerved into the fast lane. But Martin's tone soon darkens. Several of the cuts demonstrate loss, regret, uncertainty, and apprehension about what the days after tomorrow hold in store for us. An SUV was maintaining an aggressive stance inches behind my license plate, and I pulled back into one of the middle lanes.

The CD reached its fifth track: a haunting, nine-note melody, repeated softly, then with a surge of percussive volume. Martin sings about his fear of the future, his need to speak out. When an early attempt at reassurance fails, he probes deeper, asking if "you," his brother, feel incomplete or lost. The song is called "Talk." To the underlying rhythm of a drummed heartbeat, its lyrics summon up an anxiety specific to words and meaning: the feeling that other people are addressing him in a language

beyond his grasp. It's as though language has lost its ability to connect us — as though we've misplaced a key that would allow us, somehow, to understand what words have come to mean. Birds kept flying somewhere above Walnut or Diamond Bar, but all utterance now seemed strange, unfathomable. The guitar riffs swooped and rose to match the breathtaking, lethal grandeur of the California freeways, yet the song's lyrics were bleak.

Back home in Montreal, I found myself continually listening to *X&Y*. So were millions of other people in dozens of countries — this had been the world's top-selling album in 2005. One day I came across a futuristic, B-movielike video of "Talk"; it showed the perplexed band trying to communicate with a giant robot. A version of the video on the YouTube website had been watched more than 442,000 times in the previous ten months. Many hundreds of viewers had posted comments. Some of them were brief, uninhibited love letters. *ace this song iz wick id lol ace vid*, wrote a viewer from Britain. *coldplay is the BEST!!* added a thirteen-year-old Finn, using a Japanese screen name. *vid. is kind of err. but the song is roarific*, noted an American. A comment in English from China followed one in Basque from Spain and one in Spanish from Botswana.

If I were more of a joiner, I might have signed up for the official Coldplay.com online forum, which boasts tens of thousands of members. The forum makes national borders immaterial — Latvians and Macedonians, Indonesians and Peruvians, Israelis and Egyptians all belong. To them it doesn't matter that the band consists of three Englishmen and a Scot singing in a tongue that was once confined to part of an island off Europe's coast. Now, wherever on the planet these fans happen to live, music connects them. So does language. As long as they're willing to grope for words in the accelerating global language that Coldplay speaks, the forum gives all its members a chance to speak. Which is how the fifth song on *X&Y* ends. Martin admits

that things don’t make sense any longer. But as the melodies collapse around him, he invites us to talk.

All sorts of borders are collapsing now: social, economic, artistic, linguistic. They can’t keep up with the speed of our listening, of our speaking, of our singing, of our traveling. Borders could hardly be less relevant on teen-happy websites like Facebook and MySpace. That morning, a Canadian in the exurbs of Los Angeles, I was listening to a British band while driving to meet a Mexican-American professor who began a memoir in Argentina full of sentences like this: “repente veo que ALL OF A SUDDEN, como right out of nowhere, estoy headed for the freeway on-ramp.” Routes are merging. Languages are merging.

That professor celebrates a promiscuous, unruly mix of words. But many people contemplate such a mix with annoyance and fear, emotions they also feel about other kinds of language change, like the chatroom abbreviations in those YouTube comments. When you first peer at the weirdly spelled, lowercase fragments of speech, or listen to the staccato interplay of tongues in major cities like LA, you may be fearful that everyone else is talking in a language you don’t speak. Is it mere unfamiliarity that inspires such unease, or is it something deeper?

Language enables us to feel at home in everyday life. But of late, language seems to have packed up its bags, slammed the door behind it, and taken to the open road. That’s where we find ourselves: on the move. Every few days, if not every few hours, we become aware of a new word or phrase speeding past us. There’s no going back, either — no retreat into the grammar and lexicon of the past. Our only home is this: the verbal space in which we’re already traveling. The expressions in that space are often amazing — a generation or two ago, before our use of language went digital, no one would have believed some of what we routinely see, hear and type.

Yet from time to time, I too feel lost. In the future, wherever we are, what in the world will we say?

The way other people use language sometimes troubles us. But the reasons vary wildly. It may be the particular version of English spoken in Singapore, Sydney or San Diego. It may be the way teenagers talk — Joan Didion, describing the "blank-faced" girls and "feral" boys of southern California, criticized their "refusal or inability to process the simplest statement without rephrasing it. There was the fuzzy relationship to language, the tendency to seize on a drifting fragment of something once heard and repeat it, not quite get it right, worry it like a bone." It may be a pompously inflated polysyllabic phrase, a contortion of words in an ad, a noun that masquerades as a verb. It may be grammatical errors in a TV news bulletin, phrases abused on a radio talk show, spelling mistakes on a website. It may be the opaque language of bureaucracy — in March 2007, to take a random example, the Queensland Government Chief Information Office defined its task as "the development of methodologies and toolkits to strengthen the planning and project management capability of agencies." Say what? "The QGCIO also plays an integral part in building relationships and identifying opportunities for collaboration between agencies, cross-jurisdictionally, with the ICT Industry and with the tertiary sector." Even more than this kind of flaccid verbiage, my personal bugbear is the rhetoric of war, engineered to hide the truth: "collateral damage," "friendly fire," "transfer tubes," or "the excesses of human nature that humanity suffers" (such was Donald Rumsfeld's euphemism for the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib). There are innumerable reasons why people get irritated about language.

Irritation can lead to anxiety. If words no longer bear their proper meaning, or are no longer pronounced the right way, or are now being combined with other words in some incorrect manner, what verbal defacements might scar the future?

Experts keep trying to reassure the public. Even in 1929, the British linguist Ernest Weekley felt it necessary to observe that "stability in language is synonymous with *rigor mortis*." "People have been complaining about language change for centuries," says Katherine Barber, editor in chief of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. "They're fascinated to learn that 'travel' started off as an instrument of torture — but they want the changes to stop now. I think people invest a lot in correct spelling and grammar because they worked very hard to learn it well in school — that's why there's a resistance. They say, 'It's terrible, they don't use the subjunctive anymore.' But the subjunctive has been disappearing for centuries." As the American scholar John McWhorter has pointed out, "There is no such thing as a society lapsing into using unclear or illogical speech — anything that strikes you as incorrect in some humble speech variety is bound to pop up in full bloom in several of the languages considered the world's noblest." Nobility, the linguists reiterate, is in the ear of the beholder. Many native speakers beg to differ.

Amid the commotion, rest assured: I have no ideological ax to grind. I'm not interested in persuading you to refine your punctuation, double your vocabulary or perfect your grammar. I write simply as someone who loves and cares about language; I believe its manifold powers of expression help make us truly human. Today the evidence of linguistic change, like that of climate change, is all around us. But I suspect that with both words and weather, we don't always ask the right questions. "Is language declining?" may not be the smartest inquiry to make. It might be more rewarding to ask: "Why does language change provoke

such anxiety? What kinds of change can we expect to see in the future? And how should we try to cope?”

More than two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Horace compared words to leaves in a forest: just as trees lose their withered leaves and welcome fresh ones, so too do words fall away to be replaced by the new. The process is continual, and older than any of our languages. Yet words seem unusually volatile now. “We are living at the beginning of a new linguistic era,” the eminent linguist David Crystal wrote in 2004. “I do not believe that ‘revolution’ is too strong a word for what has been taking place.” He based his assertion on three interrelated phenomena: the planetwide spread of English in the late twentieth century, the disappearance of hundreds of other languages, and the sudden dominance of the Internet as a means of communication. When these topics are looked at together, Crystal argued, “we encounter a vision of a linguistic future which is radically different from what has existed in the past.”

The nature of that difference is the central theme of these pages. Having devoted a previous book, *Spoken Here*, to the last-ditch struggles of minority languages, I promise to say little about that subject here. The awareness of a terrible loss — on average, a language goes extinct somewhere in the world every two weeks — underlies some of what follows. But loss is not the only story to be told. This book sets out to explore and interpret a verbal revolution.

On a bright October afternoon, I was standing in front of a class of sixteen-and seventeen-year-olds in a small town west of Montreal. Their English teacher had invited me to give a writing workshop in the high school library. The hour was nearing its end when abruptly I switched course.

Instead of talking about metaphors and similes, sweet conclusions and dynamite beginnings, I asked each student to jot down a few words or phrases that older people would not understand, and then provide a brief definition for each term. I gave the class no advance warning. The risk was that this impromptu assignment would induce a yawn-filled silence, a retreat into heavy-lidded boredom. But instead the students — especially the girls, I noticed — set about the task with enthusiasm.

"You mean *any* words?" said a preppy-looking girl in blue. "Even the ones that aren't in the dictionary?"

"Especially the ones that aren't in a dictionary," I replied.

I waited a couple of minutes — time was short — and asked for the results. Arms filled the air. Hands waggled. I'm a reader, a parent, a viewer, a listener; I thought that all together, the students might come up with a dozen words I didn't know. So much for the vanity of age.

Cheddar, said the first, meaning "money, lavish earnings." (I'll give this and all the other definitions in the students' exact words.) *He got owned*, said another: "rejected, shut down, beat up." *On the go*, added a third: "it's like going out, but not official." I recognized some of the expressions, of course; even a senior citizen of fifty can comprehend *eye candy* and *loaded, poser and flame*. Did these innocent, cool teenagers really believe their generation had invented *high*? But as I stood there in the sun-dappled library, I realized that the majority of the students' words and phrases left me bemused. What on earth was *burninate*? Was *d-low* somehow related to "below," "delay," "J Lo" — or to none of those terms? (Not wanting to keep the meanings secret — to d-low them, that is — I'll suggest that you'd burninate something only if you had the fire-breathing powers of a dragon.) More generally, by what learned or instinctive command had these young people enacted their self-assured takeover of the language?

Before the bell freed them from the joy of learning, the students handed in the slips of paper on which they'd scribbled their definitions. I have them still: scraps torn from notepads and workbooks, a page from a disintegrating paperback, a yellow Post-it note with a smiley at the top. Overlaps were surprisingly rare; just one word — *noob*, meaning somebody new, ignorant or inexperienced — was defined three times.

Looking at the sixty-six words now, I'm struck by the diversity of their origins. A few emerge from the online world of instant messaging: *rofl*, for instance, which gathers the initial letters of "rolling on the floor laughing." Others are abbreviations: *sup*, for instance, originally "What's up?" and now a synonym for "Hi, how are you?" Almost anywhere you go, the power of hip-hop seems unavoidable: surely that's how *homie* (friend) and *foshizzle* (I agree) migrated from America's inner cities to a small, WASPISH town in Quebec. Hip-hop and cyberspace together encouraged the spread of *phat*, which morphed from "sexy" in the 1960s to "cool, great, wonderful" by the '90s, and which is now widely regarded as an acronym for "pretty hot and tempting" — its original meaning, in short. Drug culture is just as influential; blame or credit it for *fatty* (an oversized joint), *gacked* (on speed) and *pinner* (a small joint). It's unfortunate *That's so gay* has come to mean "That's stupid, not worth my time." But what could be the origins and adolescent meanings of *lag* and *One* and *die in a fire*?

It was humbling to read an impromptu definition of *scene*, a word I thought I knew, that deployed a word I couldn't quite pin down — "style (knock-off of emo)." *Emo*? It was even more humbling for me, a writer, someone whose livelihood depends on the rich and exact use of words, to realize how far the English language had slithered away from my grasp, not for reasons of ethnicity or culture but simply because of time. "But at my back I

always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near,” wrote the poet Andrew Marvell in the seventeenth century. It’s not a chariot any longer; it’s a Dreamliner.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that all these expressions are destined to enter the permanent storehouse of English vocabulary. Many of them will be as fleeting as youth itself. Young men and women have always used slang as a weapon to cut their lives free from the nets cast by their elders — didn’t I aspire, unsuccessfully, to be a groovy freak? Older people have no reason to try and memorize the throwaway lexicon of the young. But the cascade of teenage slang I faced that afternoon can stand as a symbol of the astonishing rate at which new words are pouring into English. Nobody can control this breakbeat language; nobody can even keep track of it.

The language is both inherently permissive and amazingly powerful. Yet while it soaks up terms from dozens of foreign cultures and nations, English also infiltrates and penetrates most of the world’s other languages. Worry about the linguistic future is nothing unique to English-speakers. People around the world are struggling with verbal shock: angst about how we speak, how we read and write, the changing ways we communicate. Perhaps all this helps to explain why so many are convinced that language is deteriorating. It’s as though — regardless of whether the supposed peak of eloquence was attained in the era of Shakespeare, Goethe or Proust — the language of the twenty-first century must inevitably mark a sad decline in accuracy, grace or both. Nervousness about falling standards makes us resort to grammar hotlines and seek the stern advice of language mavens. Google the phrase “proper grammar,” and you’ll find, as of November 2007, no fewer than 394,000 hits.

If technological innovations are usually cheered, linguistic innovations just as commonly come under attack. A few years ago Prince Charles attacked the “corrupting”

effect of American English, saying, “People tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs and make words that shouldn’t be. I think we have to be a bit careful; otherwise the whole thing can get rather a mess.” His late compatriot Alistair Cooke bemoaned “the disastrous decline in the teaching of elementary grammar.” But is language really in a state of free fall? Are speakers in the future condemned to be messier and less accurate than ourselves?

It’s easy for me to say that words are evolving fast. But I need to prove the point. So let’s perform a brief test. If you look back at the eleven paragraphs you’ve just read, describing my visit to a high school — and if you leave aside all the students’ new expressions (*noob, foshizzle, sup* and so on) — you’ll still find at least thirty words and usages that did not appear in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1884–1928), the most ambitious and scholarly effort yet made to assemble a complete record of the language. Some of these terms are obvious: Google, hip-hop and instant messaging were all born in the late twentieth century. So, slightly earlier, were Post-its and smileys. According to John Ayto’s book *Twentieth Century Words*, “hotline” is believed to date back to 1955, “online” to 1950. More subtle, more thought-provoking, are recent coinages that evoke not technological inventions but concepts and ideas. The creators of the *OED* had no knowledge of “takeover,” a word that appeared only in the mid-1940s, nor “permissive,” a 1950s term, nor “inner city,” a phrase from 1968. “Ethnicity” dates from 1953; one particular ethnicity, “WASP” (meaning white Anglo-Saxon Protestant), had been around for centuries, although the word remained absent from the language until 1962.

The list goes on. “Senior citizen” arrived in 1938, a year after “workshop” began to signify something more than just

a room full of tools. “Angst,” understandably, seems to have become an English word during the Second World War. Another wartime invention was “acronym.” Both angst and acronyms have proliferated since. “Throwaway” was unavailable to the *OED*’s first editors; so was “cool,” except as a term evoking temperature. Even “insecure,” in its common usage, arose only in the 1930s.

Most surprising — given the ubiquity and apparent necessity of the term — the word “teenager” was not born until the early 1940s. “I never knew teen-agers could be so serious,” declared a writer for *Popular Science Monthly* in 1941. The first verifiable use of “teenage” goes back another generation, to (of all places) Victoria, British Columbia, where a 1921 article in the *Daily Colonist* declared: “All ‘teen age’ girls of the city are cordially invited to attend the mass meeting to be held this evening.” The *OED*’s staff had already finished work on the letter T by then, so anybody looking up “teenage” in the great dictionary is in for a shock: it’s defined as a country term meaning brushwood for fences and hedges.

In 1921 few people outside the Victoria area would ever read the *Daily Colonist*. A copy took days to reach the East Coast, weeks to travel overseas. Today the *Times Colonist*, like almost every other newspaper, maintains a lively presence on the Internet. With some clicks of a mouse, anybody who has access to a computer can learn about the city, keep up with its goings-on, or send aggrieved letters to the editor. Thanks to technology, you don’t have to live in Victoria to stay abreast of the Victoria news. Besides, the growth of immigration, cheap air travel and a global economy means that no English-speaking city in the world is ethnically homogeneous. I used to believe this wide dispersal of readers and speakers would encourage a uniformity of language — a smoothing out of differences. Even if a few slang expressions varied from place to place,

surely the varieties of English were destined to become ever more similar.

Now I'm not so sure. Admittedly, many dialects and accents have faded over time — as long ago as 1962, in *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck lamented the decline of American regional speech. The little town of Lunenberg in southern Nova Scotia was settled by Swiss and German immigrants in the eighteenth century, and until recently dozens of German-based expressions could be heard in the area: "struddle," "mawger," "gooke-mole," "wackelass" and so on. Few of these terms, unfortunately, remain in daily use. Most of them have joined the silent, ever-growing army of lost words.

Yet robust dialects still flourish. Many people in Scotland, for instance, are convinced that their daily idiom, Scots, is so different from mainstream English that it should count as a separate tongue. In 2006 some portions of *Trawlermen*, a BBC-TV miniseries about fishermen off a coastal town in Scotland, had to be subtitled before being shown elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Matthew Fitt, a young writer appointed by the Scottish government to serve as National Schools Scots Language Development Officer, has written poems in which lines I can figure out ("be guid tae yirsel") are followed by lines I find totally incomprehensible ("sic a drochle / a peeliewally"). Fitt invents words on occasion — "cyberjanny" was his coinage for a virtual concierge who made an appearance in a Scots cyberpunk novel — but more often he simply puts into writing the everyday idiom of Scottish people. Their accent can be so distinctive that many common words — "guid," for instance — look weird in standard English spelling, like a fullback in a tutu.

If you wander down the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, you'll pass a six-floor apartment building (a block of flats, I mean) on which a historic-looking plaque is kitted out with flags and emblems. But the plaque is far from old. The wording

on it reads: AL THIS WARK WAS BEGUN BE DANCON ON 10 JANUARY 1989 AND ENDIT BE THEM ON 31 MARCH 1990. The use of Scots on the plaque makes a strong cultural and political statement. Part of its meaning is that, in the face of the rampantly global, Scottish people are determined to value and promote the local. Yet every vibrant dialect, not just Scots, generates new expressions; and these expressions can get in the way of a shared understanding. Think of all the acronyms that speak volumes to insiders and say nothing to everyone else.

TTC, for instance. If you're a sports fan, you probably associate those initials with The Tennis Channel. Unless you're a sports fan living in Toronto, in which case you'd first call to mind the Toronto Transit Commission. Anyone moving to the city finds TTC an essential trio of letters to figure out. In the American South, the letters also involve transportation: Trans-Texas Corridor. But in Paris, TTC is a hip-hop band; in Singapore, South Carolina, Essex and Oklahoma it refers to a college (four different colleges, that is); and in Wellington, New Zealand, it signifies the Tararua Tramping Club. ("Tramping" means hiking, if you're American, or rambling, if you're British.) The initials also belong to a European research project, Timing, Trigger and Control, whose website helpfully notes: "The TTC system was initially developed by RD12, an LHC Common Project financed by EP and SL Divisions and the four LHC experiment collaborations." TTC, in short, has dozens of disconnected meanings around the world.

For a stranger, mastering the language of a new place means getting to know its initials as well as its cultural and political references. And countries, like cities, have their own allusions, their own illusions. The playwright George Bernard Shaw once quipped that the USA and Britain are divided by a common language. It might be more accurate to say they're united by a different language. North Americans traveling in Britain would be well advised to

realize that “randy” means what they know as “horny”; otherwise they could be as baffled as a Chicago girl I once met in a Glasgow youth hostel who couldn’t fathom the reaction she caused by walking up to boys and saying, “Hi, I’m Randi.”

Teenagers in London are less and less likely to speak in the traditional Cockney accent, but they’re not switching over to the Queen’s English, nor even to the Estuary English adopted by their parents and older siblings. Instead, many of them use a new transcultural idiom that goes by the name “Jafaikan.” Besides the obvious Caribbean source, it draws on accents and words from Africa, South Asia and Australia. “Safe, man,” wrote a *Guardian* journalist in a piece entitled “Learn Jafaikan in two minutes.” “You lookin buff in dem low batties. Dey’s sick, man. Me? I’m just jammin wid me bruds. Dis my yard, innit? Is nang, you get me?”

Migration is a fact of language. Now that the peoples of the world jam with their bruds on each other’s doorstep, it may be necessary to understand the differences between, say, a hijab and a niqab, a khemar and a chador. In large cities, isolation from other cultures is impossible. The more we mix, the more we match. And just as our words keep flooding into other languages, some of their words inevitably seep into ours. English has already adopted terms from at least 350 other tongues, including Choctaw, Twi, Nootka and Araucanian.

Languages change when a minority people asserts itself as strongly as Jamaicans in Britain and Algerians in France have recently done. There’s nothing new or alarming about this; Jewish immigrants to the United States a century ago had the chutzpah to make Yiddish a rich source of English expressions. Languages alter too when sheer proximity forces idioms to rub up against each other — to share a physical space is also to share a verbal space. In Montreal, English- and French-speakers routinely and genially wreak

havoc on each other's languages. Soon after a collapsing overpass had killed several people, I heard a Quebec official say on English-language radio: "Circulation on Autoroute Dix-neuf will have a little perturbation."

In other words, traffic on Highway 19 will be chaotic.

Technological change can add to our verbal unease. On a trip to New York in 2006 I happened to pass a notice board at the entrance to East Green, a quiet area of Central Park, that still told passersby: "Earphones are required for listening to radios and tapeplayers." The sign became outmoded as soon as the Discman and MiniDisc Walkman replaced the portable cassette player. In an era of iPods and MP3 players, the notice makes even less sense. The word "tapeplayers," once so shiny, bears the scuff marks of age. To keep up with technology, the notice board would require a fresh noun every few years.

Over the next few decades, advances in technology will bring us a megaload of gleaming words. But more important, the whole feel and, so to speak, headspace of the future will be unlike anything we can foretell. Words don't just give names to devices, they give flesh to ideas. Apart from the multitude of fresh vocabulary that speakers in 2100 will take for granted, and the subtly different threads of grammar that will knit their words together, it's likely they will pronounce the language in different ways than we do. The sounds and rhythms of English, French and many other languages have undergone substantial change within the past century.

To hear exactly how a language alters, we're lucky that the New Zealand Broadcasting Service sent mobile recording units around the country in 1946. The units had previously gathered soldiers' and nurses' wartime messages to their families at home. After the outbreak of

peace, New Zealand decided to record the music being performed in outlying areas as well as the reminiscences of old-timers living there. “The recordings were made on fourteen-inch acetate disks,” the linguist Margaret Maclagan explained to Australia’s Radio National, “which were so soft that they didn’t actually want to play them very often, so most of the people who were recorded never even heard themselves. They made the recordings in people’s homes, or on farms or in the local town halls.” Surprisingly, perhaps, the music proved less popular than the stories, and so the mobile units went back on the road for another two years, harvesting the voices of more than three hundred people.

Why is this of any interest now? Because New Zealand English is a young dialect. Other varieties of English, from North America and the Caribbean to India, South Africa and Australia, were already well established by the second half of the nineteenth century, when most of these speakers were born. They are, Maclagan explained, “the first generation of European people born in New Zealand. So they’re the very first people who ended up speaking New Zealand English.” This means, unusually, that almost the entire history of the dialect exists in recorded form.

Radio National played the voices of a brother and sister, a Mr. and Miss Bannatyne, who were small children in South Island in the 1890s. Their given names appear to be lost. Even in the late 1940s, Mr. Bannatyne spoke in what sounded very much like an English accent; he would have pronounced the word “fish” with a vowel sound recognizable to English-speakers elsewhere. But Miss Bannatyne pursed her mouth and swallowed her short *i*’s: *fsh*, she would have said. That’s one of the most noticeable qualities of a New Zealand accent. She had it. He didn’t.

What the New Zealand researchers found in those 1940s recordings holds true elsewhere. Women take on a new accent faster than men (this matters not only for its own

sake, but also because mothers traditionally play the largest role in passing on language to children). People from a lower social class acquire a new accent more quickly than those from a higher class. And accents develop most quickly when people from many different places mix together. The more social flux and tumult there are in a community, the more likely its language is to alter. New Zealanders were fortunate to acquire their distinctive accent without rancor. In many countries today, mobility and social mixing have never been greater, and language can change with startling abruptness.

Even so, some kinds of change happen gracefully. Let's consider Somalia for a moment. It's hard to think of a nation more profoundly stricken by war, famine, displacement and ecological collapse. Somali culture, traditionally nomadic, was reliant on camel herding, and the decline of that practice has heightened the people's vulnerability to the ever more frequent droughts that plague the Horn of Africa. Over the centuries, the Somali language developed an astonishing range of words to embody a herding culture — *golqaniinyo*, for instance, meaning "a bite given on a camel's flank to render her docile during milking"; or *uusmiiro*, "to extract water from a camel's stomach to drink during a period of drought." What's striking is the confident way in which Somalis have taken their old camel-related words and applied them to new purposes.

Their use of language is dynamic. *Guree*, for example, once meant "to make room for a person to sit on a loaded camel." Now it refers to making space for someone in a full car or truck. More radically, *gulguuluc* used to mean "the low bellow of a sick or thirsty camel," but today the word applies to a poem recited in a low voice. *Haneed* once signified "the left side of a cow camel where one stands when milking." Its meaning has stretched to the point where the term now suggests good form or style. Yet the

stretching is a natural evolution, nothing forced or jagged. If English would only change as elegantly as the Somali words for camel culture, few people would have a serious objection.

Fat chance. In today's world many hundreds of millions of people speak English as a foreign language, with greater or lesser success. (One of them, translating an Israeli tourist brochure into English, recently turned a Hebrew phrase meaning "Jerusalem — there's no city like it" into "Jerusalem — there's no such city.") As their language lunges off into uncharted territory, native speakers often resent the bewildering, graceless changes they have witnessed since childhood. Can English still be ours if we don't know a *phat from a fatty*? If we respect traditional rules of spelling and grammar, will we soon be *owned*?

People with a different mother tongue are less likely to feel an intuitive bond to the particular version of English they learned. But they too can be upset by language change, especially if its effect is to make English seem even less straightforward, even harder to comprehend. Non-native speakers of the language far outnumber those for whom this is the tongue of earliest memory. And the future of English, some linguists now suggest, will depend heavily on those who did *not* speak it in their childhood.

I will have much to say in this book about the exhilaration that language change provokes, the creativity it embodies. But it can also be deeply problematic. It can leave older people voiceless in their own tongue. It can create havoc for lawyers, teachers, police officers and other professionals. It can divide a community. And what of the cultural loss it incites? The dramatic influx of new words into the language has left no room for thousands of old ones, which beat a quiet retreat into portly dictionaries and

half-forgotten classics. Even the hardy survivor words carry meanings that swell or shrink over time.

The result, often, is confusion. We may think we know what a sentence or a paragraph means, but we can easily be deceived. When a language slams its foot down on the accelerator, the past shrinks and blurs in the rear-view mirror. Much of the difficulty we have in understanding the past is semantic — if its language consistently eludes us, so does its spirit, its psychology. The attempt to read any text from a bygone century can, in Coldplay's words, make us "feel like they're talking in a language I don't speak." And as history becomes unintelligible, we lose touch with the roots of culture.

Consider a few lines from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, still being used in many churches in the twenty-first century. Some of its wording goes back nearly half a millennium, to a time before William Shakespeare was born. I remember, as a boy, being puzzled by the invitation "Come unto me, all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." Did I travail? Would I be refreshed? A few moments later, the priest declared Jesus to be "the propitiation for our sins." The what? That verse was prefaced by the command "Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him." There the language floored us — not just me, but also the vast majority of worshipers. For "comfortable" doesn't mean what we naturally assumed it did; it means, to quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "strengthening or supporting." That dictionary gives a dozen meanings for "comfortable"; nine of them were obsolete a century ago.

The Anglican prayer book employs the word in a geriatric sense that could only mislead contemporary readers. It's a good thing the book doesn't also — as far as I know — feature manure and commodes. To manure meant to manage or cultivate, which is why an Elizabethan author could say that England was "governed, administered and

manured by three sorts of persons.” And a commode, when it sauntered into the language, was a tall headdress worn by fashionable women. Hence an otherwise inexplicable couplet by the minor poet Edward Ward: “Stiff commodes in triumph stared / Above their foreheads half a yard.”

More recent texts also run up against the shifting nature of language. As a university student, I learned a few favorite poems by heart. One of them was “Lapis Lazuli” by the Irish author William Butler Yeats. Its subject is the magnificent persistence of art in times of pain and horror. Written in the mid-1930s, as Europe lurched toward war, “Lapis Lazuli” is, I would still argue, one of the key poems of the last century. But, because of language change, it’s a poem that has become hard to enjoy — even, for young people, to take seriously.

When the aging Yeats wrote, “Two Chinamen, behind them a third, / Are carved in lapis lazuli,” he didn’t know how offensive the term “Chinaman” would become (except in the game of cricket, where it continues to refer to a particular type of delivery from a left-armed spin bowler). When Yeats said, “Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out, / Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in,” he couldn’t predict that zeppelins would soon be a historical relic, even more antiquated than the expression “bomb-balls.” When he used the phrases “hysterical women” and “all men have aimed at,” he didn’t know that feminists would dismiss such wording as sexist — his “men” refers to human beings, not just to adult males. And when the poet declared, “All things fall and are built again, / And those that build them again are gay,” he wanted to evoke a brave insouciance in the face of grief. He certainly wasn’t thinking about Judy Garland albums and rainbow bumper stickers.

As a euphemism or proud substitute for “homosexual,” the word “gay” became widespread only in the 1960s. Its origins stretch back much further, perhaps to the Victorian era — although a 1942 *Thesaurus of American Slang* gives

no hint of its current meaning, which spawned the derisive usage I encountered among high school students. Cole Porter could have had no clue about the adjective's future destiny when in 1932 he entitled a musical *Gay Divorce*. In "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats used "gay" four times, making it the poem's central word. But if you're a contemporary reader who has grown up equating gay with homosexual, you'll have a hard time forgetting the familiar meaning. The line "They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay" could well evoke an unwanted image of certain actors; and the poem's slow, resounding conclusion — "Their eyes, their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay" — verges on the ridiculous.

So far I've been speaking about the vocabulary of the past. But there's another difficulty: its syntax. The sentences we fashion today tend to be a lot shorter than they were in previous centuries, when authors were normally intimate with the rotund cadences of Latin and when they wrote out their texts by hand. Yeats grew up in the nineteenth century. His early readers had no telephones, no radios, no TV sets, no computers — the list of what they didn't have is almost endless. But they did have one thing most of us lack: time. They didn't need to hurry their reading. They didn't gobble sentences like mouthfuls of fast food.

And so they expected, even welcomed ornately sculpted phrases. They were at ease with sentences so complex that the syntax resembles architecture, and with a formal register of language that strikes most of us today as puffed up. To the great reformer William Wilberforce, a hundred-word sentence was merely routine. One of his finest pieces of writing — *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* — was published in London in 1823. A typical sentence begins like this: "For then, on the general ground merely of the incurable injustice and acknowledged evils of slavery, aggravated,

doubtless, by the consideration that it was a slavery forcibly opposed on unoffending men for our advantage …”

He hasn’t got to the main verb yet. He hasn’t even got to the subject.

Wilberforce’s lifelong struggle against slavery is the subject of Michael Apted’s 2007 film *Amazing Grace*. The good characters in the movie say straightforward things like “To hell with caution!” and “Remember, God made men equal” and “If there’s a bad taste in your mouth, spit it out.” The evil characters speak pompously: “We have no evidence that the Africans themselves have any objection to the trade.” We can’t be sure, of course, exactly how Wilberforce talked; in conversation he’s unlikely to have waited more than thirty words before reaching the subject of a sentence. It’s clear, even so, that the film makes his enemies speak in an idiom reasonably true to the age — whereas Wilberforce, to appear heroic in our eyes, talks like us. We mistrust oratory. We like our heroes plainspoken.

Reading the past, we often stumble over the words we encounter. The words that are missing may be just as significant. Although Huck Finn is an adolescent boy, Mark Twain never conceived of him as a “teenager,” for teenagers had not yet, so to speak, been invented. Oscar Wilde was undoubtedly a pederast, but how much sense does it make to call him gay? If we do so, we pluck him out of the nineteenth century and deposit him in ours. People in the past lived free of concepts from our own time, just as we walk around in blithe ignorance of ideas that will seem self-evident to our grandchildren. Those ideas will rely on words that have not yet been born.

And then there’s Shakespeare, the supreme cultural icon for writers and readers of English. Without knowing it, we