

Attitudes towards variation and change...

There are two main attitudes to language change - 'prescriptivist' and 'descriptivist'. Descriptivists seek to describe, (objectively) how language is used. They do not subscribe to 'correct' and 'incorrect' language use. (This is the approach that English Language students should take). Prescriptivists favour rules that identify 'correct' language usage. They disapprove of uses of language that breaks these rules.

An example of these behaviours in action is in the use of double negatives. **Jean Aitchison**, an avid descriptivist, suggests that the use of double negatives is merely a means of emphasising a point. She states that, in other languages, the illogicalness of the statement is ignored and the multiple use of negatives just goes to enforce the idea further. In contrast, prescriptivists would argue that by using double negatives, you are expressing a positive. They view language in a logical manner.

John Humphrys (Radio 4 presenter) is a well known prescriptivist, who compared the misuse of an apostrophe as 'vandalism'. He said, "Unless you get into the habit of being precise, you will be open to misunderstanding." This is a common prescriptivist view. Lynne Truss (author of 'Eats, Shoots and Leaves') has a similar perspective, calling it, in *The Telegraph*, an 'apostrophe catastrophe'. "I am popularly supposed to be the sort of person who regularly upbraids the illiterate," she said.

As previously stated, Professor Jean Aitchison is a descriptivist. In 'The Language Web' and also in the BBC Reith Lectures in 1996, she attacks the prescriptivist view by presenting three language myths that **she feels are false:**

The **Crumbling Castle** myth suggests that English was a once great castle, but over time it has decayed and crumbled into the sea. She states this is false because the description of English as a 'once fine language' is a particularly inaccurate one, as language is constantly changing and evolving. "No year," she said, "can be found when language achieved some peak of perfection."

The **Damp Spoon** myth suggests that 'bad English' sticks to people who are lazy and passive. The laziness is reflected by the people that put the damp spoon into the sugar bowl. Aitchison, though, states that "the only lazy speech is drunken speech" and that speaking quickly, for example, isn't a sign of laziness – it is anything but.

The **Infectious Disease** myth suggests that 'bad English' is like a horrible disease, like herpes, that spreads from person to person. We have no control or vaccine. It is coming to get you! Aitchison suggests that the idea that changes are 'caught' and 'spread' is technically correct, but it is no disease. People pick up changes in language because they want to.

Similarly, **David Crystal**, language extraordinaire, shares the same perspective as Aitchison. He created his own Tide Metaphor to explain language change. In this, he suggests that language is like a tide – constantly changing. It ebbs and flows, bringing

in new words and taking out others in a natural, progressive way. In using this metaphor, Crystal claims that changes are not for the worse, or for the better. "Just changes," he says.