'Languages do not stop changing. Sometimes they change gradually over centuries and sometimes change is introduced abruptly. How does language change work? Among other factors, consider the role of languages coming into contact with each other and the impact of technology and of external events (e.g. the impact of COVID-19).'

Languages are constantly changing in a variety of ways, such as in vocabulary, structure, grammar, sound and for a variety of reasons, such as to accommodate the changing needs of its speakers, as a result of contact with another language or dialect, or change motivated by an external event, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Often change is due to a combination of these factors[1], for example change in language due to Covid-19 can be categorised as both an external event and accommodating developing needs of speakers. Whilst few people would suggest that saying 'coronavirus' or 'social distancing' is incorrect English, some people argue that using 'like' in place of a verb of speaking is incorrect. In fact, neither is wrong: they are both examples of language change, which can create different, but not wrong, versions of a language.

A common misconception is that older version of a language is 'more elegant, logical or correct'[2] than modern version, however this view is incorrect. Languages will naturally change over time[3]: people generally accept that only correct way of speaking English is not the version found in Beowulf, which was most likely written in the eleventh century, as people tend to agree that the language will have changed since then. Therefore, the same approach should be taken toward more recent innovations such as saying 'me and my friends' instead of 'my friends and I'. Whilst these newer innovations may not yet be accepted as appropriate for formal written English, in a few years they might be: language change generally occurs first in an informal spoken version of a language, then later is adopted into more formal written version[4].

Further examples of change over time include change in the meaning of words (semantic change). One example of this is the word 'villain', which originally meant 'low born', 'uncivilised' or 'rustic', referring to the lowest class in the feudal system, from the Latin word (via Old French) 'villanus', a farm worker. In 1660, feudalism was abolished, and so since villains as members of the feudal system no longer existed, the word shifted to the more general meaning 'knave', 'scoundrel', and so seemed to have been adapted as a general insult, and then developed into the modern meaning[5] 'a character in a film, novel, or play whose evil actions or motives are important to the plot' or 'the person or thing responsible for specified problems, harm, or damage'[6]

As well as semantic change, over time changes to the grammar or structure of languages can occur, for example loss of inflections. In English, we use inflections (changing the stem of a word, such as sing -> sang, or adding particular endings, such as work -> worked[7]) in some scenarios, such as when forming the plural. Here, we add endings to the singular form, usually an 's', for example horse -> horses. However, in other languages, such as Chinese, the plural is demonstrated by an additional

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[1] Van der Auwera, Johan and Genee, Inge. 2002. English *do*: on the convergence of language and linguists.
[2] Birner, Betty. Is English Changing? Linguistic Society of America.
https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/english-changing
[3] Liberman, Mark. 2003. Linguistics 001: Introduction to Linguistics, Lecture 22: Language Change.
https://www.ling.upenn.edu/courses/Fall_2003/ling001/language_change.html
[4] Filppula, Markku and Klemola, Juhani. 2014. Celtic Influences in English: A Re-evaluation.
[5] Belli, Ray. 2016. Words for Granted – an etymology and linguistics podcast.
https://www.wordsforgranted.com/
[6] Oxford languages.
[7] Bussmann, Hadumod. 1996. Dictionary of Language and Linguistics.

word, for example, one horse -> many horse[8]. Some languages use more inflections than others: languages such as Latin and Ancient Greek are highly inflectional languages with endings to show case (nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, and dative, also ablative and locative in Latin), gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), number (singular and plural, with a dual form in older Greek) for nouns, and tense, mood and person for verbs[9].

English uses much fewer inflections than Latin and its descendants the Romance languages: compare regular present tense verbs in English, where a pronoun (such as I, you, he, she, we, they) is required to indicate who is doing the verb (a more analytical method), with Italian, where the ending shows who is doing the verb and the pronouns are optional (a more inflectional method). English also uses fewer inflections than languages it is more closely related to, such as some Germanic languages. For example, German uses endings on nouns to distinguish between different cases, a feature which remains in English only for a few words, such as who/whom/whose. Since English lost its inflections more quickly than other Germanic languages, some scholars argue that the loss of inflections must have been due to language contact, possibly with Norse after invasions in the ninth century, which resulted in an area of Viking settlement known as the 'Danelaw'. Here, evidence for substantial settlements of Norse speakers is shown through both distribution of place names with Scandinavian origin, archaeological evidence and genetic evidence[10].

Texts written in different parts of the country suggest that simplification of English verb endings started in the Danelaw, and spread to the rest of the country later, as the endings found *Ormulum* (text written c1180 by a monk in southern Lincolnshire) are more regular than those found in *Ancrene Wisse* (a guide to living as an anchoress - a woman who chose to be locked in a cell to live a life of prayer - written c1225 in the South-West Midlands)[11]. When more early Modern English texts (written c1150-1325) are considered, the pattern remains that the complex endings are more common in areas outside the Danelaw, and much rarer in those written in dialects from within the Danelaw, and so supports the idea that the loss of English inflections was due to contact with Old Norse. [12]

The type of language change which takes place depends on the type of language contact: generally, in high contact situations, short term contact with mainly adult language learners leads to simplification, whereas long term contact involving children language learners involves complexification.[13] This is because children are generally better at learning languages than adults, so when adults learn languages, especially when no formal teaching is involved, they do not grasp more complex features of a language, and hence simplification occurs.

On the other hand, children are very good at learning languages, so if the second language is learnt during childhood, children acquire it like a native language, and borrowing occurs between the two languages. This leads to complexification as languages gain additional features from each other. Logically, if language contact leads to borrowing or simplification, then low contact must mean languages retain existing complexity. Evidence for this can be seen in languages such as Icelandic and

[8] Stroud, Kevin. 2012. History of English podcast. https://historyofenglishpodcast.com/
[9] Kennedy, Benjamin. 1962. Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer.
[10] Warner, Anthony. 2017. English-Norse Contact, Simplification, and Sociolinguistic Typology.
[11] British library, Discovering Literature: Medieval collection items, Ancrene Wisse. https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/ancrene-wisse#
[12] Warner, Anthony. 2017. English-Norse Contact, Simplification, and Sociolinguistic Typology.
[13] Trudgill, Peter. 2011. Languages in Contact and Isolation: Mature Phenomena and Societies of Intimates. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjy1CkH1FOE

Faroese, which are more complex than Norwegian, Swedish and Danish: the insular languages have experienced less contact and so have preserved more of the complexity of Old Norse[14].

However, for languages to be able to retain existing complexity, there must be a situation in which they develop complexity spontaneously. Thus, Peter Trudgill hypothesises that in 'societies of intimates' (small in size – no more than 150 people, restricted territory – no more than twenty-mile radius, cultural uniformity, members share all generic information[15]) language spontaneously becomes more complex. This type of society describes the societies lived in by Neolithic and pre-Neolithic people, before the domestication of animals and plants led to the decrease in hunter-gatherer, nomadic societies, and so for ninety-seven percent of their history, languages have been spoken in societies of intimates. However, since then the size of our settlements has grown rapidly as has the total population of humans[16]. Because there has been a decline in the number of societies of intimates, and a corresponding increase in high contact situations between adults, languages have on average become less complex, and as societies of intimates continue to decline, it seems as though this trend will continue.

Another factor which may prove to be contributing to the decrease in language complexity and variation is the emergence of English as a global language. While English may only have the third most native speakers worldwide (after Mandarin Chinese and Spanish) it has the highest number of total speakers worldwide: 1.348 billion[17]. The number of people who speak English as a foreign of second language outnumber native English speakers by almost 3:1. No language has ever been spoken by so many people over such a large area, and so we cannot know for certain what effect it will have, although in some respects it resembles the role of Latin: in a similar way to how the Romance languages developed from Vulgar Latin, variations of English such as Singlish, Japlish, Chinglish and Spanglish have developed. However, whilst the emergence of English as a global language is impacting and will continue to impact language worldwide, it is not the only factor contributing to the decline of language complexity and disappearance of minority languages. English contributed to the loss of minority languages in Australia and North America, however in places such as South America and Asia the growth of other languages, such as Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese has been more influential in the disappearance of minority languages[18].

Technology has had a twofold role in the threat to minority languages. The spread of the internet has made it easier for minority language speakers to communicate both with other speakers of the same language and with the rest of the world. It has allowed speakers of minority languages to communicate regardless of geographical location, and so provided increased opportunities for minority languages to be spoken. As well as increasing communication between speakers of minority languages, it has increased communication between speakers of minority languages and the rest of the world, educating people about minority languages and the threats they face.

However, the role of technology regarding minority languages is only a tiny piece of the massive impact technology has had, and will continue to have, on language. As David Crystal explains, what he calls 'Netspeak' is a 'revolution linguistically': it has introduced new vocabulary and allowed language

[14] Trudgill, Peter. 2011. Languages in Contact and Isolation: Mature Phenomena and Societies of Intimates. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjy1CkH1FOE

[15] Trudgill, Peter. 2015. Societies of intimates and linguistic complexity, in Language Structure and Environment: Social, cultural, and natural factors.

[16] Armelagos, George. Goodman, Alan. Jacobs, Kenneth. 1991. The Origins of Agriculture: Population Growth during a Period of Declining Health.

[17] Eberhard, Simons & Fennig. 2021. Ethnologue: Languages of the World.

[18] Crystal, David. 2001. A language revolution: from reluctance to renaissance.

change to be spread quickly across the world, but most importantly it has created a new way to communicate which is 'neither speech nor writing'. [19] John McWhorter described texting as 'fingered speech' or 'writing the way we talk'. [20] Because it is different from both writing, in that information can be conveyed much more quickly and colloquially, and from speaking, in that when texting we cannot use body language and facial expressions to inform our interpretation of a message, texting has led to the development of new methods of communicating these things, such as emojis and abbreviations. One such example is 'LOL', which originally meant 'laugh out loud', and in earlier texts was used to express amusement. However, if we look at more recent texts, 'LOL' is being used less to express amusement and more to show empathy or acknowledgement: it has become a pragmatic particle, playing a similar role to the Japanese 'ne'. This shows that whilst many people think of texting as indicative of the decline in writing ability and eloquence, it is actually a kind of dialect with rules and structures that reflect how language has been changed and adapted to suit this new method of communication.

In terms of the total history of language, the development of language due to technology has been rapid: languages have been spoken, or at least the capacity to speak language has existed since between 200,000 and 150,000 years ago[21], whereas the world wide web was invented twenty years ago. However, an example of even more rapid language change has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on language. The sudden increase in the use of the word 'Covid-19' prompted the Oxford English Dictionary to add it as a new entry outside their 'usual quarterly publication cycle'.[22] The OED's top twenty list of keywords also demonstrates how the vocabulary of the pandemic came to dominate people's lives. In January, 'bushfire' was top, followed by 'coronavirus'. The list also included eight other words related to Covid-19, mainly descriptive terms such as 'flu-like', 'respiratory' alongside other words relating to current affairs such as 'Iranian', 'airstrike' and 'fire-affected'. In February, the number of words related to Covid-19 in the top twenty list was fourteen, and by March all twenty of the keywords were related to Covid-19, mainly words describing the social impacts of the pandemic, words such as 'self-isolate', 'lockdown' and 'sanitiser'.[23] This shows how language reflects the events its speakers experience and just how quickly language can change to fit our surroundings: in the space of three months, our most used vocabulary changed entirely to comprise of completely new words (coronavirus, Covid-19), existing phrases that were given new meanings (self-isolate, lockdown) and rarer or specialist words which rapidly became used in everyday conversations (PPE, ventilators).

This shows that language change is not just something that has happened in the ten centuries since *Beowulf* is believed to be written, but something that we can witness happening every day. While some changes take a long time from emerging in colloquial spoken language to being accepted into more formal written language, others occur more rapidly and are accepted into common usage almost immediately, such as the vocabulary used to talk about the Covid-19 pandemic. Language change reflects the experiences of its speakers and can be caused by a number of factors, such as to accommodate the changing needs of its speakers, as a result of contact with another language or dialect, or change motivated by an external event, but more often it is due to a combination of these factors. A combination of a change our lifestyle, from living in smaller 'societies of intimates' to much larger communities has led to a decrease in complexification of languages, and globalisation,

[19] Crystal, David. 2001. A language revolution: from reluctance to renaissance.
[20] McWhorter, John 2013. Txtng is killing language. JK!!!
https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk?language=en
[21] Pagel, Mark. 2017 Q&A: What is human language, when did it evolve and why should we care? BMC Biology.
[22] Flood, Alison. April 2020. Oxford dictionary revised to record linguistic impact of Covid-19.
[23] OED Editorial. April 2020. Corpus analysis of the language of Covid-19. https://public.oed.com/blog/corpus-analysis-of-the-language-of-covid-19/

combined with a rapid increase in the worldwide use of technology and emergence of English as global language has put many minority languages at risk. Some estimates suggest that half the world's languages will disappear in the next century[24], and so studying and understanding the change and variation found in languages both modern and historical is potentially more important than it has ever been.

[24] Crystal, David. 2001. A language revolution: from reluctance to renaissance.