Aims:

- to use your knowledge of language change to put texts in chronological order
- to recognise prescriptive attitudes to language change and how people write about the ‘state’ of language
- to further develop skills of annotation and analysis of data examples.

Task 1

Read the data extracts provided. Try to order them chronologically from the oldest to the most modern. (To do this you will have to consider the ‘typical’ features of language in particular periods.)

Note the concerns being expressed about the ‘state’ of language in each extract. What is the writer’s attitude to language at this time?

Consider the language that the writer uses to express these concerns and the overall tone.

Task 2

Each group will take responsibility for one text.

Annotate and analyse the language features of this period using the framework headings:

- spelling and graphology
- lexis and semantics
- grammar and morphology.

Extension work

In what ways might a study of the history of the English language help to dispel prejudices about language change?
# The search for purity: attitudes to language change

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<th>Author / approx. date</th>
<th>Concerns about language</th>
<th>Lexis / tone</th>
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The work of this society shou’d be to encourage Polite Learning, to polish and refine the English Tongue, and advance the so much neglected Faculty of Correct Language, to establish Purity and Propriety of Stile, and to purge it from all Irregular Additions that Ignorance and Affection have introduc’d …. I wou’d therefore have this Society wholly compos’d of Gentlemen ….

Daniel Defoe

Some seke so farre outlandishe Englishe, that thei forget altogether their mother’s language. And I dare swere this, if some of their mothers were aliue, thei were not able to tell, what thei say, & yet these fine Englishe clerkes, wil saie thei speake in their mother tongue, is a man should charge them for counterfeiting the kynges Englishe. Some farre iournied ientlemen at their return home, like as thei loue to go in forrein apparel, so thei wil powder their talke with oursea language.

Thomas Wilson

It is surely undeniable that standards at the BBC have fallen woefully when we are routinely subjected to virtual illiterates bombarding us with the sloppiest clichés, Americanisms and bad grammar. There was a time when the BBC could take pride in presenting its viewers and listeners with the best possible models of English. Sadly, no longer. The proliferation of audience participation shows – the pursuit of the insignificant by the inarticulate – reveals the desperate impoverishment of our once-noble native tongue. Dreary Birmingham accents and lazy northern bluster – you got it. Bad grammar and sloppy, inexpressive vocabulary? You got it. No dumbing down? Come off it!

Anon.

If an academy should be established for the cultivation of our stile, which I, who can never wish to see dependence multiplied, hope the spirit of English liberty will hinder or destroy, let them, instead of compiling grammars and dictionaries, endeavour with all their affluence, to stop the licence of translatours, whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of France.

Samuel Johnson

This is a thing that easely may happen in so spatious a toung as this, it being spoken in so many different countries and regions, when wee see that in some seueral partes of England is self, both the names of things and pronunciation of words are somewhat different, and that among the countrey people that neuer borrow and words out of Latin or French, and of this different pronountiation one example in steed of many shal suffise…

Richard Verstegan

My Lord; I do here, in the Name of all the Learned and Polite Persons of the Nation, complain to Your LORDSHIP, as First Minister that our Language is extremely imperfect; that its daily Improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily Corruptions; that the Pretenders to polish and refine it, have chiefly multiplied Abuses and Absurdities; and that in many Instances, it offends against every Part of Grammar.

Jonathan Swift
Concerns about the decline in the standard of English. Change is due to a lack of care and maintenance.

Language is in a more efficient state – a survival of the fittest. Language is adapting to the needs of the times.

Language remains in a substantially similar state from the point of view of ‘decay’ or ‘progress’. Its advance or decline is held in check by opposing forces.

Descriptive approach:
- does not tell us how we should speak
- reflects language (describes rather than evaluates)
- no language or variety of a language is superior or inferior to any other in a linguistic sense
- every grammar is equally complex and logical – describes the rules that people know.

Prescriptive approach:
- ‘Purists’ believe that change is a corruption and that there are certain ‘correct’ forms
- often prescribes ‘rules’ that should be followed
- many elements of prejudice and elitism
- often lays blame – on television and teachers on failing to preserve standards
- evaluate language – issues of correctness.
Answer sheet – extracts in chronological order

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Richard Verstegan 1605

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Jonathan Swift 1712

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Anon. 1999