

Linguistic change is here to stay

THERE is possibly no greater demonstration of the rapidity with which cultures can change than in the domain of language in the 21st century.

It's an aphorism that a language that doesn't grow and change is a dying language and there is certainly no chance that English is going to lie down and die. Along with the myriad new words and new uses in vocabulary goes a change that has been sneaking up on us for some time. It's our increasing tendency to use nouns as verbs, a feature which Paul Warren has mentioned in an earlier column. I remember years (and years) ago being pulled up and admonished for using the noun trial as verb — we were trialling a new assessment method. I often wonder what that same purist would think about "We went antiquing in Greytown", "we booked the weekend with games of squash on Friday night and Sunday night", and "Eastview held on to a 3-1 halftime lead to 'wedgy' the Grundies' semi-final aspirations". A 1984 contributor to *Philosophy of Science* (JL464) claimed, "Practically any noun can be verbed in English". Perhaps he's right: "Monica", "diary", and "latte" are among common conversions to the verb form in the past three decades.

In a related development, Jeremy Ballantyne of Waipukurau writes: "My query is about a couple of verbs I always thought were intransitive, but in recent years, 'protest' and 'impact' seem to have undergone metamorphosis and are often used transitively. We so often hear about something impacting something else, or that someone is protesting something. What's happening? Are these isolated events, or part of a bigger trend?"

They are in fact far from isolated examples. Intransitive verbs are now frequently used transitively just as transitive verbs are used intransitively. These days we do not hear the imperative "Enjoy yourselves" or "enjoy your meal" as often as the new intransitive form "enjoy". Some of us mutter into our food when yet another waitperson places a plate in front of us with the instruction to "Enjoy!" What is astounding is that these changes are passed on as quickly as a Mexican wave — and we are swept along in their wake. And here's yet another example of change: the noun form of the



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word verb itself, in a previous life, simply meant a word, any word.

THERE is another way that language changes that is not as attractive or acceptable to some people. It's our tendency to debase words. These days, hero and icon are probably the two most debased words around. A hero no longer needs to conquer a formidable feat or challenge or save the life of another. You are a hero these days if you protest or argue. You're a hero if you find a lost dog. You are even a hero if you open your pharmacy for longer hours than is usual. And in some ways, the real heroes such as Hannibal, Sir Edmund Hillary, or Nelson Mandela are debased along with the word. An icon is now anything from a book to an All Black, rather than a tiki, a Tane Mahuta, or a flag. The word has lost sublimity in meaning, and what have we replaced it with?

Jacky Haydn of Wellington laments the use of "for free" and wants to know its background. It was first recorded in the United States during World War II. A suggestion from American Speech in the 1940s is that its use results from the confusion of "free" and "for nothing".

Change is not always something to grimace about. We need refreshing, for we soon tire of the overused "window of opportunity" or "thinking outside the square". Recently I noted two expressions from an article by Alan Perrott that we could say are perhaps still in the pre-cliche stage. Perrott reports the description of a radio station as a "meat and three veg station" and suggests that "New Zealand is heading to hell in the back seat of a Holden". It will be interesting to see how far these will travel and how soon we will tire of them.

■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz