BBC Learning English
6 Minute English

Disappearing words

Kate: Hello, I'm Kate Colin and this is '6 Minute English' - and thanks to Jackie Dalton for joining me today. Good Morrow Jackie!

Jackie: Eh…pardon?

Kate: Good Morrow! I beseech thee, whence comest thou?

Jackie: Ermm…

Kate: Don't worry, I didn't expect you to understand that, I'm speaking in 'Old English'. What I said was the equivalent of saying, 'Good morning – where do you come from?', using words which were in use a few hundred years ago and that we don't use any longer.

Jackie: Hello Kate. Yes, English is a language which is evolving all the time. So this means that there are new words continuously appearing and older words are disappearing. I didn't understand the 'Old English' you started the programme with, because you were using words which we no longer use in everyday speech.

Kate: Exactly. So, as you might have guessed, the topic we'll be discussing is language and how it evolves and develops.

So Jackie, as usual, I have a question for you…..

Some of the oldest English sounding words date back how many years?

a) 1000 years

b) 20,000 years

c) 500 years

Jackie: (answers)

Kate: OK, well we'll check your answer at the end of the programme. But first, we're going to hear part of an interview with a scientist who has been using a special computer to study our use of words and their evolution through time. Can you tell us what 'evolution' means?

Jackie: Yes, 'evolution' – it's similar to the word 'evolving', which I explained earlier. 'Evolution' is the gradual process of change and development over a long period of time and in this context it refers to language and how it develops and changes over the years.

Kate: OK –   well let's listen and see if you can hear which words he thinks are some of the oldest in the English language…

Mark Pagal

'Well we've be able to discover that the numbers two, three and five and the pronoun 'I'

and 'who' – those are the oldest words in the English language'.

Kate: So Jackie, did you get that?

Jackie: Yes, he said that the oldest words were two, three and five and the pronoun 'I' and the word, 'who'.

Kate: That's correct. It's hard to believe that some of the words we use everyday are in fact, extremely old.

Back to our scientist, as well as thinking about words that have been in use for many years, he also predicts which words may eventually become extinct.

Kate: Jackie, what does 'predict' mean?

Jackie: To 'predict' is to say what you think will happen in the future, especially as a result of having prior knowledge or experience. For example, it's cloudy outside today, so I predict that it's going to rain later.

Kate: and 'extinct' what does 'extinct' mean?

Jackie: 'to become extinct' means to be no longer in existence or you can use the phrasal verb 'to die out'. The word is often used when talking about a tribe of people or a type of animal which has 'died out', for example the dinosaurs have become extinct.

Kate: So our scientist predicts which words are likely to become extinct. He does this by finding out how quickly different words evolve or develop and are replaced by other words with the same meaning. Now, let's listen to the next extract. ….which words does he predict might become extinct?

Mark Pagal

'We can make some guesses as to what words might next go extinct, so for example the word 'dirty' seems to have the highest rate of change and so we might predict that sometime in the next 750 years, that word will be lost'.

Jackie: He said the word 'dirty' may be lost or become extinct in the future. This is because it's being replaced quite quickly by other words that mean the same thing.

Kate: That's right and we'll be hearing some more about his theory of why words come and go, but first a look at some more of the vocabulary we'll come across. He uses the word 'frequency'. What does 'frequency' mean?

Jackie: This is how often some happens, so the frequency with which a word is used, means how often the word is used.

Kate: And 'common everyday speech'?

Jackie: This is the language that we use most frequently.

Kate: And what about the word 'predictor'?

Jackie: A 'predictor' is something which can help us predict or say what will happen in the future.

Kate: And finally, 'retained'?

Jackie: 'retained' means 'to keep', so if a word is 'retained' it means we will continue to use it.

Kate: Thanks, well let's listen to the final extract….

Mark Pagal

'What we've discovered is that the frequency with which words are used in our common everyday speech, is a strong predictor of whether or not they'll be retained'.

Jackie: So he says that the words we use most often are the most likely to still be in use in the future - the most common words tend to be the most used and oldest ones!

Kate: That's correct and you might like to know that the other words he predicts may become extinct are 'squeeze and 'guts'. Let's go over some words which we came across in this programme in the programme today…

Jackie: We had:

evolution

extinct

predict

frequency

common everyday speech

predictor

retained

Kate: Thanks Jackie and just before we finish for this week, let's see if you got the answer to my question correct. I asked about some of the oldest English sounding words and how old you thought some of them were.

Jackie: I think I say 20,000 years old.

Kate: ….and you were correct! The oldest English sounding words, were used by humans over 20,000 years ago. Incredible to think that our Stone Age ancestors were using similar sounding words all those years ago. That's all we have time for today. Until next time! Goodbye.

Jackie: Goodbye!