

The year is 1571 and English is about to die. Although already the official language of England, a title it had to wrestle from Latin and French, its future is bleak. Sir Philip Sidney is painstakingly adding to its interests and its rhetoric, but progress is slow and takers are few. Enter Shakespeare. An ingenious linguist, he plunders other languages and breathes life into English, soon placing it on the lips and into the hearts of everyone who hears it. In but three decades, Middle English is transformed into Early Modern English and again into Modern English.

Now, almost half a millennium on, English is facing uncertainty once more, this time at the hands of “I18N” (*I eighteen letters N*), computer speak for Internationalisation. Every generation adds to and removes from language all the time, but the language world is spinning faster and faster. Digital social media is hurling the next generations of language users into a position of power at an accelerating rate and social media devices are starting to dictate how English is used.

Once divided into inner circle (countries with English as first language), outer circle (second language) and developing circle (foreign language), English is fast becoming more homogeneous thanks to globalisation. The custodians of English are losing control over how its grammar is changing. English is now perceived, above all else, to be a tool with which we buy and sell across borders.

Those who cling to the language as an art and a treasure, who remember Mark Twain’s *A Plan for the Improvement of English Spelling* and who hold that there is a right way and a wrong way and very little in between, are in for a sad adieu: English, at least the English they studied and grew to love, is terminally ill. Gadgetry, with its emphasis on shortcuts and easy communication, is poisoning English grammar with impure patterns, devoid of linguistic logic or love. No mercy is shown in the struggle to get a message across as quickly as possible.

The internet, with its 536 million English users -the most users in the world (Chinese isn’t far behind with 445 million, although English is growing faster) - will save English from complete annihilation. Nevertheless, the damage many of these users are doing by perpetuating erroneous grammar is sure to leave English scarred and ugly.

Teachers of English face a dilemma: Do we empower interlocutors, or do we share the language we love? It is impossible to do both, because a grammar mistake is a grammar mistake and it sounds wrong, looks wrong and makes us cringe. However, the meaning may come across unaltered by the mistake and therefore the goods can be bought and sold, which is often more than enough for the student who couldn’t care less. Perhaps teachers are not the answer; perhaps we need a second coming, of Shakespeare that is, a keyboard bard of sorts to transform inner circle English and to save its grammar from going gently into that good night.