

Sandi Toksvig for The Daily Telegraph

I have a splendid list of all the global ways there are to give seasonal greetings this time of year. It's a bit long but among my favourites for "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" are the Samoan – "*La Maunia Le Kilisimasi Ma Le Tausaga*", Pennsylvania German – "*En frehlicher Grischtdaag un en hallich Nei Yaahr*", and Iroquois – "*Ojenyunyat Sungwiyadeson honungradon nagwutut. Ojenyunyat osrasay.*" I'm not quite sure of the history but I'm going to guess that saying it at all for the Iroquois was something of a surprise.

Language is a funny old thing. The other day I was taking part in an audience Q&A when I was roundly scolded by a woman for "allowing the BBC to ruin the English language". Naturally I felt terrible as I had no idea either that it was happening or that I was responsible. She seemed particularly exercised about prepositions. "They're fired at the listener like grapeshot," she declared. "What a horrible way to go," I murmured, not entirely clear on the best line of defence. The gist of what she wanted, I think, was for us all to speak as she did, but the truth is that the English language has never been either preserved in aspic or one person's preserve. It has ever been evolving. It is a sign of the times, for example, that hardly anyone this Christmas will refer to a goose as a "Tyb of the buttery" or get so "beargered" (drunk) that someone has to send for a "quier cuffin" (justice of the peace).

Ever polite, I didn't feel the moment was right to remind the irate woman that English is actually a West Germanic language. That the very word "English" stems from the Angles who came from Angeln in what is now Schleswig-Holstein. I suppose, as a Dane, I do have to take some historic responsibility for wrecking the language. English is full of Scandinavian words. Margate, Ramsgate, Billingsgate, any town with a "gate" on it takes their suffix from the Danish word "*gade*" which simply means "street". You can just imagine a Q&A session 1,200 years ago when some poor writer would've been held responsible for the "wretched Vikings coming over here and ruining our perfectly good words for 'road'."

It was today in 1996 that the Oakland School Board in California passed a resolution which officially declared Ebonics a language or dialect. This portmanteau word derives from "ebony" and "phonics" and it is a term that was mainly intended to refer to "African American Vernacular English". My parents' generation, not knowing political correctness was around the corner, called it "jive talk".

The school board decision caused uproar but I suspect they meant well. They were trying to appreciate that not everyone speaks the same. There is a marvellous joke website which will take any sentence and “Dialectize” it into a comic version. Ask for the opening sentence of *A Christmas Carol* in “jive” and you get “Marley wuz wasted, dig dis: to begin wid. Dere be no doubt whuteva’ about dat. Man!” While the “Swedish Chef” version is “Merley ves deed: tu beegen veet. Zeere-a is nu duoobt vhetefor ebuoot thet. Um de hur de hur de hur.”

Those are just silly but I do think we need to remember that language cannot be contained forever in one endlessly reprinted volume. The philologist, Charles du Fresne (born today in 1610), wrote a glossary of medieval and late Latin still useful today but really only for historical purposes. Language is ever on the move and most days I check out the “Urban Dictionary” where anyone can invent a new and useful word or phrase. Among my current favourites are “Void the warranty” (to perform an activity in an extreme fashion), “Recyclopath” (a militant environmentalist) and “Rehab sunglasses” (sunglasses worn indoors).

We should play with language all the time. This time of year we pay tribute to the great clown Joseph Grimaldi (born today in 1778), the man who invented audience participation in pantomime. (“Oh, no he didn’t! Oh, yes he did!”) Panto is full of the joy of playing with language – “What did Cinderella say when the chemist lost her photographs? Someday my prints will come.” I think communication should be fun and that we should all worry less about how we say things and more about what we say.

Anyway, however you express it, I do wish you a *Glædelig Jul*. (That’s Danish for Merry Christmas.)

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Sandi Toksvig

1. Explain how this article presents Sandi Toksvig as a descriptivist.
2. Find phrases in the article that communicate a prescriptive attitude to language change. How can you connect it to Aitchison's metaphors? How are prescriptive attitudes conveyed?
3. Look at your theory notes from Thursday. Can you make connections to any of the theories?

