Myth: English is getting worse
How could someone conclude this?

One would need to establish two things:

1. that English has changed over time
2. that by some criteria for ‘goodness’, earlier English was better than current English
# Do languages change?

1. *Pater noster, qui es in caelis*  
   - Latin

2. *Padre nostro, che sei nei cieli*  
   - Italian

3. *Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo*  
   - Spanish

4. *Notre Père, qui es aux cieux*  
   - French

5. *Our father, who art in heaven*  
   - English

6. *sanctificetur nomen tuum*  
   - Latin

7. *sia santificato il tuo nome*  
   - Italian

8. *santificado sea el tu nombre*  
   - Spanish

9. *que ton nom soit sanctifié*  
   - French

10. *hallowed be thy name*  
    - English

11. *adveniat regnum tuum*  
    - Latin

12. *venga il tuo regno*  
    - Italian

13. *venga tu reino*  
    - Spanish

14. *que ton règne vienne*  
    - French

15. *thy kingdom come*  
    - English
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original Text</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>fiat voluntas tua</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>sia fatta la tua volontà</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>hágase tu voluntad</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>que ta volonté soit faite</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>let your will be done</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Da nobis hodie</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dacci oggi</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Danos hoy</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Donne-nous aujourd'hui</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Give us today</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>et ne nos inducas in tentationem</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>e non c'indurre in tentazione</td>
<td>Italian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>no nos dejes caer en la tentación</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>et ne nous soumets pas à la tentation</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>And lead us not into temptation</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Romance language family

Stammbaum [genealogical tree]:

Latin

Catalan

Italian Spanish French Portuguese Romanian Romansch

Ladino Castilian Ecuadorean Cuban …
Some common source: Indo-European

Sir William Jones, 1786:

“The Sanscrit language … is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists”
Some common source: Indo-European
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- Italic (Latin)
- Celtic
  - Irish, Welsh
  - Scots Gaelic, Breton
- Armenian
- Baltic
- Slavic
- Germanic
- Indo-Iranian
  - Indic
    - Hindi-Urdu
    - Punjabi
    - Bangla
    - Marathi
    - Gujarati
  - Iranian
    - Farsi
    - Kurdish
    - Romany
    - Pashto
    - Tajik
- Albanian
- Anatolian†
  - Hittite†
  - Luwian†
  - Lycian†
Some common source: Indo-European

Germanic

West Germanic
Dutch
German
Frisian
Afrikaans
English

North Germanic
Icelandic
Faroese
Swedish
Norwegian
Danish

East Germanic
Gothic
The tower of Babel

Two theories for language differentiation:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. . . And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

... And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do... Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech....

Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.

[Genesis 11:1-9]
The tower of Babel

Two theories for language differentiation:

“the formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same” Charles Darwin
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 1 (dialect chain)

A

B

C

D

E

F

G
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 2

A

B

C

D

E

F

G
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 3

A

B

C

D

E

F

G
Languages as areas of continuous variation

Phase 4

A • B

C

D

E

F

G
Variation + separation $\rightarrow$ differentiation

- Language family $\approx$ genus
- Language $\approx$ species
- Dialect $\approx$ variety, breed

Language differentiation $\approx$ speciation
Mutual intelligibility $\approx$ interbreedability
Variation + separation $\rightarrow$ differentiation

Language family $\approx$ genus
Language $\approx$ species
Dialect $\approx$ variety, breed

Language differentiation $\approx$ speciation
Mutual intelligibility $\approx$ interbreedability

“Spanish”

Castilian  Cuban  Mexican  Ecudorean  Argentinian
What language is this?
mystery.language.wav
What language is this?

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
Si þin nama gehalgod
to became þin rice
gewurþe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg

and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum

and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soplice

Father our thou that art in heavens
be thy name hallowed
come thy kingdom
be-done thy will
on earth as in heavens

our daily bread give us today
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those-who-have-
sinned-against-us
and not lead thou us into temptation
but deliver us from evil. truly.
Fader oure that art in heve, i-halgeed be thi nome, i-cume thi kinereiche, y-worthe thi wylle also is in hevene so be an erthe,oure iche-dayes-bred ʒif us today, and forʒif us our gultes, also we forʒifet oure gultare, and ne led ows nowth into fondingge, auth ales ows of harme. So be it.

Kinds of change

PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE:

1. Changes in the inventory of sounds:

   (a) loss of sounds: voiceless velar fricative [x] (night)

   (b) addition of sounds:
       [Ž] in treasure, garage
       [v]/[f] became separate phonemes (sound split): live vs. life

   (c) sound shifts
       The "Great Vowel Shift" (15th C.):

       all the (seven) long vowels underwent changes

       sound spelling in OE → spelling inconsistencies today
       nama = [nɑːmaː] in Old English vs. name [neɪm] now
Kinds of change

PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE:

2. Changes in the patterns of sounds in a word
   (a) metathesis (sound reversal):
       bridd $\rightarrow$ bird; hros $\rightarrow$ horse; ask $\rightarrow$ aks
   (b) epenthesis (addition of a sound inside a word):
       spinel $\rightarrow$ spindle; æmtig $\rightarrow$ empty
   (c) syncope (dropping a sound) (also apocope, aphaeresis)
       stanas $\rightarrow$ stones; droppèd $\rightarrow$ drop’d; sent $\rightarrow$ sen’;
       and $\rightarrow$ (a)n’; him/them $\rightarrow$ ’m, is/has $\rightarrow$ ’s
Kinds of change

WORD MEANING CHANGE (Humpty Dumpty principle)

1. Broadening (or generalization):
   
   dogge = specific breed of dog in OE (now, any dog)

2. Narrowing:
   
   mete [meat] = any kind of food in OE
   hund (hound) = dog in OE, now a breed
   hlaf (loaf) = bread

3. Semantic shift:
   (a) amelioration:

   from a negative to a positive marker [- → +]
   Gothic, Impressionism, Quakers

   (b) pejoration:

   from a positive to a negative marker [+ → -]
   harlot (= maidservant); lewd (= layperson); ivory tower
Kinds of change

LEXICAL CHANGE:

1. Addition of words:

   - borrowing: direct vs. indirect (via another language)
   - linguistic alcohol
   - (bi)lingual language (< Sp. alcohol, <Arabic al-kuhl)
   - (by one count: 60% of words in English are borrowed, but 90% of the most common words are Anglo-Saxon)

   loan translation (borrowing of a phrase or idiom)
   - German Fernseher (lit. far-seer) from television (cf. Fernsprecher telephone)
   - superman < German Übermensch

(English language contains significant numbers of words borrowed from other languages. For example, 'alcohol' comes from Spanish and Arabic, 'language' from Latin, and 'superman' from German. Some estimates suggest that about 60% of English words are borrowed, though the most common 10% are predominantly Anglo-Saxon.)
Kinds of change

LEXICAL CHANGE:

2. Loss of words:
Kinds of change

SYNTACTIC CHANGE:

X Verb Subject Y  →  X Subject Verb Y

Old English (450-1100):
þæt hus hæfdon Romane to þæm anum tacne geworht
that building had R. with the one feature constructed
‘Romans had built that building with the one feature’

Middle English (1100-1500):
Wel loved he garleek, oynons, and eek lekes,
He loved well garlic, onions, and also leek,
And for to drynk strong wyn, reed as blood;
And to drink strong wine, red as blood;
Thanne wolde he speke and crie as he were wood.
Then he would talk and shout as if he was crazy.

And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn,
And when he’d drunk up the wine
Than wolde he speke no word but Latyn.
Then he wouldn’t speak anything but Latin.
A fewe termes hadde he, two or thre,
Some phrases he had learned, two or three,

Chaucer (d. 1400); General prologue, The Summoner
Kinds of change

SYNTACTIC CHANGE:

‘Double’ negatives

He never yet in al his lyf ne seyde ‘He never yet in all his life said
No vileynie unto no maner wight . . . a mean word to any kind of being

(Chaucer, General Prologue, The Knight)

Viola says of her heart, ‘Nor never none/Shall mistress of it be, save I alone.”

(Shakespeare, Twelfth Night)
Change is bad?

‘[McWhorter] warns that the near-total loss of formal expression in America is unprecedented in modern history and has reached a crisis point in our culture such that our very ability to convey ideas and arguments effectively is gravely threatened’

[Doing our own thing: The degradation of language and music and why we should, like, care (John McWhorter, 2003, Gotham), back cover]

Simon 1980:

“The trouble with grammatical errors [sic] … is … that they multiply and proliferate until all is error and confusion.”

“We must urgently stop between you and I. Otherwise, it will lead us to every kind of deleterious misunderstanding.”
**Word pet peeves writ large**

*disinterested vs. uninterested*

(disengaged/unengaged)
(amoral/immoral/unmoral/antimoral/dismoral)

*who vs. whom*

*hopefully*  
[subject-oriented: in a hopeful manner, cf. *intelligently*]  
[speaker-oriented: I hope that ..., cf. *frankly*]

cf. the two uses of ‘honestly’:
(1) Libby carefully and honestly signed his name.
(2) Honestly, Libby is a liar.
Word pet peeves writ large

*It is me* is a ‘vulgar, inferior form of’ *It is I*  (Simon 1980:20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>French</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>Latin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s me.</td>
<td>C’est moi.</td>
<td><em>Das ist mich.</em></td>
<td><em>Me est.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s I.</td>
<td><em>C’est je.</em></td>
<td><em>Das ist ich.</em></td>
<td><em>Ego est.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m it.</td>
<td>Je le suis.</td>
<td>Ich bin’s.</td>
<td>Ego sum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m me. (?I’m I.)</td>
<td>Je suis moi.</td>
<td><em>Ich bin mich.</em></td>
<td><em>Me sum.</em></td>
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</table>

*It am I.*

So: progress or decay, or just variation? or maybe criminal activity?
The knives come out

“Language, I think, belongs to two groups only: gifted individuals, who use it imaginatively; and the fellowship of men and women, whoever they are, who, without being particularly inventive, nevertheless endeavor to speak and write correctly” (Simon 1980:24)

“Language, for the most part, changes out of ignorance” (Simon 1980:18)

[Violating a prescriptive rule is] “sinful” (Simon 1980:24)

“The worst crimes against English are committed not by the underprivileged but by bureaucrats in academia, government and business” (‘Speech crimes’, Patricia T. O’Conner, New York Times, March 11, 2007)

The not-so-hidden subtext: maintaining sociological distinctions
Prescriptive grammar: Criteria for well-being

1. Remember to never split an infinitive.
2. The passive voice should never be used.
3. Do not put statements in the negative form.
4. Verbs have to agree with their subjects.
5. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
6. A preposition is a terrible word to end a sentence with.
7. Place pronouns as close as possible, especially in long sentences, as of 10 or more words, to their antecedents.
8. Writing carefully, dangling participles must be avoided.
9. If any word is improper at the end of a sentence, a linking verb is.
10. Everyone should be careful to use a singular pronoun with singular nouns in their writing.
11. The adverb always follows the verb.
After Gilead defeated Ephraim (around 1370–1070 BC), some Ephraimites tried to sneak into Gilead to escape the genocide.

“And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.” (Judges 12:5-6, KJV)

(‘Scheveningen’ supposedly used by Dutch in WWII to find German spies ‘Wayzata’ for non-Minnesotans)
Why does change occur?

From below?
  laziness (the lower classes are lazy or stupid and don’t bother to learn)

From above?
  arms race (upper classes continually differentiate their speech, lower classes continually try to mimic it)

imperfect learning (adult → child transmission)
peer-to-peer homogenization (build, claim solidarity, friendship, intimacy)
prestige, influence
Antichange for aesthetic reasons

“I know in my heart that the English language is the finest instrument the human race has ever devised to express its thoughts and feelings” (Bernard Lewis, quoted in McWhorter 2003:165).
Fact: English is just fine

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- A standard spelling for a large language community (with typical amounts of variation) is useful
Fact: English is just fine

• English has changed, and is changing, and will continue to change

• There is no obvious metric by which modern English is ‘worse’ or ‘better’ than earlier forms of the language

• A standard spelling for a large language community (with typical amounts of variation) is useful

• Clear, forceful, cogent, accurate, precise expression (whether in writing or speech) is highly desirable—but completely unrelated to the standard shibboleths of the language mavens