Britain’s official language has undergone huge transformation over the past 100 years, but what has had the biggest influence on that change? Six experts were asked for their suggestions.

**MACHINES**
Dr Sandra Williams, Research Fellow in Natural Language Generation.

From my perspective, as a researcher in computational linguistics, machines are having the biggest impact on English. I come from a handwriting tradition. Less than 50 years ago people wrote by hand: letters, postcards, notes for work. Now, people don’t tend to do that; it’s all machine assisted. The danger of things like automatic spell-checkers and dictionary or thesaurus look-ups is that inappropriate words creep in by mistake, changing the meaning.

An even more radical change is the proliferation of English texts that are completely machine generated. I work on data-to-text systems that generate English automatically, turning numbers from medical devices or weather monitors into phrases. The English that’s generated isn’t beautiful prose. It’s rather pithy and sounds like the Shipping Forecast, but these reports are increasingly used by people who need to make critical decisions quickly.

Today, many English texts – the kind that might harm us, such as phishing scams – are never read by humans, only by machines. Texting, emails and tweeting allow millions to send their thoughts to the world, and crooks flood our inboxes with fraudulent requests for bank details, but it’s a new genre of English writing that’s never read.

**RADIO**
Barbara Mayor, Lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication.

As a member of the radio generation, I believe the BBC has had a big influence, not just on me but on the English language as a whole. When the corporation was set up in the 1920s, part of its mission was to improve the quality of English by standardising its use, and its massive global reach means it can have an enormous impact.

Radio has the power to connect with people across geographic and social boundaries, because it’s a relatively cheap technology and one that can be shared. The BBC World Service has been highly influential in disseminating news but also in English language teaching. It has this very wide, deep reach to parts of the globe that until recently other technologies wouldn’t have reached, and it has contributed to the development of English as a lingua franca.

In connection with the BBC’s mission to educate, UK regional variations have often been a source of contention. There was a furore in the 1940s about Wilfred Pickles, a broadcaster with a Yorkshire accent, when people objected to him presenting the news on the basis that they assumed he wasn’t educated.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, however, there has been a move – partly because of the proliferation of regional radio stations – towards diversification, and we are now perfectly comfortable with the idea of someone like Susan Rae for example, who has a Scottish accent, reading the UK national news.

**THE INTERNET**
Mark Swinson, Cloud and Smarter Infrastructure Business Leader at IBM (OU graduate – MBA, 2012).

English has changed over the centuries and many things – war, political change, economic change – have had a bearing on that. But when I think of the factors that drive the mixing of languages and cultures, it’s the internet that has had the most impact, allowing people around the world to connect on a peer-to-peer basis. The result is that new ideas, new concepts and new meanings have taken hold much more rapidly.

Social media makes that even stronger. New words spread so quickly because of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The way my parents and grandparents used certain words would have been different – words come and go, meanings change. My teenagers recently talked about something being “dank”, but they didn’t mean “dark and damp”, they meant “good”. They tell me I’m so last year.

The internet has created not a generation gap, but a new virtual world. It’s becoming a driver of change in its own right as well as a medium to spread and facilitate change. There are always concerns that language is being corrupted or bastardised, but that’s always happened to English. It’s not new, it’s just happening much more quickly.

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OVER THE PAST 100 years it’s globalisation – accelerated by new technology – that has had the greatest impact on the English language. English is a world language now, the dominant language of science, computing and academia in general. But looking back 100 years, to the start of the first world war, it wasn’t so clear that English would be so dominant.

People stayed in the area they grew up in, but we’ve seen tremendous changes since then in international travel and in the growth of the internet. English has a very large vocabulary and absorbs many words from other languages. That process will carry on through globalisation.

My research has looked at Chinese students writing in English, and although some people talk about Chinese becoming the lingua franca, that’s quite important. People can be quite precious about speaking British English as it’s ours.

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What do you think has had the greatest impact on the English language?
Join the debate at www.open.ac.uk/alumni/openminds