We talk about languages as if they were static and relatively clearly-defined, but the reality is that languages are always changing and the boundaries between them are fuzzy. Compare this same sentence translated into English at different times:

- Ne mæg nan man twam hlafordum þeowian (late 900s)
- No man may serve tweyn lordis (1380s)
- No man can serve two masters (1611)
- Nobody can work for two masters (2000s)

As we go further back in time, we see more and more things changing. Comparing the translation in the 900s to that in the 2000s we might not even recognise that this is ‘the same language’, but all of those differences added up gradually—there was no one moment the language changed. At the same time, different groups of people who speak a language are changing it more or less quickly and in different ways, so that just as it is hard to draw any hard-and-fast boundary between different historical stages of a language, it is hard to draw lines between different groups of speakers today. The way that people of different social groups or in different places speak differs, sometimes subtly and sometimes dramatically, but it’s impossible to draw a line around certain groups and say ‘this is English’ or ‘this is correct English’ and exclude those outside.

These changes that happen in a language happen on many different levels. There may be changes in vocabulary, where the preferred word for a concept is replaced by a new word (as in þeowian being replaced by serve and then work in our example). There can also be change in the meaning of a particular word (for example, dank originally meant ‘watery’, later shifted a little to ‘dark and damp’, and recently has taken on quite a different meaning). Pronunciations can change, and spellings might or might not change with them. The way words are formed might change, and so might the order of words in the sentence. Any of these changes might start in the language of a particular place or social group and later spread to a wider community, or might start in a small group and stay there, making the language of that group more distinctive than it was before.
Task Summary

For this challenge, we’d like you to imagine how English might change in the next 500 years. You might want to choose to concentrate on a particular social group and/or a particular context in which the language is used. For example, you might want to concentrate on written Standard English, or on the spoken English of a particular city. You could think about any of the following:

- What pronunciations change? Does spelling change to reflect these?
- What new words are created and why? Some might be created for new concepts because of changes in technology or society, whilst others might come to replace existing words for old concepts.
- When new words are created, how is this done? Are they borrowed from other languages—in which case, who does the borrowing, and why those languages? Are they created from existing words, and if so how? And how do the meanings of existing words change?
- Do any changes to the grammar (order of words in sentences, ways that words are formed from other words) take place?
- Some changes might happen when ways of speaking that some people already use get picked up by everyone else, whereas other changes might be entirely new—which are which?
- How does social context affect the ways in which the language changes? Here you could think about the way migration and travel means that speakers learn other languages and might borrow material from them, or about the ways that the language of particular social groups might have a bigger or smaller influence on how everyone else speaks. Here you might have to think a little about what is happening more broadly in your imagined future history.
- You could also think about how the contexts in which the language is used change: is it important that the language is used a lot online? How might this affect the way it changes?

You do not need to address every item above; they are just pointers to get you thinking. You don’t need to come up with a full account of everything that might happen in 500 years of change; instead, feel welcome to concentrate on some particular facet that interests you.

Your submission should include a description of how the language changes, and a short (50-100 words) sample text written in the language of 2520AD. You don’t have to format your description as a traditional essay—instead, feel welcome to organise this in the way that you think best presents your ideas, whether that be a prose essay, a commentary on your sample text, or a more technical document. The total length should not exceed 2000 words.

Please send your submission in electronic form (as a PDF) to schoolsprizes@cai.cam.ac.uk. Entries should arrive by the deadline of Friday 5 June. Please do not put your name or your school’s name on your submission, but instead complete a cover sheet. This competed coversheet must be sent with your submission as a separate file. All candidates will be notified with the results of the competition in early September. Any queries should be directed to schools@cai.cam.ac.uk in the first instance. Good luck!