

Ve fing is... vis language has gone frough some changes

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Right now is a very exciting time to be doing research on the English language. All languages change. If you heard Shakespeare, you'd find him hard to understand; and if we had recordings of Anglo-Saxon, you wouldn't understand it at all. The sounds of English have changed enormously over time.

But why is this? We don't really know. It's just an inherent characteristic of human languages that they change.

We don't fully understand how changes take place, either: So when we do have a chance to observe a change as it's happening, that's exciting. We can't observe how the change from Chaucer's "k-nicht" – his way of saying knight – to our "nite" happened. But we can now very happily study, while it happens, a fascinating new change involving the two 'th' sounds, as in thigh and thy. Older Norfolk people will have noticed that many younger people no longer have these sounds. They replace them with f and v: fing, bruvver. When sounds fall together like this, it's called a merger. This particular merger is known as "TH-fronting". It started in London around 1850 and had spread to Bristol by



■ **Joe Brown:** Clearly ahead of the linguistic game when he called his backing group "The Bruvvers"...

1870. It was reported in Reading around 1950, Norwich in 1960, Hull 1970, and Glasgow 1980. There's a clear pattern of geographical spread. It hasn't arrived in Liverpool yet – but it probably will.

Some people aren't as excited about TH-fronting as I am. They complain about it. They're part of the venerable Complaint Tradition that is repeated in every generation: older people hear youngsters speaking differently, and object.

But there's nothing wrong with TH-fronting. Nothing terrible comes of it. True, it means that some words now sound the same that didn't before: 'thin' = 'fin'. But if you can think of a sentence where

that might cause misunderstanding, please let me know!

If you're part of the Complaint Tradition, you might consider that your own speech is also full of the results of earlier mergers inherited from your ancestors – unless, that is, you don't pronounce meet and meat the same. TH-fronting isn't lazy or careless or bad. It isn't good either. It just IS. I've been criticised for my "go with the flow" attitude to language change. But there's no other course to take. By all means complain if it makes you feel better. But bear in mind there's as yet no record of any sound-change ever being halted by a letter to The Times – or even the EDP.