



Why Do Languages Change?

R. L. Trask

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The first recorded English name for the make-up we now call *blusher* was *paint*, in 1660. In the 1750s a new word, *rouge*, displaced *paint*, and remained in standard usage for around two centuries. Then, in 1965, an advertisement coined a new word for the product: *blusher*. Each generation speaks a little differently, and every language is constantly changing. It is not only words that change, every aspect of a language changes over time – pronunciation, word meanings and grammar. Packed with fascinating examples of changes in the English language over time, this entertaining book explores the origin of words and place names, the differences between British and American English, and the apparent eccentricities of the English spelling system. Amusingly written yet deeply instructive, it will be enjoyed by anyone involved in studying the English language and its history, as well as anyone interested in how and why languages change.

R. L. TRASK was a world authority on the Basque language and on historical linguistics. He wrote both academic and popular books, notably on grammar, punctuation, and English style and usage. His publications include *Language: The Basics* (1995) and *Mind the Gaffe* (2001). At the time of his death in 2004, he was Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex.

The book has been revised by Robert McColl Millar, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Aberdeen.

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Revised by

Robert McColl Millar



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521838023

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First published in print format 2009

ISBN-13 978-0-511-76387-8 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-83802-3 Hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-54693-5 Paperback

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For my wonderful Jan

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A few words before we start

This book is intended to give a sense of language change to interested laypeople of any age; it is not a textbook. I do hope, however, that it will act as a door into historical linguistics for some readers.

Because of its nature, I have made no assumptions about knowledge either of languages or, more importantly, of the techniques linguists use to describe language. If we are going to treat the subject in any depth or seriousness, however, I have found it necessary occasionally to use special terms and symbols in the text. I normally explain these, but I want to discuss some potential sticking points before we start. Readers may well find themselves coming back to this page occasionally.

The Roman alphabet used for English is not terribly effective, as we will see, in representing the sounds of English, never mind the potential sounds found in *all* the world's languages. Because of this, phoneticians and other linguists who work with sounds have spent a considerable amount of effort over the last hundred years and more developing an extended writing system, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which can describe *all* of these sounds. I will not use more than a handful of these symbols in this book, and only when necessary. Most of these symbols make sense to anyone used to the Roman alphabet: /p/ stands for <p>, for instance; /n/ for <n>. Sometimes, however, there is potential for confusion. IPA /j/ stands for the first sound in English *yes*; the <j> in *judge* is represented by /dʒ/ in IPA; IPA /y/ stands for the vowel in French *tu*. When potential headaches of this sort exist, I have highlighted them. It is worth noting that the vowel symbols in IPA stand for the 'continental' values associated with these letters. Thus /e/ stands for the vowel found in *bay*, if you are from Scotland and a few other places, not the vowel in *bee*. /a/ stands for the vowel in *cat* for most British people; while /æ/ is the vowel found in the same word in most North American accents (and some conservative upper-class varieties in southern England); /ɑ/ is the vowel found in words like *bath* in southeast England (other British varieties would have /a/).

You may have noticed that I have used the convention // to surround sounds in most of the book, but [] for a few. This represents a subtle but important distinction in sound perception. All speakers have the ability to produce *all*

sounds which can be produced by humans. By the time they have reached school age, however, the number of separate sounds speakers perceive from this variety depends upon what language they speak. For instance, German speakers can, of course, make the sound [θ], as found at the start of English *thing*; unless they are trained, however, they hear it only as a variant of a larger unit, /s/. For most English speakers, however, the initial sounds in *thing* and *sing* are absolutely separate; to a German speaker, they are variants of the same essential sound. These essential sounds are called *phonemes* and are represented by / /; all variants of these phonemes are called *allophones* and are represented by []. The important thing to remember is that how phonemes are laid out over the range of potential sounds differs from language to language. Spellings, when necessary, are shown using < >.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Lyle Campbell, Richard Coates, Jan Lock, Tony Lock, Andrew Winnard and two anonymous readers for valuable comments on earlier drafts of some or all chapters. Many of the examples in [Chapter 4](#) are taken from the scholarly publications of Richard Coates. Acknowledgements for examples taken from other people's writing are provided in the text.

For the origins of English words, I have relied chiefly on the *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (originally published as the *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*) and on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In doubtful cases, I have consulted several other dictionaries and very many websites.

The map in [Figure 1.1](#) is reproduced with permission from Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes, *American English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The BSL signs in [Figure 8.1](#) are reproduced with permission from J. G. Kyle and B. Woll, *Sign Language: The Study of Deaf People and Their Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

Any remaining shortcomings are my responsibility.

A note from the reviser

This book was left in an advanced state at the time of Larry Trask's death in 2004, since when it has passed through the editorial process at Cambridge University Press. When I took on the task of revising the typescript in Spring 2008, I made the decision that, unlike my treatment of Trask's *Historical Linguistics*, I would *not* stamp my own personality and views on *Why Do Languages Change?* When *I* is used in this book, therefore, it is Larry Trask who has chosen to do so. My task, as I saw it, was to do what Larry Trask would have done had he had the opportunity: 'cleaning' the text and ironing out inconsistencies. I hope that I have done so in as unobtrusive a manner as possible. My thanks go to my dear wife, Sandra, who helped with this work, despite the slight distraction of having a baby mid-way through the process.

I am very glad to answer queries on the material covered in this book. My e-mail address is r.millar@abdn.ac.uk.

Robert McColl Millar, November 2008

1 How do languages change?

All languages change

My grandparents didn't talk the way I talk. For example, my father's mother never used the words *at the end*. Instead, she always said *at the last end*: 'at the last end of the movie', 'at the last end of the game', and so on. My father said the same. But I have never said this, and even in childhood I considered it strange.

You too have very likely noticed that your parents or your grandparents speak or spoke a little differently from you. And, if you have children or grandchildren, you have almost certainly heard them saying things that you would never say. Everywhere we look, we find differences in speech between the generations.

Each generation speaks a little differently because our language is always changing. And not just our language: *every* language is always changing. There is no such thing as a living language that fails to change. This is a piece of truth on which you can rely absolutely.

There's a widespread legend about a remarkable village, in the Appalachians or in Derbyshire or somewhere distant from London and New York, where the locals still speak pure and unchanged Elizabethan English. It doesn't exist. Nobody on earth has spoken Elizabethan English since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, around 400 years ago. There is nobody alive today who speaks English the way William Shakespeare spoke it, or the way Samuel Johnson spoke it, or the way Abraham Lincoln spoke it, or the way Queen Victoria spoke it. Apart perhaps from a handful of very elderly people, there is no one alive today who speaks English like Humphrey Bogart or Noël Coward (both born in 1899), or like Laurence Olivier or John Wayne (both born in 1907), or like Sir Donald Bradman or Bette Davis (both born in 1908). There aren't even many people around today who speak English like John F. Kennedy or Anthony Burgess (both born in 1917), or like Marilyn Monroe (born in 1926).

Watching English change

What do you call the coloured stuff that women sometimes put on their cheeks? The first recorded English name for this stuff is *paint*, recorded from 1660. In

those days, both men and women of certain social classes painted their faces: you may have seen the garishly painted faces of the dandies in portraits of the time. In 1753, a new word appeared in English: *rouge*. The first writer to use this French word thought it necessary to explain to his readers that rouge was the same thing as paint. But *rouge* soon displaced *paint*, and it remained the usual English word for around two centuries. When I was a child, in the 1950s, *rouge* was the only word anybody ever used.

Then, in 1965, an advertisement coined a new word for the product: *blusher*. This word has gradually displaced *rouge*. When I recently heard a fashionable young woman call it *rouge*, I almost fell over with astonishment: I hadn't heard anyone use the word for decades, and associated it with styles which were already ancient when I was a child.

Few names of cosmetics are very old. Only in 1890 do we find the first mention of *mascaro*, a thick dark make-up used by (mostly male) stage actors to paint on eyebrows, so that their faces could be seen from the cheap seats. (The word derives from an Italian word for 'mask'.) And only in 1922 do we find the first use of the altered and presumably more feminine version *mascara* to label a slightly more subtle kind of eye make-up for women.

Fashionable items may be particularly given to linguistic change. Visiting my local cosmetics counter, I was startled to discover a sign inviting me to buy a certain product which, I was assured, was just the thing to 'fragrance your home or your car'. When I was just a little younger, English most emphatically did not permit me to 'fragrance' anything. Languages are always changing, and we older speakers find ourselves grumbling in the wake of the changes.

Sometimes, of course, the language changes because the world changes. When shiny little silvery discs began to appear a few years ago carrying recorded music, they had to be given a name, and so *compact discs* was duly coined – though it took English speakers the better part of ten minutes to shorten this intolerably long name to *CDs*.

This is just a very tiny sample of recent changes in English. Some have occurred within my lifetime; some have occurred very recently indeed. Consider Marilyn Monroe, who died in 1962. Marilyn never heard the word *compact disc* or *CD*. It is quite possible that she never heard *blusher*, since that word was not recorded in writing until shortly after her death. If she did hear it, it was a brand-new word, just beginning to be used in speech by Americans, but not yet found in print.

Since Marilyn's death, the language has acquired many new words. Here is just a tiny sample of the familiar English words that Marilyn Monroe never heard: *body-piercing*, *reggae*, *single mother*, *videotape*, *aromatherapy*, *G-spot*, *laptop*, *AIDS*, *miniskirt*, *jumbo jet*, *sex worker*, *designer label*, *downsizing*, *toyboy*, *trophy wife*, *sleaze*, *one-hit wonder*, *sound bite*, *bikini line*, *e-mail*, *Third World*, *GM food*, *microwave oven*, *smoking gun* ('hard evidence'), *into*

(‘deeply interested in’) and *topless dancer*. In fact, the word *topless*, applied to a woman’s attire, is not recorded until 1964, and Marilyn probably never heard it, even though *topless* is recorded from 1937 in connection with laws against such swimming costumes for *men*! Those were dear dead days indeed: the world has changed almost more than we can imagine, and the language has not lagged behind.

Social changes have introduced whole areas of vocabulary that Marilyn never heard. As a young woman, Marilyn didn’t smoke, but she was obliged to learn to smoke for her role in the 1953 film *Niagara*, in which she played a Bad Girl. We have many candid photos of a more mature Marilyn smoking off-screen, and so it appears that her film smoking led her to take up smoking in real life. This meant that she had to learn the vocabulary associated with smoking although, surprisingly, given how many people smoked then, this was very limited. In the 1950s, smoking went unremarked almost everywhere, and tobacco companies were still claiming that doctors endorsed their products. Accordingly, Marilyn never heard the words *nicotine-free*, *passive smoking*, *smokeless tobacco*, *advertising ban*, *nicotine patch*, *smoke-free zone*, *health warning*, *anti-smoking laws* or even *low-tar*. She never even heard *smoking area*, since practically everywhere was a smoking area in Marilyn’s day, and it was only the rare non-smoking areas that had to be labelled.

I must stress that the lists above do not contain even one-tenth of 1 per cent of the new words which have entered English since 1962 – even if I exclude the vast number of technical terms which have come into use in such fields as computing. There are so many thousands of words which we use every day, but which didn’t exist in 1962, that we might almost begin to wonder what Marilyn Monroe talked about when she was off the screen.

Of course, Marilyn never found herself short of words, since the English of the 1950s already provided her with a rich vocabulary for talking about anything she liked. Among the new words that only entered English in the 1950s are *rock ‘n’ roll*, *sex kitten*, *coffee break*, *bikini*, *hardback* (book), *junk mail*, *press release*, *dreadlocks*, *shades* (sunglasses), *sunroof*, *economy class*, *hula hoop*, *hacker*, *software*, *the pill* (for contraception), *BLT* (sandwich), *stir fry*, *scuba diving* and *exotic dancer*, among many hundreds of others, so Marilyn’s contemporaries were no slower than their successors in coining new words at will.

Language changes like fashion

Looking into word origins produces some surprises. I had always assumed, for instance, that *feminism* must be a very recent coinage indeed. But I was wrong: the word is first recorded in 1846! The word was never common, however, and gradually dropped out of use. The feminists of the 1960s called their movement

women's liberation, later shortened to *women's lib*. But this name fell into disfavour in the 1970s, possibly because it became associated with radical posturing. The newly revived *feminism* gradually replaced it. Anybody who used *women's lib* today would get some pretty peculiar looks.

This last example illustrates one further point: words can disappear as well as appear. The formerly prominent *women's lib* is now gone, and few people now use *rouge*. In the 1960s, there was a *sit-in* or a *love-in* in the paper almost every week, but many younger readers probably don't even know what these things are. In the 1950s, everybody followed the *hit parade*. Any idea what that is? (We now call it the *charts*.) Do you know what a *B-girl* is, or a *carhop*, or a *flack*? (A female employee in a bar who encourages customers to spend money; a waiter in an eat-in-your-car fast-food restaurant; a public-relations person.) Can you remember *rabbit ears*? (A kind of indoor TV aerial.) Come to think of it, when was the last time you heard anybody talk about a *colour* television?

Only if you're acquainted with certain historical periods or topics are you likely to know what a *bustle* is, or a *flivver*, or a *Gibson girl* (A bizarre contraption for rearranging a woman's figure; a battered old car; a young woman epitomising the fashionable ideal of around 1900.) Most of us have come across *flivver* only from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where a future society has made Henry Ford, the car manufacturer, its God. One of the many clichés which has been altered to fit this new 'reality' comes out as 'Ford's in his Flivver: all's right with the world.'

As we move slowly back in time, the dead words we encounter become steadily more numerous, and perhaps steadily more obscure. You have to be an especially devoted fan of Victorian fiction to know what a *pocket pistol* is. (It's a hip flask.) Even this degree of devotion might not help you with *delope*. A duellist deloped by refusing to fire at his opponent, instead firing his pistol harmlessly into the air. With the disappearance of duelling, its associated vocabulary has evaporated, and only a handful of people with suitable historical interests now trouble to learn these antique words. For most of us they are as dead as the street slang of Pompeii.

Word meanings are slippery

What do you call the thing you sleep in at night? Unless you are a submariner obliged to sleep in a hammock, you probably call it a *bed*, like everyone else. This word has existed in English as long as English has existed as a distinct language, and in fact it was present in the ancestors of English earlier than that. Very likely future speakers will go on calling this object a *bed* for centuries to come. This is the way we expect words to behave. But our expectations are not always satisfied. Sometimes words do change their meanings, and sometimes those changes in meaning are breathtaking. For instance, today the word *bead*

means ‘small decorative ball with a hole through it’, and beads are usually found strung together into necklaces or bracelets. But, a few centuries ago, the meaning of *bead* was utterly different: the word meant only ‘prayer’. How could it change its meaning from ‘prayer’ to ‘small ball’?

Well, if you know a little about medieval Christianity, you can probably guess at least roughly what happened. Medieval Christians were in the habit of counting their prayers, and for this purpose they used a string of beads – a *rosary* – to keep track of the number of *Hail Marys* or other prayers that had been uttered. With each completed prayer, another bead was slipped along the string, and this activity was called *telling one’s beads*. The word *tell* originally meant ‘count’ as well as ‘relate’, which is why the person who counts out cash in a bank is called a *teller*, and so the expression *telling one’s beads* meant ‘counting one’s prayers’ – which is what the praying person was doing.

However, since the person doing this *appeared* to be counting off the little balls on the string of his rosary, the expression *telling one’s beads* came to be re-interpreted as meaning ‘counting the little balls on the string’. As a result, *bead* shifted its meaning from ‘prayer’ to ‘small ball’. In the context, this shift of meaning was natural and easy.

Slightly more complicated is the case of *grammar* and *glamour*. Though you may be astonished to hear this, *grammar* and *glamour* are the same word. But *glamour* is fashionable, sexy and utterly desirable, while *grammar* is just about the least fashionable and least sexy piece of the universe that non-linguists can think of.

So how did this happen? Well, the ancestor of the word *grammar* was coined in Ancient Greek and applied to the study of writing. This word was taken over by the Romans into their Latin, and from Latin it spread into much of Europe. Today we still use *grammar* to label the study of the structures of words, phrases and sentences. But things were a little different in the Middle Ages.

In medieval times, few people in Europe could read and write; literacy was seen as a rare, almost fabulous, achievement. Even fewer people could go beyond mere literacy to the extent of studying and understanding the writings of the great philosophers, scholars and scientists, particularly since these were generally available only in Latin. To most people, such a degree of book-learning appeared simply magical, and indeed book-learning, which was commonly referred to simply as *grammar*, was hardly distinguished from magic at all. In English, the variant form *gramarye* was an everyday word for ‘magic’ or ‘conjuring’, while in French the word *grammaire* was altered into *grimoire*, meaning ‘a book of magical spells’; the word was later borrowed into English in this form and has recently become current again through the Harry Potter books.

Our story moves now to Scotland, where the word *grammar* underwent a small change of pronunciation to *glamour*, reflecting the awkwardness of having two instances of /r/ in one word. In Scots, this form *glamour*, often

compounded as *glamour-might*, acquired the sense of ‘enchantment’, ‘magic spell’, and eventually it came to be applied specifically to a kind of enchantment upon the eye, so that the victim sees things differently from the way they really are. Until the early nineteenth century, this sense remained unknown outside Scotland, but then Sir Walter Scott, a native speaker of Scots, began using it in his poems and stories. Here is an example from Scott’s poem *Lay of the Last Minstrel*:

It had much of glamour might,
 Could make a ladye seem a knight;
 The cobwebs on a dungeon wall
 Seem tapistry in lordly hall;
 And youth seem age, and age seem youth –
 All was delusion, nought was truth.

The popularity of Scott’s writings carried this formerly obscure Scots word throughout the English-speaking world. But the meaning of the word began rapidly to shift. In Scots, *glamour* was specifically a kind of supernatural enchantment. Outside Scotland, other writers began quickly extending the sense of the word to label any kind of seductive but false charm, the sort of charm you get from an unscrupulous but skilful manipulator who hopes to take advantage of you. At this stage, the word was an insult, and one that could be applied to both sexes.

In the late nineteenth century, however, *glamour* came to be applied more and more regularly and finally only to women, apparently in line with the Genesis view of women as dangerous temptresses out to seduce honourable and upright men away from the paths of righteousness. For a while, the label was still an insult, applied to a woman portrayed as a devious siren up to no good, but before long it lost its negative connotations entirely, possibly because of the more fictional allure peddled by the Hollywood dream factory. *Glamour* became a term of enthusiastic approval, as it still is today. When a gushing magazine describes a female celebrity as ‘glamorous’, the word expresses unqualified admiration, and there is no longer the slightest hint that the young lady in the picture is an unprincipled home-wrecker. Other words must be found for such an insinuation.

The writer Jeffrey Kacirk has uncovered a particularly interesting use of *glamour* in a late Victorian ‘yellow’ novel (a cheap and downmarket work), with the engaging title *Held in Bondage*: ‘I know how quickly the glamour fades in the test of intercourse.’

This sounds a startling sentence to encounter in a Victorian novel, yellow or otherwise, and you might wonder how it slipped past the censors in a day when references to sexual intimacy, however discreet, were simply Not Allowed – and this one doesn’t sound very discreet. The apparent suggestion that a string

of eye-catching young ladies had grievously disappointed the narrator in bed does not sound at all like the sort of thing that would have amused Her Britannic Majesty. How could this happen?

Well, of course, we are looking at another change of meaning. In English, as with most languages, speaking about the act of sex has always proved difficult. At any given moment, we can usually choose between obscure medical terms that will scarcely be understood, and words so blunt and coarse they will get our faces slapped in some circles. As a result, we struggle desperately to find some clear but delicate way of talking about sexual congress. Polite expressions come and go in this domain at a brisk pace, since no word can remain wholly delicate for long.

The word *intercourse* has existed in English since about 1450, but for centuries it meant no more than ‘dealings between people’. This sense persisted into the nineteenth century. That very genteel novelist Jane Austen could write of her exceedingly genteel characters Miss Anne Elliott and Captain Wentworth that ‘they had no intercourse but what the commonest civility required’. All that Jane Austen meant was that Anne and the Captain barely exchanged a word beyond a grudging ‘good morning’, but a modern reader cannot avoid at the very least a snigger at the clear suggestion that minimal courtesy in Georgian England required rather more than it does now.

Why has this happened? In our never-ending quest for polite ways of talking about sex, somebody coined the clumsy but suitably decent expression *sexual intercourse*. But English speakers are not celebrated for their love of cumbersome polysyllabic expressions, and it was no time before this coinage had been shortened to *intercourse*. As a result, the word *intercourse* today is understood as meaning sex and nothing else, and the word cannot be used in any other way. Occasionally an unwary writer tries to recover the lost meaning of the word by turning out something like: *The Serbs and the Croats have resumed normal intercourse*. But the result is always surprising, and the older sense of the word is probably gone for good – or at least until another euphemism for naming the ‘unmentionable’ is found.

What words we use, what words we consider fashionable, can change from day to day. The variation involved can appear particularly fickle. With other linguistic features – grammar, sound, and so on – change appears much slower; yet when it happens, it can still be very striking.

Changes in grammar

Language change is easiest to see in vocabulary, since new words are coined in their hundreds every year, and since reading old prose will usually turn up a few dead words. But it is not only words that change: in fact, *every* aspect of a language changes over time. Pronunciation changes. Word meanings change.

And, of course, grammar changes. Let's look at a few recent changes in the grammar of English.

A good place to start is the *progressive passive*, as in *My house is being painted*. This form seems wholly unremarkable, but in fact it is a recent introduction into English. Until only a few generations ago, this form did not exist and could not be used. A speaker had to say instead either *My house is painting*, a form which now seems strange or worse, or *My house is painted*, which exists for us but has an entirely different meaning.

In 1662, Samuel Pepys wrote in his famous diary *I went to see if any play was acted*. The intended sense is ... *was being acted*, but this form was impossible for Pepys. About 1839, Charles Dickens wrote in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: *[H]e found that the coach had sunk greatly on one side, though it was still dragged forward by the horses*. The intended sense is ... *still being dragged forward*, but Dickens, who *would* have known the new usage, obviously could not bring himself to use it. Indeed, we know that many people of the time considered it 'vulgar'.

Far more commonly, though, we find the other choice. For example:

[T]he King's statue is making by the Mercers Company. (The sense is *is being made*.) (Pepys's diary, 1660)

At the very time that this dispute was maintaining by the centinel and the drummer – was the same point debating betwixt a trumpeter and a trumpeter's wife. (Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, around 1760)

Whilst the Anthem was singing I was conducted by the Virger to the Pulpit... (James Woodforde's diary, 1784)

A code is preparing for the regulation of commerce (J. C. S. Abbot, *Napoleon*, 1854)

This construction began to recede in the nineteenth century, but it did not die out, and examples are not rare in the twentieth century:

...his canoe, which was towing behind the long-boat... (Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, 1900)

Bramante's palace was still building until 1565. (C. N. Parkinson, 1957)

Today, however, this traditional construction seems strange or impossible, and we have to say instead *is being prepared*, *was being towed*, *was still being built*, and so on. The construction *My house is painting* is probably impossible for everyone, though a few speakers will still accept it with a handful of verbs. For example, in place of *My book is being reprinted*, some people are happy with *My book is reprinting*. Indeed, the linguist David Denison, from whose writings almost all of my examples are taken, found the following in the British newspaper *The Guardian*, 22 March 1983: *Inside the... room more than a dozen television cameras were setting up on an elevated stand*. I would consider this