Exercise 7g:

Language is always changing, evolving, and adapting to the needs of its users. The change is so slow that from year to year we hardly notice it (except to grumble every so often about the ‘poor English’ being used by the younger generation). We pick up new words and phrases from all the different people we talk with, and these combine to make something new and unlike any other person’s particular way of speaking. At the same time, various groups in society use language as a way of marking their group identity — showing who is and isn’t a member of the group.

We get new words from many different places. We borrow them from other languages (sushi, chutzpah), we create them by shortening longer words (gym from gymnasium) or by combining words (brunch from breakfast and lunch), and we make them out of proper names (Levis, Kleenex). Sometimes we even create a new word by being wrong about the analysis of an existing word. That’s how the word “pea”  for a small green vegetable was created: Four hundred years ago, the word “pease” spelled p-e-a-s-e was used to refer to either a single pea or a bunch of them. But over time, people assumed that “pease” was a plural form, for which “pea” must be the singular, and a new word — “pea” — was born.

In Old English, a small winged creature with feathers was known as a “brid.” Over time, the pronunciation changed to “bird.” Although it’s not hard to imagine children in the 1400s being scolded for ‘slurring’ “brid” into “bird,” it’s clear that “bird” won out. Nobody today would suggest that “bird" is an incorrect word or a sloppy pronunciation.

Many of the changes that occur in language begin with teens and young adults: as young people interact with others their own age, their language grows to include words, phrases, and constructions that are different from those of the older generation. Most have a short lifespan (heard “groovy” lately?), but others stick around to affect the language as a whole.

The speech patterns of young people tend to grate on the ears of adults because they’re unfamiliar. Also, new words and phrases are used in spoken or informal language sooner than in formal, written language, so it’s true that the phrases you hear teenagers using may not yet be appropriate for business letters. But that doesn’t mean they’re worse — just newer. For years English teachers and newspaper editors argued that the word hopefully shouldn’t be used to mean ‘I hope’ — as in Hopefully, it won’t rain today — even though people frequently used it that way in informal speech. (And, of course nobody complained about other ‘sentence adverbs’ such as frankly and actually.) Now the battle against hopefully is all but lost, and it appears at the beginnings of sentences even in formal documents.