



# Leaping into Language!

moving from GCSE to  
A Level Language study

***emagazine* Resource Pack –  
Language**



**EMC**  
Publications

An English and Media Centre Student Resource

**This resource pack contains articles for the following activities:**

### **5. Language Fingerprints**

- Tim Grant on Forensic Linguistics

### **8. Running the Numbers**

- ‘C ya l8tr bbz’ – Language, Communication and Technology
- Investigating Social Media

### **9. Exploring *emagazine***

- Delving into the emag Archives: Child Language Acquisition
- Language Variation, Accents, Attitudes and More Delving into the emagazine Archive
- Around the World with emag – A Survey of Articles (emagplus)
- Becoming an A Level Language Student – A Quick Guide

### **11. Opinions in the Media**

- How to Read the News Sceptically
- A Level Language – Reading Around the Subject

### **12. emagClips: Linguists in the Frame**

- Accent and Dialect – Northern English
- Blogging About Language
- Making a Point – The History of English Punctuation
- More or Less Scouse – Language Change on Merseyside
- Metaphors for Cancer and Why They Matter

### **14. Language on the Page**

- Henry Hitchings: The Language Wars – A Review

## **5. Language Fingerprints**

# Language and the Law - What is Forensic Linguistics?

Following his star turn at last year's emag conference, Tim Grant outlines some of the ways in which linguistic methods can be applied to forensic texts and gives some real-life illustrations of how the analysis can be used.

There is no such thing as forensic linguistics. This message can be a bit of a shock to my students who have just enrolled on a class devoted to the topic, but it is an important message and it's good to get it out there at the start. Forensic linguistics is an application not a science. Forensic linguists are linguists who apply the methods and insights of linguistics to forensic texts and contexts. A second shock can be that only a small proportion of forensic linguists assist with investigations or provide evidence to courts. The majority examine how language is used and abused across a wide range of legal contexts.

We all carry legal texts with us all the time and if you take a moment to look in your bag or wallet you will find some. In my wallet today there is a supermarket coupon and turning it over I can find, in tiny print, the terms and conditions. Within this text are the following few sentences:

*Coupon is not transferable. This coupon entitles you to the offer on the terms displayed overleaf. Sale, auction or re-tendering of this coupon or evoucher for money or otherwise is strictly prohibited.*

This language is really odd. It seems to be written for me, the consumer, and yet it's pretty tough for the average consumer to follow. Features of legal language are well described and include nominalisation ('Sale, auction...'), rare lexis ('re-tendering'), embedding ('for money or otherwise') and explicit references to other legal texts ('the terms overleaf'). A good question to ask is 'Why is the language like this?' and the answer is, as ever, provided by Halliday's words: 'Language is as it is because of what it has to do'. The primary job of a legal text is to be legally watertight. The primary audience for the text on the back of my coupon is not me, the consumer, but rather a judge in some possible future court and the text is written in case I should get into a dispute with the supermarket. The court is the primary audience for every legal text and as such every legal text needs to be precise, explicit, self-contained and to imply only those meanings those who drafted it intend. This is not to say that we should not attempt to reform legal language, and attempt to provide plain language versions of standard legal texts, but to do so we need to understand the nature of the language.

As well as legal written texts, forensic linguists have an interest in verbal legal processes; the language of arrest and charge, the language of police interview, and the language of the courtroom have all been studied. Researchers have demonstrated that the legal meanings conveyed in the police caution can be poorly understood by those who've been arrested, that police officers can inadvertently

influence answers they receive from witnesses according to how they ask questions, and that expert witnesses can give longer answers in court in comparison to eyewitnesses, for example. Each of these findings gives rise to more questions both of explanation and of potential reform. Descriptive forensic linguistics can very quickly give rise to a critical linguistic stance. The law is a power-filled structure which coerces the citizenry into good behaviour and it operates through language. To suggest change or reform in legal linguistic interactions is to suggest a change or reform in the distribution of power. This area of forensic linguistics is radical and important to the pursuit of justice.

## Investigative Work

Investigative forensic linguistics pursues justice at a more local level contributing to individual cases rather than system-wide reform. We can work in the civil as well as criminal courts in, for instance, cases of copyright or trademark infringement. Linguists, for example, helped McDonald's defeat the McSleep Inns motel chain in America and McDonald's now have exclusive rights over the prefix 'Mc'.

In the criminal field we can engage in purely investigative work which will never reach an evidential standard or be admitted to a Court. A few years ago I was approached by the police to help them find the writer of a series of anonymous, abusive letters. This task is, of course, classic Sherlock Holmes.

In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes identifies the first language of a writer saying of their written style, 'It is the German who is so uncourteous to his verbs.' Real world profiling depends upon research observations and also on the judgement of the linguist. The writer in my case had sent more than 50 letters. In these letters the writer used terms of abuse which included 'half-castes' and 'negroes' and other slightly old fashioned words such as 'hence' and 'thrice' and this pointed perhaps to an older writer. From work in our research centre we also know that men and women tend to write abuse letters differently. In our corpus, men tend to concentrate on what they are personally going to do to the recipient, so you get more first-person pronouns and more active verbs, whereas letters by women tend to be more personally insulting and abusing, so you get more adjectives. The writer in this case definitely fell into the latter category and so I was able to suggest that it was a woman. In other cases it has been possible to spot dialect items (in one case the use of 'bad-minded people' indicated a writer using Jamaican influenced English) but there were no strong clues of this sort in this particular case. My profile was eventually used in a BBC *Crimewatch* TV appeal and the investigation received a large number of responses to the appeal amongst whom were some new individuals who had received a letter. One such victim still had an envelope and on this envelope was a fingerprint which ultimately led to the arrest of a 70-year-old woman from Portsmouth.

## Who Wrote It?

Profiling cases do not go to Court but comparative authorship analysis cases can. These cases involve texts of known authorship and texts of anonymous or disputed authorship. In the UK we've analysed texts as diverse as disputed suicide notes, terrorist conspiracy documents and text messages. These cases involve linguistic description at its most painstaking. What we try to do is examine the known texts to describe consistent and distinctive stylistic choices in a person's writing, and then see if they carry over to the queried text. If they do, we can sometimes make a tentative conclusion as to who wrote the queried text. Recently we have been involved in several murder cases where the sending of text messages has been key. In each of these cases the police believed that the suspect had killed the victim and then used her phone to send text messages. These messages seemed to show the victim was alive at a certain point in time when the suspect had a good alibi. With careful analysis of the texts it was possible to show shifts in style in the streams of messages; earlier messages were consistent

with the victims' historic style but the later set of messages looked different and were consistent with the texting style of the suspects in each case.

## Using the Linguistic Toolkit

Not all cases involve trying to work out who wrote something. Varied examples include being asked to read a diary of a girl who'd died. The police couldn't read it because it was written in a private diary code but they wanted to be sure that there was no evidence from the diary that the girl had been abused. In another example I was asked to give evidence as to the meaning of slang in an IRC chat. The language in this conversation was heavily influenced by East London street slang and contained a conspiracy to murder. With cases such as these you have rummage through your linguistic toolbox and work out what sort of analysis can best help answer a particular kind of question.

Defining forensic linguistics as 'the application of linguistics to forensic texts and contexts' allows for a diversity of interest and application. It is a growing area in applied linguistics and many universities now offer third year option courses in the field with one or two universities developing greater depth of expertise (Aston University and Cardiff University offer postgraduate programmes). It is also possible to engage in forensic linguistics within your A and AS Level. Many assessed projects would allow a focus on forensic texts and data collection can be easy - after all you are probably carrying the legal language you could analyse in your bag or wallet.

**Article Written By:** Dr Tim Grant is Director of the Centre for Forensic Linguistics at Aston University.

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**Print**

## **8. Running the Numbers**

# 'C ya l8tr bbz' – Language, Communication and Technology

PhD student Christian Ilbury explores the relationship between evolving technology and the linguistic choices we make on social media, offering insights from his current research that explode myths about spelling, abbreviations and other aspects of 'txtspeak'.

There's a strong chance that before reading this article today, you've already replied to a few stories on Snapchat, sent a few WhatsApp messages and DM'd someone through Instagram. Increasingly, our interactions are migrating online in the form of texts, but how is this shift towards digital communication changing the ways in which we communicate?

## Way Back Then

Back in the early days of the mobile phone when Nokia was the phone brand of choice, people primarily used to text each other via SMS. Unlike today, mobile data plans were expensive, apps weren't a 'thing' and most people still had pay-as-you-go contracts. With SMS (i.e. text) messages charged per 160 characters, that extra kiss or final 'see you later' could set you back the cost of an additional message. And whilst a message could be spoken in a couple of seconds, using a keypad to text the same message took somewhat longer – even for the more competent texters.

To get around these issues, people developed innovative ways to communicate the same message, using fewer characters and in less time, saving both on the cost of a text and the time taken to write the message. In fact, many of these abbreviations still persist and are regularly used today: <lol> for 'laugh out loud', <omg!> for 'oh my God!', and <hbu?> for 'how about you?'.

When these forms were first documented, academics and newspapers were quick to suggest that the internet and texting were responsible for the emergence of a new variety of English. Indeed, much of this research pointed to the fact that the language used on the internet looked like a combination of both speech and writing. For instance, think of the spelling <walkin> for 'walking' or <chu> for 'you'. These two spellings essentially 'mimic' the way that these words are sometimes pronounced in speech. This led some scholars and journalists to describe this 'new variety' as a form of netspeak or txtspeak.

## An Even Longer Communication History

However, whilst the technology that we now use to communicate may be new, in reality, much of the language used online and in text-messaging isn't so innovative. Tracing communication as far back as the 1800s when people used telegrams, we see that many of the telegraph messages sent via these machines contained several spellings that look remarkably similar to those that were characterised as netspeak. And, at that time, like text-messages, telegraphs were charged by the character. So, as with

the 160-character limit of a message, people developed shorthand phrases, spellings and other textual elements to communicate more efficiently and more cheaply. Smart, huh?

## The Truth of Txtspeak

Nevertheless, modern-day newspapers continue to bemoan the surge of txtspeak and warn of the destructive effects of the internet on communication. Yet, academic research on the language of text-messaging and online communication has shown spellings and textual features that are perceived to be 'typical' of the variety actually to be relatively infrequent in practice. This point is perhaps more relevant now given the widespread use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), such as speech recognition systems (e.g. Siri) and predictive text, which use conventional spellings derived from dictionaries.

In fact, in my own research on the mobile application and messaging service WhatsApp, I found a lot of evidence to suggest that users make good use of predictive text technologies and are generally very conscious of their spelling and grammar. Like other researchers, I noted that the messages were largely written in standard English. But I also found that there were least two different types of variant spelling: spelling errors and the use of netspeak in the data.

## My Research Data and What it Shows

My data set comprises a corpus of 100,000 messages across two group conversations sent by sixteen individuals in their early twenties who were based in the South East of England and accessed WhatsApp via a smartphone. Exploring these variant spellings in this corpus, I found that users responded to spelling-errors and so-called netspeak features in very different ways. When I looked at the examples of the genuine spelling errors, I observed that the users actively would try to maintain 'standard' language policies, such that other users would often participate in a type of language policing. An example of this policing is found in (1), where Lisa and her friends are discussing their New Year's Eve plans:

### Example 1

*Lisa: lol guys I've just been asked if I want to go to Barbadosfor 5 nights over*

*New Years FOR FREE*

*Abi: omg!*

*Ellie: Why don't you go*

*Lisa: Nooo I already made plans with y'all! Can I split myself in half*

*Abi: Lol are you STUPID Lisa*

*Ellie: hahahaha*

*Abi: It's Barbados*

*Ellie: Wow*

*Ellie: Spelling*

*Lisa: Hahahaha spelling*

*Stef: We are going to London Bridge*

When the location is revealed by Lisa in line 1, it is correctly spelt as <Barbados>, but as the conversation develops and Abi refers to the location, she makes a spelling error <Barbadous>. Instead, of continuing the conversation, Ellie explicitly references the spelling in lines 9-10, before Lisa follows up her comments using 'hahaha' to ridicule the error. In this way, the users participate in a type of linguistic policing – by emphasising the incorrect spelling and evaluating the mistake as humorous – suggesting that spelling errors should be avoided at all costs.

When I looked at these spelling errors in more detail, I found that another way that users seem to uphold these language standards is through the innovative use of the asterisk, <\*>, which is often used to repair spelling errors. In fact, of the 865 examples of <\*> in my data, 83.9% are used to fulfil this function.

But whilst genuine spelling errors are subject to ridicule and scrutiny from others in the conversation, when netspeak features are used, we do not see the same type of response from the group. This suggests that the group do not see these features as spelling errors but rather recognise them as an accepted form of online communication.

However, unlike spelling errors which are relatively frequent, these forms are incredibly rare. For instance, in (2) we observe the extensive use of netspeak features: <yaaa>, <bbz>, <c>, <u> and so on, but they occur only infrequently in other messages. For instance, whilst there are 1293 instances of 'see' in the entire corpus of nearly 100,000 messages, only seven of these are spelt as <c>. Given that they are so rare, why then would these features be used in this conversation?

## Example 2

*Mark: Ok! I'll meet yaaa*

*Abi: Yeah George*

*Abi: I'm walking up the road*

*Stef: We're in the garden bbz*

*Abi: Cooooool*

*Abi: C u in a min*

*Mark: You guys still there?*

Abi: Yeeeeeee

To answer this question, let's return to the purpose of the conversation in (2). As a friendly interaction between group members Mark, Abi, and Stef, the sole purpose of this exchange is to establish where the group will meet for a drink. Here, it seems that the use of non-standard spellings, such as <bbz> and <c>, function solely to establish the tone of the conversation. By using these netspeak features, the three users essentially mark this discussion as an informal conversation to establish where to get a casual drink with friends. Take these forms away and replace them with the standard spellings of these forms and the conversation looks somewhat more like a formal arrangement between colleagues!

## Medium, Message, Intentions and Choices

So, it seems that a lot of the work that is going here has to do with the 'medium' through which we are communicating. Given that communication on WhatsApp happens via text, we're faced with a dilemma: text doesn't allow us to use things like body language, intonation and other paralinguistic features to signal meaning that we use in speech. To account for this, we've developed unique ways to signal our true intentions. Emoji is a prime example of this. The infamous 'tears of joy' emoji, for instance, resembles the paralinguistic feature of laughter. What I would suggest here then, is that netspeak is doing a similar thing to emojis in that it is used to signal to the reader how the message should be interpreted.

### Example 3

*Mark: Ok I've paid the council tax, so if everyone could please transfer £23.56 asap that would be gr8 thaaanks!*

A further example is found in (3). In this extract, Mark has just sent a message to a group chat that includes his housemates asking them to pay their share of the council tax which he's paid in full. Note, in most of his message, he uses standard spellings and written conventions. However, we see he uses the 'netspeak' forms <gr8> for 'great' and <thaaanks> for 'thanks' at the end of his message.

Why, given the relative infrequency of these forms, does he use these features in this text? Based on my arguments so far, it seems likely that that his use of <gr8> and <thaaanks> are doing something very similar to the variant spellings in (2). In other words, by using these two features at the end of his message he essentially turns something very serious and formal (a request for money) into something not so serious that says to the rest of the group: 'this is still an informal conversation amongst friends'.

So, whilst our predictive text and our unlimited data may not mean that we may not use 'c u l8tr bbz' for the same reasons as before, during the Nokia era, it seems that the use of non-standard spellings are still an incredibly useful resource when communicating via (digital) text!

**Article Written By:** Christian Ilbury is a fourth year PhD student in the department of Linguistics at Queen Mary University of London. His doctoral research examines the relationship between offline/online communication in an adolescent speech community in East London. Follo

# Investigating Social Media

So you're thinking of investigating social media... PhD student Christian Ilbury knows just what you need to do. Here he offers advice about how to go about it.

With our interactions increasingly migrating online, it's no surprise that more and more students are looking to investigate patterns of digital language and communication. From emoji to Bitmoji, Snapchat to Instagram, digital data presents an appealing opportunity to investigate a range of diverse and innovative linguistic patterns. But, before you start screenshotting your friends' Insta feed or analysing their recent upload to TikTok, there are a number of issues to think about. After that, you can get going on your research project. In this article, I outline a five-step guide to help you think about researching language and communication in digital contexts.

## Step 1: Developing a Research Question

As with any research, a good place to start is to specify a 'research question'. Often, this question relates to your research interests, but it more often relates to why you're doing the research. A good research question is one that is answerable. Don't make it too obvious (e.g., are emojis used on Twitter?) or too vague (e.g., what language features are used on Facebook?). Remember, you actually have to conduct the research to answer your question. A good research question needs to be principled and interesting. For instance, 'Do women use more emoticons than men when texting?' or 'Do older speakers use more variant spellings than younger speakers on Twitter?' are both good research questions as they are focussed enough to be answered. It's also worth thinking about how these language features are being used, because you will also need to look at what language means.

A good place to start is to read some existing studies that relate to your research interests. In order to develop your research question, when reading the existing literature, you should start to look for 'gaps' in the existing research: Are there questions you have that haven't been answered? If so, you might want to develop a research question that fills these gaps!

An alternative way of developing a research question is by duplicating a study and applying this to another context. For instance, say you've read a study which reported that younger American users use more emojis in texts than older users, you could change the context of this study and investigate this question in the context of the UK. In later stages of your analysis, you might want to compare and contrast your findings with the American study.

## Step 2: Choosing a Platform

With an abundance of social media sites, choosing the right platform to extract and analyse data from is often a difficult choice. A good way of working out which platform you want to investigate is by assessing what type of data can help you answer your research question(s). Are you interested in textual patterns (e.g., emoji, spellings, use of figurative language)? If so, you might want to choose a platform where interactions are primarily text-based (e.g., messages, tweets, comments). A good

choice of platform here would be the mobile messaging service, WhatsApp, since the vast majority of messages sent via this app are textual.

On the other hand, if you're interested in graphical patterns of digital language and communication, you might wish to choose a platform like Snapchat or Instagram. For instance, say you wanted to investigate how individuals use hashtags to summarise the content of an image/video, you could examine this in the context of Instagram posts, as users very often tag their photos with lots of terms that summarise their upload.

An additional point to consider when choosing your social media platform is that you should think about the constraints and functions of that app or site and whether those features affect the language or style of communication used on that platform. For instance, Twitter restricts tweets to 280 characters, such that messages are often spread across multiple tweets or are very brief. Often, because of this character limit, tweets are incredibly informal and users often substitute longer words for abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., IRL = 'in real life'). It might be worth thinking about how these functions or constraints of the platform might influence the patterns of communication and language use that you observe. Thinking about these issues may be helpful in developing a research question!

### Step 3: The Ethics of Online Data

If it's online, you can use it, right?! Well, not exactly. Just because something is public doesn't automatically mean you can use it without considering the consequences of using that message/image. For instance, tweets are generally set to public by default, on Twitter. But you might want to consider the content of the message before using that tweet as 'data'. Remember, lots of people signed up to social media sites to connect with their friends and family, and few users would have anticipated that their messages or images may be, one day, analysed by a researcher. A good way of judging whether a picture or message is useable is asking yourself: 'Would I be happy if my picture/message was analysed in this way?' If not, don't use it!

Other types of social media are set to private by the user (e.g., Facebook profiles). If the data isn't public, then you'll need to think about what researchers refer to as the 'ethical issues' associated with using that data. Often, you will need to run this by your teacher or the person leading the research project to ensure that you are using the data appropriately. In many cases, where data is not publicly visible, such as WhatsApp where users communicate via closed conversations, you'll need to get permission from everyone involved in that chat before extracting and analysing that data. Even then, when you've got the permission and extracted the data, you should think about whether the use of a particular message or image is appropriate. For instance, in the case of WhatsApp messages, the chat history may include details or comments that the user has unwillingly given you permission to analyse. In my own research, participants have provided chats that give their address, bank details and other personal information. If you encounter similar messages, you should delete this information and remove these chats from your database. In all research, to ensure that you are conscious of your participants' right to privacy, you should anonymise all data.

### Step 4: Extracting Data

Unlike speech which can be easily recorded with a simple recording device, extracting digital and social media data often proves to be much more difficult. How you go about getting your data is dependent on the accessibility of the social media content as determined by the platform or site. Take Snapchat for instance. Most of the messages sent on Snapchat disappear after 10 seconds, whilst

videos uploaded to the user's Story are difficult to record without using screen capturing software. Extracting and analysing this data can prove to be incredibly challenging!

WhatsApp data, on the other hand, is pretty easy to analyse because the app allows you to export entire chats as a text file. Similarly, on Facebook Messenger, it is possible to copy and paste large chunks of messages to a text file, allowing the researcher to extract lots of data relatively easy.

For those of you who are more tech-savvy, you might want to look into whether the social media site has Application Programme Interface (API). This is essentially a way to 'tap-in' to the site's servers and extract lots of data from the site with minimal input. Twitter allows researchers to access their API and many programs have been developed to make this process much more user friendly. If you're interested in finding out more, I'd recommend 'Mozdeh' and 'FireAnt', which provide a user-friendly interface to extract data from sites such as Twitter and YouTube.

## Step 5: Analysing and Interpreting the Data

Great, so you've got your data. Now, how do you go about analysing it? Your analyses are often informed by your research question. So, say you were interested in researching whether women use more emojis than men, you might want to address this question by using a sociolinguistic approach (think William Labov, Jenny Cheshire, Peter Trudgill). A good way to answer this question is to count how many emojis are used by men and how many are used by women. Then, you might want to break this down further, by looking at the types of emoji used by individuals of each gender. Once you've found patterns in your data, you then might want to think about why these patterns exist and what they might mean? Think about the details of particular examples as well as the bigger picture and try to establish meaningful links between the two.

For instance, say you find that older users use more emoticons – e.g., 😊 :] – than emojis – – why might this be and how are these differences apparent in certain contexts? What kinds of meanings are being created? In order to work this out, you should refer to existing studies as well as your own intuitions. Lastly, think about the story behind your findings: What does this tell us about language/social media use?

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**Print**

## 9. Exploring *emagazine*

# Delving into the emag Archives: Child Language Acquisition

Nikolai Luck provides a route through the emag archive, giving an overview of the big issues in CLA, a taste of what's there and how to find out more.

*Our ability to understand the universe and our position in it is one of the glories of the human species. Our ability to link mind to mind by language... is another.*

*Richard Dawkins*

Language defines us as an exceptional species; all of our unique tool-making, art-creating, civilisation-building capacities stem ultimately from a 'minor set of mutations in our larynxes, permitting control over spoken sounds, and thus spoken language' in our recent evolutionary history. An exploration of child language acquisition (CLA) is, therefore, nothing less than an exploration into what makes us human. It is remarkable that this unique ability of our species, to convey complex meaning through language, is essentially embedded within the first few years of our lives, long before we can tie our shoelaces, ride a bicycle or reach the biscuit jar in the top cupboard. How this happens, how we acquire the ability to produce and understand language, has been one of the most hotly contested and controversial areas of science since the mid-twentieth century, when the nature/nurture binary provided the backdrop to nativist and behaviourist theories about how we develop language skills.

A number of articles about CLA can be found in emagazine's archive, including a summary of the main theories seeking to explain how it happens and an examination of the various stages of acquisition, all the way from crying and cooing to the use of implicature and irony. It's easy to locate the 'acquisition articles' under the CLA banner.

## The Theories

A useful starting point from emagazine 27 (February 2005) is Dan Clayton's introduction to the main theories of CLA and the idea that the nature/nurture debate is at its heart. Francis Galton first proposed the idea that our development is shaped by nature (that which is inborn and genetic) and nurture (that which is experienced from birth onwards). Simply put, your eye colour is determined by nature, the accent you have is determined by nurture and we are composite creatures influenced by both. But which is the key determinant of language acquisition? As Dan Clayton points out, behaviourist psychologist B.F. Skinner's 1957 book *Verbal Behavior* sought to explain language as developing in response to the nurturing principle of positive and negative reinforcement – young children copy what they hear and are rewarded/praised for getting the words right and punished/criticised for getting them wrong, and, just like rats or pigeons pushing a coloured button

for food, kids soon learn what gets results. Two years later this proposal was the subject of a truly withering critique by linguist Noam Chomsky who realised that an understanding of our very identity as human beings was at stake. For Chomsky, Skinner absolutely failed to grasp the sheer complexity of language. Sure, we learn our native language(s) from our environment (nurture) but we can only do so because of nature.

Chomsky introduced the idea of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) without which we would never be able to communicate (and Skinner wouldn't have been able to write his book). The frequent mistakes children make 'I cleaned my tooths and wented to the dentist' are virtuous errors because they demonstrate that children are actively applying the deep, underlying grammatical rules of language accessed through the LAD and are doing much, much more than simply passively copying what they hear. Dan Clayton also discusses the contribution to the field of CLA study made by cognitive science, notably Jean Piaget, who suggests that 'language acquisition is part of a child's wider development.' For instance, it is only when a child understands the concept of length that she will be able to manipulate the morphology of adjectives to produce comparatives such as 'shorter' and 'longer' and superlatives such as 'shortest' and 'longest'. Developing Chomsky's ideas about our innate biological capacity for language, Jerome Bruner's Social Interaction approach introduces the LAD to a LASS (Language Acquisition Support System) – the mother, father or other significant speaker.

Bruner's ideas focus on the importance of conversations, routines of social interaction and the role of Child-Directed Speech (CDS).

This provides a neat theoretical backdrop to Dr Marcello Giovanelli's article 'It's Sleeptime – Children's Routines and the Language of Bedtime' in emagazine 62 (December 2013). By quoting exchanges between Ella and her father at Ella's bedtime a clear picture emerges of how daily routines such as this scaffold interactions and impart the conventions of turn-taking:

*Father: [turns page and points to image under 'A']*

*Ella: apple*

*Father: good girl (.) and what's that [points to image under 'B']*

*Ella: ball*

*Father: well done Ella*

*In extract two the focus is on the particular discourse of pre-separation routines – parent wants to sneak back downstairs to a glass of wine/child wants to squeeze five more minutes out of the day:*

*Father: OK it's sleep time now Ella*

*Ella: can I look at my Mr Men poster*

*Father: we can look at that tomorrow*

*Ella: want to look at it now*

The underlying pragmatic complexity of this type of exchange is identified as a:

*...bedtime ritual which becomes an exercise in shaping, negotiating and playing out pre-separation routines.*

The LAD negotiating with the LASS as Bruner might say. The article ends with a discussion of Crib Speech (Katherine Nelson, 2006) 'a private pre-sleep monologue that doesn't rely on... collaborative communicative work.' Have a look at the article to find out why Ella is talking to herself about mending snails.

## Child-Directed Speech

The routines of bath time and bedtime invariably involve interaction between an adult and a child. In emagazine 56 (April 2012) Anna Sarchet presents the parent's perspective by detailing 'A Day in My Language Life' – and addresses the questions: why do we change the way we speaky weaky when conversing with young children and why do we talk to tots who are too young to talk back? This is a typical exchange between Anna and her ten month old daughter Ava:

*Me: helloooo (.) are you awake (.) did you have a good sleep (.)*

*A: ba ba ba da*

*Me: you did (.) shall we get up now (.)*

*A: ma ma ma ba*

*Me: yes let's get up*

Real exchanges such as this make abstract theories come alive and it is worth considering how you might collect and categorise this kind of data as a valuable resource to draw upon in order to deepen your understanding of CLA.

## The Stages

A longitudinal study of language development is an excellent way of charting the universal stages of acquisition. Dan Clayton's recordings of his sons' utterances from the age of one year and two months to two years and nine months in the article 'Child Language Acquisition 1' from emagazine 26 (December 2004) provide bite-sized data of actual children's talk alongside commentaries which bring in researchers such as Nelson, Brown and Halliday to illuminate each data set. The companion piece to this article, 'Child Language Acquisition 2', published in emagazine 34 (September 2007) charts subsequent language development from two years six months to five years and yields insights into aspects of CLA such as sentence structure and pragmatics. It picks up on Roger Brown's concept of the U-shaped curve of language development which illustrates how children can move from a correct form of the past tense 'shot' to an incorrect form 'shotted', which may look like regression, but actually reflects the child's vital move from passive copying to active creation of language with all the virtuous errors this entails. This specific and striking feature of CLA – children's proclivity to standardise non-standard verb forms in the past tense 'I sended you a text', is also the subject of the review of Steven Pinker's book *Words and Rules* in emagazine 7 (February 2000). Dan Clayton's CLA 2 data also shows clear evidence of grammatical development in the advent of subordinating conjunctions to enable complex utterances to flourish:

*Liam: The goodies are going on their ship cos they've caught a baddie*

*Context: talking while playing, age 3 years 6 months*

The article concludes by considering pragmatics and conversational implicature. Charting the various ways a child asks for a biscuit over a three year period reveals just how sophisticated children become in their facility with language:

- a) Ruby: *dat (pointing at biscuit tin, age 1,6)*
- b) Stan: *I want a biscuit daddy (age 3,6)*
- c) Stan: *can I have a biscuit daddy (age 3,9)*
- d) Stan: *please can I have a biscuit daddy? (age 4,2)*
- e) Liam: *I'm hungry daddy (age 4,9)*
- f) Liam: *Stan's had a biscuit (age 4,9)*

*Context: different conversations with dad shortly after breakfast over a three year period*

Replace 'biscuit' with 'coursework deadline extension' in that last utterance, and you can see how devastatingly effective this skilful manipulation of language can be at getting what you want, and that this kind of pragmatic awareness at a young age can stand children in good stead for the world beyond the biscuit barrel.

## Halliday! Celebrate!!

While this isn't quite what Madonna sang back in the eighties, there is a reason to celebrate when it comes to understanding Halliday's contribution to the study of CLA. As outlined in 'The Functions of Children's Talk' by Alison Ross, published in *emagazine* 44 (April 2009), Halliday asked the question 'What do children use language for?', and came up with seven answers:

- Instrumental: language to express needs (e.g. 'want juice').
- Regulatory: language to tell others what to do (e.g. 'go away').
- Interactional: language used to make contact with others and form relationships (e.g. 'love you mummy').
- Personal: language to express feelings, opinions and individual identity (e.g. 'me good girl').
- Representational: language to convey facts and information (e.g. 'it two o'clock').
- Heuristic: language to gain knowledge about the environment (e.g. 'what the tractor doing').
- Imaginative: language to tell stories and jokes, and to create an imaginary environment (e.g. 'you be the witch').

Alison Ross contrasts the experience of observing children interacting with adults to that of observing children interacting with other children:

*The child can experiment with all sorts of possibilities without any 'expert interference'.*

The transcripts that follow provide more valuable data to store in your data bank. Practically any utterance can be categorised by function, and it is worth pointing out that David Crystal extended Halliday's seven functions to nine, adding Performative – language used to 'control' reality (e.g. 'hocus

pocus'), and Phonological – language produced for the sheer delight in the sound it makes (e.g. 'neenaa neenaa') to the mix.

## Introducing Technonanny

Not, unfortunately, a Scandinavian Deep Dance DJ, Technonanny is in actual fact a blog on the Teachit website which features in emagazine 40 (April 2008) and in an article by Alison Ross in emagazine 54 (December 2011). The blog provides a perfect way to conduct another longitudinal study of language development. 'Louise's Talk – Acquiring the Language of Children' (April 2008) and 'Technonanny – Language Acquisition in Older Children' (December 2011) showcase Technonanny's capacity to focus on 'a child's language in its full communicative context', between say, the ages of three to six. The blog provides useful comparative data analysis to the Dan Clayton articles tracking language development mentioned above.

## Literacy

All authentic enquiries into language development embrace the acquisition of literacy as well as speech. Two articles 'Now Mathilda is Seven!', emagazine 59 (February 2013) and 'Learning how to write – the development of early literacy', emagazine 48 (April 2010) consider how children learn to read and write. In 'Now Mathilda is Seven!' Alison Ross highlights how the fascination children have with books, especially it seems, books featuring dragons, stems from an acute awareness that

*visual signs – pictures, logos and images (and) letters of the alphabet...carry a message.*

The article features a succinct summary of the methods used in primary schools to embed reading skills, including phonics 'breaking down words into sounds' and 'whole word' approaches, where children are encouraged to recognise, remember and recall words 'by context or initial letter or the overall shape of the word'. Danuta Reah picks up the theme of early literacy in 'Learning How to Write – the Development of Early Literacy' by exploring the concepts of environmental writing, where children 'assign meaning to (the) signs they see around them' and emergent writing 'writing-like behaviour', where children seem compelled to create texts such as shopping lists with letter like forms before they can actually write whole words. This shows how children respond to writing as a system and that they work out that 'certain symbols stand for certain sounds' and convey meaning.

## The End?

Studies into language acquisition tend to focus on the age range 0-10 but the process of acquisition never really ends. Just as Dr Johnson thought he'd absorbed every single word in the English language into his famous dictionary of 1755 until Blackadder offered him his most enthusiastic 'contrafibularities', there are always ways to expand your linguistic range and top up your active vocabulary whatever your age. Sprinkling terms such as 'holophrase' and 'heuristic' into essays is yet another stage in your language journey, a journey which began in the womb when you first started to tune in to the sounds of the world around you.

**Article Written By:** Nikolai Luck teaches at The Sixth Form College, Colchester.

# Language Variation, Accents, Attitudes and More Delving into the emagazine Archive

The emagazine archive is chock-a-block with articles on language variation, all well worth reading to enhance your understanding of this topic. Nikolai Luck surveys what's there, giving you an overview of many of the issues and angles that are explored in these articles.

## The Words We Use

Picture the scene: a train full of England fans on the way to a World Cup match. Good-natured singing, lively banter, no hint of malice or threat; after all, everyone is on the same side. And then... well, and then an RP voice (yes, one of the fabled 5%) is heard to exclaim 'Let's watch some footie!' A hush descends, the spirit of unity is shattered, snorts of derision are heard and the carriage suddenly seethes with palpable tension and potential violence. The non-RP contingent (yes, the fabled 95%) take exception – perhaps he could have been forgiven 'soccer'. But 'footie'? Never.

As Clive Upton remarks in 'Our Words, Our Lives, Our Streets – Dialect Slang and the BBC Voices Project' (emagazine 31):

*The names we choose to give things often identify us as coming from a particular region or as belonging to a certain...social group. Choose a word, and people will place you geographically or socially.*

(The suspicion is that someone saying 'footie' would rather be watching rugby.) Upton reports on the joint endeavour between the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield to record the prevalence of dialect words for their Survey of Regional English (SuRE), a systematic attempt to record informants' use of non-standard equivalents of Standard English words. Allied with the BBC Voices website, the survey documents 'where particular words are to be found and where they have their strongest support' – for example, 'alleyway' nationwide, 'ginnel' and 'twitten' in Yorkshire and Sussex respectively. Michael Rosen, in emagazine 27 (February 2005), homes in on a particular set of words relating to food in 'Mealtimes – Language on a Plate', charting his surprise at realising that he and his family may well have been eating 'breakfast – dinner – tea' but not everybody was. Rosen points out that historically

*English society marked out social distinctions by what you called the meals and by when you ate them.*

Serving 'high tea' half an hour early could see you lose your footing on social etiquette's perilous high wire, and serving any kind of 'sweet' would ensure you slipping off into the lower middle class aspirational abyss forever. Anyone for footie after supper?

## The How and Why of Language Variation

An excellent departure point for a tour of the emagazine variation archive is Ian Cushing's article 'A World of Differences – Exploring Language Variation' from April 2015. Celebrating the extraordinary diversity of different forms of English, Cushing seeks to describe how and why language begins to vary. How it happens is outlined through the concept of sociolect:

*... essentially any different group of people is likely to use language in a slightly different way*

and almost any activity you partake in identifies you as belonging to a distinct social group. As to why language is so diverse, Cushing establishes the centrality of language to our sense of self.

*The language we use... is a fundamental part of forming our identity and how other people perceive us... geography... creates accents and dialects... people working to identify themselves as being from Liverpool are... likely to adhere to (certain) linguistic forms.*

Mobility and migration play their part too.

*Bradford Asian English and Multi-Cultural London English are just two examples of... hundreds of emerging... forms across the UK.*

He draws a useful and striking analogy between the language you use and the clothes you wear to explain the phenomenon of code-switching. You don't wear a prom dress to fix a bike but choose an outfit to suit the occasion, just as you select the variety of English you use depending on what you are doing and who you are talking to. Sweary slang at a job interview is the equivalent of wearing ripped jeans to a prom; chances are you'll be thrown out. Code-switching is testament to our complexity as social beings and many factors are at play in contributing to our unique idiolect, age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, sexuality and so on.

## Attitudes

But what if you're wearing your finest prom dress and it doesn't even get you in to the prom? What if your way of speaking is deemed to be not 'good' enough? Whilst the academic consensus amongst linguists is to embrace diversity and to recognise the linguistic equality of varieties of English, a descriptive approach, beyond university linguistic departments a prescriptive (judgemental) discourse holds sway which prompts Dr William Barras to ask 'Why does accent variation attract such vitriol?' In 'Accentuate the Positive? Media Attitudes to Accent Variation' (emagazine 65, September 2014) Dr Barras charts woeful examples of blatant accent prejudice, including the BBC Breakfast presenter Stephanie McGovern confounding some viewers with her ability to gain a degree in Economics whilst retaining her Teeside accent. Dr Barras examines where accent prejudice comes from and outlines

how, commonly, two distinct elements of language, an accent (RP or Received Pronunciation) is mistakenly conflated with a dialect (Standard English). Despite popular perceptions to the contrary it is perfectly possible to speak standard English with a non-RP accent (and non-standard English with an RP accent). Dr Barras concludes that

*the polarising effect of accents... still holds true... what linguists can add to the debate is evidence that there is no linguistic justification for thinking that one accent is more correct or more pleasing to the ear than any other.*

An excellent companion piece to this article is 'She's Proper Good, Innit – Why Dialect discrimination is unwise' from September 2013. Shaun Austin and Professor Paul Kerswill present The Lancashire Study with the kind of data table beloved of A Level English Language examiners. It makes for compelling scrutiny. The social backgrounds of seventy six pupils at three Lancashire schools were documented, categorising them according to how 'academically aspirational' they were and the extent to which their home background could be described as 'pro-educational'. The prevalence of three linguistic variables, chosen because of the stigma localised versions of these features were found to invite, were then measured as the students gave presentations:

1. *h*: for example, *hat* versus *'at*
2. *th*: for example *thing* versus *fin*, *with* versus *wiv*
3. *t*: for example *better* versus *be'er*

The finding that

*in general, pupils with high educational aspiration use more prestige speech features than pupils with low aspiration*

seems to account for perceptions that localised speech forms are indicative of low levels of aspiration. Yet this is overly, and perhaps damagingly, simplistic. Two of the most academically ambitious and successful students'

*accent and dialect features match their (working-class) backgrounds and help to maintain their status as accepted members of their community. And yet, the maintenance of these features carries with it a risk of being unfairly tarred with negative stereotypes.*

She's proper good, but will she be given a proper chance?

## Phonological Change

In the Peter Morgan play *The Audience*, about the weekly meetings between the Queen and the Prime Minister of the day at Buckingham Palace, the actors Helen Mirren and Kristen Scott Thomas, who both play the Queen, have to perform a series of accent shifts alongside the numerous costume changes required of the role in order to reflect the downward convergence of the monarch from pure to modified RP over the course of her reign (even so, it remains the only production Kristen Scott Thomas has ever appeared in where she's been asked to make her voice sound posher than it already is). In 'Accent and Phonological Change' (emagazine 58, December 2012) Suzanne Williams details her own personal experience of accent modification and places it in the wider context of a perceived decline of regional accents, suggesting that rather than lamenting the disappearance of traditional regional accents

*we should view it in evolutionary terms and celebrate the emergence of new accents and new identities that reflect a changing world*

as hybrid accents form due to the constantly changing demographics of the nation.

## North and Scouse

Several articles in the archive provide a specific focus on a particular variety of English. Graeme Trousdale's 'Northern English – a State of Mind' (emagazine 35) explains the link between identity and linguistic behaviour.

*The critical issue here is one of identity as action: your identity is not a reflection of what you are, but rather the outcome of what you do.*

Speakers draw on a multilingual repertoire by varying the language they use according to context. In Preston, for instance, English freely mixes with Urdu and Bengali whilst in Newcastle speakers routinely code-switch between localised Geordie and supralocal Northern forms. In 'More or Less Scouse – Language Change on Merseyside' (April 2010) Dr Kevin Watson considers how the localised Liverpool accent bucks the seemingly inexorable trend of other regional varieties towards dialect levelling (dialects converging and becoming increasingly homogenised) by actually becoming more Scouse as young speakers show a notable tendency to use more localised 'Liverpool variants' such as fricative /t/ and /k/ sounds in words like 'matter' and 'back' rather than standard variant plosive forms.

The research shows

*a marked increase in the use of regionally restrictive features – the opposite of levelling's prediction...*

But why? Dr Watson suggests that this divergence of the younger generation away from older speakers' use of standard variant forms could be to do with covert prestige. Paradoxically, precisely because Scouse is maligned by outsiders it is embraced by insiders.

*Such a pronunciation is a marker of association, a badge of identity which distinguishes them from other people.*

Ben Farndon's 'Rural Voices: Attitudes to Language Variety' (emagazine 52 April 2011) cites the opprobrium that can be provoked by rhotic rural accents.

*Rhotic accents are those that pronounce the consonant /r/ when it falls after a vowel in words such as 'cart' or 'car'*

a form found particularly in the South West counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset. In 2005, a quarter of respondents to the BBC Voices survey from this area reported that they didn't like their own accent. The media have certainly contributed to this sense of shame, often equating the rhotic accent with stupidity and eccentricity in comedy shows and advertising. Perhaps rural accents will fade partly as a result of these pernicious associations although Farndon ends on an optimistic note; awareness of decline could lead to a conscious effort to preserve and revitalise rural accents, and a Scouse-style renaissance could be on the cards.

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**Print**

## Around the World with emag – a Survey of Articles (emagplus)

In emagazine 69, Nik Luck did a survey of all the fantastic articles in the emag archive on language variation, focusing particularly on accents, regional variation in the UK and attitudes to language variation. In this emagplus piece, he extends the survey to look at world varieties and ethnicity, pulling out some great pieces in the archive and highlighting what's specially interesting about the angles and ideas they provide.

### Black English

Discrimination against people because of the identity they project through their linguistic behaviour is a contentious and politicized issue explored in emagazine 4 (Summer 1999). In America, with its complex and particularly fraught history of racial segregation and discrimination, many advocate the need to promote Black English as a legitimate equal of (white) Standard American English by teaching it in schools. This 'would finally give Ebonics (Black English) speakers the chance to learn their mother tongue.' Yet this seemingly democratic idea is fiercely opposed by those who deem Black English to be an inferior variety characterised as 'deficient', 'illogical' and 'incomplete', alongside an 'emerging black middle class (who) also do not advocate the teaching of Black English in schools, claiming that Standard English is needed to operate successfully in corporate America.' This controversy epitomises the chasm between Descriptive and Prescriptive approaches to language variation.

### Multi Ethnic Youth Dialect

Back in the UK, Julie Blake uses the novel *Londonstani* by Gautam Malkani to examine representations of the colloquial multilingual argot of places like Hounslow in West London. Malkani's city is 'an intensely realised world of inter-racial gang warfare and gangsta culture', a bleak depiction transformed by 'the sheer vitality of (the linguistically complex) narration and dialogue' based on 'a dynamic fusion of lexical items from different cultural and linguistic sources.' Multi-cultural London English signals 'disaffection with mainstream culture' but when used in a novel 'also...links with literature in which writers express new national and cultural identities by stretching the language of literature beyond its previous boundaries.'

Multi-cultural London English is part of the emerging variety known as MEYD (Multi Ethnic Youth Dialect) or MLE (Multicultural London English). In 'What's Happening to Youth Dialect' (emagazine 32) Dan Clayton cites the research of Sue Fox in Tower Hamlets which reveals a 'shift away from traditional Cockney vowel sounds' in East London 'towards a more Bangladeshi-influenced pronunciation.' That this is evident in white as well as Asian teenagers points to the influence of 'communities of practice' – groups of people who share a linguistic identity through a shared interest or activity, like music – rather than the more traditional notions of ethnicity, gender and class'. Membership of these communities predisposes people to absorb slang from a whole host of cultural

influences, including Caribbean, American, Asian and Cockney. In an interesting coda to Dan Clayton's article, Charissa King gauges young people's attitudes towards MEYD and finds that they 'assigned 'intelligence' and high status to those who didn't use slang.' She concludes: 'Perhaps (this) shows how, regardless of social attitudes, young people will continue to be inventive with language and use it for their own social purposes, while being fully aware of how it may be seen in society and of the need to code-switch in order to get on in the wider world.'

## Campus Slang

Just as places like predominantly working class Tower Hamlets provide linguists with vibrant and stimulating soundscapes to explore, predominantly middle class places like university campuses are likewise wonderfully experimental social spaces that invariably engender a plethora of ever-changing colloquialisms and slang. Tony Thorne's 'Campus Slang' from emagazine 38, December 2007, outlines the main topics that invite sustained lexical innovation (namely flirting and drinking.) Perhaps universities up and down the country should include this study in their prospectuses to entice potential applicants: The University of Bristol – 18 ways to say 'I'm drunk'. It would liven up University League Tables at the very least.

## HRT

Alongside campus slang, another linguistic feature characteristic of student-speak is HRT (High Rising Tone), an upward lilt traditionally indicating an interrogative but now serving a multi-functional role as both a 'turn-taking' device when used in the middle of an utterance, and a 'requesting confirmation' device when used at the end. Angie Barrie looks at the origins, spread and pragmatics of HRT in emagazine 39, February 2008.

## World English

Language variation is a multi-faceted phenomenon and this is perhaps no more evident than in the advent of English as a world language. In 'World Englishes, English as Lingua Franca, Global English... What's the Difference?' from September 2013 Professor Jane Setter uses the five phases of Edgar Schneider's Dynamic Model of Postcolonial Englishes as a way of understanding how world English varieties are developing and 'moving towards a standard of their own.' It is possible to locate each variety of world English, such as Singapore English, within the five phases of the model in order to track the evolution of the language in specific geographical and cultural spaces. Invoking the three circle model of world English (Inner, Outer, Expanding) Setter suggests that 'English has taken on a life of its own and is no longer the domain of the traditional native (inner circle) speaker.' The authority of the three circle model is, however, contested by Professor Andrew Linn in 'English in Europe – Rethinking International English' in emagazine 68 (April 2015) because 'it suggests a hierarchy where the position of English gets weaker as we move out from the inner circle, and secondly it suggests that how people use English depends primarily on their nationality'. The high proficiency in English of the predominantly Nordic countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway) problematizes the three circle hierarchy. These supremely competent non-native speakers, adept at using English as a 'passport language' enabling them to communicate in a global context, do not fit comfortably in the outer circle and require us to rethink the entire model. As Professor Linn identifies, transient multilingual communities exist in Europe and beyond and 'one of the reasons we find English so endlessly fascinating is that both the form of the language and its socio-political context are always changing so that established theories and models no longer provide an adequate explanation.'

## American and Australian English

The icing on this language variation fairy/cupcake comes in the form of several articles on US English: 'The Influence of American English Slang' by Judy Carrick (emagazine 9, September 2000), 'US V British English – a pragmatic view' by Alison Ross (emagazine21, September 2003) and Ian McMehan's 'American English' (emagazine 25, September 2004). And to complement these, like a tinnie complements a barbie, Australian English is explored in 'Stop, revive, survive – Australian and UK road signs' (emagazine 27, February 2005) by Ben Farndon and Lizzie Wilkinson's 'A Brief History of Australian English – Australian English in the context of World Englishes (emagazine 55, February 2012).



*Visit a Place Where Your Accent is an Aphrodisiac. Las Vegas – What Happens Here Stays Here.  
Poster, London Underground, 2015*

Unless of course 'What Happens Here' is a matched guise sociophonetic study into localized British accent features and the attitudes they provoke in the casinos and bars on the Strip. Now, that would be something worth sharing – just imagine those data graphs!

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Print

# Becoming an A Level Language Student - a Quick Guide

Examiner and university lecturer Dr Marcello Giovanelli tells students embarking on an A Level language course what to expect and how to make the most of the course.

If you're reading this then you may well have just started your A Level studies in English Language. Congratulations on choosing an exciting, modern and engaging A Level course! However, the transition from GCSE or iGCSE to A Level can be a demanding one, and so in this article, I'll share some key principles of A Level language study with you that will help you to bridge the gap and get the most from your studies. Together, these form a 'quick guide' to becoming an A Level English Language student.

## 1. Learning a Metalanguage and Avoiding Impressionism

Given that you may not have had to do much explicit language work at KS4, you will find that you need to acquire a new terminology to deal with the kinds of analyses that you will undertake at A Level. We call this type of language about language a metalanguage. For English Language, most of this revolves around what we term levels of language (discourse, grammar, semantics, lexis, phonology), or what are currently known as linguistic methods or frameworks in examination board specifications. As a beginning linguist, it's important to start using these terms confidently and accurately to ensure that all descriptive linguistic work (any analysis that identifies and explores language features) that you do is as precise and clear as is possible, and avoids merely making impressionistic and speculative claims that are not rooted in language analysis.

As an example, look at the text (above right). This was written by a mid-day supervisor and attached to a biscuit tin in a school staffroom. It was motivated by her anger towards a member of the teaching staff persistently going through the tin trying to find chocolate biscuits.

A non-linguist might comment on this text in quite an intuitive way by identifying the angry 'tone', perhaps making some comment on the order that's being given, and even arguing that the use of the word 'please' makes the order seem more polite. However, because there's very little language analysis going on here beyond simply identifying words, the comments feel impressionistic and idiosyncratic; they are not grounded in a recognised and accepted way of talking about the content and structure of language.

On the other hand, knowing even a little bit about how language works can be incredibly enabling, helping with the analysis and making you sound more competent and professional in your work. For example, using the knowledge that events can be grammatically presented using either the active or passive voice not only enables an analysis to take place using a shared and accepted metalanguage, but can also lead to a more intricate analysis. In this example, the mid-day supervisor has chosen to write in the passive 'they are getting broken' rather than the active 'someone/name of person is

breaking them'. Since the use of the passive voice downplays the agent (person responsible) for the action of the verb, we can argue that using this form is generally significant. In this instance, we might deduce that the supervisor wants to avoid attaching a sense of blame to the breaking of the biscuits. Being able to discuss the grammar (or any other aspect) in this way is likely to lead to a much better analysis.

## 2. The Importance of Context

At A Level, engaging with context means moving beyond simple GCSE notions of audience and purpose. Now what's really important to remember is that by context we are referring to a range of factors both within and outside of the text, paying close attention to situations where a text is both written or spoken (the context of production), and where it is read or listened to (the context of reception). Returning to our 'biscuit tin' text, we could identify a whole range of contextual factors that would be important to comment on.

In terms of the context of production, the fact that the text producer is a mid-day supervisor and not a member of teaching staff is significant since it is likely that she will have a less powerful role in the school, and consequently will need to be careful about not offending someone of a higher status. This goes some way to explaining her motivation for using the passive voice that was discussed earlier.

In terms of the context of reception, we can imagine that this note would be seen by whoever was in the staffroom and happened to come across the biscuit tin, and that this could take place at many different times. It's relatively easy therefore to see that there are as many possible contexts of reception as there are potential readers, and that each reading will be motivated by who the reader is, the conditions in which they read (carefully, in a rush, whether they have had a good day or are fed up), whether they are actually guilty of breaking the biscuits and so on. Equally, context needs to be understood as a dynamic entity rather than a static one; the situation and circumstances in which a text is understood can change quite considerably. For example, the person responsible for breaking the biscuits might suddenly react in a very different way when he realises the message is aimed at him. In this instance the context that surrounds the reading, and therefore influences it, can develop and evolve as the reading itself takes place.

There are two important points worth emphasising here. First, the relationship between context and language features is both a complex and incredibly important one. Writers and speakers make language choices that are influenced by contextual factors, and readers and listeners interpret what they read and hear within the specific situations in which they find themselves. Second, the richness of contextual detail and its importance in the process of making meaning means that it's often better to think of any data you engage with in your studies not as a 'text' but as part of a larger communicative act called a discourse event that has real participants with intentions, beliefs and emotions engaging in an act of communication. All of these influence what gets written or said, and how that gets interpreted.

## 3. Ideas about Language

Another key skill that you will develop as you progress through your studies will be your ability to read and engage with ideas about language study. This will move you beyond seeing yourself as someone who analyses language to someone who actively explores ideas and concepts that researchers and academics have grappled with. Whichever specification you are following for your own studies, being able to understand the various debates surrounding language topics, and integrating these into your own analyses of data is an important skill that you will need to master. In your analysis of the 'biscuit

tin' text, you could draw on a number of theories related to how people communicate with each other (interaction and politeness theories), how status at work affects the ways in which language is used (language and occupation, the discourse of the workplace), and how technology might be influencing the ways in which we communicate in non-electronic forms (language change, attitudes to language). The best way to become competent at working with ideas like these is to try to explore them in the light of any data you are looking at in class. To what extent do you find that your data supports or challenges established research ideas that you have read?

## 4. Read Around the Subject

Of course, one of the best ways to explore issues and ideas in language is to read as widely as you can around the subject. emag is a great place to start for language articles that have been written specifically for A Level students, and your teacher will be able to guide you towards suitable ones. Beyond emag there is a wealth of material. As a start, you might try David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (Cambridge University Press) for a good reference book and overall guide to language topics, Louise Mullany and Peter Stockwell's *Introducing English Language* (Routledge) for an excellent, albeit quite advanced, guide to the study of language and linguistics. *Language: A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories* (ed. Dan Clayton, English and Media Centre) offers an excellent collection of essays by leading academics on A Level language topics.

It's also a good idea to use the internet to keep up to date with news stories and the latest debates involving language. Whether it's schools banning students from using non-standard English, how the latest innovations in technology are affecting the ways that we use language, or what the latest research in child language learning is, there's always something to interest the language student. Regularly visiting the online pages of tabloid newspapers will lead to no end of stories to read and discuss in class. To make things easier for yourself, you could subscribe to a blog which collects the latest news for you such as Dan Clayton's peerless EngLangBlog <http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk>

## 5. Become a Data Collector

Another important part of becoming a student of language is learning how to become a researcher of language. In fact your career as a collector of language data begins the moment you start your course. The wonderful thing about language data, of course, is that it's everywhere: in the conversations we have with friends, the TV we watch, the books, magazines, social media pages, and tweets we read, the websites we browse, the computer games we play and so on. Make a point of collecting interesting examples of language you see, either in hard copy form or using the camera facility or a scanning app on your smartphone. Record conversations of both real (do ask for permission!) and represented (on the TV and radio) speech, practise transcriptions, start a scrapbook, and share ideas with your fellow students via a blog or your school or college's VLE. Get used to working with data and start applying learning in class to your own examples that you collect. You've got an exciting two years of study ahead of you!

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**Print**

## **11. Opinions in the Media**

# How To Read the Language News – Sceptically

Professor Lynne Murphy offers six easy steps to help you distinguish between good journalism based on sound linguistic research and fake news when you read media stories about language.

When the editors of Collins Dictionary named fake news their 2017 Word of the Year, they probably weren't thinking about the linguistic news – though they could have been. There's plenty of bad journalism about language out there – and it's been going on for years. My own speciality is looking at how American English is represented in the British press, a particularly fertile area for stereotyping, misunderstanding and misinformation. But it's certainly not the only area.

Language is something the public want to know about. We all use language every day, and we tend to have ideas about English – what we like and don't like about it. The media are very happy to give us stories about English that support or challenge our ideas about how English works. They know it's great clickbait.

Too often, though, the news media present stories about English that misrepresent linguistic research, that interpret it in a way that suits certain prejudices, or that is not research-based at all. I have two bits of good news, though:

- There is a lot of good language journalism out there too.
- You have the power to cut through the hype and get a clearer idea of what's going on in the English language today.

In this article, I give a tool kit for evaluating language stories in the news, so that you can identify quality pieces, find the places to be suspicious, and do something about it when language articles are used to spread misinformation or prejudice.

## Step 1: Don't Judge a Book by its Cover, or a Language Story by the Masthead

Teachers like to tell us to 'consider the source' when evaluating information – and that is good advice. It's probably better to trust a textbook about English written by a linguistics professor than to trust your great aunt (unless she is also a linguistics professor). But when looking at media stories, it's easy to come to the conclusions 'broadsheets good, tabloids bad' and 'conservative press is conservative, liberal press is liberal'. But very often linguistic ideas don't go along with political ideas. I know very liberal people who are still linguistic snobs, for instance. And in my experience, there's plenty of bad linguistic journalism in broadsheets and sometimes good analyses in tabloids.

Take this example: in 2011 the British Library publicised their research on changing pronunciations in the UK – for example which syllable is stressed in controversy (CONtroversy or conTROVersy) and whether garage is garRAZH or GARridge. They concluded that British pronunciation changes have little or nothing to do with American English influence. Americans don't say the newer conTROVersy pronunciation, for example. The Daily Mail's headline for this story was:

*How is your English?*

*Research shows Americanisms AREN'T taking over the British language (1)*

But broadsheet the Telegraph ran the story with this on top:

*The 'conTROVersy' over changing pronunciations*

To language purists they might grate, but new ways of pronouncing words are spreading in Britain thanks to the influence of US culture. (2)

It was an irresponsible way to present the story, and it was in the 'quality' newspaper.

## Step 2: Read Beyond the Headline

Headlines are usually not written by the author of the article, but by the production editor who's thinking 'how can we get people to click on or share this article?' Their advertising revenue depends on those clicks and shares. In cases like the Telegraph headline, it can look like the headline writer didn't read the article. Headlines often exaggerate or use emotive language to garner interest.

By the end of a bad headline, damage has already been done. The Telegraph article goes on to quote the researcher saying that the change in the pronunciation of controversy has nothing to do with Americans. But 38% of those who click on links don't read the article. Of those who do read, only half will make it to the end of the article.<sup>3</sup> Plenty of people will share the article on social media using only the headline to support a point they want to make. So, keep reading.

## Step 3: Look at the Language

Take a minute and think about this BBC headline from 2017. What assumptions is it starting from? Is it trying to get a specific reaction from the reader?

*How Americanisms are Killing the English Language (4)*

Look for presuppositions and metaphors. A presupposition is a claim that needs to be assumed to be true in order to interpret another claim. This headline expects you to accept two presuppositions: first, that the English language is being killed – they're not asking whether they're asking how. Another presupposition comes from the 'the' before 'English language': it presumes that there is one and only

one thing called 'English language'. Is that true? When they say 'the English language', what assumptions do they expect you to make about that English and who speaks it?

Metaphors are used to frame what's happening in a particular way. But how does that metaphor work? Is the language alive? What would it mean for Americanisms to kill English? If Americanisms can kill, what are they? Disease? Poison? Weapons? Assassins? What other possible metaphors are there for words travelling around the world? British writers sometimes represent the English language as Britain's 'gift' to the world (even though the dominance of English has contributed to the decline or death of many indigenous languages). Another possible metaphor might have Americanisms enriching or revitalising English, rather than killing it. Why was this metaphor chosen?

## Step 4: Evaluate the Research

Many media pieces about language are mere opinion, based on a single person's experience of English. The thing to remember about language opinions is that they're generally based on very limited experience of English – from their own lifetime, social class, age group, educational background, etc. Everyone has a right to an opinion, but we (and they) shouldn't mistake opinions for reality. Such articles often cherry-pick their evidence – that is, they use examples that support their point, but don't acknowledge the many examples that don't support it.

Beyond the opinion pieces, much language news these days relates to linguistic research, in part because researchers feel pressure to show that their research is relevant by getting it into the news. But research deserves critical caution as well. There's stronger research and weaker research, and news organisations don't always bother to differentiate between them. Consider this from another Telegraph article:

The English language is evolving faster than ever – leaving older Brits literally lost for words, research has revealed. A detailed study has identified the social media language and mobile messaging terms that perplex millions of parents and which point to a future where emoticons may replace the written word. [...] The study was led by the English language expert Professor John Sutherland [and] was commissioned to mark the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S6 phone. The results point to a seismic generational gap in how we use and understand modern informal text speak while also suggesting older style abbreviations and acronyms such as TXT are now so old they are considered antiquated by the younger generation. (5)

It raises a few alarm bells.

- How is this person an 'English language expert'? In fact, the researcher is a professor of literature, not language or linguistics. The training in doing sociolinguistic research is quite different from that required for literary research.
- The research has been commissioned by a business that is promoting a new product. Such research does not have the quality-control requirements that go along with publication in an academic journal or research funded by an academic organisation. The company wanted something they could make a headline out of, so its press releases would be picked up as news items. That's a lot cheaper and gets more 'shares' than an advertisement would get.
- There is no link to the original research report, so you can't check the methodology, the actual findings, or the researcher's interpretations of it.

- The evidence doesn't merit the conclusions. They've shifted the discourse in two ways here:
  - from evidence about one very specific kind of language [texting] to a claim about English in general
  - from evidence from now to a historical claim. We can't actually know whether English is changing 'faster than ever' from a study of two generations at one time, and there's no reason to believe that the language of texting is the same as that of conversation or essay writing, for example.

The shiftiness in the last bullet point is something to stay very aware of. Articles about dialect-word research often shift into claims about accents. Evidence about spelling might morph into a claim about pronunciation or education.

Consider whether there are other possible explanations for the phenomena discussed. For instance, where dialects are becoming less distinct, sometimes television is blamed. But are there other factors at work, such as more people travelling further for work, more people going to university, more people moving away from their place of birth in modern times? If children's spelling is poor, it's a big leap to decide that's because of social media – you also need to check whether children's spelling is always poor at that age (is it a developmental issue) or whether spelling education is done differently now than it used to be.

## Step 5: Check Their Facts; Do Your Own Research

If the article links to the original research, have a look at that. It's likely to have more careful conclusions and less misleading language than the media coverage. For instance, one study about changing accents in Britain (mostly due to the influence of major British cities) had one line about communication becoming more casual, possibly because of the influence of social media platforms from the US. A Guardian article on the study led with the claim that

*By 2066, dialect words and regional pronunciations will be no more – consumed by a tsunami of Americanisms.*

There was no way to get from the report to that conclusion – and in fact, the article was arguing that the report didn't know what it was talking about. But to get to the point they wanted to make, the writer was gravely misrepresenting the research. (6)

But sometimes it's the researcher who gets it wrong – and the media reports it anyway. A 2017 news item (7) claimed British words were losing ground to American words. But looking at the original research, I found that one of the 'British' words that British people aren't saying nowadays was 'capsicum'. It's no wonder they didn't find it in Britain, since it's the Australian word for a sweet pepper.

You have the power to check claims made in the media about language, and all you need is access to the internet and a sense of which sources of information are reliable. Check a few dictionaries (just one and you haven't really done your research since different dictionaries might offer different information). The Online Etymology Dictionary is free and has lots of good information about word histories.

## Step 6: Do Something About Fake Linguistic News

Language changes; it's inescapable. But a lot of media articles seem intent on creating villains in the story of language change. It's the millennials! The immigrants! The Americans! The teachers! They're who we can blame! These kinds of stories serve political purposes. They are propaganda. The aforementioned study about accents changing in Britain gave rise to a Sun headline

*The 'th' sound vanishing from the English language with Cockney and other dialects set to die out by 2066 due to immigration.*

That is a seriously problematic interpretation of the research, and it serves the Sun's general anti-immigration stance. It was an unethical headline. And the newspaper deserved to be called out on it.

In those kinds of situations, it's not enough for us to know ourselves that it's bad linguistic journalism. When the press demonises groups of people (or their languages) using bad thinking and poor research, we need to stand up. The good news is that in the era of social media, this is easier to do than ever. Contact the media source and point out the errors. Find better articles on the issues to share when you see people sharing the biased articles. Be a good citizen and start conversations about the problems and consequences of bad linguistic research.

## References

1. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1365751/How-British-English-Americanisms-ARENT-taking-language-research-shows.html>
2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/8305645/The-conTROversy-over-changing-pronunciations.html>
3. [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how\\_people\\_read\\_online\\_why\\_you\\_won\\_t\\_finish\\_this\\_article.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html)
4. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170904-how-americanisms-are-killing-the-english-language>
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/11574196/new-forms-of-social-media-terms-which-parents-do-not-understand.html>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/30/hsbc-dialect-dying-rab-c-nesbitt>
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/13/american-english-language-study>

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# A Level Language – Reading Around the Subject

Examiner, regular emagazine writer and @EngLangBlog tweeter Dan Clayton shows how you can make good use of news reporting of language issues to enrich your thinking in many different parts of your A Level course.

One of the most exciting things about the English Language A Level course is that language is always in the news, in one form or another. While this can provide you with some really interesting material to refer to in essays, language investigations and your own directed writing, it can also be a bit daunting to keep up with. And even if you know where to look, it's sometimes difficult to work out how what you're reading might fit in to what you're doing on the course.

What I'll attempt to do in this article is take a range of fairly recent stories about language in the news and contextualise them within the A Level course. In doing this, I'll show you some good places to find stories, give some ideas about what you might learn from them and offer some suggestions about how to use them. Let's start with a story that directly involves A Level students themselves...

## Below the Line and Below the Belt

A Level students at Havant and South Downs Sixth Form College were involved earlier this year in a project (supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme) which investigated the history and use of the Portsmouth ('Pompey') accent. As part of their project, students and teachers looked at the history of the accent and dialect in their local area, collected examples of the variety and contributed to an exhibition for the general public. This all sounds exactly like the kind of work that takes the subject beyond the confines of the classroom and opens up links between theory in class and the real world 'out there'. However, The Daily Telegraph had other ideas.

In a piece in October 2018, titled

*College fails to 'unearth anything' after spending £34,000 investigating Portsmouth accent*

unnamed Telegraph reporters rubbished the project, claiming that the 'researchers' (aka A Level students) had spent 10 months finding nothing of interest about the 'so-called Portsmouth accent'.

The College provided their own response to the story

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/xphw2z2cid8dfh/NEW-PANEL.pdf?dl=0>) but another aspect of this whole rather unfair coverage of the college's work is what happens when a story like this is opened up to comment on the newspaper's website.

On the scale of things, 21 responses (at the time of writing this article) isn't a huge outpouring of opinion – and some of them are supportive of the college's work – but a quick glance at many of the comments shows the kind of attitudes that are often bubbling under the surface of news articles about language: namely, prescriptive and often xenophobic and/or declinist attitudes. So, while one commenter says 'the involved students and the National Lottery are all idiots who have no idea of either 'Research' or the value of money' another invokes a 'Political Correctness Gone Mad' agenda by saying

*All this proves is that the Lottery money is being wasted at an incredible speed on nonsensical projects. The corollary is that worthwhile enterprises are starved of money if they are not PC or sufficiently (sic) 'edgy'*

before another chimes in with the most nakedly prejudiced comment of the lot:

A more interesting area of research could be into why very many youngsters throughout the country of varying ethnic backgrounds seem to have adopted the intonations of Jamaican drug dealers.

What can we learn from such an article and the comments that follow it? If you're studying AQA or OCR, you have some ready-made language discourses (AQA Paper 2) or a topical language issue (OCR Paper 1 Section B) to discuss. As many people from Deborah Cameron and Henry Hitchings to John and Lesley Milroy have previously argued, when people debate language they often use it as a proxy for other concerns, often those to do with what they perceive to be wider social ills. So, a good way to see those wider arguments exposed and to have recent stories to refer to is to check the ways in which the main newspapers report on language stories and then go 'below the line' to see how those arguments play out among the readers and their wider social and political agendas.

## Power to the Peevers

Language peevish is nothing new. People have complained about language ever since humans have been able to speak: the history of pedants and prescriptivists is a long one and they love to write about their pet-hates at length. What can be very instructive is to track the current gripes that people are expressing, and social media can be a great way of doing this. As the linguist Rob Drummond pointed out in a tweet in October 2018,

*If you ever want a point-in-time snapshot of current language peeves, just find a celebrity who has decided to share theirs and then sit back and read the replies!*

Drummond was referring to a tweet by the comedian Jason Manford that had picked up over 4500 likes in the space of a few days.

Manford's own gripes were abbreviations like 'hubs' (husband), 'totes' (totally) and 'bants' (banter – which he also wanted banning as a word in its own right) but also the non-literal use of 'literally' and the phrase 'Can I get...' taking the place of 'May I have...'. His fans chipped in with plenty of others: 'LOL' said 'in person, face to face'; adding 'super' to the front of words; 'cray-cray'... And while a lot of the responses were very funny, many seemed to be genuine gripes.

A celebrity from a very different generation, the columnist and former MP, Gyles Brandreth sparked a similar peevefest among viewers of BBC Breakfast in the same month when he complained about 'totes' (again), 'I myself', 'bored of' and 'off of', arguing that

*all the research shows that people who speak correctly, spell correctly, they will be more successful in this world.*

Brandreth also claims that

*accents are neither here nor there, slang is fine but getting correct usage is important.*

Again, while dressing up his complaints in a fun, 'I know I'm a pedant' kind of self-aware schtick, Brandreth is still peddling some rather dubious ideas. What's wrong with using an extra first-person pronoun to add emphasis? The French do it with 'Moi, je...' and English speakers often say 'I personally' to do a similar job. And what is this research he speaks of about users of 'correct English' (however that is defined) being more successful (however that too is defined)?

I myself (sorry Gyles) am not convinced by these arguments, but both stories provide some interesting case studies for AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 1 Section B and perhaps Edexcel Paper 3 where the discussion of attitudes to language change can be seen to reflect battles over who is using 'correct' English and who has the power to say what's right or wrong. They also provide you with some excellent examples of contemporary debates about English that can be linked to very similar discussions that have raged throughout the history of the language, from complaints about double negatives and split infinitives to the literally never-ending arguments about 'literally' (recorded as being used non-literally as far back as the 1760s). What's also interesting is that social media seems to have allowed linguists and experts to respond directly to such populist language stories, offering genuine insight and empirical evidence. For every Gyles Brandreth or John Humphrys, there's an Oliver Kamm or Jonathan Kasstan putting forward reasoned arguments. But as we've unfortunately seen in recent years, populism is not easily countered with hard facts: people can often be swayed by gut feeling and prejudice.

## Dropping Your Rosie Lees

Accents are rarely out of the news and stories about them can provide a wealth of different examples to refer to in many parts of the course. Whether it's AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 2 Sections B and C, or Edexcel Paper 1, language variation – in this case, regional and social variation and attitudes to it – is a popular topic.

One recent story helps to illustrate the overlapping nature of social and regional variation and how accents are viewed as markers of identity. The Labour candidate for Chingford and Woodford Green in East London, Faiza Shaheen was criticised for the way she spoke by Sky presenter Adam Boulton. Accusing Shaheen of t-dropping (or more accurately from a linguistic standpoint t-glottalisation), Boulton asserted that Shaheen was 'embarrassed about being posh'.

As Language students, you will no doubt be aware that certain regional and social accents and their features can be stigmatised and frowned upon because they are perceived as being lower class, or

carrying connotations of ignorance and a lack of formal education. But on the flipside, certain accents are also seen as being rather aloof and unlikeable: Received Pronunciation (RP) regularly polls high for intelligence but low for warmth, for example. In politics, where conveying a likeable and empathetic persona seems to be part of the job description, there has been a tendency since the 90s for certain upper- and middle-class politicians to chisel away the posher-sounding features of their natural accents to relate better to their wider electorate (although interestingly, Jacob Rees-Mogg bucks this trend). Former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron (both privately educated) did it, ex-Chancellor George Osborne famously did it while addressing Morrisons warehouse workers in 2013 and was roundly mocked in the media for his Mockney affectations.

So is Shaheen just another example of a posh politician talking down? Not on your nelly. As Shaheen points out, she is the daughter of an East End car mechanic and attended the same state school as David Beckham and Harry Kane. She sounds like the area she is from. Boulton (privately educated) picked the wrong gal to tell porkies abah, especially as Shaheen also heads a think tank on class and social discrimination and has written about the stigma associated with accents. It's another excellent example of a story that shows how attitudes to language are often deeply ingrained in wider social contexts, but also an example that works well alongside some of the classic studies on accent and class – Ellen Ryan, Howard Giles, Peter Trudgill and Jenny Cheshire among them – offering a modern day application of older work.

## The Language 'Problem'

What's revealing about many of these stories – and you might have noticed this in those you have looked at on your course – is how the original stories are framed and how often language change or variation is presented as a problem. In the December 2018 edition of emagazine, Lynne Murphy offered a toolkit for evaluating language stories in the news and that is an extremely useful place to start when exploring some of the stories featured here and in the wider reading that can inform your understanding of the course.

## Some Other Stories About Language from 2018

'Gammon' and the language of political abuse:

<http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.com/2018/06/telling-porkies-about-gammon.html> and

<https://language-and-innovation.com/2018/05/15/gammon-up-against-the-wall/>

Gary Younge on the dangers of political rhetoric and political violence:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/25/donald-trump-words-consequences-violent-rhetoric>

Ben Zimmer on the use of the word 'globalist' and its sinister connotations:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/the-origins-of-the-globalist-slur/555479/>

Womxn and exclusionary language:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/10/womxn-row-companies-worry-word-women-excludes-transgender-people/>

## Links

Daily Telegraph story on Portsmouth accent research

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181009054509/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/09/college-fails-unearth-anything-spending-34000-investigating/>

HSDC response: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/xphw2z2cid8dfh/NEW-PANEL.pdf?dl=0>

The video produced as part of the project is now available here:  
<https://www.millstreamproductions.com/work/pompey-dialect>

Jason Manford's language peeves: <https://twitter.com/JasonManford/status/1055724735886168069>

Gyles Brandreth on his pet-hates: <https://twitter.com/BBCBreakfast/status/1050748647837716482>

Faiza Shaheen on accent and class:  
<https://twitter.com/faizashaheen/status/968510408809172992>

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**Print**

## **12. emagClips: Linguists in the Frame**

## Accent and dialect - Northern English

Northerner and linguist Graeme Trousdale separates out the myths and prejudices from the realities of northern English, at the same time as recognising that categorising identities is part of the way we understand linguistic behaviour.

### A State of Mind?

It's a difficult thing, working on accents and dialects of English, if you come from northern England like I do. As an academic who works on varieties of English, I strive to show that all varieties are linguistically equal, with no accent or dialect being inherently better than any other; as a northerner, I know that northern English is the best accent of the lot, no matter what academics think. It all boils down to this. There are two groups of people in the world: those who have a northern English accent, and those who wish they did!

### Defining 'northern English'

But what is 'northern English', exactly? If we ignore any sociolinguistic variation within the north, and try to concentrate just on a traditional, regional definition of a 'dialect', we run into problems. What land mass corresponds to the area in which northern English is spoken? Historically, for instance, much of lowland Scotland could legitimately be considered part of the linguistic north, given what we know about the early history of English, and the similarities between the dialects of the far north of England, and those of southern Scotland. But because political boundaries and social groupings have formed and reformed since the Anglo-Saxon period, we have to recognise that geography alone cannot serve to delimit linguistic varieties. An alternative approach is to consider individuals, and the identities that they project, partly through their linguistic behaviour. The critical issue here is one of identity as action: your identity is not a reflection of what you are, but rather the outcome of what you do. It is agential, and manifests itself in many ways, from the clothes that people buy, the music they choose to listen to, and the language that they speak.

### Multilingual northerners

Multilingualism is perhaps the most obvious way of illustrating this, and many northerners are multilinguals. Sometimes the context of the speech act, or the social and linguistic background of the participants in the discourse, will determine what language speakers use: a community language at home with grandparents, for instance, but English in the classroom. However, we also find speakers exploiting their linguistic repertoire by varying the language they use even when the context and participants remain constant: a group of teenagers from Preston might well create a variety which appears to be a jigsaw of English, Urdu, Bengali and other languages when engaged in informal talk. Such speakers don't need to be fluent in all of these languages; some may only know a handful of Bengali words and phrases, but drawing on even this limited knowledge can be enough to indicate group membership, to show that you belong. Patterns of crossing, to use Ben Rampton's term, are a regular feature of the linguistic behaviour of multilingual speakers in communities both within northern England and beyond. This crossing is a way of marking identity.

What holds for languages also holds for dialects. Speakers project aspects of their identity by drawing on the range of 'Englishes' that they know - Tyneside English, Northern English, British English and so on. For instance, in any particular speech event, a speaker from Newcastle might say house (with a diphthong) rather than hoose (with a monophthong), but, in words like bath and dance, still retain a low front vowel (as most speakers of English have in cat) rather than the low back vowel associated with southern speech. Thinking about this in terms of local and supralocal poles, we'd say that the speaker is locating himself or herself in the middle of this cline - he or she may be perceived as having a 'General Northern' accent, rather than a heavily localised variety. In another speech event, the same speaker may use many more 'Newcastle' variants, in which case the speaker is located closer toward the 'local' pole. Again, this linguistic behaviour is tied in with the projection of a particular kind of identity, from local Geordie to supralocal northerner. In my own research on Tyneside English, some of the older speakers I talked to were lamenting the fact that younger speakers from the north-east didn't talk 'proper Geordie' anymore. This view was not upheld by the younger speakers, who took great pride in speaking Geordie - they just considered themselves to speak modern Geordie. For many (including many people from the north-east) this modern Geordie is not as distinctive from other accents as it used to be, and this process of dialect levelling has been attested for other dialect areas in surveys carried out in the British Isles. But even if we accept the claim that local varieties are not as distinct as they were, the concepts of 'northerner' and 'northern English' remain.

### **Categorising and stereotyping**

How are such concepts formed in our minds? One of the ways in which our minds work is that we create stereotypes - it's an unfortunate but necessary by-product of our human ability to categorise. Our minds are constantly categorising, placing things into larger groups, based on what we perceive to be similarities among different entities. Stereotypes function as abstract members of the social categories we store in our minds; we identify attributes that we associate with the categories, and the more attributes a given instance of a particular category has, the more we consider that instance to come close to the stereotype. In terms of social categorisation, these attributes can be to do with the way in which people dress, the kind of music they like, and the kind of language they speak, which we've also seen to be influential in the projection of identity. So identity and stereotypes are closely linked in speakers' minds.

All of you reading this will have a social category of 'northern Englishman', for instance, a category which you've built up through experience, as a result of encounters with men from northern England. These encounters vary massively in kind, of course: part of your category of 'northern Englishman' might have been constructed on the basis of your dad being from York; another part constructed because you've seen Ant and Dec on the television; another part because you've heard Steven Gerrard be interviewed after he has played for England, and so on, over potentially tens of thousands of instances of northern Englishmen you've encountered, however briefly. Your category of 'northern Englishman' will be unique to you, because no-one else in the world has had exactly the same experiences as you have. This is why your concept of 'northern Englishman' can't correspond directly to a person in the 'real world': it is abstract, part of your mental make-up. And what's true of 'northern Englishman' as a social category is equally true of 'northern English' as a linguistic category. Just as you encounter and categorise speakers, you encounter and categorise speech. This is why northern English is a state of mind.

### **Prejudice and comedy**

Sometimes, however, this social and linguistic stereotyping is based on very little evidence indeed, and this can result in prejudice. Let's take a more specific category, 'Yorkshireman', and an aspect of the language associated with Yorkshiremen, the phrase 'Eeh bah gum'. I don't think I've ever heard a

Yorkshireman say 'Eeh bah gum'. Yet this has become such a stock Yorkshire phrase that a story on The Sun's website, detailing the fondness of Brad Pitt and his wife for the soap opera Emmerdale, set in the Yorkshire Dales, had the headline 'Jolie bah gum, Angelina'. 'Eeh bah gum' has now passed into folklore, and has become entrenched as a marker of Yorkshire speech with the result that it works as a stereotyped linguistic form that invokes a stereotyped social category.

Such stereotypes regularly feature in comedy portrayals of the north. Here is a transcript of part of a famous Monty Python sketch, where Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman and Terry Jones are dressed in white tuxedos, drinking white wine, against a background of a beautiful coastline:

*FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, very passable, that, very passable bit of risotto.*

*SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Nothing like a good glass of Château de Chasselas, eh, Josiah?*

*THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You're right there, Obadiah.*

*FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Who'd have thought thirty year ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Château de Chasselas, eh?*

*FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In them days we was glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.*

*SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: A cup o' cold tea.*

*FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Without milk or sugar.*

*THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Or tea.*

The sketch then descends into madness as each of the Yorkshiremen tries to outdo the others by recounting how difficult his life was while growing up. Much of the humour derives simply from the exaggerated accounts of hardship, but there is also humour in the incongruity of discourse topic and linguistic forms - the affluence associated with the discourse on risotto and fine French wine, combined with the non-standard grammar (thirty year, them days, we was glad) and Victorian names. This incongruity is marked too by what appears to be a mismatch between the way the characters are dressed (white tuxedos) and the way they speak (with Yorkshire accents). But why a Yorkshire accent? Why not one associated with London, Bristol, Plymouth, or Norwich? Again, the humour derives in part from wider cultural knowledge (or rather, assumptions) about a typical Yorkshireman, playing on the stereotype that it's grim up north. (After all, why should white tuxedos and a Yorkshire accent seem like a mismatch?)

This links to a wider, institutional stereotype: the portrayal of the north as 'other'. This is part of the cultural norms of much of the British media, which is both metrocentric (focused on cities) and austrocentric (focused on the south). These terms are used by Katie Wales to describe the way in which the history of English has often been analysed by linguists, but they are true too of much of the British establishment. For instance, the BBC News website in 1999 reported the decision of the Oxford English Dictionary to include the exclamation 'Ee', considered to be a northern form, in revisions to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, as follows:

*Ee bah gum, it's in t'dictionary*

*By 'eck! Them daft 'apeths at t'Oxford Dictionary have gone all northern.*

If that were true, what a wonderful world it would be.

## Blogging About Language – @wordspinster Speaks

Professor Deborah Cameron started a blog in 2015 and much to her surprise quickly found herself with a huge following. Here she writes for emagazine about the process of blogging and how it differs from the writing she does in her work as an academic linguist.

Blogs, or as they were originally called, 'weblogs', first appeared in the late 1990s, and today there are tens of millions of them. There's probably no subject so obscure that someone hasn't started a blog about it – I once stumbled across one that was devoted to pub carpets.

Language is a more mainstream topic, and there are language blogs to suit every taste. Some popular ones are run by commercial companies (like Oxford Words, put out by Oxford Dictionaries), others are maintained by academics (like the linguistics group blog Language Log). Some cover a range of interests (like Gretchen McCulloch's All Things Linguistic, which does what it says on the tin) while others occupy a more specialised niche (like Strong Language, a group blog about swearing).

In 2015 I started my own blog, Language: a feminist guide. As the name suggests, it's a 'niche' blog, looking at language from a feminist perspective: it's aimed at feminists more than linguists (though it does also have a following among linguists and linguistics students, including A Level English students). When I started it I assumed that someone, somewhere would want to read it, but I've been surprised by how many people it's reached: by spring 2017 it had over half a million page views. Most readers are in north America and western Europe, but it also has quite large numbers in India and Russia. There are fewer than ten countries in the world where no one's ever visited it at all.

As my blog has become better known, I've found I often get asked questions about it – not just about the content, but about the process of blogging and the reasons why I do it. So when I was invited to write this piece, I thought I'd try to answer some of the questions I'm asked most often.

### You're already well-known for your academic writing about language and gender, so why did you start a blog on the same subject?

I wanted to reach a different audience. There's a new generation of feminists out there, and a lot of what they read and talk about is stuff they find online – often through the links people share on Facebook and Twitter. Blogging allows me to be part of that conversation. It allows me to reach people who don't have access to academic libraries, and it frees me from the constraints of academic publishing. If I write an academic article it can take well over a year to get published. On my blog I can comment on current events while they're still current.

### How do you decide what to post about?

When I first had the idea for my blog, I sat down and made a list of about 20 topics which I thought would make good posts. I reckoned they'd keep me going for about six months. Two years later, I've only used about five of them. When I made the list, I was still thinking like a book-writer, not a blogger. Blogging works best when it's reactive – offering a new take on something that's already a talking-point for your audience. Once I realised that, I stopped planning ahead. Most of what I publish now is inspired by current events. Last year, when everyone was talking about Donald Trump's infamous 'pussy grabbing' tape, I wrote something about 'locker room banter' which became my most-read post of 2016. The most popular post I've published so far this year, about women changing their names when they marry, was inspired by the row that broke out when Miriam González Durántez (who's married to the politician Nick Clegg) complained that someone had addressed her as 'Mrs Clegg'. It's surprising how many news stories have a language-and-feminism angle: if I keep up with the news and whatever's trending on social media, my topics pretty much choose themselves.

## Do you do a lot of research for your blog?

Actually I do more than I'd imagined I would. I always planned to use academic research in my blog rather than making it all about my personal opinions, but I didn't expect that to involve much extra work, because a lot of my posts are on subjects where I'm already familiar with the relevant research. As time went on, though, I sometimes found myself wanting to write about things that were outside my core area of expertise, and that did mean doing some homework. More than once I've ended up reading a pile of interesting stuff that was all completely new to me. That's one of the things I like about blogging – it gets me out of my academic comfort zone.

## Is your blog style different from your academic writing style?

Yes, because it's a different audience with different expectations. On my blog I can make jokes, tell personal anecdotes and express strong opinions: I don't have to write in a conventionally 'academic' way. But I do have to work harder to keep readers' attention. I like to think my academic writing is readable, but if it gets a bit dry I can still count on readers to persevere, because essentially it's their job. Blog readers, on the other hand, won't keep reading if they're bored. When I blog I have to ask myself: 'Is this going to engage someone who's reading it on their phone on the bus home from work?'

It isn't easy to condense complicated arguments or research findings into something as short as a blog post. The ideal length is supposed to be between 800 and 1500 words, but I have to admit that most of my posts are longer than that. I want them to be accessible, but not at the cost of oversimplifying to the point where I'm misrepresenting my subject. After all, it's what I know about my subject that makes my blog distinctive. But there are some academic writing habits – like never using four words when you can use 24, and taking forever to get to the point – that I've tried hard to break.

## What do you personally get out of blogging?

In a word, control. I don't need an invitation or anyone's permission to write a blog post, there's no one telling me what to write about, and there's no waiting around for it to be published. If you enjoy writing (which I do), but you don't see much point in writing just for yourself (which I don't), blogging delivers the kind of instant gratification you don't get from other kinds of writing.

As a feminist blogger I've also got a political motivation. Blogging doesn't change the world, but it can spread ideas more widely, and sometimes it can change people's minds. I'm always happy when someone contacts me to say that reading my blog made them think about something differently. I've also discovered that blogging is a good way to get the attention of the mainstream media. My blog

has been referenced in newspapers, and it's got me on national radio in several countries. That means I'm talking to people outside my own bubble.

## What about fame and fortune?

If those had been my goals I'd be an ex-blogger by now! I know some people do make money from advertising or sponsorship, but I haven't had any offers – is there anything feminist linguistics could be used to sell? As for fame [...] there was one moment, in July 2015, when a post I'd just published went viral. More than 37,000 people visited my blog in one day, the link was all over Facebook and my email was full of messages from journalists wanting to talk to me. I'd probably have found that gratifying if I'd known, but as it happened I'd published the post when I was just about to leave for New Zealand. When I arrived two days later I'd missed my 15 minutes of fame.

## Have you had any negative experiences?

I've had some experience of the sexism women encounter when they express opinions online. I've only encountered it in a mild form (no death threats), but it's the reason I closed the comments on my blog. At first they were fine, but as my audience grew, so did the volume of personal abuse, anti-feminist ranting and long patronising screeds explaining my own subject to me. Moderating hundreds of comments to sort the reasonable ones from the rubbish became so time-consuming and annoying that in the end I decided not to do it any more.

## Can anyone blog?

Well, anyone can give it a go and see how they get on. I'd particularly encourage students to try it, individually or in a group, because writing short, engaging pieces for an audience of strangers is a great way to develop your skills as a writer. If you know, care or have opinions about something (whether it's language or pub carpets), you've got the basic ingredients for a blog. So if the idea appeals, I'd say go for it.

**Article Written By:** Deborah Cameron is the Rupert Murdoch Professor of Language and Communication at Worcester College, Oxford. Her blog 'Language: a feminist guide' is at [www.debuk.wordpress.com](http://www.debuk.wordpress.com) and she tweets as @wordspinster

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**Print**

# Making a Point – The Story of English Punctuation

Professor David Crystal's new book on punctuation takes a historical approach to a subject that is often hotly debated without drawing on this kind of knowledge. In this article, he gives a flavour of both the 'stories' and the arguments presented in the book.

Imagine this. You are a famous poet unsure of your punctuation, so you decide to write to the greatest scientist you know to ask him to correct the punctuation of a poetry book you're preparing for press. You've never met him. Moreover, you ask him to send on the corrected manuscript to the printer, without bothering to refer back to you. And he does it.

An unlikely scenario? Not so. This was William Wordsworth, preparing the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. On 28 July 1800, at the suggestion of Coleridge, he wrote to the chemist Humphry Davy:

*You would greatly oblige me by looking over the enclosed poems, and correcting anything you find amiss in the punctuation, a business at which I am ashamed to say I am no adept.*

Wordsworth wasn't alone. Thomas Gray in a 1768 letter gives over eight pages of instructions to Foulis Press about how to print his poems, but adds:

*please to observe, that I am entirely unversed in the doctrine of stops, whoever therefore shall deign to correct them, will do me a friendly office.*

And Byron writes to John Murray in 1813 to ask:

*Do you know any body who can stop—I mean point—commas, and so forth? for I am, I fear, a sad hand at your punctuation.*

On the other hand, Ben Jonson was scrupulous about punctuation, and insisted on checking every mark for printing accuracy, getting very annoyed if a printer dared to change anything. Keats also took a keen interest in the way his publisher dealt with his punctuation. In an 1818 letter to John Taylor, he expresses his indebtedness for his suggestions:

*the comma should be at soberly, and in the other passage the comma should follow quiet...*

My favourite Jonsonian is Mark Twain. Here he is in 1889:

*Yesterday Mr Hall wrote that the printer's proof-reader was improving my punctuation for me, & I telegraphed orders to have him shot without giving him time to pray.*

And in 1897:

*I give it up. These printers pay no attention to my punctuation, Nine-tenths of the labor & vexation put upon me by Messrs Spottiswoode & Co consists in annihilating their ignorant & purposeless punctuation & restoring my own.*

*This latest batch, beginning with page 145 & running to page 192 starts out like all that went before it – with my punctuation ignored & their insanities substituted for it. I have read two pages of it – I can't stand any more. If they will restore my punctuation themselves & then send the purified pages to me I will read it for errors of grammar & construction – that is enough to require of an author who writes as legible a hand as I do, & who knows more about punctuation in two minutes than any damned bastard of a proof-reader can learn in two centuries.*

Never a calm subject, punctuation.

The more idiosyncratic the writer's punctuational style, the more editors and printers have taken it upon themselves to consistentise it. The way we read Jane Austen now is very little like the way she wrote. Likewise, Emily Dickinson. A 1970 edition prints this stanza following her original:

*Our share of night to bear –  
Our share of morning –  
Our blank in bliss to fill  
Our blank in scorning –*

A 2000 edition edits it thus:

*Our share of night to bear,  
Our share of morning,  
Our blank in bliss to fill,  
Our blank in scorning.*

They are worlds apart.

## Answering the Question Why?

These are just some of the fascinating stories that I discovered when writing *Making a Point*. The story of English punctuation goes back over a thousand years – from a time when texts showed no punctuation at all, to the present-day attention to detail – and I was surprised to find that it had never been told in its entirety. A historical approach is essential, because it enables us to do something traditional accounts of punctuation of the Eats, Shoots and Leaves type never did: answer the question ‘why’. Why did Wordsworth have such a problem? Why do people get so incensed over apostrophes? One answer lies in early differences of opinion among writers, grammarians, elocutionists, publishers, and printers about the nature of punctuation, and who was responsible for it. I explore that history in *Making a Point*. Another lies in the nature of the punctuation system itself.

I think people feel they can get to grips with punctuation more readily than with other features of standard English, and so are more prepared to speak out about it. The standard is defined by four main criteria: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation. In each case, writers of English have to conform to the rules that educated members of society have come to recognise over the past two hundred years or so. Failure to follow these rules is considered an error that needs to be corrected if the usage is to be deemed acceptable.

Of the four, spelling is the most demanding, because every word on a page has to be spelled correctly if our text is to avoid criticism, and there are tens of thousands of words that have to be spelled. We can never get away from spelling. By contrast, it’s easy to get away from usage issues to do with grammar and vocabulary. In grammar, there are dozens of points of usage that define the difference between standard and nonstandard – Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* lists most of them – but none of them turn up very often. We might read an entire chapter and never encounter a split infinitive or an instance of none is/are. Points of disputed usage in vocabulary, likewise, are sporadic: if you’re concerned about the difference between, say, disinterested and uninterested or decimate meaning other than a tenth, you might read a whole book and never encounter an instance.

Punctuation sits prominently between these two extremes. Like spelling, it is there on every page; yet like grammar and vocabulary, it is sporadic. Many lines of a text will have no punctuation marks at all, and some of the marks may never appear in what you’ve written. There’s not a single exclamation mark in this article, for instance.

## Is it So Simple?

Correcting a perceived punctuation error seems like a simple task, therefore – and if everything was like potato’s it would be. But there are hidden depths to punctuation, thanks to those differences of opinion, and dangers lurking around corners – which of course is what makes the subject so intriguing. A few years ago, two Americans travelled all over the USA with marker pens correcting every typo they encountered. They added an apostrophe to a notice at the Grand Canyon Heritage Site, and later learned they had committed a federal offence of defacing a national monument. They were fined, received a year of probation, forbidden to enter all National Parks, and were banned from typo correcting. They were lucky. Another outcome would have been six months in jail.

**Article Written By:** David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor. The *Disappearing Dictionary* and *Making a Point: the Pernickety Story of English Punctuation* were published in 2015.

# more or less scouse?

## Language Change on Merseyside

**Dr Kevin Watson** is an expert in accent and dialect, currently looking at changes in the Liverpool accent. Here he outlines what his research has revealed about whether the Scouse accent is disappearing or growing stronger.

In 2001, the *Daily Mail* reported that Scouse, the accent spoken in Liverpool and parts of the surrounding county of Merseyside, was disappearing. It claimed that younger people on Merseyside were being influenced by television shows, and that this was causing their accent to become less easily recognisable as 'Liverpudlian'. However, at the beginning of this year, the *Sunday Times* ran an article with the following headline: 'Regional accents thrive against the odds in Britain'. This article reported that 'Liverpool is typical of a city with a distinctive accent that is thriving'. Here we have two opposing views. On the one hand, Scouse is thought to be disappearing, but on the other, some claim it is actually becoming *more* regionally distinctive – not less Scouse, but more Scouse. Which is correct?

### Sociophonetics and dialect levelling

In thinking about these issues, we are engaging with the area of sociolinguistics that is often called **sociophonetics**. Work in sociophonetics examines how pronunciation (the '-phonetics' part), varies according to a range of social parameters (the 'socio-' part). For example, we might want to find out whether male speakers pronounce things differently from female speakers, or whether there are differences between the accents of working-class people and middle-class people or, as is most relevant for our present purposes, between older people and younger people.

Comparing the speech of older people with that of the young is one way to investigate whether language has changed. How? Let us consider an example. Imagine that today, in 2010, we want to investigate the changes that have taken place in Scouse over the last fifty years. One way we can do this is to analyse the speech of a 70-year-old male, let us call him Derek, and the speech of a 20-year-old male, Steve. If we assume that Derek's accent in 2010 is similar to his accent when he was a 20-year-old, fifty

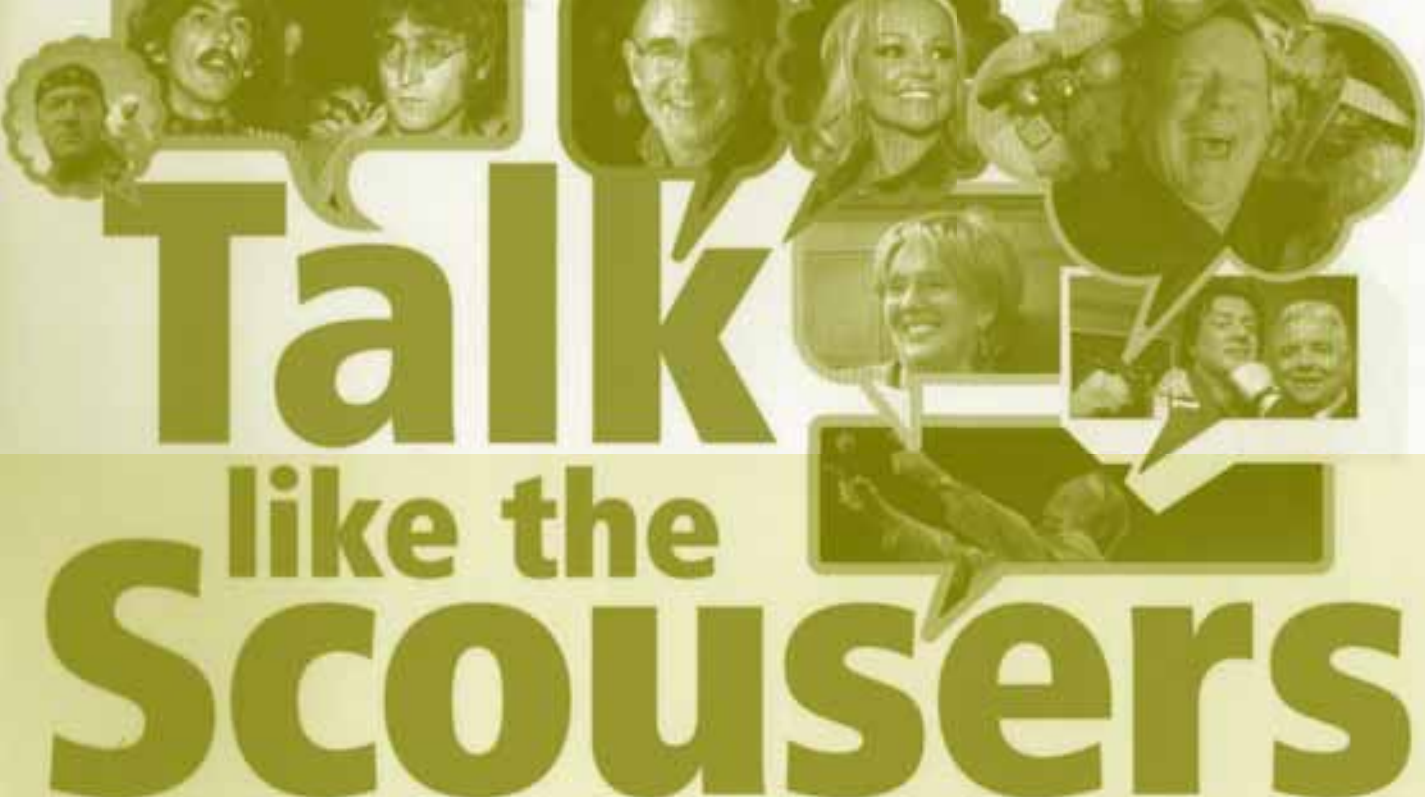
years ago, we can begin to understand what the Liverpool accent was like in 1960. And then, by comparing Derek's accent with Steve's, we are able to investigate phonological change.

### Accent levelling

When linguists have investigated phonological change in other British accents, the overwhelming discovery has been that certain regionally distinctive pronunciation features are gradually disappearing and are being replaced by '**supralocal**' features – features which are not just found in one local accent but are much more widespread. This phenomenon, called **accent levelling**, is defined by Williams and Kerswill (1999) as:

**a process whereby differences between regional varieties are reduced, features which make varieties distinctive disappear, and new features emerge and are adopted over a wide geographical area.**

A good example of levelling has been found in the north-east of England. In Newcastle, older speakers pronounce words like 'hay' and 'bay' with a vowel not unlike the vowel that other accents have in 'hear' and 'beer', which is transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) with the symbols /ɪə/. This pronunciation of words like 'hay' and 'bay' is found only in the north-east of England, and so can be seen as a regional 'marker' of this area. However, younger speakers in Newcastle use a different vowel in these words, represented by the IPA symbol /e:/. This vowel is used elsewhere in the north, too, such as in Yorkshire and Lancashire, so can no longer be seen as a 'marker' of Newcastle. Thus, younger speakers in the north-east are now using a **supralocal** vowel in these words, showing that levelling has taken place. Levelling has not just been found in Newcastle – see Britain (2002) and Kerswill (2003) for more discussion. So, if levelling has been found in Britain, what about in Liverpool? Is the *Daily Mail*'s claim, that Liverpool's accent



# Talk like the Scousers

is 'less Scouse', accurate? Before we can answer this question, we need to consider what it means to have 'a Scouse accent' in the first place.

## A characteristic feature of Scouse

Accents can be defined by their phonological characteristics. For example, one way in which a northern English accent differs from a southern English accent is that in the north the words 'put' and 'putt' are pronounced identically, but in the south they are different. In this respect, Scouse is the same as the northern accents of other nearby localities such

as Greater Manchester and Lancashire. However, there are other features of Scouse which do not occur elsewhere. Arguably the clearest example of this is the way Scouse speakers pronounce their /t/ and /k/ sounds in the middle and at the end of words like 'mat', 'matter', 'back', 'walker'. Instead of using what linguists call **plosive** sounds, which have a complete blockage of the airflow and then a quick burst of released air, as is found in other accents, Scouse speakers can pronounce their /t/ and /k/ sounds as **fricative** sounds, which have friction. This makes /t/ sound a little like /s/, so that 'mat' can sound like 'mass'. When /k/ is pronounced as a

fricative, outsiders often comment, perhaps unfairly, that it sounds like the speaker has phlegm! Of course, this is not the case – this particular way of pronouncing /k/ is simply a phonological characteristic of Scouse.

Two points are noteworthy here: (i) this way of pronouncing plosives is geographically restricted to the Liverpool region and (ii) it is stigmatised by outsiders (and, sometimes, by Liverpudlians too). Both of these facts make this feature a prime candidate for levelling, so we might expect this particular way of pronouncing /t/ and /k/ to be in decline. Is it?

## Phonological change in Scouse

To answer this question, we can compare the accent of older people with that of the young. However, we cannot base our observations on just two speakers, as we did in the hypothetical example above. This is because using such a low number of speakers cannot present the complete picture. Instead, in my research I report the results of a project which compared the speech of 13 older speakers (8 male, 5 female), born in the 1930s and recorded in the mid-1990s, with 16 younger speakers (9 female, 7 male), recorded in 2003 when they were aged 16. I will focus here on the two sounds mentioned above, /t/ and /k/, and consider whether they are pronounced as a 'Standard variant' (that is, as a plosive, as they are in other accents), or as the **Liverpool variant** (such as the fricative, described above).



Figure 1: The realisation of /t/ and /k/ in older and younger speakers of Liverpool English. All /t/ and /k/ sounds were in utterance final position.



If accent levelling is underway in Scouse, then younger speakers will use a higher percentage of **Standard variant** forms than older speakers, because the Liverpool variant forms will be in decline. Figure 1 presents the results of the comparison. The 'Standard variant' is indicated by the dark grey colour, and the 'Liverpool variant' is indicated by the lighter grey. 'O' refers to older speakers, and 'Y' refers to younger speakers.

It should be immediately clear that the 'Liverpool variants' are *not* in decline. For the males, the young and older speakers have roughly the same number of Liverpool /t/ forms, and for /k/ the percentage of Liverpool forms actually increases in the young. For the females, the situation is even more stark. Older female speakers use a much higher percentage of standard forms than older male speakers – it seems for the older speakers there is a gender difference for this particular feature. However, this gender difference no longer exists for the young – young female speakers have markedly increased their use of the Liverpool forms, matching the production of the males. This is certainly not levelling. In fact, it shows a marked increase in the use of **regionally restrictive features** – the opposite of levelling's prediction.

## Results and reasons

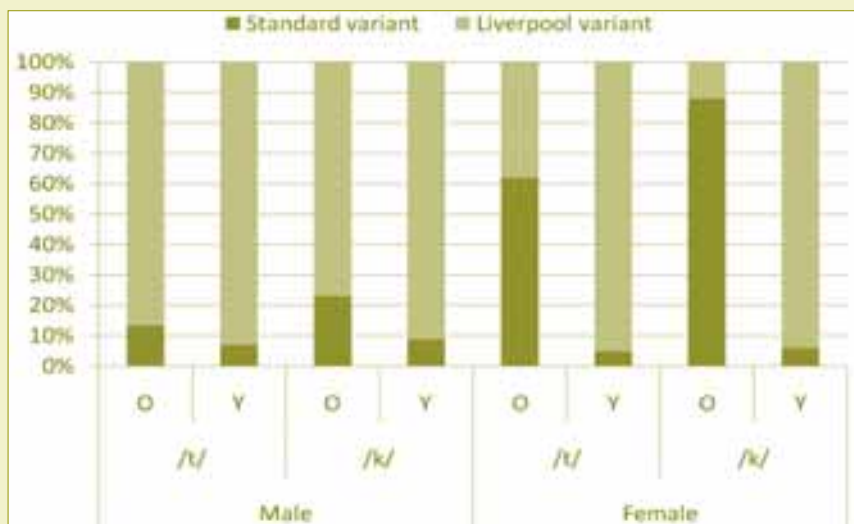
So, to answer our initial question, it seems that the claim in the more recent article from the *Sunday Times* is correct – the Liverpool accent is maintaining, or even extending, at least some its regional pronunciation features. Why is this happening? The answers are not yet fully understood, but it seems that a number of issues may be relevant. It may be that there is **covert prestige** associated to some of these features. Although to outsiders having a fricative for /k/ might sound like a speaker has a bad case of flu, to insiders – to Scousers – such a pronunciation is a **marker of association**, a badge of identity which distinguishes them from other people. It is this kind of association, the positive evaluation of a feature, which

can encourage speakers to maintain it. Whatever the full picture is, one thing is clear: Liverpool's plosives are going strong.

Dr Kevin Watson is a Lecturer in Sociophonetics at the University of Lancaster.

## Take it further

The issues raised in this project are under investigation in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University, in a research project called 'Phonological levelling, diffusion and divergence in Liverpool and its hinterland'. For more information about, and updates of the results as they become available, see: [http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/phono\\_levelling/index.htm](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/phono_levelling/index.htm)



# Metaphors for Cancer, and Why They Matter

Professor Elena Semino has been researching the metaphors people use to describe their own and others' experience of cancer. Here she shares some of her findings.

## Metaphors and Cancer

*'She lost her brave fight.' If anyone mutters those words after my death, wherever I am, I will curse them.*

This is how Kate Granger, a doctor in her early 30s with advanced cancer, rejects the 'fight' metaphor that is often used for people who have died of cancer. Later in the same 2014 article for the Guardian newspaper, she adds:

*I do not want to feel a failure about something beyond my control. I refuse to believe my death will be because I didn't battle hard enough. [...] After all, cancer has arisen from within my own body, from my own cells. To fight it would be 'waging a war' on myself.*

At Lancaster University, we have studied the metaphors that cancer patients use to talk about their experiences, in interviews and contributions to online forums.

## Why do Metaphors Matter?

Metaphor involves talking and, potentially, thinking about one thing in terms of another, on the basis of some perception of similarity. For example, being ill and fighting are different things, but we talk about the former in terms of the latter because both are difficult and potentially life-threatening.

Metaphors matter because different metaphors 'frame' the topic in different ways, and these framings can affect our perception of ourselves and of our experiences. In the 'fight' metaphor, for example, the illness itself is usually cast as the enemy; getting better corresponds to winning; and not getting better corresponds to defeat. This framing can be quite negative for patients, as Kate Granger points out: it can be distressing for cancer sufferers to think that they have an 'enemy' inside them; even worse, if lack of recovery is seen as losing a battle, patients may feel guilty about something that is not their fault.

The shortcomings of a particular metaphor can be overcome by using a different metaphor. While suffering from breast cancer in 2005, journalist Melanie McFadyean suggested an alternative, in a

piece for the Observer magazine:

*Why should people with cancer be expected to take up arms? It is better to see cancer as a journey. Everyone says that being positive helps you to come through, and being positive during a journey seems easier to me than being positive during a war in which the enemy is all around you.*

The 'journey' metaphor for cancer frames the whole experience very differently: it casts the illness as a road to travel on, or as a travelling companion, rather than an opponent; and it does not involve the idea that not getting better is a failure on the part of the patient. It is therefore not surprising that the 2007 NHS Cancer Reform Strategy includes many references to the patient's cancer 'journey', but no instances of 'battle' or 'war'.

But do cancer patients actually use 'fight' and/or 'journey' metaphors, and, if so, how?

## Cancer Patients' Use of Metaphors

In our data, patients use both 'fight' and 'journey' metaphors fairly regularly: both types of metaphors occur, on average, between once and twice per 1,000 words. An example of each is given below:

*I have kind of prepared myself for a battle with cancer.*

*We are on the bowel cancer journey.*

In our study we have found plenty of evidence of the possible negative consequences of 'fight' metaphors. For example, a patient writes:

*I feel such a failure that I am not winning this battle.*

Here the metaphor clearly undermines the patient's self esteem, at a time when she has many other negative emotions to deal with. Another war-related metaphor that can contribute to emotional distress is used by some patients who expect their cancer to return:

*I am a walking time bomb.*

This metaphor frames the possible future recurrence of the illness as totally unpredictable, irreversible and immediately devastating for the patient.

On the other hand, for some patients at least, 'fight' metaphors seem to function as a source of pride, motivation and a positive sense of self:

*Cancer and the fighting of it is something to be very proud of.*

*My consultants recognised that I was a born fighter.*

*I don't intend to give up; I don't intend to give in. No I want to fight it. I don't want it to beat me, I want to beat it.*

When we considered 'journey' metaphors in our data, we found the same kind of variation. 'Journey' metaphors often express and reinforce feelings of purpose, control and companionship. Several patients use 'journey' metaphors to convey a sense of group solidarity with other cancer sufferers:

*The rocks in our paths are easier to handle when we're all in it together.*

One patient uses a 'journey' metaphor to suggest that the experience of illness can have some positive aspects:

*My journey may not be smooth but it certainly makes me look up and take notice of the scenery!*

On the other hand, some uses of 'journey' metaphors suggest lack of acceptance of the illness, or frustration at not being in control. One patient compares being ill with cancer to:

*trying to drive a coach and horses uphill with no back wheels on the coach.*

Another patient wonders:

*How the hell am I supposed to know how to navigate this road I do not even want to be on when I've never done it before?*

## What Do Our Findings Mean?

Our findings support the avoidance of 'fight' metaphors in recent UK policy documents, and suggest that healthcare professionals should not introduce them first when speaking with patients. On the other hand, different metaphors seem to work differently for different people. 'Fight' metaphors can clearly be harmful for many patients, but they are also inspiring and motivating for some. 'Journey' metaphors are a better alternative for many patients, but they can also convey and reinforce negative feelings for some.

Ultimately, metaphors are resources for expressing ourselves and for making sense of our experiences. When we are ill, we should be encouraged and enabled to pick the ones that work best for us.

## Beyond Fights and Journeys?

If metaphors are useful resources, we should have as many at our disposal as possible. We have collected many alternatives to 'fight' and 'journey' metaphors, from our data and other sources. For example, a cancer sufferer commenting on Kate Granger's article uses a musical metaphor:

*To heal is to meet the rogue cells within and convince them to sing in tune with the rest of the body.*

In an article for BBC news, Andrew Graystone uses a household metaphor:

*For me, cancer arrived as an unwelcome lodger, parking itself in the back room and demanding attention. For three years I tried to be a courteous if unwilling host.*

Eventually the time came to invite my cancer to leave. She has left the place in a bit of a mess, and I'm conscious that she has kept the key. Still I'm hopeful that in due course all I will be left with is the rich memory of time spent with a stranger I never expected to meet.

We are hoping to collect many more such examples that we can share with patients and doctors. If you come across any, or can contribute your own, we would love to hear from you.

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**Print**

## **14. Language on the Page**

## Review of The Language Wars by Henry Hitchings

Here linguist and emagazine regular Dan Clayton reviews The Language Wars. You can find out more about Hitchings' views on the key battlegrounds in the history of the language in Dan's interview with him for emagazine 53.

'Dig beneath the present,' says Henry Hitchings in his new book The Language Wars, 'and instead of hitting something solid you open what appears to be a bottomless shaft into the past'. While most of us are used to the modern debates about supposedly declining standards of literacy, texting ruining our language and slang making us all speak like wannabe-gangstas with speech impediments, what Henry Hitchings reveals in his excellent survey of arguments about 'proper' English is that these debates, gripes and groans have been around for a very long time. In fact, he suggests that they've been around ever since we've had a language.

Did you think that writing should of instead of should have (as in 'You should of phoned me!') was a recent problem? They argued about it in the Seventeenth Century.

Is it it's or its? They were confused about it over a hundred years ago.

You was or you were? This was problematic even for the writers of grammar books in the Eighteenth Century, who would tell their readers to do one thing and then do the precise opposite in their own private letters.

Should we be worried about young people in Twenty First Century Britain not being literate by the time they leave school? In Victorian times they were more worried about too many young people learning how to read.

And so it goes on. Hitchings looks at arguments about what our language is, what different groups of people think it should be and how we've arrived at a point now when English is pretty much a global phenomenon, admittedly a global phenomenon (Greek) that has taken much of its vocabulary (Latin) from other languages (French).

The Language Wars is a great read, not just for its balanced approach to the debate about what we might see as 'proper' English, but also for its neat overviews of language topics covered at A level, such as gender and talk, political correctness, attitudes to accents and the growth of global Englishes.

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