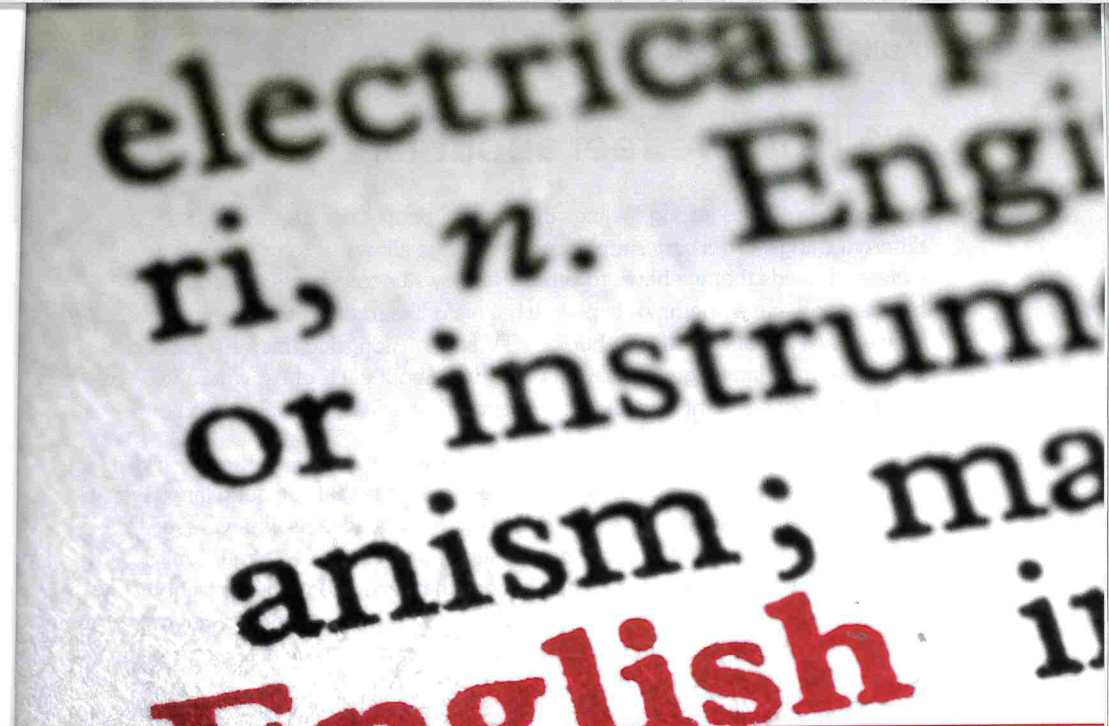


Chapter 1
Arguments about English

In this chapter you will:

- Consider some of the main debates about English
- Look at the origins of arguments about English
- Examine contemporary examples of arguments about English use

1.1 How we feel about language

Language provokes strong feelings in so many people because it does so many different things. On a very simple level, language allows us to communicate ideas and needs that we have, to others. It allows us to express the desire to have a drink, eat something, explain what we'd like to do in the evening or how we feel about a particular book or TV show. Alongside this very important functional role, language also says a great deal about each of us: where we are from, how we want to project an image of ourselves, our values and our relationships with others.

In this chapter, you will look at some of the arguments that surround language use and the attitudes that are expressed towards language. As you will see, many of these arguments appear, on the surface at least, to be about topics such as new words, slang terms, the changes that technology makes to how we communicate and the ways in which we use accents and dialects, but once we dig a bit deeper we find that many of the arguments simply use language as a cover for other arguments. So, an argument about young people's use of abbreviations in online communication such as WhatsApp or Instagram might actually have more to do with attitudes to young people themselves – and the differences between one generation and another – than the language they use. As James Milroy and Lesley Milroy (1985: 45–46) put it:

> Language attitudes stand proxy for a much more comprehensive set of social and political attitudes, including stances strongly tinged with authoritarianism, but often presented as 'common sense'.

Later in this chapter you will look at how Standard English might be defined and how it emerged, but first have a look at some of the battlegrounds for language and the reasons for conflict.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Non-Standard English

Look at the list and consider each example of language use. Have you heard, read or used any of these expressions in any situation before? Score each one on a scale of 0–5 for how positively or negatively you feel towards each usage, with 0 as the most negative and 5 as the most positive.

- We done that yesterday
- The players gave everything they had; they done good
- And she was literally crying her eyes out
- Man's gotta earn ps innit
- And they come over to ours last week too
- #YOLO
- LOL, i no...
- You've got to listen to this track – it's sick

Whatever your feelings about these examples, there are some clear patterns to the language being used in them so that while the specific examples might change year to year, or decade to decade, the same kinds of complaints generally emerge about grammatical variation.

KEY TERM

Grammatical variation: how varieties of English use different grammatical structures to create meaning

1.1.1 Grammatical variation

Using 'done' for 'did' or 'come' for 'came' are often features of non-standard varieties of English, linked to regional dialects or sociolects. Likewise, the use of an adjective (*good*) where an adverb might be used in Standard English (*well*) might be linked to region or social class variation. A more recent grammatical development in some urban British varieties is the emergence of *man* being used like a pronoun instead of its more traditional noun role.

KEY TERMS

Dialect: language associated with a particular locality, region or geographical area

Sociolect: language associated with a particular social group

1.1.2 Semantic variation

Complaints often arise out of words that change meaning or that are used to mean different things. This is known as semantic variation. 'Literally' being used to mean 'metaphorically' (as in the expression, 'When she left, my heart

was literally broken in two' which doesn't 'literally' mean this at all – the consequences would be fatal – but is being used as a form of intensification or hyperbole) is not a recent development but has provoked much discussion in the last decade. Likewise, the process of flipping words, as in the case of 'sick' being used as a term of approval, is not a recent phenomenon (as anyone old enough to remember the release of Michael Jackson's *Bad* album could tell you). The use of cliché or dead metaphors such as 'gave everything' might also be an issue of semantics.

KEY TERMS

Semantic variation: how word meanings vary from place to place and group to group

Flipping: a term used to describe a rapid semantic change in a word from one meaning to its opposite or near opposite

1.1.3 Orthographical variation

Orthographical variation, for example in acronyms (such as 'LOL' for 'Laugh(ing) Out Loud' or 'YOLO' for 'You Only Live Once') or other abbreviations (such as 'no' for 'know') provoke strong feelings among many people, but are frequently used in online contexts without any communicative problems. The changing role of punctuation symbols such as the octothorpe (or hashtag #) and ellipsis dots (...) could also come under this category.

KEY TERM

Orthographical variation: how the use of symbols, letters and spellings varies among language users

Other aspects of language provoke complaint too, such as phonological variation, but this is difficult to convey in the printed word on the page. Certain regional accents (often those associated with historically urban and economically deprived areas such as Birmingham and Liverpool in the UK, or Baltimore and south central Los Angeles in the USA) often cause strong negative reactions, being rated as less trustworthy and/or intelligent than apparently more prestigious accents, while certain characteristics of speech such as rising intonation or vocal fry lead to some negative judgements. Why should any of these examples provoke complaint? These judgements vary from place to place as well, because what is 'normal' for one group or place might be seen as novel or odd by others.

KEY TERMS

Phonological variation: how the sounds of English vary among different speakers of English

Rising intonation: using a rising tone as an utterance ends. Generally used when asking a question, but now more prevalent in statements. Can also be referred to as High-Rising Terminals or Uptalk

Vocal fry: a way of speaking that constricts the vocal cords and creates a creaking, low frequency sound

RESEARCH QUESTION

Researching media representations of language

Choose a year in the last two decades and, using a range of media websites (e.g. *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Independent*, Slate.com, *Daily Telegraph*, Mail Online), identify the main stories that offer opinions about language. Can you categorise the main topics or areas that give rise to concerns about language use? For example, are some of them about accent prejudice, new words in the dictionary, or texting and literacy? What kinds of concerns are raised and how are these expressed?

You can develop this research task as the book goes on in order to identify possible data for analysis of language debates and for a potential language research investigation or project, so you can treat this as a step on the way to a more complete data set.

1.2 Standard English

All of the examples in Activity 1.1 vary from what might be seen as the norm for English language in ways that mark them out as non-standard: in other words, they are not examples of Standard English. But what exactly is Standard English and what is it for?

The linguist David Crystal explains that the role of a standard language is 'to enable the members of a community to understand each other' and that 'the leading national institutions, such as the British parliament, the US Congress, the BBC, and CNN, adopt it as their primary means of expression, in the interests of universal comprehensibility' (Crystal 2005: 6).

Defining Standard English is perhaps less easy. According to sociolinguist Janet Holmes, a standard variety of a language 'is generally one that is written, and which has undergone some degree of regularisation or codification (for example, in a reference grammar and a dictionary); it is recognised as a prestigious variety or code by a community' (Holmes 2008: 76).

Standard English is not a static, unchanging form of language either. There have been significant changes over time to what might be viewed as Standard English – changes that are likely to continue into the future – and different standard forms exist around the world. So, for example, Standard American English and Standard Australian English exist as standard forms in their respective countries. Importantly too, very few people are brought up with Standard English as their home dialect and most of us will use non-standard varieties when we speak or we communicate online.

To even call Standard English a dialect is to open up part of its history to scrutiny. As you will see later in this chapter, Standard English first emerged from particular areas of England and from particular social groupings in England at the time, so it is linked to the history of the language and to the country's political and social history. As a result of being chosen as a prestigious form of English by a powerful group in society, Standard English carries with it (and can be used to exhibit) many connotations of power and authority. Some would even see Standard English as a superior form of English because it has power and authority, and the apparent ability to confer this power to others.

We are generally taught to use Standard English during our years in the education system and, whatever our social or geographical background, are encouraged to view it as the prestige form of our language: a standard to aspire to in our formal communication with others.

Standard English is generally regarded as possessing certain grammatical and lexical characteristics that make it suitable for its role as a shared language that all can understand. As such, it is seen to follow the widely accepted 'rules' of English. These 'rules' are not genuine linguistic rules, but more like conventions that are agreed upon, however. As language academic Jean Aitchison explained in her Reith Lectures for the BBC in 1996:

> All languages have their "rules" in the sense of recurring subconscious patterns. In English, we usually place the verb inside the sentence, and say: "The spider caught the fly". In Welsh, the verb comes first: "Caught the spider the fly" (Daliodd y pryf copyn y gleren), and in Turkish it comes last, "The spider the fly caught". Without these rules, communication would break down. But real "rules" need to be distinguished from artificially imposed ones.

1.3 Non-Standard English

While Standard English proves itself quite difficult to define, non-Standard English is a little simpler: anything that is not Standard English. This means that a range of grammatical variations would be seen as non-standard in most cases, such as:

- **Multiple negation:** using more than one negative marker in a clause, e.g. *we didn't see nothing* or *I'd never say nothing bad about him*
- **Subject–verb discord/lack of agreement:** using a verb form that does not match the standard person or number of the subject, e.g. *we was hoping* or *she were a great sister*
- **Marking/not marking tense:** using a form of a verb that is not generally seen to be a standard way of indicating the past tense, e.g. *he come up here yesterday* or *we done grammar at school today* (as my daughter told me after a day of grammar tests in school).

As a language student, you are discouraged from using terms such as 'incorrect' or 'bad English', so 'non-standard' is viewed as a less judgemental, more descriptive, term but it is clear that many people would see such usage as wrong. Some have even argued that the users of such non-standard expressions are ill-educated, ignorant or even immoral.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Ghetto grammar

Read Text 1A and consider the views about non-Standard English put forward. What objections is the writer raising about the uses of English that he dislikes and what views is he putting forward about the speakers of such language?

Text 1A

> Acceptance of "ghetto grammar" amounts to a betrayal of young people, trapping them in stereotypes. The young people I mentor are not stupid – yet their street slang makes them sound stupid and uneducated.

> The better they speak, the more others – especially in positions of authority – will be inclined to take them seriously. Embracing street slang leads to disenfranchisement, marginalisation and ultimately the dole queue. Embracing "proper English" unlocks an intellectual feast.
>
> Extract from 'Ghetto grammar robs the young of a proper voice', Lindsay Johns (*Evening Standard*, 16 August 2011)

In this text, Johns makes a number of claims about the reactions people might have to what he calls 'ghetto grammar', including comments about employability, intelligence and education. Such views – and the language used to express them – are commonplace and will be explored in later chapters, but the idea that using non-Standard English limits and holds back its users is one that has been in circulation ever since there has been a Standard English to diverge from.

1.4 The origins of Standard English

Standard English did not appear by chance, despite many of its key elements gradually emerging over the history of the language. While attempts had been made in the Anglo-Saxon period to promote a standard in the form of the West Saxon dialect, this proved short-lived and for much of the time between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, other languages – Latin and then French – provided the prestigious forms to which educated people aspired and in which most written communication took place. In the case of Latin, this was due in part to its role in religious texts (some of the most widely read texts of the time) and in the case of French, this was due to the Norman invasion of 1066 and the influence of French-speaking rulers on the population of Britain.

By the fifteenth century, English had managed – against some considerable opposition – to achieve more prestige as a language in its own country: an idea that may appear odd to us now, given the subsequent spread and influence of English all over the world. According to Terttu Nevalainen and Ingrid Tieken-Boon Van Ostade (2006), King Henry V used English in his letters home while fighting in France during the Hundred Years War and at the same time Chancery English (the Chancery being what we might see now as a branch of the government's civil service) was becoming more widespread as the role of the written word and the subsequent need for agreed standards in writing began to grow.

The form of English used by Henry V is widely believed to have been the East Midlands dialect of English, so at some point a conscious decision would probably have been made to choose this. Figure 1.1 shows the areas of England that influenced Standard English at that time.

> Arguments usually given to explain this development are that this dialect was spoken by the largest number of people, that the east midland area was agriculturally rich, that it contained the seat of government and administration as well as the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge, that it contained good ports and that it was close to the chief archiepiscopal see, Canterbury. (Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon Van Ostade 2006: 275)

Figure 1.1: Map showing the 'triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge, the key areas in the south east and east Midlands that influenced Standard English

While these economic and political factors clearly had an influence on the selection of the East Midlands dialect as the developing standard form of English, other developments were probably responsible too. Professional writers and scribes – *scriveners* – were part of a growing middle class, who viewed the written word as a crucial means of conducting trade and government. As the written word grew in influence, a standard form, made up of many shared elements of English dialects around the UK, started to come together.

> For the basis of a standard language to have emerged so quickly, during the fifteenth century, its roots must have been present in a broad cross-section of society. There must have been a growing sense of shared usage, as individual scriveners (a term recorded from the end of the fourteenth century) with different backgrounds came into contact and began to influence each other. (Crystal 2005: 229)

At this point, it is important to point out that the emerging standard form was not entirely uniform. Standardisation is a process rather than a one-off event, and a process that continues to this day. It is clear for example that spelling

has become more standard over time and this is something that had started to standardise by the sixteenth century (although not entirely, if stories about the six different ways Shakespeare spelled his name are to be believed) and continues to be discussed and debated to this day. Written texts from this time show a range of different spellings:

> In a single page one might read of *coronation* and *crownacion*, of a *rogue* and a *roage*, and of something that has *been*, *bin* or *beene*. (Hitchings 2011a: 69)

Moves were made in the eighteenth century to standardise grammar and word meanings through a range of publications, including dictionaries and grammar guides.

1.5 The development of Standard English

David Graddol, Dick Leith and Joan Swann (2006: 83–84) identify four key processes in the standardisation of a language: selection, elaboration, codification and implementation. Having selected the East Midlands dialect as the emerging standard, writers produced a growing body of written work in many different fields (religion, science, politics and cookery, for example) allowing the standard to be elaborated across different forms and functions. Codification came into play as time went on. With English growing in prestige, many attempts were made to draw up sets of rules to codify its use in written (and sometimes spoken) forms. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, dictionaries and grammars of English flourished and various pronouncements were made about the 'correct' way to use certain structures of English or (perhaps more often) the 'incorrect' and 'inelegant' usages to avoid. Among these, Bullokar (1586), Cawdrey (1604), Swift (1712), Johnson (1755), Lowth (1762) and Murray (1795) are perhaps the best known authorities of their time and more can be read about them in the suggestions for wider reading at the end of this chapter.

> It is difficult to assess how successful the eighteenth-century legislators were in achieving their aim of suppressing variation in language. They seem to have been successful in codifying a set of conventions appropriate for the written language – conventions which have not changed greatly since that time. The orthography, for example, has changed very little since Dr Johnson codified the spelling in his dictionary. Clearly, they were answering the need of a developing nation for reliable communication in writing, and in this they have been generally successful. (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 28–29)

In establishing a model for written English, spread through the now largely printed word (Caxton's printing press appearing in the UK in 1476), an ideology

or way of thinking about English was taking root and it was written English that provided this model.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Why have a standard?

Why is having a standard form of a language important? Think about the various benefits of having an agreed form of a language and the implications for individuals and institutions. What might be the problems faced without a standard form of a language? Alternatively, can you see any potential drawbacks to having a standard form?

Many of the arguments you will look at in this chapter and the rest of the book are focused on how English is used more widely than just formal, written communication. It is perhaps no surprise that once a standard has been set and conventions broadly agreed, other forms of language are often seen as sub-standard if they do not follow that standard, even if at times they are actually more widely used than the so-called standard form.

Much of this argument derives from different perspectives about language use, which can be broadly classified as prescriptive or descriptive. In the Cambridge Topics in English Language series, *Language Change* explores the historical development of these positions and approaches in more detail, but it is probably simplest to suggest that a prescriptive approach tells us what we should be doing with language (*prescribing* a way of using language), while a descriptive approach tells us how language is actually used (*describing* its features, functions, users and nature).

KEY TERMS

Prescriptivism: a way of viewing language as correct or incorrect, prescribing a 'correct' way to use language

Descriptivism: a way of viewing language as being standard or non-standard, not making judgements about correctness

The eighteenth-century grammarians, whose books on the language shaped the perception of what Standard English should be, were largely prescriptive in their outlook. They often made reference to forms of grammar or vocabulary that people should avoid and offered examples of what they saw as 'proper' or 'elegant' language. It was an understandable position to adopt at the time, especially considering the relatively recently acquired status of English as the national language.

Many of the grammarians saw the diversity of English – its accents, dialects, variable spellings, common turns of phrase – as being wild and out of control, and sought to 'cultivate' the language, much as a gardener might try to keep nature in check and make it attractive to others.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Researching the 'grammarians'

Find out what you can about the ways in which each of the following people tried to exert an influence on the development and use of the English language. Which areas of language were they concerned about and how did they propose regulating them?

- Jonathan Swift
- Robert Lowth
- Lindley Murray
- Samuel Johnson

To help you with this, you could use some of the following sources, which offer insights into the work of each of the writers, or check the wider reading section at the end of this chapter for further suggestions:

- Baugh and Cable (2012) *A History of the English Language*
- Crystal (1997) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*
- Crystal (2005) *The Stories of English*
- Hitchings (2011a) *The Language Wars: A History of Proper English*

1.6 Complaints about English

Even before this wave of concern about English, people had complained about the standard of the language. Jean Aitchison (1996: 4) refers to a '14th-century monk' who complained that 'the English practised strange "wlaffyng, chytering, harryng, and garryng grisbittyng" (strange stammering, chattering, snarling and grating tooth-gnashing)'. Robert Lane Greene (2011: 24), writing about William Caxton's frustration at finding so many different dialect words for the same thing (in this case, 'eggs') quotes the printer as saying, 'Certainly it is hard to please every man by cause of diversity and change of language'.

What is it about the English language that makes so many people appear so concerned for its health and future? Perhaps it is not the language itself, but its users. In many ways, concerns about language decline are natural in that they are generational. In other words, each generation will see the language used by the next as different – and potentially deficient – compared to their own. Even young people can feel like this about those even younger than them. How do you feel, for example, about the language you hear spoken by those who are five to ten years younger than you? Do you ever feel that younger people's slang is embarrassing or childish?

A different perspective is to suggest that the language itself is resistant to regulation. As linguist Kate Burridge puts it, 'language is simply not amenable to being forced into standard moulds'. She explains:

> Speech communities are extremely complex and language has to cover a huge range of social behaviour. Yet, variability and mutability – qualities intrinsic to any linguistic system – do not sit happily within the classifications of a pure and consistent standard variety. The label 'standard' entails not only 'best practice' but also 'uniform practice' and this is only practical in the context of the written language, especially formal written language. (Burridge 2004: 11–12)

Spoken language is very different to written language: it varies much more from place to place and person to person, it does different jobs, is used in different situations and takes different forms. The range of different varieties of spoken language is huge: just look at the different dialects of the UK and varieties of World Englishes to get a sense of this. Websites such as those of the British Library can provide a useful starting point. Also, we have historically used speech when face to face with our conversational partners and in casual, spontaneous talk we often make it up as we go along, adopting grammatical structures that are quite different to those of written communication.

Alongside the spoken word itself, the context of communication is often more fluid, with the opportunity to refer to the immediate environment (for example, by pointing at things around us), respond quickly to questions or requests for clarification and shape meaning together using interaction.

The language of formal, written communication is not suited to many forms of spoken interaction, yet people are often judged on their spoken language using the standards of written language. And in some ways, it could be argued that spoken language has the potential to mean *more* than written language because spoken language is often a more multi-modal and social act where the literal meanings of the words and grammatical structures used are perhaps not as significant as the act of talking to someone, the body language of those involved and the implied meanings of the conversation taking place.

1.7 Changing English

English has continued to develop throughout its history. New words are added all the time, new meanings emerge, ways of pronouncing words and sounds shift from person to person and place to place, and grammar looks quite different in some contexts to how it did in the past.

Increasingly, as you will see in Chapter 3, advances in technology now mean that some forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) use many dimensions of the spoken mode in a form that is still read through the visual channel (so still a kind of writing). Do the rules of eighteenth-century Standard English still apply to the language of Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat?

KEY TERM

Computer-mediated communication (CMC): any form of communication that uses the medium of a keyboard or digital device, rather than being spoken or written

ACTIVITY 1.4

Spelling study

Investigate the ways in which words are spelled in texts from different times. First, choose a set of words to research and use the British Library website to check the spelling of these words from different periods of history. What variations do you notice? Are spellings more regular in printed texts in the twenty-first century?

Then take a range of messages from different people using social media platforms and apps such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter and text messages. (Make sure you ask permission before you use the messages.) Study a sample of these and identify any examples of non-standard spelling, punctuation and grammar. What patterns do you notice? How standard is spelling now compared to previous centuries?

Figure 1.2 is a screenshot from the Cambridge Learner Corpus, which consists of answers to written tests from students all over the world (in this case, First Certificate in English (FCE) tests). What do you notice about the common spelling mistakes in these responses?

Figure 1.2: Spelling mistakes in answers to FCE tests

areas, good food, and friendly <#DN><#S>	**sorrounding**	| *surrounding* </#S>| *surroundings* </#DN> - it
Radiant didn't <#FV> *played* | *play* </#FV> for 35 <#S>	**minuts**	| *minutes* </#S> in all, as the report explains
might have gone cut <#RT> *by* | *on* </#RT> our <#S>	**bicyles**	| *bicycles* </#S> . Unfortunately <#MP>
to <#UD> *the* | </#UD> school by <#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> , <#RP> *A* | *a* </#RP> car collided
, <#RP> *A* | *a* </#RP> car collided with her <#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> , and this accident <#DV> *gave*
<#DV> *gave damage to* | *damaged* </#DV> her <#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> . She can no longer ride her
bicycle </#S> . She can no longer ride her <#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> after that incident. Therefore
<#RN> *idea* | *plan* </#RN> and we didn't buy a <#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> . Moreover, there is
more which I want you to know. In my <#S>	**contry**	| *country* </#S> it's impossible to ride <#MD>
impossible to ride <#MD> | *a* </#MD><#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> or motorbike because of our
roads for riding <#MD> | *a* </#MD><#S>	**bicyle**	| *bicycle* </#S> . Anyway, <#RC> *so* | *because* </#RC>
of the <#R> *most* | *worst* </#R> problems of <#S>	**ur**	| *our* </#S> town. <#RY> *Especially* | *Particularly*
old buildings to save their historical <#S>	**charakter**	| *character* </#S> . In general we must combine
<#R> *According to* | *Having seen* </#R> your <#S>	**advertisment**	| *advertisement* </#S><#RT> *on* | *in* </#RT> the London
</#RP> at my old club in Stockholm. I <#S>	**belive**	| *believe* </#S> it's very important for everybody
to do some <#UN> *sport* | </#UN><#S>	**exercis**	| *exercise* </#S> to keep <#UA> *them* |
Because I'm <#MD> | *a* </#MD> very <#S>	**buzy**	| *busy* </#S> man, my <#R> *working time is almost*
</#R> and we've <#W> *got* <#FN><#UP><#S>	**managment-meeting**	| *management-meeting* </#S>| *management meeting*
Sincererly | *Sincerely* </#DY> The most <#S>	**embarrasing**	| *embarrassing* </#S> moment of my life was
the murdered woman wasn't Martine but <#S>	**sorried**	| *sorry* </#S> for the other woman who was murdered

Attitudes to changes in modern English follow many of the same patterns already observed in this chapter: changes are often seen as a form of degradation and decay, and much change is viewed as a kind of decline from a pinnacle of perfection at some distant point in history. As Aitchison (2012) argues, such a prescriptive mindset does not reflect the true nature of language change, but neither does a more scientific 'evolutionary' model of change proposing that some languages or characteristics of them are inherently 'better'. In fact, to talk about language – or varieties within a language – being better or worse than others is to miss the point.

> The quasi-religious conviction of gradual decline has never entirely died out. But from the mid nineteenth century onward, a second, opposing viewpoint came into existence alongside the earlier one. Darwin's doctrine of the survival of the fittest and ensuing belief in inevitable progress gradually grew in popularity [...] The former lead(s) to an illogical idealization of the past, and the latter to the confusion of progress and decay with expansion and decline. (Aitchison 2012: 236–237)

Robert Lane Greene (2011) has argued that such declinist views simply fail to acknowledge the reality of language around them:

> A hundred and forty years ago, one in five Americans was illiterate. Now less than one in a hundred is—and this fall began during a hundred years of "separate but equal" dismal schools for blacks in America. In Britain, illiteracy is rarer still. It may be true that formal grammar was taught more extensively in good schools in the past. But the notion that once upon a time, every schoolboy was an H.W. Fowler, every schoolgirl a perfectly punctuating Lynne Truss, but today no one can put two words together simply holds no water. Where is the former golden age of the written word? (Greene 2011: 47)

KEY TERM

Declinism: a tendency noted by Robert Lane Greene for prescriptivists to view language as being in a state of constant decline from a once great peak

It is undeniable however that the speed of certain forms of language change has increased in recent years as a result of the internet and digital communication, so concerns about language change have tended to match this pace. Articles complaining about new words entering the dictionary and new meanings emerging for old words, along with pieces bemoaning the apparent disappearance of the full stop and apostrophe from young people's writing are all part of the linguistic landscape. As you will study in more detail in Chapter 4, many of these concerns are phrased in similar ways and draw on familiar discourses, but here you can look at some of the main trends.

1.7.1 Vocabulary change

New words appear in order to describe new things, but also to describe and label new concepts or beliefs. From its earliest days, English has added to its lexicon, often taking words from other languages, the process of borrowing what are then called loan words. This way of describing it led one commentator to ironically suggest, 'We don't just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary' (Nicoll 1990).

KEY TERMS

Lexicon: the vocabulary of a language

Borrowing: the process of taking a word from another language and inserting it into the lexicon of another

Loan word: a word that has been borrowed

Borrowing is well recognised now and, in many cases, English speakers are unaware that the words they treat as normal English vocabulary once came from abroad. Try looking up words such as 'alcohol', 'pyjamas', 'bungalow', 'assassin', 'skill' and 'tattoo' for evidence of their linguistic origins. However, lexical imports from Greek and Latin created some concern in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries in what became known as the 'Inkhorn Controversy'. 'Inkhorn terms' – those imports that were judged to be pretentious or

unnecessary, including words such as 'democracy' and 'impede' – were debated and 'purer' Anglo-Saxon derived alternatives proposed.

While the controversy was a clear example of a public debate about the nature of English language change, many of the words earmarked for rejection are still used today, and this is a common trend: attempts to regulate the language and control its use are generally doomed to failure. However, the same argument – that of protecting the 'purity' of English from outside forces – is still advanced in the present day, often with what are seen to be American English words identified for rejection.

For example, in his article 'Say no to the get-go!' the journalist Matthew Engel (2010) complains about the term 'from the get-go' which he describes as 'an ugly Americanism, meaning "from the start" or "from the off". It adds nothing to Britain's language but it's here now, like the grey squirrel, destined to drive out native species and ravage the linguistic ecosystem'.

In a different article on the same theme, Engel (2011) addresses a range of other words he deems to be American imports, citing 'lengthy', 'reliable', 'talented', 'influential' and 'tremendous' as US English. However, only one of these ('lengthy') is recognised as such by the linguist Mark Liberman (2011) and Engel's attack is described by Liberman as a form of 'language peeving': a venting of irrational prejudice with little basis in fact.

Other complaints about new words follow a similar pattern. When words enter one of the recognised dictionaries, there is a flurry of media attention, often focusing on the novelty of these new terms and the perception that they will be short-lived and faddish. Some commentators argue that only 'proper words' should be recorded in a dictionary (single words rather than phrases or compound nouns, and words rather than emojis, as Oxford Dictionaries did in 2015 with the 'face with tears of joy' emoji 😂 becoming their word of the year) and that they should be serious, substantial words that are set to last. Quite how anyone can tell which words will last is not entirely clear!

KEY TERM

Emoji: a term to describe visual icons (representations of facial expressions, actions and objects) used in social media messaging

Christopher Howse (2010) argued that:

> … it is very easy to concentrate on neologisms that reflect the wilder shores of modern life. It's harder to spot defining markers of the way we live now. At the moment the temptation is to identify too many trends from new media – web-surfing, blogging, twittering and unfriending.

But if those terms are in fact the ones that most accurately represent the language used at a given time, why shouldn't they appear in a dictionary?

ACTIVITY 1.5

Words of the year

Using the websites of the following dictionaries, put together a list of the 'words of the year' for the last five to ten years. What patterns do you notice in terms of the way they are formed and the processes that have created them? Are they blends, compounds, initialisms, acronyms or clippings, for example?

Then look for media articles from around the same time as these words entered the dictionaries. What opinions have been offered about these new words and their suitability for inclusion?

Suggested sources:

- Oxford Dictionaries
- Macmillan Dictionaries
- Collins Dictionaries
- Merriam-Webster Dictionaries
- Macquarie Dictionaries

It is not just neologisms and new words in the dictionary that provoke anger in some commentators. The appearance of particular words in speech, such as 'like' used as a filler (as in 'I was like so upset and she was just like so uncaring') has led some journalists to describe the speech of those who use such features as inarticulate and vacuous. The actor Emma Thompson even went so far as to say in an interview in 2010 that young people should not use such features in their language: 'Just don't do it. Because it makes you sound stupid and you're not stupid.'

KEY TERMS

Neologism: a completely new word

Filler: a word or sound used to fill a gap in spoken language (e.g. *um, err, uh, like*)

However, appearances can be deceptive, and while the use of 'like' as a filler has probably increased – influenced by US usage, perhaps – the same word has

also been used in other ways. 'Like' can also function as a quotative (as in 'I was like "What did you say?" and she was like "Nothing!"'), so while it might be used more by particular groups of people, it is also being used in different ways.

Semantic changes in existing words can also cause concern. While you are probably familiar with how established slang terms such as 'sick', 'wicked' and 'bad' are all flipped or ameliorated forms of their original meanings, many other words have gone through a gradual process of semantic change in which their meanings have gone through narrowing to become more precise, broadening to encompass more meanings, or pejoration to pick up more negative connotations.

Words such as 'awful' and 'awesome' have shifted over time. While 'awful' is believed to have once meant 'worthy of respect or fear' (with its meaning linked to its component 'awe') it is now widely perceived as meaning 'very bad' (as in 'Did you see that accident outside college? It was awful.'). 'Awesome' has moved in a different direction, from being used to describe something that provoked fear, terror or respect to a more modern meaning that expresses approval (e.g. 'I loved that film; it was awesome.').

While these are relatively gradual changes to language, prescriptivists often argue that changes in meaning can lead to a lack of intelligibility between the different generations, with younger speakers seeing a word as having a meaning that is completely at odds with how an older generation might view it.

KEY TERMS

Quotative: a language device used to convey what was said, thought or done in an interaction (e.g. she *said*... or she *was like*...)

Amelioration: the process of a word's meaning changing and picking up more positive connotations over time

Narrowing: the process of a word's meanings becoming more specialised over time

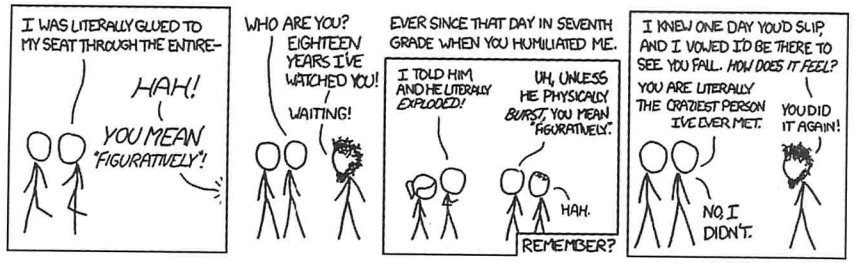
Broadening: the process of a word's meanings becoming more generalised over time

Pejoration: the process of a word's meaning changing and picking up more negative connotations over time

Intelligibility: the ability to be understood and comprehended

'Literally' is another example of a word that has been used in different ways. On one level, 'literally' can mean 'to the letter', where it is the opposite of 'figuratively' or 'metaphorically', but it can also mean its exact opposite (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: 'Literally' or 'figuratively'? Cartoon from xkcd webcomic



In an article responding to the decision by some dictionaries to include the 'figurative' definition, Samantha Rollins (2013) explains it as follows:

> As anyone who paid attention in grade school knows, "literally" means "in a literal or strict sense, as opposed to a non-literal or exaggerated sense," and is the opposite of "figuratively," which means "in a metaphorical sense." But recently, it's become in vogue to use "literally" for emphasis in precisely the non-literal sense, as in, "We were literally killing ourselves laughing." It's the type of informal use that drives any self-respecting language lover nuts.

Again, there is more to this debate than meets the eye. 'Literally' has been used figuratively for hundreds of years and caused very little confusion. The lexicographer Michael Rundell (2011) points out that when examining corpus entries for the word, the meanings of 'literally' were generally very clear: 'Our corpus includes almost 30,000 examples of *literally*, and I've looked at a sample of 1000. The great majority reflect one of the unproblematic senses of *literally*.'

Elsewhere, the linguist John McWhorter compares 'literally' to other similar words with similarly expressive functions – 'really', 'very' and 'truly' – which have all undergone semantic change, shifting away from their original meanings. He also makes the point that many other words mean one thing and their opposite; there is even a name for these words – contronyms.

KEY TERM

Contronym: a word that can mean one thing and its exact opposite at the same time

> You *seed* a watermelon to get the seeds out, but when you seed the soil, you're putting the seeds in. You can *bolt* from a room (running fast) in which the chairs are bolted to the floor (stuck fast). (McWhorter 2016: 26)

We understand the meanings of the words from their contexts, so rarely get genuinely confused.

> Asked to seed a watermelon, no one carefully removes the seeds from one watermelon and then inserts them into another. (McWhorter 2016: 26)

ACTIVITY 1.6

Semantic change

Are there any other words whose meanings have changed over time? Have any of these caused complaints? Look at the examples and see if any of these follow the same patterns that have been discussed.

- terrible
- heavy
- cute
- silly

1.7.2 Phonological change

Changes to the sounds of English have taken place over many hundreds of years, and in the Cambridge Topics in English Language series, *Language Change* offers more details on developments such as the Great Vowel Shift, while in this book, Chapter 3 will consider attitudes to different accents and dialects of the UK and beyond. More recent changes have led to some consternation on the part of language prescriptivists and those averse to innovation. As with so many other arguments about language, these are often more to do with the users of language than the feature itself.

We will consider one example in this section: high-rising terminals (HRT) but you might also want to look at Activity 1.7 at the end of the chapter, which asks you to examine media representation of vocal fry. Traditionally in English, the intonation of questions rises at the end of the utterance, but not the intonation of statements. Think of how you might say the following sentences aloud:

- Would you like some crisps?
- Was that your dad?
- Wasn't that amazing?

KEY TERM

High-rising terminals (HRT)/uptalk: a way of speaking in which the intonation pattern moves up towards the end of a declarative utterance

When this intonation is used with statements, it becomes what has been referred to as uptalk. Try saying the following sentences as if you are asking a question with them:

- You like crisps.
- That was your dad.
- That was amazing.

Uptalk is generally viewed as a recent phenomenon and has been identified in a number of media articles over the last 20–30 years. Originally associated with 'Valley Girl' talk (speech associated with the San Fernando Valley in California, USA and popularised in the song 'Valley Girl' by Frank Zappa) and then with Australian accents (from which it has also gained the title Australian Question Intonation), its supposedly increased use among young people – and particularly young women – has attracted much comment.

Stefanie Marsh of *The Times* (2006) described it as 'this irritating verbal tic' while others have described English as being 'infected' with this style. And a cursory scan of YouTube videos about uptalk even suggest that it could make you physically sick.

One of the key complaints about uptalk for many commentators has been its association with uncertainty. If you make a statement sound like you are asking a question – the complaint often goes – you will sound uncertain about what you are saying. Many articles have been written advising women (and it is generally women who are the targets of these articles) on how to avoid using uptalk so as to not be judged as uncertain or unassertive.

A piece by Naomi Wolf (2015) asserted that 'the most empowered generation of women ever – today's twentysomethings in North America and Britain – is being hobbled in some important ways by something as basic as a new fashion in how they use their voices'. She argued that uptalk can 'undermine these women's authority in newly distinctive ways'.

Responding to this article, linguist Deborah Cameron (2015b) pointed out that it is not just young women who use uptalk, but that it is also used by older women and many men. While young women often lead linguistic innovation and are first to use a new speech feature, 'if everyone does uptalk, just to different degrees, then it doesn't make sense to interpret it as an expression of young women's lack of confidence and their reluctance to project authority. If that was what uptalk expressed, men wouldn't have followed women's lead by adopting it'.

It is no coincidence that women – and especially young women – have been singled out for attention with uptalk, because as Cameron points out in the same blog post, 'negative attitudes to the language of subordinate groups are just manifestations of a more general prejudice against the groups themselves. People may claim that their judgments are purely about the speech, but really they're judgments of the speakers'. As she goes on to say elsewhere:

> This endless policing of women's language—their voices, their intonation patterns, the words they use, their syntax—is uncomfortably similar to the way our culture polices women's bodily appearance. Just as the media and the beauty industry continually invent new reasons for women to be self-conscious about their bodies, so magazine articles and radio programmes like the ones I've mentioned encourage a similar self-consciousness about our speech. (Cameron 2015a)

Perhaps what is actually happening with uptalk is that the intonation pattern no longer means what it meant before. As words change meaning over time, so do sounds. In this case, uptalk is perhaps signalling a desire to cooperate in interaction, to check that someone else is following, or even to assert control over a conversation by making sure others are listening.

John McWhorter (2016: 36) explains it in the following way:

> … the meaning of an intonation can drift, via implication, just as the meaning of a word can. This includes questions. It's interesting how often what we couch formally as questions are meant as statements. If we ask someone who is piling their omelette with pepper "How much pepper do you *need*?" we are not waiting for them to specify how much. We are stating something, and something quite specific: that the person is overdoing it – here, using too much pepper.

And therefore uptalk is performing a role different to the role it performs when phrasing a question:

> If the uptalker is actually questioning anything, it is not the validity of her statement but whether the person listening understands or shares the same basis of knowledge and evaluations. (McWhorter 2016: 36)

ACTIVITY 1.7

Examining vocal fry in the press

Investigate the media coverage of vocal fry and gather different texts about it. What do you notice about the ways in which it is represented and the advice offered to its users? This data will be useful when you reach Chapter 4 where you will study language discourses in more detail.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

Aitchison, J. (2012) *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* (Fourth edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, D. (2005) *The Stories of English*. London: Penguin.

Milroy, J. and Milroy, L. (1985) *Authority in Language: Investigating Standard English*. London: Routledge.

Nevalainen, T. and Tieken-Boon Van Ostade, I. (2006) 'Standardisation'. In R. Hogg and D. Denison (eds) *A History of the English Language* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 275.

Chapter 2
Technology and language

In this chapter you will:

- Look at how technology has influenced changes in the English language
- Consider arguments about the impact of technology
- Explore and evaluate contemporary debates about technology and language