Chapter 1
The nature of language change

In this chapter, you will:

- Establish an understanding of what language change is
- Explore some approaches to studying language change
- Start to examine some of the ways English has changed and the reasons for these changes

1.1 The inevitability of change

All languages change over time. They always have done, and they always will. Some people find this a source of disappointment and frustration, and many have spent time trying to resist and challenge language change, complaining about imaginary things such as a 'decline in standards' and 'new, unwanted forms of language'. This is a futile endeavour, carried out by people who misunderstand what language actually is, and what it is used for. Language change is inevitable – languages are dynamic, malleable and flexible. They change in the way they look and sound, and they change in the way they are perceived by others. They have changed in the past, they are changing right now, and they will change in the future. New words come and go; languages are born, and languages die.

This book is a study of how and why those changes happen. Throughout it, you will see how English has undergone massive change over time, looking at change from both a diachronic perspective (where the historical development of a language is studied) and a synchronic perspective (where a particular moment in time is studied). In this chapter, the fundamental approaches that this book takes to the study of language change are laid out, exploring the nature of language itself and how we think, talk and feel about change.

KEY TERMS

Diachronic change: the historical development of language

Synchronic change: the study of language change at a particular moment in time

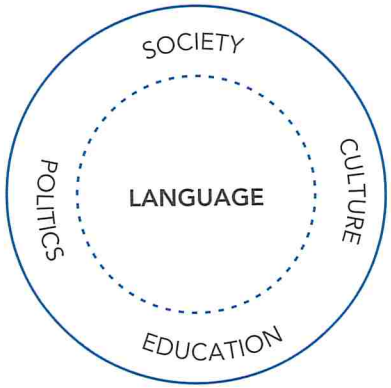
1.2 Why study language change?

Language is a human phenomenon that both shapes and reflects the way we view and understand the world. Knowing about the ways in which language has changed can therefore offer us insight into what human behaviour is like now, what human behaviour was like in the past – and what it might be like in the future. Because language is a system for social communication, understanding how and why it has changed reveals patterns of social behaviour throughout time. As explored in this book, changes in society and changes in language are reciprocal and deeply intertwined. Understanding language change is just one of the ways that we understand society.

Figure 1.1 represents the way that language usage, variation and change are embedded within sociocultural conditions. The dotted line on the inner circle indicates the way that *language* and *sociocultural conditions* are not separate, but connected domains that influence and shape each other. So, language has

different forms and functions across different sociocultural contexts such as politics and education. Context is crucial to how language works, in that it shapes how people select and use different forms, and what they do with those forms.

Figure 1.1: A sociocultural model of language use, variation and change



1.3 Approaches to studying language change

The next three sections outline some of the ways in which language change can be studied. These are the principles and approaches to language study that are adopted in this book, and which form an important theoretical background in terms of thinking about what language actually is.

1.3.1 Describing, not prescribing

Depending on who you talk to about language change, you are likely to encounter different opinions on whether it is a good or a bad thing – or just a 'thing' that happens, which is the view that most linguists take. Many public discourses on language change can be rather negative – it can be fairly rare to hear people say things like 'I love this new word I heard my teenage daughter say' or 'Isn't it brilliant that people don't always use punctuation marks in text messages?' Despite language change being progressive, innovative and creative, some people's attitudes towards change can be rather conservative. Many views about language are often tied up with wider aspects of society such as nationalism, traditionalism and the maintenance of moral standards.

This book adopts and advocates a descriptivist approach to language study. You will find out more about this in Chapter 4, but it is important to briefly consider what this means here, as it has direct implications for how we understand

language itself. Descriptivism is about exploring, analysing and describing language. It draws attention to how language is actually used by people in society, acknowledges language change as an important thing to study, and celebrates multicultural/multilingual diversity. For descriptivists, no language, accent or dialect is 'better' than another one – all varieties are equal in status and understood according to the context in which they appear. Descriptivists reject the notion that language choices can be either 'correct' or 'incorrect', and think about a scale of linguistic *appropriateness* instead.

This is in stark contrast to prescriptivism, which is concerned with hierarchical notions of linguistic standards, correctness and rules. Prescriptivists tend to bemoan language change as they often align it with 'falling standards', 'laziness' and 'sloppiness' with little regard for the actual contexts in which language occurs. For example, consider the following quotation from Norman Tebbit, a former Conservative MP who, when interviewed on the *Today* programme in 1985, suggested that there was a correlation between the ability to use 'good English' (whatever this might be), personal hygiene and a life of crime:

> If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy at school [...] all these things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards there's no imperative to stay out of crime.

As explored further throughout this book, attitudes towards language change are very rarely just about language.

KEY TERMS

Descriptivism: an approach to language study that seeks to describe language use, variation and change, where no judgement or negative attitude is imposed on language

Prescriptivism: the notion that language should be fixed, prescribing to a set standard of rules for language usage, with any shift away from these rules or standards being seen as incorrect

ACTIVITY 1.1

Discussing and evaluating language change

In groups, discuss the following statements (a–i). They are designed to provoke, so try and explore multiple points of view in your discussions. How far do you agree with each of them, and why? Why do you think some of the statements might be seen as controversial? Can you talk about them in terms of prescriptivism and descriptivism?

a. We should embrace and celebrate language change.
b. Language change is ruining the beauty of the English language.
c. If we all spoke one language, things would be a lot easier.
d. Slang and swearing should be banned in schools.
e. Technology is the main driving factor behind language change.
f. Young people are responsible for language change.
g. There is a proper and correct way to use English.
h. Bad grammar makes people look uneducated.
i. British people have a right to say how English is used because they own the language.

1.3.2 Language change as a sociocultural process

This book takes language to be a sociocultural phenomenon. This means that language has primarily a *social function*, and any study or description of language should consider the social, cultural and contextual factors in which it occurs. Understanding language in this way appreciates the fact that it is a human activity, and that changes in a language come about because of changes in human behaviour.

When exploring language from a sociocultural perspective, we can do so at different 'levels', as outlined in Table 1.1. This is a useful approach to take because it allows linguists to 'zoom in and out' to the different components of language, whether they are 'small' parts like particular grammatical constructions, or 'bigger' parts like entire **speech communities**.

Table 1.1: Levels of sociocultural processes (adapted from Culpeper and Nevala, 2012: 383)

	Level of sociocultural process	Descriptive focus	Associated descriptive focus	Brief example involving the history of English
Macro (sociological) ↕	Macro	Sociocultural structures associated with broad speech communities	For example: ideologies, cultures, nations, laws	The eighteenth-century ideology of correctness, prescriptivism and standards

	Level of sociocultural process	Descriptive focus	Associated descriptive focus	Brief example involving the history of English
↕ Micro (linguistic)	Mezzo	Sociocultural activities associated with local communities	For example: social practices, activity types, genres, roles	Lectures, school lessons, debates, discussions
	Micro	Sociocultural actions and reactions amongst individuals	For example: speech acts, interactions	Evaluative language, directives
	-	Linguistic forms	For example: modal verb, rising intonation, double negative	Any linguistic construction that has undergone change

The notion of a speech community is an important one in studying language change. The term is used to describe any socially or regionally defined human group, identifiable by the way that its members use a language (such as English) or a variety of a language (such as South London English). Most people are members of multiple speech communities, each of which have their own distinct linguistic characteristics. For example, somebody could be a member of the British English speech community, the Indian Hindi speech community and the Lancashire dialect speech community at the same time. Speech communities do not exist in neatly defined containers that bear no influence on each other – they are networks that cross over, interact and influence one another. A speech community is also broadly defined by the value or attitude towards language that it holds.

KEY TERM

Speech community: any socially or regionally defined group in which its members share a number of linguistic characteristics

Identity and language

Language is an inherent part of your identity: the way you use language signals to the world who you are, much in the same way that your clothes and taste in music do. So, one of the most important factors involved in language change is derived from its function as a social identity marker. Members of speech communities and social groups exhibit certain ways of marking group membership, lifestyle choices and cultural preferences: clothes, taste in music, ways of behaving, political views, and, crucially, language. Language is one of the key factors that marks different social groups – as well as helping to define who we are as individuals and as group members, it also helps to mark us out as different to other groups. For example, ethnographic research by the sociolinguist Anna-Brita Stenström (2014) found that certain forms of teenage language were characterised by the following linguistic features:

- irregular turn-taking
- overlaps
- indistinct articulation
- word shortenings
- teasing and name calling
- verbal duelling
- slang
- taboo lexis
- language mixing (or code-switching).

The use of such language enables teenagers to define themselves as a social group, and to distance themselves from groups that they might not want to be associated with – adults, or young children, for example. At the same time, different groups want to establish their own identity and so 'pull away' from teenage groups, in patterns of variation that create diversity and change. Young people in particular are often seen as the instigators or, as Penelope Eckert (2011: 367) describes them, the 'movers and shakers' of language change. Various researchers, including Eckert, argue that some of the motivations behind adolescents' linguistic choices and behaviour are:

- they are free to challenge linguistic norms and perceived standards
- they have a desire to build and maintain individual and group identities
- they have a desire to be seen as credible, modern and fashionable by their peers
- they seek to belong to a group that is distinct from their parents and other adults.

KEY TERM

Code-switching: when speakers of two (or more) different languages switch from one to the other, often in mid-conversation depending on who they are talking to or what they wish to accomplish. Can also be used to refer to switching between dialects in the same language

ACTIVITY 1.2

Speech communities, identity and change

Think about the different speech communities that you belong to. For each one, consider the way that you use language within this community. What things are different and similar? Can you account for these similarities and differences? How do these factors contribute to your overall sociolinguistic identity?

1.3.3 Metaphor and language

In this book, metaphor will be used as a tool for analysing the way people talk and think about language. Metaphor is a powerful and pervasive aspect of language, which has long been recognised as a feature of everyday speech, as most famously demonstrated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). When people use metaphor, it allows them to understand one thing in terms of another, reflecting the way that we perceive, think and talk about things in the world. For example, English is often talked about as if it were a 'living thing'. Expressions such as *the English language is alive and well*, *English has grown enormously*, *the birth of English* and *English is unlikely to die anytime soon* are all metaphorical – English has not literally 'grown' or 'been born', but is often talked about as if it had. This is metaphor.

KEY TERM

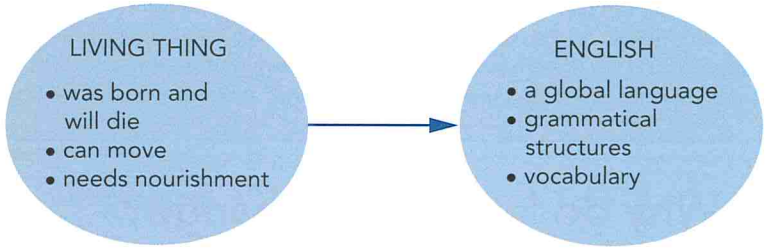
Metaphor: the use of figurative language, where one thing is understood in terms of another thing

Linguists use a recognised formula to label metaphor use in language, as in the conventions of conceptual metaphor theory. This is done by using small capital letters, in a X IS Y structure. So, the examples above can be captured through the metaphor:

ENGLISH IS A LIVING THING

In this metaphor, knowledge from conceptual 'domains' (ENGLISH and LIVING THING) are brought together in a process known as 'mapping'. This cross-domain mapping is shown in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2: Cross-domain mappings for ENGLISH IS A LIVING THING



When we use metaphor, we map knowledge from one domain (the source domain) onto another (the target domain). The source domain for LIVING THING includes information that a speaker knows about things that are alive: the fact that they were born and will die, need nourishment to survive, and so on. This information is mapped onto the target domain of ENGLISH, which includes information that a speaker knows about the English language: the fact that it is a global language, has certain grammatical structures, a vocabulary, and so on.

What do you think of the ENGLISH IS A LIVING THING metaphor? Does talking and thinking about language in this way affect the way you actually understand what 'language' is? Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphor does not just *reflect* the way we see the world, but *constitutes* it. If this is true, then what does this mean for the way we talk – and think – about language?

There are various other ways of talking and thinking about language through metaphor, which will be returned to throughout the course of this book. In addition to the LIVING THING metaphor, Mario Saraceni (2015) also suggests how the metaphors of LANGUAGE IS A TRAVELLER and LANGUAGE IS A PHYSICAL OBJECT are often used to talk about the way that English has 'moved', 'spread' and 'grown' across the world. These metaphors are highly commonplace, giving rise to expressions such as *English has arrived here*, *the English language taken to India* and *we must protect the English language*. He argues that such expressions project a rather simplified understanding of what language is, and fail to include any kind of human agency or involvement. Languages do not just exist by themselves: there are always speakers and often ideological motivations for wanting to 'cut down', 'spread' and 'grow' a language. Saraceni suggests that the metaphor of LANGUAGE IS AN OPEN SOURCE CODE offers a useful way of thinking about how language is a network of features that can be accessed, modified and enhanced by its users.

In this book, language will be understood through a different metaphor: that is, LANGUAGE IS AN EVENT. This metaphor is chosen to try and capture the way that language is *not* a physical object, but is an abstract concept controlled and

adapted by people who use it in different sociocultural contexts. It also tries to capture the dynamic and ongoing nature of language change.

KEY TERM

Conceptual metaphor: a theory of a metaphor whereby one 'domain' of knowledge is 'mapped onto' another domain. The convention for writing conceptual metaphors is through the use of small capitals, in an X IS Y structure

1.4 Why do languages change?

We have seen that language change is inevitable, ongoing and happening right now. But why? This is a difficult question which has no simple answer – the causes of language change are various and only some of them are reasonably understood. It may be useful to think not of 'language changing' but instead of 'people changing language'. Re-conceptualising language change in this way positions human beings as the subject of the verb *changing*, emphasising the 'force' and agency of the speakers behind language.

Language change is natural, and deliberate attempts to either trigger or stop it have been met with fierce resistance, and almost always failed. Despite a number of efforts to 'fix' and standardise a language, or to purposefully introduce new reforms (such as the alternative, phonetic-based English spelling system proposed by the Simplified Spelling Society), English has continued to change and exist without the need for restrictive interventions.

Deep social changes are the main reasons for changes in a language, and the English language is a reflection of the history and lives of the people who speak it. This point cannot be stressed enough: political, economic, social and cultural factors are powerful forces that influence the way a language is used and changes. Such changes manifest themselves in different ways, whether it be a shift in the way a word is pronounced, a new word that enters into a language, or a speaker in a different country shifting to a new language. Chapter 3 explores the processes of language change in further detail.

1.5 What does change mean?

Depending on who you talk to, you are likely to encounter different opinions and attitudes towards language change. Some people are inclined to view changes in a language as 'sloppy' or 'lazy', whereas other people regard new forms as perfectly normal. It is absolutely *not* the case that changes are symbolic of a

'decline' in the language or of 'falling standards'. Indeed, if all of the changes that have happened to English in the last 1,500 years had been a drop in standards, then modern English would surely be so crude that we would hardly be able to use it at all.

A related argument is made by Jean Aitchison (2012), who suggests that language change is indicative of progress, rather than decline. Most of the people who bemoan language change are concerned with linguistic purism, a zero-tolerance approach to change with the view that one variety of a language is inherently better than another, and that change somehow means language deterioration.

KEY TERM

Linguistic purism: a pejorative label used for a view that sees a language as needing preservation from things that might make it change, such as dialect variation and borrowings from other languages

RESEARCH QUESTION

Eliciting views on language change

Design a set of interview questions, prompts or statements about language change, which seek to address some of the issues raised in this chapter. These might include things like:

- How do you define 'correct' spelling, punctuation and grammar? Is it always necessary to use these correct forms?
- Is there anything about the way that English is used that irritates you?
- Which social groups do you think are the most responsible for changes in the English language, and what is your attitude towards this?

Once you have your questions, put them to as wide a range of people from different social groups (e.g. teenagers, grandparents) as you can. Once your data is gathered, compare the responses across groups, which will give you more data to explore. What do your comparisons reveal about people's attitudes and feelings about the nature of language change?

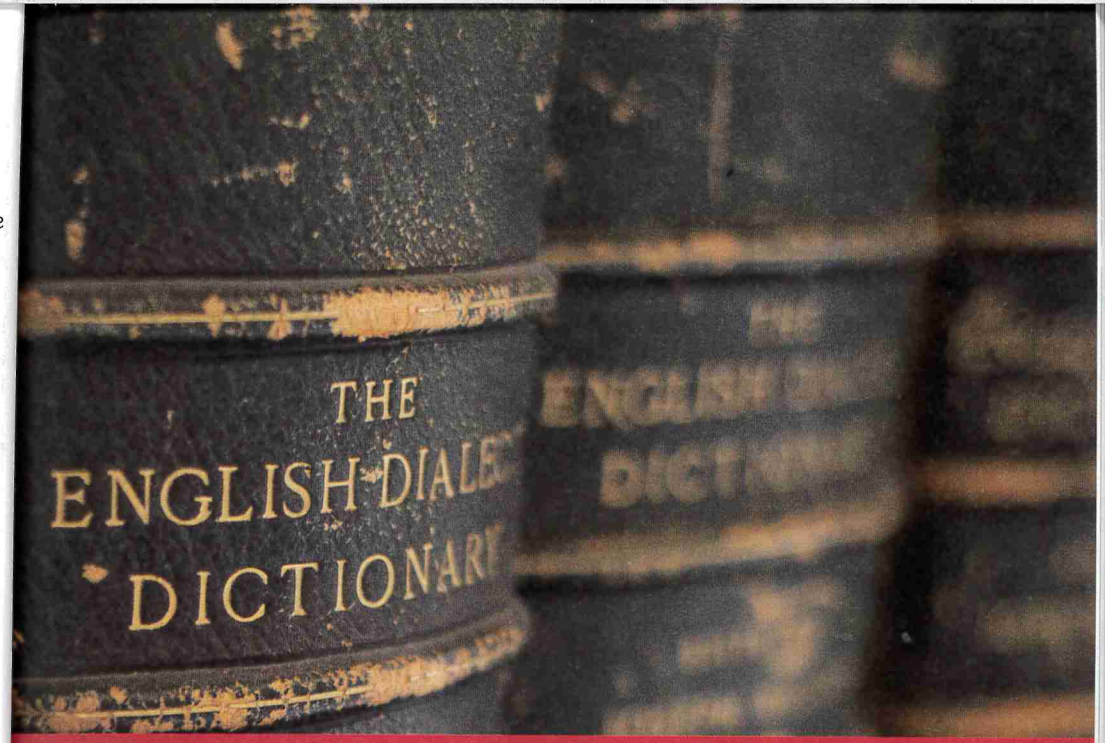
Wider reading

Read more about the nature of language change from a sociocultural perspective by exploring the following books:

Aitchison, J. (1991, reedited 2012). *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fennell, B. (2001). *A History of English: A Sociolinguistic Approach*. London: Blackwell.

Leith, D. (1997). *A Social History of English*. London: Routledge.



Chapter 2
A history of English

In this chapter, you will:

- Consider the development of English over time
- Examine some of the historical and social factors that have led to language change
- Explore some of the ways in which English has changed