Chapter 3
Processes of language change

In this chapter, you will:

- Examine some of the main ways that the English language has undergone change

- Consider why and how language changes

- Reflect on some of the ways that language continues to change

Chapter 2 introduced some of the sociocultural contexts surrounding the 'story' of English, and identified some of the ways that this has shaped the way the language has changed. This chapter looks at the processes of change: in other words, the specific ways in which English has changed. It considers etymology and lexical change: where new words come from, how they are formed, and how their meanings change over time. It will also look at phonological change, in how the sounds of English have changed. Finally, the process of grammatical change is explored, and some of the attitudes towards this.

Once again, there will be an emphasis on the idea that language change and variation is not arbitrary, but exhibits patterns that are driven by sociocultural changes.

3.1 How do we study language change and usage?

We all know that languages change – but how do we monitor this? In the past, linguists would often draw on tools from anthropology and archaeology to help them uncover the histories of a language, piecing together evidence from written texts. Although this approach is still valid, linguists today often make use of corpus linguistics. This method makes extensive use of corpora and computational tools to document and study language change and usage; an approach that provides a number of advantages in examining how a language develops over time. Corpora are large collections of texts (often consisting of more than a million words), which can then be searched and analysed using computers. Figure 3.1 is a screenshot of the Cambridge English Corpus, showing the surrounding words for the phrase 'English is a'. Looking at the results, what things strike you as interesting?

KEY TERMS

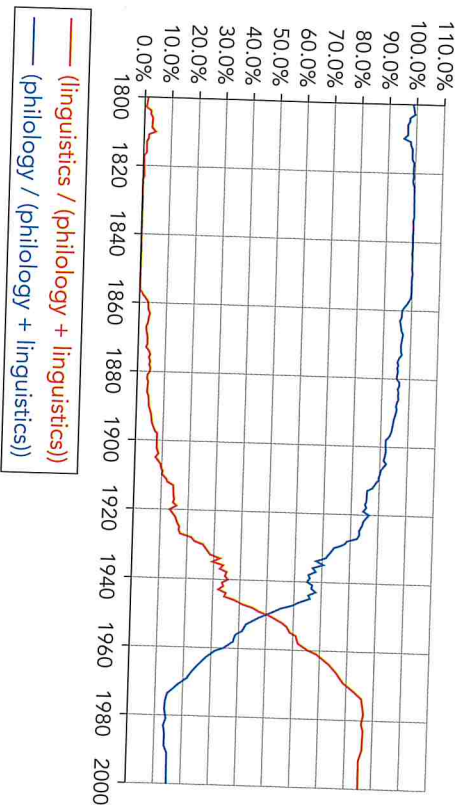**Etymology:** the study of the origin of words and the way they change in meaning

Corpus linguistics: a method of studying language using computational tools and big datasets (corpora)

Figure 3.1: Extract from the Cambridge English Corpus

... be an interesting day, Texican </p><p> **English is a** mongrel tongue. It is basically composed of 29
and now -are **English is a** bonus. </p><p> Hopefully, they will still be tak
e's more patient with colleagues for whom **English is a** second language. But the big change, and hard
revisers of dissertations, writers for whom **English is a** second language, or authors of manuscripts tha
, Labov, a native of Puerto Rico for whom **English is a** second language, passed the test, including dict
Latin or Greek roots. </p><p> In origin, **English is a** Germanic tongue based on the Germanic dialect
blic access web sites, web users for whom **English is a** second language and on-line advertisers. He sai
ed, working, works , and so on. </p><p> **English is a** , deriving originally from Angic
for Best Speech By A Politician For Whom **English Is A** Second Language. Despite the many nomination
lag behind in reading; children for whom **English is a** second language; and special-needs students,
those with disabilities and those for whom **English is a** second language? </p><p> Which schools or d
onomy and society. Strong competence in **English is a** great advantage in order to enter and graduate
11 teachers, who teach children for whom **English is a** second language. </p><p> The national union
es, can be intimidating for those for whom **English is a** second language. </p><p> "A lot of people are
quotations or as unconscious borrowings. **English is a** West Germanic language originating in England
soluely "brilliant"! Thay you are teaching **English is a** worry... </p><p> If " in no way condones
se applicants must speak and understand **English is a** foreign language, coupled with a growing conce
tive teachers of English in countries where **English is a** West Germanic language originating in England
i-Deitsch Children learn English in school. **English is a** West Germanic language originating in England
... </p><p> The King's English The King's **English is a** quaint, independent bookshop in the 15th and J
oup according to their particular traditions **English is a** West Germanic language originating in England
American English within American English. **English is a** pluricentric language , without a central languag
ich more useful and easy it is. </p><p> " **English is a** most noble and melodious tongue as one hears

Figure 3.2: Corpus linguistics with Ngram

Legend:
— (linguistics / (philology + linguistics))
— (philology / (philology + linguistics))

Another useful (and free) tool for doing corpus linguistics is Google Ngram, an online database of written texts published between 1500 and 2008. You can access it here: www.cambridge.org/links/esccha6007. Ngram allows you to compare the usage of multiple words or phrases against each other over time. For example, Figure 3.2 is a screenshot from Ngram comparing the words *philology* and *linguistics*. *Philology* is the traditional term for the study of language, but came to be replaced by *linguistics* in the 1950s, a time when there was a surge of interest in the discipline. Here then, is a nice, clear example of a social change impacting on language change. Activity 3.1 asks you to explore Ngram for yourself.

ACTIVITY 3.1

Doing corpus linguistics

A revealing way of studying language change on Ngram is to compare multiple words or phrases against each other. This can be done by simply separating lists of words by a comma. So, where WORD A and WORD B are the two words to be compared:

WORD A, WORD B

for example:

philology, linguistics

Try the following searches for yourself. You could try predicting what the result will be before you search, and then discuss the potential reasons for the results. As you do this, think about sociocultural changes and what you learnt about some of the historical issues of English in Chapter 2.

- *motor car, car*
- *courting, dating*
- *wireless, radio*
- *analogue, digital*
- *policeman, policewoman*
- *letter, email, fax, telegram*
- *pavement, sidewalk*
- *correct grammar, incorrect grammar, bad grammar, good grammar*

Finally, using word groups of your own choice, explore their usage distribution.

3.2 Lexical change

In any language, the most audibly and visually noticeable change is the appearance (and disappearance) of new words. You may well remember the first time that you heard a new word, including where you heard it, who used it, and what your reaction was like. When new words enter a language, it is called the process of lexical change.

Jean Aitchison (2012) suggests that once a new word has been identified, this can trigger the process of lexical diffusion, whereby its usage is gradually taken up by a speech community. It can take time for a new word to filter through the language – and some new words simply don't take hold. However, if and when a word gains currency through widespread use by a variety of people and in different contexts, then it becomes established, with its meaning and pronunciation gradually becoming more uniform.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Lexical diffusion:** the increased use of a linguistic form throughout an area over a period of time

Lexical expansion takes place for two main reasons:

- **Need:** as people's social and cultural experiences expand, they need a vocabulary that reflects and allows discussion about these new experiences.

- **Contact with others:** the increased ability to travel, including immigration and resettlement, has seen the incorporation of new words and phrases from other languages into the English lexicon.

There are various different types of (and reasons for) lexical change, which are examined in turn below.

3.2.1 Borrowing

Borrowing is the incorporation of features (typically vocabulary) of one language into another. The term itself seems rather misleading, given the implication that the speakers of a language take a word for a limited amount of time before returning it to the original source – which does not happen. A more accurate term might be *replication* or *copying*, since the original term 'lives on' in the source language. Aitchison (2012: 142–143) lists four important characteristics of borrowing:
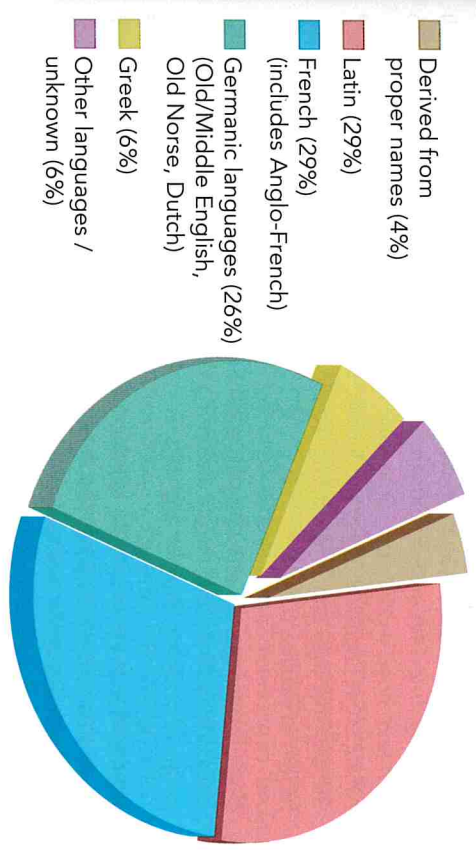
1 The kinds of elements that are borrowed are easily detachable from the source language and will not affect the structure of the borrowing language. Vocabulary items are borrowed with ease, without any kind of limit. For example, French gastronomy words such as *gâteau* and *sorbet* were readily borrowed into English because of the sense of perceived prestige and sophistication.

2 Borrowed items tend to adapt to fit in with the structure of the borrowing language. For example, Russian speakers borrowed words from English and

then adapted them to reflect the phonological properties of their language: *dzhemper* for *jumper* and *dzhaz* for *jazz*.

3 A language tends to borrow items from another language which appear to resemble features of its own. For example, language contact on the French-German border has resulted in the French language adopting certain syntactical characteristics of German.

4 The borrowing language makes a series of minimal adjustments to its internal structure, rather than huge leaps at once.

The metaphor ENGLISH IS A SCAVENGER has often been used to describe the way that English has borrowed extensively from other languages. Some of the points of contact between English and other languages were explored in Chapter 2, which is the main reason for the high amount of borrowings in English. Figure 3.3 gives an idea of the sources of the thousands of words that have been 'loaned' to English.

Figure 3.3: Borrowings in English

Legend:
- Derived from proper names (4%)
- Latin (29%)
- French (29%) (includes Anglo-French)
- Germanic languages (26%) (Old/Middle English, Old Norse, Dutch)
- Greek (6%)
- Other languages / unknown (6%)

3.2.2 Word formation

If new words are not taken from another language, then speakers will form new ones, in a process called word formation. There are various different ways that this process happens, some of which are explored here.

- **Compounding** is an extremely common process of word formation, where two or more existing words combine to create a new word. Examples include: *ice cream; lipstick; jetlag; girlfriend; toothbrush; environmentally friendly; nevertheless, daydream,* and so on.

- **Clipping** is where an existing word is shortened, retaining the original meaning. For example, *telephone* is clipped to *phone*; *gymnasium* becomes *gym*, *antifascist* becomes *antifa* and *celebrity* becomes *celeb*. Words can also be shortened through the process of *acronyms*, whereby the first letter of each word in a phrase is taken to form a new word, such as *RAM* (random access memory) and *AIDS* (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). *Initialisms* are where the first letter of words in a phrase are each pronounced separately: *BBC* (British Broadcasting Corporation) or *FBI* (Federal Bureau of Investigation), for example.

- **Blending** is a combination of compounding and clipping, where parts of an existing word combine to form a new word. Well-known examples include *smog* (smoke+fog) and *brunch* (breakfast+lunch). More recent examples include *Brexit* (Britain+exit), *broflake* (brother+snowflake) and *staycation* (stay+vacation). Although blending is a highly creative method of word formation, many blends tend to be rather transient and fail to take hold in popular usage.

- **Affixation** (or derivational morphology) occurs where words 'multiply' into new ones, using affixes (either prefixes or suffixes). Thus, prefixes such as *inter-*, *anti-* and *poly-* can be glued onto existing words to generate new meaning: *internet*; *anti-establishment*; *polymath*. Suffixes such as *-less*, *-ism* and *-hood* work in the same way: *selfless*; *Britishism*; *sisterhood*. Affixation in English is highly productive, with affixes being relatively free in the way that they attach to existing words. Morphological change is covered further in Section 3.5.1.

- **Back-formation** is where part of a word that looks like an affix is removed. Thus, the verbs *sculpt*, *burgle* and *edit* are derived from their respective nouns of *sculptor*, *burglar* and *editor*.

- **Conversion** is the process of moving a word from one grammatical category to another without changing the morphology of the word. For example, *Facebook* began life as a noun but is now also frequently used as a verb: *I'll facebook her later*. Other (less recent) examples include the adjective *brown* being used as a verb: *brown the meat*, the verb *commute* used as a noun: *my commute to work is killing me*.

ACTIVITY 3.2

Patterns of lexical change

Use the Recent updates to the Oxford English Dictionary website (www.cambridge.org/links/esccha6008) to find new words that have entered English. Pick around 20 at random, and analyse either the source of borrowing or the word-formation process, or both.

3.3 Semantic change

In this section, the notion of semantic change is explored. This is the process whereby the meaning of a word changes over time. English words have undergone changes in meaning for centuries – for example, in Old English the preposition *with* meant 'against' and the verb *explode* meant 'to drive out'. As with lexical change, one reason for semantic change is the sociocultural context in which language is used. Take the word *car*: this used to refer to 'a wheeled cart pulled by animals', but when technology enabled engines to replace animals, the meaning of the word shifted. There are various processes of semantic change, which are as follows.

- **Broadening** (or generalisation) is where a word 'spreads' or broadens its meaning. For example, the word *dog* used to only refer to a specific type of canine, but is now used in a much more general sense to denote all canines. In its original meaning, *rubbish* was only used as a noun, referring to 'broken stones', but is now used to denote any unwanted items, and can also be used as an adjective.

- Closely related to broadening is the notion of **semantic bleaching**, when a word's literal meaning 'reduces' in intensity. The use of the term 'bleaching' implies a lightening of meaning, where a word is deprived of vitality or substance. Many intensifying adverbs in English have undergone the process of bleaching, such as *literally*, *awfully*, *pretty good*. For example, imagine a speaker who has a cold using the phrase *I'm literally dying*. Here, *literally* is used in a very non-literal way!

- **Narrowing** (or specialisation) is where a word 'thins' or narrows its meaning. For example, *deer* and *meat* used to refer to all types of livestock and food, respectively. *Wife* in Old English has narrowed from 'woman' to 'woman of humble rank' to 'married woman'.

- **Amelioration** (or elevation) is where a word's meaning 'improves', taking on a more positive meaning. For example, *queen* and *knight* used to refer to simply 'woman' and 'boy', but are now used to denote people who hold positions of power.

- **Pejoration** is the opposite to amelioration – where a word takes on a more negative meaning. For example, *spinster* originally meant 'a person who spins (thread)', and gradually came to be used in a derogatory sense for 'unmarried woman'. *Churl*, *villain* and *boor* were once used to mean 'farm-worker' but took on negative meanings over time. Interestingly, words referring to females tend to take on pejorative meanings much more than the male equivalents. To illustrate this, consider the word pairs below (adapted from Trask 1996: 43), which once denoted 'parallel' meanings. How have they changed, and which way have they gone?

master	*mistress*
sir	*madame*
governor	*governess*
bachelor	*spinster*
working man	*working girl*

- **Metaphor** is an extremely common process of semantic change, where a word or concept is understood in terms of something else. Some metaphors are so commonplace that we tend not to even realise that they are just that. For example, take the word *head*. The original, literal meaning of this refers to the body part. As the thing containing the brain and sensory components such as the eyes, ears, mouth and nose, the head is regarded as a very important part of the body. Hence, over time, *head* has been extended and used in a metaphorical sense, to denote all kinds of people and concepts that are perceived as important, as well as the top or front parts of objects. This gives rise to expressions such as *head teacher*, *head of the table*, *head of the company* and *bedhead* (where *head* means 'top of a hierarchy' or 'most important/prominent component').

  Metaphors like this are everywhere in language: we talk about *the root of a problem*, a *bright person*, *the bottom of the class*, a *hard exam* and the *journey of life*. Indeed, most body parts can be used metaphorically: *the foot of a table; the eyes and ears of a company; a knee-jerk reaction*, and so on. As has been discussed throughout this book, we even talk about language itself using metaphor: *the seeds, growth and spread of English; the killing of minority languages* and the *defence of a language*.

- Closely related to metaphor is **metonymy**. This is using language in a 'part for whole' way, whereby the use of an attribute or feature of something is used to denote the thing that is being referred to. For example, using *the crown* for 'the queen', *number 10 Downing Street* for 'the UK government' or '*he's such a suit*' to mean 'he's such a corporate businessman'.

- **Taboo language** and **euphemisms** provide ways of talking about socially sensitive subjects such as sex, death, excretion and parts of the human body. In order to avoid talking about such subjects literally, speakers of a language are particularly creative in developing new words and phrases. For example, *they're sleeping together* refers to sexual intercourse, and *where's the bathroom?* can mean 'I need to urinate'.

3.4 Phonological change

Phonological change is concerned with how the sounds of a language change. Research on phonological change often relies on spelling systems, given the fact that sound recording equipment is a fairly recent invention in terms of how old English is. Linguists rely on sound reconstruction to study older varieties of English, using written language such as grammars, schoolbooks and poems as a form of evidence.

The following sections look at different types of sound change that arise as a result of connected speech, which is the study of how neighbouring sounds influence each other.

KEY TERM

Connected speech: a term used to refer to spoken language when analysed in a continuous sequence, including how neighbouring sounds affect one another

3.4.1 Assimilation

Assimilation is a common type of sound change, whereby two sounds become more alike. This change largely happens due to economical and efficiency reasons: when people speak, they combine vocal articulator movements in a series of complex patterns to produce different sounds, and assimilation makes the production of these sounds easier.

Partial assimilation is where neighbouring sounds *influence* each other. For example, try saying the phrase *one cause* out loud and slowly – monitor the transition point between the final consonant in *one* and the initial consonant in *cause*. What sounds are produced here? They could be transcribed as /wʌn kɔːz/. But is this actually how the phrase sounds in naturally occurring speech? In reality, it is much closer to /wʌŋkɔːz/, where the alveolar nasal /n/ moves its place of articulation backwards, assimilating to a velar nasal /ŋ/ as a result of influence from the velar plosive /k/ that follows it. For more detail on the sounds

of English and pronunciation, see the IPA chart at the end of this book. A more complete overview of the mechanics of speech is presented in *Text Analysis and Representation* in this series.

Total assimilation occurs when neighbouring sounds become the same. For example, in naturally occurring speech, what might happen to the /n/ consonant in the phrase *ten mice*? In many cases, /n/ would assimilate to become a bilabial nasal /m/, yielding the following transcription: /temaɪs/.

KEY TERM

Assimiliation: a process of phonological change, whereby two sounds influence each other and become more alike.

3.4.2 Lenition

Lenition (or weakening) is where a sound becomes 'weaker' along a scale. Voiced plosive sounds are at the top of this scale and are the 'strongest' sounds, in that they require the most articulatory effort and have a long constriction length. This is followed by voiceless plosives, voiced fricatives, voiceless fricatives and then approximants. Figure 3.4 shows how this can be represented on a scale:

Figure 3.4: Lenition scale

	strong (*fortis*) ⟷ weak (*lenis*)	
plosives	fricatives	approximants
/b, d, g, p, t, k/	/z, v, ʒ, ð, f, θ, ʃ, s/	/w, r, j, l/
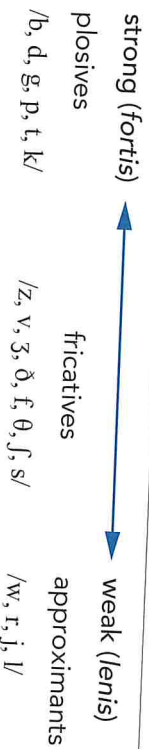
Speakers generally prefer to make less rather than more articulatory effort, meaning that many consonants shift towards weak positions during speech production. A pervasive example from British and American varieties of English is **tapping** or **flapping**, which affects the articulation of /t/ and /d/. When either of these plosives occur in between a vowel, they often change to an alveolar tap /ɾ/ or a glottal stop. /ʔ/. Both /t/ and /ʔ/ are still plosive sounds, but carry significantly less energy than /t/ or /d/, and so are 'weaker' sounds. An alveolar tap sound is made when there is a brief, rapid contact between the tongue and the roof of the mouth, and the plosive sound is not fully realised – hence it being a weaker sound, and moving towards the right on the scale above. A glottal stop is made when the vocal folds are tightly closed so that air cannot pass between them. Since the tongue is free during the production of a glottal stop, it is allowed to assume its position for the sound that follows – a very economical and energy-saving way of speaking.

Think about how words such as city and body are pronounced in American English (which provides good examples of /t/ weakening to /ɾ/, as in /sɪɾi/ and /bɒɾi:/). Most accents in English will feature lenition in some form or another, and although there is variation in how this is realised, /t/ is the phoneme that is generally reduced, such as in the pronunciation of *butter* in some accents: /bʌɾə/.

Lenition can also be very extreme, so that complete phonemes are omitted in a process called elision. For example, said by itself, the word *sixth* would normally be articulated as /sɪksθ/, but in a phrase such as *the sixth month*, the /θ/ undergoes elision, and would be realised as /ðəsɪksmʌnθ/.

KEY TERMS

Lenition: a process of phonological change, whereby a sound becomes 'weaker' in its articulation

Tap (flap): a manner of articulation of consonant sounds, whereby a single, rapid point of contact is made between two vocal articulators (such as the tongue and the roof of the mouth)

Elision: a process of phonological change, whereby a sound becomes omitted

3.4.3 Vowel reduction

Vowel reduction is a change to the acoustic quality of vowels, where typically a vowel becomes 'weaker': shorter in length, quieter and with less-defined articulation. It can be thought of as a type of lenition. When a vowel is reduced, it is often realised as the 'schwa' sound /ə/. For example, /ɒv/ often becomes /əv/ when unstressed – the 'of' in *teacher of English* would not be /ɒv/ but /əv/, to be transcribed as /ti:tʃərəvɪŋlɪʃ/.

3.4.4 Fortition

Fortition involves the 'strengthening' of a sound, where a consonant moves from right to left on Figure 3.4. It is much less frequent than lenition, given that speakers much prefer to produce sounds that require less articulatory effort than more. Fortition in English is usually realised when a voiceless plosive (either /p/, /t/ or /k/) occurring in syllable-initial position is **aspirated** – that is, when an extra burst of air escapes through the vocal folds, which sounds like /h/. So, words such as *party* and *appear* include aspiration on the /p/. This is transcribed using a 'small h' diacritic mark as in [pʰ].

3.4.5 Sociophonetics

In the following two sections, two case studies from the field of sociophonetics, that is, research conducted at the interface of sociolinguistics and phonetics, are explored. Linguists who work in sociophonetics examine language variation and change, and the relationship between social factors such as gender, ethnicity, class and age with speaking style. Given the emphasis this book places on sociocultural factors in language change, sociophonetics is considered to be an important and exciting field of enquiry that can offer useful and revealing answers to issues in language study. *Language Diversity and World Englishes* in this Cambridge Topics series explores sociophonetic variation in further detail.

Case study of a sound change: th-fronting

In September 2016, *The Telegraph*, a UK newspaper known for its rather prescriptivist and conservative views on language, published an article with the headline 'Th' sound to *vanish from English language by 2066 because of multiculturalism, say linguists*. Although it quickly transpires the headline was somewhat misleading, disparaging of diversity and factually incorrect – the /θ/ and /ð/ phonemes are, in fact, *not going to vanish* – the article nevertheless points to an interesting aspect of phonological change in English. The change in question is known as th-fronting, whereby the articulation of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ shifts forward in the mouth to a labio-dental fricative of /f/ or /v/ sound, respectively. So, *think* becomes /fɪŋk/, *mother* becomes /mʌvə/ and *bathe* becomes /beɪv/. The feature is sometimes regarded as an accent feature of non-standard, lower class, typically younger groups, and is an important marker of sociolinguistic identity, as argued by Jane Stuart-Smith and Claire Timmins (2006).

Th-fronting is a common feature of many UK accents, including parts of London (where it originally started), Essex, Sheffield and Glasgow. Figure 3.5 (from Kerswill 2003: 234) shows the diffusion of th-fronting across the UK. The dates indicate the dates of birth of speakers using th-fronting, and the size of the circles indicates the population size of each town or city. As you look at the map, you might like to think about your own pronunciation. Does your accent feature th-fronting? If so, does your hometown appear on the map? If not, then we are witnessing a 'live' phonological change in process, especially given the map is now rather out of date.

Figure 3.5: Th-fronting diffusion in the UK
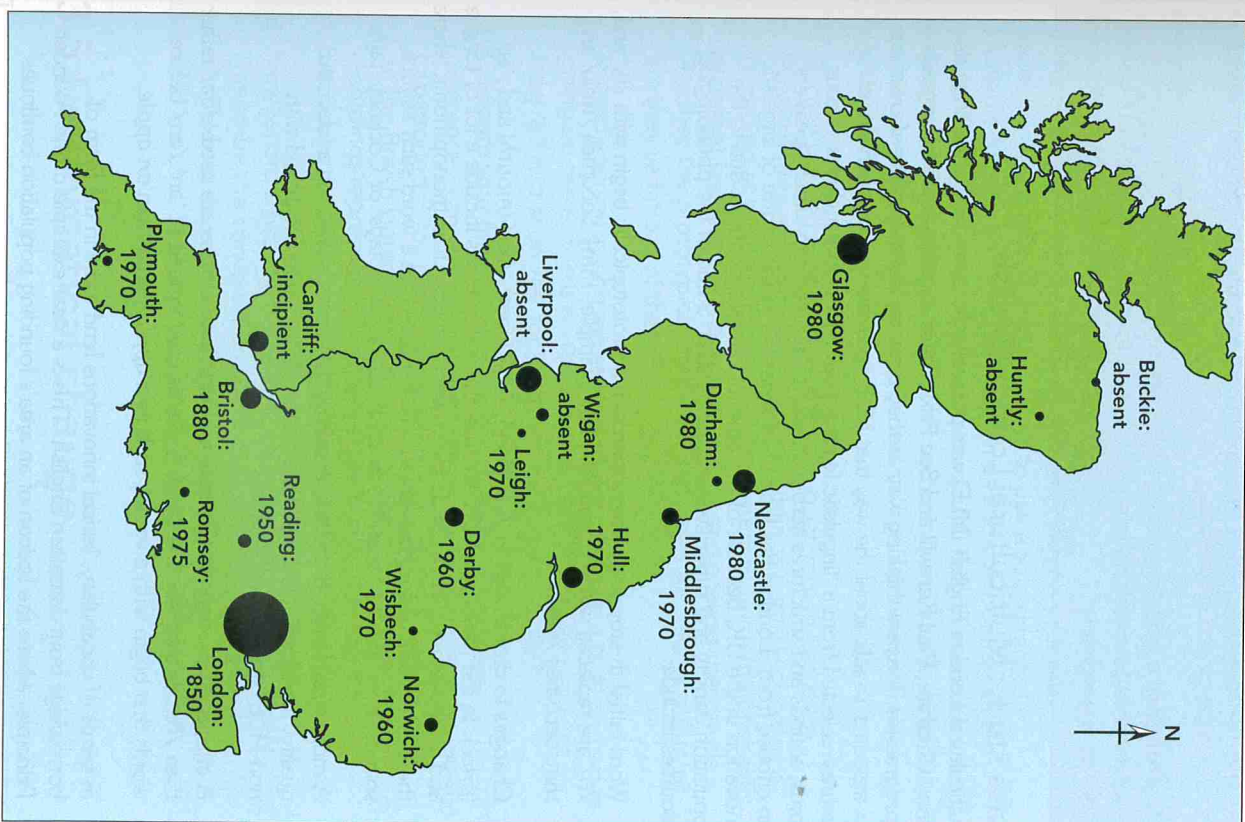
KEY TERMS

Sociophonetics: a branch of linguistics at the interface of sociolinguistics and phonetics

Th-fronting: a phonological process whereby the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ shift forward in the mouth to a labio-dental fricative of /f/ or /v/ sound, respectively

Case study: Multicultural London English

Multicultural London English (MLE) was primarily documented by the linguists Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill and Sue Fox. These linguists describe language in a progressive, forward-thinking way as they draw on the metaphor of LANGUAGE IS A RESOURCE to talk about the way that MLE speakers use a 'repertoire of features' selected from a 'linguistic feature pool'. This pool includes various words, sounds and structures across different dialects, from which speakers can choose from. London has long been regarded as the centre of linguistic innovation in the UK, because of the amount of dialect contact due to the population density and superdiverse communities. Some of the phonological resources include:

- Word-initial th-stopping, where words that prototypically begin with /θ/ and /ð/ are replaced with /t/ and /d/. For example, *think* becomes /tɪnk/ and *they* becomes /deɪ/.

- Changes to diphthongs in /eɪ/ (*face*), /əʊ/ (*goat*), /aʊ/ (*mouth*) and /aɪ/ (*price*). In the majority of UK accents, these diphthongs include a lot of tongue and lip movement, but in MLE the vowel is reduced to a monophthong, where there is less articulatory movement. This means that a word such as *face* sounds more like 'fes' than Received Pronunciation 'fays' or Cockney 'fayis'.

- A more syllable-timed rhythm, meaning that speech takes on a 'staccato' quality, where syllable duration is more regular when compared with non-MLE, stress-timed accents.

- A change in the way that definite and indefinite articles are used. /ðə/ rather than /ðiː/ is used for 'the', and 'a' /ə/ is used instead of 'an' /ən/ before words that begin with a vowel, such as *a apple* rather than *an apple*.

- In terms of vocabulary, lexical innovations tend to be in the form of borrowings from Jamaican English. This is a neat example of the Founder Principle, where the lexicon of an area's founding population continues to survive despite the arrival of later, different, immigrant groups.

- Words borrowed in this way include *blood* and *bredren* ('friend'), ends ('neighbourhood') and *whagwan* ('what's up').

- Lower frequency of h-dropping than in other London dialects.

ACTIVITY 3.3
Your own sociophonetic profile

In this activity, you will be creating and reflecting on your own sociophonetic profile. It may be useful to use a sound recorder (available for free on most mobile phones and computers) to help you compile a database of speech recordings. The phonetic analysis software *Praat* is also a useful tool for recording and analysing spoken language, and is available to download for free at: www.cambridge. org/links/esccha6003.

1 Record yourself saying the words face, goat, mouth and price. Put them into a sentence so you can obtain as natural sounding a recording as possible. Transcribe the sentences using the phonetic alphabet (see the IPA chart on page 110) and analyse the vowels. Are they the prototypical diphthongs of /eɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/ and /aɪ/, or are they variations of these?

2 Record yourself saying the sentences *I'm going for a bath and we're going up there*. Focus on the vowel in *bath* and *up*. Do you use a long /ɑː/ or a short /æ/ for *bath*, or a /ʌ/ or /ʊ/ for *up*?

3 Compare your findings with somebody else's. If there are differences, can you account for them in terms of your sociolinguistic backgrounds? You could also explore the Sounds Familiar? page on the British Library's website, a database of spoken language recordings representing different accents and dialects of the UK: www.cambridge.org/links/esccha6004.

4 Now record a two-minute natural conversation with somebody else. Transcribe the conversation and focus on the use of th-fronting. To what extent do you do this?

3.5 Grammatical change

This section explores how the grammar of English has changed over time. This tends to be a slower process of language change when compared to lexical and semantic change.

Chapter 2 looked at some of the major changes in the English grammatical system over time, such as the loss of case, changes in pronouns and the gradual rigidity in word order. As a descendent from Germanic languages, English began as a language that made extensive use of inflectional morphology to signal grammatical distinctions. However, the arrival of the Vikings and their linguistic influence meant that this system collapsed. This shift was one of the biggest changes in the history of English grammar.

The rest of this section looks at some of the attitudes towards grammatical change. Chapter 5 will cover attitudes in more detail. Grammar changes much more slowly than words or meanings, and newer changes can often be the the source of anger and frustration for many – especially older, more conservative speakers. The Queen's English Society (QES) is a perfect example of such a group, which states in its constitution that its aim is to:

promote the maintenance, knowledge, understanding, development and appreciation of the English language as used both in speech and writing; to educate the public in its correct and elegant usage; and to discourage the intrusion of anything detrimental to clarity or euphony.

But what exactly is 'correct and elegant usage'? The QES fails to provide a satisfactory explanation, and also fails to acknowledge the importance of linguistic variation and the way that language changes according to context. It does, however, provide what it deems to be a 'useful guide to English' on its website which includes guidance on the 'correct' usage of a range of 'grammatical gripes'. It may surprise you that these were written in the twenty-first century. Three of the QES's objections are dealt with in a linguistically informed way in Table 3.1, taking a critical perspective to the prescription and regulation of language use.

Table 3.1: QES 'guide to English' and some critical responses

Queen's English Society 'guide to English'	A critical reply
Double negatives such as *I don't want no lessons from you and he didn't say nothing* are regarded as an illogical 'error'. An analogy to mathematics is made here, where two negatives create a positive, so that *he didn't say nothing* means *he said something*.	• Language is not maths, and so the analogy does not work here. • Many regional varieties of English (such as Lancashire and Yorkshire) use double, and even triple, negatives. They are an important marker of linguistic identity.

Queen's English Society 'guide to English'	A critical reply
	• In actual communication, double negatives are never interpreted as the positive meaning of an expression, and do not yield a communication breakdown. • Many languages (including Spanish, Portuguese and French, where we 'borrowed' many words from) use double negatives. • Many writers (including Chaucer and Shakespeare) make extensive use of double negatives.
Personal pronouns should be in the 'correct form and order' – such as *my husband and I* and not *me and my husband*. In the second example, *me* is functioning as the Subject, but English grammar only allows it to function as the Object, as in the first – correct – example.	• In polite and formal contexts it may well be appropriate to use *my husband and I*. But not all situations of language use are polite and formal contexts. • Shifting the *me* to the front of the clause can have a desired stylistic effect of emphasis, especially if used with stress or an increase in volume. • This is a 'politeness rule' rather than a 'grammatical rule'.
Verbless sentences are constructions that should 'never be used in formal writing or by schoolchildren in their work'. Established writers are 'allowed to commit occasional grammatical errors', but if they use verbless sentences, then they 'do so at their own risk'.	• Writing a sentence without a verb can be a powerful and stylistically appropriate choice of language in the right context. • For example, consider the opening to *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, who creates a striking image of Victorian London without using a single finite verb:

Queen's English Society' guide to English	A critical reply
	Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. • Language is a resource from which we can make choices. To state that a construction should 'never' be used is denying the right of people to access the resources of a language.

Hopefully what has become clear in this criticism is that:

- It makes no sense to talk about the 'correct' use of a language without the consideration of context. This is not to say that 'anything goes', but that we adapt and shape our language according to the sociocultural situation of use.

- English is not an 'object' to be defended or owned. The very name of the QES implies that this metaphor underpins the work of the group. Nobody has privileged rights to use or prescribe English, in the way that the QES appear to position itself.

- The LANGUAGE IS AN OBJECT TO BE DEFENDED metaphor has dangerous implications for the promotion of nationalism and jingoism.

- Grammar is a RESOURCE, not a RULEBOOK.

- 'Helpful' guides such as those published by the QES are not in fact helpful, but can be damaging and dangerous in promoting a form of linguistic imperialism, which is explored further in Chapter 5.

- Those who love the study of language do so because of variation and change: it's what makes linguistics interesting.

3.5.1 Morphological change

Morphology is defined as the internal structure of words. It has two main subdivisions: inflection and derivation.

Inflection is concerned with how word structure is affected by other words in sentences. For example, a pronoun like *she* can take the forms *she*, *her* and *hers* depending on whether it is functioning as the Subject, Object or a possessive. Verbs *inflect* when they exhibit different tenses: *walk*, *walking* and *walked*.

Derivation is where new words are created, either with new meanings (for example, *malnourish* is derived from *nourish*) or with new grammatical properties (for example, we can form adverbs by using the base adjective, as in *slowly derived from slow*). Section 3.2.2 provided some more examples of this.

As well as these processes, there are various other types of morphological change. Two of them are explored below.

- **Reanalysis** is where a word contains two separate roots that have coalesced into a compound, meaning that the new word has to be 'reanalysed' as a whole. For example, *hair* (noun) + *cut* (verb) created the compound noun *haircut*.

- **Analogy** is where new words simply adopt the morphological patterns that already exist in the language. For example, when speakers introduced the noun *Brexiteer* into English, they did so by applying existing morphological patterns – in this case, adding the *-eer* suffix to *Brexit*, which is used to denote a person or a thing that does something. Young children are able to do this very easily when they are shown new words, such as in Jean Berko's famous *wug test*, where children were able to apply the plural marker *–s* onto the noun *wug*. As humans, we tend to prefer regular patterns over irregular patterns, and so there is a cognitive basis for analogical processes of morphological change. Of course, analogies are often so embedded into the structure of a language that they become a grammatical rule of word formation. This is one reason why irregular nouns and verbs look odd and can be difficult for non-native speakers or young children – such as *octopi* and the past tense of *swim* (*swam*, not *swimmed*).

3.6 What causes change?

In this chapter, you have seen that speakers of a language are highly innovative and creative when it comes to developing and changing language. Many new forms are a result of sociocultural changes such as technology, exploration and language contact, with English speakers seeing other languages as a 'resource

pool' from which words can be taken and adapted. There are hundreds of reasons for language change, and whilst there are too many to cover them all here, the more widely researched reasons are outlined below.

3.6.1 Variation and prestige

Change is sometimes a result of certain linguistic forms having perceived prestige over others. Certain individuals or speech communities might be 'linguistically attractive' and become seen as fashionable. Accommodation theory argues that speakers tend to converge (become more linguistically similar) towards others when they wish to reduce social distance and create a sense of a speech community. They tend to diverge (become less linguistically similar) when they wish to emphasise their distinctiveness or idiosyncrasies.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Accommodation theory:** a sociolinguistic theory arguing that speakers modify their speaking style to become more like or less like the people they are speaking to

3.6.2 Language contact and superdiversity

We live in an increasingly globalised world, with more and more people living in densely populated urban areas than ever before. This means that languages and dialects come into regular contact with each other – this, of course, is nothing new for English as it has always been a highly 'sociable' language. There is now a large body of research and a growing interest in the way that Englishes are used around the world, bringing about exciting and innovative changes in the language. This is explored further in Chapter 5.

3.6.3 Language planning

Most changes to a language occur naturally, but sometimes change is the result of deliberate external intervention. This is known as language planning. Decisions about how language should be used are made every day – from small-scale, local interventions such as the banning of particular slang forms in schools, to large-scale, global interventions such as a government deciding to adopt or change its official language. It is typically those that hold authority that impose language planning, and there are always political and ideological motivations behind decisions. Ironically, language planning is rarely about language, but more about social, political and economic factors. English has undergone various forms of language planning, such as the publication of

Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary, which sought to standardise spelling and meaning. And UK National Curriculum documents for schools are a form of language planning, decreeing that all children become familiar with the uses and purposes of Standard English.

3.6.4 Inter-generational change and language acquisition

If you speak to somebody from a much older or younger generation than you, then you will no doubt notice that they use language in a variety of different ways to you. Indeed, differences in language use across generations are one of the more immediately obvious pieces of evidence that language is changing. Every generation makes its own contribution to language change, and when enough time has passed, these differences become increasingly noticeable. Generations differ in the way they use language because they were brought up in different sociocultural environments, and so are likely to have views about the world that reflect this. This can be manifested in lexical, semantic, grammatical and phonological differences, but also in different attitudes and perceptions towards language use. The next chapter explores these kinds of things further.

Wider reading

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

Lexical change and semantic change

McWhorter, J. (2016). *Words on the Move: Why English Won't – and Can't – Sit Still (Like, Literally)*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Trask, R.L. (1996). *Historical Linguistics*. London: Routledge.

Phonological change

Cruttenden, A. (2008). *Gimson's Pronunciation of English*. London: Routledge.

Honeybone, P. (2012). 'Lenition in English'. In Nevalainen, T. & Traugott, E. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of the History of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Grammatical change

Hollmann, W. (2009). 'Grammatical change'. In J. Culpeper, F. Katamba, P. Kerswill & T. McEnery (eds). *English Language: Description, Variation and Context*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp 314–333.

Reasons for change

Holmes, J. & Wilson, N. (2017). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (Fifth edition). London: Routledge.

Wright, S. (2016). *Language Policy and Language Planning: From Nationalism to Globalisation* (Second edition). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Chapter 4
Attitudes to language change

In this chapter, you will:

- Explore some of the different attitudes to language usage, variation and change
- Consider why different attitudes exist and what factors drive them
- Critically analyse texts that project different attitudes to language usage, variation and change