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# STUDYING LANGUAGE

URSULA CLARK

# Studying Language

## English in Action

Urszula Clark

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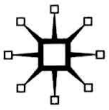

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# Series Preface

This series has been a twinkle in my eye for a number of years. I am delighted to be able to launch it with the three 'core' books, *Discovering Language*, *Studying Language* and *Thinking about Language*, which together make a broad introduction to language study in general and the study of English in particular. An explanation of why I felt these books were needed is probably useful here, and it will also serve as an explanation of the series as a whole.

The first thing to note is that English language study is growing in Britain and elsewhere, to some extent at the expense of general linguistics. As a linguistics graduate myself I both regret this and also celebrate the numbers of students wanting to study English language. These students may be studying English language as part of a more general degree course, or as a single subject. All such students need tools of analysis. They need to be able to say what is going on in a text, whether that be a literary or non-literary text, spoken or written. *Discovering Language: The Structure of Modern English* aims to provide just these tools at the level required by undergraduates and their teachers.

Whilst there are many other introductory books on the market, and some of them are very good in different ways, none of them does exactly what *I* want as a teacher of English language undergraduates. I want to be able to teach them the tools of analysis and gain expertise in using them separately from the question of where they come from and whether the theory behind them is consistent or eclectic. We have therefore separated out the contextual and theoretical issues, making sure that all the basic tools are in one volume, *Discovering Language: The Structure of Modern English*, while the issues of context are collected together in *Studying Language: English in Action*, and the basic theories of language which inform all of these approaches are discussed in *Thinking about Language: Theories of English*.

The aim of the second volume, then, *Studying Language: English in Action*, is to put into practice some of the analytical techniques learnt in *Discovering Language*, and to add to these skills by learning about the techniques and problems of studying real language data, either spoken or written, from different points of view, whether social, geographical or even historical. The third book, *Thinking about Language: Theories of English*, enables the student to take a step back from the detail of description and research in order to consider what the underlying views of human language may be. It is likely that students will use these three books at different points in their studies, depending on the kind of course they are taking and the uses their tutors wish to make of them.

The first three books in the series have a logical relationship (description, research and theory), but they can be used in flexible and inventive ways by tutors who find that the individual books do not fit exactly into the modules or course structures they are working to. The series will be developed from here with a 'second wave' of higher-level textbooks, each of which will cover the kind of topic that might be introduced in final-year optional modules or on Masters' courses. These books are currently being commissioned, and the list is not final, but we hope to have titles on English Pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Literary Stylistics and History of English. They will build upon the core texts by emphasising the three strands of these books: descriptive tools, underlying theories and the methodological issues relating to each topic. They will be written by scholars at the cutting edge of research, and will include both an overview and the latest developments in the field concerned.

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# Introduction

*Studying Language: English in Action* is one of three companion books in the series *Perspectives on the English Language*. The other two are *Discovering Language: The Structure of Modern English* (Jeffries, 2006) and *Thinking about Language: Theories of English* (Chapman, 2006). Together these three books provide the student of English with the foundation in descriptive apparatus, theoretical background and research skills that are needed at the undergraduate level.

The current volume aims to provide students with guidance on studying 'real' language data, setting aside (to the other volumes) tools of analysis (*Discovering Language*) and the theories underpinning these tools (*Thinking about Language*).

As the title of this volume suggests, it introduces ideas and debates about the English language as it is actually used in social and cultural contexts. It also provides guidance and practical suggestions on how to conduct research into each of the topics covered. Its primary concern is how language is used in everyday life. As such it addresses the use of descriptive and theoretical frameworks to researching and analysing data, both written and spoken. Consequently it differs from more traditional textbooks that focus either on speech or on writing.

The book is divided into four chapters, each of which provides an overview of the topic in question and examines the current issues, debates and research methods in the field. Every chapter ends with a section that provides students with guidance on conducting their own research on the topic. There are also suggestions for further reading.

Chapters 1 and 2 deal with spoken language. Chapter 1 considers key areas of sociolinguistics, with particular reference to accents, dialects, linguistic variability and factors that change the way we speak. Chapter 2 examines the

growing field of pragmatics and discourse; that is, the interactive nature of language and how communication involves more than the words that are actually spoken. English in action manifests itself not only in speech but also in writing. Chapter 3 therefore, considers language in written texts, and in particular the application of linguistics to the study of literature. It also describes the frameworks and methods currently used to analyse written texts. Finally, Chapter 4 considers critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines the relationship between the use of language and the possession/exercise of power. As such CDA goes beyond linguistics to examine the structures of discourse in both speech and writing. The chapter provides a theoretical framework that draws on the methods of analysis presented in the previous chapters, and offers practical guidance on applying the framework to a chosen area of study.

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CHAPTER

# 1 Variation and Change in English

## 1.1 Introduction

Linguistics is concerned with the study of language, including theories of language and the ways in which a language is structured and patterned. Language can be theorised and described in a general and abstract way, or a particular language can be categorised and described. However when we look at how language is actually used in everyday life it becomes clear that, far from being spoken and written in exactly the same way by everybody, it is in fact tremendously varied. This chapter considers different spoken varieties of English and the extent to which the society and communities in which we live affect the ways in which we speak and write.

Section 1.2 begins by defining 'language', 'dialect', 'accent', 'variety' and 'standard' English, and then considers people's attitudes towards variations in language use. Section 1.3 outlines the history of the standardisation of English in order to illustrate why dialectal variations persist in England and the United Kingdom as a whole. This section also traces the origins of prejudice against variations that continues to this day. In the United States the processes of standardisation have been very different from those in England. The resultant variations are fewer than in the United Kingdom and there is less prejudice against them. Our investigation of these two examples shows that linguistic variations depend a great deal on specific social, economic, political, geographic and historical variables.

Section 1.4 discusses two methodological approaches to research into variation, the first of which focuses on linguistic variables and the second on social variables and social networks. Investigation of variations in phonology, morphology and syntax is the realm of traditional dialectology and can be found in regional studies such as *The Survey of English Dialects* (Orton, 1962)

and *A Handbook of Varieties of English* (Kortmann and Schneider, 2004). Studies of social variables are the focus of sociolinguistic dialectology, which considers the effect of social factors such as race, class and gender on linguistic variation. Examples of studies in this field are Labov (1966, 1972a, 1979) and Trudgill (1974, 1978). More recently, Milroy (1987) and Milroy and Gordon (2003) have examined the influence of social networks on language. They argue that, in addition to linguistic and social variables, attention should be paid to the communities and contexts within which speech occurs. Finally, Section 1.5 provides students with guidance on conducting their own studies of variation and change, and Section 1.6 offers suggestions for further reading.

## 1.2 Language, dialect, accent and variety

### 1.2.1 Language

Let us consider the meaning of the term 'language' and to what it refers. In the first of the companion volumes in this series Jeffries (2006) distinguishes between language as a system and language use. A language system is an idealised form of the language in question, which differs from the way in which it is actually used. In the second companion volume Chapman (2006) considers language from three theoretical perspectives: as a type of behaviour, as a state of mind and as a form of communication. The sociolinguistic approach to the study of language considers language as behaviour. It takes into account the regional and social situations in which language occurs, as well as the social and linguistic factors that affect how speakers relate to one another. Thus the sociolinguistic approach to language, rather than being concerned with language in a general or abstract sense, asks questions such as 'What is a language?' and 'What is language for?' Hence language is not just about communication but also about identity, a factor that is paramount in sociolinguistics.

Deciding which criteria to adopt when defining a language, is far from straightforward. Take English for example. Who are the speakers of English? Are they solely the people who live in the country, England, that gives its name to the language? We generally assume that all the people who live in a geographically defined country speak the language associated with it: French in France, German in Germany and so on. However it is not always the case that all the people who live in a country speak the same language, or that the language is the exclusive property of that country. This is certainly not the case with English, which is spoken as the first language not only in the countries that make up the United Kingdom, but also in many other countries

around the world, including the United States and Australia. Moreover it is widely used by speakers of other languages throughout the world as the language of business, diplomacy, medicine and the internet.

We should also take account of the fact that there are many countries that are not monolingual: that is, they have more than one official language. For example in Switzerland there are three official languages: German, French and Italian. Switzerland recognises itself as a multilingual society whereas most of us would agree that Britain (with the exception of Wales and some parts of Scotland) is thought of as a monolingual society in which everyone speaks English all the time. The same could be said of the United States. However if we look at the actual languages spoken there are many others besides English. So far from being monolingual, these countries are actually multilingual, with many inhabitants speaking languages other than English.

One of the countries that makes up Great Britain, the principality of Wales, has two official languages – Welsh and English – and in some areas most of the inhabitants are bilingual and school children receive a bilingual education. This situation is similar to that in the province of Quebec in Canada, where people are bilingual in French and English. In the United States there is no official language and legislation to impose one is forbidden by the constitution, although to all intents and purposes English functions as the national language through its use in education, business, the law and so on. What these examples illustrate then is that language depends not only on geography but also on history, politics and economics.

The association between language and nationhood or nationality is a very strong and powerful one, as is the association between language and identity of all kinds: regional and social as well as national. The language, languages or dialects of a language that we speak are an integral part of who we are, and attempts to impose one language or a variation of it are often bound up with the exercise of power and ideology. The reasons why a language becomes associated with a particular nation are many and varied, and they result from a combination of historical and social developments. Throughout history one of the first things an invading force has imposed on the conquered people is its language, particularly in respect of political, economic and educational institutions and the like. Examples are the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the Roman colonisation of numerous countries from the first century BC and the combining of a vast swathe of national territories into the Soviet Union from 1922. What counts as the language of a country at any particular moment in time, therefore, is not as simple and straightforward as it seems. The term language is also very difficult if not impossible to define linguistically, as the example in the following section illustrates.

### 1.2.2 The Ebonics debate

In December 1996 the Oakland School District Board in the US State of California passed a resolution that gave official recognition to Ebonics, a language that was viewed as distinct from English. Ebonics is a compound word made up of from the words 'Ebony', meaning black, and 'phonics' meaning sound. Thereafter schools in the Oakland district were required to provide black pupils with a bilingual education in Ebonics, and English. The impetus for this resolution came from the persistently low educational achievements of black students, who made up over 50 per cent of the school population in the district. The issue quickly became national news and provoked a fierce debate across the United States. Amongst the topics raised was whether or not black English could be shown to be a linguistically separate language. This brought to the fore the broader, more politically sensitive question of the relationship between language and ethnicity, and between African Americans and Anglo-Americans in contemporary American society. Hence the debate moved away from the matter of Ebonics *per se* and on to the issue of equality: the right to equal educational provision for all young Americans regardless of ethnicity and, by extension, full participatory status in American life regardless of class, ethnicity and gender (Clark, 2001, pp. 237–52).

According to Tatalovich (1995, p. 1) whenever an opportunity arises in the United States to debate matters of language, 'ordinary people rise to defend the English language against those who speak other tongues'. He points out that the Oakland resolution, in common with similar episodes throughout the history of the United States, 'is symptomatic of the debate over whether the United States should reflect a dominant English-speaking majoritarianism or encourage a multilingual culture' (ibid., p. 2). Thus for Tatalovich, controversies over language are not only linguistic conflicts but also moral ones. As noted in the previous section, although English is by far the most common language in the United States and is used in most areas of public life, the constitution prevents it from being enshrined as the official language. Therefore, unlike in many of the other major English-speaking countries in the world, the US federal government has not been able to assert the dominance of English or legislate any national language policy. Despite this immigrants who wish to acquire US citizenship are required to take a test in English.

Not surprisingly the Ebonics debate found its way onto the agenda of the Linguistics Society of America. In 1997 the society passed a resolution calling for Ebonics, alongside African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Vernacular Black English, to be recognised as a systematic language governed by linguistic rules. However the society refused to be drawn on the issue of classification, on the ground that the distinction between 'languages' and 'dialects' or 'varieties' was usually made more on social and political grounds

than on purely linguistic ones. It argued that what was important from a linguistic and educational perspective was not whether Ebonics and AAVE could be called languages but that they, in common with other speech varieties, be recognised as systematic and governed by linguistic rules. At the heart of the debate, then, was not what counted as a language but the social and political issues that surrounded the establishment and maintenance of language hierarchies.

If linguistics cannot help us to define the term language, another approach is to think of language in terms of subdivisions or as a collection of mutually intelligible dialects, such as the south-west dialect of France, the Black Country dialect of English, the Bavarian dialect of German and so on. So English as a language consists not only of what is known as standard English (see Section 1.3), but also of all other dialects that exist within the geographical boundaries of England and elsewhere. Mutual intelligibility is not an important criterion, since different languages as well as dialects can be mutually intelligible. For example Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, though accepted as different languages, can each be understood by speakers of the other languages. Other factors relating to intelligibility do have to be taken into account, however, such as an individual's degree of exposure to a language, her or his educational background and willingness to understand.

### 1.2.3 Dialect, accent and variety

One way of defining a language is as a group of dialects and accents that have certain forms and structures in common. Put simply, dialect refers to words and syntactic structure, whereas accent refers to the sounds that speakers produce and the intonations and pitches that accompany these sounds. The two often go hand in hand. For example if people speak in a regional dialect of English, such as Scouse in the North West or Black Country in the Midlands, then their pronunciation will be particular to that area. If you were to walk north from Land's End in Cornwall to John O'Groats in the very north of Scotland you would hear a progressive range of accents and dialects. This a known as a dialect continuum or a chain of mutual intelligibility; that is, there is no distinct or complete break from one dialect and accent to another, and speakers of geographically adjacent dialects can understand one another. However the cumulative effect is such that the greater the geographical separation, the greater the difficulty of understanding what people say. Europe has many dialect continua, one example of which is Romance, which stretches across the Iberian peninsula through France and parts of Belgium down to the southern tip of Italy.

There is also a social dimension to accents and dialects. As Chambers and Trudgill (1980, p. 3) point out, dialects are commonly viewed as:

substandard, low status, often rustic forms of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige. DIALECT is also a term which is often applied to other forms of language, particularly those spoken in more isolated parts of the world, which have no written form. And dialects are often regarded as some kind of (often erroneous) deviation from a norm – as aberrations of a correct or standard form of language.

According to Trudgill and Chambers people who speak with rural accents are sometimes typified as dim-witted but trusting, whereas people with some urban accents may be stereotyped as quick-witted but untrustworthy. By contrast speakers of standard English with a Received Pronunciation accent (see Section 1.3.1) are often portrayed as more intelligent than speakers of other dialects as well as morally and socially superior.

Linguists prefer to use the term 'variety' when describing variations in language as this has none of the negative connotations associated with the terms dialect and accent, and fits in with the idea of descriptive linguistics; that is, basing descriptions of language upon actual use. It can also be applied across a wider range of language features. For example we can talk of linguistic variation, historical variation, social variation, geographic variation, stylistic variation and so on.

Language operates across two dimensions simultaneously: the horizontal dimension of space, called the 'diachronic' axis, and the vertical dimension of time, called the 'synchronic axis'. In addition there is a social dimension, which takes account of variations between social classes and cuts across both. The reason why there is so much geographic variation in language in England and so little in the United States is historical, as is the prejudice commonly held against linguistic variations. Consequently in order to comprehend variations in English and the attitudes towards them it is necessary to consider the social history of English.

## 1.3 Standards of English

### 1.3.1 What is standard English?

The term standard English (SE) is the one most commonly applied to the language 'English'. It is the variety of English used in public life, for example in education, the law, medicine and government. Nowadays it has no geographical boundary and is used throughout the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. In England it has an associated accent, known as Received Pronunciation, or RP for short. Because of their origins and history, SE and RP

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