

# THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

## A Historical Introduction

Second Edition

Charles Barber, Joan C. Beal and Philip A. Shaw

originat

inapit argumentum

goponden ah lichoma dnhcep  
pactum sed corpus dñi  
dñh pond god cunder ycep  
DER HERBIM DIMEUOCIS  
a godpeller  
etiaice

ouis os  
ay neder  
aeleceat  
lichomay  
canis  
ocymenda t  
emietas  
et ppe  
bena  
lum pond  
seuerbu  
it ponum  
sonauab  
andc

enina  
p godpeller  
eucangelu  
mid pulph

xpi euangelium in iudicia  
scripsit ostendens in eo  
quod exenem suo debere  
exponam in iudicium  
apn in uoce prophetae  
exclamationis in iudicium  
ordinem leuatae lectionis  
ostendit ut praedicatus  
praedicti uocam iohanne  
num zachariae in uoce  
angelu euuauas emissu  
nou solum uenbum caro

opus intrans ad apasmo  
dnhcep bodigu god originat  
dñi praedicare dñi in co  
ans non laborauit uocam  
uocem canis quam in pri  
orib; uicereat dicere sed  
uocam in pñimis exposition  
desera ieiunium uumeru  
tematationem diaboli com  
gustationem bestiarum  
amnistiam protulit  
angelorum ut iustitiam  
uos ad intellegendum silcau

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# The English Language A Historical Introduction

Second Edition

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# The English Language

Where does today's English come from? This new edition of the bestseller by Charles Barber tells the story of the language from its remote ancestry to the present day. In response to demand from readers, a brand new chapter on late Modern English has been added for this edition. Using dozens of familiar texts, including the English of King Alfred, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Addison, the book tells you everything you need to know about the English language, where it came from and where it's going to. This edition adds new material on English as a global language and explains the differences between the main varieties of English around the world. Clear explanations of linguistic ideas and terms make it the ideal introduction for students on courses in English language and linguistics, and for all readers fascinated by language.

**CHARLES BARBER** was formerly Reader in English Language and Literature at the University of Leeds. He died in 2000.

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## **Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics**

General editor: Jean Aitchison, *Emeritus Rupert Murdoch  
Professor of Language and Communication,  
University of Oxford*

In the past twenty-five years, linguistics – the systematic study of language – has expanded dramatically. Its findings are now of interest to psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, teachers, speech therapists and numerous others who have realized that language is of crucial importance in their life and work. But when newcomers try to discover more about the subject, a major problem faces them – the technical and often narrow nature of much writing about linguistics.

Cambridge Approaches to Linguistics is an attempt to solve this problem by presenting current findings in a lucid and non-technical way. Its object is twofold. First, it hopes to outline the 'state of play' in key areas of the subject, concentrating on what is happening now, rather than on surveying the past. Second, it aims to provide links between branches of linguistics that are traditionally separate.

The series will give readers an understanding of the multifaceted nature of language, and its central position in human affairs, as well as equipping those who wish to find out more about linguistics with a basis from which to read some of the more technical literature in books and journals.

### **Also in the series**

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## Preface to the second edition

In revising and updating Charles Barber's *The English Language: a Historical Introduction*, we have tried to interfere as little as possible with the overall tone and design of what has been a very popular and successful introductory textbook. Some revision was needed because of the advances of scholarship and opening up of new fields of research in the last decade of the twentieth century. This is particularly evident in chapters 9, 10 and 11: the study of Late Modern English gained momentum in the 1990s, the diversity of world Englishes has received much more attention in this period; and, of course, we are now in a position to review the twentieth century as a whole. In studying pre-modern languages, we are increasingly aware of the difficulties of simplistic equations of ethnicity with language, and there is a renewed emphasis on direct study of the epigraphic and manuscript records of early languages, along with increasing use of electronic corpora and computational approaches.

There has been some debate in recent years about whether it is appropriate to publish a 'history of English', given that there are many Englishes and many histories. In our experience of teaching an introductory module on this subject to first-year undergraduates, they need and appreciate a narrative which 'tells a story' simply and clearly without 'dumbing down' or glossing over difficulties. This is precisely what Barber's *The English Language: a Historical Introduction* has provided for the past fifteen years, and we hope that this new edition will continue to do so.

We are very grateful to a number of friends and colleagues who have provided information and advice. Alan M. Kent brought us

up to date with the Cornish language situation, and Anthea Fraser Gupta provided a great deal of help with chapter 10. Mary Swan gave valuable advice on Old English. It goes without saying that any defects, errors or imperfections should be attributed to us.

Joan C. Beal and Philip A. Shaw  
Sheffield, 2009

## Preface to the first edition

Enormous numbers of ordinary people are fascinated by language, and have views about it, often strong. This book aims to provide material which will interest these general readers, and give them things to think about. Its central theme is the history of the English language, beginning with our remote Indo-European ancestors and working its way from Anglo-Saxon times down to the present day. Use is made of numerous short passages of English, to illustrate the varieties of the language in different times and places.

Many other languages are also given some attention. In the course of its history, English has been influenced by numerous languages, especially by Latin, by French and by the Scandinavian languages. In more recent times, colonization and worldwide trade have led to contributions to its vocabulary by the speech of many countries – from Greenland to South Africa, from India to Mexico. Something is therefore said about such languages, but nevertheless the main theme of the book is the English language.

But while there is widespread interest in language, there is also a good deal of prejudice and ignorance about it. Much of the ignorance is due to an absence of technical knowledge about such things as phonology and grammar: it is difficult, for example, to write coherently about pronunciation without some grasp of phonetics. I try to overcome this difficulty by giving a clear and simple introduction to the basic concepts of linguistics, which are not really difficult to grasp. Books written for specialists in the field are often obscure to the general reader. On the other hand, many popular books about language avoid technicalities, thus limiting their range and usefulness. This book tries to bridge the gap, by building

on a basic theoretical structure while remaining easily accessible to the ordinary reader. As for prejudices about language, many of these arise from an absence of historical knowledge, and I hope that this history of English will help to clear some of them away.

But at the same time, you should try to enjoy language. English is extremely rich and varied, and it can be great fun just to listen to the speech of different groups and different individuals – to the speech of Australians, Scots, Irishmen, West Indians, to the speech of different social classes and different occupations, and to the latest modish inventions of the young. I hope that this book will help you to have fun!

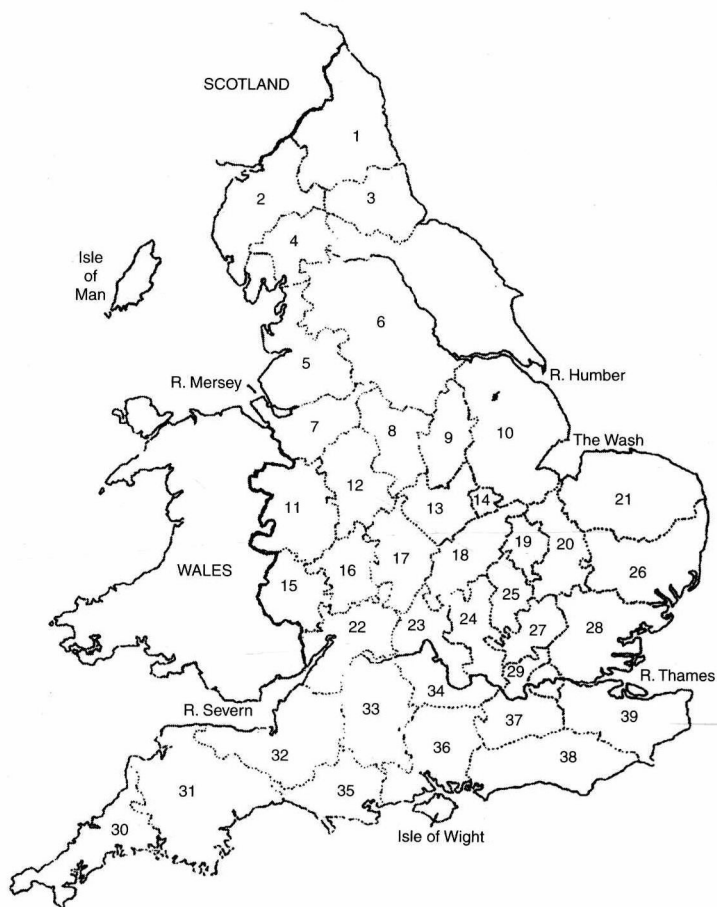
In preparing this book, I have been fortunate to have the constant help and advice of Dr Jean Aitchison, the General Editor of the series. Without her penetrating and invariably constructive suggestions it would have been a much poorer work. Other friends and colleagues who have given valuable help include Karin Barber, David Denison, Stanley Ellis, Joyce Hill, Colin Johnson, Göran Kjellmer, Rory McTurk, Peter Meredith, Karl Inge Sandred and Loreto Todd. To all, my grateful thanks. For the errors and shortcomings which remain, I alone am to be held responsible.

I am also grateful to the publishers concerned for permission to quote the following copyright material: a passage of Nigerian pidgin from Loreto Todd's *Modern Englishes* (1990), by permission of Blackwell Publishers; two passages from G. N. Garmonsway's edition of *Ælfric's Colloquy* (1947), by permission of Methuen & Co.; a passage from the translation by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (1969), two passages from Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon* as reproduced in Kenneth Sisam's *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (1921), and a passage from D. F. Bond's edition of *The Spectator* (1965), all by permission of Oxford University Press; and a passage from *The New English Bible* ©1970 by permission of Oxford and Cambridge University Presses. In some cases the version given in the text differs in small ways from that of the source, for example by the insertion of length-marks over vowels or the adoption of emendations.

Throughout the work, use is made of the traditional division of England into counties, before the local government changes of the 1970s (see the map at the beginning of the book). This can hardly

be avoided, since the traditional county framework has been used by the majority of earlier works, including such major ones as the Survey of English Dialects and the publications of the English Place Name Society.

Charles Barber



### The counties of England before 1974

Bedfordshire 25. Berkshire 34. Buckinghamshire 24. Cambridgeshire 20.  
 Cheshire 7. Cornwall 30. Cumberland 2. Derbyshire 8. Devon 31. Dorset 35.  
 Durham 3. Essex 28. Gloucestershire 22. Hampshire 36. Herefordshire 15.  
 Hertfordshire 27. Huntingdonshire 19. Kent 39. Lancashire 5.  
 Leicestershire 13. Lincolnshire 10. Middlesex 29. Norfolk 21.  
 Northamptonshire 18. Northumberland 1. Nottinghamshire 9. Oxfordshire  
 23. Rutland 14. Shropshire 11. Somerset 32. Staffordshire 12. Suffolk 26.  
 Surrey 37. Sussex 38. Warwickshire 17. Westmorland 4. Wiltshire 33.  
 Worcestershire 16. Yorkshire 6

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# 1 What is language?

It is language, more obviously than anything else, that distinguishes humankind from the rest of the animal world. Humans have also been described as tool-making animals; but language itself is the most remarkable tool that they have invented, and is the one that makes most of the others possible. The most primitive tools, admittedly, may have come earlier than language: the higher apes sometimes use sticks as elementary tools, and even break them for this purpose. But tools of any greater sophistication demand the kind of human co-operation and division of labour which is hardly possible without language. Language, in fact, is the great machine-tool which makes human culture possible.

Other animals, it is true, communicate with one another, or at any rate stimulate one another to action, by means of cries. Many birds utter warning calls at the approach of danger; some animals have mating-calls; apes utter different cries to express anger, fear or pleasure. Some animals use other modes of communication: many have postures that signify submission, to prevent an attack by a rival; hive-bees indicate the direction and distance of honey from the hive by means of the famous bee-dance; dolphins seem to have a communication system which uses both sounds and bodily posture. But these various means of communication differ in important ways from human language. Animals' cries are not *articulate*. This means, basically, that they lack structure. They lack, for example, the kind of structure given by the contrast between vowels and consonants, and the kind of structure that enables us to divide a human utterance into words. We can change an utterance by replacing one word by another: a sentry can say 'Tanks

approaching from the north', or he can change one word and say 'Aircraft approaching from the north' or 'Tanks approaching from the west'; but a bird has a single indivisible alarm-cry, which means 'Danger!' This is why the number of signals that an animal can make is very limited: the Great Tit has about thirty different calls, whereas in human language the number of possible utterances is infinite. It also explains why animal cries are very *general* in meaning. These differences will become clearer if we consider some of the characteristics of human language.

## **What is language?**

A human language is a signalling system. The written language is secondary and derivative. In the history of each individual, speech or signing is learned before writing, and there is good reason for believing that the same was true in the history of the species. There are communities that have speech without writing, but we know of no human community which has a written language without a spoken or signed one.

## **Vocal sounds**

The vocal sounds which provide the materials for a language are produced by the various *speech organs* (see figure 1). The production of sounds requires energy, and this is usually supplied by the diaphragm and the chest muscles, which enable us to send a flow of breath up from the lungs. Some languages use additional sources of energy: it is possible to make clicking noises by muscular movements of the tongue, and popping noises by movements of the cheeks and lips, and such sounds are found in some of the African languages. It is also possible to use air flowing *into* the lungs, i.e. to utilize indrawn breath for the production of speech sounds in very short utterances. In English, however, we usually rely on the *out-flow* of air from the lungs, which is modified in various ways by the position and shape of the organs that it passes through before finally emerging at the mouth or nose.

First the air from the lungs passes through the vocal cords, in the larynx. These are rather like a small pair of lips in the windpipe,

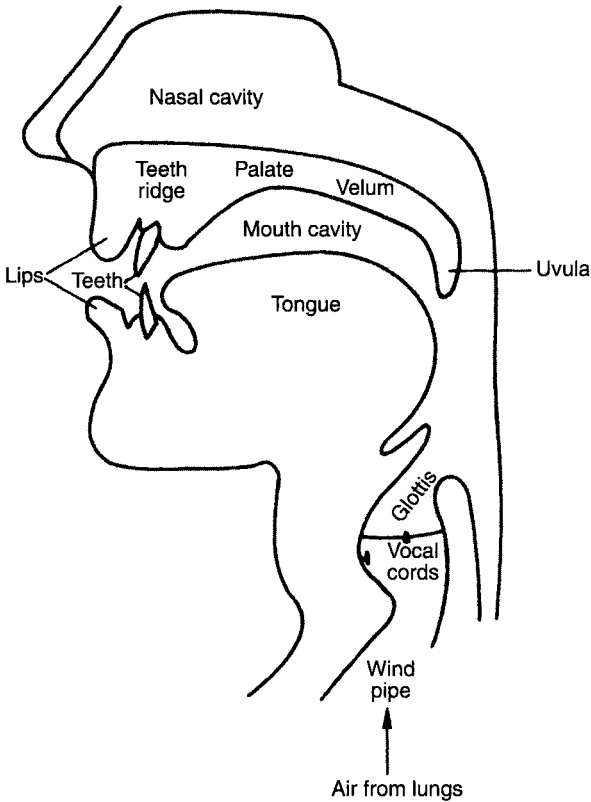


Figure 1 Main speech organs

and we are able to adjust these lips to various positions, from fully closed (when the flow of air is completely blocked) to wide open (when the flow of air is quite unobstructed). In one of the intermediate positions, the vocal cords vibrate as the air passes through, rather like the reed of a bassoon or an oboe, and produce a musical tone called **voice**. We can vary the pitch of our voice (how high or low the tone is on the musical scale), and it changes constantly as we speak, which produces the characteristic melodies of English sentences. The sounds in which voice is used are called **voiced** sounds, but some speech sounds are made with the vocal cords in

the wide open position, and are therefore **voiceless** (or **breathed**). You can detect the presence or absence of voice by covering your ears with your hands: voiced sounds then produce a loud buzzing noise in the head. For example, if you cover your ears firmly and utter a long continuous *v* sound, you will hear voice; if you change it to an *f* sound, the voice disappears. In fact the English *v* and *f* are made in exactly the same way, except that one is voiced and the other voiceless. There are many other similar pairs in English, including *z* and *s*, the *th* of *this* and the *th* of *thing* (for which we can use the symbols [ð] and [θ]), and the consonant sounds in the middle of *pleasure* and of *washer* (for which we can use the symbols [ʒ] and [ʃ]). We can play other tricks with our vocal cords: we can sing, or whisper, or speak falsetto: but the two most important positions for speech are the voiced and the voiceless.

After passing through the vocal cords, the stream of air continues upwards, and passes out through the mouth, or the nose, or both. The most backward part of the roof of the mouth, called the *velum* or the soft palate, can be moved up and down to close or open the entrance to the nasal cavity, while the mouth passage can be blocked by means of the lips or the tongue.

In a **vowel** sound, voice is switched on, and the mouth cavity is left unobstructed, so that the air passes out freely. If the nasal passage is also opened, we get a nasal vowel, like those of French *bon* 'good' or *brun* 'brown', but for the English vowels the nasal passage is normally closed (though some American speakers habitually leave the door ajar and speak with a nasal 'twang'). The quality of a vowel is determined by the position of the tongue, lower jaw and lips, because these can change the shape of the cavity that the air passes through, and different shapes give different resonances. The tongue is the most important. If we raise part of our tongue, we divide the mouth passage into two cavities of different sizes, one at the back and one at the front; the quality of the vowel is, to a great extent, determined by the relative sizes of these two cavities. To describe any vowel sound, therefore, we specify the position of the highest part of the tongue: we can do this in terms of its height (open, half-open, half-close, close) and of its retraction (front, central, or back). A little experimentation with your finger in your mouth, or with a torch and a mirror, will show