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The language magazine

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Language as evidence
forensic linguistics

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In the Biblical story of the tower of Babel, God punishes his people for their pride by destroying the enormous tower they have been constructing as a monument to their own greatness. And as if this isn’t enough, he ‘confounds’ their single common language, breaking it up into a myriad of languages and dialects, presumably on the grounds that this act will make it difficult for them to organise themselves to perform such hubristic acts in the future. The myth of Babel is designed to explain the number and variety of human languages. Moreover, it suggests that, for humans, having many thousands of languages is much worse than having a single shared language. One thing we do know about the Babel story, then, is that whoever thought it up was obviously not a linguist. The truth is that while a single common language might be useful for communication, there’s no evidence that it would ever bring about the harmony that people often assume it would. The number of Civil Wars fought over the course of human history is ample proof of that. More to the point though, the variety of languages spoken in the world today is endlessly fascinating, so why on earth would we wish for fewer? Language is interesting. And languages (plural) are absorbing and intriguing. Why, for instance, does Hungarian have two words that both mean red? Why do French, German, Italian and many other languages have formal and informal second person pronouns (e.g. tu and vous) while English doesn’t? What makes it so apparently easy for children to learn languages when adults struggle to do the same thing? Why does your voice get higher when you reach the end of a phone call? Why do people get so hot under the collar about so-called correct and incorrect ways of writing? The answers to these questions can be found in linguistics, often called the scientific study of language. One of the reasons that language is so fascinating is that it’s something we all share. And just as everyone uses language, so too does everyone have an opinion about it. But if we want real answers to questions about language then we need the insights of linguistics. Babel aims to provide these.

In producing this first issue, we hope to encourage language enthusiasts from around the world to subscribe for regular quarterly editions (see inside front cover) starting from February 2013, in which we will maintain a mix of topics and styles to suit all tastes. Whilst Babel is written in English, it will address issues relating to many different human languages, including those under threat of disappearing as well as the world’s major languages. There will be regular features, such as biographies of influential thinkers on language (‘Lives in Language’) and explanations of technical terms (‘A Linguistic Lexicon’) and there will also be feature articles on topics of general interest as well as regular quizzes and competitions.

We are delighted that in this first, pilot edition, we have managed to persuade some important figures in linguistics to contribute their thoughts on topics close to their interests. We have numerous contributions from other well-known linguists planned for future editions. See the inside back page for some of these forthcoming features and visit our website to subscribe to the magazine. The University of Huddersfield has provided financial and organisational support for this pilot issue of Babel. We are also very grateful to the many linguists who have supported this venture by contributing articles and acting as members of the Advisory Panel. Finally, we would like to thank David Crystal, who has agreed to act as Babel’s Linguistic Consultant. David is probably the most well-known linguist out there in the ‘real’ world and we are great admirers of his ability to speak the truth about language whilst keeping it clear and accessible enough for non-linguists to understand. We hope that Babel will emulate these qualities.

Lesley Jeffries and Dan McIntyre
Editors
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R.I.P. QUEEN'S ENGLISH SOCIETY

Founded in 1972, the Queen's English Society has decided to close after only 22 people turned up to its annual general meeting and no one wanted to be on the committee. This, however, is not a sign that English is deteriorating, according to Paul Kerswill, Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of York, who wrote in The Sun newspaper on 7 June 2012 that 'the QES was full of people who were good at heart rather than the pompous caricatures they sometimes appeared'. Nevertheless, Prof. Kerswill does take the Society to task for worrying about things that don’t matter, such as words and phrases that gradually change their meaning so that people no longer distinguish them (e.g. owing to vs. due to). What matters to everyone who really cares about language, he suggests, is clarity and not clinging to history: ‘The society is on a particularly sticky wicket when it says it is against foreign words entering the English language. English has many more such ‘loanwords’ than most languages, thanks to centuries of influence from Norse, Latin and Norman French.’

Lesley Jeffries
Read the original story in The Sun: www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/features/4359146/Tweets-and-texting-dont-mean-falling-standardsjust-that-language-is-changing.html

David Crystal writes...

Stop Press: There has been a last-ditch attempt to resuscitate the Q.E.S. They have appointed an acting chairman and secretary, and hope to keep it going. We will see...

GOVERNMENT’S APPROACH TO THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH IS COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE

Professor Andrew Pollard from the Institute of Education (London) was one of four specialists appointed to advise the British Government’s minister for Education, Michael Gove, on the content and style of the primary school English curriculum. As his blog post on 6 June 2012 demonstrates, he does not feel he was listened to as he responded to the outcome of the review: ‘the approach is fatally flawed without parallel consideration of the needs of learners’. His criticism rests on the lack of scope in the proposals for teachers to exercise their judgment in relation to individual pupils: ‘The skill and expertise of the teacher lies in building on each pupil’s existing understanding and capabilities, and in matching tasks to extend attainment.’ The UK government’s efforts to return to some mythical ‘golden age’ of English education, when everyone could spell long words and use the subjunctive tense is, according to Professor Pollard, counter-productive in relation to the need to preserve a broad and balanced curriculum and to cater for all children: ‘in the real world of classrooms the range of pupil needs is enormous. These cannot be wished away.’

Lesley Jeffries
Read Andrew Pollard’s blog post in full: http://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2012/06/12/proposed-primary-curriculum-what-about-the-pupils/
Read the original story in The Guardian: www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jun/12/michael-gove-curriculum-attacked-adviser

Eds: We are interested to see the Queen’s English Society members displaying a realistic acceptance of the changing language, despite their reputation as die hard traditionalists, whilst the British Government, which should be helping primary pupils succeed in the real world, is clinging to outmoded models of what constitutes ‘good’ English. We regret the fact that expert panels, having been appointed, were apparently not listened to.
**Accent**

Your accent is the way that you pronounce your particular dialect. In English, for instance, the Yorkshire accent differs from the Birmingham accent. Your accent can indicate where you are from, what social class you belong to, how educated you might be, and so on. Inevitably, people make value judgements about accents. It used to be the case that newsreaders on the BBC all spoke Received Pronunciation (RP), the so-called ‘Queen’s English’. Nowadays, it’s common to hear the news being read in a wide range of accents, from Yorkshire to Geordie to Scouse. But although it’s no longer strange to hear people on TV speaking Standard English with a regional accent, it would be unusual to hear someone speaking a regional dialect using RP. And while it’s still the case that we judge people on the accent they speak, no accent is any better or worse than another in communicative terms.

**Anaphora**

Anaphora describes the practice of referring backwards in language. For example, in the following sentence, the pronoun he refers anaphorically to the noun phrase *The unhappy linguist*:

The unhappy linguist said that he was going to drown his sorrows.

Anaphora is a form of grammatical cohesion and anaphoric reference is a cohesive device. The function of cohesion is to avoid undue repetition. But anaphora is not a solely text-based phenomenon. Research in cognitive linguistics has suggested that anaphoric pronouns refer back not only to linguistic antecedents but to mental representations of specific entities. This makes sense. After all, spoken language has been around for much longer than written language.

**Alveolar**

Put your tongue behind your front teeth. Now move it back slightly. The flattish platform that your tongue is touching is your alveolar ridge. If you run your tongue from your front teeth backwards, you should be able to feel the alveolar ridge and the sharp corner which takes your tongue further up into your palate (roof of the mouth). The alveolar ridge is the most common place for articulating consonants in English (/t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /n/, /l/, /r/) and many other languages too. You make use of your alveolar ridge when you produce alveolar sounds like /d/ (as in *dog*) and /t/ (as in *ten*). Try it. You should feel that your tongue is resting against your alveolar ridge when you begin to pronounce these words. It will move away from the ridge as soon as you’ve made the /t/ or /d/ sounds. Alveolar consonants are produced using the alveolar ridge as an **articulator**. The difference between the sounds at the same ‘place of articulation’ is achieved by doing different things with the tongue and other articulators – i.e. changing the ‘manner of articulation’. 

Ambiguity

Ambiguity can occur at any 'level' of language. For instance, if we hear someone say 'the nuthatch is a neckless bird', it is our knowledge of the world that tells us we cannot be hearing 'the nuthatch is a necklace bird', because on the whole human beings do not wear birds around their necks. This, then, is a phonological ambiguity arising from the similarity of sounds (not spelling) in the words neckless and necklace. Lexical ambiguity also occurs at the level of the word, with homonyms like bank and wave needing their context to make clear which meaning is intended. 'I made my way over to the bank' is likely to imply a river bank if the context is all about a river trip in a boat but could imply a high street bank if the context is one of a busy city street. More interestingly, perhaps, there are ambiguities that arise out of the grammar itself. Subordinate clauses are particularly prone to ambiguity:

Lucy told the girl that Dave was bringing...

Here, the ambiguous section is 'the girl that Dave was bringing'. It could be a single element of the sentence forming the direct object of the verb 'told' (i.e. the girl is the person that Dave was bringing to the event), in which case you could replace the whole thing with a single pronoun: her. The other possibility is that 'the girl' is the indirect object of 'told' and 'that Dave was bringing' is the beginning of a subordinate clause forming the direct object. The remainder of the sentence is likely to make clear which of these interpretations is the right one:

Lucy told the girl that Dave was bringing to wrap up warm.
Lucy told the girl that Dave was bringing warm clothes

Anti-language

'Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts.' This is Nadsat, an anti-language spoken by Alex, the teenage narrator of Anthony Burgess’s classic novel A Clockwork Orange. Anti-languages are essentially extreme social dialects and arise among subcultures as a marker of difference from mainstream society. The term was coined by the linguist M. A. K. Halliday. Anti-languages have distinct vocabularies though are usually based on the grammar (i.e. structure) of a parent language. Nadsat is a mixture of English, Russian, some German, cockney rhyming slang and invented words, though the grammar is English.

Apposition

Have you ever played the card game Happy Families, in which the first person to complete a set of cards with members of the same family is the winner? This game defines the characters on each card by their job (or in the case of the women and children, by their relationship to the man of the family – this is a very old game!). So, you have Mr Bones the Butcher, Mrs Chip the Carpenter’s Wife, Miss Snip the Barber’s Daughter and so on. The way that these characters are named is known as apposition. The term is used to refer to two words or phrases (usually, but not always noun phrases) which refer to the same thing or person and have the same grammatical role. So, if a newspaper reports 'Mr Cameron, the British Prime Minister, arrived in Washington today', then the two ways of referring to David Cameron are both the subject of the sentence and are therefore in apposition to each other. To form a grammatical sentence, you only need one or other of these phrases. The reason for them both being there is usually explanatory, in case readers don’t know who Mr Cameron is or who is currently the British Prime Minister. Now that you’re an expert, spot the apposition in the first sentence of this definition...

Articulator

Lips, teeth, tongue, alveolar ridge, hard palate, soft palate, uvula, glottis – these are all articulators. Articulators are organs of speech. We use them to obstruct the flow of air through the vocal tract, thereby changing the manner of articulation of consonants (see the entry for alveolar for an example.)
Learning a foreign language is difficult enough but how would you manage if you had to communicate with extra-terrestrials? Peter Stockwell explores the problems and pitfalls of intergalactic communication.

It has recently become apparent that there are billions of planets orbiting stars in the universe, and millions of those are Earth-like, in the so-called ‘Goldilocks zone’ where water is liquid and the land is temperate. Of those millions of planets, a few million will have sustained the conditions for life, and of those perhaps many thousands will have forms of life that have begun to shape their own planet and maybe travelled to nearby moons and other worlds. In order to be able to do this, these aliens will almost certainly have had to develop language in some form or another. So the question for our own deep future is: are we prepared to speak to them? How can we reassure them about our presence, convince them that we are conscious and intelligent too, and share with them our history and culture? We will need to develop a xenolinguistics.
how to speak venusian

the problem of alien communication has a long history in science fiction, of course. mostly, the aliens conveniently spoke english for our benefit, claiming to have learned it from receiving our television and radio broadcasts. if this was the case, the first words they would have heard would have been either the coronation of george vi in 1937 with its commentary in what was then only just becoming known as ‘bbc english’, or more likely (because the broadcasting signal was stronger) adolf hitler addressing the nuremburg rallies in 1934-5. these aliens would need to be only 77 light-years away, which means they could live in any of the 70 or so solar systems within that compass, and they are right now presumably trying to learn demagogue german. we can expect a reply by 2089.

sf writers have imagined more remote aliens too, who were able to speak english either by telepathy or by universal translator machines. both of these technologies rest on the assumption that our conscious thought is raw and untouched by language – so your pure thoughts can be rendered into any language as long as the machine knows the right algorithm for transforming thought into vocabulary and syntax. though this idea is not a million miles from some versions of theoretical linguistics of the last 50 years, unfortunately the universal translator is impossible.

the machine would not only need to know things like your words for table, person, and cat, but also how you differentiate these objects from processes like running, eat, jumped, and why you treat abstractions like liberty, evolution, and flight more like the first group of nouns than the second group of verbs. there are somewhere around 6600 languages on our planet, and maybe ten times that many languages which have ever existed here, and there are many ways in which they carve up the world in terms of objects, processes, circumstances, who speaks where and when, and the allowable order of words. and, remember, all of this diversity has happened within the same species: we are all roughly a metre and a half high, scaffolded containers of hot liquid under pressure, with most of our sensing parts at the front and sides of our heads. we see in a small spectrum and are blind to infrared, ultraviolet, gamma and radio waves; we only have 5 types of taste, very indistinct smell capacities, crude nerve-bunches for touch. most weirdly, we communicate using the same body-parts with which we eat and breathe!

in an episode of star trek (‘darmok’), captain jean-luc picard and an alien tamarian captain are marooned together on a barren planet where they are stalked by a monster. they find that they cannot communicate with each other at all, though picard’s universal translator renders the individual words accurately: ‘darmok and jalad at tanagra’, ‘shaka, when the walls fell’. after much trial and error in extreme circumstances, it becomes apparent that the tamarrians communicate metaphorically by citing parallel instances from their own cultural history, so the latter phrase above is a metaphor for failure, and the former phrase is the same testing situation that picard and the alien find themselves in. the universal translator doesn’t work because it can never know the entire history and culture of the alien language, even though it can decode the individual meaning of the words and syntax (somehow!).

even so, the science fictional xenolinguist has a relatively easy job learning languages like klingon or láadan, since – like some of earth’s languages – they still divide perception of the world up into objects and processes (roughly, nouns and verbs).
The Star Trek language of Klingon was invented by linguist Marc Okrand who up-ended the most common human syntax of subject-verb-object (SVO) into the Klingon word-order OVS. However, once you have learned the guttural vocabulary for ‘chicken ate I’ and worked out the particles to attach to words to tell you which is which (‘I’ is subject where ‘me’ is object in the English remnants of this similar system), then you pretty much have it. Klingon could be a long-lost Earth-like language, and again it is not surprising because the Klingons are humanoid even if they are unnecessarily aggressive to the point where they are hardly likely to have survived as a species in the first place.

Láadan is a language invented by Suzette Haden Elgin in her novel Native Tongue, in which a futurist group of women invent their own feminine language to express their worldview as women. Similarly to its masculine opposite Klingon, Láadan alters syntactic order to the uncommon-Earthly VSO, and it has some interesting peculiarities of grammar, but otherwise it is learnable (even by men) and human. Klingon sounds rough and Germanic to English-speakers, Láadan sounds euphonious like native American or Chinese speech; but both exist for poetic effects or to mark alienness and so are at least partly familiar.

The xenolinguist faced with languages such as these is in roughly the same position as generations of anthropologists living with discovered peoples, isolated communities or lost tribes: you just have to work out the rules and words, but since you share a human body and condition (and planetary environment and local physics), your task is possible. More strange forms of language have been imagined in science fiction to stretch our capacities. Thomas More’s 16th century Utopian is transcribed at the end of his book, and a ‘rudely englised’ translation is supplied: the Utopian passage has fewer words and is thus more economical, but it still looks a bit like Latin. It is impossible, though, to identify the meanings of any words in Utopian, and the text gestures towards the unknowable ideal: living in your real 1516 Europe, you are too ignorant to understand it.

Even more advanced versions of futuristic evolved post-humans (in Dan Simmons’ Ilium series or Alastair Reynolds’ Revelation Space series) communicate in superfast machine language (which you, mere old-style human, also cannot understand). In the galaxy-spanning Culture of Iain M. Banks, you might be able to speak a basic form of Marain (M1), which is nevertheless complex, subtle and beautiful, but altered humans, other aliens, and the artificial Minds that are embodied in Ships or Orbitals speak far more complex dialects of the language – right up to M32 which is encrypted to an insanely paranoid level accessible only to the military intelligence Minds working in Special Circumstances.

As a post-human, you might communicate by combining traditional mouth-created sounds with floating images and icons called ‘picts’ (in Greg Bear’s Eon universe). These add shapes and colours to allow more subtle expressions of political shading, commitment and emotion than we can articulate. Most fundamentally, our bodies do not have the cranial implants or projection and perception equipment to be able to engage in this sort of language. So as a xenolinguist you are going to need either a lot of remedial technology to overcome your disabilities, or some serious body modification.

Nevertheless, with an appropriate cyborgisation (Charles Stross) or a new set of body chops (L.E. Modesitt), you would at least be able to communicate with the post-humans. And even modified post-humans presumably still retain some ancestral sense of their earlier physical condition that remains in the way their language works, just as our languages are still highly dependent on the things that as early humans we needed the most: we understand time and complex relationships still basically in terms of space (‘Summer is coming’, ‘It’s getting late’, ‘My friends are very close’); we understand things that are not there as significant absent objects; we are provoked by things that are different faster than we notice things that are similar. We are still basically smart apes.
All human and post-human languages are thus fundamentally representational. A word or a stretch of discourse stands for a thing or a phenomenon or a process, either out in the world or in your imagination, that you want to package up and send speaking to them in anything other than noises. They don’t even believe we are individually conscious. The humans on Arieka have genetically cloned Ambassador couples whose twin minds and ability to speak simultaneously convince the Arieki that they are persons.

The Arieki have a unique identity between language and thought that means they cannot conceptualise a lie. This also means that deception, fiction and metaphors are completely alien to them, though they can feel a thrilling sensation when confronted by a simile.

The Arieki have a unique identity between language and thought that means they cannot conceptualise a lie. This also means that deception, fiction and metaphors are completely alien to them, though they can feel a thrilling sensation when confronted by a simile – however, the simile cannot be spoken but must be represented by a particular person or object. The Arieki would split a rock to create a particular figure of speech, or empty a house of all its furniture and then put it back again to express another. And humans for them become embodied similes or examples: the man who swims with fishes every week, the boy who was opened and closed again, the girl who ate what was given to her. Of course, as soon as the humans teach the Arieki how to lie, the result is catastrophic for the Host population on the planet.

What, though, if your prospective conversational partner was not in fact from some Earth-like planet, not even from somewhere cold and barren like Mars or hot and toxic like Venus? What if they were not humanoid at all, or not bodied like us in any way, and therefore experienced their world in a completely different manner? What would the language of floating balloon creatures in the upper atmosphere of a gas giant like Jupiter or Saturn sound / look / feel / smell like? What would the language of hive-mind species with no sense of individual consciousness be like? Would at least all carbon-based lifeforms like us have a similar language feature (such as us and them, me and other, or figure and ground) that is different from silicon-based, hydrogen-based, gaseous or metallic forms of life? Venusian is a relative walk in the carbon-dioxide park; now, xenolinguist, you have your work cut out.

Peter Stockwell is Professor of Literary Linguistics at the University of Nottingham. His most recent books include Introducing English Language (Routledge, 2010) and Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading (Edinburgh University Press, 2009). With Sara Whiteley, he is currently editing The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

Find out more

Books
The Poetics of Science Fiction by Peter Stockwell (Longman, 2000)
From Elvish to Klingon: Exploring Invented Languages edited by Michael Adams (Oxford University Press, 2011)

TV
‘Darmok’ is episode 2, season 5 of Star Trek: The Next Generation (original transmission, 30 September 1991)
The job description ‘forensic speech scientist’ probably means little or nothing, even to the keenest fan of detective fiction and fact. This is largely because most of the work undertaken in a forensic speech laboratory is not to help solve ‘live’ crimes. Rather, the point at which police officers, prosecutors and defence lawyers usually enlist a forensic speech scientist is when the police consider the puzzle to have been solved and their chase finished. In other words, the exciting part is over; the suspect has been arrested and charged, and we have entered the long weeks and months of meticulous and ‘invisible’ case preparation and checking. Bundles of papers, lab-based analysis of exhibits, pre-trial court hearings … it can’t exactly compete with Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple or Lewis. Nevertheless, the work forms an important part of judicial process, and has been instrumental in securing a good many convictions and, indeed, acquittals. Famous cases in which this type of evidence has figured include the International War Crimes Tribunal trial for genocide of the former Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic, the prosecution of the ‘Yorkshire Ripper’ hoaxer John Humble, and that of the ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire?’ game show fraudster Major Charles Ingram.

In the UK alone forensic speech scientists act in around 500 – 600 cases per year. These fall into a number of categories, all of which involve the examination of recordings of speech or the consideration of speech related matters.

The major category of work is forensic speaker comparison. In the UK, evidence from this kind of analysis has been used in criminal trials for around 45 years, the first case having being heard in the Winchester Magistrates’ Court as long ago as 1967. The task entails comparing the voices in criminal recordings with those of known suspects. ‘Criminal recordings’ here refers to a wide and catholic array of material. They may be abusive messages or death threats left on a victim’s voicemail facility, recordings of hoax calls made to the emergency services, fraudulent telephone calls to financial institutions, or conversations between

Anything you say may be given in evidence …’

It may not be as glamorous as CSI but language analysis is an important part of many court cases. Peter French and Louisa Stevens describe the work of the forensic speech scientist.
major drugs importers, people traffickers or terrorists in cars, flats and business premises that have been bugged by the police or security service. The ubiquity of mobile telephones has resulted in many violent crimes being recorded. Victims or bystander witnesses to robberies, rapes and murders often dial 999 and the voice of the criminal is recorded over the open line in the background of the call. In nearly all other countries the criminal recordings are very often telephone intercepts (‘wire taps’). The UK, while allowing call interception to take place on a warrant from the Home Office, currently restricts the use of those recordings to investigative purposes (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, 2000). As they cannot be used in evidence, they are not submitted for speaker comparison tests.

The reference recordings with which the criminal voices are compared are in most cases those of police interviews with the suspects. Until the mid-1980s, someone suspected of being ‘the voice’ in a criminal recording would be asked to provide a voluntary voice sample. Needless to say, many did not. However, the enactment of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984) required all police interviews to be recorded. This resulted in suspects ‘automatically’ providing voice samples – simply as a by-product of the interview procedure. Almost overnight, the volume of forensic speaker comparison work rose exponentially.

So how is it done? The most prevalent method comprises a combination of two types of tests: auditory-phonetic (analytic listening) and acoustic (computer-based). The auditory-phonetic tests involve intensive, repeated listening and draw heavily upon the skills and ear training gained from a university education in phonetics. One ‘deconstructs’ the speech and listens selectively and individually to its component parts. For example, the voice quality (‘timbre’) is examined in accordance with categories encoded in the Vocal Profile Analysis Scheme developed by Professor John Laver and his colleagues at the University of Edinburgh. This involves checking the comparability of the criminal recording and the suspect’s recording against 38 different voice quality settings and assigning them a score on each. Some of the settings relate to activity within the larynx (e.g. creaky voice, breathy voice), some to muscular tension (e.g. tense/lax vocal tract) and others to supralaryngeal settings (e.g. tongue orientation, nasality). One also listens to intonation – the rise and fall of the pitch of the voice across utterances, to speech rhythm and tempo (the latter may be measured and averaged in terms of syllables per second), and to the pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds; here one has the assistance of the International Phonetic Alphabet, an extended system of symbols and diacritical marks that enable the analyst to capture the fine grained nuances of pronunciation.

The acoustic tests are carried out using specialised sound analysis software. They include examinations of voice pitch. This is measured as fundamental frequency, which equates to the rate of vocal cord vibration. Other acoustic tests involve examining the resonance characteristics of consonants and vowels using sound spectrograms. Here the analyst can visualise the speech on a computer screen and take detailed measurements from the acoustic signal.

The process of fully analysing and comparing one sample against another may take in the region of 15 hours, and many people will no doubt be surprised to find that it is not nowadays done wholly automatically and with instantaneous results. Automatic speaker recognition (ASR) software is available and its accuracy and reliability are very good, though not perfect, when processing high quality recordings. The recordings that arise in forensic cases, having poorer sound quality (television or music in the background, people distant from the microphones, people speaking simultaneously, etc), pose particular problems for ASR.

Our view is that it may be used in cases where the recordings are of sufficient quality, but as an addition to the types of testing described above, rather than as a stand-alone replacement. We are not quite up with CSI yet! The way in which the conclusions of speaker comparisons should be expressed is a hotly debated matter, with alternative frameworks being proposed and defended by different ‘camps’. However, experts are unanimous in the view that the evidence should never be seen as definitive, i.e. a criminal trial should not be
A second major area of work for forensic speech scientists is the determination of the content of evidential recordings (‘what was said?’ as opposed to ‘who said it?’). Sometimes the task is very general and comprehensive and involves the transcription of an entire recording. Many poor quality recordings are initially submitted for enhancement, i.e. digital sound processing to remove noise interference or raise the level of the conversation relative to background sound. Police officers and lawyers often have very high expectations of enhancement technology (we’re back to CSI again!). However, in reality, the improvements it can bring to speech intelligibility are generally rather limited. On discovering this, the instructing party will often ask that a transcript is prepared by the forensic speech scientist, who has advantages over the layperson. First, s/he can make a study from the clearer areas of the recording of the pronunciation patterns of the people involved. This may assist with resolving what was said in the less clear areas. Second, s/he has available high quality replay and listening facilities. The speech analysis software from which the material is played back allows the transcriber to delineate and ‘zoom in’ on small sections of speech – single words, syllables or just individual consonants and vowels – for multiple repetition. Third, s/he has time and patience, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. For a good, clear quality recording (which we would be unlikely to be asked to transcribe) one can estimate a ratio of 8:1 transcription time to recording time, i.e. one minute of speech will take eight minutes to transcribe. For the poorest quality recordings we are asked to deal with, the ratio may be as high as 180:1. This is not work for those who need high levels of stimulation.

In other cases, the determination of content is much more localised and highly focussed. This task is referred to as ‘questioned’ or ‘disputed utterance’ analysis. Here one is examining perhaps just an unclear phrase or even a single word, which potentially has high evidential significance for the case. It may be subject to competing interpretations by prosecution and defence. Past cases of this kind include one involving a covertly recorded consultation of a doctor who had a heavy Greek accent. The issue was whether he said to a drug addict to whom he was prescribing synthetic codeine tablets ‘you can inject those things’ or ‘you can’t inject those things’. In another case, a speaker of Urdu/Punjabi accented English had been interviewed by police on tape about the unexpected death of his gay lover. He initially insisted that no sexual activity had taken place between them immediately prior to the death (the police feared sadomasochistic activities that may have gone too far) but then, at a later point, appeared to say that the man had gone to sleep and died after ‘wank off’. If correct, this signalled a highly significant change of story. We were asked to verify this hearing of the words. At first it appeared correct, but after very close and detailed analysis they transpired to be ‘one cough’, and therefore of no evidential significance at all. In cases such as these one seeks clear and relevant reference speech from the person concerned. This is analysed phonetically and acoustically to establish, for example, how they pronounce particular vowels.
and consonants. The patterns found are brought to bear in interpreting the questioned utterance and determining which of the competing alternative hearings is likely to be correct.

Not all the work involves recorded speech. In a minority of cases we are asked to evaluate the earwitness evidence of lay people. These may involve crimes where the witness or victim did not see the perpetrator’s face but claims to have recognised him/her by voice. Masked robberies and rapes are cases in point. Here the work involves assisting the police with setting up a voice line-up, the auditory equivalent of a visual identification parade, which must be constructed in accordance with Home Office guidelines. In other cases, it may involve establishing whether a witness’s claim to have recognised a voice is a realistic one, given the prevailing acoustic conditions (e.g. echoey subway with traffic passing overhead), and in the light of what is known from relevant experimental research studies. It may also involve carrying out sound propagation tests at a crime scene in order to assess the credibility of a witness’s claim to have heard a relevant event (‘Could Mrs X in her sitting room have heard the words she claims to have heard screamed through the wall from the flat next door?’).

Finally, one has to remember that the examinations and testing, whatever their nature, are only part of the job. The other part involves going to court to give expert evidence. This happens in around 5% of the cases in which one acts, and the skills required are very different from the lab-based ones. One needs to be able to express in a clear way – and without cutting too many corners – what are often highly complex linguistic and acoustic findings to a panel of jurors who have had no previous exposure to the subjects. We shall always remember a senior forensic scientist who, when asked about where he had developed his renowned skills at communicating with juries, replied that it was during his experience in a previous career. He had been a schoolteacher. ¶
Politeness in everyday terms can be as simple as holding a door open for someone or saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. But in linguistics the term ‘politeness’ refers to the language techniques involved in maintaining relationships, achieving goals and conveying and negotiating identity.

Here, Dániel Z. Kádár discusses and challenges the common view that politeness practices in Chinese are different from the strategies used in other languages.

Although linguistic politeness itself is a source of ambiguity, perhaps one of the most confusing areas within the field of politeness research is linguistic politeness in Chinese. When foreigners study the Chinese language they often find themselves in a somewhat awkward situation as the Chinese are represented, and often represent themselves, in two entirely different stereotypical ways: either ‘traditionally polite’ or ‘direct and pragmatic’. And there is a certain truth behind this stereotype. In certain contexts the Chinese apply self-denigrating and other-elevating honorific expressions (see box), which look akin to the more renowned Japanese honorifics, as well as strongly ritualised and formal language. However, in the vast majority of everyday interactions Chinese language usage is not only void of old-fashioned honorific expressions and other traditional forms, which might be familiar to many readers from historical and martial art films, but also lacks communication strategies that westerners would define as the basic norms of politeness behaviour. In a restaurant, especially when one is part of a group of guests who are frequent visitors to the place, one is likely to be served as royalty. But when buying food in the street, the vendor may resort to an abrupt “What do you want?”. And this ambiguity is not confined to non-native speakers: both foreigners and natives may be treated with extreme deference in certain situations and practically ignored as ‘faceless’ entities in others. While it is tempting to brush aside Chinese language usage as simply ‘exotic’, the increasing global importance of China means that understanding Chinese language usage and behaviour is a must, especially...
if one wants to avoid blunders of ‘exoticising’ East Asian people, as happened with the US President, Barack Obama recently.

When Obama hosted Hu Jintao in 2011, he bowed solemnly as he shook hands with the leader of the Chinese State. The US President probably imagined that he was being progressive by accommodating himself to what he imagined as ‘traditionally Chinese’ behaviour, but he had blundered badly. Far from feeling flattered by Obama’s humble bow, the Chinese leader is more likely to have felt a measure of contempt because in contemporary Chinese culture, in this specific setting where leaders represent the ‘faces’ of their nations, a bow is potentially not a sign of ‘neutral’ politeness but is a non-verbal communication of weakness.

So how can we give a reliable picture of the two faces of Dragon, without falling into the trap of making overgeneralisations? A recent research project by Yuling Pan and I has revealed, that norms of politeness – or normative ‘politic’ behaviour as linguistic politeness researchers would put it – do not apply to every interactional context in Chinese society. In order to avoid representing the Chinese in an exotic light, it is important to clarify that this is a tendency, which is subject to geographical and social variation, rather than being a rule. Perhaps even more importantly, it is not so much the case that the Chinese are polite in some contexts and rude in others. Instead, as the analysis of a large research database has revealed, there are at least two major types of normative behaviour in Chinese society. The first type can be described as the mode of ‘deference’. The second can be labeled as a normative ‘lack of politeness’ mode, which is somewhat unusual from a western perspective. The lack of politeness in certain settings should therefore not be interpreted as a breach of norms. Such behavior is not ‘impoliteness’, as we might initially think, for the simple reason that it is the norm.

This duality originates in an important gap between the way in which ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ relationships are traditionally perceived by many Chinese. In-group (nei in Chinese) settings necessitate the observance of the norms of ‘proper’ language usage because in-group relationships are lasting ones in Chinese minds. As anthropological research has illustrated, in Chinese society the building of ‘networks’ (guanxi) has prevalence over individualism: obtaining a lucrative job, getting into a good school or being elected into a leading role all tend to happen through networking abilities rather than on the basis of purely individual skills. Out-group (wai) contexts, on the other hand, do not usually necessitate any attempt to form interpersonal relationships, and consequently… it does not make much sense to apologise for stepping on someone’s foot on a crowded bus in which everyone steps on each other’s feet.
normative politeness does not apply in such settings. This is not surprising if one considers the large density of population, and consequently the vast number of out-group encounters, in Chinese society. To illustrate this with a simple but authentic example, it does not make much sense to apologise for stepping on someone’s foot on a crowded bus in which everyone steps on each other’s feet.

What makes the duality of Chinese linguistic politeness and its lack even more complex from a western perspective is that even within in-group relationships, where the norms of polite language usage apply, these norms tend to differ from their western counterparts. In western cultures polite language usage is generally associated with the value of equality. However, this is not the case in Chinese society, which traditionally perceives human relationships as predominantly hierarchical ones. Because of this perception, in conversations in which there is a power difference between the interactants, the powerful party can usually afford to ignore polite behaviour without being interpreted as ‘impolite’ in a strict sense.

The two faces of the Dragon raise plenty of challenges for future research. Inquiries into Chinese politeness are not only difficult due to the large number of native speakers of Chinese, but also because Chinese politeness and impoliteness are in a complex state of ideological and linguistic transition. After the opening of the country in the 1970s, the state ideology of Communism has in recent decades intermingled with revived Neo-Confucian ideals, as well as contemporary western ideologies which have been ‘imported’ into China. This ideological mixture not only results in a large social and geographical diversity in the ways in which individuals and groups perceive ‘proper’ Chinese politeness, but also influences actual language usage.

The aim for future research is to bring us closer to the intriguing (non-)polite aspects of Chinese language use, hence making Chinese communication more understandable for the western spectator.

Find out more

**Books**

*Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese* by Yuling Pan and Dániel Z. Kádár (Continuum, 2011)

*Politeness in East Asia* edited by Dániel Z. Kádár and Sara Mills (Cambridge University Press, 2011)

**Online**

Explore the study of linguistic politeness through the website of the international Linguistic Politeness Research Group: http://research.shu.ac.uk/politeness

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Honorifics are words or expressions used to convey esteem when addressing or referring to someone. They can be as simple as ‘Mr’ or ‘Mrs’ or as complex as ‘Your Imperial and Royal Majesty’. In Monty Python’s ‘Refreshment Room at Bletchley sketch, the compère, Kenny Lust, goes somewhat overboard with the honorifics when introducing the entertainment for the evening:

You know, once in a while it is my pleasure, and my privilege, to welcome here at the refreshment room, some of the truly great international artists of our time. And tonight we have one such artist. Ladies and gentlemen, someone whom I’ve always personally admired, perhaps more deeply, more strongly, more abjectly than ever before. A man, well more than a man, a god, a great god, whose personality is so totally and utterly wonderful my feeble words of welcome sound wretchedly and pathetically inadequate. Someone whose boots I would gladly lick clean until holes wore through my tongue, a man who is so totally and utterly wonderful, that I would rather be sealed in a pit of my own filth, than dare tread on the same stage with him. Ladies and gentlemen the incomparably superior human being, Harry Fink!

Honorifics work mainly by elevating the status of the person addressed (as in ‘My Right Honorable Friend’) or by denigrating the status of the speaker (as in the Monty Python example above). What is particularly interesting about Chinese is that the honorific system is socially diverse. This means that, historically, a commoner would denigrate himself using a different honorific than a high ranking person. For example, a commoner might use xiaoren (‘this worthless person) while an official might use xiaoguan (‘this worthless official). And a Buddhist monk might choose pinseng (‘poor monk’). These would not only indicate humbleness but would also display the different social ranks of their speakers. Because of this, in historical hierarchical Chinese communication, speakers could not use the honorific vocabulary of other social classes.

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English is frequently described as a global language, but perhaps we should use the plural ‘Englishes’ rather than the singular noun. If you travel from region to region in the USA, UK and Australia, you can hear shifts in accent and changes in dialect which, whilst still being identifiably English, can sound like a foreign language. Now that English has spread around the world, there are ever more varieties – Englishes – to be heard.

One of the most influential ways of describing the global spread of English was put forward in 1990 by Braj Kachru, now Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Kachru’s model describes the global development of English using a series of ever expanding concentric circles. The inner circle comprises those countries where English is the native language (ENL) and includes the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. These countries map the spread of the original diasporas of English speakers, taking the language to new lands as a result of an expanding British Empire. The inner circle is seen as ‘norm-providing’, setting the boundaries of what counts as ‘English’. There are, of course, variations in English across these countries. In the USA, for example, you might well embarrass yourself if you turned up dressed as Superman for a party described as ‘fancy dress’. Fancy dress in America simply means formal clothes – with underpants most definitely underneath the trousers. And while we’re on the subject of pants, in the UK, walking around wearing nothing else would most likely be greeted with gasps of horror. In America, where pants are trousers, you have nothing to worry about. But despite such minor lexical and syntactic differences between these varieties there is, a large amount of overlap. British English and American English are not nearly as different as is often claimed.

The second or outer circle comprises those countries, like Nigeria, India and Singapore, where English is widely spoken as a second language (ESL). A quick
The second or outer circle comprises those countries, like Nigeria, India and Singapore, where English is widely spoken as a second language (ESL). A quick cross reference between a map dated around 1920 and a list of ESL countries shows that the majority of these were once part of Britain's global empire. Cross reference between a map dated around 1920 and a list of ESL countries shows that the majority of these were once part of Britain's global empire. These are the territories in which English was introduced as the official language by the ruling powers of the time. In these 'norm-developing' countries, non-native speakers adopted (or were forced to adopt) English in order to become involved with the trade and infrastructure of the colonies. These are the countries where, today, English is firmly entrenched in the cultural, political and social systems of the nation. There are upwards of 300 million ESL speakers and they may soon outnumber ENL speakers. It was a two way process: just as Standard British English may have undergone several local modifications in ESL countries, so was it enriched by imported words – khaki, pajamas, bungalow, bogus, jumbo, okay and zebra – as well as by changes in accent and syntax.

Finally, there is the expanding circle. This is by far the largest of the three and currently includes almost all the places which aren’t already in the first two circles. These are the EFL countries, the countries where English is a foreign language but is increasingly seen as essential not just for survival but also for prospering in the world village. Europe. Japan. South Korea. Latin America. The Middle East. North Africa. China. Up and down these countries and continents, in cities and in remote villages, there are thousands of EFL classes in progress. As you read this article, someone, somewhere is getting to grips with English for the first time. There are Chinese three years olds being sent to 'English Club' before they have begun to comprehend the basics of Mandarin. There are Kurdish scientists, statisticians and engineers developing their English in order to begin the development of their newly autonomous nation. Somewhere in Tokyo, there is a salary man or woman sitting, possibly against their will, in a business English class trying to prepare for an 18 month branch management placement on the other side of the world. There are more of these expanding circle English speakers than there are of the inner and outer circles combined. A
conservative estimate would place the figure at about 1 billion.

These expanding circle countries are described as ‘norm dependent’, using the inner and outer circles to provide the so-called ‘correct’ models of English. From these circles the rules are laid out, the text books written and the teachers sent. It is from these countries that the pop music blares, the movies roll and the advertising flashes. The expanding circle looks to the inner and outer circles as its frame of reference for what good, proper English is. At least, it did. ‘Spread’, on the other hand, is uncontrolled. It is English shaped by contact with different cultures, languages and users. It is word of mouth, digital, of the moment. It is not the language of the text book and is beyond the pedantic clutches of even the most zealous prescriptivist. As English spreads ever outwards, so the centre loses its control and we find the language multiplying into a range of ‘Engliishes’. These are not creoles with strictly developed rules, but improvisations on a theme.

Consider Japan. Here, Jenglish, or more properly Eigo-Wasei, has been developing for a long time. English words are borrowed and manipulated into the Japanese language. These mutated loanwords are then used by the Japanese when they come to speak English. Japanese speakers might say bed-town for suburb, healthmeter for weighing scales, free-size meaning one size fits all, and the particularly descriptive new-half when describing a transexual. Whilst Jenglish, Chinglish, Spanglish and the like are often the butt of pejorative remarks, they work. They have meaning for their users. Wrong as they might seem to those from the ‘inner circle’, they are adopted wholeheartedly by the expanding circle and, these days, spread exponentially through social media networks.

Which English, then, should have authority in the EFL classroom? Is EFL the guardian of some kind of ‘authenticity’ in English? Should Japanese students be informed that when they say baby car they are wrong and that they must use pram instead? Surely, baby car is just as good, if not better? In the future, will the role of the English teacher be entirely redundant as these divergent Englishes harmonise into one, homogenous global English? Or will English teachers find themselves in a classroom mediating between a babble of mutually unintelligible Englishes? Perhaps the future of English lies somewhere between the two, where a convenient global standard is underpinned by a range of local forms and where ‘Konglish’ and Indian English have as much authority as ‘norms’ as British and American English.

The ‘norm’ as laid down by the inner and outer circles is becoming increasingly less normal. The linguist H. G. Widdowson pointed to a late twentieth century shift from the ‘distribution’ of English to the ‘spread’. He saw the original distribution of the language as one which was controlled. The inner circle handed down English to the outer circle, insisting that the grammar remained untampered with and the correct lexicon was studied slavishly.

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Find out more

Books

World Englishes: A Resource Book for Students by Jennifer Jenkins (Routledge, 2009)


The Handbook of World Englishes edited by Braj Kachru, Yamuna Kachru and Cecil Nelson (Blackwell, 2009)
THE STORY OF ENGLISH: HOW THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CONQUERED THE GLOBE
by Philip Gooden
Quercus, 297 pages, RRP £8.99

Dan McIntyre on a contentious account of the history of English

A conventional history of English goes something like this: Germanic dialects brought to the British Isles by the Angles, Saxons and Jutes are then influenced by the Scandinavian dialects spoken by the later Viking invaders. Following the Norman Conquest, this fledgling English language is then influenced by French, the language of the new nobility, and Latin, the language of the church. There follows a period during which English declines in prestige, only to rise again as a result of war with France and the loss of Normandy. During the 15th century, the language is then fixed as a direct consequence of the introduction of the printing press. Early Modern English, or the language of Shakespeare, then becomes the basis of an eventual global English once it is transferred to the New World and beyond by British colonists and Empire builders.

In his 2005 book, The Stories of English, David Crystal begins with this standard history before proceeding to demolish it on the grounds that it is manifestly biased in favour of Standard written English; by contrast, regional dialects and spoken language don’t get a look in. Given that Crystal’s book is one of the few referenced in Philip Gooden’s The Story of English, it is surprising that Gooden sticks so rigidly to the conventional history. The result is a fairly lacklustre retelling of the standard series of events deemed to have affected the development of English. It is not so much that Gooden is wrong in what he says, more that his inability to look beyond the conventional story results in some gross simplifications and misleading impressions. So, for instance, Middle English is covered in the chapter called ‘Chaucer’s English’ while Early Modern English, predictably enough, is dealt with in a chapter called ‘The Age of Shakespeare’. These two writers may well be the most famous exponents of the English of their respective times but to describe Middle English and Early Modern English solely through their work gives a highly incomplete picture of how the language was developing in these periods. To be fair, the chapter on ‘Chaucer’s English’ does briefly cover the work of Caxton and the Gawain poet. However, reading the chapter on Shakespeare, one could be forgiven for thinking that Early Modern English was almost entirely his creation.

Elsewhere, Gooden suggests that the Norman Conquest was the event that led to the introduction of French into England (it wasn’t: French had been used in the Royal Court during the reign of Edward the Confessor). And when discussing English overseas, Gooden gives the highly misleading impression that there is a language variety called ‘Pidgin English’ that was then ‘spread around the world’ (p.176). Perhaps the most problematic claim, though, is that the pattern of English’s development over time has been one of simplification. While it is true that English has become a language where word order rather than inflections is responsible for meaning, this is a process of regularisation. Whether this means the language is becoming simpler is very much a matter of point of view. No doubt the Anglo-Saxons would have seen this process very differently! For me, the major issue with this book is summed up in the title. Despite what the definite article suggests, there is no one ‘story’ of the English language.

For me, the major issue with this book is summed up in the title. Despite what the definite article suggests, there is no one ‘story’ of the English language.

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HOW TO TALK LIKE A LOCAL
by Susie Dent
Arrow Books, 244 pages, RRP £7.99

Ella Jeffries on a lively account of contemporary variation in British English.

Effective as a reference book or simply to flick through, How to Talk Like a Local is a collection and description of regional words and phrases that have been or still are in use around the UK today. These include words we may consider to be old-fashioned, such as the endearment ‘chuck’, and also words that bear the markings of a 21st century fad for cultural phenomena such as ‘chav’ (‘a young person in trendy clothes and flashy jewellery’) and ‘minging’ (‘ugly’). However the addition of some description of the history and etymology of the words shows that even the apparently modern dialect words have been around longer than we think (‘chav’, derived from a Romany word, has been around for over 150 years). I was struck by how many words I had not heard of throughout the book, a testimony to both the regional diversity evidently still existent and the depth of the research that has gone into the finding and choosing of these words. A useful feature of this book is found in the links between the words which mean roughly the same thing in different dialects; underneath each word is a list of other similar regional words which can in turn be looked up in the book. Also, scattered throughout are lengthier descriptions of some common slang names for processes, such as the many different ways tea making, brewing and pouring are described throughout Britain (‘brew’, ‘wet’, ‘steep’, ‘mash’, ‘teem’, ‘bide and draw’). There are also longer descriptions of some of the specific phonetic features of certain accents, with two-page sections on ‘How to talk like a ...’ which ranges from Cockney to Geordie to Scot (being from Yorkshire I felt a section on this region was lacking!). These sections are user-friendly for non-specialists, providing sounded out letter examples of the way in which we distinguish these accents and they include some words and phrases specific to the region.

This book explores and uncovers the dialect variation that some people believe is dying out but is evidently still in use throughout the UK. Personally I was particularly drawn to words from my native Yorkshire and found some that I have never heard before (e.g. ‘gobslotch’; an idle fellow), words that I hadn’t previously known were dialect specific (e.g. ‘ginnel’; alleyway) and words that I recognise but whose meanings I wouldn’t have been able to pin down (e.g. ‘blethered’; tired out). In the introduction to the book, the point is nicely made that although many words have died out, the constantly changing language reflects the constant development of lifestyle and society over the years. With this sentiment in mind, I expected more terms reflecting young people’s interests and concerns. In order to reflect the diversity and constant development of language, it would have been useful to document some of those words currently in vogue today which may well become established dialect words in the future.
The Linguistics Olympiad

Suffering withdrawal symptoms from London 2012? Then why not try a different kind of Olympics? The Linguistics Olympiad movement has branches around the world and also holds an international Olympiad each year: you can find out more at www.ioling.org. The puzzles set for these competitions provide fascinating examples of the combination of logic and linguistic sensitivity that are required to be successful as a linguist. Here’s one that comes from the Foundation Level test of the UK’s Olympiad in 2012:

Say it in Abma

Abma is an Austronesian language spoken in parts of the South Pacific island nation of Vanuatu by around 8,000 people. Carefully study these Abma sentences then answer the questions below. Note that there is no separate word for ‘the’ or ‘he’ in these Abma sentences:

Here are some new words in Abma: sesesrakan (teacher), mwegani (eat), bwet (taro, a kind of sweet potato), muhural (walk), butsukul (palm-tree).

Mwamni sileng. He drinks water.
Nutsu mwatbo mwamni sileng. The child keeps drinking water.
Nutsu mwegau. The child grows.
Nutsu mwatbo mwegalgal. The child keeps crawling.
Mworob mwabma. He runs here.
Mwerava Mabontare mwisib. He pulls Mabontare down.
Mabontare mwisib. Mabontare goes down.
Mweselkani tela mwesak. He carries the axe up.
Mwelebte sileng mwabma. He brings water.
Mabontare mworob mwesak. Mabontare runs up.
Sileng mworob. The water runs.

Now, after that crash course, translate the following sentences into Abma:
1. The teacher carries the water down.
2. The child keeps eating.
3. Mabontare eats taro.
4. The child crawls here.
5. The teacher walks downhill.
6. The palm-tree keeps growing upwards.
7. He goes up.

Done it? Now try translating these Abma sentences into English:
8. Sesesrakan mweselkani bwet mwabma.
10. Mwelebte bwet mwesak.

Easy? Check your answers on page 25 opposite.
Creativity isn’t just for artists. Anyone who’s ever made a groan-inducing pun is being creative with language, and creativity is common in language use. Rob Pope’s book *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (Routledge, 1994) introduced a technique for studying texts which relies on ‘intervention’ – i.e. changing the text. This technique is not only enlightening, it’s fun.

Pope discusses his success in using intervention with students in class using well-known statements like ‘I think, therefore I am’ (Descartes) and ‘Smoking can damage your health’. The aim is to change one of more of the words and then to contemplate the significance of both the new and the original form. Students might well come up with ‘I drink, therefore I am’ as an ironic and playful version of the famous philosophical phrase. Some of the effects of this are to demonstrate one of the features of modern scholarly life as an undergraduate and to make us compare this with the image of the thinker in Descartes’ version. Intervening in the health warning on packets of cigarettes might lead to something like ‘Smoking can enhance your sex appeal’, which highlights the tendency for cigarette producers to use this as their marketing strategy.

Send us your best interventions on the following phrase from Hamlet:

**To be, or not to be – that is the question**

We’ll reward the winner with a free one year subscription to Babel. There are no restrictions on what you can do with the phrase, except that the intervened version must be recognisably derived from Shakespeare’s version. You may depart from his version as far as you want within this general rule and you may wish your version to reflect differences in your life from those in Hamlet’s or to comment on some aspect of social or political life.

The winner will be chosen by the Editors, whose decision is final*.

* Babel reserves the right to change the nature of the prize for this competition.

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Richard Burton as Hamlet: To be or not to be: can you answer the question – in our special competition to win a year’s subscription to Babel: The Language Magazine?

**Answers**

We are grateful to the UK Linguistics Olympiad for permission to reproduce test materials from their website.

1. Sesesrakan mweselkani sileng mwisib.
2. Nutsu mwatbo mwegani.
4. Nutsu mwegalgal mwabma.
5. Sesesrakan muhural mwisib.
7. Mwesak.
8. The/a teacher carries (the) taro here. Or: The/a teacher brings (the) taro.
9. (The) water runs down/downwards/downhill.
10. He carries (the) taro up/upwards/uphill.
We all know that what we literally say can be different from what we actually mean. If an acquaintance tells you ‘My father-in-law is a dinosaur’, you don’t puzzle over why she is saying something bluntly false; you accept it as a significant, if figurative, description. Further, the difference between what we say and what we mean often depends on context. If you say ‘It’s cold here’ while talking on the phone to a friend in another country you may just be making a factual statement; if you say the same thing while visiting him in his flat you may well be giving a none too subtle hint that he should turn up the heating. One important question in linguistics, particularly in the discipline of pragmatics, is whether and if so how we can explain these differences, and here linguists owe a huge intellectual debt to the philosopher H. Paul Grice.

Born in 1913, Grice began his academic career at Oxford towards the end of the 1930s during a major controversy about the nature of the philosophical study of language. The school of ‘ideal language philosophy’ took seriously only artificial and logically perfect languages. Natural language was messy and unruly because it could be used figuratively or vaguely and also because, unlike logic, it was sensitive to our everyday ways of making sense of the world. If you are told ‘Joan insulted her boss and was fired’ you are likely to come away believing that the two events took place but also with the impression that the firing took place after, and probably as a result of, the insulting. But in logic the conjunction of two propositions doesn’t allow us to form any such additional impressions. Proponents of ‘ordinary language philosophy’ didn’t disagree about the differences between logic and natural language, but argued that this only went to show that logic was not an appropriate measure of natural language, which deserved serious attention from philosophers in its own right.

Grice was associated with ordinary language philosophy as it became established at Oxford after the Second World War, but became uneasy with what he saw as its over-simplistic reliance on listing and describing the resources of everyday language. He wanted a more systematic account of how language works. In ‘Meaning’, written in 1947, he explained the meaning of what we say in terms of the psychological concept of what we intend to communicate. Realising that there was still much to be explained about the relationship between intended and literal meaning, he worked during the 1960s on a series of lectures entitled ‘Logic and conversation’.

Grice made two bold claims. Firstly, both the ideal and the ordinary language philosophers were wrong about the incompatibility of logic and natural language because they were ignoring the differences between literal and intended meaning. Secondly, those differences could be accounted for by a coherent set of principles. Grice distinguished between ‘what is said’ on any particular occasion, something akin to literal meaning, and ‘what is implicated’. Logic can explain
‘what is said’, but to give a full explanation of intended meaning we need also to refer to what he styled ‘the cooperative principle’, a basic feature of human social interaction. We generally expect those we interact with to cooperate in whatever task we jointly undertake. In the case of conversation, we interpret what someone says to us as a cooperative contribution if we possibly can, and do so in relation to particular expectations about the quantity, quality and relevance of the information we receive and the manner in which it is offered. In this way Grice addressed the debate over logic and language. ‘What is said’ when we use the word ‘and’, for instance, can be explained by the logical function of joining together two propositions. If we understand further information to do with sequence and causality, these can be explained as ‘conversational implicatures’, derived from our expectation that the manner, in this case the order, in which the information was conveyed was cooperative.

Strikingly, the cooperative principle can also explain everyday examples of the type with which we began. Literally, at the level of ‘what is said’, your acquaintance’s statement about her father-in-law is just false. Instinctively, you search for an alternative, implicated meaning consistent with your joint commitment to the cooperative principle. In your friend’s flat, the statement that it is cold doesn’t offer a cooperative quantity of relevant new information at the level of ‘what is said’. You are relying on him to seek an alternative, cooperative meaning at the level of ‘what is implicated’. There are various flaws and problems with the theory Grice proposed in ‘Logic and conversation’, but his framework opened up a whole new approach to the study of meaning in our use of language, and introduced the possibility that non literal meaning might be amenable to systematic explanation.

In 1967 Grice left Oxford for the University of California, Berkeley. He continued to devote his considerable energies to work on a range of philosophical topics, including rationality and ethics, and in doing so he often drew on the resources of ordinary language and on his own distinction between saying and implicating. He was legendary for his untidiness, his gregariousness and his generous but indiscriminate hospitality. A heavy smoker for most of his adult life, he contracted emphysema and died in 1988 at the age of 75.

Grice published only a handful of articles during his life; much of his work appeared only posthumously, or is still unpublished. But even in that handful of articles he changed for good the way we think about language and how it is used. He did so because he took on an apparently intractable philosophical controversy, and refused to explain it away as insoluble.

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In this previously unpublished series of interviews, Chomsky discusses his iconoclastic and important ideas concerning language, human nature and politics.

‘The book is truly exceptional in affording an accessible and readable introduction to Chomsky’s broad-based and cutting-edge theorizing. A must-read!’

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