

# A Level English Language

## Year 12 2020 Independent Work

“The limits of my language means the limits of my world.”  
— Ludwig Wittgenstein



“But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”  
— George Orwell, 1984

“Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says “We’re the same.” A language barrier says “We’re different.”

— Trevor Noah, *Born a Crime: Stories From a South African Childhood*



# Becoming a student of English Language

What does an A Level in English Language involve and what does it mean to be a great student of English Language?

This activity will help you find out what's involved in the A Level and beyond and the ways of learning that will help you succeed in your exams and non-exam work, but more importantly than all that: how to enjoy and get the most out of the course. You might be in for a surprise or two along the way...

- Use the table below to get a sense of what might be involved in the A Level English Language course. Tick the things that sound like you might find them interesting and then tick any that you have already studied or learned about at some point in your education (whether at Primary, Secondary or just out of your own interest).
- Select three of these areas for language study that you most want to study in greater depth. Write a paragraph or two explaining what you already know (either through study or general knowledge), and a paragraph explaining what you would like to know more about and why.

What you might study	I know a bit about this but have never studied it	I've studied this	Would like to learn more about it
How children start to say their first words			
The ways in which women and men use language in similar and different ways			
Why everyone has an accent but why some accents are liked more than others			
How social media language has developed rapidly in the last couple of decades			
Where new words come from and why			
Why people in India, Nigeria, USA and New Zealand all have their own ways of speaking English			

# Becoming a student of English Language

What you might study	I know a bit about this but have never studied it	I've studied this	Would like to learn more about it
How people in conversation interrupt and overlap with each other and how that works			
How slang develops and how it's been around for hundreds of years			
Why some words in the language are particularly offensive and make others feel angry or upset			
How writers use language to persuade and influence their readers			
Why some jobs and occupations develop their own specialist vocabulary and expressions			
How people switch and shift the ways they use language in different situations and with different people			
How English has changed from something that only the common people spoke to being the language of all parts of society			

# Do we need new words?

The English language is always generating new words. New words can be created out of nothing (**neologisms**) or be formed by using other words – or parts of words – together in new combinations (what are called **compounds** and **blends**). Sometimes initials of words in a phrase might be used (**acronyms** and **initialisms**) and you might also see parts of words being added to the front or end of another word to give it a new form (**prefixes** and **suffixes**). Most A Level English Language courses look at how and why new words are formed, but there is also debate about whether we need new words and when (or whether) they should appear in dictionaries.

- Look at the list of some of the new words that have appeared (or suddenly become much more popular) in English over the last few years.
- Have you heard of these words before? Have you used any of them? Tick the relevant columns for each word.
- Choose two words from the list that you think are an important addition to the language. Try to come up with a sentence or two explaining why they are so important.
- Then choose two words from the list that you think are pointless and insignificant. What's the problem with these words and why do you think they shouldn't be included? Again, write a sentence or two explaining your thinking.
- Are there any other new words – or new meanings for older words – that you have heard about? Perhaps you could make a note of new and interesting uses of words over the next few months.
- What are your predictions for the most popular and widely-used words for the next 12 months?

If you are interested in looking at the history of new words and slang terms that have appeared in the language, this article by one of the world's most respected slang lexicographers (i.e. people who compile dictionaries of slang), Jonathon Green, is a very good read:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27405988>

Word	Definition	Have heard / seen this word being used	Have used this word myself
Floss	A dance in which people twist their hips in one direction while swinging their arms in the opposite direction with the fists closed. Popularised by the game <i>Fortnite</i> .		
VAR Video Assistant Referee.	A system used in football to assist refereeing decisions.		

Word	Definition	Have heard / seen this word being used	Have used this word myself
Gaslight	To manipulate or trick someone by pretending that they cannot trust what they see or hear until they doubt their own sanity.		
Twerking	A way of dancing that involves bending forward and shaking or thrusting your buttocks in a rhythmic motion.		
Dadbod	A term used to describe the typically flabby and unsculpted male physique that most dads have.		
Cancel culture	A way of describing the movement to 'cancel' - to publicly disapprove of and then attempt to ignore - celebrities or organisations because of their perceived immoral or unpopular actions.		
Climate strike	A protest in which people leave work, school or college when they should be attending to take part in a protest about climate change.		
Influencer	A person who uses social media to promote a particular way of life or commercial products to their online followers.		
Nonbinary	A word describing a sexual identity that does not conform to binary categories of male and female.		
Hamsterkaufing	Stockpiling food like a hamster storing food in its cheeks (from German)		
WFH	Working From Home		
Mansplaining	A patronising way of explaining something (by a man to a woman).		

# Textercise

One of the things you will quickly notice about the study of language at A Level is that you don't just look at serious, weighty books. You might have studied quite a lot of literary fiction on your English courses so far and even when it hasn't been literature, it has probably been what is broadly termed 'literary non-fiction'. On an A Level English Language course, you will analyse all sorts of language. This activity gives you a taste of that and asks you to think a bit more about the language around you all the time.

- On the next couple of pages, you will find eight 'texts'. These might not be the kind of texts you've analysed before, but they are all worth analysing because they have been created to communicate in some way.
- Have a quick look at each text and think about the following:
  - What they are about
  - What they might mean – the ideas, messages, opinions, personalities being expressed
  - How they use different methods of communication: design, colour, vocabulary choices, structure, style, interaction.
- Choose three texts and use the questions below to make some quick notes about how they compare in their uses of language.
- Once you've done this, think about gathering your own set of texts from the world around you. Like these texts here, your texts could be written, spoken, online, serious, silly, informative, clever and/or important. Try to find at least five interesting texts and use the same questions to help you think about them.

## Questions to ask about your choice of texts

- What is the language in each text designed to achieve? Do you notice any differences between the three you have chosen?
- How have visual elements been used in the texts? Any differences?
- If any of the three were originally spoken, do you notice anything distinctive about them?
- How easy or difficult is it to analyse some of these texts? Does it feel like you can analyse them in the same way as a piece of literature, for example?

While analysing these types of text might be a new experience for you, the ways in which you explore and analyse them will build on things you've done before. Some of that will take you back to the work you might have done at Primary school with grammar (verbs, nouns and phrases, for example) and some will build on the work you've just been doing for GCSE.

<p>The Texts</p>	
<p>On tonight's show, we've got Fontaines DC live in the studio, old session tracks from The Chameleons, Ruthless Rap Assassins and Half Lazy plus all the usual mixture of weird, wonderful and just a bit wonky music from all around the world. Join me after nine tonight for the last of this week's Evening Shows.</p>	<p>A radio DJ presenting a trailer for a show.</p>
<div data-bbox="68 323 601 629" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><b>6. Serve</b></p> <p>Serve the <b>spiced Moroccan soup</b> in bowls with the remaining <b>coriander</b> sprinkled over. Dollop on some <b>Greek yoghurt</b> and finish with a sprinkling of <b>dukkah</b>. Add a sprinkle of the remaining <b>chilli</b>, if you want an extra kick.</p> <p><b>Enjoy!</b></p>	<p>Part of a recipe for a meal.</p>
<p>What refugees using our services say:</p> <div data-bbox="68 990 882 1520" data-label="Complex-Block"> <div> <p>“I want to say thank you and I really appreciate the effort you made towards making my life look beautiful, peaceful and secure.”</p> <p>– Resettled refugee</p> </div> <div> <p>“Refugee Action has been amazing with us. They helped us with everything – registering our children in schools, this was a priority for us.”</p> <p>– Dara</p> </div> <div> <p>“They help me a lot – Refugee Action is great. And I feel that they love me.”</p> <p>– Joseph</p> </div> <div> <p>“A lot of people in this country have helped me, including Refugee Action. Now I would like to change my career and help other people.”</p> <p>– Ade</p> </div> </div>	<p>A section of a charity leaflet from Refugee Action.</p>
<p><b>Play as a band of rebel cats trying to stop fascists from seizing control of the galaxy in this cooperative game!</b></p> <p>In the year three million, the animals of Earth's past inhabit the galaxy in advanced societies. Now, using fear and force, the regime known as the Rat Pack is sweeping into power across the planets. Together, a small group of cat rebels will try to stop these fascist forces from seizing power – while building a new galaxy where all species are free together.</p>	<p>A description of the boardgame, <i>Space Cats Fight Fascism</i> (TESA Collective games) on the back of the box.</p>



From the first time he was stopped and searched as a child, to the day he realised his mum was white, to his first encounters with racist teachers; race and class have shaped Akala's life and outlook. In *Natives*, he takes his own experiences – with education, the police, identity and everything in between – and uses them to look at the social, historical and political factors that have left us where we are today.

**'Gripping . . . trenchant and highly persuasive'**

**METRO (BOOKS OF THE YEAR)**

**'One of the most thoughtful books of the past year'**

**EVENING STANDARD**

**'A potent combination of autobiography and political history'**

**INDEPENDENT**

The blurb from the back of a book (*Akala's Natives*, published by Two Roads).

**EASY OPEN: FLIP, SQUEEZE, RIP AND TIP**



*Grain-free, Natural, Complete, Delicious*

(GB) **INGREDIENTS/COMPOSITION:** FRESH TURKEY (45%), FRESH DUCK (20%), GREEN PEAS (3%), CARROTS (1%), SEAWEED EXTRACT, YUCCA EXTRACT, FRUCTOOLIGOSACCHARIDE PREBIOTICS (0.5G/KG).

**NUTRITIONAL ADDITIVES:** VITAMINS: VITAMIN A: 2500 MG/KG; VITAMIN D3: 200 IU/KG; VITAMIN E: 30 MG/KG. TRACE ELEMENTS: POTASSIUM IODIDE 0.8 MG/KG, CUPRIC SULPHATE PENTAHYDRATE 20 MG/KG, ZINC SULPHATE MONOHYDRATE 139 MG/KG, FERROUS CARBONATE 33 MG/KG.

**ANALYTICAL CONSTITUENTS:** CRUDE PROTEIN 10.25%, CRUDE FAT 10%, CRUDE FIBRE 0.2%, INORGANIC MATTER 4%, MOISTURE 69%.

BEST BEFORE/ BATCH NUMBER: SEE BASE

**FRESH INGREDIENTS  
LOCALLY SOURCED  
FAMILY-FARMED TURKEY  
FAMILY-FARMED DUCK  
FRESH VEGETABLES  
SOURCE OF ANTIOXIDANTS**

A dog food carton.

And it's controlled beautifully by Jack Harrison who beats his man and whips a ball across the face of goal. It's an inviting ball aaaaand it's Ben White who gets on the end of it to put it past the keeper's outstretched hand. First goal of the season for the central defender and what a great team goal that was.

Part of a radio commentary on a football match





**Rapture**  
@RaptureWitney

We're all feeling a bit sad that  
#RSD2020 has been postponed.

We thought it might cheer things up a  
teeny bit to share some throwback  
photos from past #RSD celebrations! 🥳

@RSDUK



11:27am · 18 Apr 2020 · Twitter for Android

2 Retweets 7 Likes

A tweet from a local  
record shop on Record  
Store Day.

# Forensic Linguistics

## Language and the Law - What is Forensic Linguistics?

Following his star turn at last year's emag conference, Tim Grant outlines some of the ways in which linguistic methods can be applied to forensic texts and gives some real-life illustrations of how the analysis can be used.

There is no such thing as forensic linguistics. This message can be a bit of a shock to my students who have just enrolled on a class devoted to the topic, but it is an important message and it's good to get it out there at the start. Forensic linguistics is an application not a science. Forensic linguists are linguists who apply the methods and insights of linguistics to forensic texts and contexts. A second shock can be that only a small proportion of forensic linguists assist with investigations or provide evidence to courts. The majority examine how language is used and abused across a wide range of legal contexts.

We all carry legal texts with us all the time and if you take a moment to look in your bag or wallet you will find some. In my wallet today there is a supermarket coupon and turning it over I can find, in tiny print, the terms and conditions. Within this text are the following few sentences:

*Coupon is not transferable. This coupon entitles you to the offer on the terms displayed overleaf. Sale, auction or re-tendering of this coupon or evoucher for money or otherwise is strictly prohibited.*

This language is really odd. It seems to be written for me, the consumer, and yet it's pretty tough for the average consumer to follow. Features of legal language are well described and include nominalisation ('Sale, auction....'), rare lexis ('re-tendering'), embedding ('for money or otherwise') and explicit references to other legal texts ('the terms overleaf'). A good question to ask is 'Why is the language like this?' and the answer is, as ever, provided by Halliday's words: 'Language is as it is because of what it has to do'. The primary job of a legal text is to be legally watertight. The primary audience for the text on the back of my coupon is not me, the consumer, but rather a judge in some possible future court and the text is written in case I should get into a dispute with the supermarket. The court is the primary audience for every legal text and as such every legal text needs to be precise, explicit, self-contained and to imply only those meanings those who drafted it intend. This is not to say that we should not attempt to reform legal language, and attempt to provide plain language versions of standard legal texts, but to do so we need to understand the nature of the language.

As well as legal written texts, forensic linguists have an interest in verbal legal processes; the language of arrest and charge, the language of police interview, and the language of the courtroom have all been studied. Researchers have demonstrated that the legal meanings conveyed in the police caution can be poorly understood by those who've been arrested, that police officers can inadvertently

influence answers they receive from witnesses according to how they ask questions, and that expert witnesses can give longer answers in court in comparison to eyewitnesses, for example. Each of these findings gives rise to more questions both of explanation and of potential reform. Descriptive forensic linguistics can very quickly give rise to a critical linguistic stance. The law is a power-filled structure which coerces the citizenry into good behaviour and it operates through language. To suggest change or reform in legal linguistic interactions is to suggest a change or reform in the distribution of power. This area of forensic linguistics is radical and important to the pursuit of justice.

## Investigative Work

Investigative forensic linguistics pursues justice at a more local level contributing to individual cases rather than system-wide reform. We can work in the civil as well as criminal courts in, for instance, cases of copyright or trademark infringement. Linguists, for example, helped McDonald's defeat the McSleep Inns motel chain in America and McDonald's now have exclusive rights over the prefix 'Mc'.

In the criminal field we can engage in purely investigative work which will never reach an evidential standard or be admitted to a Court. A few years ago I was approached by the police to help them find the writer of a series of anonymous, abusive letters. This task is, of course, classic Sherlock Holmes.

In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes identifies the first language of a writer saying of their written style, 'It is the German who is so uncourteous to his verbs.' Real world profiling depends upon research observations and also on the judgement of the linguist. The writer in my case had sent more than 50 letters. In these letters the writer used terms of abuse which included 'half-castes' and 'negroes' and other slightly old fashioned words such as 'hence' and 'thrice' and this pointed perhaps to an older writer. From work in our research centre we also know that men and women tend to write abuse letters differently. In our corpus, men tend to concentrate on what they are personally going to do to the recipient, so you get more first-person pronouns and more active verbs, whereas letters by women tend to be more personally insulting and abusing, so you get more adjectives. The writer in this case definitely fell into the latter category and so I was able to suggest that it was a woman. In other cases it has been possible to spot dialect items (in one case the use of 'bad-minded people' indicated a writer using Jamaican influenced English) but there were no strong clues of this sort in this particular case. My profile was eventually used in a BBC *Crimewatch* TV appeal and the investigation received a large number of responses to the appeal amongst whom were some new individuals who had received a letter. One such victim still had an envelope and on this envelope was a fingerprint which ultimately led to the arrest of a 70-year-old woman from Portsmouth.

## Who Wrote It?

Profiling cases do not go to Court but comparative authorship analysis cases can. These cases involve texts of known authorship and texts of anonymous or disputed authorship. In the UK we've analysed texts as diverse as disputed suicide notes, terrorist conspiracy documents and text messages. These cases involve linguistic description at its most painstaking. What we try to do is examine the known texts to describe consistent and distinctive stylistic choices in a person's writing, and then see if they carry over to the queried text. If they do, we can sometimes make a tentative conclusion as to who wrote the queried text. Recently we have been involved in several murder cases where the sending of text messages has been key. In each of these cases the police believed that the suspect had killed the victim and then used her phone to send text messages. These messages seemed to show the victim was alive at a certain point in time when the suspect had a good alibi. With careful analysis of the texts it was possible to show shifts in style in the streams of messages; earlier messages were consistent

with the victims' historic style but the later set of messages looked different and were consistent with the texting style of the suspects in each case.

### Using the Linguistic Toolkit

Not all cases involve trying to work out who wrote something. Varied examples include being asked to read a diary of a girl who'd died. The police couldn't read it because it was written in a private diary code but they wanted to be sure that there was no evidence from the diary that the girl had been abused. In another example I was asked to give evidence as to the meaning of slang in an IRC chat. The language in this conversation was heavily influenced by East London street slang and contained a conspiracy to murder. With cases such as these you have rummage through your linguistic toolbox and work out what sort of analysis can best help answer a particular kind of question.

Defining forensic linguistics as 'the application of linguistics to forensic texts and contexts' allows for a diversity of interest and application. It is a growing area in applied linguistics and many universities now offer third year option courses in the field with one or two universities developing greater depth of expertise (Aston University and Cardiff University offer postgraduate programmes). It is also possible to engage in forensic linguistics within your A and AS Level. Many assessed projects would allow a focus on forensic texts and data collection can be easy - after all you are probably carrying the legal language you could analyse in your bag or wallet.

Article Written By: Dr Tim Grant is Director of the Centre for Forensic Linguistics at Aston University.

This article first appeared in emagazine 57, September 2012.

# How to read the news sceptically

Professor Lynne Murphy offers six easy steps to help you distinguish between good journalism based on sound linguistic research and fake news when you read media stories about language.

When the editors of Collins Dictionary named fake news their 2017 Word of the Year, they probably weren't thinking about the linguistic news – though they could have been. There's plenty of bad journalism about language out there – and it's been going on for years. My own speciality is looking at how American English is represented in the British press, a particularly fertile area for stereotyping, misunderstanding and misinformation. But it's certainly not the only area.

Language is something the public want to know about. We all use language every day, and we tend to have ideas about English – what we like and don't like about it. The media are very happy to give us stories about English that support or challenge our ideas about how English works. They know it's great clickbait.

Too often, though, the news media present stories about English that misrepresent linguistic research, that interpret it in a way that suits certain prejudices, or that is not research-based at all. I have two bits of good news, though:

- There is a lot of good language journalism out there too.
- You have the power to cut through the hype and get a clearer idea of what's going on in the English language today.

In this article, I give a tool kit for evaluating language stories in the news, so that you can identify quality pieces, find the places to be suspicious, and do something about it when language articles are used to spread misinformation or prejudice.

## Step 1: Don't Judge a Book by its Cover, or a Language Story by the Masthead

Teachers like to tell us to 'consider the source' when evaluating information – and that is good advice. It's probably better to trust a textbook about English written by a linguistics professor than to trust your great aunt (unless she is also a linguistics professor). But when looking at media stories, it's easy to come to the conclusions 'broadsheets good, tabloids bad' and 'conservative press is conservative, liberal press is liberal'. But very often linguistic ideas don't go along with political ideas. I know very liberal people who are still linguistic snobs, for instance. And in my experience, there's plenty of bad linguistic journalism in broadsheets and sometimes good analyses in tabloids.

Take this example: in 2011 the British Library publicised their research on changing pronunciations in the UK – for example which syllable is stressed in controversy (CONtrovery or conTROVersy) and whether garage is garRAZH or GARridge. They concluded that British pronunciation changes have little or nothing to do with American English influence. Americans don't say the newer conTROVersy pronunciation, for example. The Daily Mail's headline for this story was:

*How is your English?*

*Research shows Americanisms AREN'T taking over the British language (1)*

But broadsheet the Telegraph ran the story with this on top:

*The 'conTROversy' over changing pronunciations*

To language purists they might grate, but new ways of pronouncing words are spreading in Britain thanks to the influence of US culture. (2)

It was an irresponsible way to present the story, and it was in the 'quality' newspaper.

## Step 2: Read Beyond the Headline

Headlines are usually not written by the author of the article, but by the production editor who's thinking 'how can we get people to click on or share this article?' Their advertising revenue depends on those clicks and shares. In cases like the Telegraph headline, it can look like the headline writer didn't read the article. Headlines often exaggerate or use emotive language to garner interest.

By the end of a bad headline, damage has already been done. The Telegraph article goes on to quote the researcher saying that the change in the pronunciation of controversy has nothing to do with Americans. But 38% of those who click on links don't read the article. Of those who do read, only half will make it to the end of the article.<sup>3</sup> Plenty of people will share the article on social media using only the headline to support a point they want to make. So, keep reading.

## Step 3: Look at the Language

Take a minute and think about this BBC headline from 2017. What assumptions is it starting from? Is it trying to get a specific reaction from the reader?

*How Americanisms are Killing the English Language (4)*

Look for presuppositions and metaphors. A presupposition is a claim that needs to be assumed to be true in order to interpret another claim. This headline expects you to accept two presuppositions: first, that the English language is being killed – they're not asking whether they're asking how. Another presupposition comes from the 'the' before 'English language': it presumes that there is one and only one thing called 'English language'. Is that true? When they say 'the English language', what assumptions do they expect you to make about that English and who speaks it?



Metaphors are used to frame what's happening in a particular way. But how does that metaphor work? Is the language alive? What would it mean for Americanisms to kill English? If Americanisms can kill, what are they? Disease? Poison? Weapons? Assassins? What other possible metaphors are there for words travelling around the world? British writers sometimes represent the English language as Britain's 'gift' to the world (even though the dominance of English has contributed to the decline or death of many indigenous languages). Another possible metaphor might have Americanisms enriching or revitalising English, rather than killing it. Why was this metaphor chosen?

## Step 4: Evaluate the Research

Many media pieces about language are mere opinion, based on a single person's experience of English. The thing to remember about language opinions is that they're generally based on very limited experience of English – from their own lifetime, social class, age group, educational background, etc. Everyone has a right to an opinion, but we (and they) shouldn't mistake opinions for reality. Such articles often cherry-pick their evidence – that is, they use examples that support their point, but don't acknowledge the many examples that don't support it.

Beyond the opinion pieces, much language news these days relates to linguistic research, in part because researchers feel pressure to show that their research is relevant by getting it into the news. But research deserves critical caution as well. There's stronger research and weaker research, and news organisations don't always bother to differentiate between them. Consider this from another Telegraph article:

The English language is evolving faster than ever – leaving older Brits literally lost for words, research has revealed. A detailed study has identified the social media language and mobile messaging terms that perplex millions of parents and which point to a future where emoticons may replace the written word. [...] The study was led by the English language expert Professor John Sutherland [and] was commissioned to mark the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S6 phone. The results point to a seismic generational gap in how we use and understand modern informal text speak while also suggesting older style abbreviations and acronyms such as TXT are now so old they are considered antiquated by the younger generation. (5)

It raises a few alarm bells.

- How is this person an 'English language expert'? In fact, the researcher is a professor of literature, not language or linguistics. The training in doing sociolinguistic research is quite different from that required for literary research.
- The research has been commissioned by a business that is promoting a new product. Such research does not have the quality-control requirements that go along with publication in an academic journal or research funded by an academic organisation. The company wanted something they could make a headline out of, so its press releases would be picked up as news items. That's a lot cheaper and gets more 'shares' than an advertisement would get.
- There is no link to the original research report, so you can't check the methodology, the actual findings, or the researcher's interpretations of it.
- The evidence doesn't merit the conclusions. They've shifted the discourse in two ways here:
  - from evidence about one very specific kind of language [texting] to a claim about English in general



- from evidence from now to a historical claim. We can't actually know whether English is changing 'faster than ever' from a study of two generations at one time, and there's no reason to believe that the language of texting is the same as that of conversation or essay writing, for example.

The shiftiness in the last bullet point is something to stay very aware of. Articles about dialect-word research often shift into claims about accents. Evidence about spelling might morph into a claim about pronunciation or education.

Consider whether there are other possible explanations for the phenomena discussed. For instance, where dialects are becoming less distinct, sometimes television is blamed. But are there other factors at work, such as more people travelling further for work, more people going to university, more people moving away from their place of birth in modern times? If children's spelling is poor, it's a big leap to decide that's because of social media – you also need to check whether children's spelling is always poor at that age (is it a developmental issue) or whether spelling education is done differently now than it used to be.

## Step 5: Check Their Facts; Do Your Own Research

If the article links to the original research, have a look at that. It's likely to have more careful conclusions and less misleading language than the media coverage. For instance, one study about changing accents in Britain (mostly due to the influence of major British cities) had one line about communication becoming more casual, possibly because of the influence of social media platforms from the US. A Guardian article on the study led with the claim that

*By 2066, dialect words and regional pronunciations will be no more – consumed by a tsunami of Americanisms.*

There was no way to get from the report to that conclusion – and in fact, the article was arguing that the report didn't know what it was talking about. But to get to the point they wanted to make, the writer was gravely misrepresenting the research. (6)

But sometimes it's the researcher who gets it wrong – and the media reports it anyway. A 2017 news item (7) claimed British words were losing ground to American words. But looking at the original research, I found that one of the 'British' words that British people aren't saying nowadays was 'capsicum'. It's no wonder they didn't find it in Britain, since it's the Australian word for a sweet pepper.

You have the power to check claims made in the media about language, and all you need is access to the internet and a sense of which sources of information are reliable. Check a few dictionaries (just one and you haven't really done your research since different dictionaries might offer different information). The Online Etymology Dictionary is free and has lots of good information about word histories.

## Step 6: Do Something About Fake Linguistic News

Language changes; it's inescapable. But a lot of media articles seem intent on creating villains in the story of language change. It's the millennials! The immigrants! The Americans! The teachers! They're who we can blame! These kinds of stories serve political purposes. They are propaganda. The aforementioned study about accents changing in Britain gave rise to a Sun headline

*The 'th' sound vanishing from the English language with Cockney and other dialects set to die out by 2066 due to immigration.*

That is a seriously problematic interpretation of the research, and it serves the Sun's general anti-immigration stance. It was an unethical headline. And the newspaper deserved to be called out on it.

In those kinds of situations, it's not enough for us to know ourselves that it's bad linguistic journalism. When the press demonises groups of people (or their languages) using bad thinking and poor research, we need to stand up. The good news is that in the era of social media, this is easier to do than ever. Contact the media source and point out the errors. Find better articles on the issues to share when you see people sharing the biased articles. Be a good citizen and start conversations about the problems and consequences of bad linguistic research.

## References

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2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/8305645/The-conTROversyover-changing-pronunciations.html>
3. [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how\\_people\\_read\\_online\\_why\\_you\\_won\\_t\\_finish\\_this\\_article.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2013/06/how_people_read_online_why_you_won_t_finish_this_article.html)
4. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170904-how-americanisms-are-killing-the-englishlanguage>
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/11574196/new-forms-ofsocial-media-terms-which-parents-do-not-understand.html>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/30/hsbc-dialect-dying-rab-cnesbitt>
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/13/american-english-language-study>

Article Written By: Lynne Murphy is a linguistics professor at Sussex University and author of *The Prodigal Tongue: The Love-Hate Relationship between British and American English* (OneWorld, 2018). Follow her on Twitter: @lynneguist

# Opinions in the media on language

As well as debating big ideas about the English language, you'll be studying what others say about it. Language is constantly being discussed online and in the press, with opinion pieces being produced all the time. This is great news for language students, because there's a never-ending supply of material to explore. But it can also be a little tricky to keep track of.

We've chosen a couple of articles for you to have a look at, to give you a taste of the kinds of arguments people have about language. Some of these are by linguists (people who study language) and others are by journalists or commentators. We're not saying we necessarily agree with the views being offered, but they will give you a sense of some of the different arguments out there.

Whenever you read an article about language, you have to have your wits about you, so remember to read the 'How to read the news sceptically' article by the linguist Lynne Murphy about how to read an article about language and use the approach she suggests to assess the ideas presented, the credentials of the writers and the validity of their opinions.

Suggested opinion pieces:

2. The Ugly Rise of Accent Softening:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/mar/20/ugly-rise-accent-softening-people-changing-their-voices>

3. Calling Someone a 'Gammon' Is Hate Speech: <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/what-does-gammon-mean>

You can keep track of articles about language by following @EngLangBlog (<https://twitter.com/EngLangBlog>) on Twitter and by bookmarking your favourite articles using your preferred social media apps.

Why not keep a reading record of the articles you come across over the next few months? You could even do a top five and a bottom five of the best and worst articles about language that you've read!

# Becoming an A Level Language Student – a Quick Guide

**Examiner and university lecturer Dr Marcello Giovanelli tells students embarking on an A Level language course what to expect and how to make the most of the course.**

If you're reading this then you may well have just started your A Level studies in English Language. Congratulations on choosing an exciting, modern and engaging A Level course! However, the transition from GCSE or iGCSE to A Level can be a demanding one, and so in this article, I'll share some key principles of A Level language study with you that will help you to bridge the gap and get the most from your studies. Together, these form a 'quick guide' to becoming an A Level English Language student.

## 1. Learning a Metalanguage and Avoiding Impressionism

Given that you may not have had to do much explicit language work at KS4, you will find that you need to acquire a new terminology to deal with the kinds of analyses that you will undertake at A Level. We call this type of language about language a metalanguage. For English Language, most of this revolves around what we term levels of language (discourse, grammar, semantics, lexis, phonology), or what are currently known as linguistic methods or frameworks in examination board specifications. As a beginning linguist, it's important to start using these terms confidently and accurately to ensure that all descriptive linguistic work (any analysis that identifies and explores language features) that you do is as precise and clear as is possible, and avoids merely making impressionistic and speculative claims that are not rooted in language analysis.

As an example, look at the text (photo not reproduced here). This was written by a mid-day supervisor and attached to a biscuit tin in a school staffroom. It was motivated by her anger towards a member of the teaching staff persistently going through the tin trying to find chocolate biscuits.

A non-linguist might comment on this text in quite an intuitive way by identifying the angry 'tone', perhaps making some comment on the order that's being given, and even arguing that the use of the word 'please' makes the order seem more polite. However, because there's very little language analysis going on here beyond simply identifying words, the comments feel impressionistic and idiosyncratic; they are not grounded in a recognised and accepted way of talking about the content and structure of language.

On the other hand, knowing even a little bit about how language works can be incredibly enabling, helping with the analysis and making you sound more competent and professional in your work. For example, using the knowledge that events can be grammatically presented using either the active or passive voice not only enables an analysis to take place using a shared and accepted metalanguage, but can also lead to a more intricate analysis. In this example, the mid-day supervisor has chosen to write in the passive 'they are getting broken' rather than the active 'someone/name of person is breaking them'. Since the use of the passive voice downplays the agent (person responsible) for the action of the verb, we can argue that using this form is generally significant. In this instance, we might deduce that the supervisor wants to avoid attaching a sense of blame to the breaking of the biscuits. Being able to discuss the grammar (or any other aspect) in this way is likely to lead to a much better analysis.

## 2. The Importance of Context

At A Level, engaging with context means moving beyond simple GCSE notions of audience and purpose. Now what's really important to remember is that by context we are referring to a range of factors both within and outside of the text, paying close attention to situations where a text is both written or spoken (the context of production), and where it is read or listened to (the context of reception). Returning to our 'biscuit tin' text, we could identify a whole range of contextual factors that would be important to comment on.

In terms of the context of production, the fact that the text producer is a mid-day supervisor and not a member of teaching staff is significant since it is likely that she will have a less powerful role in the school, and consequently will need to be careful about not offending someone of a higher status. This goes some way to explaining her motivation for using the passive voice that was discussed earlier. In terms of the context of reception, we can imagine that this note would be seen by whoever was in the staffroom and happened to come across the biscuit tin, and that this could take place at many different times. It's relatively easy therefore to see that there are as many possible contexts of reception as there are potential readers, and that each reading will be motivated by who the reader is, the conditions in which they read (carefully, in a rush, whether they have had a good day or are fed up), whether they are actually guilty of breaking the biscuits and so on. Equally, context needs to be understood as a dynamic entity rather than a static one; the situation and circumstances in which a text is understood can change quite considerably. For example, the person responsible for breaking the biscuits might suddenly react in a very different way when he realises the message is aimed at him. In this instance the context that surrounds the reading, and therefore influences it, can develop and evolve as the reading itself takes place.

There are two important points worth emphasising here. First, the relationship between context and language features is both a complex and incredibly important one. Writers and speakers make language choices that are influenced by contextual factors, and readers and listeners interpret what they read and hear within the specific situations in which they find themselves. Second, the richness of contextual detail and its importance in the process of making meaning means that it's often better to think of any data you engage with in your studies not as a 'text' but as part of a larger communicative act called a discourse event that has real participants with intentions, beliefs and emotions engaging in an act of communication. All of these influence what gets written or said, and how that gets interpreted.

## 3. Ideas about Language

Another key skill that you will develop as you progress through your studies will be your ability to read and engage with ideas about language study. This will move you beyond seeing yourself as someone who analyses language to someone who actively explores ideas and concepts that researchers and academics have grappled with. Whichever specification you are following for your own studies, being able to understand the various debates surrounding language topics, and integrating these into your own analyses of data is an important skill that you will need to master. In your analysis of the 'biscuit

tin' text, you could draw on a number of theories related to how people communicate with each other (interaction and politeness theories), how status at work affects the ways in which language is used (language and occupation, the discourse of the workplace), and how technology might be influencing the ways in which we communicate in non-electronic forms (language change, attitudes to language). The best way to become competent at working with ideas like these is to try to explore them in the light of any data you are looking at in class. To what extent do you find that your data supports or challenges established research ideas that you have read?

#### 4. Read Around the Subject

Of course, one of the best ways to explore issues and ideas in language is to read as widely as you can around the subject. emag is a great place to start for language articles that have been written specifically for A Level students, and your teacher will be able to guide you towards suitable ones. Beyond emag there is a wealth of material. As a start, you might try David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (Cambridge University Press) for a good reference book and overall guide to language topics, Louise Mullany and Peter Stockwell's *Introducing English Language* (Routledge) for an excellent, albeit quite advanced, guide to the study of language and linguistics. *Language: A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories* (ed. Dan Clayton, English and Media Centre) offers an excellent collection of essays by leading academics on A Level language topics. It's also a good idea to use the internet to keep up to date with news stories and the latest debates involving language. Whether it's schools banning students from using non-standard English, how the latest innovations in technology are affecting the ways that we use language, or what the latest research in child language learning is, there's always something to interest the language student. Regularly visiting the online pages of tabloid newspapers will lead to no end of stories to read and discuss in class. To make things easier for yourself, you could subscribe to a blog which collects the latest news for you such as Dan Clayton's peerless EngLangBlog <http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk>

#### 5. Become a Data Collector

Another important part of becoming a student of language is learning how to become a researcher of language. In fact your career as a collector of language data begins the moment you start your course. The wonderful thing about language data, of course, is that it's everywhere: in the conversations we have with friends, the TV we watch, the books, magazines, social media pages, and tweets we read, the websites we browse, the computer games we play and so on. Make a point of collecting interesting examples of language you see, either in hard copy form or using the camera facility or a scanning app on your smartphone. Record conversations of both real (do ask for permission!) and represented (on the TV and radio) speech, practise transcriptions, start a scrapbook, and share ideas with your fellow students via a blog or your school or college's VLE. Get used to working with data and start applying learning in class to your own examples that you collect. You've got an exciting two years of study ahead of you!

Article Written By: Dr Marcello Giovanelli is a Lecturer in English in Education at the University of Nottingham.

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# Reading Around the Subject

**Examiner, regular emagazine writer and @EngLangBlog tweeter Dan Clayton shows how you can make good use of news reporting of language issues to enrich your thinking in many different parts of your A Level course.**

One of the most exciting things about the English Language A Level course is that language is always in the news, in one form or another. While this can provide you with some really interesting material to refer to in essays, language investigations and your own directed writing, it can also be a bit daunting to keep up with. And even if you know where to look, it's sometimes difficult to work out how what you're reading might fit in to what you're doing on the course.

What I'll attempt to do in this article is take a range of fairly recent stories about language in the news and contextualise them within the A Level course. In doing this, I'll show you some good places to find stories, give some ideas about what you might learn from them and offer some suggestions about how to use them. Let's start with a story that directly involves A Level students themselves...

## **Below the Line and Below the Belt**

A Level students at Havant and South Downs Sixth Form College were involved earlier this year in a project (supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme) which investigated the history and use of the Portsmouth ('Pompey') accent. As part of their project, students and teachers looked at the history of the accent and dialect in their local area, collected examples of the variety and contributed to an exhibition for the general public. This all sounds exactly like the kind of work that takes the subject beyond the confines of the classroom and opens up links between theory in class and the real world 'out there'. However, The Daily Telegraph had other ideas.

In a piece in October 2018, titled

*College fails to 'unearth anything' after spending £34,000 investigating Portsmouth accent*

unnamed Telegraph reporters rubbished the project, claiming that the 'researchers' (aka A Level students) had spent 10 months finding nothing of interest about the 'so-called Portsmouth accent'.

The College provided their own response to the story

(<https://www.dropbox.com/s/xphw2z2cid8dfh/NEW-PANEL.pdf?dl=0>) but another aspect of this whole rather unfair coverage of the college's work is what happens when a story like this is opened up to comment on the newspaper's website.

On the scale of things, 21 responses (at the time of writing this article) isn't a huge outpouring of opinion – and some of them are supportive of the college's work – but a quick glance at many of the comments shows the kind of attitudes that are often bubbling under the surface of news articles about language: namely, prescriptive and often xenophobic and/or declinist attitudes. So, while one commenter says 'the involved students and the National Lottery are all idiots who have no idea of either 'Research' or the value of money' another invokes a 'Political Correctness Gone Mad' agenda by saying

*All this proves is that the Lottery money is being wasted at an incredible speed on nonsensical projects. The corollary is that worthwhile enterprises are starved of money if they are not PC or sufficiently (sic) 'edgy'*



before another chimes in with the most nakedly prejudiced comment of the lot:

A more interesting area of research could be into why very many youngsters throughout the country of varying ethnic backgrounds seem to have adopted the intonations of Jamaican drug dealers.

What can we learn from such an article and the comments that follow it? If you're studying AQA or OCR, you have some ready-made language discourses (AQA Paper 2) or a topical language issue (OCR Paper 1 Section B) to discuss. As many people from Deborah Cameron and Henry Hitchings to John and Lesley Milroy have previously argued, when people debate language they often use it as a proxy for other concerns, often those to do with what they perceive to be wider social ills. So, a good way to see those wider arguments exposed and to have recent stories to refer to is to check the ways in which the main newspapers report on language stories and then go 'below the line' to see how those arguments play out among the readers and their wider social and political agendas.

### **Power to the Peevers**

Language peevish is nothing new. People have complained about language ever since humans have been able to speak: the history of pedants and prescriptivists is a long one and they love to write about their pet-hates at length. What can be very instructive is to track the current gripes that people are expressing, and social media can be a great way of doing this. As the linguist Rob Drummond pointed out in a tweet in October 2018,

*If you ever want a point-in-time snapshot of current language peeves, just find a celebrity who has decided to share theirs and then sit back and read the replies!*

Drummond was referring to a tweet by the comedian Jason Manford that had picked up over 4500 likes in the space of a few days.

Manford's own gripes were abbreviations like 'hubs' (husband), 'totes' (totally) and 'bants' (banter – which he also wanted banning as a word in its own right) but also the non-literal use of 'literally' and the phrase 'Can I get...' taking the place of 'May I have...'. His fans chipped in with plenty of others: 'LOL' said 'in person, face to face'; adding 'super' to the front of words; 'cray-cray'... And while a lot of the responses were very funny, many seemed to be genuine gripes.

A celebrity from a very different generation, the columnist and former MP, Gyles Brandreth sparked a similar peevefest among viewers of BBC Breakfast in the same month when he complained about 'totes' (again), 'I myself', 'bored of' and 'off of', arguing that

*all the research shows that people who speak correctly, spell correctly, they will be more successful in this world.*

Brandreth also claims that

*accents are neither here nor there, slang is fine but getting correct usage is important.*

Again, while dressing up his complaints in a fun, 'I know I'm a pedant' kind of self-aware schtick, Brandreth is still peddling some rather dubious ideas. What's wrong with using an extra first-person pronoun to add emphasis? The French do it with 'Moi, je...' and English speakers often say 'I personally' to do a similar job. And what is this research he speaks of about users of 'correct English' (however that is defined) being more successful (however that too is defined)?

I myself (sorry Gyles) am not convinced by these arguments, but both stories provide some interesting case studies for AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 1 Section B and perhaps Edexcel Paper 3 where the discussion of attitudes to language change can be seen to reflect battles over who is using ‘correct’ English and who has the power to say what’s right or wrong. They also provide you with some excellent examples of contemporary debates about English that can be linked to very similar discussions that have raged throughout the history of the language, from complaints about double negatives and split infinitives to the literally never-ending arguments about ‘literally’ (recorded as being used non-literally as far back as the 1760s). What’s also interesting is that social media seems to have allowed linguists and experts to respond directly to such populist language stories, offering genuine insight and empirical evidence. For every Gyles Brandreth or John Humphrys, there’s an Oliver Kamm or Jonathan Kasstan putting forward reasoned arguments. But as we’ve unfortunately seen in recent years, populism is not easily countered with hard facts: people can often be swayed by gut feeling and prejudice.

### **Dropping Your Rosie Lees**

Accents are rarely out of the news and stories about them can provide a wealth of different examples to refer to in many parts of the course. Whether it’s AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 2 Sections B and C, or Edexcel Paper 1, language variation – in this case, regional and social variation and attitudes to it – is a popular topic.

One recent story helps to illustrate the overlapping nature of social and regional variation and how accents are viewed as markers of identity. The Labour candidate for Chingford and Woodford Green in East London, Faiza Shaheen was criticised for the way she spoke by Sky presenter Adam Boulton. Accusing Shaheen of t-dropping (or more accurately from a linguistic standpoint t-glottalisation), Boulton asserted that Shaheen was ‘embarrassed about being posh’.

As Language students, you will no doubt be aware that certain regional and social accents and their features can be stigmatised and frowned upon because they are perceived as being lower class, or carrying connotations of ignorance and a lack of formal education. But on the flipside, certain accents are also seen as being rather aloof and unlikeable: Received Pronunciation (RP) regularly polls high for intelligence but low for warmth, for example. In politics, where conveying a likeable and empathetic persona seems to be part of the job description, there has been a tendency since the 90s for certain upper- and middle-class politicians to chisel away the posher-sounding features of their natural accents to relate better to their wider electorate (although interestingly, Jacob Rees-Mogg bucks this trend). Former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron (both privately educated) did it, ex-Chancellor George Osborne famously did it while addressing Morrisons warehouse workers in 2013 and was roundly mocked in the media for his Mockney affectations.

So is Shaheen just another example of a posh politician talking down? Not on your nelly. As Shaheen points out, she is the daughter of an East End car mechanic and attended the same state school as David Beckham and Harry Kane. She sounds like the area she is from. Boulton (privately educated) picked the wrong gal to tell porkies abaht, especially as Shaheen also heads a think tank on class and social discrimination and has written about the stigma associated with accents. It’s another excellent example of a story that shows how attitudes to language are often deeply ingrained in wider social contexts, but also an example that works well alongside some of the classic studies on accent and class – Ellen Ryan, Howard Giles, Peter Trudgill and Jenny Cheshire among them – offering a modern day application of older work.

## The Language ‘Problem’

What’s revealing about many of these stories – and you might have noticed this in those you have looked at on your course – is how the original stories are framed and how often language change or variation is presented as a problem. In the December 2018 edition of emagazine, Lynne Murphy offered a toolkit for evaluating language stories in the news and that is an extremely useful place to start when exploring some of the stories featured here and in the wider reading that can inform your understanding of the course.

## Some Other Stories About Language from 2018

‘Gammon’ and the language of political abuse:

<http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.com/2018/06/telling-porkies-about-gammon.html> and

<https://language-and-innovation.com/2018/05/15/gammon-up-against-the-wall/>

Gary Younge on the dangers of political rhetoric and political violence:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/25/donald-trump-words-consequencesviolent-Rhetoric>

Ben Zimmer on the use of the word ‘globalist’ and its sinister connotations:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/the-origins-of-the-globalist-slur/555479/Womxn> and exclusionary language:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/10/womxn-row-companies-worry-word-womenexcludes-transgender-people/>

## Links

Daily Telegraph story on Portsmouth accent research

<https://web.archive.org/web/20181009054509/>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/09/collegefails-unearth-anything-spending-34000-investigating/>

HSDC response: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/xphw2z2cid8dfh/NEW-PANEL.pdf?dl=0>

The video produced as part of the project is now available here:

<https://www.millstreamproductions.com/work/pompey-dialect>

Jason Manford’s language peeves: <https://twitter.com/JasonManford/status/1055724735886168069>

Gyles Brandreth on his pet-hates: <https://twitter.com/BBCBreakfast/status/1050748647837716482>

Faiza Shaheen on accent and class:

<https://twitter.com/faizashaheen/status/968510408809172992>

Article Written By: Dan Clayton is an education consultant at the English and Media Centre.

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# Accent and Dialect

## Northern English

**Northerner and linguist Graeme Trousdale separates out the myths and prejudices from the realities of northern English, at the same time as recognising that categorising identities is part of the way we understand linguistic behaviour.**

### **A State of Mind?**

It's a difficult thing, working on accents and dialects of English, if you come from northern England like I do. As an academic who works on varieties of English, I strive to show that all varieties are linguistically equal, with no accent or dialect being inherently better than any other; as a northerner, I know that northern English is the best accent of the lot, no matter what academics think. It all boils down to this. There are two groups of people in the world: those who have a northern English accent, and those who wish they did!

### **Defining 'northern English'**

But what is 'northern English', exactly? If we ignore any sociolinguistic variation within the north, and try to concentrate just on a traditional, regional definition of a 'dialect', we run into problems. What land mass corresponds to the area in which northern English is spoken? Historically, for instance, much of lowland Scotland could legitimately be considered part of the linguistic north, given what we know about the early history of English, and the similarities between the dialects of the far north of England, and those of southern Scotland. But because political boundaries and social groupings have formed and reformed since the Anglo-Saxon period, we have to recognise that geography alone cannot serve to delimit linguistic varieties. An alternative approach is to consider individuals, and the identities that they project, partly through their linguistic behaviour. The critical issue here is one of identity as action: your identity is not a reflection of what you are, but rather the outcome of what you do. It is agentive, and manifests itself in many ways, from the clothes that people buy, the music they choose to listen to, and the language that they speak.

### **Multilingual northerners**

Multilingualism is perhaps the most obvious way of illustrating this, and many northerners are multilinguals. Sometimes the context of the speech act, or the social and linguistic background of the participants in the discourse, will determine what language speakers use: a community language at home with grandparents, for instance, but English in the classroom. However, we also find speakers exploiting their linguistic repertoire by varying the language they use even when the context and participants remain constant: a group of teenagers from Preston might well create a variety which appears to be a jigsaw of English, Urdu, Bengali and other languages when engaged in informal talk. Such speakers don't need to be fluent in all of these languages; some may only know a handful of Bengali words and phrases, but drawing on even this limited knowledge can be enough to indicate group membership, to show that you belong. Patterns of crossing, to use Ben Rampton's term, are a regular feature of the linguistic behaviour of multilingual speakers in communities both within northern England and beyond. This crossing is a way of marking identity.

What holds for languages also holds for dialects. Speakers project aspects of their identity by drawing on the range of 'Englishes' that they know - Tyneside English, Northern English, British English and so on. For instance, in any particular speech event, a speaker from Newcastle might say house (with a diphthong) rather than hoose (with a monophthong), but, in words like bath and dance, still retain a

low front vowel (as most speakers of English have in cat) rather than the low back vowel associated with southern speech. Thinking about this in terms of local and supralocal poles, we'd say that the speaker is locating himself or herself in the middle of this cline - he or she may be perceived as having a 'General Northern' accent, rather than a heavily localised variety. In another speech event, the same speaker may use many more 'Newcastle' variants, in which case the speaker is located closer toward the 'local' pole. Again, this linguistic behaviour is tied in with the projection of a particular kind of identity, from local Geordie to supralocal northerner. In my own research on Tyneside English, some of the older speakers I talked to were lamenting the fact that younger speakers from the north-east didn't talk 'proper Geordie' anymore. This view was not upheld by the younger speakers, who took great pride in speaking Geordie - they just considered themselves to speak modern Geordie. For many (including many people from the north-east) this modern Geordie is not as distinctive from other accents as it used to be, and this process of dialect levelling has been attested for other dialect areas in surveys carried out in the British Isles. But even if we accept the claim that local varieties are not as distinct as they were, the concepts of 'northerner' and 'northern English' remain.

### **Categorising and stereotyping**

How are such concepts formed in our minds? One of the ways in which our minds work is that we create stereotypes - it's an unfortunate but necessary by-product of our human ability to categorise. Our minds are constantly categorising, placing things into larger groups, based on what we perceive to be similarities among different entities. Stereotypes function as abstract members of the social categories we store in our minds; we identify attributes that we associate with the categories, and the more attributes a given instance of a particular category has, the more we consider that instance to come close to the stereotype. In terms of social categorisation, these attributes can be to do with the way in which people dress, the kind of music they like, and the kind of language they speak, which we've also seen to be influential in the projection of identity. So identity and stereotypes are closely linked in speakers' minds.

All of you reading this will have a social category of 'northern Englishman', for instance, a category which you've built up through experience, as a result of encounters with men from northern England. These encounters vary massively in kind, of course: part of your category of 'northern Englishman' might have been constructed on the basis of your dad being from York; another part constructed because you've seen Ant and Dec on the television; another part because you've heard Steven Gerrard be interviewed after he has played for England, and so on, over potentially tens of thousands of instances of northern Englishmen you've encountered, however briefly. Your category of 'northern Englishman' will be unique to you, because no-one else in the world has had exactly the same experiences as you have. This is why your concept of 'northern Englishman' can't correspond directly to a person in the 'real world': it is abstract, part of your mental make-up. And what's true of 'northern Englishman' as a social category is equally true of 'northern English' as a linguistic category. Just as you encounter and categorise speakers, you encounter and categorise speech. This is why northern English is a state of mind.

### **Prejudice and comedy**

Sometimes, however, this social and linguistic stereotyping is based on very little evidence indeed, and this can result in prejudice. Let's take a more specific category, 'Yorkshireman', and an aspect of the language associated with Yorkshiremen, the phrase 'Eeh bah gum'. I don't think I've ever Yorkshireman say 'Eeh bah gum'. Yet this has become such a stock Yorkshire phrase that a story on The Sun's website, detailing the fondness of Brad Pitt and his wife for the soap opera Emmerdale, set in the Yorkshire Dales, had the headline 'Jolie bah gum, Angelina'. 'Eeh bah gum' has now passed into folklore, and has become entrenched as a marker of Yorkshire speech with the result that it works as a stereotyped linguistic form that invokes a stereotyped social category.

Such stereotypes regularly feature in comedy portrayals of the north. Here is a transcript of part of a famous Monty Python sketch, where Michael Palin, Eric Idle, Graham Chapman and Terry Jones are dressed in white tuxedos, drinking white wine, against a background of a beautiful coastline:

*FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: Aye, very passable, that, very passable bit of risotto.*

*SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: Nothing like a good glass of Château de Chasselas, eh, Josiah?*

*THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: You're right there, Obadiah.*

*FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Who'd have thought thirty year ago we'd all be sittin' here drinking Château de Chasselas, eh?*

*FIRST YORKSHIREMAN: In them days we was glad to have the price of a cup o' tea.*

*SECOND YORKSHIREMAN: A cup o' cold tea.*

*FOURTH YORKSHIREMAN: Without milk or sugar.*

*THIRD YORKSHIREMAN: Or tea.*

The sketch then descends into madness as each of the Yorkshiremen tries to outdo the others by recounting how difficult his life was while growing up. Much of the humour derives simply from the exaggerated accounts of hardship, but there is also humour in the incongruity of discourse topic and linguistic forms - the affluence associated with the discourse on risotto and fine French wine, combined with the non-standard grammar (thirty year, them days, we was glad) and Victorian names. This incongruity is marked too by what appears to be a mismatch between the way the characters are dressed (white tuxedos) and the way they speak (with Yorkshire accents). But why a Yorkshire accent? Why not one associated with London, Bristol, Plymouth, or Norwich? Again, the humour derives in part from wider cultural knowledge (or rather, assumptions) about a typical Yorkshireman, playing on the stereotype that it's grim up north. (After all, why should white tuxedos and a Yorkshire accent seem like a mismatch?)

This links to a wider, institutional stereotype: the portrayal of the north as 'other'. This is part of the cultural norms of much of the British media, which is both metrocentric (focused on cities) and austrocentric (focused on the south). These terms are used by Katie Wales to describe the way in which the history of English has often been analysed by linguists, but they are true too of much of the British establishment. For instance, the BBC News website in 1999 reported the decision of the Oxford English Dictionary to include the exclamation 'Ee', considered to be a northern form, in revisions to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, as follows:

*Ee bah gum, it's in t'dictionary*

*By 'eck! Them daft 'apeths at t'Oxford Dictionary have gone all northern.*

If that were true, what a wonderful world it would be.

# Making a Point: The Story of English Punctuation

Professor David Crystal's new book on punctuation takes a historical approach to a subject that is often hotly debated without drawing on this kind of knowledge. In this article, he gives a flavour of both the 'stories' and the arguments presented in the book.

Imagine this. You are a famous poet unsure of your punctuation, so you decide to write to the greatest scientist you know to ask him to correct the punctuation of a poetry book you're preparing for press. You've never met him. Moreover, you ask him to send on the corrected manuscript to the printer, without bothering to refer back to you. And he does it.

An unlikely scenario? Not so. This was William Wordsworth, preparing the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. On 28 July 1800, at the suggestion of Coleridge, he wrote to the chemist Humphry Davy:

*You would greatly oblige me by looking over the enclosed poems, and correcting anything you find amiss in the punctuation, a business at which I am ashamed to say I am no adept.*

Wordsworth wasn't alone. Thomas Gray in a 1768 letter gives over eight pages of instructions to Foulis Press about how to print his poems, but adds:

*please to observe, that I am entirely unversed in the doctrine of stops, whoever therefore shall deign to correct them, will do me a friendly office.*

And Byron writes to John Murray in 1813 to ask:

*Do you know any body who can stop—I mean point—commas, and so forth? for I am, I fear, a sad hand at your punctuation.*

On the other hand, Ben Jonson was scrupulous about punctuation, and insisted on checking every mark for printing accuracy, getting very annoyed if a printer dared to change anything. Keats also took a keen interest in the way his publisher dealt with his punctuation. In an 1818 letter to John Taylor, he expresses his indebtedness for his suggestions:

*the comma should be at soberly, and in the other passage the comma should follow quiet...*

My favourite Jonsonian is Mark Twain. Here he is in 1889:

*Yesterday Mr Hall wrote that the printer's proof-reader was improving my punctuation for me, & I telegraphed orders to have him shot without giving him time to pray.*



And in 1897:

*I give it up. These printers pay no attention to my punctuation, Nine-tenths of the labor & vexation put upon me by Messrs Spottiswoode & Co consists in annihilating their ignorant & purposeless punctuation & restoring my own.*

*This latest batch, beginning with page 145 & running to page 192 starts out like all that went before it – with my punctuation ignored & their insanities substituted for it. I have read two pages of it – I can't stand any more. If they will restore my punctuation themselves & then send the purified pages to me I will read it for errors of grammar & construction – that is enough to require of an author who writes as legible a hand as I do, & who knows more about punctuation in two minutes than any damned bastard of a proof-reader can learn in two centuries.*

Never a calm subject, punctuation.

The more idiosyncratic the writer's punctuational style, the more editors and printers have taken it upon themselves to consistentise it. The way we read Jane Austen now is very little like the way she wrote. Likewise, Emily Dickinson. A 1970 edition prints this stanza following her original:

*Our share of night to bear –  
Our share of morning –  
Our blank in bliss to fill  
Our blank in scorning –*

A 2000 edition edits it thus:

*Our share of night to bear,  
Our share of morning,  
Our blank in bliss to fill,  
Our blank in scorning.*

They are worlds apart.

### **Answering the Question Why?**

These are just some of the fascinating stories that I discovered when writing *Making a Point*. The story of English punctuation goes back over a thousand years – from a time when texts showed no punctuation at all, to the present-day attention to detail – and I was surprised to find that it had never been told in its entirety. A historical approach is essential, because it enables us to do something traditional accounts of punctuation of the Eats, Shoots and Leaves type never did: answer the question 'why'. Why did Wordsworth have such a problem? Why do people get so incensed over apostrophes? One answer lies in early differences of opinion among writers, grammarians, elocutionists, publishers, and printers about the nature of punctuation, and who was responsible for it. I explore that history in *Making a Point*. Another lies in the nature of the punctuation system itself.

I think people feel they can get to grips with punctuation more readily than with other features of standard English, and so are more prepared to speak out about it. The standard is defined by four main criteria: grammar, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation. In each case, writers of English have to conform to the rules that educated members of society have come to recognise over the past two hundred years or so. Failure to follow these rules is considered an error that needs to be corrected if the usage is to be deemed acceptable.

Of the four, spelling is the most demanding, because every word on a page has to be spelled correctly if our text is to avoid criticism, and there are tens of thousands of words that have to be spelled. We can never get away from spelling. By contrast, it's easy to get away from usage issues to do with grammar and vocabulary. In grammar, there are dozens of points of usage that define the difference between standard and nonstandard – Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage lists most of them – but none of them turn up very often. We might read an entire chapter and never encounter a split infinitive or an instance of none is/are. Points of disputed usage in vocabulary, likewise, are sporadic: if you're concerned about the difference between, say, disinterested and uninterested or decimate meaning other than a tenth, you might read a whole book and never encounter an instance.

Punctuation sits prominently between these two extremes. Like spelling, it is there on every page; yet like grammar and vocabulary, it is sporadic. Many lines of a text will have no punctuation marks at all, and some of the marks may never appear in what you've written. There's not a single exclamation mark in this article, for instance.

### **Is it So Simple?**

Correcting a perceived punctuation error seems like a simple task, therefore – and if everything was like potato's it would be. But there are hidden depths to punctuation, thanks to those differences of opinion, and dangers lurking around corners – which of course is what makes the subject so intriguing. A few years ago, two Americans travelled all over the USA with marker pens correcting every typo they encountered. They added an apostrophe to a notice at the Grand Canyon Heritage Site, and later learned they had committed a federal offence of defacing a national monument. They were fined, received a year of probation, forbidden to enter all National Parks, and were banned from typo correcting. They were lucky. Another outcome would have been six months in jail.

Article Written By: David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor. The Disappearing Dictionary and Making a Point: the Pernickety Story of English Punctuation were published in 2015.

# Language and Gender

## Vocal Fry – Article 1

Also known as ‘pulse register’ or ‘glottal fry’. If we remember that the word ‘glottal’ or ‘glottis’ refers to sounds made at the very back of the throat, we can figure out what kind of sound this might be. It has a very low register, it sounds very rough and deep, and it is the vibrating of the thick vocal cords at the back of the throat.

### *Like, what is Vocal Fry?*

In a paper published today in the [New Zealand Medical Journal](#), a University of Canterbury study has found that **vocal fry is voluntary and is becoming common in some young New Zealand women.**

Fried things are delicious. But apparently fried lady voices are not.

The study that’s causing such a fuss today isn’t talking about anything new – vocal fry, the creaky voice often attributed to Kardashians and Zooey Deschanel, has been the subject of much discussion since the Kardashians were first birthed into the public consciousness in 2007.

[A study from Long Island University](#) on vocal fry in “young adult female speakers” – ie Valley Girl speak – published in 2012 sought to understand what this new terrifying trait might mean for the future of mankind. They found approximately two-thirds of this population used vocal fry and that it was most likely to occur at the end of sentences.

It’s a trait overwhelmingly attributed women, despite being shared by men and women, and unsurprisingly the University of Canterbury only surveyed New Zealand women too. It also found that men prefer women with higher voices yet both men and women rate lower voices in women as sounding more authoritative. Connect those dots how you will.

Vocal fry, or glottalisation, is a creaking sound made by the vocal chords as a result of dropping the voice to its lowest vocal register. The three vocal registers are falsetto, modal and vocal fry. The creaking sound is a result of the vocal fold fluttering. It was first identified by linguist David Crystal in 1964 among British men as a way to denote their superior social standing.

Another linguistic trend often discussed alongside women’s vocal fry is ‘uptalk’ – the habit of ending sentences as if one was asking a question, of which we New Zealanders are the Olympic gold medallists. One of the theories around uptalk, which fits the profile for both women in general and New Zealanders, is that it’s a less confrontational manner of speaking that doesn’t come across as arrogant or too assertive.

*I’ve gotten a few vocal fry complaints over the years. It was always men and by the second para they’d usually have moved onto a few \*other\* reasons why they objected to hearing a young(er) woman on the radio. Never heard of one male colleague getting anything similar.*

In 2015, the public radio show and podcast [This American Life](#), hosted by Ira Glass – a man with both a mid-Atlantic drawl and textbook vocal fry – did a segment about the phenomenon in response to the hate mail they’d received about their reporters’ voices. The criticism was solely directed at the women on staff.

A number of New Zealand women broadcasters report being told to smoke and drink whiskey in the early stages of their career in order to lower their speaking voices, but yet have also been criticised for vocal fry.

Considering the changing goalposts, maybe we should stop pretending the issue is vocal fry and commission a study into why so many people just don’t want to hear women speak.



# Language and Gender

## Vocal Fry – Article 2



Patriarchy is inventive. The minute a generation of women has figured out how to not be enslaved by Ideology A, some new cultural pressure arises in the form of Internalisation B, making sure they don't get too far too fast. The latest example: the most empowered generation of women ever – today's twentysomethings in North America and Britain – is being hobbled in some important ways by something as basic as a new fashion in how they use their voices.

This demographic of women tends to have a distinctive speech pattern. Many commentators have noticed it, often with dismay. [Time magazine devoted a column to the mannerism](#) called [vocal fry](#), noting a study that found that this speech pattern makes young women who use it sound less competent, less trustworthy, less educated and less hireable: "Think Britney Spears and the Kardashians."

["Vocal fry" is that guttural growl at the back of the throat](#), as a [Valley girl](#) might sound if she had been shouting herself hoarse at a rave all night. The less charitable refer to it privately as painfully nasal, and to young women in conversation sounding like ducks quacking. "Vocal fry" has joined more traditional young-women voice mannerisms such as run-ons, breathiness and the dreaded question marks in sentences (known by linguists as uptalk) to undermine these women's authority in newly distinctive ways. [Slate notes](#) that older men (ie those in power over young women) find it intensely annoying. One study by a "deeply annoyed" professor, found that young women use "uptalk" to seek to hold the floor. But does cordially hating these speech patterns automatically mean you are anti-feminist?

Many devoted professors, employers who wish to move young women up the ranks and business owners who just want to evaluate personnel on merit flinch over the speech patterns of today's young women. "Because of their run-on sentences, I can't tell in a meeting when these young women have said what they have to say," confided one law partner.

"Their constant uptalk means I am constantly having to reassure them: 'uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh'. It's exhausting."

I myself have inadvertently flinched when a young woman barraging a group with uptalk ran a technology-based conference call: "We'll use Ruby on Rails? It is an MVC framework to support databases?" Well, will we?

One 29-year-old woman working in engineering told me it was easier for gatekeepers in her male-dominated field to disregard running-on, softspoken, vocally frying and uptalking women. "It is difficult for young women to be heard or even responded to in many male-dominated fields if they don't strengthen their voices, That kind of disregarding response from men made me feel even softer and even lesser – in a vicious circle of silencing," she said.

Style is content, as any writing teacher knows. Run-ons and "non-committal-ness" dilute many young women's advocacy powers and thus their written authority. Many young women have learned not to go too far out on a limb with their voiced opinions; but the dilution of "voice" and the muddying of logic caused by run-on sentences in speech can undermine the power of their written thought processes and weaken their marshalling of evidence in an argument. At Oxford University young women consistently get 5% to 10% fewer first-class degrees in English – and the exams are graded blindly. The reasons? Even the most brilliant tend to avoid strong declarative sentences and to organise their arguments less forcefully. Elleke Boehmer, an Oxford English professor, says: "I often observe my female students' silence and lack of confidence in class with concern. How anxious they are about coming forward to express an opinion, to risk a point of view, so often letting the male students speak first and second and even third. And in this way they lose out in the discussions that are going to help them hone their pitch, write winning essays, secure the out-and-out firsts that male students in Humanities subjects still are securing in far greater numbers, proportionately, than they are."

The problem of young women's voices is gaining new cultural visibility. Recent books and plays have dealt with the suppression of young women's voices: Boehmer's own recent novel *The Shouting in the Dark* narrates the inner life of a young woman in South Africa in the 1970s – and shows how abuse breaks such a voice. The hit play *Nirbhaya*, in which Indian actresses narrate stories of their own rapes, also shows how young women's voices are stifled by cultural silencing, even today. Voice remains political at work as well. [A Catalyst study](#) found that self-advocacy skills correlate to workplace status and pay more directly than merit. In other words, speaking well is better for your career than working hard.

But Amy Giddon, director of corporate leadership at Barnard College's Athena centre for leadership studies in New York, found in original research that "there is a disconnect between women's confidence in their skills and abilities – which is often high – and their confidence in their ability to navigate the system to achieve the recognition and advancement they feel they deserve. Self-advocacy is a big part of this, and identified by many women in the study as the biggest barrier to their advancement." In other words, today's women know they can do great things; what they doubt – reasonably enough – is that they can speak well about those great things.

When you ask young women themselves what these destructive speech patterns mean to them, you get gender-political insights. “I know I use run-on sentences,” a 21-year-old intern at a university told me. “I do it because I am afraid of being interrupted.” No one has ever taught her techniques to refuse that inevitable interruption. “I am aware that I fill my sentences with question marks,” said a twentysomething who works in a research firm. “We do it when we speak to older people or people we see as authorities. It is to placate them. We don’t do it so much when we are by ourselves.” Surely we older feminists have not completed our tasks if no one has taught this young woman that it was not her job to placate her elders.

Ally Tubis, a 29-year-old star in the male-dominated data analysis field, explained that at first sounding far younger than her years helped her to feel safe. But finally: “Admitting that I had a voice problem and then having the guts to practice strengthening it gave me confidence, as that process took a lot of courage.” Tubis took voice training, and her career soared.

“Why was it scarier to have a strong voice rather than a very breathy voice?” I asked her. “I would purposely do things in the past to detract from getting even positive attention,” Tubis explained. The breathier voice camouflaged her.

What is heartbreaking about the current trend for undermining female voice is that this is the most transformational generation of young women ever. They have absorbed a feminist analysis, and are skilled at seeing intersectionality – the workings of race, class and gender. Unlike previous generations, they aren’t starting from zero. They know that they did not ask to be raped, that they can Slutwalk and Take Back the Night, Kickstarter their business ventures and shoot their own indie films on their phones – and that they deserve equal pay and access.

Which points to the deeper dynamic at play. It is because these young women are so empowered that our culture assigned them a socially appropriate mannerism that is certain to tangle their steps and trivialise their important messages to the world. We should not ask young women to put on fake voices or to alter essential parts of themselves. But in my experience of teaching voice to women for two decades, when a young woman is encouraged to own her power and is given basic skills in claiming her own voice then huge, good changes follow. “When my voice became stronger, people took me more seriously,” says Ally Tubis. “When people feel from your voice that you are confident, they will believe that you are smarter, and that you are better at what you do – even when you are saying the exact same thing.”

# Linguists in the frame

The English and Media Centre *emagazine* website includes a collection of video interviews with leading linguists and language experts.

A taster selection from emagClips is available without a subscription to accompany this download.

<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/video-clips/clip-listing/leaping-into-language-emagclips>

The screenshot shows the English and Media Centre (EMC) website. The header includes the EMC logo, navigation links (Poetry Station, About, Contact Us, FAQs, Redeem voucher, My Account, Log out), a search bar, and a shopping cart icon. The main navigation bar lists Home, Publications, CPD & Consultancy, emagazine, MediaMagazine, Conferences, Blog & News, and Video Clips. The breadcrumb trail reads: Video Clips > Videos > Leaping into Language: moving from GCSE to A Level Language study (emagClips). The featured video is titled 'Leaping into Language: moving from GCSE to A Level Language study (emagClips)' with the subtitle 'Linguists in the Frame'. The video player shows a man speaking. Below the video, the 'Video Clips' section lists several clips:

Video Clips	
— Graeme Trousdale	+ David Crystal
+ Why Study Language?	+ Kevin Watson
Accent, dialect and language	+ Elena Semino
Evolving English	
+ Deborah Cameron	



# English Language for Your Ears

In the last few years, more and more linguists have been getting their ideas and interests out to the public through radio programmes and podcasts. In some cases, these are linked to big publishers and broadcasters (the BBC in the UK and Slate in the USA), while others are independently produced. There's now a really good range out there and plenty to choose from.

- Have a browse through the suggestions here and listen to one or two in more detail. Most of the radio programmes can be accessed directly through the link provided and the podcasts through the links or via an app like Spotify.
- If possible, use the platform recommended and validated by your school to share what you listened to with friends. Which podcast would you most recommend and why?
- Follow up the suggestions from your classmates.
- Keep listening to any of the podcasts you enjoyed (or try out some others), follow the ones you like on Instagram or Twitter and let the presenters know what you thought. Many of these podcasts will engage with their listeners and pick up ideas that you want to discuss, so get involved.

The BBC's **Word of Mouth** programme presented by Michael Rosen, has a huge archive of previous programmes all available for download. Some recent highlights have been selected for you here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qtnz/episodes/player>

- A Debate About American English <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08g5533>
- Will Emoji Be the Future of English? <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08ffvp6>
- The Language of Lying <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dfpy>
- Romani Language <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00050qw>
- Black British Identity and Black-related Words <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004l93>
- Solving Crime with Language <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00027n6>
- Language, Gender and Trans Identities <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09r4k4l>

**Lexicon Valley**, presented by John McWhorter can be found here and a few particularly relevant ones have been highlighted below:

<https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley>

- Women's Language <https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley/2020/03/vocal-frywomen-language>
- Like, Sort Of... <https://slate.com/podcasts/lexicon-valley/2019/11/politeness-in-the-english-language>
- Language on the Internet <https://slate.com/human-interest/2019/07/john-mcwhorter-and-gretchen-mcculloch-on-because-internet.html>

The BBC's **Seriously** podcast isn't just about language but you'll find a few interesting language programmes on there, including this one featuring Susie Dent on American English:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08qxd02>

Another BBC programme, **The Verb** often has language issues up for discussion. A few selected episodes are:

- Puns and Wordplay <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000dj45>
- Sports Writing <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000c2ls>
- How to Write Out Sexism <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0002zyh>

# English Language for Your Ears

Other podcasts include the following:

**The Language Revolution**

<https://thelanguagerevolution.co.uk/>



**Accentricity**

<https://www.accentricity-podcast.com/>



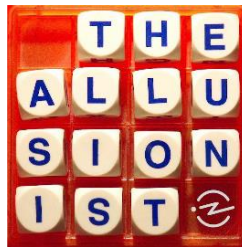
**The Vocal Fries**

<https://vocalfriespod.com/>



**The Allusionist**

<https://www.theallusionist.org/>



**Lexitecture**

<http://www.lexitecture.com/>



**Lingthusiasm**

<https://lingthusiasm.com/>



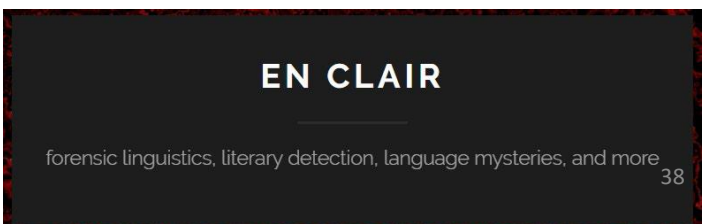
**Talk the Talk**

<http://talkthetalkpodcast.com/>



**en clair**

<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/enclair/>



# Online Resources for English Language

Many linguists and university linguistics departments have an online presence that's accessible and interesting for the general public, as well as those who are studying language at school, college or university. Along with these, you can find online resources from the BBC, British Council and British Library. A few of these have been selected for you below. They start with the most accessible and move on to ones that are a little more complex or demanding in nature. Dip into a few of these and see what you make of them. They are all interesting in different ways!

Perhaps once you have had a look at the few of them, you could write a short report on two or three that you were particularly interested in. What grabbed you? What else would you like to know more about? Were there any ideas you'd like to challenge and argue about?

## British Library

- British Accents and Dialects: <https://www.bl.uk/british-accent-and-dialects>
- English Language and Literature Timeline:  
<http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/evolvingenglish/accessvers/index.html>
- Texts in Context: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/texts/context.html>

**The Open University** has always been good for this, and recently one of their linguistics lecturers, Philip Seargeant, posted a link to a range of their online resources

- What is Language? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwG9SNeCof8>
- The History of English in 10 Minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3r9bOkYW9s>
- A Brief History of Emoji: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTXLuZHYf4>
- Narrative in Journalism and Politics: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCP\\_ifjRZgA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCP_ifjRZgA)
- Filter Bubbles and Fake News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaolE1blpWk>
- Why Do We Swear? [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsFm-pN\\_XJO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsFm-pN_XJO)

The dictionary makers (lexicographers) are also very good at making their work with the English language really accessible.

- **The Oxford Dictionary** blog: <https://public.oed.com/blog/>
- **Macmillan Dictionary** blog: <http://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/>
- Australia's **Macquarie Dictionary** blog: <https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/blog/>
- The US's **Merriam-Webster Dictionary**: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

## Queen Mary University London (QMUL)

Resources aimed at students, teachers and the general public on accent attitudes, changing language in the UK and lots more.

- Accent Bias in Britain Project: <https://accentbiasbritain.org/>
- Teach Real English Resources: <http://www.teachrealenglish.org/>

## University of York

Lots of very useful resources on aspects of language use and how people feel about it

- The York English Language Toolkit: <https://englishlanguagetoolkit.york.ac.uk/>

# Online Resources for English Language

## **University College London (UCL)**

Helping you understand what grammar is and how it works.

- Englicious Grammar Resources: <http://englicious.org/>

## **Lancaster University**

- Corpus-based teaching resources that explain how you can use technology and digital databases to track changes and variations in English:

<http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnclab/search?display=resources>

## **Tony Thorne's *Language and Innovation* pages**

- Tony Thorne is a linguist at King's College London who collects and tracks slang usage, among other things: <https://language-and-innovation.com/>

## **Deborah Cameron's *A feminist guide to language blog***

- Deborah Cameron is one of the country's leading experts on language and gender and her blog is funny, thought-provoking and insightful: <https://debuk.wordpress.com/>

# Experience a University- style Lecture

OK... so you're thinking of heading into an A Level rather than a degree but it's always interesting to see what's further down the path, should you choose to take it. As more and more universities provide material online and reach out beyond their own students to the wider community, you will find lots of interesting and accessible resources available, including lectures and MOOCs (interactive, self-taught online courses).

Some lectures and talks have been chosen to give you a taste of a few interesting areas.

- Watch a few minutes of these and choose a couple to watch all the way through. Don't worry about making notes at this stage; just follow the line of argument and think about the ideas being offered.
- Once you have listened to a couple of lectures, try to jot down a few notes at the end. What were the key ideas? Did you understand the arguments being made? Were there any things you weren't sure about and might need to look up?
- If you can, arrange with a classmate to listen to the same lecture and swap notes via the platform recommended and validated by your school. Sometimes, two of us can listen to the same lecture and come away with very different ideas or see a different importance to the points being made.
- Many of the links from the TED talks offer suggestions for other language-based lectures. Follow a few of those links and keep a note of which of these you found interesting, and some key ideas from them. Many of these could come in useful later on in the course.

## TED Talks

- Lera Boroditsky on the links between language and thought  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/lera\\_boroditsky\\_how\\_language\\_shapes\\_the\\_way\\_we\\_think](https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think)
- John McWhorter on digital language and texting  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/john\\_mcwhorter\\_txtng\\_is\\_killing\\_language\\_jk](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk)
- Deb Roy on children's language development [https://www.ted.com/talks/deb\\_roy\\_the\\_birth\\_of\\_a\\_word](https://www.ted.com/talks/deb_roy_the_birth_of_a_word)
- Anne Curzan on what makes a word 'real'  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/anne\\_curzan\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_word\\_real](https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_curzan_what_makes_a_word_real)
- Erin McKean on making up new words  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/erin\\_mckean\\_go\\_ahead\\_make\\_up\\_new\\_words](https://www.ted.com/talks/erin_mckean_go_ahead_make_up_new_words)
- Claire Bowerman on where English comes from  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/claire\\_bowerman\\_where\\_did\\_english\\_come\\_from](https://www.ted.com/talks/claire_bowerman_where_did_english_come_from)
- John McWhorter on made-up languages in sci-fi and fantasy  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/john\\_mcwhorter\\_are\\_elvish\\_klingon\\_dothraki\\_and\\_na\\_vi\\_real\\_languages](https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_are_elvish_klingon_dothraki_and_na_vi_real_languages)

## And others

David Crystal interviewed by Cambridge University Press

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59GMlpAdVok>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8jofTbIxM>

## Online Courses

If you are feeling like you really want to immerse yourself in some language study over the next few months (And why not?) **Future Learn** have a selection of online courses you can sign up for, including some excellent ones on Language and Linguistics. Here are a few we would recommend:

- Understanding English Dictionaries <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/understanding-dictionaries>
- An Introduction to Sociolinguistics: Accents, Attitudes and Identity  
<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/accents-attitudes-and-identity-an-introduction-to-sociolinguistics>
- Introduction to Intercultural Studies: Language and Culture  
<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/intercultural-studies-language-culture>

# Big Questions

Linguists are always asking questions about the nature of language and exploring how it's used. In *emagazine* we have interviewed a number of linguists and language experts about the work they've been doing and the questions they think need answering. Here are a few extracts that we think you'll find interesting.

Perhaps you could come up with your own questions for linguists. Make a note of any of the big questions (or even little questions!) about language that you want to ask and send them to us at the @EngLangBlog Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/EngLangBlog>) – we can then put them to our panel of experts.

**David Shariatmadari**, Guardian writer and editor and author of *Don't Believe a Word: The Surprising Truth About Language*. February 2020

*emagazine*: What's so great about Linguistics? Would you encourage A Level students to study it?

Linguistics is really cool! If you like learning quirky facts about language, then look no further. It can be quite technical, but there's a lot of fun too. If you've ever asked any of the big questions about language – what makes languages different? What makes them the same? Does the language you speak shape your thought? Why are words the way they are? – then I think you should seriously consider studying Linguistics.

**Devyani Sharma**, Professor of Linguistics, Queen Mary University London and co-investigator on the Accent Bias in Britain project. February 2020

*emagazine*: Why is accent bias a problem? If we like one accent over another is that necessarily a problem?

All humans have biases – simplified ways of thinking when we need to process our thoughts quickly. Accent is no exception: we all have automatic associations with accents, and we might use those to make snap judgments about a person's social background. These automatic stereotypes and preferences — whether positive, negative, or neutral — are referred to as accent bias. Such biases are a natural and universal part of human cognition. We can't process our complex social world without sometimes relying on fast judgements.

But when we rely on these simple stereotypes to judge unrelated traits, like intelligence or competence or trustworthiness, our cultural baggage becomes discriminatory. Accent bias becomes accent discrimination.

The accent we grew up with is unrelated to the knowledge and expertise that we might acquire. If we judge people by their accent, we risk discriminating against well-qualified people because of their social background. Often those people already face other forms of discrimination, so this is a serious problem for social justice.

# Big Questions continued...

**Henry Hitchings**, author of *The Language Wars* and *The Secret Life of Words*. September 2011

*emagazine*: Is there a danger of the English language spiralling out of control at an ever greater speed because of technology? Should we be worried?

I don't believe it's going to spiral out of control. I do think, though, that changes - not just linguistic ones, but social ones also - are happening rapidly, and, while there are countless ways in which technological innovation benefits us, there are costs involved that we haven't yet fully understood.

If we take the internet, for instance, it's prompting changes in the ways we think about a lot of important issues - for instance, community, privacy, ownership, authorship and sex. Some of those changes are positive, but others aren't. We should be concerned about the sheer speed of change, definitely. I say 'concerned' rather than 'worried' because worrying achieves nothing; we have to engage with these matters, rather than fretting about them.

**John McWhorter**, Professor of Linguistics at Columbia University, language podcaster and author of several books on language. February 2018

*emagazine*: Is there a political element to your work as a linguist? Is linguistics a scientific, neutral discipline, or is there room for bringing to bear one's own political and social beliefs?

Linguistics is, in many of its facets, highly sociopolitical. One mission of linguistics, which I applaud, is helping the public to understand that it doesn't make scientific sense to suppose that most people speak their native language 'badly.' As an outgrowth of that, I would venture that the subfield of sociolinguistics tilts significantly towards exploring the speech of the disempowered - there is only so much explicit interest in how affluent, straight white men talk! My own work as a linguist is sociopolitical where I write on Black English for the general public; that, however, is not what I usually work on in the academic sense. Most of my academic linguistic work is just geeky exploration of issues relating to how language changes and how languages come together in the structural sense, with the social part marginal. I adapt as I need to.

**David Crystal**, Professor of Linguistics, author of too many books on language to count and all-round language guru. 2020

*emagazine*: What do you predict or anticipate to be the biggest new developments of the English language over the next few decades?

It's never possible to predict the future, when it comes to language. Who would have thought, a year ago, that 2020's 'words of the year' were going to be words like *self-isolate* and *lockdown*? Or, a decade ago, that there would be a new suffix in *English*, -exit? These are tiny details, but the same applies to bigger issues. Language reflects society, so any question about the future of language is actually a question about the way society (in the broadest sense, including politics, economics, religion, culture...) is going to change.



# The Future of English

English is ever-changing; it doesn't stay the same for very long, but somehow we still share it as a common language that can unite us (and occasionally divide us). What do you think might happen to English in the future? Below you'll see three predictions for the future of English. Have a think about each one: how likely are they to happen, do you think? Write a sentence or two in response to each and then come back to your predictions once you are well into your course next year, or even at the very end, before your final exams. How have your predictions held up? Remember too that **you** are part of the future of English: it's the speakers and writers of English who shape its use so you will have a part to play in how it develops, and this course might just have a lasting impact on you as well.

Prediction	Your ideas
Technology will advance so quickly in the next five to ten years that it won't matter which languages we speak because translation apps will allow us to talk to everybody in any language.	
The English language will continue to take over the world, spreading everywhere and leading to it becoming the shared language of nearly everyone. But we will all speak English with American accents.	
The English language will change so quickly and in such different ways that it will break into new separate languages, just like Latin turned into Italian, Spanish and French in centuries gone by.	