Leaping into Language:

moving from GCSE to
A Level Language study

emagazine Resource Pack – Language

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‘C ya l8tr bbz’ – Language, Communication and Technology

PhD student Christian Ilbury explores the relationship between evolving technology and the linguistic choices we make on social media, offering insights from his current research that explode myths about spelling, abbreviations and other aspects of ‘txtspeak’.

There’s a strong chance that before reading this article today, you’ve already replied to a few stories on Snapchat, sent a few WhatsApp messages and DM’d someone through Instagram. Increasingly, our interactions are migrating online in the form of texts, but how is this shift towards digital communication changing the ways in which we communicate?

Way Back Then

Back in the early days of the mobile phone when Nokia was the phone brand of choice, people primarily used to text each other via SMS. Unlike today, mobile data plans were expensive, apps weren’t a ‘thing’ and most people still had pay-as-you-go contracts. With SMS (i.e. text) messages charged per 160 characters, that extra kiss or final ‘see you later’ could set you back the cost of an additional message. And whilst a message could be spoken in a couple of seconds, using a keypad to text the same message took somewhat longer – even for the more competent texters.

To get around these issues, people developed innovative ways to communicate the same message, using fewer characters and in less time, saving both on the cost of a text and the time taken to write the message. In fact, many of these abbreviations still persist and are regularly used today: <lol> for ‘laugh out loud’, <omg!> for ‘oh my God!’, and <hbu?> for ‘how about you?’.

When these forms were first documented, academics and newspapers were quick to suggest that the internet and texting were responsible for the emergence of a new variety of English. Indeed, much of this research pointed to the fact that the language used on the internet looked like a combination of both speech and writing. For instance, think of the spelling <walkin> for ‘walking’ or <chu> for ‘you’. These two spellings essentially ‘mimic’ the way that these words are sometimes pronounced in speech. This led some scholars and journalists to describe this ‘new variety’ as a form of netspeakor txtspeak.

An Even Longer Communication History

However, whilst the technology that we now use to communicate may be new, in reality, much of the language used online and in text-messaging isn’t so innovative. Tracing communication as far back as the 1800s when people used telegrams, we see that many of the telegraph messages sent via these machines contained several spellings that look remarkably similar to those that were characterised as netspeak. And, at that time, like text-messages, telegraphs were charged by the character. So, as with

the 160-character limit of a message, people developed shorthand phrases, spellings and other textual elements to communicate more efficiently and more cheaply. Smart, huh?

The Truth of Txtspeak

Nevertheless, modern-day newspapers continue to bemoan the surge of txtspeak and warn of the destructive effects of the internet on communication. Yet, academic research on the language of text-messaging and online communication has shown spellings and textual features that are perceived to be 'typical' of the variety actually to be relatively infrequent in practice. This point is perhaps more relevant now given the widespread use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), such as speech recognition systems (e.g. Siri) and predictive text, which use conventional spellings derived from dictionaries.

In fact, in my own research on the mobile application and messaging service WhatsApp, I found a lot of evidence to suggest that users make good use of predictive text technologies and are generally very conscious of their spelling and grammar. Like other researchers, I noted that the messages were largely written in standard English. But I also found that there were least two different types of variant spelling: spelling errors and the use of netspeak in the data.

My Research Data and What it Shows

My data set comprises a corpus of 100,000 messages across two group conversations sent by sixteen individuals in their early twenties who were based in the South East of England and accessed WhatsApp via a smartphone. Exploring these variant spellings in this corpus, I found that users responded to spelling-errors and so-called netspeak features in very different ways. When I looked at the examples of the genuine spelling errors, I observed that the users actively would try to maintain 'standard' language policies, such that other users would often participate in a type of language policing. An example of this policing is found in (1), where Lisa and her friends are discussing their New Year's Eve plans:

Example 1

> *Lisa: lol guys I've just been asked if I want to go to Barbadosfor 5 nights over*
>
> *New Years FOR FREE*
>
> *Abi: omg!*
>
> *Ellie: Why don't you go*
>
> *Lisa: Nooo I already made plans with y'all! Can I split myself in half*
>
> *Abi: Lol are you STUPID Lisa*
>
> *Ellie: hahahaha*
>
> *Abi: It's Barbadous*
>
> *Ellie: Wow*

> *Ellie: Spelling*
>
> *Lisa: Hahahaha spelling*
>
> *Stef: We are going to London Bridge*

When the location is revealed by Lisa in line 1, it is correctly spelt as <Barbados>, but as the conversation develops and Abi refers to the location, she makes a spelling error <Barbadous>. Instead, of continuing the conversation, Ellie explicitly references the spelling in lines 9-10, before Lisa follows up her comments using 'hahaha' to ridicule the error. In this way, the users participate in a type of linguistic policing – by emphasising the incorrect spelling and evaluating the mistake as humorous – suggesting that spelling errors should be avoided at all costs.

When I looked at these spelling errors in more detail, I found that another way that users seem to uphold these language standardsis through the innovative use of the asterisk, <*>, which is often used to repairspelling errors. In fact, of the 865 examples of <*> in my data, 83.9% are used to fulfil this function.

But whilst genuine spelling errors are subject to ridicule and scrutiny from others in the conversation, when netspeak features are used, we do not see the same type of response from the group. This suggests that the group do not see these features as spelling errors but rather recognise them as an accepted form of online communication.

However, unlike spelling errors which are relatively frequent, these forms are incredibly rare. For instance, in (2) we observe the extensive use of netspeak features: <yaaa>, <bbz>, <c>, <u> and so on, but they occur only infrequently in other messages. For instance, whilst there are 1293 instances of 'see' in the entire corpus of nearly 100,000 messages, only seven of these are spelt as <c>. Given that they are so rare, why then would these features be used in this conversation?

Example 2

> *Mark: Ok! I'll meet yaaa*
>
> *Abi: Yeah George*
>
> *Abi: I'm walking up the road*
>
> *Stef: We're in the garden bbz*
>
> *Abi: Cooooool*
>
> *Abi: C u in a min*
>
> *Mark: You guys still there?*

> *Abi: Yeeeeee*

To answer this question, let's return to the purpose of the conversation in (2). As a friendly interaction between group members Mark, Abi, and Stef, the sole purpose of this exchange is to establish where the group will meet for a drink. Here, it seems that the use of non-standard spellings, such as <bbz> and <c>, function solely to establish the tone of the conversation. By using these netspeak features, the three users essentially mark this discussion as an informal conversation to establish where to get a casual drink with friends. Take these forms away and replace them with the standard spellings of these forms and the conversation looks somewhat more like a formal arrangement between colleagues!

Medium, Message, Intentions and Choices

So, it seems that a lot of the work that is going here has to do with the 'medium' through which we are communicating. Given that communication on WhatsApp happens via text, we're faced with a dilemma: text doesn't allow us to use things like body language, intonation and other paralinguistic featuresto signal meaning that we use in speech. To account for this, we've developed unique ways to signal our true intentions. Emoji is a prime example of this. The infamous 'tears of joy' emoji, for instance, resembles the paralinguistic feature of laughter. What I would suggest here then, is that netspeak is doing a similar thing to emojis in that it is used to signal to the reader how the message should be interpreted.

Example 3

> *Mark: Ok I've paid the council tax, so if everyone could please transfer £23.56 asap that would be gr8 thaaanks!*

A further example is found in (3). In this extract, Mark has just sent a message to a group chat that includes his housemates asking them to pay their share of the council tax which he's paid in full. Note, in most of his message, he uses standard spellings and written conventions. However, we see he uses the 'netspeak' forms <gr8> for 'great' and <thaaanks> for 'thanks' at the end of his message.

Why, given the relative infrequency of these forms, does he use these features in this text? Based on my arguments so far, it seems likely that that his use of <gr8> and <thaaanks> are doing something very similar to the variant spellings in (2). In other words, by using these two features at the end of his message he essentially turns something very serious and formal (a request for money) into something not so serious that says to the rest of the group: 'this is still an informal conversation amongst friends'.

So, whilst our predictive text and our unlimited data may not mean that we may not use 'c u l8tr bbz' for the same reasons as before, during the Nokia era, it seems that the use of non-standard spellings are still an incredibly useful resource when communicating via (digital) text!

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Delving into the emag Archives: Child Language Acquisition

Nikolai Luck provides a route through the emag archive, giving an overview of the big issues in CLA, a taste of what's there and how to find out more.

> *Our ability to understand the universe and our position in it is one of the glories of the human species. Our ability to link mind to mind by language... is another.*
> *Richard Dawkins*

Language defines us as an exceptional species; all of our unique tool-making, art-creating, civilisation-building capacities stem ultimately from a 'minor set of mutations in our larynxes, permitting control over spoken sounds, and thus spoken language' in our recent evolutionary history. An exploration of child language acquisition (CLA) is, therefore, nothing less than an exploration into what makes us human. It is remarkable that this unique ability of our species, to convey complex meaning through language, is essentially embedded within the first few years of our lives, long before we can tie our shoelaces, ride a bicycle or reach the biscuit jar in the top cupboard. How this happens, how we acquire the ability to produce and understand language, has been one of the most hotly contested and controversial areas of science since the mid-twentieth century, when the nature/nurture binary provided the backdrop to nativist and behaviourist theories about how we develop language skills.

A number of articles about CLA can be found in emagazine's archive, including a summary of the main theories seeking to explain how it happens and an examination of the various stages of acquisition, all the way from crying and cooing to the use of implicature and irony. It's easy to locate the 'acquisition articles' under the CLA banner.

The Theories

A useful starting point from emagazine 27 (February 2005) is Dan Clayton's introduction to the main theories of CLA and the idea that the nature/nurture debate is at its heart. Francis Galton first proposed the idea that our development is shaped by nature (that which is inborn and genetic) and nurture (that which is experienced from birth onwards). Simply put, your eye colour is determined by nature, the accent you have is determined by nurture and we are composite creatures influenced by both. But which is the key determinant of language acquisition? As Dan Clayton points out, behaviourist psychologist B.F. Skinner's 1957 book Verbal Behavior sought to explain language as developing in response to the nurturing principle of positive and negative reinforcement – young children copy what they hear and are rewarded/praised for getting the words right and punished/criticised for getting them wrong, and, just like rats or pigeons pushing a coloured button

for food, kids soon learn what gets results. Two years later this proposal was the subject of a truly withering critique by linguist Noam Chomsky who realised that an understanding of our very identity as human beings was at stake. For Chomsky, Skinner absolutely failed to grasp the sheer complexity of language. Sure, we learn our native language(s) from our environment (nurture) but we can only do so because of nature.

Chomsky introduced the idea of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) without which we would never be able to communicate (and Skinner wouldn't have been able to write his book). The frequent mistakes children make 'I cleaned my tooths and wented to the dentist' are virtuous errors because they demonstrate that children are actively applying the deep, underlying grammatical rules of language accessed through the LAD and are doing much, much more than simply passively copying what they hear. Dan Clayton also discusses the contribution to the field of CLA study made by cognitive science, notably Jean Piaget, who suggests that 'language acquisition is part of a child's wider development.' For instance, it is only when a child understands the concept of length that she will be able to manipulate the morphology of adjectives to produce comparatives such as 'shorter' and 'longer' and superlatives such as 'shortest' and 'longest'. Developing Chomsky's ideas about our innate biological capacity for language, Jerome Bruner's Social Interaction approach introduces the LAD to a LASS (Language Acquisition Support System) – the mother, father or other significant speaker.

Bruner's ideas focus on the importance of conversations, routines of social interaction and the role of Child-Directed Speech (CDS).

This provides a neat theoretical backdrop to Dr Marcello Giovanelli's article 'It's Sleeptime – Children's Routines and the Language of Bedtime' in emagazine 62 (December 2013). By quoting exchanges between Ella and her father at Ella's bedtime a clear picture emerges of how daily routines such as this scaffold interactions and impart the conventions of turn-taking:

> *Father: [turns page and points to image under 'A']*
> *Ella: apple*
> *Father: good girl (.) and what's that [points to image under 'B']*
> *Ella: ball*
> *Father: well done Ella*
> *In extract two the focus is on the particular discourse of pre-separation routines – parent wants to sneak back downstairs to a glass of wine/child wants to squeeze five more minutes out of the day:*
> *Father: OK it's sleep time now Ella*
> *Ella: can I look at my Mr Men poster*
> *Father: we can look at that tomorrow*
> *Ella: want to look at it now*

The underlying pragmatic complexity of this type of exchange is identified as a:

> *…bedtime ritual which becomes an exercise in shaping, negotiating and playing out pre-separation routines.*

The LAD negotiating with the LASS as Bruner might say. The article ends with a discussion of Crib Speech (Katherine Nelson, 2006) 'a private pre-sleep monologue that doesn't rely on... collaborative communicative work.' Have a look at the article to find out why Ella is talking to herself about mending snails.

Child-Directed Speech

The routines of bath time and bedtime invariably involve interaction between an adult and a child. In emagazine 56 (April 2012) Anna Sarchet presents the parent's perspective by detailing 'A Day in My Language Life' – and addresses the questions: why do we change the way we speaky weaky when conversing with young children and why do we talk to tots who are too young to talk back? This is a typical exchange between Anna and her ten month old daughter Ava:

> *Me: helloooo (.) are you awake (.) did you have a good sleep (.)*
> *A: ba ba ba da*
> *Me: you did (.) shall we get up now (.)*
> *A: ma ma ma ba*
> *Me: yes let's get up*

Real exchanges such as this make abstract theories come alive and it is worth considering how you might collect and categorise this kind of data as a valuable resource to draw upon in order to deepen your understanding of CLA.

The Stages

A longitudinal study of language development is an excellent way of charting the universal stages of acquisition. Dan Clayton's recordings of his sons' utterances from the age of one year and two months to two years and nine months in the article 'Child Language Acquisition 1' from emagazine 26 (December 2004) provide bite-sized data of actual children's talk alongside commentaries which bring in researchers such as Nelson, Brown and Halliday to illuminate each data set. The companion piece to this article, 'Child Language Acquisition 2', published in emagazine 34 (September 2007) charts subsequent language development from two years six months to five years and yields insights into aspects of CLA such as sentence structure and pragmatics. It picks up on Roger Brown's concept of the U-shaped curve of language development which illustrates how children can move from a correct form of the past tense 'shot' to an incorrect form 'shotted', which may look like regression, but actually reflects the child's vital move from passive copying to active creation of language with all the virtuous errors this entails. This specific and striking feature of CLA – children's proclivity to standardise non-standard verb forms in the past tense 'I sended you a text', is also the subject of the review of Steven Pinker's book Words and Rules in emagazine 7 (February 2000). Dan Clayton's CLA 2 data also shows clear evidence of grammatical development in the advent of subordinating conjunctions to enable complex utterances to flourish:

> *Liam: The goodies are going on their ship cos they've caught a baddie*
> *Context: talking while playing, age 3 years 6 months*

The article concludes by considering pragmatics and conversational implicature. Charting the various ways a child asks for a biscuit over a three year period reveals just how sophisticated children become in their facility with language:

> *a) Ruby: dat (pointing at biscuit tin, age 1,6)*
> *b) Stan: I want a biscuit daddy (age 3,6)*
> *c) Stan: can I have a biscuit daddy (age 3,9)*
> *d) Stan: please can I have a biscuit daddy? (age 4,2)*
> *e) Liam: I'm hungry daddy (age 4,9)*
> *f) Liam: Stan's had a biscuit (age 4,9)*
> *Context: different conversations with dad shortly after breakfast over a three year period*

Replace 'biscuit' with 'coursework deadline extension' in that last utterance, and you can see how devastatingly effective this skilful manipulation of language can be at getting what you want, and that this kind of pragmatic awareness at a young age can stand children in good stead for the world beyond the biscuit barrel.

Halliday! Celebrate!!

While this isn't quite what Madonna sang back in the eighties, there is a reason to celebrate when it comes to understanding Halliday's contribution to the study of CLA. As outlined in 'The Functions of Children's Talk' by Alison Ross, published in emagazine 44 (April 2009), Halliday asked the question 'What do children use language for?', and came up with seven answers:

- Instrumental: language to express needs (e.g. 'want juice').
- Regulatory: language to tell others what to do (e.g. 'go away').
- Interactional: language used to make contact with others and form relationships (e.g. 'love you mummy').
- Personal: language to express feelings, opinions and individual identity (e.g. 'me good girl').
- Representational: language to convey facts and information (e.g. 'it two o'clock).
- Heuristic: language to gain knowledge about the environment (e.g. 'what the tractor doing').
- Imaginative: language to tell stories and jokes, and to create an imaginary environment (e.g. 'you be the witch').

Alison Ross contrasts the experience of observing children interacting with adults to that of observing children interacting with other children:

> *The child can experiment with all sorts of possibilities without any 'expert interference'.*

The transcripts that follow provide more valuable data to store in your data bank. Practically any utterance can be categorised by function, and it is worth pointing out that David Crystal extended Halliday's seven functions to nine, adding Performative – language used to 'control' reality (e.g. 'hocus

pocus'), and Phonological – language produced for the sheer delight in the sound it makes (e.g. 'neenaa neenaa') to the mix.

Introducing Technonanny

Not, unfortunately, a Scandinavian Deep Dance DJ, Technonanny is in actual fact a blog on the Teachit website which features in emagazine 40 (April 2008) and in an article by Alison Ross in emagazine 54 (December 2011). The blog provides a perfect way to conduct another longitudinal study of language development. 'Louise's Talk – Acquiring the Language of Children' (April 2008) and 'Technonanny – Language Acquisition in Older Children' (December 2011) showcase Technonanny's capacity to focus on 'a child's language in its full communicative context', between say, the ages of three to six. The blog provides useful comparative data analysis to the Dan Clayton articles tracking language development mentioned above.

Literacy

All authentic enquiries into language development embrace the acquisition of literacy as well as speech. Two articles 'Now Mathilda is Seven!', emagazine 59 (February 2013) and 'Learning how to write – the development of early literacy', emagazine 48 (April 2010) consider how children learn to read and write. In 'Now Mathilda is Seven!' Alison Ross highlights how the fascination children have with books, especially it seems, books featuring dragons, stems from an acute awareness that

> *visual signs – pictures, logos and images (and) letters of the alphabet...carry a message.*

The article features a succinct summary of the methods used in primary schools to embed reading skills, including phonics 'breaking down words into sounds' and 'whole word' approaches, where children are encouraged to recognise, remember and recall words 'by context or initial letter or the overall shape of the word'. Danuta Reah picks up the theme of early literacy in 'Learning How to Write – the Development of Early Literacy' by exploring the concepts of environmental writing, where children 'assign meaning to (the) signs they see around them' and emergent writing 'writing-like behaviour', where children seem compelled to create texts such as shopping lists with letter like forms before they can actually write whole words. This shows how children respond to writing as a system and that they work out that 'certain symbols stand for certain sounds' and convey meaning.

The End?

Studies into language acquisition tend to focus on the age range 0-10 but the process of acquisition never really ends. Just as Dr Johnson thought he'd absorbed every single word in the English language into his famous dictionary of 1755 until Blackadder offered him his most enthusiastic 'contrafibularities', there are always ways to expand your linguistic range and top up your active vocabulary whatever your age. Sprinkling terms such as 'holophrase' and 'heuristic' into essays is yet another stage in your language journey, a journey which began in the womb when you first started to tune in to the sounds of the world around you.

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Language Variation, Accents, Attitudes and More Delving into the emagazine Archive

The emagazine archive is chock-a-block with articles on language variation, all well worth reading to enhance your understanding of this topic. Nikolai Luck surveys what's there, giving you an overview of many of the issues and angles that are explored in these articles.

The Words We Use

Picture the scene: a train full of England fans on the way to a World Cup match. Good-natured singing, lively banter, no hint of malice or threat; after all, everyone is on the same side. And then... well, and then an RP voice (yes, one of the fabled 5%) is heard to exclaim 'Let's watch some footie!' A hush descends, the spirit of unity is shattered, snorts of derision are heard and the carriage suddenly seethes with palpable tension and potential violence. The non-RP contingent (yes, the fabled 95%) take exception – perhaps he could have been forgiven 'soccer'. But 'footie'? Never.

As Clive Upton remarks in 'Our Words, Our Lives, Our Streets – Dialect Slang and the BBC Voices Project' (emagazine 31):

> *The names we choose to give things often identify us as coming from a particular region or as belonging to a certain...social group. Choose a word, and people will place you geographically or socially.*

(The suspicion is that someone saying 'footie' would rather be watching rugger.) Upton reports on the joint endeavour between the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield to record the prevalence of dialect words for their Survey of Regional English (SuRE), a systematic attempt to record informants' use of non-standard equivalents of Standard English words. Allied with the BBC Voices website, the survey documents 'where particular words are to be found and where they have their strongest support' – for example, 'alleyway' nationwide, 'ginnel' and 'twitten' in Yorkshire and Sussex respectively. Michael Rosen, in emagazine 27 (February 2005), homes in on a particular set of words relating to food in 'Mealtimes – Language on a Plate', charting his surprise at realising that he and his family may well have been eating 'breakfast – dinner – tea' but not everybody was. Rosen points out that historically

> *English society marked out social distinctions by what you called the meals and by when you ate them.*

Serving 'high tea' half an hour early could see you lose your footing on social etiquette's perilous high wire, and serving any kind of 'sweet' would ensure you slipping off into the lower middle class aspirational abyss forever. Anyone for footie after supper?

The How and Why of Language Variation

An excellent departure point for a tour of the emagazine variation archive is Ian Cushing's article 'A World of Differences – Exploring Language Variation' from April 2015. Celebrating the extraordinary diversity of different forms of English, Cushing seeks to describe how and why language begins to vary. How it happens is outlined through the concept of sociolect:

> *... essentially any different group of people is likely to use language in a slightly different way*

and almost any activity you partake in identifies you as belonging to a distinct social group. As to why language is so diverse, Cushing establishes the centrality of language to our sense of self.

> *The language we use... is a fundamental part of forming our identity and how other people perceive us... geography... creates accents and dialects... people working to identify themselves as being from Liverpool are... likely to adhere to (certain) linguistic forms.*

Mobility and migration play their part too.

> *Bradford Asian English and Multi-Cultural London English are just two examples of... hundreds of emerging... forms across the UK.*

He draws a useful and striking analogy between the language you use and the clothes you wear to explain the phenomenon of code-switching. You don't wear a prom dress to fix a bike but choose an outfit to suit the occasion, just as you select the variety of English you use depending on what you are doing and who you are talking to. Sweary slang at a job interview is the equivalent of wearing ripped jeans to a prom; chances are you'll be thrown out. Code-switching is testament to our complexity as social beings and many factors are at play in contributing to our unique idiolect,
age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, sexuality and so on.

Attitudes

But what if you're wearing your finest prom dress and it doesn't even get you in to the prom? What if your way of speaking is deemed to be not 'good' enough? Whilst the academic consensus amongst linguists is to embrace diversity and to recognise the linguistic equality of varieties of English, a descriptive approach, beyond university linguistic departments a prescriptive (judgemental) discourse holds sway which prompts Dr William Barras to ask 'Why does accent variation attract such vitriol?' In 'Accentuate the Positive? Media Attitudes to Accent Variation' (emagazine 65, September 2014) Dr Barras charts woeful examples of blatant accent prejudice, including the BBC Breakfast presenter Stephanie McGovern confounding some viewers with her ability to gain a degree in Economics whilst retaining her Teeside accent. Dr Barras examines where accent prejudice comes from and outlines

how, commonly, two distinct elements of language, an accent (RP or Received Pronunciation) is mistakenly conflated with a dialect (Standard English). Despite popular perceptions to the contrary it is perfectly possible to speak standard English with a non-RP accent (and non-standard English with an RP accent). Dr Barras concludes that

> *the polarising effect of accents... still holds true... what linguists can add to the debate is evidence that there is no linguistic justification for thinking that one accent is more correct or more pleasing to the ear than any other.*

An excellent companion piece to this article is 'She's Proper Good, Innit – Why Dialect discrimination is unwise' from September 2013. Shaun Austin and Professor Paul Kerswill present The Lancashire Study with the kind of data table beloved of A Level English Language examiners. It makes for compelling scrutiny. The social backgrounds of seventy six pupils at three Lancashire schools were documented, categorising them according to how 'academically aspirational' they were and the extent to which their home background could be described as 'pro-educational'. The prevalence of three linguistic variables, chosen because of the stigma localised versions of these features were found to invite, were then measured as the students gave presentations:

> 1. *h: for example, hat versus 'at*
> 2. *th: for example thing versus fing, with versus wiv*
> 3. *t: for example better versus be'er*

The finding that

> *in general, pupils with high educational aspiration use more prestige speech features than pupils with low aspiration*

seems to account for perceptions that localised speech forms are indicative of low levels of aspiration. Yet this is overly, and perhaps damagingly, simplistic. Two of the most academically ambitious and successful students'

> *accent and dialect features match their (working-class) backgrounds and help to maintain their status as accepted members of their community. And yet, the maintenance of these features carries with it a risk of being unfairly tarred with negative stereotypes.*

She's proper good, but will she be given a proper chance?

Phonological Change

In the Peter Morgan play The Audience, about the weekly meetings between the Queen and the Prime Minister of the day at Buckingham Palace, the actors Helen Mirren and Kristen Scott Thomas, who both play the Queen, have to perform a series of accent shifts alongside the numerous costume changes required of the role in order to reflect the downward convergence of the monarch from pure to modified RP over the course of her reign (even so, it remains the only production Kristen Scott Thomas has ever appeared in where she's been asked to make her voice sound posher than it already is). In 'Accent and Phonological Change' (emagazine 58, December 2012) Suzanne Williams details her own personal experience of accent modification and places it in the wider context of a perceived decline of regional accents, suggesting that rather than lamenting the disappearance of traditional regional accents

> *we should view it in evolutionary terms and celebrate the emergence of new accents and new identities that reflect a changing world*

as hybrid accents form due to the constantly changing demographics of the nation.

North and Scouse

Several articles in the archive provide a specific focus on a particular variety of English. Graeme Trousdale's 'Northern English – a State of Mind' (emagazine 35) explains the link between identity and 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.*

Speakers draw on a multilingual repertoire by varying the language they use according to context. In Preston, for instance, English freely mixes with Urdu and Bengali whilst in Newcastle speakers routinely code-switch between localised Geordie and supralocal Northern forms. In 'More or Less Scouse – Language Change on Merseyside' (April 2010) Dr Kevin Watson considers how the localised Liverpool accent bucks the seemingly inexorable trend of other regional varieties towards dialect levelling (dialects converging and becoming increasingly homogenised) by actually becoming more Scouse as young speakers show a notable tendency to use more localised 'Liverpool variants' such as fricative /t/ and /k/ sounds in words like 'matter' and 'back' rather than standard variant plosive forms.

The research shows

> *a marked increase in the use of regionally restrictive features – the opposite of levelling's prediction...*

But why? Dr Watson suggests that this divergence of the younger generation away from older speakers' use of standard variant forms could be to do with covert prestige. Paradoxically, precisely because Scouse is maligned by outsiders it is embraced by insiders.

> *Such a pronunciation is a marker of association, a badge of identity which distinguishes them from other people.*

Ben Farndon's 'Rural Voices: Attitudes to Language Variety' (emagazine 52 April 2011) cites the opprobrium that can be provoked by rhotic rural accents.

> *Rhotic accents are those that pronounce the consonant /r/ when it falls after a vowel in words such as 'cart' or 'car'*

a form found particularly in the South West counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset. In 2005, a quarter of respondents to the BBC Voices survey from this area reported that they didn't like their own accent. The media have certainly contributed to this sense of shame, often equating the rhotic accent with stupidity and eccentricity in comedy shows and advertising. Perhaps rural accents will fade partly as a result of these pernicious associations although Farndon ends on an optimistic note; awareness of decline could lead to a conscious effort to preserve and revitalise rural accents, and a Scouse-style renaissance could be on the cards.

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How To Read the Language 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 (CONtroversy 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.3 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' then 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.

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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.

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