An essential early step in the study of a language is to model it. A ‘model’, in this context, is not a three-dimensional miniature replica: this book does not devote its space to techniques of moulding the English language in Play-Doh®, Meccano®, or Lego®. To model the English language is, rather, to provide an abstract representation of its central characteristics, so that it becomes easier to see how it is structured and used.

Two models provide this first perspective. The first, shown below, breaks the structure of English down into a series of components; and these will be used to organize the exposition throughout Parts II to IV. On the facing page, there is a model of the uses of English; and this will be used as a perspective for Parts I and V. The omniscient eye of the English linguist surveys the whole scene, in ways which are examined in Part VI.
Social variation

Society affects a language, in the sense that any important aspect of social structure or function is likely to have a distinctive linguistic counterpart. People belong to different social classes, perform different social roles, use different technologies, and carry on different occupations. Their use of language is affected by their sex, age, ethnic group, and educational background. English is being increasingly affected by all these factors, because its developing role as a world language is bringing it more and more into contact with new cultures and social systems. (See Part V, §21.)

Personal variation

People affect a language, in the sense that an individual's conscious or unconscious choices and preferences can result in a distinctive or even unique style. Such variations in self-expression are most noticeable in those areas of language use where great care is being taken, such as in literature and humour. But the uniqueness of individuals, arising out of differences in their memory, personality, intelligence, social background, and personal experience, makes distinctiveness of style inevitable in everyone. (See Part V, §22.)

Temporal variation

Time affects a language, both in the long term and short term, giving rise to several highly distinctive processes and varieties.

Long term: English has changed throughout the centuries, as can be seen from such clearly distinguishable linguistic periods as Old English, Middle English, and Elizabethan English. Language change is an inevitable and continuing process, whose study is chiefly carried on by philologists and historical linguists. (See Part I.)

Short term: English changes within the history of a single person. This is most noticeable while children are acquiring their mother tongue, but it is also seen when people learn a foreign language, develop their style as adult speakers or writers, and, sometimes, find that their linguistic abilities are lost or seriously impaired through injury or disease. Psycholinguists study language learning and loss, as do several other professionals, notably speech therapists and language teachers. (See Part VI, §24.)

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Why Study the English Language?

Because it's fascinating

It is remarkable how often the language turns up as a topic of interest in daily conversation – whether it is a question about accents and dialects, a comment about usage and standards, or simply curiosity about a word's origins and history.

Because it's important

The dominant role of English as a world language forces upon our attention in a way that no language has ever done before. As English becomes the chief means of communication between nations, it is crucial to ensure that it is taught accurately and efficiently, and to study changes in its structure and use.

Because it's fun

One of the most popular leisure pursuits is to play with the English language – with its words, sounds, spellings, and structures. Crosswords, Scrabble®, media word shows, and many other quizzes and guessing games keep millions happily occupied every day, teas ing their linguistic brain centres and sending them running to their dictionaries.

Because it's beautiful

Each language has its unique beauty and power, as seen to best effect in the works of its great orators and writers. We can see the 1,000-year-old history of English writing only through the glass of language, and anything we learn about English as a language can serve to increase our appreciation of its oratory and literature.

Because it's useful

Getting the language right is a major issue in almost every corner of society. No one wants to be accused of ambiguity and obscurity, or find themselves talking or writing at cross-purposes. The more we know about the language the more chance we shall have of success, whether we are advertisers, priests, politicians, journalists, doctors, lawyers – or just ordinary people at home, trying to understand and be understood.

Because it's there

English, more than any other language, has attracted the interest of professional linguists. It has been analysed in dozens of different ways, as part of the linguist's aim of devising a theory about the nature of language in general. The study of the English language, in this way, becomes a branch of linguistics – English linguistics.

Modelling English

CHAPTER 1

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