

Introduction

This textbook about the History of the English Language (HEL) is intended as a relatively brief volume designed for undergraduate courses in the area. *The Emergence and Development of English* is meant to be an all-in-one volume, and so it includes introductory treatment of basic terms and concepts for language study in two of the three appendices. It adopts a traditional organizational pattern of periods in HEL from Indo-European up to the present day, and at the end offers a chapter on what we mean by Standard English, and an appendix on the use of corpora, a relatively new and growing method for study of the language. The book is meant for students who lack training in English language studies, so the chapters are designed to leave nobody behind, and are not for advanced specialists. Finally, the book constitutes a brief tour of the subject, as appropriate for the Cambridge Introductions to the English Language series (CIEL), and so does not provide the kind of extended treatment found in some other HEL textbooks.

The key challenge for students and instructors in *The Emergence and Development of English* will be the incorporation of the science of complex systems into the mainstream coverage of HEL. If you are not aware of this, you might think that the title refers to the beginnings of English as a language at some moment in time, and to its improvement over time as it turned into the standard versions of the language we have today. Not so much. The book pursues a narrative thread throughout its chapters on “emergence,” which is the key term from the study of complex systems. The science of complexity describes how massive numbers of random interactions can give rise to order, regularities that “emerge” from the interactions without specific causes. Complexity science is currently useful in physics, genetics, evolutionary biology, and economics, among fields that study large numbers of elements that interact with each other, but it is also a perfect fit for the humanities. People are talkers, and what we say depends on the people we interact with. The drive of twentieth-century linguistics to make the study of language more scientific, a logical system governed by grammatical and exceptionless phonological “rules,” has never been as

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successful as linguists might have hoped. Speech, language in use, is first and foremost not a logical system but a complex system, as demonstrated from first principles and copious evidence in the author's *The Linguistics of Speech* (2009) and *Language and Complex Systems* (2015). Emergence in English is not once-and-done; it continues in every place where the language is spoken or written, in every locality and in every kind of conversation or text. Thus, in this book, while the text will apply the common terms and concepts of contemporary language study and linguistics, the story of the language will be about continual emergence and reemergence of lexical, phonological, grammatical, and discourse forms of English out of the interaction of its speakers and the contingencies of their history. The central aim is to produce a compelling account of HEL that does not leave out the people in favor of paradigms and rules, and that casts the important facts of the language as regularities that exist within a matrix of variation, subject to continual change both in the past, as we know has already occurred, and in the future.

The subject of complex systems is explained briefly and non-technically in Chapter 2; additional aspects of complex systems will be introduced in later chapters, but nowhere will students and their instructors be subjected to heavily mathematical or otherwise technical discussion. Complex systems can describe the process by which we perceive our language behavior to be associated with our communities and practices. Thus, the study of speech as a complex system addresses language as an aspect of culture that emerges from human interaction. The key point about the A-curve and the property of scaling, signs that a complex system has operated in a speech community, is that these are understandable on a conceptual basis, so that students and their teachers will not have to engage at all with the more technical aspects of complexity discussed in other sciences. As Chapter 2 will discuss in more detail, the A-curve is the frequency ranking of the different variants that exist in any community of speakers for anything we want to say: there are always a couple of very common variants, a few moderately common ones, and a great many rare variants. The property of scaling just means that we see this nonlinear A-curve pattern wherever we look, say when we consider English as a national language, or as the language of a particular region or city, or as the language of a small group of speakers who share a common interest. Whether we are interested in English overall or in small places or groups, we can rely on the same pattern being present, even if we do not try to do elaborate statistics on the frequencies of variants. Moreover, the book cannot replace normal linguistic terminology because the complex systems approach leads to discussion of emergence, and exactly what has emerged in the language must be described in linguistic terms. Basic discussions of linguistic terms and concepts are

provided as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. Appendix 3 is a little different, in that it explains how complex systems underlie what we understand as word meaning, and how modern corpus analysis can help us to see the bigger picture by using Big Data.

This volume follows the format of the CIEL series, and so each chapter includes the following sections: *In This Chapter*, *Chapter Summary*, *Key Terms*, *Exercises*, and *Further Reading*. The volume is also provided with online supplements. Readers and teachers can access three main resources online, which are referenced throughout this text book:

Moore, Knott, and Hulbert (1972), referred to throughout this book as the “Reference Grammar.”

Moore and Marckwardt (1965), referred to throughout this book as the “Historical Outlines.”

Audio samples from Bessinger and Bornstein (1973). Transcripts for the audio samples are also available online as a supplement to the often partial transcripts in the text itself. The audio samples available are listed in an additional section at the end of the relevant chapters.

These online resources replace things that are often found in longer, more extensive HEL textbooks, such as lists of sound changes (especially for early English in the Reference Grammar), paradigms (in the Reference Grammar and the Historical Outlines), and samples of texts from the earlier periods of the language. The Historical Outlines has particularly good coverage of the language of Chaucer, including phonetic transcriptions that will allow students to learn how to pronounce Middle English. While these resources could not be included in the book itself, many students and teachers will find them invaluable aids to studying HEL.

CHAPTER 1

Popular English: What We Think We Know

In this chapter

This chapter begins with what we already know about the English language. We have experience with the language that includes how it sounds and what words we expect. We know from our experience that people from different places sound and use words differently. People from different places also use different grammar, ways of putting words together. This is even true of what is often called Standard English. Our experience gives us all perceptions of how the language is used by different people, but these perceptions may not be very reliable when we come to describe how people actually talk. Linguists use a number of different approaches to describe the language, and such descriptions are always different from the prescriptions taught in schools.

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1.1 History and Variety

The English language has a history. It’s obvious once you think about it, yet the history of English is not something we think much about. All of us who use the language, wherever in the world we happen to live and work, whether we use other languages as well, and whether or not we consider ourselves to be fluent speakers of the language, use English in our daily lives in a kind of eternal present tense. English is now. English is what we say now

and what we hear now from the other English speakers around us. How we got to where we are with the language does not enter into our conversations very much, we might think. And yet the history of English does enter into our talk and writing every day, without us being much aware of it. The history of English is more important to us than we might think because of the central fact about English, about all languages really, that the language changes over time. Your English will not be the same tomorrow as it is today. This book will introduce you to how the process of change works, and will tell you things about the history of the language that make a difference in how you use English today. Along the way, you will find out how you can describe aspects of English, so that you can mark the changes in the language and also talk in a more informed way about your own English today. You will find by the end of the book that you feel empowered to use English more effectively, both in the way that you understand how others speak and write the language and also in the way that you can express yourself. Once you know more about English and its history than most people do, you will be more in control of what you say and understand.

We are satisfied with our own impressions of English, instead of wanting to make a study of it, because our impressions are so clear. English has a certain concrete reality for us, based on our experience with people speaking English in comparison with people speaking what we consider to be other languages. Many of us around the world speak more than one language, and so we have a very personal and intimate experience with more than one language. We all have somewhat different experiences with English, too. Some of us learned English as children as our first language; some of us learned the language when we were children as a second language, one in addition to what we were speaking in our families; and some of us have learned English later in life, often with less opportunity for complete fluency. Many of us use English as a **lingua franca**, a common language among speakers of many languages, as for example between people from different parts of the European Union. Moreover, we all realize that our own English is not the same as the English used by somebody from another English-speaking country – even if we have never traveled far from home. The perennial James Bond of the movies (no matter the particular actor) just sounds different from us (no matter who we are), and that is part of his character. There are dozens of video clips of James Bond on YouTube, where you can hear that this is so. The directors of Bond movies often play up the difference through the introduction of an American colleague for Bond, typically a man from the CIA who shows a rough-hewn American persona as against Bond's British suavity. The CIA man sounds recognizably American, Bond recognizably British, and their ways of pronouncing

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words come to constitute a part of what we consider to be “rough-hewn” or “suave.” Dame Judi Dench plays up the female side of “suave” as the character M in more recent Bond films. Different Bond movies also introduce speakers of English from Asia or Europe who have their own recognizable ways of speaking English, and their parts in the movies are sometimes large enough for us to associate the way they talk with a personality stereotype. We can take home the same impression from different musical artists when we hear them in interviews. While differences in pronunciation do not come through so clearly in the music itself, when we hear the singers and players talk, women and men, of many different ethnicities, we can wonder how (on the charts at this writing) Adele sounds so different from Lady Gaga or Beyoncé in an interview as well as in their music. Since we hear people’s pronunciation all the while they are talking, it is only natural that this characteristic of speech, often called **accent**, becomes identified with the behavior of the people doing the talking.

Besides pronunciation, British English also contains words and expressions unfamiliar to Americans. These vocabulary differences (words and expressions in general are called the **lexicon**) can sometimes be difficult to decode, such as a British road sign that says “Unsuitable for Heavy Goods Traffic” when the American sign would say “No Trucks.” Sometimes they can be pretty obvious: the British “Mind Your Head” sign to warn tall people about low ceilings is probably better than the American “Caution!” sign, even for Americans. Different words are, well, different, like British *windscreen* for American *windshield*, or American *parking lot* for British *car park*. Canadians can often call the same thing a *parkade*. The majority of differences in the lexicon are more subtle, words and expressions that are available for use in British and American English, and in other Englishes worldwide, but are simply used more often in one than in the other. Differences range from preferences, like American *mail* versus British *post*, to very subtle matters of endings we put on words to mark how they work in a sentence (called **morphology**) or other aspects of sentence construction (called **syntax**) or of the arrangement of chunks of language larger than sentences (called **discourse**). British speakers, for instance, may seem to you more likely to use the “have you (an object)” form of making a type of question, while Americans prefer to construct the question with “do you have (an object).” American workers want a *raise* in pay, while British workers want a *rise*. American students *review* material before a test, while British students *revise* it. Australians and New Zealanders tend to agree with Americans and Canadians in saying that they *studied* a subject, while the British *read* a subject at college. While the word *mistake* is quite common in world Englishes, the word *blunder* is much more common in Sri Lankan English than elsewhere.

As for whole discourses beyond the sentence level, British speakers seem more likely to inject qualifiers like *perhaps* or *sorry* than Americans would be. We all believe that such differences exist, and on them we base our belief in British English, as opposed to American English, or Australian English, or any other sort of English.

Differences between American English and British English come in for more comment than differences between either British or American English and any other world variety of English because British and American English are the varieties most familiar to English speakers around the world, but a list of differences might be drawn up between any two national varieties of the language. We can call the whole collection of features – pronunciation, lexicon, morphology, syntax, discourse – used by speakers from one place, or from one social group, a **dialect**. We have to be careful with the word “dialect,” however, because when some people use that word they mean that there is something wrong with the speakers who talk that way. The same thing is true of the word **slang**, which describes words in common usage among some speakers which are not typically used in polite circles. A more neutral term for the collection of features used by some group of speakers is a **variety of a language**. All of these differences between varieties are the result of emergence, as we will see in the next chapter.

1.2 Perception

While many English speakers would find it difficult to cite particular differences in usage between, say, British and American English, most of them could also offer an imitation – more or less effective – of the speech of a British or American English speaker. Imitation here is not flattery but a declaration of differences: even people who give very bad imitations believe that there is a difference and can try to enact it. Dennis Preston has studied what he has called **folk linguistics** or **perceptual dialectology**. He has found that people are not slow to form perceptions of how other people talk, and that the perceptions are bound up with how these folk (by which Preston means nothing bad, just that his subjects are not trained to analyze speech) see themselves as English speakers. Thus, the “suave Brit” and “rough-hewn American” of the James Bond movies: the image is part of how the speech is perceived, and the speech helps to create the image portrayed by the actor. Speech and image are intertwined, as enacted by Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan, or Daniel Craig (or by the likes of Jack Lord, David Hedison, or most recently Jeffrey Wright for

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the CIA part) in Bond movies, and as enacted by every English speaker every day in every real conversation. Nelson Mandela sounded neither British nor American, and the way he talked was part of his identity, the image he conveyed. There are of course suave Americans and rough-hewn Brits (the Daniel Craig version of James Bond has his dark side), in other movies and in real life, but this does not in the least diminish the perception of difference between British and American English. We can accept individual people for themselves without abandoning our stereotypes. And we can maintain the stereotypes even if we cannot readily make a list of actual differences between them, whether in pronunciation or lexicon or syntax. This, then, is what most people mean by “a variety of English.” For most people a variety of a language is constituted by the perception of a difference.

The boundaries of such a variety are usually convenient designations of linguistic borders, rather than accurate assessments of linguistic evidence. It is very convenient, for instance, to use national boundaries as definitions for varieties of languages, like British English and American English and Singapore English. The problem with attaching national labels in this way can be illustrated from the different actors who have played James Bond. Sean Connery, George Lazenby, Roger Moore, Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan, and Daniel Craig do not speak with exactly the same accent. Brosnan, for instance, was born in Ireland, not Britain! We must allow for variation within national varieties, whether regional (Connery is Scottish, Dalton was born in Wales and grew up in the North of England, and Craig also has Welsh connections and grew up near the Welsh border, while Dame Judi Dench grew up in the North in York) or merely individual.

The problem remains even at the national level, as we can see from Canadian English. For British English speakers, Canadian English often gets lumped together with American English – rightly so, because Canada is also part of North America, and the USA need not, though in practice it usually does, grab the label “American” all for itself. “North American English” is a better term to apply to the English of Canada and the USA. While non-North-Americans perceive the pronunciation of Canadians to be essentially similar to that of the USA, American English speakers quite frequently think that a number of features of Canadian English remind them of British English – spelling, for one, in words like *labor/labour* and *center/centre*. The fact is that in many respects Canadian English, especially in the western part of the country, is very much like American English; on the other hand, especially in the eastern part of Canada, there are indeed a number of features that many Canadians share with British English. As R. E. McConnell (1979) puts it,

Canadian English is basically of the North American variety. But Canadians also share in the innovations and usages of the British . . . They learn to shift between such items as *first floor/ground floor*, *pants/trousers*, *suspenders/braces*, *absorbent cotton/cotton batting/cotton wool* – and to recognize that *ladders*, as well as *runs*, can occur in stockings, and that *boaters* and *bowlers* can be hats.

If Canadian English is not to be recognized for itself by most non-specialist listeners (there are, after all, fewer opportunities for most English speakers around the world to gain experience with Canadian English than with American or British English), then it is plausible for people who hear Canadian English to connect it with either British or American English, depending on their point of view. Perceptions of linguistic differences, because they are defined by convenience and depend upon your point of view, are not very objective. They are, however, how most people lead their linguistic lives; they allow people to conceive of their linguistic experiences in a more ordered way.

We now can see that the idea that American English is “spoken in the United States” is problematic because what is “American” is defined less by the national border than it is by people’s perception and point of view. We can say exactly the same thing about Australian English and Australia, or British English and Britain, or Canadian English and Canada, just to do our ABCs of English. Or about (New) Zealand and New Zealand English, to get all the way to *zed*, or *zee* as some of us would say.

1.3 Standard English

At the same time that we know, for certain, that English is a little different wherever you speak or write it, we also know, for certain, that there is such a thing as “Standard English.” Describing a standard language might be thought to consist of the relatively simple act of writing down what people say, particularly what people say in the capital city where we all go to find the best and latest styles in many areas, not just language. Yes, London in England, but in the USA and other former colonies where English is spoken natively, the political capital may not also be the commercial capital, and there may be more than one important center whose language is influential (in the USA, you might think of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, among others, rather than Washington, DC). While some efforts to try to control variation may have been made earlier in history, the idea of a standard for language really got started in the Neoclassical period (starting in the seventeenth century in England and its dependencies),

when there was new confidence that science and observation could find the causes behind the workings of the world around us. Great progress was made then on many fronts, for example Newton's formulation of our (neo)classical laws of physics. However, describing a standard language is not the writing down of what people do say and write, as the modern sciences rely on observation of facts in the world around us, but instead the formulation of rules for what people *should* say, often based on cultural factors like the political influence of the capital. In our contemporary world, higher education has taken the place of mere political influence, and the idea of a standard language is the particular province of the schools. Therefore, it is fair to say that Standard English is an institutional variety of the language, not one that emerges directly from the buzz and hum of language in use.

Standard English is real. You can find it in the grammar books used for teaching in the schools, and as the answers to language arts questions on standardized tests. And yet it is not complete, not anywhere, because the grammar books do not tell us everything about Standard English, and standardized tests do not ask us about all of it. We will consider what Standard English might be, and how it might be a little different from place to place, in a later chapter. In popular terms, we can say that the idea of Standard English is about **correctness**, the way that people *should* use English based on what is taught in school and included on standardized tests; this idea is also called **prescriptivism** because people who teach Standard English *prescribe* what we should say or write, in the same way that a doctor might prescribe medicine for an illness. We can also say that our perceptions of English tell us about the **rightness** of using the particular kind of English that belongs to people in any particular place and in any particular situation. Nobody teaches or tests whether you say the right kind of English; you just learn it in your family and your neighborhood and your workplace. In the popular view, then, what is right about someone's characteristic English, what makes people who use it sound right, like they belong to their groups, may at the same time sound wrong according to the idea of correctness. The popular idea of English thus has to endure an inherent contradiction between correctness and rightness, between what the school teaches and local authenticity.

1.4 Linguistics

There is yet another way to think about English, one that is not quite the same as our popular perceptions of English all around us, or the same as institutional Standard English either: **linguistics**. Academic linguists have