Why do some people say *aks* and not *ask*?

How many different ways can you use the word *like*?

Do you feel *good* or *well*?

Who said *ain't* isn't a word?

Do you write with a "pen" or a "pin"?

Who wrote "the dictionary"?

When does "I'm busy" mean "No"?

Are some words too powerful to say?

Is hip-hop poetry?

How do children learn to speak?

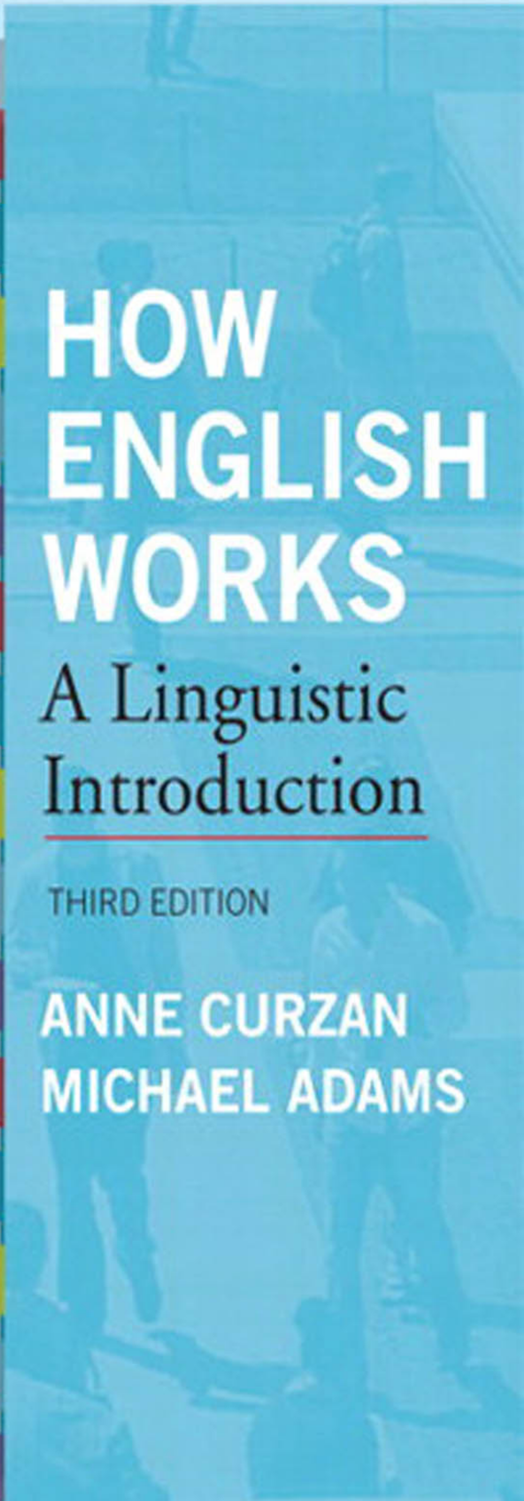
How is a word like *blog* created?

Who speaks a dialect?

Why is *colonel* spelled the way it is?

Do men and women speak differently?

Will txtng make us talk in abbrevs?



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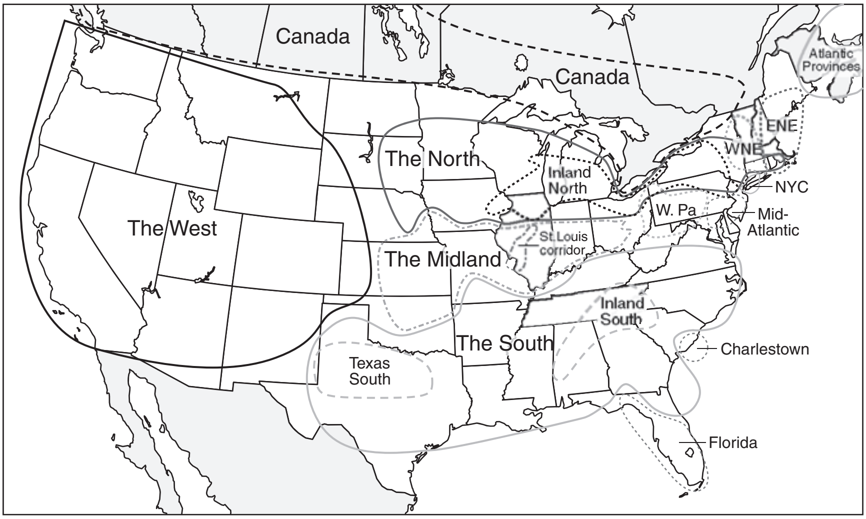
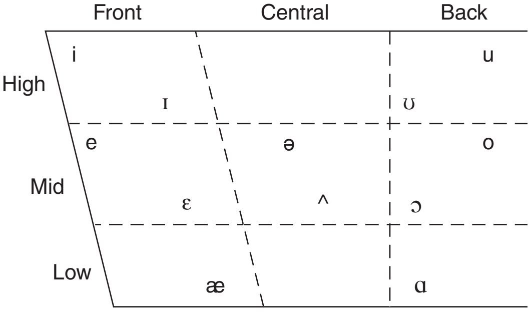

Canada
Canada
Atlantic Provinces
ENE
WNE
The North
Inland North
NYC
W. Pa
Mid-Atlantic
The West
St.Louis corridor
The Midland
Inland South
Charlestown
The South
Texas South
Florida

The major dialect areas of American English (*The Atlas of North American English,* 2005).

| *Manner of Articulation* | *Bilabial* | *Labio-dental* | *Inter-dental* | *Alveolar* | *(Alveo-) Palatal* | *Velar* | *Glottal* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stops | p | | | t | | k | |
| | b | | | d | | g | |
| Fricatives | | f | θ | s | ʃ (š) | | h |
| | | v | ð | z | ʒ (ž) | | |
| Affricates | | | | | tʃ (č) | | |
| | | | | | dʒ (ǰ) | | |
| Nasals | m | | | n | | ŋ | |
| Liquids | | | | l (lateral) | | | |
| | | | | r (bunched) | | | |
| Glides | w (ʍ) | | | | j | | |

The consonant phonemes of standard American English categorized by distinctive features.

The vowel phonemes of standard American English drawn according to their distinctive features.


Front
Central
Back
High
Mid
Low
i
u
ɪ
ʊ
e
ə
o
ɛ
^
ɔ
æ
ɑ

Diphthongs: ɑɪ, ɑʊ, ɔɪ

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# List of Symbols, Linguistic Conventions, and Common Abbreviations

## Symbols and Conventions[†]

| | |
|---|---|
| / / | Phonemic transcription |
| [ ] | Phonetic transcription |
| * | In historical linguistics, a reconstructed form for which linguists have no record |
| * | In syntax, a grammatically unacceptable sentence (in the descriptive sense) |
| ? | In syntax, a grammatically questionable sentence (in the descriptive sense) |
| + | In syntax, one or more of this constituent can appear |
| *word* | Italics are used to refer to a word as a word |
| 'meaning' | Single quotes are used to refer to a word's meaning |

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[†] For the transcription conventions for spoken conversation, see Exercise 8.7.

## Common Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AAE | African American English |
| ADJ | adjective |
| ADJP | adjective phrase |
| ADV | adverb |
| ADVP | adverb phrase |
| ASL | American Sign Language |
| C | consonant (in phonology) |
| C | complement (in syntax) |
| COCA | Corpus of Contemporary American English |
| CONJ | conjunction |
| DET | determiner |
| EMdE | Early Modern English |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| IPA | International Phonetic Alphabet |
| ME | Middle English |
| MICASE | Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English |
| N | noun |
| NP | noun phrase |
| O | object |
| OE | Old English |
| *OED* | *Oxford English Dictionary* |
| P | preposition |
| PDE | Present-Day English |
| PP | prepositional phrase |
| PRED | predicative |
| PRO | pronoun |
| RP | Received Pronunciation |
| S | sentence (in syntax) |
| S | subject (in syntax) |
| V | vowel (in phonology) |
| V | verb (in syntax) |
| VP | verb phrase |

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# Preface to Instructors

*How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction* has proven to be a highly successful introductory language/linguistics textbook designed specially for English and education majors. This engaging, accessible textbook provides extensive coverage of issues of particular interest to English majors and future English instructors, and it invites all students to connect academic linguistics to the everyday use of the English language.

One of the principal challenges of an introductory course in English linguistics is helping students see the material as relevant to their professional and personal lives. Linguistics textbooks often present technical linguistics as if it were disconnected from what students already know about language. Our goal with this book is to encourage students to connect academic linguistics to the everyday use of the English language around them, as well as to relevant social and educational questions. We provide students with the tools to make these connections to explore their own questions about English, to understand more fully the language they see and hear every day. The book also shows students how English and the study of English are dynamic: it engages students with ongoing changes in English, new insights in linguistics, and problems that remain to be solved. Students thereby become active participants in the construction of linguistic knowledge. And the book emphasizes for students why the study of English matters—not only for them as students but also for them as parents, teachers, and citizens.

For example, students take a narrative walk among dialect areas in order to discover how subtle shifts in vocabulary and pronunciation—and attitudes about them—are related to isoglosses on maps. They see how the world of computer technology has employed natural word-formation processes to create most of the needed high-tech vocabulary (e.g., *blog*, *cyberspace*, *to google*). They encounter the origins of prescriptive usage rules and see their relationship to descriptive grammar. They explore the integral role of indirect speech acts in dating rituals. They learn why some speakers are more fluently bilingual than others and have the opportunity to consider the implications for educational policy.

Thus, in *How English Works* we apply the premise that by moving away from a more esoteric study of language and by making connections between the study of linguistics and the everyday use of language, students will:

- be more interested in and care more about the material because it is relevant to their lives outside the classroom;
- learn the material more effectively because they can integrate it with what they already know; and
- apply and use the information beyond the class, and talk about the material with others.

## Organization

*How English Works: A Linguistic Introduction* covers topics at the core of linguistics (e.g., syntax, phonology, discourse analysis, language variation), complemented by related topics particularly relevant to English majors and future English teachers (e.g., language attitudes and authority, bilingual and bidialectal education, the history of English spelling and prescriptive usage rules). You might visualize the book's organizational structure as a progression inside a frame.

The first two chapters frame the book by introducing the foundations of systematic language study and addressing some of the prior understandings that students may have, both about the nature of language and about sources of language authority.

The central ten chapters (Chapters 3–12) progress "up" through the levels of language structure, and the units of analysis at each level serve as building blocks for the next. For example, sounds combine to make words, which combine to make sentences. Sentences in combination can be analyzed as text or discourse. All of this information can be analyzed as the linguistic and communicative competence of a speaker; speakers together create speech communities, which generate language variation.

The final two chapters focus on language change. Chapters 13 and 14 provide an historical context in which to consider the preceding ten chapters on the structure of Modern English. These two chapters describe the history of English: how English looked before and how it may look after this particular historical moment.

The third edition continues to create strong connections among chapters. For example, it employs the distinction between form and function to explain syntax at the level of the word (Chapter 5) and at the level of the clause/sentence (Chapter 6); it integrates more explicitly the discussion of semantics (Chapter 7) with syntax (Chapters 5 and 6) and pragmatics (Chapter 8); it shows how speech acts (Chapter 8) help us understand and analyze literature (Chapter 9).

The chapters can be reordered and some might be omitted, depending on how instructors choose to organize the course.

### New to This Edition

The third edition of *How English Works* includes new material on recent research findings, for example on the effects of texting on written English, on the origins of the "rule" about splitting infinitives, on differences between expert and novice academic writing, and on the relationship of language and thought. The examples of language change in progress and current slang have also been updated throughout the text—although we know that, especially with slang, the language will always be ahead of any book, and we forever risk being unhip in describing any slang as "current." But such is the nature of language!

Below are some of the key features of each chapter and the most significant revisions in the third edition:

- What makes human language unique? Chapter 1 ("A Language Like English") situates English with respect to the definition of language and the development of languages to capture what makes English, as a human language, unique and worthy of detailed study. It includes detailed material on animal communication and a more extended discussion of attitudes about language change. The new edition includes an opportunity for students to reframe their own pet peeves about language in the context of new information about language variation and change.

- Why did the punctuation guide *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* become a best seller? Chapter 2 ("Language and Authority") tackles the concept of "rules" and language authority, providing students with critical background on traditional sources of language authority such as dictionaries and grammar books. The third edition contains a nuanced treatment of the definition of Standard English that addresses the relationship of dialect and register, particularly formality.
- How does a stream of continuous sounds become words in our brains? Chapter 3 ("English Phonology") not only explains the fundamental concepts of the English sound system but also connects this material to dialect variation, sound change, and English spelling. The new edition includes an additional exercise on reading phonetic transcription.
- How do we make up new slang? Chapter 4 ("English Morphology") covers important morphological categories, and it explains how frequency, systematicity, and creativity play into the stability of parts of the lexicon and the striking creativity that accounts for slang, new technical terms, and the annual Words of the Year (all updated in the third edition). The third edition features a new box on clitics in English.
- What does it mean that all speakers "know grammar"? Chapters 5 ("English Syntax: The Grammar of Words") and 6 ("English Syntax: Phrases, Clauses, and Sentences"), in recognition of the challenge grammar poses to many students, provide extended coverage to parts of speech before discussing the structure of phrases and clauses; the chapters also discuss the origins of prescriptive usage rules in relation to descriptive grammar. Examples in both chapters include both standard and nonstandard varieties of English.
- How do we all agree on what *dog* means? Chapter 7 ("Semantics") connects technical semantics to more philosophical approaches to meaning and to issues such as politically correct language, the relationship of language and thought, and the sensical nonsense of "Jabberwocky."
- Dude, what is going on with *dude*? Chapter 8 ("Spoken Discourse") explains how conversations work, from implied meanings to turn-taking to those "meaningless" words like *like*, *you know*, and *dude*; it also provides students the tools to pursue their own (critical) discourse analysis of spoken text. The third edition provides an improved discussion of performative speech acts and felicity conditions.
- Can linguistics really help us "close read" better? Chapter 9 ("Stylistics") provides students with an extensive set of tools and frameworks for detailed linguistic analysis of written text, both literary and nonliterary. The third edition includes new sections on speech acts and literature, which show students how they can exploit what they learned in Chapter 8 to analyze literature. The special focus on what makes good writing has also been significantly revised to include corpus-based studies that compare expert and novice academic writing.
- How do kids learn language so easily while their parents struggle? Chapter 10 ("Language Acquisition") covers not only the stages of children's language acquisition

but also the implications of cognitive linguistic research for language education. In addition, the chapter includes recent research on language learning for speakers in isolation and speakers with brain damage.

- Why don't all speakers of English sound the same? Chapter 11 ("Language Variation") gives students a general framework for thinking about a range of sociolinguistic factors (e.g., gender, age, race and ethnicity, class, region) in the study of language variation. The third edition provides a more streamlined discussion of sociolinguistic methodologies. Chapter 12 ("American Dialects") then focuses specifically on the history and present status of dialect variation in the United States, including the implications for language attitudes and education. Case studies of regional and social variation in the United States include Appalachian English, California English, African American English, and Chicano English.
- Just how much has English changed? Chapters 13 ("History of English: Old to Early Modern English") and 14 ("History of English: Modern and Future English") provide an overview of major linguistic events in the history of the English language, with a final section that examines the future status of English as a world language and the implications of electronically mediated communication, from e-mail to Instant Messenger to texting. Will emoticons and acronyms take over the written language? What will English of the twenty-fifth century look like? A new exercise allows students to investigate the etiquette of Instant Messaging.

## Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical approach used in *How English Works* reflects our respect for students' ability to contribute new knowledge to ongoing conversations about language, which involves acknowledging where linguistic knowledge comes from and posing questions for students that will help them participate in the conversation. Throughout the text we use the following pedagogical tools to help students see English linguistics as relevant to their lives, concerns, and curiosities:

- *Chapter Opener Vignettes*: Each chapter begins with an engaging scenario that opens the door for students to make the material relevant to their own experience.
- *Special Interest Boxes*: In the special interest boxes, we use questions and facts about English as a way to make connections to students' experience with actual language in use and to introduce more technical material.

  Discussion boxes pose provocative questions that instructors can use as prompts for in-class discussion or for short written assignments.

  Language Change at Work and Language Variation at Work boxes show students how the technical material connects to diversity and change in English.

  Language Acquisition at Work boxes provide students with insights about the relationship between language acquisition and, for example, facial imitation and hand gestures.

  Scholar profile boxes introduce students to major figures in the field and help students put faces and histories to theories and facts.

- *End-of-Chapter Exercises*: Exercises at the end of each chapter cover the range of the material, sometimes asking students to apply this information to discrete problems and sometimes asking students to go out into the world, collect information (e.g., from observation or interviews), and analyze it in relation to the information presented in the chapter.
- *Figures and Photos*: Throughout the book, figures and photos liven the text, providing not only visual representations of information presented in the prose but also memorable images, from Panbanisha communicating with her keyboard to Andrew Meltzoff's imitation experiments to a T-shirt advertising /r/-less pronunciations in Boston.
- *Tone*: The book presents a host of current examples, from modern slang to current popular culture, and is written in a narrative, colloquial style that draws students into the interest of the material without simplifying it.
- *Glossary*: The extensive glossary provides not only clear, concise definitions, but also examples whenever possible and critical cross-references to other terms, so that students can use it to study material as well as to look up terms about which they are unsure.

## Instructor's Manual

The Instructor's Manual (0-205-03231-1/978-0-205-03231-0) provides practical, tried-and-true advice and class activities for the material in each chapter. For each chapter, we provide learning objectives and an explicit statement of where students may find challenges with the material and where they will be particularly engaged. We then detail specific in-class and out-of-class activities that instructors can use to review and complement material provided in the book with related exercises and information (e.g., events from the news, data collected by students, material on the Web). We specify for each chapter which discussion boxes and which homework problems can be used effectively for classroom activities. We also provide additional resources, such as helpful Web sites and reference books.

The manual provides full answer keys for the relevant exercises in each chapter in a form that instructors can copy should they want to provide answer keys to students.

## Acknowledgments

We cannot possibly thank here all the many people who have helped and supported us at every step of the process of writing this book and then revising it for this third edition, but to all of you, please know that we are grateful beyond words. We would like to start by acknowledging our students, who have taught us much of what we know about how to teach this material successfully and who have shown us how to hone the book for the third edition. We are especially grateful to Bethany Davila, James Beitler, Katie Glupker, Jessica Grieser, Stephanie LaGrasso, Zak Lancaster, Lauren Puccio, Joseph Ruple, and Amber Shewalter for their notable contributions. In addition, we have had many wonderful colleagues who have generously shared their material, experiences, and advice over the years and who, we hope, will be pleased to see all the ways that it has shaped

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*Anne Curzan*

*Michael Adams*

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# Letter to Students

## Dear Students:

Do you use *friend* as a verb? Can you use *Coke* to refer to all pop/soda? Did you realize these are questions we legitimately ask in English linguistics? As you read *How English Works,* you will have the chance to connect more technical linguistic information to your own daily experience with language, whether it is slang or American dialects or blogging or writing a formal essay or watching a child learn language.

### Please join in . . .

The linguistic study of the English language continues to evolve from conversations among scholars. There remain complex questions to be answered. And you can be an active participant in the conversation about the English language. You have the ability to make new and interesting observations about the English language that inform the questions raised throughout the book, and we hope you will do so.

### But first . . .

In this book, we question and probe every part of language. Along the way, the book is going to ask you to question some of your commonsense beliefs about language. As native speakers of language, we all come to the study of language with strong prior understandings, some of which are accurate and some of which are not. Sometimes it can be difficult to accept the findings of linguists, particularly if these findings, presented as "facts" about language, run counter to what we think we already know about language.

For example, here are a few questions about English that may or may not challenge what you've heard or thought about the language: Did you know the English language is always changing? This does not mean (no matter what you have been told!) that it is being ruined by "lazy" or "sloppy" speakers. Nor does it mean that it is improving as speakers become ever more technologically sophisticated. But how could the rules of "standard written English" have changed so much over time that, for example, the double negative (e.g., *I can't give no more*) used to be standard? And if the contraction *ain't* is just as old and logical and grammatical as other English contractions such as *won't* and *can't*, then why do some speakers consider it "wrong"? As you'll discover, "right" and "wrong" are very complicated concepts when it comes to language use.

We encourage you to think about, question, argue, and try to make sense of these and similar concepts that you will meet throughout the book. After you finish reading *How English Works*, we hope that you may exclaim, as have some of our past students: "It's so distracting: I just can't stop noticing language everywhere I go!"

We have enjoyed writing this book. We hope you enjoy reading it.

*Anne Curzan and Michael Adams*

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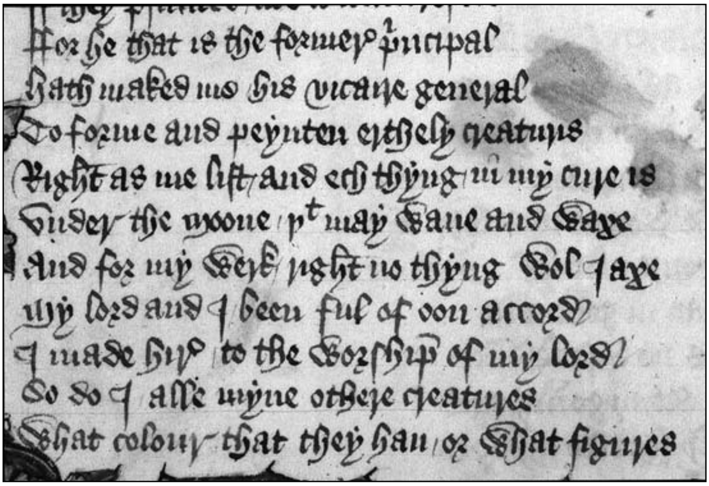
## Chapter 1

# A Language Like English



For he that is the former principal
Hath maked me his vicaire general
To forme and peynten erthely creaturis
Right as me list and ech thyng in my cure is
Under the moone that may wane and waxe
And for my werk right no thyng wol I axe
My lord and I been ful of oon accord
I made hir to the worship of my lord
So do I alle myne othere creatures
What colour that they han or what figures

The sixth line of this excerpt from “The Physician’s Tale” illustrates Chaucer’s occasional use of *axe* for *ask* in *The Canterbury Tales*. Surprised? Turn the page to read more about the history of *ask/aks*.

Every day we use things whose inner workings we do not fully understand: the toaster, the washing machine, the laptop computer, the gas pump, a lightbulb, the English language.

Wait a minute, you might say: *the English language* is not a machine like the others.

True. English is clearly not a machine. And English, like any other language, was not “invented,” like these other everyday objects. But the English language is systematically structured, much like these other everyday objects. It follows predictable rules and patterns. There may even be a blueprint, but that’s a complicated question that we’ll return to later in the text. The point is that English is a complex, rule-governed system that we use every day without having to think about its intricacies. For example, do we consciously group sounds together to make a word or methodically think through word order to make a grammatical sentence? Do we wonder how the words *I am sorry* uttered together function as an apology? And when do we ever reflect on how we learned to use language in the first place?

This book provides you with the tools to think about how English works. If you were to take apart your watch, you would need the appropriate tools to pull out each part. If you ever wanted to reassemble the watch, you would need not only these tools but also an understanding of how each part functions. You would need to understand the broader framework of how each part relates to the whole. Here, we will open up English like a machine to be taken apart, and we will provide you with the analytical tools and the conceptual framework with which to understand it.

Each chapter of this text equips you to poke around, explore, and analyze an aspect of the English language. As you see how each aspect of English works, you will increase your understanding of how the language as a whole works. You will also understand how the English language got to be the way it is.

If you are reading this book, English is clearly one of the languages you control. For many of you, it is probably your native language and the language in which you work, live, and play. We use the language so much, we hardly notice it—like a lightbulb, we tend to take it for granted. Language can seem mundane because we learn it as children and use it every day without having to think consciously about it. In fact, one of the fundamental properties of spoken (or signed) human language is that we learn it without explicit instruction as long as we are exposed to it. Like a lightbulb, language can seem simple. But also like a lightbulb, there is much more to language than meets the eye, or the ear, as the case may be. Language is an enormously complex system, and it enables humans to communicate about everything under and including the sun.

Every chapter of this book begins with a story about the English language at work around you. Often the examples come from everyday experiences with language that you may have noticed but not thought too much about. Once you do start thinking about these examples, they will open up questions about how we use language, how a language changes, and how our attitudes about language are shaped. Each chapter then provides you with answers to many of these questions, as well as tools to pursue further questions of your own. So here's our first story.

## The Story of *Aks*

In January 2007, an anonymous employee in New York wrote to Randy Cohen, the ethicist for the *New York Times*, with a question about *aks*. The employee was to screen candidates for a job that required extensive phone interaction with high-end, "snobbish" clients, and the employee's boss had instructed, "Don't bring in anyone who wants to 'ax' you a question." The employee worried that the boss, normally supportive of equal opportunity, was being racist in this prejudice against *aks*.

What is it about this word? This one word alone, as the boss's instructions make clear, seems to be enough for many Americans to judge a speaker as ignorant, unintelligent, uneducated, or in some other way not worthy of an opportunity. The people who complain about *aks* often assume that it would be both easy and appropriate to substitute *ask* for *aks*. At this moment in history, a lot of negative social attitudes about speakers are heaped on one little word, but this has not always been the case.

The pronunciation of *ask* as *aks* is an example of **metathesis**, a systematic process of sound change that you will read more about in Chapter 3. Metathesis involves the reversal, or switching places, of two sounds. For example, the

Modern English word *bird* used to be *brid*. The Modern English verb *ask* can be traced back to the Old English verb *ācsian*, the form used throughout England through the eighth century. So in the early Old English verb, the sound /k/ occurs before /s/. During the ninth century, the metathetic form *āscian* (with the sounds reversed) appeared, the sound /s/ moving before /k/. This new form is the ancestor of Modern English *ask*, and it gradually replaced the earlier form for most speakers, although this process took several centuries. In other words, *ācsian* is the older form; *āscian* is the newer form. And back in Anglo-Saxon England, many who witnessed the variation may have wondered why some people "just couldn't learn to speak correctly."

The English poet Chaucer, writing in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, used *ask* and *aks* (or *axe*) interchangeably. And though Standard English, as it developed, codified *ask* as the "standard," folks throughout England employed the archaic form well into the twentieth century. Noah Webster, in *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789), reported that *ax* was common in New England—brought to America by English settlers. By 1953, E. Bagby Atwood noted in *A Survey of Verb Forms in the Eastern United States* that *aks/ax* no longer occurred north of the Mason-Dixon line. Once widely spoken in America, *aks* had become regarded as a Southernism—even though speakers throughout the United States can be heard using it. As African Americans migrated from the South, they carried *aks* with them, and today enough African Americans employ it, regardless of where they live, that it also counts as a feature of African American English.

All living languages change over time, and all show variation, such as *ask* and *aks*. Just because a current form was common in English 1,500 years ago doesn't mean that we should use it today or think it is somehow better—and clearly in the case of *aks*, age has not given this form authority. But given these details about the history of *aks*, it is difficult to insist that *aks* is somehow wrong or inferior. It is a systematic variant of *ask*. From one perspective, the present is merely a continuation of the past, and much nonstandard American English is older than the innovations now considered "standard."

This story may shake up some things that you thought you knew about language, such as that *aks* is just wrong or bad English. Clearly, many English speakers do not think of the words *ask* and *aks* as equals. But in the structural system of the English language, *ask* and *aks* are linguistically equal ways to refer to the act of posing a question, and they are related historically to each other.

This chapter explores how sets of sounds, such as *ask* and *aks*, are associated with particular meanings that we all agree on. It is arbitrary that the string of sounds in *ask* or *aks* refers to posing a question, but it is critical to the system of language that we all accept this arbitrary relationship and use the words accordingly. After all, if you were to use *ask* to mean ‘to pose a question’ and we were to use it to mean ‘porcupine’, then arbitrariness would have gotten the better of the system. In this chapter, we also discuss what makes this kind of language system uniquely human—why porcupines and bees and dolphins and even chimpanzees don’t use words like *ask* or *aks*, let alone use words to debate correct and incorrect usage.

## Language, Language Everywhere

Language inundates us, and every one of us is not only inundated but an inundator. Few of us wake up to silence; most of us groan out of our sleep to the jarring noise of the morning radio blaring from our alarm clocks. Whether in our kitchens at home or in the cafeteria at school, many of us eat a rushed breakfast (if we eat breakfast at all!) between sleepy conversations about the day ahead and a rushed glance through the morning paper. Sometimes the television drones in the background. Once at school, the flood of language continues: lectures, classroom discussions, campus meetings—during all of which we may not only listen but also have much to say. Who doesn’t also steal snatches of the day to send text messages or surf the Internet? Even a serious workout at the gym can entail language, for example, if we’re flirting with someone on the next machine—although, in this case, body language may matter even more than speech. On top of racking up cell minutes talking and texting, there’s always homework: reading, reading, reading . . . writing, writing, writing. And then you sleep, so that your body and mind are sufficiently rested to survive another arduous linguistic day.

Where in life doesn’t language act its part? In what human medium do we gain more, learn more, express more, play more, or live more? Language composes, though not exclusively, what we are as a species and who we are as individuals in society. Birds sing and bees dance to communicate, but they don’t use language creatively in the way that humans do. Animals (other than humans) don’t argue about meaning and look words up in dictionaries. Most animal communication is unambiguous. When an oriole calls out an alarm, for example, all the orioles in the neighborhood, and a number of other animals as well, flee, whether or not they are actually threatened by a predator. So if a nearsighted oriole mistakenly warns of a predator day after day, the other orioles will fly away nonetheless. Animals are not held accountable for their communication, but humans are—another reason for us to study and use language carefully.

Language is a kind of work by which we accomplish things. Language is also a kind of social link: we use it to establish and maintain our networks of friends and acquaintances. Language is also, importantly, play. We read novels and poetry, attend performances of Shakespeare, or sing along with fellow groupies at a rock concert. We play with language itself, for example by making bad puns and laughing at them despite ourselves (e.g., “The show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is driving straight men into their closets”). Maybe we do the daily crossword puzzle or play along with reruns of *Wheel of Fortune*. Sometimes, language serves a concrete purpose; sometimes, it defines us as social beings; sometimes, it elevates the spirit or provokes thought; sometimes, it’s just plain fun. Most of the time, it's a combination of purposes, sociability, learning, and play. Can you imagine anything that deserves our careful consideration more than language?

## The Power of Language

The common saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is not, in fact, true. Words can, and do, hurt—not only those we speak to, but also ourselves, as we are judged by the language we use. Words have the power to hurt and heal, inform and misinform, reveal and hide. Words can create and destroy the social connections critical to our lives.

### Name Calling

We all recognize names as powerful. For example, many of us feel we own the words in our names in a way different from other words, and we grant only certain people permission to use some versions. If your name is Katherine, it may feel disrespectful or off-putting if people other than your friends and family call you Kate, let alone Katie. If they rename you without your permission, they may be asserting a *right* to do so: sometimes nicknaming is a matter of affection; sometimes it is all about power. Yet, in other circumstances, you may well say "Call me Kate," to create a more intimate social connection. Names alone have the power to do that.

Sometimes words have such religious or mystical power that speakers will not utter them. Judaism, for example, prohibits the use of God's real name (substituting *Yahweh, Adonai*, or *Eloim*, instead). Even today, many Jews who write English prefer *G-d* to *God* for this reason. And Judaism is not alone in fearing the power of God's name: *by golly* (originally African American) is a euphemism for *by God*, and *gosh* is a similar evasion. Use God's name, the theory goes, and you will call down God's wrath. The characters in the Harry Potter books refrain from uttering Voldemort's name and refer to him as "he who must not be named." As the Harry Potter stories remind us, magic, too, endows words with power, in spells, charms, and curses, and these words eventually become taboo: utter certain words and you can animate the forces of nature to create (as in a love charm) or destroy (as in a curse).

Speakers hesitate to utter other words because they have the power to offend. Some speakers don't use "bad words," and from a very young age, children raised in no-bad-words households quickly figure out that there is something powerful about these words—they still try out the words, but they do so knowing that they are putting themselves at risk. Some speakers refer to the "F-word," the "C-word," or the "N-word" because these words seem too offensive or too risky to utter aloud, even though the audience knows exactly which words the speaker means. Some of these words are banned from (or bleeped out of) network television and radio, and their use by public figures can be considered news in and of itself, as when a live microphone caught Vice President Joe Biden say to President Obama "This is a big fucking deal" after the passage of the health care reform bill in 2010.

Although some of our beliefs about the magic of language may have shifted, our sense of its power remains. For example, superstitions persist that make us "knock on wood" when we say things, for fear that the words will affect future events. Our sense of linguistic appropriateness means that we avoid some words for others in order to respect, for example, the deceased (rather than "the dead") or women (rather than "girls" or "chicks"). In all these ways, we recognize the power of words; we recognize that it is not "just language," because the consequences of language use are very real.

## Judging by Ear

As soon as you begin speaking to another person, that person, often without even being aware of it, starts to judge you based on your speech—not only what you say, but how you say it. Where are you from originally? Are you a native speaker of English? How educated are you? With what social groups do you identify?

In any given speech situation, each of us makes choices, usually subconsciously, about how we present ourselves linguistically. For example, do you want to sound like a well-educated applicant in a job interview? If so, you may decide to speak more formally than you would if you were with your friends. If you control more than one dialect of English, you may use primarily features of one of those dialects to express your affiliation with that speech community. Do you want, for instance, to mark your membership in the Southern speech community or the New York speech community? We shape our identities and how others perceive us through our speech—it is an important part of how we negotiate our social worlds.

Is it fair to judge others based on how they speak? We can often legitimately tell many things about people from how they talk—often things that they want us to know. But we can also make very unfair judgments about people based on their speech, and it is important to be aware of those leaps from linguistic features to stereotypes or unjustified beliefs associated with those features. For example, it is not fair to judge speakers of nonstandard dialects as less intelligent or less educated. Schools may teach Standard English, but many bidialectal speakers who control Standard English do not choose to use it in all situations. So it is unfair to judge a speaker who uses *aks* as inferior in some way. It is equally unfair to assume that a speaker who uses Standard English is inherently more qualified for a given job.

In her book *English with an Accent* (1997), Rosina Lippi-Green describes language as the last back door to discrimination in the United States. She argues that we make judgments about people and discriminate for or against them based on their language. We know we should not judge people based on their race, ethnicity, or gender, but we often do judge others by their speech. Yet Lippi-Green notes that the language we learn as children is a fundamental part of our identity and not something that we can, or necessarily want to, give up to conform to the Standard-English-speaking world in all situations. We cannot change our language like we change our clothes. It's not an equivalent demand to insist that speakers should "just" substitute *ask* for *aks* or "put on" Standard English as they should put on a suit for a job interview.

Humans size each other up whenever they meet, evaluating each other's clothes, haircut, demeanor, language, and much more. The power of language to express identity is critical to its effective functioning in a speech community. At the same time, we must be aware of unwarranted leaps we may be making when a linguistic feature leads us to judge a speaker's character or competence.

## A Question to Discuss

### What Makes Us Hear an Accent?

Our brains are tricky when it comes to accents. If we hear someone speaking differently from us, perhaps in a way that we can identify with a particular social group or geographic region, we can jump to conclusions about that person. On the flip side of the coin: if we already know something about someone (e.g., where the person is from or the person's race or ethnicity), we can sometimes hear an accent in ways we otherwise might not.

One study examined the relationship between undergraduate students' expectations and what they "heard" in an instructor's lecture (Rubin 1992, described in Lippi-Green 1997). Sixty-two undergraduates listened to one of two prerecorded, four-minute lectures, on a topic either in the sciences or in the humanities. The voice on the tapes was of a native speaker of English from central Ohio. Before listening to a tape, students were shown one of two pictures of "the lecturer": one of a Caucasian woman and one of an Asian woman, who were photographed in similar settings with similar hairstyles, clothes, and other aspects of outward appearance. All of the students listened to the same voice, but students who believed the Asian woman was the speaker were more likely to rate the speaker as having an accent. These students also scored lower on the comprehension test given after the mini-lecture than those who believed that they were listening to a Caucasian woman. So students' expectations or preconceptions of how a lecturer might talk, given the person's appearance, seem to have the power not only to create "imaginary accents" but also to set up learning obstacles. In this case, the students convinced themselves that the lecturer's accent was confusing.

If you have taken courses from instructors who spoke with unfamiliar accents, does this study make you reflect differently on that experience? How much responsibility do you think that students should take for understanding an instructor who is highly trained in his or her academic field and may speak English with an unfamiliar accent? In other words, how do you think the "communicative burden" should be split between the instructor and the students?

## The System of Language

"Birds do it, bees do it," sang Cole Porter, and certainly human beings do it. We all communicate (and perhaps fall in love, but that is a different matter—although definitely related to communication). But just how far do the similarities among animal species go? In the most general sense of the term *language*, we could argue that many animal species—birds, bees, dolphins, and chimps, as well as humans—communicate by means of sound or patterned movement. The oriole's alarm call can warn other birds of danger, and bee dances can communicate important information about the location of pollen. Human language differs significantly from bird song and bee dance, however. Human language is, in fact, one of the defining features of being human. So we need a more specific definition.

With the caveat that defining human language is a very difficult task, and with the knowledge that defining language is clearly central to this book, we start with a basic definition of human language:

> Human language is a conventional system of signs that allows for the creative communication of meaning.

Now let's unpack that definition:

- *Conventional:* There is, for the most part, no direct relationship between linguistic elements such as words and the meanings they represent. Instead, the meaning of linguistic signs rests on conventional understandings—that is, the understandings that are shared by a community of speakers (see the discussion of the linguistic sign below). For example, English speakers all use the string of sounds in "English" to refer to the language in which we are writing this book—although if we all agreed to it, the string could just as well be "Lisheng" instead.
- *System:* The organization of language is rule governed. These rules apply to the way linguistic elements are related to each other and the way they combine to create meaning. In other words, we cannot combine words any which way in a sentence (e.g., *which a any in sentence way*) but must instead follow specific word-order rules. And if, for example, we want to make a noun plural, we follow a systematic rule for doing so.
- *Creative communication of meaning:* Language allows speakers to create new utterances to convey new meanings as needed, both about the world around them and about abstract ideas, including about language itself.

Some scholars argue that human language is an evolutionary adaptation, like opposable thumbs and upright locomotion, and other scholars disagree. It is certainly an intellectual and expressive faculty that leads to art and to e-mail, even to our capacity for self-reflection. Human cultural history is thus partly linguistic history, and current culture is inextricably tied to language. We cannot fully understand human behavior or human achievement without understanding language. (Throughout the rest of the book, we often use the term *language* as shorthand for 'human language'.)

## Arbitrariness and Systematicity

Most Americans recognize the "thumbs up" sign as an indication of approval. There is, of course, nothing inherent in that gesture that means 'good job'. In fact, putting up your third finger, rather than your thumb, means something radically different. The key point here is that these gestures carry meaning through social convention.

Human language also depends on convention. A set of sounds (or hand gestures in the case of signed languages) carries a particular meaning because a community of speakers agrees that it does. The relationship of those sounds to a given meaning depends on that agreement—not on any meaning inherent to those sounds. This definition of language can be traced back to Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist working at the beginning of the twentieth century, who proposed the following formulation:

Signifier + Signified = Sign

The **signifier** is the linguistic form (the string of sounds), and the **signified** is the concept to which the signifier refers (be that a real-world object or an abstract idea). Together, the relationship of the signifier and the signified create the **linguistic sign**—what we might think of as a meaningful word. So, for example, the sequence of sounds in “dog” and the concept of the four-legged canine creature together create the linguistic sign we think of as *dog*. Or the sequence of sounds in “ask” or “aks” and the concept of requesting information or posing a question together create the linguistic sign *ask* or *aks*.

Saussure made the critical observation that, with a few exceptions, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. There is no direct relationship between the sound of the word (e.g., the sounds in *dog*) and its meaning (e.g., ‘four-legged canine creature’). One of the clearest pieces of evidence for the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign is that different languages employ different strings of sound to refer to the same concept—or, in the case of *ask/aks*, two different strings of sound in the same language refer to the same concept. The obvious exception to the arbitrariness principle is onomatopoetic words, such as *slush* or *plop*, but these words are a very small subset of the lexicon. Sounds we conventionally ascribe to animals do not correspond exactly to real-world sounds animals make: for instance, dogs say “woof” or “bow wow” in English but “woah-woah” in French and “wang-wang” in Chinese.

Although the relationship of the signifier and signified is arbitrary, the relationship of linguistic signs to each other, Saussure argued, is systematic. The meaning of a linguistic sign is related to and in some ways determined by the meaning of the other signs in the system. Saussure drew an analogy to chess: the role of each piece and its movement has meaning only in relation to the other pieces. This system of interrelated signs, which makes up language, is what Saussure called *langue*. He proposed a fundamental distinction between ***langue*** and ***parole***, concepts that we refer to with their French

## A Scholar to Know

### Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist whose ideas have shaped modern linguistics, didn’t actually write his best-known work, *Course in General Linguistics*, which details the material summarized here. Former students at the University of Geneva compiled his lecture notes after his death. The lectures span three courses on general linguistics between 1907 and 1911 and capture Saussure’s theories about language and his proposed direction for the field now called linguistics. Saussure broke from traditional historical approaches to language (and, therefore, his own training), and his own approach was therefore radical. He did not publish this important work before he died, though he was clearly preparing to publish a book somewhat different from the one for which he is famous. In 1996, unpublished manuscripts in his hand were discovered, and a new edition of Saussure’s great work has since been published (Saussure 2006). We are glad, though, that we didn’t have to wait until the twenty-first century for his basic argument. So take good notes in class, because you never know if your instructor might turn out to be the next Ferdinand de Saussure.

terms because there are no perfect English translations. *Langue* refers to the underlying abstract system of a language—the signs and their relationships to one another both in the lexicon and combined into sentences; *parole* refers to the actual speech that speakers produce, based on this system. Saussure was interested in studying the abstract system, not in documenting speech.

Noam Chomsky, probably the most influential linguist of the twentieth century, has proposed a different way to understand "the systematicity of language." He argues that linguists should focus on the systematic knowledge of language in the mind of the ideal, native speaker. Chomsky's approach distinguishes between **linguistic competence** and **linguistic performance**. Linguistic competence refers to a speaker's knowledge of the grammatical rules that govern his or her language; linguistic performance is a speaker's realization of these rules in his or her speech. As we all know, performance can be imperfect: we stumble over words, make speech errors, and speak in incomplete sentences. Performance also varies: speakers in various parts of America use different words for the same thing or pronounce the same word differently. But our competence is stable; it is an innate human faculty. Chomsky and the school of "generative linguistics" that he founded are interested in examining linguistic competence—the mental rules that explain our ability to construct grammatical utterances. One core principle of this approach is that a language's grammar allows the creation of an infinite number of grammatical utterances from a finite number of elements. Linguists try to describe the underlying rules that make such creativity possible. (You will read more about Chomsky and generative grammar in Chapter 6.)

Sociolinguists, who study the use of language in society, argue that language variation within speech communities is also systematic or structured. One fundamental principle of sociolinguistics is that language variation, far from being random, corresponds to relevant social variables such as socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender, and other components of speakers' social identities. Speakers use language to perform identity and create discourse communities in systematic ways. If linguists consider social factors, they can account for many patterns of language variation. In other words, the performance of language in speech communities is patterned, and performance can and should be, sociolinguists argue, a central focus of linguistic study.

Linguistic competence can also be understood to encompass speakers' knowledge about discourse conventions: how to negotiate conversations and other discursive situations and how to select (consciously or unconsciously) among linguistic variants in a specific linguistic context. Sociolinguists argue that every language is actually a bundle of dialects that share many features but also vary from one another.

## Creativity

The grammar of human language allows speakers to create (and process/understand) an infinite number of utterances from a finite set of linguistic resources (sounds, words, grammatical rules). You may ask incredulously, "Infinite?" The answer is "Yes, infinite." First of all, consider that you have never before encountered the exact sequence of words that you have read so far in this chapter, and yet you have been processing this "creative input" with no linguistic difficulty (we hope). But we know this fact alone may not convince you of the infinitely creative potential of language. Instead, we turn to an example you may not think of as creative, but which allows for an infinite number of "new utterances":

> The experts said that the newscaster said that some random people on the street said that we said that they said that her friend Lola said . . . (ad infinitum) that the near-sighted oriole went to get her eyes checked.

Every time we embed a new "X said" clause into this sentence, the meaning changes, and we can embed an infinite number of these clauses into such a structure (although the sentence will quickly surpass the human brain's ability to unpack all of the clauses). The capacity of language to embed an infinite number of elements into its grammatical structures is known as **recursion**. The infinite creativity of human language is one feature distinguishing it from other animals' communication systems.

We can also be creative in the ways we combine and recombine grammatical elements: the lexical items in a sentence, for instance, can often be arranged in several different ways, and new meanings result from the new arrangements. The items in the straightforward question "What exactly do you think you mean?" can be resorted into the slightly accusing "Exactly what do you think you mean?" as well as the even more skeptical "What do you think you mean, exactly?" But wait, there's more! For instance, if you doubt that your friend is as thoughtful as she claims, you can say, "What exactly do you mean, you think?" And if you want to drive the conversation to a certain level of precision, you might ask, "Do you mean what you think exactly?" These permutations are not infinite, in the nature of recursion, but the rule-governed rearrangement of elements within grammatical structure allows for yet another dimension of creativity.

## Grammar

The terms **grammar** and **grammatical** merit more explanation here. Many speakers use the word *grammatical* to refer to sentences that conform to rules in grammar or usage books for how we should write (e.g., some usage guides tell you not to use *impact* as a verb: that the "grammatically correct" form is *to have an impact*, not *to impact*). Linguists use the term *grammatical* much more broadly, to refer to all language constructions that conform to the systematic rules of a language and are, therefore, comprehensible to another speaker of the language. Under this definition, *to impact* is grammatical: it is a new verb that English speakers use systematically like any other verb. For our native languages, we learn this kind of grammar as children through interaction with other speakers—without explicit instruction. Thus, the definition of *grammar* in linguistics is clearly not the same as the everyday definition of *grammar* captured in the student's lament "My grammar isn't very good," or the teacherly recommendation "You need to work on your grammar."

To take a specific example, suppose you walk into a bakery and ask for a low-fat blueberry muffin. The clerk responds, "I don't have none of those today," indicating that you are out of luck. A school grammar or usage book may state that using two negatives in this way is "illogical" or "incorrect," but the sentence "I don't have none of those today" is perfectly grammatical in a dialect of English that employs two or more negatives to create negation. Many languages, and many dialects of English, use multiple negatives as systematically as other languages use only one. As you can see, the linguist's definition of grammaticality requires a reexamination of notions like "right" and "wrong" in describing linguistic constructions. A construction may not conform to a grammar book's rules about Standard English, but it may still be grammatically legitimate and "right" according to the grammatical rules of a particular variety of English. (You will be reading more about Standard English and questions of language and authority in Chapter 2.)

The word *grammar* is also used more broadly by linguists to encompass the structure and rules governing a language at the level of sound, word formation, syntax, and semantics. So the linguist's understanding of *grammar* includes many rules so basic and natural to native speakers that they would never be found in a usage book.

## Linguistics

**Linguistics** can be defined as the principled study of language as a system. Linguists employ specific methodologies and theoretical frameworks for investigating the system of language. Linguistics incorporates both scientific approaches to language as a system and a focus on language as a social phenomenon.

The field of linguistics typically is highly comparative, examining many languages and comparing the structure of one language to others. In fact, if you ever tell someone you are a linguist, the first question he or she may ask is "How many languages do you speak?" This book, designed for an English linguistics course, focuses almost exclusively on the English language—both its structure and its use. In the process, we compare English to other languages. We also often compare Modern English to earlier stages of English to demonstrate some fundamental changes English has undergone and to show how these changes explain features of Modern English.

Linguistics comprises many subdisciplines, some of which correspond to the levels on which language is organized. **Phonology** is the study of sound systems and sound change, usually within a particular language, and is accompanied by **phonetics**, the description and classification of sounds more generally and the study of their production and perception. **Morphology** is the study of how words form. **Syntax** considers the structure of phrases, clauses, and sentences. **Semantics** is the study of meaning, the relationship between linguistic signs and the things or ideas they represent. Many linguists study language as a system or web of systems independent of use; their approach is formal rather than functional.

**Pragmatics** and **discourse analysis**, attempt to explain how we manage to communicate with language. In order to understand what language means in context (e.g., how *dude* functions as both a signal of approval and a warning), we must consider language as it is used by real people in real social situations. **Stylistics** is the study of language as it is used in written contexts, usually literary, but including courtroom rhetoric, political speeches, and journalism, as well as poetry, novels, and graffiti. **Sociolinguistics** is the study of language in use more generally, including the study of language variation by region (sometimes specifically called **dialectology**) or by socioeconomic status, gender, race, age, or other category. **Applied linguistics** encompasses all applications of linguistic theory to real-world problems, including areas such as language policy, language education, language acquisition and loss, speech pathology, lexicography, and discourse analysis.

Any aspect of language can be considered historically (or **diachronically**) and is then a branch of **historical linguistics**, which studies processes of language change and their results. Any aspect can also be considered in terms of the present, or **synchronically**. The ways in which we acquire and understand language fall under **psycholinguistics**. As this term indicates, language is studied in disciplines other than linguistics, including psychology, anthropology, communications, and most specific language disciplines (e.g., Romance or Near East languages and literatures).

Because this book is an introduction to the field, we dip into each subfield to give you the broadest sense of the field as a whole. We also show how these subfields overlap: phonology and morphology are often interconnected, as are syntax, semantics, and discourse. Language acquisition and loss are central to a theory of linguistic competence, but they are also matters of applied linguistics. The boundaries between subfields of linguistics are permeable, and we must cross them in order to understand how language works.

## Human Language versus Animal Communication

We can assert with a very high degree of confidence that humans are the only living animal species on Earth capable of either speech or language as defined earlier. As we move into the details of what makes human language unique, however, we enter more contested territory. What exactly makes human language distinctive? How related is human language to our other cognitive skills, or is there a separate "language gene" or "language organ" in the brain? How related is human language to the communicative abilities we find in animals?

Many people think their pets can understand human language. Dogs, for example, certainly do associate strings of sound with meaning (or with requested behavior), but odds are that a well-trained dog would hit the floor in response to both "I want you to lie down" and "I want to give you the low down" if the last two words were spoken to it with the same intonation and pitch. Apes may understand much more, as we discuss later in this chapter, but they still cannot match a ten-year-old human. Other species vocalize and communicate with one another, but vocalization and speech are not the same, and neither are communication and language. Other species do not talk about language itself, as we are doing right now. Nor do they seem to have abstract verbs to describe particular linguistic and nonlinguistic acts, such as imagining, wondering, or asking. Unlike humans, other animals do not have an infinitely creative grammar.

Our ability to speak depends partly on the position of the human larynx, which is lower in the throat than in other primates (e.g., chimpanzees and other apes), and thus can express a greater variety of sounds. Scientists used to believe that the descended larynx was uniquely human, but it turns out that, for example, lions and koalas have a descended larynx, and some other animals, including dogs, pigs, and monkeys, lower their larynx when they vocalize. In some species, the descended larynx may have been an evolutionary adaptation that allowed male animals to exaggerate their body size through deeper calls (that is, they would seem more threatening to potential competitors). In humans, however, the larynx descends in both male and female infants at about three months. Scientists are still debating whether the descended larynx in humans was an adaptation for speech or for size exaggeration and then speech. In either case, from an evolutionary point of view, one suspects that speech must have constituted a significant evolutionary advantage, an advantage that outweighed the risk of suffocation. The descended larynx places it unusually close to the esophagus and entry into the digestive tract. It never hurts to swallow your words, but you have probably swallowed food that has "gone down the wrong pipe." Without the Heimlich maneuver, the relative position of the larynx constitutes a risk: swallowing food into the "windpipe" or larynx can be lethal.

Speech also depends partly on our muscular tongue and uniquely shaped jaw, which together assist in the production of the distinctive sounds of human language. Unlike other animals, we have fine motor control over the tongue and jaw, which allows us to produce the various distinctive sounds of human language.

None of these human advantages challenges the miracle of animal communication. It is no small thing that orioles can warn one another of predators vocally—that is, without direct physical or visual contact among themselves, such as a nudge or a wink. Vervet monkeys' calls distinguish different kinds of predators (e.g., a predatory bird versus a snake) so that other monkeys know whether to scurry up or down the tree, for example. But the parable of the nearsighted oriole is nonetheless instructive. Bird calls—indeed, the calls of most animals—are holistic (to be interpreted as a whole) and unambiguous. Most animals neither analyze nor interpret the messages they hear. For animals other than humans, messages cannot be parsed into elements and then freely recombined to make new sentences, and words with multiple possible meanings do not exist. First we discuss research on the communicative systems of birds, bees, and apes, and then we outline some of the features that make human language distinctive.

## Birds and Bees

Birds sing as spring approaches because the increased light stimulates hormones that trigger the parts of the brain that control song. Birds sing by instinct. A young bird taken from its species will start singing that species' songs at a given age, although it will do so imperfectly (it needs the input from adults to get the songs exactly right). If an abandoned oriole chick were raised among a family of starlings, the oriole would sing imperfect oriole songs, not starling songs.

A young child, on the other hand, needs language input in order to produce language. Infants laugh and cry by instinct, but language is different. Abandoned children who have lived in the wild, and abused children kept in isolation, have a chance of learning language more or less naturally, if they are discovered and socialized before adolescence. If they are discovered and socialized *after* adolescence, though, they never learn to produce language as adult speakers do. And a child born to Russian parents but raised by Swahili-speaking parents will speak Swahili, not Russian. This linguistic flexibility among humans isn't analogous to animal inflexibility, however, because Russian speakers and Swahili speakers are members of the same species, whereas orioles and starlings are not.

Bees have a relatively sophisticated means of communication. When a bee finds a lush, pollen-rich field of flowers, it returns to the hive and performs a dance. The dance is specific to the pollen's location, so bee dances differ according to facts, according to the bee's experience. But in this case, too, communication is not language: the bee apparently inserts distance and direction into the equivalent of a function or algorithm (not to say that bees are doing complex math in their heads) and comes up with a dance—yet

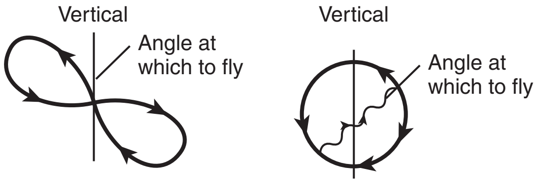


**FIGURE 1.1** The sickle dance (on the left) looks much like a figure-eight, and the waggle dance (on the right) involves two semicircle arcs.

there's no thinking or real creativity involved. As far as we know, bees do not dance for reasons other than mapping the hunt for pollen.

Karl von Frisch (1886–1982) conducted landmark studies of honeybee dances starting in the 1940s, training blue-dyed bees to feed close to the hive and red-dyed bees to feed much farther from the hive, and then watching their movements—or dances—when they returned to the glass-fronted hives that he constructed. He discovered that there are three bee dances (see Figure 1.1):

- The *round dance* indicates that the food source is very nearby—usually within 20 feet—although the dance does not show direction. The more intense the movements, the richer the source.
- The sickle dance (which looks much like a figure-eight) indicates that the food source is relatively close—within 20–60 feet—and the angle of the dance shows the direction of the nectar in relation to the sun. How? The dancing bee, on the vertical wall of the hive, orients the dance straight up if the source is in exactly the direction of the sun from the hive and straight down if it is in exactly the opposite direction. Otherwise, the angle of the dance indicates the angle between the source and the sun. Like the round dance, more intense movements describe a richer source.
- The *waggle dance*, performed with serpentine tail wagging in a straight line followed by a semicircle arc, indicates that the food source is farther than 60 feet. The speed and number of repetitions of the dance per minute—slower means farther—specify how far beyond 60 feet the source is.

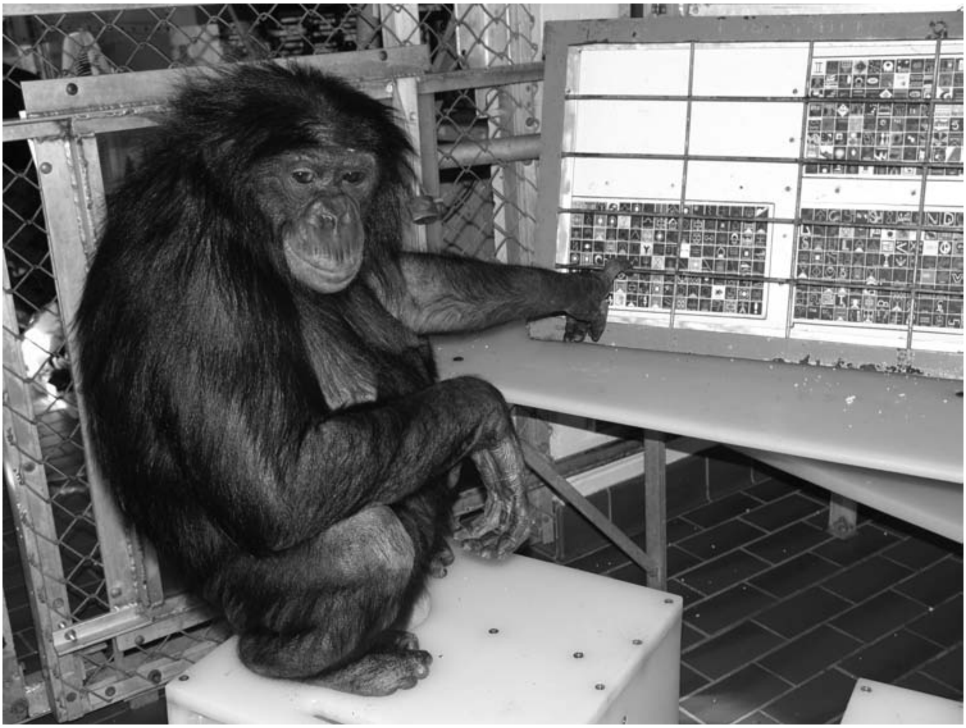
Amazingly, honeybees, therefore, have a highly effective system of communication, but as far as we know, they cannot add information such as, "Beware of the lawn mower" or "I was feeling sluggish in flight today so the pollen may not be as far as I'm saying it is." New studies show that other bees communicate by leaving scent trails without the more complex dances at the hive. Some researchers hypothesize that the honeybees dance in the hive to thwart competitors for the food sources. The dances provide an evolutionary advantage.

## Chimps and Bonobos

It's only natural to wonder whether animals more similar to humans than birds or bees, like chimpanzees, have language or something resembling it. Certainly, not all primates have language. Vervet monkeys, for instance, use alarm calls—the presence of a leopard elicits one call, the presence of a vulture another—but they cannot form sentences any more than orioles can.

Chimpanzees cannot speak, but they have been taught to recognize a limited human vocabulary and to communicate with words, though never more than 300 or so. Chimpanzees are semantically more advanced than most other species, because it is clear that they can use words to represent concepts, rather than just objects. They can generalize a term to cover more than the original object to which it referred—in other words, *banana* is not the name of the banana for which the chimp first learns the word, but instead refers to all bananas. But chimps, as far as current research suggests, do not possess syntax. (See also Gill 1997, Cattell 2000, and Kenneally 2007 for good detailed summaries of chimp and other ape research.)

Two early experiments in the 1930s and 1940s involved baby female chimps adopted into human families to test whether they could acquire language like young children. The Kelloggs raised the chimp Gua with their son Donald, and although she could respond to about one hundred words by a year and a half old, Donald soon surpassed her. Gua never moved much beyond that one-hundred-word point. The Hayes had a similar experience with the chimp Vicki, but Vicki, unlike Gua, is supposed to have mouthed some words, although it's not clear that anyone other than her human parents could understand her. Most researchers today assert with confidence that chimps cannot be taught to speak.



The bonobo Panbanisha learned to communicate using the symbols on a keyboard.

In the 1960s, Alan and Beatrice Gardner decided to try to teach American Sign Language to Washoe, the young chimp they raised. Washoe learned close to one hundred signs in her first four years and could produce sequences of signs, but researchers have raised concerns about whether she really understood grammar. If Washoe used a series of signs in a different sequence, was she really signaling a different meaning, or was the sequencing more haphazard? It is clear, however, that Washoe, who died in 2007 at the age of about 42, understood quite a lot of sign language, and she was capable of the abstract extension of meaning. For example, she knew the sign for 'open' in relation to a door, and she then used it to request the opening of a briefcase. Washoe also taught some sign language to her adopted chimp son.

A decade later, a chimp named Sarah, owned by Ann and David Premack, learned how to use colored plastic shapes to communicate. The shapes were all in arbitrary relation to the referent, like any human language. For example, a pink square meant 'banana' and a blue triangle 'apple'. Through exercises involving trial and error, Sarah learned which sequences would get her what she wanted. For example, 'give apple Sarah' would get her the apple, whereas 'apple Sarah give' would not. She learned a good number of symbols for objects and actions, but serious questions remained about her language learning. How fundamentally different is using plastic symbols from using language? And to what extent was she learning grammar versus learning which sequences would lead to a successful outcome (e.g., getting the apple she wanted)? In other words, it was unclear whether Sarah was being creative with these symbols the way that humans are with words.

The fundamental question underlying much of this research with chimps has been whether the difference between animal communication and human language is a matter of degree along a scale, with humans representing a much more advanced level, or whether human language is qualitatively different—a sort of quantum leap in communication. Right now, most researchers seem to agree that human language is qualitatively different. But work over the past two decades by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues with the bonobos Kanzi and Panbanisha has at least some scholars questioning their confidence in this assertion.

Bonobos, a species of ape, may be more like humans than other apes. They are less aggressive than chimps, and some researchers argue that bonobos can empathize emotionally with others, much like humans. The bonobo Kanzi learned to communicate by watching researchers try to teach his mother, Matata, how to use the symbols on a computer keyboard to express meaning. He looked like he was just playing and trying to distract his mother, but what his mother could not seem to learn, he began to do as soon as his mother was taken away for breeding. Apparently, he decided to please the adult humans in his life once his bonobo mother was no longer there, and using these symbols to communicate with the human researchers clearly made them very happy.

Kanzi was able to express what he wanted and what he planned to do, including where he planned to go in the woods on his walks. In other words, he could engage in purposeful communication. His comprehension of language reached the level of a two- or three-year-old human, at which point he probably struggled more with the limits of his memory than with his ability to comprehend complex grammatical structures. In one test, when Kanzi was nine, he responded correctly 72 percent of the time to 660 different commands, ranging from "Put the raisins in the shoe" to "Use the toothbrush and brush Liz's teeth" to "Go get the noodles that are in the bedroom" (Savage-Rumbaugh et al. 1998, 68–69). Kanzi was able to use signs from the keyboard in combination, as well as combinations of symbols and gestures, but there is some question about how grammatical those utterances were. His comprehension, even more than his production, has raised challenging questions.

Bonobos, although relatively advanced in their ability to understand human language and to use linguistic signs for purposeful communication, still fall far short of humans in terms of language abilities. But do they blur any distinct line between human language and animal communication? Savage-Rumbaugh presents us this challenge:

> Kanzi had learned to comprehend and use printed symbols on his own without special training. He had also learned to understand many spoken words, even though he himself could not speak. He knew that words could be used to communicate about things he wanted or intended to do, even though those actions were not happening at the time of the communication. He could also purposefully combine symbols to tell us something . . . we would have had no way of knowing otherwise. He recognized that two symbols could be combined to form meanings that neither symbol in isolation could ever convey. He used this skill to communicate completely novel ideas that were his own and had never been talked about with him. Consequently, whether or not he could be shown to possess a formal grammar, the conclusion remained inescapable that Kanzi had a simple language.
>
> Nonetheless, many scientists continued to insist that until the use of grammatical rules could be shown in his language, the rest of what Kanzi had done was of little interest. Such an extreme view is taken, I believe, because many scientists are hesitant to conclude that apes are capable of rational thought, foresight, or purposeful communication—behaviors formerly held to be exclusively human. If we allow that apes such as Kanzi are indeed attempting to tell us what is on their minds, and that their minds are shaped by their experiences just as the minds of young children are, we lose our claim to being drastically different from all other creatures on the planet. (63–64)

Let the discussion continue. But while it does, let us outline some fundamental differences between human language and all other observed, naturally occurring animal communication systems.

## Distinctive Characteristics of Human Language

Drawing hard and fast lines between human cognitive abilities and those of other animals has proven tricky: many other animal species share cognitive abilities with humans. For example, a range of other animals also seem to have a reasonably rich inner (mental) life. The African gray parrot understands conceptual categories like shape and number. Chimps and elephants seem to have self-awareness (e.g., they recognize themselves in mirrors). Dolphins and chimps can generalize, learning patterns and applying them to new situations. Bonobos and orangutans seem to have a sense of the future. (See Kenneally 2007 for further examples.) In other words, if these animals had words and syntax, they might have something to say. But other conceptual systems seem to be more human specific: Theory of Mind (understanding of our own and others' full range of mental states, including beliefs, desires, and intentions), ownership, essences, multipart tools, fatherhood, romantic love, and most moral concepts (Pinker and Jackendoff 2005, 205).

We summarize here four significant ways that human language differs from other animal communication. But it's important to note that this is a lively field of debate right now, including a rapid-fire exchange of papers in 2005 in the journal *Cognition*, between coauthors Steven Pinker and Ray Jackendoff and coauthors Marc Hauser, Noam Chomsky, and W. Tecumseh Fitch, about what exactly is special about the human language faculty.

First, humans acquire language in speech communities. A human baby learns whatever human language is spoken in the community in which it is raised; it does not matter what language the baby's biological parents spoke if it is raised in a different speech community. Communicative systems are inborn in other animals. In humans, the capacity for language may be biological, but the specific linguistic signs that we acquire are determined by what we hear after we are born.

Second, human words are unique compared to other animal signs (Pinker and Jackendoff 2005). The sheer number of words that an average human uses (about 50,000) has no rival in the rest of the animal kingdom, by at least one-hundred-fold. The size of the human vocabulary suggests a phenomenal ability by children to use vocal imitation to learn, to decipher the proper meanings of words—from the very concrete (*diaper*) to the highly abstract (*love*) to the grammatical (*of*)—and to remember all these words. With this rich vocabulary, humans talk far beyond the "here and now" and the physical stimuli around us. We reminisce about last year, we make plans for summer vacation, and we debate the possibility of a perfect love. Humans exhibit **displacement**, or the ability to project forward and backward in time, as well as to discuss the abstract. We express the notion that something "could" or "might" happen, which allows us to use language to form hypotheses and to question the hypotheses of others. Language may even allow humans to conceptualize things they couldn't without language, from the idea of a "week" to the supernatural to, arguably, higher numbers. Language labels things, classifies them according to properties, and helps us conceptualize entities such as time and space. Language organizes much of our world.

Bird calls, like that of the oriole, are unambiguous and respond to particular stimuli, such as danger. Birds do not possess the creativity in their communicative system to discuss, for example, the near-sighted oriole's false alarms.

Third, human language can be ambiguous. Many of our words carry multiple meanings, and sentences can have more than one interpretation. The oriole's alarm call and the bee's tail-wagging dance are unambiguous. But if you say "You lost me," there are at least three possible interpretations: (a) a description of a past event in which you got lost; (b) a request for someone to repeat information because you are confused; and (c) a sarcastic jab at someone who just said something ridiculously obvious. As this third interpretation demonstrates, we can also imbue our utterances with emotional content that is separate from the words themselves. In "Human and Animal Languages," Jacob Bronowski (1977) explains that human language entails separation of affect: it distinguishes between the emotional and factual contents of a message. Animals cannot compartmentalize emotional response from informational stimulus in the way that humans do.

Fourth, and most remarkably, human language is infinitely creative. Given the powers of syntax, we understand our sentences as made of combinable (in fact, infinitely combinable) parts. With a closed inventory of linguistic signs (although we certainly do introduce new ones on a regular basis as a community), we can use the rules of grammar to say anything that we think needs to be said, both about what we experience physically and about what we think. Syntactic recursion, as described earlier, is fundamental to human language's creativity, and the crux of the debate in 2005 in the *Cognition* papers was whether recursion alone is both uniquely human and uniquely linguistic. Are other features of human language unique? In 2004, linguist Dan Everett, after thirty years of fieldwork, made the highly controversial argument that the Amazonian language Pirahã shows no evidence of recursion. If this claim holds up, it would be a first among human languages.

No animal communication other than human language exhibits all the properties just described. And all these properties mean that human language changes from generation to generation in ways that far surpass any other animal communication system. Because other animal sign systems are inborn, they rarely change from one generation to the next, and when they do, it is very gradual change. In a similar way, human laughter and crying remain very stable from generation to generation. Human language, on the other hand, in all its creativity and ambiguity, changes rapidly as each new generation of speakers learns, modifies, adds to, and subtracts from the language of its speech community.

## The Process of Language Change

All living languages change all the time. Do you struggle to understand Chaucer and Shakespeare? Your teachers insist that both authors wrote in English, but sometimes it's Greek to you. The distance between you and Chaucer (who wrote at the end of the fourteenth century) or Shakespeare (who wrote at the end of the sixteenth century), or indeed between Chaucer and Shakespeare themselves, can be measured in terms of language change: sound change, grammatical change, semantic change. What results is not quite a foreign language but at least a language that can only be interpreted with help from footnotes or a historical dictionary like the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*—until you become familiar with it, of course. Still, if you and Shakespeare met on the street and began to speak to each other, your respective versions of English would be mutually intelligible: you would understand each other, though not effortlessly. You could not engage the poet who wrote down *Beowulf* (in the tenth century, scholars think) in conversation, however. Old English and Present-Day English are not mutually intelligible. The difference between them is 1,000 years—an eyeblink in evolutionary terms, but more like an eternity on the time-scale of language change.

### Language Genealogies

Old English did not fall to earth with a meteorite or hatch from an egg or in any other way magically appear. It developed from the Germanic dialects brought to England in the fifth century. Many English speakers think English is a Romance language (descended from Latin) because English has so many Latinate words. But these words are borrowings into English, not signs of its genealogy. As shown in Figure 1.2, English is a member of the

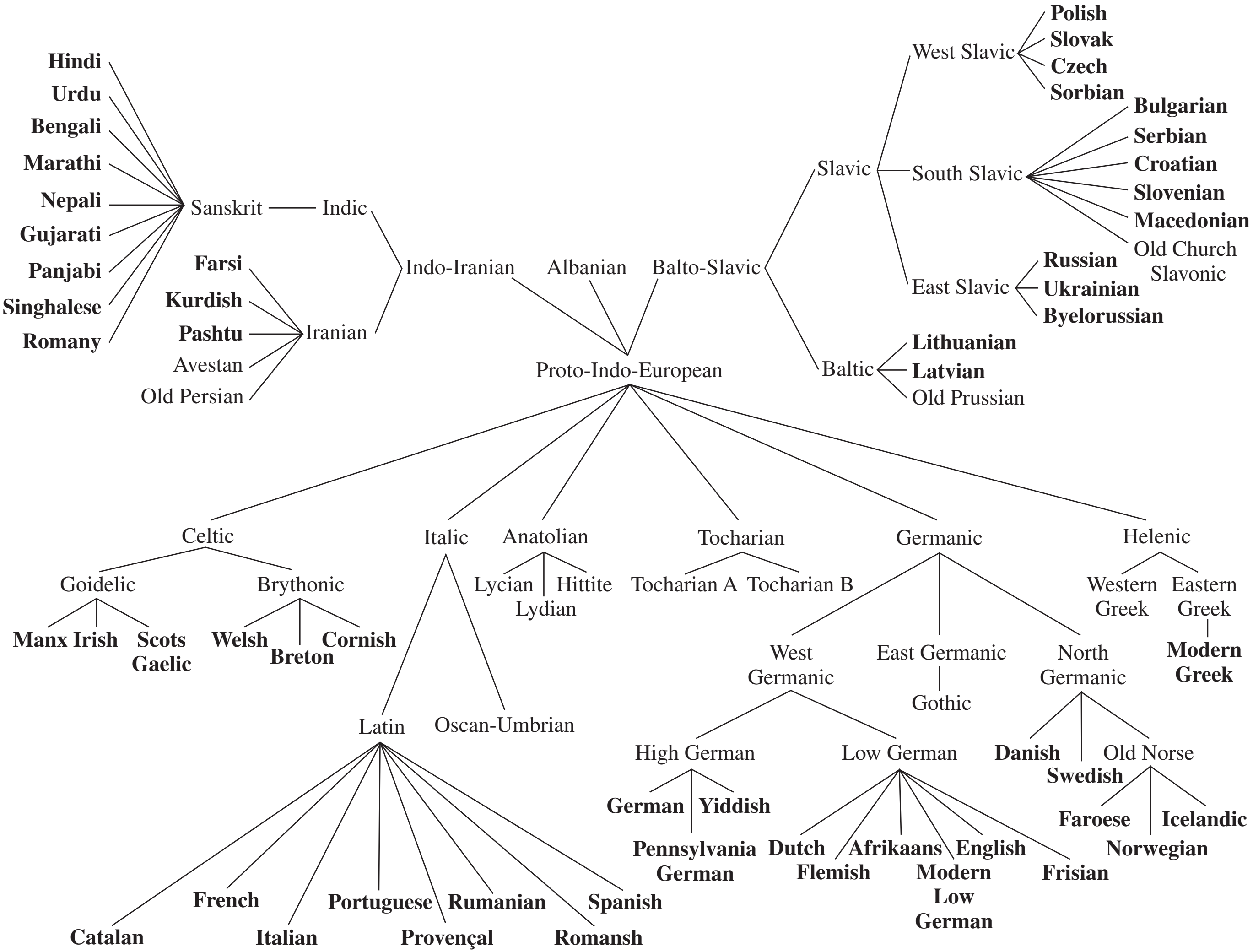
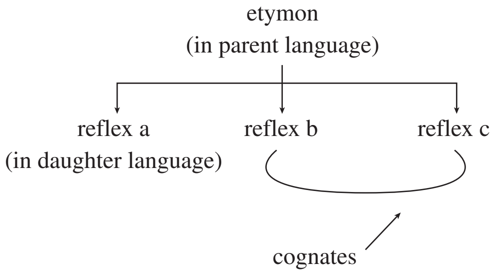

Hindi
Urdu
Bengali
Marathi
Nepali
Gujarati
Panjabi
Singhalese
Romany
Sanskrit
Indic
Farsi
Kurdish
Pashtu
Avestan
Old Persian
Iranian
Indo-Iranian
Albanian
Balto-Slavic
Proto-Indo-European
Slavic
West Slavic
Polish
Slovak
Czech
Sorbian
South Slavic
Bulgarian
Serbian
Croatian
Slovenian
Macedonian
Old Church Slavonic
East Slavic
Russian
Ukrainian
Byelorussian
Baltic
Lithuanian
Latvian
Old Prussian
Celtic
Goidelic
Manx Irish
Scots Gaelic
Brythonic
Welsh
Breton
Cornish
Italic
Latin
Oscan-Umbrian
Catalan
French
Italian
Portuguese
Provençal
Rumanian
Romansh
Spanish
Anatolian
Lycian
Lydian
Hittite
Tocharian
Tocharian A
Tocharian B
Germanic
West Germanic
High German
German
Yiddish
Pennsylvania German
Low German
Dutch
Flemish
Afrikaans
English
Modern Low German
Frisian
East Germanic
Gothic
North Germanic
Danish
Swedish
Old Norse
Faroese
Norwegian
Icelandic
Helenic
Western Greek
Eastern Greek
Modern Greek

**FIGURE 1.2** The Proto-Indo-European language family tree visually captures how Indo-European languages are related to each other. Living languages appear in bold.

Germanic family of languages, "cousins" with language like German, Dutch, and Icelandic. You can tell that these languages are related. English *father*, for example, closely resembles Dutch *vader* and German *vater*.

The job of the historical linguist is to explain just what the relationships are and how differences among related languages came to be. *Father, vader*, and *vater*, for example, all have a common ancestor word in a shared early Germanic ancestor language. These words are **reflexes** of that ancestor and **cognates** to one another; the ancestor is their **etymon.**



Cognate words or languages are, therefore, related to each other through a shared ancestor word or language.

In 1786, Sir William Jones, known as "Oriental" Jones, a justice of India's Supreme Court when India was under British rule, proposed that similarities among Greek (*patēr*), Latin (*pater*), and Sanskrit (*pitar*-) suggested that they had all developed from a common ancestor. In 1822, Jacob Grimm (one of the brothers of fairy-tale fame) took the argument a step further, specifically explaining sound changes that happened to make the sounds in Germanic words different from their Romance cognates—and different in systematic ways. For example, Indo-European *k* remains the sound /k/ in Latin but becomes /h/ in Germanic, which explains why in Modern English our *hearts* (an English word) are cared for by *cardiologists* (a Latin borrowing). This system of sound correspondences, known as Grimm's Law, explained the relationship between English *father* and Sanskrit *pitar*- and initiated the reconstruction of Indo-European, the common source for most current and historical languages of Europe and the Indian subcontinent.

Indo-European is a **proto-language**, one for which we have no written evidence, but which we can infer from comparison of its descendents and development of the laws according to which its sounds and word-forms changed. In other words, historical linguists must reconstruct Indo-European forms from evidence in its daughter languages and the rules of change that they have hypothesized. Linguists always put an asterisk (*) next to a hypothesized form in a proto-language to indicate that it is hypothesized—that we have no written evidence for it.

Linguists have traditionally dated Proto-Indo-European back about 6,000 years. Recent work by biologist Russell D. Gray, which applies mathematical tools for genes and species family trees to language family trees, proposes a much earlier date: 8,700 years ago, give or take 1,200 years. These conflicting dates add fuel to an ongoing debate based in part on archeological evidence about whether these Proto-Indo-European speakers were warriors who spread from the steppes of Russia or farmers who spread from ancient Turkey.

We can draw similar trees for other language families, such as Uralic and Altaic. The larger unresolved question is how all of these family trees are related to each other. Is there one proto-language from which they all descend, which can be traced back to our first ancestors in Africa? You may have heard of Nostratic, which some linguists propose as a parent language of several language families, but it is not widely accepted as such.

## Mechanics of Language Change

Looking at the Indo-European language family tree, you can grasp the big picture of language change. But you might naturally wonder how exactly dialects develop and then change within themselves so dramatically over time. Part of the answer goes back to the creativity inherent in human language. Every day, perhaps several times a day, each of us speaks or writes in ways that challenge conventional uses of English. When enough people do so often enough (or continually enough) for a long enough time, then a change is generalized (especially as children learn it as part of the system of English) and becomes a feature of the language. And those changes add up over time.

All fundamental aspects of a language change over time: sound, word forms, syntax, and vocabulary. William Labov, a leading American linguist who has completed two volumes in a proposed three-volume study of linguistic change, describes three factors that motivate change:

- *Internal factors*—those inherent to the structure, especially the sound structure of the language.
- *Social factors*—those that depend on the behavior of speech communities.
- *Cognitive factors*—those that depend on our comprehension of the language and on our mind's language processes.

Sociolinguists continue to learn how language change starts and spreads. You will read more about this in Chapter 11.

There is no decisive moment at which a daughter language splits from a parent language and gets its own name. Historical linguists make language family trees in retrospect. One could argue that French is Latin spoken in France, but because it has changed so dramatically from Latin and from other daughter languages such as Italian and Spanish, French is described as a distinct language with its own name. The Germanic tribes brought their Germanic dialects to England in 449 CE. "English" is said to begin around this time because the Germanic dialects spoken in England began to diverge and develop independently from the other Germanic dialects spoken in continental Europe. But in 449, the Germanic speakers in England did not think of themselves as speaking a new language. And subsequent generations of speakers in England were not aware of the larger implications of the small changes occurring in their language—that it was splitting further from German, Swedish, and other Germanic cousins and would one day get its own name.

## Progress or Decay?

Because human language is infinitely creative, speakers are constantly using words in new combinations and with slightly—if not radically—new meanings. If other speakers start to use the words in this new way, they can create new conventional meanings or uses. In other words, if enough speakers adopt a new meaning or construction, it becomes a conventional, accepted part of the day-to-day language. For example, after the noun *google* entered the language, some speakers began using it as a verb to describe the act of searching for something on the Internet. As more and more speakers have adopted the word as a verb, this use has become a conventional part of the language.

In a book about language change, Jean Aitchison (2001) raises a question that many people want answered: Is all this change progress or decay? Aitchison provides an answer but does not choose one side over the other. Language change, she asserts, is not decay or progress. While languages sometimes become more regular, they also sometimes introduce new exceptions that disrupt existing patterns. As Aitchison puts it:

> even if all agreed that a perfectly regular language was the "best," there is no evidence that languages are progressing towards this ultimate goal. Instead, there is a continuous pull between the disruption and restoration of patterns. In this perpetual ebb and flow, it would be a mistake to regard pattern neatening and regularization as a step forwards. Such an occurrence may be no more progressive than the tidying up of a cluttered office. Reorganization simply restores the room to a workable state. Similarly, it would be misleading to assume that pattern disruption was necessarily a backward step. Structural dislocation may be the result of extending the language in some useful way. We must conclude therefore that language is ebbing and flowing like the tide, but neither progressing nor decaying, as far as we can tell. (253)

Some linguists argue that languages maintain equilibrium over time in terms of grammatical complexity: a language may lose complexity in one feature while gaining it elsewhere.

All languages, and every historical stage of any given language, are equally capable of expressing anything that the speakers need to express. Languages often express similar things differently, but not because some are more "evolved" than others. For example, some varieties of Modern English use multiple negation (e.g., *I won't have none of that*) and some do not (e.g., *I won't have any of that*) because some varieties lost multiple negation over the centuries since Old English, while others retained this historical feature. Moving from multiple to single negation in the history of some varieties of English is not the result of laziness, sloppiness, or decay; it is also not the result of streamlining, efficiency, or improvement. Both structures are equally capable of expressing negation. It is all part of ongoing language change.

## A Question to Discuss

### Can Your Language Peeves Be Rethought?

All of us have our language peeves: the words or grammatical constructions that grate on our ears, that we just don't like. Maybe it's *BRB* pronounced "burb" or the road sign "Drive Slow" that uses a flat adverb (*slow* rather than *slowly*) or the notice at the grocery store that reads "Ten Items or Less." Often, our peeves focus on parts of the English language that are undergoing change. And as we discuss in the Special Focus section, sometimes usage that people don't like at one historical moment becomes standard at a later historical moment. What are your language peeves? Then for each one, try reframing it so that it is a positive rather than a negative development in the language.

## Special Focus: Attitudes about Language Change

Near the end of the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Noah Webster to complain about the new verbs *notice*, *advocate*, and *progress* (all created from nouns), in hopes that Webster might use his authority as a dictionary maker to obstruct these changes in the language. Franklin also conceded in a letter to David Hume that the words *colonize* and *unshakeable* were bad and low (qtd. in Safire 2003). From our current perspective, these concerns about language change can seem quaint, as all of these words have become standard.

These are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of new words that commentators have worried are signs of the decay of English. Do you have a problem with the adjective *talented*? Probably not, but Samuel Coleridge and other nineteenth-century writers did; the problem, as they saw it, was that there is no verb *to talent*. Ambrose Bierce, in *Write It Right: A Little Blacklist of Literary Faults* (1909), included *talented* along with *run a business* ("vulgar") and *electrocution* ("disgusting") (Freeman 2009).

But similar complaints still abound today. For example, Edward Rothstein describes the verb *incentivize* as "boorish bureaucratic misspeak" in an article in *The New York Times* in 2000, and laments its inclusion in the fourth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*. In a 2008 column in *The Ann Arbor News* entitled "Country Rife with Sloppy English," an English department head cites innovations such as *invite* as a noun and the abbreviation *EVOO* for extra virgin olive oil as examples of language change that "eviscerates the language." And while one can now run a business without condemnation of the verb, in 2002, 80 percent of the American Heritage Usage Panel rejected the relatively new transitive use of *grow* in *grow our business*.

New grammatical constructions can also create anxiety. In the nineteenth century, the new use of the passive progressive, in a clause such as *the house is being built*, was singled out for vicious criticism. The clause should correctly be *the house is building*, critics argued; to use the passive progressive was not just awkward but an outrage, according to some. Now what seems outrageous to us is the criticism itself. How else could you say the house is being built? (As a side note: while *the house is building* sounds archaic, expressions such as *dinner is cooking* may be remnants of this earlier passive.)

The point is that we have several centuries of evidence of commentators lamenting changes in the English language. What seemed like a terrible change in the nineteenth century now often seems to us unremarkable, and this is an important perspective to keep on changes that we notice—and that some people denounce—in current English usage. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, some commentators will look back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as times when "good English" was spoken and written. As the examples show, commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not necessarily hold up their language as "good English."

But, you might ask, are some language changes better than others? American writer David Foster Wallace raised exactly this question in a 2001 article in *Harper's Magazine*, which challenged some of the descriptions of language change that linguists may see as givens. Linguistics books such as this one assert that "Language changes constantly." Foster Wallace replies: "OK, but how much and how fast?" Descriptive linguistics asserts that "Change is normal." Foster Wallace responds: "Same thing. Is Heraclitean flux [everything flows and nothing abides] as normal or desirable as gradual change? Do some changes actually serve the language's overall pizzazz better than others?" (45). You will be able to frame detailed answers to his questions, complete with examples, by the time you have finished this book. Let's address briefly the issues here.

The speed of language change varies. Communities that experience a lot of contact with speakers of other dialects or languages may undergo more rapid change than isolated communities. For example, after the Norman Conquest in 1066, which involved extensive language contact, English seems to have undergone more dramatic changes than its cognate languages at the time. More oral cultures may experience more rapid change than more literate ones, especially if these literate communities have more rigid prescriptive practices (e.g., widespread education in writing and "correct grammar"). But literacy and prescriptivism certainly do not stop language change, and linguists are not sure how much they slow it down.

Are some language changes better than others? Beauty (or pizzazz) is in the eye of the beholder. Our judgment to embrace or to reject a language change that we notice is usually more socially motivated than linguistically motivated. The metathesis of *aks* to *ask* is neither good nor bad in and of itself.

Many English speakers object to language change, and this is natural: most of us prefer stability to change. Some resistance is generational. How often do your parents ask you to turn down the volume of the sweet, optimistic lyrics (okay, maybe not) sung by Eminem? You may see generational resistance to language change as you speak with your parents and grandparents. Perhaps your parents object when you say "This sucks!" Or they nag you about using an interruptive like *like*, as in "It's, like, not fair! This sucks!" Or they shake their heads at how you quote when you tell them about your best friend's bad day: "And then he goes, 'That test was hella hard!' and I'm like, 'Dude, don't go ballistic.' "

Some change is temporary: it doesn't stick. For example, *jiggy* was hot, but now it's not. Some changes do stick and alter English beyond the span of our lifetimes (e.g., *go* meaning 'say', and probably *like* meaning 'say'). As one of the authors of this book has written, we should admire the linguistic engine's formidable power: "Language stops for no one, not even an Oxbridge or an Ivy League grammarian: when one hears the engine whistle, one may pull a switch and temporarily divert the language's course, but one might as well just jump out of the way." Some people pull and pull and refuse to jump—their resistance is just one among many social factors in linguistic change.

## ☑ Summary

- Language is the primary means by which humans communicate. It is how we express complex ideas and emotions. It is how we negotiate our social relationships. The discipline of linguistics systematically investigates the structure and use of language.

- Human language involves a conventional system of signs, in which the relationship between the linguistic form (signifier) and the meaning or referent (signified) is arbitrary.

- The grammar of human languages allows the creation of an infinite number of creative utterances from a finite set of linguistic resources. This aspect of human linguistic competence distinguishes human language from all other animal communication systems.
- All living languages change all the time, and historical linguists can trace language histories to create language genealogies or family trees. English is one of the Germanic languages, which make up one branch of the Indo-European language family tree.
- Linguists continue to search for more definitive answers about how language change starts and spreads. What they know definitively is that all languages will continue to change, no matter whether we try to stop them from doing so or not.

## Suggested Reading

*The First Word: The Search for the Origins of Language* (2007), by linguist and journalist Christine Kenneally, provides a highly readable and informative account of research on language evolution. We encourage all interested in the theoretical debate about what makes human language unique to read the original papers in *Cognition*, as well as the 2002 paper in *Science* by Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch to which they respond. *Apes, Language, and the Human Mind* (1998), by Sue Savage-Rumbaugh et al., describes the bonobo Kanzi's language learning in detail and devotes several chapters to a more philosophical discussion of the distinction between human and animal communication. For more on curses and taboo words, see Geoffrey Hughes's *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (1991), Edwin Battistella's *Bad Language* (2005), and Keith Allan and Kate Burridge's *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (2006). Rosina Lippi-Green's *English with an Accent* (1997) provides further case studies of the link between language and discrimination. April McMahon's *Understanding Language Change* (1994) provides an excellent technical overview of historical linguistics, as well as a fascinating discussion of the question of linguistic evolution; for a lively, more generally accessible account of language change and attitudes, see Jean Aitchison's *Language Change: Progress or Decay* (2001). All who study English linguistics seriously should read these major works of William Labov, *Principles of Linguistic Change: Internal Factors* (1994) and *Principles of Linguistic Change: Social Factors* (2001). Two of the standard introductory linguistics textbooks are Victoria Fromkin, Robert Rodman, and Nina Hyams's *An Introduction to Language* (8th ed., 2007), which is informative, highly readable, and full of entertaining cartoons about language, and the denser, perhaps more upper-level text by Edward Finegan, *Language: Its Structure and Use* (5th ed., 2008), which covers an impressive amount of material about the many subfields of linguistics. For a more general history of linguistics, consider the more comprehensive *A Short History of Linguistics* by R. H. Robins (1997), as well as Randy Allen Harris's lively account of the Chomskyan revolution and twentieth-century linguistics in the United States in *The Linguistics Wars* (1993).

# *Exercises*

## Exercise 1.1 Sense and Nonsense

As a thought experiment, consider the following poem from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures through the Looking-Glass* (2003 [1871]):

**Jabberwocky**

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Calloo! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.

"Jabberwocky" is considered nonsense verse, but the first thing one notices about the poem is that it makes at least as much sense as it doesn't. True, a number of words are unfamiliar, and one can't find most of them in a dictionary, but even these words are formed from parts meaningful in English. For instance, *jabber* (in *Jabberwock),* *snatch* (in *Bandersnatch*), and *out* (in *outgrabe*) make sense to English speakers, as do the plural suffix *-s* in three of the nouns and the various adjective suffixes, *-y*, *-ous*, *-al*, *-(s)ome*, and *-ish*. In fact, *beamish*, though used infrequently, has been an item of English vocabulary since the sixteenth century.

Some other elements in these words, though obscured, look like English because they are. According to Carroll, *-wock* in *Jabberwock* is a form of Old English *wocor* 'offspring, fruit'; *slithy* combines *slimy* and *lithe* and means 'smooth and active'; *outgrabe* is past tense of *outgribe*, supposedly related to the archaic English verb *grike* or *shrike*, from which Modern English developed *shriek* and *creak*, and means ‘squeaked’ (see Carroll 2003, 328–33, for these explanations and more commentary on the language of “Jabberwocky”).

So the supposedly nonsense words are archaic English words, derived from archaic English words, or formed like English words.. Two other features contribute to our general feeling that the poem almost makes sense. First, the words sound like English words (*frabjous/fabulous*) and are often onomatopoetic (*uffish, galumphing*). Second, the sentences are unmistakably structured as English sentences, so that, even if a word’s lexical meaning isn’t clear, its grammatical function is. Thus we grasp the relations among words and infer a general meaning for a word that in isolation would be meaningless. Finally, the poem makes some sense to us because a few of the words (*galumphing* and *chortle*, for instance) have been assigned meanings because of the poem itself and entered in dictionaries. *Jabberwocky* itself has come to mean ‘nonsense’—you can look it up!

If the poem were really nonsense, that is, if it made no sense, we wouldn’t read it. Instead, from our intuitive knowledge of English and the overwhelming, human need to understand, we supply meanings, even if only imagined meanings, to the words in front of us. The imagining is what makes the poem fun: “Jabberwocky” is a puzzle that draws on our linguistic experience and exercises our linguistic ingenuity.

*Now it’s your turn.* Try your hand at writing two additional stanzas for “Jabberwocky,” parallel to stanzas 4 and 5, about the boy’s subsequent encounter with the Jubjub bird or the Bandersnatch (or both). Include 8–10 made-up words that, like those in the original poem, generally sound and function like English words.

Then exchange your stanzas with another member of your class and attempt to translate each other’s work. Share your translations and find out how close you came to what, as authors, you had in mind.

## Exercise 1.2 Linguistic Creativity

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), a German philosopher and linguist, once asserted that the grammar of human language can “make infinite use of finite means.” Using your own words, explain what he is saying. Direct your explanation to a skeptical audience. Be sure to explain both parts: “infinite use” and “finite means.” And provide at least one concrete example.

## Exercise 1.3 Language Judgments

Imagine that you, instead of Randy Cohen, are “The Ethicist” who responds to the question about the ethics of evaluating job applicants on the basis of their preferences for *aks* or *ask*. How would you answer the question from the anonymous employee in New York on p. 2? You can find Cohen’s published answer at the *New York Times* Archive (www.nytimes.com), in the January 28, 2007, column.

## Exercise 1.4 Language Change

English has changed dramatically over the past millennium, and it has even changed recognizably during your lifetime. The following questions focus on language changes both in the more and less distant past. These are designed as puzzles: you may not *know* the answers to these questions, but you can figure out many of them with a little stretching of linguistic muscles and sometimes a good dictionary. Take your best shot at explaining the "why" and "how" behind each change.

1. President George W. Bush, like many Americans, says the word *nuclear* "noo-kyuh-luhr." Compare this pronunciation with the spelling. What has happened? (Hint: consider the history of *ask/aks*.)
2. Many speakers of English now say "heighth" for "height." How would you account for this change in pronunciation?
3. When Americans first began using the Russian word *Sputnik* in the late 1950s, they did not pronounce it "correctly" with the Russian vowel "oo" as in "boot." Why might Americans pronounce *Sputnik* the way they do, so that *Sput* rhymes with *putt*?
4. The word *mouse* has taken on a new meaning to refer to the small clicker device attached to many computers. Why is it called a mouse?
5. The word *gay*, which for much of the twentieth century was used as an insulting reference when applied to men, has been reappropriated by the homosexual community as the preferred term for referring to homosexual men. The word *gay* meaning 'happy' still appears in Christmas carols and other conventionalized contexts, but many speakers no longer use the word *gay* to mean 'happy'. Suggest a reason for this shift.
6. In the Old English version of Genesis, Eve is tempted to eat the forbidden fruit by a *nædre*, meaning 'snake'. This word for the evil tempter has come down to us in Modern English as an *adder*. What reason can you give for the disappearance of the initial *n* in *adder*?
7. The word *another* comes from *an* + *other*. What has happened that allows the insertion of *whole* into the middle to create *a whole nother*? (Hint: consider the adder from question 6.)
8. When the phrase *a moot point* was first used in English in the sixteenth century, it referred to a point that was open to debate, uncertain, or doubtful. In the United States, it now usually refers to a point of no practical significance or relevance. Suggest a reason for this shift.
9. Some speakers of American English now say "mute point" instead of "moot point." Why might they do this?
10. The noun *burglar* (from Anglo-French and Anglo-Latin) appears in English by the Renaissance. The English verb *burgle* (which does not appear in French or Latin) is relatively recent, first appearing in the late nineteenth century. Suggest an explanation of its origins.
11. In March 2003, the cafeteria in the U.S. House of Representatives replaced "French fries" on the menu with "freedom fries." Why? (The House quietly changed the name back to "French fries" in July 2006.)
12. The plural of the noun *syllabus* in English has historically been *syllabi*. These days, however, many instructors might say, "Are there any extra syllabuses?" Why has *syllabus* developed this new plural form? Bonus question: Should one of these two plurals be considered "right" or "wrong"? Why or why not?

# Chapter 2

# Language and Authority

The game of Scrabble begs the question of what counts as a real word and who has the authority to decide.

Imagine that you are playing Scrabble with your grandmother. You need all of the points that you can get—you're not letting her win. You lay down the tiles for *blog*. She challenges you. She doesn't know the word. Even worse, *blog* isn't in the dictionary that you have on hand—some dictionaries are more up-to-date than others. Should you be denied points for playing a word just because your opponent doesn't recognize it and your dictionary is behind the times? Who wrote the dictionary we choose to settle the dispute, and why does it have the authority to tell us what is a word and what is not? The assumptions that underlie our reliance on dictionaries are suspect from a linguistic point of view.

For instance, how did we get comfortable with the phrase "*the* dictionary" when, in fact, there are many different types of dictionaries? And within each type, dictionaries vary considerably. You may not find the word you lay out on the Scrabble board in a pocket dictionary or a college dictionary, but it may be registered in an unabridged dictionary. Perhaps the word was used 700 years ago but not today, and you could find it if you had a copy of the multivolume *Middle English Dictionary* in your living room. And you might be able to defend your score if you consulted *Merriam-Webster's Third New International Dictionary,*