Introduction

In this unit students will learn about origin, development and variation of language. Students will look at how and why English has changed over time, the development of English as a world language and the development of children’s spoken and written language. The unit is synoptic, drawing from the skills, knowledge and understanding the students have developed in Units 1 and 2.

More information on this unit can be found in the Specification pp5–9, 31–33, 81–82, in the Sample Assessment Materials, pp31–50, 75–87, and in Getting Started, passim.

Map of Unit 3

Section A (SB pp8–46 / CD-ROM pp8–22)

1 English over time
2 Diversity in English
3 Tackling Section A of the exam

This section teaches the knowledge and skills required for Section A of the exam. It demonstrates the way language has changed over time and the ways it varies socially, culturally, nationally and internationally. It will help students develop the necessary skills of identifying, commenting on and applying the key constituents of language.

Section B (SB pp47–97 / CD-ROM pp23–38)

1 Children’s spoken language
2 Children’s written language
3 Tackling Section B of the exam

This section teaches the knowledge and skills required for Section B of the exam. It demonstrates the way that children develop the skills of written and spoken language, and explores the theories and research that relate to this language area.
Section A: Language diversity (SB pp8–46)

Key teaching points. Encourage students to:
• understand that English is always changing
• use appropriate linguistic terminology to describe language at various levels
• adopt a descriptivist, non-judgmental approach to language study
• understand that despite the prestige held by Standard English, variation is the norm.

1 English over time (SB pp9–29)

Key teaching points. Encourage students to:
• understand how social, cultural, political and technological developments led to the process of standardisation and how these affected the form of the language
• explore how and why the English language has changed by exploring a wide range of texts from different periods
• understand that the lexical stock of a language changes in response to external changes such as new technologies and changes in society
• understand that English is user-led; words enter English and/or survive because they are useful
• use appropriate linguistic terminology to describe language at various levels.

The aim of part 1 is to allow students to focus on one aspect of diversity – the changing form of English over time. They will explore how the forms of English have changed in response to external factors such as political, technological and cultural changes. Remind students that the concepts they learned at AS will be essential as they will be expected to relate and discuss issues concerning language change alongside the specific contexts of a text.

English today (SB p9)

Ask the question: What is English? Point out to students that they have already explored various different ‘Englishes’, giving them relevant examples from their AS studies. Point out that they have already acquired some familiarity with language diversity and language change, even if it was not directly signposted. Explain that they are going to look at the notion of language change (and to link that to future exploration of diversity) and to think about the different forms in which English can appear.

Activity 1 (SB p9) This activity has no definite answers, but will get students thinking about some of the key issues which underpin diversity. Draw out that the difficulty of defining English reflects the many different forms that English has had, does have and no doubt will have.

Commentary on Activity 1

Try to define English. Traditional education tends to give only one view of what English is – the standard form. This is reflected in the views of those who believe dialect speakers and other non-Standard users are not speaking ‘proper’ English. Student definitions are likely to be wide-ranging, but key notions like intelligibility are likely to be the most commonly given. However, intelligibility is not always a good guide as meaning can be obscured easily through spelling and lexis.

What makes a language English? Is it safe to think of English-based language as anything that has descended from the language based originally in the British Isles? To accommodate the vast variation in these forms, linguists now talk of Scots English, Irish English, etc. Within such a definition there are forms that are very close to Standard English (e.g. Australian English) and forms which seem much further away (e.g. Gullah).

Where is English found? Who speaks it? If anything, the speakers of English are more diverse than the forms of English. English may be a country’s main or official language and spoken by a vast majority of residents. In some areas, there may be two official languages and English could be one of these – a second language. It also exists as a ‘foreign’ language. In this case, it will have no official status, but will be taught in schools, universities, etc. This means that the number of English speakers is hard to gauge. When has somebody learned enough English to be classified as an English speaker?

Activity 2 (SB pp9–11) This builds directly on Activity 1 but provides some texts and guiding questions to illustrate the diversity of modern English. Remind students of the continuing importance of the key constituents of language and context, and take the opportunity to revise some of the key work done at AS if necessary. Explain that they will ultimately use their knowledge of language change over time alongside the skills they developed in analysing context at AS.

Commentary on Activity 2

1 A (Geordie); B (text message); C (modern scientific); D (Gullah); E (spam); F (Lallans); G (Caribbean); H (Old English); I (Middle English).

2a and b Not surprisingly, they are all forms of English. Valid indicators (among others) of the texts being English are:
• Perhaps the most telling is the fact that the word order or syntax of the texts is English. Sentences follow a subject + verb structure. Demonstrating this can be used as revision of these terms and to show how they can be applied relevantly.
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• Each text has a high proportion of recognisable lexis (disguised with non-standard spelling representing phonology in some cases).
• Grammatical function words such as prepositions are recognisable in most of the texts.
• Most show examples of English morphology such as the ‘s’ plural in A, C, E and F and the present participle ‘ing’ inflection in A, B, E, F.

Texts H and I are the exceptions to many of the points above, but they are still likely to be identified as forms of English. There are aspects recognisable as English such as ‘men’in I. Much that would be recognisable in H is obscured by the unfamiliar form of the handwritten script.

2c

A: This is a written version of a form of English (Geordie) normally only heard in the spoken mode and is an example of a regional dialect/accent. It shows how English can vary geographically within the British Isles based on features such as region and the social class of the speaker. The speaker is narrating a story.

B: This type of text message will have been studied at AS and students are likely to identify it in terms of its context as electronic communication. Features such as unusual spelling and use of abbreviation, driven by contextual factors, would make it seem very alien to anybody unfamiliar with its rules. As a form of language, it didn’t really exist until the rise of the mobile phone in the latter years of the twentieth century.

C: Despite this being one of the more obvious examples of English, it is one of the least accessible in terms of meaning – especially to non-scientists. This is mainly due to its lexis. It demonstrates that a language is about more than its lexis and it builds on the identification of grammatical function words, morphology and syntax as ways of identifying English. Many of the words have a Latin or Greek origin (e.g. tyrosine (cheese)). Many other words (e.g. crucial, activation) come from French. Such lexical characteristics demonstrate the effect that other languages had and to continue to have on English, just as English is affecting other languages today. (For the development of scientific writing, see SB p15 and CD-ROM p 00).

D: The Gullah creole is spoken in South Carolina and Georgia, North America, by some African Americans. It is based on English, but has strong influences from West and Central African languages and is believed to have been formed by the two language forms ‘mixing’ together as a result of the slave trade. Its inclusion here makes links with the geographical diversity aspects of Unit 3. Like Text A, it is an example of spoken language being written down. The original features are preserved as they add a sense of oral realism to narrative. A translation of the tale can be found at www.yale.edu/glc/gullah/10.htm.

E: Spam email seems to have an international origin and may even be translated into several languages through a translation programme. It has the overall structure of letter/email and directly addresses the audience in an attempt to engage them. Pronoun use, including references to the company in the third person shows how it is attempting to imitate the type of language use found in personal emails. Verb tenses change and a strange mix of English morphology is applied to words like ‘electronical’ (electronic and electrical).

F: Lallans is one of the Scots languages, written down. Like Gullah, it is based on English, but has distinctive words and spellings (designed to reflect the sound of Scots). The Scots Language Association promotes its use at all levels. For some users, a form distinct from Standard English reflects their national/social identity.

G: Although many distinctive features of the speaker’s original Caribbean ‘creole’ language have been lost, as they have been influenced by the language used in the UK, the phonology is still distinct. Before mass transport and social mobility, you would have been unlikely to hear such diverse forms outside their country of origin.

H: This Old English text from the Peterborough Chronicle shows the extent of the changes English has undergone. It demonstrates that mutual understanding is not necessarily the criterion for deciding what a language is. It can also be used for introducing the idea of pre-printing texts and unusual letter forms.

I: Middle English can be linked to the topic of standardisation (SB p13) because part of the reason this example is so accessible is that it was produced in the south.

How do we define English? (SB p12)

Make sure students realise that English cannot be defined in terms of the Standard as this is merely another form or dialect of English. It has social and academic prestige, but is no more valid linguistically than any of the other forms. Only the descriptivist viewpoint can accommodate English at this level.

The origins of English (SB p12/Handouts 3.1-3.3)

Explore some features of Old and Middle English. Although students will not be assessed directly on knowledge of Old English and Middle English, an exploration of these stages in the ongoing development of English is very interesting in its own right. More importantly, this will help students to contextualise other language features and understand the process of change as a whole. Handout 3.1 presents an extract of Old English for students to explore. Handout 3.2 gives students information on how Old Norse influenced English.

Watch out for ... Students have a tendency to refer to any older forms of English as Old English. Make sure they realise that this term should only be used to refer to English produced between 449 and 1100CE, not as a catch-all term.