CHAPTER 1A Language Like EnglishCHAPTER OVERVIEWThis opening chapter of How English Works has three primary goals: 1) to  
engage students in the study of the English language and show them how  
material in the book may challenge some of their assumptions about the  
English language; 2) to provide foundational material on the nature of  
language; and 3) to highlight how all living languages change over time.  
From the very beginning, the book connects the systematic study of the  
English language with students’ everyday experience with language, from  
new words to speakers’ judgments about usage to subtle language changes  
students can see and hear around them—once they know what to look and  
listen for.  
We recommend assigning the Introductory Letter to students along with  
Chapter 1: it frames the goals of the book for students and introduces the  
idea that students bring prior understandings to the study of the English  
language that the book may challenge. If instructors want to further  
discuss the prior understandings about language that students bring to the  
course, some of the material in the Introductory Letter will prove a useful  
starting point, as will the story of aks in Chapter 1.  
In keeping with these goals, Exercise 1.1 aims to show students how much  
they already know intuitively about the structure of English; Exercise 1.3  
asks students to apply the introductory information in this chapter about  
language variation and change and about language attitudes to a real-world  
dilemma involving aks; and Exercise 1.4 is designed to spark students’  
curiosity and exercise their linguistic muscles by thinking through these  
interesting language changes.  
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LEARNING OBJECTIVESBy the end of this chapter, students should be able to:  
Explain the different components of the following basic definition of  
language: “Human language is a conventional system of signs that  
allows for the creative communication of meaning.”  
Define linguistics.  
Explain what linguists mean that language is “rule-governed.”  
Counter the myth that words cannot hurt.  
Explain the arbitrary relationship of the signifier and signified, as well  
as the relationship of the signifier and signified to the linguistic sign.  
Differentiate between langue and parole, linguistic competence and  
linguistic performance.  
Describe how the terms grammar and grammatical are used in  
linguistics, as opposed to in everyday conversation.  
Describe the communication systems used by birds and bees and  
explain how human language is fundamentally different.  
Describe the attempts to teach chimps and bonobos human language  
and explain what bonobos have and have not been able to achieve in  
the acquisition of human-like language.  
Explain the motivation for constructing language family trees and the  
evidence by which historical linguists construct them.  
Identify how German, French, English, and other languages are related  
within the Proto-Indo-European family tree.  
Explain why linguists argue that language change, which happens in  
all living languages, is best thought of as neither progress nor decay,  
no matter how speakers may feel about particular changes.  
NEW VOCABULARY TERMScognate  
diachronic  
dialectology  
discourse analysis  
displacement  
etymon  
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grammar  
grammatical  
historical linguistics  
languelexicography  
linguistic competence  
linguistic performance  
linguistic sign  
linguistics  
metathesis  
morphology  
parolephonetics  
phonology  
pragmatics  
proto-language  
psycholinguistics  
recursion  
reflex  
semantics  
signified  
signifier  
sociolinguistics  
stylistics  
synchronic  
syntax  
WHERE STUDENTS AREStudents may not be expecting a course on the structure of the English  
language or on introductory English linguistics to engage the language  
that they know and use everyday, so it can be useful to set that tone on  
the very first day of class.  
Students, like all other speakers of the English language, will enter the  
course with strong preconceived ideas about right and wrong, about  
slang, etc. It can be useful to acknowledge this fact from the beginning  
and perhaps even try to generate together as a class what some of these  
ideas are.  
Given the ways that they have heard grammar and grammatical used  
in school before, many students will benefit from extra review and  
emphasis on how these terms, as well as the term rule-governed, are  
used in linguistics.  
Students often have much to contribute to a discussion about attitudes  
toward language change and the “degenerating” language of “young  
people.”  
Students often find additional examples of cognates helpful for  
understanding how language reconstruction works.  
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IN-CLASS ACTIVITIESIntroduction to the Study of the English LanguageOn the first day or two of the course, the key is to find hooks for students  
that show them how the systematic study of the English language relates  
to their own use of, and experience with, language. We have tried to  
provide many of these in the book, and it helps to complement these with  
additional examples in class. Teasers, if you will. Here are a few ideas:  
Words of the Year: On the American Dialect Society homepage  
(http://www.americandialect.org), you can find the winners, as well as all  
the other contestants in the various categories (e.g., Word of the Year,  
Most Creative Word of the Year, Most Useful Word of the Year) for the  
past few years. You can pick highlights for your students or give them a  
mock ballot and ask them to choose their own winners. This exercise  
emphasizes the fact that language is changing all the time.  
Slang: Find a pop or hip hop song that uses a current slang word in the  
lyrics (for example, “My Boo,” a duet by Usher and Alicia Keys, or one of  
the many hip hop songs that use the verb bounce). In small groups, ask  
students to provide a dictionary definition of the word. Share these  
definitions and then read them a definition from a published dictionary  
(which will probably not have this meaning). Should this meaning be  
recorded in the dictionary or not? This exercise emphasizes language  
change and questions of language authority.  
Nicknames: Learning students’ names on the first day or two of class can  
be a good opportunity to talk about nicknames. For those with nicknames,  
who is allowed to use particular ones? How do students respond when  
others get their name wrong, mispronouncing it or shortening it without  
permission or creating a new nickname for them? This discussion usefully  
touches on issues at the heart of the relationship between language and  
power

**A Puzzle**: Give students a language puzzle or two. For example, what do  
*pizza*, *mind*, and *gossip* all have in common? The answer: We have or give  
*a piece of* each. Or why can’t or don’t we say “I and my friend…”? Or  
how many different ways can they use *like*? Or how can *unpacked* mean  
both ‘with the contents removed’ and ‘with the contents still inside, yet to  
be removed’?  
**Definitions of Grammar**On the first or second day of class, you can give students a sheet or halfsheet of paper with the title “What Grammar Means to Me.” Have them  
write for ten minutes or so, being completely honest about their  
connotations of the word and their previous experiences with grammar.  
You can then collect these and, in the next class, read some of the  
highlights, or compile a handout with excerpts from their responses. This  
exercise can be an engaging way for students to talk about the different  
meanings of the word *grammar* and for you to learn about the prior  
understanding of *grammar* that students are bringing to class with them.  
**Linguistic Autobiography or Self-Reflection**As a way to get to know your students and to encourage them to reflect on  
the role of language in their own lives, you can ask them to write a brief  
linguistic self-reflection or autobiography. We recommend requiring that  
the final piece have an overarching argument, so that it is not just a collage  
of memories and reflections, not yet coherently organized or connected.  
But for students to get started, it can help to provide them with a few  
questions that can serve as jumping-off points, such as: Do you speak  
more than one language or dialect, and if so, how do you negotiate  
between them? Has anyone ever commented on the way you talk? Do you  
remember when you first noticed that other people spoke differently from  
you? Are you more comfortable with the written or spoken language? In  
what ways do you see your language as part of your identity? If students  
are willing, you can share excerpts from these with the class as a whole.  
You can also ask students to revisit these self-reflections at the end of the term to see if they are thinking differently about any of the issues they  
discussed.  
**Animal Communication**It is one thing for us to talk or write about chimps and bonobos using and  
understanding language and another for students to see it. There are  
several good videos available, including:  
*Signs of the Apes, Songs of the Whales*. New York: Ambrose Video, 1984.  
*Washoe: The Monkey Who Communicates through Sign Language*.  
Princeton, NY: Films for the Humanities, 1997.  
It is also possible to see video clips of Kanzi and other bonobos at:  
http://www.greatapetrust.org/great-apes/bonobos/.  
**Attitudes about Accents**The box “What Makes Us Hear an Accent?” can generate very productive  
discussions with students. Many of them will have had experiences with  
instructors who speak English with an accent, often because the instructors  
are speakers of English as a second or foreign language. Does this study  
make them reflect on that experience any differently?  
**Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign**Most students easily grasp the idea that the connection between the  
signifier and signified is arbitrary. It can be fun to spend a little more time  
on linguistic signs that are not arbitrary: onomatopoeia and sound  
symbolism more generally. You can provide students with a few spellings  
of sounds (e.g., <sh, sl, fl>), ask them to brainstorm words beginning with  
these sounds, and then ask them to describe what these sounds often refer  
to. Or, if you have speakers of various languages in your class, you can

review the differences among languages for various onomatopoetic words  
(e.g., *meow*, *woof*).  
**Cognates**Create a list of Latin borrowings in English that have native English  
cognates and ask students to guess the cognate. They can start to find  
patterns in the sound changes if you give them enough examples (e.g.,  
Latin /k/ and English /h/, described in the book). So, for example, Latinbased *fraternal*/English *brother*; Latin-based *pedestrian*/English *foot*;  
Latin-based *paternal*/English *father*.  
**Attitudes about Language Change**Ask students to monitor the newspaper for a week and clip language  
columns. Do these columns lament changes in English or celebrate them?  
Why is everyone so interested in language?  
In the third edition, we have added a “A Question to Discuss” box about  
language peeves (p. 24), which should help students start to rethink some  
of their prior understandings about what is “right” and “wrong” in  
language usage.  
**INTEGRATING THE HOMEWORK  
Homework Progression**The exercises can be used in any order and in any combination. Exercises  
1.1 and 1.4 are designed to engage students with their own intuitive  
knowledge of the English language and with evidence of language change  
all around them. Using Exercise 1.4, emphasize for students that they are  
not expected to *know* the answer, but they should do their best to figure  
out a plausible answer. Exercise 1.2 aims to assess students’ understanding  
of what it means to say that language is infinitely creative. In Exercise 1.3,  
students must grapple with the realities of linguistic prejudice against the form *aks* by answering the letter as if they were the Ethicist. Near the end  
of the term, you could revisit these responses to see if students would  
answer the question differently than they did at the beginning of the term.  
**In-Class Activities Based on Homework**Exercise 1.1 is designed for a follow-up in-class activity in which students  
exchange stanzas and try to translate each other’s made-up words.  
Exercise 1.4 works very well for an in-class review of the answers, as  
students typically very much want to know the “real answers” after they  
have tried to work out plausible explanations on their own.  
**EXTRA RESOURCES**Many history of English textbooks, such as C. M. Millward’s *Biography  
of the English Language*, provide additional examples of English/Latin  
cognates as part of the discussion of the Germanic sound changes  
(Grimm’s and Verner’s Laws).