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- Help students raise their grades with with sample answers, examiner commentary and exam-style practice

Engage students with a wide variety of text and data sources – see pages 193 and 198

Language change

7

Specific examples. And, for the purpose of this exercise, we will accept the terminology of statement 2:

The language of business and finance is everywhere these days. Corporate speak is changing the way we think.

Text D

Activity 7.3

Copy and complete the table below – ten examples for each column.

EXPLORING N-GRAM GRAPHS AND CORPUS DATA

STEP 1 Deciding on n-gram search terms

This is a conventional exercise to teach students how to search for n-grams in various search engines and to use the results to identify areas of language change. The example in this exercise is from the book "The Oxford English Dictionary," published in 1989.

You can adapt this exercise to suit the needs of your students. For example, you can use the n-gram tool to find the most frequent words in a particular text, such as a novel, a newspaper, or a blog post. You can also use the tool to explore the frequency of words in different contexts, such as in writing, in conversation, or in different parts of speech.

Activity 7.3

Invaluable exam support

Ensure students achieve their potential with plenty of exam advice and guidance – pages 189, 192 and 195

Exam tip

One skill which is particularly useful is the ability to read quickly and analyze information. By selecting key phrases and highlighting important points, students can improve their reading speed and comprehension.

Equip students to think critically and analytically about texts with skills-focused activities – see pages 188, 196 and 199

The book has been exceptionally helpful! I have been using it to tweak writing and address the areas we were unsure about. The clarity was so welcome.

Beth Rubin, Department of English, West Boca Raton High School, USA, review of First Edition
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AS Level
Introduction
1. A toolbox for textual analysis
   → Genre and context
   → Voice and point of view
   → Structure, form, cohesion
   → Lexis and diction
   → Register and tone
   → Grammar
   → Metaphorical language
   → Spoken and written language
2. Language issues
   → The language of advertising
   → Language – unconsciously conveying attitudes and values, plus gender
   → Language change and variation
   → English, the Internet and electronic communication
   → Diaries, autobiographies, and biographies
3. Paper 1: Reading
   → Phase 1 – Tackling the question
   → Phase 2 – Creating a text
   → Phase 3 – Comparing texts
   → Sample questions
   → Analysing texts: Contextual and linguistic analysis
4. Paper 2: Writing
   → Shorter writing and reflective commentary
   → Creating longer texts – extended writing:
     → Route 1: Imaginative writing
     → Route 2: Review/critical writing
     → Route 3: Discursive / argumentative writing
5. AS Level: A conclusion

A Level
6. Welcome to A Level
   → Thinking about language
   → Exploring meaning
   → Denotation and connotation
7. Language change
   → Attitudes to language change
   → Dealing with historical language data
   → Language change 1500-present day
   → Language change reflecting society and culture, politics and technology
   → Consequences of language change
8. Child Language Acquisition (CLA)
   → Ways of representing spoken language in written form
   → Stages of children’s language development
   → Exploring the functions of children’s language
   → Concepts, theories and research studies in CLA
9. English in the world
   → Historical development of English as a ‘global’ language
   → Roles and status of English language
   → Varieties of English
   → Issues and problems with English Language
10. Language and the self
    → Construction and communication of a sense of self
    → Social identity: Individuals and groups
    → Relationship between language and thought
11. Papers 3 and 4: Exam technique and preparation
12. Sample questions and answers

Support students’ learning with guided answers to Student Book activities on the accompanying support site.

Fully matched to the latest syllabus

A selection of pages from this chapter are included for you to evaluate.
This chapter will:

- look at some attitudes to language change
- develop your understanding of how to deal with historical language data
- explore some of the ways in which the English language has changed between 1500 and the present day
- consider how changes in language reflect changes in society and culture, politics and technology
- explore some of the consequences of language change in English.

Language change and general knowledge

Most people have ideas about various ways in which they believe language might have changed or might still be changing.

Here is a series of typical statements and questions about Language Change from people with general knowledge of language:

1. It’s bad English to use slang.
2. The language of business and finance is everywhere these days. Corporate-speak is changing the way we think.
3. Does texting damage people’s use of English?
4. I don’t like the way television broadcasters and politicians are using the word ‘disinterested’ to mean the opposite of ‘interested’. It’s wrong to do that: look in a dictionary and you can see that the opposite of ‘interested’ is ‘uninterested’. ‘Disinterested’ means something quite different.
5. Allowing American spellings and vocabulary is wrecking the English language.
6. Young people are less accurate in the way they use grammar than older people.
7. Official letters – like the ones you get from the Tax Inspectors – are friendlier in tone these days. And nurses and doctors use fewer technical words than they used to.

Activity 7.1

You’re now going to approach each one of these statements and questions with the benefit of your linguistic knowledge.

Make a four-column list in which you:

- identify the underlying linguistic issue or concept – e.g. ‘correctness’ or levels of formality – which may not occur to someone not studying A Level English Language
- consider whether there’s any evidence to support the statement, or to explain why someone might ask the question
- explore whether there’s any misunderstanding going on because general knowledge isn’t precise enough to deal with a linguistic issue
- consider what other factors (societal, political, cultural) might be influencing language choice and thus language change.

You can copy and complete the columns provided below; or you might prefer to devise your own columns, based on the Chapter objectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number(s) and issue(s)</th>
<th>Evidence?</th>
<th>Evidence? View limited by lack of linguistic knowledge?</th>
<th>Changes in Culture and Society?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7: formality and tone in ‘official’ or expert communication</td>
<td>Are there any research studies on how texting affects other aspects of language use?</td>
<td>6: Comment is about ‘grammar’ – but the general public often use the term ‘grammar’ when what they really mean to criticise is the accuracy of spelling or punctuation in written communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 3 and 6: differences according to age and generation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: ‘gendered’ language</td>
<td>8: ‘gendered’ language</td>
<td>Political Correctness – concern not to offend or exclude groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflecting on language change and general knowledge

Did you manage to complete the table?

You should now make a list of any linguistic issues and/or concepts which emerged from your thinking there.

You will have noticed a number of situations in which the general/everyday view of language use is limited or mistaken when compared to the view of someone with precise linguistic knowledge.

These are situations in which you can now offer a more informed view – being able to refer, for example, to the debate between Prescriptivists and Descriptivists in discussing notions of Bad English and Good English.

If you’ve never come across these distinctions and this terminology before, now is a good time to start your independent research.

Exam tip

Think back to the Tip about terminology after Activity 6.1 in the last chapter. It’s always helpful if you can use more precise terms to describe language use – e.g. you can make a distinction between more formal or more informal language rather than using everyday terms like ‘friendly’.

But don’t make the mistake of thinking that just using a more technical-linguistic term is all you have to do. You need to go on and use that more precise term to help you develop a more detailed analysis.
Language change and linguistic knowledge

What we are studying under the heading of ‘Language change’ is the second of two main branches of language variation:

- **Synchronic variation** = differences in language use at one time, according to the place or the context – e.g. the difference in how people pronounce the noun bath according to whether they live in north-west England, south-east England or North America.
- **Diachronic variation** = differences in language use over different times – e.g. the semantic broadening of the noun mouse to mean a peripheral device for a computer as well as a small rodent.

So, what the A Level English Language syllabus calls ‘Language change’ involves looking at the history of the language. Some of the statements and questions in Activity 7.1 were more to do with synchronic variation, but from here on in this chapter we will be concentrating on diachronic variation.

The most obvious examples of diachronic variation are those we can observe at the level of single words.

### Semantic change

You can see in the example of mouse above how the meaning of a word can change over time. Some meanings are lost altogether: no-one nowadays uses the adjective artificial to denote (or connote) something that’s been created with great skill, although this was what it originally meant (from the noun artificer = a skilled craftsman or invent). Over time, social attitudes to man-made things have changed, and it’s now fashionable to prefer (for example) natural fabrics over man-made fabrics. So the adjective artificial has developed negative connotations while the adjective natural has developed positive connotations.

You will probably be relieved to discover that there is a pair of single-word linguistic terms to describe the process that just took me four lines to explain! And you’ll learn it below, together with more terminology that’s even more useful. Some of the words we are studying under the heading of ‘Language change’ will be examples of semantic change: narrowing, broadening, amelioration and pejoration.

Narrowing and broadening involve shifts in denotative meaning, while amelioration and pejoration also involve shifts in connotative meaning.

#### Semantic narrowing

This is the process by which a word’s meaning becomes less general over time. For example, the word accident nowadays means an event that is at least unfortunate and possibly disastrous, and which was not foreseen. In previous times, it could mean any event that was not foreseen, so a 19th-century writer could innocently refer to a chance meeting with a long-lost friend as a ‘happy accident’, whereas now this meaning would only be employed in a joking or ironic way.

#### Semantic broadening

Not surprisingly, this is the opposite process, where a word gains broader or additional meanings over time. Some people would argue that this is happening at a faster rate now than at other times in history because of information technology: not only do words spread around the globe, changing meaning as they go, but additional words are needed for new technology and new processes. The obvious example is mouse, which no longer denotes only a small furry rodent.

Some words shift word class as well, for example from noun to verb. The word friend was for a long time only a noun; now people use it as a verb and talk of being friended (or unfriended) on social media.

#### Semantic amelioration

This is the process by which meaning undergoes an improvement over time, coming to represent something more favourable than it originally referred to. A simple example is the word nice, which nowadays is a vague or empty adjective meaning ‘pleasant’ or ‘agreeable’, but which originally (when it entered the English language from French) meant ‘stupid’, then later on ‘precise’. Occasionally you might find nice being used to mean precise in the expression a nice distinction, but this usage is mostly thought of as archaic.

#### Semantic pejoration

Pejoration involves a word acquiring negative connotations that it didn’t have previously. For example, the word attitude has begun to have the connotation of ‘disagreement’ or even ‘aggression’. Formerly, it had a more neutral meaning of a person’s mental state or way of thinking, without any suggestion that this was a positive or a negative state in a particular situation. Now – especially in American English – to say that someone has attitude is to suggest that he/she is uncooperative. The word issue has undergone a similar shift, moving from a relatively neutral meaning of a topic to be discussed to a more negative sense of ‘problem’ or ‘complaint’.

### Reflecting on semantic change

All of the examples of semantic change which we’ve considered have involved looking at just one word at a time: we’ve been considering language use at word-level.

The developing linguist – that’s you! – will have been wondering if there’s any way of exploring hard objective evidence of language change at single-word level without having to depend on the subjective memories of people who speak and read and write the English language, but whose prejudices about language use might distort any data they can offer. For example, as we saw in Activity 7.1 above, people might believe that more American-English expressions and spellings are being used in British-English – but is that actually true? And can we possibly find hard evidence of it?

The developing linguistic researcher – that’s you! – will be delighted to learn that the answer is Yes! We can indeed find hard evidence about trends and changes in language use, thanks to the existence of collections of language data, both spoken and written. Such a collection is called a corpus (from the Latin word for a body), and this branch of study is called corpus linguistics. (The plural form is corpora.)

Later in this chapter we will move on to examples of language change at clause-level, sentence-level or whole-text-level. But first you’re going to learn the basics of how to use linguistic corpora for independent research.
How to deal with language data

As far as the A Level English Language syllabus is concerned, you will need to be prepared to deal with sources of quantitative language data in Paper 3. These sources will appear as Texts B and C on the question paper, and they will be of two particular types:

- **n-gram graphs** representing changes in language use over time – such as comparisons of related words, parts of speech, inflections, collocations.
- **Word tables** derived from corpus data – such as collocate lists and synonym lists.

It’s likely that you will never have come across either n-gram graphs or word tables derived from corpus data before. They will make sense when we look at some examples and try out the approaches needed.

So we’re going to look at a scaled-down version of a Paper 3 exam-style question on language change, and practise some approaches to dealing with the data.

**Reflecting on language data**

The developing linguistic researcher – that’s you! – will have been wondering how word tables of corpus data and n-gram graphs are generated, and how they might be used.

They both depend on developments in computational linguistics. Search engines make it possible to search a data-base of language – a linguistic corpus – for particular words or combinations of words across a particular time-period.

So, for example, n-gram graphs are generated by searching the texts of published books whose texts are available on the internet. You can search for the occurrence of individual words or phrases, or you can compare the frequency of alternative words and phrases.

**How to approach an exam-style question on language change**

**STEP 1**

Read the question and make sure you know what you’re being asked to do.

**Read Texts A, B and C.**

Analyse how Text A exemplifies the various ways in which the English language has changed over time. In your answer, you should refer to specific details from Texts A, B and C, as well as to ideas and examples from your wider study of language change. (10 marks)

Text A will contain various features of language which are typical of the time in which it was written. It will be up to you to identify some of those features and then to decide which ones you can write about in relation to what you already know from your wider study.

Texts B and C will be linked to a small number of those features in Text A, and will provide you with more specific detail. So, some of the work of identifying significant features has been done for you. That might be a reason for looking quickly at Texts B and C before you read Text A.

**STEP 2**

Read the texts and annotate them on the question paper itself.

- you can read and annotate Text A first
- or you can look at Texts B and C first, then see what there is in Text A which relates to the language data in the graph and table texts
- give yourself 15 minutes to do Step 2.

**Text A**

Excerpt from Rural Rides (1821) by William Cobbett, in which the writer describes his journeys by horseback through the countryside of England.

Saturday night, 10 November 1821

Went to Hereford this morning. It was market-day. My arrival became known, and, I am sure, I cannot tell how. A sort of buzz got about. I could perceive here, as I always have elsewhere, very ardent friends and very bitter enemies; but all full of curiosity. One thing could not fail to please me exceedingly: my friends were gay and my enemies gloomy: the former smiled, and the latter, in endeavouring to screw their features into a sneer, could get them no further than the half sour and half sad: the former seemed in their looks to say, “Here he is,” and the latter to respond, “Yes, G - - d - - - him!”

I went into the market-place, amongst the farmers, with whom, in general, I was very much pleased. If I were to live in the county two months, I should be acquainted with every man of them. The country is very fine all the way from Ross to Hereford. The soil is always a red loam upon a bed of stone. The trees are very fine, and certainly winter comes later here than in Middlesex. Some of the oak trees are still perfectly green, and many of the ashes as green as in September.

**Text B**

Reading material

**Exam tip**

Once you’re in the exam room, the question paper belongs to you and you can do anything with it that helps you. Some students (and some teachers) are reluctant to write on the question paper; but the best way to read a text in an exam is with a pen in your hand. That way, even on the first read-through, you will be ready to pick out features which you can use in your answer.

You won’t usually be handling the question paper in at the end of the exam with your answer paper, unless the question paper and answer booklet have been combined into one document. So you won’t actually get any marks just for making the annotations. But students who make a good job of the annotations stage give themselves a much better chance of doing well when they come to write their essay answer.

**Exam tip**

This task prepares you for what you will be doing in your final examination. By the time you reach the end of the course, you will be well-prepared and able to combine examples from your own wider study with examples from the texts on the question paper. And here’s a reminder of what these texts will be:

- **Text A**: a passage of English prose (300–400 words) written at any time from 1500 to the present.
- **Texts B and C**: graphs and tables containing language data linked to language use in Text A.
Text C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘bitter’</th>
<th>‘ardent’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>disappointment</td>
<td>supporter(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taste</td>
<td>feminist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pill</td>
<td>desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blow</td>
<td>suitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dispute</td>
<td>Royalist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

↑ Figure 7.1 Top five collocates (nouns only) for ‘bitter’ and ‘ardent’ from the British National Corpus (1980–1993).

STEP 3

Look at your annotations from Step 2. They should show what you thought were significant features of language in Text A, and connections with the data in Texts B and C – in other words, your observations about language change.

In an exam, you would need quickly to organise these observations into groups of ideas which would lead to a paragraph structure for an essay.

When you look at these annotations, can you see connections between them?

- If the answer is ‘yes’, take a fresh sheet of paper and try to organise your observations about language change into groups which could be developed into paragraphs of sensible discussion. (Columns or rows might help.) Then go on to ‘Language change at word level’ and Activity 7.3.
- If the answer is No, study ‘Making sample observations…’ before you go on to ‘Language change at word level and beyond’ in Activity 7.3.

Making simple observations and more complex inferences from language data

One of the reading skills you practised and mastered at AS-level was making inferences.

Looking at the graph and table in Texts B and C, and using our linguistic knowledge, what can we observe?

- (From Text B) buzz and buzz were found almost equally from 1800–1820.
- From Text B) After 1820, the use of buzz declines sharply, and by 1960 it has almost disappeared.
- (From Text B) The use of buzz rises sharply after the early 1980s.
- (From Text C) Neither of the Text A combinations/collocations with ‘bitter’ and ‘ardent’ (ardent friends and bitter enemies) occurs in the top five collocates for 1980–1993.
- (From Text C) Bitter collocates with abstract nouns (disappointment and dispute) and a concrete noun (pill) to create metaphorical or figurative meanings – e.g. a bitter pill (to swallow) is a common idiom meaning something unpleasant that you have to force yourself to accept.

Now, from what we know about semantic change, what can we infer?

- Perhaps buzz and buzz were interchangeable between 1800–1820, and possibly before that too.
- Perhaps the two variants went through a divergence in meaning from 1820 onwards: Cobbett seems to be using buzz to mean ‘rumour’.
- The variant buzz became dominant after 1820 – it’s an onomatopoeic word for the sound made by insects, so perhaps we should be applying the concept of phonology (= sound) rather than semantics.

Inference ↔ speculation

There are two dangers at this point:

1. Anyone who is less than fascinated by language change is likely to have fallen asleep ...
2. Sensible and informed inference can turn into half-informed speculation if we push it too far.

However, you could build a sensible argument about how the phonology of the word buzz/buzz mimics the sound of a whispered rumour as well as the sound of an insect. You could then move on to how buzz has acquired new meanings throughout the 20th century because of developments in technology: a low-flying aircraft can be described as having buzzed people on the ground; you can ask someone to buzz me in when you want to get into a block of flats (British English expression for American-English apartment block!)

And in terms of slang – a not-very-technical term for non-Standard English – a buzz can mean a feeling of euphoria, with positive connotations of an exciting and/or dangerous physical activity (like skiing or rock-climbing) and negative connotations.

Language change at word level and beyond

So far, we’ve been concentrating on changes in language use at the level of individual words. There are still many aspects of change at word-level that we could consider – three of which (antonyms, archaisms and orthography) we will look at below, based on examples from Text A and Text C.

After that, in Activity 7.3, you will have the chance to do some independent research.

Antonyms

Looking at the collocate list (Text C), bitter and ardent don’t seem to be antonyms at the end of the 20th century in the way that they might have been in 1821. They don’t now collocate with friends or enemies in the way they might have done in 1821.

Of course, we don’t know from personal experience of language how often they were collocated in 1821 – they might be unusual choices, peculiar to Cobbett – but we could generate some new quantitative data of our own. And you will soon be doing just that.

We can say from personal experience of language which pairs of adjectives and nouns do commonly collocate in contemporary English in the lexical field of personal relationships, in terms of friendship and hostility.
**Archaisms**

If gay and gloomy don’t function as antonyms in contemporary English, it may be that either or both adjectives have undergone semantic change, so that the meaning intended by Cobbett would now be archaic.

Similarly, his use of perceive to mean ‘see’ might now be thought a bit over-formal or old-fashioned. And nowadays we would say please me very much rather than please me exceedingly. (Can you think of a situation in which someone would deliberately use the archaic forms?)

**Orthography**

We looked at Cobbett’s use of gay and gloomy as a contrast in Text A. He makes the contrast more obvious by using italics for these adjectives.

He also uses dashes to represent missing letters when he imagines the reaction of his enemies to hearing that he was in Hereford: “G - -  d - - -  him!” He does this to avoid causing the offence to some readers which they would feel if he wrote words of swearing and blasphemy in full. (What other orthographic methods do we have in contemporary written English to avoid writing every letter of a potentially-offensive word?)

---

**Reflecting on making observations and inferences about language change**

Having looked exhaustively (and exhaustingly!) at language change at word-level, where could we go next? We might look yet again at Cobbett’s writing in Text A and think about ways in which it is different from contemporary English at phrase-level, sentence-level or whole-text (discourse) level. And we will certainly adopt that approach with some further texts later in this chapter.

But now it’s time for you to do some research. You will be looking into your own memory and knowledge of the English language, and also into some resources available on the internet.

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**Activity 7.2**

Use your own resources to explore language change:

A Look at the collocations in the table below, involving elements from Texts A, B and C on pages 192–4.

B For each pairing of noun and adjective, make notes on how likely you think it would be to find that collocation, what connotations each might have (including current usage), and anything interesting about the etymology/derivation of either of the words as used in that collocation. Some parts have been completed for you.

C Select from a variety of texts of your own choosing. Look for adjective and noun pairings that make up collocations and add them to your table. As previously, make notes on anything interesting about the derivations / etymology.

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**Searching the internet for language change data**

You can use the internet for independent linguistic research in many ways.

- Using a general search-engine, you can research the usage of individual words or phrases. You can limit these searches to usage within defined time-periods and/or individual countries.

- You can search for information (e.g. for meaning or etymology) about individual words in on-line dictionaries or on the huge number of web-sites devoted to the study of English Language and Linguistics. By using quotation marks and the + sign, you can search for words and phrases (collocations or clusters or ‘strings’) occurring together.

- The English Language and Linguistics faculties of many universities have websites which ‘host’ ways into linguistic corpora. You may have to sign up or register for some of these; others are open-access.

- You can generate n-gram graphs and word tables similar to those which you will have to deal with in the exam.

Look back to what you wrote in response to Activity 7.1 – where you were taking a more precisely linguistic approach to issues of language change where the attitudes expressed were based on personal feelings and general knowledge.

We are now going to search for quantitative linguistic data to support or to criticise some of the ideas about language use in Activity 7.1. That will mean choosing one of the statements from Activity 7.1 and then exploring some
specific examples. And for the purpose of this exercise, we will accept the terminology of statement 2:
The language of business and finance is everywhere these days. Corporate-speak is changing the way we think.

Text D

Here’s another contemporary meaning for buzz, and in an interesting compounding with -word. So, before we even start to look for other examples of corporate-speak, we have one to start us off. Like many examples of compound words, buzzword probably occurred first in hyphenated form. A search of online dictionaries might tell you when and where it was first used.

Hyphenation – an example of Orthography

Deciding whether or not to hyphenate buzzword, heads-up and wake-up call is partly a matter of taste and fashion. When a new word is first coined through the process of compounding, it’s likely that it will be hyphenated to show its origins. As the word becomes accepted into mainstream usage, the hyphenation tends to be lost – sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly.

One example of hyphenation disappearing quite quickly is e-mail / email. Most people are happy to type or write email without the hyphenation which showed the word was an abbreviation of electronic mail. Most ‘style guides’ recommend email.

In contemporary English, there are many compounds which were once hyphenated but now are not. There are also many compounds which retain hyphenation.

Reflecting on corporate-speak: a language-change ‘fashion’?

Another quick internet search reveals many articles about corporate-speak. Synonyms for this fashion in language include management/business jargon and office-speak. Searching for examples generates a number of terms from other lexical fields which have been imported into the business field. Alongside buzzword we’re going to explore two other examples of expressions which are often used in the discourse of business, finance and politics in contemporary English: heads-up and wake-up call. Both of these expressions are hyphenated in the text here to make it more obvious that they have undergone the process of compounding.

Once again, it’s up to you to look up the etymology (and thus the meaning) of these two expressions. You may discover alternative explanations. And the developing linguistic researcher will be thinking about why business leaders and politicians would be keen to use lexical items from the fields of sport or science.

The explanation lies in how language constructs images, and how it can be used to represent aspects of social and personal identity. This is a very complex area, and we’ll come back to it in Chapter 10. But you’ll also have noticed that our general-knowledge statement about language change included the assertion that Corporate-speak is changing the way we think. This touches on advanced linguistic theory: linguistic relativity, linguistic determinism and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Is it true? Can we only think about concepts which we have words for?

Exploring n-gram graphs and corpus data

STEP 1 Deciding on n-gram search terms

The n-gram viewer will allow you to search the texts of books printed between 1500 and 2008. Its default/display position is to show a frequency graph resulting from a search for the three terms Albert Einstein, Sherlock Holmes, Frankenstein from the corpus of books in English for the years 1800-2000.

You can adjust which corpus you want to search – for example, to one for British-English or American-English only. You can change the span of years. And you can type in whatever search terms you want up to a maximum of 5 words at a time. So, for example, you could complicate the default search to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, Bride of Frankenstein.

If you feed buzz-word, heads-up and wake-up call into the n-gram viewer both with and without hyphenation, you will discover that the decision to hyphenate (or not) is crucial to how we choose our search terms in any exploration of n-gram graphs and corpus data. Running a comparison between hyphenated buzz-word and un-hyphenated buzzword for the years 1960-2008 produces the n-gram below:
The developing researcher of quantitative linguistic data will have realised that removing the hyphenation from heads-up and wake-up creates new complications.

You could try running heads-up and wake-up as un-hyphenated compound words. If you run them as separate words – heads up and wake up – then the search will take in all uses of these terms as phrasal verbs (e.g. He heads up the European branch of the company / It’s time to wake up and smell the coffee) and thus blur the attempt to find out how frequently they appear in their more modern sense as abstract nouns in the discourse of business.

STEP 2 Trying out n-gram searches

The most useful thing you can do now is to experiment with running a variety of n-gram searches.

You might try some searches for words and phrases which you think are examples of fairly recent language change – e.g. expressions which you would use with friends and contemporaries, but not with older family members. By searching different spans of years you might be able to determine roughly when a particular word or phrase passed into general usage.

You could also try searching for much earlier examples of language use. Perhaps you can think of words which would now be seen as archaic? Try earlier spans of years.

Try two different approaches. (a) Start with a text from a particular period – many old texts have been digitised – and look for examples of features of language which you think have changed. (b) Start with words (or spellings) which you feel are archaic, and see if you can work out when changes occurred, and why.

Record your findings. The developing researcher of quantitative linguistic data – that’s you! – is perfectly capable of devising a way of doing that, but use a table like the one below if you like:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word/phrase; search-years</th>
<th>Reason for search</th>
<th>Results → inferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>troll – as verb or noun 1800-2008</td>
<td>Is it a modern usage arising from the internet?</td>
<td>Increase in incidence around 1865 – was there an edition of Fairy Tales then? Fairly consistent 1880-1980, then significant increase late 1990s onwards → internet trolling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bungalow 1700-2008</td>
<td>I know it’s a loanword (a borrowing) from India. When did it start to be used in English?</td>
<td>Hardly any use before 1830. Most commonly used in the mid-1920s → but probably for a social reason (more building) and not a linguistic reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrought 1600-2008</td>
<td>I know it’s an archaic past-tense verb-form (past tense of work). When did it start to fall out of use in English?</td>
<td>Most common 1650-1700; steady decline in use from 1750; worked became more common than wrought in 1850s → fashion to have more regular past-tenses ending in -ed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you’re particularly surprised by any of your n-gram search findings, you should add them to your Personal Collection of Linguistic Artifacts.

STEP 3 Locating and navigating a corpus of written texts

So many digitised e-texts are available on-line through web-sites such as Project Gutenberg that the range is completely bewildering. You could narrow your field of research to https://www.gutenberg.org/browse/scores/top which shows the current top 100 searches.

But starting like that won’t allow you to choose a particular subject or period, so you could begin by looking for lists of books/authors related to one subject (e.g. travel: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_travel_books) or books from one period (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_travel_books#17th_century)

End of Chapter 6 – your Personal Collection of Linguistic Artifacts.
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