WORCESTER SIXTH FORM COLLEGE

Progression – A-Level English Language

Contents:

Thinking of studying A Level English Language at Worcester Sixth Form College?

We teach the AQA specification.

Here is a brief summary of the topics we cover over the two-year course. If you want to find out more about each of these topics, you can find the full specification on the AQA website:
https://www.aqa.org.uk/subjects/english/a-level/english-7702/specification

- Methods of language analysis: we analyse a range of texts from spoken conversations to newspaper articles, from social media posts to speeches.

- Language diversity: how language varies according to age, gender, class, region, ethnicity and occupation, and why some varieties of language are seen as better than others. For example, why do your teachers tell you not to say 'like' so much? Why does everyone hate the Birmingham accent?

- Language change: how and why language has changed over the past 500 years, how and why it is still changing now. For example, where did 'lit' come from, how did it spread so quickly and why did you stop saying it as soon as your dad started?

- Child Language development: how do children learn to speak so quickly? There are various theories about this, but we don't yet have any conclusive answers.

- Language discourses: we analyse how language controversies and debates are dealt with in the media, and we write our own media exts about language issues.

In order to prepare for the course, you need to complete these three compulsory tasks:

1. Read this blog post by one of the senior examiners for AQA A-Level English Language: https://tinyurl.com/yd49g2kt

2. Watch this TED Talk on language change and texting, then answer the questions – you should bring your answers to your first A-Level English Language lesson. You can write your answers in full or in note form.

https://tinyurl.com/z3np3fm

a. What are the key features of the way you use language in text messages and social media? For example, what are some of the words and punctuation you use when texting that you don't use in other kinds of speech or writing?
b. What affects the way you use language in these situations? For example, how do you use punctuation when texting your mum compared to how you use it when posting on Instagram or texting your best friend?

3. Watch this TED Talk on language change and new words, then answer the questions – you should bring your answers to your first A-Level English Language lesson. You can write your answers in full or in note form.

https://tinyurl.com/yakv3ed2

a. Pick a word that you think has only been in use for a year or two. You could look here for ideas https://tinyurl.com/ydyyrf8s

b. Make notes on what that word means and why it only came into use recently

c. Pick one slang word that you think your English teacher won't know and get ready to teach them what it means and the context in which it should be used – keep it appropriate for the classroom!

One of the best ways to improve your understanding of the issues we learn about in English Language is to do some extra reading. Below is a pack of reading on some of the topics we cover. You can choose one or two, or you can read them all. As you read, it would be useful to highlight key points – you can do this on screen if you prefer not to print.

Becoming an A Level Language Student – a Quick Guide

Examiner and university lecturer Dr Marcello Giovanelli tells students embarking on an A Level language course what to expect and how to make the most of the course.

If you're reading this then you may well have just started your A Level studies in English Language. Congratulations on choosing an exciting, modern and engaging A Level course! However, the transition from GCSE or iGCSE to A Level can be a demanding one, and so in this article, I'll share some key principles of A Level language study with you that will help you to bridge the gap and get the most from your studies. Together, these form a 'quick guide' to becoming an A Level English Language student.

1. Learning a Metalanguage and Avoiding Impressionism

Given that you may not have had to do much explicit language work at KS4, you will find that you need to acquire a new terminology to deal with the kinds of analyses that you will undertake at A Level. We call this type of language about language a metalanguage. For English Language, most of this revolves around what we term levels of language (discourse, grammar, semantics, lexis, phonology), or what are currently known as linguistic methods or frameworks in examination board specifications. As a beginning linguist, it's important to start using these terms confidently and accurately to ensure that all descriptive linguistic work (any analysis that identifies and explores language features) that you do is as precise and clear as is possible, and avoids merely making impressionistic and speculative claims that are not rooted in language analysis.

As an example, look at the text (above right). This was written by a mid-day supervisor and attached to a biscuit tin in a school staffroom. It was motivated by her anger towards a member of the teaching staff persistently going through the tin trying to find chocolate biscuits.

A non-linguist might comment on this text in quite an intuitive way by identifying the angry 'tone', perhaps making some comment on the order that's being given, and even arguing that the use of the word 'please' makes the order seem more polite. However, because there's very little language analysis going on here beyond simply identifying words, the comments feel impressionistic and idiosyncratic; they are not grounded in a recognised and accepted way of talking about the content and structure of language.

On the other hand, knowing even a little bit about how language works can be incredibly enabling, helping with the analysis and making you sound more competent and professional in your work. For example, using the knowledge that events can be grammatically presented using either the active or passive voice not only enables an analysis to take place using a shared and accepted metalanguage, but can also lead to a more intricate analysis. In this example, the mid-day supervisor has chosen to write in the passive 'they are getting broken' rather than the active 'someone/name of person is breaking them'. Since the use of the passive voice downplays the agent (person responsible) for the action of the verb, we can argue that using this form is generally significant. In this instance, we might deduce that the supervisor wants to avoid attaching a sense of blame to the breaking of the biscuits. Being able to discuss the grammar (or any other aspect) in this way is likely to lead to a much better analysis.

2. The Importance of Context

At A Level, engaging with context means moving beyond simple GCSE notions of audience and purpose. Now what's really important to remember is that by context we are referring to a range of factors both within and outside of the text, paying close attention to situations where a text is both written or spoken (the context of production), and where it is read or listened to (the context of reception). Returning to our 'biscuit tin' text, we could identify a whole range of contextual factors that would be important to comment on.

In terms of the context of production, the fact that the text producer is a mid-day supervisor and not a member of teaching staff is significant since it is likely that she will have a less powerful role in the school, and consequently will need to be careful about not offending someone of a higher status. This goes some way to explaining her motivation for using the passive voice that was discussed earlier.

In terms of the context of reception, we can imagine that this note would be seen by whoever was in the staffroom and happened to come across the biscuit tin, and that this could take place at many different times. It's relatively easy therefore to see that there are as many possible contexts of reception as there are potential readers, and that each reading will be motivated by who the reader is, the conditions in which they read (carefully, in a rush, whether they have had a good day or are fed up), whether they are actually guilty of breaking the biscuits and so on. Equally, context needs to be understood as a dynamic entity rather than a static one; the situation and circumstances in which a text is understood can change quite considerably. For example, the person responsible for breaking

the biscuits might suddenly react in a very different way when he realises the message is aimed at him. In this instance the context that surrounds the reading, and therefore influences it, can develop and evolve as the reading itself takes place.

There are two important points worth emphasising here. First, the relationship between context and language features is both a complex and incredibly important one. Writers and speakers make language choices that are influenced by contextual factors, and readers and listeners interpret what

they read and hear within the specific situations in which they find themselves. Second, the richness of contextual detail and its importance in the process of making meaning means that it's often better to think of any data you engage with in your studies not as a 'text' but as part of a larger communicative act called a discourse event that has real participants with intentions, beliefs and emotions engaging in an act of communication. All of these influence what gets written or said, and how that gets interpreted.

3. Ideas about Language

Another key skill that you will develop as you progress through your studies will be your ability to read and engage with ideas about language study. This will move you beyond seeing yourself as someone who analyses language to someone who actively explores ideas and concepts that researchers and academics have grappled with. Whichever specification you are following for your own studies, being able to understand the various debates surrounding language topics, and integrating these into your own analyses of data is an important skill that you will need to master. In your analysis of the 'biscuit tin' text, you could draw on a number of theories related to how people communicate with each other (interaction and politeness theories), how status at work affects the ways in which language is used (language and occupation, the discourse of the workplace), and how technology might be influencing the ways in which we communicate in non-electronic forms (language change, attitudes to language). The best way to become competent at working with ideas like these is to try to explore them in the light of any data you are looking at in class. To what extent do you find that your data supports or challenges established research ideas that you have read?

4. Read Around the Subject

Of course, one of the best ways to explore issues and ideas in language is to read as widely as you can around the subject. emag is a great place to start for language articles that have been written specifically for A Level students, and your teacher will be able to guide you towards suitable ones. Beyond emag there is a wealth of material. As a start, you might try David Crystal's The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language (Cambridge University Press) for a good reference book and overall guide to language topics, Louise Mullany and Peter Stockwell's Introducing English Language (Routledge) for an excellent, albeit quite advanced, guide to the study of language and linguistics. Language: A Student Handbook on Key Topics and Theories (ed. Dan Clayton, English and Media Centre) offers an excellent collection of essays by leading academics on A Level language topics.

It's also a good idea to use the internet to keep up to date with news stories and the latest debates involving language. Whether it's schools banning students from using non-standard

English, how the latest innovations in technology are affecting the ways that we use language, or what the latest research in child language learning is, there's always something to interest the language student. Regularly visiting the online pages of tabloid newspapers will lead to no end of stories to read and discuss in class. To make things easier for yourself, you could subscribe to a blog which collects the latest news for you such as Dan Clayton's peerless EngLangBlog http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.co.uk

5. Become a Data Collector

Another important part of becoming a student of language is learning how to become a researcher of language. In fact your career as a collector of language data begins the moment you start your

course. The wonderful thing about language data, of course, is that it's everywhere: in the conversations we have with friends, the TV we watch, the books, magazines, social media pages, and tweets we read, the websites we browse, the computer games we play and so on. Make a point of collecting interesting examples of language you see, either in hard copy form or using the camera facility or a scanning app on your smartphone. Record conversations of both real (do ask for permission!) and represented (on the TV and radio) speech, practise transcriptions, start a scrapbook, and share ideas with your fellow students via a blog or your school or college's VLE. Get used to working with data and start applying learning in class to your own examples that you collect. You've got an exciting two years of study ahead of you!

How To Read the Language News — Sceptically

Professor Lynne Murphy offers six easy steps to help you distinguish between good journalism based on sound linguistic research and fake news when you read media stories about language.

When the editors of Collins Dictionary named fake news their 2017 Word of the Year, they probably weren't thinking about the linguistic news — though they could have been. There's plenty of bad journalism about language out there — and it's been going on for years. My own speciality is looking at how American English is represented in the British press, a particularly fertile area for stereotyping, misunderstanding and misinformation. But it's certainly not the only area.

Language is something the public want to know about. We all use language every day, and we tend to have ideas about English — what we like and don't like about it. The media are very happy to give us stories about English that support or challenge our ideas about how English works. They know it's great clickbait.

Too often, though, the news media present stories about English that misrepresent linguistic research, that interpret it in a way that suits certain prejudices, or that is not research-based at all. I have two bits of good news, though:

- There is a lot of good language journalism out there too.
- You have the power to cut through the hype and get a clearer idea of what's going on in the English language today.

In this article, I give a tool kit for evaluating language stories in the news, so that you can identify quality pieces, find the places to be suspicious, and do something about it when language articles are used to spread misinformation or prejudice.

Step 1: Don't Judge a Book by its Cover, or a Language Story by the Masthead

Teachers like to tell us to 'consider the source' when evaluating information – and that is good advice. It's probably better to trust a textbook about English written by a linguistics professor than to trust your great aunt (unless she is also a linguistics professor). But when looking at media stories, it's easy to come to the conclusions 'broadsheets good, tabloids bad' and 'conservative press is conservative, liberal press is liberal'. But very often linguistic ideas don't go along with political ideas. I know very liberal people who are still linguistic snobs, for instance. And in my experience, there's plenty of bad linguistic journalism in broadsheets and sometimes good analyses in tabloids.

Take this example: in 2011 the British Library publicised their research on changing pronunciations in the UK — for example which syllable is stressed in controversy (CONtroversy or conTROVersy) and whether garage is garRAZH or GARridge. They concluded that British pronunciation changes have little or nothing to do with American English influence. Americans don't say the newer conTROVersy pronunciation, for example. The Daily Mail's headline for this story was:

> *How is your English?*

> *Research shows Americanisms AREN'T taking over the British language (1)*

But broadsheet the Telegraph ran the story with this on top:

> *The 'conTROversy' over changing pronunciations*

To language purists they might grate, but new ways of pronouncing words are spreading in Britain thanks to the influence of US culture. It was an irresponsible way to present the story, and it was in the 'quality' newspaper.

Step 2: Read Beyond the Headline

Headlines are usually not written by the author of the article, but by the production editor who's thinking 'how can we get people to click on or share this article?' Their advertising revenue depends on those clicks and shares. In cases like the Telegraph headline, it can look like the headline writer didn't read the article. Headlines often exaggerate or use emotive language to garner interest.

By the end of a bad headline, damage has already been done. The Telegraph article goes on to quote the researcher saying that the change in the pronunciation of controversy has nothing to do with Americans. But 38% of those who click on links don't read the article. Of those who do read, only half will make it to the end of the article.3 Plenty of people will share the article on social media using only the headline to support a point they want to make. So, keep reading.

Step 3: Look at the Language

Take a minute and think about this BBC headline from 2017. What assumptions is it starting from? Is it trying to get a specific reaction from the reader?

> *How Americanisms are Killing the English Language (4)*

Look for presuppositions and metaphors. A presupposition is a claim that needs to be assumed to be true in order to interpret another claim. This headline expects you to accept two presuppositions: first, that the English language is being killed – they're not asking whether they're asking how. Another presupposition comes from the 'the' before 'English language': it presumes that there is one and only one thing called 'English language'. Is that true? When they say 'the English language', what assumptions do they expect you to make about that English and who speaks it?

Metaphors are used to frame what's happening in a particular way. But how does that metaphor work? Is the language alive? What would it mean for Americanisms to kill English? If Americanisms can kill, what are they? Disease? Poison? Weapons? Assassins? What other possible metaphors are there for words travelling around the world? British writers sometimes represent the English language as

Britain's 'gift' to the world (even though the dominance of English has contributed to the decline or death of many indigenous languages). Another possible metaphor might have Americanisms enriching or revitalising English, rather than killing it. Why was this metaphor chosen?

Step 4: Evaluate the Research

Many media pieces about language are mere opinion, based on a single person's experience of English. The thing to remember about language opinions is that they're generally based on very limited experience of English – from their own lifetime, social class, age group, educational background, etc. Everyone has a right to an opinion, but we (and they) shouldn't mistake opinions for reality. Such articles often cherry-pick their evidence – that is, they use examples that support their point, but don't acknowledge the many examples that don't support it.

Beyond the opinion pieces, much language news these days relates to linguistic research, in part because researchers feel pressure to show that their research is relevant by getting it into the news. But research deserves critical caution as well. There's stronger research and weaker research, and news organisations don't always bother to differentiate between them. Consider this from another Telegraph article:

The English language is evolving faster than ever — leaving older Brits literally lost for words, research has revealed. A detailed study has identified the social media language and mobile messaging terms that perplex millions of parents and which point to a future where emoticons may replace the written word. [...] The study was led by the English language expert Professor John Sutherland [and] was commissioned to mark the launch of the Samsung Galaxy S6 phone. The results point to a seismic generational gap in how we use and understand modern informal text speak while also suggesting older style abbreviations and acronyms such as TXT are now so old they are considered antiquated by the younger generation. (5)

It raises a few alarm bells.

- How is this person an 'English language expert'? In fact, the researcher is a professor of literature, not language or linguistics. The training in doing sociolinguistic research is quite

  different from that required for literary research.

- The research has been commissioned by a business that is promoting a new product. Such research does not have the quality-control requirements that go along with publication in an academic journal or research funded by an academic

organisation. The company wanted something they could make a headline out of, so its press releases would be picked up as

news items. That's a lot cheaper and gets more 'shares' then an advertisement would get.

- There is no link to the original research report, so you can't check the methodology, the actual findings, or the researcher's interpretations of it.
- The evidence doesn't merit the conclusions. They've shifted the discourse in two ways here:
    - from evidence about one very specific kind of language [texting] to a claim about English in general
    - from evidence from now to a historical claim. We can't actually know whether English is changing 'faster than ever' from a study of two generations at one time, and there's no reason to believe that the language of texting is the same as that of conversation or essay writing, for example.

The shiftiness in the last bullet point is something to stay very aware of. Articles about dialect-word research often shift into claims about accents. Evidence about spelling might morph into a claim about pronunciation or education.

Consider whether there are other possible explanations for the phenomena discussed. For instance, where dialects are becoming less distinct, sometimes television is blamed. But are there other factors at work, such as more people travelling further for work, more people going to university, more people moving away from their place of birth in modern times? If children's spelling is poor, it's a big leap to decide that's because of social media – you also need to check whether children's spelling is always poor at that age (is it a developmental issue) or whether spelling education is done differently now than it used to be.

Step 5: Check Their Facts; Do Your Own Research

If the article links to the original research, have a look at that. It's likely to have more careful conclusions and less misleading language than the media coverage. For instance, one study about changing accents in Britain (mostly due to the influence of major British cities) had one line about communication becoming more casual, possibly because of the influence of social media platforms from the US. A Guardian article on the study led with the claim that

> *By 2066, dialect words and regional pronunciations will be no more – consumed by a tsunami of Americanisms.*

There was no way to get from the report to that conclusion – and in fact, the article was arguing that the report didn't know what it was talking about. But to get to the point they wanted to make, the writer was gravely misrepresenting the research. (6)

But sometimes it's the researcher who gets it wrong – and the media reports it anyway. A 2017 news item (7) claimed British words were losing ground to American words. But looking at the original research, I found that one of the 'British' words that British people aren't saying nowadays was 'capsicum'. It's no wonder they didn't find it in Britain, since it's the Australian word for a sweet pepper.

You have the power to check claims made in the media about language, and all you need is access to the internet and a sense of which sources of information are reliable. Check a few dictionaries (just one and you haven't really done your research since different dictionaries might offer different information). The Online Etymology Dictionary is free and has lots of good information about word histories.

Step 6: Do Something About Fake Linguistic News

Language changes; it's inescapable. But a lot of media articles seem intent on creating villains in the story of language change. It's the millennials! The immigrants! The Americans! The teachers! They're who we can blame! These kinds of stories serve political purposes. They are propaganda. The aforementioned study about accents changing in Britain gave rise to a Sun headline

> *The 'th' sound vanishing from the English language with Cockney and other dialects set to die out by 2066 due to immigration.*

That is a seriously problematic interpretation of the research, and it serves the Sun's general anti- immigration stance. It was an unethical headline. And the newspaper deserved to be called out on it.

In those kinds of situations, it's not enough for us to know ourselves that it's bad linguistic journalism. When the press demonises groups of people (or their languages) using bad thinking and poor research, we need to stand up. The good news is that in the era of social media, this is easier to do than ever. Contact the media source and point out the errors. Find better articles on the issues to share when you see people sharing the biased articles. Be a good citizen and start conversations about the problems and consequences of bad linguistic research.

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A Level Language – Reading Around the Subject

Examiner, regular emagazine writer and @EngLangBlog tweeter Dan Clayton shows how you can make good use of news reporting of language issues to enrich your thinking in many different parts of your A Level course.

One of the most exciting things about the English Language A Level course is that language is always in the news, in one form or another. While this can provide you with some really interesting material to refer to in essays, language investigations and your own directed writing, it can also be a bit daunting to keep up with. And even if you know where to look, it's sometimes difficult to work out how what you're reading might fit in to what you're doing on the course.

What I'll attempt to do in this article is take a range of fairly recent stories about language in the news and contextualise them within the A Level course. In doing this, I'll show you some good places to find stories, give some ideas about what you might learn from them and offer some suggestions about how to use them. Let's start with a story that directly involves A Level students themselves…

Below the Line and Below the Belt

A Level students at Havant and South Downs Sixth Form College were involved earlier this year in a project (supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund's Young Roots programme) which investigated the history and use of the Portsmouth ('Pompey') accent. As part of their project, students and teachers looked at the history of the accent and dialect in their local area, collected examples of the variety and contributed to an exhibition for the general public. This all sounds exactly like the kind of work that takes the subject beyond the confines of the classroom and opens up links between theory in class and the real world 'out there'. However, The Daily Telegraph had other ideas.

In a piece in October 2018, titled

> *College fails to 'unearth anything' after spending £34,000 investigating Portsmouth accent*

unnamed Telegraph reporters rubbished the project, claiming that the 'researchers' (aka A Level students) had spent 10 months finding nothing of interest about the 'so-called Portsmouth accent'. The College provided their own response to the story (https://www.dropbox.com/s/xphw2z2cid8dflh/NEW-PANEL.pdf?dl=0) but another aspect of this whole rather unfair coverage of the college's work is what happens when a story like this is opened up to comment on the newspaper's website.

On the scale of things, 21 responses (at the time of writing this article) isn't a huge outpouring of opinion – and some of them are supportive of the college's work — but a quick glance at many of the comments shows the kind of attitudes that are often bubbling under the surface of news articles about language: namely, prescriptive and often xenophobic and/or declinist attitudes. So, while one commenter says 'the involved students and the National Lottery are all idiots who have no idea of either 'Research' or the value of money' another invokes a 'Political Correctness Gone Mad' agenda by saying

> *All this proves is that the Lottery money is being wasted at an incredible speed on nonsensical projects. The corollary is that worthwhile enterprises are starved of money if they are not PC or sufficiently (sic) 'edgy'*

before another chimes in with the most nakedly prejudiced comment of the lot:

A more interesting area of research could be into why very many youngsters throughout the country of varying ethnic backgrounds seem to have adopted the intonations of Jamaican drug dealers.

What can we learn from such an article and the comments that follow it? If you're studying AQA or OCR, you have some ready-made language discourses (AQA Paper 2) or a topical language issue (OCR Paper 1 Section B) to discuss. As many people from Deborah Cameron and Henry Hitchings to John and Lesley Milroy have previously argued, when people debate

language they often use it as a proxy for other concerns, often those to do with what they perceive to be wider social ills. So, a good way to see those wider arguments exposed and to have recent stories to refer to is to check the ways in which the main newspapers report on language stories and then go 'below the line' to see how those arguments play out among the readers and their wider social and political agendas.

Power to the Peevers

Language peeving is nothing new. People have complained about language ever since humans have been able to speak: the history of pedants and prescriptivists is a long one and they love to write about their pet-hates at length. What can be very instructive is to track the current gripes that people are expressing, and social media can be a great way of doing this. As the linguist Rob Drummond pointed out in a tweet in October 2018,

> *If you ever want a point-in-time snapshot of current language peeves, just find a celebrity who has decided to share theirs and then sit back and read the replies!*

Drummond was referring to a tweet by the comedian Jason Manford that had picked up over 4500 likes in the space of a few days.

Manford's own gripes were abbreviations like 'hubs' (husband), 'totes' (totally) and 'bants' (banter — which he also wanted banning as a word in its own right) but also the non-literal use of 'literally' and the phrase 'Can I get...' taking the place of 'May I have…'. His fans chipped in with plenty of others:

'LOL' said 'in person, face to face'; adding 'super' to the front of words; 'cray-cray'… And while a lot of the responses were very funny, many seemed to be genuine gripes. A celebrity from a very different generation, the columnist and former MP, Gyles Brandreth sparked a similar peevefest among viewers of BBC Breakfast in the same month when he complained about

'totes' (again), 'I myself', 'bored of' and 'off of', arguing that

> *all the research shows that people who speak correctly, spell correctly, they will be more successful in this world.*

Brandreth also claims that

> *accents are neither here nor there, slang is fine but getting correct usage is important.*

Again, while dressing up his complaints in a fun, 'I know I'm a pedant' kind of self-aware schtick, Brandreth is still peddling some rather dubious ideas. What's wrong with using an extra first-person pronoun to add emphasis? The French do it with 'Moi, je...' and English speakers often say 'I personally' to do a similar job. And what is this research he speaks of about users of 'correct English' (however

that is defined) being more successful (however that too is defined)?

I myself (sorry Gyles) am not convinced by these arguments, but both stories provide some interesting case studies for AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 1 Section B and perhaps Edexcel Paper 3 where the discussion of attitudes to language change can be seen to reflect battles over who is using 'correct' English and who has the power to say what's right or wrong. They also provide you with some excellent examples of contemporary debates about English that can be linked to very similar discussions that have raged throughout the history of the language, from complaints about double negatives and split infinitives to the literally never-ending arguments about 'literally' (recorded as being used non-literally as far back as the 1760s). What's also interesting is that social media seems to have allowed linguists and experts to respond directly to such populist language stories, offering genuine insight and empirical evidence. For every Gyles Brandreth or John Humphrys, there's an Oliver Kamm or Jonathan Kasstan putting forward reasoned arguments. But as we've unfortunately seen in recent years, populism is not easily countered with hard facts: people can often be swayed by gut feeling and prejudice.

Dropping Your Rosie Lees

Accents are rarely out of the news and stories about them can provide a wealth of different examples to refer to in many parts of the course. Whether it's AQA Paper 2, OCR Paper 2 Sections B and C, or Edexcel Paper 1, language variation — in this case, regional and social variation and attitudes to it — is a popular topic.

One recent story helps to illustrate the overlapping nature of social and regional variation and how accents are viewed as markers of identity. The Labour candidate for Chingford and Woodford Green in East London, Faiza Shaheen was criticised for the way she spoke by Sky presenter Adam Boulton. Accusing Shaheen of t-dropping (or more accurately from a linguistic

standpoint t-glottalisation), Boulton asserted that Shaheen was 'embarrassed about being posh'.

As Language students, you will no doubt be aware that certain regional and social accents and their features can be stigmatised and frowned upon because they are perceived as being lower class, or carrying connotations of ignorance and a lack of formal education. But on the flipside, certain accents are also seen as being rather aloof and unlikeable: Received Pronunciation (RP) regularly polls high for intelligence but low for warmth, for example. In politics, where conveying a likeable and empathetic persona seems to be part of the job description, there has been a tendency since the 90s for certain upper- and middle-class politicians to chisel away the posher-sounding features of their natural accents to relate better to their wider electorate (although interestingly, Jacob Rees-Mogg bucks this trend). Former Prime Ministers Tony Blair and David Cameron (both privately educated) did it, ex- Chancellor George Osborne famously did it while addressing Morrisons warehouse workers in 2013 and was roundly mocked in the media for his Mockney affectations.

So is Shaheen just another example of a posh politician talking down? Not on your nelly. As Shaheen points out, she is the daughter of an East End car mechanic and attended the same state school as David Beckham and Harry Kane. She sounds like the area she is from. Boulton (privately educated) picked the wrong gal to tell porkies abaht, especially as Shaheen also heads a think tank on class and social discrimination and has written about the stigma associated with accents. It's another excellent example of a story that shows how attitudes to language are often deeply ingrained in wider social contexts, but also an example that works well alongside some of the classic studies on accent and class – Ellen Ryan, Howard Giles, Peter Trudgill and Jenny Cheshire among them – offering a modern day application of older work.

The Language 'Problem'

What's revealing about many of these stories – and you might have noticed this in those you have looked at on your course – is how the original stories are framed and how often language change or variation is presented as a problem. In the December 2018 edition of emagazine, Lynne Murphy offered a toolkit for evaluating language stories in the news and that is an extremely useful place to start when exploring some of the stories featured here and in the wider reading that can inform your understanding of the course.

Some Other Stories About Language from 2018

'Gammon' and the language of political abuse:
http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.com/2018/06/telling-porkies-about-gammon.html and https://language-and-innovation.com/2018/05/15/gammon-up-against-the-wall/

Gary Younge on the dangers of political rhetoric and political violence:
https://www.theGuardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/25/donald-trump-words-consequences- violent-rhetoric

Ben Zimmer on the use of the word 'globalist' and its sinister connotations:

https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/the-origins-of-the-globalist-slur/555479/

Womxn and exclusionary language:

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/10/womxn-row-companies-worry-word-women- excludes-transgender-people/