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Exploring the English language



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Introduction

In this course you will consider key developments in the English language from the end of the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. You will study how the social and political changes of this period affected the English language as well as the development of new tools and ways of thinking about language.

Firstly, however, some useful ‘tools of the trade’ – you'll take a look at some vital foundations of English grammar.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in English Language.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how the English language has changed over time from its origins to the present day
- understand the relationship between the history of the English language and social and political processes
- understand methods of enquiry into English language, viewed diachronically and synchronically with awareness of the limitations of any one approach
- deploy skills in handling information relating to quantification in various aspects including time in relation to the courses historical aspect and very simple presentation of statistical data
- demonstrate an awareness of a range of techniques in linguistics for the analysis of data including those related to corpora.

1 Word classes

Activity 1

Allow about 5 minutes

Look at an extract from *An A to Z of English* by clicking on the video clip below. In this extract, poet Michael Rosen acts out a confusing lesson on grammar. How many of the questions would you have got right? (Just give an answer based upon your immediate impression, it's not a test!)

'An A to Z of English' – Michael Rosen extract (50 seconds)

Video content is not available in this format.

'An A to Z of English' – Michael Rosen extract (50 seconds)

Discussion

If you had the same problem as George, then the next set of activities on word classes may set you on the right track. If you guessed correctly the identity of the noun, verb, adjective and so on in Rosen's little bit of fun, then the following activities will serve as a useful refresher for you.

As a matter of interest, your ability to do these activities may well rest on your age, the type of English lessons you had in school and where you studied. Rosen's depiction of grammar as boring (and ultimately useless) displays the attitude which swung the UK English curriculum away from the study of formal grammatical analysis during the 1960s and 1970s.

Michael Rosen's poem focused on the functions of different types of word (or 'word classes') in a sentence. It is useful to be familiar with the basic word classes in this course, and the following activities will give you practice in identifying them.

Activity 2

Allow about 10 minutes

In parts 1 and 2 below you'll find a series of formal and reasonably traditional definitions of eight word classes.

Part 1. Read the definitions of the word classes at the top of the table. Then look at the list of word classes, and match the word class to the definition by placing it in the second column.

preposition
determiner

pronoun
noun

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Examples are *by, with, in, on, at, through, during, over, around, according to, apart from*. Typically indicate a relationship between other words e.g. *slice of bread*. Or they are to do with positioning things e.g. *in your dreams, over the top*.
Indicate whether something is general (*a car, an example*) or specific (*the car, the example*), or owned by somebody (*your dog, her cat*). Can also indicate whether something is near (*this book, these papers*) or far (*that view, those roads*).
Can substitute for nouns. Can be personal (*I, you, he, we, they*), or possessive (*mine, yours, ours*), demonstrative (*this, that, these, those*) or interrogative (*who, which*), amongst others.
Refer to places, people, things or ideas. Can usually be expressed as singular or plural, e.g. *issue - issues, pencil - pencils*. Often used with *a* or *the*.

Part 2. Now do the same for the word classes below.

verb
adverb
adjective
conjunction

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Express events such as doing, happening, being, saying, feeling, sensing, having. Generally vary for present or past tense (*hold - held - was holding*) and indicate modality (*can hold, could hold, might hold*).
Modify verbs by adding extra information about when/where/how etc. a verb takes place e.g. *he smiled grimly, they shouted loudly, we went yesterday*. Can also modify adjectives e.g. *she seemed genuinely surprised*, or other adverbs e.g. *they were playing surprisingly well*.
Typically modify nouns (or pronouns), giving them some kind of quality e.g. *an old house, decayed flesh, he's lucky, lonesome me*. Can themselves be qualified by words like *very, so, rather, quite* e.g. *very old, rather lucky, so filthy*.
Join parts of a text together, expressing a logical relationship. They include words that add (*and, besides, moreover, in addition*), compare (*like, as, but, in contrast, on the other hand*), express time (*after, as long as, while*) or express cause (*so, because, therefore*).

Activity 3

Allow about 25 minutes

Here are some word class identification exercises for practice. For each sentence below, write each word (or word group) into the correct row of the table according to its word class.

1. Initially, it will only come for a very short distance, but in a few days you will be able to increase the distance.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	distance, days, distance
Verb	will, come, will, be, able, increase
Adjective	short, few
Preposition	for, in, to,
Adverb	initially, only, very
Pronoun	it, you
Determiner	a, a, the
Conjunction	but

2. If you are planning a holiday in Italy this summer, you must visit the ancient city of Rome. Book your accommodation early because it is very hard to find at that time of the year.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	holiday, Italy, summer, city, Rome, accommodation, time, year
Verb	are, planning, must, visit, book, is, to, find
Adjective	ancient, hard
Preposition	in, of, at, of
Adverb	early, very
Pronoun	you, you, it
Determiner	a, this, the, your, that, the
Conjunction	if, because

3. We are developing novel classes of drugs to treat epilepsy at its cause, more effectively and more safely. Our gene discoveries are also potentially powerful tools for the accurate diagnosis of epilepsy.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	classes, drugs, epilepsy, cause, gene, discoveries, tools, diagnosis, epilepsy
Verb	are, developing, treat, are
Adjective	novel, powerful, accurate
Preposition	of, at, for, of, to
Adverb	more, effectively, more, safely, potentially
Pronoun	we
Determiner	its, our, the
Conjunction	and, also

4. If you are a speaker of English you will be able to estimate the social status of native speakers solely on the basis of the linguistic evidence of their speech.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	speaker, English, status, speakers, basis, evidence, speech
Verb	are, will, be, able, to, estimate
Adjective	social, native, linguistic
Preposition	of, of, on, of, of
Adverb	solely
Pronoun	you, you
Determiner	a, the, the, the, their
Conjunction	if

5. When the hawk is bound to a creance and perched on a post or an assistant's hand, you hold a piece of meat in your gloved fist so the hawk can see it.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	hawk, creance, post, assistant, hand, piece, meat, fist, hawk
Verb	is, bound, perched, hold, can, see
Adjective	gloved
Preposition	to, on, of, in
Adverb	
Pronoun	you, your, it
Determiner	the, a, a, an, a, the
Conjunction	when, and, or, so

In the last example of the preceding activity, did you correctly identify *creance* as a noun? Did you know what a *creance* was before reading this? If you answered ‘yes’ and ‘no’ respectively, then you have identified the word class by dint of the way it behaves within the text. You've worked out that any word which occurs within that particular context (a -and…) must be a noun. In other words, you've made the identification on the grounds of the function rather than the form of the word. This is usually the most dependable way of making such an identification, since a single form, such as *holiday*, can behave as a number of different word classes according to its function within the text:

> It was a dreadful *holiday* (noun).
>
> They have a *holiday* cottage (adjective).
>
> We *holiday* there each year (verb).

This means that you do not have to recognise a word in order to allocate it to a word class. You simply have to analyse its behaviour within the sentence.

Activity 4

Allow about 5 minutes

Now look at this nonsense sentence and place each word into the correct word class.

The greeful porgs bleened glidly.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*
Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	porgs
Verb	bleened
Adjective	greeful
Preposition	
Adverb	glidly
Pronoun	
Determiner	the
Conjunction	

Activity 5

Allow about 5 minutes

As in the previous activities, place each of the following words into the correct word class, thinking once again about the *behaviour* of the words in the sentence.

These cortical striatal fibres may expand their terminal fields and occupy a number of synaptic spaces on caudate neurons vacated by degeneration of their ipsilateral prefrontal input.

Noun	*Provide your answer...*
Verb	*Provide your answer...*
Adjective	*Provide your answer...*
Preposition	*Provide your answer...*
Adverb	*Provide your answer...*
Pronoun	*Provide your answer...*

Determiner	*Provide your answer...*
Conjunction	*Provide your answer...*

Answer

Noun	fibres, fields, number, spaces, neurons, degeneration, input
Verb	may, expand, occupy, vacated
Adjective	cortical, striatal, terminal, synaptic, caudate, ipsilateral, prefrontal
Preposition	of, on, by, of
Adverb	
Pronoun	
Determiner	these, their, a, their
Conjunction	and

2 Standardisation

Activity 6

Allow about 60 minutes

Now read the textbook extract linked below. This chapter describes key developments in the English language from the end of the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. You should read the whole of the chapter now to gain an overview. You can then return to it later as you need to.

Click here to view Chapter 3, 'Modernity and English as a national language'.

As you have just read in the extract, the period in which modern English arose was characterised by fundamental changes in the structure of society. The key linguistic process associated with these changes is standardisation: English was transformed from a vernacular language into one with a standardised variety that could be identified with England as a nation state.

Activity 7

Allow about 15 minutes

From the reading in Activity 6, you have learned that a standard language is one that provides agreed norms of usage, usually codified in dictionaries and grammars, for a wide range of purposes such as education, government and science.

What are the four main processes of standardisation? Make some notes about each process.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

You may have made fuller notes than these but the following is a selection of significant points.

The four main processes of standardisation are:

1. Selection: of an existing variety, usually that of the most powerful group in society. Key to this process was the invention of printing and its introduction to Britain by Caxton.
2. Codification: loss of some variability, with the establishment of norms of vocabulary and preferred grammatical forms. In the written form, includes standardised spelling. You may have particularly noted the discussion of the first grammars and dictionaries.
3. Elaboration: development of new specialised words, phrases and other resources to cope with new purposes. There is considerable material about innovations in the language; you may have particularly noted the explanations and illustration of Latin and Greek entering English especially in the realms of scientific and other intellectual domains.

4. Implementation: the distribution of texts; through formal education and other means encourages the prescriptive promotion of the standard variety. The Bible itself was an important 'focusing agent' through which the standard language was spread among the populations.

Activity 8

Allow about 10 minutes

This activity asks you to use basic skills in retrieving and interpreting numerical information about the elaboration and growth of the English vocabulary in the Early Modern English period.

Look again at Figure 3.3 in 'Modernity and English as a national language' (relinked here) which illustrates changes in the English vocabulary 1500–1700. You can find this figure on page 88. Based on this figure, answer the questions below.

1. What happened to the size of the English vocabulary every year between 1500 and 1700? Select one of the options below.

- ☐ Grew
- ☐ Decreased
- ☐ Sometimes grew, sometimes decreased

Discussion

Every year the English vocabulary grew. You can only see positive numbers on the chart.

2. From the following alternatives, in which decade did the vocabulary grow the least? Select one.

- ☐ 1510-1520
- ☐ 1610-1620
- ☐ 1670-1680

Discussion

Between 1510 and 1520 the vocabulary grew by less than 500 words. In the other decades it grew by more.In 1610 to 1620 a greater number of words were being added to the vocabulary each year than in the other two periods mentioned.

You may well have found this exercise easy. If you have difficulty interpreting this sort of information, you may like to study the OpenLearn courses *Working with charts, graphs and tables* and *More working with charts, graphs and tables*, which offer advice on study skills involving information retrieval and working with numbers.

3 Lexicography and etymology

Robert Cawdrey's (1604) dictionary is actually called *A Table Alphabetical of Hard Usual English Words*. It provides some early illustrations describing use of the English language.

As this interest in describing (and prescribing) use of the English language developed, so did lexicography, the craft of making dictionaries.

In Activity 9 you will look at an extract from *Blackadder III* which makes fun of the part of a lexicographer's task that might be to do with capturing neologisms, or newly minted words.

Activity 9

Allow about 5 minutes

Watch the extract from the comedy programme *Blackadder III* by clicking on the video clip below. Recalling Section 3.5 from 'Modernity and English as a national language', how did Samuel Johnson actually avoid the problem of being continually confronted by new words?

'An A to Z of English' – Samuel Johnson extract (sketch from Blackadder III) (1 minute)

Video content is not available in this format.

'An A to Z of English' – Samuel Johnson extract (sketch from Blackadder III) (1 minute)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Samuel Johnson set out to collect only words that were well established in the English language.

Even if lexicographers decide only to deal with words long established in the language, they are still faced with many problems about defining meanings.

Activity 10

Allow about 5 minutes

Without looking in a dictionary, or spending more than three minutes thinking about it, define the word *category*.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

One brief response to this question would be – *category:* ‘classified type’. Now let's see what some lexicographers made of the word.



- Cawdrey defined *category* as ‘an accusation’ so clearly the meaning of the word has changed over the centuries. He added the information that the word derived from Greek.
- In his dictionary, Samuel Johnson (1756) gave four definitions as follows: ‘a class; a rank; an order of ideas; predicament’. He also gave the Greek word from which he suggested the word originated and the name of an established author who used the word *category*. The first three meanings seem contemporary but the last is surprising, possibly related to Cawdrey's but not necessarily so. Perhaps we can find a clue as to meaning changes in the word's etymology, that is, its origins and development.

Take a dictionary, either one you have to hand or can find online, and try to find any clues to explain the changing meanings of the word *category* as illustrated above.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the period you've studied in this course, English was an important written language, but was still secondary in status to Latin in the domains of Church and scholarship. Political and social changes combine to have an impact on English; the events of this period demonstrate too the impact of extremely significant technologies. Interest in the English language grew, as evidenced by the beginning of practices that are still key in language description and analysis such as the compilation of glossaries and dictionaries. The stage had been set for a period of immense creativity.