

**KEYWORDS  
IN  
LANGUAGE  
AND  
LITERACY**

**RONALD CARTER**

# KEYWORDS IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

‘We’ve got to produce people who can write proper English.  
. . . You cannot educate people properly unless you do it on a  
basic framework and drilling system.’

HRH the Prince of Wales

‘Language is indissolubly linked to power. . . . To think  
seriously about teaching English . . . we need to understand  
the paradox that language is both potentially liberating and  
potentially enslaving.’

Harold Rosen

The teaching and practice of language and literacy is a hotly contested subject. Questions like ‘what is standard English?’, ‘what is grammar?’ and the place accorded to canonical writers in the curriculum continue to provoke controversy. In this handy A to Z guide to language and literacy Ronald Carter unpicks the meaning of key terms like ‘grammar’, ‘proper English’, ‘real books’, ‘text’ and ‘discourse’, and the way in which such concepts are used – and abused – by teachers, politicians, linguists, journalists and employers.

Each concise definition is cross-referenced and supported by extensive examples and references to further reading. Designed as a dictionary, but possessing an encyclopaedic range, *Keywords in Language and Literacy* provides an invaluable guide to the debates surrounding language and literacy. An indispensable book for all teachers and students of language and education, and anyone interested in the place of language in our schools.

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. . . the way in which education is organised can be seen to express, consciously and unconsciously, the wider organisation of a society, so that what has been thought of as a 'simple distribution' is in fact an active shaping to particular social ends.

Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*  
(Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965)

Language is a system of sounds, meanings and structures with which we make sense of the world around us. It functions as a tool of thought; as a means of social organisation; as the repository and means of transmission of knowledge; as the raw material of literature, and as the creator and sustainer – or destroyer – of human relationships. It changes inevitably over time and, as change is not uniform, from place to place. Because language is a fundamental part of being human, it is an important aspect of a person's sense of self; because it is a fundamental feature of any community, it is an important aspect of a person's sense of social identity.

*The Cox Report* (DES, 1989, para. 6.18)

Children will never learn to speak and write properly if, for instance, their teachers tell them that 'we was' is as 'valid' as 'we were'. A study commissioned by the government on how English should be taught under the national curriculum summed up many teachers' views. The government refused to publish it because it disagreed with the findings. It is not hard to see why. To regard grammar in terms of mistakes, the report recommended, was 'unhelpful'. Rather, grammar should be seen as 'a series of options'.

Grammar is not a series of options. There is correct standard English and there is bad English. If children want to use slang in the street, then fine – but only if they know better. If they want to improve themselves, they need to know how to speak and write properly when the occasion requires . . . What hope has an unemployed teenager of finding a job if he cannot fill in a form correctly or write a grammatical letter? The report suppressed by the government claimed that 'he ain't done it' and 'she come here yesterday' are 'no more a barrier to achievement'.

*The Times*, editorial, 22 April 1992

Every time the question of the language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganise the cultural hegemony.

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed.  
D. Forgacs and G. Nowell-Smith (Lawrence & Wishart,  
London, 1985)

Let them leave language to their lonely betters  
Who count some days and long for certain letters;  
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:  
Words are for those with promises to keep.

W. H. Auden, 'Their Lonely Betters', in  
*Collected Shorter Poems* (Faber, London, 1966)

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The teaching and practice of literacy has again become a highly contested area in the 1990s, with disputes among professionals and interventions by governments creating ideological battlegrounds which have serious repercussions for the formation of the curriculum.

The main aim of this book is to introduce some central concepts in the teaching and practice of literacy in English by examining in particular key words and terms used to describe literacy practices. The book is designed as an A–Z of such key words and many of the entries begin by an unpacking of linguistic ideas or of the assumptions about language which underpin such ideas. Language use is therefore often a starting point for definition and description.

The book also shows the extent to which descriptive linguistics, and especially sociolinguistics, can illuminate the relationship between language and literacy and can contribute to an understanding of the social and cultural discourses that condition how issues of language and literacy are debated. The book is designed for students of education, in-service and pre-service teachers and for all those with an interest in the relationship between language and literacy.

Any dictionary of words and terms is inevitably highly selective; indeed, it is especially characteristic of debates at the interface of language and literacy that there will be considered

to be omissions from any list of key words such as this, and that certain topics will be considered to be treated either in insufficient detail or in too great a degree of detail.

Certainly, there are words which have proved central to literacy debates in Britain. One such word is 'expert', a term of disparagement of the professional teacher or teacher educator in language and literacy (unless the expert represents an acceptable point of view) and widely used in the discourses of politicians and certain sections of the British press; another is the word 'discipline' which slips in the meanings constructed for it from that of an almost military code of behaviour (felt by 'traditionalists' to be lacking in schools) to that of a subject 'discipline' such as English (which, for many sections of the press and for government ministers in Britain, is not a subject because 'trendy' teaching methods do not foster appropriately disciplined approaches to learning). It will be seen, too, how similar inflections for 'progressive' and 'trendy', 'orthodox' and 'traditional' could be explored. For example, 'traditional' is rarely exemplified, perhaps because its primary association is with a nostalgia for some previous 'golden age' in which teaching and learning English was an ordered, uniform process. (Wherever possible, however, terms which have specifically linguistic roots or outcomes are the starting points for definitions and descriptions.)

In one sense this may be a timely book since, as the quotation from Gramsci on the foregoing page of extracts illustrates, issues of language appear to come to the fore at moments of national crisis. It is perhaps therefore no accident that the issue of standard and proper English should surface again in the late 1980s and early 1990s since those years encompass a historical shift in the identity of the country which has been given a particular impetus by the question of the extent to which Britain properly belongs inside Europe. They are years in which the question of what it is to be British is at the centre of national consciousness. They are also years in which forces of centralisation, manifested in particular in centralised educational planning through a

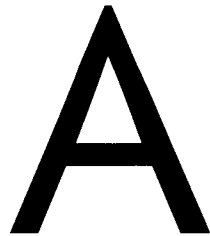
national curriculum, were gathered in part at least to counter what was perceived by a Conservative government to be the threat of local, regional, multilingual and multicultural fragmentation. An insistence on a homogenous, codified and unifying standard English becomes in such a context an index of order in a world of increasing diversity and 'disorder' from which traditional (Victorian) moral and social values appear to have departed.

In this respect this whole book illustrates what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls the centripetal and centrifugal forces in language and society. Centripetal forces in language push towards a unitary language system and cultural and political centralisation. The centrifugal forces work against the centripetal forces and push towards variation, diversity and disunification. Bakhtin points out that it is this opposition which keeps language alive but that both forces are always detectable, as many of the entries in this book indicate, even though at particular moments in history one or the other may appear to be in the ascendant.

This book has been put together over a number of years and has been influenced by books and people too numerous to mention. Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, though more explicitly an exercise in socio-historical semantics, is an obvious source of inspiration. My work on the LINC (Language in the National Curriculum) project has also served to sharpen understanding of a number of words which were endlessly recycled during the life of that project. Though I owe a particular debt of understanding to the many colleagues, especially the regional coordinators with whom I had the pleasure of working during that time, particular thanks must go to Rebecca Bunting and John Richmond for comments on parts of this manuscript, to John Richmond for allowing me to use material which was jointly written and to John Harris and Jeff Wilkinson who worked with me on a LINC glossary on which I have, in places, drawn for the purpose of this book. The success of the LINC project with teachers and its lasting contribution to their understanding of language is proportionate to the British government's

disapproval of the project. In this limited respect, the book is therefore a testimony to the LINC project and to the competing discourses which it and similar projects continue to generate.

Ronald Carter  
Nottingham, May 1994



## **accent**

### **Glottal stops ain't allowed no more**

The latest suggestion that schoolchildren should speak Standard English – even in the playground's rough and tumble – has generally been received as a good thing by the world of adults.

From the age of five, the nation's children may now be encouraged to pick up their aitches and drop the ubiquitous glottal stops, *ain'ts* and other manifestations of non-U grammar. With regional accents allowed to remain, the result is likely to be that BBC English is once again a model for the nation.

*(Times Educational Supplement, 25 September 1992)*

The term 'accent' refers to those features of pronunciation which identify a person either geographically or socially. A geographical accent can be associated with a specific town or city (e.g. Liverpool, New York) or a particular region (e.g. Texas) or with national groups speaking the same language (e.g. Australian). It can also show whether a speaker is a native speaker of a language. For example, 'She speaks French with an English accent.'

Social accents relate more to social and educational back-

ground. An example of this in Britain is *Received Pronunciation* (RP), commonly known as 'BBC', 'posh', or 'Oxford' English. This is a geographically neutral accent in so far as speakers using it do not betray their geographical origins. It is, however, often associated with public schools and professional uses and tends to be a local accent in several parts of southern England, especially in areas surrounding London. Because of its geographical neutrality, it is popularly but wrongly thought that people speaking in RP have no accent. In terms of a linguistic description of accent, everyone has an accent, which may be geographical or social or both and vary according to the speaker's situation.

RP is the model of pronunciation which figures prominently in courses for the teaching of English as a foreign or second language and is the preferred model in a number of countries overseas. Increasingly, however, the model is seen as simply one of many national accents, and other native-speaker accents, such as Australian and American English, are being taught in contexts where it had previously been assumed that there was only one correct form of pronunciation. The choice of pronunciation model, as well as the variety of international English taught, is also an ideological choice. Language learners in several countries pride themselves on the greater sense of national identity conferred by speaking English with an Indian or a Nigerian or a Singaporean accent.

The sociolinguistic situation in Britain regarding accent variation is not dissimilar. An RP accent may be geographically neutral but it has a marked social significance, being associated, in particular, with its normally more upper-class speakers. Much sociolinguistic research (e.g. Trudgill, 1983, 1984) has underlined the extent to which speakers either aspire or at least orient to an RP accent in most formal contexts of language use, such as answering the telephone or in interviews. The phenomenon of hypercorrection neatly illustrates this point. Hypercorrection is the tendency to over-correct low-prestige vowels with high-prestige vowels even when they are not needed. It leads to the conversion of

standard English words such as plastic into 'plarstic'. It leads to people fearful of nuclear emissions convinced that not even a gas-mask but a new kind of 'gars-mask' will be needed.

Advertisers are, as always, linguistically sensitive to such phenomena. For example, the accents used to overlay many current television and radio advertisements betray some fundamental British social attitudes towards accent variation. Thus, a Standard English accent (predominantly received pronunciation) is used to sell banking and insurance policies, lean cuisine ready meals, expensive liqueurs and exotic holidays; regional accents are used to market beers, especially cider, holidays in inclement British coastal resorts and wholesome foods such as 'bootiful' turkeys from Norfolk and wholemeal bread which is either 'ot from t'oven' or 'wi' nowt taken out'. Given the connection between Standard English, 'proper accents', purity and cleanliness it may not be surprising to learn that in Britain bleach is marketed in RP accents. Dialects may coexist with the marketing of washing powders but hardly ever with the marketing of the more deeply cleansing properties of bleach.

In the teaching of National Curriculum English in British schools strong emphasis is placed on Standard English and on the clear and comprehensible use of Standard English in writing and in speech. Because of the clear connection of Standard English (as a prestige variety of English) with RP (as a prestige accent of English), it is, however, but a short step from correction of writing of pupils' non-standard dialects to correction of pupils' non-standard accents. Research evidence underlines that overcorrection of the speech of very young children can result in a low self-image, lack of confidence and linguistic confusion during crucial years of language development.

Even though it is widely recognised that Standard English can be spoken with any accent, for example, that standard English spoken in a Scots accent or a Lancashire accent is still Standard English, the notion that there are rules of 'pure' pronunciation and a single correct accent is not easily eroded. The situation is not helped by the existence, as noted above,



of RP as an accent which has considerable international currency. A balanced view is one which recognises the importance of the need to preserve self-confidence and a sense of linguistic identity alongside the facilitating of clear communication. The difficulties in achieving this balance are neatly illustrated, however, by the quotation from the *Times Educational Supplement* which is at the head of this entry. Apart from a basic confusion between accent (matter of pronunciation such as 'aitches' and 'glottal stops') and grammar ('ain't'), the statement can be further confusing for teachers for whom it is written by suggesting a more rigid opposition between standard and non-standard Englishes than is either desirable or is matched by the linguistic reality of contemporary Britain.

*See also* **dialect, proper, purism**

*Further reading* Coggle, 1993; Honey, 1989; Trudgill, 1975

**applied linguistics** Applied linguistics is the application of linguistic theories, descriptions and methods to the solution of language problems which have arisen in a range of human, cultural and social contexts. One of its main uses is in the exploration of problems in language learning and teaching and, for many, the term is used with almost exclusive reference to this field. However, the term 'applied linguistics' is used in relation to other fields, such as: literary studies (stylistics); translation studies; lexicography; language planning; as well as being specific to other 'applied' branches of linguistics such as clinical linguistics and critical linguistics. Ideally, applied linguists should work alongside other professionals in the exploration of language problems or difficulties so that the applications of linguistics are the result of a genuine synthesis rather than one in which answers are found only according to an agenda provided by the linguist.

*See also* **educational linguistics, stylistics**

*Further reading* Carter, 1993; Hasan and Williams (eds), forthcoming; Richards *et al.*, 1993; Widdowson, 1989

**appropriate** In many public discussions the term ‘appropriate’ is opposed to the term ‘correct’. Appropriateness or appropriacy is a sociolinguistic concept which stresses that language varies according to the social context in which it is used. The term is used to describe any variety or forms of language which are judged to be suitable or possible within a particular situation. Thus, contracted forms such as ‘I would’ve’ or elisions such as ‘I wanna’ are appropriate in most contexts of informal speech, in some informal written contexts and for the representation of informal speech in writing. More prescriptive accounts of language consider the notion of appropriacy to be unduly relativistic, preferring to regard particular language forms as correct or incorrect irrespective of the social situation.

*See also* **proper**

*Further reading* Trudgill, 1984

**author(ship)** The concept of authorship is central to romantic philosophies of English teaching. Within such philosophies what is imaginative and literary about language, which stems from the creative unconscious of an individual author, is also, in turn, central. Authors express personal, individual visions which are uniquely theirs. Whereas in some pre-industrial cultures creativity is collective and the production of literary works often anonymous, romantic conceptions of creativity arise in part in opposition to a perceived impersonality in industrialised cultures and assert the originality of the individual voice.

As far as literacy practices are concerned, such privileging of the individual author and of unconscious and mysterious creative processes results in high value being placed both on

the study of literary texts and on creative writing. Such an emphasis can also produce assumptions that appreciation of literature is best intuited rather than too explicitly taught and that genuinely creative writing cannot be taught. Consequently, the craft of writing is not prioritised, the writing of personal narratives is preferred to impersonal reports and writers are encouraged to find their own unique 'voice' as writers. Correspondingly, too, the human voice is associated with speech which is in turn assumed to be a more natural, personal, spontaneous, truthful and less contrived form of language. The most successfully authored texts are then those which most closely approximate the spoken language. Such a philosophy applied to language development results in relatively restricted genres of writing and a rather limited view of writing development. For example, writing for the world of work outside school often needs to be impersonal and instrumental, with the personal voice of the individual author reduced.

Advocates of the central importance of authorship to English teaching stress, however, that learning is at its most effective, especially in processes of writing, when writing is not a blind transcription of existing forms and content but when an individual imprint is placed on the writing. Writing to learn through recording unique experience is a key element in learning to write. A number of specific examples relevant to this entry and including texts written by children can be found in the entry for **genre**.

*See also* **genre, literary language, literature, narrative, personal growth, romantics and reactionaries**

*Further reading* Gilbert, 1989,1990; Graves, 1983; Luke, 1988