

# The Handbook of English Linguistics

Edited by

*Bas Aarts and  
April McMahon*



# The Handbook of English Linguistics

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April McMahon*

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To my parents  
Flor Aarts and Sjë Aarts-Postmes





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# 1 Introduction

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BAS AARTS AND APRIL MCMAHON

When you picked up this book you may have been struck by the phrase *English Linguistics* (EL) on the cover. What is English Linguistics? Is it like other areas of linguistics, on a par with psycholinguistics, computational linguistics, cognitive linguistics, forensic linguistics, or other topics in the Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics series? Or is it perhaps linguistics as practiced in England by the English? In both cases the answer is 'no.' We define English Linguistics as a discipline that concerns itself with the study of all aspects of Present-Day English (PDE) from a variety of different angles, both descriptive and theoretical, but with a methodological outlook firmly based on the working practices developed in modern contemporary linguistics. EL arguably includes diachronic studies, though we have chosen not to include papers from this domain in this *Handbook*, mainly because there is a separate *Handbook of the history of English* (edited by Ans van Kemenade and Bettelou Los).

The phrase *English Linguistics* is not a recent one, and can be traced back at least to a number of publications that have it in their titles, e.g. Harold Byron Allen (1966) (ed.) *Linguistics and English linguistics: a bibliography* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), R. C. Alston (1974) (ed.) *English linguistics: 1500–1800* (London: The Scolar Press), and John P. Broderick (1975) *Modern English linguistics: a structural and transformational grammar* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.). However, as these titles show, the phrase is either used in a very wide sense, as in Allen's and Alston's books, or quite narrowly, as in Broderick's.

In its present-day sense it is probably the case that the label *English Linguistics* is used more in Europe than in other parts of the world. In North America there are programs and courses in EL, but, as Bob Stockwell points out to us "I do not believe there exists in North America a field 'English Linguistics' that can be administratively defined. By 'administratively defined' I mean something like a faculty, a department, an interdepartmental program that is separately budgeted, or an independent research center. The field exists as a concept, as a set of shared research interests."

Things are quite different on the other side of the Atlantic. In the UK, while there are no Departments of English Linguistics, there is a university Department of English Language in Glasgow, and there are a number of departments which have both 'Linguistics' and 'English Language' in their titles (e.g. Bangor, Edinburgh, Lancaster, Manchester, Sheffield, Sussex). In addition, there are several research units dedicated to research in EL, as well as a number of academics whose title is Professor of English Linguistics. Of course, there are also many Departments of English Language and Literature, but in these units English literary studies are usually the main focus of interest.

On the continent of Europe the English language is mostly studied in departments of English which have two or three sub-departments, including language, literature and medieval studies. These departments often have names that includes the label 'philology,' e.g. *Seminar/Institut/Fachrichtung für Englische Philologie* or *Departamento de Filología Inglesa*, though this seems to be changing, and we also find *Seminar für Englische/Anglistische Sprachwissenschaft* and *Vakgroep Engelse Taalkunde*. Linguists in these departments, apart from doing research, also often teach English-language skills, such as writing, pronunciation, etc.

In the wider academic community there are a number of journals specifically devoted to the English language: the *Journal of English Linguistics* (Sage, since 1972), *English Linguistics* (Kaitakusha, since 1983) and *English Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press, since 1997). In addition there are also now several specialist conferences in EL. For those interested in the history of English there's the bi-annual International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL), while the more recent International Conference on the Linguistics of Contemporary English caters for those interested in PDE. Computer-oriented studies are the focus of the annual ICAME (International Computer Archive of Modern and Medieval English) conference.

The demonstrable fact that there is a field of English Linguistics with its own identity in terms of research interests does not, however, mean that this field is inward looking, or that its findings are irrelevant to colleagues working on other languages. Many general linguistic innovations can be traced to research on English: think of Chomsky and Halle's *Sound Pattern of English*; or the big reference grammars of English; or Labov's pioneering sociolinguistic investigations of the Lower East Side in New York. Influence from these works has spread to inspire descriptions and theoretical analyses of other languages: at least in some cases, it seems that English Linguistics sneezes, and general linguistics catches cold. Likewise, EL is sensitive to developments in other fields both within and beyond linguistics; the mention of the ICAME conferences above recalls the considerable influence which the construction and use of corpora has had in both historical and synchronic studies of English. At the same time, however, EL has been characterized by a sensitive awareness of variation; a focus on fine-grained description; and approaches which are informed by history, both as change in the language and change in the discipline, even when they are not explicitly or overtly historical or historicizing themselves.

The confluence of many traditions and approaches in EL means both a diverse range of possible audiences (a point to which we return below), and many possible ways of constructing and dividing coverage of the field. There is certainly no single, agreed syllabus, as it were, which determines the particular chapters and areas to be included in a book such as this one; and many traditionally recognized disciplinary divisions are rather fluid, so that while we have a section on syntax and another on lexis and morphology, there might equally have been a case for a composite section on morphosyntax. Some readers might take issue with the treatment of English phonetics, surely a particularly broad subject area, within a single chapter, while prosodic phonology and intonation are allowed to take up two. Phonological variation might equally have been in this phonetics and phonology section, whereas we have in fact located it in a separate grouping of chapters on variation, discourse, and stylistics. Similarly, we might have opted for a chapter on English syntax, say, from each of a number of theoretical perspectives, such as minimalism, LFG, cognitive and construction grammar. There are, it is true, certain theoretical *Zeitgeist* effects (like the presence of a good deal of Optimality Theory in the phonology chapters); but authors in general balance their theoretical predilections with accounts of the particular phenomena which are specific to English, but of more general theoretical relevance, in each domain.

Our decision in formulating the contents for this *Handbook* was to confront the various tensions within EL head-on, by commissioning chapters that deal with them: hence, our first part is on methodology, and includes chapters on description and theory; on data collection; on the use of corpora; and on the development and historical context of grammar writing. Although diachronic research is covered in our sister *Handbook of the History of English*, we have sought to maintain and encourage the historical awareness which we see as characteristic of EL, so that readers will find chapters on syntactic change in progress, and syntactic and phonological variation, along with an engagement with historical facts and legacies in the chapters on phonology and morphology, productivity, and English words, for example. After all, the history of the language has shaped its present, and is partly responsible for the fine line linguists attempt to tread between what is regular, patterned, and amenable to theoretical analysis on the one side, and the exceptions, language-specific oddities, and relic forms on the other.

Our selection of chapters is, unavoidably, driven partly by considerations of space, as well as by whether research in a specific area has been particularly colored by the fact that its data are from English. The prominence of dictionary writing in the history of English has led to the inclusion of a chapter on lexicography; likewise, the coverage of syntax is driven by the constructions and grammatical/semantic areas which may be encountered in English and not necessarily elsewhere, though they may also raise points of more general theoretical and typological interest. We have opted to cover English usage, differences between spoken and written English, and the interface between language and literature, since these are areas characterized by productive

ongoing research and findings of general interest and relevance. But the same could be said of first or second language acquisition, where many pioneering studies have involved English; or of English in education; or of the development of new Englishes. Arguably, the one possible dichotomy we have not addressed explicitly through the structure of the *Handbook* is the equally amorphous one between theoretical and applied linguistics; again, considerations of space mean there must be some compromises, and we have only been able to dip a toe in the waters of variation and ongoing change with the chapters in our final section.

We hope this *Handbook* will be of use to colleagues and students in English Linguistics, who may be working on a specific area of syntax, say, but wish to update their knowledge of other aspects of the language and of current approaches to it. Each chapter is a self-contained summary of key data and issues in a particular area of the field, and should be accessible to advanced undergraduate or graduate students who are seeking an initial overview; a suggestion of where some of the unanswered questions are; and a list of readings to turn to as the next step. The chapters are relatively short, so that decisions have had to be made on what each author can include, but these decisions are flagged clearly in each case. This joint focus on data, description, and theoretical analysis means that chapters will also be useful for readers who work on other languages or are primarily concerned with particular theoretical models, and who wish to acquaint themselves with English data and with accounts inspired by such data. The introductory, methodological chapters, and the balance and interplay throughout between the more theoretical chapters focusing on a single area of the grammar, and the more global, later chapters dealing with issues of usage and variation, also make this *Handbook* relevant and potentially provocative reading for colleagues who already see themselves as working in English Linguistics, but who wish to contextualize their understanding of their field of research. Finally, although we have not sought contributions on particular varieties of English, the wide geographical spread of our authors ensures that attention is paid to the richness and diversity of English data. This perhaps highlights a further tension between the variation which we acknowledge and can increasingly exploit through corpus studies, for example, and the rather monolithic datasets sometimes used in particular theoretical approaches.

Tensions and oppositions have been mentioned at various points through this introduction – between broad description of a range of phenomena and deep, detailed theoretical analysis of a small number of facts; multiple, variable datasets and *the* English pattern; usage and documentation; history and the here and now. However, we certainly do not want to present English Linguistics as a field riven with division, disagreement, and factions; on the contrary, the field often seems a particularly harmonious and welcoming one. But tension can be a force for the good; physical tension holds up bridges, after all. The crucial thing is to be aware of the potential tensions and areas of disagreement, and to debate them openly; and this has been a characteristic of the best work



in English Linguistics. It is to such lively, scholarly, and collegial debates that we hope this *Handbook* will continue to contribute.

We would like to thank all those who have helped with the production of this *Handbook*. In particular, we owe our authors a special, if obvious, debt of gratitude for their enthusiastic participation in the project; their (mainly) timely delivery of their chapters; and their good-humoured and swift attention to the comments of reviewers. We also thank these reviewers, some, though not all, authors themselves, for their involvement and for their detailed, careful, and sensible reports. Leaving author-reviewers aside, we wish to thank in particular Paul Buitelaar, Noël Burton-Roberts, Jenny Cheshire, Bernard Comrie, Bill Croft, Teresa Fanego, Susan Hunston, Koenraad Kuiper, Knud Lambrecht, Lynne Murphy, Frank Palmer, Carson T. Schütze, Peter Trudgill, and Richard Xiao. We are also grateful to our editors at Blackwell for commissioning the volume and seeing it cheerfully through the process thus far, and to our copy editor. Finally, we thank all those colleagues and students with whom we have debated the existence, health, definition, and future of English Linguistics; we have appreciated the many reminders of how friendly and vibrant a field this is, and why we enjoy working as part of it.

Bas Aarts, London  
April McMahon, Edinburgh  
November 2005



# Part I      Methodology

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# 2 Description and Theory

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KERSTI BÖRJARS

## 1 Introduction

As reflected in many chapters in this book, English is probably the most well-studied language in the history of linguistics, so that there is a vast pool of examples of both excellent description and insightful theoretical analysis to be found in the literature. Still, concepts like ‘description’ and ‘theory’ are anything but clear. The issue of what the defining characteristics of a ‘theory’ are has received a lot of attention in philosophy and the history of science. However, in terms of distinguishing a theory from a description, that literature is not terribly helpful. Even though ‘theory’ may appear to be the more complex of the two notions, there are issues also with what constitutes a description of a language.

## 2 The Description of English

A description of any language should contain an inventory of the building blocks; sounds and morphemes, roughly. It should also contain the rules for how those elements can be combined; phonotactic constraints, information about which differences between sounds are distinctive, how morphemes can be combined to form words, and how words can be combined to form phrases. In spite of the attention that the language has received, no complete description of English in this sense has yet been provided. To take but one example, even though there are many insightful descriptions of the English passive, the exact rules that allow for sentences such as *This road has been walked on* have not been provided. The view of a grammatical description just described coincides with the original conception of a ‘generative’ grammar. A generative grammar in that sense takes the building blocks of a language and ‘generates’ all and only the grammatical sentences of that language. Needless to say, no complete such grammar has been defined, not for English and not for any other language.

Associated with the question of what constitutes a description of English is the question of what such a description describes. Traditionally, the object of description has been a variety of English referred to as the 'standard.' Many grammars of course aim not only to *describe* this variety, but also to *prescribe* it; to describe a variety which native speakers of English should aim to follow. Even though modern grammars of English such as Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002) avoid prescriptivism, descriptions which aim also to prescribe are still prevalent, as witness the popularity of books such as Trask (2002). Descriptions of varieties of English other than the standard do, however, also have a long tradition. There are many good grammars of geographical dialects within Britain (for examples and references, see for instance Hughes and Trudgill 1980, Milroy and Milroy 1993), the US (e.g. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998) and to some extent Australia and New Zealand (e.g. Burridge and Mulder 1998). See also Kortmann (this volume). Increasingly, varieties of English which have arisen in countries where English has not traditionally been the first language are also considered varieties in their own right and are described as such and not as examples of "English not used properly." This has led to an area of study known as World Englishes (e.g. Trudgill and Hannah 2002).

A description of a language, regardless of how one selects the particular variety, has to be based on data and a further issue involved in description is how to select these data. Although most descriptions rely on a mixture of types of data collection, a number of types can be distinguished. These are described in more detail in Meyer and Nelson (ch. 5, this volume), but given the direct way in which they impact on the relation between data and theory, we will discuss them briefly here. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages, and all of them involve some degree of idealization.

An approach that has not been uncommon in descriptions and in theoretical work is introspection; the author of the description considers whether he or she would accept a particular pronunciation, a particular phrase or sentence and uses these judgments as a basis for the description. An advantage of this approach might be that a linguistically trained person can provide more subtle judgments, whereas non-trained native speakers might find it difficult to make the distinction between 'is grammatical' and 'makes sense,' a distinction which is crucial both for description and theory.<sup>1</sup> The disadvantages of this approach are, however, also obvious; even trained linguists might not have a good awareness of what they actually say. There are examples of linguistic articles in which a construction is attested which is claimed in the description or in the analysis not to exist.

The introspective approach is particularly dangerous in theoretical work within a particular framework, where the desire to provide a neat analysis within the favored theory may cloud the linguist's native speaker intuitions. A more reliable way of collecting the data is to elicit grammaticality judgments from a group of native speakers or to get their judgments in a more subtle way through picture description tasks or similar processes. In an approach