



# Linguistics at School

Language Awareness in  
Primary and Secondary Education

EDITED BY  
Kristin Denham  
and Anne Lobeck

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## Linguistics at School

Linguistics is a subject that has remained largely confined to the academy, rather than being integrated into school curricula. This is unfortunate but not surprising as, although some teacher education programs include courses on linguistics, it is not comprehensively integrated into teacher education, so it is largely absent from the curriculum.

This volume brings together a team of leaders in the field of linguistics and education, to provide an overview of the current state of research and practice. It demonstrates changes which can be made to teaching, such as revising teachers' preparation, developing and implementing practical applications of linguistics in both primary and secondary classrooms, partnering linguists with classroom teachers, and working to improve state and national education standards. The contributors emphasize the importance of collaboration between professional linguists and educators in order to meet a common goal: to raise awareness of the workings of language.

### **The editors**

KRISTIN DENHAM is Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at Western Washington University. Her work includes articles on theoretical syntax and linguistics in education and she is co-editor with Anne Lobeck of *Language in Schools: Integrating Linguistic Knowledge into K-12 Education* (2005). Denham and Lobeck are also co-authors of *Linguistics for Everyone: An Introduction* (2009).

ANNE LOBECK is Professor of English and Linguistics at Western Washington University. Her work includes articles on theoretical syntax and linguistics in education, and in addition to her two books with Kristin Denham she is author of *Ellipsis: Functional Heads, Licensing and Identification* (1995) and *Discovering Grammar: An Introduction to English Sentence Structure* (2000).



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## Notes on contributors

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JEAN ANN is an associate professor of Linguistics at the State University of New York, Oswego. Her research concerns the relationship between linguistics and K-12 teaching, L2 sound systems, TESOL in urban schools, and the structure and use of sign languages. She conducts professional development with ESL/bilingual teachers. Her recent publications include a book about Taiwan Sign Language handshapes and an article about urban education.

EDWIN BATTISTELLA is Professor of English and Writing at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, where he served as Dean of the School of Arts and Letters and as Interim Provost. His publications include four books: *Markedness: The Evaluative Superstructure of Language* (1990), *The Logic of Markedness* (1996), *Bad Language: Are Some Words Better Than Others?* (2005), and *Do You Make These Mistakes in English? The Story of Sherwin Cody's Famous Language School* (2008). Battistella's work has also appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, and the *Vocabula Review*, and he is currently the co-editor-in-chief of Wiley-Blackwell's *Language and Linguistic Compass*.

DEIDRE CARLSON taught in a public elementary school setting for eighteen years before becoming a private school teacher. She holds degrees in English and Education. She is currently working on the curriculum for Fairhaven Girls' School in Bellingham, Washington, and is excited about developing a strong linguistics program within that curriculum.

DAN CLAYTON teaches English Language A-level to 16–18-year-olds at St. Francis Xavier Sixth Form College in south London and is an A-level examiner. He runs a Language blog aimed at students and teachers of English Language (<http://englishlangsfx.blogspot.com/>) and has been involved in forging links between university linguists and A-level teachers with a series of conferences and workshops.

KRISTIN DENHAM is Associate Professor of Linguistics in the English Department at Western Washington University. Her current research focus is

on the integration of linguistics into K-12 education. She and Anne Lobeck received a National Science Foundation grant for the integration of linguistics in education, and they are also co-editors of *Language in the Schools: Integrating Linguistic Knowledge into K-12 Teaching* (2005). They are co-authors of *Linguistics for Everyone* (2009), an introductory linguistics textbook, as well as other textbooks for teachers.

IVAN DERZHANSKI has been the principal person in charge of the extracurricular activities in linguistics for secondary school students in Bulgaria since 1998. He is one of the founders of the International Olympiad in Linguistics and a key member of its organizing committee, problem committee, and jury. He has authored over fifty linguistic problems.

LEATHA FIELDS-CAREY teaches English at Johnston County Middle College High School in Smithfield, North Carolina. She has taught for sixteen years with the Johnston County school system and is certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

MAYA HONDA is an associate professor of Human Development at Wheelock College in Boston. Her work in linguistics education focuses on making linguistic inquiry conceptually accessible to all students. She is co-author with Wayne O'Neil of *Understanding First and Second Language Acquisition* (2004) and *Thinking Linguistically: A Scientific Approach to Language* (2008).

RICHARD HUDSON's interest in educational linguistics started in the 1960s while working with Michael Halliday and continued as a sideline through a career at University College London in descriptive and theoretical linguistics. He continues to build bridges between linguistics and schools, such as downloadable material on grammar for teachers at [www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/education.htm](http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/education.htm).

RAY JACKENDOFF is Seth Merrin Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. His primary research is on the semantics of human languages and its connections to the conceptual system and to linguistic expression. He was 2003 President of the Linguistic Society of America and also the 2003 recipient of the Jean Nicod Prize in Cognitive Philosophy. His books include *Foundations of Language* and *Language, Consciousness, Culture*.

SHARON KLEIN is a professor of Linguistics in the English Department and Linguistics/TESL Program at California State University, Northridge. She has worked and taught in several areas of educational linguistics, with a commitment to raising preparing teachers' awareness both of aspects of language itself and of the nature of linguistics as a critical field of inquiry.

ANNE LOBECK is Professor of English at Western Washington University. Her publications include *Discovering Grammar: An Introduction to English Sentence Structure* (2000), and as co-editor with Kristin Denham, of *Language in the Schools: Integrating Linguistic Knowledge into K-12 Teaching* (2005). Lobeck and Denham are also co-principal investigators on a National Science Foundation grant to improve linguistics education in elementary and secondary schools.

CAROL LORD has a joint appointment at California State University Long Beach as Associate Professor in the Department of Teacher Education and the Department of Linguistics. Her research interests include literacy development, language issues in content area assessment, grammaticalization, and African languages. A former public school teacher, she is currently investigating the efficacy of electronic books in after-school programs for struggling readers.

KARREN MAYER has worked twenty-six years as a kindergarten, 1st-, and 2nd-grade teacher, and currently serves as a communication skills specialist for Norfolk Public Schools, working with K-5 students. She also does ongoing staff development with teachers. She is currently working at Larchmont Elementary in Norfolk, Virginia. She received a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and a master of science degree in Education, specializing in reading.

ATHENA McNULTY is an 8th-grade English teacher at Cascade Middle School in Sedro-Woolley, Washington. She has a BA in English, and an MA in Teaching, both from Western Washington University, where, as part of her BA degree, Athena took linguistics courses from Anne Lobeck. McNulty and Lobeck worked together as partner teachers at Cascade Middle School in 2007.

JEAN MULDER is a senior lecturer in the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. Her research ranges over educational linguistics, language documentation, and grammatical and discourse analysis, covering a variety of languages including Australian English, Sm'algyax (Canada), Ganalbingu (Australia), siSwati (Swaziland), Cree (Canada), and the Philippine languages.

DEBRA MYHILL is Professor of Education at the University of Exeter, and Head of the School of Education. Her research interests focus principally on aspects of language and literacy teaching, including underachievement, equality issues, children's writing, and talk in the classroom. She is the author of *Better Writers* (2001), *Talking, Listening, Learning: Effective Talk in the Primary Classroom* (2006), and the *Handbook of Writing Development* (forthcoming).

KIRSTIN NEW has worked as a 1st- and 2nd-grade teacher and as a communication skills specialist for Norfolk Public Schools. She is currently working as a

literacy teacher at Larchmont Elementary School in Norfolk, Virginia. She received a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and a master of science degree in Education, specializing in reading.

WAYNE O'NEIL is Professor of Linguistics at MIT and an instructor in human development at Wheelock College, working on linguistics in the school curriculum and second-language acquisition. With Maya Honda, he is co-author of *Understanding First and Second Language Acquisition* (2004) and *Thinking Linguistically* (2007). O'Neil has long been connected with educational practice: at Oregon Curriculum Study Project (1962–1966), at Harvard University (1965–1973; 1977–1986), and at Wheelock College (1991–).

THOMAS PAYNE is a linguistics consultant with SIL International, and general co-chair of the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad. He has done major linguistic fieldwork on North American, South American, and Austronesian languages. He is the founder of the US Linguistics Olympiad and an advisory board member of the International Linguistics Olympiad.

LONG PENG is an associate professor of Linguistics at the State University of New York, Oswego. His research focuses on phonology and education. The phenomena he has studied span languages from Kikuyu, Warao, and Taiwan Sign Language to Hong Kong and Singapore English, Nigerian English, and English of Spanish speakers. His work in education concentrates on linguistics in K-12 schools, urban education, and education research.

DAVID PIPPIN teaches English and boatbuilding at Billings Middle School in Seattle, Washington and has taught for eighteen years in both public and private schools at the elementary and middle school levels. It was a need to bring a constructivist pedagogy to the English curriculum that led him to the field nine years ago. Formal training came at the 2005 Linguistics Society of America's summer institute.

JEFFREY REASER is an assistant professor in the teacher education and linguistics programs at NC State University. His primary research involves developing, implementing, and measuring the effects of dialect awareness programs in the public schools. He is co-author of the *Do You Speak American?* and *Voices of North Carolina* curricula.

ANGELA ROH has been an educator in the public school system for the past eight years, and currently teaches language arts at Oliver M. Hazen High School in Renton, Washington. She holds bachelor's degrees in Linguistics and Secondary English Education, both earned at Western Washington University. She has also earned a master's degree from Lesley University in Educational Curriculum and Instruction.

SUZANNE SWEAT currently teaches Freshmen English at Clayton High School. She received her undergraduate degree in Journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her teaching certificate from East Carolina University.

JULIE SWEETLAND is a senior research associate at the Center for Inspired Teaching, where her current research projects focus on the nature of teaching and learning in District of Columbia public schools and the process of teacher change. Julie has several years of experience as a classroom teacher in a variety of urban contexts and a background in curriculum design. She is a graduate of Georgetown University, where she first got interested in educational linguistics, and holds an MS and Ph.D. in Linguistics from Stanford University.

CAROLINE THOMAS has been teaching English and ESL for over thirty years. A keen interest and studies in Linguistics at the University of Melbourne inspired her involvement in English Language. She has participated in its development as a teacher, examiner, co-author of a textbook, and provider of professional development and tutor.

GRAEME TROUSDALE is a senior lecturer in English Language at the University of Edinburgh. In addition to research interests in grammaticalization, Construction Grammar, and non-standard varieties of English, he is committed to work in educational linguistics, particularly that which involves collaboration with high school teachers and students across the United Kingdom.

SARA WAWER has been a teacher of English, French, and Hebrew in Government and Private Schools in Victoria for over thirty years. She majored in Linguistics in her Arts degree at Monash University and has gained a Masters of Educational Studies. Sara currently teaches English Language and mentors beginning teachers in this subject.

REBECCA WHEELER works with K-14 urban schools to bring linguistic insights and strategies to the dialectally diverse classroom. She is an associate professor of English Language and Literacy at Christopher Newport University in Virginia. Recent publications include *Code-switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms* (2006) and “Becoming Adept at Code-switching,” in *Educational Leadership: The Journal of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* (ASCD) (2008).

## Foreword: The challenge for education

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*Ray Jackendoff*

A few years ago, my daughter received a Master's degree in Education from a prestigious and progressive program, and the school district in which she had interned hired her immediately to teach third grade. My pride in her notwithstanding, I was astonished to learn that her training had included nothing at all about the contemporary understanding of language: the structure of English, the systematicity of dialects, the cognitive challenges faced by beginning readers and English language learners, and the sociology of language prejudice – issues that from a linguist's point of view are central to all levels of K-12 education.

By virtue of having grown up with a linguist in the house, my daughter did indeed have some exposure to these issues. But typically, classroom teachers do not. The teaching of the structure of language as part of language arts was largely abandoned in the US twenty-five years ago, so many teachers do not even have a background from their own primary and secondary education, as they do in science and math. Rather, they are simply left to deal with language problems in their classrooms in terms of what they – and their administrators and their students' parents – take to be common sense.

As linguists constantly stress in their introductory courses, people's "common sense" about language is far from accurate. Moreover, it often stands in the way of effective education in speaking, understanding, reading, and writing mainstream English. In turn, command of mainstream English is essential not only for its own sake, but also for success in every other subject, from history to science and mathematics, as well as for success in later professional settings.

For many years, a few linguists here and there have concerned themselves with these issues, collaborating with classroom teachers to try to inject some of the science of language – and the joy of exploring language – into K-12 curricula. Most of these efforts have been rather isolated and small-scale. But in the last decade, a community of researchers has begun to coalesce around the Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee of the Linguistic Society of America. Many of the same people are also active in the National Council of

Teachers of English, and for some years the two societies have sponsored successful joint symposia.

I am delighted to see in the present volume a cross-section of the exciting work being done in this community, as seen by linguists and also by the teacher educators and classroom teachers with whom they have collaborated.

Several important themes recur throughout the volume. Perhaps the most crucial is how essential it is to validate students' own languages and/or dialects. Many of the contributors stress that teaching mainstream English proves far more effective if the language can be viewed as a tool rather than a threat, intended to supplement rather than supplant students' customary linguistic practices. This change alone makes a major difference to students' growth in competence in the mainstream language, not to mention to their test scores.

Another striking theme is the value of learning about language by playing with it. Students love observing their language, experimenting with it, and comparing it systematically to other accents, other dialects, other languages, to language at home, in the street, in school, and in the media. Encouraging and capitalizing on such creative metalinguistic activity has benefits all across the spectrum, from reading and writing to critical thinking and problem solving.

Which leads to a third theme: The most natural application of linguistics is of course to language arts, where it helps underpin learning in speaking, reading, and writing. But it also can play a valuable role in social studies, where for instance the study of dialects can serve as a springboard for studying social stratification and the history of migration and settlement. Furthermore, the science of linguistics can serve as a low-tech example of empirical investigation and scientific theory-formation, in which students can find the data all around them, free for the picking.

Many of the projects discussed here are collaborations among a small group of linguists and teachers. The challenge they pose is how to extend their benefits to a larger cohort of students. There obviously can't be a linguist in every classroom. At least three tasks have to be addressed in tandem: winning broader public acceptance of these approaches to language teaching; creating self-standing classroom materials that teachers can use without the intervention of a partnering linguist; and finding ways to train teachers in the use of such materials, whether through schools of education, inservice workshops, or the internet. None of these three can really succeed without the others. Yet it can be done, as shown by the large-scale integrated language curricula in Great Britain and Australia, also presented in this volume.

An important key to these goals is getting teachers on board. On their own, linguists cannot develop K-12 curricula in language arts, social studies, and science. Teachers and teacher educators must be collaborators throughout the process. It will not be easy. Teachers often find they must overcome their own linguistic prejudices and insecurities. In addition, they face enormous pressures,



from parents, administrators, and even from state assessment requirements, to maintain the traditional approach to language study. But, as the chapters in this book show, with teachers and linguists working together, it is possible to shift language study to an approach informed by the science of natural language. Teachers who have learned to deal with language from this new perspective love it, and their students thrive.

All these issues came to the fore in a 2006 workshop on Linguistics in Education at Tufts University, co-hosted by the Center for Cognitive Studies and by Maryanne Wolf's Center for Reading and Language Research. The participants included many of the contributors to the present volume. The excitement generated by the workshop led to new collaborations and to a series of follow-up workshops organized by Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham, some of whose fruits appear here.

The overall goal of these efforts, of course, is to benefit our children and our society through the better teaching of language. The publication of this book is an important step toward this goal. I hope readers will be inspired to join the effort.



# Introduction

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*Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck*

Over the past thirty years, research in linguistics has led to a deeper understanding of language, and linguists have developed better analytic tools for describing the structure of words, phrases, and discourses – better theories of grammar. The scientific study of language, linguistics, has provided us with greater understanding of how languages are acquired, how they develop over time and space, what it means to be bilingual, how languages are similar to each other, and what accounts for their differences, among many other aspects of this uniquely human phenomenon. Nevertheless, the advances of linguistic science have remained largely confined to the academy, and many of us who teach linguistics still find that our students know very little about language. This lack of knowledge of language is unfortunate but not surprising; though some teacher education programs include courses on linguistics, linguistics is not comprehensively integrated into teacher education, and is thus largely absent in the K-12 curriculum. The chapters in the book show, however, that this tide is starting to turn; linguists are becoming more and more active in K-12 education in a variety of productive ways. You will also see from the chapters in this book that there is no “right” way to integrate linguistics into K-12 education. If we do have one message, it is that we linguists can’t do this alone; we need to collaborate with practicing teachers and work in partnership toward the common goal of improving language education.

## **The need to bridge theory and practice**

Much research has been conducted to identify ways in which raising awareness of language can be of use to K-12 teachers, and thus of benefit to their students. For example, the study of sentence structure (syntax), word formation (morphology), sound patterns (phonetics and phonology), and meaning (semantics) can aid in understanding and analyzing oral and written language (and sign language). Knowledge of syntax, phonology, and morphology deepens understanding of and provides tools to analyze distinctions among literary genres, stylistic choices, and cultural literacies, spelling patterns and irregularities, accent and pronunciation, etymology and vocabulary.

Knowledge of these fundamental areas of linguistics can be an important tool in analyzing reading and writing development and patterns of error. Knowledge of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse helps teachers identify and understand different conversational patterns and narrative structures (in oral, written, and signed language). Knowledge of differences in cross-cultural conversational practices can be of use in mitigating miscommunication that impedes learning. Knowledge of language acquisition can be applied in analyzing developmental patterns in writing and literacy in both first- and second-language readers and writers, and can help teachers distinguish between actual language disorders and what are perceived to be disorders that can in reality be attributed to second-language learning or dialect difference. Knowledge of language change and variation helps teachers respond in informed ways to differences between academic and home speech varieties in reading, writing, and speaking. Understanding that language varies and changes systematically helps situate “standard” and “non-standard” varieties of English in the classroom in reasoned rather than discriminatory ways. Studying language change and variation deepens our understanding of language as a dynamic system, expressed by shifts in word meaning, syntax, and pronunciation (the latter reflected in the English spelling system). Studying language as a social tool helps dispel myths and stereotypes based on language and fosters linguistic equality in an increasingly multicultural society. (See research compiled in Denham and Lobeck 2005; as well as in Adger, Snow, and Christian 2002; Baugh 1999; Wheeler 1999a, 1999b; Andrews 1998, Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Smitherman 2000; Delpit 1988; among others)

Educators are also acutely aware of the need for language study, though the goals for its integration and implementation in the classroom are typically different from those of linguists. These goals include accountability requirements that demand that students demonstrate high level literacy skills (Abedi 2004), an increased focus on writing which calls for expert control of text and sentence structure, as well as vocabulary, and state assessments that demand expert reading skills. Further, although some of the unique linguistic demands associated with the content areas have been identified (e.g., Lee and Fradd 1996; Abedi and Lord 2001), educators’ lack of understanding of language leads to inaccurate assessments of and responses to English language learners and other students whose academic language skills lag behind their social language skills (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian 2004; Heath 1983; Short 1994). Improving teaching and learning for these students often involves revising linguistic practices, texts, and knowledge about second language learning (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2004). In addition, the possible role of dialect differences in the persistent achievement gap between Black and White students is often mentioned but

not well understood. Indeed, there is a high degree of politicization with respect to language use in school about which the public, including teachers, is often naive, as witness conversations during the Oakland Ebonics controversy that referenced myths about dialects more often than scientific information (Vaughn-Cooke 1999). Teachers therefore need a broad understanding about the structure of language and its use to help their students understand how language works so that they can use it well for reading, writing, and speaking in the increasingly multicultural and multilingual classroom (Fillmore and Snow 2002). Nevertheless, though widely used English Education textbooks in the US (Christenbury 2000; Atwell 1998) include chapters on dialect diversity and discuss the value of home language, it appears that primary and secondary teachers continue to rely on traditional approaches to language, approaches that are inconsistent with what we now know about language structure, variation, change, acquisition, and use as a social tool.

### **Some roadblocks**

Given linguists' and educators' joint commitment to the importance of the study of language in the K-12 curriculum it is perhaps surprising that research in linguistics has had only a minimal impact on school teaching. The reasons for this state of affairs are complex. Linguistics is a donor discipline to English language arts. In addition to supplying knowledge about the subsystems of language, it has helped to shape the knowledge base on reading, writing, speaking, and listening (e.g., Farr and Daniel 1986; Labov 1970; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999). But the connection between linguistics and English language arts has not been as strong as it should be, particularly with regard to grammar, a language process that underlies language production and comprehension. Linguistics' decades-long focus on generative syntax (e.g., Chomsky 1965, 1981, 1995) has had little impact on grammar study in colleges of education and in schools. Linguistics and English language arts have had different views of what grammar is and should be, and different goals for its use. Linguists have sought to build a grammar that would be adequate for describing the language, and English language arts has sought to apply a grammar that is already constructed. It is perhaps not surprising that there continues to be longstanding debate over the efficacy of teaching grammar in primary and secondary school, based on early controversial studies that claimed that grammar teaching was ineffective in teaching writing (see discussion cited in Hartwell 1985 and, for updates, Weaver 1996). Connections between linguistics and other curricular areas (history, social studies, science) are virtually non-existent, largely because of the public resistance to identifying linguistics as a science, and because, with a few

notable exceptions (publication in 1995 of Steven Pinker's popular *The Language Instinct* and the weekly commentary by linguist Geoffrey Nunberg on National Public Radio), linguistics remains largely confined to the academy (Battistella 2005).

### **The importance of an eclectic approach**

It is our belief that in order to truly integrate linguistically informed instruction into education, we must approach the task from all angles: targeting teacher preparation, developing and implementing practical applications of linguistics in both primary and secondary classrooms, partnering with classroom teachers, working to change state and national standards with respect to language education, writing textbooks (at all levels), pursuing funding, among other approaches. In short, we will advocate for both a top-down and a bottom-up approach to integration of linguistics into the school curriculum, an approach illustrated by the contributions in this volume.

Variation in local and/or national educational standards with respect to language education makes it especially important to approach the task from every possible direction. So, for example, in the states/districts/provinces in which at least one linguistics course is required for prospective teachers, linguists can develop course curricula and materials that help teachers productively apply linguistics in their classrooms. However, in places in which there is no linguistics education for teachers, the task must be approached in other ways – by developing materials that are easily accessible for non-specialists, by sitting on regional/national standards boards, by developing materials and course modules that can be used as continuing education credits, by becoming involved in textbook and other materials development, by pursuing grants that bring together linguists and educators. At the same time, working from the bottom up (locally) can also effect broad-reaching change by exposing teachers to the benefits of linguistic knowledge, by developing assessment tools that demonstrate how important linguistic knowledge is, and by developing materials and lesson plans that can lead to linguistically informed teaching and learning.

The chapters in this volume also highlight the importance of teaching linguistics “in and of itself” in the classroom. Too often, linguistics is seen within the field of education as relevant only to teaching writing or reading (as part of the “language arts”), even though the applications of linguistic knowledge reach far beyond these borders. Several contributions in the volume will address the benefits of engaging students in the scientific study of language in and of itself, an area of study that enriches the curriculum in ways unavailable to more narrow approaches.

### **A call to action**

The target audience for this volume is linguists, whom we hope to inspire to participate in this important work. We hope this volume will also be of use to teachers, teacher educators, and others interested in the integration of linguistic knowledge into primary and secondary education. Although the volume does include some ideas for implementation of linguistics into K-12 education it does not focus on educational/pedagogical theory (other than as it arises in the vignettes by teachers, in [Part III](#)). Rather, the focus is on successful ways to improve education about language, and how linguists can make a difference in this regard. We focus primarily on the projects in the US, simply because that is the system we are most familiar with. However, there are important examples from the UK and from Australia as well.

There are some common themes in each chapter, some threads that weave the chapters in this volume together. We mention them here, so that each author can get right to the substance of each chapter's topic and avoid redundancy. Those shared themes are the following:

- There are many reasons why linguistics is valuable in education as a topic in and of itself, as well as integrated into other disciplines.
- There are known barriers to curricular change: teacher preparation and the structure of educational programs, assessment pressure, prescribed curricula, lack of materials.
- Collaboration between linguists and teachers is crucial in order to reach curricular goals. Linguists need to really work *with* teachers, as many of the contributors to this volume are doing.
- Linguists need to get more involved in the integration of linguistics into primary and secondary education; let the chapters in this book serve as a call to action.

Regardless of the differences between the two fields, linguists and educators share a common goal, namely to integrate the science of language into K-12 pedagogy in ways that raise awareness of the workings of language. Successful collaboration between linguists and educators has begun to emerge. It is these successful collaborations, both from the bottom up and the top down, that you will read about in this book.

### *Acknowledgments*

The theme of this book is collaboration; as each chapter makes clear, it is only with the cooperation, support, and expertise of practicing teachers that linguistics can gain any kind of foothold in the schools. We therefore thank, above all, the many teachers who have taken the time out of their already demanding days to work with us on the projects chronicled here. We also thank their

students, whose ingenuity, enthusiasm, and linguistic intuitions inform the projects highlighted here in invaluable ways. And a special thank you to our colleagues in linguistics for persevering in this sometimes difficult but always ultimately rewarding work. It is through all of these efforts that we collectively extend the reach of linguistics beyond the borders of academia into “real life.”

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*Part I*

Linguistics from the top down: encouraging  
institutional change



## Introduction to Part I

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*Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck*

The chapters in [Part I](#) provide historical background on linguistics in education, in the form of discussion of successful (and not so successful) projects that have resulted by working mainly from the “top down.” The contributors discuss diverse ways to integrate linguistic knowledge at the institutional level, through national or regional curricula, standards and assessment, and teacher training and collaboration, and by working to change ideologies about language and its place in education. Authors also address challenges they’ve encountered in their work, which may help others avoid such stumbling blocks in the future. Below we outline each chapter, and highlight recurring themes among them.

Edwin Battistella’s chapter addresses the public misperceptions about linguistics and the role those misperceptions play in shaping language education; linguistics is irrelevant and academic, descriptivism promotes the elevation of non-standard dialects, and so on. He draws parallels with public perceptions of biology and visual art, both of which have faced resistance for similar reasons. Battistella highlights what we can learn from the challenges faced by other fields and how we can use those lessons to change perceptions of linguistics and encourage institutional change.

Wayne O’Neil’s chapter discusses the failure of a “top-down” approach to institutional change in the 1960s (Project English in Oregon State). The rise and fall of this project provides us with important insights into what it takes for large-scale, top-down curricular change to succeed, and what stumbling blocks can arise along the way to derail such projects. O’Neil outlines a project that began as a successful, university–K-12 collaborative project, the core of which was teacher training and materials development, and which involved piloting and experimentation. For a number of reasons, this project devolved into turning out textbooks that were intended to “run on their own.” Gone was the university–schools connection, and all that was left were “inert” textbooks. O’Neil continued his work on creating and piloting educational materials that promote the science of language, and recounts the story of his and Maya Honda’s ongoing and very successful collaboration with Seattle school teacher David Pippin (see [Chapter 12](#) in this volume by Honda, O’Neil, and Pippin). He reminds us of the importance of nurturing queries from teachers, because what

begins as a simple exchange can lead to the kind of university–school collaboration that he believes is essential to curricular change.

Richard Hudson’s chapter outlines a successful model of “top-down” curricular change in England, emphasizing that such comprehensive change takes the collaboration not only of linguists and teachers, but also of government officials. Also important to the integration of linguistics was the implementation of a National Curriculum. Hudson discusses how linguistics found a curricular niche in the National Curriculum with the demise of “drill and kill” grammar teaching, which was unsuccessful in meeting teachers’ goals. Linguistics, under the umbrella of “knowledge about language” or KAL, was integrated into the curriculum through applications to the study of literature and creative writing, building on the interests and skills of teachers. Linguistics was also linked to improving the teaching of foreign language, which had also been identified as a curricular need. Strong leadership by linguists dedicated to reforming education, such as Randolph Quirk, Michael Halliday, David Crystal, Hudson himself, and others, was instrumental in this process, as were teachers themselves, who were enthusiastic about and committed to these changes. One result of this curricular change is the linguistically informed A-level course in English Language (see also Clayton, [Chapter 23](#) in this volume on “A-level English Language teaching in London”), and a wealth of resource materials, including websites, teacher training materials, and email discussion lists. As a result of these changes, dialect diversity is now more tolerated, and prescriptivism is in decline. Language is viewed as an object of study in and of itself. Hudson notes that teacher training, though not an insurmountable problem, is still a challenge that remains to be overcome.

Graeme Trousdale’s chapter on integrating linguistics into the curriculum in Scotland echoes many of the themes in Hudson’s chapter, with some important differences. While KAL is part of the Scottish curriculum, guidelines are unclear, and participation in courses on language is rather low. To boost interest in KAL and to encourage more interest in this area of study, a number of different organizations have been formed to promote KAL in the curriculum. Trousdale discusses these organizations, among them the Committee for Language Awareness in Scottish Schools (CLASS), a group of university linguists, educationalists (those involved in teaching and research on educational policy and teacher training), primary and secondary teachers, and writers who have a particular interest in raising language awareness in the curriculum. By connecting KAL to Scottish language and culture, the study of English and of foreign languages, these committees and organizations have made progress in not only changing the curriculum, but in fostering the kinds of essential collaborations needed for such work to succeed and continue. The collaborative groups Trousdale discusses host workshops and conferences, create Google groups and blogs, offer professional development for teachers, create materials

for English and foreign language teaching, and offer a variety of opportunities for exchange between universities and primary and secondary schools.

Jean Mulder's chapter traces the development and implementation of a national linguistics curriculum in Australia, called VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) English Language, developed by a group of academic linguists and secondary English teachers. This "top-down" work was supported by a call for institutional change and, as we've seen before, for an approach to language to fill the void created by the abandonment of traditional grammar instruction (a factor in the projects undertaken by both O'Neil and Hudson, described in this section). Mulder focuses primarily on the curriculum itself – what is taught and why, and how linguistics is connected to the study of text in a variety of ways. She elaborates on the role of linguist as learner rather than expert when it comes to designing materials for secondary schools, and the importance of collaboration with teachers. Mulder provides important insights into the challenge and process of writing a linguistically informed textbook that will meet teachers' needs, and offers useful commentary on the kinds of judgment calls linguists must make in developing lessons and assessments.

Carol Lord and Sharon Klein's chapter explores how educational standards have developed over the years, to help us better understand why linguistics has been largely excluded from such standards. Understanding the forces that drive standards (currently, to measure school success and to enforce accountability) helps us understand how to respond in constructive ways. Lord and Klein discuss how to bring the advances of linguistic science into education standards by linking that research with pressing educational needs (in California, the academic success of English language learners, for example). Effective standards must also be aligned with teacher preparation, curriculum development, and assessment. Such alignment offers linguists many opportunities to become involved in shaping education. Lord and Klein, like Mulder, discuss the importance of working not only on curriculum but on textbooks. The success of their work also relies, as we have seen with the other examples of top-down change in this section, on "bottom-up" collaboration with teachers.

Jeffrey Reaser's chapter describes two curriculum projects he and his colleagues have developed for high schools. One is a companion to the Public Broadcasting System's series *Do You Speak American?*, created by Robert MacNeil *et al.* (1986). The curriculum is explicitly tied to the educational standards of both the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Council for the Social Studies, and is designed for use by teachers who have no training in linguistics. Reaser also discusses Voices of North Carolina, a regionally based dialect awareness curriculum which is also tied explicitly to North Carolina educational standards and teacher identified topics of interest. A multitude of materials is available for both curricula; DVDs, websites, teachers' manuals, and workbooks, all of which are tied to Social

Studies rather than English/Language Arts standards. This situation is advantageous for several reasons, one of which is that it avoids the potential tension (outlined by Wheeler and Sweetland among others in the volume) that arises between appreciating linguistic diversity and teaching Standard English.

Debra Myhill's chapter shows the importance of linguistic research in order to link linguistics to teachers' needs and goals. Myhill assesses the impact of grammar teaching on children's writing development, which methods and approaches work, which do not, and why. She argues (as does Wheeler in [Chapter 9](#)) that successful strategies for teaching and evaluating writing have the most impact in the schools, and that research in this area has much to offer. Her research shows that through linguistically informed methods of teaching writing, learners gain the necessary metalinguistic understanding to become confident crafters of written texts. Teachers can also use linguistics as a tool to assess the development of students' writing. She provides insights into when and how writers make the transition from oral to written grammatical patterns, and when and how to teach certain structures and concepts (coordination and subordination, for example), based on assessments of students' lexical choice, sentence complexity, coherence, thematic variety, use of passive voice, and so on. She offers ways to reconceptualize the pedagogical approach to grammar and writing and discusses how linguists can help in this endeavor not only by doing research on the linguistics of writing, but also by incorporating such research into teacher training.

# 1 Ideologies of language, art, and science

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*Edwin Battistella*

On the bookshelf in my living room is a copy of Franklin Folsom's *The Language Book*, a 1963 book for pre-teenagers. Richly illustrated, the book covers topics as varied as animal communication, language origins, language families, the development of writing, Indo-European, sign language, spoonerisms, and communication by machine. It serves as a reminder that linguistics has much to offer teachers and young students – perspectives on grammar and writing instruction, history, multiculturalism and diversity, critical thinking, and science instruction. Yet linguists have not had much success in institutionalizing our field in the K-12 curriculum. The chapters in this volume are a way to build our field into the curriculum from the top down and the bottom up, and my aim in this chapter is twofold. First, I explore one of the reasons linguists have not had much success in the past: our failure to manage the misperceptions about linguistics and how our field relates to culture and to the goals of education. Next, I compare public perceptions of linguistics with those of two other fields: biology and visual art. This entails looking at the social and cultural controversies about evolution on the one hand and about artists and art on the other. In looking outside our field, I hope to highlight some common issues and to suggest some approaches for enhancing public understanding of the value of linguistics.

## **Linguists: permissive enablers and science fetishists**

One indication of the general public's view about linguistics comes from the treatment of the field in the opinion-maker press. Professional writers are heavily invested in consistency of style, so we should expect that commentators will be sympathetic to prescriptive approaches. What is especially interesting is the negative attitude toward linguistics as the science of language. Textbook and classroom discussions by linguists often begin by pointing out that the term grammar itself is ambiguous, referring both to the scientific account of a language and to the rules that educated speakers supposedly follow when writing and speaking formally. Descriptive linguistics aims at the former. Its modern origins were in the traditions of European historical linguistics,

structuralism, and descriptive anthropology, and typically the scientific investigation of language involves study of sounds, words, grammar, and meaning – phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics – and the facts of language use, variation, and change.

The study of variation and change entails a critical examination of the notion of correctness and puts descriptive linguistics at odds with the view of many traditionalist commentators. John Simon, in his 1981 collection *Paradigms Lost*, portrays linguistics as a “statistical, populist, sociological approach, whose adherents claimed to be merely recording and describing the language as it was used by anyone and everyone, without imposing elitist judgments on it” (1981: xiv). The theme of traditionalists of course is that civility and civic cohesion requires prescriptive norms of language, and that populism is both morally and politically suspect. John Updike, reviewing Robert Burchfield’s *The New Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, talks about linguistics as “a slippery field for the exercise of moral indignation” and sees its editors as “lenient.” Discussing one entry, Updike suggests that Burchfield “takes cover behind another permissive, precedent-rich authority, *Webster’s Dictionary of American Usage*.” And concerning the perennial shibboleth *ain’t*, Updike sees him as “pleading the outcast’s case like a left-wing lawyer.” The tone of Updike’s review is emphasized by a sketch of Fowler captioned “Henry Watson Fowler: cataloguer of grammatical sins.” For Updike, moral indignation and civility come together in adherence to traditional grammar; lenience, permissiveness, and moral relativism characterize scientific linguistics.

The tension between scientific description of usage and grammatical discipline is sometimes framed as the irrelevance of science to usage. Mark Halpern, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, asserts that “What linguistic scientists have been doing ... has absolutely no relevance to the constellation of literary–philosophical–social–moral issues that we are talking about when we discuss usage” (Halpern 1997: 19–22). In a later essay in *The American Scholar*, Halpern argues that linguistics is both too broad and too specialized. He predicts that it will lose its status both as an autonomous discipline and as a source of judgment about usage:

Questions of usage – judgments as to how we should write and speak today – will be recognized as lying within the purview of the general educated public, with philosophers, literary critics, and poets perhaps seen as leaders. We, the new usage arbiters, may occasionally turn for assistance to the findings of what is now called linguistics, if we judge such information to be relevant to our own objectives, but if we do we will be looking not for judicial rulings but for expert testimony on technical points, whose values we will assess by our own lights. (Halpern 2001: 13–26)

For Halpern, usage questions are to be decided by the educated general public, relying on common sense rather than a scientific method.



Novelist David Foster Wallace, in a long, interesting review article of Bryan Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*, also targets descriptive linguistics as irrelevant, though in a broader way. Wallace sees linguistics as reflecting an outdated faith in science, writing that "Structural linguists like [Phillip] Gove and [Charles Carpenter] Fries are not, finally, scientists but census-takers who happen to misconstrue the importance of 'observed facts'." In his view, the value-free descriptivism attributed to Gove and Fries undercuts semantically useful distinctions (such as the difference between *imply* and *infer*) and the norms which, Wallace argues, are important because they "help us evaluate our actions (including utterances) according to what we as a community have decided our real interests and purposes are."<sup>1</sup>

The attitudes of the opinion-makers and the public become most apparent at periodic flashpoint debates over usage. The publication of the National Council of Teachers of English report on *The English Language Arts* in 1952 was one such flashpoint. That report endorsed the idea that language change was both ongoing and expected. It also stressed the idea that correctness is based on spoken usage and that usage is relative to context. The publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in 1961 was also a call-to-arms for traditional-minded editorialists who responded with such critiques as "Permissiveness Gone Mad" and "Sabotage in Springfield," among others. Other flashpoints have involved dialect. The National Council of Teachers of English "Student's Right to Their Own Language" resolution in 1974, the Ann Arbor Black English court case of the late 1970s, and the Oakland Ebonics controversy of the 1990s all provided opportunities for opinion-makers to comment on language and linguistics. While space precludes a detailed survey, readers are invited to browse the news coverage surrounding these events for images and descriptions of linguistics.<sup>2</sup>

### Survival of the fittest

Linguistics is not the only place where reliance on science is perceived as misguided. Political and social pressures from religious fundamentalists and

<sup>1</sup> Wallace criticizes structural linguistics for a faith in science as neutral and unbiased observation, a view that he suggests has been displaced by poststructuralist views of science. At the same time he sees linguistics as promoting a relativism that serves as a source for the "language in which today's socialist, feminist, minority, gay and environmentalist movements frame their sides of the political debate" (Wallace 2001: 45). He tries to eat his cake and have it too.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Finegan 1980, Morton 1994, and Rickford and Rickford 2000. Charles Fries and Phillip Gove have been particular targets of traditionalists, and each was compared to sex researcher Alfred Kinsey. A more humorous reaction was Alan Dunn's *New Yorker* cartoon of 1962, reprinted in Morton 1994. The cartoon reflected the public's sense that descriptivism is impractical by showing a receptionist at the Merriam Webster Company greeting a visitor with a cheery, "Dr. Gove ain't in."