

1 Introduction

1.1 The Time Periods of English

There are a number of ways to tackle a linguistic history of this sort. One would be to trace changes in the language level by level, that is, by looking at all the phonological changes first, then all the morphological, all the lexical, all the syntactic changes, and so on. There are some books that proceed this way. Another way might be to proceed topic by topic: the spread of Indo-European, the Great Vowel Shift, the change from a type A language to a type B language, and so on. There are also texts that proceed in this way. Yet another approach might be to choose authors who typify a particular period, such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne or Milton, and base any description on their work. Alternatively, one might wish to trace the history of the English language in accordance with a particular theoretical or methodological approach, for example a structuralist account or a language variation account. Needless to say, such books also exist.

The present book, however, attempts to provide a taste of a variety of ways in which the development of the English language can be approached. For this reason, each chapter contains sociohistorical and cultural background, a descriptive account of major structural characteristics from stage to stage and a particular topical focus. As a consequence of this approach, it seems most reasonable to split up the book into discrete historical periods.

Typically, studies of the development of English taking this wider approach divide the language into four stages: Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English and Modern or Present Day English. However, this is also not a straightforward task, as there are no hard and fast rules about when one period of English ends and another begins. What one has to do is decide upon a set of criteria for dating each period in a particular way. The dates for the periods of English I have chosen in this book are as follows:

Old English	CE 500–1100
Middle English	1100–1500
Early Modern English	1500–1800
Modern English	1800–present

Each of these dates actually marks a historical event (rounded to the nearest century or half-century), rather than a linguistic development. The Old English period begins about fifty years after the invasion of Britain by the Germanic tribes at the behest of the Celtic king Vortigern in CE 449. This is the time when the Germanic dialects were first brought to Britain, providing the raw material for the development of English. We round up to CE 500 here with good reason, as it probably took several generations of settlement before any distinctively Anglo-Saxon variety of Germanic established itself. The Old English period ends with the second major invasion of Britain (the third, actually, if we include the invasion by the Romans before the Germanic language came to Britain; see chapters 2 and 3). This was the conquest of Britain by William, Duke of Normandy, in 1066, which marks a watershed in the linguistic history of Britain, as it heralds almost four hundred years of intimate contact with French, the period that we call Middle English. The Early Modern period begins in 1500 and ends in 1800. The date 1500 roughly marks the beginning of the Renaissance and the introduction of the printing press, both of which had profound consequences for the development of the English language. The Early Modern English period ends with the independence of the American colonies. This event marks the end of the British monopoly on the English language and the beginning of the Modern English period, in which several national varieties of English developed, changing the profile of English for ever.

There are some important linguistic characteristics that overlap with these historical periods, of course. The year CE 500 marks the branching off of English from the other Germanic dialects. The year 1100 marks the period in which English lost the vast majority of its inflections, signalling the change from a language that relied upon morphological marking of grammatical roles to one that relied on word order to maintain basic grammatical relations; 1500 marks the end of major French influence on the language and the time when the use of English was established in all communicative contexts. From 1500 to 1800 and later, the English language absorbed a huge number of words from Latin and Greek as a result of the revival of classical learning. Towards the end of this period, and picking up momentum from 1800 on, the lexicon of English is enriched by two significant historical processes. The first is colonialism (which actually begins at the beginning of the Early Modern English period), during which process English both spread throughout the world and absorbed many hundreds of words from a rich array of the world's languages with which it came into various forms of contact. And from the end of the eighteenth century the Industrial Revolution and, eventually, the emergence of the United States as a world power, coupled with the development of technology (particularly electronic and computer technology), also had a profound influence on the vocabulary of English.

1.2 Language Change

Why do languages change? This entire book is about language change, and it illustrates the fact that languages change for a wide variety of reasons. Firstly, languages have an internal structure, which is itself dynamic, and may change for internal reasons. Secondly, languages might also change because people do not learn them perfectly: as people come into contact with others, they might learn the contact language imperfectly, which could ultimately cause the language to change, perhaps causing a ‘substratum’ effect on the language, that is, an underlying effect from language A on the structure of language B. It is underlying by virtue of the fact that A is usually a language that existed but is no longer spoken in the territory of B.

And a second question we might ask here is, why don’t people always speak the same way all of the time? Linguists believe that all children who are born without special needs are linguistically equal: that is, they are all born with the potential to learn any language. Thus, a child of British parents who is born in Japan is just as able to learn Japanese as a first language as any Japanese child born in Japan to Japanese parents. Moreover, all normally developed human beings are born with the same articulatory apparatus, which is why we are all potentially able to make the same range of sounds (indeed, it used to be believed that at the ‘babbling’ stage, babies went through the entire range of possible human language sounds). However, there is always the potential for slight variation in the production of sounds: some people produce ‘sh’ sounds that are closer to ‘th’ than others, while some people pronounce ‘r’ sounds that are closer to ‘w’ or ‘l’ than others. Or, if we look at the vocabulary choice of individuals, we know that sometimes we consciously or subconsciously take a liking to a particular word and use it with particular frequency and in a specific way. (For example, in Britain in late 1999 and early 2000, teenagers and young adults used the word *pants* to mean *bad*, as in *I don’t like this dinner – it’s really pants!*) This individual variation provides the potential for change. It might be that the way a particular individual pronounces or uses a word becomes a marker of prestige, in which case other members of his or her cohort will, possibly subconsciously, begin to change their speech in the direction of the prestige pronunciation, in order to express their solidarity and identify with that person. We are all aware of the fact that we often shift our speech according to the person we are talking to: if we want to express solidarity with that person, we shift towards his or her speech, while we shift away from it if we want to keep our distance. In social psychology, this quite natural process is called ‘linguistic accommodation’. When this occurs on a one-to-one basis and is a temporary phenomenon, no language

change ensues from it. But when such accommodation spreads from individual to individual and happens repeatedly over time, it can lead to language change.

Another reason why language changes is that speakers of a language come into contact with speakers of another language or languages. This can be because of migration, perhaps because they move to more fertile lands, or because they are displaced on account of war or poverty or disease. It can also be because they are invaded, as in the case of the earlier periods of English, when first the Germanic tribes, then, later, the Vikings and, later still, the Normans invaded Britain. Depending on the circumstances, the home language may succumb completely to the language of the invaders, in which case we talk about **replacement**. Alternatively, the home language might persist side-by-side with the language of the invaders, and, depending on political circumstances, it might become the dominant or the dominated language. If there is close contact between the invaders and the invaded, it is possible for there to be significant influence from one language on the other. Cultural and physical separation, on the other hand, could lead to the persistence of both languages in their separate domains with very little influence of one on the other (for example, in the case of Welsh and English throughout the Tudor period; see chapter 5).

If the contact is between a dominant language and more than one other language, and the speakers of these languages have no language in common, then an interim contact language might develop. This language would have a reduced linguistic system in the first instance; it would be subject to variation and would not be equal to all the communicative tasks that a native speaker is likely to need to perform (from, say, ordering goods to saying prayers to composing songs or poems). In this case, we would call the variety a pidgin. The pidgin might persist over time and stabilize in terms of its forms and functions. If it is passed on to subsequent generations, which need to use it as their main or only language, it will expand to fulfil those linguistic functions it was not equal to in its earlier form. In this case, we would speak of a creole developing. More often than not, such languages end up shifting in the direction of the dominant language as social conditions improve and access to power and the mainstream society increases. It is usually the case that a society in which a creole develops displays a continuum of language varieties, which we refer to as a post-creole continuum. The varieties that coexist in such circumstances range from a still relatively reduced ‘basilectal’ variety, through a range of more standard-like ‘mesolectal’ varieties to ‘acrolectal’ varieties, which are very close to the dominant (lexifier) language, but which retain features of grammar, lexicon and pronunciation that still mark them off from the national (often European) standard variety. I illustrated this process in Fennell (1997: 82) (see figure 1.1).

But language contact is not always a necessary or sufficient condition for language change: its opposite, separation, also very often leads to language change. When the English language was taken to America in the seventeenth century, for

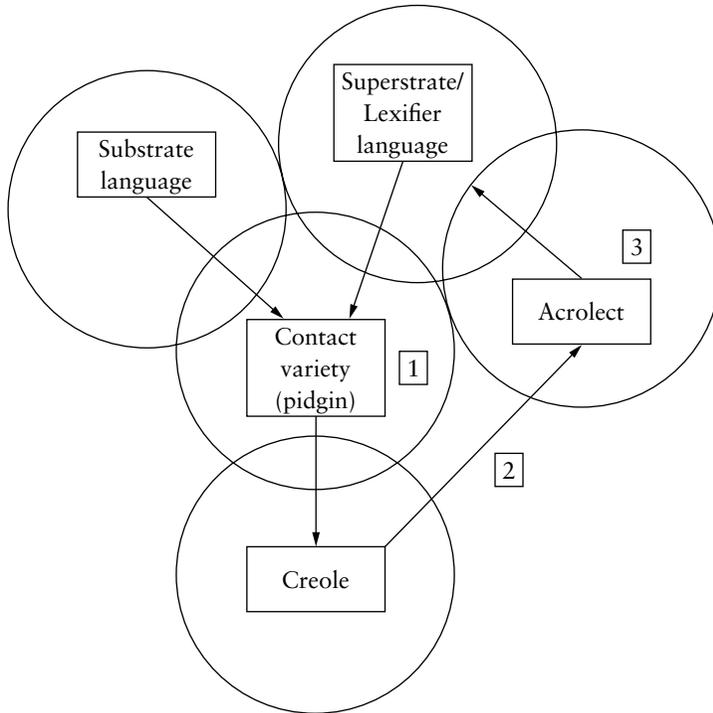


Figure 1.1 Typical developments of creoles

example, it began to diverge from British English for a number of reasons. Firstly, it developed from not one (standard) dialect of English, but from a number of regional varieties that were all brought to America by different waves of settlement. Once in America, English changed in response to the new conditions that the settlers encountered, from physical geography to forms of government, and as a result of contact with many other indigenous and immigrant languages. Furthermore, and this was particularly the case after political separation from Britain, American English diverged from British English in the absence of, or indeed in reaction to, an acknowledged British model. And since there was no one particular American state or city to which all Americans looked as their linguistic model, a large number of regional focal centres developed, each acquiring its own regional prestige.

We must bear in mind, however, that a discussion of language change such as this necessarily simplifies matters. Most languages change across time for a variety of reasons. For example, American English also diverged from British English because of contact with other languages, and in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) this divergence is considerable. In the standard

language, however, the influence from other languages is comparatively minimal, and confined for the most part to lexical elements (though some of the differences, such as pronouncing ‘r’-sounds that occur after a vowel, have become emblematic of the differences between the national varieties; see chapter 7 on American English).

The factors involved in language change that we have discussed so far depend on language-external conditions. But there also appear to be language-internal reasons why languages change. A prime example of this is the change in system in English from a synthetic or inflectional language, which relies on morphological endings to mark grammatical function, to an analytic one, which relies on word order to convey grammatical relations. From a structural point of view this is the most significant change that has occurred in the history of English. As we shall see in greater detail in chapters 2–6, the reason why English developed in this way is also internal. The major stress on a word, which in Indo-European could originally fall on any syllable in the word (though not haphazardly, but according to rule), eventually fixed on the word-initial or nuclear syllable. This meant that attention was drawn away from the end of the word, ultimately leading to the obscuring, and eventual loss, of inflectional endings. This in turn caused English to become heavily reliant on word order to signal the basic grammatical role of a noun phrase (as subject, direct object, indirect object, etc.), resulting in a major typological change. Ultimately we do not know what caused the stress to fix on the nuclear syllable, and it may indeed have been on account of some extralinguistic factor such as those we have discussed above, but we have no way of knowing this. Once the stress became fixed, however, it triggered this succession of internal changes.

Another example of system-internal change is the phenomenon known as front mutation or i-umlaut, which occurred between Germanic and Old English (and occurred in all West and North Germanic languages). If an unstressed syllable in Germanic containing [i] or [j] followed a stressed syllable, the vowel of the stressed syllable was fronted or raised in anticipation of it (that is, it partially assimilated to the following vowel). Thus *beran* ‘to bear’ produces *bireþ* ‘bears’ (3rd person singular) *mūs* (‘mouse’) becomes *mys* (‘mice’) because of the form from which they derived in earlier Germanic (see chapter 3). Again, this change cannot be attributed to anything other than system-internal factors that have to do with the articulation of sounds within the English system.

The development of the verb *do* in English from a full verb with its own lexical content to a support or auxiliary verb after about CE 1500 is another example of system internal change. In this instance the original meaning was bleached out of the full verb *do*, and it became a lexically empty grammatical function word, used for example in yes–no questions (*Do you know the way home?*) and to support the negative particle *not* (*I don’t smoke*). (See chapter 5 on Early Modern English.) We refer to this kind of system-internal change as *grammaticalization*.

This last example could also be termed a form of *reanalysis*, that is, where a word that historically has been associated with one particular structure becomes associated with another. There are lots of morphological examples in English of a sub-type of reanalysis, namely *metanalysis*, where morpheme boundaries come to be reinterpreted or reanalysed. Thus, English *naddre*, *napron* and *noumpere* have become *adder*, *apron* and *umpire* by reanalysis of the morpheme boundaries in combinations such as *a naddre*. The converse has also happened; for example, the morpheme boundaries in the phrase *an ewt* have been reanalysed to produce *a newt* (cf. Trask, 1996: 103). This is another type of internal source of language change.

To summarize the causes of language change, then, we can say that languages change because of:

- geography (separation of one language or variety from another; alternatively closeness – language contact);
- contact with new vs. old phenomena (the need to adapt to new, different, or changing aspects of society);
- imperfect learning;
- a substratum effect;
- social prestige factors (the attempt on the part of speakers to imitate or acquire linguistic features that are considered ‘better’ than their own).

Where internal factors are concerned, we can cite as motivation such reasons as:

- ease of articulation (is X easier to say/pronounce than Y?);
- analogy (the application of one phenomenon to others by association);
- reanalysis;
- randomness (see Crystal, 1987: 333, and Trask, 1996, for good discussion of the cause and types of language change).

We will have cause throughout the chapters that follow to look at numerous examples of external and internal linguistic change.

1.3 Sources of Information on Language Change

Thomas Alva Edison did not invent the phonograph until 1877, and David Hughes invented the microphone the following year. The first crude magnetic sound

recordings became a possibility in 1899, though it was not until 1942 that magnetic recording tape was invented. In this age of DVDs, CDs, VCRs and video-phones, it is perhaps difficult for us to imagine a time when it was not possible to record what people say. I remember once in North Carolina several years ago a mature student in one of my seminars told a first-year student that she ‘sounded like a broken record’. The younger student looked blank and asked, quite genuinely, ‘What does a broken record sound like?’ This incident brought home to me the fact that in the ‘postmodern’, or to use a term coined recently by Eric Idle, the ‘*postmodern*’ era, young students take for granted the ability to record and retrieve written and spoken information by depressing a key on a keyboard or operating a remote-control device.

When we attempt to investigate the history of any language, however, we have no such aids in our investigations. Indeed, we start not merely in pre-technological but even in pre-literate times, and evidence from archaeology and theoretical reconstruction is all we have to go on in the earliest stages. To assist us in our analysis of Old English we are fortunate to have written texts in English from the seventh century CE onward; many languages of Europe had no written records until several hundred (in some cases more than five hundred) years later (see chapter 2).

However, we have relatively few texts from that time, as we shall discuss in the chapter dealing with Old English, and the texts we do have do not cover all types of language. For example, we do not have many examples of everyday speech, domestic language or the dialects of particular areas. This means that whatever generalizations we do make about Old English, we always have to bear in mind the gaps in our data, and the fact that we are *interpreting* the past, not objectively describing it.

Another limitation of using written texts is that they often conform to a written standard of speech, so that spellings do not necessarily reflect the pronunciation of the writer. The fact is that the orthography of standard English conceals a variety of pronunciations, and that since it is not a phonetic system, linguists have difficulty guessing how a word is ‘really’ pronounced by a particular speaker at a particular time. To take a modern example, a research student of mine doing fieldwork on Scots in the North-East of Scotland had great difficulty eliciting pronunciations of the word *good* in North-East dialects from a dialect word list. At first she tried using a quasi-phonetic spelling <gwid> in the list to prompt the informants in the pilot study, but they explained that the spelling ‘put them off’, because they don’t say [gwid]. Once she replaced the spelling with standard <good>, however, and simply asked the informants to say the word as they would in their own dialect, they responded much more readily, and provided a variety of different local pronunciations.

However, all is not lost when it comes to investigating pronunciation in older periods of English. Luckily, there are also written texts from people who are only

semi-literate, and their spelling is a clue to their pronunciation: <sarvent> for *servant*, for example. Poetry is also often useful, as rhyming words give us a further indication of how they were pronounced.

Far from always being helped by the existence of written documents, however, we are also often misled by written texts in the earlier periods of English because they were frequently translated from other languages, particularly Latin and French, and contained interference from the source language, thus giving us a false impression of idiomatic English of the period. This seems to have been particularly the case with vocabulary (for example, using borrowed words that resembled the source word very closely, where a word from the native word stock was more usual) and with syntax (slavishly following the word order of Latin instead of using English word order, for example). Even morphology was sometimes influenced by the source language in translations.

1.4 Linguistic Preliminaries

In attempting to look at the structure of any language linguists customarily divide the language into different levels.

Phonetics is the science of the production or articulation and reception of human speech sounds, and can be studied without looking at the sound system of any one particular language, while **phonology** is the study of sounds as they operate in the system of a language. Thus we talk about the **phonetics** of human speech sounds, but the **phonology** of English or Swedish or Swahili. **Phone** is the term for any individual sound, while a **phoneme** is any meaningfully distinctive sound in a language. Thus while the difference between the articulation of /p/ in [p^hɪn] and [pɪn] is audible in English (there is a little breath after the first /p/ which is not heard after the second), it does not make a distinction in meaning. On the other hand, the difference in pronunciation between /p/ and /b/ in *pin* and *bin* [pɪn] and [bɪn], while still relatively slight (the only difference between the two sounds is whether the vocal folds are vibrating in their production), does make a significant contrast (that is, in meaning); therefore these two sounds are **phonemes**, while [p] and [p^h] are not, but rather variants or **allophones** of the phoneme /p/.

Morphology is concerned with the arrangements of and the relationships amongst **morphemes**, which we classify as the smallest meaningful units in a language. Thus, *cat* is a morpheme, since it represents a unit of meaning, but so also is -s, which has the meaning of ‘plural’, that is, ‘more than one’. On its own *cat* is also said to be a **lexeme**, a member of a language’s **lexicon** (popularly referred to as ‘vocabulary’), or set of ‘words’ (see below). *Cats* is therefore made

up of two morphemes, the difference between them being that *cat* can stand on its own (*I've just bought a cat*), while *-s* cannot (**I've just bought a -s. Two *-s are better than one*). (Note that in this chapter an asterisk before an example denotes that it is not grammatical.) Morphemes that can stand alone are called **root** or **free** morphemes, while those that cannot are called **bound** morphemes. It is important to note that a morpheme is not equivalent to a syllable: *banana* consists of three syllables in English, but it constitutes only one morpheme (it cannot be broken down into smaller units of meaning). **Affixes** (that is, prefixes and suffixes) are bound morphemes. For example, *-er*, *-or* as in *eater*, *sailor* are affixes which allow us to derive an agentive noun from another root (e.g., the verb *sail*); consequently, affixes like these are known as **derivational** affixes. Other affixes, however, have a grammatical rather than a lexical function, so that, for example, the suffix *-ed* is used to change certain verbs into past tense verbs: *jump* > *jumped*; *cross* > *crossed*. This latter type of affix is called an **inflectional** affix, of which Old English had many more than any subsequent period of English, as we shall see in the coming chapters.

In **syntax** we study the way in which words are ordered into larger elements, namely phrases, clauses and sentences. The two sentences *The dog bit the man* and *The man bit the dog* contrast in meaning in English, not merely on account of any particular property of the phrase *the man* or *the dog*, but because of their order in relation to the verb (the subject of the sentence occurs before the inflected verb here; the direct object appears directly after it). Another important contrast in meaning occurs between the sentences *It is raining today* and *Is it raining today?*, where the order of the elements subject and verb (together with the intonation of the sentence) signals whether the sentence is a statement or a question.

All the words and morphemes of a given language in one exhaustive list would constitute the **lexicon** of that language. The lexica of languages are notoriously unpredictable and idiosyncratic, and not so subject to rule and regularity as are the phonology, morphology and syntax. The lexicon of a language is subject to continual and often rapid change, and vocabulary is the one part of our language that we continue to learn for much of our lives, while the basic grammatical rules of our language are learned by and large by the time we reach puberty.

Semantics is the study of the meanings of individual morphemes, words, sentences and whole texts or utterances. When we relate our knowledge of utterance formation to the real world, that is, when we bring in notions of appropriateness and context, we are operating on the level of **pragmatics**. For example, it would be inappropriate to greet a grieving widow at a funeral with 'Long time no see!', even though in terms of its form it is beyond reproach. This level of language is very difficult for us to examine in older forms of English, since we are unable to observe face-to-face contact and other contextual constraints on linguistic behaviour of the time, though we can venture some analyses of the way utterances function in social context (see chapter 5 on address forms in Early Modern English).

1.5 The Sounds of English, and Symbols Used to Describe Them

The phonemic inventory of English is provided below. Note that it is the *sounds* that are the key, not the spelling (a given sound can be represented by more than one written symbol in our alphabet); to represent the basic sounds of the language we use the IPA – the International Phonetic Alphabet – which differs from our own orthography wherever the latter is unable to reflect the reality of the sounds of a given word.

1.5.1 Consonants

Stops: the flow of air is interrupted during the articulation of the sound:

p **b** **t** **d** **k** **g**
 (*pearl*; *bird*; *tongue*; *different*; *king, curl*; *gambol*)

Fricatives or spirants: the flow of air is not interrupted during articulation, but is continuous:

f **v** **s** **z** **θ** **ð**
 (*five*; *very*; *strong*; *zebra*; *thing*; *this*;

ʃ **ʒ** **h**
shirt; *pleasure*; *heart*)

Affricates: complex sounds made up of a stop element + fricative simultaneously articulated:

tʃ **dʒ** (*child*; *jungle*)

Nasals: the flow of air passes through the nasal, not the oral, cavity:

m **n** **ŋ** (*my*; *needle*, *knee*; *sing*)

Liquids: vowel-like, with uninterrupted flow of air:

r **l** (*ring*, *wrist*; *lung*)

Semivowels or **glides**: consonants articulated in the same position as the corresponding vowels [u], [i], but involving constriction of the lips [w], and tongue against the palate [j]:

w j (*waist; young*)

1.5.2 Vowels

1.5.2.1 Monophthongs

Symbol	as in
i	seat, feel, receive
ɪ	hit, illness
e	rain, freight, great (NB: this sound can be realized as monophthongal or diphthongal, depending on the variant/dialect). In general, however, the sound does not appear in its ‘pure’ form in Modern English. It might be useful to compare these words with French <i>thé</i> , German <i>Tee</i> (tea).
ɛ	set, elephant
æ	fat, trap
u	true, blue, moot
ʊ	look, would
ʌ	stuff, above, enough, flood
o	spoke, road, harmonious
ɔ	awe, flaw, broad, tall, dog, frog (in British English)
a	father, lah-dee-dah
ə	pieces, peruse, sofa (though some speakers of British English use ɪ in words such as <i>pieces</i> [pisɪz]).

Note: Throughout the book a colon will appear, where appropriate, to mark a long vowel, e.g. [i:], [e:].

1.5.2.2 Diphthongs

aj (also aɪ)	fight, binary, lie
aʊ (also æʊ)	plough, about, Howard
ɔj (also ɔɪ)	ploy, royal

1.6 Structure of the Book

In accordance with what we said above about our approach to the development of English and the dating of the periods of English, most chapters of this book are written in chronological order. Chapter 2 provides us with a discussion of the pre-history of English, concentrating on where English came from and how it got to Britain in the first place. A particular focus of this chapter is the question of how and why the ancestors of the English-speakers, the Indo-Europeans, spread the language group out from the original homeland. Chapter 3, 'Old English', discusses the development of English from its arrival in Britain until the Norman invasion in 1066. It describes the structure of Old English, the nature of Old English vocabulary, and the various influences upon its character. In this chapter we look particularly at the effects of contact with other languages on the English language. The Middle English chapter, chapter 4, traces the development of English from the time of the Norman invasion up to the Renaissance. We see that this is a particularly important time for the structure of the English language, since it is the period in which English loses its inflectional character and begins to look more like the English we use today. The vocabulary of English in this period is, as always, an important aspect of its development, since it shifts away from being Germanic in character on account of the long and intimate contact with French. Since the changes in the Middle English period are so striking, we discuss the question of whether English became a creole at this time, reflecting the influence of Scandinavian and French. Chapter 5 focuses on Early Modern English, which is a very long period, spanning as it does three hundred years and a number of important sociohistorical and cultural events. Since during this period the Great Vowel Shift occurs and British class-based society develops, we investigate whether there is any connection between the two events. As we said above, the Modern English period, the subject of chapter 6, is the era of two significant developments that changed the world, making international travel and international communication and therefore contact with diverse languages and cultures commonplace. Consequently this chapter explores the effects of colonial expansion and the development of technology on the English language. From 1800 on we can say that British and American English are the two major varieties of the language, and that other national varieties also develop. For this reason, we concentrate at the end of chapter 6 on modern British dialects. Chapter 7 is devoted entirely to a discussion of the development of American English, beginning with the first settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 and ending with a discussion of the relationship of modern American dialects to the original patterns of settlement on the one hand, and to British English on the other. Chapter 8, 'World-Wide English', examines the expansion of English throughout the world and the

development of its role as a global language. In this chapter we look at the changing role of English in the former colonies and the varieties of English that have developed in these contexts. We ask how it is that English has become a global language in the past half-century, and why there is so great a demand for English language teaching. We end chapter 8, and with it the book, by looking to the future and speculating about the role of English as a world language in the new millennium.

Suggested Readings

- Crystal, David (1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, 1st edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Finegan, Edward (1999) *Language: Its Structure and Use*. London: Routledge.
- Trudgill, Peter (1986) *Dialects in Contact*. New York: Basil Blackwell.