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CHARLES F. MEYER is Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. His recent publications include *English Corpus Linguistics: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2002).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521541220

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Meyer, Charles F.

Introducing English linguistics / Charles F. Meyer.

p. cm. — (Cambridge introductions to language and linguistics)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-521-83350-9

1. English language — History. 2. Linguistics. I. Title. II. Series.

PE1075.M5995 2009

420 — dc22

2009009162

ISBN 978-0-521-83350-9 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-54122-0 paperback

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Preface

English is currently the most widely spoken language in the world. Mandarin Chinese may have more speakers, but no language is spoken in more parts of the world than the English language. The global reach of English is one reason the language has more non-native speakers than native speakers. The popularity of English, it must be emphasized, has little to do with the language itself, and more to do with geopolitical considerations: the initial spread of English worldwide as a consequence of British colonization, and the rise in the twentieth century of the United States as an economic and political power in the world.

Because of the importance of English as a world language, it has been widely studied and taught: English has been the focus of many linguistic descriptions, and it is taught worldwide in thousands of classrooms and language institutes. In fact, more people are learning English from non-native speakers of the language than native speakers. For this reason (and many others), it is important that teachers of English as well as others having an interest in the structure and use of the language have an adequate understanding of the language. This book attempts to provide such an understanding, but it does so in a manner that is different from many other introductions to the English language.

Because language involves not just individual sentences but sentences that are parts of texts, the book is organized on the principle that an adequate introduction to the study of the English language requires a top-down rather than a bottom-up discussion of the structure of English. That is, instead of beginning with the smallest unit of language (the phoneme) and working up to the largest unit (the text), this book begins at the level of the text and works

its way down to progressively smaller units of language. The idea behind this organizational strategy is that the structure and use of smaller structures is in many cases dependent on larger linguistic considerations. For instance, in Boston, whether one pronounces the word *never* with a final /ɪ/ [nevə] or without one [nevə] depends not just upon whether the speaker's grammar contains a rule deleting /ɪ/ after vowels but upon other factors as well, such as the social context (e.g. formal vs. informal) in which the individual is speaking.

To provide a top-down description of English, the book is divided into two main sections: one dealing with more general characteristics of English – its development as a language and the pragmatic considerations governing its use – and a second focusing on the grammatical characteristics of the language, from the sentence down to the individual speech sound.

Chapter 1 (“The study of language”) discusses how linguists study language, advancing but also critiquing the widely held view in linguistics that all languages are valid systems of communication and that it makes little sense to claim that one language is “better” than another. Chapter 2 (“The development of English”) provides a historical perspective on English: where it has stood over time in relation to the other languages of the world, and how its development can be explained by general principles of language change. The next two chapters focus on the various pragmatic principles that affect how English is used. Chapter 3 (“The social context of English”) examines the social factors influencing linguistic interaction, such as politeness considerations and speaker variables (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, and level of education). Chapter 4 (“The structure of English texts”) describes how English texts (both written

and spoken) are structured, and why they have the structure that they do.

The second section of the book contains chapters concerned with examining the grammar of English. Chapter 5 (“English syntax”) discusses the major syntactic categories in English, focusing on how the structure of English sentences can be described in terms of the particular constructions that they contain – clauses (main and subordinate) and phrases (e.g. noun phrase and verb phrase) – and the functions within clauses (e.g. subject and object) that these forms serve. Chapter 6 (“English words: Structure and meaning”) is concerned with the structure and meaning of words. The chapter begins by discussing how morphemes, the smallest unit of meaning, are combined to create words, and continues with a description of how the meanings of words are described by lexicographers (those who produce dictionaries) and semanticists (linguists who theorize about meaning in language). Chapter 7 (“The sounds of English”) discusses the sound system of English, beginning with a description of speech segments (phonemes) and concluding with an overview of word stress and intonation.

Much current work in linguistics has demonstrated that linguistic descriptions are most accurate and meaningful if they are based on actual examples of spoken and written English rather than on examples invented by the linguist him or herself. Therefore, most of the examples included in this book were taken from a number of different linguistic corpora: computerized databases containing various kinds of spoken and written English, such as transcriptions of actual conversations that

people had, or samples of articles appearing in newspapers. The appendix contains a list of the corpora that were used as well as a brief description of the kinds of texts that they contain.

There are many people to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude for their help with this book. First of all, I want to thank Andrew Winnard of Cambridge University Press for his help and support throughout the process of writing this book. I also wish to thank three anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press for the many useful comments they provided that helped improve the book considerably; Malcolm Todd, whose expert copy-editing skills greatly improved the clarity of the book; Bill Kretzschmar for his feedback on sections of Chapter 3; Stephen Fay, who did the artwork for Figures 6.3 and 7.1; my colleagues in the Applied Linguistics Department at the University of Massachusetts, Boston; the many students whom I have taught over the years who have helped me refine and improve the way that I teach linguistics; and, most importantly, my wife, Libby, and son, Freddie, who offered their constant love and support while I spent many hours away from them writing this book.

Copyright acknowledgment

My thanks to Mouton de Gruyter for giving me permission to include material in chapter 6 taken from my forthcoming paper ‘Pre-electronic corpora’ to be published in *Corpus Linguistics: An International Handbook*, ed. Anke Lüdeling and Merja Kytö (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter).