

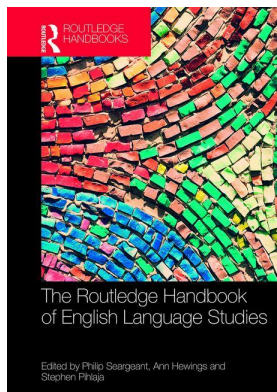
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of English Language Studies

Philip Seargeant, Ann Hewings, Stephen Pihlaja

The idea of English

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351001724-2>

Philip Seargeant

Published online on: 20 Jun 2018

How to cite :- Philip Seargeant. 20 Jun 2018, *The idea of English from: The Routledge Handbook of English Language Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 07 Jun 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781351001724-2>

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The idea of English

Philip Seargeant

Introduction: studying something which doesn't exist

In a famous gesture intended to prove a realist understanding of the world, the philosopher G. E. Moore held up first one hand and then another to indicate that there are external objects in the world. As everyone present could see, here were his hands, and thus it followed that an external world must exist generally (Moore 1939). We can perhaps do something similar with the English language and say that, as I'm now writing this sentence in English, it stands to reason that the English language exists. This seems obvious enough – basic common sense, in much the same way that Moore's proof was (to his mind at least).

The reason for beginning the discussion of English language studies in this way – i.e. by pointing to seemingly simple truths about the existence of the entity which the book as a whole is about – is that over the past few years there has been a strain in some scholarship which questions whether we *can* really say that an entity called 'English' exists. Or at least, can we take it as self-evident that it is simple common sense that we know what this entity is, and that this belief should thus be accepted as an uncritical starting point for all discussions of the language?

Characterising the argument as being that certain scholars are saying English doesn't really exist is perhaps slightly over-exaggerating. A more accurate way of putting it would be that for some, viewing languages as discrete entities is starting to be seen as sociolinguistically problematic. Alastair Pennycook, for example, wonders if

[p]erhaps it is time to question the very notions that underpin our assumptions about languages [and] ask whether the ways we name and describe [them] as separate entities . . . are based on 20th century epistemologies that can no longer be used to describe the use of languages in a globalizing world.

(Pennycook 2010: 121)

The argument here is that categories such as 'languages' (as well as 'varieties', 'dialects' and so on) are not scientifically real so much as products of a particular set of events in Western intellectual history. If we fail to take this into account when discussing or analysing English, we risk simply reinforcing the beliefs that produced the concept of the language in the first

place, and this can constrain our investigation into the workings, functions and implications of language use.

Specifically, this argument is centred around the premise that the concept of discrete languages as we understand them in Western thought is a consequence of the promotion of the nation state as the principal politico-cultural unit in eighteenth-century European political philosophy (Anderson 1983). As part of this worldview, the language practices of a community were valorised as an essential element of that community's cultural-political identity. And with the principal unit of community being understood as the nation state, so the ideology of idealised 'national languages' was created. These national languages were identified with a particular high-prestige standard, which was codified in grammar books and dictionaries, thus cementing its status as the 'correct' form of the language (Milroy and Milroy 1985). The ideology then worked in consort with the theories that developed into the modern discipline of linguistics. Although research into sociolinguistics does regularly acknowledge the idealised nature of categories such as discrete languages and varieties (Swann 2007), these nevertheless still have deep roots in the ontological presuppositions of much academic research in the subject (Seargeant 2010), and are even more central in popular perceptions of a language such as English.

The main reason that recent scholarship has drawn attention to the ideological foundations of some of these underlying presuppositions is because the eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century frameworks of social organisation which gave rise to them are arguably no longer valid for the world we now live in (Blommaert 2009). The impact of globalisation particularly has altered the social, cultural and political landscape, and with it the sociolinguistic practices of millions of people around the world. Yet there is a disjunction between the practices people manifest in their everyday language use, and the way language is conceptualised, be it in public discourse, policy initiatives, or even in different disciplines of scholarship. Or to put it another way, there is a division between the language practices and resources that speakers of English use, and the idea of English as a particular cultural, political or (social) scientific entity. And an understanding of the latter – the concept of English – is of vital importance because the way people think about a language influences the attitudes they take towards it, as well as towards broader social issues in which language is involved. This chapter, therefore, will examine the 'idea' of English as it is constructed in society. It will begin with an overview of the theoretical concerns which shape this approach to English, before moving to analyse examples of the ways in which concepts of English are constructed in various different domains, and the implications these have for English language studies more generally.

Current issues and topics

Linguistic ideologies

In his essay on 'Oratio imago animi', the seventeenth-century dramatist Ben Jonson writes of the way that language acts as a marker of a person's character (Jonson 1947 [1641]: 625):

Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee. It springs out of the most retired, and inmost parts of us, and is the Image of the Parent of it, the mind. No glasse renders a mans forme, or likenesse, so true as his speech.

The belief expressed here is that the way a person uses language is an index, or indicator, of his or her character. Jonson is talking of articulate thought ('speech is the image of the mind', as the

title of the essay has it), but in expressing one's mind the material form this takes – in terms of accent, style, prosody and so forth – is something upon which we make judgments about the social status, moral character and cultural background of the speaker. These judgements are a product of the shared beliefs that circulate within communities, and which interpret linguistic traits as metonymic for statistically co-occurring social attributes and stereotypical social features (related to class, gender, ethnicity and so forth).

These shared beliefs are what are commonly referred to as language ideologies. In his foundational paper on this topic, Silverstein (1979: 193) describes language ideologies as 'any sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure or use'. In other words, they are the embedded beliefs that a group shares about language and language use which structures the way in which language is perceived by a particular group and in which it operates as social practice within that group. These beliefs are occasionally articulated as explicit conceptualisations of language, but they can also implicitly shape the way language is used, or the attitudes and stances people take towards it. It is this structuring that Silverstein calls the 'indexical' layer of language – the way certain elements of language use point towards embedded beliefs concerning the social, political or cultural nature of acts of speech.

A key point within this theorisation of language and social practice is that language ideologies are never about language alone. Instead, they incorporate the ties between language and other social dynamics such as gender, class and nationality (Woolard 1998). Use of a particular syntactical form, for example, can index a complex of ideological beliefs about class or cultural background, and these then provide a frame in which interaction between participants takes place. Furthermore, syntactical features or particular accents always exist within a wider ecology of linguistic practices wherein diversity is marked differentially, so that a particular feature is given symbolic significance in relation to the other features with which it is contrasted (and particularly 'standard' concepts of the language).

Another conceptual distinction introduced by Silverstein (1998) is that of the 'language community' as opposed to the more common sociolinguistic notion of the 'speech community'. Whereas a speech community is the grouping who have broadly similar patterns of language use in terms of accent, dialect, pragmatics and so forth, a language community is one which has a shared conception of the language as a named entity, and thus consider the *idea* of the language as part of their collective identity. An example would be groupings who view English (or a particular variety of it) as in a sense 'their' language, and promote this shared commitment as a central part of their communal identity. In other words, beliefs such as the idea that language homogeneity across a nation is a natural state of the world are particular, albeit very deeply embedded, language ideologies about the relationship between societies and linguistic practices (Kroskrity 2000).

Structuring language conceptualisation

As noted above, ideologies are manifest in both discourse and practice – in how people speak about a language, as well as in how they use and relate to it. As such it is a potentially very broad area for investigation, and in this chapter I will therefore narrow the focus to concentrate specifically on the ways in which the concept of English is constructed in discourse.

So how does language conceptualisation take place? There are five key elements to the process, which can offer a useful structure for its analysis. These are the mode, the domain, the function, the context and the means – all of which I will explain in further detail below (and then provide extended examples of in the next section).

First, there are the different modes in which conceptualisation takes place. By this I mean the different semiotic resources – verbal discourse, image, movement – which can be used to communicate ideas. Clearly the most prominent in this respect is verbal discourse – using language itself to talk or write about the nature of language – as this allows for the most flexible and richest way of generating and expressing conceptual meaning. Yet representations can also take place in other modes. There are examples, for instance, of ideas of language being represented visually – either diagrammatically (e.g. family trees of historical language development) or pictorially. In the Middle Ages, for example, there was an established iconography for ideas about grammar (Seargeant 2016), and throughout the history of art the visual trope of the Tower of Babel has been a popular subject.

The second point of note is that conceptualisation occurs in different domains. That is to say, language is the object of study for a wide range of different scientific disciplines, while at the same time featuring as an idea in non-scientific domains such as the arts, humanities and social sciences. While linguistics is, of course, the principal site of study, concepts of language are also commonly constructed in the cognitive sciences and psychology, in politics and educational contexts, and in philosophy, as well as literature and everyday contexts.

Each of these have a different set of concerns and aims, a point which stands as the third element of conceptualisation. A broad division can be made here between those conceptualisations which have as their aim the representation of language as it actually is (in so far as we can determine this), and those which present language as it could or should be (in their opinion). Scientific representations, for example, aim to flesh out a concept of language which fits as closely as possible with the observed phenomena of how language exists and works in the world. This is not necessarily the case in other domains.

A useful way of looking at this divide is by means of the distinction put forward by Searle (1995), building on the work of J. L. Austin and G. E. M. Anscombe, between two ‘directions of fit’. This maps the relationship that a conceptual term has with the phenomenon it is representing. There can be a ‘word-to-world’ direction of fit, whereby the term represents the reality of the observed phenomenon, i.e. an utterance is used to describe the way things in the world already are. For example, when I say ‘I have been to Tokyo’ I am describing an event that has actually occurred in the world. The opposite of this is a ‘world-to-word’ direction of fit, whereby the utterance is used as a declaration of something that is meant to come to pass, and thus provides a structuring device for an action or phenomenon. An example of this would be saying ‘I’ll meet you at half past seven’, and in doing so discursively projecting a version of a future reality which then acts as a structure for my upcoming plans.

In scientific discourse, representations are aiming for a ‘word-to-world’ direction of fit, whereby the term ‘language’ or ‘English’ equates as closely as possible to the actuality of these phenomena, and can function as an accurate conceptual category for analytic purposes. In this context the function of conceptualisation is, on the whole, straightforward, in that it is meant to provide an accurate representation which contributes to linguistic science. As we have seen, however, there are conflicting views of precisely what language or English can mean even in this context, and indeed much of the business of linguistics is concerned with refining this conceptualisation.

The opposite direction of fit also occurs for language conceptualisation in certain domains. Language policy, for example, promotes ideas of language which are then used as a template for regulating actual language use. This is found in particular in education, where choices about which variety or register should act as the standard become a set of norms to which students are then socialised. Similarly, language planning and policy initiatives project ideas about forms of language to which communities are urged or forced to conform. In this case the

functions of conceptualisation will be related to purposes of social cohesion or identity, or to other cultural and political ends. When, for example, a national standard is prescribed in the curriculum, and other (local) languages or varieties are discouraged or banned, the political aim is likely to be a means of fostering and enacting an ideology of national unity. In the pure sense, a standard national language is an ideal. There is no direct correspondence between the representation of, say, English that it puts forward, and the real-life diversity and variety in English that is found in even the most homogeneous of communities. Yet within society this concept of the language often underpins policy and pronouncements due to the role that it plays in the belief systems of those with regulatory power.

An even more salient example of the ‘world-to-word’ direction of fit is the case of the inventors of artificial and reduced languages, such as Esperanto or Basic English. In these cases, the aim was to make actual language practice (the ‘world’) adapt to the tenets of their invented or contrived systems (the ‘word’). For those advocating these projects, the concept ‘language’ was used to refer to a phenomenon which did not actually exist in the world but which they felt could be engineered into existence and become a reality of social practice for the population through promotion and education.

The fourth consideration of language conceptualisation is that it always happens within a particular historical context, which frames the nature of the knowledge about it. In other words, an act of conceptualisation occurs in a particular place and at a particular time, and the resources available at that time and place determine (or at the very least influence) its nature. Furthermore, the aims it is pursuing will be of relevance (and often be responding) to beliefs circulating within the culture at that time.

Historical context is of particular relevance for scientific explanations of language. Despite, in certain discourses, science being presented as ahistorical, and pursuing external truths which are removed from the influence of culture, scientific theories are always themselves cultural tools, which are shaped by the disciplinary and technological resources available at the time of their formulation, and are in dialogue with the epistemic and political beliefs of their time.

The final element in the system of analysis is the means by which language is conceptualised. These means consist of various discursive strategies, including the use of narrative, or the highlighting and downplaying of certain attributes. One of the key means is the use of metaphor, for which English can be both tenor and vehicle. In other words, one can describe English with reference to other entities and phenomena, or one can use English as a metaphor for other social issues. As Bailey writes,

English is asserted to mirror whatever the speaker or writer believes to be most distinctive of Anglophone culture – whether the best or the worst. English at once liberates and enslaves, enlightens and thwarts, affirms and denies those who use it.

(Bailey 2009: 2)

We will look at a number of examples of these means of conceptualisation in the next section.

Examples and implications

Naming the language

To examine all this I will look at two case studies, one from political discourse and policy, the other from fiction and popular culture. The study of linguistic ideologies is mostly studied as

part of particular disciplines or sub-disciplines, examining specific domains. Looking across different domains, however, and seeing how similar processes of conceptualisation take place there, is useful not only in highlighting the generic structural properties of conceptualisation, but also in understanding how ideas circulate throughout and across society and culture. Before moving to the two case studies, though, let us consider briefly the naming of the language, and the role this plays in its conceptualisation, as this, in recent years in particular, has become an important first step in the analysis of the nature of English around the world.

In its very earliest incarnation in the linguistic ecology of the people of Britain, English was just one language among many. It had no particular status over the other languages spoken on the island – the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* lists also Brito-Welsh, Scottish, Pictish and Latin (Freeborn 1992: 13) – was very much a local language, and was without a strongly defined identity. While it had first emerged sometime during the fifth century AD when Germanic tribes from the north of Europe arrived in Britain, bringing with them their various indigenous dialects, it was not until at least four centuries into its existence, sometime during the ninth century, that the term ‘English’ began to be regularly used to refer to it (Crystal 2005: 27).

Today, of course, its identity – and with it the discourses around it – are vastly different from these very modest beginnings. While English today may still be only one among many languages spoken across the British Isles, it is very much the dominant one. It is also the principal language in several other countries, and over the last century has emerged as the dominant international language of the present era. So much so, in fact, that there have been various suggestions about the need to rename it. Toolan, for example, just prior to the turn of the millennium, proposed that the language as it is spoken in international contexts – and especially where it functions as a lingua franca – is so far removed both culturally and politically from the traditional national language of England that the term ‘English’ is simply no longer appropriate. The identity of the language today is far, far broader than this name suggests, and thus instead he suggests changing it to ‘Global’ (Toolan 1997).

While this particular renaming strategy never gained much traction, there are others which have. Braj Kachru, for example, arguing that due to the fact that ‘English now has multi-cultural identities’ and thus its traditional name does not capture the ‘sociolinguistic reality’ of the way it is now used (Kachru 1992: 357), instigated use of the plural form ‘Englishes’. His contention that it is no longer possible to speak of a single English language is now an accepted precept across a great deal of the subject area, and this fairly small grammatical refinement has led to a number of fundamental reconceptualisations of the language. Following on from this, and with the continued expansion in the use of English around the globe (as well as the associated growth in scholarship examining this expansion), there have been several proposals for new technical names to refer to the language and its varieties – from Global Englishes and Postcolonial Englishes to English as a lingua franca (see Bolton, this volume, for further discussion of this issue) – each of which represents a distinct theoretical stance. Naming strategies, in other words, can act as the first step in a discursive re-examination of the ontological assumptions which underpin research into the nature and usage of the language.

National identity and English only policies

Despite the reappraisal within academia of many of the longstanding ‘common sense’ assumptions about the concept of English, there are still mainstream societal discourses which remain focused on the ideological relationship between language and national identity. While Noah Webster may have attempted to establish the notion of an ‘American tongue’ all the way

back in 1828 with his creation of a national dictionary (along with selective spelling reform) (Webster 1991 [1789]: 93), for many the concept of English is still married to the identity of what it means to be American – and this idea acts as a powerful identification feature for certain factions in political circles. In 2014, for example, local media reported that a senator in Arizona, John Huppenthal, had pseudonymously written a succession of inflammatory comments on online forums, including some calling for the banning of all Spanish-language media, with the exception of menus at Mexican restaurants (Planas 2017). The unorthodox means of communicating his message notwithstanding, the agenda he was pursuing was part of a long-running dispute in Arizonan politics over the primacy of English in society, which in turn is part of a broader pattern of ‘English only’ advocacy campaigns in the United States.

The ‘English only’ ideology gained renewed national impetus in the United States in 2016 and 2017 with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. During the election campaign, Trump took a position which bucked recent trends by presidential candidates by explicitly asserting, as part of a critique of one of his Republican rivals, that ‘This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish’ (Goldmacher 2016). Despite the fact that over 37 million US citizens now speak Spanish (Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013), he continued to press this line once in office by, for example, removing the Spanish-language pages from the White House website (Sharman 2017).

Trump’s position is symbolically pointed, but without policy implications. At federal level there is no official language policy, and thus it is left to the states to determine this themselves. In Arizona, where Senator Huppenthal was campaigning for the linguistic purification of everything except restaurant menus, a law was passed in 2006 known as the English as the Official Language Act, which required state and local government representatives to ‘preserve, protect and enhance the role of English as the official language’ (Ballotpedia 2006). The state has a long history of supporting ‘English only’ policies (Terry 1998), and three decades earlier, a similar law was passed calling for *all* government business to be conducted solely in English, yet this was subsequently overturned by the state’s Supreme Court on the grounds that it interfered with citizens’ access to government (*Washington Times* 2006). The 2006 bill included a number of situations in which ‘a language other than English’ could be used by state or local government, such as petitioning the government, teaching other languages and preserving Native American linguistic heritage, issues related to public health and safety, tourism and international trade contexts, and informal communications between officials. Beyond these exceptions, though, English was to be the default and promoted language for all governmental business.

The ideologies that shape the concept of English in this case are discursively articulated in a very explicit way, drawing on the standard national language ideology, and using tropes such as metaphor and analogy to persuade of the naturalness of this. The sponsor of the bill, for example, argued that ‘A common language promotes unity and understanding and is as vital to the health of a nation as having a common currency’ (Ballotpedia 2006). The stated purpose of the conceptualisation here is social cohesion, though many media outlets also noted that it had a specific exclusionary function, and was ‘viewed by many as a backlash against illegal immigration’ (*Washington Times* 2006), if not against migrants in general. The demographic context is important here in that, according to census data from 2000, nearly 30 per cent of the population of Arizona speak a language other than English at home, and thus many of these will be effectively disenfranchised by the legislation. And subsequent rulings have further discriminated against this section of the population, building on the precedent of this law. For example, another bill, passed in 2017 by the Arizona House of Representatives, stated that should there be any differences between the English-language version of an insurance

contract and a foreign language version (where the agent issues both, for the ease of the customer), it is the English version which takes precedent. Representative Mark Finchem argued this was natural given that English is the official language under state law, and that ‘We spent hundreds of millions of dollars in our public education system on something called “English-language learning” . . . Yet we are making excuses for people to not learn the English language’ (Fischer 2017).

This same economic discourse was also voiced in the 2006 bill, which in part justified making English the official language on the basis that this would eliminate ‘the wasteful spending used to translate millions of state documents into hundreds of languages’, which, it argues, ‘is not the responsibility of the taxpayer’. Here, two separate conservative discourses are brought together: the one advocating cultural homogeneity, the other a ‘small government’ agenda. At the heart of the conceptualisation however is the conviction that cultural integration is the natural state for an effective society: ‘By making English the official state language we provide an even greater incentive for all immigrants to learn English, become empowered and productive citizens, and participate in society as full Americans’ (Ballotpedia 2006).

The function of conceptualisation in this case, then, is clearly political. It can straddle two forms of political purpose, having both a campaigning function, where it is used as part of a repertoire of talking points aimed at appealing to and persuading the electorate (as in the Trump statements), while also having practical policy implications where it is related to beliefs about social organisation (as in the Arizona law). In terms of the domain, it is thus both political discourse and public policy. With respect to this latter context we can suggest that there is a blurring between the two ‘directions of fit’. Depending on the perspective you take, an English-only agenda is either a natural state of affairs, or it is historical contingency. That is to say, from the perspective of those advocating the policy it is likely to be considered a word-to-world fit, and they are simply reflecting in their discourse the way they see English naturally existing in the world. From a social linguistic perspective, on the other hand, it is a world-to-word direction of fit, as the discourse and policy is aimed at enacting an ideology which, as discussed above, arose at a particular point of time in eighteenth-century Europe, and now, within the context of the politics and demographics of the United States, has a divisive, if not racist, element to it. Yet context is also key to understanding the renewed impetus behind the idea, where it is often part of populist movements which are riding on a backlash against globalisation.

Fictional representations: Star Wars

For the second case study I will move from the world of populist politics to popular culture. While language use in fiction is not an authentic example of extempore communication, but rather an artistic representation of such communication, it is, nevertheless, a reproduction of ideologies current in society. For a work of fiction to have cultural purchase it needs to resonate within the cultural values in which it is consumed. Works of fiction can therefore be seen as part of the wider framework by which ideologies are circulated, drawing from and feeding back into the language practices and beliefs that exist throughout society. Furthermore, given the influential role that literary and popular culture can play in shaping narratives in social life (Giglio 2007), there is an interesting relationship to be explored between the means and content of conceptualisations in these different domains.

For this second example, therefore, I will look at the representation of languages within the *Star Wars* franchise, and at how ideologies of English inform the way that language is used as

part of the narrative world in this series. Depictions of language in science fiction adhere to the same paradox that exists for all types of fantasy world-building. The language spoken by an alien race needs to be significantly different from human languages to illustrate the otherness of the species, yet at the same time still be recognisable as language. It is also often used as a key ingredient in representing the alien race's culture and identity, and thus decisions made about the way it sounds or operates assist with the process of characterisation. In some cases, the nature of the language also acts as a plot complication or even as one of the major speculative premises underpinning the science fiction. A film such as Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*, for example, is based on the conundrum of how humans might communicate with an alien race, and the philosophical complications this might entail.

Star Wars is not in this tradition, however. In terms of characterisation, whereas a number of high-profile science fiction projects (*Star Trek*, *Avatar* etc.) have employed specialist linguists to construct their fictional languages, alien communication in the *Star Wars* films was initially approached mostly as sound design rather than linguistics. The sound designer, Ben Burtt, has written that the intention was 'to use human-produced sound and the mimicry of actual languages' in order to come up with something that was 'entertaining, alien, and full of appropriate character' (Burtt 2001). In order to do this he chose languages which sounded markedly different from English, and then distorted them until he produced a sound which, to his ear, was 'alien'. For the Ewoks in the third film, for example, he started with a BBC documentary recording of an old woman speaking Tibetan which was then tampered with in post-production, while Jawaese is based very distantly on Zulu (Conley and Cain 2006), and Lando Calrissian's co-pilot Nien Nunb, who helps blow up the second Death Star, speaks something resembling the Tanzanian language Haya (Zimmer 2016). In all these cases there is no attempt to create from these sounds anything that structurally recreates the properties of an actual language (no regular phonology, lexis or grammar), but simply strings of sound.

A similar abstract process was used in *Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. For the language spoken by the Kanjiklub, one of the gangs encountered by Han Solo and Chewbacca aboard their shipping freighter, the producers enlisted a YouTube star from Finland, Sara Maria Forsberg, whose video 'What Languages Sound Like to Foreigners' had been hugely popular in 2014. For her work on *Star Wars* she used a mixture of the sounds of Indonesian and Sundanese to come up with something she described as 'suitably exotic-sounding' (Zimmer 2016).

Although none of these are conceptualisations of English, the thinking behind their design is based very much on a contrastive principle, with English being the unmarked, 'non-exotic' language. Something akin to this underpinning ideology was, in fact, written into the original film script, with directives such as 'The Sand People . . . speak in a coarse *barbaric* language' (Lucas 1977; italics added). As such it plays into a very standard tradition of science fiction, which has roots in an Orientalist mind-set. As Rieder (2008: 1) notes, colonialism has always been a significant historical context for science fiction. The genre first arises in 'those countries most heavily involved in imperialist projects – France and England – and then gains popularity in the United States, Germany, and Russia as those countries also enter into more and more serious imperial competition'. And one of the ways in which this is encoded, as the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin comments, is by enacting 'the permanent hegemony of manly, English-speaking men [versus] the risible grotesqueness of non-English languages' (Le Guin 2006: xvii).

This approach to linguistic representation in *Star Wars* has resulted in some notable issues and controversies over appropriation and stereotyping. With the first film, in 1977, for example, a number of linguistic anthropologists from Berkeley were asked to record dialogue in Quechua for the film, which the filmmakers then planned to play backwards in order to

create one of the alien languages. Due to ethical concerns, particularly around the idea that this might indirectly imply that ‘primitives’ were aliens rather than humans, the linguists in question refused (Speech Events 2015; Wilce 1999).

In contrast to these impressionistic ‘languages’, all the humans within the franchise speak what is known as Intergalactic Basic and which is, to all intents and purposes, English. As Stockwell (2000) notes, the use of English as a lingua franca in science fiction is in many ways a simple way of side-stepping the logistics of intergalactic communication problems. And this is very much the rationale here. But it also reinforces the hegemony of English – and of a particular type of English – as here again the same Anglophone equation applies. For the most part, a standard US accent is the unmarked code, and the more ‘foreign’ the sound of the accent, the more alien it is meant to be. In the first film the director George Lucas reports carefully trying ‘to balance the British and American voices’ so that there wasn’t a regional divide between heroes and villains (Scanlon 1977). But to many the impression is still that the villainous Imperial characters speak in Received Pronunciation, while the heroic Rebels have American accents.

In the second trilogy of the franchise this standard versus non-standard divide was even more marked, leading to criticism that the symbolism behind some of the linguistic and cultural representation bordered on the racist. The Neimoidian race, for example, many of whom conspire with the main villains of the films, spoke in what sounded, to many, like a rather crude mock-Japanese accent, while their clothing had a faux Chinese aspect to it. This led critics such as John Sutherland to write that the depiction came ‘straight out of the Yellow Peril propaganda of the world war two’ (Sutherland 1999).

In contrast to something like the English-only policy discourse, English is here being conceptualised indirectly, and drawing mostly on deeply embedded ideologies which the makers of the film were not, at least in the early days, reflecting on in any particular critical way in their character depiction. The mode in this instance is multifaceted, and not confined to verbal discourse. It includes the use of sound engineering, meant to imitate alien language without actually being articulate speech, and which often draws on non-European language sounds to facilitate this. Then there is visual imagery, such as the iconography around the costumes of the Neimoidian people, which acts as a complement to the symbolism of the sound and speech. Plus there is the use of narrative as a means of conceptualisation, in that associations between accent and character are given a particular meaning due to the part that characters play in the plot.

Finally, the purpose behind conceptualisation is part of the broader purpose of the film as entertainment in relatively pure and simple terms. And yet as has been noted, Hollywood, even when not being purposefully political, plays a strong role in shaping normative cultural values, even if this is not an explicit intention of those involved in projects of this sort.

Future directions

Conceptualisation of English lies predominantly across three important areas for English language studies: (social) scientific investigation, political intervention, and literary representations of social life. For the first two of these it is a key element in how we study language, and one that can affect the direction of research and the structure of social practice. The third area – how language is conceptualised in the arts and humanities – is a field which has received less focus to date, but can be an important complement to the others, not least in that it often becomes a useful touchstone or analogy for discussion of political discourse (references to George Orwell’s Newspeak when discussing the political manipulation of language are a recurrent example).

Within social and applied linguistics, prevailing ideologies at the present moment are that English needs to be seen from a global perspective, from a social perspective, from a political perspective and from a critical perspective. As many of the chapters in this handbook discuss, a recent turn has been towards a position which deconstructs and fragments what is meant by English. The sceptical re-evaluation of what ‘English’ is, and whether it exists as a singular coherent entity (an issue discussed in the introduction to this chapter), has expanded into approaches which not only pluralise English, but also highlight the way that, in a globalised world, the actual practices people use, especially in multiculturally-inflected contexts, are to draw on a variety of different linguistic – and semiotic – resources that are available to them, and engage in what is commonly referred to as translanguaging as part of their real-world communication practices (an issue taken up in other chapters in the book).

Conceptualisations of the language such as these, which occur in parts of the discipline, are not orthodox across English language studies as a whole. For example, corpus approaches to English rarely acknowledge the translanguaging paradigm. They are also in stark contrast to the way that English is conceptualised in many public policy contexts, especially those where language-related issues are co-opted as part of a broader nationalist politics, or as part of education policy. Given this discrepancy, a critically-engaged language studies may wish to address why this discrepancy exists, and how those responsible for policy might be made more aware, and take more account, of social-scientific conceptualisations, so as to confront the exclusionary politics which prescriptive attitudes, centred around particular concepts of language, often promote. As this chapter has outlined, across this and many different domains, analysis of situated acts of conceptualisation can examine how and why we have the idea of English that we do in these various different contexts – and thus provide clear foundations for all other avenues of investigation into the language.

Further reading

Richard W. Bailey’s *Images of English: a cultural history of the language* (2009, Cambridge University Press) presents a history of English from the perspective of how the language has been perceived over the centuries. Drawing upon folk beliefs about English, and on debates over deterioration and change, it examines the way ideas of English have shaped its history.

Language ideologies: practice and theory, edited by Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard and Paul Kroskrity (1998, Oxford University Press), includes a series of essays on the way concepts of language are used and function in a range of social settings.

Regimes of language: ideologies, politics, and identities, edited by Paul Kroskrity (2000, School of American Research Press), is another collection of essays looking at the role of language ideologies in contexts such as national and ethnic identities, state formation and political discourse.

Related topics

- Standards in English
- Sociolinguistics: studying English and its social relations
- World Englishes: disciplinary debates and future directions
- English and multilingualism: a contested history.

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