

What does our language say about us?

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PAGE PROOFS

- | | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 1.1 | How are language and identity <i>related</i> ? | 4 |
| 1.2 | How does the way we use language <i>identify</i> us with different groups and communities? | 20 |
| 1.3 | How do we use language to <i>express our individuality</i> ? | 26 |
| 1.4 | How do we use language to <i>conceal ourselves</i> ? | 38 |

big ideas: Assessment tasks

Text list

In this Part you will read or view and discuss extracts from:

WRITTEN

Australian texts

Richard Blackburn 'If you want to keep young drivers safe, then give them your car keys' *WA Today* (news article)

Tom Cho 'Learning English' in Alice Pung (ed) *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (non-fiction)

Martin Flanagan 'It's an exciting game at every level' *The Age* (news article)

Anna Goldsworthy *Piano Lessons* (memoir)

Michelle Griffin 'Empire of superheroes' *The Age* (news article)

Andrew Herrick 'With American lingo, we've imported toxic US culture' *The Age* (news article)

Steven Herrick 'Peter' and 'Jake: Chasing Ghosts' (poems)

Melina Marchetta *Looking for Alibrandi* (novel)

Andrew McDonald *The Greatest Blogger in the World* (novel)

Alex Morris 'Boy in a bubble' *The Age*, *Good Weekend* (magazine article)

Pip Newling *Knockabout Girl* (memoir)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts

Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Pryor *The Binna Binna Man* (non-fiction)

Tania Major 'Remembering history' *Sydney Morning Herald* (news article)

World texts

John Boyne *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (novel)

Bill Bryson *A Really Short History of Nearly Everything* (non-fiction)

David Crystal *Words Words Words* (non-fiction)

Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng and Benjamin Ajak *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* (memoir)

Robert Frost 'The Road Not Taken' (poem)

Matt Seaton 'Word up' *The Guardian* (news article)

MULTIMODAL

Australian texts

Bruce Beresford (director) *Mao's Last Dancer* (film)
Herald Sun Online, 'Moderate quake shakes Tokyo' (news article)

Kath & Kim (television show)

Paul Keating 'Redfern Address' (speech)
Leunig 'Let it go. Let it out.' (cartoon)

Phillip Noyce (director) *Rabbit-proof Fence* (film)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts

Vincent Lingiari (spoken word)

World texts

Neil Gaiman and Mike Dringenberg *Death: The Time of Your Life* (graphic novel)

John Cleese and Graham Chapman 'Dead Parrot' sketch *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (television show)



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CULTURE

Over to you

Working in groups, list the cultural backgrounds of the members of your group. Are there any differences in the ways members of your group use English? Give some examples and share them with the rest of the class.

What does our language say about Australia's identity?

If we look closely at Australian English, it provides a record of the many events and influences that have made Australia a country. It can show us what Australia has gained, and what it has lost over the years.

The language brought by the British colonisers – English – is the language most of us speak in Australia today. However, we probably wouldn't recognise much of the English used by the first British settlers. Like all languages, it has evolved in response to what has happened over the last two centuries.

The English we use in Australia today not only differs from the English of the first settlers, it also differs from the English used in other English-speaking countries, such as Scotland, the USA or Nigeria. We use the same language, but we use it differently.

Over to you

- 1 In small groups, brainstorm a list of Australian words or phrases and their American versions (for example, footpath/sidewalk; queue/line up). Share your list with the rest of the class.
- 2 Write down some words or phrases that your grandparents (or parents) use, but that you never use. Why do you think this is? Discuss as a class.

In Australia and other English-speaking countries, such as Nigeria, we use the same language, but we use it differently.

1.1 How are language and identity related?

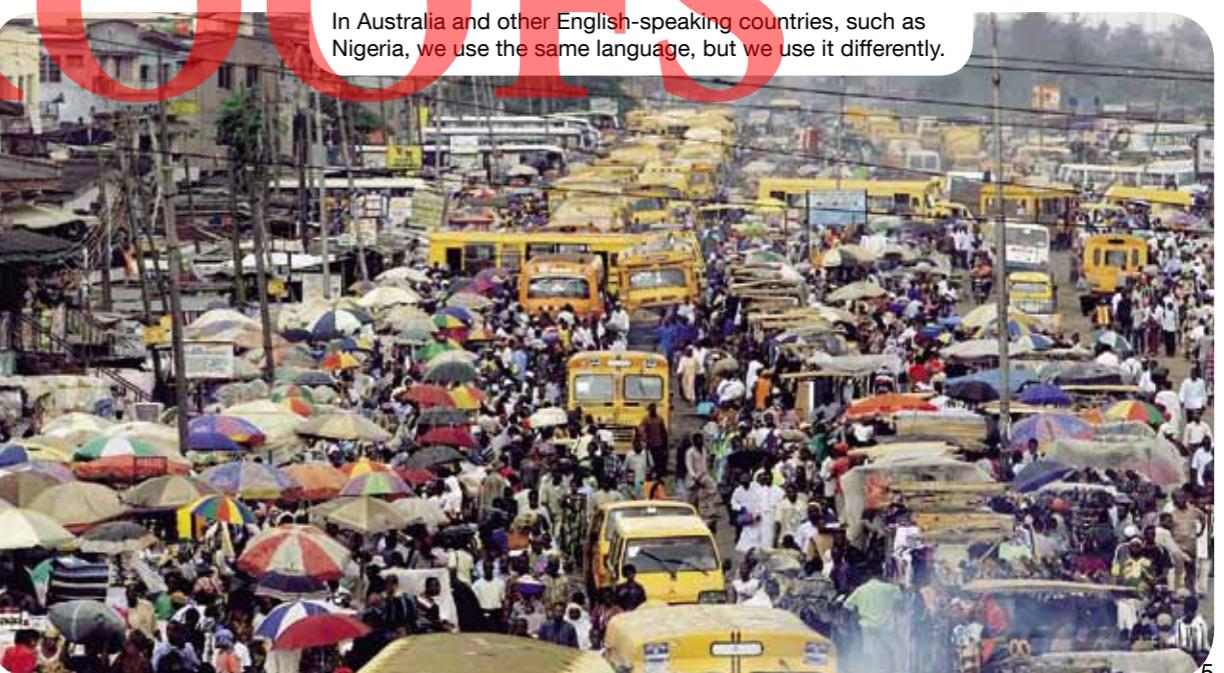
Our sense of who we are is linked to the language we use. We are identified as citizens of different countries, as members of different communities and as individuals not just by *what* we say, but also by *how* we say it.

When we hear someone speak, we will often recognise them immediately as Australians because of how they use English. We may notice their distinctive accent and choice of words. We may make judgments about their cultural background, and about their age, their interests and their personality based on how they use English. We may also make the same sort of judgments based on their body language. Perhaps we will notice that they use language differently, depending on whether they're at a family celebration, playing a team sport, or giving a speech at a school assembly; they will be using the same language, but they may be using it in different ways in different situations.

Our language is so linked to our identities, that changes in the ways we use language reflect changes in our identity – at a national, community and personal level. Like all languages, Australian English is constantly evolving; we use new words and expressions, and drop others in response to new influences and ideas. With increased globalisation and the rapid development of technology, we absorb features of other languages. Second and later generations of migrants often use language differently to their parents, and words and phrases go out of fashion.

In 10 years' time, we will be using words to describe things that are unheard of today.

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The many varieties of Australian English include those spoken by migrants.

What are the varieties of Australian English?

Over time, the English used by the first settlers was shaped by new ideas and new inventions. Australians still didn't speak English in exactly the same way as each other, but they didn't speak like people in Britain either. Our language has also been shaped by new places and people; it has absorbed features of other languages and so reflects Australia's unique history.

There are many varieties of Australian English, and they reflect who we are and what we have been as a country. The main varieties we will discuss in this chapter are:

- Standard Australian English
- Aboriginal Englishes
- Migrant Englishes.

Standard Australian English

In Australia today, we use English in a range of ways, depending on our subject matter, and on who we are, whom we are with, and what we are doing. One variety of Australian English that is shared by most Australians is Standard Australian English (SAE). This is the spoken and written English used in Australia in formal settings.

When using SAE, we avoid colloquial language, choose words precisely and, for the most part, structure our sentences according to grammatical conventions. There are some contexts when we are all expected to use SAE; for example, news reports, school projects, job interviews and formal speeches.

The then Prime Minister Paul Keating used SAE when he gave the famous 'Redfern Address' in 1992. He spoke of the need to begin the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, based on the recognition that:

We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disease and the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice and our failure to imagine these things being done to us.

History

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Justin Bieber

Over to you

1 Reread the extract from Prime Minister Paul Keating's 'Redfern Address' on the previous page and answer the following:

a Why do you think Keating begins the first three sentences in the above extract with 'We'?

b In the last two sentences, Keating uses the nominations 'discrimination', 'exclusion' and 'failure', rather than the verbs 'discriminate', 'exclude' and 'fail'. How does this make his speech more formal?

2 Now listen to a recording of the same address from the National Film and Sound Archive website – www.nsfa.gov.au – and answer the following:

a How does hearing the speech add to your understanding of its message?

b Do the images and music add to this message or detract from it? Give reasons for your answer.

Some people use SAE most, if not all, of the time. Others only use it in more formal situations. In *A Little Book of Language*, linguist David Crystal explains that those with 'a good education will speak and write the form of the language that is felt to be the "best" – standard English, in the case of English-speaking countries' (p. 141). (Note that there are also standard versions of English in other countries where English is the common language, for example Standard American English.)

Sometimes, we may mix SAE with less formal English. For example, in the extract below, journalist Alex Morris describes a day spent with singer Justin Bieber and his entourage in New York. Morris uses SAE except when quoting teenager Juliet who uses colloquial language:

In a triage area set up in the shadowy hallway of Rockefeller Centre, Juliet was seated, pale and trembling and wearing an oxygen mask, surrounded by other young fans in similar states of semi-consciousness. 'There are so many of them,' one medic said, scanning the supine young bodies. 'How many do you think? Twenty?'

'Thirty,' his partner answered.

Suddenly, Juliet pulled off her mask. 'Please don't tell my mom,' she pleaded. 'Justin has another concert tonight. I have to go!'

And in the end, she was there, watching Justin from afar amid another throng of shrieking, shoving teens, all enraptured by the sight of him,

'I love him! He's amazing! I don't want to be that creepy fan, but, like, I totally am. Oh, Justin ...' Juliet trailed off, her adoration outpacing her words. 'My mom is so over Justin Bieber.'

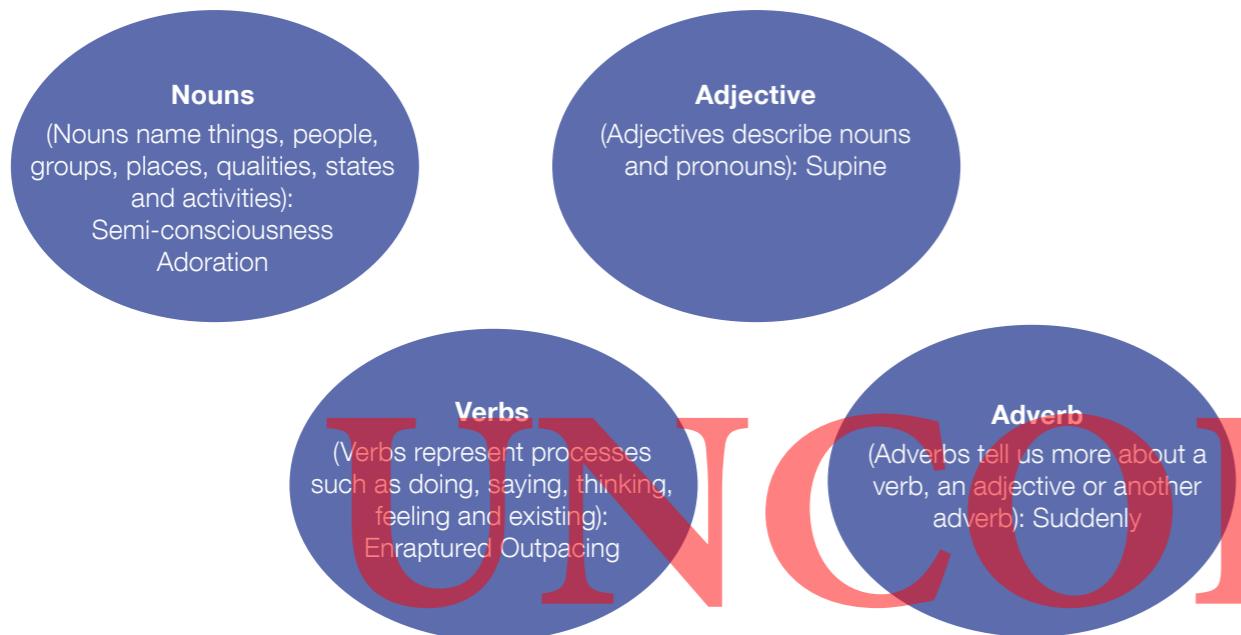
Source: Alex Morris, 'Boy in a bubble', *The Age, Good Weekend*, 4 September 2010

Paul Keating giving the Redfern Address



Language

In this extract, Morris uses a range of vocabulary characteristic of SAE, for example:



Adverbial phrases tell us more about an adverb, for example 'so over' is an adverbial phrase ('over' is an adverb, defined by 'so').

Complex sentences are made up of an **independent clause**, joined by one or more **dependent clauses**.

An **independent clause** is a clause that makes sense on its own.

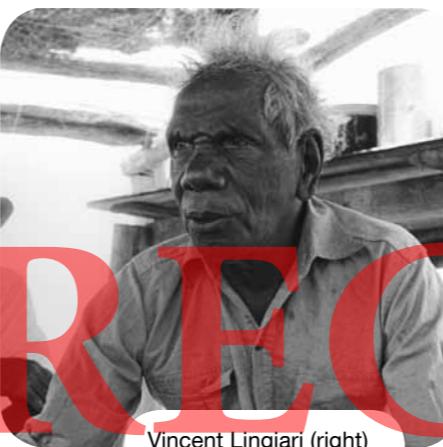
A **dependent clause** adds meaning to an independent clause, but cannot stand alone.

Over to you

1 Create a digital or handwritten alphabetical glossary of new words. Start by looking up the meanings of any words in the passage by Alex Morris that you are unfamiliar with.

- For each word, include its origin and meaning(s), and a sentence showing how it is used.
- Update your glossary as you add to your vocabulary.

2 Working in pairs, use the same passage as a model to create a text that uses SAE but includes quotations from a speaker using more informal language. Try to include a range of vocabulary, different parts of speech and sentence types in your text.



Aboriginal Englishes

Australian English today reflects the influence of the languages of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who lost many of their languages, as well as their land, as a result of British colonisation. Before white settlement, Indigenous Australians spoke over 250 languages. Of those that are left, many are endangered – for example, in 2003 there were only 60 speakers of the language of the Gurindji people.

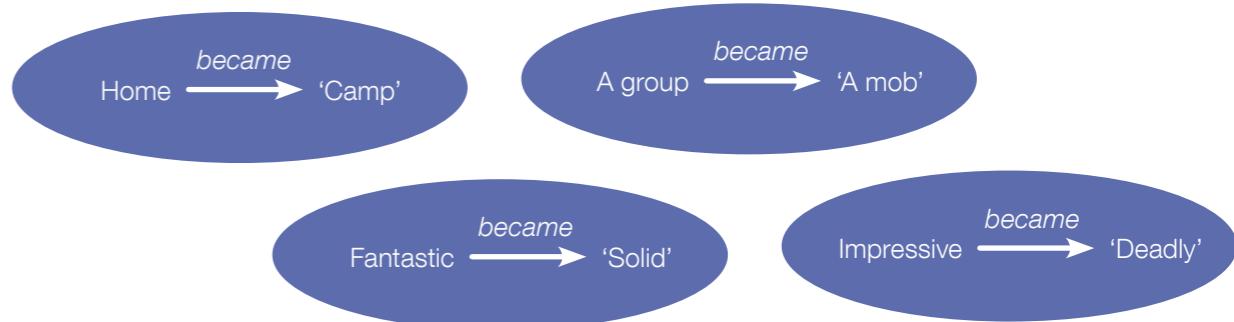
Vincent Lingiari, a Gurindji man from Daruragu in the Northern Territory, fought for Aboriginal rights and was recorded speaking his language. This can be heard, along with the translation, at www.indigenousrights.net.au/files/f56.mp3. Lingiari said:

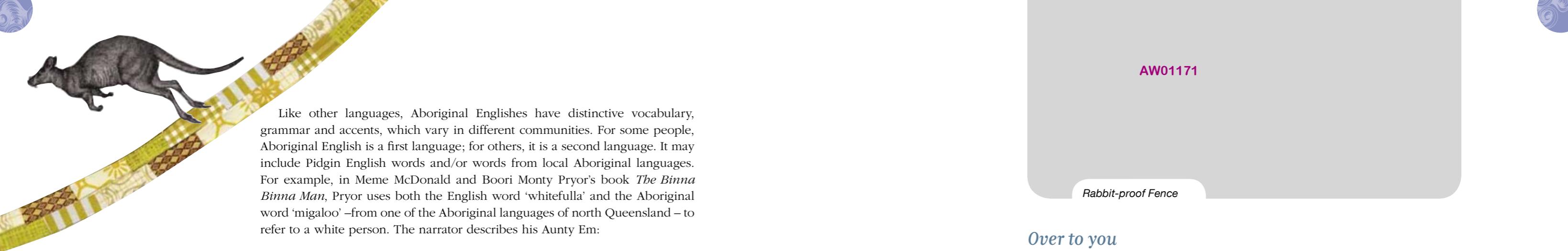
My name is Vincent Lingiari, came from Daruragu, Wattie Creek station. That means that I came down here to ask all these fellas here about the land rights. What I got story from my old father or grandfather that land belongs to me, belongs to Aboriginal men before the horses and the cattle come over on that land where I am sitting now. That is what I have been keeping on my mind and I still got it on my mind. That is all the words I can tell you.

In the years following British colonisation, not many people tried to learn Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and this is still the case today. In her memoir, *Knockabout Girl*, Pip Newling recounts how she left Sydney to go and work in Halls Creek in Western Australia in the 1990s. The Aboriginal people there mostly spoke one of the main local languages, Jaru and Kija. Newling explains that more people in the town spoke one of those languages – or even both – than English. Even so, she added, 'few non-Aboriginal Australians [had] any understanding of either of these languages'.

A form of language called Pidgin English developed. This was made up of a limited number of English words, together with some words from Aboriginal languages. Over time, some Pidgin English words were absorbed into the English spoken by Aboriginal peoples and developed as Aboriginal Englishes. Aboriginal people began to use these words to communicate with other Aboriginal people who spoke different languages. In some regions, they adapted English words as part of their own language, for example:

IDENTITY PAGE PROOFS





SPEAKING

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Like other languages, Aboriginal Englishes have distinctive vocabulary, grammar and accents, which vary in different communities. For some people, Aboriginal English is a first language; for others, it is a second language. It may include Pidgin English words and/or words from local Aboriginal languages. For example, in Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Pryor's book *The Binna Binna Man*, Pryor uses both the English word 'whitefulla' and the Aboriginal word 'migaloo' –from one of the Aboriginal languages of north Queensland – to refer to a white person. The narrator describes his Aunty Em:

straggling round this morning like she's had her own mob of ghosts chasing after her. That migaloo smile, that sure-of-itself whitefulla smile, has lost its hold. Her mouth's gone all wobbly. (p. 82)

Pryor also uses phrases and sentence structures that are characteristic of Aboriginal Englishes. The 'Quinkin' for example, is:

called the Binna Binna man 'cause he's got big long ears. Binna means ears, see. He's got ears that long they drag on the ground, true. Drag along the ground as he walks.

The old people call those spirits Quinkins. They reckon the Binna Binna man can be good and heal you and stuff. But you poke fun at him or go to touch him when he don't want to be touched, then you can get into big trouble, like die. (p. 10)

In the film *Rabbit-proof Fence*, directed by Phillip Noyce, three Aboriginal children are not allowed to speak their own language when they are forcibly removed from their home and mother in north-western Australia. They are taken to the Moore River Native Settlement. On their first day, 2000 kilometres from home, they are told: 'We don't use that jabba here – you speak English' (Scene 5).

Aboriginal people in the film speak English in a distinctive way, however. For example, when the girls escape, they are helped by Mavis, an Aboriginal maid who had been at Moore River herself. When she first meets the girls, she says:

Mavis: Youse that lot from Moore River?
Molly: Yeah
Mavis: What you girls walk all that way – 800 miles? I was there, too scared to run away, but. Everyone was always caught ... Youse got the furthest. (Scene 11)

Rabbit-proof Fence

Over to you

- Find some other texts created by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander writers and add words to your personal glossary that are characteristic of Aboriginal Englishes.
- With a partner, read aloud the passages on the previous page from Meme McDonald and Boori Pryor's *The Binna Binna Man*.
 - How does the narrator use language to give the impression that he is speaking directly to his audience?
 - The passages provide vivid word pictures of Aunty Em and the Binna Binna man. Create a visual image showing how you would represent one of them if you were the illustrator of a graphic novel version of the text.
- In the dialogue from *Rabbit-proof Fence*, on the previous page, Mavis's questions are put as statements. How do we know that she is asking questions?

Migrant Englishes

Migrants from all over the world have changed the way we use English. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most migrants came from British backgrounds. Since the end of World War II in 1945, however, more than six and a half million people have migrated to Australia from over 200 countries. Over 300 languages are spoken in Australian homes. Forty five per cent of Australians were born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. Australia now identifies itself as a multicultural country.

The way new migrants use English sometimes shows their background. For example, in Melina Marchetta's novel *Looking for Alibrandi*, when Josie's Italian grandmother describes a boy she thinks would be suitable for Josie, the way she speaks shows her Italian origins. She gets her grammar and words a little wrong, such as when she pronounces 'with' as 'wit':



'He is a very well-manner boy.'

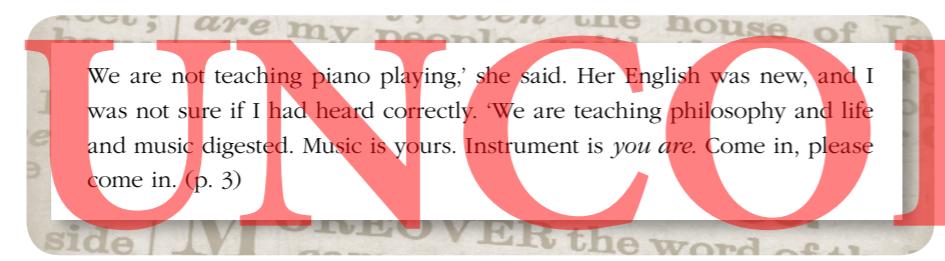
'He is very well-manner boy.'
'Mannered,' I corrected, knowing that it irritated her ...
'You misintrepid everything, Jozzie.'
'It's mis-interpret everything,' I corrected, rolling my eyes.
'You are without respect, Jozzie. Just like your mother. Always wit no respect.' (pp. 36–37)



Freshly harvested from the spaghetti bush?

Italian migrants, like Josie's grandmother, brought new words and ideas to Australia. For example, they introduced many of our favourite foods, such as pizza and pasta. In the 1950s, Australians with a British background were so unfamiliar with spaghetti that they fell for an April Fools' hoax. A BBC television program presented a spoof documentary showing how spaghetti was grown and harvested. The television station was flooded with calls from people asking where they could get hold of a spaghetti bush.

We use **pronouns** to replace the names of people or things. When we write from our own point of view – or create a character and speak as, or through them – we use the **first-person pronouns** *I*, *me* (singular), and *we*, *us* (plural). We use **third-person pronouns** – *he*, *him*, *she*, *her*, *it* (singular), and *they*, *them* (plural) – to refer to other people, or to write more impersonally.



Other varieties of English include those spoken by migrants from different Asian countries. Some of these have been described as Chinglish, Japlish, Singlish and Manglish. Writer Tom Cho learned English when he arrived in Australia from China. He humorously describes in 'Learning English' (from

Growing Up Asian in Australia, edited by Alice Pung) how difficult he found English lessons and how he developed his own variety of English. He explains that he:

learnt the trick of replacing words I did not know with phrases like 'bla bla bla,' 'yada yada yada,' 'whatever,' or the name of a celebrity. (p. 15)

Tom explains how television was an important influence when he was learning English, and that he picked up many expressions by watching television. He especially liked programs with courtroom scenes. Soon, his:

day-to-day speech was filled with sentences like: 'Murder in the second, twenty to thirty-five years, and we'll drop the conspiracy charge.' (p. 16)

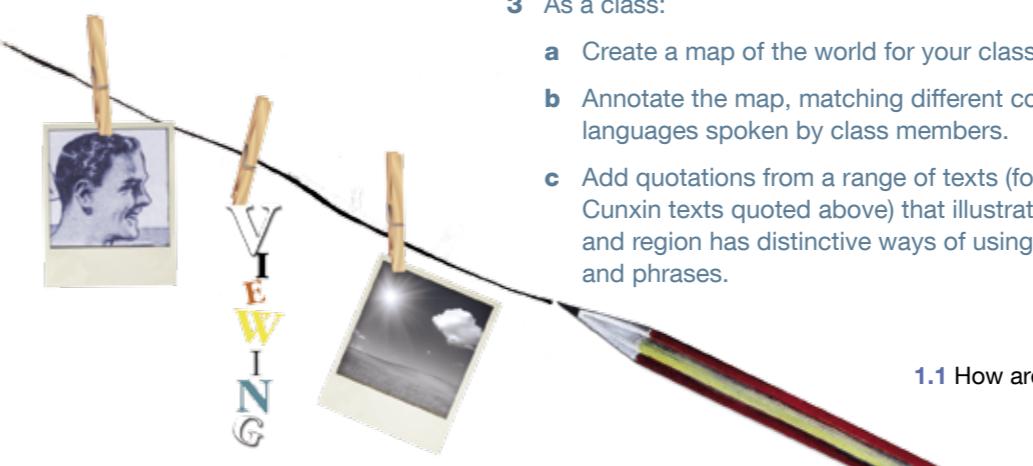
In the film adaptation of Li Cunxin's autobiography *Mao's Last Dancer*, directed by Bruce Beresford, Cunxin uses old-fashioned expressions such as 'Upon my soul', which he has learnt from an out-of-date language book (Scene 1).

Children whose parents come from different countries are influenced by the ways their parents speak. The way children speak can also be influenced by their schoolmates. For example, when children from non-English-speaking families form a majority in a school, the students with a British background – who are in the minority – may adjust the way they speak to reflect the majority.

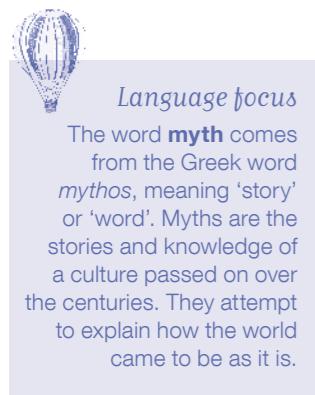
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Over to you

- 1 Working in groups, use the Department of Immigration and Citizenship website at www.harmony.gov.au/schools/students/aussie-facts.htm to answer the following questions:
 - a What are the top 10 countries for migration to Australia?
 - b Apart from English, what are the most common languages spoken in Australia?
- 2 In the same groups:
 - a List the different languages or dialects spoken by members of your group outside school.
 - b Organise the list according to how many group members speak each language, and compare your group's languages with your answer to Activity 1(b).
- 3 As a class:
 - a Create a map of the world for your classroom wall.
 - b Annotate the map, matching different countries and regions with languages spoken by class members.
 - c Add quotations from a range of texts (for example, the Tom Cho and Li Cunxin texts quoted above) that illustrate the ways in which each country and region has distinctive ways of using English, such as particular words and phrases.



What do Australian accents say about us?



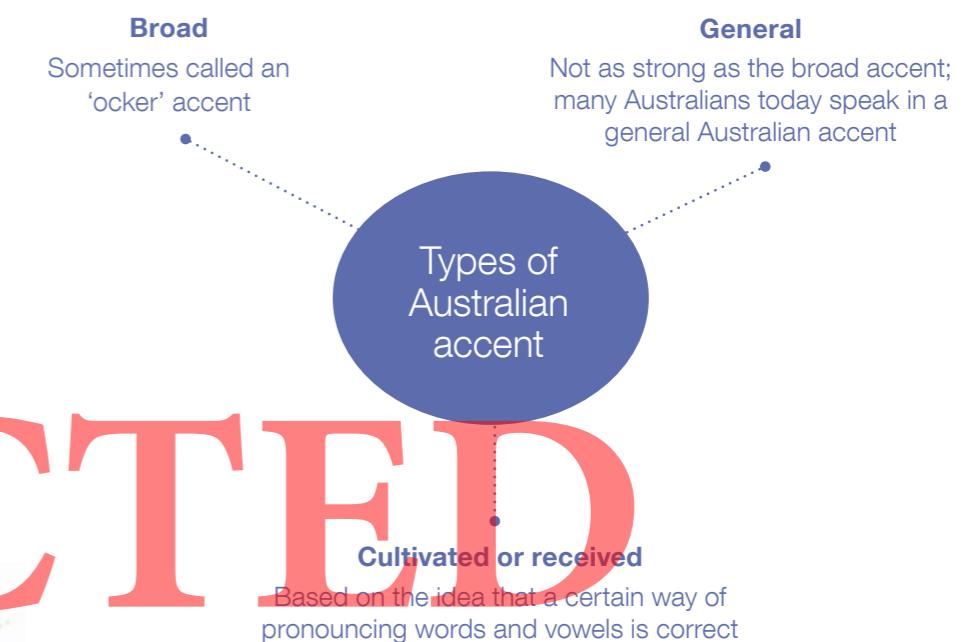
While many Australians who were born overseas speak Australian English with accents that reflect their cultural background, you can usually tell that someone is Australian as soon as they speak. The Australian accent is unique. The first settlers would not have recognised the way we speak now, as it has changed over the years in response to our unique history.

Early settlers, wherever they came from, soon adopted a recognisably Australian accent that was used right across Australia. There are a number of myths about how this happened – one theory is that there were so many flies, the settlers couldn't open their mouths properly, and so developed a way of speaking with their lips barely apart!



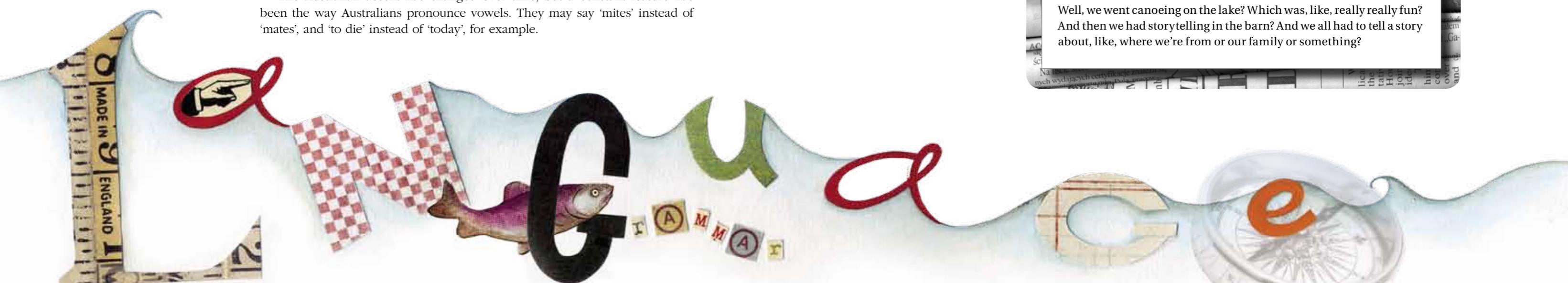
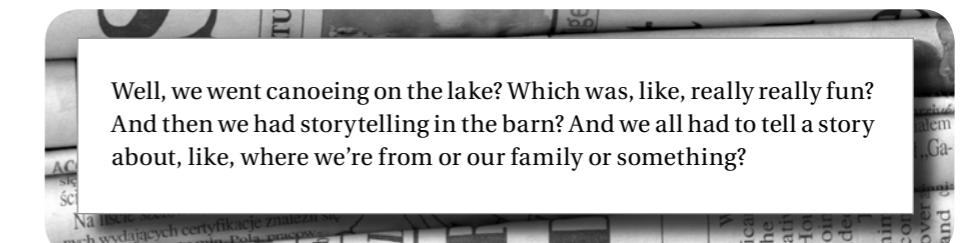
The Australian accent has changed over time, but a constant feature has been the way Australians pronounce vowels. They may say 'mites' instead of 'mates', and 'to die' instead of 'today', for example.

The Australian accent has sometimes been described as falling into three groups:



As new varieties of Australian English have evolved, however, the Australian accent has become more varied. Australian accents now reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of their speakers.

The Australian accent, like Australian English, is always changing as we are more exposed to the accents of people who speak other varieties of English and Australian English. A recent development is called the rising *inflection*, or 'uptalk', where a person raises their voice at the end of a sentence. This sounds as if the speaker is unsure of themselves, or is asking a question. The British writer Matt Seaton suggests in 'Word up', an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, that British teenagers have been influenced by Australian soap operas and also use uptalk. He describes a conversation that he overheard:



Our accent is strongly linked to our sense of identity. When people want to change their identity, they may try to change their accents. In her memoir *Piano Lessons*, Anna Goldsworthy describes her attempts to talk in a ‘posh’ way when she wins a scholarship to an independent school in Adelaide. She practised her vowels so that:

‘hi’ began more like a ‘har’ before finding its way back to ‘i’. As long as the conversation went no further, nobody would pick me as a scholarship winner. (p. 71)

Comedy shows often caricature peoples’ attempts to put on a ‘cultivated’ or ‘posh’ accent.



AW01271, a bucket contoured and placed at an interesting angle

Hyacinth Bucket, from the 1990s British sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*, pronounces her surname ‘Bouquet’ and affects a ‘posh’ accent

Over to you

In pairs, read the following extract from Series 1, Episode 3 of *Kath & Kim* aloud, using uptalk to mark the end of each sentence or phrase:

Sharon: Oh, Kimmy, come on, Kim. We've got the big game today, it's the big game. You've got to get up, Kimmy, Kim, come on. Atta, girl. See you downstairs in five. Kim, come on. How's about I make you some breaky, hey? How's about I put the kettle on, alright? Come on, Kimmy, That's a girl.

- 1 Discuss whether Sharon’s accent would be broad, general or cultivated Australian. Give reasons to support your answer.
- 2 Now change Sharon’s dialogue so that it can be read using a different accent. Consider which words and phrases you need to change. Read your revised version aloud, and summarise the changes you have made.

What does our body language say about our identity?

We communicate with different parts of our bodies, as well as with words. We use gestures, such as shrugging or pointing, and facial expressions such as frowns or grins. The ways we do this partly depend on where we come from. People from different countries sometimes use the same gestures in the same ways – some rude signs are rude wherever you are. On the other hand, some body language means different things in different cultures, or is used in different ways. For example, hand gestures and eye contact play an important part in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Film director Phillip Noyce described the first audition of 12-year-old Everlyn Sampi, whom he cast in the leading role of Molly in *Rabbit-proof Fence*:

for the first two hours, she didn’t look at me. There is a tradition amongst indigenous people which is the opposite of our tradition. We call it shyness but in fact not looking at a person when you first meet them indicates respect rather than the opposite.

In the film, the hungry Molly and her sisters meet a kangaroo hunter as they walk the 2000 kilometres home. Molly greets him with a flick of the wrist – a hand gesture understood by some Aboriginal peoples to mean ‘hello’.

Over to you

As a class, discuss examples of how misunderstandings may occur when people use body language differently.





What is the relationship between changes in language and identity?

Language, and the way we use it, is so closely linked to our sense of identity that when people lose their language, they can feel they have lost their identity. Kokoberra woman Tania Major, who was Young Australian of the Year in 2007, explains how the loss of language has affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this way. She writes of the tragedy of many young people who:

don't know who they are or where they belong. They don't know their own language, and all too many can't even speak Standard Australian English. My own knowledge of my home languages, Kokoberra and Kokomenjan, is imperfect: I mix the languages and older people laugh when I speak. But I have become enthusiastic about restoring the languages in my own life. Do I need them to function? Probably not. But they are part of my identity and help me understand and appreciate who I am.

Source: 'Remembering history', Tania Major, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 2010

Pip Newling, in her memoir *Knockabout Girl*, illustrates how important language is to a sense of identity. She recalls how very old Aboriginal people in Halls Creek, Western Australia, set up the Kimberly Language Resource Centre. They wanted to try and preserve the local languages. Newling describes how important it was to them to teach these languages to the local Aboriginal children, so they would not lose their sense of identity:

The old people were so keen and full of determination and joy at the idea that their languages might be spoken fluently by future generations that they came in no matter what. Every day. All day. There was a sense of urgency and support for the task that I have never seen since. Anywhere. (p. 83)

Asian-Australian Ivy Tseng also highlights the links between our language and our identity in 'Learning English' (from *Growing up Asian in Australia*, edited by Alice Pung). When Australian migrants learn English, they can feel that they fit into Australia. But if they lose the language of their parents or grandparents, they can also feel that they don't belong in their own families. Tseng came to realise that when her father made her go to Mandarin lessons, he was trying to ensure she recognised her cultural inheritance.

ABSORB

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English has been absorbing words from other languages for over a thousand years. However, some people argue that taking on too many words from another culture is a problem. Writer Andrew Herrick gives an example of this when he suggests that we have taken on American understandings of the words 'winner' and 'loser' and changed aspects of our own culture because of it:

Australian culture was once marked by our admiration for a good loser and for deplored a poor winner. Our tennis champions didn't pump their fists in the air and throw tantrums or their racquets. Our sports heroes weren't hounded and derided when they didn't win, because Australians believed that winning wasn't everything.

The American term 'loser' means something quite different in a culture where only winners are valued. Even trying is demeaned in America, where the sneering term 'try-hard' is applied to people who have little chance of winning.

Source: 'With American lingo, we've imported toxic US culture', Andrew Herrick, *The Age*, 6 August 2010

Over to you

- All of the writers quoted in the passages above comment that their language is part of their identity. Write several paragraphs describing how your language is part of your identity, and how you would feel if you were no longer able to use it to communicate.
- Hold a class debate on the topic: 'It's OK to be a loser or a try-hard in Australia.'





1.2

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How does the way we use language *identify* us with different groups and communities?

Some people use language in much the same way all the time; but for many of us, how we use language changes, depending on *who we are with* and *what we are doing*. As most of us identify ourselves with a number of different communities, we may adjust the way we use English many times in one day, depending on who we are with and *how we want to be seen*. Most of us probably use at least several different varieties of English every day. Whenever we say anything – whether it is in spoken or written language – we reveal certain things about ourselves.

In this chapter, we will explore how we use language differently depending on our age and the communities we belong to, or aspire to belong to.

How we use language changes, depending on who we are with and how we want to be seen.



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GOLLY!

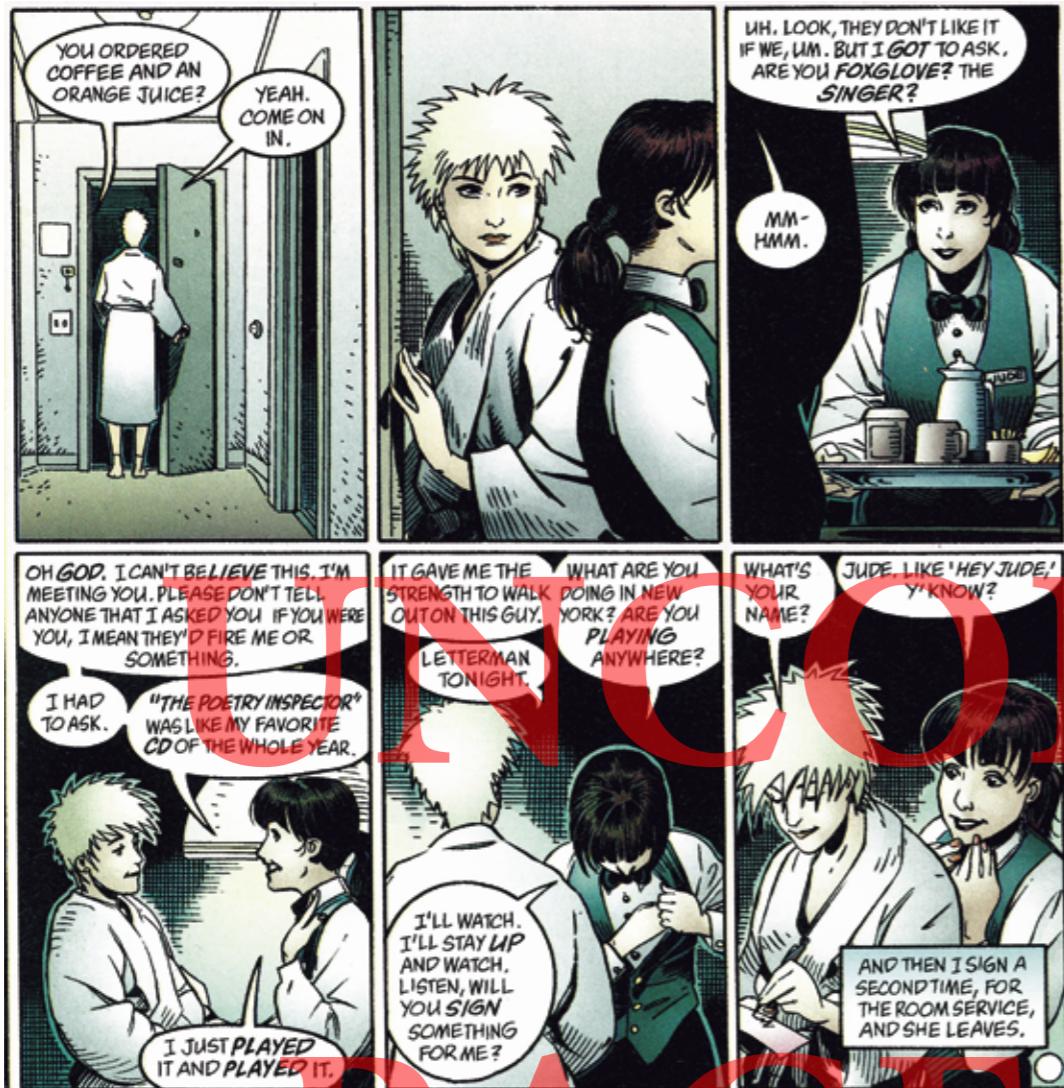
MERCY ME!



How do different age groups use language to identify themselves?

People can usually tell how old we are by the way we use English. Enid Blyton's children's books illustrate how differently people spoke 60 or 70 years ago. First published in the 1940s, the characters in the *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* series use expressions that are rarely heard today. Alison Flood, in her article 'Golly! Blyton gets an update' (*The Age*, 25 July 2010) notes that the girls in the original book wear school 'tunics' and get up to 'jolly japes'. They use expressions like 'golly!' and 'mercy me', and refer to 'tinkers' and 'Mummy and Daddy'. Older people with a British cultural background understand these terms, but younger ones do not. Publishers have recently updated Blyton's outdated language so that it can be understood by readers today. For example, 'tinker' has been changed to 'traveller', and 'mercy me!' to 'oh no!'

Some language of the 1950s is terribly, awfully unfamiliar to young people of the twenty-first century.



Neil Gaiman and Mike Dringenberg's graphic novel *Death: The Time of Your Life* illustrates the use of 'Teenglish'.

INCORRECTED PAGE PROOFS

Older people, on the other hand, often have problems working out what younger people mean. Lucy Tobin, in her article 'Teenglish: the words kids don't want parents to know' (*Sunday Times*, 20 September 2009) explains the English spoken by young people in Britain and includes a glossary of key words that parents should know. This includes examples of words used to mean the opposite of their usual meaning, for example, 'allow' is used to mean 'forget about it':

Want to go halves on that?

– Allow that, man; not happening!

Australian teenagers similarly use words and phrases that distinguish them from older people, for example the use of the adverbs 'totally' and 'like':

He's so totally wrong.

It's like ... you should go.



Teenagers are using social networking sites such as Facebook to 'communicate with their in-group and conceal the content from the out-group'.

Just as different generations share the same language but use different words and expressions that distinguish them, members of different generations often speak to each other differently. *The Age* newspaper writer David Campbell describes a particular language used when speaking to old people called 'elderspeak': 'It involves the use of a singsong tone, slower speech and a limited vocabulary.' Names are replaced by 'sweetie' and 'darl'. When people talk to babies or small children, on the other hand, they sometimes use 'baby talk'. This usually involves a high-pitched tone, shortening words or substituting simple versions of words such as 'blankie' or 'din dins'.

Sometimes, different generations use language so differently that they misunderstand each other. According to a recent newspaper article (*The Telegraph*, 26 April 2010), research of online social networking pages suggests that sometimes this is quite deliberate and that some teenagers have developed a secret language to exclude adults.

Facebook speak: Teenagers create secret online language

The above headline refers to research in Scotland showing that teenagers are creating a secret language for use on social networking sites. This involves distorting words by removing all the vowels. According to a researcher quoted in the article, the creation of this special language means that teenagers are able to 'communicate with their in-group and conceal the content from the out-group. This further adds to their online identity.'

Over to you

Working in pairs:

- 1 Find some examples of the ways teenagers use English on social networking sites and Twitter.
- 2 Create a short script of a discussion between two teenagers talking at recess. You may choose to use some of the expressions you found in your research for Activity 1.
- 3 Now write a second short script of a discussion between a teenager and someone who is older and/or from a different cultural background.
- 4 Present your scripts as role-plays to the class, and explain how you changed the way you used English in the two situations.

How do different communities use language to identify themselves?

Slang is a form of colloquial language, often used by people to identify with their peers, and sometimes humorous and/or vulgar.

One way we identify with a cultural or social group is by using a form of language called **slang**. As linguist David Crystal points out in his book *Words Words Words*:

Slang is used by people who want to show, by the way they talk, that they belong together. It's very informal, casual, colloquial. It's like a secret language, known only to the people who are members of the group. (p. 113)

He quotes an old rhyme:

The chief use of slang
Is to show that you're one of the gang (p. 113)

Slang changes over time, and we can often tell a person's age by the slang they use. 'Groovy' of the 1960s, for example, has changed over time to 'awesome' to 'cool', to 'sick', to 'fully sick'.



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PAGE PROOFS
FULLY SICK!

The evolution of slang:
1960s – 2010s

Jargon is the vocabulary of a particular profession or group.

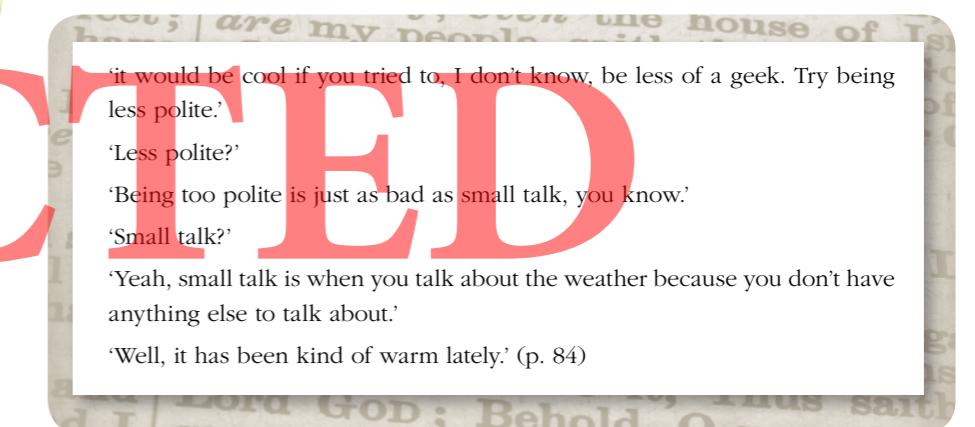
Jargon is another specialised language that groups use to communicate with each other. Different professions or groups use different jargon. For example, a plumber, a cricketer and a computer expert will all have their own specialised language. A plumber who plays cricket and knows about computers will understand all of them.

Using jargon shows you are an insider. If you don't understand it, it's unlikely you belong to the group. People who don't know anything about cricket, for

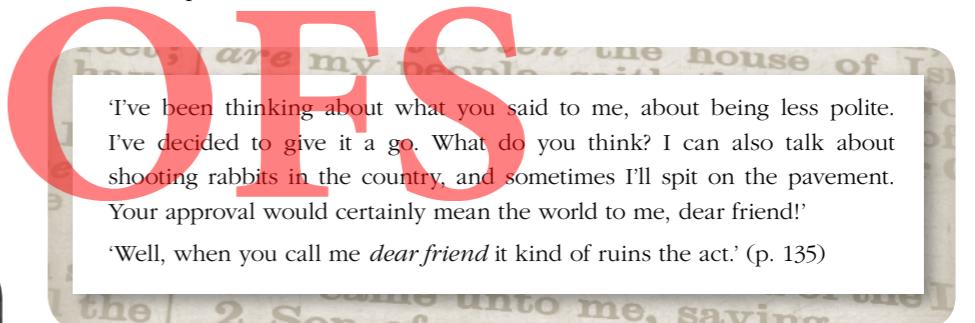


example, may be baffled by terms such as 'silly mid on', 'ducks', 'covers' and 'dibbly dobblies'. Only members of the Cub Scouts have any idea what a 'sixer' or a 'wobble' is.

Andrew McDonald, in his novel *The Greatest Blogger in the World*, illustrates how important it is to speak like the other people in a group you want to join. The narrator, Charlie, is a student at the Schlock School of Excellence. New boy Lance Green, nicknamed 'Cardboard', sets himself apart by the way he talks. Even Lance's father realises that the way his son speaks makes him different. He explains to Charlie that his son 'isn't the most popular of boys. He often eats lunch alone and he uses expressions like "bless you"' (p. 48). When Cardboard asks: 'Do you think I'm boring?' Charlie responds 'Not at all', but advises him to change the way he speaks:



A later comment from Cardboard shows he just doesn't 'get it', and Charlie's response confirms this:



Over to you

- 1 Interview an older relative or acquaintance about some of the slang they used as teenagers. Try and match these words with slang used today. Share your findings with the class.
- 2 Working in groups, choose one sporting or other group that uses jargon and do some research to find as many examples and definitions as you can. Create a PowerPoint presentation explaining some of this jargon to a someone unfamiliar with the group.





1.3 How do we use language to express our individuality?

The way we use English indicates where we belong or would like to belong, and it also shows how we are uniquely individual. *What* we say is important, but so is *how* we say it. Although much of what we say has already been said by someone else, many times, every time we speak or write, we are still expressing our individuality. We tell others a great deal about ourselves by the ways we choose to combine over a million words.

Although our language choices are very important, we often don't actually think about the words we use and how we combine them in sentences. In this chapter, we will explore how we can choose language features and vocabulary so that they are a powerful way of expressing ourselves – not only as members of different groups, but also as unique individuals. If we want others to find what we say interesting, we need to use language effectively.

Over to you

- There are many adverbs that describe how someone uses language; for example, fluently, laconically, clearly and precisely. What do these words mean, and what is the adjectival form of each? Include them in your personal glossary.

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Active verbs describe an action and who does it, eg 'My parents punished me.'

To revise adverbs, go to page 8.

A phrase is a two or more related words without a verb, eg: 'Absolutely everything.'

A simple sentence is made up of one independent clause and makes sense on its own, eg: 'I hate it all.'

- We use many expressions to describe how someone uses language. We may say, for example:

He has verbal diarrhoea.

They were talking nineteen to the dozen.

She really put her foot in it.

Think of other examples of expressions that describe how someone uses language. Then try to create some of your own.

What may our sentences tell people about us?

We make many language choices that indicate who we are as individuals without really thinking about them, for example:

- When we speak or create texts that express our point of view, or are about ourselves, we use the first-person pronoun *I*.
- We often use **active verbs** that put us at the centre of the action.
- We use adverbs – words such as 'hopefully' or 'sadly' – to indicate our point of view.

We also tell people about ourselves by the way we construct sentences. For example, if we use a series of short, sharp **phrases** or **simple sentences**, this may indicate that we are anxious, angry or upset. Notice how novelist John Boyne shows how his character, Bruno, is upset in *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, without actually telling us:

I hate this house, I hate my room and I even hate the paintwork. I hate it all.
Absolutely everything. (p. 56)



Bruno in the film version of
The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

Over to you

In the above passage from *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, John Boyne uses the following:

- Phrase: 'Absolutely everything.'
- Simple sentence: 'I hate it all.'
- Compound sentence: 'I hate my room and I even hate the paintwork.'

A compound sentence communicates more than one idea and is made up of two or more independent clauses, joined by a conjunction, eg: 'I hate my room **and** I even hate the paintwork.'

- 1 Rewrite the phrase above as a simple sentence.
- 2 Add a second independent clause to the simple sentence above to make it a compound sentence. Join the two clauses with a conjunction other than 'and'.
- 3 Add a dependent clause to add to the meaning of the compound sentence above, and make it into a complex sentence.
- 4 Put your sentences together and suggest how you have changed the way we understand Bruno.

In the following article, notice how Martin Flanagan uses the first person *and* active verbs to write a very personal account of a football game he watched with his 91-year-old mother. Words like 'footy' and 'barracked' identify him as distinctively Australian. Simple sentences such as 'Mum's loyal' and 'She's had a few strokes' give the impression that this is how Flanagan talks and that he is talking directly to us. His description is understated – and *shows* us, rather than *tells* us, about his love and admiration for his mother. His concluding compound sentence – made up of two balanced independent clauses joined by the conjunction 'and' – suggests that Flanagan is close to his mother, knows what she likes, and is responsive to her needs:

She likes watching the footy and she likes someone to watch it with her.

Flanagan's understated words show us a great deal about the relationship between a mother and son.

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crop bottom of pic so we can't
see they are reading a book

It's an exciting game at every level

Mum and I watched eight quarters of footy last Saturday. If there had been no AFL, we would have watched the Tasmanian State League. Two of her granddaughters have boyfriends playing for Hobart. Mum's loyal.

When I worked at the *Examiner* in Launceston in the 1980s, I let her do my tips as they

appeared in the paper. I asked her why she kept tipping Latrobe when it kept losing. She said, 'Because Granddad Leary barracked for them.' Granddad Leary died in 1940. Mum's 91. She's had a few strokes. She likes watching the footy and she likes someone to watch it with her.

Source: Martin Flanagan,
The Age, 4 Sept 2010

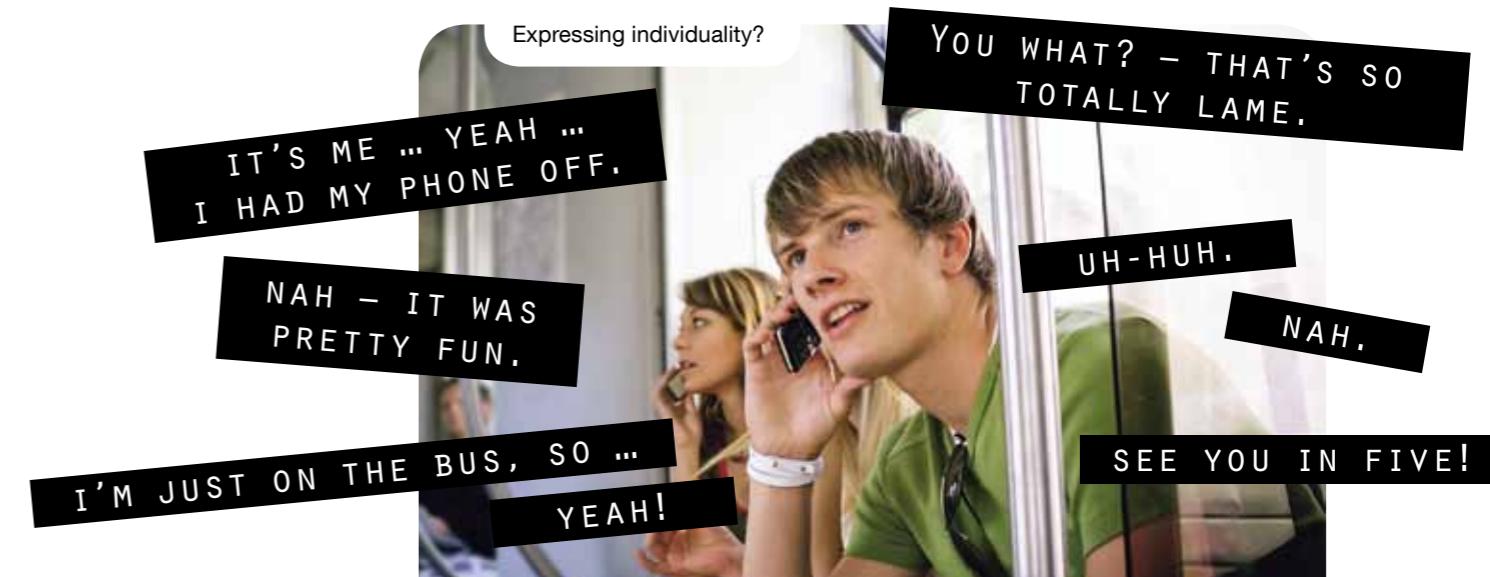
Over to you

- 1 Use a range of simple and compound sentences in a short, understated description of someone that shows – rather than tells – the audience about your relationship with them.
- 2 Share your piece with a partner and discuss what it reveals about you, the writer.

How does the way we use words distinguish us from other people?

The way we use words is an important way of showing people who we are. For example, we often remember the way people describe something to us – we remember being bored or interested – and this depends on how people use language.

The words we choose and the way we put them together say a lot about us. Think of all those tedious, one-sided mobile conversations we overhear on public transport. They serve their purpose, but they don't express anyone's individuality:



Stringing together a series of predictable expressions – many of which really don't say anything much at all, let alone anything interesting – will mainly show others that there's not much to distinguish us from millions of other people.

We can't express ourselves as individuals if our vocabulary is limited. We need to learn new words to express new ideas. We learn new words best when we:

- read or hear them used in context
- find out what they mean when we come across them
- try and use them ourselves.

Learning new words is an important way of expressing our developing self, but it doesn't always work. Anna Goldsworthy describes the way students at her school learned new vocabulary when they were preparing for a scholarship exam. They were expected to collect words to 'garnish' their essays, such as *'fluctuate, irrevocable, heinous'* (p. 53). This sort of straining for effect doesn't always lead to good expression, however. Nor does using too many adjectives – or long words – at once. It can sound laboured and detract from the flow of words. For example, piling on adjectives doesn't necessarily make a description more interesting – choosing an accurate noun or verb can work better:

A mean aggressive snarling dog was ready to engage in a fight

is less effective than

The pit bull terrier was ready to fight.

On the other hand, using interesting language can engage our audience and suggest that we are ourselves interesting!

One way to learn new words is to use a *thesaurus* – a type of dictionary that lists **synonyms**, or words that mean similar things. A thesaurus is useful for finding an alternative for an overused or repeated word, and sometimes for finding a more interesting word. As most words have a range of meanings, however, it's important to think carefully about context before replacing one word with another. We can look up a word in a thesaurus and find *possible* synonyms, but we should remember that although the meanings are similar, they are not likely to be *identical*. We can't always replace one word neatly with another.

Different thesauruses may give different synonyms for the same words, but they all:

- list the synonyms in alphabetical order
- list words that are the same parts of speech
- provide an example of the word used in context.

get verb 1 *She got a new book*. acquire, be given, buy, come by, get hold of, obtain, procure, purchase, receive. 2 *He got all the prizes*. earn, gain, land, receive, scoop, score, take, win. OPPOSITE lose. 3 *Go and get your umbrella*. bring, collect, fetch, pick up, retrieve. 4 *She has got a cold*. be afflicted with, catch, come down with, contact, develop, pick up, suffer from. 5 *The police will get the culprit*. arrest, capture, catch, grab, nab (*informal*), seize. 6 *Try to get his attention*. attract, capture, draw. 7 (*informal*) *He didn't get what I meant*. comprehend, cotton on to (*informal*), fathom, follow, grasp, realise, understand. OPPOSITE misunderstand. 8 *I'll get lunch now*. fix, make ready, prepare. 9 *Try to get him to eat*. cause, convince, induce, influence, make, persuade OPPOSITE dissuade. 10 *The days are getting longer*. become, grow. 11 *How do you get to work?* go, journey, travel. 12 *He got home late*. arrive, at, reach.

An entry for the word 'get' from Oxford's *The Australian School Thesaurus*

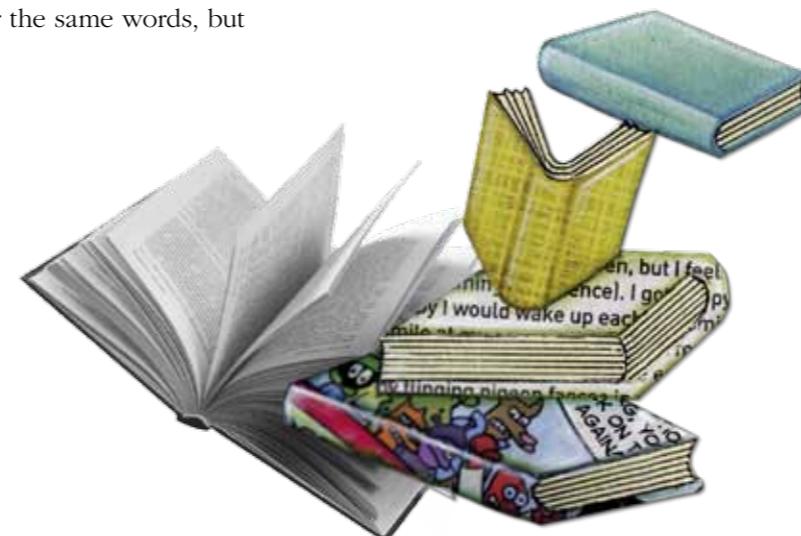


Remember, however, that although it can be tedious when someone keeps repeating a word, repetition isn't *always* bad. Sometimes we repeat words for a purpose. In the poem 'Peter' from Steven Herrick's verse novel *Lonesome Howl*, for example, Peter uses the word 'stuff' several times. Herrick does this not because he can't think of another word, but because that's how Peter talks. He doesn't use words precisely, and he tends to repeat himself.

My dad, he gets angry sometimes.
I don't know what for.
Maybe it's because of the farm
and not having no money and stuff.
Or maybe it's 'cause he wishes
he was a truckie,
which was his job before he met Mum.
He was just driving through town,
delivering stuff. (p. 50)

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Thesauruses, although useful, need to be treated with caution. In the above poem, for example, Herrick repeats the word 'stuff', but uses it in different ways to achieve a particular effect. If we wanted to avoid repeating the word, we could use a thesaurus to find a synonym, but we'd have to be careful. 'Stuff' can be used as a verb and a noun. Herrick uses it as a noun, so synonyms for the verb have to be rejected. The noun 'stuff' also has a range of meanings. By 'no money and stuff', Peter means 'money or material possessions'. In the last line, however, he uses 'stuff' to mean something different – he is referring to the things his father delivers in his truck.

A thesaurus could give the following synonyms for the noun 'stuff':

material, substance, matter, things, objects, and bits and pieces

Only 'things' would work as a replacement (although not a very good one) for 'not having no money and stuff'. 'Material', 'things' or 'bits and pieces' could replace 'stuff' in 'He was just driving through town delivering stuff'. The synonyms 'substance' and 'matter' couldn't be used to replace 'stuff' in either example.

Over to you

Read the following passage from the memoir *They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky* by Benson Deng, Alephonsion Deng and Benjamin Ajak, who vividly describe their experiences as 'Lost Boys', fleeing war-torn Sudan:

The name Lost Boys came to be when our village was attacked by fierce Arab horsemen. We, little boys, spewed out of the blazing village like a colony of ants disturbed in their nest. We ran in different directions not knowing where we are going. We gathered some fruits for our breakfast and lunch. We, little boys, were so messy, all chaos and cries filling the dark, fiercely lightless night. (Frontispiece)

Using a thesaurus, identify synonyms for the verb 'spewed', the adjective 'fierce' and the adverb 'fiercely'. Discuss which would be appropriate, and whether any of them are more effective than the originals.

Avoiding clichés

A cliché is an overused phrase or opinion.

Despite having so many words to choose from, some conversations are made up almost entirely of clichés – well-worn expressions such as:

At this moment in time

Don't work too hard

Clichés

Making a difference

I am passionate about ...

If we use clichés all the time, it suggests that we're using other people's ideas, as well as their words. Writer Martin Amis describes clichés as 'herd thinking, herd writing'.

Author Don Watson, quoted in an article by John Masanauskas in the *Herald Sun* newspaper, noted that Prime Minister Julia Gillard used the phrase 'moving forward' 24 times in one speech:

It is the cliché of our times. When she started trotting it out I walked away after five minutes. I couldn't stand it any more.

Recent research revealed that the clichés Australians most hated are: 'at the end of the day', 'let's do lunch', 'it's not rocket science' and '24/7'.



Language focus

Unique means that there is nothing else like it. Something cannot, therefore, be 'quite unique'. It's either unique, or it isn't!

Over to you

As a class:

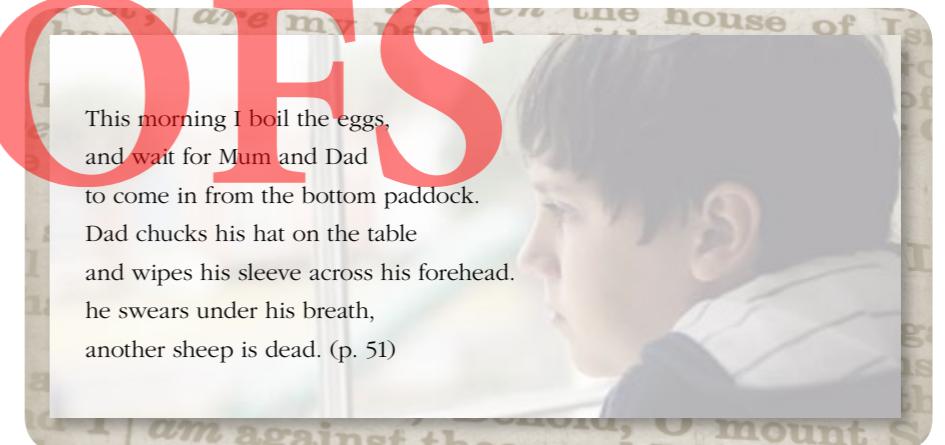
- 1 Discuss what Martin Amis means by 'herd thinking'.
 - 2 List as many clichés you can think of. Include those you use yourselves, and those you dislike.
- Working in pairs:
- 3 Write the script of a conversation between several students, using as many clichés as you can. Share your script with the class.

Rather than garnishing what we say with long words, or with clichés, we can give our own, unique take on things. Choosing interesting words is important, and so is the way we put them together.



Simple language can be very effective and say something that is unique. For example, in the following verse from the poem 'Jake: Chasing Ghosts' by Steven Herrick (from his verse novel *Lonesome Howl*), the narrator, Jake, waits for his parents, whose livelihood is being threatened by a wolf:

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This morning I boil the eggs,
and wait for Mum and Dad
to come in from the bottom paddock.
Dad chuck's his hat on the table
and wipes his sleeve across his forehead.
he swears under his breath,
another sheep is dead. (p. 51)

There are no adverbs in the verse, and the adjectives 'bottom' and 'another' are hardly unique. Yet Herrick creates a powerful picture of both the action and the atmosphere in the kitchen. The language suits the narrator who is describing people who suffer, but try to get on with life without speaking about their feelings.

Over to you

Create a short verse of your own where something difficult or sad happens. To recreate the event and people's response to it, use simple vocabulary, but try and create a powerful impression of the scene.



Try to recreate someone's response to a difficult or sad event.

The similes and metaphors we choose to describe people and things therefore say a lot about how we see things. When we use figurative language to compare things creatively, we set ourselves apart from the 'herd' and we add interesting layers of meaning to what we are saying. Anna Goldsworthy does this in her book *Piano Lessons* when she describes sitting next to her piano teacher. She uses an interesting simile to create a memorable picture of hands that:

brown with the Australian sun, tripped across the keyboard beside hers, as pink and round as starfish. (p. 13)

Notice, too, in the following extract how journalist Michelle Griffin uses a metaphor to help us picture New York, suggesting that the city is not just *like* a comic, it *is* a comic – it tells a story, it has illustrated panels and is an 'empire of superheroes':

Michelle Griffin surveys the shadow zones of New York City that have inspired the world's most popular comics.

Any time of day, New York looks like a comic. Every block of Manhattan tells part of the story, like illustrated panels on the page: Superman soars over Midtown's skyscrapers, Batman lurks on the rooftops of Gothic buildings, the Spirit sulks in the shadows of the Lower East Side and Spider-Man's girlfriends plunge to almost certain deaths from the borough-spanning bridges.

Source: 'Empire of superheroes', *The Age*, 4 September 2010

Using figurative language

In **figurative language**, we use words and phrases in ways that differ from their everyday usage and literal meaning.

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While simple language can be a powerful way of expressing our individuality, the way we use **figurative language** to compare one thing with another shows people how we see the world. **Similes** and **metaphors** are both examples of figurative language that require us to make connections between different things.

With a simile, we say that something is *like* something else – she 'squawked like a parrot', for example – whereas metaphors suggest that something *is* something else. When we use a metaphor such as 'my heart is broken', we mean that our emotions have been terribly wounded – we suggest that the heart is connected with emotions – but we don't mean it literally.

There are many clichéd similes that we use without thinking, such as 'quick as a wink' or 'bright as a button'. The same is true of metaphors – we often hear about life's 'winners' or 'losers', for example, and this is a metaphor – we are suggesting that life *is* a game or a war. As with any cliché, when we use clichéd similes and metaphors, we are not telling others anything about ourselves as individuals, except, perhaps, that we don't think for ourselves.

Over to you

Working in groups, bring a range of texts to class (for example, novels, newspaper articles, poems and picture books) and look for metaphors that show something in a creative rather than a clichéd way.

Choose one of these metaphors and present it as a quotation, accompanied by a visual image that would be appropriate for a page of a children's picture book.

'Every block of Manhattan tells part of the story.'



We show something about ourselves by the metaphors we choose. For example, we may see life as a game instead of a journey – one with opponents to be outsmarted and scores to be kept. Alternatively, we may see life as a gift – something to be valued. We may see life as a gift and a game *and* a journey.

Even when choosing well-worn metaphors, the choices we make depend on who we are and how we see the world. Some of the world's greatest writers used well-worn metaphors – but they used them in interesting ways, as Shakespeare did when Jaques says in *As You Like It*: 'all the world's a stage'. The American poet Robert Frost, in his poem 'The Road Not Taken', gives new meaning to another well-worn metaphor – life is a journey:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood ...

Cartoonist Leunig similarly takes the metaphor of life as a journey and gives it new meaning:

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Over to you

- 1 a In Robert Frost's poem 'The Road Not Taken', what choices did the narrator face on their journey?
- b Write a short piece suggesting what difference it would have made to the narrator's life had they taken the other road
- 2 What words and phrases does Leunig use in his poem accompanying the above cartoon that represent life as a journey? What do the words and image suggest about the sort of journey life could be?
- 3 Combine words and a visual image to illustrate your own understanding of the metaphor 'life is a journey'.





1.4

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How do we use language to conceal ourselves?



Language focus
A **diplomat** represents a government in its dealings with the governments of other countries.

We give away a lot about who we are, or who we would like to be, by the way we use language. On the other hand, we also use language to *bide* who we are. The French diplomat Talleyrand, who lived in the eighteenth century, said that 'speech is given to man to disguise his thoughts'. There are a number of ways we can use language so that we distance ourselves from what we say, or avoid saying what we really think. Indeed, when we read *some texts* we learn very little, either directly or indirectly, about their author.

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We can use language as a mask – to hide who we really are.

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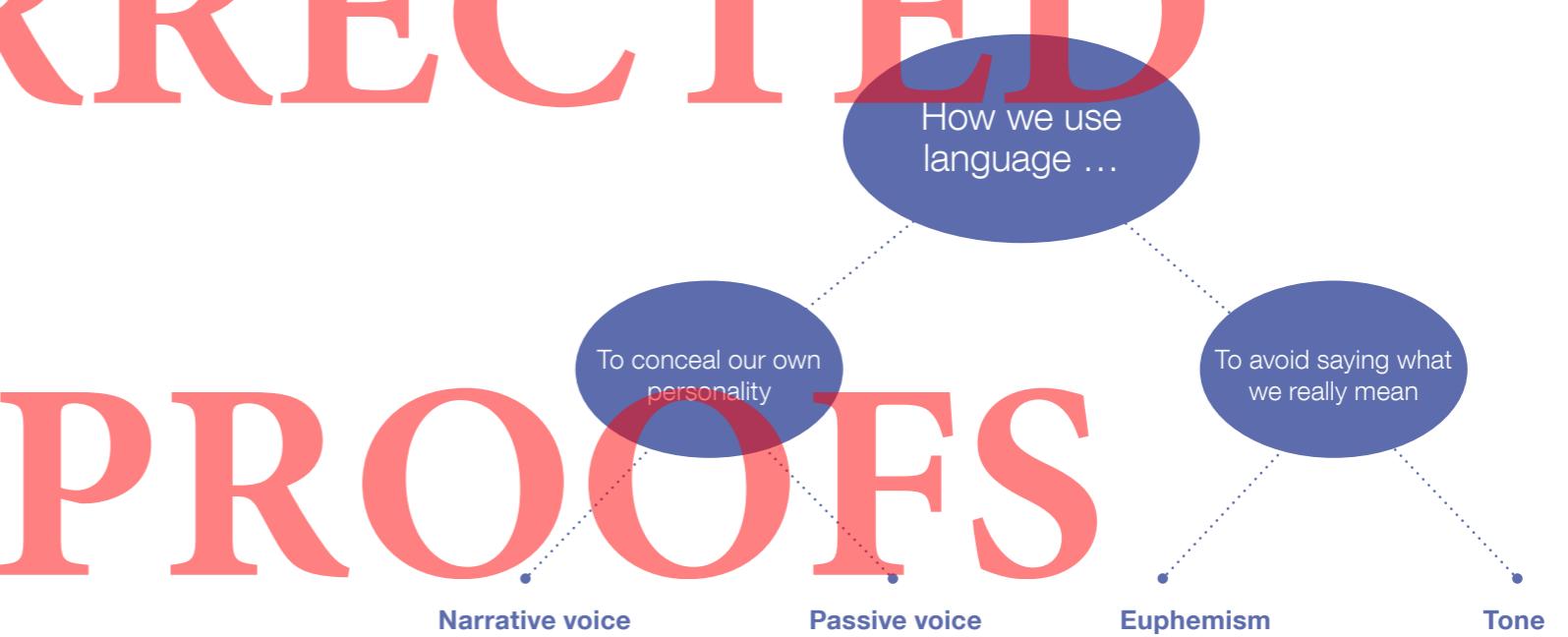
According to *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, **objective** means 'uncoloured by feelings or opinions', while **subjective** means the opposite – that something depends on a personal or individual point of view.

How do we distance ourselves from what we say?

Much of our communication is focused on expressing ourselves – on saying what we think or feel about something, or responding to others. When we write or speak in this way, we say we are being **subjective**; that is, we are writing *personally*. We are usually writing or speaking subjectively in a diary, a poem, or a conversation with a friend.

In some forms of communication, however, especially those presenting information, we want to be **objective**. We may be identified by name, but we want our audience to understand that we haven't been influenced by personal opinion. For example, an official report may present the views or research of a number of people rather than the writer, or it may present facts in an objective way.

In this chapter, we will explore the following:



Choosing narrative voice

Just as the way we speak tells people about us, we also reveal ourselves by the way we write. We adjust what we write and how we write it for different audiences and purposes because we want to be seen in a particular way. We will adopt different ‘voices’ when writing a school essay and a Facebook post, for example.

When we refer to narrative voice in a text, we mean the viewpoint from which the text is written or a story is told, as well as the way the author has chosen language to make us see the narrator in a particular way. When we refer to a work as a ‘first-person narrative’, we mean that it is written using the first-person pronoun. This means that the author is speaking with an individual voice. Novelists, for example, may take on the voice of a character to narrate their story and write in a style appropriate to that character.

To revise first- and third-person pronouns, go to page XX.

If we want to create an objective text where our personality doesn’t – or shouldn’t – affect what we are saying, we write in the third, rather than the first, person. Notice how the following example of a news item on the online newspaper the *Herald Sun* is written in the third person. This means the focus of the text is the quake in Tokyo, not the author’s feelings about it:

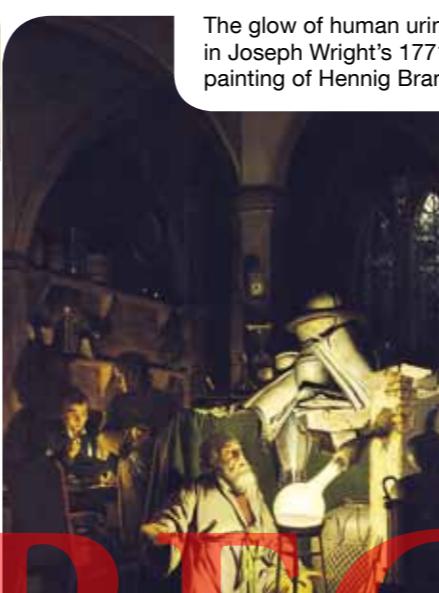
Moderate quake shakes Tokyo

A 5.3 magnitude quake shook Tokyo and other eastern Japanese cities today, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries. Buildings in the capital shook, but public transport and traffic continued unaffected.

Source: Herald Sun, 5 February 2011

In many cases, however, even in texts that seem objective, we can still tell something about the individual writing the text. Their personality seeps through! Bill Bryson in *A Really Short History of Nearly Everything* uses the third person to write a humorous account of the history of chemistry. In the following extract, Bryson explains that chemistry did not develop as a science until the eighteenth century, when the alchemist Hennig Brand discovered phosphorus in an attempt to turn common metals into gold. Even though Bryson is presenting facts, his humorous interpretation of them allows something of his character to come through:

The glow of human urine, in Joseph Wright's 1771 painting of Hennig Brand



The alchemists

Chemists in those days were largely alchemists – scientists who were convinced they could turn common metals into silver or gold. The German Johann Becher went further still. He was certain that, given the right materials, he could make himself invisible. Even stranger, another German, Hennig Brand, collected 50 buckets of human urine which he kept for months in his cellar. By various processes, he converted the urine first into a smelly paste and then into a waxy substance. None of it yielded gold, of course, but a strange and interesting thing did happen. After a time, the substance began to glow. Moreover, when exposed to air, it often spontaneously burst into flame. He hadn’t got his gold, but he had discovered phosphorus. (p. 58)

Compare Bryson’s writing to the following extract from the Wikipedia entry for phosphorus:

[Hennig Brand's] process originally involved letting urine stand for days until it gave off a terrible smell. Then he boiled it down to a paste, heated this paste to a high temperature, and led the vapours through water, where he hoped they would condense to gold. Instead, he obtained a white, waxy substance that glowed in the dark. Brand had discovered phosphorus, the first element discovered since antiquity.

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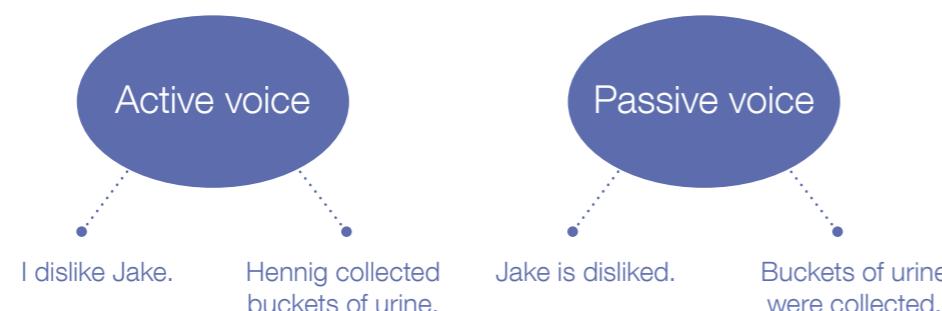
Over to you

- 1 Do you think the two different accounts above about the discovery of phosphorus are intended for different audiences? Give reasons for your response.
- 2 Unlike the author of the Wikipedia entry, Bill Bryson presents information in a way that suggests he has a point of view about alchemists. How does his use of language indicate this?
- 3 What does Bryson’s account suggest about the personality of the author? Give reasons for your answer.

Using the passive voice

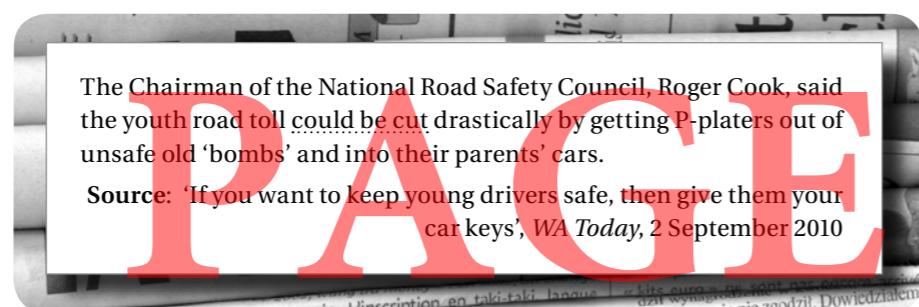
To revise active verbs, go to page XX.

In the **passive voice**, the focus is on the action and it is not revealed who or what is performing the action.



In the sentences using the passive voice, we don't know who is doing the disliking or taking the action. So if, for example, we want to say we dislike someone without saying it directly, the passive voice allows us to distance ourselves. Phrases such as 'it has been suggested that ...', or 'it is understood that ...' also distance the writer from what they are saying.

We can use the passive voice to avoid saying who did something, for example the passive 'he was killed' avoids saying who did the killing. Richard Blackburn, the writer of the following newspaper article, uses the passive voice when he writes:



The passive 'could be cut' doesn't tell us who is going to do the cutting. It suggests that the Chairman is speaking on behalf of his organisation, rather than personally.

Over to you

- 1 Rewrite the above extract from WA Today using the active rather than the passive voice, and discuss what difference this makes.
- 2 Bring a newspaper to class and try and find examples where the writer has been objective, and where they have revealed something of themselves. Identify the language choices the writers have made and discuss how these affect the ways you understand the material they are presenting.

How do we avoid saying what we really mean?

There are several reasons why we may want to avoid saying directly what we think. We may want to avoid offending someone or being impolite. We may want to be mean, but indirectly, so that our victim wonders which way to take our words. There are a number of ways we can hide behind words, including using euphemisms and tone.

Euphemisms

We sometimes avoid talking directly about things that are sensitive or unpleasant. We find alternative words or phrases called **euphemisms** that, if taken literally, mean something else. For example, we might say that someone who lies is 'economical with the truth'.

Unsurprisingly, there are many euphemisms for death: a person is 'lost', has 'passed away' or 'is no longer with us'. John Cleese and Graham Chapman's still popular 'Dead Parrot' sketch from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969) makes fun of the euphemisms we use to avoid referring to death. Mr Praline has bought a parrot who turns out to be dead, but when he returns it to the pet shop, the owner insists that the parrot is only resting. Mr Praline uses a string of euphemisms to insist that the parrot is, indeed, 'stone dead':

It's passed on! This parrot is no more! It has ceased to be! It's expired and gone to meet its maker! This is a late parrot. It's a stiff! Bereft of life, it rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed it to the perch it'd be pushing up the daisies! ... THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!

PAGE PROOFS

Euphemisms are also used to avoid describing something as it really is. For example, the editor of *The Age* described how, in China, the 'usual euphemism' for the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989 is 'the June 4 incident'.

WE'LL HAVE TO LET YOU GO They're being a bit economical with the truth
I'm going to the bathroom with the truth
She's a sandwich short of a picnic
We had to have the cat put to sleep Euphemisms
WE'LL HAVE TO LET YOU GO It fell off the back of a truck
They're being a bit economical with the truth
WE'LL HAVE TO LET YOU GO She's a sandwich short of a picnic
It fell off the back of a truck
I'm going to the bathroom
We had to have the cat put to sleep



Tone

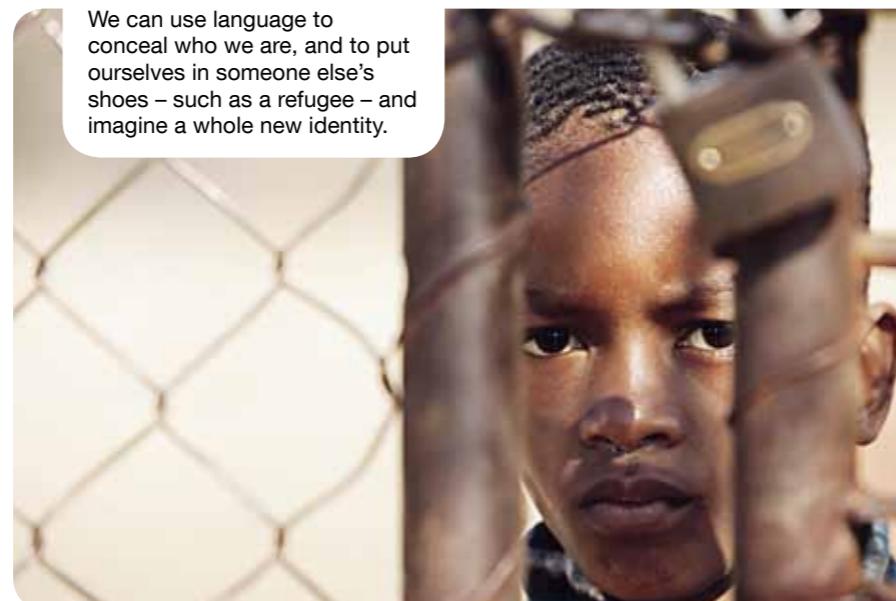
Tone reveals the attitude of the speaker or writer. We may speak in a bored or enthusiastic tone, or write a text that conveys that we are angry or calm.

Neutral means having no particular preference. When we use a neutral tone, we don't show what we think.

Over to you

- 1 Watch the 'Dead Parrot' sketch on YouTube and think of several adjectives you could use to describe the tone of voice of both Mr Praline and the pet shop owner. How would you compare their tone of voice to:
- Prime Minister Paul Keating's tone of voice in the 'Redfern Address' (at www.nsfa.gov.au), and
 - the tone of voice of an ABC newsreader?
- 2 Working in pairs, write either a comic script or a serious script, using a series of euphemisms to avoid saying what you really mean. Think carefully about your tone of voice and, when you have practised your script, present it to the class.

We can, of course, also conceal our own identity by writing or operating in a virtual world *as if* we are someone else. We may imagine, for example, what it would be like to be a refugee and write from their point of view. In a debate, we may be asked to present an argument expressing a point of view we do not hold. We use our language to discover who we are and to reveal this to other people, but we also use it to conceal who we are, and to put ourselves in someone else's shoes and imagine a whole new identity.



We can use language to conceal who we are, and to put ourselves in someone else's shoes – such as a refugee – and imagine a whole new identity.

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big ideas

What does our language say about us?

1.1 How are language and identity related?

create

- 1 Create several pages for a children's picture book that shows how your own identity and the ways you use English are related.

1.2 How does the way we use language identify us with different groups and communities?

write and speak

- 2 Working in small groups, create a script for several speakers who belong to the same group or community. Show what happens to the way they speak when someone from another community, or who speaks a different variety of English, joins the group. Practise your script and present it to the class.

- 3 Write an imaginative narrative describing how you would feel if you were suddenly no longer allowed to use your own language.

1.3 How do we use language to express our individuality?

write and create

- 4 Write a reflective piece presenting your point of view on the topic: 'You can tell a lot about who a person is and how they would like to be seen by the way they use English.' Then highlight one noun, verb, adjective and adverb in your piece that could be improved upon. Use a thesaurus to find an effective replacement and write several sentences explaining your choice.

- 5 Develop the poem you completed for the activity on page XX, where something difficult or sad happens. Try and include a metaphor that shows how you see the world. Choose some images and music, and present your poem in multimodal form, such as a digital poem.

1.4 How do we use language to conceal ourselves?

write

- 6 Rewrite the reflective piece you wrote in response to Activity 4 above, using a range of language choices to present the ideas in a more objective way.