

Linguistic Inquiry in the Classroom:  
*A Missing Link?*

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## Abstract

Linguistic inquiry is the exploration of language—what language is, how language works, and how language is used. Students themselves engage in linguistic inquiry by observing language use, collecting language data, and investigating what they find.

This research creation asks the question: Is linguistic inquiry a missing link between students, teachers, language, and learning? Can linguistic inquiry enable students to become more aware of their own language expertise, more respectful of language diversity, more engaged as second language learners, more effective as writers and readers, and more confident in using academic language?

As a language arts and ESL teacher with twenty-five years' experience (P-12), I have explored linguistic inquiry and its possibilities in the classroom by creating a book about language for young people. This book is my writing to discover how to recognize, highlight, and investigate language itself—in order to understand how linguistic exploration might enhance learning in school.

Part I of the thesis contains the thesis overview, a description of my linguistic location, and the literature review. Part II, *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*, is a nine-chapter nonfiction manuscript written for students in Grades 4 - 8. Chapters include topics such as language acquisition, endangered languages, writing systems, the history of English, code-switching, and the poetry of language. Part III explores possible classroom connections for *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*. These connections support the tentative conclusion that, like the arts, linguistic inquiry is a valuable—but often missing—link in school, an important connection between students, teachers, language, and learning.

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## PART I.

# Introduction

## Overview

Nearly three decades ago I completed an undergraduate degree in linguistics. I was fascinated by the inner workings of language, amazed that humans used such an intricate, complex communication system—without even thinking about it. I was in awe of how this system of sounds, words, and structures allowed for infinite creativity in the transfer of meaning from one person to another.

Then I became a teacher. As I learned more about language from my language arts and English as a second language students, I began to question the role of language in school. Why was there an ongoing and heated debate among educators about the language arts curriculum—particularly in urban schools?

The idea for this inquiry took root as I reflected on how the language arts curriculum had evolved during my twenty-five years of teaching. Perhaps the field of linguistics had something important to say to educators who were struggling to make the language arts curriculum more meaningful



and effective. I decided to use writing as inquiry to explore the possibilities of linguistic inquiry in the classroom.

I chose writing as inquiry as a research method because it fit with what I believed about writing—that writing is a tool for exploration and learning. I hoped that writing a book for young people about linguistics would help me investigate the role of language in school. Part I of the thesis, the introduction, provides a theoretical framework for the research creation to follow. Part II is the research creation, a book for young people about language. Part III follows up on the research creation by exploring possible connections to classroom learning.

Part I lays a foundation for this inquiry by situating me as a teacher/researcher. What is it about my linguistic location, my own experiences of language and teaching, that has led me to this inquiry? The description of my linguistic location is followed by the literature review. A review of the literature on classroom language instruction traces its history over the past three decades, noting the distinction between a prescriptive view of language and a descriptive view of language. A review of the literature on writing as inquiry, arts-informed research, and research creation provides the context for my choice of research method.

Part II of the thesis is a nine-chapter nonfiction book for young people in Grades 4 - 8 about language and linguistics. The working title is *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*. Chapters include topics such as language acquisition, endangered languages, world writing systems, the unusual history of English, code-switching, and the poetry of language.

Part III is an exploration of possible classroom connections for *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*, written in the form of notes to teachers who might use this text with their students. Perhaps the beginning of a new inquiry, Part III looks ahead to a time when *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids* might actually be used in the classroom. This section concludes with a summary of what I have learned about writing as inquiry, about creation and learning, about linguistic inquiry, and about the role of language in school.

## Linguistic Location

Where I am “coming from” linguistically and educationally has much to do with where I *come from*, experientially. Spanish was the predominant second language in my childhood neighbourhood. My Palestinian next-door neighbours spoke Arabic. Other neighbours had Lithuanian and Greek backgrounds. Some neighbours were African American. Some neighbours were Native American. Some neighbours had moved to Detroit from “down south.” My family had moved to Detroit from Nova Scotia. We all spoke different varieties of English.

When the children on my block played together outside, we all spoke the same *code*, the same kind of English. I called it “talking tough.” The grammar, the pronunciation, and sometimes even the words were different from the English I spoke at home. I had to “talk tough” outside my house in order to fit in. But at home I was reminded to speak another way.

My grandfather left Germany when he was twenty-seven years old. He learned English as a second language. I always loved his accent. It made him an infinitely more interesting person to me as a child. As a

grown-up, I still retain this bias. An accent signals to me that someone knows more than one language, more than one culture, is a bridge to other worlds.

I was a student in the Detroit Public School system from kindergarten through Grade 12. My elementary school became a bilingual Spanish-English school shortly after I had moved on to junior high. My all-city high school in downtown Detroit offered curricula ranging from automechanics to fine arts. The student body came from all parts of the city and was predominantly African American.

From high school I became an exchange student to Kenya, placed with the family of the Headmaster of Kangaru Secondary School in Embu. My African parents spoke English as well as Swahili and GiChuka, their mother tongue. The classes at Kangaru School were taught in English, but after school my classmates spoke the languages of their homelands. A few teachers came from India. I was introduced to the Hindi language while becoming friends with their children. I later took Hindi courses at university.

From 1976 to 1980 I studied linguistics at Cornell University. Professor Linda Waugh brought phonology and morphology to life by connecting abstract linguistic concepts to poetic language and to language in the

real world.<sup>1</sup> The field of linguistics, I learned, was descriptive, not prescriptive. I also studied child language development, psycholinguistics, historical linguistics, the structure of English, and how to teach English as a second language. As a linguistics major, I was required to study both a European and a non-European language. Spanish and Hindi words often became mixed up in my head while learning them simultaneously.

During two summers I worked as a Recreation Leader on the 25th Street playground, a gravel playground next to my old elementary school. In this context my code-switching<sup>2</sup> and “talking tough” shifted back into high gear.

In the summer of 1979 I volunteered to work in a village in India, hoping to improve my proficiency in Hindi. The village was in a remote area of Madhya Pradesh, so no one spoke Standard Hindi except the people I lived with, and they preferred to speak English to me.

I learned to be a teacher in the Urban Teacher Preparation Program at Syracuse University. The emphasis was on learning by doing: we were injected into the local public school system as substitute teachers while taking courses at night and during two summers. Classroom management skills and understanding diversity were strong themes throughout the program.

I became an English as a Second language teacher in 1981. Most of my first students spoke Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong. I taught in a pilot high school ESL program. The greatest challenge for me was discerning how to effectively teach students who had never been to school before, never learned to read and write in their first language first.

My next ESL teaching assignment was in an elementary school. Most of my students—children of professors and international students at Syracuse University—had already been introduced to reading and writing in their first languages. They seemed to have little difficulty transferring literacy skills and academic knowledge to a new language.

After moving to Chicago in 1985 I taught ESL to adults first in a private language school and then at a community college. Later I became a Chicago public school teacher in a bilingual Spanish-English K-8 school. The school was in the southside neighbourhood called Back-of-the-Yards. Ninety-eight percent of the students spoke Spanish at home. A few students spoke Arabic. I taught English language arts in a federally-funded program for at-risk students. Many of my students had exited the bilingual program without strong literacy skills in either language.

To coincide with the introduction of a new Chicago Public School *Writing Handbook and Curriculum Guide* (1987), the staff at our school

was given writing workshops by Dr. B.J. Wagner and Dr. Joe Fischer from the National College of Education.<sup>3</sup> We were encouraged to view writing as a process, and to engage in this process ourselves. I embraced this view of writing because it resonated with my own love of writing. We were also encouraged to connect with the school neighbourhood, to explore its history with the kids through writing and the arts.<sup>4</sup>

In 1992 I returned to my Nova Scotia roots and worked as an ESL instructor in the Halifax County schools. After amalgamation, I was hired to teach ESL at a north-end Dartmouth school. When the federal grant came to an end, my job became a circuit job. I was (and am) in a 50% position responsible for seven elementary schools. In this job I have, again, taught students from many language backgrounds: Albanian, Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Farsi, French, German, Hindi, Ilocano, Indonesian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Sinhalese, Spanish, Tagalog, Tamil, Ukrainian, and Urdu.

During my first year in Dartmouth one of the parents agreed to provide Arabic classes for teachers once a week. I asked her to do this because I felt we—but especially I—needed to know more about this predominant second language in our school. We also needed to learn important cultural lessons. Without a doubt I learn more from my ESL students and their

families than they learn from me. The following poem expresses a small fraction of what I have learned from my students in the past twenty-five years.



*Landscape of Words  
(To My Second Language Students)*

*You have come  
from other landscapes,  
other ways of speaking  
the world, writing  
the world, understanding  
the world.*

*You need new words to tell  
me who you are.*

*Yes, I am teaching you  
new words,  
but you are teaching me  
new worlds.*

*Every day I learn from you.*

*A: from you I learned  
Hmong is a language, a people;  
and even though  
you had to understand the numbers*

*before opening your locker,  
you could needlepoint  
the most intricate designs,  
and you, a teenager  
in this strange place,  
didn't fall apart.*

*You, like your exquisite cloth,  
woven in the mountains of Laos,  
proved resilient.*

*Tuyet: from you I learned  
your name means "snow"  
in Vietnamese.*

*I never asked you why  
the parents you no longer had  
named you this.*

*Was there snow in Vietnam?*

*Muoy: from your eyes I learned  
the killing fields were real.*

*And Beng Ly: from your family I learned  
Cambodian followers of Jesus  
bore miraculous testimonies  
after fleeing those fields.*

*Latifa: from you I learned  
eight a.m. ESL classes are impossible  
when you are newly-  
married by arrangement, newly-  
pregnant and morning sick.*

*Mubarek: from you and your family I learned  
the discipline of Ramadan's fast,  
of going without  
food and water from sunup to sundown.*

*Thamir: from you I learned  
how to be graciously tolerant  
of misunderstanding;  
that John the Baptist followers  
still exist.*

*Yashar: from you I learned  
courage  
as I saw you walk home alone  
on September eleventh.*

*Faisal: from your mother I learned  
to say alhamdulillah  
and insha'allah,  
about starting over,  
all the while longing  
for justice and the olive groves  
of Palestine.  
I learned to stop asking  
"where are you from?"*

*And Jesse: from you I learned  
(but slowly)  
HELP is sometimes spelled  
in bizarre school behaviour.  
When your strung-out mother*

*told me you  
took care of  
the newborn twins, you  
paid the bills, you  
ran the household,  
I understood why you  
did so little sixth-grade  
homework.  
And so I won't lose  
your crumpled letter to me,  
rescued from the trash  
expressing your ambivalent  
hopes in this new landscape  
of words.*

My experiences—as a young child, a student, a teacher, and a writer—have led me to this inquiry.

## Literature Review: Classroom Language Instruction

School is a new linguistic landscape for many students. Academic language, Standard English, formal language, the school “code”—no matter what you call it, the language that students are expected to use in school is often new (Delpit, 1995; Wheeler and Swords, 2006). The words are new, the structures are new, and sometimes the pronunciation is new. Often teachers don’t talk about this with their students. But when this new linguistic landscape is not acknowledged and explored, the classroom can become a place of misunderstanding and alienation, where learning is impeded.

When my own Grade 9 English teacher presented a unit on linguistics, I was hooked. Until then, no one had drawn my attention to the systematic patterns of language or explained that language itself could be the focus of inquiry. I hadn’t understood the code-switching phenomenon in my urban neighborhood (and in me) until I learned about linguistics. Even after twenty-five years of teaching language arts and English as a second language, I am still learning and still hooked on linguistics.

Language is an amazing system. Its structure allows for infinite creativity. Not only can we speak with efficiency and precision, but we can make this oral communication permanent by writing it down, by using marks to represent our words which represent our ideas, plans, and memories. When students realize what an amazing system it is that they already own, the language arts curriculum becomes a journey of discovery.

In the past twenty-five years educators have heard the call to focus on meaning in reading and other ways of knowing and to utilize multiple sign systems in the classroom (Leland and Harste, 1994). We have begun to think of writing as a process as well as a product (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985) and we have recognized the important role of the arts in literacy learning (Carger, 2004; Goldberg, 2001; Wolf, 2006). At the same time we have witnessed our classrooms become increasingly diverse, both culturally and linguistically (Brisk and Harrington, 2000; Cummins, 2000b; Delpit, 1995). Yet a unifying theme in the language arts curriculum seems to be missing: linguistic inquiry—that is, recognizing language itself as a subject of exploration and discovery.

Historically, when language was taught as a subject in school it was taught as prescriptive grammar—correction and drills on “proper” language usage without a context, without explaining to students why they might

need to learn a new linguistic code. The ineffectiveness of this approach resulted in boredom, an intense dislike of grammar, and an eventual turning away from language as an object of study.

The whole language philosophy in language arts shifted the focus away from language as a subject, placing new emphasis on constructing meaning, on using language to learn. But, as Yetta Goodman (2003) points out, there were some misconceptions along the way.

Some teachers, parents, and researchers have mistakenly come to the conclusion that teachers who hold constructivist views of teaching and learning do not discuss the sounds, the structures, and the meanings of language with their students. There are even some novice whole language teachers who have developed the misconception that language concepts should not be the focus of classroom content...Whole language advocates do not reject the existence of phonics or grammar and vocabulary study in school settings. Rather, they seriously consider how students' intuitive knowledge of letters and sounds, the rules of grammar, and word meanings relate to students' proficiency as speakers, listeners, readers and writers, and they help students become conscious about their own language knowledge. (pp. 5-6)



Educators are beginning to take notice of what linguists have been saying all along about language: the study of language is descriptive, not prescriptive. This means that linguists study and describe language as it is actually used. They don't prescribe how language should be used. Freeman and Freeman (2004) explain:

Linguists work to describe language so that they can study it. However, historically, grammar teachers have prescribed, not described. They have laid down the rules for students to learn and to follow... We want to encourage teachers to take a descriptive approach to language study because prescriptive approaches to natural phenomena like language simply don't work. (p. xiv)

Eric Hawkins published his revised edition of *Awareness of Language: An Introduction* (1987) because he believed that schools in England were still missing something essential. He called for the teaching of language awareness to junior high students as a way to bridge the gaps between the different aspects of language they encountered in school, such as mother tongue instruction, foreign language instruction, academic language instruction, and English as a second language instruction. Hawkins (1987) explained: "Nowhere does our present curriculum offer children help in

learning to understand language itself, the unique characteristic of the ‘articulate mammal’ ...Slogans such as ‘language across the curriculum’ have helped to distract attention from the haphazard nature of the child’s language experience.” (pp. 1-2) Hawkins also edited a series of short topic books for 11-14 year olds that focused on various aspects of language.<sup>5</sup>

During the same decade, Traugott and Pratt, in their classic text *Linguistics for Students of Literature* (1980), wrote passionately about the connection between linguistics and literature. They demonstrated that linguistic concepts contribute greatly to an understanding of literature.

The more one understands the linguistic system, the more one appreciates the infinity and variety of possible choices and combinations of choices available, and the more one appreciates the genius of an artist who, by making and combining choices, creates structures that are deeply meaningful, imaginatively fulfilling, and expressive of our most fundamental concerns as human beings.  
(p. 34)

Recently the call for linguistic inquiry in the language arts curriculum has begun to appear in the literature (Cummins, 2000b; Delpit, 1995; Freeman and Freeman, 2004; D. Goodman, 2006; Y. Goodman, 2003; Wheeler and Swords, 2006). Educators from different perspectives are

reaching a similar conclusion: linguistic inquiry (also referred to as language study, language inquiry, language awareness, critical language awareness, the study of language diversity, or code-switching) is largely missing in the classroom today.

More than ten years ago Lisa Delpit drew our attention to the fact that teachers in some diverse classrooms were not giving African American students the tools they needed to succeed in school. She argued that not only should teachers recognize and support the students' home language, which was a well-developed, rich language, but also teach a new code—the language of school. Delpit (1995) explained: “Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them with input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a non-threatening, real communicative context.” (p. 53)

Delpit's view is that teachers in many diverse classrooms are not acting effectively as linguistic and cultural “translators” for their students. Many students need to learn to operate in a new code in order to be successful in school and to compete in the world outside their own community. Therefore a focus on language and language diversity should be an integral part of the language arts curriculum. “It is possible and desirable to make

the actual study of language diversity a part of the curriculum for all students.” (Delpit, 1995, p. 54)

In his essay, “The Career of Black English,” George Elliot Clarke, Africadian scholar and poet, presents the rich history of Black English and its long presence in Nova Scotia. Calling for students to be proudly bidialectal, Clarke (1999) writes:

While we Africadians will continue, in increasing numbers, to learn Standard English, that education should not be won at the expense of our own native, strange, beautiful, and musical tongue. Even as we enter academia and scale corporate ladders, we should seek to further the career of Black English in Nova Scotia. We should always remember the special voice of our people. (p.139)

Stephanie Inglis writes about the linguistic characteristics of written Mi’kmaq-English in Nova Scotia (Inglis, 1999). She explains how language contact has created a new dialect among bilingual Mi’kmaq speakers of English as evidenced in their writing. It is not “sub-standard” English, she argues. It is a dialect with systematic patterns created by two hundred years of language contact between Mi’kmaq and English. Inglis (1999) explains: “...regional dialects of Standard English, such as written and spoken Mi’kmaq-English, reflect the cultural consciousness framed by the first

language of the speakers of the dialect. Language analysis gives insight into a people's framework of reality.” (p. 156)

At the TESL Canada 2000 Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Jim Cummins articulated the differences between conversational English and academic English, tracing these differences back through the history of the English language (Cummins, 2000a). He explained that academic, written English is the language of literature, magazines, and textbooks, and includes complex syntax, low frequency words originating from Latin and Greek sources, as well as figurative language not often used in conversational English.

Academic language is what we develop in first language students all through school in the subject called Language Arts. ESL students are continuously catching up to a moving target because academic language increases in difficulty throughout the grade levels. This distinction between academic and conversational English has become pivotal for many ESL teachers. Cummins' connection of theory to practice also has ramifications beyond second language instruction.

Cummins (2000b) argues for a transformative pedagogy which develops language awareness in all students, focusing on both language itself and on the relationship between language and power. He believes a peda-

gological bridge is possible between “effectiveness” educators (who rely mainly on quantitative research) and critical educators (who rely mainly on qualitative research). “The development of language awareness would include not just a focus on formal aspects of the language but also the development of critical language awareness which encompasses exploring the relationships between language and power. (Cummins, 2000b, p. 276)

Debra Goodman (2006) believes teachers, too, benefit from increased language awareness, from looking at language as linguists do. She describes how, in her graduate course for preservice and inservice teachers, she engages course participants in language inquiry. This linguistic experience in turn helps teachers observe, document, and understand the language development of their students.

Like linguists who are given a chance to review evidence, many experienced and novice teachers find that systematic, descriptive language inquiry—focusing on samples of actual language in use—leads them to reform old assumptions and gain new insights about their own and their students’ language usage. (p. 145)

The importance of language awareness and linguistic understanding in the language arts curriculum is the focus of three recent books for educa-

tors. In *Valuing Language Study: Inquiry into Language for Elementary and Middle Schools* (2003), Yetta Goodman presents strategies for language arts teachers in leading language inquiry in their classrooms. In her preface she writes:

I continue to wonder why K-12 curricula do not focus more on language as an object of study—language and linguistic study... This book is my attempt to help raise the consciousness of teachers and the language arts profession as a whole to consider the importance of treating language as a matter for serious inquiry by young people. (p. x)

Freeman and Freeman (2004) also believe that a teacher's understanding of linguistic concepts will enhance the development of literacy in the classroom. In their book *Essential Linguistics: What You Need to Know to Teach Reading, ESL, Spelling, Phonics, Grammar*, they present linguistic concepts in a clear, concise way for classroom teachers. Their intent is to give teachers the linguistic tools they need in order to make well-informed decisions in the classroom and to show teachers how they can lead their own students in linguistic inquiry. They explain: "Students who investigate how language works can apply insights from their study to their own reading, writing, and oral language development." (p. xv)

Most recently, in their book *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms*, Wheeler and Swords (2006) offer a new approach to teaching Standard English, or formal language, in urban schools. They demonstrate that when students learn how to code-switch from the home language to the school language, they gain new linguistic tools for learning. Their home language is also affirmed. Wheeler and Swords show how teachers can use linguistic inquiry to “flip the switch” from correction to contrast in their language arts lessons, that is, how they can use contrastive analysis to teach kids to switch language codes depending on the context. In their concluding remarks to teachers, they write: “Expect that the insights underlying code-switching will permeate and transform your language arts life. Under the code-switching approach, you will consider student language as data.” (Wheeler and Swords, 2006, p.162)

Now that these three important books about language inquiry are available for teachers, what is available directly for the students?

Books *do* exist for students about writing (Fitch, 2000; Steinberg, 2003); about reading (Goodman, D. 1999); about success with language arts assignments (Zeman and Kelly, 1995); and about grammar (Cleary, 2001; Heller, 1988). But to my knowledge no current book exists which introduces the students themselves to linguistic inquiry.



### Literature Review: Writing as Inquiry

When I first decided to explore linguistic inquiry in the classroom, I wasn't certain what form this research would take. But as I learned about arts-informed research and research creation, it became clear that writing as inquiry would offer the most exciting possibilities for new understanding.

Writing as inquiry is a journey, and I have been learning all along the way, making important connections, looking at language and research in new ways. As I created a book for young people about linguistics, I explored what I knew, what I didn't know, and what I wanted to know about language and linguistic inquiry. The process of creation was also a process of inquiry, exploration and discovery.

While working on the linguistics book for students I kept a writer's journal as a place to record my research journey. I soon realized that my writer's journal was a part of the inquiry as well. The journal activated my memory and guided new connections—like an archaeological dig for ideas hidden inside my brain.

As I continued writing and creating the linguistics book for young people, I no longer followed the chapter outline with which I had started. I discovered more effective ways to choose and order the array of subtopics, to tie ideas together. I also discovered that the writing process for me was not linear. It was spiraling. What I wrote first informed what I wrote next. On the other hand, what I wrote later reinforced and sometimes changed what I had written earlier.

Concurrently I read texts on arts-informed research, particularly on writing-as-inquiry, and examples of writing-as-inquiry (Baskwill, 1992; Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004; Finn, 2003; Neilsen, Cole, & Knowles, 2001). Writing as inquiry enabled me to explore the possibilities of language inquiry in the classroom. And the audience, the community of students and teachers, became an integral part of what I was learning and doing. As Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, and Luciani (2004) write in their preface: “At a time when researchers must learn to ‘go publish or perish,’ arts-informed research shows the transformative potential to bring the academy and the community together.” (p. vii)

Students and teachers contributed to this inquiry by offering important feedback as I read drafts of selected chapters in their classrooms. I did this as part of the Writers in the Schools Program in Nova Scotia (2005-

2006) and as part of the Canadian Children's Book Week Tour in Quebec (November 2005).<sup>6</sup>

What kind of feedback did I receive?

As a visiting writer I focused on revision. I talked with my audiences, students in grades 3-6, about the two types of feedback writers need during the revision process. First they need encouragement. They need to know what is working well about the writing. Second, they need constructive criticism. They need ideas for making the writing clearer and more interesting for the target audience. The drafts I read most often were of Chapters 1, 2, and 7 of my manuscript. The positive feedback was much like this:

“This chapter made me think about something I've never thought about before.”

“This chapter made me want to read the rest of the book.”

“I liked the examples you gave.”

“I never realized how much we say ‘up.’”

“I never thought that language could be so interesting.”

“I'm going to find out what my first word was.”

“I made a new word!” (during the inverted compound word “Try This” activity)

The constructive criticism was amazingly insightful and helpful. Here is a sample.

“The title might need to be changed.”

“Why not use one of the “up” words in the title?”

“Maybe you should have a glossary.”

“I think you used too many questions.”

“You could show the pronunciation of new words.”

“Maybe you could interview a real linguist.”

“Maybe you could use more narrative writing.”

“You should include a world map of writing systems.”

“Maybe you used ‘listen to what’s coming out of your mouth’ too many times.”

Teachers, too, offered valuable feedback and suggestions. Most teachers were excited about the book idea and seemed to think such a book would be an asset to their language arts programs.

The audience, then, has helped to shape this inquiry. I have learned firsthand how arts-informed research takes place as part of a community of artists and learners. It is designed and redesigned and refined as it is being created in juxtaposition to the work of others. Arts-informed research is informed not only by my own creative explorations and the creative explorations of others, but also by the audience.

Who is the intended audience for *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*? Students in Grades 4 - 8 as well as their teachers. *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids* focuses on language itself—what it is, how it works, and how it is used. I believe that by participating in linguistic inquiry students will not only become more respectful of language diversity, but they will also become more effective writers and readers, more critical thinkers, and more engaged second language learners.

## PART II.

# Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids

## Contents

1. What's Up With *Up*?
2. First Words
3. Vanishing Words
4. Writing—A Time Machine
5. English—A Sandwich and A Thief
6. How Does this Crazy System Work?
7. Shotsnaps: The Poetry of Language
8. Code-Switching
9. Time's Up! Now What?

1.

## What's Up With *Up*?

There's one thing you should know right away: I'm crazy about language.

There's another thing you need to know before you read this book: *you* are a language expert.

You are a language expert because you are reading the marks on this page and connecting them to what they mean using a language system called English. And you are an expert at this language because you use it every day for all kinds of purposes.

The next time you open your mouth listen to what comes out of it. Stop and think about what your tongue and teeth and lips and vocal chords and breath and brain and ears are doing. It is truly remarkable that we can talk. What is talk anyway? How did you learn to talk? When did you



learn to talk? Why is language so important and why are there so many different languages?

These are only a few of the questions that linguists are thinking about. Linguists are people who study language. They make you stop and think about what you are saying.

For example, have you ever noticed how often we use the word “up” when we speak?

*Clean up your room.*

*Hurry up and do your homework.*

*Hang up the phone.*

*Wait up for me.*

*Listen up.*

*Hey, you messed me up!*

So, what’s up with “up”? Why do we use this word all the time? How does it change the meaning of the words it follows? Or does it always change the meaning?

Do these two sentences mean the same thing?

*Clean your room.*

*Clean up your room.*

How about these two sentences?

*Blow the trumpet.*

*Blow up the trumpet.*

Or, what about these two sentences?

*Use the paper towel.*

*Use up the paper towel.*

You will be amazed as you begin to explore the language you use every day. You are already a language expert—whether you realize it or not. This book will help you discover and analyze the language that is in your brain, on your tongue, on your paper, and in the world around you.

I am writing this book in English because I am fluent in English. You are reading this book because you are also fluent in English. English is the language I heard at home when I was a baby so it is the language I started to speak. If I had heard French at home, I would have started speak-

ing French. If I had heard Arabic at home, I would have started speaking Arabic. If I had heard more than one language at home, I would have started speaking more than one language.

I teach English as a second language to students who speak other languages. My students teach me a lot about language. They help me realize that the English we use when we speak is not always the same as the English we use when we read and write. You might call these two kinds of English *spoken* English and *written* English.

There are also many interesting variations in the way people speak English from one community to another, or even from one situation to another. When I was a kid, my neighbourhood in Detroit was filled with people who had moved there from other places. So I heard Spanish English, African-American English, Southern American English, Arabic English, Lithuanian English, and because my family came from Nova Scotia, I heard Canadian English at home. All these kinds of English had distinct differences. And yet when we were playing together outside, there was a kind of English all of us kids used together. (Linguists call these language variations *dialects* and *registers*, but it's easier to think of them as different language *codes*.)

Have you ever noticed that you might say something one way to your best friend but a different way to the principal of your school? Depending on who you are speaking to, and where and when you are speaking, you might change your words, or the way you arrange or pronounce them. We all use different language codes in different situations.

Here is an example. When we speak we use a lot of “ups” (*you crack me up, lighten up, give up*), but when we write something more formal we sometimes change the words. So, instead of “lighten up” we might write “relax.” Or instead of “give up” we might write “surrender”.

My family, friends and I have been collecting “up” phrases for a few years. Our collection is up to 200! How many phrases with “up” can you think up?

**TRY THIS:** For more fun, think up some phrases with “off” (bug off) or “out” (chill out) or “on” (hold on). (Linguists call these words which we add onto verbs, “verbal particles.” Why do you think they have this name?)

## 2.

### First Words

Do you know how old you were when you first began to talk? Do you know what your very first word was? Most kids begin to say words when they are between one and two years old, but everyone is on their own schedule. Ask your mother or father or grandparent or big sister or brother if they can remember when you first started talking. Ask them what your first word was. It's fun to know this. Sometimes it even tells something about your personality.

I have two sons. I call my older son the "improviser" because he plays jazz and loves to create with music as well as with building supplies. He also plays sports. When he was little he enjoyed playing with toys like

balls and inventing games to play with them. So it's no surprise that his first word was "ball".

I call my younger son the "analyzer" because he likes to analyze a situation and then take action. This is his approach to soccer as well as to science. When he was little he made keen observations about the world around him. It's no surprise that his first word was "hot".

My brother works as an engineer and has always enjoyed fixing and fixing up cars. Again it's no surprise that his first word was "car".

I'm not sure what my first word was. One of my sisters thinks it might have been "banana" (although I couldn't say the word right) and I do love food! If you can't find out what your first word was, don't feel badly. Guess what it might have been!

How kids learn to speak is fascinating. It tells us a lot about how language works. Linguists believe that everyone goes through similar language development stages no matter what language they are learning to speak.

The **babbling stage** usually begins when babies are seven or eight months old. They play around with all the sounds their mouths can make, using consonant-vowel syllables, like ba-ba-ba-ba. Do you know any babies who are at this babbling stage? Children at this age are fun to listen to.

When they begin to use the right voice intonation, it sounds as if *of course* we should know what they are saying. But they are babbling—their sounds don't match meaning in a consistent way yet.

Around the age of one children begin to say words. They start catching onto the fact that certain combinations of sounds always mean the same thing. Linguists believe that most early words are words that name something or someone important to the child—like the name of a person, a food, a toy, or a pet. Often these single words pack a lot of meaning! Linguists call this the **one-word stage**.

Young children at this stage often make up their own words, or have their own pronunciations of words. When I was a kid, I had lots of unusual pronunciations. I said “piscetti” for spaghetti, “mazagine” for magazine, and I called olives “ovals”. Did you have any funny pronunciations when you were learning to talk?

Although everyone is on an individual schedule, little kids usually start putting two words together when they are around one and a half years old. In English and in many other languages, two words can be a complete sentence. So this is when kids begin to figure out that words work together to make things happen. They begin to discover the power of language. Linguists call this the **two-word stage**. Here are some examples.

*more juice*

*hot water*

*go car*

*new shoes*

Once kids are at this stage, they begin learning to say lots of new words in lots of new combinations. They begin to make longer sentences, but usually with some function words missing. Linguists call this the **telegraphic speech stage**. Here are some examples:

*no me go*

*purple boat in water*

*out my bed (yelling at the cat)*

We are all “wired” to learn to speak. Our brains have a specialized capacity for language. But this capacity is only activated by linguistic input. That means babies need to hear language in order to learn it. Talking to babies and to toddlers and to preschoolers is so important. It activates the language area in their brains, and helps them learn language quickly and easily. Babies who grow up hearing two languages start speaking two lan-



guages. And if they hear three languages, they will learn to speak three!

Isn't that amazing? Do you know any small children who are beginning to talk? Listen closely to what they are saying, and talk, talk, talk to them!

**TRY THIS:** Draw a picture of you when you said your first word. Think about where you lived when you were a one-year-old. What might you have been doing when you said your first word? Who might have heard you say your first word? Include clues in your drawing that show why this might have been your first word.

OR

**TRY THIS:** Take a "first word survey" in your classroom. Find out if some first words are more common than others. If possible, compare first words across languages. Are there any patterns or similarities?

### 3.

## Vanishing Words

What do you call an animal with fur, a long tail and pointy ears that says “meow” in English?

Why is this animal a *cat* in English, a *Katze* in German, a *chat* in French, a *gato* in Spanish, a *paka* in Swahili, a *billee* in Hindi, a *koshka* in Russia, and a *meo* in Vietnamese? Languages all over the world have different words for this animal. Why are some of these words similar in sound?

English and German are sister languages. They come from the same parent language—Old German. French and Spanish are also sister languages. They come from the same parent language—Latin. English and German are cousins of French and Spanish. They don’t share the same par-

ent language, but they do share the same grandparent language. They are all part of a language family. Look at the similarities in their number words.

<b>English</b>	<b>German</b>	<b>French</b>	<b>Spanish</b>
one	ein	un	uno
two	zwei	deux	dos
three	drei	trois	tres
four	vier	quatre	quatro
five	funf	cinq	cinco

Linguists believe languages that are similar may have been the same language at one time in history. They are still working on the best way to classify all the languages of the world into language families. The language family that English, German, French, and Spanish belong to is called the Indo-European Language Family.

More than six thousand languages exist in the world today. But the United Nations estimates that half the world's languages will disappear in the next century. Three thousand languages gone in only a hundred years!

The diversity of the world's languages is as threatened as the diversity of its plants and animals. Why is language diversity so important anyway?

There is an amazing connection between the preservation of language and the preservation of the environment. Scientists are learning that as languages become extinct, traditional understanding of the natural world and about preserving ecosystems is also lost. When a language dies, we lose an entire history and culture full of knowledge. This is a great loss for everybody in the world. By preserving or reviving a language, we protect not only the language, but its culture, ancient wisdom, and knowledge of the natural world. We also learn about language itself.

You might be surprised to know that there are 145 languages in Canada! At least fifty of these languages are spoken by Canada's First Nations peoples. It is important to protect and preserve these indigenous languages because some are growing close to extinction—there are very few people who still speak these languages.

I live in Nova Scotia. The indigenous language of Nova Scotia is Mi'kmaq. Today there are only about seven thousand people who still speak the Mi'kmaw language. This language is not endangered yet, but it is threatened. So efforts are now underway to protect and preserve this lan-

guage—and the wisdom it holds. Here are some Mi'kmaw words and phrases you can learn.

<b>Kwe'</b>	Hi
<b>Wela'lin</b>	I thank you (to one person)
<b>Wela'lioq</b>	I thank you (to more than one person)
<b>Taluisin ki'l?</b>	What is your name?

People in most regions of the world speak more than one language. Learning a second or third language is one way to help preserve languages. It is also a way to learn about other cultures. And it's fun!

I have been a teacher for more than twenty-five years. I learn a lot about languages from my students. Here are some of their languages:

Albanian  
Arabic  
Armenian  
Cambodian  
Chinese  
Farsi

French

German

Hindi

Hmong

Ilocano

Indonesian

Laotian

Portuguese

Romanian

Serbo-Croatian

Spanish

Sinhalese

Tagalog

Tamil

Ukrainian

Urdu

Vietnamese

Yoruba

Do you speak more than one language? Do your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents speak a language other than English or French? How many different languages are in your school?

Linguists believe that half the world's population right now speaks one of these eight languages as a first or second language: Chinese, English, Hindi, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese and French. But not all linguists agree. Why not? Because people use languages for different purposes. Some people speak one language at home, a different language at school, a different language with their grandparents, a different language at work. And because language is always changing, statistics about languages are also always changing.

Here are some of the strategies my students and I think are helpful when learning a new language. Do you have other strategies to add to this list?

1. Take risks (go for meaning, not perfection)
2. Ask people to speak more slowly.
3. Ask people to repeat.
4. Use a bilingual dictionary.
5. Try to say it another way if people don't understand you.
6. Make predictions about what you think people will say.

7. Learn rhymes and songs in the new language.

When you learn a new language you learn to understand it and speak it. You also learn to read it and write it. Some languages use the Roman alphabet—the alphabet we use to write English. But many languages don't. Did you know that there are more than four hundred different writing systems in the world today? It's fascinating to learn a new writing system. Read the next chapter to find out more!

**TRY THIS:** Learn to say hello and thank-you in an indigenous language within your province. Is this language endangered? What is being done to preserve it?

OR

**TRY THIS:** Take a language survey in your classroom, and if possible, in your school. You may use the questions below for your survey. Then use a graph or chart to show the results.



Language Survey Questions:

1. What is your first language?
2. Do you speak a second or third language?
3. What language (s) do your parents speak? Grandparents? Great-grandparents?

## 4.


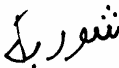


### Writing—A Time Machine

Writing is an amazing invention. It makes language permanent. It also allows people to communicate across time and space. But what if people don't use the same writing system?

Of the eight most widely spoken languages in the world, only four use the Roman alphabet for writing. Here is how you write the word “soup” in the four languages that use the Roman alphabet.

English	soup	Roman alphabet
Spanish	sopa	Roman alphabet
French	De la soupe	Roman alphabet
Portuguese	sopa	Roman alphabet

Here is how you write the word “soup” in the other four widely-spoken languages. Each of these languages uses a distinctly different writing system.

Chinese		Chinese script
Arabic		Arabic script
Hindi		Devanagari script
Russian		Cyrillic script

I chose the word “soup” because it exists in all eight languages. (Not every word exists in every language. On the other hand, some words can be two or more words in a different language.)

Here are some interesting facts about these writing systems.

The Chinese writing system uses characters to represent words instead of symbols to represent sounds. Sometimes the characters even resemble the word’s meaning, like pictures.

Arabic is written from right to left in a cursive, consonant-based script. (The vowels are little marks above or below the word. Sometimes

people don't write the vowels at all.) There are four forms of every letter depending on its position in the word (beginning, middle, end, or alone.)

Hindi uses the Devanagiri script which comes from Sanskrit, an ancient language which no one speaks anymore. This is also a consonant-based script with the vowels showing up as additional marks connected to the consonant symbols. Hindi uses a line across the top of the letters to show word boundaries.

Russian uses the Cyrillic script which is a descendant of Greek. It has many letters similar to the Roman alphabet, but it also contains letters that don't exist in the Roman alphabet. Some of its letters look like English letters, but they make different sounds. For example, "H" sounds like an English /n/.

It's fun to learn a new writing system. Is there anyone in your class, your school or your neighbourhood who can teach you a new writing system? Have you ever tried to invent your own writing system?

When people got the idea to write things down, it changed the world forever. Writing catapulted ideas across time and space. Before people invented writing, they shared their ideas through storytelling. But after writing was invented, it became a tool for people to record their stories, their

history, their music, their poetry, their business transactions, and their technology. Ideas and technology became more and more complex.

When and where did writing begin?

Ancient humans drew pictures on cave walls. Later they began to make pictograms (picture messages) like the Mi'kmaw petroglyphs carved on the rocks at the lakeshore at Kejimikujik National Park. Many people throughout the world used picture messages to convey information. These pictures represented the actual objects, not the sounds of the words.

About five thousand years ago the Sumerians, who lived in what is now Iraq, invented a type of writing called “cuneiform.” They used a tool called a stylus to press cuneiform shapes (*cuneus* is Latin for ‘wedge-shaped’) into soft clay. These shapes represented the sounds of words, not the look of the objects. This was a new type of writing!

At about the same time ancient Egyptians created a writing system which was later called “hieroglyphics.” (*Hieroglyphics* is a Greek word that means “sacred carvings”.) Over time the Egyptians transformed their picture-based writing system into a syllable-based system, which means each symbol represented the sound of a syllable.

The Phoenicians, people who lived on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, borrowed this writing system from the Egyptians. And the

Greeks borrowed it from the Phoenicians. Because the Greek language did not contain as many consonant sounds as the Phoenician language did, the Greeks used the leftover symbols to represent vowel sounds. This was a revolutionary idea—an alphabetic writing system! (The word *alphabet* means a system of symbols which represents all the sounds of a language, both consonants and vowels. It comes from the two first letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha (a vowel) and beta (a consonant), ancestors of our “a” and “b”.)

This Greek alphabet finally reached Rome and spread throughout the Roman Empire. Our alphabet, the Roman alphabet, was born. In fact, our alphabet looks almost the same as it did two thousand years ago in Rome. Only a few new letters were added as European languages adopted the Roman alphabet. The newest letters in the Roman alphabet are J, U, W, and Y.

The Phoenicians wrote from right to left (the way Arabic and Hebrew are still written today). But the Greeks reversed the direction when they adopted this alphabet. They wanted the writing to move from left to right so their mostly-right handed scribes (writers) would not make a mess smudging the ink. (Only a few people actually knew how to read and write two thousand years ago.)

There have been a few other changes to our writing system since the Greeks changed its direction.

Can you read this?

*punctuationmadereadingeasierbecauseyousawsentences*

Punctuation marks at the end of sentences were invented to help people read more easily. But it was still necessary to read out loud to figure out where the words were.

When your Grade 1 teacher told you to leave spaces between your words, did she also explain how the idea of space boundaries between words was an amazing invention thirteen hundred years ago? The idea of word spacing revolutionized reading because people could finally begin to read more quickly—and silently.

Humans could speak long before they invented writing. People always learn to speak before they learn to write, and speaking and writing don't convey exactly the same information. Imagine communicating a message by email, by telephone, and by talking to someone face to face. How would the same message differ in different modes?

When we talk face to face we communicate extra information with our body language—facial expressions and the movements of our hands.

We don't use body language when we talk on the telephone. But on the telephone we still communicate additional information in the intonation, stress and emphasis in our voices. But this is all lost in email. Misunderstanding can most easily take place in email because the extra information in voice intonation, stress, emphasis, and body language is not there.

On the other hand, there is a different kind of information encoded in writing that does not exist in speech. English spelling—as crazy as it is—reflects the history of English words. It also helps us distinguish between homonyms. People have tried to “reform” the English spelling system for hundreds of years—with no luck. This is because of all the historical information that can be found in our wacky spelling system. Read the next chapter to find out about the surprising history of English.

**TRY THIS:** Say the following sentences, but each time emphasize a different word. Does word emphasis change the meaning? (Note: In writing we use italics to show emphasis.)



*I* know she really likes that blue car.

I *know* she really likes that blue car.

I know *she* really likes that blue car.

I know she *really* likes that blue car.

I know she really *likes* that blue car.

I know she really likes *that* blue car.

I know she really likes that *blue* car.

I know she really likes that blue *car*.

OR

**TRY THIS:** Numerals are not written the same way in every language.

(Even in English we use two sets of numerals - Roman and Arabic, al-

though what we call “Arabic” does not match modern Arabic language nu-

merals today.) In the chart below you will see numerals in four different

writing systems. Can you create your own symbols for numbers?

English "Arabic" numerals	Roman numerals	Arabic numerals	Hindi numerals	Chinese numerals	Invented numerals
1	I	١	१	一	
2	II	٢	२	二	
3	III	٣	३	三	
4	IV	٤	४	四	
5	V	٥	५	五	
6	VI	٦	६	六	
7	VII	٧	७	七	
8	VIII	٨	८	八	
9	IX	٩	९	九	
10	X	١٠	१०	十	

## 5.

### English—A Sandwich and a Thief

When I was a kid, “Kristin” was an unusual name. People didn’t know how to pronounce it. They called me Kristine, Kirsten, and Christian. Sometimes I was called Kristina because I lived in a Spanish-speaking neighbourhood, and this was the Spanish equivalent of my name.

My name also was misspelled. When I was in Grade 6 I won my school’s spelling bee. But when I received the prize—a new dictionary with my name printed in gold letters on the front cover—my name was misspelled! I couldn’t believe it.

The situation was even worse with my last name. No one had ever heard of the name “Bieber” before, and no one knew how to say it. Once people learned how to say it, they never remembered how to spell it. I always held my breath when new teachers took attendance at school. (Now you know what the initials “K.B.” stand for.)

Names are full of mysterious meaning just waiting to be discovered. Do you know what your first name means? Do you know what language your last name comes from? What family history is encoded in your name?

Historical information is encoded not only in our names but also in the wild and crazy spelling of English words. English is a very unusual language. It is both a sandwich and a thief. I’ll explain why.

Until the new millennium, I didn’t know the amazing history of this language I’ve used all my life. Here’s what I found out: the English we use today is actually two older languages sandwiched together.

About a thousand years ago, before the Norman-French invasion of England, the English language (Old English) was a Germanic language, sharing many similar words with German. But after the Norman-French invasion, thousands of new words entered the language. These new words came from French and had Latin and Greek roots.

During this time in England's history, the peasants spoke a language that was still very Germanic, but the ruling class, the nobility, spoke a language that resembled French. (And only the nobility knew how to read and write.) This sandwich of languages has evolved into the English we use today.

Many of the short words we use in everyday conversation are similar to words in Germanic languages like German and Dutch. Many of the longer, academic words we use in school are similar to Romance languages like French and Spanish. This strange history accounts for why English has such a strange spelling system and why it contains so many synonyms. You can say "fast" or you can say "rapid." You can say "big" or you can say "large." You can say "fall" or you can say "autumn." Some people call English a bilingual language because it is a sandwich of languages.

English contains a huge number of words—more than 400,000! One reason for this large number of words is the "sandwich-like" history of English. But there is another reason to account for why English has so many words: It is a thief!

We call the words "borrowed" but we don't really return them, do we? English likes to borrow words from many different languages. Can

you guess the language origin of these words? (Look on page to see if you are right.) Can you think of other borrowed words?

veranda	chipmunk	salsa	algebra	tea
(Hindi/Urdu)	(Ojibwa)	(Spanish)	(Arabic)	(Chinese)

Borrowing isn't the only way new words come into a language. Languages "coin" new words for new inventions. Whenever new technology is developed, we need new words. One hundred years ago the words below didn't exist yet in English.

television	modem	space shuttle
------------	-------	---------------

What new words can you think of that must have been added in the last ten years?

Compounding words (putting two words together to make a new word) is another way all languages create new words. English is full of compound words, and we continue to make new ones all the time. Think about when and why these words were invented.

snapshot

firewall

baseball

Clipping and blending are two more ways languages make new words. Clipping means to shorten a word to make a new one. For example “math” from “mathematics” and “fridge” from “refrigerator.”

Blending is when you blend two words together to create new meaning, such as “brunch” for a meal that combines breakfast and lunch. Or “zonkey” for an animal whose parents are a zebra and a donkey.

It’s fun to discover the origin of words. When you know a word’s history, you not only understand its meaning more clearly, but you learn all kinds of interesting things along the way. The study of word origins is called *etymology*. *Etymologists* are language detectives as well as language historians.

English—like all languages—is constantly changing. It’s hard to imagine what English will be like in another hundred years. But you can be sure that it will have changed in many, many ways.

**TRY THIS:** Arrange the following sets of compound words from oldest to newest. (Think about the meaning of each word and when it might have

been invented.) Now check a dictionary for the approximate date of entry into the English language, or check p. to see what my dictionary says.)

firecracker

snowball

firewall

snowboard

fireplace

snowshoe

OR

**TRY THIS:** Test the sandwich theory of the history of English. You will need a dictionary (or a website) that includes the origin of words. Now think of a common one-syllable word (like *good* or *house*). Look it up. What is its origin? Now think of a three or four-syllable word (like *mathematics* or *fantastic*) and look it up. What is its origin? Can you collect more evidence for the sandwich theory?

OR



**TRY THIS:** Create and draw a new animal by combining the attributes of two existing animals. How and what will you name it? (You might use compounding, clipping, or blending, or you might coin a completely new word.)

## 6.

### How Does This Crazy System Work?

The most amazing thing about language is how it actually works. How it actually works, though, is very complicated. I'll do my best to describe it clearly. (This will be the hardest chapter of the book. If it gets too tough, just skip it.)

Our lives are full of systems. Traffic systems. Library systems. Recycling systems. In our homes we have electrical systems and plumbing systems. In our bodies we have digestive systems and nervous systems.

A system is a unified whole made up of parts that interact in specific, important, productive ways. Our lives are dependent on many types of sys-

tems. Some systems have been designed by people. Other systems already exist in the natural world.

Human language is a complex system that connects sounds to meaning. It is a symbolic system. This means that a particular combination of sounds always stands for a particular meaning, but you have to learn the connection—it's not obvious. (Remember all the different words for a cat?)

Each language has its own sound system and its own patterns for combining sounds to stand for objects, ideas and feelings. And each language uses its own combination of sounds (words) to build larger meaningful sequences (phrases and sentences) in order to communicate messages.

Human language consists of three subsystems:

- a sound system

(linguists call it a *phonological system* because *phon* = sound),

- a word system

(linguists call it a *morphological system* because *morph* = form)

- a sentence system

(linguists call it a *syntax system*, because *synt* = together).

This last subsystem is what we often refer to as grammar, how words in a language are put together to make meaning. Kids (and even adults!) often groan when they hear the word *grammar*. But this is a very misunderstood word. To linguists, grammar doesn't mean how words *should* be put together. It means how people actually *do* put words together using the patterns of their language.

In English we make sentences by putting the subject (S) first, the verb (V) next, and then the object (O). If we don't use this order, the sentence either doesn't make sense or it has an unusual meaning.

We understand the meaning of this sentence.

**My cousin lost the book.**

S    V    O

But what if we change the word order?

**The book lost my cousin.**

O    V    S

We understand message, but now the meaning is not what we intended.

What if we change the word order again?

**Lost the book my cousin.**

V            O            S

**Lost my cousin the book.**

V            S            O

We don't really understand these sentences. And we are really lost if we move the words around completely, if we don't follow any of the patterns of English.

**Book cousin the lost my.**

English is called an SVO language. The subject (S) usually comes first, the verb (V) usually comes next, and the object (O) usually follows the verb. But other languages use different kinds of basic word order. Hindi is an SOV language, with the verb at the end of the sentence. He-

brew is a VSO language, with the verb at the beginning. Each language has its own grammar, its own patterns for combining words.

Believe it or not, words are not the smallest unit of meaning in our language. Have you ever heard of a morpheme? Morphemes are very important. They are the smallest language units that hold meaning. Morphemes are sometimes words—but not always.

*Pencils* has two morphemes.

The two morphemes are pencil + s. The “s” tells you “more than one.” It is the plural marker in English. Linguists call it an inflectional morpheme.

*Rewind*.

This word also has two morphemes: re + wind. The prefix “re” means “again.” Linguists call prefixes like “re” derivative morphemes. Here are the different kinds of morphemes we use in English.

<u>Kind of Morpheme</u>	<u>Example</u>
Inflectional morpheme	“s” (plural ending)
Derivative morpheme	“re” (prefix)
Word	book

Compound	“bookcase”
Idiom	“put up with”

Morphemes are the building blocks of language. We combine them in many interesting, creative ways, but only by following the patterns of a particular language. Each language has its own kinds of morphemes, and its own patterns of combinations.

Each language has its own sound system as well. Phonemes are sounds that make a difference in meaning like the beginning sounds /t/ and /d/ in *time* and *dime*. When I was learning Hindi, I couldn't understand how a language could have four kinds of “t” sounds, four kinds of “d” sounds, and two kinds of “r” sounds. My brain and my tongue had to adapt to a new system of sounds. English speakers have a hard time pronouncing Arabic because of the different kinds of “h” sounds in the Arabic sound system. In order to produce these sounds, you have to be able to hear the difference between them first.

Although the English alphabet has 26 letters, the English language actually contains at least 40 phonemes. (English has only five letters called vowels, but it has about 15 different vowel sounds or phonemes depending on your dialect.) We are able to combine these 40 phonemes to create

more than 450,000 morphemes! And with these 450,000+ morphemes we can make an infinite number of messages. An *infinite* number.

Human language is an amazing system for communication, but no one knows its exact origin. What we do know is that the capacity for language is already built into our brains when we are born. Babies' brains are primed to acquire the sounds, words, and patterns of the language they hear. But hearing the language is key: if a baby never hears language, she won't begin to speak.

Playing around with language is what children do when they are learning to speak. Poets play around with language. Comedians play around with language too. All human languages are creative. Although in each language there is only a fixed number of sounds, the sounds combine to create hundreds of thousands of different words, and these words in turn can be modified and combined to create an infinite number of messages. It is astonishing that we acquire such a complex system so quickly and easily when we are young.

What about animal communication systems? Are they similar to human language? As far as linguists know right now, animals are able to communicate only a fixed number of messages. They are not able to create



an infinite number of messages in the same way humans do. Also, as far as linguists know right now, animals only communicate about *real* things.

Linguists describe these animal messages as stimulus-bound. Honeybees communicate the location of food through a kind of dance. Birds communicate the boundaries of their territory, or messages about their nest or courtship or danger, through their calls and songs. Parrots, and other talking birds, mimic the words they hear. They don't break down language into parts and then rearrange the parts in new, creative ways on their own. At least as far as we know right now.

Many linguists believe that human language is distinct from animal communication in two important ways: (1) only human language can be used to communicate ideas that are untrue, abstract, or imagined; and, (2) only human language is infinitely creative. Linguists continue to make important discoveries about the communication systems of animals. We already know that all human languages are complex and creative, each with its own system of sounds, words, and sentences.

**TRY THIS:** Brainstorm as many systems as possible. Which of these systems exist in the natural world? Which of these systems were created by people?

OR

**TRY THIS:** Find out about the sound system of another language. How many phonemes does it contain? How many letters are there in its alphabet? (Or does it use a non-alphabetic writing system?)

OR

**TRY THIS:** Check out the latest research in animal communication. What are some recent discoveries?

## 7.

### Shotsnaps: The Poetry of Language

When you play around with language, you discover things. Babies play around with the sounds of language. That's how they learn to speak.

That's how they "figure it out." Linguists believe that poetry is an important step in child language development. They also believe poetry exists in all languages.

Poetry is like a photograph or painting made with words. It has color, shape, images, and texture made with the sounds, patterns, and meanings of language. Poets find inventive ways to arrange words, ways that help us experience the world in new ways. Poets intuitively understand

language. That's why linguists pay attention to their poetry. In fact, linguists and poets live on a two-way street: linguists learn about language from poets, and the magic of poetry can sometimes be deciphered through what linguists know about language.

In school we sometimes think of poetry as being “a little bit off the map” or out of the ordinary. But actually poetry exists all around us: in songs, in tv advertisements, in playground rhymes, even in our normal conversations. Our talk is full of poetry.

Bubble gum, bubble gum in a dish.

How many pieces do you wish?

Five

1-2-3-4-5 and you are not IT.

When I was a kid I recited rhymes and chants with my friends. We performed chants as we walked to the corner store or played Chinese jump rope. We used rhymes to find out who would be IT when we were playing Kick-the-Can. The rhyme above is one of these.

Whenever we create poetry, we discover things about language. Poetry is full of sound color, language patterns, images, and feelings. Poetry

reflects and connects what's inside of us and what's outside of us. Carefully chosen and arranged words (based on their sounds and their meanings) convey these reflections and connections to other people.

I invented the word “shotsnaps” in this chapter’s title to show that when you play around with language, you make discoveries. “Shotsnaps” is actually the word *snapshot* turned around. *Snapshot* was a new word in the English language in the 1890s when cameras were first invented. It means a casual picture taken with a small, handheld camera.

*Snapshot* is a compound word. Compounding words is one way the English language creates new words. *Snap* means quick or easy and *shot* is an informal word for taking a picture with a camera. (If you look these two words up in a dictionary you will see that they each have many other additional meanings as well.)

Let’s experiment with compound words. What happens when you change the order of the two words in a compound? For example:

papernews

hoppergrass

mintpepper

Why does the meaning seem to change when the words are inverted? Is it because the first half of the compound word is often the describer of the second? Sometimes compound words are two adjectives combined (bitersweet), or two verbs (kickbox). What happens when you invert them?

Since writing this chapter I am much more aware of compound words in the world around me. They're everywhere! And we invent new ones all the time. Can you think of any compound words that are less than ten years old? Less than a hundred years old? (Did you try the activity in Chapter 6?)

The study of linguistics helps us pay attention to the language we use every day. Do you remember the "up" collection from Chapter 1? How many "up" phrases did you think up? Let's use them to write poetry!

**TRY THIS:** Choose 5 (or more) verbs with the verbal particle "up." Use them to create a poem. Here is an example.

Do It Up!

Sometimes I

slip up,

mess up,

goof up;

But then I usually

loosen up,

lighten up,

brighten up,

even crack up.

Once in awhile I

choke up

or freeze up,

but I never

ever give up!

OR

**TRY THIS:** Close your eyes and visualize your neighbourhood. Look for compound words. Choose one compound to sketch. Now turn your paper over and sketch the inverted form of this compound word. Write a poem using both the compound word and its inverted form. Be creative and inventive.

OR

**TRY THIS:** Write down a rhyme or chant that you and your friends used when playing games. How many different rhymes or chants can you collect?



8.

## Code-Switching

There isn't just one kind of English. There are many! When I was a kid, I talked two different ways. I spoke one way with my teachers and parents. I spoke a different way with my friends. Here's an example. To my teachers or parents I would say, "I'm not chewing gum." But to my friends I would say, "I ain't chewin' no gum." Two ways to say the same thing in different situations.

Language variation is natural. There is formal English and informal English. There is spoken English and written English. There is the English of your home, the English of your community and the English of your

school. There are different kinds of English in different geographical regions of the world, and in different cultural communities.

When I first moved to Nova Scotia, the minute I opened my mouth people would ask me where I was from. Mostly, my vowel sounds were different. They gave me away every time—no matter how hard I tried to blend in. The minute I said “cat” or “hot” or “out” or “borrow” people knew I was a CFA (Come From Away). It drove me crazy! It didn’t matter that my mother and sisters were born here, or that my grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and even great-great-great-grandparents had all lived here. My speech marked me as different. People knew I grew up somewhere else.

Babies have amazing ears and brains. They learn to speak the language they hear around them. They learn to speak the kind of language they hear in their home and in their community.

The English spoken in Canada is not the same as the English spoken in Australia, England, or the United States. But we can still understand each other. Even within Canada there are different varieties of English (as well as different varieties of French!) Just listen to people from eastern, western, northern and southern Canada. You will hear the differences in their pronunciation, in their word choices, and sometimes in the order and

arrangement of their words in a sentence. Even within Nova Scotia there are a variety of ways of speaking English, from Cape Breton to Preston to Lunenburg County.

Not all language varieties are determined by geography. When I worked on the 25th Street playground in my old neighbourhood in Detroit, my recreation program partner would say to me at break time. “I finned to go home and bust some suds.” I knew she meant she was getting ready to go home and wash the dishes. She spoke more than one variety of English. Most of us do.

And most of us have to learn a new kind of English when we start school. Some people call it Standard English. What they call Standard English is the kind of English used in books and magazines and in the world of business and science. It is the language variety expected in many formal situations. This doesn’t mean that one’s own home or community language variety should never be used. It means that it is valuable to learn how to “code-switch” — switch from one way of speaking (or writing) to another.

Exploring our use of different language varieties or “codes” makes us stronger language users in every way. George Elliot Clarke, a scholar from Nova Scotia, speaks and writes in more than one dialect of English. He ex-

plains it like this: “While we Africadians will continue, in increasing numbers, to learn Standard English, that education should not be won at the expense of our own native, strange, beautiful, and musical tongue.” (Clarke, 1999, p. 139)

Each language variety, or code, has its own system of patterns, its own regularities, its own beauty. Some people think that any kind of English that isn't Standard English is inferior, or sub-standard. But this isn't true. Every kind of English is valuable. History and wisdom are embedded in our home and community languages. Linguists learn a lot from studying language variation.

Linguists are also interested in language attitudes. Here is one observation. It seems okay for a language to borrow words and even pronunciation from another language (we often think of accents as being interesting and beautiful), but if grammatical patterns are borrowed from another language, we often think this is “bad grammar.” Why? Why can a language borrow words, but not the patterns for combining them?

“I don't have no books.”

In Spanish, double negatives are grammatically correct. But when this pattern is transferred to English, we think of it only as bad grammar, not as an example of language transfer.

Sometimes people shut others out because of the way they speak. Until this happens to you, you don't know how it feels. It is important to respect the way other people speak. We all have our own unique way of speaking. We also speak the language variety of our community. Then we meet the language of school. The more we learn to be “code-switchers,” the better able we are to communicate effectively in different situations.

Linguists help us to see that language variation is natural and valuable. Language variation tells us a lot about the creative power of language, the history of our own language, and how language changes over time. It is definitely worth the exploration.

**TRY THIS:** Think of some examples of code-switching — how to say the same thing two different ways. How many more examples can you add?

**Formal**

Are you going to drink that?

I don't have any gum.

The crayons are all broken.

**Informal**

You gonna drink that?

I ain't got no gum.

The crayons they all broke.

## 9.

### Time's Up! Now What?

The word “linguist” comes from the Latin word *lingua* which means “language” or “tongue.” It was first used hundreds of years ago to signify a person who was accomplished in languages. My dictionary pinpoints the date of entry into the English language as 1591.

Today the word “linguist” means a person who specializes in the study of language. You were already a language expert before reading this book. Now you are a linguist too. You pay attention to the language that is around you and in you. You have become a language explorer.

Language is one of life's greatest mysteries. Where did it come from? When and how did it develop into so many different languages? There are still many aspects of language we don't understand fully. But here is what we do know about language. All humans have language. All human languages are patterned, complex, infinitely creative, and they continuously change.

Since writing Chapter 1 of this book, I have collected more examples of “up” phrases. Sometimes new examples just roll off my tongue as I'm speaking or roll onto my paper as I'm writing. Sometimes I find them in other people's conversations. Sometimes I discover them in books and magazines. I heard the newest example on a television commercial. The slogan for a rice commercial was: “Rice it up!”

I think I have become a better teacher because of what I am still learning about language. I now understand how challenging it is to learn to read and write for the first time in a language that is different from the one you speak. Think of all the new systems you have to learn at once!

Outside my teacher role I am also exploring language and how it is similar to music. Music is a kind of language because it communicates (expresses emotion), is creative, and relies on time to work. Jazz musicians improvise. This means they are able to create their own music right on the



spot, music that fits in with the music around them. When we speak, we are always improvising, making it up right on the spot to fit the conversation. We use the patterns of our language so that others will understand us. Jazz musicians also use the patterns of music (scales and modes and chords) when they improvise. I plan to keep on exploring this connection between language and music.

Time's up! I hope this book has inspired you to explore further, too, to find out more about your own language as well as other languages. I hope you have become more aware of how language impacts your life—at home, at school, in the community, and in the world.

Language is a powerful tool. It empowers you to discover, explore, and communicate your life experiences. The more you understand this tool, the better able you will be to use it well.

**TRY THIS:** Find out what these types of linguists do (but make your own predictions first before researching in the library or on the internet.)

computational linguists

psycholinguists

neurolinguists

historical linguists

## Part III.

# Classroom Connections

Bookwriting provides a way to use language in a purposeful, meaningful, exploratory, artful, and creative way. I have always valued the creation of books as a learning activity for my English as a second language and English language arts students.

Five years ago I visited a Grade 2 classroom where my ESL students were about to share their Bookwriting Projects with their classmates. By way of introduction I asked the class these questions:

1. *What language am I speaking now?*
2. *What do we need language for anyway? What couldn't we do if we didn't have language?*
3. *How many languages exist in the world today?*
4. *How many different languages are right here in your own class? What other languages do your classmates speak? Do you know what their languages look like when they are written down?*
5. *How many of you speak another language, or have relatives or friends who speak other languages?*

I did not anticipate such an enthusiastic response! The Grade 2 students were genuinely interested in and excited about language. If Grade 2 students were wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the topic, students in Grades 4 - 8 would likely be as well.

Part III explores classroom connections for *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids*. What is the purpose of each chapter? How might each chapter connect to classroom learning? What additional information might teachers need to know? How might the ideas in *Talking Up a Storm: Linguistics for Kids* enhance learning in the classroom?

## *Chapter 1: What's Up With Up*

### Purpose:

- To create language awareness
- To demonstrate that language is fun to explore
- To model language data collection
- To introduce the word “linguistics”
- To introduce the concept of formal / informal language

### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Sharpening listening skills
- Language Arts: Using language data to write authentic dialogue
- Language Arts: Making appropriate language choices
- Language Arts: Recognizing and investigating verbs
- L.A. / Science: Organizing and analyzing language data

The primary purpose of the first chapter is to get students hooked on the idea that their own language is surprisingly fun to explore. As Debra Goodman explained in the preface to her 1999 book, *The Reading Detective Club*:

I wrote these stories initially for my own students. I wanted them to know that language can be fun, interesting and exciting. I wanted to show them that they are really smart kids who already know a lot about language. (p. ix)

I chose the verbal particle “up” because I discovered it everywhere in my own speech. Then I began to listen for it in the speech of others. I clearly remember the day I began collecting instances of “up” phrases. As my family and I celebrated the beginning of summer vacation by eating out, I wrote down every “up” phrase I heard in our conversation. Then together we thought up more and more and more examples. We had discovered something we had not noticed about our own language usage.

Collecting “up” phrases exemplified the ease with which one could gather language data, and was proof to convince students that they were already language experts, full of language data themselves. Collecting “up”

phrases also served as an effective vehicle for introducing the concept of formal and informal language.

How does this chapter connect to the classroom?

Focused listening is essential in collecting language data. The analytic skills involved in organizing and investigating language data are the same skills used in science and math. Language data can also be useful in writing authentic dialogue in writer's workshop.

Teachers may choose to pursue further analysis of the verbal particle “up” or other verbal particles. Verbal particles like “up” often magnify the action. By adding “up” to a verb, you magnify the action by adding a sense of completion or willfulness to the action (Traugott and Pratt, 1980). Verbs with verbal particles are called phrasal verbs. Some linguists categorize phrasal verbs this way (Liao and Fukuya, 2004):

Literal Phrasal Verbs (the meaning is literal)

Figurative Phrasal Verbs (the meaning is figurative)

Completive Phrasal Verbs (the meaning is magnified)

Finally, the concept of formal and informal language is one of great value in school, a concept that will be explored further in Chapter 8.

## *Chapter 2: First Words*

### Purpose:

- To create language awareness by investigating first words
- To explore the basic stages of language development
- To connect language input with language development
- To explore similarities in language development across

### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Collecting language data
- Language Arts: Investigating child language acquisition
- Language Arts: Highlighting the expertise of multilingual students  
/showcasing their first languages
- Language Arts: Finding an authentic purpose for grammar
- Second Language Study: Comparing first and second language acquisition



By investigating their own first words, their own language acquisition, students will connect with language in a personal way. The purpose of collecting and sharing first words is to discover what patterns may emerge. What can we learn about language development from the pattern of first words?

The “Try This” activity is an arts-infused activity, connecting drawing with language. Drawing is a way to think more deeply about language (Carger, 2004; Goldberg, 2001). It is an effective tool for remembering and learning. This activity is designed to use drawing as a way of thinking about one’s first word. (Even students who don’t know what their first words were may still creatively explore the possibilities through drawing.) In multilingual classrooms, sharing first words across languages is a way to showcase first languages other than English and to demonstrate that language development is similar across languages.

This chapter easily ties in with second language learning. How does second language learning mirror first language learning? Multilingual students will be valuable resources to the class in this exploration.

Finally, the study of first words provides an authentic context for learning grammar. Here is a reason for learning to categorize words into nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. One can much more effectively talk about,

explore, organize, and analyze language data when descriptive labels are used. This is a perfect opportunity to reinforce the idea that linguists talk about descriptive grammar, not prescriptive grammar. They tell people how language is actually used, not how it should be used (Freeman and Freeman, 2004).

See D. Goodman (2006) for a description of how and why teachers might learn to analyze their own language usage, their own linguistic data.

### *Chapter 3: Vanishing Words*

#### Purpose:

- To explore, understand, and respect linguistic diversity
- To introduce the concept of endangered languages
- To show the importance of language preservation and language

learning

- To generate interest in the connections between language, culture, and the environment

#### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Sharing linguistic knowledge in the classroom
- Language Arts: The value of linguistic diversity
- Second Language Study: Its purpose and value
- Social Studies: World cultures, the environment and endangered

animals

Chapter 3 introduces students to the concept of linguistic diversity, to the fact that the world is filled with thousands of different languages and dialects. At the same time, this chapter explores the importance of language preservation and why endangered languages should be a matter of great concern to everyone in the world.

Maintaining one's first language is an important step in language preservation. Second language study is also an important step in helping to preserve endangered languages. In Nova Scotia, the study of the Mi'kmaw language is one way to help preserve it. Second language study is also a bridge to other cultures. A connection.

In multilingual classrooms, the idea that language is a bridge to other cultures can be readily explored. Second language students are tremendous resources in the classroom. These students have a wealth of linguistic knowledge—as well as cultural, geographical and historical knowledge. As Promislow (2003) explains: “The “betweens” of our social fabric need to be created throughout our curricula, across subject matter, in all interactions between teachers and learners, by including the diversity of languages and cultures that learners bring with them to the classroom.” (p. 4)

Finally, the idea that language and the environment are connected is complex. Ancient knowledge of the natural world is encoded in ancient

languages. When these languages are lost, that ancient knowledge is also lost (Comrie, Matthew, and Polinsky, 1996; Leonard, 2005). This might be an area for further inquiry, especially by older students.

## *Chapter 4: Writing—A Time Machine*

### Purpose:

- To introduce world writing systems
- To describe the historical development of writing
- To present writing as an invention
- To highlight the differences between spoken and written language

### Possible Classroom Connections:

•Language Arts: “Literacy literacy” (by understanding that writing is an invention, students will have greater understanding of and appreciation for the act of reading as well as writing)

•Language Arts: Punctuation, its origin and importance

•Language Arts: Classroom second languages with different writing systems (such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Hebrew, Farsi, Japanese)

•Social Studies: World history, the geography of languages and

•Math: Numeral reflection and invention

Students rarely get the chance to learn about other writing systems in elementary and junior high school. In order to introduce writing as an amazing historical invention, I decided to show that half of the world's most widely-spoken languages utilize writing systems that are different from the Roman alphabet. By seeing the diversity of writing systems in the world, students will begin to look at their own writing system in the light of contrast.

It is very difficult to delineate the history of writing in a few pages and in words that students will comprehend. I thought that perhaps connections to modern places such as Iraq, Egypt, Greece, and Kejimikujik National Park would be helpful. Pre-reading questions for this chapter might be: Why is the English alphabet called the Roman alphabet? What other languages use this same alphabet? What is the origin of the word alphabet? For further information on the historical development of writing systems see chapter 5 of Freeman and Freeman (2004).

The “Try This” activity gives students the chance to create their own symbols for writing numerals. The process of creation is always a process of exploration, discovery, and learning.

Punctuation is a fascinating area for further inquiry, and will draw students' attention to these strange marks that were invented to make read-

ing easier. Older students might want to explore the bestseller, *Eats, Shoots, and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* (Truss, 2003).

Finally, the difference between spoken language and written language is mentioned in this chapter. It is important for kids (and adults) to realize that these two types of language are not the same. Spoken English (conversational English) and written English (usually academic English) differ in structure, word usage, and in amounts of additional information given—such as body language, intonation, stressed syllables, and emphasis. Although the “Try This” activity highlights the linguistic importance of emphasis, body language is another fascinating area for further inquiry, particularly in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. Meanings conveyed by body language differ from culture to culture. We are often unaware of many aspects of our own culture’s body language.



## *Chapter 5: English—A Sandwich and a Thief*

### Purpose:

- To present a brief history of the English language
- To show how English is a “sandwich” and a “thief”
- To show that language changes over time
- To explore how new words come into a language
- To introduce the field of etymology

### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: English spelling patterns and “breaking the rules”
- Language Arts: Why English has so many synonyms
- Social Studies: How historical events are reflected in our language
- Second language study: Cognates and word borrowing

English language learners often ask why English seems to break its own rules, particularly in spelling. My standard answer used to be: “English is crazy.” But at the TESL Canada 2000 Conference in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in a symposium led by Dr. Jim Cummins (Cummins, 2000a), I finally understood how the history of English contributed to its huge vocabulary and unusual spelling patterns. In that symposium I also learned how academic English is different from conversational English: it utilizes low frequency words from Greek and Latin sources, more complex syntax, and figurative language not used in conversational English.

By learning about the history of English language arts students will come to understand that language changes over time. They will also learn some of the mechanisms for language change. English has borrowed many words from other languages. In multilingual classrooms, it will be interesting to search for English words that originated in the first languages of students in the class.

Compound words are a concrete way to look at historical change in language. When did particular compound words enter English? Why? (Compound words will be explored further in Chapter 7.) For more information on how new words enter a language, see Chapter 2 of Fromkin and Rodman (1993).

*Chapter 6: How Does This Crazy System Work?*

**Purpose:**

- To introduce kids to the “nuts and bolts” of linguistics
- To describe the three subsystems of language
- To understand what linguists mean by “grammar”
- To explore the creativity of language
- To contrast human language with other animal communication

**Possible Classroom Connections:**

- Language Arts: The mechanics of writing
- Language Arts: The study of grammar
- Science: Animal communication systems
- Second Language Study: Comparing linguistic systems

This chapter serves as an introduction to the “nuts and bolts” of linguistics—how linguists describe language. The three subsystems may be difficult to grasp with only this brief overview. Therefore, there is a caution at the beginning of the chapter with the suggestion that if it is too abstract and hard to understand (or boring), readers should skip it and go on to the next chapter. This essential information must be in a book about linguistics. On the other hand, it is not necessary for everyone to read it. By warning students up front, they have the option to accept the challenge or to opt out of reading the chapter.

The main idea is that human language is intricately complex. Most of us do not appreciate the fact that language parts, or sounds, are combined in complex ways to signify meaning and that the number of possible messages created by these combinations is infinite (Freeman and Freeman, 2004; Fromkin and Rodman, 1993; Traugott and Pratt, 1980). The infinite creativity of human language and its abstract nature—the ability to communicate about things that are abstract or untrue—are what linguists believe distinguish human language from animal communication systems (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993). (Animals don’t seem to be able to lie.)

Animal communication systems are a fascinating field for further inquiry. Linguists continue to make astonishing discoveries about the ways in which animals communicate. This is an interesting tie-in to science.

Finally, the complexity of human language is contrasted with the fact that language is acquired by humans when they are very young. This is proof that students are already language experts: they have mastered such a complex system for communication. Tie-ins to the language arts curriculum are many. The “mistakes” students make when writing are windows into how language subsystems work—especially the morphological system. A possible extension activity would be to choose a few common mechanical writing “errors” to analyze in light of this chapter. From these valuable “mis-writes” what can be further discerned about how the English language works?

## *Chapter 7: Shotsnaps: The Poetry of Language*

### Purpose:

- To highlight the creativity of language
- To demonstrate that in the creation of poetry one can make discoveries about language
- To show that linguists learn from poets
- To demonstrate how language changes over time

### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Poetry reading and writing
- Language Arts: Exploring compound words
- Second Language Learning: Poetry and the visual arts

When I was an undergraduate student thirty years ago, I was introduced to the idea that linguists could learn much about language from poetry. I still believe this is true. Language is inherently poetic and poetry is inherently a linguistic window. My linguistics professor, Dr. Linda Waugh, introduced the notion that child language acquisition and poetry were also connected. “The universal existence of poetry and the demand for poetry find a powerful corroboration in studies of child language.” (Jakobson and Waugh, 2002, p. 220)

This chapter focuses on compound words and what happens when you invert them. It is a way to draw attention not only to compound words and how they work, but also to what they can teach us about the creativity of language. By inverting them, we pay much closer attention to what they mean and how they work. As Wolf (2006) explains:

Graham (1997) suggests that the best of poets rarely hesitate to invent and invert language, arguing: “This juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar forces us to hear and to consider afresh things to which we would otherwise pay little attention” (p. 7). (p. 13)

The “Try This” activity connects drawing with poetry. Different sign systems used together produce deeper thought, deeper meaning, and deeper understanding (Wolf, 2006). For second language students, poetry is a way to explore a new language without worrying about grammatical constraints (Goldberg, 2001).



## *Chapter 8: Code-Switching*

### Purpose:

- To show the value of language diversity
- To deepen respect for, and understanding of, language variation
- To present the language of school as one language variety
- To explore the strategy of code-switching (using the language

### Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Exploring language variation in literature
- Language Arts: Exploring language variation in the classroom
- Language Arts: Exploring language variation and voice in writing  
and public speaking
- Language Arts: Collecting and exploring language data
- Social Studies: Understanding the connection between language  
and culture

Although this chapter will be particularly valuable for students in urban schools, it will also connect with rural students and others whose home or community language varieties are different from the language variety of school. Understanding my own childhood code-switching experience made linguistics very relevant for me.

Delpit (1995), who calls for the study of language diversity for all students, and Wheeler and Swords (2006), who advocate teaching formal language to urban students by using contrastive analysis, are three of very few researchers and educators who recognize the fact that urban kids often speak a different language variety than the one they are expected to use in school. This seems to be a crucial understanding for urban teachers if they want to make the language arts program relevant to their students.

Wheeler and Swords (2006) suggest contrast, not correction, in the language arts classroom. They explain why it is more productive to contrast the patterns of a students' home language with the patterns of Standard English, than to constantly "correct." First we need to question our assumptions about the language urban children bring to school, particularly African Canadian and African American children. Wheeler and Swords (2006) explain:

Thus, contrary to traditional assumptions, African American children do not arrive at school ‘linguistically impoverished.’ Instead, they arrive positively adept at intricate verbal exchange. But the ways in which many African American children are pros at language are not recognized or valued by schools. (p. 40)

The concept of language variation is important and relevant to students’ lives. They meet up with a new kind of English in school—whether it is a new dialect, a new register, or academic language. This is a valuable area for further inquiry in the classroom and is connected to classroom learning in many ways. Vocabulary development is one connection. Using different voices for different types of writing and public speaking—using the appropriate language variety for the context—is another relevant connection to classroom learning.

I first wrote this chapter using the linguistic terms “dialect” and “register,” but it became clear to me that these terms might be confusing for students. After reading Wheeler and Swords’ book I agreed that the terms “formal” and “informal” would be more familiar to students and therefore less confusing when recognizing and analyzing different language varieties, or codes.

*Chapter 9: Time's Up! Now What?*

Purpose:

- To encourage further language inquiry
- To connect linguistics with other subjects, interests, and hobbies
- To review the main attributes of human language
- To show that language inquiry is ongoing—never “finished”
- To define the word “linguist”

Possible Classroom Connections:

- Language Arts: Further language inquiry by groups or individuals
- Language Arts / Social Studies: Research a local linguist

This chapter opens with the definition and history of the word “linguist.” It closes with a “Try This” activity designed to initiate further inquiry. What different types of linguists are there? And what do they actually do? Students are encouraged to find out more about linguists and their particular fields of study. (Another classroom activity might be to invite a local linguist into the classroom. Or perhaps students might interview a linguist online.)

Students are encouraged to see that linguistic inquiry is always ongoing, never finished, because language is always changing. What students learn about language will connect with many other aspects of their lives—even outside of school—and will also make the language arts curriculum in school more meaningful, effective, and exciting.

## Conclusion

Although the role of linguistic inquiry in the classroom is what I set out to investigate, I have learned much about the process of research creation along the way. What I have learned about linguistic inquiry and the process of research creation will inform my teaching practices in many ways.

First, I have learned that writing is a powerful tool for reflecting on both educational theory and teaching practices. In fact, writing is a powerful tool for connecting theory to practice. It is a vehicle for discovering those connections that exist below the surface. It is a tool for creating more meaningful learning experiences for students.

Second, I have come to understand how the process of creation is also a process of exploration and discovery. I now recognize the value of creation in the learning process. Where once I thought creative “extension” activities were reserved for students who “finished early,” I now see that creation greatly strengthens learning for all students every step of the way.

Third, at the outset of this inquiry I wondered if we educators needed to look more at “the language” and less at “the arts” in language arts. But I have discovered a great reciprocity between language and the arts. Each is an important door to learning, and each enhances and clarifies the meanings created by the other. As Wolf (2006) writes: “Moving from one sign system to another is deeply engaging work, for one must look and look again to see if the meanings created in one system are explaining and enhancing the meanings in the second system.” (p. 18)

Finally, I have come to see how language itself is a synthesis of science and art. Language is both intricately structured and infinitely creative. When language is explored in the classroom by means of linguistic inquiry, it can become a powerful link between students, teachers, and learning.

## Endnotes

1. The book Linda Waugh was working on when she was my professor, *The Sound Shape of Language*, has become a linguistics classic. Written with linguist, Roman Jakobson, the text was first published in 1979. The third edition was published in 2002.
2. Code-switching as defined by Wheeler and Swords (2006) is a linguistically informed approach to language arts based on contrastive analysis. Here I use the term to mean the ability to switch from informal English (in my case a distinctly different vernacular) to formal (Standard) English.
3. National College of Education's inservice program for teachers was called The Children's Literacy Project. Fifteen hours of writing workshops offered fresh insights into teaching writing by giving us (the teachers) new experiences with the writing process ourselves.
4. A second National College of Education program brought Visiting Artists into our school. Sue Sommers, a visual artist, worked with some of my language arts students on the visual representation of Dream Poems.



5. The discovery of one of these books (Jones, 1984) on a shelf in the MSVU library corroborated the intent of this thesis. But I came to this idea long before I discovered Eric Hawkins and the series he edited.

6. The Writers in the Schools (WITS) Program, administered by the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia, is a visiting writer program which connects writers with schools across the province. The Canadian Children's Book Week Tour is an annual week-long tour of Canadian authors, illustrators, and storytellers outside their home provinces. It is administered by the Canadian Children's Book Centre.

7. The original working title was *What's Up With Up? Linguistics for Kids*. Students felt this title did not work well because they found both parts difficult to understand.

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