

St Aidan's and St John Fisher Associated Sixth Form

Y11 to Y12 Transition Work

Subject:

English Language

Topic(s):

Idiolect analysis: looking at our own language.

Independent Learning Task(s) to Complete:

Complete the preparatory tasks below to help you explore your own idiolect. Your final task is to make a presentation that you could share upon starting the course.

How it links to the Specification:

AQA English Language Paper 2: accent and dialect.

NEA: Independent research project

Planning a presentation for class discussion will prepare you for the collaborative and discursive nature of the course.

Resources (include any hyperlinks):

Three articles attached.

Style models: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqkIv79KBTw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS5O4n0TqIU>

Additional Information:

Deadline:

Friday 12th September 2025

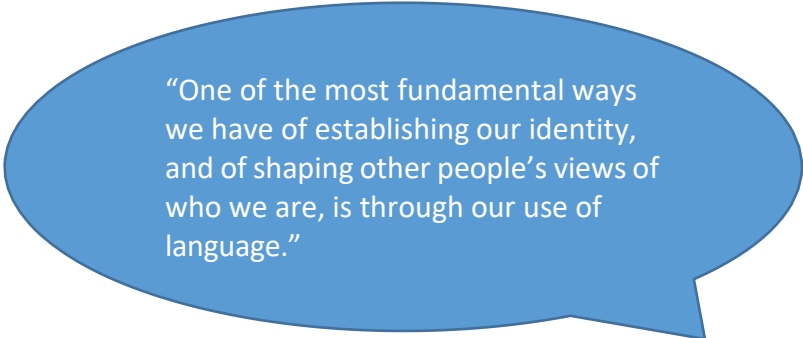
Objective: to understand the term idiolect, the factors contributing it and apply it to our own language use.

Think: What does the term “identity” mean to you?

Some possible definitions:

- ▶ *The fact of being who or what a person or thing is.*
- ▶ *The characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is*
- ▶ *the sense of self*

Respond:



“One of the most fundamental ways we have of establishing our identity, and of shaping other people’s views of who we are, is through our use of language.”

Joanna Thornborrow (2004)

To what extent do you agree with this idea?

Can you think of any specific ways in which your language use identifies who *you* are? Jot your first thoughts below

Key term: idiolect *The distinctive speech of an individual.*

Like your fingerprint, your idiolect is unique due to the specific influences you will have had during the course of your lifetime. You will then select from your linguistic repertoire according to the context in which you’re speaking i.e. who you are speaking to, about what, for what purpose(s).

Read: Study these three articles first published in the English & Media Centre's *emagazine* which is targeted at A Level English students:

The three articles attached explain more about the concepts of "idiolect" and "language variation". They were originally published in the English & Media Centre's magazine for A Level English Language students, *emagazine*:

- 1. "A World of Differences, Exploring Language Variation" by Ian Cushing, April 2015**
- 2. "Idiolect" by Michael Rosen, October 2001**
- 3. "Idiolect" by Daniel Pearce (a student's response to the Rosen article).**

Respond:

Make a list or mind-map of the different social groups you belong to. Then think about the language you use in these different groups. How does it vary? Can you describe the variations?

Which other people or factors have contributed to your personal language development? Consider the role of teachers, books, TV/music/films, the internet, places you have lived and add some more ideas to your mind-map.

Can you find out what your first words were? Chat with your family and friends about their memories of your early speech and add some notes.

Final task:

Prepare an article, voiced Powerpoint or video presentation in the style of an interview or Ted talk (see attached style models) to upload to your new class Team in September. In this you need to identify and explore the different influences on your own language development.

ARTICLE 1

A World of Differences: Exploring Language Variation

Ian Cushing explains the what, how and why of language variation – and why we should celebrate our differences.

Imagine, for a moment, that we all used language in exactly the same way. No differences in pronunciation, writing, words and grammar. No accents, no dialects, and certainly no variation in the way you speak to your friends and your teachers.

The world would be a boring place, and language wouldn't be nearly as interesting to study. Indeed, variation in the way a language is used is one of the things that keeps linguists in a job! Language variation is a good thing – something to celebrate, enjoy and study. We need variation to help us perceive and describe the world in all our weird and wonderful ways.

But how does a language begin to vary? And why does it happen? And what happens when variation in a language spreads much further than we might have originally thought?

How Is Language Diverse?

Language varies in all its forms. Spelling, pronunciation, grammar, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, semantics – you name it, the whole system of a language is liable to variation.

Take variations in British and American spellings and lexis: colour versus color and doughnut versus donut; tap or faucet; pavement or sidewalk, and dialect variations within a country, too: forms such as it was bare busy and that is jokes! Grammar of course, varies too: sorry I was late versus sorry I were late, or I'm always hungry me.

Think about well-known accents, such as those from Australia and Ireland. And variation doesn't just exist on such global scales – the most famous of all fictional phoneticians, Henry Higgins (said to be based on the non-fictional Henry Sweet), from *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* said he could deduce a London accent to within two miles, sometimes within two streets.

The way that different social groups use these different variations helps to form a sociolect, and idiosyncratic variations within and across those groups form an idiolect. Social groups can be formed through a huge number of variables – friends, colleagues, your Tuesday night yoga class – essentially any different group of people is likely to use language in a slightly different way. In addition, bilingual speakers will often jump or code-switch between their different languages. People who wish to communicate but have no common language try to hold makeshift conversation – with lexis from one language, and grammar from another. This can create pidgins, which may well turn into creoles over time, when the pidgin is taken up and spoken by a new generation.

To be put it bluntly, variation is everywhere in language, and I could go on listing examples. But simply listing examples of language variation is (a) an infinitely impossible task, and (b) doesn't actually tell us anything about why the variation is there.

Why Is Language Diverse?

To understand the reasons for variety, it's important to consider how language forms part of our identity. The language we use – specifically through lexical choices, pronunciation and grammar – is a fundamental part of forming our identity and how other people perceive us. For example, perhaps there is a tendency for younger people to use more slang and taboo terms, and make use of new words influenced by technology – such as emoji, selfie and unlike. We use language to build our identity and show we belong to social groups in the same way that we might choose to wear certain clothes, eat certain foods or listen to certain music.

Social groups often aim to be different from others in the way they use language – a 14-year old wants to be different from a 24-year old, and vice-versa. Teachers and students might use language differently to create contrast between themselves and create group identity. The result of this variation is that linguistic distinctions between groups increase and become more marked. Difference helps us to understand how society works. A person's language gives us a clue to their social type and character, which in turn gives us a clue about how to plan and deliver our own language. Do we trust them? Admire them? Respect them?

Look up any definition of accent and dialect in a dictionary and chances are there will be a reference to geography. It's geography that creates accents and dialects in the first place. For example, the dialect and accent of Liverpool has its origins in its port location – a mix of many migrant workers who came into the city and brought their variety of dialects with them. People wanting to identify themselves as being from Liverpool are then likely to adhere to these linguistic forms, further strengthening the accent and dialect.

People like to travel. And when they travel, they take their language with them. Migration from and into other countries yields new varieties, bringing new forms and culture – resulting in new words, grammar and pronunciation entering the language. Bradford Asian English and Multicultural London English are just two examples of the hundreds of emerging and secure forms across the UK.

The Power Of Context

Accents and dialects originate from how, where and when you learned the language(s) you speak. People tend not to have a ‘fixed’ accent and dialect but adapt and change this according to context – who they are talking to and why they are talking. These changes are done either subconsciously or consciously, and may be done to converge closer to a particular social group, or diverge away from them. Think about the clothes you choose to wear for different purposes. A posh dress for a school prom or grubby jeans to fix your bike – they serve different functions, whilst helping you to create identity and either fit in or look different. The same is true of the language variety we choose to use.

As with most things in linguistics then, context shapes and influences the way language is used – a different accent for a different audience; a different register for a different purpose; a different language for a different country.

Every factor that shapes language is called a variable – age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, sexuality, and so on. It can be hard to ‘zoom in’ on just one of these variables, and in everyday situations different variables work together to affect the way people use language.

The varieties are incredible and enormous, which also poses another question: when does a variety of a language become so different from the original that it becomes a new language in itself?

The Wonder Of Variation

We need variation not just to satisfy our own interests as linguists, but in order to increase our capacity for communication and cultural understanding. We need it to stand out, to identify ourselves and others, to create impressions, to serve functions and to build relationships. Language is a social function; a social and cultural tool: and its glorious varieties simply help us to navigate our way through society.

When studying language variation, the important thing to remember is that no one variety is better than another. You may well discuss concepts of prestige, and indeed, certain varieties are often deemed to be ‘more prestigious than others’ in certain contexts, and by certain people. This is interesting in itself. But as linguists, we take a descriptivist view: we describe, not prescribe.

Remember that variety and diversity is a good thing. It's what makes studying language interesting – so celebrate it, use it, and enjoy it.

Further Reading

- Hughes, A.D., Trudgill, P. & Watt, D. (2012). English Accents and Dialects. 5th edition. Routledge. A comprehensive review of social and regional varieties of English.
- Hudson, R. Sociolinguistics. 2nd edition. (1996). Cambridge University Press. A clear and lively discussion into how language is used in society.
- Todd, L. Pidgins and Creoles. (1974). Routledge. Basic, readable, and still not outdated in terms of its primary concepts.

ARTICLE 2

Michael Rosen - Idiolect

Michael Rosen explores 'idiolect' - a personal language map.

I don't speak English in exactly the same way as anyone else in the world. This is quite exciting when I want to prove to myself that I'm unique, but sadly, being unique in this way is not unique. No one speaks in exactly the same way as anyone else. As American chat show hosts always remind us: we are all unique

Here's something you can try at home. It's not dangerous - you can do it without your parents. However, doing it with them will be quite useful but only if you're still on talking terms with them. It's an investigation into why you speak in exactly the way you do.

You put yourself in the middle of a piece of paper and identify the many influences there have been in making you the user of language that you are. You can put each of these influences in the style of a speech bubble leading back to you in the middle. Likely candidates will be: mother, father, brother, sister, other relations, best friends, school (maybe different schools), different TV and radio programmes, clubs you belong to, religious, political and sporting organisations.

I wrote: 'speak in exactly the way you do,' but that needs refining. The easiest features to spot are individual words and phrases. You can ask yourself, for example, where did I get this or that expression from? Why do I say, 'well safe'? Why do I call it a 'sofa' whilst other people seem to call it a 'settee'? Perhaps you can speak more than one language and parts of other languages. Who did you learn those from?

But what about your accent? Probably it's at least two accents: one for informal situations and the other for formal. But maybe you have others: say, informal with people of the same age, informal with older people. And what about dialect? Almost certainly you use some expressions and phrases that are confined to your age group, to your locality, even to your school

But then you might also have some phrases that have come to you through your family that originate in other localities. In each of the bubbles you could give an example of what you think you've acquired from each of your influences. Many of the examples you look at may well come at you from several bubbles. In other words, something you acquired in one speech community is confirmed by another, or several others.

The great thing about this kind of investigation is that it's absolutely fascinating because it's about the one thing that you find really interesting - you. Unfortunately, it may not be quite as interesting to anyone else. Bearing that in mind, here's me: I learnt my main, basic language, English, from my parents and my brother. I also speak quite good French which I learnt from my father, many holidays in France and school. Same goes for German, but much less well. But there's another language, or part of a language: Yiddish. That's the language that was spoken by Eastern European Jews. There are many, perhaps hundreds of Yiddish words and phrases that I know. They came to me mostly from my parents and my mother's parents but were confirmed by knowing other Jewish people here and in America: 'shlump', 'chutzpah', 'shmerel', 'in shtuch'l and so on.

There are specific phrases, expressions, jokes, quotes from plays, catch-phrases, rude and jokey ways of twisting the language and the like that I can trace to individuals: 'you must be out of your mind' - my father; calling the broken dishwasher 'the wishdasher' - my mother. At school in North West London there were games and rituals which are called different things elsewhere: 'he', 'kingie', 'fainites', 'dobbing' for 'it'. 'Dets' were school detentions. When my own children use different words I have to ignore mine.

Some of our language comes to us as a result of education: there are the schooling words like 'subjects', 'invigilation', 'Year 9 SATs'. In my day there were 'O levels'. There are academic words like: 'quadratic equation', 'metaphor' and the like. The odd bit of literature might have rubbed off on you - anything from Roald Dahl's 'snozzcumbers' to Shakespeare's 'whirligig of time'. For brief periods I find myself using catch-phrases I hear from TV like the 'waassuuuuup' from the Budweiser ad, and some of Harry Enfield's lines. You may not know it but, thanks to your parents and grandparents, you might use old catch-phrases from previous eras, like 'Nice one, Cyril!'

But what about my dialects and accents? My main voice is what used to be called 'suburban cockney' but is now called 'Estuary English'. This comes from my school friends. My main

dialect I would identify as informal standard English. Unlike my children, I don't say 'ain't', 'we was' and 'he come through the door'. But I do say, 'Me and Joe were in the car'. When I'm broadcasting, I know that I tend to formalise my dialect - ('Joe and I...'), and switch the accent from Estuary to 'Received Pronunciation'.

More subtly, you might try to identify features like your different tones of voice (how you show that you're angry, afraid, certain, excited etc.); intonation pattern (the music of your speech, the ups and downs); hesitation pattern (where you pause); your use of filler sounds and expressions like 'er', 'mmm', 'you know what I mean?' Same again for all the different ways in which you say yes and no. You might need other people to tell you how all this sounds. Quite often, people *er* sound like one or other of their parents! One test for these features of language is to find out if people sometimes think you are someone else when you answer the phone.

By the time you've done all this, (and you can go on and on making it more complex and more specific to you) you will end up with what is a personal language map. As you might expect, linguists have a name for it: your 'idiolect'. To investigate it, chart it and to uncover the processes involved in how you acquired it is to engage with the very heart of how language really works.

ARTICLE 3

Idiolect

In this article Daniel Pearce, an A Level student at Peter Symond's College, responds to Michael Rosen's invitation to explore his idiolect - or language map.

I am proud to say that I am different from every other person living on this earth and the main reason for this is that my personal language map is unique. I am influenced, sometimes subconsciously, by different factors in the world around me: religion, political views, county or country of origin, family background, speech communities, education and the media are to name but a few. The easiest way of examining this fascinating subject is to look at the way I speak as an individual, compared with friends and family around me.

For most people, the one major factor influencing their way of speaking is their background. My grandparents on my mum's side come from Ireland and their accent is, although not prominent, still distinguishable on the phone or on recordings. Despite my two sets of grandparents coming from different areas of the country, I have grown up to call them both Grandpa and Granny. My parents address each of their respective parents differently however: my mother calls her parents Ma and Pa and my dad, the more traditional Mum and Dad. When I was younger my parents used

to call each other Mum and Dad when around me, but in the last few years I have attempted to correct their language and they now call each other by their first names.

Up until a few years ago, I was sure I was using 'correct' English grammar when I came home from school and told my mum: me and my friend went to town. My parents and grandparents didn't hesitate to correct me on this and soon I wasn't sure whether it was me and my friend went to town, my friend and me went to town or my friend and I went to town! Far too confusing! Now however I understand the concepts of subject and object pronouns and when to use me and I, and if I ever make a mistake, I always correct myself straight away.

My grandparents living in Hampshire and my Irish grandparents (who now live near Bath) are extremely different in their way of speaking and both have influenced my idiolect in a different way. My maternal Irish grandpa does tend to swear quite a lot, and it not unusual to hear him talking about the bloody Tories, whilst my paternal grandparents are far more old fashioned in their speech, which means that they still call dresses frocks - my sister says this destroys her credibility! Even now in the twenty-first century they still like using titles, distinguishing between Mr and Master and Mrs and Miss, and even refer to my mum as Mrs C. J. Pearce (my dad's initials), much to her distaste!

The most interesting forms of spoken language can be found in general, everyday conversation however. For instance: a lot of families somehow seem to find different and obscure names for everyday objects such as the television remote control. I myself prefer to call it the remote, but my dad insists on it being the flipper, and I know people who call it anything from the dingalinger to the zapper to the whojamaflip. All weird, wonderful, and in the case of a couple of examples, absolutely nothing that clearly describes the function of that small hand-held object!

We have also named a way of cooking potatoes after our family name: Pomme Pearce, which are roughly chopped potatoes cooked without fat in an oven. The heel is the name we give to the end of a loaf of bread and this somewhat strange title has come from my family's Irish background. Indeed my family all use a lot of vocabulary which comes from Ireland: Slainte, the phrases ... so it is and sure ... (for emphasis) and the exclamation wisher.

I run a recording and design partnership with a friend and also used to do a lot of lighting at my secondary school with someone who has now gone on to Southampton City College to do a BTEC in Technical Theatre. I therefore use a lot of technical 'jargon' when I meet up with them, and because I use 'technical' phrases fairly often, occasionally this language creeps into my everyday way of speaking, when I just assume that everyone will understand me! One of my favourite sounding words is crossfade; one that I use regularly when I am mixing and editing tracks. Apron, Tabs, Chasers, Tallescope and Cans are words that I know the meaning of, but an



outsider listening in would not have the faintest idea of what exactly was meant. Another example of lexis that I have picked up from this area of lighting is Intelligent lights - what exactly is 'intelligent' about them I have never really worked out! The same goes for ETC Source 4 lights - I still have no idea what happened to 'Source 1, 2 or 3'!

I use very few 'catchphrases' myself, although the ones I do use without thinking about probably come from the media. Certainly two phrases that I do say fairly frequently must have been taken from television and constantly annoy the rest of my family: I say who instead of what if I have misheard something (even if the subject is a concrete noun!) and anywhos instead of anyway, God knows why.

The language I use around different speech communities also varies a lot. Unusually perhaps, I would be happier to swear in front of my Irish grandparents than in front of my mum and dad and tend to use some slang, being careful not to drop consonants, around my friends.

Looking at your idiolect is fascinating and makes people think carefully about what they say and why they say it. So saloncha, standby on cans, Source 48s to upright, chasers to sequence 1, tabs up ... and crossfade.

Glossary

Slainte [sal_nt_a]: 'Cheers' (Ireland)

Crossfade: decreasing the volume of one track whilst simultaneously increasing the volume of another (also can be used for lighting)

Apron: extended part of the stage in front of the proscenium

Tabs: house curtains

Chasers: lights set to automatically flash around a set pattern and direction

Tallescope: mobile scaffold tower with extendable ladder and upper platform

Cans: headsets with single earpiece and integrated boom microphone, used for communication.

ETC source 4 lights: powerful, multipurpose spotlight