
1 Language-in-use

1.1 Overview

The main aim of this opening chapter is to suggest a general framework for considering language from the socio-cultural perspective of *language-in-use* outlined below:

- *Language is dynamic and powerful*: it reflects and is reflected by the changing ways human societies order themselves; it influences and is influenced by people's relationships, activities and communications. Structured, but flexible, it is a vital human tool for getting things done in the world and the ways in which people actually use language to accomplish their various ends are subtle and complex.
- *Language is rarely either straightforward or value-free*: it always springs from the linguistic choices made by participants in any 'language event'. In order for any instance of 'real world' language to be fully understood, its context – including what has gone before it and what is likely to come after – has to be taken into account. This context is the key to decoding the meanings carried in the choices people make. These choices depend partly on the fact that language is flexible, and partly on what people consider to be the most effective way of using language to convey their message. The effectiveness of any communication depends, in turn, upon a whole range of extra-linguistic factors, including the response, interpretation and attitude of the receiver of the message.

The perspective on language outlined above may not necessarily be one which is familiar to language teachers, whose day-to-day work may have much more to do with the linguistic systems that make up a language: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and possibly discourse. In our framework for awareness of language-in-use, therefore, we will introduce eight features of language in general which we hope will, first, support the broader perspective, and second, provide a basis for understanding the discussion in subsequent chapters of the book. A brief summary of these features and their basic characteristics is provided first, and then we look at each feature in greater detail, with examples to illustrate it from a variety of sources.

1.2 A basic framework for awareness of language-in-use

Just as language is both complex and complicated, so is its study. It would be very difficult to decide upon a definitive list of language features comprehensive enough to include everything and please everyone. The basic features we list below, each with a short gloss, are among those we consider to be useful starting points for enhancing our awareness of language-in-use. Figure 1 shows how these features can be seen to relate to each other: working out from the centre, we can say that the language people use – the ‘what’ – depends on their *choices* of words and structures, which in turn are allowed by the *flexibility* of the language; ‘how’ they put across their message will depend on their choice of form from the huge *variety* available to them, and their choice of *medium*, which will in turn be dictated by the *attitude* and *effectiveness* they wish their message to convey. The recipients of these messages will, consciously or unconsciously, likewise have an attitude towards, and judge the effectiveness of, the chosen words and structures. Finally, at the outer edge of the Figure, all choices and reactions to choices are governed by the specific *context* within which the language is used, and by the ‘knowledge of the world’ brought to bear upon the interaction by the initiator(s) and recipient(s).

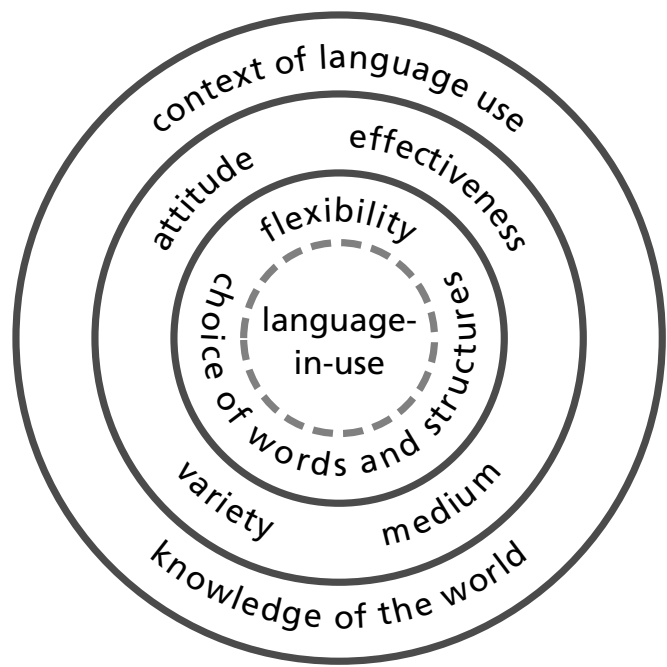


Figure 1

The basic language awareness features in the framework above, and briefly described below, are *all* important: it would be hard to say that some are more important than others. Also, we can see that the categories are not mutually exclusive (i.e. things in one category can also quite easily be in another) and that there is often considerable overlap between them.

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Valerie Arndt, Paul Harvey and John Nuttall

Excerpt

[More information](#)1 *Language-in-use*

knowledge of the world: the way our use and understanding of language is affected by our specific cultural backgrounds, our learning experience, and the way we view the world

If we did not have this knowledge it would be difficult for us to understand each other; things like railway timetables and phone books would be unintelligible. *Knowledge of the world* helps us in one type of context to interpret correctly what someone is saying to us, or in another, to identify a specific newspaper from its format and typeface.

context: the importance of the situation and environment – including the relationship between initiator and recipient – in which people use language, and their purpose in using it

A lecture on thermo-nuclear physics has an identifiable context, as does a family argument or a newspaper sports report. Thus, the language used in each context is likely to be very different.

variety: the different forms in which language may appear

One major set of factors here relates to the obvious differences between spoken and written language but there are other equally powerful factors contributing to variety, such as style, source, situation, dialect and accent.

medium: the modes or channels through which language is manifested

This not only extends the spoken/written distinction, but is also concerned with the form and style in which meanings and messages are transmitted. For example, the language used in a teenage comic, or in a conversation between friends is very different from the language of a legal document, or that of a telephone enquiry. E-mail is an example of a relatively new medium which is evolving a distinctive form and style of its own.

attitude: the fact that people use language to *convey different attitudes* as well as the fact that they *have different attitudes* towards the language they encounter

Letters to newspapers and radio phone-ins are two examples of contexts where the former dimension of attitude can be seen, i.e. people convey opinions through the linguistic choices they make when they write or speak, as the case may be. The judgements we make about other people's use of language illustrates the latter dimension.

effectiveness: the degree to which users of language successfully achieve their purpose

Warnings, prohibitions, advertising and advice are examples of areas where effectiveness can be relatively easily judged. In other areas, such as political propaganda or literary criticism, judgement is much less straightforward, and possibly controversial.

structure: the basic ways in which language is organised and structured

This feature enables us to understand how a language works and how the various components interact with each other. The systems and rules of grammar,

Features of language-in-use

vocabulary and pronunciation are all important aspects of structure, as are other less obvious ones such as regional variations, or discourse (interwoven stretches of language or sequences of utterances beyond discrete sentence level).

flexibility: the way language is dynamic and able to adapt to changing circumstances

In English, technology contexts provide a wide range of instances where new words have appeared (*interface, internet*) and existing words have taken on new meanings (*mouse, web*). Changes in social attitudes and mores influence usage, e.g. in Britain, the increasing acceptance of the word *partner* in preference to *wifelhusband, spouse* or *girl/boyfriend* in the context of a personal relationship.

1.3 Features of language-in-use

We now look in closer detail at the eight features in the framework, starting with the broadest constraints on language use – *knowledge of the world* and context of communication.

1.3.1 Knowledge of the world

The way each of us views the world is dictated by our socio-cultural background(s) and our learning experiences. The more similar our backgrounds and experience, the more likely it is that we will have similar interpretations of what is going on when we encounter any instance of language-in-use. These interpretations will be both linguistic (such that we understand the language) and socio-cultural (such that we recognise the significance of the language behaviours which are part of the society and culture we inhabit). This interrelation in interpretation is inevitable, and as language teachers, we are constantly aware of it.

When a language is an international property, as in a sense English is, the interface between linguistic and cultural interpretations becomes an extremely sensitive issue. This is perhaps why ELT coursebooks often attempt to go for the culturally ‘lowest common denominator’ approach by producing materials that hopefully will offend nobody and appeal to a wide (world-wide) audience. The truth is, though, that nothing is value-free. Even something as apparently straightforward as greetings and leavings (which often appear in the introductory units of coursebooks), may be more complicated – and even treacherous – than they seem. Is it possible, for example, to learn from an English language textbook when or whether you should shake someone by the hand as you greet or leave them? What is the assumed cultural context in which this greeting or leaving takes place and are there in fact any norms which govern this particular behaviour? If there are, do they depend more upon the cultural context within which the language is being used than upon the language itself? What right has the original cultural context of the language to impose its norms (if indeed they exist) upon anyone else using the language in a different cultural context?

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It is, of course, certainly possible for learners of a second language to produce the forms of the language accurately without ever having had any first-hand contact with the culture(s) or societies in which it is spoken as a first language. At the same time, though, any claim to be able to operate effectively in a language involves much more than just manipulating the forms successfully. An important pedagogical question, therefore, is: *How and to what extent should language teachers attempt to include the socio-cultural dimension and teach the 'knowledge of the world' associated with the target language?* We could expand upon this basic question with others such as:

- Whose version of this 'knowledge' might be taught?
- Why should it be taught?
- What use do learners wish to make of the target language, and thus what knowledge do they need?
- What cultural context is the language being taught in?
- Can we expect coursebooks to cater for the huge diversity of student backgrounds, needs and expectations?

Another important question is: *To what extent do people wish to participate in the culture of the language they are learning?* This in turn raises yet more questions:

- What are the goals of people learning the language? (commercial? scientific? academic? political? diplomatic? educational? personal?)
- Are there reasons – political, social or religious – why association with the culture of the language may not be attractive or appropriate?
- To what extent can the learner's own culture mesh with the L2 culture without a conflict developing?
- Might it be easier for certain learners (e.g. children, who are generally less inhibited than adults about cultural niceties) to integrate cultural knowledge than others?

Our first four examples illustrate the extent to which all texts (including spoken 'texts') are grounded in the culture which produced them. These particular examples happen to have originated in the culture of late 20th century Britain, and understanding of these texts, both linguistic and cultural, is based to a large degree on shared experience of that culture.

Activity 1

- ▶ Look at Examples 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 on pages 23–26. What 'knowledge of the world' do you need to bring to bear on these texts in order to be able to understand them? Does your 'knowledge of the world' allow you to identify or place these texts easily in their cultural context?
- ▶ Would you say there are aspects of this 'knowledge' which are reasonably 'teachable'? How far do 'textual' features (i.e. layout, typeface, graphics and so on) of the texts in Examples 1.1, 1.3 and 1.4 help in this respect?

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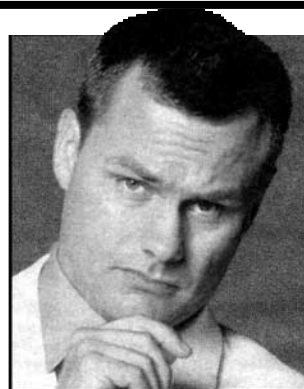
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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Features of language-in-use*

Example 1.1

SMACK DEE



Comic Jack ...
street brawl

Raging comic flattens TV critic over 'Cockney' taunt

EXCLUSIVE

By ANDY COULSON and JANE ATKINSON

FURIOUS comic Jack Dee flattened a TV critic in an amazing street brawl yesterday.

The star – famous for his deadpan expression – was getting into a taxi when university-educated Victor Lewis-Smith yelled: “You Cockney commoner.”

Jack, 34, **LEAPT** from the cab, **THREW** several punches at the dreadlocked critic – and had to be **PULLED AWAY** by his own manager.

The manager was left nursing a

bruised face after one of the comic’s blows missed and landed on him. Two passing policemen intervened in the 1am punch-up outside a London club.

Teetotal Jack, and Lewis-Smith – who is five inches taller at 5ft 11in – were both spoken to but no action was taken.

Sulky loudmouth Lewis-Smith is consulting lawyers over the incident – but defiant Jack has vowed to fight any action. He fumed last night: “Victor is a very poor heckler.”

Before the bust-up the pair were spotted angrily shouting at each other in the bar of the trendy Groucho Club in Soho.

Lewis-Smith, who has often savaged

Continued on Page Seven

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[More information](#)1 *Language-in-use***Example 1.2**


D is a senior house officer in a hospital; P is a patient. Turns in the interaction are numbered.

- 1 **D** Hello, Mr X?
- 2 **P** Yes, that's right.
- 3 **D** I'm Dr Y. Now I'd like to check a few of the details of your problem.
- 4 **P** Right, doctor.
- 5 **D** This is Mr N from the University. He's looking at doing some of the things we get up to in hospitals.
- 6 **P** Oh yes.
- 7 **D** Now, what's the main thing that's been worrying you lately?
- 8 **P** Well, I've had a bit of shortness of breath.
- 9 **D** Does this happen at any particular time?
- 10 **P** Well, after walking a fair way I get a bit ...
- 11 **D** How about at night?
- 12 **P** Well yes I wake up feeling a bit ...
- 13 **D** Yeah any other problems?
- 14 **P** No, I've been fine in myself.
- 15 **D** No headaches?
- 16 **P** No.
- 17 **D** Now when you wake up is it because of shortness of breath, or is there something to bring up?
- 18 **P** Well it's the shortness of breath mainly I think.
- 19 **D** D'you feel very short of breath?
- 20 **P** It's difficult to say really, sometimes it's quite severe.
- 21 **D** How many pillows do you use? D'you feel uncomfortable if you lie flat?
- 22 **P** Well not really, if I wake up feeling this ... I usually get up then and ...
- 23 **D** Yeah OK, now you were being treated by Dr A for blood pressure, weren't you? What happened? Did it clear up?
- 24 **P** Well, he as good as told me to stop taking the tablets.
- 25 **D** I see. D'you look after yourself at home? Do you do your own cooking?
- 26 **P** Oh yes, that's fine.
- 27 **D** Appetite OK?
- 28 **P** Well, you know ...
- 29 **D** Well, we're just going to take some blood off you. Just sit back and the Sister'll be along to see you in a minute OK?
- 30 **P** Yes, thank you doctor.
- 31 **D** Right.

(Authors' data)

Features of language-in-use

Example 1.3

Mondays to Fridays					MX WW	B SO TT	Notes for this and opposite page:
London Paddington	d	2245	2335	2345	0045	0045	A Service continues to Taunton.
Slough	d	2229	2329	2329	0052	0052	B Does not run 17 January to 21 February.
Heathrow Terminal 	d	2145	2215	2215	2315	2315	C Service continues to Carmarthen. Table 4
Gatwick Airport	d	2124	—	2224	2317	2317	D Refreshments are not available.
Reading	d	2309	0008	0017	0123	0124	b Change at Redhill and Reading.
Didcot Parkway	d	2323	0024	0032	0141	0140	c Change at Maidenhead and Reading.
Swindon	d	2341	0046	0055	0208	0202	e Arrival time. Change at Bath Spa.
Chippenham	d	2354	0058	—	—	—	f Service travels via Bristol Temple Meads before Bristol Parkway.
Bath Spa	d	0009	0111	—	—	—	g Arrives 0830.
Bristol Parkway	d	0037v	—	0122	—	—	k Change at Oxford.
Bristol Temple Meads	a	0022	0125	—	—	—	v Arrival time. Via Bristol Temple Meads.
Weston-super-Mare	a	—	—	—	—	—	MX Monday mornings excepted.
Newport	d	—	—	0142s	0313	—	SO Saturday mornings only.
Hereford	a	—	—	—	—	—	
Cardiff Central	a	—	—	0203	0332	—	
Bridgend	a	—	—	—	—	—	
Port Talbot Parkway	a	—	—	—	—	—	
Neath	a	—	—	—	—	—	
Swansea	a	—	—	—	—	—	

For standard notes see inside back cover.
Light printed timings indicate a connecting service. See page 5

(Great Western timetable)

1 Language-in-use

Example 1.4



STARS

By Marjorie Orr *Britain's top astrologer*

IF IT'S YOUR BIRTHDAY TODAY: Then your year ahead will be very focussed with a strong sense of mission, hard working, extravagant and rather romantic. You will feel you have turned a corner. Keeping fit is a priority in a fast moving, rather challenging year. DOES YOUR BIRTHDAY FALL UNDER THE CURRENT STAR SIGN? PHONE 0894 707 319 TO HEAR MARJORIE'S SPECIAL FORECAST.

Sagittarius

(November 23–December 22)

The New Moon in your sign only comes round once a year and this is definitely your day to make resolutions for the next 12 months. What kind of image do you want to project? Does this mean clearing out the wardrobe? Or will you be mixing and matching the old with the new. Whether it is clothes or a deeper aspect of your personality you are determined on a makeover.

More details: ☎0894 707 342

Aries

(March 21–April 20)

Whatever you want to do in terms of travelling further afield, or maybe just painting your life on a broader canvas, now is the time to get cracking. Being fiery and highly imaginative, you are never short of grand visions of what you would like. Make sure that at least one of them gets pushed slightly further down the road to reality now. Do not hold back. Fortune favours the brave.

More details: ☎0894 707 334

Capricorn

(December 23–January 20)

Shining light on hidden places is not always easy for a practical rather ambitious sign like yourself. You much prefer flying ahead producing solid results and ambitiously scaling the heights. But try to find the time when you can. After Tuesday, when the Sun moves into your own sign, there will no chance for calm reflection since a busy schedule lies ahead.

More details: ☎0894 707 343

Taurus

(April 21–May 20)

By next Tuesday you will be out of this rather intense, slightly confrontational phase but do not think that all your pushing has been in vain. Your perseverance of the past weeks will pay off over the next few months in ways you cannot imagine. But one more building block needs to be put in place now to get new financial ventures or agreements off on a good footing.

More details: ☎0894 707 335

Aquarius

(January 21–February 19)

Keep an eye around for any encounters with new acquaintances. They could become firm friends in the days ahead if you make the effort to pull them into your circle. You are sifting and sorting through different options at the moment and may need different company to travel with. What is important, for whatever begins now, is that you are committed, no ifs and buts.

More details: ☎0894 707 344

Gemini

(May 21–June 21)

You can decide to wipe the slate clean in long running relationships and see whether you can get off to a new start. Or maybe you just want to start afresh altogether by making new connections that you feel can bring you much fulfilment. Whichever way you lean, you know you need to take the initiative and be clear about what your renewed commitment means.

More details: ☎0894 707 336

Pisces

(February 20–March 20)

The seed of a project, plan, idea or new venture is planting itself firmly in your head now at work. It will take time to flourish, but it is good to have a dream which you can follow over the next year. Now you can begin to see where you can rally the support behind you. The more hands on deck and shoulders to the wheel the less effort it will take to get it all rolling.

More details: ☎0894 707 345

Cancer

(June 22–July 23)

Never was there a better day to start a new health regime. Get out the diet sheets and choose whichever suits your mood. This is about feeling more energised, not getting slimmer. You need to start treating your body like a racing machine, that needs good fuel, sensible maintenance and pit stops every so often. If you keep running without recharging your batteries you will feel flat.

More details: ☎0894 707 337

(The Express 18.12.98)

1.3.2 Context

In the ‘real world’, as distinct from the often controlled and constricted world of many language teaching materials, language always occurs in specific contexts, involving *people* (their personalities, relationships, socio-economic status) and *situations* (the purpose(s) and importance of the communication, social and cultural expectations about it, what came before it and what is likely to come after). These contextual factors, especially when several participants are involved, give rise to language which is often much more complex than controlled teaching materials would suggest, not only because of its unpredictability, but also its inevitable link with situational and personal circumstances. Our notion of context is represented graphically in Figure 2.

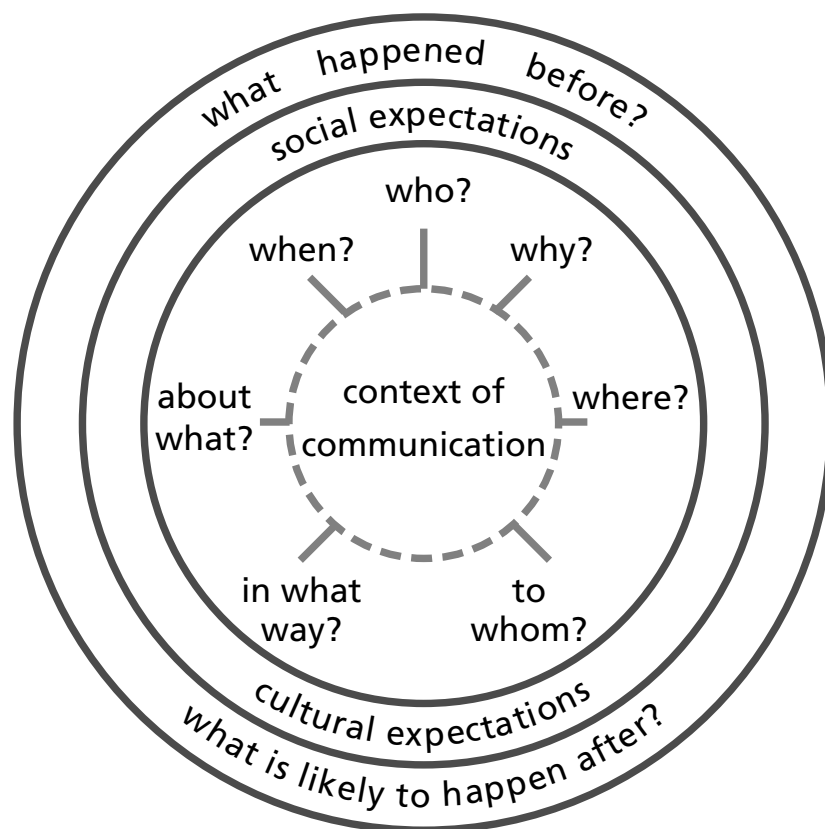


Figure 2

Contextual factors (constraints on context)

People speaking a language as their first or mother-tongue language do not always need to think consciously about the contexts of their language use, unless these contexts demand a particular effort for successful or effective communication (preparing for an important interview, for instance, or writing a book). However, for second language learners, context may present a number of difficulties:

- different conventions govern use of language in different cultural contexts