Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar
CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS: 
LANGUAGE POWER TECHNIQUES AND ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English
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Introduction

We are surrounded by media, advertising, and political messaging everywhere – in social media posts, texts, videos, TV commercials, podcasts, news programs, e-mails, print flyers and posters, newspapers, and magazines. To inform, sell to, persuade, and motivate us, the authors of these messages and stories use the power of language, choosing to word their message in particular ways. Behind their messages lie particular worldviews, discourses, and ideologies – systems of ideas and ideals about how the world is and how it should be. In making certain word and grammatical choices, they show us their perspective and invite us to share in it. To do this, they may use rhetorical or language power techniques like metaphor, euphemism, hyperbole, address forms, weasel language, and epithets. These can be enacted with particular grammatical features; for example, an epithet may use a noun phrase, hyperbole a superlative adjective, or weasel language a passive form. We need critical language awareness to see these connections.

While many everyday interactions involve some negotiation of power, some of these media, advertising, and political messages serve a purpose that is less than honest. While we
usually know that we should be skeptical of much advertising for consumer goods and services, we also need to be aware of **propaganda**, biased information meant to promote a particular point of view, and **disinformation**, deliberately false information meant to mislead in political and other media discourse. In a democratic society where government is by majority consent, all citizens have a right to participate in governance and, ideally, they respect one another’s rights and freedoms equally. However, some powerful agents and entities may feel that having social and economic capital entitles them to have more of a say than others; it is no surprise that these agents often find their ways to positions of social, political and corporate power, and that they find a way to promote their ideologies, sometimes resorting to propaganda and spreading disinformation to do so. In order to achieve their goals, they may use propaganda techniques and logical fallacies, take advantage of cognitive biases, appeal to emotions like fear, pride, and desire, and selectively misrepresent context. As the classical Athenians argued, participants in a democratic society need the skills of rhetoric, grammar, and logic to see through these nefarious intentions. Without this criticality, democracy doesn’t work.

**What kinds of propaganda are there?**
Developing critical language awareness

Just because the messaging around us may contain bias or disinformation does not mean that we should never trust media sources. Some may be more biased than others, and many journalists try very hard to be unbiased and present the objective truth, but ultimately it is the job of the reader or listener to identify when various power techniques are being used, and whether they are being told the truth. There are several reputable websites for fact-checking like Politifact,
Snopes, or Factcheck that should be referenced before believing or sharing anything remotely questionable. It’s also good practice to be highly skeptical of conspiracy theories, be aware of your own confirmation bias – seeing only what confirms what you already believe – and know when you are in an echo chamber – only hearing opinions similar to your own and thus believing you must be in the majority. It’s smart to read your news rather than only viewing or listening to it, because this allows you enough time to stop and re-read, to analyze the language, and to question how, who, and why the message is being presented as it is.

If you have time and interest, learn more about media biases and fact checking websites here:

• https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/media-literacy/2021/should-you-trust-media-bias-charts/
• https://library.csi.cuny.edu/c.php?g=619342&p=4310783

To recognize when these techniques and appeals are being used and combat their effects, it’s helpful to focus on the exact words that are said, written, or shared. An analytical approach called critical discourse analysis is ideal for this task because it examines language in use (rather than invented examples) while considering both the grammar and the context of what is said – the how, who, where, when, and why, not just the what. A critical discourse analyst might look at a news headline “Factory rioters arrested” and question the choice of the term
‘rioters’ and the use of the *passive voice*, instead of the possible active equivalent, “Police arrested union protestors”. They might consider that this headline was in a conservative blog report and conclude that the report thus shows an anti-union bias. By understanding the power technique of *weasel language* and how the passive voice can be used to mask agency or responsibility, the analyst can show objective evidence for the bias of the report. Another useful approach is called *corpus analysis* – looking at a body or database of language use, searching for all the instances of a particular word, and analyzing its frequency or co-occurrence with other words. Corpus analysis can tell you, for example, how frequently a politician might use the *inclusive we* in their campaign speeches in comparison to their opponent – the inclusive we is an appeal to listeners to think of the speaker as like them, a kind of *plain folks* propaganda technique. The analysis might then help explain why that politician won or lost. While there may be other ways of enacting weasel language or making a plain folks appeal besides employing these particular grammar structures – passive voice and the inclusive we – leveraging your understanding of a linguistic power technique to comprehend a grammatical structure and vice-versa is an excellent way to deepen your knowledge about both. Discourse and corpus analysis can thus help you develop *critical language awareness*.
For instructors and independent learners:

How this resource is organized

The approach to developing CLA presented in this resource, *Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar*, is to promote comprehending and analyzing language like a critical discourse analyst. To this end, each module presents one of eight **language power techniques** corresponding to one of eight **grammar features** that typifies, but is not restricted to, that technique, and vice-versa. The modules can be used independently or in pairs, or only the LPT modules can be used, or only the GF modules. Each LPT module introduces, but does not elaborate on, corresponding GFs, and each GF refers to its corresponding LPTs. The LPT modules do not need to be done in the order here if they are going to be used independently, and while the GFs are presented in a typical, hierarchical curricular sequence,
they can also be used relatively independently from one another.

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The introduction modules serve as basic introductions to the topics as well as tables of contents linking to all the corresponding techniques and features. In addition there is an Introduction to Corpus Analysis module that learners who want to do the corpus activities should be sure to complete first.

After an outline and list of key concepts, each LPT module begins with general discussion to situate understandings. Each module is split into subsections that may refer and link to external readings (openly available online pieces); some may be required for discussion/reflection activities and others may be optional, set off by: “if you have the time and interest”. Each
subsection concludes with discussion/reflection activities and brief comprehension questions. The second subsection of each LPT module focuses on the associated grammatical features, with a link to the corresponding GF module(s). Each LPT module concludes with general reflection questions, discourse analysis activities, and a corpus analysis activity.

Each GF module presents information about a part-of-speech or another grammatical concept. Each begins with focus on what the feature is, including morphological information and sometimes corpus analysis activities to enhance understanding. Different aspects of the feature are then thoroughly explored with clear examples and exercises taken from authentic texts. Each module concludes with discourse and corpus analysis activities.

**Why we need this resource**

This resource is meant to develop critical language awareness in advanced high school, community college, or university-level students who need or want to learn why English grammar is relevant and how it can be used in media messaging, advertising, and political discourse, among other registers. It addresses three crucial issues:

- Students are not regularly taught media literacy skills and awareness of propaganda and disinformation.

  Although many high school and college/university
curricula include some focus on these topics, they are often treated separately from other subjects in education, humanities, and the social sciences and not integrated into courses where they might be. Without direct and consistent focus, students may be more vulnerable to their negative effects.

• Since the advent of process writing, attention to rhetorical skills focused on specific techniques has been gradually removed from the core of composition curricula. Traditional rhetoric approaches focus more directly on integrating these skills while developing, or as a means to develop, reading and writing skills, but as other pedagogical trends have come to the fore, these techniques may be given only sporadic and inconsistent attention.

• Explicit focus on grammar has been removed from many high school, college, and university English and writing courses and curricula, because it is seen as arcane, abstract, and irrelevant. Most grammar textbooks and curricula coming from traditional linguistics and syntax perspectives rarely, or only superficially, relate their content to critical language use or rhetorical techniques. Research on language and power, critical discourse analysis, and critical language awareness is often situated in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, so it may be unknown in traditional linguistics, English, and composition silos. In applied linguistics, corpus
linguistics, and TESOL, attention to grammar has not been abandoned because it simply cannot be, since learners of English as an additional language must learn grammar explicitly. This may mean that the potential of work in these fields to make grammar relevant and less arcane, even to those not learning English as an additional language, goes unrealized.

About this resource

The development and production of this open educational resource has been made possible by a generous donation to the Clarify Initiative, a project led by Prof. Jonathon Reinhardt at the University of Arizona Department of English. Fully funded by the donation, this resource is publicly available through the university’s open textbook website.

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funded project with the goal of raising critical language awareness and media literacy throughout society.
PART I
INTRODUCTORY MODULES
A. INTRO TO LANGUAGE POWER TECHNIQUES

A.1 Introduction

What makes us human? What differentiates us from animals? Anthropologists, philosophers, and neuroscientists have contemplated this question for centuries. There are many competing theories, but two of the most compelling ones are language and social structure. Humans are characteristically different from animals because of the complexity of language they have developed in order to communicate. Unlike animal communication systems, human language has particular design features like displacement (we can talk about times and places not present), arbitrariness (most words are not iconic, e.g. the relationship of the sound of a word is normally only arbitrarily related to what it means), and productivity (we can invent new words and say things that have never been said before). This in turn has played a fundamental role in helping us communicate with a massive number of others like us, which has enabled the coordination of joint human action across the globe (and even beyond) and supported extremely complex social structures.
A.2 Language, Society, & Power

Power is a key ingredient to the glue that binds human societies, although its uneven application or unbalanced use can also contribute to them breaking. In very simple terms, power is simply the ability of an individual or a group of individuals to act as they wish, and exercising power involves acting influencing others in a manner in accordance with those wishes – doing what you want and making others do so too. Exercising power may as simple as a parent making their child go to bed or as complex as an authoritarian government censoring the Internet and restricting its citizens from accessing outside information, as in contemporary China, Russia, or Iran. Some argue that in many modern capitalist societies like the USA, things like race, gender, class, wealth, and education have a massive impact on how much and what kind of power is ascribed to you in general, even more so than hard work, talent, and merit.

All human societies are held together by varying levels of power dynamics, but in democratic and egalitarian societies, a single group of people does not have absolute power over another group of people – in theory anyway. Rather
what exists is a highly complex web of power relations, where in different moments individuals and groups exert various sorts of power over others while in other moments, they have power exerted over them. What’s more, the exercise of power isn’t always either good or bad, because of differing value structures – greed and desire for dominance may motivate some to wield power, but enabling peace and enacting justice may motivate others. Sometimes, however, ultimate results are difficult to predict, and some may be unintended. Power is volatile, to say the least.

A.2 Activity: Is power good or bad?

a. Try this activity and read the article to learn more:

https://elawtalk.com/democracy-vs-authoritarianism/

An interactive HSP element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
b. Lord Acton Smith of Great Britain said in 1907: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority”. Do you agree? What is the danger of power?

c. Take a look at the various quotes at this website and choose one that resonates with you: https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/power-quotes. Why do you find it interesting or meaningful?

A.3 Power ↔ Language

How is power exercised? Language plays a key role in enabling humans to exercise power over other humans, especially when it’s not physical. Whenever we use language, we essentially encode reality, or a slice of it and pass it onto others. The specific ways in which we do this encoding reflects our value systems and wishes, our positionality. This in turn presents
a perspective on reality to whomever we communicate with, whether we intend it to or not, possibly influencing their perception and altering their behavior to align with our perspective. Traditional rhetoricians noted that we can influence others by appealing to logos – logical reasoning, pathos – emotional response, and ethos – trust building, but in practice the exercise of power through language is quite complex.

Individuals, governments, corporations, and political, industrial, media, and commercial organizations may exercise power through the use of language. Commercial businesses and corporations, for example, may try to influence consumers to purchase or subscribe to their goods and services by means of advertising, much of which uses language. While marketers develop promotional messages using techniques that may appeal to logic, emotion, or trust, these messages may use more sophisticated language power techniques akin to propaganda – information that deliberately promotes a particular perspective, regardless of its veracity. Historically, propaganda is used by governments to promote particular behaviors and align individual to group or official perspectives, for example, during wartime to rally a
populace around a cause and support a collective war effort. It may be distributed through physical media like posters, signs, mailings, and flyers, electronic media like emails, texts, social media memes and posts, podcasts, and websites, and traditional media like newspapers, television news, infotainment, or radio/talk programs. Many have argued that with the advent of the Internet and social media, propaganda techniques and disinformation – purposefully false information (sometimes also called “fake news”) – have led to societal strife and the growth of populism and conspiracy theories. Thanks to the phenomenon of virality and because the Internet is not centrally fact-checked, misinformation – unintentionally false information – is easily spread. Whether they align or contrast with our own views, the perspectives and worldviews of political, cultural, and corporate forces are spread through messaging that is inescapable in our everyday modern lives. The least we should do is be aware of it so that we can then choose to accept it or not, and the best we can do is to be critical of it and challenge it when we see that it is doing harm.

A.3 Activity: Propaganda, mis-, and disinformation
a. What do you think of when you hear the word ‘propaganda’? Who do you think produces it and why? What makes it effective? ineffective?

b. Watch this video on ‘Fake News’ by Global News, a Canadian news organization.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fQdzVbQlau

After watching, discuss/reflect on the following:
Who spreads misinformation, and why? disinformation? How does misinformation become disinformation? How can we be aware of both, and how can we stop them?

A4. The Techniques

There are countless ways that power is expressed through
language use. To narrow down the possibilities, this book focuses on eight specific techniques we call **language power techniques** – ways that language power is expressed or exercised in speech or writing, whether intentionally or not. Being aware of these techniques will not only make you better aware of propaganda and disinformation, it will make you a better communicator, consumer, and citizen.

Each of the language power techniques has been studied and discussed in many fields, including rhetoric, critical applied linguistics, journalism, information studies, and other fields in the social sciences and humanities; what is here is only an introduction. We hope that the modules plant seeds that lead to exploring and learning more about the technique and how it is used in the world, developing your critical discourse analytic skills and ultimately your critical language awareness.

**Metaphor**

Metaphor is a technique that involves equating a new idea with an idea that the audience (readers or listeners) already understand, so that they can conceptualize the new idea. While metaphors can be used intentionally, they also already underlie much of our thought processes and are deeply tied to culture. For example, the metaphor of ‘anger = heat’ underlies language like ‘he blew up’, while ‘busy place = zoo’ allows others to understand statements like ‘the party became a zoo’ when not referring to an actual zoo. Grammatically, metaphor may make
use of basic sentence structures like subject complements, as well as a variety of other features.

Doublespeak

Inspired by the writings of George Orwell, William Lutz coined the term “doublespeak” which refers to a kind of language that seeks to “mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, obfuscate” (Lutz 2016: 24). It is created using several linguistic techniques like euphemisms, dysphemisms, jargon and bureaucratese. For example, corporate officials sometimes use terms like “involuntary conversion” as doublespeak for theft or destruction of property. When National Airlines received 1.7 million $ in insurance compensation after one of their planes (flight 272) crashed and lots of people were killed, they wrote in their annual report to their shareholders that this extra money in their balance sheet was a result of the “involuntary conversion of 727”! Grammatically, doublespeak may make use of nouns and the phenomenon of synonymy.

Pronoun Choice & Address Forms

Pronouns, fundamental grammatical devices that help us reduce the number of times we need to repeat nouns (e.g: replacing ‘boy’ with ‘he’, ‘him’, ‘his’, or a ‘queer person’ with ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘their’), and address forms, another basic
linguistic device we use to address different people around us (e.g. sir, man, dude, bro etc.), are simple only on the surface. Their actual usage shapes complex social relationships and can be used to include, exclude, respect, and disrespect others. For example, we can use the pronoun ‘we’ inclusively to refer to ourselves and the audience, or we can use it exclusively to refer to ourselves but not the audience. We can use ‘you’ to refer to ‘anyone’ generically or to the person we are addressing, sometimes including others if plural. We can also use ‘he’, ‘she’, and ‘they’, and while a person who may not identify with the male-female gender binary may wish to be referred to with the singular ‘they’ or another 3rd person pronoun, seeking to carve out a space within language use that has historically been denied to them, purposefully not using such pronouns to refer to them then becomes an act of disrespect. By understanding the power of pronouns and address forms, we can better understand how the words we choose shape social relationships and contribute to social realities.

Name-calling & Epithets

Grammatically making use of nouns and adjectives, name-calling involves the pejorative use of a linguistic or literary device called an epithet – a commonly-used descriptive name for someone or something that is additional to their actual name. Epithets allow the listener or reader to take a cognitive shortcut and see one trait or quality as the primary defining
quality of the person. When an epithet is positive, its use can serve to show solidarity or respect, but when it is pejorative its use can result in exclusion and cause the listener or reader to close their mind to other characteristics the person has. Since criticality takes effort, it’s easier for the listener to fixate on a single ‘definitive’ negative trait. For example, name-calling became associated strongly with Donald Trump’s presidential campaign when he started using pejorative names like “low-energy Jebb” and “Crooked Hillary” to “Sleepy Joe” for his political opponents which influenced the American population to fixate on negative portrayals of these politicians instead of fairly judging them based on their past policy records.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a rhetorical technique or figure of speech that exaggerates the facts of an event, idea, or person to an unrealistic degree such that it massively increases their intensity and evokes a strong emotional response in the audience (usually of shock, fear, or surprise, etc.). For example, instead of saying “It was an excellent concert”, one might use hyperbole and say “it was the most excellent concert in the history of this planet!”. Grammatically making use of adjectives in their various forms, hyperbole is used frequently in literature and pop culture. However, its use is especially powerful when it’s used in advertising and political rhetoric to
influence people to behave or act in particular ways without their awareness. For example, beauty and health products might use hyperbole to tell its potential customers that they may be the most beautiful, the strongest, or the most desirable person in their circles if they use their product; a beer company might imply that the most interesting people in the world drink their beer, even though there’s no way they could determine who those people actually are.

**Storytelling & Censorship**

We create narratives in English using a combination of verb tense and aspect – for example, past tense and progressive aspect are both used in “We were heading to the park when we saw a shooting star”. Narratives are part of stories, and telling stories is how humans relate to one another and share ideas, humor, beliefs, and histories. Narratives are also how they deceive and fool one another – by telling lies or false narratives. Since history and truth are created through narrative, some try to “control the narrative” about events as they are shared through media by presenting their version as the sole truth, even though there are always multiple perspectives on it. Others, like leaders of governmental, religious, and educational institutions, may try to control histories by censoring particular perspectives and narratives.
Weasel Language

Weasel language refers to language that allows the speaker or writer to be vague, to generalize, and to hide or mask authority on purpose – for example, when a reporter uses passive voice even when they know the agent, as in ‘Rioters were apprehended’, instead of ‘Police beat protestors’. Weasel language is ideal for propaganda and disinformation because it is sneaky and easy to miss; for example, a news report might say ‘A crowd of people demanded’ instead of ‘A crowd of thousands of people demanded’ in order to downplay the size of the crowd, or someone might say ‘It is said that..’ or ‘They say that...’ in passing without allowing for the reply ‘wait, who is ‘they’?’ Technically, they’re not lying, but are they being entirely honest?

Logical Fallacies

Logical fallacies are false arguments that can be proven wrong through logic; they often involve weasel language and other deceptive techniques, for example omitting information, repeating it, or exaggerating it (i.e. using hyperbole). Propaganda techniques that often involve logical fallacies include slippery slope arguments, causal fallacies, circular arguments, hasty generalizations, red herrings, and bandwagon appeals. Grammatically, logical fallacies often make use of negation and conjunctions, e.g. ‘so’, ‘because’,
‘therefore’, and ‘however’, that connect two clauses and imply logical relationships between their assertions.

NEXT:
⇒ B. Intro to Grammar Features

Module author: Anuj Gupta & Jonathon Reinhardt
Last updated: 4 October 2022

This module is part of Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar, a freely available open resource offered by the Clarify Initiative, a privately funded project with the goal of raising critical language awareness and media literacy throughout society.
B1. What is grammar?

Grammar comprises the rules of how language is structured. For example, ‘dog chase cat’ means something very different from ‘cat chase dog’, because the rules of syntax or word order are fundamental in grammar. In English, the subject comes first and it is followed by the predicate, which consists of a verb and sometimes an object. The subject does the action, and it comes before the verb, which is the action, and the thing that follows the action is the receiver of the action – the object. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Because English is a subject-verb-object or SVO language, when English users hear a noun followed by a verb followed by a noun, they assume the noun before the verb is the subject and the noun after it is the object. Other languages have different rules of syntax. To a speaker of an SOV language like Japanese or Korean, ‘dog cat chase’ would mean the dog is chasing the cat, and ‘cat dog chase’ would mean the cat is chasing the dog.

However, grammar is not only the rules of syntax, it is also the rules of morphology – how words are put together and
conjugated, of **phonology** – how words are pronounced, and of **semantics** – what words mean. According to some views of grammar (but not all), it also includes **pragmatics**, that is, how language is used differently according to social context – a functional view. The view we take of grammar here is centered on **language use**, but it also recognizes that there is fundamental grammatical knowledge that is important for all approaches, whether structural or functional.

From our perspective, to use language is to make a **series of word choices** from many possibilities to convey intended meaning. When a language user says or writes something they don’t just follow the rules of syntax, morphology, and phonology; they also consider what information to convey (**ideational** meaning), the relationship between themself and the audience (**interpersonal** meaning), and the connection between what they’re saying and what is known or already said (**textual** meaning). The **context** of where they say it and broader cultural issues are also considerations. A situation might be more or less formal, the user might have a particular relationship with the listener, or the user might intend to convey a certain perspective on the information. These impact the grammatical and lexical (i.e. word) choices that the user makes.

Colloquially speaking, ‘grammar’ sometimes means the **rules of style or usage** – what is appropriate or inappropriate for certain registers, like formal academic writing. What is right or wrong according to the people who adhere to, and often try
to enforce, these rules is not exactly grammar in the linguistics sense, but rather, grammar in the sense of an editor, a writer, or a traditional English teacher. For example, you might have heard never to end a sentence with a preposition, or to use ‘whom’ instead of ‘who’ if it’s an object, or to never split an infinitive (whoops!), or never to start a sentence with a coordinating conjunction like ‘and’, ‘but’, or ‘or’. The people who preach these rules as inviolate are sometimes called ‘grammarians’, because they see grammar as a perfectly standardized set of rules that must never be broken, or else English might decay. But in fact (sorry!), the rules of grammar and style do change, and what is expected in one context is not in another, and what is appropriate for one context today may not be tomorrow. It’s better to think of grammar as something to describe rather than prescribe, recognizing how it shifts and changes over time. That being said, there are still rules you can’t break if you want to be understood and accepted, like SVO word order, and when those are violated, it really is a grammatical error. Those rules won’t change for a while, and are the same across contexts. Learners of English as an additional language may make these kinds of errors, especially when just starting.

Activity B1. Grammar pet peeves and descriptivism
a. What are some of your ‘grammar pet peeves’, if any? What mistakes do you hear that bother you, or seem inappropriate? Are they really mistakes? When do you think they should or should not be corrected?

b. What is the difference between a descriptive and a prescriptive approach to grammar? Read this article and discuss/reflect on the question: https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-descriptive-grammar-1690439

What can English teachers, writers, and editors learn from a descriptive approach?

c. Be descriptive and decide if the following are acceptable in some varieties or registers, or if they are true errors.

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An interactive HSP element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=97#h5p-5
B2. Registers and corpora

A more exact way to talk about the differences among contexts of use is to recognize the concept of register, which is a kind of language used in a particular kind of situation, for example, formal register, academic register, news register, or conversation register. English use really is different in these different registers, and what is appropriate in one is not in another. For example, in academic register you find words like ‘moreover’, which you never find in conversation, and you find more pronouns like ‘I’ and ‘you’ in conversation than in academic registers. Written and spoken registers are very different, and over time different kinds of texts reflecting these differences called ‘genres’ have emerged with specific social purposes and conventions – for example, a personal letter has an opening and a closing, and a meme has a lead and a punchline.

Activity B2. What register is it?
Corpus linguistics is a field in applied linguistics that sees language as composed of registers of use, each with potentially differing grammar rules and tendencies – a tendency being a rule that is followed most — but maybe not all — of the time. Corpus linguists argue that we can’t really understand grammar and language if we don’t analyze language use, instead of trying to think of examples that may or may not violate the rules we think there are. They collect language use examples as data and create gigantic databases of it called corpora (singular: corpus), and then analyze it for trends; they’ve found that how people use language is not always how the grammarians say they do or should.

To learn how to do corpus analysis, don’t skip
module C, which teaches you how to use a corpus. Most of the GF and LPT modules have Corpus Analysis Activities to do that will help you better understand the features and techniques.

B3. Parts of Speech

The first step in understanding grammar is to know the parts of speech. All words in English can be categorized according to the part-of-speech (POS) that they are when they are used. Some words are almost always one POS no matter what, but some words can change their part of speech depending on when and how they are used. For example:

- Did you read that book? (*book* is a noun)
- Did you book the flight? (*book* is a verb)

Every POS category is either an open or closed class, meaning that we can add new words to the category, or we cannot. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are open class, but the others are closed class. Generally speaking, open class words are also content words, meaning they refer to something specific, while closed class words are function words,
meaning that they play a grammatical function. Some parts of content words, e.g. the endings on some nouns, adjectives, and verbs, a.k.a. conjugations, may also show grammatical function.

- **cat love fish** – (all content)
- **This cat loves fish.** – (with function words and conjugations)

There are 9 parts of speech, each listed below and preceded by its common abbreviation. They are defined very briefly here along with a mention, for the content word classes and pronouns, of the role each can play in certain language power techniques.

**N – Nouns**

A noun is a word that names or identifies a person, place, concept, or thing, for example:

- **cat**
- **fish**
- **day**
- **whiskers**
- **chocolate**
- **vanilla**

Nouns can serve as subjects and objects of sentences, for example: **The cat ate the fish.**

Nouns are used in many language power techniques. They play a prominent role in the use of euphemism, dysphemism, jargon, and other techniques commonly understood as **doublespeak**. A euphemism is a ‘polite’ or potentially less offensive way to say something using a close synonym, while a
dysphemism is a more rude or shocking way to say something using a close synonym. For example in US American English we say ‘bathroom’ instead of ‘toilet’ in polite company, but we might say ‘hit the can’ as a jocular dysphemism when with friends.

Nouns are also key in **name-calling** and the use of epithets. They are also the end product of the process of nominalization, a kind of **weasel language**.

### V – Verbs

A verb is a word that describes an action, state, or occurrence, for example:

- *would eat accept build like will come*

A verb explains what a noun is doing, or is being done to a noun. Auxiliary, or helping, verbs, which include modals, are also considered verbs.

Verbs are perhaps the most complex part of speech. In language power techniques they play a key role in **storytelling** and in **weasel language**. As an example of weasel language, a journalist who wants to avoid mentioning the fact that the police shot a bystander might use the passive voice in the headline ‘Bystander shot in crossfire’ instead of the active voice ‘Police shot bystander in crossfire’.
ADJ – Adjectives

An adjective modifies (i.e. describes or qualifies) a noun, often coming before the noun it modifies, but not always. An example of an adjective is *white*, as in:

*white whiskers* or *The whiskers are white.*

While adjectives are used in all sorts of language power techniques, their role in **hyperbole** and **name-calling** is notable. Hyperbole is extreme exaggeration in a statement to garner an emotional response – fear, shock, humor, or disbelief; for example, a politician might say “This is the most dangerous legislation I’ve ever seen” about a bill that comes across their desk, even though they said it before and would probably say it again about other bills. Their purpose is to express that they think it is very dangerous, but in truth it’s doubtful it really is the most dangerous.

PRO – Pronouns

A pronoun replaces a noun so that it doesn’t have to be repeated. For example:

*The man ran off.* → *He ran off.*

Examples of pronouns include I, they, he, you, and it. Using language without pronouns would be impossible. However, their status as **address forms** that index social relationships makes them very powerful. For example, the inclusive ‘we’, the
generic ‘you’, and the singular ‘they’ can be used strategically to make appeals towards respect or solidarity.

**ADV – Adverbs**

An adverb describes a verb, that is, how, when, or in what manner the verb is done. Adverbs can also describe adjectives and clauses. They have relatively free word order. An example is happily, as in:

- **I happily accept.** or **Happily, I accept.** or **I accept happily.**

Adverbs are used everywhere, but the use of negation is important for making arguments, and is therefore involved in making **logical fallacies**.

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*Function words are less directly involved in language power techniques than content words, but because they play important supporting roles they shouldn’t be overlooked.*

**DET – Determiners**

A determiner modifies a noun by specifying which noun it is. Determiners are similar to adjectives, but they are a closed class. They include words like **this, every**, and **the**.
CONJ – Conjunctions

A conjunction connects words, phrases, and clauses. Examples include if and and; examples of how they connect clauses include:

If you build it, they will come.
They will come if you build it.
I like chocolate and vanilla.

Because conjunctions imply logical connections between two ideas, they may be involved in logical fallacies.

PREP – Prepositions

A preposition shows a relationship, often temporal or spatial, between other words. A common preposition is with, as in:

He was covered with mud. or With whom am I speaking?

INT – Interjections

Interjections are stand-alone words that we use to express emotion or stance, like well, wow, hey, or some four-letter swear words.

Activity B3. Putting parts of speech together
Every word used in English can be categorized according to the part of speech it is taking when used.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=97#h5p-7

NEXT:
⇒ C. Intro to Corpus Linguistics

Module author: Jonathon Reinhardt
Last updated: 4 October 2022
This module is part of Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar, a freely available open resource offered by the Clarify Initiative, a privately funded project with the goal of raising critical language awareness and media literacy throughout society.
C. INTRO TO CORPUS ANALYSIS

This module is helpful for learners who want to know more about a corpus analytic approach to language use and critical discourse analysis. We recommend doing it before trying the corpus analysis activities in the LPT and GF modules.

Situating questions for discussion and reflection

1. What things would you describe with one word as opposed to its synonym? For example, ‘little’ as opposed to ‘small’? ‘weird’ as opposed to ‘odd’?

2. What buzzwords do you think a politician use more frequently than others do, and what effect does that have? For example, ‘freedom’, ‘we/us/our/ours’, ‘struggle’, ‘patriot’, or ‘justice’?
3. What’s the difference between ‘mistakes were made’ and ‘I made a mistake’?

4. What’s the difference between academic writing and casual conversation in terms of the words you would likely, or would likely not, use in them?

5. How has the meaning and frequency of usage of certain words changed over time? For example, ‘cool’, ‘groovy’, ‘gay’, ‘wicked’, ‘bro’?

6. How did you know or intuit answers to the above questions? How much do you trust your experience or intuition? How would you learn it if you wanted a more objective answer, or had no idea?

C1. What is a corpus?

A corpus is a large, searchable, (often) annotated collection of authentic language use that is collected in a principled manner to be representative of language from a certain domain. This definition has some keywords deserving elaboration. Let’s explore each in turn:

1. **Large:** In the 1960s, the first modern corpus—the
Brown Corpus—contained approximately 1 million words representing 15 written genres. Today, perhaps the most widely used corpus is the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) with 1 billion words drawn from registers such as film and television, blogs, fiction, magazines, newspaper, and more. Yet, 1 billion words does not make the COCA the largest public corpus. For example, the iWeb corpus contains nearly 15 billion words while the Google Books Corpus is greater than 150 billion words. Other popular corpora available at English-corpora.org are displayed in the image below.

2. **Searchable**: A corpus of such size as previously mentioned would not be useful if it were not easily searchable. The various search functions made available at public corpora such as the COCA and that are embedded in corpus tools such as Antconc enable researchers, teachers, and students to collect information about certain words, see the contexts in which words are used, examine how the use of a word has changed, and much more. For example, one could quickly do a search to discover whether figure out or discover is used more frequently in academic writing, which adjectives are most commonly used with the noun immigrant, which tense of verb most often appears with subordinating conjunctions when and while, and much more.

3. **Annotated**: A feature of corpora that allows for such
search potential is the fact that most corpora are annotated. The most common form of annotation is a part-of-speech (POS) tag. This means that in the COCA, for example, each of the 1 billion words has been annotated with a POS tag, thereby adding to the search capabilities of the collection. For example, one may want to determine which are the most common nouns following the near-synonyms beautiful and attractive or the most frequent verbs used with the adverbs broadly and largely. Additionally, one may want to search for only examples of when cook is used as a noun, excluding instances where it appears as a verb. While there are other types of annotations that can be added, for the purposes of our text, POS tags are the most relevant and important.

4. **Authentic**: Though authentic is fourth on this list, it is possibly the most important feature of a corpus. Why is authenticity so important? Before the development of corpora, people made claims about language use based primarily on their intuition alone. The problem is intuition is limited and generally inaccurate. Though we may think we know how a word or grammar item is used, research has shown again and again that our intuitions about language use are often incorrect. One reason is researchers could only base their statements about the use of the subjunctive, the frequencies of who or whom, the functions of modals such as may, might,
or could on their individual experiences with language. Thus, they could only formulate claims about language use based on their own limited experience with language. A middle-aged linguistics professor may think a word or phrase is used commonly, but they only know what is used in their small community. This limitation had consequences in all sorts of areas. For example, though less common today, the language presented in textbooks for language learners often felt dated and/or artificial. Today, textbook writers can use corpora when creating materials, allowing them to include the actual language that speakers/writers use.

5. **Principled and representative:** Though there are some technical distinctions concerning these two items, we can combine them for our purposes. These terms indicate that corpora are meticulously designed and created so that users can be certain that their corpus findings are accurate and relevant to their question. For instance, if one wanted to analyze the use of adverbs such as probably, likely, and clearly in legal writing, they would need to have a principled plan to collect texts. Should they include briefs written by lawyers, opinions published by judges, legal textbooks written by law professors, or medical reports written by physicians? Obviously, you would not include medical reports, but depending on the focus of the analysis, you might also want to exclude textbooks too. If you decide to use a
C2. What does corpus study make possible?

The applications of corpus study are numerous, and the previous section highlighted several. Their primary application is that they allow us, whether language researcher, textbook creator, language teacher, or language learner, to gain insights into the actual language that people use. Rather than responding to a question about language with disclaimers such as “Well, I think that...” or “I feel that...”, we can simply go to a corpus and find the answer. When we then go to the corpus for the answer, we are able to see numerous examples of how people indeed use a word, grammar item, or phrase. This allows textbook writers and language teachers to present accurate information to readers and learners.

Additionally, corpus study allows us to see things about language use of which we were not previously aware. For example, by analyzing corpora, we have learned that language is rather formulaic, meaning we use lots of “chunks” when we speak and write. Yes, we are aware of “chunks” such as ‘on the other hand’, ‘a result of’, and ‘I don’t know if’, but
corpus study has revealed how these “chunks” are the building blocks of language. In other words, we do not necessarily learn and mentally store individual words that we later retrieve one by one to build a sentence; rather, we learn, store, and use “chunks” of language. Corpus study shows us too that the “chunks” I use in one genre or register are different than the “chunks” I use in other genres and registers.

And finally, and related to the previous items, corpus study allows us to see patterns in language use of which we may be unconscious but that function to shape our perceptions of and relationships with the world around us. Considering the critical aims of this book, this is quite powerful. The popular notion suggests that language use is somehow natural and that it simply captures and reflects objective facts about the world. However, the language choices we make do not capture an existing reality but build one for us. Language use and choice are not given; they are purposeful and subjective. For example, there is nothing inherently natural about the pairing illegal immigrant. As Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel states, “No human is illegal”. If I instead choose to use undocumented immigrant, I am building a different sort of world. As Carbaugh states, the choice we make is “a symbolic move within a cultural game, a move which creatively evokes a complex of associations, and invites one’s interlocutor into a discursive space from which we see, hear, feel, and act” in certain ways. In the case of undocumented/illegal immigrant, the selection of the pre-modifying adjective influences how we
think and ultimately act. For a grammar-oriented example, if I use the passive construction “Mistakes were made”, I have selectively chosen to hide who actually made the mistake. The passive is quite different than the active voice alternative: “I made a mistake”. If we consider how this may be manipulated for certain ends, consider the following samples from the News on the Web (NOW) Corpus collected from reporting following the May, 2022 killing of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh:

1. **Israeli police clashed with Palestinian mourners packed around the coffin of killed Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh** (Reuters, May 13, 2022)
2. **13 Palestinians were wounded in the clashes, one of them seriously.** (MSN.com, May 13, 2022)
3. **More than 40 Palestinians were injured in renewed clashes at the Al-Aqsa Mosque on Friday** (Forbes, May 13, 2022)

These instances demonstrate how the selection of verb forms can either foreground, background, or even remove agents and obscure the reality of the events. The selection of a certain pattern is not altogether arbitrary for it captures and reflects one’s perception of the event. In the first sample, the agent (Israeli police) responsible for the action is explicitly named in the subject noun phrase of the sentence. The placement of Israeli police in this initial and prominent position serves to
essentially assign responsibility for an action/event. However, in samples 2 and 3, the agent is removed from the sentences through the passive verb construction. In both sentences, the affected is clearly named but the agent responsible for wounds and injuries is not identified. While that information can likely be retrieved from elsewhere in the article, it is revealing that the person/group responsible for the injuries is removed. As these authentic samples illustrate, grammar, in this case the passive verb phrase, allows speaker/writers to package information in ways which influence the interpretation and understanding of readers and listeners. Throughout the modules, we will see examples where the grammar we use is a powerful tool for informing, misinforming, and obscuring in order to persuade listeners and readers to build a certain view of the world.

C3. How does one search a corpus?

Though the activities throughout the modules do not require you to be an expert in corpus linguistics, it will nonetheless be useful for you to understand how to do basic searches within an online corpus. By gaining such skills, you will be able to verify claims about language use and complete corpus activities throughout the modules. Most importantly, you will be able to explore language use of interest to you. In this section, we will explore the 6 primary search options of the COCA. While the functions are demonstrated using the COCA, these basic search options are present in most available corpora.
First, go to https://www.english-corpora.org. You will need to register to use the corpora on the site, but it is free and only takes a moment. Once registered, select “Corpus of Contemporary American English” from the list of available corpora.

a. list

The first search option is rather simple, but we will add a few techniques to increase its power. As we have previously discussed immigrant and immigration, we will use these words to demonstrate the various search functions in COCA.

Search 1: Frequency

1. Click list from the options above the search bar.
2. Enter immigrant in the search bar.
3. Click find matching strings

This simple search displays how many times a word is used in the corpus.

Search 2: Wildcard

1. Enter immigra* in the search bar
2. Click find matching strings
The output produced by the use of the wildcard is quite useful for it allows us to view many forms of our search word. In this instance, the search allowed us to capture all words beginning with immigra. We can use the wildcard in many positions to enhance our searches. For example, we could search *tion to explore all words ending in tion. The wildcard can also fill a slot in a phrase. For instance, we could search “the * of immigration” to determine which words are used to frame immigration.

**Search 3: Verb forms**

1. Enter [immigrate] in the search bar
2. Click find matching strings

The bracket search is most useful for exploring forms of a particular verb. For example, [take] yields the frequencies of take, takes, took, taking, taken and also takin.

**Search 4: Synonyms**

1. Enter [=immigrate] in the search bar
2. Click find matching strings

Entering the equal sign in the search signals that
you would like to explore synonyms of the search word.

b. chart

Search 5: Searching by register and across time

1. Click chart from the search options
2. Enter immigrant in the search bar
3. Click find matching strings

In the output for this search, you can observe in which register (e.g. magazines, fiction, newspaper, etc.) the word most frequently appears. You can also view its frequency of use across six five-year periods from 1990-2019.

It is important to remember that the previous searches using wildcards, brackets, and the equal sign can all be used with the chart search option as well.

c. word

The word option provides rather comprehensive information about any of the 60,000 most frequently used words in the corpus. If you enter and search immigration, you can get a view of the sort of information provided. For instance, the output displays
a chart of the word’s frequency in various registers, the various topics in which it appears, its common collocates, and more.

**Search 6: Exploring immigration**

d. collocates

From our critical orientation, the collocates search is likely the most powerful of the search options, as it allows us to see how a particular word is represented and in which contexts it is most frequently used. Indeed, much research in corpus-assisted discourse analysis analyzes the collocations of keywords, often additionally exploring how a keyword’s collocations have changed over time. When analyzing a word’s collocates, we are aligning with a key corpus linguistics principle: “You shall know a word by the company it keeps”. One way to think about “company” is whether the collocates are generally negative or positive. For example, Tognini-Bonelli demonstrates how the collocates of the near-synonyms largely and broadly are quite distinct. While we intuit these words to be interchangeable, they occur in rather distinct contexts. In this case, broadly frequently appears with positively-loaded adjectives (e.g., similar, applicable, shared, popular, acceptable) while largely occurs with more negative-loading collocates (e.g., responsible, unknown, irrelevant, absent, ineffective). In corpus study, these contextual loadings are referred to as
semantic prosody. Let’s search the semantic prosodies of illegal and undocumented.

Search 7: Collocations of immigrant
Search 8: Adjective collocations of immigrant

e. compare

The compare search adds a layer to the collocates function, as it enables you to view collocates for two words at the same time. This function can be quite useful for exploring how two near-synonyms collocates are used differently. Indeed, the function illustrates why the term near-synonym is preferred within linguistics for no words are truly synonymous. To illustrate, consider the adjectives beautiful and attractive. Upon first reflection, it is likely you view these items as synonyms. However, a compare search in a corpus such as the COCA will reveal the rather divergent contexts in which they are used. The image below displays the two words collocates.

Search 9: Compare illegal and undocumented

f. KWIC (Key Word In Context)

The final function is made possible due because the corpus has been annotated for part of speech. The KWIC search is simple function, but it can be quite useful for it assigns a color to each part of speech in the context of the search term. The color
coding can help to identify grammatical patterns around the target search word.

**Search 10: KWIC immigrant**

c4. How are corpora used in the modules?

Most samples of various grammar items that are present in the modules throughout this course are from corpora. One reason for including samples from corpora is that it allows you to validate claims made about grammar and language use. Rather than simply writing, “Most times people use passive verb constructions to....” or “This adverb is most commonly used in contexts where....”, we include authentic examples of the grammar items in use. In other cases, the modules include information derived from corpus analysis. For example, in the section on modal auxiliaries (e.g., may, might, could, would, etc.), you will be presented with corpus data displaying how frequently modals are in spoken language in contrast to academic writing. Generally, these samples have been extracted from large, public corpora such as the previously mentioned Corpus of Contemporary American English. In other instances, the samples are taken from small, specialized corpora we have built of particular domains of language use in order to display the use of a particular grammar feature in a certain genre, register, or discourse domain.

In addition to the use of samples and data, some of the
activities will guide you through corpus searches so that you can experience corpus study for yourself. As noted in section III, you will need to register to use the corpora at english-corpora.org. Registration is free and only takes a moment. We are not expecting you to become corpus experts, but we think you will enjoy doing searches and reaching your own insights about language use.

Module author: Robert Poole
Last updated: 7 October 2022

This module is part of Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar, a freely available open resource offered by the Clarify Initiative, a privately
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PART II
MODULES

Language Power Techniques

1. Metaphor
3. Doublespeak
5. Pronoun Choice & Address Forms
7. Name-calling and Epithets
9. Hyperbole
11. Storytelling & Propaganda
13. Weasel Language
15. Logical Fallacies

Grammar Features

2. Sentence Basics
4. Nouns
6. Pronouns
8. Adjectives & Determiners
10. Adverbs & Prepositions
12. Verbs I: Tense, Aspect, & Modality
14. Verbs II: Voice & Mood
16. Conjunctions, Clauses, & Negation
5. PRONOUN CHOICE & ADDRESS FORMS

Outline

⇒ 5.1 Introduction: Why are pronouns such a big deal these days?
⇒ 5.2 Pronouns and address forms
⇒ 5.3 How has the use of pronouns changed over time, and why?
⇒ 5.4 Generic & specific ‘you’
⇒ 5.5 Inclusive vs. exclusive ‘we’
⇒ 5.6 Us vs. them
⇒ 5.7 Gender-neutral third person pronouns
⇒ 5.8 Unit activities
⇒ 5.9 Key points
⇒ 5.10 Key concepts
5.1 Introduction: Why are pronouns such a big deal these days?

Module preview questions

What is your experience with third person-pronoun choice? Why do you think some people support it while others take issue with it? What rights do you think an individual has with regards to how others name or address them?

In 2016, a big controversy erupted at the University of Michigan. In order to foster an environment of inclusiveness, administrators at the university gave all the students the right to choose a personal pronoun of their choice and have it reflected in the class roster. All University members would need to address students using their chosen pronouns (Fitzgerald, 2016).
While many students and faculty rejoiced at the progressive step this policy would take which was in sync with their principles of gender social justice, several others felt that this was both absurd as well as a form of repression on their freedom of speech. The controversy started when one student, Grant Strobl, listed his pronouns as “His Majesty” on the university portal and asked all teachers and students to refer to him with it in order to call out what he believed to be the absurdity of this policy.

Since then, numerous such conflicts have emerged on campuses across North America with both pro and against sides making charged arguments in favor of or against people designating their own pronouns.

If you have time and interest, watch this video to learn Strobl’s position. “University allows students to choose their own pronouns. Fox News Report, 1 Oct 2016”:
5.2 Pronouns and address forms

A pronoun is a specific type of word that represents and replaces a noun or noun phrase, and there are a limited number of them. If we didn’t have pronouns, we’d have to repeat names and nouns every time we spoke and wrote. Instead of having to say something like: “Vaccines? That woman is a doctor so that man should ask that woman about vaccines” we can say “Vaccines? She is a doctor and so he can ask her about them.”

There are different types of pronouns: personal pronouns like ‘you’ and ‘us’, demonstrative pronouns like ‘this’ and ‘that’, and reflexive pronouns like ‘myself’ and ‘themselves’. Pronouns can be marked for number (singular or plural), person (first, second, third), case (subject or object), and
gender (male, female), but not all pronouns are marked for the same features.

First person (1P) personal pronouns like ‘I, me, mine, we, us, ours’ refer to the speaker(s) or writer(s), while the second person (2P) pronouns ‘you, yours’ refer to the addressee – that is, who the speaker or writer is addressing. Third person (3P) pronouns, ‘it, its, she, her, hers, he, him, his, they, them, theirs’, are used to refer to a thing, concept, or person that has been previously mentioned but that is not being addressed directly.

Address forms are names or titles we use when we address or refer to other people – they are similar to nicknames, but they can be used universally and are socially recognized. In English we traditionally use address forms like ‘mister, sir, madam, ma’am, miss’ as honorifics or polite forms to show respect towards, or the independence of, the addressee or referent – honorifics can usually be used by themselves, e.g. ‘Sir’, or they can precede a name, e.g. ‘Mister Jones’. Address forms can also be neutral, as in the use of given (first) names in the US, and they can also show disrespect, as in name-calling, slurs, and abusive profanity. They can also be familiar or intimate, like ‘bro’, ‘honey’, or ‘dear’. Intimate forms are used to show solidarity and make an appeal towards friendship, involvement or rapport. If you are American, you should know that it sounds odd in many cultures to use ‘pumpkin’ as an intimate form of address. Think about it!

Because pronouns are used to refer to other people, when we use them we imply a relationship between us (the speaker
or writer) and whomever is being addressed or referred to. Historically, English had two 2P forms: ‘thou’ and ‘you’. ‘Thou’ was used as the familiar form for one person, while ‘you’ was the respect form for one or more people, but between the 1600s and 1800s, people stopped using ‘thou’, and ‘you’ took over. Interestingly, in standard English we still say ‘you are’ and not ‘you is’, even though we use it to refer to a single person. In Spanish the familiar form of ‘you’ is ‘tu’ and the respect form is ‘Usted’; many other languages have two 2P pronouns that are distinguished according to their social use.

Like address forms, pronouns not only imply relationships, but also identities. If I use ‘he’ to refer to someone, it means I ascribe their identity as male. In other languages, even the use of 1P and 2P pronouns can imply the speaker or listener’s gender identity, for example, in Japanese, there are different pronouns for ‘I’, one traditionally used to assert a male identity (‘boku’) and another used to assert a female identity (‘atashi’).

If you have the time and interest, take a look at these webpages to learn about:

- the many different terms of endearment used in English and other languages:
Key points from 5.2

- Pronouns are a key part of English grammar that allow us not to have to repeat nouns over and over.
- A speaker’s (or writer’s) choice of address form can show respect, rapport, disrespect, or intimacy between the speaker and addressee.
- As address forms, the pronouns we choose to use reflect our understandings of social relationships and our own identities.
Activity 5.2 Pronouns & address forms

a. Identify the pronouns

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=70#h5p-13

b. Read this brief webpage by Thoughtco.com on terms of address and discuss or reflect on the following: https://www.thoughtco.com/term-of-address-1692533

- How do you address medical doctors, teachers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents? What is considered respectful or disrespectful? How does this compare to others’ terms, and how does it compare to other languages that you know? Why do you think that these uses can be different?
Consider the words ‘man’, ‘sir’, ‘ma’am’, ‘lady’, ‘girl’, ‘boy’, ‘brother’, and ‘sister’ as address forms. When are they used, and for what purpose? Which uses do you consider polite, rude, or offensive?

c.

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=70#h5p-14

Need to know more about the grammar of pronouns now? ⇒ 6. Pronouns
5.3 How has the use of pronouns changed over time, and why?

The use of address forms has changed over time; most agree that accepted usage has become less socially rigid over time, and more formal forms are being dropped by younger generations. While address forms shift generation by generation, it is more difficult to change the use of pronouns over time, however, because they are a closed class. We can’t easily add new words to closed classes since they serve grammatical purposes, standing in for full noun phrases and providing discourse coherence by connecting referents. Still, the meanings and uses of existing pronouns in English have shifted over time, sometimes through conscious effort.
For example, in the 1650’s during the English Civil War the Quakers were considered radical because they wanted to create an egalitarian society that challenged the hierarchies and formalities established by English royalty and aristocracy. At that time, English society was rigidly divided into classes and elaborate systems of address forms maintained these hierarchical divisions. While we now use “you” as a common 2P pronoun for everyone, irrespective of the person’s social status, in those times “you” was reserved exclusively to address people of high social status, while “thou” and “thee” were used to address an equal or someone with lower social status (“ye” was plural). If a poor man spoke to a wealthy man, he was supposed to use the respectful “you” to address him, while the rich man would use the more common “thou” to address the poor man.

The Quakers wanted to change this system because it
violated their beliefs (Bejan, 2019). George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, said that God “forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to thee and thou all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small” (Bejan, 2019). According to their beliefs, no human was between an individual and God – not the Pope and not the King of England. As captured in the King James Bible, it was considered normal to refer to God with the familiar ‘thou’ rather than the respectful ‘you’, because ‘you’ implied that God was distant, not familiar, as the Quakers believed. Thus, as a form of political protest and religious expression, the Quakers used “thou” even to the aristocracy! Facing a lot of ridicule and persecution for using language in new ways, some sought refuge in the American Colonies, especially Pennsylvania.

Another example of how pronoun use changes over time is the gradual loss of the ‘royal we’ or ‘majestic pronouns’. If you’ve seen movies about the English royalty, you might be familiar with how people of royal descent refer to themselves using plural pronouns like “we”. For example, in 1902, Edward VII of England proclaimed in a treaty: “Now, We, Edward, by the grace of God, [...] have arrived at the following decisions upon the questions in dispute” (source: Wikipedia). The ‘royal we’ is no longer used in everyday situations, except perhaps by celebrities and aspiring socialites who want to be considered majestic.
Key points from 5.3

- Address forms and pronoun uses have shifted throughout the history of English, sometimes because of shifts in how younger generations use language differently than older generations, and sometimes intentionally as the result of social protest.
- Unlike many other languages, English no longer has a 2P pronoun system that can indicate unequal social relationships; respect and rapport are shown in other ways.

Activity 5.3: Changing pronouns and address forms

a. Shakespeare wrote in a variety of English called
‘Early Modern English’, spoken from about 1100 to 1600 CE. We can still understand Shakespearean English because, even though language changes over time, English hasn’t changed enough since then so that Shakespeare is unintelligible, it just requires effort. His was the first recorded use of many modern English words, but many other words he used are no longer commonly understood. He also used structures that are no longer used, and he used both ‘thou’ and ‘you’ – ‘thou’ when he wanted a character to express familiarity to the addressee, and ‘you’ when he wanted an expression of formality. In reality, however, uses were mixed, sometimes by a pair of people when talking, for various reasons. Read about how these pronouns on this webpage by nosweatshakespeare, then discuss/reflect on the question that follows.


In modern English we no longer use ‘thou’. How do we use language instead to express social distance, respect, solidarity, and rapport? What language besides address forms and
**Pronouns do we use to imply social relationship status?**

**b.** The titles “Sir” and “Ma’am” have their origins in British aristocracy. Initially used to refer only to knights and royalty, during the colonial era, oppressed subjects of colonies like India were forced to use these terms to broadly refer to anyone from the British community. The purpose of this strategy was to create a hierarchical distance between the colonized and the colonizers so that the two could never be seen as equals. These terms carry on even today in India where people on a lower rung of a social or economic ladder are expected to address people above them using such terms. Many organizations are working to challenge these norms; for example, the Congress party, an Indian political party, recently created a new policy asking all its party members in the Indian state of Kerala to drop the use of “Sir” and “Ma’am” in official communication and instead to use terms like chetta (a Malayalam word which means elder brother) and chechi (a Malayalam word which means elder sister) in order to evoke a sense of familiar relationships between people who belong to different levels of their organizational chart. Read more about this...
attempt to sanction new forms of address and discourage others in this report by theprint.in, then discuss/reflect on the question that follows.


*Do you think an organized movement can successfully change which terms of address are used? If so, what do you think it takes? Do you think the Congress Party’s movement in Kerala will be successful? Why or why not?*

### 5.4 Generic & specific ‘you’

The merging of informal ‘thou’, formal ‘you’, and informal ‘ye’ into just ‘you’ has given the pronoun broad powers. It can be used to address a person respectfully, e.g. “Mr. President, did you sign the bill?”, it can be used to address a person intimately, e.g. “I love you”, and it can be used to address more than one person together (although some varieties of English use ‘y’all’, ‘you guys’, or ‘youse’ for plural you). Many other languages have two or more different forms for those three purposes, for example Spanish has ‘tu’, ‘Usted’, and ‘Ustedes’.
Another powerful use of ‘you’ in English is called the ‘generic you’, the use of ‘you’ to address anyone listening or reading without being specific, meaning ‘one’, ‘everyone’, or ‘anyone’. It is context dependent. For example, in:

- You should bring a raincoat if you visit Seattle in the spring.
- When you turn 40 you should get life insurance.

the advice can apply to anyone, and so the ‘you’ is likely generic. But in:

- When you turn 40 you should get life insurance, Bob.
- You should bring a raincoat when you visit Seattle this summer.

the ‘you’ is referring to a specific person. To tell if a use of ‘you’ is generic, replace the ‘you’ with ‘one’, and if it makes sense, it is a generic use. So,

- One should bring a raincoat if one visits Seattle in the spring.
- When one turns 40 one should get life insurance.

make sense, so the you is generic. However, with:

- You are an excellent singer.
- Did you finish your homework?
it sounds a bit odd to say:

- One is an excellent singer. &
- Did one finish one’s homework?

so ‘you’ in these examples is specific, not generic.

Generic you is powerful because it can be heard as general advice or a proclamation of truth that applies to anyone, so a listener feels as if they are being addressed, as part of an in-group. For this reason it can be found in advertising, for example:

- Red Bull gives you wings.
- Visa. Everywhere you want to be.
- M & Ms melt in your mouth, not in your hands.

Dr. Ariana Orvell and colleagues, psychologists at the University of Michigan (2020), analyzed Kindle data from 1,900 users reading 56 different books and found that readers highlighted passages containing generic you more often than would be statistically probable, as if the readers felt they were being addressed. They argue that this is evidence that generic you can resonate with readers and listeners and help them feel a personal connection with the author and the content, even when they know rationally that they aren’t being addressed specifically.
An unwitting politician uses the generic you to try to show her political stance and resonate with like-minded followers, but someone who knows pronouns are inescapable catches her with a specific you. When you use social media, keep an eye out for how both generic and specific you are used strategically.

Finally, imperatives (commands) in English that addressed to a single person or a group do not use the word ‘you’, but they imply it. Commands can therefore be either obviously generic or specific, or ambiguous, which gives them a unique kind of persuasive power.

- Finish your homework and you can play video games. (clearly specific)
• Brush your teeth every night before bed. (clearly generic)
• Just do it. (ambiguous)
• Think different. (ambiguous)
• Make America Great Again (ambiguous)

**Key points from 5.4**

• The pronoun ‘you’ has unique power because it can be used both specifically and generically. An ambiguous use can be interpreted either way.
• The careful use of a ‘generic you’ can cause ‘resonance’ in a listener or reader, especially in a context focused on general advice and proclamations.
• The deliberate use of a ‘specific you’, especially in a context like advertisement or recruitment, can make a listener or reader feel directly spoken to and that they need to respond somehow.
• ‘You’ is the subject, but is not stated, in commands. They can also be generic, specific, or ambiguous.
Activity 5.4 You oughta know when you’re being addressed

**a.** Canadian songwriter Alanis Morissette is well-known for her hit 1995 album, “Jagged Little Pill”. Search for the album online and listen to the lyrics of the songs on the album that include the pronoun ‘you’ in their titles.

*Which “Jagged Little Pill” song or songs use the generic you, and which use the specific you? What is the effect of these uses on listeners? How do you think the songs ‘resonate’ differently?*

**b.** The well-known Uncle Sam WWII army recruitment and 1940s Smokey Bear posters were designed with the clear goal of influencing behavior. They clearly used the specific you.
I WANT YOU FOR U.S. ARMY
NEAREST RECRUITING STATION
What feelings or emotions do you think a viewer would have seeing these? In what context do you think they were most effective?

c. Looking at advertisements or political discourse, find three examples of the use of ‘you’ and note who is the author or speaker and in what context it is used. Find one use that is clearly generic, one that is clearly specific, and one where it is ambiguous. Remember that commands count, too.
5.5 Inclusive vs. Exclusive We

‘You’ is not the only pronoun that can be used strategically because it has ambiguous referents. The 1P plural pronoun ‘we’ and its variations ‘us’ and ‘ours’ in English can also be used strategically because ‘we’ can have an inclusive meaning of ‘I the speaker/writer and you the listener/reader’, or it can have an exclusive meaning of ‘I the speaker and someone else but not you the listener’. Using the ‘inclusive we’ is an appeal towards involvement, for example, if you’re talking to someone and you refer to something you did together. However, if someone uses ‘we’ to refer to something they did with others and you were not part of that group, it is clear it is a use of the ‘exclusive we’ (although its use does not necessarily mean the listener was purposefully excluded). Exclusive we is used often in ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric (see 5.6 below). The phrase ‘let us’, contracted as ‘let’s’ is used as the 1P command form, and it automatically sounds inclusive. However, someone can use it to give directives and make suggestions to others even if they do not mean to follow the directive themselves; for example, when a professor says ‘Let’s take the test now’, they know very well they aren’t taking the test. But it makes them sound like they are involved.

Because of this ambiguity, the use of ‘we’ or ‘us’ is potentially quite powerful. Because humans naturally want to belong to a group, English users may interpret ‘we’ as inclusive, unless they know explicitly that they are not part of the group
being referred to. If you are listening to a politician giving a speech to a group you actively do not identify with or are not a part of, when the politician uses ‘we’ you may judge it as exclusive and not meant to include you. However, when any politician uses ‘we’ to refer to a vaguely defined group that might include you, it is difficult to hear ‘we’ as exclusive of you.

Inclusive ‘we’ is used by leaders on all parts of the ideological spectrum to appeal to a sense of community, solidarity, and belonging. The Finnish linguist Tyrkkö (2017) found that the use of inclusive we pronouns in political speeches around the world has increased in the past 100 years; this could be due to the rise of democracy and the use of propaganda techniques like plain folks appeals, where politicians attempt to appear from an average, middle or working class background, even though they may come from an upper class background.

If you have time and interest, learn more about plain folks appeals:

- https://www.logicallyfallacious.com/logicalfallacies/Appeal-to-Common-Folk
A leader can unite and inspire followers by strategically using the inclusive we, and since 1900, US American politicians have increasingly used forms of inclusive we more frequently than 1P ‘I’ pronouns (Tyrkkö, 2017). For example, watch the will.i.am video “Yes We Can”, based on a campaign speech Obama gave in 2008.

‘We’ is sung 80 times in will.i.am’s song lyrics, and Obama used ‘we’ 45 times in his speech. If you have time and interest, read the full transcript of the speech:

- https://gist.github.com/mcdickenson/25479c8571b8f86f3a21c8d579102f93
Key points from 5.5

- The pronoun ‘we’ (along with us and ours) can be used strategically because it has both an inclusive and exclusive meaning.
- Because it is perceived to imply inclusivity, the use of ‘inclusive we’ can appeal to solidarity and a sense of unity.
- However, the use of ‘exclusive we’ implies division when used in ‘us vs. them’ language.

Activity 5.5: Who is accountable?

a. Besides politicians, who else might use ‘we’ strategically to imply inclusivity, or emphasize exclusivity? Find an example from the real world.

b. Dahnilisyah (2017) analyzed Obama’s presidential
speeches and argued that he used pronouns in a manner that was “rhetorical, persuasive and manipulative”. What lies below is an extract from a speech that Obama gave after a terrorist attack attempt on a Northwest Airlines flight. Read the excerpt and notice the pronouns. How does Obama use ‘we’ and ‘our’ strategically? Which are inclusive and which are exclusive? How does this allow him to take, or avoid, individual responsibility? What other effect does it have?

“I believe it’s important that the American people understand the new steps that we’re taking to prevent attacks and keep our country safe. In our ever-changing world, America’s first line of defense is timely, accurate intelligence that is shared, integrated, analyzed and acted upon quickly and effectively. That’s what the intelligence reforms after the 9/11 attacks largely achieved. That’s what our intelligence community does every day” (Obama qtd. in Dahnilsyah, 2017: 65)."
5.6 Us vs. Them

Taking advantage of the clusive ambiguity of ‘we’, politicians and others can strategically juxtapose them with uses of the third-person plural ‘they’ pronouns and draw sharp black-and-white contrasts between the two groups so that they are perceived as 100% oppositional. Because the people ‘they’ represent are not present during such discourse, they cannot argue otherwise. Offering only two polarized choices and forcing people to choose between the two – implying that “you are either with us or against us” – is presenting a false dichotomy, a propaganda technique that has been used for ages. Because it is simpler to quickly choose between black and white rather than to consider shades of gray or other colors, this ‘us vs. them’ strategy works to unite people by not only
what they think they are (us), but what they do not want to be (them).

If you have time and interest, learn more about false dilemma and false dichotomies here:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_dilemma
Political scientists Matos and Miller argue in their research (2021) that Donald Trump strategically used pronouns in this way to promote bonding among his core followers during his campaigns, more so than his opponents did. Using the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomy, Trump encouraged “outgroup hostility” or hostility against those his followers believed to be “outsiders” in their minds.

According to Matos and Miller’s study, Trump created an identity story whereby he “framed ingroup attitudes among white Americans by answering three main questions: ‘who are they,’ and thus, ‘who are we,’ and ‘what’s at stake (what do we have to lose)’ (pg. 2)”. The answer to these questions involved defining “the ingroup (we, us) as “good” and superior in comparison to framing the outgroup (them) as “bad,” as criminals and terrorists, as foreigners, and importantly, as people who wanted to take what rightfully belonged to the ingroup. Trump used immigration and the refugee crisis to define the outgroup (pg. 2). Continuously using pronouns in this way creates a powerful cognitive frame which may
promote “groupthink” and prevent individuals from rationally weighing evidence, considering complexity, and making up their own minds. Such skillful rhetoric may make listeners more amenable to what politicians say, as it implicitly appeals to their need to feel part of a ingroup, especially when that ingroup’s identity also aligns with culturally-conditioned prejudices.

Key points from 5.6

- First person plural pronouns (we/us/ours) are especially powerful when juxtaposed with the use of third person plural pronouns (they/them/their) because it sets up a potential false dichotomy between the ingroup and an absent outgroup that cannot defend itself.

Activity 5.6 Who are we?
a. Anybody can use language strategically to motivate their audience and create a sense of shared, ingroup identity. For example, the following text is from an email from the Arizona Democratic Party soliciting a donation, sent to a registered Democrat. Read the excerpt and identify the pronouns, then reflect on/discuss the question.

“Our reproductive rights and privacy are at stake. The AZ GOP has cheerleaded every day since the Dobbs decision came out, and they openly support an 1800’s near-total abortion ban that requires jail time for doctors. Some candidates want a national abortion ban and even a ban on contraceptives. This is a direct attack on our rights and on our privacy. We can’t let the AZ GOP drag us back to the 1800s on health care.” (an email soliciting donations from AZ DEMS, received August 29, 2022)

How does this solicitation use pronouns to create a sense of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’? What other language choices contribute to a sense of ingroup identity? What language is used to give a sense of urgency and shared goals?
b. Watch this video on the science behind ‘us vs. them’ by Dan Shapiro and Robert Sapolsky of Big Think. Discuss/reflect on the questions below afterwards.

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=70#oembed-3

What can be done to counter the destructive potential of ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric and thinking? In what situations, if any, do you think the use of ‘us vs. them’ techniques are ever justified?
5.7 Gender-neutral third person pronouns

While English has ‘it’ to refer to non-humans, according to traditional grammarians, users must choose ‘he’ or ‘she’ when referring to humans. The sentence ‘Everyone must bring their own lunch’ is incorrect according to traditionalists because ‘everyone’ is singular, and so ‘their’ should be a singular ‘his’ or ‘her’ so that the referent agrees with its antecedent. However, this supposedly traditional rule was actually invented in the 1800s, and before that, English users made use of singular ‘they’ just as they do now.

If you have time and interest, read the Oxford English Dictionary’s blog entry about the history of the singular they:

- https://public.oed.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-singular-they/
Other gender-neutral pronouns have been proposed for trans, non-binary, or genderqueer people in English, but since pronouns are a closed class and the matter has been politicized in the USA, widespread adoption and acceptance has been difficult. However, other languages with more centralized control and fewer speakers have successfully done so, for example, the Swedish government and academics have adopted ‘hen’ instead of ‘han’ (he) and ‘hon’ (she) as a gender-neutral 3P pronoun for humans, in an attempt to create gender equality.

If you have time and interest, read a brief announcement about the Swedish movement to adopt a new gender-neutral pronoun here:

- https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/03/27/395785965/he-she-or-hen-sweden-s-new-gender-neutral-pronoun

Key points from 5.7
The pronoun ‘they’ has been used for singular referents for centuries in English. This usage has been rejected by strict grammarians who restrict it to plural usage, even though the pronoun ‘you’ has broadened its usage from only plural referents to also include singular referents.

There have been many attempts over the past few centuries by language reformers to create new gender-neutral singular 3P pronouns for humans.

Activity 5.7 Why doesn’t English have gender-neutral 3P pronouns?

a. Throughout history there have been attempts to invent new gender neutral 3P pronouns for humans in English and promote their use. Read this piece on the history of these attempts:
Why do you think past attempts to promote new gender neutral pronouns for English have failed to be successful? Why do you think it might be especially difficult to get people to use new third-person pronouns?

b. Most recently the debate on 3P pronoun use has become highly politicized, with conservatives arguing that forcing people to use new pronouns to refer to others when those others are not present is a restriction of their right to free speech, while liberals argue that we should respect the rights of individuals to be referred to as they wish. Watch this debate on Canadian Broadcasting between Jordan Peterson and A.W. Peet on the controversy:
Which arguments do you find most or least convincing for using, or not using, new gender-neutral pronouns? What practices do you follow, and why?

**c.**

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=70#h5p-16
5.8 Unit Activities

a. Reflection/Discussion Questions

Reflect on the content of this unit by answering some or all of the following questions. Provide examples to support your points.

1. What are address forms and how do they reflect social relationships and identities?
2. What can we learn from the past about the potential future of pronouns in English?
3. How can the pronouns ‘you’, ‘we’, and ‘they’ be used strategically? In what contexts does this happen?
4. How can you be aware of when pronouns are being used strategically to sway you?
5. What arguments are there for and against using gender-neutral third person pronouns for humans? Which are stronger and weaker arguments, and why?

b. Discourse Analysis Activity: Three pronouns

Find and analyze three real world examples of how
different pronouns are used strategically. Consider tweets, social media posts, discussion commentary, advertisements, a speech, or a conversation from a TV show or movie. In your analysis, discuss points such as speaker/author identity, audience identity, relationship, and purpose have influenced the pronoun choices made.

**c. Corpus Analysis Activity:** Address forms and inclusive language use: The case of ‘you guys’ and ‘y’all’

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**5.9 Key Points on Pronoun Use and Address Forms**

**5.2 Pronouns and address forms**

- Pronouns are a key part of English grammar that allow us not to have to repeat nouns over and over.
- A speaker’s (or writer’s) choice of address
form can show respect, rapport, disrespect, or intimacy between the speaker and addressee.

- As address forms, the pronouns we choose to use reflect our understandings of social relationships and our own identities.

5.3 How has the use of pronouns changed over time, and why?

- Address forms and pronoun uses have shifted throughout the history of English, sometimes because of shifts in how younger generations use language differently than older generations, and sometimes intentionally as the result of social protest.
- Unlike many other languages, English no longer has a 2P pronoun system that can indicate unequal social relationships; respect and rapport are shown in other ways.

5.4 Generic ‘you’

- The pronoun ‘you’ has unique power because it can be used both specifically and generically. An ambiguous use can be interpreted either way.
- The careful use of a ‘generic you’ can cause
‘resonance’ in a listener or reader, especially in a context focused on general advice and proclamations.

- The deliberate use of a ‘specific you’, especially in a context like advertisement or recruitment, can make a listener or reader feel directly spoken to and that they need to respond somehow.

- ‘You’ is the subject, but is not stated, in commands. They can also be generic, specific, or ambiguous.

5.5 Inclusive vs. Exclusive We

- The pronoun ‘we’ (along with us and ours) can be used strategically because it has both an inclusive and exclusive meaning.

- Because it is perceived to imply inclusivity, the use of ‘inclusive we’ can appeal to solidarity and a sense of unity.

- However, the use of ‘exclusive we’ implies division when used in ‘us vs. them’ language.

5.6 Us vs. Them

- First person plural pronouns (we/us/ours) are especially powerful when juxtaposed with the
use of 3P plural pronouns (they/them/theirs) because it sets up a potential false dichotomy between the ingroup and an absent outgroup that cannot defend itself.

5.7 Gender-neutral third person pronouns

- The pronoun ‘they’ has been used for singular referents for centuries in English. This usage has been rejected by strict grammarians who restrict it to plural usage, even though the pronoun ‘you’ has broadened its usage from only plural referents to also include singular referents.
- There have been many attempts over the past few centuries by language reformers to create new gender-neutral singular third-person pronouns for humans.

5.10 Key Concepts on Pronoun Choice and Address Forms
• address form
• exclusive we
• false dichotomy
• familiar form
• generic you
• honorific
• inclusive we
• intimate form
• plain folks
• pronoun
• respect form
• singular they
• thou

NEXT: Learn about the grammar of pronouns ⇒ 6. Pronouns

Module authors: Jonathon Reinhardt and Anuj Gupta
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This module on Pronoun Choice and Address Forms is part of Critical Language Awareness: Language Power Techniques and English Grammar, a freely available open resource offered by the Clarify Initiative, a privately funded project with the goal of raising critical language awareness and media literacy throughout society.
6. PRONOUNS

6.1 What is a pronoun?

1. Referents, antecedents, & precedents
2. Pronoun types

6.2 Pronoun Parameters

1. Number: singular or plural
2. Case: subject or object
3. Person: first, second or third
4. Gender: feminine, masculine, neuter, neutral
5. Grammatical vs. Natural gender

6.3 Personal, Possessive, & Reflexive pronouns

1. Personal
2. Possessive
3. Reflexive

6.4 Other pronoun types
6.1 What is a pronoun?

A pronoun is a word that replaces a single noun or noun phrase, which can be singular or plural.

- That big friendly dog is hilarious. → She is hilarious.
- Roxy is hilarious. → She is hilarious.
- I love cats. → I love them.
- I love big lazy orange cats with stripes. → I love them.

Unlike nouns, pronouns cannot be modified by determiners and adjectives.

- That big friendly she is hilarious.

If languages didn’t have pronouns, we’d have to constantly repeat nouns and noun phrases.
• My dog loves to play ball. My dog is a Golden Retriever. I love my dog.

Instead we can say:

• My dog loves to play ball. She is a Golden Retriever. I love her.

Activity 6.1 Pronouns in a speech by Barack Obama

a. 

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=79#h5p-8

b. 
6.1.1 Referents, antecedents, & postcedents

The noun or noun phrase that a pronoun replaces is called its referent. It is not necessarily in the same sentence, and possibly only understood in the context of conversation. If the referent comes before the pronoun it is its antecedent; if it comes after it is its postcedent.

- That’s Roxy the dog. She is a good girl. (‘Roxy the dog’ is the antecedent of ‘she’)

• When I saw her, Roxy the dog started jumping up and down. (‘Roxy the dog’ is the postcedent of ‘her’)

**Tip:** In Latin, ante means before and anti means against. Remember this by noting that the word ‘before’ contains e, and the word ‘against’ contains i, or that ante comes before anti in alphabetical order.

In writing the referent may also be unstated and understood, helping to establish a fictional pretense or an author-reader relationship. Sometimes it’s the very first line.

• **Call me Ishmael.** – Herman Melville, Moby Dick (The reader understands the narrator to be ‘me’)
• **It was love at first sight.** – Joseph Heller, Catch-22 (The reader understands that they will eventually understand the postcedent of ‘it’)

6. PRONOUNS | 113
Activity 6.1.1 Referents, antecedents, & postcedents

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=79#h5p-11
6.1.2 Pronoun types

Pronouns are a closed class, which means we can’t easily add new ones; there are about 100 of them. There are 7 different types of pronouns in English:

1. **personal**, e.g. I, me, them, him
2. **possessive**, e.g. mine, theirs, hers
3. **reflexive**, e.g. myself, himself, ourselves
4. **indefinite**, e.g anyone, all, few, one, somebody
5. **demonstrative**, e.g. this, that, these, those
6. **interrogative**, e.g. what, which, who, whom, whose
7. **relative**, e.g. that, which, who, whom

Many indefinite and demonstrative pronouns are also determiners. When one is acting on its own as a subject or object, it is a pronoun, and when it is modifying/preceding a noun, it is a determiner. Compare:

- **This is interesting.** (‘this’ is a pronoun)
- **This book is interesting.** (‘this’ is a determiner modifying the noun ‘book’)

Learn more about determiners in module 8:
6.2 Pronoun parameters

Most pronouns can be described according to one or more parameter of number, case, person and gender. Pronouns must agree in number and gender with their referent.

- That was a good movie. I saw them it yesterday.
- The King has taken the throne. May her his rule be peaceful!

6.2.1 Number: singular or plural

Most pronouns – not just personal ones – are either singular or plural:

**singular**: I, you, he, she, it, they, who, this, that, one

**plural**: we, you, they, who, these, those

Some pronouns, like ‘you’, ‘they’, and ‘who’ can be singular or plural, but they are always conjugated as if they were plural.

- You is are a genius.
Curious about the singular ‘they’ and issues of gender-neutral pronouns? Learn more in module 5: Pronoun Choice and Address Forms, section 5.7 Gender-neutral third person pronouns

Activity 6.2.1 Is the pronoun singular or plural?

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/languageawareness/?p=79#h5p-12

6.2.2 Case: subject or object

Personal pronouns are either subject or object case, depending on what role they play in a sentence. The
interrogative/relative pronoun ‘who’ was traditionally for subjects, while ‘whom’ was for objects.

**subject:** I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who  
**object:** me, you, him, her, it, us, them, whom

- Elizabeth was the queen. → She was the queen.  
- The visitors saw the queen. → They saw her.  
- My father is a teacher. → He is a teacher.  
- The teacher gave the students As. → He gave them As.

The personal pronouns ‘you’ and ‘it’ can be used for both subjects and objects. The other pronouns have different subject and object forms.

- I like you. Me like you. You like me. You like I.

Subjects come before verbs and are easier to identify than objects. To test whether a personal pronoun is an object, put it after a transitive verb like ‘see’ or ‘eat’, and if the sentence is grammatical, it is an object pronoun.

- I see _____. → I see you. I see her.  
- The dog ate _____. → The dog ate them. The dog ate it.

‘Whom’ is the object form of the interrogative (question-asking) and relative pronoun ‘who’, but it is becoming archaic. ‘Whom’ may still be expected in formal writing, and it is still
hanging on as an object of a preposition. Which sounds acceptable or not?

1. To who is this letter?
2. To whom is this letter?
3. Who is this letter to?
4. Whom is this letter to?