

# Introduction

## Your knowledge of English

If you can read this you know a lot about English. You may not think you do, and you may well be reading this book for the very reason that you feel you don't know enough. You might even think that your own English is *not good enough*. Whether you feel like this or not, you obviously want to know more about the English language, so let's start by looking at the kinds of things you know already.

### Using your language knowledge

### Activity O.1

Read the following text. What language knowledge do you need to have in order to be able to understand it? Think about:

- ▶ how you decipher the printed words
- ▶ how you make sense of sentences
- ▶ what you know about the 'ingredients' of a story
- ▶ what you notice about the vocabulary used
- ▶ how the text makes you use the 'world' knowledge you already have.

*I first started to act at the age of three. We were a very poor family and it was my mother's idea to have me help out with her many outstanding bills. She wrote the script and directed the action. The cue to begin my performance was a ring at the front door. Grasping my small hand, my mother rushed down the three flights of stairs from our small flat and hid behind the front door as I opened it. The unsuspecting third member of the cast – the rent collector – was standing there as I delivered my first lines: 'Mummy's out,' I said and slammed the door in his face.*

(From *What's it all about?* Michael Caine)

## Reflection

How is it that you are able to translate some small black marks on a sheet of paper into comprehension and amusement? Obviously a lot is going on.

- 1 You can recognise individual **letters**. You know all the possible **speech sounds** the letters can represent and know how to put these together into words. Some of the **words** you recognise by sight. You also notice that the **spelling** is correct (or at least you would notice if it wasn't). You know all the **words**, including some which are made from smaller units (e.g. *unsuspecting*). You know that some words

carry more than just a straightforward meaning – you will know the convention in this kind of story that the character called the rent collector is more than likely to be an adversary.

- 2 You recognise that all the **sentences** are correctly formed (or again, at least you would know if they weren't). What you know about **word order** tells you that *The unsuspecting third member of the cast* and *the rent collector* are the same person. It also tells you that in the sentence that begins *grasping my hand*, it is the author's mother who is doing the grasping, while your knowledge of **pronouns** tells you that the same person wrote the script. A lot of your understanding at this level depends on your ability to recognise words' membership of classes like **noun and verb**. Your recognition of the **inflexions of tense** is the means by which you know that the story happened in the past.
- 3 You probably recognise that the **text** follows the conventional pattern of **story**. **Characters** are introduced and the **setting** is sketched in. A **problem** is stated (or at least implied) **and a resolution** reached. How far were you into the text before you realised that it was a story; what were the clues that told you this? You also recognise the **vocabulary** of the theatre (*script, cue, performance* etc.) and your knowledge of the wider world helps you recognise the **irony** of portraying this episode in such grandiose terms. Your knowledge about the author himself will probably influence the way in which you understand the story too. Finally, you recognise that the whole story is written in a kind of language which is known as **Standard English** and you would immediately be able to spot any words or structures which broke the rules of that variety.

You may not have known any of the terminology used in the last three paragraphs, but that doesn't stop you using all this language knowledge, any more than not knowing the anatomical names for the bones in your fingers would stop you from playing the piano.<sup>1</sup> Any user of English knows *implicitly* a bewildering array of rules about all aspects of language. You know how to speak 'correct' English in a way which matches the demands of any context. You notice whenever people use English which is 'incorrect' or inappropriate. So why do you need a book like this?

You may well feel confident of your ability to discuss and explain some of the knowledge indicated in paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 – you have **explicit knowledge** of the sounds associated with letters, for example, and can talk about that knowledge. On the other hand, much of what you know about other aspects of language will be in the form of **implicit knowledge**. The next activity will help give you an idea as to how much of your own language knowledge is explicit.

1 This section includes a lot of grammatical terminology. The point of it is to illustrate how much you know, even if you don't know what everything is called. Please don't think you have to learn all these words now – all will be explained in due course.

Do you agree that each of these samples of English is in some way incorrect? Can you say *why* each one is incorrect?

- 1 He know.
- 2 My father happy.
- 3 Helen and Julia are playing together. Helen is digging and Julia was climbing.
- 4 We are going to swim, dance and athletics.
- 5 This traditional English woodworking tool is called a bnock.
- 6 A story begins 'Once upon a time there were three fluffy squirrels ...' and ends "'Take him away officer; Prendergast is the killer.'"

## Reflection

I would be very surprised if you found any of these completely acceptable, although you could probably guess at the meaning of most of them and also find ways of 'correcting' most of them. But how many of your answers can you explain? How much of the terminology (shown in **bold** type) in the following explanations is familiar to you?

- 1 In Standard English this should be *He knows*. The final *-s* is an **inflection** needed to mark the **verb** as **third person singular, present tense**.
- 2 This sentence needs a **verb**. You might expect *My Father is happy*.
- 3 The verb *was climbing* is in the **past tense** when the rest of the verbs are in the **present tense**.
- 4 You might say again that the sentence is missing a verb e.g. **do** *athletics*. Alternatively, you might say that the end of the sentence is a list of words functioning as verbs and *athletics* does not fit the pattern because it is a **noun**.
- 5 **Bnock** would break the rule of English **phonology** which says that initial /b/ can only be followed by /l/, /r/ or a **vowel**.<sup>2</sup>
- 6 The start of this story belongs to the **genre** *Children's story*, while the ending belongs to the genre *Whodunnit*. In this case it is possible that the author intends to use the features of more than one genre, but you will probably agree that you have expectations about how a story beginning 'Once upon a time' is likely to end.

You probably found that you could make explicit your objection to some of these sentences but not all of them. One of the things which makes language study so interesting is that it is the study of ourselves. To discover the rules of the language that we use, we can examine and reflect on our own language behaviour (and language is just that: an extremely complex form of behaviour). As you work through this book,

- 2 Of course, English is able to accommodate words from other languages (*loan words*) which break these rules, though just as often speakers make adjustments to fit an English pattern. So, for example, some English speakers will pronounce the place name *Brno* as in the original Czech, but many will pronounce a vowel after the 'B' since English does not usually allow this string of three consonants.

for each topic you will need to think about your own linguistic knowledge and judgements before seeing how that aspect of grammar is conventionally described and explained. In other words, the aim is to help you turn your implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

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## How is this knowledge useful?

You are probably reading this book because at some point in the near or distant future you intend to put the knowledge it contains to use in a primary classroom or early years setting. If that is the case, then you are entitled to ask how it will be of practical use to you.

Depending on the age of the learners and other factors, there will be elements of subject knowledge which you will want or need to teach explicitly. You will be able to help children develop their writing by looking at different ways of structuring information within a text, for example, or you might draw a child's attention to a word's internal structure in order to help them spell it. The Framework of the Primary National Strategy for Literacy<sup>3</sup> sets out objectives which can only be taught effectively if they are fully understood by the teacher.

As a teacher of English your overarching objective is to ensure that children use language as effectively as possible. Armed with a sound knowledge of English, teachers are able to understand a child's current stage of language and literacy development and offer appropriate explanations and tasks. It may seem frustrating, for example, when a young child cannot 'hear' all the letters in a word in order to spell it; with a good understanding of how the sound system of English works, teachers understand why the child finds the task difficult and know which aspects of a word to concentrate their teaching on. To a layperson a child's story may simply seem boring or repetitive; a teacher should be able not only to identify the less successful features of the text (maybe restricted vocabulary or over-reliance on a single type of sentence structure) but also to make the child aware of vocabulary and structures which are more sophisticated whilst still within their personal range. One way of doing this is to expose the child to texts which will model these attributes; good subject knowledge enables teachers to identify texts which will support their teaching. A teacher who is sensitive to the forms of language used by children will also be aware of the potential for difference between a child's own language and the language of instruction and therefore the potential for misunderstanding. S/he will, therefore, when teaching, use language structures which are accessible and at the same time conducive to the development of the child's language repertoire.

Through understanding the language of children, the language of texts and the language of the classroom, teachers are able to plan, teach and make assessments more effectively.

3 The National Literacy Strategy was adopted by almost all English Primary Schools in 1998. The Strategy has been superseded by the Primary National Strategy, but a framework of objectives remains central to literacy teaching.

## Levels of language

If you look back to the discussion of activity 0.1 on page 000, you will notice that it has been organised into three paragraphs according to the size of the language unit referred to. Paragraph 1 deals with words and smaller units. We can call this area of study **word level**. Paragraph 2 is concerned with sentences and the units through which they are structured. This area we can call **sentence level**. Paragraph 3 is concerned with ways of organising whole texts. This area of study is called **text level**. The structure of this book owes much to this classification, with a chapter dedicated to each of word and sentence level and three linked chapters on text level matters.

The three levels correspond loosely to the distinctions made by linguists<sup>4</sup> between **phonology** and **morphology** (word level), **syntax** (sentence level) and **textual studies** (text level). If you are familiar with the workings of the Primary National Strategy then you will recognise word, sentence and text level as the three organising categories of its Literacy Framework. Examining the language one level at a time makes the job of analysis and description simpler, though, of course, in practice elements of each level always occur together.

## The structure of this book

The first chapter deals with some basic information about language, language study and the English language which will provide a foundation for the detailed study in Chapters 3–7. Chapter 2 gives an outline of the way in which young children learn language and some of the theories that have been developed to account for the process. The final chapter draws on material from the preceding chapters to discuss the relationship between thinking and spoken and written language and to look a little deeper into the processes of reading **and** writing.

The order of Chapters 3–7 is a little problematic, for the very reason that although separating levels helps us to see things more clearly by focusing on a chosen theme, explanations are usually impossible without reference to other levels. So, for example, study of an aspect of sentence structure may involve reference to inflexions (word level) or how repeated use of that structure promotes cohesion (text level). In the writing of this book I felt the need to reverse the direction of these chapters more than once, before finally settling on the present order of *word, sentence, text*. The order inevitably means (as any order would) that in the earlier chapters I sometimes need to refer to elements of language which are not properly explained until later. Often this won't matter because the knowledge you already have will see you through. If there is a reference to 'nouns', for example in Chapter 3, then if you can remember the definition you learnt at school (probably 'the name of a thing') that will be enough to enable you to understand the point; you won't need to know all the detailed information in the definition on page 000. Throughout the book you will find page references in the margin for any terminology which is not explained within that section

<sup>4</sup> In this book the term 'linguist' is used in the sense of 'one who studies language' – an academic whose field is linguistics (i.e. the study of language). Linguist is a near synonym of grammarian.

of the text. If you are having trouble following an explanation it might help you to go back to pages referred to. If you are working through the book from beginning to end it should not usually be necessary for you to skip forward. If, however, you are using the book for reference or revision then you might well find all the references helpful.

The order of Chapters 3–7 might appear to imply a view that language users begin with the smallest units and work by combining them into ever larger chunks until they finally arrive at a meaningful whole. Such a view is, of course, untenable – when we speak, listen, read or write we operate at all levels simultaneously. Unfortunately, although the human mind is capable of working at all levels at once, books simply aren't.

## Using this book

Each chapter of this book contains activities which explore your implicit language knowledge and help you assess the current level of your explicit knowledge. Through reflection and further activities you will then be able to make essential areas of linguistic knowledge explicit. Most activities are discussed fully in the following reflection but in some cases it will be useful for you to compare your responses with 'correct' ones. Where this is the case the activity is marked with a symbol (✓) and you will find the answers on pages 000–000.

You may decide, on the basis of your answers to activities 0.1 and 0.2, that your knowledge of language in some areas is sufficient to allow you to skip one or more of Chapters 3–7. If you decide on this course, I would advise you to at least skim through the chapter(s) in case elements unfamiliar to you are included. There will probably be some detail which is new to you and, perhaps more importantly, some of the explanations will probably not be quite what you expect. Be prepared also to return to particular sections after doing the final assessment activity.

### **In this chapter you have seen that:**

- ▶ As proficient users of English we have an extensive implicit knowledge of its rules and patterns.
- ▶ We can increase our understanding of how English works by making our implicit knowledge explicit.
- ▶ Language can be studied at word, sentence and text levels, but in use elements of all levels come into play together.