

**Janet Maybin, Neil Mercer, Ann Hewings (eds.) *Using English*. New York. Routledge. 2007. pp. 300. ISBN 978-0-415-37682-2\***

*Using English* is an edited collection of essays divided into seven chapters plus an introduction. Each chapter begins with an introduction, contains several activities and extra readings with a further comment on each one of them, and each chapter ends with a conclusion aimed at summarizing the main points. This book is thought of as a general introduction to the study of English for students of both language and linguistics. This text has been designed to target people with no previous knowledge of linguistics since it introduces and explains basic concepts. It raises issues related to the use of the English language in different countries and contexts by both native as well as non-native speakers.

The Introduction (1-3) highlights briefly the main themes of the book and provides readers with a description of chapters. In this introductory part the editors express their attempt to reach «readers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds» (2) and claim that the information presented in their volume is not to be thought of as definitive but as «open to critical evaluation» (3).

In Chapter 1, *Everyday talk* (5-41) Janet Maybin claims that talk is a fundamental aspect of our life and although conversation has experienced little appreciation in the past, nowadays thanks to the emergence of conversation analysis more and more linguists have begun to pay attention to it. Taking linguistic and pragmatic concepts as reference points, she draws the readers' attention to the structure and function of conversation through examples of openings, small talk, closings, politeness and turn takings. Further on, she claims that language produces meanings through functions in specific contexts. The notion of context is at the core of all the examples and explanations provided in this chapter and in the rest of the book. Maybin then moves on to analyze communicative strategies and conversation styles by referring in particular to Aboriginal English and mixed gender conversations claiming that in both cases the way people use language is an expression of identity. The chapter includes two further sections on storytelling and code-switching, the aim of which is to reinforce the point made in the previous sections in relation to style and identity.

The aim of Chapter 2, *Using English to persuade* (43-81) by Adrian Beard, is to analyze two major areas in which language is used to persuade people, namely politics and advertising. The first part of the chapter deals with public speaking focusing especially on political rhetoric and Beard attempts to show how through the use of particular persuasive techniques, such as careful choice of

---

\* Questa recensione è apparsa sul sito The LINGUIST List nel 2008 <http://linguistlist.org/issues/19/19-528.html>. La presente versione è stata in parte cambiata e revisionata rispetto alla versione originale.

pronouns, repetition, ambiguity, references to countries and national characteristics, metaphors, euphemisms and contrasts, people can distinguish different kinds of messages which can signal: 1) personalization, 2) inclusiveness or 3) distance /detachment. The best way to analyze this kind of texts is to apply Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis. The second part of this chapter focuses on the notion of advertising which is characterized by a particular use of persuasive techniques and language play. The latter element is eventually covered in the following chapter. Beard attempts to show how advertising plays with emotions through the use of multimodal texts, that is, texts which combine words and pictures. He claims that although we are directly addressed in persuasive texts, in reality we are not offered the opportunity to reply and we are somehow manipulated in so many different ways. Advertisements are viewed as difficult texts which are interpreted in different ways by different people for different reasons. When analyzing advertisements, several factors should be taken into account, such as age, gender, race, and cultural contexts. The notion of context here refers to both the context of production as well as the context of reception needs.

In Chapter 3, *Language play in English* (83-121) also by Adrian Beard, the focus is on the creative use of language and language play in particular which may be interpreted in different ways (Crystal [1998]; Cook [2000]). Language play is classified into three different categories based on Cook's approach (2000), namely, linguistic form (playing with the look and sound of words), semantics (playing with meaning of words) and pragmatics (playing with the factors affecting language choices). These categories are put into practice by providing a few practical examples taken from the shop names, the headline news and songs (comic songs in particular). Section 3.5 covers the issue of *graffiti* which are considered to be another form of language play. They are bound to their situation and environment and, as such, they acquire meaning and value and achieve their intended purpose by being written on surfaces and public walls. *Graffiti* may bear upon political, social, economic or other topics and should not always be given a negative connotation because at times it is meant to be the only way to express people's identity and opinions in cases where this is not publicly possible. Beard claims that puns can play with 1) meaning, 2) sound, 3) appearance and that they can also be cross-linguistic phenomena. He also acknowledges that puns are not regarded as seriously as other forms of word play and therefore they tend to be ignored. He finally provides the readers with short analyses of puns in private texts, such as in an email exchange between colleagues and chat rooms and insists upon the need to give more importance to puns and their potential in terms of language play which «is everywhere around us» (111).

In Chapter 4, *Literary practices in English* (123-66), Mike Baynham and Janet Maybin focus their attention on the use of written English in order to show how «literary practices in English vary

across different social and cultural contexts» (151). This chapter also includes a section on the differences between spoken and written English by highlighting the major differences. Although this distinction may seem to be quite straightforward, in reality it is no longer so clearly defined due to the growth of technologies and electronic communication. Besides, spoken language is more complex than it may appear especially in terms of grammatical relationships as also acknowledged by Halliday (1987). The examples provided are taken from both email messages and chat room conversations and are aimed at making readers aware of shifts from formal to informal language so that literary practices from both written and spoken language are mixed together. The authors suggest that in order to analyze and fully understand any kind of text written in English, readers need to take into account the context in which it is set. This is important because literary practices are likely to change as a result of both technological and social changes. This chapter includes some interesting references to social semiotics, mainly in the work carried out by Kress – Van Leeuwen (2001), claiming that the preference for a specific code does not only reflect a particular language community, but it may be a result of a variety of factors, such as «geopolitical ideology», «pragmatic convenience» or «current fashion» among others (140). Stress is laid upon the importance of literary mediation which does not only include language matters, but also technological and other generic conventions.

In Chapter 5, *English at work* (167-203), Neil Mercer and Almut Koester focus on both spoken and written English used in the work environment. The main assumption here is that language is used as a ‘tool’, as also acknowledged by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978). The authors claim that this kind of working language is characterized by its own specialized vocabulary and specialized texts and can be used in two different social events, namely English among co-workers and working with the public, which are the two main sections of this chapter. In the first section, stress is laid upon the fact that nowadays English is, *ipso facto*, the *lingua franca par excellence* in business communication and, as it used differently and adapted by many non-native speakers all around the globe, English is evolving into new varieties called pidgins or New Englishes. Different views are highlighted as to whether problems in using English in intercultural business negotiations are related exclusively to differences in the speakers' cultural background (Marriott [1995]; Poncini [2002]). In the second section, *working with the public*, the authors address the issue of how professionals communicate things to lay people and highlight four main reasons for misunderstanding between these two opposite groups: 1) different cultural backgrounds, 2) high technical nature of subject matters, 3) low proficiency in language and 4) power and control. Their findings lead them to conclude that the kind of language used at work fulfils two important functions, namely the ideational and the interpersonal functions as defined by Halliday (1978).

Chapter 6, *Market forces speak English* (205-44) by Sharon Goodman, deals with the phenomenon of the English language border crossing in a world where socio-political and economic changes have a dramatic impact on the kind of English used in different contexts. Goodman focuses on the informalization and marketization of the English language border crossing. She claims that English is becoming more and more informalized in many public and professional contexts and this can be interpreted either as a sign of friendly environments or as a lack of professional distance since «informality can serve to build and maintain social bonds» whereas «formality [...] can be used as a resource to create and maintain professional relationships» (208). In the last few years language has been considerably simplified by institutions in order to make it more accessible to the public and this tendency, in Fairclough's (1992) opinion, mainly reflects two clear and distinct strategies, namely: 1) a form of democratization of power towards the public as well as 2) a clever way to disguise more subtle and implicit power control over the public. As far as the marketization of the English language is concerned, there seems to be a close link between political speeches and language used for selling in the field of advertising. This implies a crossing from the field of advertising to the field of information. Nowadays, political institutions are, *ipso facto*, turning nowadays to commercial advertising strategies in order to: 1) better persuade the public and 2) sell them their policies. This phenomenon is so widely spread that even employees working in commercial and political institutions are trained on how to use language at work. Both informalization and marketization of the English language question the issue of agency, that is, «who does what to whom» (230). Goodman concludes that informalized and marketized forms of English may be viewed as positive or negative depending on our personal opinion and experience. Nevertheless, it is fundamental to note that while these institutions employ particular strategies to persuade the public and sell them their services, products or policies, people are not always passive or powerless and they are now developing other strategies to resist them.

In Chapter 7, *Making judgements about English* (245-80), Donald Mackinnon explores the issue of how people judge the quality of the English language. In this chapter there is no linguistic approach to the issue since Mackinnon is not himself a linguist but trained in English language and philosophy. After listing a series of possible categories of judgments, he focuses on that of correctness and he briefly analyses three more categories connected to it, namely appropriateness, social judgments and offensive language. The judgments reported in this chapter are taken from a variety of sources and are bound to their own contexts. Most of them refer to British English although they could easily apply to other English-speaking countries all around the world. Among the most important criteria used to judge the correct or wrong use of English, Mackinnon mentions 1) the frequency of occurrence, 2) appeals to authority, 3) disapproval, 4) logic, 5) conservative or

innovative views on language and 6) etymology. Nevertheless, some linguists substitute the notion of correctness with that of appropriateness of usage in terms of informal or formal style. According to Mackinnon this notion is not so convincing as that of correctness although he acknowledges that both notions raise more or less the same problems. According to Mackinnon, the speaker's social position seems to be a crucial factor when judging the quality of English usage. Spelling, for instance, is an important social and educational marker in English-speaking countries. Finally, one of the strongest judgments about the quality of English refers to offensive language and, more precisely, to swear words and discriminatory language. Both categories are, in Mackinnon's opinion, bound to their context of use and their «offensiveness lies in the abusive intent, not in the words themselves» (273).

The volume has been described as «an invaluable introduction to the study of English for students of language and linguistics». I would add that it might also be helpful to scholars and anyone interested in the use(s) of the English language and its varieties. This volume is undoubtedly a handy and reliable guide to the use of English in different contexts and one of its major strengths is its practical nature. Theoretical notions are indeed very well related to practice and this renders it a very useful resource to English language use. Thanks to both the variety of sources used in this volume as well as the topics covered in the extra readings, the readers are provided with a multitude of views aiming to construct an enlarged vision of techniques and strategies employed in the use of English to fulfil different purposes.

This book is a perfect example of active reading where readers are given the opportunity to play an active role. They can predict information, make inferences and even draw conclusions from both readings as well as activities covered in each chapter. Readers are also given the chance to compare and contrast the findings and the views expressed in this book with different contexts or languages. The activities included in each chapter, indeed, are very useful as they allow readers to think about the issues and put them into practice.

The volume is engaging, challenging and well documented. It covers a variety of linguistic concepts ranging from general linguistics to applied linguistics, from sociolinguistics to pragmatics. Readers are therefore offered a wide range of concepts and notions for which a short gloss is provided.

Regrettably, there are a few minor deficiencies which should be pointed out. Firstly, it would have probably been more helpful to either focus on fewer concepts or provide more in-depth explanations for them (even by adding a comprehensive glossary at the end of the book). Key terms are highlighted in bold and explained straightaway in order to facilitate comprehension. It is felt, however, that these short explanations (usually a line or two) are not sufficient for people with no

previous knowledge of linguistic concepts, such as pragmatics or critical discourse analysis. Secondly, some theories and concepts lack proper references to authors or scholars who have developed and/or adopted them. This kind of information is fundamental in order to provide readers with a possibility to search for more in-depth details and to be able to associate particular notions to specific scholars, studies, currents of thought and/or disciplines. Thirdly, the extra readings are very interesting but it would have probably been better to have more detailed analyses of them right at the end so that readers do not have to switch back and forth to read the authors' comments on them. Furthermore, more detailed analyses should have been provided in order to better guide people with no previous linguistic knowledge into ways to look at strategies and techniques of language use.

Nevertheless, despite these minor shortcomings, this volume is thoughtfully compiled and written in simple language.

Vanessa Leonardi  
Università degli Studi di Ferrara  
Dipartimento di Scienze Umane  
Via Savonarola, 27  
I – 44100 Ferrara  
[vanessa.leonardi@unife.it](mailto:vanessa.leonardi@unife.it)

## References

- Cook, G. (2000) *Language Play, Language Learning*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1998) *Language Play*. Harmondsworth. Penguin.
- Fairclough, N. (ed.) (1992) *Critical Language Awareness*. London. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis*. London. Longman.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London. Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1987) Spoken and written modes of meaning. In Horowitz, R., Samuels, S.J. (eds.) *Comprehending Oral and Written Language*. Orlando, FL. Academic Press. 55-82.
- Kress, G., Van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. London. Edward Arnold.
- Marriott, H. (1995) Deviations in an intercultural business negotiation. In Firth, A. (ed.) *The Discourse of Negotiation: Studies of Language in the Workplace*. London. Pergamon. 247-68.
- Poncini, G. (2002) Investigating discourse at business meetings with multicultural participation. In *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. 40. 345-73.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. London. Harvard University Press.