

# Editorial

This issue of *ET* has a special focus on lexical variation, or the study of the extent to which vocabulary differences embody social differentiation. Although the elicitation of lexical data was the main target of traditional dialect surveys such as the *Survey of English Dialects*, lexical variation has in many ways been the ‘Cinderella’ of variationist sociolinguistics. Labov’s famous definition of the linguistic variable as ‘two or more ways of saying the same thing’ (in his classic *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, 1972) might seem to preclude analysis of semantic or even lexical variation. Nevertheless, some recent studies have demonstrated that lexical variation can be seen to correlate with social factors such as age, gender and class as well as region, and that speakers are aware of this. Llamas (2007: 10), for instance, reports ‘two young male Middlesbrough informants arguing that they would never use the variant *bonny* for the notion word “attractive”, it being “an old person’s word”, and that they would never use *canny-looking*, it being used by girls, opting themselves to use *nectar*, *sweet*, *fit* and *lush*’. These participants appear to consider *bonny*, *canny-looking*, *nectar*, *sweet*, *fit* and *lush* as ‘ways of saying the same thing’ which are socially stratified.

This issue of *ET* explores the relation between the social and the semantic in case studies of dialect lexis and vocabulary change. Joan Beal and Lourdes Burbano-Elizondo discuss how the traditional dialect terms *lad* and *lass* are still used in the modern urban dialects of Newcastle upon Tyne and Sunderland. Philip Durkin asks ‘What is it about variation in word forms and word meanings that presents such challenges for empirical research?’ Javier Ruano García investigates how nineteenth-century Lancashire dialect literature contributed to Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary*. Jonathan Robinson tells us about the lexical treasure trove discovered by the *BBC Voices* project and the challenge of making this available to the public. Justyna Robinson asks whether sociolinguistic methods can shed light on semantic variation and change, with particular reference to the word *gay*. From further afield Brian Poole, a regular contributor to *ET*, discusses recent lexical developments in Singapore English. Using his status as long term participant-observer in Singapore and comparative information from the BNC (British National Corpus) he points to subtle differences in usage (adjectives, verbs, fillers, collocations and specialised terminology) between the two varieties as English comes of age in Southeast Asia.

The inspiration for this volume of *English Today* came from a workshop held at Sociolinguistics Symposium 18, which took place at the University of Southampton in September 2010, with the aim of exploring ways in which lexical and semantic variation and change might be analysed. The papers by Beal and Burbano-Elizondo, Jonathan Robinson and Justyna Robinson were all presented in a preliminary form at this workshop, along with a paper by Clive Upton and Ann Thompson about evidence for innovation in regional lexis provided by the *BBC Voices Project*. Philip Durkin acted as discussant to the workshop and brings to this volume his experience as an etymologist and lexicographer. Although he was not involved in the workshop, Javier Ruano García contributes an important historical perspective to the volume with his account of dialect literature in Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary*. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of all those who attended the workshop at SS18, and also to thank Kathryn Allan, Karen Corrigan and Clive Upton for acting as peer reviewers for this special issue: their helpful and constructive comments are greatly appreciated.

*From David Graddol and Rajend Mesthrie:* This issue of *ET* will be the last under the current editorship, as our five-year terms (2008–2012) as co-editors now come to an end. We were tasked with continuing the legacy of *ET*’s founding editor, Tom McArthur, in fostering research and writing on English in multicultural settings in a fast-changing global world. Our fruitful co-editorship with Kingsley Bolton between 2008 and 2011 and the special issue co-edited with him this year (*ET* 111) resulted in 20 issues whose vast geographical, cultural and thematic coverage fulfilled this task – we would like to think – rather well. We now hand over to, and welcome, the new *ET* editor as of 2013, Professor Clive Upton of Leeds University, who will be setting up a new editorial team. Rajend Mesthrie will act as an interim adviser for the next twelve months.

*Guest editor Joan Beal, and the ET editors*

## References

- Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Llamas, C. 2007. ‘A new methodology: data elicitation for regional and social language variation studies.’ *York Papers in Linguistics*, pp. 138–63. *The editors*

The editorial policy of *English Today* is to provide a focus or forum for all sorts of news and opinion from around the world. The points of view of individual writers are as a consequence their own, and do not reflect the opinion of the editorial board. In addition, wherever feasible, *ET* generally leaves unchanged the orthography (normally British or American) and the usage of individual contributors, although the editorial style of the journal itself is that of Cambridge University Press.