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Accent biases in childhood

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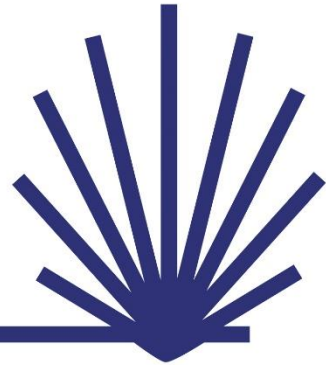
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English Linguistics on the Way: Expanding Horizons



Santiago de Compostela | 1-4 September 2025

8th Conference of the International Society for the Linguistics of English

Book of Abstracts



Table of contents

PLENARY LECTURES

Unbroken sequences of language transmission and the child as ‘linguistic historian’ <i>Alexandra D’Arcy</i>	10
Connecting the dots: Drawing children’s attention to form in an EFL setting <i>María del Pilar García Mayo</i>	11
English linguistics in the next quarter century: Prospects, problems, promises <i>Bernd Kortmann</i>	12
<i>what the seid Sere Harry entendith to do therin I knowe not</i> : Claims of no knowledge in the history of English <i>Daniela Landert</i>	13
The surprising English language <i>Graeme Trousdale</i>	14

PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP 1

Dialect death and rebirth: Exploring obsolescence in the traditional dialects of Britain, Ireland and Canada <i>Karen P. Corrigan – Laura Rupp</i>	16
Tracking obsolescence and persistence: Inversion in embedded questions in Irish English and beyond <i>Carolina P. Amador-Moreno* – Karen P. Corrigan** – Mary Robinson**</i>	19
Obsolescence in non-standard subject-verb agreement in England: A dialectological perspective <i>Claire Childs</i>	21
<i>There’s a one for sale in Northumberland</i> : Exploring the obsolescence of an indefinite marker in North-East England <i>Beth Cole* – Karen P. Corrigan* – Laura Rupp**</i>	23
Morphosyntactic obsolescence across the Shetland Islands <i>E. Jamieson</i>	25
Phonological variation and change in the MEAT and FOOT lexical sets in Northern Irish English <i>Warren Maguire</i>	27
Obsolescence in Ontario: A twentieth-century watershed in Canada <i>Sali A. Tagliamonte</i>	29

WORKSHOP 2

Agreement in English: Unlocking the secrets of grammatical harmony <i>Yolanda Fernández-Pena – Javier Pérez-Guerra</i>	31
Agreement at the crossroads of syntax and complexity: A quantitative account of hybrid verbal agreement with collective nouns <i>David Hernández-Coalla</i>	32
Subject-verb number agreement in flux: Structural complexity, proximity and linguistic regularization in English varieties <i>Yolanda Fernández-Pena – Javier Pérez-Guerra</i>	33

Do native authors agree more than non-native professional writers? <i>Elizaveta Smirnova</i>	35
<i>Liverpool were superior tonight</i> : Variation and change of verbal agreement patterns in L2 idiolects <i>Alexander Lakaw – Mikko Laitinen</i>	36
Non-verbal plural number agreement in English: A multi-perspective approach <i>Karolina Rudnicka</i>	37
WORKSHOP 3	
Expanding Horizons – Expanding Circles – Expanding Englishes <i>Sofia Rüdiger – Jakob R. E. Leimgruber</i>	39
Words of Japanese origin in the <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> across the history of Japanese English <i>Ariane Macalinga Borlongan* – Danica Salazar** – Zen Sato* – Yukio Tono*</i>	41
Explorations on the emerging variety of English in Oman <i>Kristine de Leon – Edward Jay M. Quinto</i>	42
Phonology of Indonesian English <i>Fransisca Kristanti – Shirley N. Dita</i>	43
Expanding beyond variety? Challenges of categorizing and structurally describing English(es) in geolocated social media data <i>Lisa Lehnen – Ninja Schulz – Carolin Biewer</i>	44
Expanding horizons in World Englishes research: Introducing the xE+ Network <i>Jakob R. E. Leimgruber – Sofia Rüdiger</i>	45
English in Brazil: Initiating corpus-based research from a World Englishes perspective <i>Philipp Meer</i>	46
Expanding English in an “Outer Circle French” territory: Postcolonial and global language competition in Mauritius <i>Susanne Mühleisen</i>	48
Register variation in the Expanding Circle Englishes: Does it exist? <i>Chisato Oda</i>	49
English as and for development in Timor-Leste: Perspectives of young Timorese professionals <i>Edward Jay M. Quinto</i>	50
WORKSHOP 4	
Building historical corpora of World Englishes <i>Guyanne Wilson* – Danica Salazar** – Kate Wild***</i>	51
Diachronic Corpora of Philippine English and Japanese English <i>Ariane Macalinga Borlongan – Yuuki Ino</i>	53
Introducing the <i>Corpus of Historical Indian English</i> <i>Robert Fuchs – Tjorven Halves</i>	54
Postcolonial internationalisms in the OED: A new stratum of the English lexicon? <i>Christian Mair</i>	56
The <i>Oxford Corpus of Historical English</i> : Developing a new global resource for research into modern and historical English <i>Danica Salazar – Kate Wild</i>	57
Genre development, comparability and representativeness: Rethinking the structure of diachronic corpora using insights from the compilation of the <i>Diachronic Corpus of Hong Kong English</i> (DC-HKE) <i>Ninja Schulz – Carina Stick – Aditya Upadhyaya – Lisa Lehnen – Carolin Biewer</i>	58

Beyond newspapers: Increasing the range of written text-types in the <i>Historical Corpus of English in Trinidad</i> <i>Guyanne Wilson</i>	59
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GENERAL SESSION

Humour as a strategy of denigrating dialect speakers: Investigating the historical enregisterment of non-standard American English <i>Lieselotte Anderwald</i>	61
Bridging Psychophysiology and Linguistics: Insights into Japanese students' English reading and anxiety using eye tracking and GSR <i>Andrew Atkins</i>	62
Gamification in the language classroom: Investigating its impact on learner motivation <i>Kevin Ballou</i>	63
<i>Don't worry, I will take care of this</i> : First date payment negotiation sequences and gender in Nigeria <i>Anne Barron*</i> – <i>Ezekiel Olajimbati**</i> – <i>Ayo Osisanwo***</i> – <i>Akin Odebunmi***</i>	65
The tortoise and the hare: Evolving modal constructions in Singapore and British English <i>Alessandro Basile – Thomas Van Hoey</i>	67
Mutual predictability of English compound prominence and compound semantics <i>Melanie J. Bell*</i> – <i>Dominic Schmitz**</i> – <i>Ingo Plag**</i>	69
Probabilistic variability in clausal verb complementation in Inner and Outer Circle varieties of English <i>Anastasia Beloborodova</i>	71
Form-to-function mapping in British and American grammar <i>Eva Berlage</i>	73
Exploring innovations in the religious prose: Ephemeral CCC adverbial subordinators as a case in point <i>Cristina Blanco-García</i>	75
The passive alternation in spoken North American English <i>Axel Bohmann</i>	77
<i>They tried their hardest to find evidence of regional variation</i> : Superlative Objoide Constructions in British and American English <i>Tamara Bouso – Marianne Hundt</i>	79
A data-driven approach to object omission in English transitive verbs <i>Vladimir Buskin</i>	81
Evaluating the applicability of Radial Network Theory to semantic loss: The cases of <i>anful</i> , <i>about</i> and <i>so</i> <i>Hilke Cenppens – Hendrik De Smet</i>	83
<i>I don't know why I ever done it</i> : Preterite lexical <i>do</i> variation in a sample of colonial Late Modern English <i>Madeleine Clews</i>	85
The <i>YouTube Corpus of Singapore English Podcasts</i> <i>Steven Coats – Carmelo Alessandro Basile – Cameron Morin – Robert Fuchs</i>	87
150 years of <i>ain't</i> : Innovation in African American English <i>Patricia Cukor-Avila*</i> – <i>Guy Bailey**</i> – <i>Juan Salinas**</i>	89
Propagation of structured variation across non-contiguous speaker groups: Intensifiers in FL English spoken in Germany <i>Julia Darydova</i>	91

A corpus linguistic perspective on error detection and correction in English academic texts: There's an AI for that? <i>Katharina Deckert</i>	92
A preliminary study of the sociophonetics of word-final /t/ in <i>The Young Offenders</i> <i>Sara Díaz Sierra</i>	94
An overview of locative prefixoids: Modeling directional antonyms in a constructional network <i>Kim-Kristin Droste</i>	95
“Shaping the future” between the EU and China: The perceptions of the New Silk Road in European diplomatic discourses <i>Sophie Eyssette</i>	97
Subordinate interrogatives and embedded inversion in historical Irish (and British) English: Evidence from the 1641 Depositions and the CED Depositions <i>Teresa Fanego</i>	99
Requests in Nigerian and British English conversational interactions: A corpus-based approach <i>Ilka Flöck – Omwu Inya – Anne Barron</i>	101
Informal access to English among Italian university students: A sociolinguistic profile <i>Maicol Formentelli – Elisa Ghia – Maria Pavesi – Elena Ballante</i>	103
Secondary CLIL students’ performance of the cognitive discourse function “explore”: Examining the role of epistemic modality in reasoning <i>Maria del Pilar Gerns Jiménez-Villarejo</i>	105
<i>We can work it out</i> : Using Corpus Linguistics for language and translation learning <i>Adriana González – Fausto Luna – César Aguilar</i>	107
South African English – A question of authenticity <i>Rebekka Haerter</i>	108
To whom does <i>they</i> refer? Comparing LLMs and trained human annotators in pronoun resolution <i>Carlos Hartmann</i>	110
Late Modern input to Southern Hemisphere Englishes <i>Raymond Hickey</i>	112
Diasporic creole in urban dialect contact: The case of Toronto Jamaican English <i>Lars Hinrichs</i>	114
<i>More interesting, the closer you look</i> : English ‘reversed’ comparative correlatives from a cognitive perspective <i>Jakob Horsch</i>	115
Tracking the diachronic development of an NPN constructional network <i>Lara Höttecke</i>	118
Private verbs in interactive discourse in contemporary American English <i>Yoko Iyeiri – Michiko Yaguchi</i>	120
Focus Fronting in English and Spanish: Feature Inheritance revisited with Split INFL <i>Ángel L. Jiménez-Fernández – Jiahui Yang</i>	121
English in the classroom: Teacher perceptions and language boundaries in Guyanese primary schools <i>Emma Kainz</i>	123
Did simple forms change meaning as <i>BE Ving</i> came peaking? <i>Juliette Kayenbergh – Hendrik De Smet</i>	125

[S]ince this is an issue of foreign policy I'm going to speak in English: English as a Lingua Franca in public political discourse <i>Veronika Kilian</i>	127
A corpus approach to (<i>not</i>) <i>that</i> hedging in English <i>Jihye Kim – Jong-Bok Kim</i>	129
Not (<i>as</i>) <i>easy as pie</i> : Factors determining the omission of the first correlative in frozen similes <i>Gabriele Knappe</i>	131
Changing conceptualizations of social roles: Recent change in American English address terms and language use in service encounters <i>Svenja Kranich – Hanna Bruns</i>	133
Morpho-syntactic patterns across nine varieties of English: Insights from the Bamberg Survey of Language Variation and Change <i>Manfred Krug – Fabian Vetter</i>	134
Lexical innovation in digital social networks: From actuation to diffusion <i>Mikko Laitinen – Masoud Fatemi – Mehrdad Salimi – Kimmo Juntunen</i>	136
On conditionals in spoken and written English and Spanish: Exploring the correlation between discourse functions and morphosyntactic features <i>Cristina Lastres-López</i>	138
Hedged performatives in spoken American English: Recent change and variation in their use <i>Lucie Latouche – Samantha Laporte – Ilse Depraetere</i>	140
Orthographic evidence for Older Scots long front vowel changes <i>Pia Lehečka</i>	142
<i>Thank you, Suren. I'm very grateful for the offer and for everything you did for me.</i> Expressions of gratitude in the English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora community <i>Anke Lensch</i>	144
Modal sentence adverbs of certainty from LModE to PDE: <i>Certainly</i> and <i>definitely</i> <i>Diana Lewis</i>	146
Investigating the use of the conjunction <i>and</i> in English prenominal adjective sequences <i>Arne Lohmann – Sarah Clart</i>	148
Nonfinite clauses in varieties of English: Conspiracy for convergence? <i>Christian Mair</i>	150
Experimental evidence on facilitating factors in non-native processing of English compounds <i>Frane Malenica* – Emilija Mustapić Malenica* – Mojca Kompara Lukančič** – Jelena Gugić*** – Jakov Proroković*</i>	151
Exploring English sensory light nouns: From data to cognition, and back <i>Roberta Mastrofini – Carla Vergaro</i>	153
The intersection of register and complexity: Subject pronoun expression in Singapore English <i>Gemma McCarley – George Walkden</i>	155
(th)-variation in Nigerian English: A large-scale corpus phonetic study <i>Philipp Meer</i>	158
The acquisition of <i>-ing</i> -complements in British and American children <i>Marc Meisenzahl</i>	160
The emergence of English <i>-ing</i> -complements as result of broader syntactic changes <i>Marc Meisenzahl – George Walkden</i>	162
Identity construction of engineers in websites: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis approach <i>Silvia Molina-Plaza</i>	165

Updating the <i>Coruña Corpus</i> : Advances in the <i>Corpus of English Texts on Physics</i> <i>Leida Maria Monaco – Isabel Moskowich</i>	167
Where do butterflies and ants meet? Salient vs. frequent variants of habitual <i>used to</i> in the statistical modelling of English variety types <i>Jakob Neels* – Arne Lohmann* – Sven Leuckert**</i>	169
Asymmetries in the nineteenth-century courtroom – Talking about spoken threats in Old Bailey trials <i>Theresa Neumaier</i>	171
Bayesian multivariate analysis of grammatical variability in spoken and written English as a Lingua Franca <i>Chunyuan Nie</i>	173
Morphological insights into the phonological analysis of variation /n/–/ŋ/ in eighteenth-century pronouncing dictionaries <i>Mar Nieves-Fernández</i>	175
Structural priming and preposition omission in fragment responses to questions <i>Joanna Nykiel</i>	177
The role of adjuncts in the development of copula verbs in the history of English <i>Jerzy Nykiel – Kristian A. Rusten</i>	179
<i>If I were sorry</i> : Describing <i>sorry</i> in repair in Australian and Canadian English <i>Cara Penny Williams – Michol F. Hoffman – James A. Walker</i>	180
From condition to construction, <i>if at all</i> : Uncovering the status of an English fragment <i>Javier Pérez-Guerra – Yolanda Fernández-Pena</i>	182
Revisiting the expression of the perfect in Irish English: A comparative study of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland <i>Marina Pérez-Martín</i>	184
Spectral dynamics of monophthong vowels in German learners of English <i>Nicholas Peterson</i>	186
<i>The mother of the country doesn't even speak Finnish</i> : The changing role of English and its relationship to the national languages of Finland <i>Elizabeth Peterson – Marika Hall</i>	188
Cognitive styles versus social circles in the Early Modern English progressive construction <i>Peter Petré</i>	189
Synthetic or natural? Tracing the semantic evolution of smell-related adjectives in American English <i>Daniela Pettersson-Traba</i>	191
[N <i>is</i>] focalizing sequences in the initial field: Pragmatics and ordering preferences <i>Mathilde Pinson</i>	193
Always a female entrepreneur and never a male entrepreneur: A corpus linguistic analysis <i>Ramneek Kaur Rai</i>	195
<i>#JustSaying</i> – Tracking constructional change in online communication <i>Paula Rautionaho – Masoud Fatemi – Mikko Laitinen</i>	197
Attitudes and ideologies in primary education in Cameroon <i>Giuliana Regnoli</i>	199
Sweet tastes and sweet voices: Sensory word ratings meet use in discourse <i>Esme Richardson-Owen – Carita Paradis</i>	201
Fronted /u/ but no /u/-fronting? Investigating /u/ in an older Canadian community <i>Anastasia Riehl – Chantal Cheung – Corey Martin</i>	203

Exploring the lexicon of video game jargon as a product of informal language learning <i>Yonay Rodríguez Rodríguez</i>	205
Accent biases in childhood <i>Sergio Rojo*</i> – <i>Kathleen McCarthy**</i> – <i>Anna Caunt***</i> – <i>Caroline Flocia***</i> – <i>Joost van de Weijer****</i> – <i>Carita Paradis****</i>	207
Five verbs, one pattern: Insights from corpus data on complementation <i>Raquel P. Romasanta</i>	209
Accent bias and equity: Implications for telephone triage <i>Evelyn N. Roth</i>	211
Effects of donor dialect and substrate: Laryngeal phenomena in Pākehā versus Māori New Zealand English <i>Erika Sajtós</i>	213
Morphosemantic analysis of English denominal converted verbs with particles (NV-Ps) through a frame-semantic approach <i>José A. Sánchez Fajardo</i> – <i>Akiko Nagano</i>	215
Which English do you (think you) use? Divergent intuitions and norms among advanced students of English in eight Expanding Circle countries <i>Julia Schlüter</i> – <i>Anouschka Foltz</i> – <i>Alaa Alahmadi</i> – <i>Fariba Chamani</i> – <i>Monika Kavalir</i> – <i>Philipp Meer</i> – <i>Min Lim Ryoo</i>	217
Syntactic change in negative interrogatives was complex, wasn't it? <i>Ulrike Schneider</i>	219
Complexity is complicated: Variable past marking in South Atlantic English <i>Daniel Schreier</i>	220
<i>How landmark is this?</i> On the spread of N > A category shifts in Late Modern English <i>Xin Sennrich</i> – <i>Marianne Hundt</i>	222
Global trends, local patterns: A corpus-based study of <i>end up</i> constructions across World Englishes <i>Mario Serrano-Losada</i>	223
English non-native accents in Russia: Influence of some local indigenous languages (Tatar, Bashkir, Udmurt) <i>Ilshat Sharafutdinov</i>	225
"Of course not," she said matter-of-factly: The historical development of reporting clause constructions with <i>matter-of-factly</i> <i>Reijiro Shibusaki</i>	227
Negative and positive polarity violations: An acceptability rating study of English <i>Balázs Surányi</i> – <i>Máté Gulás</i>	229
The meaning and function of early English <i>do</i> -support: Using clues from a northern Italian dialect <i>Nicola Swinburne</i>	231
Long term variation in the complementation of <i>remember</i> , <i>forget</i> and <i>expect</i> in Late Modern English: The interaction between individual and population <i>Nicola Swinburne*</i> – <i>Peter Petrě*</i> – <i>Hubert Cuyckens**</i>	233
Why the dative alternation has been around for 1,000 years <i>Benedikt Szendrői</i> – <i>Ruiming Ma</i> – <i>Thomas Van Hoey</i>	235
Pathways of specialization in semantic change: English adverbs of approximation <i>Sali A. Tagliamonte</i> – <i>Gemma McCarley</i>	237

Productivity and prototypicality: A cross-varietal investigation of the null subject alternation <i>Iván Tamaredo</i>	239
The dynamics of probabilistic grammar: Investigating grammatical alternations across different registers through the lens of grammaticalization <i>Claudia Thorwarth</i>	241
Backgrounding and reduction on a grammaticalization cline: Realizations of <i>sort/ kind of X</i> in spoken American English <i>David Tizón-Couto – David Lorenz</i>	243
Microaggression: A mismatch between illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect? <i>Célia Vamiller* – Ilse Depraetere* – Nicolas Ruytenbeek**</i>	245
The English past perfect progressive and discourse relations <i>Naoaki Wada – Haruka Shimura</i>	247
Language gatekeepers and the implicit transmission of linguistic norms <i>Anja Wanner</i>	249
The impact of language prestige on phonological confidence in Jamaican children <i>Tanyia Joy Wilkins Miller</i>	251
Human vs. AI-generated texts for inclusive and sustainable tourism: A corpus-assisted analysis <i>Federico Zauza – Silvia Cavalieri</i>	253
<i>go to Spain in summer</i> or <i>go in summer to Spain</i> : Modelling PP-order in the history of English <i>Eva Zehentner</i>	255
<i>On behalf of</i> complex prepositions in the history of English <i>Eva Zehentner – Yoko Iyeyi</i>	257
The status of language(s): Multilingualism and English as a Lingua Franca in the Swiss anglophone diaspora <i>Ronja Zimmermann – Rebekka Haerter – Daniel Schreier</i>	259
The probabilistic grammar of rap: A corpus study of future temporal reference <i>Roman Zingel</i>	261

POSTER SESSION

Searching for Old English influence in Old Norse homilies through the lens of verb-initial word order and cohesive vs. contrastive conjunctions <i>Karoline Aastrup-Köhler</i>	264
An analysis of the awareness level of English loanwords and proficiency levels of English in an EFL context <i>Sumie Akutsu</i>	265
Exploring personal pronoun declaration in digital social media networks <i>Rabel Albicker</i>	267
Cognitive Linguistics' role in analysing how immigrant stand-up comedians construct their racial and ethnic identity <i>Idania Rosa Castro Bravo</i>	269
The status of FOOT-STRUT vowels in Northern England: A sample study in young adults <i>Daria Eliseeva</i>	271
Generational variation in intensifiers in Michigan English <i>Annan Kirk – Suzanne Wagner</i>	273
Metaphors of HATRED from Anglo-Saxon to Present-day English <i>Julia Reinhardt-Beiersdorfer</i>	275

Accent biases in childhood

*Sergio Rojo** – *Kathleen McCarthy*** – *Anna Caunt**** – *Caroline Floccia**** – *Joost van de Weijer***** – *Carita Paradis*****

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Sociolinguistic research shows that people judge others not only based on what they say, but also on how they say it. For instance, people from the UK consider a person speaking with a standard British accent as more suitable to be a lawyer than someone with a London accent (Levon et al. 2021). It was thought that such associations between accents and personal traits emerge in adolescence (e.g. Labov 1964). However, recent research (e.g. Dossey et al. 2020) demonstrates that children's language attitudes develop in childhood. This study investigates the factors that drive the development of accent biases in childhood. It focuses on whether this development depends on (i) the type of accent used as stimuli (i.e. regional vs. second-language accents), (ii) exposure to linguistic diversity, and (iii) accent intelligibility and categorization.

Data from 249 children between the ages of 7 and 11 years was collected. Of these, 136 were from Southwest England and 113 from London. All children were native speakers of English. Children who spoke more than one language used or heard English the most. The accents included in the study were: Standard Southern British English, Southwest British English, London English, and French- and Chinese-accented English. The battery of tests consisted of five tasks. One was a questionnaire for the caregivers to gauge their children's exposure to linguistic diversity and provide demographic information. The children completed the four remaining tasks:

- intelligibility task (speech in noise)
- verbal-guise task (e.g. how smart they think a speaker of a given accent is)
- accent classification task, where they group multiple speakers of each accent
- British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS), a receptive vocabulary task.

London children were exposed to more linguistic diversity than those from the Southwest of England. Both groups of children scored similarly in the BPVS. Results from the intelligibility task show that task performance improved with age across locations at comparable rates. In the verbal-guise task, the smart and hardworking questions showed an age, accent, and city interaction. In Southwest England, children's ratings between the ages of 7.0 and 9.5 years did not differ across accents. It is only after this age that they showed signs of accent biases. In London, the youngest participants already showed accent biases. In the classification task, children in the Southwest of England became better at correctly categorizing accents with age, but London children's performance did not vary with age. Younger children from London outperformed their peers from Southwest England. The age at which the scores of participants from Southwest England start to match those from London was 9.5 years.

In conclusion, the development of accent biases is argued to depend on the ability to categorize accents, but not on what kind of accents they are or the ability to understand them. Furthermore, children's categorization skills are likely the result of exposure to linguistic diversity, creating an indirect link between exposure to language variation and accent biases.

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