

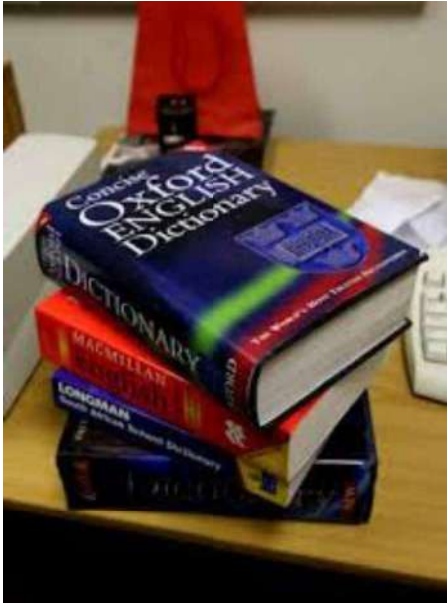


## Why don't we all speak standard English?

Jenny Cheshire

Queen Mary University of London





**Standard English** is the dialect of English that

- has nothing to do with pronunciation
- is normally used in writing
- is normally spoken by educated native speakers
- is taught to non-native speakers studying English

Peter Trudgill (1992) *Introducing Language and Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

## Spoken English



- Typically face-to-face (interactive)
- Unplanned
- Can't be unsaid

## Discourse markers: Stan

**of course** I got called up . for the army . when I was eighteen . and er by then I'd become a fully fledged huh terrible amateur magician . and when I had to go and register and the chap said "what would you like to go in?" I said "Ensa" which was the entertainments . unit . so I finished up in infantry **of course** that was er ...but I got into the regimental concert party . erm eventually I was trained as an army signaller . and er . **course** when I got called up the war had just finished [Interviewer: right] so I thought "**oh well** that's . **you know** that's a bit safe" but **of course** the war with Japan was still going on . and we were being trained . to fight the Japanese . how they thought we were gonna get out there . quickly to do it I don't know well then **of course** they . dropped the terrible bomb and finished that .



1. **of course** I got called up . for the army . when I was eighteen .
2. and er by then I'd become a fully fledged huh terrible amateur magician .
3. and when I had to go and register and the chap said "what would you like to go in?"
4. I said "Ensa" which was the entertainments . unit .
5. so I finished up in infantry **of course** that was er ...but I got into the regimental concert party .
6. erm eventually I was trained as an army signaller . and er .
7. **course** when I got called up the war had just finished [Interviewer: right] so I thought "**oh well** that's . **you know** that's a bit safe"
8. but **of course** the war with Japan was still going on . and we were being trained . to fight the Japanese .
9. how they thought we were gonna get out there . quickly to do it I don't know
10. **well** then **of course** they . dropped the terrible bomb and finished that .



## Group frequencies for *of course* and *like*

	<i>(of) course</i> N per 1000	<i>like</i> N per 1000
Hackney 70+	<b>0.48</b> (45/92,859)	<b>1.78</b> (165/92,859)
Hackney 16-19	<b>0.05</b> (15/309,378)	<b>14.78</b> (4547/309,378)

---

linguistics-research-digest.blogspot.com

Linguistics Research Digest: Discourse-pragmatic markers take centre stage in spontaneous spoken language

More ▼ Create Blog Sign



# Linguistics Research Digest

Blogging on Language Issues

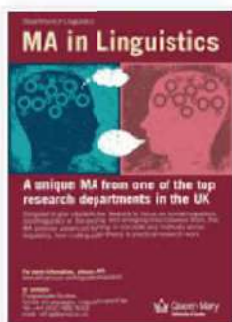
[Home](#) [About](#) [Contact](#)

The image shows a screenshot of a web browser displaying the homepage of the 'Linguistics Research Digest' blog. The browser's address bar shows the URL 'linguistics-research-digest.blogspot.com'. Below the address bar, the page title is 'Linguistics Research Digest: Discourse-pragmatic markers take centre stage in spontaneous spoken language'. The main content area features a graphic of five overlapping speech bubbles in yellow, green, pink, red, and blue. To the right of the graphic, the title 'Linguistics Research Digest' is displayed in a large, black, serif font, with the subtitle 'Blogging on Language Issues' in a smaller, black, sans-serif font below it. At the bottom of the page, there is a navigation menu with three links: 'Home', 'About', and 'Contact'.

Follow The Linguistics Research Digest by Email

Email

Submit



MA in Linguistics at Queen Mary

Browse digest by Category

Accents and Dialects  
Bilingualism  
Child Language  
Cognition  
Communication  
Corpus Linguistics  
Discourse analysis  
Discourse markers  
Euphemism  
Global English  
Grammar  
Intensifiers  
Irony  
Language and Age  
Language and gender  
Language

Monday, 16 April 2012

## Discourse-pragmatic markers take centre stage in spontaneous spoken language



Discourse markers play a central role in unplanned communication

What are discourse-pragmatic markers? They are features of speech which generally do not contribute to the propositional content of communication but which have important functions in the way that we manage our conversations. Researcher Jean E. Fox Tree takes a look at what constitutes a discourse marker (DM), what they do, what is known about children's and second language learners' acquisition of discourse markers and how they can vary across settings and speakers.

Fox Tree provides an inventory of some of the discourse markers that have been investigated in previous research studies and includes such features as *like*, *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *everything*, *sort of*, *kind of*, *and*, *but*, *so*, *because* and *you see*. There are many others. Switch on the radio or TV and listen to a spontaneous interview or discussion and you'll hear that the speech of people from all spheres of life is littered with these constructions. So if

Awards

- BAAL Applying Linguistics Fund 2012

Sponsors of the Linguistics Research Digest

LAGB

LAGB - the leading professional association for academic linguists in Great Britain



The British Association for Applied Linguistics

Related Links

- English Language Teaching: Linguistic Resources
- The Talk of the Toon
- Language and Identity in the national Curriculum: A Scheme of Work
- Committee for Linguistics in Education



## Filled pauses: Dafne and Nandita

Dafne: we **erm** we som we eat jollof rice jollof rice is like a type of rice that is . **erm** brown or orange. and and sometimes with spice and very nice

Interviewer: really?] [Nandita: mmm] wow what

Dafne: yeah . when it was my birthday my mum cook it and **er** some of my she cook two type of rice [Int: wow] she cook fried rice [Int: yeah] and then she and she cook jollof rice and they're nice [Int: yeah? Wow] very nice

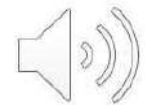
Nandita: there's so many different types of rice that I like

Int: yeah what do you like I mean like what type of food

Nandita: I like **er** . egg fried rice [I like

Dafne: [oh that's fried rice I like the egg fried rice too

Nandita: I like **er** . pilau [Int: pilau yeah] yeah my mum always makes it when we've like lots of people come over [Int: mhm] I like plain rice [Int: yeah] and .. I think that's it



Monday, 9 January 2012

## Er, what about this?



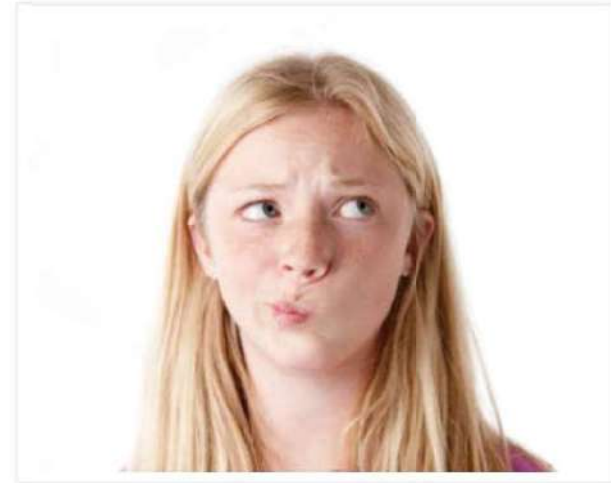
*er* and *erm* have important functions in speech

We may think of *er* and *erm* (or *uh* and *uhm* as they are usually represented in American English) as unimportant little fillers, but [Gunnel Tottie's](#) research suggests that they have important functions in speech. Her research also reveals some intriguing social differences in the way that people use them.

Tottie analysed two collections of spoken English: the impromptu conversational section of the British National Corpus, and the more context governed part of the same corpus, which contains transcripts of talk from domains such as business and education. Overall there were more *ers* and *erms* in the context governed collection of recordings, but in both sets of data men used them more frequently than women. People over the age of 60 used more *ers* and *erms* than younger speakers, and so did speakers who were better educated and from a higher

Thursday, 12 January 2012

## Uh, more on the mysterious case of 'uh' and 'um'



A recent summary on this blog ([Er, what about this?](#)) discussed the intriguing finding that while male speakers of British English used *um* and *uh* (or *erm* and *er*, in British English) more often than female speakers, females preferred *um* over *uh*. Now recent research in the US has revealed that female speakers of American English behave in the same way – at least in the two sets of data that [Eric K Acton](#) analysed.

Acton analysed two distinct corpora of spoken American English. One was a collection of 992 audio recordings from three speed-dating sessions held for graduate students in 2005. He found small but

## Linguistic tails

Monday, 18 June 2012



Language has tails too!

It holds the record, **this pub**, for growing celery, hard to believe

It's a serious picture **that**

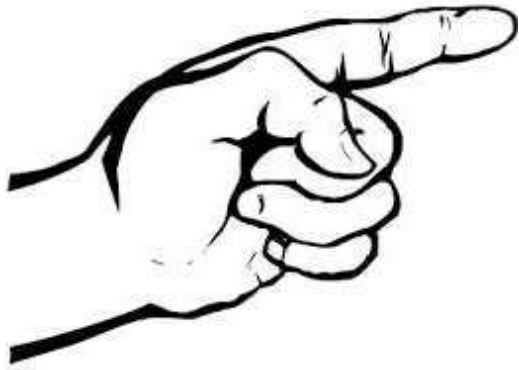
This feller must be well in his 30s, **this right back**

# **Repairing the language**

English once had a **singular and plural contrast** in the **second person pronouns**:

*Get **thee** to a nunnery* (*Hamlet* 111.i.13, spoken to Ophelia as an individual)

*God hath given **you** one face, and **you** make yourselves another* (*Hamlet* III.i.144, still spoken to Ophelia, but now addressing womankind as a whole)



*youse* (UK)

*yinz* (Pittsburgh)

*y'all* (Texas)

*you uns* (Zimbabwe)

*you guys*

**“Do you understand who I’m talking to?” Second person plural forms in English**



Most languages have separate words for singular and plural pronouns. English used to have separate second person pronouns too, but since *thou* fell out of use the *you* pronoun has had to do double duty. So, in the scene depicted here, is the speaker accusing one of his friends, or all of them? How do we deal with this problem?

*you took my biscuit!*

You could investigate how English speakers make clear who they’re talking to when there is more than one person around. How do they show that they are speaking to just one person? Or to two people? Or to the whole group?



**How to investigate?**

***Listen and note***

One way to find out is to listen to what your teachers say when they are addressing one person, the whole class, or a small group of students. Note this down during the course of a day, so that you end up with a collection of phrases. Perhaps the teacher uses the student’s name as well as *you* (but this obviously wouldn’t be possible for a group

of students!) You’ll probably find that the phrases include *you all* (for example, *will you all now think about this?*) and *the two of you* or *both of you* (for example, *would the two of you do this?*) What other phrases does your teacher use to show who he or she is addressing? Does the teacher sometimes make it clear through eye contact, or pointing?

Some linguists\* have claimed that we have an unconscious rule about how to address two or more people: if it isn’t clear from the context, the speaker must make it perfectly clear whether they are referring to one person, to everyone who is there or to a subset of the people who are there. They usually do this by using people’s names, or a phrase like *all of you*, *you fellows*, *both of you*, or by gesturing (usually pointing). Once this has been made clear, it is OK to use *you* from then on, but only until the next ambiguous moment in the conversation. If someone joins the group or if someone leaves, the speaker has to make it clear all over again just who they are talking to.

[\* Andrew Pawley and Frances Hodgetts Syder (1983) Natural selection in syntax: notes on adaptive variation and change in vernacular and literary grammar. *Journal of Pragmatics* 7: 551-579.]

***Watch TV***

Researchers have found that in the *Friends* series, the speakers often use *you guys* when they are addressing more than one person. You could watch an episode of *Friends* and note down all the words and phrases used when people address more than one person. How often do speakers say *you guys*? Are there any other words or phrases that they use to make it clear whether they are talking to one person or more than one person? Is it always clear what *you* means?

Perhaps more interestingly, watch a British TV sitcom where people sometimes address more than one person (such as *Big Brother*). Do people use *you guys* here? If not, how do they make it clear who they are addressing?

***Do some dialect research***

Many varieties of English have a separate second person plural pronoun, unlike standard English. There are many different forms, including *youse*, *you all*, *yinz* or *you uns* (and more). You could browse the internet or look at some Linguistics textbooks to gather examples. Find as many second plural pronoun forms as you can, and note down in which parts of the world they are heard.

**TIP:**



Try googling "second person pronouns" and national varieties of English around the world, such as "Irish English", "America", "Australia", "Jamaica" or "South Africa". You could also search for second person pronouns in regional varieties (dialects) of British and American English.

You could also try to find out what has happened to the old singular pronoun *thou*. Is it still used? If so, where?

**In conclusion**

Once you've done your investigation, consider whether *you* in English is really ambiguous. Do people really not know who is being addressed when they hear *you*? Or do they find other ways of showing that they are addressing more than one person?

**Suggested Reading:**

Theresa Heyd (2010) How you guys doin'? Staged orality and emerging plural address in the television series *Friends*. *American Speech* 85 (1): 33-66. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper).



Monday, 31 October 2011

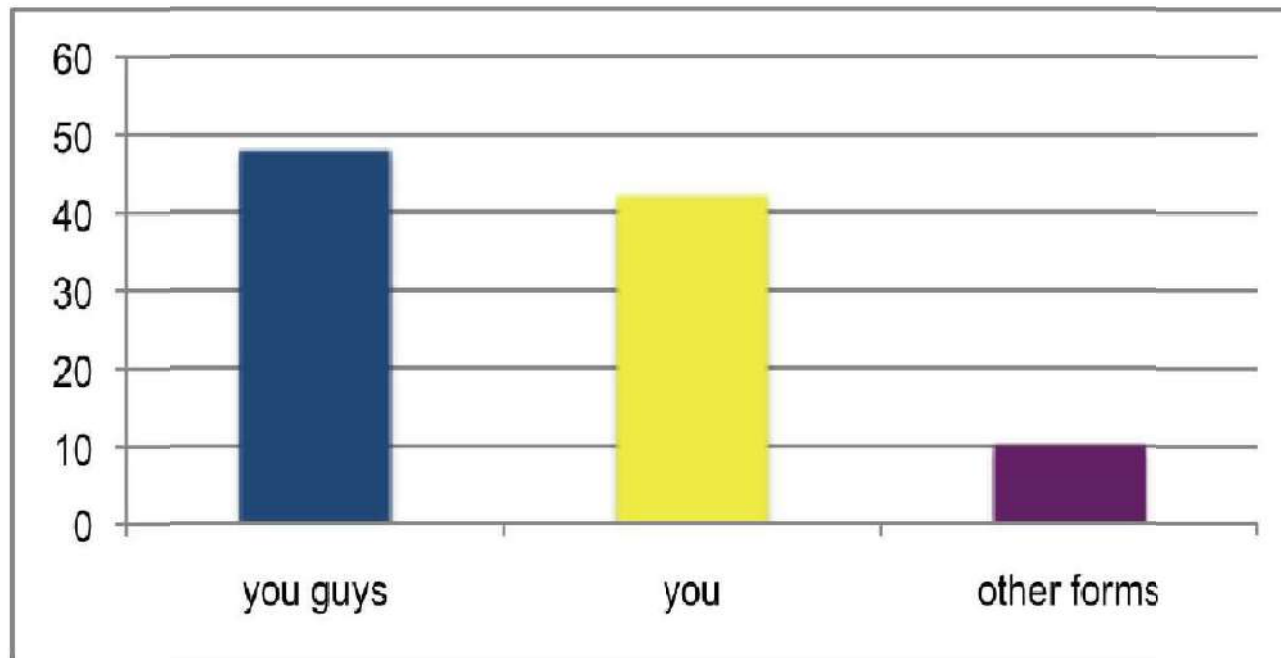
## What's going on with you guys?



Which one of you guys stole my biscuit?

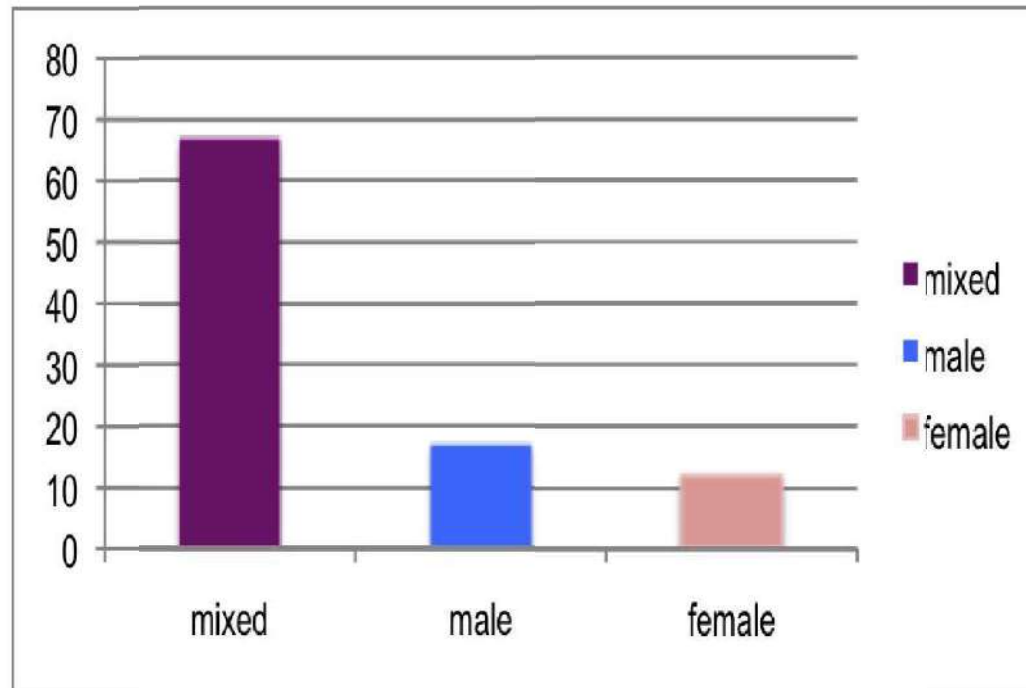
How do we cope with the ambiguity of *you* in English? When we say to a group of friends *what have you been doing recently?* are we asking just one of them, or two or more of them? Research by Theresa Heyd suggests that young people are resolving the potential ambiguity by coining a new pronoun, *you guys*, used only when they want to refer to more than one person. She traces the development of *you guys* over a ten year period in the *Friends* TV series (noting that young people in Britain are also beginning to use *you guys* as a new plural pronoun).

## Second person plural pronouns in *Friends* 1994-2004



'other forms' include *all of you, you all*

## *you guys*: gender of addressee



# Standard English?

It's easier to say what it isn't, than what it is

(Peter Trudgill 1999, 'Standard English: what it isn't'. In Bex, T. and Watts, R.T. (eds.) *Standard English: The widening debate*, pp. 117-128, London: Routledge)

*we ain't amused*

*we aren't amused*

*I don't want nothing*

*I don't want anything*

*she come here yesterday*

*she came here yesterday*

*they drunk tea at 4 o'clock*

*they drank tea at 4 o'clock*

Follow The Linguistics  
Research Digest by  
Email

Email

Submit



MA in Linguistics at  
Queen Mary

Browse digest by  
Category

Accents and  
Dialects Bilingualism  
Child Language  
Cognition  
Communicati  
on Corpus  
Linguistics  
Discourse Discourse  
analysis Discourse  
markers Euphemism  
Global English  
Grammar Intensifiers  
Irony Language and  
Age Language and

Monday, 17 October 2011

## I sang the song or I sung the song? What do YOU say?

What do the verbs *hang*, *spin*, *sling*, *sting*, *dig* and *slink* all have in common? Answer: they all form their past tense **and** past participle by changing their vowel to <u>, so that *I spin the wheel* becomes *I spun the wheel* in the past tense and *I've spun the wheel* in the present perfect tense (using the past participle). So, what happens with verbs like *begin*, *sing*, *drink*, *ring*, *shrink*, *spring*, *sling*, *stink* and *swim*? On the face of it, these verbs look very similar to the first group of verbs but they behave differently. In standard English these verbs have a past tense form with <a> and a different past participle form with <u>, resulting in three-part paradigms like *begin* - *began*- *begun* and *sing* - *sang* - *sung*.

However, it soon becomes clear – as researcher Lieselotte Anderwald has discovered – that there is frequently variation between two past tense forms in the second group of verbs. This variation is quite often reflected in the entries of some dictionaries, which permit an *either/or* past tense form for these verbs. For example, the *Longman Advanced Dictionary of Contemporary English Use* gives the past tense of *shrink* as *shrank or shrunk* and the past tense of *sink* as *sank or sunk*, with, in this dictionary, the second of the two past tense forms being attributed to American English usage (though this is not always the case in other



### Awards

- BAAL Applying Linguistics Fund 2012

### Sponsors of the Linguistics Research Digest

LAGB

LAGB - the leading professional association for academic linguists in Great Britain



The British Association for Applied Linguistics

### Related Links

- English Language Teaching: Linguistic Resources
- The Talk of the Toon
- Language and Identity in the national Curriculum: A Scheme of Work
- Committee for Linguistics in

Under 'experimental stress':

SING *I sung a song yesterday*  
BRING *I brung a cake*

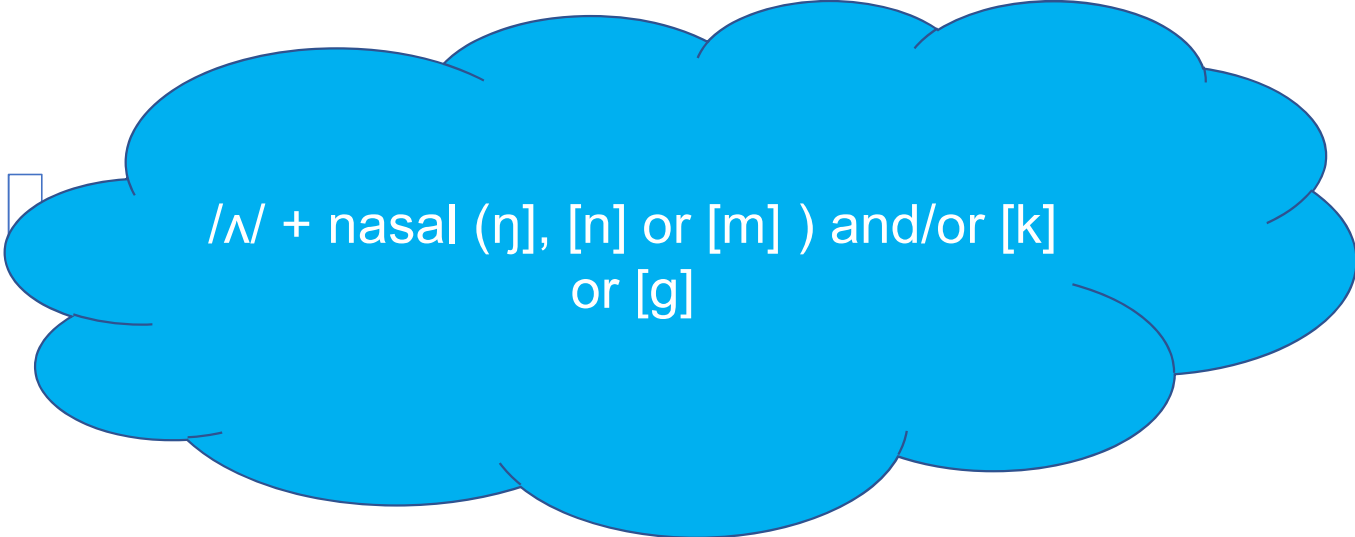
RING *I rung my sister yesterday*

RUN *I run a mile yesterday*

SWIM *I swum a mile yesterday*

DRINK *we drunk tea just now*

Bybee, J. L and Moder, C. L. (1983) Morphological classes as natural categories. *Language* 59: 251-270



/ʌ/ + nasal ([ŋ], [n] or [m] ) and/or [k]  
or [g]

SUNG, RUN, SWUM

DRUNK

DUG *I dug the garden yesterday I've dug the garden now*

## Another psycholinguistic schema

Past tense of BURN?

SPILL?

DREAM?

*When I shouted, he **SPILL** his coffee*

*The water **SPILL** out all day until the ceiling gave way*



*When I shouted, he **spilt** his coffee*

punctual aspect

*The water **spilled** out all day until the ceiling gave way*

durative aspect

## Why don't we all speak standard English?

The linguistic features that are important for speaking are not included in descriptions of standard English (e.g. discourse markers, filled pauses)

Much of what is considered to be standard English isn't suitable for speaking (e.g. the ambiguity of the second person pronoun *you*)

Linguistic features we use when speaking sometimes conform to psycholinguistic schemas that don't fit descriptions of standard English (*I sung a song*)

Or make linguistic distinctions that aren't recognised as standard English (*spilt/spilled*: punctual/durative aspect)