**TEACHER NOTES What is Language Variation?**

**4. HOW CAN WE DESCRIBE LANGUAGE VARIATION?**

This is an evidence-based unit which begins to look at the concept of language variation in terms of the grammar and lexis.

**Identifying the key questions**

**Activities 1-7** work through the key areas of grammatical and lexical variation. The focus is on encouraging students themselves to recognise the ways in which language can vary from Standard English. Straightforward examples give them the opportunity to first spot and then attempt to describe the variations. Explanations can be revealed on-screen after discussion.

The examples are grouped according to their word class – they are not named so that students can try to see the links themselves. For instance, the main variations in nouns are all grouped in **Activity 1**, the main adjective variations in **Activity 2** and so on. At the end of each section, there is a list of key questions which can later form the basis for analysis of unseen texts. Before revealing these guideline questions, however, it is worth encouraging students to develop their own question bank from the work they have done.

In addition to developing an awareness of the key features of language variation, the examples here can form the basis for grammatical discussion of common areas of confusion. For instance, the confusion between pronouns and determiners can be broached in relation to examples like ***Them*** *are* *the best* (pron) and *I can buy* ***them*** *trainers …* (det); and the difference between the conjunction *as* and the preposition *like*. Students may not even notice anything distinctive about some of the examples and this offers an equally useful focus for discussion. Addressing the difference between using prepositions as conjunctions (and other non-standard features) in a formal and informal setting, for instance, will help to draw attention to the importance of audience, purpose and context in every language interaction, whether written or spoken.

Having worked through the examples of grammatical and lexical variation, **Activities 8-9** look at semantic change. Tracing the meaning of words using OED Online, [www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com), Wiktionary or a decent sized Chambers dictionary will show students how language change is inevitable. Wider discussion of other examples and of students’ own experiences of language change (their own use of slang or a local dialect, or an awareness of the distinctive language choices of an older generation) will be a useful addition.

Printable materials include a worksheet, a blank table for recording changing meanings and completed tables offering one approach to the given words. The five general categories of semantic change provide a framework for approaching other examples. Before categorising the given words, students could be encouraged to think of, or find out about other examples.

**Applying the key questions**

The key questions introduced in the earlier work can be printed out as a framework for analysis. In addition to the specific word class and semantic change questions, there are two wider final sections: grammatical structure (length of phrases, clauses structure, punctuation) and style (sentence organisation, patterning, figurative language). This hand-out should be used with caution – students must always be reminded that ‘spotting’ the key features is only the starting point of their linguistic analysis

The tasks in this section begin with short extracts. **Activities 1-3** provide a written copy of the texts that can either be used as a means of recording class discussion, or as a starting point for group or individual work before using the white board. On screen, examples of linguistic variation can be revealed along with some key information, drawing attention to the way we can describe variation. A sample commentary in response to **Activity 4** can printed for discussion purposes.

The final texts in **Activity 5** are designed only as a written exercise because the extracts are longer and less suitable for the white board. In order to support study, there are accompanying printable notes which address some of the key issues. These can be developed by class room discussion – there are many more relevant points which could be made. The written task is designed to mirror the kind of commentary students may face in their external exams. Using the general notes provided here alongside the wider discussion that can take place in the classroom should help to establish good practice: students should be encouraged both to look closely at the text and to apply their wider language knowledge about context, audience, purpose and the creation of meaning.