Introduction:

A student of English Language and Culture will tell you all about your first year at this programme.

Lecture:

Title: What is English? A simple question with many (not so simple) answers.

Short description:
Most people use the English language without thinking too much about what it really is they speak. If you would ask any speaker of English what they consider English, you can expect different answers based on where they live, the history they have with speakers of English, or whether they speak it natively or non-natively, to name but a few examples. In most cases, however, you will receive answers about what English isn’t. In order to study and understand various aspects of the English language and culture, we need to have a clear definition of what the English language is and how this is perceived by different groups in different societies. For instance, if you want to become a teacher of English for non-native speakers, what kind of model do you provide? The Queen’s English, or the English that you hear on American sitcoms? What are the differences between these kinds of English and who decides which is best? Or what if you want to study the history of English? You will quickly be faced with the question where English begins and when English stops being English.
In this lecture we will reflect on some of these questions and we will try to define what English is from an academic perspective. We will also consider how non-academics view the English language, both in the past and the present. This will reveal a lot about the status and use of English in society.

Lecturer: Dr. Moragh Gordon (m.s.gordon@hum.leidenuniv.nl)
Mo(ragh) Gordon is lecturer at the bachelor English language and Culture at Leiden University. She is interested in the history of the English language and particularly in how, when and why the language changed over time. In addition, she is fascinated about how English is and was viewed and used in society.

Seminar:

Title: What is English? A simple question with many (not so simple) answers.

Short description:
In this workgroup session we will define and redefine some terminology. We will look at various examples of English and discuss them in relation to the lecture. You will also get the opportunity to share your own views on what the English language means to you.

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Q&A:

Do you have any questions regarding the programme? The student will answer them all at the Q&A.

Preparation:
Prepare the questions on the following pages.
Workgroup session: What is English? A simple question with many (not so simple) answers

In this workgroup session we will define and redefine some terminology. You might find some of the questions quite challenging to answer, but please don’t let that stop you from trying! I don’t expect perfect answers from you. All I want is to challenge you to think about things that you might not have thought about before. Whenever possible, try to think about your personal experience with English and how that relates to the questions asked. Furthermore, some of the questions will be addressed in the lecture preceding the workgroup, so make sure to take notes during the lecture and see if that will make you revise some of the answers you gave before. Good luck, and, most importantly, have fun!

1. Without looking it up anywhere, try to define what language is in a few sentences.

2. Now, how does English fit in with your definition of language?

3. Consider the excerpts below and answer the corresponding questions.
   a. The passage below is the first recorded poem in English, Caedmon’s hymn. The transcript is of the earliest surviving copy (c. 737). Without looking words up, how many words are recognizably English to you? If you speak Dutch, do you see any words that resemble Dutch more than English?

   Nū scylun hergan hefanrícaes Uard,
   metudæs maecti end his mòdgidanc,
   uerc Uuldurfadur, suē hē uundra gihwaes,
   ēci dryctin ār ñéstelidæ
   hē ærist scōp aelda barnum
   heben til hrōfe, hāleg scepen.
   Thā middungeard moncynnæs Uard,
   eci Dryctin, æfter tīddæ
   firum foldu, Frēa allmectig.

   b. The excerpt below is a passage from a Scottish poem: The Bubblyjock by Hugh MacDiarmid. Are there any words you don’t recognize?

   c. Can you guess what kind of bird this poem is about?

   It’s hauf like a bird and hauf like a bogle
   And juist stands in the sun there and bouks.
   It’s a wunder its heid disna burst
   The way it’s aye raxin its chouks.

   Syne it twists its neck like a serpent
   But canna get oot a richt note
For the bubblyjock swallowed the bagpipes  
And the blether stuck in its throat.

d. The passage below is an excerpt from the Jamaican poem *Noh Lickle Twang* by Louise Bennett (you can listen to the whole poem here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW9GeQF-1bU&t=158s). Do you understand what this passage is about?

Me glad fe se's you come back bwoy,  
But lawd yuh let me dung,  
Me shame o' yuh soh till all o'  
Me proudness drop a grung.

Yuh mean yuh goh dah 'Merica  
An spen six whole mont' deh,  
An come back not a piece betta  
Dan how yuh did goh wey?

Bwoy yuh noh shame? Is soh you come?  
Afta yuh tan soh lang!  
Not even lickle language bwoy?  
Not even little twang?

e. Considering the above passages and considering how difficult some, or all, may have been to understand, would you call all these passages examples of English? What are arguments to call them English and what are some arguments against this?

4. Read this short article by David Crystal and be prepared to discuss the following questions in the workgroup (so you don’t have to write down lengthy answers, but think about what you would say in a discussion during the workgroup session).

a. According to Crystal what are the main characteristics of Standard English?

b. Have you been taught a Standard variety? Which one?

c. Do you think one standard variety should have preference over the others, say American Standard English is a better model than South African English? Why (not)?

d. Have you ever been in a situation that made you (first) realise there is more than one variety of English and that not all of them are considered appropriate in all contexts?

e. Can you think of some advantages, as well as disadvantages of having *Standard English(es)*?

f. Nowadays, there are more non-native speakers of English than there are native. What consequences do you think this might have for the English language in the long term?

5. Consider the chat conversation below (from Schlomotics blog spot, extracted from WebCorp). Focus on their discussion concerning “proper” English. Do you agree that Lamotta makes grammatical mistakes? If so, what are they? What do Old School’s and ajofi’s comments say about their conception of what is “proper” English?
10:59 Lamotta) he don't care what other say.
10:59 OldSchool) even when it's wrong x.
10:59 Lamotta) he don't get easily pursuaded.
10:59 Lamotta) keep throwing your bs jabs because your so lither from this conversation.
10:59 OldSchool) yes, it's clear that his capacity for reason isn't very developed.
11:00 ajofi) he don't care? he don't get? what is this? people don't know how to conjugate verbs correctly.
11:00 ajofi) lamotta can you speak proper english or are you diseducated.
11:00 ajofi) LOL.
11:00 Lamotta) i just don't follow ethics in spelling on irc.
11:00 ajofi) ethics.
11:00 ajofi) what.
11:00 ajofi) that makes no sense.
11:00 Lamotta) because your uneducated.
11:00 ajofi) get a dictionary.

6. The following excerpt is from an extreme right-wing blog poster (20 March 2008, extracted from WebCorp). What does their comment reveal about their conception of what is and what isn’t English?

“Being a rational thinker it is often impossible to get how Democrats can be so stupid. What exactly do the Democrats think is going to happen when they Balkanize America and invent categories for people so that no one is an American any longer but rather an “African-American” or an “Hispanic-American” or a woman or a homosexual whose allegiance shouldn’t be to America but rather to the “cultural heritage” or the unique behavior that “defines” them? What do the Democrats think is going to happen when English is not the language of everyone but everyone is to speak their own language (even made up slang like “ebonics”) so that communities become isolated and antagonistic and incapable of communicating with one another to solve differences and problems?

That was it! I hope you enjoyed doing these exercises.