1
CLEARING THE GROUND: BASIC ISSUES, CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This book is intended to introduce you to an important branch of language study, generally known as sociolinguistics. We assume that readers of this book are currently taking or are about to take an introductory course in linguistics. Accordingly, we start with a brief characterisation of the place of sociolinguistics within the overall discipline of linguistics.

'Language' and Linguistics

Linguistics may be somewhat blandly defined as the study of language. Such a characterisation leaves out the all-important formulation of how such study is to be conducted, and where exactly the boundaries of the term 'language' itself lie. Edward Sapir (1921: 7) in his influential book *Language*, which is still in print after 80 years, defined his subject matter as follows:

> Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so-called 'organs of speech'.

Drawing on this characterisation, modern linguists (e.g. Ronald Wardhaugh, 1978: 3) conceive of language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. This definition stresses that the basic building blocks of language are spoken words which combine sounds with meanings. The symbols are arbitrary in the sense that the link between the sound and the meaning system varies from language to language. There is no necessary connection between the form of a word and its meaning. For example, the term 'cat' in English refers to a particular animal by convention, not by a special connection between the sequence *c-a-t* and the animal. Of course, cats are referred to by other sound (or words) in other languages, for example *billī* in Hindi. An exception is formed by words which do reflect

some property of the concept which they denote. In literary analysis, these are described as onomatopoeic, as in the word *buzz*, which to some extent mimics the sound made by bees (see the term 'icon' in the box below). The arbitrariness of linguistic symbols was stressed by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who differentiated between the 'signifier' (the word for a concept) and the 'signified' (the concept denoted by the word). These were two indistinguishable aspects of what he called the 'linguistic sign'.

Three types of signs distinguished by the US philosopher Charles Peirce in his general theory of communication systems

- A **symbol** involves an arbitrary relationship between sign and object, but which is understood as a convention, for example a green light as a traffic signal 'go'.
- An **index** involves a logical relation between sign and object (such as cause and effect), for example a weathercock, which stands for the wind but which is directly influenced by the wind direction.
- An **icon** involves a relationship whereby the sign replicates some characteristic of the object: for example a drawing of a cat replicates some features of the shape of a cat.

(cited in Noth 1990: 112–14)

At the time that Sapir was writing, not many linguists were familiar with the structure of sign languages used by hearing- and speech-impaired people. Rather than insisting that language has to be based on speech, linguists would today distinguish different modes of language: sign, speech, writing. Finally, the emphasis in the definition of language on *human* communication draws attention to differences between language and animal systems of communication. Research on the communicative systems of primates, bees and dolphins inculcates a great deal of respect among linguists for their abilities but also shows that their communicative systems are qualitatively different from the language capacity of humans. The ability to convey complex information about things that are not necessarily present, to discuss entities that do not necessarily exist and to use language to negotiate and plan is not found in the animal world (Hockett 1966). This is the sense in which Sapir, as cited above, took language to be non-instinctual. However, today many linguists, following Noam Chomsky (1965), prefer to see language as an instinct, in another sense – as a manifestation of an ability that is specific to humans. Aitchison (1976) has captured the differences and overlaps between humans and other animals in the title of her book characterising humankind as 'the articulate mammal'.[1]

Sociolinguistics' Antecedents

As the accompanying box indicates, different aspects of language have been in focus at different times in the history of linguistics. Interest in sociolinguistic issues was not excluded by the nineteenth-century historical linguists or by the structuralists of the twentieth century. The former belatedly took to the study of living dialects for the light that these could shed on changes that had taken place in the past, as was evident from ancient texts. There were two branches of what is now called sociolinguistics that had strong nineteenth-century antecedents: the study of rural dialects in Europe (discussed in Chapter 2) and the study of contact between languages that resulted in new 'mixed languages'. The work of Hugo Schuchardt (1882), Dirk Hesseling (1897) and Addison Van Name (1869–70) on contact between languages challenged some of the assumptions made by their contemporaries.

Key phases in linguistic study

- c.500 BC: Pānini and his followers in India produce oral treatises on phonetics and language structure. Later, independent traditions of language study develop in Europe.
- 1786: founding of modern linguistics, on the basis of a seminal speech by Sir William Jones concerning the relations between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and other ancient languages. Linguistics enters a historical phase in which principles of language comparison and classification emerge.
- Early twentieth century: structuralism predominates in linguistics. 'Structuralists' like Ferdinand de Saussure in Europe and Leonard Bloomfield and others in the USA were concerned with internal systems of languages rather than with historical comparisons.
- 1957: Generative linguistics is founded with the publication of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. Linguistics shifts to a psycho-biological stage, with interest in the way in which children acquire languages on the basis of an abstract 'universal grammar' common to all languages.

In the USA, structuralists were motivated partly by the need to describe rapidly eroding American Indian languages in the early twentieth century before they became extinct. The work of scholars like Franz Boas, Leonard Bloomfield and Edward Sapir added a cultural or anthropological interest in languages. Via their acquaintance with the cultural patterns of societies that were novel to them, these scholars laid the foundation for studies of

language, culture and cognition. Such an anthropological perspective of language was a forerunner to some branches of sociolinguistics, especially the ethnographical approach discussed in Chapter 6.

The term 'sociolinguistics' appears to have been first used in 1939 by T.C. Hodson in relation to language study in India (Le Page 1997: 19). It was later used – independently – in 1952 by Haver Currie, a poet and philosopher who noted the general absence of any consideration of the social from the linguistic research of his day. Significant works on sociolinguistics appearing after this date include Weinreich's influential *Languages in Contact* (a structural and social account of bilingualism) of 1953, Einar Haugen's two-volumed study of the social history of the Norwegian language in America (1953), and Joos (1962) on the dimensions of style.

Emphases in Current Sociolinguistics

Chomsky's emphasis in the 1960s on abstracting language away from everyday contexts ironically led to the distillation of a core area of sociolinguistics, opposed to his conception of language. In a frequently cited passage, Chomsky (1965: 3) characterised the focus of the linguist's attention on an idealised competence:

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

While such an approach brought significant gains to the theory of syntax and phonology, many scholars felt that abstracting language away from the contexts in which it was spoken served limited ends which could not include an encompassing theory of human language. This period marked a break between sociolinguists with an interest in language use within human societies and followers of Chomsky's approach to language (with their interest in an idealised, non-social, psycholinguistic competence).[2] Whereas the Chomskyan framework focuses on structures that could be generated in language and by what means, the social approach tries to account for what can be said in a language, by whom, to whom, in whose presence, when and where, in what manner and under what social circumstances (Fishman 1971; Hymes 1971; Saville-Troike 1982: 8). For the latter group, the process of acquiring a language is not just a cognitive process involving the activation of a predisposition in the human brain; it is a social process as well, that only unfolds in social interaction. The child's role in acquiring its first language is not a socially passive one, but one which is sensitive to certain 'environmental' conditions,

including the social identity of the different people with whom the child interacts.

Dell Hymes (1971) was the principal objector to the dominance of Chomsky's characterisation of what constituted the study of linguistic competence. He suggested that a child who might produce any sentence whatever without due regard to the social and linguistic context would be 'a social monster' (1974b: 75) who was likely to be institutionalised. Hymes coined the term 'communicative competence' to denote our ability to use language appropriately in different settings. Hymes' interest was not just in the production of sentences but also in characterizing the more social-bound aspects like when it is appropriate to talk and when to remain silent in different communities, rules for turn-taking, amount of simultaneous talk and so on. These topics are discussed in Chapter 6.

A distinction that persists (though it is not one that we particularly advocate) is that between the sociolinguistics (proper) and the sociology of language. Some scholars believe that the former is part of the terrain mapped out in linguistics, focusing on language in society for the light that social contexts throw upon language. For these scholars, the latter (sociology of language) is primarily a sub-part of sociology, which examines language use for its ultimate illumination of the nature of societies. Ralph Fasold (1984, 1990) has attempted to capture this formulation by writing two scholarly books, one devoted to *The Sociolinguistics of Society* and the other to *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. While we accept that there is some basis for such a partition, and something to be gained by it, in practice the boundaries between the two areas of study are so flexible as to merit one cover term. This book can be seen as a short introduction to both areas (which we consider *alter egos*, rather than a dichotomised pair) which for simplicity we label, unsurprisingly, *sociolinguistics*. Sometimes the distinction between the two orientations is expressed by the terms *macro-* and *micro-sociolinguistics*. As in other subjects, notably economics, macro-studies involve an examination of large-scale patterns relating to social structures (the focus is broad, as in the study of patterns of multilingualism in a country). Micro-studies examine finer patterns in context (for example, conversational structure or accents in a particular community).

1.2 RELATIONS BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

A concern for the 'human communication' aspect within the definition of language implies attention to the way language is played out in societies in its full range of functions. Language is not just **denotational**, a term which refers to the process of conveying meaning, referring to ideas, events or

entities that exist outside language. While using language primarily for this function, a speaker will inevitably give off signals concerning his or her social and personal background. Language is accordingly said to be indexical of one's social class, status, region of origin, gender, age group and so on. On the term 'index', see the box on page 2. In the sociolinguistic sense, this indexical aspect of language refers to certain features of speech (including accent), which indicate an individual's social group (or background); the use of these features is not exactly arbitrary since it signals that the individual has access to the lifestyles that are associated with that type of speech.

Chapters 2 to 4 will be concerned with the relationship between region of origin, age and – especially – social status and characteristic ways of using language. Many sociolinguists go one step further in characterising the way in which language is entwined with human existence. Susan Gal (1989: 347) argues that language not only reflects societal patterns and divisions but also sustains and reproduces them. Accent, for example, may reveal the social group to which a person belongs, but is also part of the definition of that social group. Ways of talking are not just a reflection of social organisation, but also form a practice that is one of social organisation's central parts. As such, they are implicated in power relations within societies, as we stress in Chapters 6 and 10.

The idea was once popular in anthropology that language and thought are more closely intertwined than is commonly believed. It is not just that language use is an outcome of thinking; but conversely, the way one thinks is influenced by the language one is 'born into'. Mind, according to this hypothesis, is in the grip of language. Edward Sapir and – especially – Benjamin Lee Whorf were led by their studies of American Indian languages in the early twentieth century to argue that speakers of certain languages may be led to different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar phenomena. This claim came to be known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. According to Whorf (1956: 213), 'we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language'. Using a language forces us into habitual grooves of thinking: it is almost like putting on a special pair of glasses that heighten some aspects of the physical and mental world while dimming others. One example provided by Whorf concerns the distinction between nouns and verbs in Hopi (a language of Arizona) as opposed to English. The Hopi terms for 'lightning', 'wave', 'flame', 'meteor', 'puff of smoke' and 'pulsation' are all verbs, since events of necessarily brief duration fall into this category. The terms for 'cloud' and 'storm', on the other hand, are of just enough duration to qualify as nouns. Whorf (1956: 215) concludes that Hopi has a classification of events by duration type that is unfamiliar to speakers of European languages.

Another of Whorf's striking examples concerns tense and time. Whereas English dissects events according to their time of occurrence (relative to

the act of speaking), Hopi expresses other categories in the verb, notably the kind of validity that the speaker intends the statement to have: is it a report of an event, an expectation of an event or a generalisation or law about events?

> The Hopi metaphysics does not raise the question whether the things in a distant village exist at the same present moment as those in one's own village, for it is frankly pragmatic on this score and says that any 'events' in the distant village can be compared to any events in one's own village only by an interval of magnitude that has both time and space forms in it. Events at a distance from the observer can only be known objectively when they are 'past' (i.e. posited in the objective) and the more distant, the more 'past' (the more worked upon from the subjective side). (Whorf 1956: 63)

The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is a thought-provoking one that, in its strong form, suggests among other things that real translation between widely different languages is not possible. The hypothesis has proved impossible to test: how would one go about ascertaining that the perceptions of a Hopi speaker concerning the world are radically different from that of,

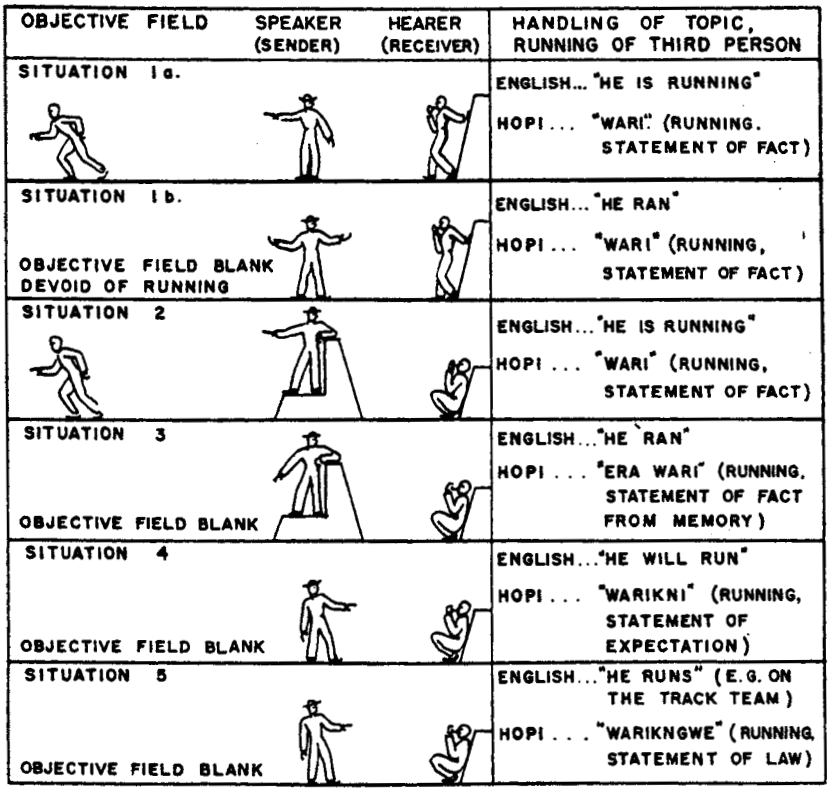


Figure 1.1 Contrasts between English and Hopi in expressing tense (from Whorf 1956: 213)

say, a French speaker? Most linguists today insist that there are limits to which languages vary. In appealing to the notion of 'deep structure', Chomsky and his followers stress an underlying capacity for language that is common to humans. What seem to be radical differences in the grammatical structure of languages are held to operate 'on the surface', as mappings from an abstract and universal deep structure. Linguists feel safer in accepting a 'weak form' of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis: that our language influences (rather than completely determines) our way of perceiving things. But language does not grip communities so strongly as to prevent at least some individuals from seeing things from different perspectives, from forming new thoughts and ideas. As Gillian Sankoff (1986: xxi) puts it, 'in the long term language is more dependent on the social world than the other way around . . . Language does facilitate social intercourse, but if the social situation is sufficiently compelling, language will bend.' Studies in the way that languages influence each other via borrowing and mixing are discussed in Chapters 8 and 9. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis remains of considerable relevance to contemporary sociolinguistic debates, notably those about 'politically correct' language. These relate to issues like racism, sexism and discrimination against the aged, minorities and so on. Does the existence of a term like *the aged* predispose others to viewing people so described in a negative light? Would peoples' perceptions be different if no such word existed in English? Does a new term like *senior citizens* make the concept a more positive one? Those who believe that using new terms will change societal attitudes for the better are subscribing to a Whorfian view of the relation between language and thought. The use of euphemism and derogatory terms is discussed in Chapter 10 in the light of power imbalances in language.

'A Language' as a Social Construct

Up to now we have discussed *language* in the abstract, meaning the faculty of human communication in general terms. When we turn to *languages* as individual entities, the possession of specific societies, we run into problems of definition. It may come as a surprise to you that linguists are unable to offer a definition of what constitutes 'a language' in relation to overlapping entities like 'dialects'. For this reason, the term **variety** is a particularly useful one to avoid prejudging the issue of whether a given entity is (in popular terms) 'a language' or 'a dialect'. In many instances, the boundaries between languages are far from clear, especially where historical and geographical links are involved. Mutual intelligibility might seem a useful test of whether two varieties are distinct languages or not. In practice, however, it is almost always sociopolitical criteria that decide the status of a variety, rather than linguistic ones.

The case of Norwegian and Danish provides a clear illustration of the sociopolitical nature of the distinction between what counts as a language and what does not. For four centuries, Norway was ruled by Denmark. Danish was considered the official language, with Norwegian speech having dialect status (that is, it was considered a dialect of Danish). Upon political independence in 1814, Norwegian was declared an 'official language', distinct from Danish. The same has happened in what was formerly Yugoslavia, where for much of the twentieth century Serbian and Croatian did not have independent status but were officially considered as 'eastern' and 'western' varieties of the same language called Serbo-Croatian (or Croato-Serbian). These varieties did have independent status prior to the twentieth century, while being mutually intelligible as 'South Slavic' languages. Croatian, for example, had dictionaries, grammars and literary works. Centralisation began when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was formed (1918–29), yielding first to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–41) and then to Communist rule (1945–90). The bloody conflict that accompanied the break-up of the federation in the 1990s saw the formation of new states of Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Not surprisingly, linguistic nationalism followed the new independence, with the differences between the varieties now being emphasised. Today Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian (a third variety

Map 1.1 New states arising from the former Yugoslavia

associated with Islam) are considered independent languages (see UCLA *Language Materials Project* 2007 on the internet).

In South Africa, Zulu and Xhosa have about 11 million and 8 million mother-tongue speakers respectively, making them the most spoken varieties in the country. In terms of their official status, social history and written forms they count as separate languages. Yet they are so similar in terms of their structure that mutual understanding is virtually guaranteed: anyone who speaks Zulu as a mother tongue understands Xhosa when first exposed to it and vice versa. Historical linguists classify the two varieties as part of a Nguni cluster, which includes Swati (or Swazi) and Ndebele (spoken in Zimbabwe and South Africa) as well. The term 'cluster' specifies that the varieties concerned are historically related, structurally similar and mutually intelligible. Whom is the sociolinguist to follow – the scientific linguists who posit one language cluster, or the communities themselves who see four distinct languages whose speakers are culturally and historically separate? (Swati is, for example, an official language of the kingdom of Swaziland.) Recent developments in South Africa's language policy are discussed in Chapter 12.

On the fuzzy boundaries between languages in Papua New Guinea, one of the most multilingual areas of the world

The language spoken in Bolo village is also from a linguist's point of view identical to Aria, but Aria speakers from other villages say it is not Aria. They say Bolo speakers really speak Mouk. However, the people of Salkei village, who speak Mouk, say that Bolo people speak Aria. As for the Bolo speakers themselves, they claim to be Anêm speakers. (Romaine 1994: 9, citing Thurston 1987)

[If this were not complicated enough, the Anêm people of another village do not think that the Bolo speak acceptable Anêm any more.]

Language varieties often exist as geographical continua, without natural divisions into 'languages'. Such continua have been claimed for North Indian and Germanic languages. In the Indian case (now divided into Pakistan, India and Bangladesh), several distinct languages exist with long traditions of literary production, including Sindhi, Kashmiri, Hindi, Rajasthani, Panjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali and others (see Map 1.2). These autonomous, regional languages do show sharp breaks in terms of their grammar, so that it is possible to differentiate one from the other. However, in terms of everyday, informal speech at the village level there are no such sharp breaks. Gumperz (1971: 7) speaks of a chain of mutually intelligible varieties from the Sind (in the north-west) to Assam (in the

Map 1.2 The North Indian speech continuum (unshaded area)

north-east). It would thus be possible to traverse the subcontinent from the north-west to the north-east without discerning any radical differences in speech characteristics from one village to the next.

One result of the dichotomy between colloquial speech 'on the ground' and supra-regional, official languages is the difficulty linguists have in classifying border dialects: varieties that are sandwiched between two officially recognised languages. Very often it is not possible to assign such varieties to one rather than the other language, except in an arbitrary way:

> Dutch and German are known to be two distinct languages. However, at some places along the Dutch–German frontier the dialects spoken on either side of the border are extremely similar. If we chose to say that people on one side of the border speak German and those on the other Dutch, our choice is again based on social and political rather than linguistic factors. The point is further emphasized by the fact that the ability of speakers from either side of the border to understand each other will often be considerably greater than that of German speakers from this area to understand speakers of other German dialects from distant parts of Austria or Switzerland. (Trudgill 1983a: 15)

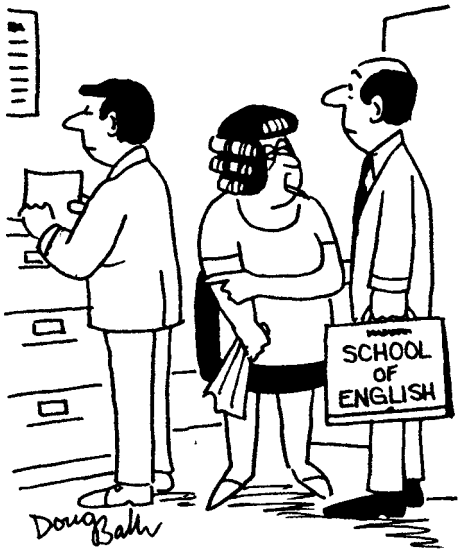
Map 1.3 The Dutch/German border

For further discussion of the West Germanic continuum in western Europe (made up of what are usually referred to as German, Dutch, Frisian and Flemish), see Trudgill and Chambers (1980: 6). We now turn to the issue of what forms of language are appropriate for sociolinguistic study.

1.3 PRESCRIPTIVISM

Description versus Prescription

A **descriptive** approach is one which studies and characterises the language of specific groups of people in a range of situations, without bringing any preconceived notions of correctness to the task, or favouring the language of one social group as somehow 'better' than those of others. One could attempt a description of the language of royalty in formal and informal situations, of mineworkers at work in Wales, and of street vendors in Cape Town in neutral terms, the way a scientist might describe the object of his or her study. By contrast, a **prescriptive** approach to language (or prescriptivism) is concerned with what might be termed 'linguistic etiquette'. In this section, we focus on English mainly, since the prescriptive tradition has been best documented for this language (for example Milroy and Milroy 1985a; Cameron 1995b). Prescriptivism is best exemplified by the traditional approach to the teaching of grammar in English schools. The



'I am but the cleaner. It is he, Mr. Gleason, to whom you should speak.'

role of the language teacher is seen as upholding certain forms of language as the norm to be emulated. Prescriptions are given covering different aspects of language:

- Grammar: Don't end sentences with prepositions.
- Vocabulary: Don't say *cool*.
- Meaning: *Nice* only means 'finely nuanced', as in a nice *distinction*.
- Pronunciation: Don't pronounce the final *t* in *trait* (British English).

Prescriptive grammarians put forward a number of arguments in defense of their preferences.

(1) *One form is more logical than another*. Prescriptivists believe that language should obey certain principles of mathematics, notably the rule that two negatives make a positive. The use of two negatives in a statement like *I can't see no animals* is held to 'cancel each other out' and should 'really' mean *I can see animals*.

(2) *Appeal to classical forms*. Sometimes prescriptive grammarians back up their judgments about correctness in modern languages by appealing to the authority of classical languages. In the case of English, the language sometimes held up as a model is Latin (in other parts of the world, languages like Sanskrit, Classical Tamil and Classical Arabic are held up as similar models). Although it had long declined as a spoken language and as a language of European diplomacy and education, Latin continued to be part of educational curricula in Europe and elsewhere, and influenced many grammarians of the eighteenth century as to what should count as good English usage. For example, when students are urged not to split the infinitive in

sentences like *Mary did her best to fully support Jill during her illness*, their teachers are paying homage to Latin, where split infinitives do not occur.

(3) *A preference for older forms of the language*. Prescriptivists are typically intolerant of innovations in language. This applies to new meanings, new synonyms and new syntactic constructions. For example, teachers and academics complain about the use of the word *hopefully* as a synonym for 'I hope/one hopes', preferring that it be used in its 'older' sense of 'in a manner full of hope'. For such a prescriptivist, *Hopefully they won't lose again* is unacceptable, but *She will speak hopefully of peace in the twenty-first century* is.

(4) *Injunction against the use of foreign words*. Some societies are intolerant of new words from foreign sources, sometimes for nationalistic reasons, at other times for fear of being swamped by neighboring languages or major world languages like English. A significant part of French prescriptivism, promulgated by L'Académie Française (The French Academy) and enacted by law, is devoted to ousting popular English words from the vocabulary: *le drugstore*, *le weekend*, *le dancing*, *le pop music* and so on. These efforts have not had much influence on the spoken language. English has for many centuries adopted and adapted words from other languages, and its speakers are today relatively liberal about accepting neologisms and borrowings. This was not always so. In the eighteenth century, which was a period of intense borrowing from French and coining of new words

based on Greek and Latin roots, the disparaging term 'inkhorn' was used to describe writers who used excessive foreign terms. Today some people in Britain still express reservations about 'Americanisms' in British English.

English words assimilated from other sources

cheese (Latin)	*royal* (French)	*opera* (Italian)
khaki (Hindi)	*algebra* (Arabic)	*mango* (Tamil)
chocolate (Aztec)	*glasnost* (Russian)	*zombie* (Kimbunda)

Colloquial Japanese words assimilated from English
hamu tosuto 'toasted ham sandwich'
apaato 'apartment'
pasokon 'personal computer'
kureemaru 'to do Kramers', that is to separate and fight over custody of children (based on the US film *Kramer versus Kramer*)

The Roots of English Prescriptivism

James Milroy and Lesley Milroy (1985) locate the origins of prescriptivism in what they call 'the Complaint Tradition', that is, a long-standing tradition of complaints about the adequacy of the English language compared to others. French had been the language of administration and education from the eleventh to the fourteenth century in England, after the Norman Conquest. From the fourteenth century on, when English took over from French as the language of education, misgivings were enunciated about the adequacy of English to the task. Complaints about the enormous amount of variation in regional varieties of English arose in this period that pre-dated the rise of a standard form of the language. Even after a standard form for writing emerged, writers continued focusing on the supposed inadequacies of English compared to classical languages like Latin and Greek and the more fashionable contemporary languages like French and Italian. This tradition reached its fruition in the eighteenth century, when writers and grammarians consciously set out their preferences about English usage in dictionaries and style manuals. Whereas previously variation in speech and writing was tolerated, the influence of writers like Jonathan Swift and dictionary-makers like Samuel Johnson gave authority to one kind of English over others.

Objections to Prescriptivism

In contrast to the prescriptive view of language, most linguists adhere to a position of 'linguistic equality' in asserting that all varieties of a language

are valid systems with their own logic and conventions. Linguists point out that almost all the tenets of prescriptivism are based on the linguistic practices and preferences of the elites of a society, rather than on any natural or objective notion of correctness. We briefly review the typical responses of linguists to the prescriptive claims listed above:

(1) A view of the logic of language in strict mathematical terms is highly problematic. The work of syntacticians inspired by Chomsky has shown how complex the rules that generate a language can be. But they do not follow from elementary principles of mathematics, which have not been concerned with the nuances of natural language. If this were the case, then presumably using three negatives together would be unproblematic to the prescriptivist, since three negatives make a negative in mathematics. It should therefore be grammatical in Standard English to say *I don't want no spinach nohow*.

Double negatives are avoided in formal, middle-class speech and writing as a matter of convention rather than logic. With adjectival phrases, the rule is specifically suspended. *I am not unhappy with his suggestion* conveys the meaning 'neither quite happy (positive) nor quite unhappy (negative)'. Here, the two negatives (*not* and *un-*) refer to a neutral state. Double negation, which was standard in English up to the sixteenth century, is today used as a stylistic rule by people with a control of standard English to signify emphasis or rebellion. It is a popular device in English-language pop music, for example in the well-known song of rebellion of the 1960s by the Rolling Stones, 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction', the love song of the same period 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough' (sung by Marvin Gaye, composed by Ashford and Simpson), or a line from a song of the 1990s, 'Ain't no angel gonna greet me' (Bruce Springsteen: 'Streets of Philadelphia').[3]

(2) Regarding the appeal to classical languages, anti-prescriptivists point out that there is no strong reason to expect one language to match the mould of another, older (dead or, at best, embalmed) one. This view of linguistic independence is put provocatively by the US linguist Steven Pinker (1994: 374): 'Of course forcing modern speakers of English to not . . . whoops, not to . . . split an infinitive because it isn't done in Latin makes about as much sense as forcing modern residents of England to wear togas and laurels'.

(3) In response to the injunction 'older is better', linguists assert that languages are continually changing in subtle ways. New rules evolve and interact with older ones in subtle ways little appreciated by the guardians of traditional language. This is in fact shown by the example of new functions associated with *hopefully*. Pinker (1994: 381–3) suggests that not all English adverbs indicate the manner in which the actor performs the action. Rather, there are two classes of adverbs: sentence adverbs and

The first shall be last?
An example of 'linguistic etiquette' that prescriptivists often insist on is to put oneself last in coordinated phrases: thus *Mary, you and I* rather than *Me, you and Mary*. Yet the latter colloquial form follows a kind of linguistic logic in putting the first person (*I*), first; second person (*you*) next and third person (*he/she/it*) last. Philip Angermeyer and John Singler (2003) undertook a detailed descriptive study based on the actual usage of New Yorkers in a variety of spoken and written contexts. They found that the two sequences of coordination were not in fact equivalent, but carried nuances pertaining to politeness and formality. The rules in subject position can be broadly described as follows:

- Children first learn the basic (or vernacular) form 'Me and X' and use it in subject as well as object positions (*Me and Miriam are good friends. She gave the prize to me and Miriam.*)
- Schooling is mainly responsible for inculcating the standard rule of using 'X and I' in subject position and 'X and me' in object position (*Miriam and I are good friends. She gave the prize to Miriam and me*).
- However, many speakers have a third option of expressing politeness using 'X and I' in both subject and object positions (*Her and I are still sober and working together with God. She gave the prize to Miriam and I*).

There is thus some uncertainty as speakers waver between a need to use the standard (and formal) form 'X and me' and the polite 'X and I' in object position. Angermeyer and Singler's study shows that despite minor fluctuations, these three rules (for vernacular, standard and polite) have been stable in the history of English, citing examples from Shakespeare and Dickens through to modern celebrities, college graduates and political leaders.

verb-phrase adverbs. Sentence adverbs modify an entire sentence, stressing the speakers' attitude to the proposition being expressed, for example *frankly* in the sentence *Frankly, I don't give a damn*. Verb-phrase adverbs like *carefully*, on the other hand, modify the verb phrase only, as in *John carefully carried the kitten*. Although *hopefully* derives from a verb-phrase adverb, it has also been in use as a sentence adverb for at least sixty years. It is the latter function which is becoming more frequent. Pinker and others adhering to a descriptivist position thus challenge the idea that all change in a language reduces its preciseness or aesthetic value.

(4) Descriptive linguists point to the fact that all languages have adopted words from other sources. It is an essential part of language development. Many innovations serve to refer to new types of activities or to renovate and revivify aspects of language. An example comes from the modern use of *-bilia* to mean 'collectible things associated with the past', as in *rockabilia* ('rock music of the past') and *restorabilia* ('restored antiques'). This is a change from the original meaning of *-bilia*, from the Latin-based term *memorabilia*, where it was the root *memora* that meant 'memory' and the suffix *-bilia* simply denoted 'pertaining to'. What might to a prescriptivist seem an untenable change arising from an ignorance of Latin grammar is in another light a creative manipulation of language to serve new ends.

Further Debate – Is Prescriptivism Unavoidable?

It has long been the policy among linguists to ignore prescriptive judgements in their descriptions of language. There is a growing argument, however, that if their aim is to characterise the full range of language use and attitudes towards language, then sociolinguists cannot pretend that prescriptive ideas do not or should not exist. On the contrary, ideas about good and bad language are very influential in society. The British linguist, Deborah Cameron (1995b), coined the term 'verbal hygiene' for the practices born of the urge to improve or clean up language. Just as hygiene is necessary for good health, verbal hygiene is felt to be necessary for everyday language use. She points to the need to pay attention to the role of journalists, writers, editors and broadcasters in promoting an awareness of acceptable public forms of language.

A second pro-prescriptive argument is that even people who disapprove of the pedantry of traditional grammarians conform in their writing and formal speech to the conventions laid down by authorities of language such as editors. Critics sometimes censure sociolinguists for promoting a tolerance of dialect diversity while using the prestige dialect of their society themselves. According to this view, sociolinguists themselves are closet prescriptivists. They promote a view of non-standard language as the equal of standard

language, but write textbooks in which double negatives and dangling participles are carefully weeded out. Moreover, they may penalise their own students for not writing in a formal, acceptable way. There thus seems to be no way of escaping from the existence and influence of language norms.

To some extent, prescriptivists and descriptivists have been talking at cross-purposes. The former are primarily concerned with improving public and formal language, the latter with describing colloquial speech (see section 1.5 below). A compromise position therefore seems possible – that variation in language is to be expected in informal speech, but that more formal contexts of use (like a public lecture) require shifts towards other, more educationally sanctioned, styles that minimise variation. This view emphasizes that some form of prescriptivism is necessary, for example in teaching a language to foreigners in classrooms, where the standard variety is the target. This might be termed a 'weak prescriptive' position. It holds that it is a necessary part of education to enable children to learn new styles of speaking and writing that are highly valued in particular societies. Mastering the standard form of a language involves making choices about what should count as appropriate usage in formal contexts.

However, most sociolinguists (see, for example, Trudgill 1975), would insist that the learning of standard English should not lead to a devaluation of the styles that students bring to schools with them. Mastery of formal standard English alone will not take foreign learners too far, unless their aims are to read and write without speaking. If the aim is to interact with speakers of English informally, then certain prescriptive principles might prove counter-productive. Cameron (1995b: 115) argues that '[t]here is nothing wrong in wanting standards of excellence in the use of language. Rather what is wrong is the narrow definition of excellence as mere superficial "correctness".' In keeping the debate about language standards at this superficial level, neither prescriptivist not descriptivist is entirely blameless.

Is Descriptivism Adequate?

The role of the linguist today goes beyond the academic description of language for its own sake, to be discussed with other academics at conferences. For one thing, sociolinguists are called upon as experts by governments in planning for education and governmental administration. In these matters, they are forced to make choices about the suitability of certain varieties of language and certain words and expressions within those varieties. Florian Coulmas (1989b: 178), a German linguist, argues that the stance of description for its own sake is inadequate:

> The scholar's serene detachment from the object of their studies is, however, in sharp conflict with the expectations of the speech community, as well as the actual needs of modern standard languages. What is a linguist good for when he

cannot give advice about good or bad language and refuses to make statements about what is good for our languages? Who else would be more qualified to make such statements?

This view holds that even if sociolinguists themselves prefer not to make prescriptive judgements, they should not ignore the fact that verbal hygiene is a part of the 'ecology of language' in most communities.

An important area where researchers have felt the need to go beyond descriptivism is sexism in language. Robin Lakoff's ironically titled book, *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), spawned a great deal of research into areas of language showing differences between men's and women's usage (discussed in Chapter 7). Such researchers were not content to describe or record gender differences in language, but helped to popularise the argument that languages could be sexist, that is, they could discriminate against women by presenting things from a male perspective. In Gal's terms language not only reflects inequalities that exist, but also helps to sustain and reproduce them unless challenged. We pick up this theme in Chapter 10, which analyses power inequalities in society and their bearing upon language.

Some examples of sexism in English claimed by Robin Lakoff (1975)

- Women are devalued in language, for example in slang terms like *chick or kitten*, or derogatory terms like *slut*.
- Words associated with women are not valued (for example, use of specific colour terms like *mauve* and *lavender*).
- A male perspective is the norm (for example, in terms like *he, man, mankind* for people in general).
- Expectations about femininity and ladylike speech force women into euphemisms or silence.

1.4 STANDARDISATION

Standardisation and the Standard Dialect

A discussion of prescriptivism goes hand in hand with the study of the rise of standard languages and their relation to other dialects. Garvin and Mathiot (1960: 783) defined a standardised language as a 'codified form of a language, accepted by, and serving as a model to, a larger speech community'. In other words, the standard form of a language is that dialect which is most often associated with specific subgroups (usually educated people or people having high status and authority within the society) and with specific functions serving a community that goes beyond that of its native speakers (for example writing, education, radio and television). The

term *codified* – based on Latin *codex* and English *code* – refers to the existence of explicit statements of the norms of a language, as in dictionaries and grammars, especially concerning aspects of language use where some variation exists among speakers. The definition of standardisation draws attention to the social nature of the process. The popular conception that a standard form of a language is automatically an 'original' or 'pure' form of a language that pre-existed other dialects (which are 'deviations' from the standard) is frequently incorrect. Standardisation occurs when a language is put to a wider range of functions than previously – typically for the spread of literacy, education, government and administration, and in the expansion of the media. Successful standardisation involves the creation (or acceptance) of a variety as the most prestigious one, on account of its use by those who have status and power in the society.

> The power of a standard variety derives from historical accident and convention. Parisian French, for example, is usually taken as the standard dialect of that language yet, if history had decreed that some other centre were to be the capital of France, then presumably its linguistic variety would now be the accepted standard. (J. R. Edwards 1979: 76)

In the Middle English period (roughly 1150 to 1500), there was arguably no national literary standard English. While Chaucer wrote in the East Midlands dialect (which included that of the city of London), other writers used their own regional varieties. By the end of the fourteenth century, a written standard had started to emerge, though it still contained some variation. It is traditionally thought that standard English arose because of the influence of an East Midlands 'triangle' bounded by three centres of prestige: London, Oxford and Cambridge. This area was important for its economic development (as a wealthy agricultural region and the centre of the wool trade), its dense population, the social and political standing of many of its citizens, and its centers of learning. David Crystal (1995: 110) lists the following essential characteristics of modern standard English:

- It is historically based on one dialect among many, but now has special status, without a local base. It is largely (but not completely) neutral with respect to regional identity.
- Standard English is not a matter of pronunciation, rather of grammar, vocabulary and orthography.
- It carries most prestige within 'English-speaking' countries.
- It is a desirable educational target.
- Although widely understood, it is not widely spoken.

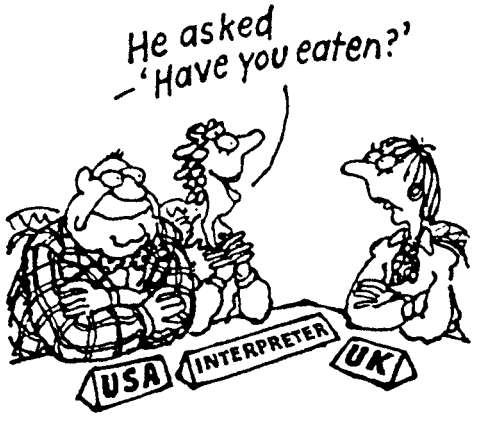
However, many points of disagreement exist among linguists as to the exact provenance of the term 'standard English'. John Joseph (1987: 17) believes that a standard language is not 'native' to anyone. It is a higher cultural endowment serving (formal) functions and has linguistic features that

cannot be mastered until after the period of normal first-language acquisition (that is, the age of four or five). Others disagree: for example, Michael Stubbs (1986: 87) argues that standard English is the native language of a particular social group – the educated middle classes. Whereas the former view places emphasis on vocabulary, including learned or technical terms and on complex (bookish) syntactic constructions, the latter view (subscribed to by most sociolinguists) concentrates on everyday, non-technical uses of language. For someone like Stubbs, the standard form of a language must, by virtue of having a community of native speakers, be divisible into formal and informal norms. Speakers of standard English, he argues, can be as casual, polite or rude as anyone else, and can use slang, swear and say things in bad taste or in bad style. This, of course, makes defining the features of a standard dialect much harder. Most English utterances can be easily classified (*I ain't seen them kids* is non-standard; *I haven't seen those kids* is standard though informal). However, there are some features which cannot be so easily categorised. Even among prescriptivists, there may be disagreements about the status of certain constructions. It makes sense to think of a gradient of 'standardness' in cases like the following:

The man what you saw.
The man that you saw.
The man who you saw.
The man whom you saw.

These four sentences exist on a scale from least standard to most standard. The first sentence is considered non-standard while the last one is considered standard in formal writing. The second and third sentences are intermediate in terms of standardness. Some editors, writers and teachers accept *that* and *who*, while others insist on restricting *that* to non-human referents and using *whom* as the only acceptable object pronoun for human referents. For historical reasons, we have focused on British English in order to stress the point that the rise of a standard form of a language is primarily a sociopolitical matter. The existence of a 'double standard' for English (in Britain and the USA) is an embarrassment to the prescriptivist and those who believe in the superiority of British standard English. In learning and teaching English, European and South Asian countries follow RP and British English norms, whereas South-east Asian and South American countries follow US English norms. Clearly US English is a dialect whose speakers had sufficient political and economic influence to have declared their social (and linguistic) independence. This did not occur without a tussle, however (see, for example, R. W. Bailey 1991: ch. 6). It is noteworthy that some constructions which have become non-standard in the course of British sociolinguistic history have remained standard in the USA. To this category belong syntactic constructions like

the use of *for . . . to* verb complements as in *I would like for you to do this by tomorrow*, which counts as standard in the USA but not in Britain. US speakers tend to ask past-tense questions beginning with 'did', while people in Britain tend to favour 'have' (as alluded to in the accompanying cartoon). The same applies to features of verb morphology, as in *gotten* as past participle in the USA, *dove* as the past tense of *dive*, and past participle *snuck* in parts of the USA against *sneaked* in Britain. These reinforce the point that the standard forms of a language are based on pre-existing dialect usage, rather than dialect usage being necessarily a subsequent departure from a standard norm. Contrasting the British and US usage also serves as a reminder of the linguistic arbitrariness of what eventually counts as standard.



On RP

Crystal's characterisation of standard English excludes matters of pronunciation; in this view, it is not tied to any particular accent. However, the issue is not as simple as this. Theoretically, one can speak standard English with any accent, though in Britain, especially, these are seldom very localised accents – but rather modified regional accents. Nevertheless, there is one accent that has non-localised prestige and is something of a standard (or reference point) for teaching (British) English to foreigners. This is the accent used most frequently on British radio and television, known as Received Pronunciation (or RP), or sometimes as the Queen's English, Oxford English or BBC English. The 'received' part of RP refers to an old-fashioned use of the word for 'generally accepted'. RP was promoted in the public schools (i.e. exclusive fee-paying schools) of England and spread throughout the civil service of the British Empire and the armed forces. Crystal (1995: 365) notes that RP is not immune to change, as any examination of early BBC recordings will show. Further,

> RP is no longer as widely used today as it was fifty years ago. It is still the standard accent of the Royal family, Parliament, the Church of England, the High Courts and other national institutions; but less than 3 per cent of the British people speak it in a pure form now. Most educated people have developed an accent which is a mixture of RP and various regional characteristics – 'modified RP' . . .

Some scholars argue that accent *is* involved in notions of standardness. Stubbs (1986: 88) points out that the fact that standard English only occurs with 'milder regional accents' undermines the claim that phonetics and phonology are not involved in people's ideas of standard English. He observes that the very fact that there are such things as elocution lessons, which focus on accent, means that people have an idea of what is and is not standard in pronunciation. (See further Petyt 1980: 30–6.)

There is no US equivalent of RP – an accent that is considered the most appropriate for education, broadcasting and so on, as Roger Lass (1987: 244) stresses:

> Every American can pretty much be identified as coming from someplace. Though there is a tendency for Americans with certain very marked regional accents to accommodate to a more widespread type under certain conditions: especially for Southerners and Northeasterners to adopt certain 'General American' features, such as being rhotic [pronouncing /r/ after vowels, as in the word *bird*]. This is particularly so in the media, where up till recently anyhow, new readers speaking southern standards for instance have tended to drop some very local features. It's worth noting that in the U.S. strong regionality is not negatively related to political success . . .

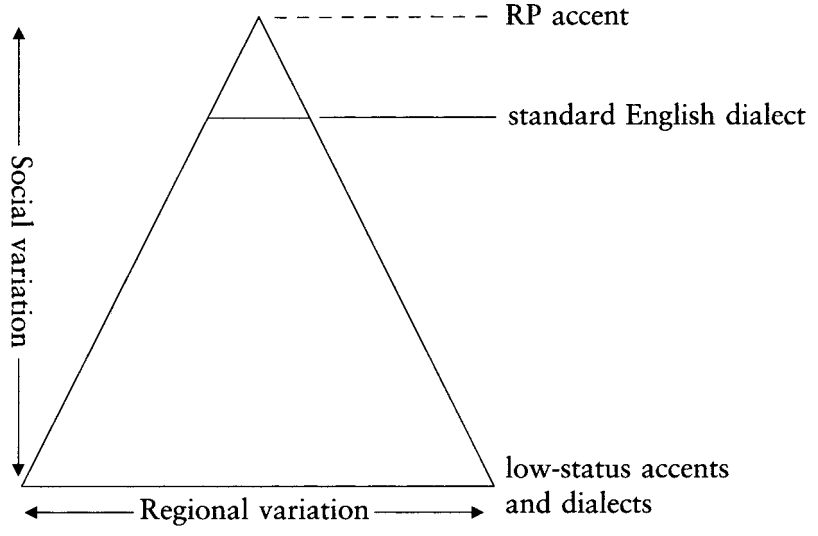


Figure 1.2 The pyramid diagram of regional and social variation in England (based on Trudgill 1975: 21)

'General American' is a term that covers about two-thirds of the mother-tongue speakers of English whose accent is not recognisably local (Wells 1982: 118). It is the type of American English pronunciation that is taught to learners of English as a foreign language, and is to be found most commonly and with slight variation from Ohio to the mid-West and thence to the Pacific coast (Prator and Robinett 1972, cited by Wells, 1982: 118). More recent dialectological work in the US and Canada is discussed in Chapter 3.

Standardisation in Non-Western Settings

In many African centers, it was the advent of colonialism that brought literacy and standardisation. Missionaries attempted to target the maximally useful variety in which to convey the message of Christianity. This was often the variety used by the more prominent chieftains among whom they settled. In cases where the existing dialects did not have much significance outside their own localities, the choice was often arbitrary. In Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the missionary-linguist C. M. Doke was called upon by the colonial authorities to make recommendations about the standardisation of a group of dialects (Korekore, Zezuru, Karanga, Ndau and Kalanga). Doke recommended that a unified literary language be created on the basis of two prominent varieties, Karanga and Zezuru. Whereas the grammar of the language, to be called Shona, would draw on these two varieties, the dictionary of Shona was to be as inclusive as possible, drawing on the other varieties too (Ansre 1971). This compromise along linguistic, social and demographic lines seems to have been moderately successful. People were expected to write Shona (the new standard) while continuing to speak one of the varieties that make up this language. However, since a large number of speakers who are prominent in the media originate from or around the capital, Harare, there are signs that the Zezuru variety is gaining the most prestige. At the same time, the educational authorities are experimenting with new methods that do not discourage children from writing in their own dialect of Shona (Batidzirai 1996). If this becomes a reality, it will no longer be true that 'Shona is the language which everyone writes and nobody speaks' (Ansre 1971: 691).

Such an attempt at blending together a standard (written) language was rare, however. Sometimes the elevation of one variety over another was based on factors like the region where the missionaries happened to be based. Ansre (1971: 687) provides the example of the Ewe language of Togo. The basic standard that arose in colonial times was based on the Anglo dialect, rather than its rival Anexo, because of the strength of the backing of the German government and German missionaries. While the standard was used in education and worship, economic factors have worked in a counter

direction, favouring the Mina dialect (an offshoot of Anexo) in many parts of Togo.[4]

1.5 SPEECH VS WRITING

Compared to speech, writing is an invention that came late in human history and until recent times applied to a minority of languages. Even within literate societies, literacy was for a long time the preserve of the few. Children learn their first language as an oral entity by socialisation. Writing comes later (if at all) by conscious teaching.

Three linguists on the role of writing

Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks. (Bloomfield 1933: 21)

Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object. But the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role. People attach even more importance to the written image of a vocal sign than to the sign itself. A similar mistake would be in thinking that more can be learnt about someone by looking at his photograph than by viewing him directly. (Saussure 1959: 23–4, based on his lectures of 1907–11)

In linguistics it has become abundantly clear that writing is not just visible speech, but rather a mode of verbal communication in its own right . . . . It changes the nature of verbal communication as well as the speakers' attitude to, and awareness of, their language. Writing makes a society language-conscious . . . . Without writing modern societies cannot function . . . . Generally writing enlarges the functional potential of languages. (Coulmas 1989a: excerpted from pp. 12–14)

This **primacy of speech** over writing was stressed by structuralists like Bloomfield and Saussure. It led them to devise descriptions of linguistic structure without having to refer to spelling conventions and other visible marks like commas and full stops. Rather, they focused on the study of sounds and significant pauses (to which commas and full stops partly correspond). To a large extent, sociolinguists have followed suit in concentrating on the study of human interaction via speech. But as the third quote from Coulmas suggests, it is an oversight to exclude writing from

the 'linguistic ecology' of modern societies. This book reports largely on speech-based research, and on sign language (in Chapter 13). The study of writing as a social practice is a relatively new interest in sociolinguistics (e.g. Street 1993, Blommaert 2005) which we have not been able to include, largely for reasons of space. Some inkling of the kinds of issues involved can be found in Chapter 11 on sociolinguistics and education. Furthermore, issues raised by Coulmas about modern communication, and the role of written language in societal modernisation are discussed in Chapter 12, on language planning and policy.

As we show in Chapter 3, many sociolinguists prefer to focus not just on speech, but on the more informal types of speech involving relaxed conversations between friends, peers and family members. These **vernacular** forms of language are the ones generally ignored in the classroom.

1.6 SOCIETIES AND SPEECH COMMUNITIES

Three Views of Society

In order to take the 'socio' side of the discipline of sociolinguistics seriously, we outline some of the major approaches to the study of human societies. This is, of course, a complex topic, as reference to any textbook of sociology will show. Within sociology there are three dominant theories of human society, and there is little agreement between adherents of these theories. Naturally, it is important for sociolinguists to be aware of their own working assumptions, for these will often determine the kinds of questions they raise and research about language. A coherent theory of language in society can only unfold within a particular theory of society. The three theories (or sets of ideas about how society works) that we shall outline here are **functionalism**, **Marxism** and **interactionism**.

Functionalism

This paradigm (or dominant theoretical perspective) was influential in western thought between the 1940s and mid-1960s. It pursued the view that a society may be understood as a system made up of functioning parts. To understand any part of society (for example the family or school), the part must be examined in relation to the society as a whole. Haralambos and Holborn (1991: 8) stress the analogy with biology: just as a biologist might examine a part of the human body such as the heart, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the human organism, the functionalist examines a part of society, such as the family, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the social system. The social system has certain basic needs (or functional prerequisites) which must

be met if it is to survive (for example, food and shelter). The function of any part of society is its contribution to the maintenance of the overall whole. There is a certain degree of integration between the parts (social institutions) that make up the society. Functionalists argue that the order and stability which they see as essential for the maintenance of the social system are provided by 'value consensus', that is, agreement about values by members of society. In this view, two major occupations of the sociologist are the study of social subsystems and the value consensus that binds them together. Haralambos and Holborn (1991: 10) give the following example of value consensus:

> For example it can be argued that the value of materialism integrates many parts of the social structure in Western industrialized society. The economic system produces a large range of goods and ever increasing productivity is regarded as an important goal. The educational system is partly concerned with producing the skills and expertise to expand production and increase its efficiency. The family is an important unit of consumption with its steadily rising demand for consumer durables such as washing machines, videos and microwaves. The political system is partly concerned with improving material standards and raising productivity. To the extent that these parts of the social structure are based on the same values, they may be said to be integrated.

Concepts stressed within (but not exclusive to) this brand of sociology which are particularly useful to the student of sociolinguistics include: culture, socialisation, norms and values, and status and role.

- *Culture.* Although the popular sense of this word stresses 'high' culture (e.g. musical, literary and artistic achievements), in the technical sociological-anthropological sense the culture of a society refers to, 'the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation' (Linton 1945: 203). Culture in this sense is a 'design for living', which defines appropriate or acceptable ways and forms of behavior within particular societies. In Chapter 5, we discuss research that shows that what counts as linguistically acceptable, desirable or highly valued behavior may vary from society to society.
- *Socialisation.* This refers to the process via which people learn the culture of their society. Primary socialisation takes place in childhood, usually within the family. The peer group (child's circle of playmates within and outside the home) is also an important reference group in transmitting social and linguistic behaviour.
- *Norms and values.* A norm is a 'specific guide to action which defines acceptable and appropriate behaviour in particular situations' (Haralambos and Holborn 1991: 5): think of dress codes at school, at home and at a party. In the course of socialisation, norms are inculcated by rewards (a sweet, a kind word) or punishments. Some norms become enacted in law to serve a larger society, for example a law forbidding nude bathing or in some societies the exposure of a woman's face in public. Values, on the

other hand, provide general guidelines as to qualities that are deemed to be good, desirable and of lasting worth. In many modern societies, the value placed on human life is a basic one, that determines norms of behaviour (standards of hygiene, settling of disputes, work-safety regulations and so on). Functionalist sociology proceeds from the premise that unless norms are shared, members of society would be unlikely to cooperate and work together. In this view, an ordered and stable society requires shared norms and common values. This has been the implicit assumption of much of sociolinguistic research.

- *Status and role.* Status refers to social positions that society assigns to its members (not just the high ones as in popular parlance). Such a status may be 'ascribed', that is, relatively fixed by birth, (for example one's gender status, or aristocratic titles in some societies), or it may be 'achieved'. The latter refers to statuses that result from some in society is accompanied by a number of norms which define how an individual occupying a particular status is expected to act. This group of norms is known as a 'role'. Social roles regulate and organise behaviour. In the course of a day, a person may play out several roles: that of teacher (at work), mother and wife (at home), client (with a bank), poet (at a leisure society) and so on. These roles are defined by their interactive nature: the role of doctor usually assumes the existence (if not the presence) of a patient; that of mother the existence of the child and so on. Each of these roles calls upon different forms of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour.

> Status refers to differences between social groups in the social honour or prestige they are accorded by others. Status distinctions often vary independently of class divisions, and social honour may be either positive or negative. Positively privileged status groups include any groupings of people who have high prestige in a given social order. For instance doctors and lawyers have high prestige in a given social order . . . .
>
> Possession of wealth normally tends to confer high status, but there are many exceptions. The term 'genteel poverty' refers to one example. In Britain, individuals from aristocratic families continue to enjoy considerable social esteem even when their fortunes have been lost. Conversely, 'new money' is often looked on with some scorn by the well-established wealthy. (Giddens 1989: 212)

Marxism

Since the 1970s, Marxist approaches have become increasingly influential in sociology. Differing sharply from the functionalist belief that all social groups benefit if their society functions smoothly, Marxism stresses fundamental differences of interest between social groups. These

differences ensure that conflict is a common and persistent feature of society, not just a temporary disturbance of the social order (as functionalists believe). Karl Marx (1818–83) stressed the economic basis of human organisation, which could be divided into two levels: a base (or infrastructure) and a superstructure. The base is determined by the forces of production (e.g. the raw materials and technology of a particular society) and the social relations of production (e.g. social relationships that people enter into – such as manager, worker – to produce goods). The other aspect of society, the superstructure, is made of the political, legal and educational institutions, which are not independent of the base but shaped by it. Marx believed that many societies contain basic contradictions that preclude them from existing permanently. These contradictions, involving the increasing exploitation of one group by another (for example, the exploitation of serfs by lords in feudal times), have to be resolved since a social system containing such contradictions cannot survive unchanged.

The concepts that Marxists emphasise in their studies include social class, exploitation and oppression, contradiction, conflict and change, and ideology and false consciousness. Class denotes a social group whose members share a similar relationship to the means of production. Essentially, in capitalist societies there is the ruling class which owns the means of production (e.g. land, raw materials) and the working class which must sell its labour power to earn a living. In a feudal society, the two main classes are distinguished relative to ownership of the land: the feudal nobility owns it and the landless serfs work it. 'Exploitation' is a technical term that stresses that the wealth produced by the labor power of workers is appropriated in the forms of profits by the ruling class. 'Ideology' within Marxist theory refers to the set of dominant ideas of an age: it emanates from the control of the ruling classes of the institutions of the superstructure. Such ideas serve ultimately to justify the power and privilege of the ruling class 'and conceal from all members of society the basis of exploitation and oppression on which their dominance rests' (Haralambos and Holborn 1991: 14). A clear example comes again from the feudal age in Europe when the dominant concepts were honour and loyalty, which appeared as the natural order and were celebrated in literature and implicit in superstructural institutions like the law courts and education. Similarly, according to many theorists, in the capitalist age exploitation is disguised by the ideology of equality and freedom, which appear to be not just sensible but natural and desirable. This, Marxists argue, conceals the reality that capitalism involves fundamentally unequal relationships: workers are not ultimately 'free' since they are forced to work in order to survive: all they can do is exchange one form of wage subordination for another.

Class versus caste societies

A caste system differs from a class-based society insofar as status and role are fixed from birth. This social system is found in countries like India and Senegal. The usually accepted attributes of caste in India are the following:

- *Endogamy*. Marriage is restricted to members of one's caste group.
- *Occupational specialisation*. Individual castes are associated with fixed occupations, inherited at birth.
- *Hierarchy*. There is a division of castes according to status, with the Brahman (or priest) at the top, and Shudras (working castes) at the bottom. Another group is considered 'outcaste'.
- *Hereditary membership*. One is born into a particular caste, and cannot change it despite individual merit.

However, the relative rigidity of caste society should not lead to an exaggeration of the flexibility of the class system, in which there are constraints on who has access to the best education, the most prestigious jobs and the most powerful positions. Societies which espouse freedom of opportunity were often built on a different set of principles. Analysts of class point to the historical system of racial capitalism built on slavery. This was a kind of colour-caste system that contributed to the growth of the southern US and European economies, which were subsequently able to denounce these principles.

Interactionism

A third school of thought within sociology, less influential than the previous two, adopts a bottom-up approach of examining small-scale encounters rather than large-scale social systems. It seeks to understand action between individuals. Haralambos and Holborn (1991: 15) emphasise that interactionism begins from the assumption that action is meaningful to those involved, and that those meanings are accordingly not fixed but created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interaction. Not only is the meaning of a social encounter a negotiated entity, but the individual develops a 'self-concept' (or idea of oneself) according to the interactive processes in which he or she participates, and according to the way he or she is evaluated therein. For the interactionist, social roles are not as clearly defined as within functional theory. Furthermore, interactionists argue that roles are often unclear, ambiguous or vague. This may provide actors with considerable room for negotiation, improvisation and creative action.

Much of sociolinguistics has proceeded implicitly from a functionalist perspective of society, though it must be said that the linguistic tends to overshadow the sociological. The latter is often considered useful largely for informal background information and orientation. In this book, we will focus on the major findings of such sociolinguistics but will be emphasising where and how they might fit together sociologically. Marxist approaches are not typically emphasised in the west, and, while we understand the scepticism with which Marxist/communist political practice has come to be viewed worldwide, from a scholarly point of view many of the insights emanating from sociolinguistics do fit the Marxist critique of social systems quite well. Some linguists like Norman Fairclough explicitly acknowledge their position as Marxist, and undertake sociolinguistic analyses of speech and writing based on a Marxist understanding of society. This line of research is discussed in Chapter 10, where we explore the linguistic ramifications of rule, control and power. Interactionism, which may not seem as substantial a sociological approach as the other two, has nevertheless inspired some important work in sociolinguistics which we introduce in Chapter 6. The development of language among children is best characterised in interactional terms. Languages are not products residing in grammars and dictionaries, but flexible interactive tools. There is accordingly an interplay between socialisation and language learning in early life. This interplay is stressed in the work of the British linguist, Michael Halliday (1978: 19), who describes the functions discernible in the pre-linguistic behaviour of infants (see box below). Since the school typically demands a more impersonal way of using language, interactionism forms a significant perspective in modern research on classroom language (see Chapter 11).

Outside Linguistics, an influential school of thought regarding culture in the modern world, *Postmodernism* can be seen as a combination of Marxism and Interactionism. This school of thought stresses identities as

The interactional functions of language in early infancy – Halliday (1978: 19)

1. *Instrumental* ('I want'): satisfying material needs.
2. *Regulatory* ('do as I tell you'): controlling the behavior of others.
3. *Interactional* ('me and you'): getting along with other people.
4. *Personal* ('here I come'): identifying and expressing the self.
5. *Heuristic* ('tell me why'): exploring the world outside and inside oneself.
6. *Imaginative* ('let's pretend'): creating a world of one's own.
7. *Informative* ('I've got something to tell you'): communicating new information.

fluid, multiple, fractured, unstable, contradictory and always open to possibilities of change. Few linguists endorse a fully chaotic view of language and culture, preferring to look for underlying regularities amid seeming flux. Still, there are times when a dynamic view of human behaviour is particularly appropriate, as when examining the expressive styles that young people experiment with and sometimes adopt.

Types of Societies/Types of Languages?

Societies may be classified in terms of their complexity, defined by their size, hierarchical organisation, economic structure, specialisation of tasks and interaction with other societies. It is important to note that there is no linguistic analogue to this. Languages cannot be arranged in a list from least to most complex. The structure of languages does not correlate with the complexity of the communities that typically use them. In terms of morphology, syntax and semantics, a language of an isolated mountain-bound community in the Himalayas is no less complex than any of the six world languages of the United Nations. The poet-cum-linguist, Edward Sapir (1921: 219), put it as follows: 'When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam'. Sapir's student Whorf, who, as we have seen, was intimately acquainted with the structure of Hopi and other Amerindian languages, was just as emphatic, if less poetic:

> The relatively few languages of the cultures which have attained to modern civilization promise to overspread the globe and cause the extinction of the hundreds of diverse exotic linguistic species, but it is idle to pretend that they represent any superiority of type. On the contrary, it takes but little real scientific study of pre-literate languages, especially those of America, to show how much more precise and finely elaborated is the system of relationships in many such tongues than is ours. (1956: 84)

A reverse argument is sometimes offered: people maintain that languages rich in inflections or in ways of combining basic grammatical units (morphemes) into words are perhaps too complex to function as languages of wider communication. Conversely, they suggest that the inflectional simplicity of English enables it to be effective as a language of international transactions. There are several things wrong with this argument. In the first place, the notion of complexity should not be limited to the morphology of a language. Modern linguistics emphasises the enormously complex organisation of all languages. One language might be morphologically 'simpler' on the surface, but a relatively simpler morphology (as with English) has to be made up in other components of the grammar: in the syntax and vocabulary. If we are to look for reasons for the spread of one language over another, the wrong place to start would be the structure of the language, as John Edwards (1995: 40) forcefully argues:

> It is [. . .] clear, to the modern linguist at any rate, that these varieties [dominant languages] achieved widespread power and status because of the heightened fortunes of their users, and not because of any intrinsic linguistic qualities of the languages themselves. The most common elements here have to do with military, political and economic might, although there are also examples in which a more purely cultural status supports the *lingua franca* function. However, in this latter case, the cultural clout which lingers has generally grown from earlier associations with those more blatant features just mentioned. The muscle, in any case, which these languages have, derives from the fact that their original users control important commodities – wealth, dominance, learning – which others see as necessary for their own aspirations. The aphorism 'all roads lead to Rome' has linguistic meaning too.

This view is hard to assimilate within a functionalist and interactionist perspective. Edwards makes it clear that infrastructural factors ('military, political and economic might') and ideological factors ('cultural clout') are involved when a language becomes dominant over a wide area. By 'cultural clout', Edwards refers to factors like an established literature, a tradition of grammatical study of the language, and the high status of the language and its speakers.

Sapir, Whorf and descriptive linguists generally were at pains to stress that languages were in principle of equal complexity. This was a necessary step to guard against potential European and American ethnocentrism in linguistics and anthropology, and led to great advances in understanding language structure. Some sociolinguists argue that it is now time to recognise that if languages are all linguistically equal they are not all sociolinguistically equal. In this vein, Joseph (1987: 25–39) points to the effects of print literacy and standardisation in giving some forms of language and some languages an advantage over others, so that certain forms of language come to seem to be more important than others. Coulmas (1989b: 4) believes that the egalitarian perspective has led linguists to downplay the functions of language in society, in which all languages 'are clearly not equal'. (One such instance of an unequal function and position assigned to different languages within the same society is discussed in the next section.) However, it is not the case that some languages are better placed in an absolute sense to serve a range of sociolinguistic functions (for example, in formal speeches, writing or television) than others. Every language has the potential to add to its characteristic vocabulary and ways of speaking if new roles become necessary. Some languages have a superior technical vocabulary to that of others in certain spheres. This is a difference in actuality rather than in potential.

A rural technology: ploughing terms in nineteenth-century Bihar, India

to plough	*har jot-*
first ploughing	*pahil cās*
second ploughing	*dokhār*
third ploughing	*tekhā*
land sown after a single ploughing	*bhokauā*
ploughing in the month of Magh of land to be sown in the next rainy season	*maghar jot-*
ploughing of millet when it is a foot high	*bidāh*
ploughing of a deliberately flooded rice field	*lewā*
ploughing with a plough having a new full-sized block	*nawṭha ke jot*
ploughing with a plough having a small worn block	*khinauri ke jot*
light re-ploughing to get rid of weeds and prepare for sowing of rice	*unāh*
small pieces of field which a plough is unable to touch	*pais*
cross-ploughing	*ārā*
ploughing in diminishing circuits	*cauketha*
centre plot round which bullocks have no room to turn	*badhār*
ploughing from corner to corner in small centre plot	*koniya jot*
ploughing of a crooked field	*ūnādyorhī jot*
ploughing along the length and breadth of a rectangular field	*sojhauā jot*
ploughing breadthways	*phānī*

(based on G. A. Grierson, *Bihar Peasant Life* 1975 [1885]: 171–4)

A bar over a vowel denotes a long pronunciation; a dot below a consonant denotes a retroflex pronunciation (tongue tip curled backwards to strike the palate).

The Notion of 'Speech Community'

Traditionally, sociologists study societies in terms of categories like class, ethnicity or regional and economic characteristics. 'Community' as typically used in sociology suggests a dimension of shared knowledge, possessions or behaviours. Linguists draw attention to another dimension of social organisation by using the term 'speech community'. Essentially, the term stresses

that language practices may be equally diagnostic of the social coherence of a group, and may be a more natural boundary for sociolinguistic study than, say, geographical cohesion alone. The term cannot be exactly equated with groups of people who speak the same language. Thus speakers of Spanish in Spain, Columbia and Texas do not form a speech community. (The term 'language community' is sometimes used to discuss the superset of speakers of the same language in different parts of the world.) Conversely, speaking different primary (or home) languages does not necessarily preclude people from belonging to the same speech community. In multilingual communities where more than one language is spoken by a majority of people, sufficient consensus about appropriate rules of speaking and interpreting linguistic behavior may arise for it to be considered one sociolinguistic unit (or speech community). This has been claimed, for example, of India, where a number of common sociolinguistic conventions have been found to underlie the great diversity of languages. Prabodh Pandit (1972) used the term 'sociolinguistic area' to describe this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that 'speech community' is not precise enough to be considered a technical term. Even in linguistics, the emphases stressed by different scholars carry varied nuances, as Muriel Saville-Troike (1982: 17–18) emphasises:

1. Shared language use (Lyons 1970).
2. Frequency of interaction by a group of people (Bloomfield 1933; Hockett 1958; Gumperz 1962).
3. Shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance (Hymes 1972).
4. Shared attitudes and values regarding language forms and language use (Labov 1972a).
5. Shared sociocultural understandings and presupposition regarding speech events (Sherzer 1977).

The core meaning that we might extract from these is that a speech community comprises people who are in habitual contact with each other by means of speech which involves either a shared language variety or shared ways of interpreting the different language varieties commonly used in the area. Peter Patrick (2002: 593) concludes his detailed survey of the complexities of the concept of speech community, with a more postmodern outlook:

> [Researchers] should not presume social cohesion or accept it to be an inevitable result of interaction; size and its effects should not be taken for granted; social theories, including class analyses, must be explicitly invoked, not accepted as givens; the speech community should not be taken for a unit of social analysis; and we ought not to assume that [they] exist as predefined entities waiting to be researched or identify them with folk notions, but see them as objects constituted anew by the researcher's gaze and the questions we ask.

1.7 MONOLINGUALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM

Many countries, especially in the west, attach special significance to the existence of one majority language per territory, adhering to an ethos of 'one state – one language'. Indeed, many of the states of Europe arose in a period of intense nationalism, with accompanying attempts to make national borders coterminous with language (and vice versa). The dominance of European powers in modern history has made this seem a desirable situation, if not an ideal one. The non-aligned sociolinguist would do well to bear in mind the essentially multilingual nature of most human societies, and that there are almost no countries in the world – even in western Europe – where everyone speaks, or identifies with, one language. In statistical terms, Grosjean (1982: vii) estimates that about half the world's population is bilingual. Romaine (1989b: 8) points out further that there about thirty times as many languages as there are countries. Even countries like France, Germany and England that are sometimes characterised as monolingual in fact have a vast array of languages within their borders. In France, for example, the following languages are still in use: French, Breton, Flemish, Occitan, Catalan, Basque, Alsatian and Corsican. There are also languages spoken in large numbers by more recent immigrants like Arabic from North Africa and Wolof from West Africa. In England, several Asian languages are used daily by some part of the population, for example Gujarati, Panjabi, Urdu and Hindi. In Germany, Turkish is prominent among the languages of immigrants and settled communities descended from immigrants.

In this book, 'bilingualism' will be used as a general term for the use of two or more languages in a society. The term thus subsumes the idea of 'multilingualism'. Many writers do the reverse using the term 'multilingualism' in the more general way (to mean the use of *two or more* languages). Neither usage is quite satisfactory, and the reader has to deduce whether in certain cases *multi-* means 'two' or *bi* means 'more than two'. In practice, with the aid of context however, there is little ambiguity. Some sociolinguists, however, prefer to restrict bilingualism to its literal sense of commanding two languages and multilingualism to more than two. This is the policy of the *International Journal of Multilingualism*, for example, which restricts its subject matter to the acquisition, use and theories regarding third or fourth languages (etc.) used by individuals, rather than second languages.

While bilingualism is common throughout the world, many schools have a policy that recognises (and replicates) the hierarchy of relations within a territory and in the world as a whole. Only a small proportion of the 5,000 or so languages of the world are used at high-school level as media of instruction, and still fewer at university level. Schools have

often downplayed the value of the 'vernaculars' by minimising their use in classrooms or recognising them only as means of facilitating competence in the dominant language(s). Since the 1950s, and more especially since the 1970s, educationists have begun to recognise that multiculturalism and multilingualism are phenomena which should be encouraged, rather than treated as if they are transient. Sociolinguists are generally sympathetic to an approach that gives recognition to, and valorises, as many of a society's languages as possible. This is in keeping with a holistic approach that is sensitive to the needs of the children ('bottom up'), and not just the bureaucratic needs of the state ('top down'). These themes will be explored in Chapter 8, on language maintenance and shift, and Chapter 11, on education.

Diglossia – An Unequal Arrangement of Language Varieties

The term 'diglossia' was coined by the US linguist Charles Ferguson (1959) to denote a situation where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout a speech community, with each being assigned a definite but non-overlapping role. Ferguson was interested in societies in which a classical form of a language (no longer spoken colloquially) was reserved for some functions like education, literature and public speeches, while a modern colloquial variety of the same language was used for other functions like domestic interaction. The community regards the classical form as superior, while the colloquial form tends to be taken for granted. Ferguson used the labels 'H' ('high') for the variety accorded social prestige and 'L' ('low') for the other variety. Ferguson stressed that these labels were meant for convenience of reference rather than as judgmental terms on his part. Arabic in many parts of the Middle East is the paradigm example of diglossia, with Classical Arabic being accorded public and prestigious roles while colloquial Arabic is used in other roles. Table 1.1 shows typical diglossic distributions of H and L in the societies that Ferguson studied.

Great importance is attached to using the right variety in the right situation. According to Ferguson, an outsider who learns to speak fluent, accurate L and then uses it in a formal speech is an object of ridicule. A member of the speech community who uses H in a purely conversational situation or in an informal activity like shopping is equally an object of ridicule. In a sense, this is verbal hygiene taken to an extreme, with one variety not deemed worthy of 'serious' use. Since the H form is learned via formal education, diglossia can be a means of excluding people from access to full participation in society. This might apply in some societies to women and the poorer sections of the populace (see for example, Jaakola 1976). Two varieties used in contemporary Greek society, Katharevousa ('H') and Dhimotiki ('L'), show the political tensions surrounding diglossia.

	H	L
Sermon in church or mosque	X	
Instruction to servants, waiters, workmen, clerks		X
Personal letter		X
Speech in parliament, political speech	X	
University lecture	X	
Conversation with family, friends, colleagues		X
News broadcast	X	
Radio 'soap opera'		X
Newspaper editorial, news story, caption on picture		X
Caption on political cartoon		X
Poetry	X	
Folk literature		X

Table 1.1 A typical diglossic distribution of language varieties (Ferguson 1959: 329)

The H form is associated with the nineteenth-century upsurge in literature and the creation of a literary language based in part on older forms of literary Greek. The L form is the colloquial variety as it has evolved over the centuries. Katharevousa is strongly associated with religion and 'high' culture. Supporters of Dhimotiki feel that it can be used to a greater extent in the public sphere in the interests of all citizens. There was serious rioting in Greece in 1903 (when the New Testament was translated into Dhimotiki). Even today, there is a political colouring to the preferences for H or L. Under the liberal Greek government of the 1960s, a modified type of Dhimotiki (with elements from Katharevousa) was made the language of schools and to a certain extent of newspapers. However, after the coup of 1967, the military government decreed that Katharevousa be used in the schools. The subsequent return of democracy to Greece saw a restoration and strengthening of Dhimotiki (Trudgill 1983a: 115–16). In other societies, like those of the Middle East or Tamil Nadu state in India, the status of H (Classical Arabic and Classical Tamil respectively) is not contested; it is felt to be the bearer of religion, culture and history, and a symbol of unity.

Diglossia is different from a simple 'standard versus dialect' arrangement in other societies. First, the standard in non-diglossic societies is typically a modern form spoken by some sectors of society from childhood. This is not the case with the H form in diglossia, which has to be learned via formal education. Second, the relationship between standard and dialect is typically a close one, and it is not always easy to draw the line between the two. Again, in contrast the H and L forms of diglossia have distinct grammars which are almost like those of different languages. Whereas diglossia was meant to be a special concept limited to a few communities, the standard–dialect dichotomy today applies to almost all

societies. One attempt at revising Ferguson's scheme, which has come to be known as 'Fishman's extension', places diglossia at the centre of any attempt to characterise societies in terms of their linguistic repertoires. Joshua Fishman (1967) argued that some societies show the kind of functional specialisation identified by Ferguson, where the roles of H and L were played by different languages, rather than two specially related forms of the same language. Fishman gave the example of Paraguay, where for the general population Spanish played the role of H while the indigenous language, Guarani, played the role of L. A similar situation holds for many African countries in which a colonial language like English or French is the H. Some critics feel that this extension dilutes Ferguson's original definition too greatly (for example Britto 1986: chs 2 and 3). However, in categorising societies by their language hierarchies, the parallels between 'narrow' (Ferguson's) diglossia and 'broad' (Fishman's extension) diglossia are of considerable interest. While some critics worried that broad diglossia more or less equated diglossia with bilingualism, Fishman (1967) pointed to the following relations between bilingualism and diglossia:

- Bilingualism without diglossia: e.g. German–English bilingualism in Germany.
- Bilingualism with diglossia: e.g. Guarani–Spanish bilingualism in Paraguay.
- Diglossia without bilingualism: e.g. Classical and colloquial Arabic in Egypt.
- Neither diglossia nor bilingualism: e.g. monolingual parts of the USA.

Fishman's extension thus gives an important way of categorising societies by their speech repertoires.

1.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have laid out the key issues that current sociolinguistics is concerned with. These issues, we have argued, go well beyond the lay perceptions about language that one encounters from time to time in letters to the press or in the prescriptive and literary focus on language that schools typically offer. Language is embedded in a social and historical context, and a full understanding of language can only be achieved by paying attention to those contexts. This applies equally to attitudes and judgements concerning language use as to the rise of standard forms of language. However societies and histories are not closed topics themselves but are subject to different analyses, as we have stressed in our accounts of functionalism, Marxism and interactionism. The sociolinguistic approach introduced in this chapter – especially the focus on speech rather than writing – serves as a background and an orientation towards appreciating the research presented in the rest of the book. Many of the issues raised in this opening chapter will be covered in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Notes

1. The title is taken from a line in a poem by Ogden Nash.
2. Although for a long while William Labov, one of the most influential of sociolinguists, hoped that sociolinguistic studies could be made compatible with generative linguistics, the two branches of linguistics have gone their own ways, with interest in their own research problems.
3. On the history of *ain't* (another casualty of prescriptive sensibilities), see Joseph 1987: 127.
4. Anglo and Anexo are more usually written as – Aŋlɔ and Anexɔ.